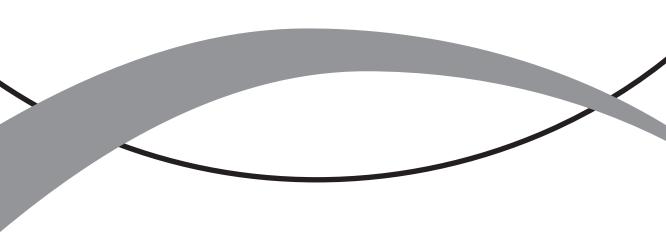
# UNITING CHURCH STUDIES UNITING CHURCH STUDIES UNITING CHURCH STUDIES



### **EXTRACT**

## SALVATION, DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM

## Contemporary Issues in Evangelism and Mission: perspectives and contributions from the Uniting Church in Australia

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#### **Abstract**

This article discusses the critical contemporary issues surrounding evangelism and mission, addressing various theological, historical, scriptural, and contextual challenges. It engages with important debates, such as the implications of the *missio Dei*, the legacies of colonialism on mission practices, and the ethical dimensions of evangelism within a secular, multicultural, and multireligious society. A central focus is placed on the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), analysing its distinctive theological insights, historical engagement with mission, missiological shifts, and contextual strategies. The paper examines UCA's unique contributions and argues that its approach offers valuable perspectives for global discussions on evangelism and mission, particularly through its commitment to reconciliation and social justice. Additionally, UCA's emphasis on contextualised gospel proclamation and embodiment showcases its innovative responses to modern challenges and its resonance with eight themes emerging in world Christianity. This study highlights UCA's potential to shape the future trajectory of intercultural mission theology and practices, emphasising the importance of adapting evangelistic and missional efforts in a pluralistic world.

#### Introduction

#### Contextualising Evangelism and Mission Today

I define evangelism and mission as joining God's work in redeeming and restoring humanity and creation through Jesus Christ. Mission must be holistic (integral), integrating proclamation, service, discipleship, justice, creation care, and community building. Mission should reflect Christ's teachings and embody

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For my fuller definition of mission see: Graham Joseph Hill, "What is Christian Mission?" accessed September 25, 2024. https://grahamjosephhill.com/christian-mission/.

The "five marks of mission" have appeared in many publications and were first proposed here: Anglican Consultative Council, Bonds of Affection: Proceedings of ACC-6 (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 1985), 49; Anglican Consultative Council, Mission in a Broken World: Proceedings of ACC-8 (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 1990), 101.

the Good News across diverse contexts and cultures. Mission must be informed by Scripture, theology, missiology, cultural and religious studies, and social science research.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary challenges such as secularisation, cultural pluralism, religious diversity, colonialism, and social justice require thoughtful engagement. We must navigate the complexities of sharing and embodying faith in a relevant, respectful, dialogical, holistic, and transformative way that responds to the needs of individuals and communities.

The Uniting Church in Australia (hereafter "UCA") plays a vital role in this discussion. It is rooted in a unique theological heritage and a commitment to social justice and reconciliation. Its *Basis of Union* emphasises a collaborative approach to mission, valuing and inviting diverse voices to participate in God's mission.<sup>4</sup> This inclusive approach makes believers, society, and creation integral to God's mission.

#### Purpose and Scope of this Paper

This paper aims to explore the multifaceted theological, historical, scriptural, and contextual issues surrounding evangelism and mission today. By critically examining these dimensions, the study seeks to illuminate the complexities of contemporary mission practices and the pressing challenges faith communities face in a pluralistic society. I address critical debates – such as *missio Dei*'s implications and evangelism's ethical considerations – to understand current realities comprehensively.

The UCA and its distinctive theological contributions and practices are central to this exploration. The paper analyses how UCA's commitment to reconciliation, social justice, and contextualised gospel proclamation shapes its approach to mission. By highlighting UCA's unique perspectives, the study aims to contribute valuable insights to global discussions on evangelism and mission, demonstrating how the church's rich heritage can inform and inspire contemporary mission strategies in diverse cultural settings.

#### Theological Issues in Evangelism and Mission

The Doctrine of Mission: missio Dei and its Implications

*Missio Dei* theology marks a significant shift in theological thinking, where we understand mission not as an activity of the church but as something rooted in God's very nature. <sup>5</sup> The UCA missiologist John Flett

The emerging disciplines of "intercultural theology" and "world Christianity" point out the need for the interdisciplinary and intercultural study and practice of Christian mission. See: Henning Wrogemann, Intercultural Theology, Volume 1: Intercultural Hermeneutics. Translated by Karl E. Böhmer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016); Graham Joseph Hill, World Christianity: An Introduction (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024).

<sup>4 &</sup>quot;The Basis of Union," Uniting Church in Australia, accessed September 25, 2024. https://uniting.church/basisofunion/.

I won't outline all the documents on the theology of the missio Dei in this paper. The widespread adoption of the concept is generally traced back to the International Missionary Council (IMC) at Willingen in 1952, where Karl Barth's theology of mission began to be embraced widely. Karl Barth's lecture at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference 1932 is probably the first instance of a theologian intentionally integrating a theology of mission with the doctrine of the Trinity.

has written extensively on the *missio Dei.*<sup>6</sup> God's mission is eternal and precedes the church's existence. God's mission is about God's redemptive action in the world through creation, reconciliation, and renewal. The church is not the orchestrator or designer of this divine mission, but a humble participant. This understanding frames God as the initiator and humanity, creation, and the cosmos as the object of God's love. In this light, mission isn't about expanding ecclesial or secular boundaries but bearing witness to God's loving, shalomic, good, restorative, and redemptive work in the world, reconciling all things to Godself. Mission is holistic (integral), deeply relational, and engaged with such issues as justice, peace, and ecological stewardship.

While many traditional views of mission placed the church and its institutions at the centre as the primary agent of God's activity in the world, the *missio Dei* concept disrupts this by decentralizing the church. We are not at the centre, nor are the institutions we serve. The *missio Dei* positions God as the driver of mission, moved by holy and immeasurable love. The church is not sidelined, but rather it's a valued participant in God's mission. We serve God's mission. We participate in the mission of the triune God, from whom all loving, restorative, redemptive mission flows. This contrast demands a radical rethinking of mission beyond the institutional boundaries of the church. Mission becomes less about converting individuals to join a religious community – although it certainly involves forming communities of disciples – and more about transforming the world in alignment with God's purposes. Mission in the way of Christ engages society's margins, the oppressed, the environment, and global concerns, pulling the mission away from a solely evangelistic focus to a comprehensive witness to God's justice, reconciliation, and peace.

The UCA, deeply rooted in its ecumenical tradition, interreligious dialogue, intercultural understandings, and the theology of the *Basis of Union*, engages *missio Dei* through a strong commitment to God's reconciling work in the world. The UCA's mission is framed as participation in God's ongoing activity, prioritizing justice, reconciliation, and care for creation. The church's emphasis on seeking reconciliation with First Nations peoples (especially through its Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress), responding to climate change, addressing unjust systems and structures, and advocating for the marginalized are concrete expressions of *missio Dei*. These actions demonstrate the UCA's commitment to living out a mission that aligns deeply with the vision of missio Dei, emphasizing the transformation of society, not just the church.

#### Interfaith Dialogue and Inclusivity

Navigating the labyrinthine intricacies of interfaith dialogue unveils a plethora of dialectical theological conundrums. This challenge is particularly striking when engaging the UCA's Christian doctrines with the variegated tenets of disparate religious traditions. At the epicentre of theological contention is the Christocentric proclamation of Jesus as the definitive *Selbstoffenbarung Gottes* (self-revelation of God).<sup>7</sup> Such a claim stands in stark dialectical opposition to the pluralistic inclusivity prevalent among manifold

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See, for instance: John Flett, "Missio Dei: A Trinitarian Envisioning of a Non-Trinitarian Theme," Missiology: An International Review 37, no. 1 (2009): 5–18; John Flett, The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); John Flett "A Theology of Missio Dei," Theology in Scotland 21, no. 1 (2014): 69–78.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> A term developed in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume II: The Doctrine of God*, Part 2, translated by G. W. Bromiley and T. F.Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957).

faiths. Moreover, the hermeneutical challenge emerges in reconciling the UCA's interpretation of Scripture – both *kritisch* and *kreuzförmig* (critical and cruciform) – with those traditions that adhere to alternative sacred texts or exegetical frameworks. This dialectical engagement necessitates a nuanced position – one firmly rooted in Christian convictions yet profoundly responsive to the diverse religious experiences and convictions of others.

Within the realm of religious plurality, the UCA's ecclesial mandate for evangelism, a cornerstone of myriad Christian communities, frequently encounters a theological *Krisenpunkt* (crisis point). The ecclesiastical impetus to promulgate the Christian kerygma occasionally (or perhaps often) collides with the imperative for respect and openness that is indispensable in interfaith dialogues. The quest to balance evangelistic fervour with the promotion of mutual *Verstehen* (understanding)<sup>9</sup> and respect among diverse religious communities poses a significant *praktisch-theologische* (practical-theological) dilemma. This tension often necessitates a re-envisioned evangelistic praxis, where proclamation is transmuted into acts of respectful presence and attentive listening, eschewing aggressive proselytization in favour of a relationally and contextually attuned mission praxis, congruent with the UCA's emphasis on a relational and contextual missional ecclesiology.

Distinctively, the UCA's approach to interfaith dialogue is profoundly rooted in its *oikoumenikós* genesis and the rich theological insights articulated through ecclesial documents like the *Basis of Union* and diverse Assembly resolutions. The church's active participation in interfaith activities highlights the doctrinal value placed on erudition in, and respect for, alternative religious traditions. This commitment, central to the UCA's missional identity, transcends mere coexistence; it endeavours to enrich the Christian faith through the insights gleaned from other religious praxes. By advocating for social justice and championing initiatives that bridge disparate religious and cultural divides, the UCA exemplifies its commitment to actualizing the Gospel in a complex and interconnected world, where interreligious learning becomes a beacon of enlightenment, open-mindedness, and magnanimous ecumenism.

#### The Role of the Holy Spirit in Mission

Contemporary pneumatology offers insights and resources for engaging in intercultural and interreligious missions in pluralistic, secular, and diverse contexts. Christology may present a stumbling block to dialogue and understanding, especially in the early stages of conversation. But pneumatology offers opportunities to explore themes of spirituality and divine presence mutually. Theologians like Amos Yong and Grace Ji-Sun Kim articulate this well, advocating for an inclusive, dialogical, and transformative approach.<sup>10</sup>

Christian pneumatology offers space for conversations with established religions, new religious movements, philosophical and psychological themes, Indigenous stories, animistic and New Age spiritualities, and

See the dialectical theology in Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 1, translated by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The term *Verstehen*, though used broadly in hermeneutical discussions, is associated with the hermeneutics of understanding, particularly influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim, The Holy Spirit, Chi, and the Other: A Model of Global and Intercultural Pneumatology (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Amos Yong, The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

secular society. Examples include the concepts of Atman and Brahman in Hinduism (paralleling the Christian idea of the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence connecting people to the divine), the idea of prana in Hinduism (the vital life force associated with breath, with parallels to ruach in Hebrew and the Spirit as breath and life in Christianity), meditative states in Buddhism (resonating with Christian contemplative practices aimed at perceiving the presence of the Spirit within and beyond ourselves), the notion of *Ruh* (spirit) in Islam, and the shared understandings of the role of God's Spirit in creation and inspiration, the concept of Tazkiyah (spiritual purification) in Islam, and the shared experience of the role of the presence of God in sanctifying and purifying people, as well as the many resonances and shared understandings between Christian and Jewish theologies of the Spirit. We can also turn our thoughts to the presence of spirit in Indigenous stories and animistic traditions and the opportunities for dialogue these present. We may also perceive dialogical opportunities in the parallels that exist between Christian notions of the Spirit and some philosophical and psychological traditions, such as the idea of vitalism in holistic health, the notion of collective human spirit or consciousness in some forms of humanism, and the concept of "flow states" in modern psychology and the inspiration, creativity, and intuition which comes from them. New Age spirituality often talks about universal energy or life force, and practices like Reiki or Tai Chi emphasize channelling this energy for healing and growth, with remarkable parallels to Christian thinking about the role of the Spirit.

In these and numerous other examples, we can see opportunities for pneumatology to open spaces for conversation about such themes as life force or breath, divine presence, healing and creativity, inspiration and renewal, our connection with all creation, and the role of the Spirit in personal and communal transformation, empowerment, moral guidance, and more. The Spirit acts across diverse contexts to bring about God's reign, emphasizing reconciliation and healing. A pneumatological approach to theology and missions embraces diversity, welcomes dialogue, and actively addresses systemic injustices, empowering us to make a difference and aligning with a broader, more holistic understanding of salvation that includes personal redemption and the restoration of social and ecological systems. It's not that we avoid questions about Jesus and his gospel altogether. Instead, we start conversations at points of resonance, mutuality, and respectful dialogue, then move to points of difference where they arise.

#### Historical Issues in Evangelism and Mission

Colonialism and Mission: Historical Legacies

The historical entanglement of colonialism and mission work is fraught with complexity. Mission and evangelism – often arms of Christendom and agents of state power – were frequently complicit in the spread of imperial power, operating under a theological framework that saw Indigenous and alternative cultures as needing Christian civilisation. The gospel, in many cases, was presented not as liberating good news but as a colonising force, subjugating the spiritual and cultural identities of First Nations and other peoples. Missionaries, though often well-meaning, participated in systems that erased languages, practices, and social structures, embedding Christian conversion within the broader colonial matrix of domination and control. Many missionaries did beneficial things (humanitarian work, establishing hospitals, providing education to marginalised groups, advancing the cause of women and girls, cultural preservation initiatives, abolition of slavery, promoting peace and conflict resolution, and enriching people's spiritual lives). However, their entanglement with colonial projects is undeniable. These include entanglement

with cultural imperialism, collaboration with the aims of colonial powers, displacement and disruption of communities, racism and ethnocentrism, suppression of Indigenous rights and cultures, and more. The picture is complex.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars and theologians have since interrogated the colonial impulse inherent in many forms of evangelism, critiquing it as an expression of cultural imperialism cloaked in theological justification. Theological paradigms that viewed non-Western societies as "heathen" fostered a condescending form of mission that often disregarded the divine presence within Indigenous cultures. Too frequently, evangelism can be a tool of cultural erasure rather than a dialogue with the sacred and the presence of God and Christ in diverse contexts. However, the transformative power of postcolonial theology is evident as it deconstructs imperial narratives and seeks to disentangle the gospel from Western dominance, advocating for missiological approaches that honour grassroots cultures, local expressions of faith, and Indigenous and contextual theologies.

The UCA has made significant strides in acknowledging its historical complicity in colonial mission practices. Through documents like the 1994 Covenanting Statement and the 2009 Preamble to the Constitution, the UCA not only confesses its role in the oppression of Indigenous Australians but also actively seeks a path of reconciliation. The creation of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) represents a deliberate shift towards honouring and learning from First Nations Christians, affirming their spiritual traditions and insights, and pursuing justice as a central aspect of UCA mission. The UCA's theological reflection increasingly centres on decolonising missions and seeking to repair historical wounds, demonstrating a profound commitment to reconciliation.

#### Reconciliation and the Healing of Historical Wounds

When mission is concerned with reconciliation, peacemaking, and justice, it assumes a posture of humility and attentive, deep listening and learning, especially in conversation with Indigenous and marginalised communities. Such mission doesn't merely focus on gospel proclamation or activities done for communities. Such a posture is paternal, colonial, oppressive, arrogant, and self-defeating. Mission must be a transformative, mutual journey toward healing, where those who have enjoyed historical privilege and power relinquish this control in a spirit of service, humility, and repentance. Postcolonial Christian thinkers remind us that mission is only worthwhile when it is an instrument for restoring relationships fractured by colonialism, moving together toward shared spiritual renewal.

In such contexts, terms like "mission" and "evangelism" often carry significant negative and painful baggage. So, I often talk about "co-creation" rather than "mission." The term "co-creation" may better capture the essence of mission by emphasising collaborative participation in God's redemptive and restorative work, aligning with the Five Marks of Mission, while avoiding the colonial and imperial connotations historically associated with "mission." <sup>12</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> See John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See footnote 2 on the Five Marks of Mission.

Historical injustices are many – land dispossession, cultural erasure, and spiritual subjugation, to name a few. These injustices demand a missiology of reparative justice. This justice is not symbolic (and so, often token and cheap) but material, addressing the systemic and generational harms caused by mission shaped and integrated with colonialism. Reparative justice calls for land acknowledgement and reparation, financial restitution, cultural revitalisation, theological reformation, collaborative spirituality and theology, formal apologies and truth-telling, and covenantal partnerships.

The UCA has made efforts in this direction, advocating for First Nations peoples' rights and spiritual autonomy. Initiatives like the UAICC and the Covenanting process contribute to global dialogues on mission as reconciliation (or a move away from such language toward a language of "co-creation"). But such efforts toward repentance and justice are too sparse. The UCA has vast resources at its disposal (property, people, finances, influence) but uses these in a minimal way regarding Indigenous rights and reparations. Much more can and should be done.

#### **Contextual Issues in Evangelism and Mission**

#### The Impact of Secularisation and Postmodernity

Western societies – indeed, societies across the entire globe – have changed significantly due to secularisation and postmodernity and the spread of ideas associated with these movements due to globalisation. Secularisation and postmodernity introduce profound challenges for evangelism and mission. Secular ideologies challenge religious, spiritual, and sacred ideas, introducing expressive individualism and spiritual consumerism and questioning whether religion has a place in public discourse or, at least, a privileged place. With its scepticism toward metanarratives, postmodernity resists grand theological claims, reducing mission to a fragmented and contested terrain.

Charles Taylor examines themes in secular society that pose challenges and opportunities for established religions. These themes and trends include disenchantment with the notion of a world filled with divine meanings and supernatural forces, individualism that emphasises personal autonomy and subjective experience over established religious practices, pluralism and the religious relativism that follows, a focus on this-worldly concerns where transcendence and divine authority are questions (an "immanent frame"), and "expressive individualism" and "the buffered self" that emphasise self-fulfilment, self-expression, reason, authenticity, autonomy, and moving away from conformity, especially religious conformity. The marginalisation of religion offers threats and opportunities for Christians and our witness – we are pushed to the margins but able to offer profound and personal spiritual experiences, such as deep community, prayer, and meditation, with authenticity, humility, love, inclusiveness, hope, and integrity.<sup>13</sup>

These changes in secular Western societies demand humble, innovative, and culturally engaged missiological engagement. Christendom is over. Societies are often secular and pluralistic. The UCA must reevaluate its mission, considering the gospel and social changes. No longer operating from a position of societal

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007). Terms in quotation marks are coined by Charles Taylor in the book.

dominance, the UCA must navigate a context where multiple truth claims compete. Our mission must now be dialogical, contextual, and rooted in humility and mutuality.

The UCA has responded by embracing contextual theology, talking openly about historical approaches that grasped power and control, dialoguing with secular philosophies, and reimagining mission as co-creation. Through initiatives like Fresh Expressions, blended ecologies of church, and a focus on justice, the UCA meets postmodern scepticism with incarnational, relational, and justice-oriented missional practices, emphasising embodied witness over proclamation alone.

#### Mission in Multicultural and Pluralistic Settings

Australia is a multicultural and religiously diverse context with a long history of colonialism, racial discrimination, oppression of Indigenous peoples, and the excesses of Christendom. Christian witness in this continent requires considering and responding to complex spiritual, historical, theological, cultural, and ethical issues. Traditional evangelistic methods may appear colonial or hegemonic in these settings, where diverse truth claims and spiritualities coexist, and people are aware of and moved by global, pluralistic, intercultural, and interreligious realities. We cannot, nor should we want to, impose faith or belief. All Christian witness in our context must be humble and dialogical, engaging respectfully with religious and cultural pluralism.

Cultural sensitivity is paramount. Missiology must avoid imposing Western norms and instead seek inculturation, wherein we authentically express and embody the gospel within local neighbourhoods and cultures. Postcolonial theology challenges us to such self-reflection and humility. We must value the contributions of every culture and religion, dismantling Eurocentrism in missional, hermeneutical, and theological practices.

The UCA has been proactive in multicultural and intercultural ministry and mission. This proactivity is a testament to its deep commitment to global justice and intercultural harmony. By fostering covenantal relationships with diverse communities and supporting culturally appropriate expressions of faith, the UCA seeks to contribute to contemporary missional practices, redefining its mission as co-creative, inclusive, intercultural, polycentric, polyvocal, and contextually grounded. Yet even a cursory look at our interrelated councils – local churches, regional presbyteries, state synods, and the national assembly – shows that they are not as culturally diverse as our Australian society and are still dominated by a handful of cultures. We like to call ourselves "multicultural" and "intercultural", but are we? Australia has large groups of Asian, African, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and other Christian groups which are not represented in our councils and leadership teams, so the UCA has a long way to go to be a truly multicultural, diverse, intercultural church at every level.

#### Social Justice and Mission: Integrating Faith and Action

When we integrate gospel proclamation, social justice, and creation care, we challenge dualistic approaches to faith. Christian Mission cannot separate proclamation from advocacy, social justice from creation care, peacemaking from mercy ministries, evangelism from discipleship, prayer from public witness, worship from community engagement, spiritual formation from economic justice, church planting from intercultural dialogue, reconciliation from repentance, faith from good works, kingdom witness from local action,

hospitality from solidarity with those experiencing poverty, pastoral care from systemic reform, theology from practice, mission from unity, compassion from prophetic voice, holistic healing from mental health support, truth-telling from cultural sensitivity, sacrament from service, global mission from local justice, or grace from justice in Christ's reconciling work.

This integrated approach aligns with the UCA's vision of mission, which sees these elements as interdependent aspects of living out the gospel in the world. Integral mission reflects the Five Marks of Mission, emphasizing holistic transformation across life's spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions. The UCA embodies this integration through its holistic missiology, which intertwines evangelism and social justice. Its commitment to climate action, Indigenous reconciliation, and refugee advocacy reflects a gospel-centred mission that addresses spiritual and material liberation. As a missiologist, I find this encouraging, especially when dualistic or polarising approaches to faith and mission are too common in some parts of the global church.

## Missiological and Intercultural Issues in Evangelism and Mission Eight Emerging Themes in World Christianity

In my book on world Christianity I write, "Seven integrated paradigm shifts are revolutionizing world Christianity, including theologies and practices of church and mission – world Christianity methodologies, polycentricity, polyvocality, interculturality, integrality, pentecostality, and glocality. These seven approaches are combined and interdependent. As a shorthand, I call this *holisticostal* (a neologism I've coined to capture these transformative missiological and intercultural dynamics in world Christianity). Holisticostal missions and movements are reshaping the church and the world." In this section, I explore these while adding cruciformity and noting their resonances with UCA theology and practice.

#### **World Christianity Methodologies**

Developing world *Christianity* as a discipline is crucial in today's interconnected societies. As migration, urbanisation, climate change, technologies, and refugee crises bring diverse populations into closer contact, this approach underscores the need for a more inclusive, global view of Christianity. World Christianity recognises Christianity's cultural diversity, shifting away from a Eurocentric and Americentric-dominated framework to explore how Christianity is lived and practised across different contexts and cultures. This global perspective is vital for understanding contemporary challenges, fostering intercultural dialogue, and building a more equitable Christian community attuned to local distinctiveness and global connections in faith practices. We need a methodology for understanding and responding to World Christianity. Such a methodology involves engaging global perspectives, historical depth, contextual theologies, intercultural dialogue, interdisciplinary approaches, collaborative learnings and partnerships, migration and diaspora, postcolonial critique, ecumenical sensitivity, inculturated leadership, religious and secular pluralism, lived religion, power dynamics and hierarchies, diversity and multiplicity, critical consciousness, shared humanity, and flexible and adaptable approaches in changing contexts.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Graham Joseph Hill, World Christianity: An Introduction (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024), 6.

<sup>15</sup> See Table 2.1 "Eighteen Qualities and Features of World Christianity Methodologies" in Graham Joseph Hill, World Christianity: An Introduction (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024), 28.

The Uniting Church in Australia contributes a distinctive theological depth, including its covenant theology and trinitarian understanding.

The Uniting Church in Australia lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Uniting Church recognises that it is related to other Churches in ways which give expression, however partially, to that unity in faith and mission . . . It believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries (BoU, para.2).

As this quote demonstrates, the *Basis of Union* articulates a relational vision of God's work, emphasising unity and reconciliation, shaping its approach to mission in a world of pluralistic challenges. This theological foundation aligns with world Christianity's call for intercultural dialogue, fostering a mission that respects cultural particularities while engaging global theological discourse.

#### **Polycentricity**

I define polycentricity this way: "Mission is from everywhere to everywhere, and from everyone to everywhere." This phrase signals a radical shift in mission theology: the "Christian West to the rest" era is over. Today, mission is polycentric, transcultural, and unbounded by geography or culture. God's mission belongs to no single institution or region. Instead, contextual, polycentric mission emerges from and is carried by all peoples, cultures, and churches. Diverse voices are crucial, each with unique histories, gifts, and perspectives and contributing to the revelation of God's kingdom. Polycentricity decentralises authority, celebrating local solutions and expressions while fostering collaboration across global contexts. Polycentricity must privilege centres that have been historically silenced or marginalised to deal with power imbalances, colonialism, and the historical monopoly of a few powerful centres.

The UCA's historical journey of reconciliation with First Nations peoples may take preliminary steps toward a polycentric mission. God dwells in all places, among all people, and throughout all times and ages, restoring all humanity and creation to Godself. No one culture or vision of Christ and the gospel is at the centre. Through the *Covenanting Statement* and partnership with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), the UCA embodies a mission honouring and learning from marginalised voices. This approach is a model for global churches, offering insights into decolonising mission practices, listening and learning from First Nations peoples, and engaging power imbalances.

#### **Polyvocality**

Polyvocality means "a church and mission with many voices and perspectives contributing, valued, and heard." Such polyvocality is increasingly embraced in Christian mission and theology. Polyvocality highlights the inclusion of diverse cultural, theological, and experiential viewpoints, reflecting the richness of God's creation. As today's global church shifts away from monocentric dominance by any one voice, gender, or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> All the terms and definitions in quotation marks in this section are mine. Still, they are hardly original, given how widely these dynamics are discussed in missiology and intercultural theology today.

tradition, polyvocality fosters humility and mutual respect. This approach is inclusive and transformative, ensuring mission strategies and theologies are contextually relevant and affirm the dignity of all. By listening to and integrating diverse voices, we embody a fuller expression of Christ's body, nurturing multiplicity, belonging, contribution, and spiritual growth.

The UCA's mission strategies have potential to reflect a polyvocal engagement with scripture, where diverse interpretations are welcomed. Its hermeneutics emphasise listening to multiple cultural and theological perspectives, creating space for historically silenced voices. This approach contains possibilities for enriching evangelism, mission, and theology, allowing scripture to speak anew into diverse contexts, resonating with global conversations about the significance of polyvocality in mission.

#### Interculturality

The meaning of interculturality is captured in "a people of the Jesus way who value unity in diversity, embracing and honouring all cultures." Intercultural theology explores the intersection of theology with diverse cultural beliefs, practices, and perspectives. It fosters cross-cultural dialogue, moving beyond the imposition of one tradition or culture over another. Instead, intercultural theology emphasises mutual understanding and spiritual growth among diverse groups. In a globalised world where cultures interact and influence one another constantly, intercultural theology and mission become essential. It challenges traditional Western theological paradigms and invites a broader, richer exploration of God. This theology celebrates the diversity of voices and experiences, seeing them not as threats but as opportunities for deeper understanding, where God's love transcends cultural boundaries and nurtures unity in diversity.

The UCA's commitment to contextual strategies tailored to the Australian situation has the potential for it to foster this interculturality. Engaging with a secular and multicultural society, the UCA is beginning to adapt its mission to resonate with the spiritual needs of diverse communities. Its focus on mutual understanding and cultural respect reflects the broader intercultural movement within global Christianity, fostering deeper connections in an interconnected world. And, as the 1994 *Covenanting Statement* says, "It is our desire to work in solidarity with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress for the advancement of God's kingdom of justice and righteousness in this land." <sup>17</sup>

#### **Integrality**

The meaning of integrality is summarised in the phrase: "a pilgrim people dedicated to a mission and gospel that integrates whole gospel, whole church, whole world, whole life." Our mission and movements must be transformational and integral (holistic) – this is what the voices of world Christianity teach us. Integral mission isn't just about what the church does; it is, more importantly, about the nature of the church. Integral mission is about the church's being and not just its doing. The church has integrity and credibility when it aligns its social justice and proclamation, peacemaking and teaching, compassion and

<sup>17 &</sup>quot;The Covenanting Statement," The Uniting Church in Australia, 1994, accessed 9 October 2024, https://uniting.church/the-covenanting-statement/

advocacy, public and private practices, actions and preaching, and passion for humility, mercy, love, truth, compassion, and justice. 18

Missiologist Vinoth Ramachandra writes: "Integral mission is then a way of calling the church to keep together, in her theology as well as in her practice, what the Triune God of the Biblical narrative always brings together: 'being' and 'doing,' the 'spiritual' and the 'physical,' the 'individual' and the 'social,' the 'sacred' and the 'secular,' 'justice' and 'mercy,' 'witness' and 'unity,' 'preaching truth' and 'practising the truth,' and so on." <sup>19</sup>

Integral mission in the UCA's context means uniting social action with proclamation. Drawing from its covenant theology, the UCA is beginning to integrate justice, peacemaking, and evangelism into a holistic expression of the gospel. The concept of being a "pilgrim people" emphasises the integral nature of the church's mission, where action, social justice, and proclamation are intertwined in pursuing God's kingdom. This resonates with global calls for integrality in mission, where the church's credibility depends on the congruence between its being and doing.

The Uniting Church's vision of Australia is integral. "We see a nation where each person and all creation can flourish and enjoy abundant life. The Uniting Church in Australia believes the whole world is God's good creation. Each person is made in God's image and is deeply loved by God. In Jesus, God is completing the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation. Our vision, grounded in the life and mission of Jesus, is for a nation which:

- is characterised by love for one another, of peace with justice, of healing and reconciliation, of welcome and inclusion.
- recognises the equality and dignity of each person.
- recognises coexistent sovereignty of First Peoples, has enshrined a First Nations voice and is committed to truth telling about our history.
- takes seriously our responsibility to care for the whole of creation.
- is outward looking, a generous and compassionate contributor to a just world."20

#### **Pentecostality**

Pentecostality means "a Spirit-enlivened community and empowered-mission that's global, diverse, and inclusive." At Pentecost, the church became a diverse, intercultural, polycentric, polyvocal, Spirit-filled body. The day of Pentecost exemplifies the Spirit's vision of inclusion, where no culture, language, or

The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission defines integral mission and prioritizes the role of the local church in such mission. See "Micah Declaration on Integral Mission," Micah Global, accessed October 7, 2024. https://d1c2gz5q23tkk0.cloudfront.net/assets/uploads/3390139/asset/Micah\_Network\_Declaration\_on\_Integral\_Mission.pdf?1662641257. This section on integrality was first published by me as "Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Practice," Missio Alliance, accessed October 7, 2024. https://www.missioalliance.org/holisticostal-mission-paradigm-shifts-in-theology-and-practice-pt1/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Vinoth Ramachandra in C.V. Mathew, *Integral Mission: The Way Forward* (Kerala: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2006), 57.

<sup>20 &</sup>quot;A Vision for a Just Australia," Uniting Church in Australia, accessed 9 October 2024, https://uniting.church/a-vision-for-a-just-australia/

nation holds exclusive claim to the gospel. The Pentecost event in Acts 2, where disciples spoke in various languages, symbolises breaking barriers, borders, divisions, and exclusions and the call of God's Spirit for the church to join in the universal mission of God in Jesus Christ. The gospel transcends cultural confines. The people of the Jesus way are a global Christian community united by faith yet enriched by diverse expressions. Pentecost ignited a movement where the Spirit empowers and unifies believers, cultivating a global body committed to living out Christ's love across all cultures, continents, civilisations, and contexts. This dynamic, Spirit-led diversity continues to shape the church's mission and identity today.

Some in the UCA are starting to explore a Spirit-driven approach to embracing cultural diversity and spiritual gifts. This has potential. Such a pnematological theology and practice must emphasise the role of the Spirit in empowering communities for mission and reconciliation, embodying a global and inclusive vision. The UCA can make further concerted effort toward being a Spirit-led community that witnesses, praises, and serves reflects the Spirit-driven mission of the church, aligning with the idea of pentecostality. Such a Spirit-led mission fosters a sense of unity amid diversity, echoing the dynamic vision of the global church.

#### Glocality

By glocality, I mean "a church grounded locally, reaching globally – embracing both neighbourhood and nations in mission, co-creation, and love." Glocalisation describes the symbiosis between the global and the local. I recently spent time at an international mission conference in Malaysia, listening to people from all over the world talk about contextual missions within their countries and describe the influence of global conversations about theology, church, and mission. Today, everywhere, local and global, people are mutually informing, forming, and enriching. Far from opposing forces, the global and local are deeply intertwined, constantly shaping and influencing each other. Global forces and conversations profoundly shape local contexts and dialogues in today's globalised world. Modernity, postmodernity, secularity, interculturality, and globalisation constantly impact local contexts. There would be no notion of Fresh Expressions or "missional church," for instance, without conversations in the North American and British contexts impacting and shaping missiological visions in other, quite different, local contexts.

Conversely, local cultures also contribute to the formation of global themes, creating a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship. No global conversations exist without local imaginations and movements influencing beyond their immediate contexts. This interconnection between local and global necessitates a glocal exchange, particularly within the global church. By fostering mutuality, respect, and partnership among Majority World, Indigenous, and Western churches, glocalisation cultivates a missionally vibrant church.

The UCA's engagement with glocal mission emphasises local rootedness and global awareness. The UCA has a long way to go in this regard, but many UCA leaders seek to explore how local congregations can draw from global theological conversations to address local challenges through initiatives like Fresh Expressions and partnerships with global Christian movements. The Uniting Church says that it is "a community of people following Jesus and God's call to live with love, grace, and hope in the world" – this vision is lived

out locally, across our nation and region, and globally.<sup>21</sup> This approach mirrors the broader glocalisation trend, creating mission practices that resonate across diverse contexts.

#### Cruciformity

A cruciform church and mission embody Jesus Christ's sacrificial love through humility, service, and suffering. Such cruciformity must shape every aspect of Christian mission, theology, and church life. Like the broken bread and poured-out wine, our lives must reflect a vulnerability and humility that aligns with the suffering Christ. In mission, cruciformity compels us to embrace those on the margins, and to honour, listen, and learn from those on the margins – not in power but in solidarity and sacrifice. Cruciformity calls us to a deep identification with the cross, where love, sacrifice, relinquishment, and suffering meet. Cruciform churches and missions bear one another's burdens, relinquish power and control, honour the least and last, and transform brokenness into an expression of grace-filled love. We become wounded healers through cruciform living, reflecting Christ's redemptive power.

The UCA has theological resources and lived practices which can develop and illustrate this cruciformity. "Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church" (BoU, para.4). This cruciform mission invites the church to embrace vulnerability and sacrificial love, modelling its life after Christ's suffering. It offers a counter-narrative to power-centric missions, highlighting the transformative potential of suffering and solidarity. This cruciform approach enriches global discussions on mission, calling for a church that embodies the cross in its witness and service.

#### UCA Resonance with these Eight Themes in Intercultural Missions

Uniting Church theologies, missiologies, and practices resonate deeply with the eight themes outlined. World Christianity methodologies look like what the UCA endeavours to pursue and embody. Polycentricity aligns with the UCA's commitment to decentralising mission, empowering marginalised voices, and embracing mission "from everywhere to everywhere." The church's embrace of polyvocality is seen in its dedication to multiculturalism and inclusion, creating space for diverse theological and cultural expressions. Interculturality is central to UCA's theological dialogue, which promotes unity in diversity, fostering mutual growth and understanding across cultures (see, for instance, UAICC). Integrality reflects the UCA's holistic approach to mission – where justice, proclamation, and action are integrated and inseparable. The church's pentecostality embodies a Spirit-led, globally diverse community unified by Christ's love. Glocality shapes UCA's engagement, integrating local mission and witness with global justice, intercultural, and interreligious issues. Finally, cruciformity guides the church's mission, rooted in sacrificial love, humility, and solidarity with the marginalised (especially as we live and worship on invaded yet sacred lands alongside our First Nations sisters and brothers), along with a willingness to suffer for and defend the values and way of Jesus Christ. The UCA has a long way to go in these eight areas but shows potential that should be celebrated and built upon.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> "We are the Uniting Church," Uniting Church in Australia, accessed 9 October 2024, https://uniting.church

#### Conclusion

This article has explored critical issues in contemporary evangelism and mission, including world Christianity realities and methodologies, polycentricity, polyvocality, integrality, pentecostality, interculturality, glocality, cruciformity, and the integration of social justice and gospel proclamation within a holistic, post-colonial, and dialogical mission framework. The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) offers unique contributions, such as covenant theology – a dedication to covenanting with, honouring, learning from, and seeking justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – and an emphasis on reconciliation, which enrich global conversations by challenging Western-dominated perspectives and advocating for inclusive, context-sensitive mission practices. Future directions for research include a deeper exploration of the UCA's role in fostering intercultural dialogue, conversations with marginalised cultural and theological groups within the UCA community, and adapting mission strategies for pluralistic societies. The UCA's ongoing focus on integrating social action with proclamation positions it as a significant contributor to shaping the evolving, glocal realities of global mission, gospel proclamation, and local contextualisation, encouraging a church that is genuinely "from everywhere to everywhere."

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## **About Uniting Church Studies**

### Uniting Church Studies ISSN: 3083-5267

*Uniting Church Studies* is published twice yearly (June, December) by United Theological College, 16 Masons Drive, North Parramatta, NSW, Australia, 2151.

Phone: 61-2-8838 8927; Facsimile: 61-2-9683 6617.

*Uniting Church Studies* website: unitingchurchstudies.org

Digital copies of previous issues of the journal are available via the website of the Camden Theological Library: www.utc.edu.au/library/

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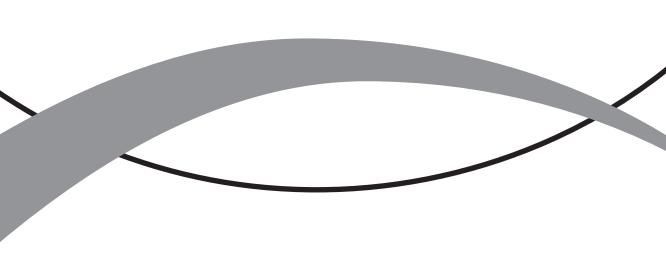
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