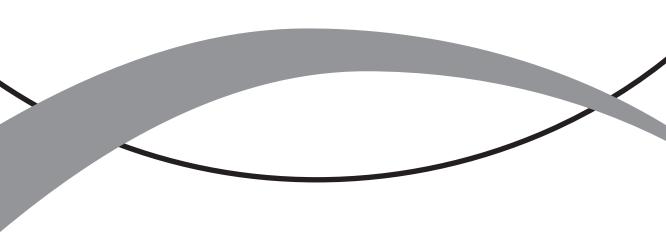
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EXTRACT

SALVATION, DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM



"Soft Evangelism": Reimagining faith-sharing in the Uniting Church

Karina Kreminski

Abstract

The ambivalence around the term "evangelism" in the church today is particularly true within the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). Many people in the UCA feel awkward about the practice of evangelism in our secular culture which carries unhelpful "baggage" from Christendom. This presents a barrier for Christians who have "good news" to share with those who do not identify as Christian. This article will explore the peculiarities of the theory and practice of evangelism (or "witness") in the UCA, drawing on UCA theology and the *Basis of Union*. It will then employ a memoir theology approach, using a vignette and observations, to propose a way for UCA churches to engage in contextually appropriate evangelism in the liminal spaces between church and society, shaped by the peculiarities of UCA theology and practice. The result is a model of evangelism – "soft evangelism" – that can inspire UCA churches to reimagine faith-sharing in the Australian context.

Introduction

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has an ambivalent relationship with the theology and practice of evangelism. Yet many people still hold to the conviction that what we Christians believe is good news for our world today. In this article I will explore the unique approach to evangelism in the UCA, stemming from UCA theology and the *Basis of Union (Basis)*. I will then share my story of practicing "evangelism" as a UCA minister in my context, using memoir theology. Based on this, I will outline a "model" for soft evangelism that can be contextualised in various places so that people can feel more confident in sharing their faith today.

Reflecting on the ambivalence towards evangelism, UCA theologian Chris Walker commented that "The Uniting Church has not been effective or even interested in evangelism for the most part," noting that "National Church Life Surveys showed Uniting Church people were reluctant to share faith and invite others to church." One reason he cited was some conservative members of the UCA (who were perhaps more comfortable with evangelism) leaving over specific issues. Those who stayed have not been able to find viable alternative approaches to standard evangelistic models, which were considered distasteful. In an article in *Insights*, the key communications channel of the NSW/ACT Synod, Jonathan Foye offered this commentary:

¹ Chris Walker, "Reflection on the Theological Culture of the Uniting Church in Australia," Act2, August 29, 2023, https://act2uca.com/theological-culture/reflection-on-the-theological-culture-of-the-uca/.

Despite often being considered a weakness of the Uniting Church, evangelism is part of the church's DNA. 41 years after Union, how we define evangelism and how to go about it is worth discussing. ... The 2016 NCLS data results show that there is a need for more active evangelism by the Uniting Church and that the local church members want their congregations to implement innovative faith initiatives.²

Another reason for this hesitation could be found in the theologies of the denominations that formed the UCA. UCA missiologist Amelia Koh-Butler observes that:

The three churches coming into union had different understandings. Up to 200 years ago, Presbyterians did not do evangelism beyond their own congregations because of the doctrine of election. Congregationalists were active in converting the 'heathen', but that was associated with colonialism. Methodists were also associated with colonialism.

Koh-Butler continues:

Evangelism has been strongly associated with Aboriginal genocide and exclusion of prophets and advocates for the marginalised ... And for a long time evangelism was associated with church-building and recruitment... Evangelism was also associated with grooming the vulnerable rather than offering news of Jesus' salvation for all. Hence, using the terms faith-sharing and sharing good news were favoured for about two decades.³

Therefore, more discussion followed by action on how evangelism takes shape in the UCA is sorely needed.

The Broader Context

Not just the UCA, but the broader church in Australia and globally, faces challenging times when it comes to matters of faith, spirituality and community. Evangelism, proselytising and even the seemingly innocuous practice of "sharing faith" are regarded with suspicion in a culture that resists authority and institutions and questions tradition. In the mid-1990s, Hunsberger wrote:

... the day has gone when the church was generally valued by the society as important to the social and moral order and when for that reason, people tended to seek out a church for themselves. We sail today in a different kind of sea ... We are caught between a Constantinian Christendom that has ended and to which we cannot return and the culture's relegation of the church to the private realm.⁴

² Jonathan Foye, "Evangelism: Part of the Uniting Church's DNA," Insights, June 22, 2018, https://www.insights.uca.org.au/evangelism-part-of-the-uniting-churchs-dna/.

³ Personal conversation with Amelia Koh-Butler, October 8, 2024.

⁴ George Hunsberger, The Church between Gospel and Culture, ed. Craig Van Gelder and George Hunsberger (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 17.

Writing more recently, Root and Bertrand believe the problem lies not so much with the church but with shifts in society: secularisation; the growing division between private and public spheres, such that fewer people express their faith in public ways; and, crucially, the fact that it is now possible not to believe in God,⁵ which means people no longer have the language to talk about "the sacred." This is a relevant and provocative thought for developing evangelistic practices today.

Peculiarities of UCA theology and practice of evangelism

So far, I have noted the theological and practical awkwardness around evangelism within the UCA. Yet there are also peculiarities or strengths within UCA theology and practice that can help to develop contextualised evangelistic practices that need not be awkward or distasteful, but affirming of UCA identity and values.

Evangelism and the Missional Church

The *Basis* embodies a missional view of the church. As evangelism is a subset of mission, understanding this missional context can help to flesh out what evangelism could look like in the UCA.

Laing argues that "The church is missional, being constituted by being sent into the world by Christ, in continuity with Christ's own sending. Mission is therefore not to be understood as an additional activity of the church, but as inherent to its nature." Former UCA Assembly President Andrew Dutney finds just such a connection in the *Basis*:

The only consistent reason given for union was mission: to hear anew the commission of the risen Lord to make disciples of all nations (*Basis of Union* Paragraph 1), and thereafter to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other Churches (Paragraph 2). ... Mission is the hermeneutical key to the Basis of Union, and the most important pointer to the Uniting Church's way of being Reformed.⁷

This observation strongly places evangelism at the forefront of UCA theology and practice, since evangelism is a crucial aspect of mission.

The *Basis* offers insights that can inform a peculiarly UCA practice of evangelism relevant to our culture. I will only briefly mention these here, as they inform my model of evangelism outlined later. Firstly, the *Basis* mentions "a pilgrim people on the way" (BoU, 8).8 Could this apply not only to the church but to those who don't identify as Christian – the broader community beyond the church? Secondly, the notion of discernment of the Spirit is peppered throughout the *Basis*. For instance, the church "has the gift of

Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand, When Church Stops Working: A Future For Your Congregation Beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2023), 9–14.

⁶ Mark T. B. Laing, From Crisis to Creation: Lesslie Newbigin and the Reinvention of Christian Mission (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 83, cited in David Withers, "The Basis of union: a missionary vision for Uniting Church congregations," Uniting Church Studies, 21, no. 1 (2017), 68.

⁷ Andrew Dutney, "Is there A Uniting Church Theology?," Uniting Church Studies 2, no. 1 (March 1996): 31-32.

⁸ Throughout this article, I will quote from the *Basis of Union: 1992 Edition*, https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/media/rhmivzuy/basis1992-english.pdf, without citation.

the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way" (BoU, 3) and 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" (BoU, 4). Could we apply this spiritual discernment to our broader community? Where can God be found in the spaces where we live? Does the Spirit have something to teach us through the lives of people in our neighbourhoods? Thirdly, the *Basis* mentions the "strange" way Christ works. This means that as followers of Jesus we might also be characterised as a strange or "peculiar" people. What does it mean to be a peculiar people today in our practice of evangelism? Fourthly, the *Basis* speaks of listening to contemporary society "in ways which will help [the church] to understand its own nature and mission" (BoU, 11). Listening to the complexities, philosophies and thinking of society can inform an evangelism theology and practice for the UCA.

Evangelism and Our View of God

Theologian Ben Myers suggests that the *Basis* is a "manifesto of evangelism." While this might be seen as a hyperbolic overstatement, evangelism is not just about method or effectiveness, but about theology: what we believe about God. A 2009 UCA Assembly paper describes this link:

Evangelism is that non-coercive practice in which the church as the community of Jesus and in acknowledgement of his Lordship, embodies and proclaims the love and saving grace of the triune God. It does this in following Jesus' way in its witness, worship and service. Bound to the way and purposes of the crucified One, the church must never allow its evangelistic practices to be predatory or violent, but always wanting the ultimate welfare of the "other." Evangelism is to be distinguished from "proselytism" in that it takes place in faith sharing episodes that are separate from coercion. Every evangelistic endeavour must be reflective of God's self-giving in Jesus (1 Cor. 2: 2).¹¹

We can see in this assertion a particular theology of God: self-giving, sacrificial and never "predatory or violent." Thus, one would imagine that evangelistic practices in the UCA would reflect this God; our evangelism will be cruciform. The Assembly papers continues: "By faithfully being the church in praise and petition, the church indicates to itself and to the world who is at the centre of its life and to whom it looks for ultimate meaning (Eph 1:11-12). The church's evangelistic work must never be adrift from this theological foundation." ¹²

This is clearly a critique of a typical Evangelical style of evangelism which, as alluded to previously, many in the UCA find distasteful, and is linked to colonisation and imperialism. The ways in which other cultures have been subjugated and disempowered as a result of evangelistic practices are well known and generally recognised today. Wakka Wakka woman and Aboriginal Christian leader Brooke Prentis writes, "The Australia

See Rodney Clapp, A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1996).

¹⁰ Ben Myers, cited in Foye, "Evangelism," 2018.

Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, "Worksheet 7: Evangelism: Evangelism: Yes or No?," Doc.bytes: Discussion starters offered by the National Working Group on Doctrine, 2009, https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/336.

¹² UCA Assembly, "Worksheet 7: Evangelism.

that is 231/119 years old, I suggest, has created a colonial Jesus." As a result, "Aboriginal peoples who identify as Christian are not sitting in the institutional church each Sunday – Aboriginal Christians are exiles from the Australian church." This critique resonates with the view of God in the 2009 statement as non-violent and, by extension, non-colonising.

Evangelism as Witness

There is also a strong view expressed in the 2009 Assembly statement that a key element of evangelism is a life of witness. That statement, "The most evangelistic thing that the church can do is to be the Body of Christ," implies evangelism is about words (proclamation) *as well as* deeds and presence. The *Basis* states: "The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshiping and witnessing life of the Church" (BoU, 5). Evangelism, then, emerges from the people of God practicing a life of witness. As I write in my book *Urban Spirituality*, "In the same way that God loved us by putting on flesh and 'showing up' in the world, we also need to embody the gospel in our neighborhoods." In this way, we exhibit an incarnational faith that fleshes out what we believe about God.

This connects with UCA's emphasis on acts of justice. Mark Zirnsak writes: "From its foundation in 1977, the UCA embraced, on theological grounds, social justice as part of its mission." He quotes Dutney:

In a literal sense, the Basis of Union does not call us to do justice through the specific use of the word "justice." What it does do is call the church to be constantly renewed in faith and mission. It is this that provides the theological impetus for the Uniting Church's commitment to social justice.¹⁷

A life of witness means living out values of justice and kindness – a "faithful presence." Witness therefore is evangelistic, in that it points to the coming kin-dom and gives opportunity to share why we live out our values. 18

Evangelism principles that can inform a model for evangelism

I will now flesh out these peculiarities of UCA theology and practice of evangelism: church as missional; God as sacrificial, self-giving, non-violent and non-colonising; and evangelism as witness and proclamation – by identifying seven principles based in a UCA theology of evangelism that will help shape a practical model for evangelism.

¹³ Brooke Prentis, "Dangerous Memories," in Not in Kansas Anymore: Christian Faith in a Post-Christian World, eds Michael Frost, Darrell Jackson and David Starling (Macquarie Park: Morling Press, 2020), 165.

¹⁴ UCA Assembly, "Worksheet 7: Evangelism.

Karina Kreminski, Urban Spirituality: Embodying God's Mission in the Neighborhood (Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2018), 226.

Mark Zirnsak, "Social Justice in the Uniting Church in Australia 1999 to 2022," Uniting Church Studies 25, no. 1 (June 2023), 25, https://illuminate.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/23947.

¹⁷ Andrew Dutney, "Does the Basis of Union call us to do justice?" in *Doing Justice. Stories of hope from everyday believers*, ed. Rosemary Hudson Miller and Nancy Victorin-Vangerud (Sydney: Assembly of the UCA, 2003), 16, cited in Zirnsak, "Social Justice," 25.

¹⁸ Zirnsak, "Social Justice," 25.

Non-coercive: non-predatory or non-violent

Evangelism is not to be coercive, defined as "the use of force to persuade someone to do something that they are unwilling to do." Typically, in many forms of evangelism, Christians have implied (or threatened) that those who do not follow Christianity will "go to hell." Moreover, the apostle Paul writes, "My message and my preaching were not marked by *persuasive words of human wisdom*," possibly implying there was caution needed with the use of "persuasion" in the way it was practiced in the culture of his time. Our Christian culture could also be accused of occasionally engaging in "feverish sales talk" to convince or persuade people about the primacy of Christianity, as though it were some kind of product. The words "non-predatory" and "non-violent" in the 2009 statement flesh this out somewhat. "Predatory" conjures up images of "hunting" and "exploitation." Evangelism is never to take advantage of the other or to use force, whether harsh force or more subtle manipulation and misplaced persuasion.

Not Proselytising

It is bold of the 2009 statement to say evangelism is not proselytising and to make a distinction between the two. To proselytise is "to try to persuade someone to change their religious or political beliefs or way of living to your own."²³ How can we evangelise without proselytising? One possibility is to realise we are a "pilgrim people on the way," and so we each have only a snapshot of the truth. When we evangelise we do so humbly and with the knowledge that we do not know all things. We might even learn from "contemporary society," as the *Basis* states, if we are open to experiencing "mission in reverse."²⁴ This means that, in the same way we might desire our truth to transform others' lives, we also accept being transformed by others' wisdom – a certain kind of mutual transformation.

Embodying and proclaiming the love of God

The emphasis on the love of God is crucial here as it keeps followers of Jesus accountable to speaking and acting within the parameters of God's love. It is also about being motivated by the love of God. The balance between proclaiming and embodying is important as our culture desires authenticity, so our words and actions must match. As Morey says,

As we move deeper into a post-Christian twenty-first century, the people of God will need to rediscover the power of an embodied apologetic. By this I mean an apologetic that is based more on the weight of our actions than the strength of our arguments. This is an apologetic that

^{19 &#}x27;Coercion', Cambridge Dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/coercion.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:4.

²¹ Paul used persuasion, however he did not use it in the same way as the Sophists of his time. Rather than using clever or sometimes manipulative rhetoric, he relied on the power of God to persuade his hearers. This would indicate he was ambiguous or cautious about the practice of persuasion – a caution that we should equally use today. See Duane Liftin, Paul's Theology of Preaching: The Apostle's Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2015), 263.

²² UCA Assembly, "Worksheet 7: Evangelism."

²³ "Proselytizing," Cambridge Dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/proselytizing.

Anthony Gittins, Bread for the Journey: The Mission of Transformation and Transformation of Mission (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 12.

is high-touch, engages people relationally, ordinarily takes place in the context of an ongoing friendship, and addresses the needs inquirers have and the questions they pose.²⁵

Faith-sharing

Faith-sharing is a gentle and attractive image when referring to evangelism. It invokes the picture of a generous banquet table with nourishing produce that anyone can take because it is being offered with "no strings attached." It conjures up images of participating with others in the taking of the "food" we have put on the table if they choose to. To share is to offer, to participate with and to give freely to others for nourishment. There is a clear element of hospitality here that can see the roles of guest and host overturned as we practice mutuality and "mission in reverse." Again to draw on my book, *Urban Spiritualty*, I discuss how hospitality can shape communities through small, ordinary acts:

Hospitality is not simply about entertainment. But from a Christian perspective it must run deeper in that we show love, welcome and acceptance towards those who we bump into everyday in our neighbourhoods. As we do this, we can bring healing, reconciliation and justice to our world through small acts of hospitality in our community. Hospitality does not have to be expressed in monumental acts. When we hear words such as healing, reconciliation and justice, these sometimes tend to sit as abstract and large concepts in our minds. We can localise these values by practicing them in a small, yet radical way in our community.²⁶

The practice of "faith-sharing" can be framed as engaging with people about faith from a posture of hospitality.

Self-giving

Evangelism is self-giving: it is cruciform. Gorman defines cruciformity as

an ongoing pattern of living in Christ and of dying with him that produces a Christ-like (cruciform) person. Cruciform existence is what being Christ's servant, indwelling him and being indwelt by him, living with and for and 'according to' him, is all about, for both individuals and communities.²⁷

Applied to evangelism, it means embodying the *kenosis* practiced by Jesus: letting go of our ego and placing others' needs first. This does not mean letting go of our agency, but using our discernment to sense the Spirit at work in others' lives and participating with the desires of Christ in that moment. UCA theology has a strong emphasis on discernment of the Spirit; in evangelism, this means we humbly recognise that God is at work in others' lives and practice being facilitators of the Spirit as we step back and create space for them to encounter God. We are all pilgrims "on the way."

²⁵ Tim Morey, *Embodying our Faith: Becoming a Living, Sharing, Practicing Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 40.

²⁶ Kreminski, *Urban Spirituality*, 57–58.

²⁷ Michael J. Gorman, Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 48-49.

"Be" the body of Christ: faithful presence

The *Basis* places emphasis on living a life of witness. The means "being" the body of Christ – the church in the world – and as people see our good works they will be drawn to this light. James Davison Hunter calls this "faithful presence." Appealing to the Incarnation, he writes:

For the Christian, if there is human flourishing, in a world such as ours, it begins with God's word of love becoming flesh in us, is embodied in us, enacted through us and a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks, to the realities to which we speak and the realities to which we the church point. In all, presence and place matter decisively.²⁸

Evangelism must be characterised by faithful presence in the places where we work, live, socialise and worship.

Resist Empire

The 2009 Assembly paper speaks of not complying with any "alien Lordship." Evangelism is not to be conscripted by any state, political or institutional power. This includes the institution of the church. It should also not be driven by a culture of marketing and consumerism. As mentioned, the UCA holds strongly to a theology and practice of justice. This sits well with the UCA practice of evangelism, which opposes the forces of injustice and evil in the world and the church, and in doing so proclaims Christ. In this sense we are a "strange" people who follow the "strange ways" of Christ. We are an alternative to the powers of Empire in our world: "a militant and triumphalistic attitude runs counter to a humble, patient and cruciform posture, which is more Christlike and representative of the early church." 29

A Model for Today: "Soft Evangelism"

In this section, I will relate these seven peculiarities of a theology and practice of evangelism in the UCA to my experience as a UCA minister in the inner city. I offer my experience as a "model" or guide for soft evangelism in the UCA. This model is not a one-size-fits-all; all models must be contextualised and require practitioners to think missiologically for their own context. My hope is that, as the seven principles are fleshed out in other contexts, more models will emerge that could also be used as case studies for evangelism in the UCA, allowing us to ask challenging questions around what is and isn't working and to identify patterns. This process can continually be refined as more case studies eventuate.

The term "soft evangelism" follows Volf's "soft difference." The implication is an evangelistic practice that is moderate, involving permeable boundaries, mutuality between "missionary" and missional context, and a contextual approach, in line with the seven peculiarities of UCA evangelism.

²⁸ James Davison Hunter, To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 241.

²⁹ Karina Kreminski, "Humility, Embodiment and Contextualisation: Missional and Homemaking Opportunities for the Cultivation of Shalom by the Church in Exile," in Not in Kansas Anymore, 152.

³⁰ Volf coined this term in his 1995 essay, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," Ex Auditu 10 (1994): 15-30.

I understand that the term soft evangelism will be unappetising for some. We live in polarised times and many today call for a more hardline approach in a confusing world. The cry is for certainty and for a harder, rather than gentler, approach to truth. I disagree. A soft approach does not mean a weak approach. In fact, it requires even more strength, confidence and courage. This is different to being hard – polarising, aggressive and deaf to context.

A soft approach resonates with an eco-feminist perspective and a culture that calls for us to "walk gently" on the earth. Victoria Loorz, in *Church of the Wild*, calls for Christ followers to see themselves as a part of nature rather than its overlords:

The early Jesus movement, born out of the Hebrew culture, was what Howard-Brook calls a "religion of creation:" a faith in which sacred encounters happen on Earth, in mountains, rivers, and wilderness. And it had pushed back against exploitation by empires for generations. Jewish prophets portrayed a lush and harmonious relationship with the land and animals. Yahweh sent people away from cities and into the wilderness again and again.³¹

Loorz adds:

God as the Patriarch. Christ as the Lord. God as the King. Christ as the One and Only Word. These are all metaphors or images created by people (well, men) at particular times in history to define relationship with sacred reality. These are metaphors that made sense to people who were ruled by violent, imperial monarchs – people who depended on the whims of lords and property owners for their survival. These metaphors also conveniently helped those in charge to legitimate and enforce their power.³²

Ecotheologian Sallie McFague calls on us to construct new images and metaphors relevant to our times. We must experiment with images other than the "hard" royalist, triumphalist ones of past eras, drawing instead on "soft" images that express the ecological interdependencies of life³³ rather than seeing nature as something to exploit.

From my recent experience of sharing my faith in Surry Hills, and based on the history and peculiarities of the UCA, a soft evangelism approach would be appropriate, contextual and effective as we reimagine faith-sharing in contemporary Australia. I turn now to reflecting on this experience.

³¹ Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2001), 118.

³² Loorz, Church of the Wild, 123-125.

³³ Sallie McFague, "Imaging a Theology of Nature: The World as God's Body," in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, ed. Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 208–209, 211.

Sharing Faith: A Memoir

I have been engaging in my community of Surry Hills, an inner-city Sydney suburb, for nine years. I have wrestled with whether what I am doing is evangelism. I am ambivalent about the term and feel awkward and embarrassed about the way it has previously been practiced. A friend in our community who identifies as atheist asked me once, "Will you be upset if you don't get any converts here in Surry Hills?" (She used "converts" disparagingly.) Another woman who runs a local organisation I am now a part of, after telling her I was a minister, warned me when I first started volunteering, "Everything will be fine as long as you don't proselytise here." And a key member of the community, also an adamant atheist, shared with me about an experience I would consider spiritual. When I asked him whether the experience could have been God, he was offended.

What does evangelism look like in this challenging context? Would a "hard" approach work? What does it mean to listen and be responsive to my context and yet be confident about my identity as a Christ-follower and about the good news I carry? Despite my ambivalence, I feel strongly about sharing the good news. But I want to share it in a way that draws people in. As author Madeleine L'Engle says, "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."³⁴

In post-Christendom, the sender is God, not the church (*Missio Dei*); territory is irrelevant – all are "sent" into their local contexts; and agents of mission are not a chosen few – all Christians are sent into our world. Lastly, mission is not about saving souls and growing the church, but about bringing reconciliation to a whole world. This includes justice, ecology, sexuality and honouring First Nations through decolonisation.³⁵ This is the missiological basis for the evangelistic practices I have engaged with in my own neighbourhood.

Sentness and place

As I go about my daily life, I see myself as being sent into my neighbourhood – not as someone specially ordained for the task but as a part of the church sent into the world. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). As I embody the values of the kin-dom of God, the point is not to grow the church but to participate with what God is already doing in my neighbourhood, to work for its flourishing and to create space for people to encounter God. More and more, I have come to realise that place matters to God. Too often our faith is disembodied and disconnected from our bodies and the places where we live. The realisation for me has been that God has placed me in my neighbourhood and that I am to be a faithful presence. Initially I had felt led to start a church in the neighbourhood, however I then felt God saying, "Simply go to where the people are and love them."

Indigenous traditions have much to teach us about the interdependence between spirituality and place. Aboriginal Elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann shares about the practice of *dadirri* or deep listening

³⁴ Madeleine L'Engle, Madeleine L'Engle Herself: Reflections on a Writing Life (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2001), page unknown.

³⁵ Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, Worship and Mission after Christendom (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 36-53.

in her tradition. This practice grounds us deeply in place or country. In thinking about contextualised evangelism, we can learn from these practices stemming from the land in which we are placed by our Creator.³⁶

The Happiness Lab

I have made myself available to the people in my community and joined local organisations that work for the good of the neighbourhood. I have run programs such as The Happiness Lab, aimed at generating discussion about living a flourishing life. This was though our local Neighbourhood Centre and, while the course did not include explicitly Christian content, it described broad values that are Christian such as forgiveness, compassion and relationships. In this safe space, the participants – most of them not identifying as Christian – could explore spirituality and faith.

The Sunday Gathering

These conversations eventually led my husband and I to invite people into our home monthly on Sundays to discuss spirituality and meaning-making. In these conversations we resist "persuasion, proselytising and coercion" and are open to mutual transformation ("reverse mission"). We are aware that our Christian history is filled with stories of colonisation and that "missionary" is seen as a derogatory word. We wrestle with terminology such as "spiritual," "sacred" and "faith." What do these terms mean in a context where people have no language for these concepts that are so normative for Christians? How do we connect people to the sacred when there is a lack of perception regarding spiritual matters in our Western context? In his most recent book, Charles Taylor defines spiritual as

connected with the ethical in the widest and deepest sense – that is, with the full good life, realized life, fulfilled life; life as it was "meant to be;" where that expressions can be used literally, with reference to some creator god or spiritual, or lese as a place-holder for whatever the full good life is – what out nature or being calls on us to be.³⁷

This is a broad definition but a necessary one as a first step in conversations with people who are not familiar with words such as "faith" and "spirituality," and who recoil from these terms in a culture of efficiency, pragmatism and utilitarianism. Yet we have found in our gatherings that there is a desire for "something more than this" and for connections with "the sacred" through wonder, awe and transcendence.

Loorz translates "Word" in John 1:1 as *Conversation*. She believes that imagining "Christ as conversation" shifts our hard metaphor of God towards a softer one. She describes conversation as "not just a way to pass information back and forth like a computer," but about "forming a relationship where listening and responding is not just the medium of connection; it is connection." We try to practice connection in our Sunday discussions rather than simple transactions of information.

³⁶ "Dadirri: A Reflection by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann," Dadirri Disability Services, 2002, https://www.dadirri.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Dadirri-Inner-Deep-Listening-M-R-Ungunmerr-Bauman-Refl1.pdf.

³⁷ Charles Taylor, Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2024), 593.

³⁸ Loorz, Church of the Wild, 97.

Our practice is based around hospitality – faith-sharing in a participatory, soft way – so that we each share what we believe and respond to this through conversation, clarification, good humour and curiosity rather than judgment.

Winter Solstice

Instead of imposing our Christian rituals on our friends, we try to enter into their world of festivals and "secular" liturgies. We held a winter solstice gathering in our home and asked: "What fond memories do you have of winter in your childhood?" "What do you love and not love about winter?" "What does winter speak to us about in our lives?" Within these questions we went deeper into talking about faith and spirituality with a group of people for whom these words are alien. Missiologist Steve Taylor examined three community festivals: "a harvest festival in Scotland, a Blessing of the Fleece service at a craft festival in Australia and a neighbourhood festival in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The intention [was] not to be exhaustive but to consider several examples of churches connecting with God's ongoing work of creation." How can we enter the world of the other rather than expect them to initially enter our own?

Connecting people to God, not church

From these conversations and events, we were able to talk further with people about the story of God. Some have decided to attend church; others remain in our regular gatherings and do not feel the need to go to church. We believe the Spirit of God is at work in their lives and ours as we learn together about life, meaning, faith and God. We have tried to be an expression of a movement that returns to "more organic structures, high relational values, incarnation and agility," as exhibited in the early church.⁴⁰ We have tried to exist "for the world in solidarity with the world," as opposed to separating ourselves from the world as a faith community. We try to be present with and for people in our community without being tokenistic, colonising or patronising; we view us all as "pilgrims on the way," working out the meaning of life together, engaging with the Sacred.⁴¹

We practice a low ecclesiology but a high missiology and Christology. In this we recognise that no church can be everything. We know of churches that have a high ecclesiology and we are grateful for them. This is the advantage of adopting a mixed ecology perspective: different forms of churches are needed for a diverse and complex culture.

Many questions emerge from this experience of faith-sharing. The next section addresses some of these.

³⁹ Steve Taylor, "Ordinary-Time Festivals: An Application of Wisdom Ecclesiology," Theology Today 81, no. 4 (2024), 380-392: 384.

⁴⁰ Ed Olsworth-Peter, Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting an Integrated Church (London: SPCK Publishing, 2024), 20.

⁴¹ Amy Plantinga Pauw, Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 34.

Remaining questions

Is evangelism ethical?

Through my time in the neighbourhood, I have wrestled with the question of the "ethics" of evangelism. In a recent article in *Christianity Today*, ⁴² young adults who were interviewed shared that they are open to spirituality and faith but dislike the methods of faith-sharing we use as Christians, and even question the ethics of faith-sharing. I think we need to explore this further. What has made us seem unethical to others? What is the balance between sharing our faith and wanting others to "come to know Jesus?" Are we agents of God, or friends of our neighbourhoods and communities, or both? How do we encourage people to encounter God within their own frameworks of faith/no-faith and spirituality?

Should we use the word evangelism?

The question also remains as to whether we continue to use the word evangelism at all, since it has pejorative connotations – the very reason the UCA distanced itself from the practice in the first place. Should we, as the before-mentioned *Christianity Today* article suggests, "Bring the evangel, leave the 'ism'?" Perhaps we should simply use the term faith-sharing. Yet a deeper part of me wants to redeem certain words that link us with our tradition, for all the good it has done, despite mistakes made. Can the word evangelism be redeemed? This is a question we must answer. As we do so we go gently, softly, yet with conviction into our contexts to proclaim Christ.

Where are the spaces to facilitate wonder?

An important aspect of evangelism that resonates with UCA theology is discernment of the Spirit. This should mean discerning the Spirit not only in the church but also in the world. If we are going to connect with people who are unfamiliar with the language of the spiritual, we need to create more spaces, resources and conversations to help them connect with faith and spirituality on their terms and in language they feel comfortable with. UCA theologian Ian Robinson's resource, *Makes you Wonder*, is helpful for this. It asks, "Where can we see God at work in others' lives? How can we interpret that to help them to see how BIG God is? What is happening around them that bears the fingerprints of God? Some voices speak of a pattern or purpose emerging in their life." Australian musician Nick Cave finds music helpful for connecting to the sacred and experiencing "genuine moments of transcendence". Through music, a "fundamental spiritual shift of consciousness can happen. At best, it can conjure a sacred space." Recent research shows that, more than ever, people are willing to use the word "spiritual" to describe themselves and the activities they engage in. As Christianity decreases in popularity, the identification with "spiritual" indicates a curious perspective on the word:

⁴² Janel Breitenstein, "Bring the Evangel, Leave the 'ism'", October 17, 2024, https://www.christianitytoday. com/2024/10/evangelism-strategies-youth-gen-z-faith-how-to-share-gospel/.

⁴³ Ian Robinson, "Help a friend see the spiritual stuff", Makes You Wonder 2: Conversations about Your Story, https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/media/tynjxzdx/myw2-your-story.pdf, 3.

⁴⁴ Nick Cave and Seán O'Hagan, Faith, Hope and Carnage (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022), 24, 80.

Yes, spiritual people value being connected to their authentic selves, but they still find deep meaning in connections – whether with nature or the human community. For many, these connections are what they define as "spiritual," and in the Australian context, they seem more down to earth and relational rather than being "out there," transcendent, or other-worldly.⁴⁵

We can keep inviting people to church and they may or may not come. However, what we need more of is an incarnational ("go to them") as opposed to attractional ("come to us") approach. We need to meet people where they are at. Eventually, the Spirit of Christ might lead them into faith and perhaps even into the church.⁴⁶

Conclusion

As we identify and interrogate the threads of evangelism found in the *Basis* and in UCA theology more broadly, we might be surprised to find that a case for the practice of "soft evangelism" emerges. Rather than defining evangelism by what the UCA is not, we must define it by what it is. We have rejected certain manipulative practices when it comes to faith-sharing; we can now build on who we are and what we value. People in the UCA have a desire to practice evangelism in a way that is consistent with its history, learnings and theology: non-violent, not manipulative, resisting empire, embodying the love of God and humble; an approach that resists proselytising and focuses instead on witnessing in word and deed. Living out soft evangelism in our local contexts would provide a way for people in the UCA to unashamedly share their faith with conviction, contextualised for a world that needs to hear the good news.

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⁴⁵ Andrew Singleton, Anna Halafoff and Rosie Shorter, "The meaning of 'spirituality' among Australian adults: Connections to self, community and beyond," December 6, 2024, https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-meaning-of-spirituality-among-australian-adults/104695486.

⁴⁶ Janel Breitenstein, "Bring the Evangelism, Leave the 'ism'", October 17, 2024, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/10/evangelism-strategies-youth-gen-z-faith-how-to-share-gospel/; and Singleton et al., "The meaning of 'spirituality".

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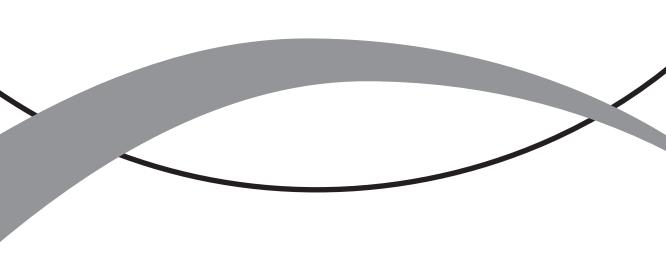
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