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SALVATION, DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM

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Editorial

Geoff Thompson

Welcome to the first online issue of *Uniting Church Studies*. As explained in the previous issue of the Journal, the intention of transitioning to an online and fully open-access publication is to increase access to the scholarship which the Journal publishes, reduce production costs, and decrease the Journals' environmental impact. It will take some time for the full scope of this move to be realised. We will continue to develop the online format, build the online archive, and enhance our online visibility and profile. Many thanks are due to our typesetter, Felix Oppen, for the work he has done in fine-tuning the style and format for online purposes. And, very importantly, many thanks to Adrian Jackson, the eLearning Co-ordinator at Pilgrim Theological College, who has co-ordinated the technological dimensions of setting up the website. Thanks also to Pilgrim Theological College for freeing up Adrian to do this work.

Five of the six themed articles in this issue were first presented at the online seminar, "Salvation, Discipleship and Evangelism," held on October 23rd 2024 and hosted by *Uniting Church Studies*. The authors were invited to address this theme – and the interconnections built into it – from the perspective of their own interests and expertise. The seminar provided an opportunity for them to test their ideas with their fellow presenters and to allow that process to inform the final versions of the papers which appear here. The result is a very rich set of reflections, shaped variously by theological, cultural and practical considerations. As a number of the authors point out, "salvation" and "evangelism" bear heavy burdens in the Uniting Church, often provoking discomfort and/or suspicion.

Sally Douglas offers a mix of exegetical and doctrinal considerations to draw our attention to the variety of understandings of salvation present both in the New Testament and proclamation of the church in its early centuries. Wrestling with and appropriating this variety is, for Douglas, one tool for opening greater engagement with salvation and its link to evangelism. Sathianathan Clarke focuses on "discipleship" in the context of a "multireligious" world. Drawing on the doctrine of the Trinity as a template for a theology of religions, he sketches a vision of discipleship shaped by a non-competitive relationship between the particularity of Christian proclamation and interfaith hospitality. Graham Hill also addresses the theme in the context of wider global concerns by placing some of the relevant theological commitments of the Uniting Church within the framework of the increasingly significant discipline of "world Christianity." Hill argues that there is much within the Uniting Church's theology and practice which offers significant potential to shape evangelism in the contemporary pluralist world.

The next two papers bring some of the concrete realities of local and national cultures to bear on the topic. Karina Kreminski explores the idea of "soft evangelism." Employing a "memoir theology" approach, she draws on her own experiences in of faith sharing the inner Sydney suburb of Surrey Hills to articulate an understanding of mission liberated from some of its negative legacies, whilst also continuing to wrestle with the questions that these experiences have raised. Cyrus Kung invites us to wrestle with the social and cultural marginality that the Uniting Church shares with most mainline Churches of the West. He presents this not as something to be resisted, but as invitation for the Church to be engage with the marginality of Jesus.

Drawing on various statements of the Uniting Church and the work of various contemporary theologians, he sketches ideas of "in between" and "marginal theology" as a framework for contemporary mission.

In various ways, each of these papers acknowledges the way colonisation has shadowed understandings and practices of salvation, discipleship and evangelism in this country. The sixth of the themed papers explicitly brings an Indigenous voice to the conversation. Although invited to present at the seminar, Aunty Denise Champion and Uncle Ken Sumner chose to offer a reflection on the theme which would emerge from their own conversations in their own style. Writing with Rosemary Dewerse, they bring to the fore some of the unhealed wounds which salvation and evangelism, mixed with colonisation and racism, have left in their wake. They also bring their own wisdom to the conversation. It is salutary to read this paper alongside the other five.

In the one General Article in this issue Robert Gribben responds to Stephen Burns' article, "Manual Acts, Mass Confusion?" published in the June 2024 issue of the Journal. Gribben shares some of Burns' concern that liturgical practices in the Uniting Church risk rendering congregations confused about what is happening at celebrations of communion and to adopting the posture of an "audience." Nevertheless Gribben resists Burns analysis of Gribben's own role in the development of these risks. He proposes a wider history of reasons for the current situation, and constructively proposes complementary roles for presider and congregations. He also articulates his concern that Uniting Church's capacity for the oversight and development of shared liturgical wisdom is institutionally very limited. He fears that this restricts the kind of attention that is needed fully to address Burns' legitimate concerns.

The focus of the series on United and Uniting Churches in this issue is the Uniting Church in Sweden. Founded in 2012, it is the one of the most recent Uniting Churches to be formed. Strikingly, not only was its mix of uniting Churches quite distinctive, the theology and cultural forces that brought the Church into being were not dependent on those of the mid-twentieth century unions, shaped as they were by that century's ecumenical movement. The article has been written by Erik Lennestål who occupies the unique position of being a minister of the Uniting Church in Sweden but working in the Uniting Church in Australia. His knowledge of both Churches has enabled him to clearly explain the distinctiveness of the UCS to a UCA audience, not least in helping the UCA to appreciate reasons for union other than those which generated its own.

The Book Forum in this issue attends to Renie Chow Choy's 2021 book, *Ancestral Feeling: Postcolonial Thoughts on Western Christian Heritage*. Choy's book has generated a significant amount of commentary. Employing biographical, historical and postcolonial tools, she critically analyses the reality of the "feeling" that non-Western Christians in colonised contexts have for the Western Christian heritage and how that feeling is often ignored in accounts of the Western heritage, which is in fact, no longer just the property of the West. Although Choy's own context, and that of the book, is that of Anglicanism, the three Uniting Church respondents – Sunny Chen, Joy Han and John Flett – indicate how the book resonates with realities which shape the life of the Uniting Church and its context. At the same time, sparking off Choy's book, they identify other issues which are sharpened in and by this particular colonised context. Choy has herself responded, with much appreciation and careful engagement, to her three Australian-based readers.

The issue concludes with two book reviews. Te Aroha Rountree reviews *Pacific Well-being: (Is)lands, Theologies, Worldviews* edited by Jione Havea. Predominantly pitching to a Maori readership, Rountree's observations are a challenge to a Uniting Church readership to better understand the perspective of our near neighbours. My own review of Hanna Reichel's *After Method: Queer Grace, Conceptual Design and the Possibility of Theology* suggests that engagement with this book is important to the ongoing relationship in the Uniting Church between doctrinal/systematic and contextual theologies.

Salvation as Liberation: (Re)Imagining Hope in a Time of Crisis

Sally Douglas

Abstract

It is not uncommon for people in the Uniting Church to avoid discussion of salvation and to recoil from evangelisation. In part, this occurs because ideas of salvation that focus on sin and atonement are considered questionable, or potentially harmful, by many. This is problematic. The problem is not that people are uncomfortable with a soteriology that focuses on sin and sacrifice. Rather the issue is that people have not been made aware of the diversity of New Testament and early church understandings of salvation. In this paper the soteriological understanding of Jesus' liberation from cosmic evil will be discussed and investigated for potential resources for responding seriously to the myriad threats to flourishing that face humanity and the earth.

Introduction

"I am an atheist. Why are churches full of crosses? I can't stand all this talk of sacrifice." This was how a stranger responded when they discovered that I was a Uniting Church minister. Surveying our architecture, our artwork, and the language of many of our hymns and worship songs, it is understandable to assume that sacrifice is the integral feature of Christianity. Indeed, in Protestant circles often the impression is given that sacrifice – regularly accompanied by ideas of sin and atonement – is at the heart of understandings of Christian salvation. This is problematic. While there are Uniting Church people for whom a soteriology of sacrifice is meaningful and life-giving, there are many, both lay and ordained, who recoil from this construction of salvation. The idea of God requiring God's Son to sacrifice his life, in order to appease God's wrath, or to fulfil the requirements of divine justice, is as abhorrent to them as it was to the person I conversed with. However, the problem is not that many people within and beyond the church reject this construction of soteriology. After all, the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed make no mention of atonement theology, as they seek to safeguard the core foundations of Christian faith. Rather, the issue is that people within the church have not been given access to the diversity of understandings of salvation embedded within the New Testament. It is a false dichotomy to assume that people must choose between accepting a form of sacrificial soteriology or rejecting convictions that in Christ Jesus there is salvation. Earliest understandings of soteriology are complex and dynamic. In the pages that follow one of these soteriological understandings will be retrieved and explored. In the earliest church salvation was commonly understood to be accomplished through Jesus' liberation of humanity, or all things, from cosmic evil. While, perhaps, far removed from contemporary Uniting Church proclamations of faith, it will be demonstrated that within this soteriology there are resources for responding with seriousness, vitality, and hope to the diffuse threats to flourishing that confront our global village and the very earth.

What's soteriology have to do with it?

Soteriology matters. There is a direct relationship between constructions of salvation and the potentiality of evangelism. If we have convictions that make sense within our lived experience, about how Jesus is good news, we will find it easy to tell about it. However, if we cannot abide the theology of salvation that we have inherited, and have nothing, or little, to replace this with, we will struggle to find words to share about why there are good tidings in Jesus the Christ – even if we sense that this to be true. Instead, we will be tempted to define our faith by what we do not believe: "we are not like them"; or "we don't believe those old ideas about the cross"; or "it is not about sacrifice". Such statements may be authentic, and integral to our ecclesial identity and sense of belonging. However, these words offer little in the way of hope to those within and beyond the church who are trying to make it through the day, are enduring tragedy, or who are wondering if life has any meaning.

Despite narrow preoccupations in recent centuries, the seismic intrusion of the Christ event could never be contained by one theology of salvation. This is reflected within the New Testament. The incarnation, the disruptive teaching and healing, the non-retaliatory dying, and the shocking and peace-bestowing resurrection of Jesus defy the bounds of one neat summation of why this is salvific. Alongside cultivating communities of rigorous engagement, contemplation, and testimony,[1] it behoves us at this time to wrestle afresh with questions of soteriology. Through inviting people into the richness of early Christian soteriologies, we may yet discover resources for giving language and imagery to the hope that stirs within us.

Is it queasiness about the blood?

The arguments in favour of atonement theologies are well rehearsed and need little explication.[2] However, as noted above, for many theologians and congregants, theories of atonement are increasingly unsatisfactory. This concern is not simply due to Western, or middle class, sensibilities that recoil from ideas of self-sacrifice, nor is this the result of squeamishness about the blood. Rather theologians from diverse contexts demonstrate that this soteriology does not adequately address the problem of evil. In contrast, this understanding of salvation often provides the foundation for violence, particularly violence against women and other minorities, to be legitimised and emboldened. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza observes, in relation to Anselmian framings of soteriology:

> If one extols the silent and freely chosen suffering of Christ, who was "obedient to death" (Phil. 2:8), as an example to be imitated by all those victimized by patriarchal oppression, particularly by those suffering from domestic and sexual abuse, one not only legitimates but also enables acts of violence against women and children. [3]

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[1] For further discussion of rigorous engagement, contemplation, and testimony see my article "Say What? The Ineffable within the Theological Culture of the Uniting Church" *Uniting Church Studies,* vol 26, No. 1. (2024). 7–16.

[2] It is important to note that there are diverse understandings of sacrifice in both Old and New Testament texts. While some New Testament texts may reflect understandings of atonement as salvation, many do not. Furthermore, constructions of atonement theology are diverse within the Christian tradition.

[3] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM Press, 1995), 106.

For nearly one thousand years, deeply influenced by Anselm (b. 1033 C.E.), a soteriology of sacrifice has dominated the imagination of Western Christianity. However the impacts of this soteriology are not culturally bound. Over the last millennia, this construction of theology has spread around the globe, especially in more recent centuries, due it pivotal place in the modern missionary movement, aligned as it was to European colonisation. Reflecting on the impacts of this theology in the Philippines, Virginia Fabella states:

> In the course of time and movement across cultures, the positive meanings of Jesus' death became lost or distorted. In the Philippines, we have developed (or inherited) a dead-end theology of the cross with no resurrection or salvation in sight. Most of the women who sing the "pasyon" during Holy Week look upon the passion and death of Jesus as ends in themselves and actually relish being victims. This attitude is not uncommon among other women outside the "pasyon" singers, and it is not helped when priests reinforce the attitude through their homilies.[4]

Similarly Chung Hyun Kyun observes the way in which Jesus' suffering is employed to justify the suffering of women:

> The church's teachings about Jesus are very similar to what Asian women's fathers, husbands, and brothers say to them, rather than what Jesus actually says in the gospels. The church tells Asian women: "Be obedient and patient as Jesus was to his heavenly father. He endured suffering and death on the cross. That is what good Christian women are supposed to do. When you go through all the suffering, you too, like Jesus, will have a resurrection someday in heaven…"[5]

Despite the contemporary prevalence of soteriologies that hinge on sacrifice, when Anselm was writing he was intentionally seeking to displace dominant understandings of soteriology that had held sway since the earliest church. In doing so, Anselm was seeking to bring the shocking Christ event into dialogue with the problems, and symbolic world, of his own day. In order to be honest and faithful in our own rapidly changing contexts, we need to do this work afresh.

Ransom from cosmic evil within the New Testament and early church

The dominant understanding of salvation in the New Testament, within the earliest church, and for centuries afterwards, was not hinged upon the necessity of sacrifice in order to appease God, or address human sinfulness. Rather, soteriology was centered in Christ's liberating victory from cosmic evil. As Nicholas Lombardo states:

> For the first thousand years of Christianity, the metaphor of ransom supplied the dominant interpretative category for making sense of Christ's crucifixion. By allowing himself to be crucified,

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[4] Virginia Fabella "Christology from an Asian Woman's Perspective" in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women,* ed. E Johnson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 124. Brackets original.

[5] Chung Hyun Kyun "Who is Jesus for Asian Women?" in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women,* ed. E Johnson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 104. For discussion of the impacts of this within the Australian context, see my article '"I desire mercy not sacrifice": How Soteriology Constructs Discipleship – A Test Case', *Colloquium*, December (2019): 44–60.

> it was understood, Christ offered a ransom (in Latin, a *redemptio*), and this ransom liberated humanity from the devil and the powers of sin and death.[6]

We can miss the internal architecture of the metaphor of ransom in the West. In part this is because many recoil from notions of cosmic evil. However, this is also because we are no longer familiar with the realties that lie behind the imagery. Unlike in many parts of this world, in Western countries kidnap and slavery are not daily threats, at least for those who are white, or have immigration papers. Language of ransom is dependent upon the understanding that there are those who are held captive. As in many places in our global village today, within the ancient world kidnap was common place. When the forces of the empire stormed towns or cities, those who were not killed, were regularly made captives, and turned into slaves. In addition to this, when a person fell into debt, they could be made a slave, or if they had the means, and the predilection, they could sell a family member into slavery in their stead. Only if an enslaved person was fortunate enough to have a wealthy patron, relative, or friend, could they be ransomed and released from slavery.

Drawing from the world around them, New Testament writers, again and again, use the language and imagery of ransom in order to give expression to their convictions about Jesus' liberative salvation. This understanding is reflected in Colossians. Here the author proclaims that in the God of Jesus Christ there is victory from these powers for: "He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us to into the Kingdom of his beloved son" (Col 1:13; see also Rev 1:17–18). Likely drawing from a liturgical fragment, the author of 1 Timothy makes a similar proclamation:

> For there is one God;
> There is also one mediator between God and humankind
> Christ Jesus, himself human,
> Who gave himself a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

John the Revelator depicts those before the throne singing a new song to the Lamb, with lyrics that echo this conviction:

> You are worthy to take the scroll and to open it seals,
> For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev 5:9)

The author of Hebrews makes plain that this ransom is understood to be from cosmic evil:

> Since therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. (Heb 2:14–15).

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[6] Nicholas E. Lombardo *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 181. Brackets original.

In Ephesians, the power of these cosmic forces, and the even greater power of salvation in Christ, is graphically depicted:

> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God … (Eph 6:10–13; see also 14–17).

Within the earliest gospel, the theology of ransom from cosmic evil is integral to the proclamation of salvation. After contesting with Satan in the wilderness (Mark 1:12–13), in Mark's Gospel Jesus' first salvific action is to liberate a person from an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21–28). Jesus' power over cosmic evil, that frees people, continues as the dominant theme throughout the Gospel (see Mark 3:20–30; 5:1–20; 6:7; 7:24–30; 9:14–29).[7] In a key dispute with the religious elite about whether he is in league with Satan (and thus able to cast out demons), the Markan Jesus images himself as the One who binds the "strong man" – that is, Satan (Mark 3:20–27).[8] When the Markan Jesus goes on to proclaim his salvific purpose the centrality of ransom is made explicit. After telling the disciples plainly three times that, counter to their hopes for glory, he will be handed over, betrayed, killed, and then raised (see Mark 8:31–33; 9:30–21; 10:32–34), the Markan Jesus states "the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The understanding of Christ's liberation from cosmic forces continues to be integral in the early church. Justin Martyr (b. 100 C.E.) does not elaborate a detailed soteriology, yet his conviction that in Christ Jesus there is salvation is clear. In the *First Apology* Justin writes about the power of demons, and in particular their lies and deceptions, and warns readers that demons "strive to make you their slaves and servants" (*The First Apology*, 14). Justin goes on to make this claim about the experience of Jesus communities we "after our conversion by the Word have separated ourselves from those demons and have attached ourselves to the only unbegotten God, through his Son." (*The First Apology*, 14). Justin then details the salvific impacts of this separation from the demons through Christ. According to Justin, now Jesus communities are freed from the deceptions of idolatry and violence, and begin to live in compassion for one another, even among those who were former enemies (*The First Apology*, 14).

Drawing from the Markan imagery of binding the strong man, Irenaeus (b. 120-140 C.E.) also understands salvation in Christ as being achieved through ransom from cosmic evil (see *Against Heresies*, Book 3.8.2; 18.6–7). With tenderness, Irenaeus describes the impacts of this liberation through Christ. Through this liberation, humanity is led "back to friendship and concord" with God (Against Heresies, Book 3.18.7).

Within his commentary on Romans, Origen (b. 185 C.E.), states:

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[7] See John R Donahue and Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark,* Sacra Pagina Series, Vol 2. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 37.

[8] As Elizabeth Struthers Malbon states "Satan's kingdom is falling, not because it is divided against itself (with Jesus casting out demons form within Satan's domain), but because Satan (as the strong man) has been tied up and his house is being plundered as part of the in-breaking kingdom of God." Elizabeth Struthers Malbon *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 27. Brackets original.

> If then we have been bought at a price, as Paul also confirms, undoubtedly we were bought from someone whose slaves we were, who also demanded the price he wanted so that he might release from his authority those whom he was holding. Now it was the devil who was holding us, to whom we had been dragged by our sins (*Commentary on Romans*, Book 2.13.29.

The centrality of ransom soteriology within Origen's understanding of the good news is reflected throughout his writings (see for example *Commentary on Romans* 3.7.14; 4.11.4; 5.3.7; 5.10.9–12; *Commentary on Matthew*, 16:8; Homily on Exodus 6.9).

The risks of re-engaging with ransom soteriology

It seems likely that discussion of the devil, Satan, or cosmic forces will be even less popular in many Uniting Church circles than discussing atonement theology. There are valid concerns about retrieving this language and imagery. Therefore, it needs to be underscored at the outset that in seeking to reclaim this ancient soteriology, it is not being advocated that we adopt literalist constructions of cosmic evil. When New Testament and early church writers engage with this theological idea they do not do so from a position of quaint superstition or primitive ignorance. Diverse New Testament and early church writers utilise this imagery as they engage with metaphor, symbol, and story. As Lombardo rightly states:

> Patristic authors usually discuss the devil's ransom in homilies and sermons, literary forms in which the use of metaphor is natural and expected, or while commenting on sacred scripture, which itself is replete with metaphor and symbolic language… Consequently, patristic descriptions of the devil's ransom should be taken in a fluid, metaphorical sense, and not as straightforward theological assertions.[9]

While New Testament and early church writers are able to engage with ransom soteriology "in a fluid and metaphorical sense", in recent centuries the pursuit of objective reason, and, an often, reductionist scientific approach have corroded our capacity to engage seriously with the power of symbol and story *as sources* of truth and meaning. Compounding this problem, within popular culture both comical and terrifying images of personified evil proliferate, making it difficult to engage with understandings of cosmic forces with subtlety or maturity. Our hyperlinked technological age further complicates the possibility of serious reclamation and reworking of this ancient cosmology.

Within this multilayered context, the risk of being misinterpreted is extreme. It therefore needs to be explicitly stated that it is not being suggested that we take these forces literally, by trying to identify cosmic evil within people, or institutions, or that we become fixated on cosmic battle. There are significant risks when churches of any, or no, denomination, allow their attention to be focused on the demonic, and ignore the weightier and non-negotiable teachings of Jesus to love God (Mark 12:30; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27), love neighbour (Mark 12:31; Matt 22:39; Luke 10:27), love enemy (see Matt 5:5:43–48; Luke 6:27), and pursue

[9] Lombardo, *The Father's Will*, 209.

justice and mercy (Matt 23:23; see also Matt 9:13; 12:7).[10] Just as early church writers engaged with metaphor and symbol in order to speak of the realities of systemic and experiential evil and the liberative inbreaking of Christ's alternate reign, I am seeking to do the same.

Evil in contemporary contexts and the Johannine Jesus

In our era, in the wake of two World Wars, the Cold War, the climate emergency, contemporary conflicts, unchecked consumerism, the weaponisation of racism, extreme poverty, the expanding power of the obscenely rich, the caustic attention economy, increasing levels of violence directed at women – now amplified due to lurching technological "advances" – and the far reaching dismissal of religious sensibilities, we need robust and rich soteriology that will speak meaningfully into the extraordinary challenges that we face. In short, any construction of salvation in our own contexts needs to seriously address, and equip us in the work of standing against, the realities of evil. That is, not only must Christians directly address the realities of peoples' lived experiences of evil, but also explain why there is hope in Christ. From the perspective of ransom soteriology, there is potential good news to share.

In the process of working more deeply with early church understandings of salvation from cosmic evil, John's Gospel has come into sharp focus. The Johannine Jesus' describes the devil, stating:

> He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

Here it is revealed that lying and violence coalesce as inseparable features of cosmic evil. This claim speaks into the realities of history. Through deception, atrocities are enabled. Over the last century we have seen this at devastating scale. By constructing Jewish people as non-human, the Nazi's were able to convince a nation that millions of people deserved to be tortured and eliminated. In 2025, the Trump presidency has deployed a similar strategy, labelling all people who have entered the United States without papers as "criminals", in order to dehumanise and justify their arrest and expulsion. In these lands called Australia, through the blatant lie of *Terra Nullius* – that this was "land belonging to no one" – the invasion of First Nations countries was legitimated, and as a consequence nations, families, cultures, languages, and traditions were pulverised.

From the global, let us to turn to the local and consider the lies and violence that saturate our own lives. The advertising industry bombards us with the message that we are not enough, and that in order to be whole, we need to consume or experience the new "new" at each and every each moment. We are now so drenched in the mechanism of this lie that we have taken to manufacturing the deceptions ourselves on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok. People endlessly feel pressure to perform, presenting a glossy image, while tucking away their struggles, failures, and fears, as they post about their

[10] A recent movement illustrates the dangers of severing Christianity from the life and teachings of Jesus (and the wider church) and instead devoting energy to literalist interpretations of cosmic evil. See Stephanie McCrummen "The army of God comes out of the shadows" *The Atlantic,* February 2025: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/new-apostolic-reformation-christian-movement-trump/681092/, accessed 11/02/2025.

#greatest day, meal, relationship, or holiday, and keep tally of the likes they gain. Concurrent with the work of maintaining these false narratives, people are pressured to consume everyone else's lies. As a result the deceptions of scarcity and unworthiness are perpetually reinforced. Since the advent of smartphones rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm, particularly among younger people, have skyrocketed.[11] Parallel with these increases, attention spans are decreasing, as grimly reflected in Oxford University Press 2024 Word of the Year brain rot.[12] The Johannine Jesus discloses the inner workings of evil in which deception and violence are symbiotic. The evidence of both history, and contemporary life, bears this out.

Salvation in contemporary contexts and the Johannine Jesus

What do lies and violence have to do with Jesus, and how do these relate to understandings of salvation? To these questions we will now turn. In John's Gospel, not only does Jesus reveal the internal dynamics of evil. What is equally striking is that the Johannine Jesus discloses the inner contours of divine reality. On the night that Jesus is betrayed this is amplified. In John's Gospel there is no institution narrative, instead Jesus washes the disciples' fetid feet, commands them to love like this (John 13:1–15; 34), eats and talks with them, and prays for them (John 13:16–17:26). On this long evening, in response to a question from Thomas, the Johannine Jesus – who in this gospel is the Word "who was with God" and "was God" (John 1:1) – states: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In this gospel Jesus embodies divine truth and life. The dripping irony is that within a few hours, when Pilate asks "what is truth?" (John 18:38), even though he does not see, the truth stands before him enfleshed in skin and bone.

We have done damage to, and with, the Johannine Jesus' statement "I am the way, and the truth, and the life". Often these words are sliced out of their original context, and carved into incendiary tests for belonging. This can make the content of this declaration hard to hear. However, when we read these words within John's Gospel we discover that they are not abstract divine qualities. After making clear that cosmic evil is inherently deceptive and violent, Jesus proclaims that there is a greater power. While the movement of evil is always towards deception and death, the movement of the divine is always towards truth and life. What is more, John's Gospel proclaims that this life is "the light of all people" and "cannot be overcome" (John 1:4–5).

If we take seriously that in Jesus, divine "isness", truth, and life reside we need to wrestle with the question of what this means in the face of lies, violence, and evil. To put this bluntly, how can this be salvific? If it is true that in some deep-down gnarly way, Christ Jesus embodies divine reality – the truth at the heart of the universe – then in this Holy Human One dwelling with us, and teaching, feeding, challenging, healing, and washing our feet, *and* in this One's non-retaliatory dying, *and* in this One's disruptive resurrection, the balance of power is irrevocably changed.

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[11] See Johnathan Haidt *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Westminster: Penguin Press, 2024).

[12] Brain rot is defined by Oxford University Press as "Supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as a result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging. Also: something characterized as likely to lead to such deterioration", https://corp.oup.com/word-of-the-year/, accessed 04//02/2025.

The whole Christ event

In reclaiming ransom soteriology I am inviting us into an expanded vision. Here the cross is not the sole location of salvific power. Instead, the whole Christ event – the incarnation, the life, the murder, and the resurrection of Christ Jesus – invite us into the strange, unfolding, and ultimate victory of God over evil. In this One the divine kingdom is breaking into our world. Within the confines of space, we will turn briefly to consider each of these movements of the Christ event.

If the *incarnation* cradles divine reality – if it is true that in Jesus we behold God face to face (see John 1:1; 18; Col 1:15; 2:9; Heb 1:3) – then there are very serious implications. It necessarily follows from this conviction that in the *life* of Christ Jesus, as proclaimed in the Gospels, we are confronted with who and how God is. In Jesus' words and actions we are challenged by the truth that the divine is love (see 1 John 4:7–8). In this One we discover grace that consistently longs to free us, feed us, challenge, and forgive us – and others. Here we discover that we each have value beyond our striving, and apart from our abilities, mistakes, gender, cultural background, or status – or lack thereof. In this One we can finally stop competing and pretending, and acknowledge our hunger and brokenness, knowing that the divine longs to heal and restore us by nourishing us with the gift of very self (John 4:14; 6:35; 57). Confronted with this reality we discover that the call to love neighbour and enemy, is not a nice idea or a particular moral prescription, but a call to abide in the truth of who the Composer is (see Matt 5:43–48; 1 John 4:7–8). If Jesus is the image of God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3), all of the images of God that we construct that are not loving are revealed to be lies.

Across the Gospels, Jesus chooses to use power for others not over others, and in the *cross* this divine emphasis reaches a crescendo. In the death of Christ Jesus, we are confronted with the truth that the divine will not participate in our violence. While we hurl verbal, emotional, and physical violence at the God One, culminating in an abhorrent state sanctioned execution, we are steadily met by the One who chooses to endure our violence, rather than inflict it. In the cross of Christ Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life, we are confronted with the divine who is love all the way down and, who therefore will not mirror our evil. While people of religion, including Christians, claim that God ordains, or desires, violence against God's own son, against women, against the LGBTQI community, against nations, or against strangers, in Jesus the divine definitively rejects violence in all its ugliness. Here we are challenged by the truth. The violence is ours. In the cross, the Source of all chooses to absorb our violence in order to set us free from its power.[13]

Without the *resurrection* of Christ there is little in the words above beyond a collection of potentially inspiring ideas. As Paul states "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor 15:17). Yet our faith proclaims that the story did not end on that tree. Testimonies from earliest times in the Jesus movement proclaim that something happened. Christ Jesus was unexpectantly raised and in the power of the Spirit continued to be present, vivifying communities. In the shocking rupture of the resurrection we discover that the divine's way and truth and life – all the loving and non-retaliation – are

[13] As René Girard states as he reflects on Col 2:14–15: "The victory of Christ has nothing to do with the military triumph of a victorious general: rather than inflicting violence on others, Christ submits to it … Christ does not achieve this victory through violence. He obtains it through a renunciation of violence so complete that violence can rage to its heart's content without realizing that by so doing, it reveals what it must conceal…" René Girard *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* trans James G. Williams (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 140.

more powerful than all the violence, lies, and toxic forces of evil (see 1 Cor 1:21–25). As René Girard states "The Resurrection is not only a miracle, a prodigious transgression of natural laws. It is the spectacular sign of the entrance into the world of a power superior to violent contagion."[14] In the risen life of Christ Jesus, we are snatched out of the lie that brute force, trickery, and intimidation have the ultimate power, or final say.

Get up, stand up

These are not simply ideas to agree with or reject. From the beginning, amidst the precarity of seeking to survive under the occupation of the brutal Roman empire, followers of Jesus have declared that they are experiencing the inbreaking of this risen life, the kingdom coming, amidst the stench. They proclaim that they are seeing the "glory" and receiving "grace upon grace" from Christ Jesus' fullness (John 1:14; 16). They celebrate being infused with the fragrance of Christ, and bearing this in their bodies wherever they go (2 Cor 2:15–16). Amidst the ongoing threats and realities of violence, they celebrate the experience of being carried from the slavery of fear into the homecoming of divine love in real time (Rom 8:14–16).[15]

Against the odds, and the optics, Jesus communities proclaim that liberation from the clutches of evil is happening. While the kingdom has not yet fully arrived, they testify to the kingdom breaking into the world.[16] Through the potent energy of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing presence of the non-violent, victorious One, Jesus communities celebrate experiencing a shift within them, not only individually, but collectively. They are being moved from the grasp of darkness into God's marvellous light (1 Pet 2:9), and because of this they are living differently together. They are being enabled, slowly and falteringly, to break free from the web of lies – the terror, competing, and violence – as they discover new life growing within and amidst them, and are shaped by this radical grace into people of love and joy and peace (see Gal 5:16–26; Col 3:1–17), like Christ.[17]

Could we trust this to be true in our actual lived reality? Could this be an authentic proclamation of salvation? In a world that is drowning in lies and saturated with violence, could we cleave to Jesus who was and is and is to come the way and truth and life? In our global village in which we are told that we are each irrelevant atoms floating in the stratosphere, this is meaningful good news. In a world that tell us that we are unworthy unless we buy this product, or gain that status, this is liberative good news. In a world that encourages us to dismiss those who are different, or with whom we disagree, this is uncomfortable good news. In a world that prizes self-obsession and might, this is destabilising good news. This is good news because all of these cultural assertions are poisonous. In a world in which it looks like violence and wholescale deception are winning, Christ's disruptive defeat of cosmic evil, that is now and is coming, is the most astounding good

[14] Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* 189.
[15] When Paul makes these claims he speaks in the plural, giving expression to the collective nature of these experiences across Jesus communities.
[16] Origen reflects on the "already/not yet" nature of this kingdom stating: "For this is why we are taught to say in the Lord's prayer, "Your kingdom come!"... The present time, however, I would say seems not so much a time of reigning as of war. Through this war the future kingdom is being striven for. Yet Christ can be said to reign even in this time of war, since the dominion of death is now broken in part and being gradually destroyed, a dominion which had previously spread itself out to all men [sic]." Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, Book 5.3.7
[17] This is the pattern that Justin Martyr describes unfolding within Jesus communities, see above and *The First Apology*, 14.

news. We, and all things, are loved. The current powers – that goad our attention, pollute our relationships, corrode our purpose, and demand our loyalty – do not have to dominate us, and they will not prevail.

While Christ's liberation from evil is good news, it is also costly. Reclaiming this early soteriology demands that we set aside ideas of salvation in which we are passive recipients waiting for the life to come. To enter into this way, as followers of the risen, crucified One, requires that we be slowly unravelled from the lies that we are embroiled in: the lies we fear may be true about God, the lies we cherish about others, and the despairing lies that we tell about ourselves. In this ancient understanding of salvation, becoming free is not a process of self-realisation. This is another lie. Instead, we are called to allow the Triune God to rescue us, each of us, from the particular nest of toxic deceptions that is ensnaring us on any given day. We are called to allow the Spirit of truth (John 14:17) to confront us, and advocate within us and on our behalf, against the father of lies.[18] We are called to set aside appeasing God (this construction of love is yet another deception), and allow ourselves to be emboldened for love – like Jesus – so that we can expose the lies and violence, even when it would be far easier to keep our comfortable place in the mob. The Johannine Jesus says "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). This is true. However, this process of liberation, of sanctification, of pruning (John 15:1–5), will be ongoing and often excoriating.

At the foot of the empty cross, with our hands in the hand of the risen One, our liberator, we are called to get up, stand up, and join the resistance against evil. We are called to pray for, and play our part now in, the kingdom coming like the dawn with all its subversive power. In living more and more into the grace and truth that we were born for and are returning to – divine reality as reflected in Christ's shimmering face (see John 1:14; 2 Cor 4:6) – we may yet relish and embody the scent of freedom and find words to share about it.

Conclusion

At this juncture in history, amidst myriad crises in which lies and violence proliferate, Christians often struggle to articulate their hope in Christ. We have work to do. In recognising that there are diverse soteriologies within the New Testament and early church, we are freed from the false dichotomy of choosing between a soteriology of sacrifice and silence. We are also given fresh resources for understanding and telling about the good news that we experience in the God of Jesus Christ. In this article the ancient soteriology of ransom from cosmic evil has been retrieved, examined, and experimented with. It has been demonstrated that within this strange symbol there are abundant riches that may yet speak into our local and global contexts. In returning to this early understanding of salvation as liberation there is much to be considered and tested. I offer this as a beginning.

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[18] Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning,* 189–90.

Discipleship in a Multireligious World: living the Jesus Way and loving within the Trinity's embrace

Sathianathan Clarke

Abstract

This essay has two parts. The first section briefly evaluates two unhelpful theological models and then suggests how the Trinity can be creatively utilized as a Christian template for working out a spacious yet faithful theology of religions. The second section focuses on a pragmatic question: What would Christian discipleship look like in our multireligious world when we commit to generous compassion for all God's communities with a singular passion for Christ? The balance between spacious universality in the Triune One and God's particularity in Jesus Christ offers a productive means to passionately proclaim the Christian gospel while compassionately engaging with neighbours from other religions. The essay concludes by arguing that Christian discipleship in an interreligious world can be reimagined by uniting Christian embassy and interfaith hospitality.

Introduction

This is an explorative paper that will help us think differently together. Thus, it is provocative, creative, suggestive, and invitational. It also challenges our embedded and almost-settled theology. Because this essay calls for our willingness as disciples to stretch our God-endowed minds as Christians and extend our hearts to our God-given religious neighbors, it is best to start with a prayer of commitment:

> Oh gracious, living and loving Triune God,
> We remember your ask of Moses to "take off his sandals, for he treads upon holy ground."
> In our desire to be passionately Christian and become compassionately interreligious,
> we, too, offer to take off our footwear to love God
> and our religious neighbors as ourselves.
> In our continued journey on the Jesus Way, we remove:
> our sandals of prejudice against the religious other,
> our shoes of religious ignorance,
> our slippers of easy misrepresentation,
> our sneakers of flighty judgment and
> our boots of misplaced spiritual pride.
> We do this in the blessed expectation that the Spirit invites us
> into abundant life in you and with each other. Amen

What do we need to help us be passionately Christian and compassionate interreligious disciples in our multi-religious world? We need two things. First, we need a theology of religions, which lays out a Christian understanding of other religions that affirms the overall providence of a universal God. And second, we need a vocation for a Christian mission that is fruitful even as it is respectful. This will allow Christian disciples to be confident yet humble about our witness and mission. Spacious theology and gracious mission in our interreligious world must hold together a singular passion for Christ and generous compassion for all God's differently-graced communities. After all, mission-shaped Christian disciples are God-centred, Christ-modelled, Spirit-driven, world-transforming, other-loving, poor-embracing, wisdom-serving, and kingdom-escalating.

Two dominant theological models when thinking about other religions

Several distinct models have emerged in the theology of religions.[1] For this essay, let me avoid the temptation of a professional theologian. I will steer clear of the nuances of the respective arguments and the perplexity of the unique jargon inherent in such models. Instead, let me briefly describe two theological bookends Christians have inherited concerning their relationship to other religions. One is exclusive in its commitment to be passionately Christian, while the other overreaches in its effort to be compassionately interreligious. I believe a more balanced model is needed. Mediating between these two, I will sketch the outlines of a third theological option that enables us to correlate our passion for Christ with interreligious compassion.

The Christianity over-and-against other religions model

Acknowledging the broad brush strokes and bold contrasts being used, I suggest Christians have tended to adopt two theological models when thinking about other religions. At one end, there is the model of *Christianity over-and-against other religions*. At the other end is the model of *Christianity alike and one-with other religions*. The Christianity over-and-against model magnifies differences and erases commonality. There are two limitations to this theological framework for living in an interreligious world. First, by focusing solely on Jesus Christ, this model does not do justice to the universality of God for the one human family God created in love. Archbishop Desmond Tutu makes this point well in a book entitled God is Not Christian and Other Provocations. He says,

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[1] For those interested in a basic bibliography that takes seriously some basic Protestant, Roman Catholic, Pentecost, and Orthodox theological voices in this field of theology of religions, the following are my suggestions: Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (InterVarsity Press, 2023); Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Rodopi, 2011); Peter Phan, *The Joy of Religious Pluralism: A Personal Journey* (Orbis Books, 2017); Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973); Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, Rev. edition (Paulist Press, 1999); Alan Race, *Thinking about Religious Pluralism: Shaping Theology of Religions for Our Times* (Fortress Press, 2015); Alan Race and Paul Knitter, Ed., *New Paths for Interreligious Theology: Perry Schmidt-Leukel's Fractal Interpretation of Religious Diversity* (Orbis Books, 2019); John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (Fordham University Press, 2020); Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Coexistence, Peace, Nature, Poverty, Terrorism, Values: Religious Perspectives* (WCC Publications, 2021); and Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Wipf and Stock, 2003). Also, note the books by Mark S. Heim, who has greatly influenced my thinking on this matter, in a later footnote.

> To claim God exclusively for Christians is to make God too small and in a real sense blasphemous. God is bigger than Christianity and cares for more than Christians. He has to, if only for the simple reason Christians are quite late arrivals on the world scene. God has been around since even before creation, and that is a very long time.[2]

Second, an "over-and-against model" does not gel with our everyday experience of other religious neighbours, nor is it useful for peaceful living in our flatter, smaller, and more organic world. Boundaries that have allowed us to spawn suspicion have been erased in a new global context of intense, many-sided flows and exchanges between various peoples with their own distinct cultural and religious worldviews. In my journey with Christ into the sacred spaces of other children of God, I have experienced these religious folk as fellow pilgrims rather than contending competitors. I am reminded of the passage in the Gospel of Mark when the disciples tell Jesus they saw someone casting out demons in his name, and they tried to stop him because he was not following them. Jesus was plain in his response. He said, "Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mk 9: 40). In line with this instruction, we must insist that oppositional models of vilifying other religions are counterproductive to peaceful living in our world of intermingling religious worldviews and communities. I quote from the Introduction to a copious collection of World Scriptures:

> Granted the integrity of each religion, it is significant for believers of one faith to find in other faiths common teachings and common attitudes towards life, death, and ultimate ends. First, there is the discovery that the transcendent Reality that the ground of life in one's own faith is also grounding the spiritual life of other people whose faith stems from different revelations, different revealers. Second, the discovery that people of other religious faiths are leading spiritual lives similar to one's own can promote tolerance of, and respect for, other faiths.[3]

The Christianity alike and one-with other religions model

However, jumping to the other extreme may not be the most appropriate theological solution. The Christianity *alike and one-with other religions* model magnifies commonalities but erases differences. Let me point to two limitations of this theological framework for living in an interreligious world. First, while celebrating the universality of God, this romantic model does not do justice to the particularity of Christianity. This also means it overlooks the same claim to particularity in other religious traditions. Suppose we respect other religions as we want to be respected. In that case, we must resist the temptation of using the contours and colours we are familiar with to paint their respective portraits. Being respectful of religions means being willing to accept their claims of particularity. It allows us to celebrate our own affirmation of the particularity of Jesus Christ.

Second, this "alike and one-with" model also does not seem true of the impressive and disturbing differences noticeable in the world's religions. One example that we encounter that bespeaks radical differences concerns the religious goals of various religions. For example, while Hinduism talked about the end of the religious journey as moksha, which is a merger with God, Buddhism espoused nirvana or extinguishment of life as the goal. Both can be contrasted with Christianity's goal of salvation, which looks forward to a reconciled

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[2] Desmond Tutu, *God is Not Christian and Other Provocations* (HarperOne, 2011), 14.
[3] Andrew Wilson, Ed., *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, (Paragon House, 1991), 3.

state of everlasting life in blessed harmony with God and each other. Prothero exaggerates differences among religions, but he makes a useful point:

> One of the most common misconceptions about the world's religions is that they plumb the same depths, ask the same questions. They do not. Only religions that see God as all good ask how a good God can allow millions to die in tsunamis. Only religions that believe in souls ask whether your soul exists before you are born and what happens to it after you die. And only religions that think you have one soul ask after the 'soul' in the singular.[4]

An alternative Trinitarian particularity-in-spaciousness model

So, we need to leave these simplified but unhelpful theological models behind. Is there an alternative, though? The challenge is to find a theological model that retains the particularity of Christ, who has embraced us graciously while respecting the spaciousness of the divine, which generously harbors other children of God. I suggest we look to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to help us determine this mediation between the particularity of grace gifted in Jesus Christ and the spaciousness of grace contained in the Triune One. I recall Apostle Paul's words in I Corinthians 4: 1: "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." In conformity with this statement, I submit that a Christian theological model for our interreligious context needs to correlate what it means to be servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. The singularity of our calling to be servants of Christ must go hand in hand with our vocation to be stewards of the spacious mysteries of God. We might call this Trinitarian theology of religions option the particularity-in-spaciousness model. It reconciles communion with difference through love, which also characterizes the relationship of the Christian trinity.

The *Christianity over-and-against other religions* model is a deficient theology. It focuses completely on "the scandal of particularity," which lifts high the "Jesus only" means of truth and a "Christians alone" election for salvation. Thus, it is so Christ-confined that it fails to take seriously the spaciousness of the mystery of God. Similarly, the *Christianity alike and one-with other religions* model excessively conforms to a forced and simplistic unitive theology. It focuses solely on "the surplus of divinity," which celebrates an "anything goes" truth and an "everybody wins" mantra of salvation. The orthodox Christian affirmation of the Trinity may reconcile both extremes in a blessed conciliatory model that allows us to cultivate a theology of religions that mediates between the "scandal of divine particularity" and the "surplus of divine spaciousness." Let me say more about each of these poles within the Trinitarian model that I am holding up as a third option.

When I invoke the term "the scandal of particularity," I am pointing to the assertions by Christians that God emptied himself in grace through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is only because of this event that Christians can talk about God. It scandalizes because it is so confined to the specificity of Jesus Christ. It grounds our life of witness to God. Raimon Panikkar expresses this particularity for Christianity in the following manner. "Christ is the parameter for speaking about God. For Christians,

[4] Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* (Harper Collins, 2010), 24.

God has pronounced one and only one word: Christ."[5] Nevertheless, this particularity is only one pole of the Trinitarian model.

The "surplus of divine spaciousness" is the other complementary pole in the Christian theology of religions. I use the terms "surplus" and "spaciousness" in the divine to capture the abundance of mystery and the copiousness of love generated by the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. It communicates the inexhaustible riches hidden in the fullness of God that interflow between the Abba God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit even as it overflows onto all creation. Rowan Williams says that the mystery built into God is often experienced in interreligious dialogue. Such dialogue, he suggests, "is one of the many means that God gives us to sink more deeply into the infinity of God's work, presence, and purpose."[6]

This third option presents us with a more complex yet quite orthodox model for interreligious engagement that weaves together a passionate commitment to Jesus Christ and compassionate acceptance of our fellow pilgrims sheltered by a spacious God. On the one hand, we need to attest faithfully and joyously to the claim of "the particularity of Jesus" in a world of many religious figures of revelation. This is no doubt a kind of scandal to the world of many religious communities. Christians passionately live from and witness to the grace of Jesus Christ, our pathway to being forgiven and reconciled with God and each other. The particularity of Jesus Christ as God's offer of Good News cannot be hidden. Jesus' instruction in Matthew 5:15 is clear: "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house." On the other, we also need to accept humbly and lovingly that our faith is in the Trinity that posits Jesus alongside the Creator (God the Abba) and the Sustainer (God the Holy Spirit). There is much divine roominess in this house of God, which has many mansions. This more than "Jesus only" manner of thinking allows for the spaciousness of love and grace in the fulness of the Triune God. The divine surplus in God allows God to be God for all human creation, even as Christ is all for Christians. It is because of such "surplus in the divine" that we, as passionate Christians, are also emboldened to take off our sandals as we enter other sacred spaces, recognizing the traces of the divine in such strange locations and among different peoples. All God's children, thus, might grow in knowledge, spiritual practice, and theological wisdom through interreligious pilgrimages.

Mission responsibility of living out the Trinitarian particularity-in-spaciousness model in our multi-religious world

As we prepare to enter the real world of many religions as passionately Christian and compassionately interreligious, in the rest of the paper, let me address the mission responsibility of living out this model as disciples of Jesus Christ in a multi-religious world.

Let me start with the spacious Trinity generously overflowing outward in love for the life of the world. In the first instance, the Triune God can be conceived of as three movements within God involving intimate communion, gifted difference, and mutual love. This intra-flow is the blessedness of the Divine life. In the second instance, this divine tri-figuration shares the blessedness of life enjoyed within the Trinity with

[5] Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of The Mystery* (Fortress Press, 2006), 68 or 69.
[6] Rowan Williams, "Dialogue is a Means of 'God-Given Discovery" in *Current Dialogue*, 54 (July 2013): 7.

those made in the image of God (imago Dei) while extending it to all creation. This overflow of the divine life becomes a blessing to all created by God to reflect the joy of intimate communion, gifted difference, and mutual love, even if in a fragmented and fragile way. This blessing of the overflow of blessed Trinitarian inter-flow beckons us to be theologically receptive to the open-ended mission of God that is inclusive of and cooperative with the whole human family.

Mission-shaped discipleship thus points to the possibility of enjoining human agents who are already drawn into the working of God in the world in every local situation. This is a theological rather than an anthropological premise. We often succumb to the temptation of some version of 'chronological modalism,' which tends to think of the Trinity as coming to us in three kairotic historical periods. We thus largely ignore the theological affirmation, which holds that the Trinitarian nature of God is from "everlasting to everlasting." (Psalm 103:17) If the primordial nature of God is continuously characterized by its sending movement, then God has, is, and will always be known by God's already-always outward reach, flowing from the inward dynamics of Triune love onto the life of the world, including the whole human family. The eternal overflow of love at the heart of the Triune One, which saturates creation for the sake of life, is constant. It is within this Divine vitality, which spans from alpha to omega, that all creatures live, move, and have their being. Taking a cue from Raimon Panikkar, I am inclined to invoke the language of the Triune movement and energy to create theological space for thinking inter-religiously. Re-conceptualizing the Trinity as an everlasting movement that encompasses all creation, he suggests, "Relations within the bosom of the Trinity are dynamic relations, in constant movement. The Father never ceases to engender, nor the Son to be engendered, and the Spirit is the permanent expression of this dynamism. We participate in this dynamism of begetting inasmuch as we too are begotten. We cannot be simple spectators."[7]

Missio trinitatis: spacious God as embracing daring openness

When we talk about *missio Dei*, we usually confine all our thinking to the reality of Jesus Christ, obscuring the fundamental Christian theological affirmation that God is a communion of Three-in-One and such a sending (flowing) out is always trinitarian (*missio trinitatis)*. The faith on which we stand involves such a foundational trinitarian credo. I believe that much of our thinking will be roomier if we consider whether God operates in the world through other religions after accepting the implications of our trinitarian faith. To put it modestly, the space generated by the trinity opens many possibilities for moving away from the constriction imposed by our "Jesus only" mission-thinking pattern. One need not sacrifice Jesus Christ. One is merely invited to extract mileage from the expansive relational possibilities inherent in the surplus potential of the Divine Trinity. Risking Jesus for God's sake may, in fact, be the Christ-way to fullness of life for the whole world. The relationality between the three persons of the Trinity have much promise for providential divine surplus of gracious, loving, and sanctifying synergy overflowing from the heart of God to quicken new life for all God's beloved children. Mark Heim makes an interesting point that is relevant to this way of thinking. He suggests that there is room within the Trinity to contain the mission

[7] Panikkar, *The Experience of God,* 81.

goals (salvation/healing/peace) expressed by all religious traditions. These goals may not be the same as Christians as gifted in Jesus Christ, but we need not think of them as outside the fullness of the Triune God.[8]

In the context of religious plurality, what this means is that there are kingdom agents alongside and sometimes prior to Christian disciples' witnessing to the particularity of God in Jesus Christ. Boff's words are fitting. "The missionary always comes late: the Holy Trinity has already arrived, ever revealing itself in the awareness, the history, the societies, the deeds, and the destiny of peoples."[9] Of course, such openness to being formed and informed by the working of the Trinitarian God is not only an abstraction. We experience this routinely in actual religious and nonreligious neighbours. There are gracious bodies and caring spirits providentially placed among us as neighbours who are also [co]missioned by the dynamic love nurturing new life nourished by the Triune God. These agents, too, are sent in kingdom-power and with kinship-spirit. On their arrival, they often receive Christian disciples to enhance God's compassionate mission for the welfare of suffering human beings and the well-being of afflicted creation.

Missio trinitatis: specificity of Jesus and embracing discerning [en]closure

At the same time, one cannot drown Christian particularity (the Jordon River) in spacious universality (the World's Oceans). Christians have been embraced and freed by the specific person and presence of Jesus, who is the point of intimate and joyous contact to the overflow of the Trinity. We can only authenticate the specificity of God's mission to reach out to touch, save, and heal in Jesus. This singular testimony is our Christian gospel...the Good News. Compassionate disciples knit together with other religious and non-religious neighbours are also specifically called to passionately witness in word and deed to the cruciform way of Jesus that transforms death zones into organisms of life. Such openness to the working of the always-already movement of the Triune God is correlated with the concrete affirmation of being embraced by Jesus Christ and animated by the Holy Spirit. On the one hand, a mission-shaped Church is compassionately inclusive of co-missioners affected by the overflow of the divine energy of life, love, and communion. On the other hand, a mission-shaped Church is also passionately committed to effectively circulating the concrete gift of Jesus as the divine embodiment of the blessed overflow of intimate communion, gifted difference, and mutual love. M. M. Thomas uses openness as a feature of the Church:

> The Church of Jesus Christ cannot, therefore, be open to God in Christ without being open at the same time to the world where God is at work...Openness is the very fundamental characteristic of the Church of Christ, and its form should be such as makes this double openness in Christ to God and the world an abiding reality.[10]

But all this language of openness veils an inevitable and truthful partial [en]closure dictated by the gestalt of Jesus Christ made attainable by the power of the Spirit. The concrete theological movement and property

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[8] S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Orbis Books, 1995); *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998); and *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2001).

[9] Leonardo Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor* (Orbis Books, 1991), p. 70.

[10] M. M. Thomas, "The Open Church," in *The Church: A Peoples' Movement*, ed. Mathai Zachariah (National Christian Council of India, 1975), 62.

of Jesus Christ set loose by the power of the Spirit determines the contours of this openness, almost as if it proffers a limited [en]closure. A phrase almost as a *koan* results: all openness is half closed, and all closeness is half open. This leads to my final assertion. Mission-shaped Church is constrained by and in conformity with the cruciform life, teaching, and praxis of Jesus set in motion in the world by the life-giving power of the Spirit.

The challenge of being a mission-shaped Church in our 21st-century context, where religions are coming together in geographical proximity, is mediating between our partial openness to accepting religious others as co-missioners and formulating our own mission invitation as a fruitful and honest partial [en]closure. I have already extolled the virtues of missiological openness with a brief commentary on the theological capaciousness of the divine Trinity. It is thus also crucial to extract some benefits from the specificity of the Christian invitation to all the children of God in the world. I do this by circumscribing the Christian particularity of the mission of the Trinity within the chosen placement of Jesus Christ among the peoples of the world as the inconsequential Other and the accompanying power of the Spirit to transform such situations of impending death into resurrected instances of life.

Christian discipleship, by submitting to becoming shaped by the cruciform life, teaching, and praxis of Jesus set in motion in our contemporary world by the life-giving power of the Spirit, attests to its vocation as an incarnate organism rather than a bureaucratic organization. The Trinity is not allowed to remain intangible and abstract so that it becomes the smoke screen for the powerful, strong, and vested power brokers of the world to peddle illusion rather than hope to the poor and the sinner, delusion rather than wholeness to the weak and the sick, and pathological servitude rather than therapeutic liberation to the oppressed and forsaken. The weakness of emphasizing the fluidity, capaciousness, and generosity of the Divine tri-figuration without a reclamation of the concreteness, specificity, and prophetic criticism of the suffering-liberating incarnate Jesus Christ leads to a mission that is not informed and formed by its Lord.

The life and witness of Jesus as the divine self-giving one among 'the crucified people' eventually finds its way to the cross. In Jesus Christ, we see a presence, a message, and a medium of compassionate self-giving that seeks to bring actual freedom, liberation, and wholeness among concrete others that were rejected, crushed, and broken. He goes out and encounters and mediates social, economic, and religious otherness with purposive love to spawn new life. Rather than moving away from and separating from such others, Jesus draws closer and relates more meaningfully with them as he offers them the fullness of life. This also involved learning from others not thought of as having elements of knowledge and truth by the religiously learned of his day: children, women, gentiles, sinners, Samaritans, and the poor. Jesus' mission thus involves a relocation with the least and the lost in the world. The site of God's mission is not the hub of safety but the margins of erasure. Jesus brings the workings of God for the fragmented and dispossessed of the world rather than for the secure and self-assured well-being of the church. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

> When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' (Mark 2: 16-17)

In many Gospel narratives, Jesus must be followed outside the gates to keep pace with his path. The cross, which we are asked to take up to follow Jesus in the end, is pitched outside Jerusalem. Accepting Jesus also means being willing to travel with him onto the hill far away, where he was glorified on an old, rugged cross. The partial [en]closure of the cruciform mission implies a peculiar opening to a special collective of people pushed to a unique location.

The Holy Spirit interweaves daring openness and discerning [en]closure for life in God's kingdom

This same mission of animating new life through self-expending love is extended through the power of the Spirit. The Church takes its shape in conformity to this mission of Jesus and in continuity with this mission of the Spirit. Mission along this continuum is all about drawing close to the constituencies of death as exemplified by Jesus and claiming these as possible recipients for new life as inspired by the Spirit. This life force animates the Church into being mission-affected and mission-effective. It proclaims the truth that as Christians 'we believe in life before death." The power of cruciform love working toward new life in the world, as stated by Pope Francis, is nothing but God going "forth from himself in a Trinitarian dynamic of love."[11] The Church, caught up in this "way of being and acting," he continues, "goes out to encounter humanity, proclaims the liberating word of the gospel, heals people's spiritual and physical wounds with the grace of God, and offers relief to the poor and the suffering."[12] *Missio trinitatis* (mission of the triune God) in cruciform love is the "way of being and acting" for the Church until the kingdom of God comes to the whole earth just as it is in heaven. Moltmann reiterates this point cogently: "*Jesus didn't bring a new religion into the world. What he brought was new life*...The eternal life which God's Spirit creates is *not another life* following this one. It is the power through which this *life here becomes different*...So Christian mission isn't concerned about Christianity; its concern is the life of men and women. And the Church's mission isn't concerned about the church; its concern is the kingdom of God. And evangelization isn't concerned about spreading the doctrine of faith; its concern is the life of the world."[13]

As Christians, we are invited to respectfully, compassionately, dialogically, and cooperatively join with other kingdom agents to enhance new life in our common and diverse world. At the same time, we are also moved to courageously, courteously, coherently, and passionately witness to the power of the gospel as we have experienced it concretely through the gift of new life in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. There is not an option to favour either one or the other. Both functions of the Church are needed to benefit love-informed, new life formations for transforming the whole of God's world. Let me drive home my point using the analogy of a community feast. Participating in the banquet of new life by selfishly eating one's own delicacies in the supposition that everyone is only entitled to one's own cuisine is like bringing a sealed food basket, with a key tied to the owner's key chain, to a clan picnic. Conversely, coming to such a banquet solely to feed the diverse multitude with one's own finest cuisine is like bringing the choicest beef steak, along with its complementary red wine, to a vegetarian and teetotallers' feast. The festive truth involves the blending of compassionate hospitality and gracious embassy.

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[11] Pope Francis, *The Gospel of Luke: A Spiritual and Pastoral Reading* (Orbis Books, 2021), 72.
[12] Pope Francis, *The Gospel of Luke*, 72.
[13] Jurgen Moltmann, Mission of the The Spirit – The Gospel of Life" in *Mission – An Invitation to God's Future,* ed. Timothy Yates (Calver, Derbyshire: Cliff College Publications, 2000), 30-31.

Christian mission blends passionate embassy and compassionate hospitality

I believe that the joyous proclamation of God's love in Jesus Christ set in operation through the Spirit for new life in the world is still needed and certainly necessary in a context of inter-religious living where Christians also cooperate with religious others in the overflowing energy of the *missio Trinitatis*. Nonetheless, all passionate proclamation works most effectively within the dynamics of compassionate hospitality. The way forward would be to interpret embassy from within the relationship and connectivity of hospitality. This can be biblically strengthened by an interpretation of Luke 10: 5-9, where Jesus appoints and sends out the seventy.

> Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house!' And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"

While copious leads are implicit within this commissioning of Jesus' disciples, I wish to note its implication for a mission-shaped Church mediating its witness in contexts of religious plurality. The primacy of peace saturates the motivation of Christian embassy. A categorical announcement, "Peace be to this house," are the first words, set within the *modus operandi* of face-to-face hospitality, which is reciprocal. This greeting, says John T. Carroll, "is more than a gesture of nonhostility; it is a prayer-wish for the house to enjoy the blessing of peace from God."[14] The "Prince of Peace" commissions peace-makers to permeate the towns and villages. Disciples also learn to be receivers of hospitality offered by others. Humility is a disposition cultivated through hospitality. Third, Jesus' instruction about *remaining* is explicit: "And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide." Christian hospitality is sustained and long drawn out. Fly-by-night, overnight express, incarnation-free, and hit-and-run modes of good news heralding hardly affect organic transformation. Jesus reiterates his caution against flighty mission agents: "Remain in the same house…do not go from house to house." Fourth, it is important to notice that a proclamation comes after a peace declaration, mutual reception, sustained hospitality, and actual healing. The good news of the kingdom's immediacy is proclaimed within this configuration. "The exchange of peace for hospitality" is more than "balanced reciprocity (quid pro quo), because workers deserve their wages (10:7)." Rather, the mission of Christ's disciples is "to heal maladies and to tell the recipients, 'The βασιλεία of God has come upon you. (10:9)."[15] Peace and healing that signify blessed wholeness (salvation) manifest the drawing near of kingdom, which is brought about by the grace-filled exchange of hospitality between guests and hosts. "The ancient key for avoiding missionary oppression, according to Jesus' original instructions to his followers," Elaine Enns and Ched Myers remind us, "is the ethos of hospitality – given and received."[16] Finally, Jesus' instructions seem to have sequential logic as he sends his disciples into the neighbourhood. The ordering of mission flow involves being sent, arriving with a peace-blessing, hospitality involving

[14] John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012):235.
[15] Robert L. Brawley, *Luke: A Social Identity Commentary* (T&T Clark, 2020): 114.
[16] Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade Books, 2021):137.

receptivity and humility, fruitful healing, and proclamation that these are the signs that the kingdom has drawn near. Thus, the passage ends with Jesus' succinct mission tutorial: "Whenever you enter a town, and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"

Our twenty-first century is an age of wider, fuller, and more complex interreligious convergence and engagement. The grace that we proclaim has embraced us in Jesus Christ needs to be stretched graciously to embrace other children of God. The General Conference of the United Methodist Church put out a reflective and instructive mission statement (1988) entitled "Grace upon Grace" to emphasize the gift bestowed upon humanity by Jesus Christ.[17] Using the language of grace is central to mission in the world. Trinitarian grace, though, has and will always overflow to operate among the whole of creation, affecting other religious neighbours as well. Christian mission needs to be founded upon "grace upon grace" received through Jesus Christ but also grounded in the mission of the Triune God, which includes "grace alongside grace." I believe that the multi-religious coming together in the twenty-first century calls for a bolder step of acknowledging common grace dispersed among other faith and no-faith traditions (understood as *differently graced*), even as we respectfully share received grace that Christians have been gifted in Jesus Christ (understood as *distinctively graced*). Accepting common grace hidden within the surplus of divine trinitarian grace takes nothing away from the grace that embraces us in Jesus Christ. Instead, such a dynamic and free circulation of common grace honours the surplus of divine spaciousness captured by the inexhaustible riches within the Triune God. It accounts for the cloud of strange and different witnesses to grace scattered throughout the human family. I believe that compassion from the spaciousness of God's grace and passion from the particularity of Christ's grace will reshape our sense of mission responsibility in new and fruitful ways. Perhaps the term "grace upon grace alongside grace" best represents such a theology of grace that both embraces the particularity of Jesus Christ and celebrates the spaciousness of the Trinity.

Being encircled by the generous grace of the Creator, the distinctive grace of Christ, and the freeing grace of the Sustainer, I invite you to take leave from this paper's reflection with a concluding prayer:

> Oh gracious, living, and loving Triune God,
> Creator of the whole universe, father of all humankind, and mother of all creation:
> Enable us to journey with Christ to all the earth's terrain that you have permeated with your graceful presence;
> Help us to compassionately embrace all human beings in the binding power of the Holy Spirit, honouring the truth dispersed among all our "fearfully and wonderfully" made kindred;
> But also strengthen us to carry your love and glory, gifted to us in Jesus, wherever you may send us.
> Respectful of the many names by which your children cry out to you from all over the world, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. AMEN

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[17] The document was accepted in 1988 and published as *Grace Upon Grace: The Mission Statement of the United Methodist Church* (Graded Press, 1990).

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

Graham Hill

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.[1] Mission must be holistic (integral), integrating proclamation, service, discipleship, justice, creation care, and community building.[2] Mission should reflect Christ's teachings and embody

[1] For my fuller definition of mission see: Graham Joseph Hill, "What is Christian Mission?" accessed September 25, 2024. https://grahamjosephhill.com/christian-mission/.

[2] 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.[3]

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.[4] 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.[5] The UCA missiologist John Flett

[3] 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).

[4] "The Basis of Union," Uniting Church in Australia, accessed September 25, 2024. https://uniting.church/basisofunion/.

[5] 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*.[6] 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).[7] Such a claim stands in stark dialectical opposition to the pluralistic inclusivity prevalent among manifold

[6] 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.

[7] 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.[8] 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)[9] 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.[10]

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

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

[9] 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.

[10] 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 *Ātman* 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.[11]

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."[12]

[11] See John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021).
[12] 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.[13]

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

[13] 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."[14] 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.[15]

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[14] Graham Joseph Hill, *World Christianity: An Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024), 6.
[15] 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."[16] 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

[16] 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."[17]

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

[17] "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."[19]

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

[18] 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/.

[19] Vinoth Ramachandra in C.V. Mathew, *Integral Mission: The Way Forward* (Kerala: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2006), 57.

[20] "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.[21] 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.

[21] "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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"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."[1] 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]

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[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."[6] 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

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[5] 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.[9] 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."[10] 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

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[9] 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.
[11] 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."[13] 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,"[14] 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."[15] 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."[16] 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.

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[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.
[15] Karina Kreminski, *Urban Spirituality: Embodying God's Mission in the Neighborhood* (Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2018), 226.
[16] 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."[19] 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,*"[20] possibly implying there was caution needed with the use of "persuasion" in the way it was practiced in the culture of his time.[21] Our Christian culture could also be accused of occasionally engaging in "feverish sales talk"[22] 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

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[19] '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.
[24] 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."

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[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."[30] 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.

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[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 life[33] 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.

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[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."[38] We try to practice connection in our Sunday discussions rather than simple transactions of information.

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[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."[39] 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."[43] 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."[44] 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:

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[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'."

Embodying the Marginality of Jesus: The Creative Core of Mission and Evangelism in the Uniting Church in Australia

Cyrus Kung

Abstract:

The context in which mission and evangelism takes place has changed dramatically over the last century. Since Union and into the 21st century the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has not manifested itself in political and social power; rather, the UCA like other churches in the west is continually coming to terms with its marginality in the wider spheres of community life, politics and society.This paper will challenge the UCA to take seriously its marginal identity by reflecting theologically on the marginality of Jesus and the implications this has on mission and evangelism in the UCA

Reflections on Being In-between

Peering over the balcony of a large UCA building, I watched the gathering of over 200 young people from various independent migrant churches around the city worshiping as a newly forming ecumenical community. Before me was the church building I grew up in, I found faith in, and developed a deep call to ministry in. Before me was a UCA building but not a UCA community. This place felt like home but we did not own it, we just gathered in that place. Home in this context did not mean security, it did not mean ownership, it did not mean power or even influence. It simply meant finding each other in the midst of our in-betweenness. For many of us who feel like pilgrims living in in-between spaces, finding and locating home can be excruciatingly difficult. What does it truly mean to be engaged in mission and evangelism as a pilgrim people especially when we *feel* like we have no home, no assets and no perceived power, even though we do?

The UCA has become a place I call home because I have always read its founding and foundational documents as an invitation for those on the margins to share in the fullness of the ecclesial family; a community defining itself in regard to its diverse participation in the mission of God. As I have engaged more with the depth and the breadth of the Church, however, my reflection is that there is also a concurrent narrative and identity within our church, a narrative that is fixated on our diminishing assets, declining church attendance, waning political influence and an increasingly lethargic ageing Anglo population. An over emphasis on this narrative has created tension when we reflect on our participation in mission and evangelism, as it measures and defines our success based on our power and status rather than the incarnational work and movement of God with us. Rather, as missiology David Bosch puts its: “It is not the church which

"undertakes" mission it is the Missio Dei which constitutes the church.[1] The mission of God is alive and well and continues to flourish despite our preoccupation with a "decline in power"; mission and evangelism continues to flourish in Christ's own strange way, often in marginal and unexpected places around us. The UCA must move away from defining mission and evangelism as the things we fail to do but be reminded that who we are is shaped by the ongoing and diverse movements that continue to arise in the margins and calls for our participation.

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With such reflections in the background, the following paper emerges from my own struggle holding together the threads of contemporary missiology, UCA heritage, theology and polity and my identity as a marginal person living in between dominant cultures. The paper will draw on aspects of my own lived experience of in-betweenness and marginality within the UCA and argue that the lived experience of in-betweenness and marginality is a creative epicentre for new forms of mission and evangelism that fully embody the incarnational message of Jesus Christ. This paper will explore the in-between and marginal aspects of mission and evangelism in three sections.

Firstly, the paper will bring into dialogue the fascination we as a Church have with legacy, influence and power, and assert that these often subconscious postures we assume come from a deeply embedded colonialism. This first section of the paper will reflect on how the UCA understands its own history in light of its wider colonial heritage and how this self understanding needs to be confronted in order to fully embrace an in-between and marginal theology of mission and evangelism.

Secondly, the paper will reflect on the binary approaches to mission we have created between 'social justice' and 'evangelism', 'progressive' and 'conservative' and offer an alternative foundation by naming theologies of the in-between. This section will aim to articulate a more robust language to address the marginal aspects of mission and evangelism that are present in our founding documents as inspired by the missiology of 20th century British theologian Lesslie Newbigin.

Lastly, the paper will survey the in-between and marginal theology present in the writings of Korean American theologian Jung Young Lee. This final section will bring into conversation the lived experience of the UCA with the in-between theology of Lee, this section will add a robust way to point to and articulate the ongoing creative potential the marginal aspects of the UCA has always embodied in its DNA.

Our History

The *Basis of Union* begins with the acknowledgement of the three churches that came into union, it is important to honour the enormous effort and resources that were given for this project to be undertaken. However, it must also be acknowledged that this union takes place "in fellowship with the whole Church Catholic" and this means taking seriously what paragraph one of the *Basis* says of the three Churches entering union: "To this end they declare their readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ

[1] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 2011)., 531.

the living Head of the Church; they remain open to constant reform under his Word; and they seek a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit" (BoU, 1).

The work of the UCA is ongoing, it is a participant in the wider work of the whole church catholic. Since June 1977 the emphasis of union has been focussed on the three founding Churches. This focus has both consciously and subconsciously created a majority culture within our life and work, bypassing opportunities of seeking wider union in the periphery and margins of the church. This work has historically been labelled under "mission" or "world mission" and more contemporarily labelled under "covenanting" or "CALD" alongside labels like "fresh expression", "church planting" and "development". These labels stretch broad and subtle distinctions within our understanding of mission and evangelism. One of these distinctions is between mission that happens at the centre (majority culture) and mission that happens at the margins (minority cultures). This often overlooked centre and margin distinction shapes our resourcing priorities. It is reflected our resourcing bodies as well as our posture when we amalgamate congregations and repurpose our resources and property. The centre and margin distinction becomes challenging when the UCA tries to determine who is in and who is out or what constitutes the "Uniting Church" and where the frontiers of mission lie. Centre and margin distinctions shape our ecclesiology, and is why it is important to reflect theologically on these to avoid defaulting to a subconscious reliance on centrist and inward thinking shaped by Christendom and our colonial heritage.

The UCA has been and is continually shaped by communities at the margins. This can be seen in the work of covenanting, the diaconate, our agencies, being a multicultural church, church planting and the decision on marriage to name a few. This work has been accumulating in the margins but has also been building up an identity that many inside and outside the Church would now associate with the contemporary context and culture of the UCA. These communities have expanded our understanding of the UCA and in fact have shown us how our church is continually finding new margins and places for uniting. To acknowledge the margins means to also acknowledge a centre, this means ongoing questions of power will continue to arise; questions such as: Where is the centre in the UCA? Who are the communities at the centre of the UCA? Are they the voices of our western heritage and our three founding European churches?

In the first report of the Joint Nominating Committee, the writers affirmed that

> [f]or some time to come the Churches in Australia will have special responsibilities for building up the Church in the Pacific Islands. *The irrelevance of formulations arrived at in the domestic Christian disputes of Western Christendom is likely to become more rather than less apparent in this setting..... the Churches of Australia will equip themselves for their part in preaching the gospel to the ends of the earth and to the end of time.*[2] (emphasis added)

The decline in church attendance in aging Anglo congregations is an indicator that the primary work of the UCA is no longer at the intersections of our founding churches moving out "to the ends of the earth".

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[2] Joint Commission on Church Union, "The Faith of the Church," in *Theology for Pilgrims : Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, edited by Robert Bos and Geoff Thompson, 10-64, (Sydney, NSW: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 40.

In light of our contemporary context the distinctive characteristics of our founding three churches have been dwarfed by previously unrecognised diversity in the global context of today. In this context the UCA is seen not as three distinct traditions but as one broad western tradition, one that is losing its status in the centre. The UCA is now situated in a post Christendom era and can no longer draw its power solely from our internal nostalgia toward a forgone Australian context. Coming to terms with our fading centrality will help the UCA address our gaze toward deeply embedded colonial structures and practices within the church. Christendom in the west has for centuries been associated with colonisation and the development of colonial structures across the world.

Phillip Jenkins describes the consequence of Christendom in these terms: "While it offered a common culture and thought-world, the era was characterised by widespread intolerance, symbolized at its very worst by aggressive crusades, heresy hunts, and religious pogroms."[3]

The early 20th century in Australia was shaped by theologies steeped in a culture that exemplified western superiority and homogenous and colonial thought, not only within the church but also the wider Australian context. For instance, the first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, introduced the first act of parliament; the Immigration Act 1901 to the House of Representatives with these words:

> The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman. There is a deep-set difference, and we see no prospect and no promise of its ever being effaced. Nothing in this world can put these two races upon an equality. Nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others.[4]

Jason Goroncy asserts that racism in Australia has explicitly Christian roots, he traces the history of racism in Australia by mapping how immigration policies and practices regarding assimilation have long standing commitments to the idea that Australia is both 'white' and Christian'.[5] Within the history of the founding churches of the UCA there has always been opposition to these quasi theological claims made by politicians, but amongst this opposition it must also be recognised that there have also been high profiled ministers within our context that where strong advocates for the white Australia policy and other policies the Church would later oppose.[6] Discussion of these intricacies within the histories of our founding churches is beyond the scope of this paper but it is worth noting that marginal and dissenting voices have existed in these histories.

The history of the Church in Australia has included both centrists and marginal voices with in the political and theological landscapes of the 19th and 20th century. Toward the end of the 20th century in the 1970s the Whitlam government expanded the concept of multiculturalism, associating it with a refined notion of

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[3] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), p16.
[4] "House of Representatives, Debates, 26 September 1901 : Historic Hansard," accessed December 11, 2024, http://historichansard.net/hofreps/1901/19010926_reps_1_4/ , p5233.
[5] Steven M. Studebaker, Lee Beach, and Gordon L. Heath, *Post-Christendom Studies: Volume 4* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020).
[6] For one example of such tensions see "Rev J. B. Ronald at St. Kilda West: Chinese poll-axed or poll-taxed," *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic) 20 March 1901, 6.

nationhood.[7] It is in these years that we begin to see policies and the shape of the multicultural Australia we now know in the present. In 1973 Al Grassby announced multiculturalism as government policy and spoke of "weaving an ever more complex fabric for Australian Society".[8] These multicultural sentiments would eventually make their way into foundational documents of the UCA through statements such as "We Are a Multicultural Church (1985) and "One Body, Many Parts" (2006).

These documents have been essential for bringing change into the church and its polity. My persistent question, however, is: have the underlying quasi theologies such as the doctrine of equality, which shaped much of the life and work of Prime ministers such as Barton, Menzies and Hughes been decolonised or even been fully acknowledged? Have we moved away or corrected these theologies or replaced them with more robust Christian theologies? Are we as a church able to name what theologies guide our identity and self understanding today?

Looking at the latest NCLS data we can see that the UCA has a lower representation of diversity than the wider national demographics despite our groundbreaking statements and the work invested in multiculturalism.[9] This as well as the disproportionate Anglo leadership across our councils would point to the fact that our theologies that influenced our early Australian government and leadership has simply been left dormant, still subconsciously influencing our fundamental foundations and practices.

In the 21st century there is a collective responsibility for second peoples of all ethnicities to reflect seriously on the responsibility and response we can make to the past and present dissemination of colonial structures and ideals. There is ongoing work in our theological reflection needed in order to fully acknowledge our colonial heritage and its effects on our theology. This means acknowledging both the centre and the margins; acknowledging not only the formation of three churches and its particular nuances, but also acknowledging the many new and ongoing areas of mission that have been arising in the margins of the margins. The work of uniting our three founding churches will be ongoing and this part of the mission of God will always be shaping a part of who we are. However, there is also a need to de-centre this conversation in order to fully embrace new missional activities now present in the new margins of the broader UCA family. It is in these new margins that mission and evangelism will continue to flourish and transform our ongoing identity beyond our colonial heritages at union. The UCA must not be tempted to feel nostalgic for particular outcomes of union; that is, an overemphasis on the central power of merging three resource-rich churches, rather, the UCA must focus on seeking Christ's renewal in the margins just as it has done in the margins of three diverse churches journeying as "pilgrim people on the way to the promised end."

Our In-between Theology

Bringing our awareness to our history and acknowledging our foundations will help us to continue to press into our own self understanding. This can highlight the origin of our binary and either/or perspectives of mission and evangelism that still exist in our present day. The problem with our binary context will not be

[7] Studebaker, Beach, and Heath, *Post Christendom Studies,* 49.
[8] Studebaker, Beach, and Heath, *Post Christendom Studies,* 49.
[9] "Denominational Church Life Profile for Uniting Church" (NCLS 2021, n.d.), 18.

solved by intellectual prowess or political domination. Rather, the problem lies in the underlying either or theology that is shaped by our colonial heritage and rewards theological assumptions that thrive by dominating the other. These theologies are reinforced by our inherited postures in mission and evangelism, specifically those that are fixated on the subconscious gaze towards Christendom.

The work of missiologist and former bishop of the Church of South India Lesslie Newbigin addresses these dichotomies by situating the conversation in the pluralistic and secular world of the 20th century.[10] The *Basis of Union* is a product shaped by this context and many of the principles addressed by Newbigin are woven into the fabric of the *Basis* and other founding documents in the UCA Newbigin's understanding of an eschatological view of mission is one of these principles. He tries to encapsulate the grand narrative of creation, fall, redemption and eschaton in much of his description of mission.

Newbigin describes the Church as a "pilgrim people," both witnessing to and participating in God's redemptive mission.[11] It journeys toward the eschatological fulfilment of God's kingdom, acknowledging its own incompleteness while calling others to reconciliation.[12] This tension between the "already" and "not yet" shapes the Church's identity, preventing triumphalism and emphasizing its role as both a sign and recipient of grace.

Newbigin describes the Church as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign, pointing to, embodying, and participating in its fulfilment.[13] As a sign, it directs attention beyond itself; as a foretaste, it offers an anticipation of the kingdom; and as an instrument, it advances God's redemptive work.[14] This eschatological vision necessitates a missionary ecclesiology, as the Church, a pilgrim people, moves toward the kingdom's consummation. For Newbigin, mission and unity are inseparable.

These eschatological foundations of Newbigin's work do not place the emphasis on the final and finished work of God, it places the emphasis on the unfinished and ongoing participation we as the church continue to wrestle with. The second report of the Joint Committee on Church Union, published in 1963, touches on similar themes of eschatology under the heading "Her Duality" (albeit in the highly-gendered language of the time):

> As the Church is set in the world, however, she must bear witness to the fact that not only is her life given from above, but, like her Lord, she is also immersed in the whole life of man. The Church is a truly temporal institution, because God seeks the redemption of man within the historical order.[15]

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[10] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 7.
[11] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of Church* (Wipf and Stock, 2008),18.
[12] Newbigin, *The Household of God, 24.*
[13] Newbigin, *The Household of God, 114.*
[14] Newbigin, *The Household of God, 114.*
[15] Joint Commision on Church Union, "The Church: Its Nature, Function an Ordering," in *Theology for Pilgrims : Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, edited by Robert Bos and Geoff Thompson, 69-186 (Sydney, NSW: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 85.

The description of the pilgrim people's image is the duality that exists in the Churches, temporality and sinfulness.[16] This image points us to the in-between nature of not only the church but of Christ and the work of the cross, it touches on the humanity and divinity of a now and not yet worldview.

Newbigin, moreover, also locates the church sociologically:

> The place of the church is thus not in the seats of the establishment but in the camps and marching columns of the protesters. The protest may be pacifist, claiming in the name of Christ to renounce all coercion; or it may be political and revolutionary, claiming to embody an alternative order of government. In either case, the protesters contend that as Jesus was crucified outside the wall of the city, the place of the Christian must always be outside the citadel of the establishment and on the side of its victims.[17]

These fundamental notions of marginal places in mission are embedded into the *Basis of Union*, and must be taken into account when we consider how to understand mission and evangelism. In-betweenness is what makes the UCA potent in a context that is constantly shifting. In-betweenness is essential when thinking about the incarnational work of Jesus and the cross. The report, "The Church; Its Nature, Function and Ordering" points us to this idea constantly. It provides a worldview and a context for the document and the later *Basis*. Yet some of this context is lost in our discussions in the UCA today. It is essential for us to reclaim the marginal and peripheral perspectives of the gospel and our movement as truly pilgrim people, living in the margins by taking statements written by the founding churches seriously. Not least statements such as this call to immersion and flexibility:

> The Church must also reveal in her life characteristics that reveal her immersion in the world. She must keep her Church order flexible and free, in order to respond to Christ in the ever-new forms of obedience necessary to bring the Word of Christ to men.[18]

Christendom and our colonial heritage struggles with in-betweenness and it is what distracts us from the mission and evangelism that we have been called to participate in from our foundations as a church. Christendom wants to assume the finished work of God in a way that emphasises the complete eradication of opposition in all of our present realities. This over overemphasis does not recognise the lament, brokenness and ongoing grief that is still felt in our realities as people on the way. The over emphasis of inherited images of Christ as the conqueror king that we sing in our hymns and preach from our pulpits only further distance us from the reality of the now but also the not-yet realities of the Church embedded in the *Basis*. It is these practices expressed in our mission and evangelism that we need to continue to decolonise. Part of this work will be to again reflect on our Christology and what centrist assumptions we have as a church, ie; western colonial understandings of Jesus and the Easter message. The post-Christendom world has opened space for the church to re-engage with a Christology that interrogates rather than reinforces power and empire. However, this has also created a perceived instability in our understanding of truth and highlighted ongoing

[16] The Joint Commission on Church Union, "The Church," 87.
[17] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 125.
[18] The Joint Commission on Church Union, "The Church," 86.

dualisms present in our culture. When we operate from a Christendom worldview these dualisms seem to destabilize and cultivate unhealthy divisions between us and them, sacred and secular, and right and wrong. This draws us further away from the full reconciling and incarnational mission of God in all places. Getting lost in our dualism pressures us to over identify with the culture war discussions and approaches toward "progressive" views on social justice and "evangelical" views of sharing the gospel. These binary and divisive either/or paradigms take us further away from embodying the both/and saving work of Christ. It is this both/and work that shapes the call in paragraph 2 of the *Basis of Union* for the church to live out the unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries.

So if a Christendom Christology and a western colonial Jesus are what distract us from our mission and evangelism, what is the alternative?

A Theology of Marginality (Another way to think about our in-between nature)

In *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*, Korean-American theologian Jung Young Lee presents a theology of marginality, positioning it as both a hermeneutical paradigm and a central aspect of Christian faith.[19] He critiques the dominance of centrist theology, which prioritizes uniformity and power, often marginalizing those outside the dominant culture. In response, Lee, drawing on his experience as a Korean-American, proposes a praxis-oriented theology suited for a multicultural society.[20] His argument unfolds in three stages, beginning with an autobiographical account that highlights the assumptions and lived experiences shaping his perspective.

Lee defines marginality through its sociological origins, traditionally understood as an "in-between" state for immigrants assimilating into a new culture.[21] Drawing from his own experience, Lee describes marginality as both neither/nor (in neither) and both/and (in both): a paradox he terms "in-beyond." He argues that marginal individuals exist at the intersection of multiple worlds, neither fully belonging to one nor the other, yet connected to both.[22] This "in-beyond" space, rather than erasing cultural centres, becomes a creative core where diverse identities merge without assimilation. This in-beyond stage holds similarities to the myriad of new creative centers created as a result of union in the UCA. I argue that at its core the UCA has missed the in-beyond aspects of missional creativity because we as a church have not fully articulated a theology of the in-between and have rather fallen back to a subconscious gaze toward Christendom and assimilation.

In the third stage of Lee's argument, he develops his theology of marginality through reflections on incarnation and creation, exploring its implications for discipleship and the church. He asserts that Jesus-Christ is the ultimate marginalized figure, embodying poverty, rejection, and ethnic minority status. Through kenosis, God embraces marginality, making Jesus' incarnation a divine act of self-marginalization. [23] Jesus' life

[19] Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.
[20] Lee, *Marginality*, 20.
[21] Lee, *Marginality*, 36.
[22] Lee, *Marginality*, 60.
[23] Lee, *Marginality*, 79.

and death exemplify the suffering of the marginalized, while his resurrection inaugurates a new marginal humanity, transcending cultural, economic, and ethnic barriers. Here, Jesus becomes the "creative core", where divisions are reconciled "in-beyond" a different type of center; a marginal one.[24]

Lee extends this argument to creation, asserting that humanity was created to be marginal. "The idea of *creatio ex nihilio*, or creation out of nothing, is not found in this text [Genesis 1:2]...Thus creating began with dividing the light from the dark."[25] Genesis emphasizes differentiation (light and darkness), reflecting a plural God whose image is found in the diversity of creation and humanity. Lee defines original sin as "indifference," a rejection of God's creative diversity and differentiation.[26] The ideology of centrality, rooted in uniformity, Lee claims, has historically shaped the Church since Constantine. Thus, the mainline Church must "die" and be resurrected as a marginal Church – one that rejects power, prestige, and rigid hierarchy in favor of servanthood, communal praxis, and reconciliation.

Lee envisions a radical transformation, advocating for cell-group-based theological education and decentralized church structures with no fixed orthodoxy or orthopraxis. The Church must pursue liberation for both the marginalized and the centrists, subverting oppressive structures by "overcoming marginality through marginality".[27] In embracing marginality, the Church fosters a truly multicultural society, where all can recognise their own marginality and exist within the creative core of "in-beyond."

A theology of marginality challenges the narrative of dominance and centrality; it does this, not by taking the place of a victim but does so through the transformative work of Christ as the margin of marginality. I propose that the UCA and much of its polity (both explicitly and implicitly) aims to take on this radical approach. The UCA's inter-conciliar councils can be seen as an expression of this decentralized notion of marginality., Nevertheless, this requires the councils to focus not on their own central existence but to thrive in the new centres created by focusing on the intersection of its own identity and the identity of another council. It is in these new centres(marginal ones), that the in-beyond nature of creativity that Lee describes will thrive.

In the book *Angels in this Wilderness* Professor Andrew Dutney highlights the term "creative minorities" in a similar way to Lee's creative core of "in-beyond".[28] Dutney asserts that the creative minority seeks "neither to control nor abandon the world but to love it to new life through redemptive participation."[29] He argues that "making unity in diversity visible is what the UCA was built for" and that this reconciling work happens in the context of minorities and the marginalised.[30] This means a theology of the in-between, of the marginal is also essential to hold our polity together.

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[24] Lee, *Marginality,* 97.
[25] Lee, *Marginality,* 102.
[26] Lee, *Marginality,* 107.
[27] Lee, *Marginality,* 149.
[28] The term, "creative minorities" was originally coined by British historian Arnold Tonybee and reemerged in the contemporary context through Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Bennedict XVI) and later missiologist Mark Sayers. For more on the background of the term, see Adrew Dutney, *Angels in this Wilderness: Reflections on the journey of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Unley: Mediacom, 2020), 91-100.
[29] Dutney, *Angels in This Wilderness*, 100.
[30] Dutney, *Angels in This Wilderness*, 102.

When we look at other significant statements and documents of the UCA we can see the outlines of this pilgrim/inbetween/marginal/minority theology woven into its fabric. It exists, for instance, in the Statement to the Nation, the Manual for Meetings, the work on the diaconate, the revised Preamble to the Constitution and the various statements addressing our vocation to be multicultural Church. A review and ongoing reflection into these statements is beyond the scope of this paper but what this paper hopes to do is give shape for ongoing reflection to be done in light of a more robust theology of the inbetween and marginal. It is in these spaces where we will find our identity as the UCA but also find the incarnate Jesus-Christ at work in the world, bringing together new and old voices and finding space for the ongoing reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view of the whole creation.

As Rev Dr Katalina Tahaafe-Williams writes in her article "Negotiating the Margins," the *Basis of Union* continues to call us out of our complacency, energising us for the work that we still need to do.[31] This work is embedded in our unpacking of our marginal identity and what it means to live in a context that moves beyond power, dominance and a command and conquer posture. The immediate challenge is to be able to see Jesus Christ at work in the places at the margins, and to withhold our subconscious tendency to impose and replicate a centrist Christendom theology of domination into our current context. The UCA needs to understand its marginality and this means articulating a more robust theology of the margins. These postures exist in our founding documents and also exist in much of the foundational statements we have made since union. Mission and evangelism continues to take place in the margins, the ongoing challenge is whether the UCA can acknowledge and embody this not only within our statements but also in the lived experience through all of our structures that support us to be a pilgrim people continuing to articulate and live out our priorities in seeking a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Cyrus Kung is a Second Generation Hong Kong Australian. An ordained Minister in the Uniting Church, he currently works for UnitingWorld as a Church Engagement Manager for South Australia and Western Australia as well as in placement as a Mission Activator for the Mission Resourcing Team in the Synod of South Australia. Cyrus is passionate about seeing people connect with the deeper parts of themselves whilst also exploring the simplicity of Christ in the complexities of life in the twenty-first century. Creativity, third spaces, liminality, in-betweenness and hybridity shapes much of his approach to ministry and community life.

[31] Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, "Growing Up Uniting: Negotiating the Margins," in *Growing Up Uniting: The Proceedings of the Third National History Society, 11-13 June 2021,* edited by Patricia Curthoys and William W. Emilsen, 177-184, (Uniting Church National History Society, 2021), 183.

Alter-narratives: Indigenous elders reflect

Rosemary Dewerse seeks wisdom from

Denise Champion and Ken Sumner

Abstract

This article emerged from a request to Denise Champion and Ken Sumner to contribute their thoughts on the theme of this special issue of *Uniting Church Studies*. They replied with a query in turn: 'Are we being invited to speak as First Peoples out of our worldviews and identities or are we being expected to speak from a Christian perspective, shaped by Christian concepts?' The answer received in response was to bring their voices and their heritage to this conversation. After noting something of the on-the-ground impact of discipleship and evangelism on Denise's Adnyamathanha and Ken's Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri nations in South Australia, this article explores paradigm-shaking queries and observations that arise from their reflection on salvation.

Introduction

Discipleship and evangelism are activities of Christianity that are fundamentally shaped and motivated by one's understanding and theology of salvation. But what if Christianity has been overlayed – imposed – onto the ancient spirituality of your ancestors and is very much a latecomer to your people's ways of knowing? What if assumptions held within Christian worldview are not your starting point for interacting with the story of Jesus and theologies that have emerged since? Is your knowledge to be considered inferior to a now-dominant narrative in these lands now called Australia, and so dismissed or ignored? What if the particular Christian story of salvation that has driven and continues to drive discipleship and evangelism has been complicit in oppressing your communities, making you 'strangers in [your] own land', pressing your language, culture, law, and ceremony to the edge of extinction?[1] Is that story and its outworking up for critique and revision?

Jill Tabart, then President of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), in her words in the Covenanting Statement (10 July 1994) stated:

> My people did not hear you when you shared your understanding and your Dreaming. In our zeal to share with you the Good News of Jesus Christ, we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom.[2]

[1] UCA Assembly, "Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia," at https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/442. Accessed 16 February 2025.

[2] Uniting Church in Australia, 'The Covenanting Statement' (1994) at https://uniting.church/the-covenanting-statement/. Accessed 26 September 2024.

A question emerged in the invitation to reflect on Christian concepts: Are First People's insights and wisdom – refined over tens of millennia – welcome through signed covenant into conversation about theology and praxis?

The Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia declares:

> The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.[3]

Recognised here is that insight into love and grace through revelation and encounter with Arrawatanha or Winnamaldi – named here using Christian vocabulary as Creator, Spirit, Jesus Christ – was already true for First Peoples before Christian colonisers arrived on these shores. This reflection explores provocations that arise for the Church today if this is true.

Setting the scene

> The church is happy with one-liner explanations of the church and of God in Australia. What would be the point of looking at 'pagan' peoples' understanding?! It's something the church would rather not have to do. Let's keep our status quo. Let's stay with the norm. But if I'm part of the other I want to explore what Christianity might look like…from my perspective.[4]
>
> Denise Champion, *Anaditj*[5]

> You can't write about something that is not yours or doesn't belong to you. What do we do in this space when we're challenged by these words 'salvation,' 'redemption,' 'saved by grace,' 'justification by faith'? There are some real challenges for Indigenous peoples because if we think differently, then we are ostracised. There's lots of ramifications for being who you are.
>
> Ken Sumner in conversation 29 November 2024

To reflect as Indigenous leaders on the topics of salvation, discipleship and evangelism is to hear that Christianity's categories and conversations are the presumed norm for how we all will think and live. This is the way it has been since the first settlers arrived and began to impress themselves on the landscapes and cultures of this continent, aided by missionary fervour. Aunty Denise and Uncle Ken have both been

[3] Uniting Church in Australia, "Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia"
[4] Denise Champion, edited Rosemary Dewerse, *Anaditj* (Port Augusta: Denise Champion, 2021), 13. 'Pagan' originally simply referred to people living in the countryside. Over time it came to mean those who did not believe in the Christian God and were thus judged less than.
[5] Denise Champion, edited Rosemary Dewerse, *Anaditj* (Port Augusta: Denise Champion, 2021), 13.

recorded elsewhere speaking to the particular impact on their peoples of the outworking of Protestant understandings of salvation in terms of evangelism and discipleship.[6]

The Adnyamathanha, Aunty Denise's people, were driven off their lands in Ikara Flinders Ranges across the late 1800s and early 1900s by pastoralists and then lost the small holding they had been left with. One pastoralist, taking pity on Adnyamathanha, gifted a small section of 'his' land to the church and in 1931 the United Aboriginal Mission established a mission station there at Nepabunna. Unable to access their traditional food sources and waterholes they were forced into costly dependency upon Christian evangelising zeal. A condition of church attendance was that they had to leave their culture and language at the door; if they did not attend Church, they received no food rations. With the lead missionary, Fred Eaton, campaigning hard for the cessation of initiation rites and mining activity disturbing key traditional sites of gathering, Adnyamathanha elders in 1948 'decided to cease ceremony altogether because it was too hard to live both ways.'[7] The men, however, continued to refuse to attend church, resistant to loss of identity. As Aunty Denise has noted, the missionaries 'failing to make many inroads reported [to their home churches] that we were beyond salvation.'[8]

For Uncle Ken's people 'salvation' began seventy years before in 1859. It took the very practical form of the establishment of a mission station by the Aborigines Friends Association at Raukkan, their ancient meeting place (called by Europeans 'Point McLeay'), to save them from the voracious encroachment of settlers upon their lands. They lost their rich food sources and, more than that, were torn from connection to Yarluwe-Ruwe (Sea-Country), which had birthed and shaped their Kaldowinyeri (worldview) for many generations. They were denied white man's food rations if they did not attend evangelistic services in the church made famous on the Australian fifty dollar note; their children were taken and separated from them into fenced dormitories to be discipled in the Bible and taught the English language in the mission school. Today as a nation they are known by the word in their language for 'people' – Ngarrindjeri – because missionary George Taplin failed to press beyond their initial response to his question 'Who are you?' to discover their collective identity as Kukabrak.[9]

Preservation of language, culture, law and ceremony has been very difficult and, in some aspects, impossible. For the Adnyamathanha and for Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri their experience of Christian salvation and its outworkings has not been identity-affirming and thus life-giving. Theology set the agenda for practice, so what needs critical consideration?

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[6] See, for example, Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," in *Location-shaped Theologies,* edited by Rosemary Dewerse (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2024), 13-15; Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, *Yarta Wandatha* (Salisbury: Denise Champion, 2014); and Rosemary Dewerse, Ken Sumner, Julie Martin, Melissa Neumann, Max Kowalick, Gillian Powis and Daniel Phan, "Kungan Kaldowinyeri: Listening to Creation and to Story on Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri Yarluwe Ruwe," *Uniting Church Studies* 26.2 (December 2024): 23-26.

[7] Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," 14.

[8] Champion with Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," 16.

[9] Rosemary Dewerse, Ken Sumner, Julie Martin, Melissa Neumann, Max Kowalick, Gillian Powis and Daniel Phan, 'Kungan Kaldowinyeri," 23-26.

Reflecting on salvation

Ken: Terms like 'salvation' are judgemental terms. They're terms that make a pre-judgement upon who you are – your character, your appearance, what you have materialistically. I'm looking at the photos on the wall here [in the board room of the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology] of Raukkan and Oodnadatta. The photo of the latter is of an older lady and two children. I know Christians/missionaries would be saying they need saving, because they are black, because of the way they look, the way they're dressed. 'Salvation needs to happen here,' when in fact they were probably content in their own world, their own land, their own country, within themselves.

Salvation is an interesting word that conjures up some form of judgement. Why does it conjure up some form of judgement when Jesus teaches us not to judge?

Denise: For some reason in the church that's part of their story that you've got to be saved. They've perpetrated a story about what we need to be saved from and who the saviour is.

The concept of salvation we have to struggle with because it implies, and it has always been implied, that we have to change and become something else. We cannot stay the same; we have to change. It's like being on a conveyor belt and having a cookie cutter cutting out the same cookie. Every saved person has to look like this. Every saved person has to sound like this. Every saved person has to mimic their teachers. I really don't agree with the word 'salvation' meaning we have to change and become something else.

Rosemary: *So Jesus isn't asking you to become Jewish or a whitefella, but to fully live into your own identity?*

Ken: Yeah. Missionaries talk about being made in the image of God. 'Let's make humans in our image.' But what colonisation has done is it says, 'You've got to be like me.' The invader says, 'You've got to be like me. You've got to sip tea like I sip tea. You've got to hold a knife and fork like I hold a knife and fork. You've got to dress like me, sound like me.'

When Creator says, 'Let's make man in the image of us,' I'm going, 'My Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri story is about being made in *that* image, not the image of the Scotsman or the Irishman. Not in the image of the missionary. Not in the image of George Taplin.' That image presented a racial superiority. That image created a welfare system. That image created a set idea of what it means to gather as church. If people understood what the good news is, and what's not the good news, then we'd have a different dynamic happening. This is not a resistance against Christianity per se, but it is a resistance against this whole manner of things I've spoken of. It's not a resistance against a story that is good and real and true and delivered in a way that builds and develops. That's a different story than the one that's been presented for two hundred years.

I wouldn't have needed [rescuing by] Jesus if the guys that came along as missionaries did their job properly. I wouldn't have had to go through that process because there was a story already there. They tried to remove that story of who I am, my identity, my ancestral heritage. They interfered with me being heir to my ancestors.

Denise: For us God has always been there in the person of Arrawatanha. We've always known that. We've never been separated from Arrawatanha-Most High. We were given stories by our ancestors and by Arrawatanha to learn how to live with one another in peace and harmony and to learn how to live with our environment, and to live with Creator, knowing Arrawatanha was always there.

Everybody has a form of the truth. We've all got our own form. Often, we will argue and be in conflict, because whose truth is truth? Arrawatanha is that third person in the picture all the time. Through the stories that have been given to us to live by truth is always being revealed, but we've not learned to live by them very well.
I've been thinking about when Jesus came. He said he came not to do away with the law but to fulfil it. The Old Testament is their Old People's story. We've got our own Old People's story. What does 'fulfil the law' mean for us? I think it's very important that we do understand this, now that we have the freedom to think for ourselves and reconstruct our own worldviews again, because our societies were decimated and we're having to do a lot of reconstructing. To reconstruct our worlds again, that's a huge thing to undertake. But we do need to do that.

Terms like salvation and redemption are not typically part and parcel of our everyday language.

Ken: Jesus is not mentioned in Kukabrak history, stories. Jesus is not a physical presence in my society. But after contact or invasion or colonisation I think Jesus can be present spiritually in creation, so there's certain things about creation and about our Ngaatji system where there's little glimpses and big glimpses of Jesus present as we understand and read the Bible stories. To suggest that that story is superior to my story, well we have an issue if that's the case. If you're saying that this story of salvation and human sacrifice is above my story, with some records being 65,000 years old…to say this other story is superior, is the only one, then that's problematic because I don't see that it's superior to my story. And I don't see that my story is superior to anyone else's. For some reason we in the Church can't accept that though.

Denise:

> …it is important that when you hear *Muda* you resist passing judgement. These stories in early whitefella missionary minds were heathen, demonic, and therefore culturally unsafe, and we were [in the interests of our (Christian) salvation] forbidden to tell them. If you are still seeing our stories in that way, please stop. When you hear *Muda* embrace the fact that it is a different way of seeing, knowing and understanding Creator. It is my inherent and inherited knowing from *Arrawatanha*, the Most High, and our ancestors.
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> *Arrawantanha inha Muda ngungangakpala*. The Most High gave us this Muda.[10]

I often hear echoes of the Bible in our Muda, like the one that sounds like the later Christian story of resurrection. Artapudapuda (a little grub) and Aramburra (the Trapdoor Spider) were debating what should happen to the body when the body dies. Artapudapuda said that when the body dies it will return to the ground from where it came and that's where it will stay. Aramburra said that when the body dies it will

[10] Champion with Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," 5-6.

return back to the ground from where it came and after three days its spirit will rise. After arguing a long time they agreed to go with Artapudapuda's version, but they came to regret it because it meant they could never see their loved ones again.

Adnyamathanha people have always believed in an afterlife, that life doesn't stop at death. We go to Kindyarra, a waiting place – some people think it's like heaven. The old stories recount how once an Adnyamathanha person dies their spirit would travel across country down to the water of the Gulf. In the action of travelling across country it would pick up dust. Their spirit would dive into the water and come up squeaky clean. There would be people waiting – generally the ones who had given birth to you and cared for you – who would then escort you to Kindyarra. Everyone goes to Kindyarra; we have no concept of a hell to be saved from.

The church has to recognise that Indigenous knowledge of good and evil was always here, however. It was always here in the oral traditions. It was written in our paintings, songs, carvings. The oral traditions were always here, and our people always passed on the knowledge of good and evil.

Ken: Is it good and evil or good and bad? Even in my culture there's no concept of hell. So what do we do about that? Even the term 'devil'. There's some bad people around. There's always been good people and bad people. There's been bad people who've practised bad stuff like sorcery. There's always been good and bad in that regard, but to actually make hell a location or a place… The concept of a place like the description of hell is not part of my peoples' tradition or understanding. When someone did do something wrong, punishment was dealt with here and now. It was either a spear in the leg or death, whatever the issue was, so that it was dealt with in the here and now because it was important for that person when they died that their journey to the next life would be free of any unresolved issues from this sacred life on earth and to ensure a protected and safe journey to the next life. Punishment wasn't something like hell where you go forever. That's a bizarre concept.

For us who have been evangelised that's the story we're given – if we're not saved, we're going to hell for eternity where there will be gnashing of teeth – so there's stark differences from the culture not having a concept of hell to the Christian story having a place like hell. Why would the Christian story, if it's a good story, have something like hell? It's a bipolar experience or story. It's this, then this. But if it's such a good story, why does it have a place like hell in it when my story doesn't have a place like that? There's some beautiful stories of my people and culture, but there isn't a place like hell. There's just good people and bad people, good choices and decisions, and bad choices and decisions. I don't want to be blaming anyone else for my shortcomings, my bad decisions – 'Oh look the devil made me do it.' It releases me from all responsibility if that's the case. I can go and do the most terrible crime and ask for forgiveness and I still enter the kingdom.

Needing alter-narratives

Denise:

> Faith was forced on Aboriginal people. Nobody asked us. It wasn't a free choice for us to become Christian…

> We could ask: Why do I need Jesus? We've always known that Arrawatanha-God was in this land. We've always been part of the sacred community. I'm intrigued that there's this other story that happened halfway around the world. I'm intrigued that the coloniser took this story to every country in the world, forced it on the First Peoples and forced them to live the colonizer way, which is not a good way to live. The word 'coloniser' is another word for enslaver of others because you have power and control over them. I equate this word 'coloniser' as sin because you have total dominance over others…
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> First Nations people always knew the concept of sacrifice. We had a practice in killing an animal to feed our community that we will always pay homage or give thanks to the spirit of the one who gave life. This is about gratitude for a life given. Early Church history gives us the image of Jesus on the cross, making what he has done visible. What I see is Jesus giving his life to set us free from those who would enslave us. Because the coloniser way is so strong we're only just beginning to understand what it is like to live as free people, even in terms of Christianity. [11]

Ken: The story of the colonised Jesus is not a good story. It's not the good news, so it doesn't become the good news. It becomes something else because attached to it is all these problematic things – control, coercion. There's slavery, there's massacres – all these terrible stories that's associated with the colonised Jesus story. I'm happy not to have that story, the colonised Jesus story, as part of my thinking, because no one's done anything about it. No one's corrected anything. No one's going, 'We've got to change this. We've got to change this story because we've done this, this and this with this story.' No one's done that. They keep pushing this colonised Jesus story to the point where denominations have built their empires. I struggle with that.

Rosemary: *I note that there has never in fact in church history been only one definition and understanding of salvation, despite the impression from Protestant mission teaching that there is.*

Denise: When it comes to salvation, we have to be finding other words and concepts to use. That would usher in a change from the way things have been done in the past.

Sodzo is the Greek word for salvation, from which is derived *soteria* – to provide recovery, to rescue, and to affect one's welfare. I like those words 'provide recovery,' 'rescue,' 'affect one's welfare.'

The Psalmists when talking about salvation tell us that God is a safe place. I would rather talk about that these days than use the word salvation.[12]

I like the word 'transformation.' Today we have the freedom to rediscover Jesus for ourselves in our own culture. The one thing I know about Jesus, as I read the scriptures, is that Jesus came to set free and to transform. Paul's writings talk a lot about transformation, rather than change.[13] I suppose you could say

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[11] Champion with Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," 16.
[12] See, for example, Psalm 46 or Psalm 91:1-2.
[13] For example, Romans 12:1-2, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Ephesians 4.

that transformation is the same as change. Within my culture, however, I don't have to change anything, but Christ has come and influenced my life in such a way that it's transformed me. I'm the same person but different.

Ken: Restoration is always a concept that has to happen in relationships and in creation. It's a continual thing. I think it's one of the pinnacles of relationship with people and creation.

Denise: I like that word restoration. I like it better than salvation.

I'm wondering how much influence the Doctrine of Discovery had on constructing a worldview that meant that people had to change…

Ken: A huge influence I think, because it created a particular narrative that everybody else needed saving and you could do whatever you wanted with them and their land.

Denise: We need to talk about the influence of the Doctrine of Discovery and the Western colonial system that came in and changed everything, including our spirituality.

If Second Peoples bring salvation to the table, what are First Peoples bringing? We need to highlight how difficult it is to try and bring a decolonised understanding [into discourse like this], because what we've ended up with is a very very colonial understanding.

It would be good for us to bring our own stories. I have to continue to put forward our thoughts about our Yura Muda (worldview). Ngalakanha Muda (Big Wisdom) is basically the salvation story but told in a different way. That story goes way back before the church to the beginning of creation. It's always been about restoring from the things that restrict us. If we talk a lot about goodness, freedom and justice, there's no time focus on people's flaws or badness. Look for ways to affirm people's goodness. Language is very important in this. It's one thing that carries culture. It's one thing we want to hand on to young people as a legacy.

Ken: That question about bringing something to the table, for me it's important because when Congress drafted the Preamble to the Uniting Church constitution we brought stuff to the table that was rejected. We brought stuff to the table that people were still trying to stop being brought to the table. We managed to get the Preamble through but not without its struggles and difficulties.

It's about being prepared. As Māori put it, we have to stand in our mana [God-given dignity], in our own spirituality, in who we are.

What I bring is what comes from me and my people. It comes from my land. That's what I'm bringing. What they are bringing comes from somewhere else. It's not of this land.

Denise: We're restoring the integrity of the gospel when we do something like this.

It's good that we have found our voice. *Yeshua*, the basis for the names Joshua and Jesus, signifies freedom from what binds or restricts, and what brings deliverance.

Ken: I think we have a story that can rescue the dominant culture. But, you know, it's always a battle for minorities. The dominant tells their story. They create a narrative. They develop institutions. They continue to tell their stories. They establish learning places that develop a particular mindset. As a minority we don't do that…but the story that I'm trying to develop has the potential to rescue some of the dominant people, maybe.

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Denise Champion is an Adnyamathanha woman from Ikara Flinders Ranges, South Australia. The first Aboriginal woman ordained in South Australia, holding an Honorary Doctorate from the Adelaide College of Divinity, she is Theologian in Residence at UCLT, a college of the University of Divinity, author of Yarta Wandatha and *Anaditj* and co-lectures the unit 'Yarta Wandatha' with Rosemary. In 2024 Aunty Denise won the NAIDOC South Australian Scholar of the Year.

Ken Sumner is a Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri korni (man) from the southeast coast of South Australia. He is the State Development Officer for the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress in South Australia. He has many years of experience in leadership within the UCA nationally and locally, including key involvement in the process that brought to life the Preamble to the Constitution. Ken co-lectures the unit 'Kungan Kaldowinyeri' with Rosemary for UCLT.

On What the People Do in Worship

Robert Gribben

Abstract

This paper is a response to, and a further refection on, an article by Professor Stephen Burns in the June 2024 issue *Uniting Church Studies* entitled "Manual Acts: Mass Confusion?" Burns argues that while the expression "manual acts" is not readily known among Uniting Church congregations and ministers, their unconscious variety of use leads to confusion in our celebration of Holy Communion. A consequential focus on what is done with the hands at the Lord's Table may lead to an over emphasis on the role of the presider (clericalism) and a diminution of the central role of the baptized people of God in the sacrament. As *Uniting in Worship 2* (2000) says, "the congregation is not an audience." In response, this paper explores the complementary charisms of both congregation and presider in Uniting and ecumenical contexts. The author offers his own critique of worship in the Uniting Church at the present time and offers some ways forward.

Introduction

"Let us receive what we are; let us become what we receive:
the Body of Christ." [1]

These words from St Augustine have been turned into a responsive prayer at the breaking of the bread, a genuinely fresh suggestion in *Uniting in Worship 2* (hereafter, UiW2). It has captured the imagination and has sparked church members' questions. Provoking such thought is one purpose of liturgical language.[2] So here we are reminded that "Body of Christ" is not one thing only, but like all symbols, is multivalent, always with a further level of meaning. So, there is St Luke's "This is my Body" in his account of Jesus at the last supper (22:19-20), St Paul's Body as an image of the church, created by the Spirit in baptism (1 Cor. 12:12-14), and there is the bread on our hands. Augustine brings them together.[3]

This article is a response to the paper, published in a recent issue of this Journal, by my colleague, the Rev. Professor Stephen Burns, and titled with its cautionary pun, "Manual Acts; Mass Confusion?"[4] I suspect that few UCA ministers would know what the term "manual acts" signified (that is, directions as to what presiders do with their hands during the remembrance of the Lord's Supper), but they do happen. Dr Burns is quite right to suggest that their meaning and purpose needs further clarity, and that is the bulk of his argument.

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[1] Words at the breaking of the Bread, from St Augustine the final words said by all. See *Uniting in Worship 2*, The Service of the Lord's Day: Second Service (Sydney: UC Press, 2005) 219.

[2] Another example was the modern post-communion prayer which began "*Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home*", an unexpected use of the parable. See *A Prayer Book for Australia (*Broughton Books 1995, 143d.)

[3] It is further elaborated in 1 Cor 15: 35f, Ephesians 1:13, 2:22 and 4:16.

[4] Stephen Burns, "Manual Acts, Mass Confusion?" *Uniting Church Studies*, vol. 26, No. 1, June 2024, 61-72.

These acts are not mentioned in the *Short Guide to the Service of the Lord's Day* (UiW2, 131f); where it speaks of bread and wine (135) it does not elaborate on them, nor when the different traditions within the UCA regarding the Institution of the sacrament are explained (136). Nor do they appear in the important Notes on the Service (138f); Note 17 comments on the placing of the Table "in such a way that the people have an uninterrupted view of the liturgical action" but it does not describe them. Alas, it appears that I am the problem, for in my chapter in *Uniting in Thanksgiving*,[5] my "practical commentary" on presiding at the Table, I discuss the options for manual acts, bodily posture and gesture, for the presider, but the result is confusion and, even worse, I may have added to the confusion.[6] I confess to it. I failed to make up my mind before I published. I hope what follows clarifies some matters. One grows.

I added this practical section to the book, which was mostly a commentary of two Great Prayers, simply because there has never been anything like it written for the Uniting Church (and then only from overseas authors from its previous denominations) and it was clear to me that presiders needed to know their options. I may have expressed preferences; it was not my purpose to lay down new rules.

In his very first sentence, Dr Burns summarizes his purpose: "This essay is at heart a proposal about how presiders at holy communion might enact their role." His charge that the UCA preserves in practice some "mediaeval or 17th century Anglican … style" and his warning about "clericalism" are dramatic but pose important questions. Would that the Assembly had an authoritative body to advise it on liturgical renewal, but it hasn't.[7]

The "manual acts"

I fear that the multiplicity and status of our various reports and debates in the Uniting Church may also have misled Dr Burns. He quotes (63) "a paragraph tucked away in the Notes of the Service of the Lord's Day… in Uniting in Worship 2." [8] The reason is that it belongs in the *pre-union* legislation for the guidance of those making decisions for the church in process of becoming, a formal summary of what the yet-to-be-created Liturgical Commission was to take care to follow. Manual acts existed in the worship books of all three uniting denominations and should be part of the United Church's celebration. The "words of institution" regularly appear. The "actions" mentioned in the quotation were the "breaking of the bread and the taking of the cup and participation in both kinds by minister and people." Interestingly, the directions to pick up or touch never appeared in 1988 or 2005, but they were so much the norm that perhaps they did not need to be inserted.

There are at least two serious issues raised by the unthinking use of the manual acts. The first, Dr Burns takes up in two ways: "the congregation is not an audience" and "Presiders don't play Jesus."

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[5] Robert Gribben, *Uniting in Thanksgiving: the Great Prayers of Thanksgiving of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Academic Press, 2008), Part 3: The Great Prayers: a practical commentary. I had attempted something similar in *A Guide to Uniting in Worship* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1990) ("You are free – if" is mentioned in its Preface, 9, a phrase I owe to the American Methodist liturgiologist James F. White.)

[6] Burns, "Manual Acts, Mass Confusion?" 64 and footnote 12.

[7] The finest book I know about presiding is by the late American Catholic Robert W. Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise, Presiding in Liturgy* (Washington: The Liturgical Conference 1976). For his title, see 2Tim. 1: 6-7 (his own translation).

[8] He notes that it also appears in UiW (1988), see his footnote 8.

"The congregation is not an audience"

Burns quotes UiW2 where it adds *a Short Guide to the Service of the Lord's Day* [9]; it may be short, but it is substantial. It represents one attempt by the then Working Group on Worship to *teach*, to draw attention to changes and to explain; it would make a good text for group study. It states that "a guiding principle" in worship is that "*the congregation is not an audience*," and a few sentences earlier it makes some suggestions for the involvement of the people: such ideas, it says, "*should be well-prepared and thought through, being a vehicle for the worship of the people, rather than a performance*"[10] Dr Burns has given us a glimpse of possibilities in his own commentary, *Pilgrim People: an invitation to worship in the Uniting Church*.[11] He then turns to the ministry of the "presider" and *en route* reflects on some of the debate in the Uniting Church about the meaning of ordination.[12]

He traces the sources which inform the UCA's understanding that (a) *all* the baptized represent Christ, not just the ordained and (b) that the presider stands among them and speaks with them and for them before God. He draws attention to the possibility that, given the manual acts whereby bread and a cup are touched or lifted, those "acts" may suggest that we are replaying the Last Supper or other eucharistic appearances of the Risen Lord, and that the presider has the role of Christ. To take the discussion a little deeper, Roman Catholic teaching speaks of the priest being *in persona Christi* and *in persona ecclesiae,* acting in the person of Christ and of the Church but holds in addition, that at the "consecration" (see more below) is acting as a priest *in a different degree* from the way the laity are members of a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2: 9).[13] The Uniting Church has specifically refused that distinction. Mostly our presiders speak as members of the Church before God; sometimes he or she is addressing the people as if God were speaking – such as in preaching, affirming forgiveness or praying a blessing – but that is because the Church cedes the tasks at that point to its authorized minister. Great care is taken in *UiW* at these points. Vatican II – it may surprise us – says of the vocation of the lay people:

> The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people, not only that they may offer

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[9] UiW2,131-37 and the Notes, 138-143 (emphasis added).
[10] UiW2, 131.
[11] Stephen Burns, *Pilgrim People: an invitation to worship in the Uniting Church* (Adelaide, Mediacom, 2012).
[12] Burns cites some of the ordination debates in the Assembly (63-4) and is accurate in what he discovers. However, the understanding of the ordained ministry is far from resolved in our church. The evolution since, producing changes in the Regulations, reflect the inherent suspicion of hierarchy and a peculiar sense of democracy or egalitarianism which means that no vocation can be confined to one set of designated persons. The first fatality was our much delayed but unique attempt to reform the diaconate; it ended with no distinction from the presbyterate and a serious bifurcation of church and world as spheres of ministry. The expansion of lay presidency was guarded by some well-judged criteria which are not universally applied. Not widening the presbyterate to all who are given the administration of the sacraments in our congregations and ordaining them (cf the Church of England's "local pastor") was a missed opportunity. The hesitation came from those who think that the "learned ministry" is defined by academic qualifications alone. The 2024 Assembly's new Commission for a national provision of theological education may provide some clarification.
[13] *A Prayer Book for Australia* (Anglican 1995) has a fine eucharistic prayer, Thanksgiving 3, 133f., whose preface runs "For he [Christ] is the true high priest, who has freed us from our sins, and made us a royal priesthood/ to serve you…". It also has the phrase, "We thank you that by your grace alone you have accepted us in Christ".

> spiritual sacrifices in everything they do but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world [emphasis added].[14]

We sometimes hear the assertion "baptism is the ordination of the laity" but out of that "laity" the Church calls women and men to maintain the place of Word and sacrament in the Church: the baptized may exercise ministry, but the ordained *must*, as representatives of what the whole Church does. It invites a new use of the old expression of "the priesthood of all believers." It will not set ordained and lay at loggerheads (as it often was in times past) but make it clear that ordination arises from the baptised in Christ, as Luther taught.

That said, I am left with the difficulty of understanding whether there is a role *at all* for a presider, so fraught it becomes in Dr Burn's desire to escape clericalism. I think he doth protest too much. A congregation at prayer, an elders' or a church council meeting *need* a presider. The Uniting Church hinted at what that leadership role might mean when it continued from Presbyterian practice the use of the title 'Moderator' for the presider at Synods. It is not the moderator's or the presider's job to do everything at a service of worship, but rather to facilitate its order, to arbitrate as required, and encourage full participation by those attending. If that is not how those who chair our assemblies behave, the answer is not to remove the role but enhancing their understanding of it. The alternative is chaos or mob rule. However, the lesson may need re-learning in some cases.

I am left uncertain as to how much a congregation's participation is required to be verbal or by some bodily sign. We are already a royal priesthood; that is our God-given call and nature, our presence, in all our variety of age, linguistic abilities, manners of self-expression, musical awareness; certainly there needs to be greater recognition of that. Some will remain silent, having no musical ability. I have known many an older member sit and meditate rather than getting up and sitting down and making the responses. It takes a certain presence of mind to do this, but it is not a separation of someone from the corporate worship. One worshipping community I know constitutes itself by a prayer of invocation led by one of the baptized and then hands a liturgical stole (symbolic of that ministry) the stole to the authorized presider. It is part of the presider's charism to know the gifts in the congregation and to call people with the appropriate gifts to exercise it; this can be ministerial "control," but it may be a proper use of their own vocation.

"Playing Jesus"

The second misinterpretation which may arise from the use of the manual acts is given the subtitle, "Holy Communion is not a tableau of the last Supper."[15] In a simplistic way, with the thought that Jesus said, "Do this for my remembrance," it may seem that we are acting it out on his behalf. That would be naïve (but no less real), but it would leave behind the profound spiritual meaning of the sacrament. It arises from a confusion between "imitating Jesus" and "remembering him in this way". Mid last century, research into biblical and liturgical texts focussed the Greek word placed on Jesus's lips in the Gospels, *anamnesis*. It has often been translated as "in memory of" but the eucharist is not a funeral service, quite the opposite. The

[14] cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10, see the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, A*postolicam actuositatem*, November 18, 1965, par. 3. at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html. The special charism of a Catholic priest or bishop is dealt with elsewhere.

[15] Burns, "Manual Acts, Mass Confusion?", 68.

full meaning is a gift from our Jewish forebears in the faith. At Passover, the *anamnesis* of the Exodus is made at the meal table, the story is told over again with words and symbolic foods. A cup of wine is raised and all present say, "Not only our ancestors were redeemed by God from slavery; all of us are now redeemed in spirit and example. Each of us, each generation, is a beneficiary of God's power of salvation."[16] The past is recalled in the present for its blessings now and in the future; time collapses like a telescope; salvation is now and always. In recent times, Christian liturgies have reclaimed this as a gift, not to be exploited but to enrich our prayer as we "do this in remembrance" of Jesus, at the holy Table, set with bread and wine as the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving begins. The Great Prayer is indeed a "sweeping thanksgiving for the whole of the Father's benevolence towards the world and this people in Christ and the Holy Spirit."[17] It is the presider's job with the congregation is to make it be so.

A moment of consecration?

But there is a third possible misleading impression which may arise from the manual acts. Picking up a loaf of bread or a cup of wine which have not otherwise been acknowledged since they were placed on the Table may suggest that something is about to happen which is different from the purpose of the rest of the Great Prayer. It is the old argument about "consecration." It makes the *elements* the central part of the eucharist, when that title belongs to the whole celebration, from the Peace to the final Blessing.[18] It is often connected with the calling on the Spirit, an invocation or *epiclesis*, which is new to some in our church. It is an ancient and beautiful, if contentious prayer. It is not an ordering of the Holy Spirit to act at this moment, as if it had not been active from the moment we gathered for worship. Our need at this point is made clear: "Pour out the Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and wine that they may be for us the body and blood of Christ".[19] The elements *and we* are consecrated by the Spirit. That is the holy communion we seek.

The two- tracks in the Great Prayer

Burns has also set out the reasons for and the problems with the choice in 1988 in our first UiW to provide for two different "tracks" through the eucharistic part of the liturgy. The reason was that we were (and are) still uniting, committed to respect for our different traditions of Presbyterians and Congregationalists as Nonconformists on one side and Methodists, with their Anglican heritage, on the other. We debated this choice at length. In the debates before UiW2 , the possibility of dropping the "warrant tradition" was raised again, and was retained, but there were many alternatives which were based on the "ecumenical tradition" of the Words of Institution included in the Prayer. The late Professor George Yule used to comment that "the Bible is not a book of precedents" to be followed to the letter. I confess I find the Warrant too close to that misunderstanding and prefer the accent on thanksgiving.

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[16] Rabbi Leon Klenicki (ed.), *The Passover Celebration, A Haggadah for the Seder* [a text for the celebration] (The Anti-defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the Liturgical Training Program of the Archdiocese of Chicago (Roman Catholic), 1980.

[17] Burns, "Manual Acts, Mass Confusion?", 59

[18] And certainly, the four constituent parts of the sacrament itself: The Taking of the bread and wine (Setting the Table), the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, the breaking of the bread (fraction) and the giving and receiving holy communion. See the headings in the services in UiW2.

[19] UiW2, The Service of the Lord's Day, First Service, 179.

The chief task for our original Assembly Commission on Liturgy was to provide words for a "uniting church" of three traditions, from within the faith as we have received it, which any of our congregations could pray and say together because they could recognize in them their own faith. Use of the participle "Uniting" recognized an ongoing process of unity, but in fact there has been a slow decline in the oversight of worship. That Commission, which was widely representative in age, gender and theology and had members with both experience and scholarship, was reduced to a "Working Group" (the title downgraded its authority), and then to one of the "Circles" with an accompanying panel which are basically voluntary. We have lost our catholicity.

I say this because there is almost nothing in Professor Burns' analysis and discussion with which I, or any other informed liturgiologist, would disagree, but the frustration is: the UCA can now do little about it. So, a constructively critical essay by an ecumenical colleague is very welcome, though this response is merely my own. It is unclear how the Uniting Church, with its present structure, could address his challenge.

Of the making of books

Let me place Dr Burns' challenges in a wider context which Uniting Church readers may appreciate. Above, I said the task of the Liturgical Commission was "to provide words, from within the faith as we have received it, which any of our congregations could pray and say together because they could recognize their faith in them". The writer of Ecclesiastes has some modern advocates: "of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (12:12) and St John echoes him (1:25), both, at the end of their books! Our three churches inherited books, and they served as standards, easily accessible to both ordained and lay users.

But one of the darkest memories buried deep in the psyche, especially of our Dissenting ancestors, is of a book of worship imposed on an entire nation by law. There lies the root of many of our contemporary difficulties.[20] Although the Methodist memory of the *Book of Common Prayer* (edited by Wesley) is different, its consistent use meant that it was possible to pray it by heart.[21] Even the smaller *People's Book*, which was published with the 1988 UiW, looked heavy and official, and we clearly failed to convince our people to use it even when purchased. UiW2 is a book largely for presiders. It is also a book already well out of date. I am not advocating a UiW 3, though something like it is necessary, I believe. Stephen Burns adds an epigram "no-one seems quite certain what to do any more,"[22] quoting an Anglican source. The impressive research behind the Act2 report at the recent Assembly records similar confusion in the Uniting Church.

One reason for the confusion is our own cleverness. With a book, one could look up the answer in UiW, but penetrating the complexities of our Assembly website is a Herculean task and one is left unsure of the

[20] It is a strange irony that the title of the *Book of Common Prayer*, "common" being intended to unite a Christian nation, should have produced such radical division. "Common" has an edge to it – according to the 1662 Act of Conformity it meant literally every word was to be used. The Church in England was truly broken in these decades, and English Christianity still is. Australian churches received its legacy.

[21] It did not help that our publishers chose a book design for UiW 1988 which was formal and formidable, especially the editions with metal corners. But it also followed a period when the experimental booklets were paperbacks! The "little Blue Book" (1980) was much loved.

[22] Burns, "Manual Acts, Mass Confusion?" 61.

authority of what is there. When it became possible to produce liturgies from internet sources, we also lost the guidance of the carefully written Notes and rubrics (and blubrics!) of UiW2.

What do the people do in worship?

Stephen Burns asks the critical question: "Does your local eucharistic celebration look like the whole congregation celebrates it, rather than the minister alone celebrates?"[23]

I take Dr Burn's rhetorical point. If this is how Uniting Church worship looks, then it is a terrible indictment indeed. But is what he is driving at possible or even desirable? Monastic Communities manage it. For instance, in the development of Taizé's Council of Youth in the 1970s, much effort went into finding accessible music which could be introduced to a new congregation in a few minutes: simple, repeated phrases, like mantras, sung by the whole congregation seated on the floor. It called on musicians of high ability to achieve this and to watch over it happening. But at the eucharist, with this communal song, an ordained brother presides over the Community's usual liturgy. Charismatic "singing in the Spirit" is another example but is not the only thing that happens in the service.[24] And indeed, hymns and other songs are a vital part of community togetherness in celebration. However, I also wonder if this democratic (not a biblical word) aim is indeed biblical? St Paul gives us his image of the body: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of each other. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us…"(Romans 12: 4-6). It has been suggested that the gift referred to in 1 Cor 12: 28, *kuberneseis*, is associated with steering a boat, or as the *Revised English Bible* has it, "power to guide them". Is that not the spiritual gift of presiding?[25] It includes the gift of so leading a prayer than the listeners are drawn into it themselves. That's how extempore prayer works. It's a *charism*, and not all have each of them.

UiW took major steps in that active congregational direction, compared with our inherited customs, in its doomed *People's Book* (1988) with its return to us of the use of the psalms. The congregational silence was broken by regular responses, reminders of the link between presider and people.[26] Learning other texts by heart is made next to impossible by our UCA desire for variety; other churches know the creeds, and communion responses through regular use. Uniting congregations appear to be reluctant to sing these, despite music being an aid to memorizing the words. Is this a conservatism of presiders or of congregations, and how can it be overcome?[27] I can only say, after more than fifty years of ministry, that

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[23] Burns, "Manual Acts, Mass Confusion?", 63. I vividly remember a Communion service in my mother's Church of Scotland parish outside Edinburgh, where the Minister, faithful to the *Book of Common Order* in his hands, also made all the responses including "and also with you." Certainly, the congregation of my relatives did not think they should say anything!

[24] The Quakers (Society of Friends) get close to it but have no clergy, and all remain silent unless the Spirit moves someone to speak; though someone has the responsibility to discern when the silence should end! Curiously (you may think) Eastern Orthodox worship also exemplifies "common prayer" because the liturgy almost never changes, so the prayers and hymns are known through repetition and familiarity by the congregation. The choir is seen as the leader of the people's worship.

[25] I believe that suggestion was associated with Anglican theologian Colin Buchanan, but I have not been able to confirm that.

[26] I summarised all of them on a single page (13, "All the responses you will ever need to learn"), many of them the same, in my *A Guide to Uniting in Worship* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press 1990).

[27] The Assembly Circle "Transforming Worship" provides many new resources for words and worship. It is accessible also on Face Book.

it is possible, with perseverance and consistency. Our congregations are rarely taught about how to pray, either personally or corporately.

Burns notes recent developments since Vatican II which are worth our study. Our mission, however, pales into insignificance against what the Roman Catholic Church took up under Pope John XXIII in 1962 and his wise and determined successor, Paul VI, who saw through the work of the Vatican Council to its completion. Here is perhaps the most critical paragraph of all, from the Decree on Liturgy: [28]

> 14. Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people' (1 Pet.2:9; cf. 2: 4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

I cannot think of a more important summary of the question. It continues,

> [This participation by all the people] is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful derive the true Christian spirit. Therefore, through the needed program of instruction, pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it in all their pastoral work.

A footnote at this point comments that "this emphasis on full, conscious and active participation by the whole Church is thus not a clerical preserve", though that is not to treat the pastor's role as unimportant. The Constitution calls the clergy to begin with themselves, becoming "thoroughly penetrated with the spirit and the power of the liturgy, and become masters of it."

Elsewhere, Burns quotes Don Saliers, where he calls the Second Vatican Council "the most important thing to affect the Protestant traditions in the twentieth century."[29] "Full, conscious and active participation" in liturgical celebrations needs translating into UCA language and practice.

So, the UCA Liturgical Commission produced books. In its first, it provided a variety of choices, partly to represent the three traditions and also to provide some examples from others. There was a new Australian Great Prayer of Thanksgiving[30] but it offered eight 'Alternative Prayers', A-H (UiW 1988, 91ff) and ten more general thanksgivings capable of adaption to eucharistic use (609-622).[31] In the second, UiW2 (2000) revised and reused the prayer from its predecessor ("in time beyond our dreaming") and added a new prayer in a

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[28] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the first Council document to be published, was promulgated on 4 December 1973. My italics. My source is Walter M. Abbott SJ, (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (London, 1967), 133ff, but it can be found in any such collection at Part II, paragraph 14 "The Promotion of Liturgical Instruction and Active Participation."

[29] Dr Burns and I both contributed to a volume of essays on the Decree on Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) fifty years after its promulgation: Carmel Pilcher, David Orr and Elizabeth Hamilton (eds), *Vatican Council II Reforming Liturgy (*Adelaide: AFT Theology, 2013), the Saliers quotation is on 253.

[30] It provided for a number of "prefaces" over the Christian Year or for special occasions.

[31] The origins of each prayer could be found in my *A Guide to Uniting in Worship* (1990). One (Alt. A) was drawn from a prayer drafted by our own Dr Harold Leatherland, now shared in both UiW2 and *A Prayer Book for Australia* (Anglican, 1995. Others came from our paperback "little blue book", *Holy Communion* (1980), Presbyterian Church USA (two), United Church of Canada (two), British Methodist (1975) and a slight adaptation of Prayer IV in the Roman *Sacramentary* (1971), based on a prayer of the eastern Saint Basil (4th C.).

Second Service (209ff) which was addressed to the Trinity with a preface with thanks for the creation ("for this wide, red land, for its rugged beauty, its changing seasons, its diverse peoples, and for all that lives on this fragile earth"). Pressed by those who wanted more congregational participation in the Great Prayer itself, it provided a response used three times throughout the prayer ("Holy God/we offer our thanks and praise") with Australian-composed music provided.

My sense is that the response did not meet that need, and the prayer, if used, was usually offered as a single text by the presider. So, does this mean that more verbal involvement by the congregation does *not* in fact promote a sense of their being participants rather an audience? My suspicion is that if the Great Prayer were offered by everyone in unison that too would not improve the experience; the communal saying of the Lord's Prayer needs more care than it receives. I believe a congregation "participates" in liturgical prayer in a variety of ways and at several levels. They hear, they see, they taste, they stand, they sit (only the sense of smell is not normally engaged!) and they ponder. Worship is not destroyed by a mind that wanders. How one presides is a main factor in enhancing this, by gesture, by use of voice, by inviting. Silence plays its part and so does communal singing.[32] The frequent practice in Uniting congregations of my acquaintance, being smaller, is to come forward at the Peace and stand around the Table until after they have received. That certainly speaks of all the baptized as celebrants.

Of course, all that I say depends on the culture in which we worship, our own or one overlaid on us. I write as an overeducated white male (and old). I write chiefly for my own Anglo-Celts who, for the moment, are a majority in our ageing congregations and still deserve to be addressed. But there is a huge challenge for the generations to come, and I see no pathway for them to negotiate the changes. If there are intergenerational roads to traverse, there are also intercultural, Christian and anti-Christian ones. Our efforts to imagine these ways have been minimal and not far from colonialist adaptations for the sake of peace (or practicality).[33] The cultures of modern Australia pose even greater questions, especially since they are a major cause of the supplanting of Christian faith in the western world. The liturgical movement has gained much from study of the growing years of the Church before Constantine brought them out of their obscurity and the next few centuries. We need to remember that in contemporary use "modern" is an Enlightenment word.

We are also prisoners of our buildings.[34] Many of ours were designed not for a congregation but precisely for an audience. After Vatican II, the Catholic Church experimented with some high success with congregational seating in a half-circle or a hollow U. I wrote a book on "Theological Guidelines for Uniting Church Worship Buildings," which proved useful but has been allowed to go out of print.[35] There are more recent and more

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[32] UiW2 was also accompanied by CD-ROM material with even more possibilities and more have been provided since. Discussion of these is beyond the scope of this essay.

[33] Some start has been made by working with Indigenous Peoples. The Basis has made our commitment to our immediate external neighbours, Pasifika and Southeast Asia clear (see Basis, # 2). Printing texts in other languages (see UiW2 334-344) cannot possibly address the issues. It was a well-meaning gesture, but it ignored the relationship of language to meaning and symbol. The Roman Catholic Church in particular has applied the implications of enculturation for liturgy. We have a way to go.

[34] See my two articles, one on the Methodist Church Worship Society, and a second on the Presbyterian Church Service Society, made up of clergy and laity, and the Congregational parallel, in *Proceedings of the Uniting Church Historical Society (Vic. & Tas.)*, vol. 31, No. 1, June 2024, 1-26, 27-53. Many issues in worship arose from the inherited architecture.

[35] *Living Stones, Theological Guide-lines for Uniting Church Worship Buildings (*UC Synod of Victoria, 1997), written at the request of the Synod body responsible for them.

detailed ecumenical sources.[36] In the ancient Church, the building's design was intended to teach the worshippers – and the catechumens – about the meaning of the worship which happened there: baptistery, place for preaching, table for eucharist, all facing east. A building is a canopy over the church's worship. We seem to have provided for one form of communication: to an audience. But worse: seeing this, we seem incapable of radical change ("radical" meaning according to the issues at the root).

Mass confusion?

These are some of the issues which arise from Stephen Burns' gentle nudge at the Uniting Church's theology and practice of ministry. I have recognized the connections with other factors like ecumenical sharing, language and culture.

We are surely aware that the issues facing faith and belief in the 21st century affect *all* the churches. Our Church should certainly have found ways by now of working with other Churches, not least those most different from us, in discerning the issues and finding ways forward. But the ecumenical movement has lost its way too: for some it became irrelevant when we stopped planning organic unions. The very threats to our existence have forced us back behind our denominational walls to protect us from marauders.

I believe we must now create or recreate ecumenical forums where common issues can be discussed by decision-makers as well as neighbouring congregations. Let inter-church councils have these on their agenda. We cooperate readily on social justice issues, but what of faith and order? The ecumenical pioneer Lesslie Newbigin, addressing a dialogue between Anglican and Reformed churches more than forty years ago made the sobering observation that they needed to face together "a missionary situation in which the Church is a small evangelizing movement in a pagan society." [37]

The fact of the matter is that the Uniting Church does not have sufficient liturgical scholars to lead us in the preparation of contemporary forms of liturgy. Our inherited fears have meant that our best students have been supported in fields like biblical studies and theology and some sociological and psychological areas, but not in liturgy or music and the arts. Frequently, theology and biblical studies have been taught without considering their application in congregations. The teaching of liturgical practice was never strong among us; even the teaching of preaching has often been neglected. It is not enough to be "interested" in such things: we need people with breadth and depth of study and experience to keep them before us. So let us really do everything with our Christian companions on the road, sharing our resources.

The work of Act2 was received by the 17th Assembly (July 2024) and put into action via a new Commission. Unfortunately (and this is not to downplay the significance of what they did decide), the accent is almost entirely on refreshing the administrative structures of the Church. The mission of the Church in general is promised for the next Assembly – three years away, plus time for consideration and decision making. By then we will be even more fragile. In this essay I have called for a recovery of the skilled commissions

[36] Burns suggests one in his first footnote, Richard Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship: Transforming the Liturgy of the Eucharist (*Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004).
[37] Quoted in Geofrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 292.

and working groups in the field of liturgy, and I would add: doctrine and ecumenical relationships. And some things can be done at other council levels, even at that highest of all equal councils, the congregation.

Let the *Basis* supply us with a goal to be made real in every congregation: "On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way" (#3). Do we believe this? Do we exemplify it in our life and worship?

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A Twenty-first Century Uniting Church: the ongoing work of union in the Uniting Church in Sweden.

Erik Lennestål

Abstract

Founded in 2012, the Uniting Church in Sweden is the second youngest member of the global United and Uniting church family and represents a somewhat unlikely fusion of the United Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Sweden, the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden and the Swedish Salvation Army. This article surveys key historical and theological factors that made union possible, gives insights into the state of ecumenism in Sweden and reflects on the theological and ecclesial self-understanding of the new movement, sometimes by comparison and reference to the Uniting Church in Australia. It finds that the dream of greater unity and future unions is an energising and ongoing work, charged with possibility.

Introduction

During my work for the Act2 project of the Uniting Church in Australia my identity as a minister of the Uniting Church in Sweden (UCS) would usually be met with curiosity – even more so when I explained that our northern sister church only came into union just over a decade ago, as a somewhat unlikely fusion of Swedish Methodists, Swedish Baptists, the Swedish Mission Covenant Church and the Swedish Salvation Army.

This article is my attempt to tell more of its fascinating story than I ever had time and opportunity to do then, in the hope that it might inspire, challenge and, if necessary, provoke the UCA as it continues to "take a long, loving look at the real" of its life since 1977.[1]

What were the contributing historical, ecclesial and theological factors that led these Swedish churches to turn towards one another and ultimately enter into union? What theological convictions continue to fuel the second youngest church in the United and Uniting church family in its self-understanding and mission?[2] And how far away are we from seeing yet another church come into union?

[1] Walter Burghardt, S.J., "Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real," Church No. 5 (Winter 1989): 14-17 cited by Bethany Broadstock, "New Act2 Report is ready to launch", June 27, 2023, https://uniting.church/launching-act2-report/.

[2] Older by less than two years than the United Protestant Church in France, founded in 2013, from Reformed and Lutheran Churches.

The state church context

Firstly, it would be impossible to say anything at all about Swedish church history without reference to the Swedish Lutheran Church. Much of the church landscape in Sweden has come into existence in continuity with, in reaction to, or in defiance of the state church, whose dominance has shaped Swedish Christendom from the Reformation until it was formally stripped of its special privileges in 2000.[3] The churches that would come into union all trace their origins to 19th century popular revival movements that swept across Scandinavia in spite of widespread official condemnation. Since the institution of the Conventicle Act in 1726 it had been outlawed to gather a group of believers in private homes without the presence of a state church priest. Penalties were harsh and included being sent into exile. While some of the strictest laws were lifted in the 1850s, Sweden would only gain full freedom of religion, including legally sanctioned departure from the state church, as late as 1951.[4] God could not be so easily boxed or constrained, of course, and both revival as well as an openness to ecumenism came through many different currents, both inside and outside the state church.

Swedish Methodism

Methodists came to Sweden early on as a result of immigration and emigration. In the early 1830s, Scottish Methodist missionary George Scott helped found the 'English Chapel' in Stockholm, with connections both to Great Britain as well as to Swedish Methodist congregations in America. Methodism, while remaining numerically quite small in Sweden, served as a significant catalyst for change. Its emphasis on prevenient grace, personal choice, holiness, and social justice extended well beyond the Methodist Church. It influenced the established state church and contributed to the rise of several free-church-style "movements" *within* it, such as the Swedish Evangelical Mission movement, and closely related to it, and beyond it, the Mission Covenant Church, the Alliance Mission and the Baptist Union.[5] Thaarup makes the poignant observation that, in a way, the formation of the Uniting Church in Sweden is a uniting of three free churches in Sweden that were all influenced by Scott's work in one way or another.[6] At the time of Union for the UCS, there were approximately 3,000 Methodists, 20,000 Baptists, and 60,000 members of the Mission Covenant Church.7[7]

Swedish Baptists

The first Swedish Baptists trace their origins to the baptisms as expressions of civil disobedience that took place in 1848 on the Swedish West Coast, where five men and women entered the waters and were baptised by a Danish Baptist pastor. A local former sailor, Fredrik Olaus Nilsson, who had previously been

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[3] Even then, the Swedish Parliament still ruled that the former state church should 'operate throughout the whole kingdom' and 'be an open church for the whole people and organised democratically' (Church of Sweden Act 1989:1591). For an assessment of the important contributions of Catholic faith in pre- and post-Reformation Sweden see also Magnus Nyman, Förlorarnas historia: katolskt liv i Sverige från Gustav Vasa till drottning Kristina (Veritas, 2017).

[4] By the passage of the Act on Religious Freedoms 1951:680.

[5] Hans Andreasson, Liv och rörelse. Svenska Missionskyrkans historia och identitet. (Verbum, 2007), 22.

[6] Jørgen Thaarup, Wesleyan Theology in Europe: Christian Thought in European Wesleyan Tradition (Tro-fast, 2022), 32.

[7] According to the Swedish government Agency for the Promotion of Faith Communities (SST) which collates annual statistics and administers significant state grants. See e.g. Swedish Agency for the Promotion of Faith Communities, "Bidragsstatistik", https://www.myndighetensst.se/bidrag/bidragsstatistik

influenced by Baptists down on the European continent would take on the leadership of the first Baptist congregation until he was sent into exile less than two years later, while other early Swedish Baptists were imprisoned. The religious authorities were ultimately powerless against the movement, and the Baptists grew tremendously, especially in the second half of the 19th century. Anders Wiberg, who had been ordained as a Baptist pastor in the United States, emerged as the de facto leader of the nascent Baptist union and served as one of its early unifying forces. The Baptists were staunch congregationalists, highly dedicated to Scripture and firmly believing in the individual's ultimate freedom to choose faith, baptism, and church membership. In spite of its initial focus on congregationalism, after Wiberg's death the movement would nevertheless come to organise itself as a denomination. The growth continued, and at its peak in 1936, the Swedish Baptist Union counted 65,000 members.[8] That number would soon be more than halved, as Pentecostals were excommunicated, and various other Baptistic groups parted way. Many who stayed nevertheless came under the heavy influence of those who left, by Wesleyan thought, and by Waldenström and others from what would become the Mission Covenant Church. It is perhaps some of this shared history, culture and common beliefs that would cause the Baptists to ultimately lean towards the Misson Covenant Church when some of the movements it had birthed were themselves coming together as the Evangelical Free Church in 1997. This move further shone a light on some of the complexity, showing it was always something far more complex than merely groups united by shared views on baptism.

Swedish Mission Covenant Church

The Mission Covenant Church, which also spread beyond Scandinavia into North America through Swedish emigration as the Evangelical Covenant Church, stemmed primarily from Lutheran pietism. Originally an intra-Lutheran missionary initiative, it facilitated and organised missions within Sweden and internationally. These missions extended to regions such as Sápmi as well as distant locations including Congo, China, Russia, and the Americas.[9] It started as one of several missionary movements within Lutheranism at the time. The individuals referred to as "Mission Friends" were ecumenically inclined and highly engaged congregationalists. Their primary focus was on faithfulness to Scripture, love, personal piety, and missionary pragmatism, rather than necessarily striving for doctrinal perfection. Nevertheless, many, attracted to the teachings of Lutheran priest P.P. Waldenström, came to take exception to the Augsburg Confession, favouring instead an atonement theory less centred on penal substitution but instead on God's reconciling of humanity to Godself.[10] As a result of adopting an open table approach to the Eucharist, particularly through sharing communion outside of approved church services, the state church and the Mission Friends

[8] Sune Fahlgren, Vatten är tjockare än blod (Stockholm School of Theology, 2015).

[9] Sápmi is in reference to the northernmost area of Scandinavia and Russia's Kola Peninsula, traditionally inhabited by the indigenous Sámi peoples. While there remains a strong affinity for the Sámi within the UCS, and a Sámi Church movement within both the Swedish Lutheran and Swedish Uniting Church, many Sámi remain ambivalent about the missions as an extended arm of the state apparatus and the devastating impacts on their ancient culture and religion. Both churches have engaged in truth-telling and apology to the Sámi peoples. There has not been the same depth of commitment, however, as the UCA's covenant with the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and much is still left to be desired in terms of meaningful commitments to justice, mutuality and reconciliation. I reflect further on this issue in Ingen rättvisa värd namnet utan rättvisa för samerna! (Hela Hälsingland, February 6, 2020), https://www.ljusdalsposten.se/2020-02-06/debatt-ingen-rattvisa-vard-namnet-utan-rattvisa-for-samerna/. UCS International Missions Director Gerard Willemsen has also written an insightful and inclusive account of God in Sámi culture in Gerard Willemsen, Gud i Sápmi: Teologiska funderingar i samiskt perspektiv (Vulkan, 2009).

[10] P.P. Waldenström, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity (1872)" in Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations, 2nd ed., Glenn P. Anderson (Covenant Publications, 1999), 101-102.

eventually separated. This separation eventually led to the official establishment of the Swedish Mission Covenant by Waldenström in 1878.

The Swedish Salvation Army

The Salvation Army arrived in Sweden in the late 1870s through visits by Bramwell Booth, son of co-founders William and Catherine Booth, and the work of Swedish woman Hannah Ouchterlony, who would become the movement's first leader in Sweden. Over the span of the coming two decades, however, friction arose between many prominent leaders in Sweden and international headquarters in London. In 1903, a number of Swedish Salvation Army officers had appealed to General Booth, seeking more democratic forms of local decision-making and more flexible practices in relation to baptism and communion.[11] When their requests and concerns were not heeded, nearly half of all Salvation Army Corps in Sweden at the time banded together to form the Swedish Salvation Army in the summer of 1905 under the leadership of Kaleb Swensson-Tollin. For most of the history of The Salvation Army, then, Sweden has known not one but two Salvation Armies, one 'Swedish' and one 'international' or 'British'. Some towns, including my own hometown in northern Sweden, even had both corps represented for quite some time! Both remained true to their Army particularities, Wesleyan sensibilities and deep-seated commitment to social-diaconal work.

Over the years, however, both Armies saw their numbers shrink significantly, but the decline of the Swedish Salvation Army was particularly steep. The two Armies evolved in different directions over the years, and in 1988, the Swedish Salvation Army signed an agreement to become associated with the Mission Covenant Church while maintaining the independence to operate their own Corps. Of note, the parents of the Swedish Salvation Army's first Colonel had both been early pioneers within the Mission Covenant Church, so there was always a strong affinity between the two. By 2005, The Swedish Salvation Army was welcomed as a non-territorial region within the Mission Covenant Church. Special consideration was also given to the group in the work leading up to Union.[12] By 2016, the denomination was officially dissolved and the remaining Corps integrated within the new Uniting Church. Using some of the remaining assets of the now defunct denomination, a foundation was created, which continues to fund ongoing ministry and diaconal work in the same spirit as the Swedish Salvation Army.

The state of Swedish "free churches" and Nordic ecumenism

At this stage, it is evident that a significant interrelationship existed among the churches that united in Sweden. This interconnectedness varied in strength, being more pronounced between certain churches than others. There was also a sense of connectedness and culture that was perhaps derived from being independent free churches vis-à-vis the dominant state church. While some historic wounds were profoundly painful, it is also important to note that the state church itself was also changed and shaped in many ways by the free churches and popular movements. The Swedish Lutheran Church itself has also played a significant role in the global ecumenical movement. Notably, the contributions of Nathan Söderblom, an

[11] "Historia", Stiftelsen Svenska Frälsningsarmén (Foundation Swedish Salvation Army), https://www.stiftelsensfa.se/historia/.
[12] Stadgar för Gemensam Framtid (Regulations for Common Future [the working name for the UCS before the final name "Equmeniakyrkan"/"Uniting Church in Sweden" was adopted by the 2013 Assembly]), 2011, Para 21.

early 20th-century Lutheran archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, were instrumental in promoting Nordic ecumenism and advancing Christian unity on a global scale. By 1992, the Mission Covenant Church and the Swedish Lutheran Church had signed an ecumenical agreement, where they, amongst other things, sought to heal past wounds, and fully recognised each other's ordination as well as gave one another full permission to preside over the sacraments in church services. A great degree of exchange of ministers between denominations, increased ecumenical cooperation, and closer reciprocal relationships between the two churches became very visible fruits of this arrangement. A renewed and deeper ecumenical agreement was again entered into in 2006 between the Mission Covenant Church and the Swedish Lutheran Church, and in 2015 between the new Uniting Church and the Lutheran Church.[13]

All of these factors would continue to converge at various points throughout Swedish church history. Eucharistic renewal movements that affected the Swedish Lutheran Church did not leave the free churches unaffected. Swedish Lutheran priests and congregants would participate in church services where communion was shared with many free church congregants. As early as 1905 the first free church conference was held in Sweden, at the large Immanuel (Mission Covenant) Church in Stockholm. Baptists, Methodists and Mission Covenant leaders were well-represented. There was a real sense in which this newfound unity was but a provisional arrangement, awaiting the full and visible unity of the Christian Church. The organic work would be formalised somewhat by 1918, and three of the founding churches formed a common organising committee and began collaborating more deeply and visibly in between conferences as well. By the end of World War II, virtually all free church denominations were actively involved in this work. There were also significant disagreements at times, however. Efforts to unite the Alliance Mission with the Mission Covenant Church failed, and views became increasingly polarised. The Alliance Mission disagreed with the Mission Covenant Church over the nature of Scripture and landed on very different interpretations and conclusions of the same Scripture. Others, including some Pentecostals and Charismatics, were treated with a degree of suspicion, and were themselves suspicious of modern biblical criticism and what they perceived to be liberal theology. While this galvanised a degree of difference in the ecclesial landscape, it also saw others double down on Christian unity. The national leader of the Swedish Baptist Union, Hjalmar Danielson, began canvassing the possibility of a federated union of free churches in Sweden as early as 1944.[14] In the next fifteen years, substantial progress was achieved, and Mission Covenant leader Ansgar Eeg-Olofsson determined in 1948 that a federation was insufficient. Rather, he asserted that establishing a unified free church was both feasible and attainable.[15] By the mid-1950s, a union of Baptists, Mission Covenant and Methodists seemed close, but failed as the Baptists were unable to convince the other Baptistic denominations to join the venture. By the late 1960s, seven free church denominations were engaged in active negotiations regarding union. However, there was no denying the most significant and enduring relationships had been established between the Baptists, Methodists, and Mission Covenant Churches. Although discussions among these three churches persisted for several years, they ultimately concluded unsuccessfully in 1971. The resulting disillusionment experienced by many was profound.

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[13] Swedish Lutheran Church and Uniting Church in Sweden, "Ekumenisk överenskommelse mellan Svenska Kyrkan och Equmeniakyrkan med kommentarer," dnr. 2016:0019b, March 2, 2016.

[14] Sune Fahlgren, Predikantskap och församling: Sex fallstudier av en ecklesial baspraktik inom svensk frikyrklighet fram till 1960-talet (Uppsala University, 2006), 201-236.

[15] Torsten Bergsten, Frikyrkor i samverkan: Den svenska frikyrkoekumenikens historia 1905-1993 (Libris/Verbum, 1995), 138.

Ecumenism from below

Interestingly, however, while "top down" ecumenism and talks between leaders had failed, there remained an unstoppable force of grassroots ecumenism, which ultimately would pave the way for Union. Local ecumenical congregations were emerging across Sweden, uniting Methodist, Mission Covenant, Baptist and, in some cases, Swedish Lutheran congregations. In the southernmost town of Höör a local Baptist and Mission Covenant congregation merged to form a new ecumenical congregation and resolved all prior disagreements about baptism and church membership through a couple of years of close collaboration.[16] Having unanimously resolved to come together in union locally, the congregation wrote to the denominational leadership of both denominations in 1969 with the simple plea, "now make our paths straight."[17]

The groundswell of ecumenical congregations would continue, and the national leaderships were permissive and tolerant, at times encouraging, but it would take until the 1990s before formal joint talks would again restart. In 1992, the Mission Covenant Church Assembly in session passed a declaration of intent to form "a free and open church" along with the Baptist Union and the Methodist Church, and, if possible, also the Swedish Lutheran Church.[18] Years of increased collaboration would follow, with both progress and setbacks. Progress was made on a joint formation program and shared ordination pathway for all churches as well as to form one joint theological college in Stockholm. After new attempts to unite with other Baptistic denominations as well as the Alliance Mission had again failed, the three churches continued their journey to form a new uniting denomination. By 2004, the three churches gathered for the first joint church conference and shared a joint ordination service at the conclusion of the Assembly. In 2006, national leaders for all the churches gathered in Tuscany to spend time together with one another and in prayer. The motivating factor for the gathering was not rationalisation but Christ's prayer "that they may be one"(John 17:21). When asked on the final night whether the time was right to form a new church, all participants responded in the affirmative. Answers ranged from "Yes, I want to! Where we build something new together from below," "I want to form a new Church and would like us to start today" and "May we find ourselves in a Church where we share all things with one another, where we have the courage to be open."[19] Importantly, what proved to be the way forward was adopting the idea to build a new Church, not to merge or merely combine something pre-existing. So these profound insights from the Tuscany talks: "We three traditions are going to build something new together … three proud traditions that are all willing to lay something down."[20] This was further crystallised in the "Way Forward" document published in 2009:

> We believe that we all have something good to receive from that which is new, and we are challenged to reassess earlier approaches for the sake of unity and renewal. Unity is for us a clearly superordinate value in relation to dividing lines. This is something other than compromise.

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[16] Sune Fahlgren, "De förenade församlingarna och förändringarnas vind. Några ecklesiologiska reflektioner," Tro & Liv, 2 (1992), 33–38.
[17] Alluding to Matt. 3:3.
[18] Svenska Missionsförbundet/Missionskyrkan, 1992 års generalkonferens, protokoll.
[19] Olle Alkholm, Sofia Camnerin, Lasse Svensson, Christina Larsson, Resa till enhet (Verbum, 2019), 8-16; my translation.
[20] Alkholm, Camnerin, Svensson and Larsson, 8-16. In addition, "creating something new together" had also been the position of the 2008 publication "Gemensam framtid?" ("Common Future?"): Per-Magnus Selinder (ed.), Anders Svensson and Karin Wiborn, *Gemensam framtid? – en rastplats för eftertanke på vandringen med Baptistsamfundet, Metodistkyrkan och Missionskyrkan*. (Svenska Missionskyrkans kommunikationsavdelning, 2008), 102-104.

> This is an exercise of the mind of Christ and to refrain in order to give place to others. ... We seek to be a church of relationships – personal, local, regional, national and global – relationships characterised by love, mutuality, solidarity and dialogue. Love is the foremost landmark...[21]

The Nordic context of local uniting churches affiliated with multiple denominations at the same time is distinctive and quite unique on an international level. At the time of Union, nearly two-thirds of Baptists were part of ecumenical congregations with various combinations including Baptist, Mission Covenant Church, Methodist, Evangelical Free Church, and Pentecostal Churches. In the Methodist Church, one fifth of local congregations were ecumenical, often linked to the Mission Covenant Church, Baptist Churches, or Pentecostal Churches. Nearly a fifth of Mission Covenant congregations were ecumenical, with many linked to three denominations, including the Mission Covenant Church, the Alliance Mission, the Swedish Lutheran Church, the Swedish Evangelical Mission, and the Pentecostal denomination.[22]

The youth leading the way

The youth organisations of the three churches formed a federation and established a national secretariat in 2007, adopted the name "Equmenia" and the vision "where children and young people grow in fellowship with each other and with Jesus." By the following year, the assemblies of each founding church decided to unite. In 2011, the new church was formally established, initially using the name "Common Future" before changing to "Equmeniakyrkan" (i.e. "the Equmenia Church") in 2013. The church consciously adopted the name "Uniting Church in Sweden" for English and international contexts.[23] The name "Equmenia" honours the pioneering youth who united first, blending words like "ecumenical" and "EQ" (emotional intelligence) creatively. The logotype of the new church is a mosaic cross, incorporating the colours of the graphic profiles of the churches that first united as well as signalling diversity and the collective identity of the union.[24] There is a palpable sense of enthusiasm as the Church has united for the benefit of future generations. The Uniting Church in Sweden is deeply rooted in the antecedent traditions, balancing various perspectives while collectively adhering to its unifying vision: to be "a church for all of life – where the encounter with Jesus Christ transforms me, you, and the world." While there are many aspects open to debate, this intent has served as a guiding principle.

Theological foundations and self-understanding

The strategic platform adopted by the 2012 conference of the UCS begins with the assertion that "we have to be honest about our own history. We have not succeeded in giving expression to the gospel which transforms the world, or ourselves be transformed. Now we need to take new steps [on the journey]." It also finishes by the expressing a desire to "stand for renewal and seek new ways to be church, better suited for our time

[21] Metodistkyrkan i Sverige, Svenska Baptistsamfundet and Svenska Missionskyrkan, "Vägen vidare" (2009), 20; my translation.
[22] Sune Fahlgren, "Equmeniakyrkans ecklesiologiska äventyr", Svensk Teologisk Kvartalsskrift vol. 90 (2014), 133-148.
[23] Alkholm, Svensson, Camnerin and Larsson, 16.
[24] Equmeniakyrkan, "Namnet Equmeniakyrkan," https://equmeniakyrkan.se/kyrkan/equmeniakyrkans-historia/namnet-equmeniakyrkan/.

... This means that we follow Jesus in every new time."[25] This propelled and fuelled the emerging church to focus on this vision over differences and to adopt a genuine posture of urgency: "it's now or never."[26]

Like the UCA's Basis of Union, the UCS has also articulated a "theological foundation" which, along with the agreed regulations for the new Church, gives us some further insights and clues into noteworthy characteristics. Like the UCA's formulation about being "a pilgrim people", our Swedish counterparts remind us that it is a church formed from three traditions. This is a richness to protect, "but we must also receive the new. This means that not everything is complete. We are a church on the way."[27] It goes on to highlight some of the key features of this heritage as "the emphasis of personal commitment to Christ, the responsibility of the individual as part of the congregation and society, and the democratic forms in decision making."[28] It is a very socially conscious and politically involved community. Through a commitment to "reconciliation, fair distribution and care for others" and in considering what it also means to "proclaim the Gospel to all people and all creation," the UCS prioritises social justice, environmental stewardship, and human rights, in living out the gospel in contemporary society.[29] The church has also publicly participated in and provided chaplaincy to Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement, and the 2021 Assembly passed motions to "declare a climate emergency."[30]

The consensus decision-making practices also implemented by the WCC and the UCA have in this context been described as a real gift to the church, allowing for all voices to be heard as we "seek the will of God and consensus."[31] Following the legacy of Mission Covenant great, P.P. Waldenström, the new church wants to resist any sectarian tendencies and repeatedly affirms that "the Church is one," "universal," "transcends all boundaries" and is, in any case, "in this time provisional, awaiting the visible unity of the Church of Christ."[32] This is very good news to a world in the post-denominational era.

On Scripture, the UCS affirms that "the Word of God is revealed in Jesus Christ," "given in the Bible" and "is interpreted by the Church throughout history."[33] Further, and importantly, that the Bible is to be "interpreted and expounded on the basis of its centre, Jesus Christ and his work of salvation."[34]

True to the vision to be "a church for all of life," the UCS states that it "embraces different generations and cultures and is seeking to make the Uniting Church in Sweden and its congregations accessible to all people."[35] Herein is found a deep desire to be a truly intergenerational church, in collaboration with Equmenia, and a truly multicultural community. The UCS has theologically reflected on disability and

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[25] Equmeniakyrkan, "Strategisk plattform för Equmeniakyrkan (antagen av kyrkokonferensen 2012)."
[26] Sune Fahlgren, "Equmeniakyrkans ecklesiologiska äventyr," 145.
[27] Equmeniakyrkan, "Teologiskt arbete," https://equmeniakyrkan.se/tro/teologiskt-arbete/.
[28] Uniting Church in Sweden, "A Theological Foundation for the Uniting Church in Sweden", Para 6.
[29] "A Theological Foundation for the Uniting Church in Sweden", Para 2, 28.
[30] Equmeniakyrkan, "Klimatnödläge," https://equmeniakyrkan.se/vart-arbete/klimat-hallbarhet/klimatnodlage/. See also "Lena strejkar varje fredag för #FridaysforFuture" (February 1, 2019), https://equmeniakyrkan.se/lena-strejkar-varje-fredag-fridaysforfuture/.
[31] "A Theological Foundation for the Uniting Church in Sweden", Para 21. See also Equmeniakyrkan, "Manual för beslutsfattande. Konsensusmetoder i Equmeniakyrkan" (2019).
[32] "Theological Foundation," Para 2, 3, 4, 6.
[33] "Theological Foundation," Para 18.
[34] "Theological Foundation," Para 18
[35] "Theological Foundation," Para 19.

accessibility in many forums, and counts in its ranks and leadership positions pastors with cerebral palsy and physical disability.

A commitment to inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people had already been discerned in all the founding churches prior to union, and the new church has affirmed this position, with the express desire to "be an inclusive church, where everyone can feel safe and welcome" while still allowing for difference and congregational discernment.[36] The new church handbook, the first published by the Uniting Church itself following a six-year process aimed at giving "stability, distinctiveness and identity", contains a variety of liturgies, including gender neutral marriage liturgies.[37] The Church also makes available a growing online service planner tool which pulls together a variety of resources, including lectionary readings, theological reflections, additional occasion-specific liturgies, prayers and recommended hymns and worship songs.[38]

Present challenges

The UCS continues to face many of the challenges it brought into union. Although, as we have discovered, the main motivation for union went far beyond trying to stem the flow of decline, the new denomination continues to face numeric challenges. The new church is still only as numerically strong as the Swedish Mission Covenant Church was at its peak. In real terms, in 2024, the new Uniting Church had approximately 750 congregations and 67,000 members, while Equmenia, the Uniting Church youth association counted approximately 320 local associations and 13,500 members. The denomination also reported having 124,000 people regularly involved in its services, ministries and activities.[39] The Uniting Church newspaper, Sändaren, was recently discontinued after facing significant economic challenges and a decline in government funding available for independent newspapers. This, however, led to massive public outcry, and an online-only version was reinstated pending further decisions at the next annual UCS Assembly. Organisationally, while bold decisions were made at the time of Union for structural reform, some of the forms adopted, with their roots in the respective antecedent traditions, have rightly begun to be called into question and subject to review and further change. This, however, is not inherently a bad thing, but rather, a reflection that, like the UCA, it continues to "keep its law under constant review."[40]

The ongoing dream of greater unity

In spite of major challenges in what has been called the most secular nation in the world, the coming into existence of the UCS in Sweden has provided a strong impetus for ecumenism and Christian unity in Sweden. Never before have there been such thin demarcation lines between denominations in Sweden. The trajectory towards further unions seems set. The dream of further union and greater unity is very much still alive and has a lot of energy behind it. The new national church leader of the UCS, like many others in the

[36] The Church has made available a wealth of materials to enable local congregations to engage with these questions and come on a journey towards greater inclusion and non-discrimination. See Equmeniakyrkan, "Equmeniakyrkan och HBTQ", https://equmeniakyrkan.se/vart-arbete/manskliga-rattigheter/equmeniakyrkan-och-hbtq/.
[37] Equmeniakyrkan, *Kyrkohandbok för Equmeniakyrkans församlingar, provutgåva*. (Verbum, 2016), 7. And in its final form as: *Kyrkohandbok för Equmeniakyrkan* (Verbum, 2019).
[38] See www.gudstjanst.se.
[39] According to statistics reported to the state funding body, the Swedish Agency for the Support of Faith Communities, for the purposes of receiving significant state funding.
[40] Uniting Church in Australia, "Basis of Union," (1992) para 17.

leadership, has played significant roles in the national ecumenical body, the Christian Council of Sweden. The Eucharistic and high church new monastic renewal movement at Bjärka-Säby has continued to bring together people from the full spectrum of Swedish Christianity. A recently elected new UCS assistant church leader, having previously led the flagship Pentecostal Church Filadelfia in Stockholm for over a decade, publicly returned to the UCS and to national denominational leadership. The national secretariat and denominational headquarters of the UCS collocates with, among others, the Pentecostal denominational headquarters, the Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Swedish Council of Churches, a national diaconal coordinating body representing 12 denominations, a free church study association, the Catholic ecumenical commission and the government Agency for Support to Faith Communities. The Uniting Church looms large in its leadership in ecumenical issues and is a driving force for further dialogue and collaboration across the board. Much has happened since the tentative collaboration begun in 1905. We are at least much closer to fulfilling our Lord's prayer "that they may all be one" than we were a hundred years ago. The dream of further and future unions is energising and continues to shape the present.

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Book Forum: Renie Chow Choy's *Ancestral Feeling: Postcolonial Thoughts on Western Christian Heritage*[1]

Cultural Rearrangement: reconciliation of a war within

Sunny Chen

It was supposed to be a simple book review on Renie Chow Choy's *Ancestral Feeling: Postcolonial Thoughts on Western Christian Heritage.* However, after reading her critical view on Eurocentrism in the introductory chapter, her argument about genealogical research in chapter 3, and her articulation of "the complex dynamic between ancestral obligation, intergenerational mobility and Western Christian heritage" (171) in chapter 6, I struggled to focus on writing a scholarly and objective analytical piece. Instead, various memories and emotions swelled up in my mind and heart. Consequently, this book review has inevitably turned into a reflection piece, recollecting parts of my personal journey and piecing together many fragmented thoughts. Regardless, reviewing the book and exercising self-reflection have helped me to see a path to reconcile the different aspects of my identity that I have kept apart since my younger days – as these aspects, or compartments, are immensely conflicting at times.

I was born in Hong Kong when it was still a British colony. During my childhood, my parents attempted to motivate me by occasionally reminding me of the "glorious past" of my ancestors. "For ten generations, your ancestors were Taishi (太師) during the Song Dynasty (宋朝), and as the Dynasty fell, one of them followed the last emperor, Emperor Bing (宋帝昺) escaping to the south." Later, I learned that a Taishi (太師) was an imperial tutor, teacher of an emperor. I am not certain how much impact my parents' iteration have on me, but I recall that when I was older, I asked for proof. "Where is the evidence? Show me the genealogy." Their reply, however, was utterly disappointing: "The genealogy has been lost for several decades." I grew skeptical as those amazing stories sounded more like myths and legends, even borderline fantasies for self-medicating our current mediocracy. "We have a glorious past!" In my mind, my rebellious response was: "So what? It's now totally irrelevant!"

In my twenties, I went to the United States to pursue my graduate studies, and later migrated to Australia. My father passed away in Hong Kong not long after I arrived at the new country that I eventually call home. Due to the distance, I missed the chance to say goodbye to my father when he drew his last breath on his sickbed. It became one of my greatest regrets. More than a decade passed and I was doing my PhD, researching on first century Koiné Greek literature. Suddenly, an unexpected discovery emerged. I accidentally stumbled on the lost genealogy on the internet. A copy of my family's genealogy in digital form had, somewhat

[1] Renie Chow Choy, Ancestral Feeling: Postcolonial Thoughts on Western Christian Heritage (London: SCM, 2021).

peculiarly, been kept in a library in the State of Utah. When I went through the whole genealogy, I realised that my parents were not lying, those stories were neither myths nor legends, they were real!

In studying my family's genealogy, the most striking discovery was that I was not the first Christian in my family. Despite studying at a Catholic school, I was an atheist until my undergraduate years. To my parents, my newfound Christian faith was regarded as a 'Western infection', clashing with Chinese philosophy and tradition. Moreover, many of my relatives associated Christianity with Western colonial invasion, occupation, and oppression. As a result, it took a very long time for my parents to somewhat accept my 'betrayal.' On the other hand, growing up watching Hollywood movies with my family created an image in my mind where the Western world appeared appealing and fascinating. I wonder if the decision to pursue my graduate studies in America was in part a subconscious attraction to that Western culture. Despite living in America and Australia, both founded through colonisation, it took me a very long time to gradually learn about colonisation and its impact on Indigenous people around the world.

My heritage with the so-called ancestral glorious past, my childhood in a British colony, my own family's disdain for the Christian faith as a Western product introduced through brutal colonisation, my own fondness of the Western culture, my opportunity to study in the West, my migration to a Western country, and my knowledge of colonisation are all intertwined in one big personal hodgepodge. These histories and identities at times clash as I shift from a sense of personal pride to a sense of collective shame. They represent lightness and darkness, tinting and shading my identities. As a result, compartmentalization of my history and identity is always my personal coping strategy.

Reading Choy's work, I was immediately captivated by the mention of William Tyndale as one of the many "great heroes of the faith" (2) in the introductory chapter. I could not agree more with Choy's appropriation in Chapter 2 of Willie James Jennings' account of the integration of colonial dominance into the West's theology : "In Western Europe, the Christian theological imagination was 'woven into processes of colonial dominance'"(58).[2] The translation of the Tyndale Bible is a good example of this.

Recently, I was invited to present a paper on the topic about multiculturalism in the context of the Uniting Church in Australia. I wanted to touch on the impact of colonisation on multiculturalism. However, I am not an expert on either of the subject matters, since my understanding of colonisation and multiculturalism are at best still emerging. As a scholar of Koiné Greek literature, I decided to present the topic from a different historical lens, investigating the impact of various translation works of ancient Greek literature. One of them was the translation of the Tyndale New Testament in the 16th century CE, the first English translation of the Bible.

William Tyndale translated a version of the Greek New Testament, the *Textual Receptus*, to English in 1526. It was a watershed moment amongst English speaking Christians in the Western world and his translation work is always considered as historically significant and is widely celebrated. Nonetheless, in my research I discovered that there was a dark and sinister association to the work, a lesser-known aspect of the Tyndale

[2] Choy is drawing from Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale, 2010), 8.

Bible. Throughout my research, I wondered if the Tyndale Bible had unintentionally fueled and justified European colonialism. His translation occurred at the dawn of European colonialism in the 1500s, after the European discoveries of a sea route around southern African coast in1488 and of America in1492. The matter that intrigued me was how Tyndale had treated the Greek word ἔθνη (ethnē) in the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. In two thirds of its twelve occurrences in Matthew, he consistently and accurately translated ἔθνη (ethnē) as "Gentiles." However, near the end of the Gospel, from chapter 24 onwards, the Greek word was curiously translated as "nations." I realised that for the first readers of the Tyndale Bible, those "nations" had been portrayed as hostile with unconverted people persecuting Christians. I then questioned if that idea had reinforced the rationale behind colonialism: the European Christians had the right to convert those 'nations' recently discovered. Of interest, in the last occurrence of ἔθνη (ethnē) in Mt 28:19, Tyndale translated the final command of Jesus as follows: "Go therfore and teache all nacions." Subsequent translations of the New Testament followed Tyndale's rendering of Mt 28:19, including The Great Bible in 1539, the Geneva Bible in 1560, and King James Bible in 1611. I am not certain if Tyndale's rendering directly fueled the pursuit of the contemporary colonisers who felt justified to invade other lands, carrying a 'noble' motive to "teach all the nations." Nonetheless, there is little doubt that a seismic change took place in the European Christian world 200 years after Tyndale's work. A new perspective of Mt 28:19 arose due to the word "nations" used in the translation instead of "Gentiles."

As I ventured further into this history, I learned that William Carey, a renowned Baptist missionary who founded the Baptist Missionary Society in England, made a specific argument in his work in 1792: *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens, in which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings, are Considered*. He began his thesis by asserting that Christ "commiffioned his apoftkes to Go, and teach all nations," and then argued that Mt 28:18–20 should be interpreted as the command of Jesus to both his own disciples and all of God's people throughout all ages. Furthermore, he also considered that it was an 'opportunity' for Christ's mission, which was offered by colonial expansion. The text was subsequently known as "The Great Commission."

When I connected all the dots that I had observed, I was struck by the possibility that the seed of Carey's interpretation had been largely based on Tyndale's peculiar translation of Mt 28:19, rendering ἔθνη (ethnē) as nations instead of Gentiles. Even one of the most celebrated translations in the history of Christianity was stained by its possible link with European colonisation. Hence ironically, a supposedly life-giving work also carries the troubled past of a darker chapter in humanity.

The example of the Tyndale Bible, which is the intertwining of the interpretation of the Bible to spread God's good message and blind human ambition illustrates the complexity of human history and life experiences. The multifaceted conflicts within myself due to my heritage and my own formation as a product of the meeting and clashing of East and West seem unresolvable. Choy's argument, however, may provide a new pathway. In chapter 6, she draws on Liu Xiofeng's idea of "cultural rearrangement" according to which "the relationship between Chinese culture and Western Christian heritage must no longer exist as a negotiation

or a dialogue between cultures, but as an existential transformation" and the two cultures "must not be conceived in terms of inculturation and assimilation but as a full-on 'cultural rearrangement'" (177).[3]

As previously mentioned, I always resort to compartmentalisation when confronted with irreconcilable and conflicting thoughts and feelings. Moving forward, I shall attempt to apply Choy's concept of "cultural rearrangement" in thinking about and understanding my history and identity. As a lover of Western Classical music, at the time of writing this I was listening to Beethoven's Piano Concerto in C major. So, I will highlight Choy's thought-provoking challenge at the end of chapter 6.

> What we should be expending our energy protesting here is not that the cultural Christians aren't 'Christian enough' or that they have sold out to whiteness; rather, what we ought to be protesting against is the association of the culture of Western history with ethnic whiteness. In the same way that Chinese pianists have now become authoritative interpreters of Beethoven and Chopin, changing the way we experience Western cultural heritage, so it can be with Augustine and Aquinas (178).

In 1985, the Uniting Church in Australia made a historic declaration at its fourth National Assembly meeting, "The Uniting Church is a multicultural church."[4] Since then, the Church has been undertaking a journey, charging towards new multicultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural frontiers. Along the way, the Church has encountered various challenges. Many multicultural communities, existing within the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture, navigate their sometimes conflicting identities. Using Choy's terms, rather than resolving those conflicts through concepts like negotiation, dialogue, inculturation, or assimilation, I propose an alternative approach: cultural rearrangement. As the Uniting Church celebrates the 40th Anniversary of that declaration this year, this new perspective may offer a more effective path forward for the entire Church, along with its multicultural communities.

Ancestral Feeling: insisting on the radical translatability of Christianity

Joy J. Han

In *Ancestral Feeling*, Renie Chow Choy brings to a head the problem of how a white-majority culture has dominated English Christian heritage, despite the fact it was British imperialism that, "having evangelized the people of Asia, Africa and the Americas, galvanized them to believe they were part of the Christianity of England" (27). Choy exposes for us Western Christianity's enduring notice to those outside the aforesaid white-majority culture that there is no birthright for them. And in order to back the claim of ethnic minority Christians – that so-called Western Christian heritage "is *our* heritage too" – Choy offers us both methodology

[3] Choy is here summarising Liu Xiaofeng,"Die akademische Forschung des Christentums im kulturellen System des Communismus," *China heute,* 178-83, and 136 (for the specific reference to "cultural rearrangement").

[4] Uniting Church in Australia, "The Uniting Church is Multicultural Church," *Uniting Church in Australia Assembly,*1985, accessed March 18, 2025, ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/494. Today, the declaration is widely known as "We are a multicultural church."

and method, which in turn raise for us greater implications (22). I offer here an exploration of several aspects of Choy's work: first, how her "autobiographical turn" (25) forms the pillar of a correction to the hegemony of Europe as Subject; and second, how her theoretical work presents opportunities to extend the method in the Australian context. Finally I touch upon some of the bigger questions it could pose to our tradition.

Today there are numerous scholarly and popular movements to uplift minority and otherwise non-dominant voices in all arenas, especially in view of nominal decolonisation in the modern era. But despite such conspicuous efforts, we should ask why it is that a subjective turn such as Choy's examination of "ancestral feeling" should at all be introduced as something of a choice to "indulge" (23). So many decades of scholarship have demonstrated that the voice of Reason as championed by the European Enlightenment is not so much a universal mode of objectivity as it is the ideology of a particular Subject – that of Europe – externalised into cultural, political, and economic hegemony. The fact that Choy's autobiographical turn has to be named and defended *as such* demonstrates that the postcolonialist critique has still not landed:[5] the impersonal mode of academic writing continues to assert itself as being objective and unbiased, while texts that openly declare the singularity of their subjective and cultural determination must apologise for and justify themselves.

Genealogocentrism

Choy's exercise of "ancestral feeling" – that is, her own identification with the Western Christian tradition as subjectively experienced and narrativized from the location of her (non-Western) ethnic inheritance – is subversive. It does not serve merely to supplement or democratize Western Christianity. Instead, her method cuts to the heart of Western Christianity's *genealogocentrism*, if you will: the ideological veneer that renders the cultural and ethnic determinations of white Christians' religious practice to be historically necessary or simply given, such that it is no longer perceived as particular, hence the impersonal and objective air of "religious ancestry"(25). Despite their biological content, genealogical texts necessarily arise from a particular point-in-time and subjective space. Western Christianity's genealogocentrism is what renders white Christians' ancestral identifications to be no longer feeling but instead fact, with the effect that the Other's ancestral feeling can never provide a source of authority or historical significance within the wider tradition.

To draw a perhaps blunt but hopefully illustrative personification: Europe as Subject declares, *When I draw upon my culture and religious tradition, it's Neoplatonism; when you do it – that's syncretism*.[6] To insist on an autobiographical turn, as Choy does, gives the lie to this Eurocentric conceit.

Antigenealogy

Choy's measured consideration of the rhizome metaphor as *antigenealogy* reiterates for us what is at stake: not just the multiplication of genealogies and inheritances to stand alongside the hegemonic one, but a

[5] "Postcolonialism", as I use the term (following Spivak), refers not to a hoped-for or aspirational state of affairs after colonialism, but rather quite the opposite: a hermeneutic of suspicion that focuses on how even the critique of Eurocentrism can serve to conceal and thus reinforce the ongoing violent aftershocks of colonisation.

[6] Or, perhaps more condescendingly, non-European reflections are categorised as "contextual theology", where this is ipso facto distinct from "systematic theology."

theoretically robust *and* popularly relatable correction to the legacies of colonial Christianity. Perhaps we could explore an inversion of the dominant notion of the family tree, as shared by Denis Koibur with Jione Havea:

> According to ancient Papuan wisdom … future generations are the *roots* of the current generation. This … overturns the common expectation that the current generation provides the roots and nourishments for future generations. In the native Papuan understanding of the complex and delicate web of life, humans are individuals who are never alone; and unseen bodies are our roots (future generations) and comrades (ancestors).[7]

We should take this not as a simple reversal of genealogy that poses no real challenge to dogmata such as lineal descent, reproductive heteronormativity or the logocentric privileging of written texts as self-evidencing. As Choy discovers in her own ancestral record, "I do not exist because I am female" (183). This poignantly demonstrates how the logic of genealogy, be it biological or spiritual, carries silences as well as traces of the *unseen*.

To reiterate Koibur and Havea with Žižek, this very attention to "unseen bodies" is what offers us the possibility of breaking open such silences and absences in a record of the past that is

> not simply "what really happened" but full of cracks, of alternate possibilities – the past is also what failed to happen, what was crushed so that "what really happened" could have happened.[8]

Spivak draws a straight line from such privileging of "what really happens" to colonialism:

> This foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production has … helped positivist empiricism – the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism – to define its own arena as "concrete experience," "what actually happens."[9]

Such analyses resonate with Choy's diagnosis that, since "thinking historically ('historicizing') about the development of Christianity is the reason why Europe is inescapable"(12), the task is not to offer alternative or supplementary histories of Christianity that are located outside Europe, but to rewrite and remediate the dominant account (12-13).

Local reflections

Thus Choy's theoretical framework equips us to consider some applications closer to home, in the context of the Uniting Church, and in settler-colonial Australia more broadly. In a society whose law, institutions and history operate to systemically conceal, deny and even justify genocide, there is no shortage of unseen bodies,

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[7] Jione Havea, "The Vein/Vain(s) of Theology: Polynesia, Poets, Pigs," in *Bordered Bodies, Bothered Voices: Native and Migrant Theologies, ed. Jione Havea, Intersectionality and Theology Series* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 1–20, 8.

[8] Slavoj Žižek, *Christian Atheism: How to Be a Real Materialist* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 117.

[9] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313, 275.

languages and stories which can and do constitute (traces of) counternarratives to colonial triumphalism. Meanwhile, we in the Church should ask ourselves afresh: what are the unintended or at least unattended implications of the Church's continued privileging of a text such as the *Basis of Union*? This is in view of our acknowledgement that it makes no mention of the violent context of settler colonialism, not to mention how an appreciation for the textual genre itself warns strictly against our becoming too attached to the document. When we affirm texts that censure or elide certain bodies, we signal those bodies' symbolic death, and this death is no less real than the biological death that "really happens." If we believe in resurrection and renewal (and not just "newness"), then the urgent task of worshipping communities is to rewrite the stories of dead and unseen bodies – not in a new corpus for optional reading, *but directly into the canon*. The blanks are already there, but sometimes the tradition resists the work of tracing these blanks, because it is *this* work that challenges that status quo.

Moreover, this remedial approach offers the possibility of birthing something truly new, precisely because it has as its reference point "what really happened" *in order to break it open*. This affords the dignity of self-consciousness to one's experience of liberation, because those bodies that have experienced the most brutal symbolic (social) deaths can best claim to have *no interest* in preserving the status quo. It is according to this logic that Fanon declares:

> The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions.
> I am my own foundation.
> And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom.[10]

Only by thinking not just a new future but also a "new past"[11] can we begin to resist the schema of original-versus-copy that permanently renders the Other "in a state of perpetual lateness" vis-à-vis Europe (71).

Whose betrayal?

At times it might seem as though a claim to the Western Christian inheritance, such as Choy's, serves only to expand the scope of participation in hegemony, without challenging the violent fact of hegemony. This is the catch-22 that postcolonials can face: to enter into real encounter with the dominant culture may be perceived as mimicry or "racial betrayal" (152, 159), but conversely to resist encounter can play into nativism and the romanticisation of subalternity. The false premise of both ends of this deadlock is the pretense that culture – be it dominant, minority, ethnic, spiritual, organisational – is static and unchanging; and this logic renders not just unseen bodies but all of us symbolically dead. Here we can draw upon those strands of the Christian tradition that emphasise the very principle of the radical translatability of what is

[10] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 180.
[11] The "greatest creative act is not to be original and break with the past but to reinvent a new past." Žižek, *Christian Atheism*, 116.

essential.[12] To simplify: the history of Christianity is a certain universalisation or pluralisation of a particular tradition – namely Judaism – and furthermore it is even the claim that this plasticity is inherent in Judaism as it is in all traditions and cultures. This principle of radical plasticity is what English Christianity forgot when it imagined itself as Israel *qua* supposedly static centre of the faith (48). It is colonial Christianity, not postcolonials, who must answer to the accusation of betrayal. And it is the most unseen bodies – those whose identity is identity-in-loss, or who are in a "position without identity"[13] – who bear first witness to this betrayal and its resulting injustices. The "Christianity" that abandoned radical translatability for its own particular account of religious ancestry as "what really happened" is the same Christianity that force-fed its own culturally specific embodiment to its colonies. It is uniquely the survivors of this violence who can lead the work of healing, redeeming and resurrecting this ancestral record – by rewriting it *from within*.

Wicked Problems

John G. Flett

At the south of 'The Mall', the one-kilometre ceremonial road from Trafalgar Square via Admiralty Arch to Buckingham Palace, stands a statue of Captain James Cook. Though his death occurred in 1779 at the age of 50, and the result of him attempting to kidnap Kalani'ōpu'u, the chief of Hawaii, the statue was erected in 1914, a final vain attempt to preserve the mythos of the British empire. The inscription, in part, reads: "Circumnavigator of the globe explorer of/the Pacific Ocean he laid the foundations of/the British empire in Australia and New Zealand/."

Renie Chow Choy's work is quite marvellous. It tackles the 'wicked problem' (more on this later) of post colonialism through historiography, more precisely, "*history* is the problem…thinking historically ('historicizing') about the development of Christianity is the reason why Europe is inescapable" (12). In terms of colonization, Choy is less interested in the question of land or place, but "an *ongoing* legacy of imperialism that continues to perpetuate inequalities today, and that is the colonization of history." This maintains Europe at the centre of Christian histories, and "the bond of attachment that keeps us tied to Europe" (56). Bonds, attachments, ties, is Choy's key concern. She feels both a personal affiliation, a "'reverential love' and 'grateful affection' of the colonized," (56) for the heritage of England, and an alienation from that same heritage. Her quest is a deeply personal one, including such comments as her "disdain at the sight of my husband's fried noodle side dish adulterating my Christmas dinner" (188). How might her long family heritage in Hong Kong and the Christian heritage which accompanied the British empire be reconciled? Or, is it possible to discard "the assumptions of linear descent, originary movement, historical development and essential unity, all of which work in continued favour of the colonizer and keep

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[12] Acts 2. Translation itself is originary. When the gathered disciples miraculously begin to proclaim God's deeds of power in numerous languages of the world, we can read this as a promise that the birth of the Church is characterised by (among other things) the very event of intercultural translation as governed by the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. If there is an original text, it is not, say, "the Greek", much less English; but Christ made flesh – where incarnation, too, is analogous to translation. In other words, the tradition of translation does not aim for the transliteration of hegemonic texts, but instead serves to honour the very principle of Immanuel *qua* radical translatability: that the gospel is as true in any one linguocultural paradigm as it is in another.

[13] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular," *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (November 2005): 475–86.

the colonized trapped in a state of perpetual lateness," while retaining "genealogical consciousness, the language of inheritance and ancestral feeling"? (71).

The challenge for Choy is "to make the Eurocentric 'timeline' of events in church history join up with the events of my life. If I can measure the worth of historical events not objectively but subjectively…would it be possible for my story no longer to be consigned to perpetual lateness?" The method she chooses for this is "'intergenerational narrative' or 'relational autobiography'" (81). By telling the stories of her ancestors and their relationship with the Christianity of the West, that relationship, passed down by her ancestors, makes it possible to bind together her biological story and her spiritual one. "[T]o fuse into a more coherent whole the memory of my non-Western biological ancestors with my Western religious heritage means to articulate an intergenerational family history which can help me claim a right to the Christian heritage of the West – effectively to write my non-Western family lineage into a Western religious lineage" (83-4). Following this argument, Choy asserts that "[e]thnic minority Catholic and Protestant Christians are the invisible successors to the heritage of Western Christianity," and through "'ancestor salience' the ethnic and religious no longer represent distinct circles of memory" (187).

Colonization is a "wicked problem." Coined in 1967 by C. West Churchman, the phrase refers to a particular type of "problem" which is: *interconnected*: not restricted to political or economic concerns, but threaded through society, culture, and the environment, meaning that one cannot address one aspect of the problem without addressing the others; *includes a complex stakeholder landscape*: there are multiple actors, including former colonial powers, indigenous communities, international organizations, settler peoples, all with conflicting investments and perspectives; *without a clear solution*: any proposed solution is not right or wrong, but better or worse because the problem is not itself understood until the formulation of a solution, and due to the complex independencies, the attempt to solve a wicked problem may both reveal and create further problems; and, *how the problem is described determines its form of resolution*.[14] It is both necessary and fateful to address wicked problems.

I learnt a great deal from Choy's work. I had not recognised the theo-political use of genealogy, though it seems completely obvious in retrospect. I am a big fan of cartography in relation to theological discourse, and very grateful to have encountered "tidalectics"! Colonization is a wicked problem. My reading of Choy's "solution" concerns whether it is, not true or false, but better or worse for the realities of post-coloniality in the "colonies."

"Rule, Britannia! rule the waves: Britons never will be slaves" (James Thomson, 1740).

James Cook appears nowhere in Choy's text, nor do any Indigenous voices. This person (and what he represents) and these voices ground my own interconnected and complex stakeholder part of the wicked problem, and needs to be remembered in the conversation for settler-colonisers who read the work. While her accounts of the intertwining of historical locations and cultural artefacts in England are wistful, romantic, her formal learned discussion of coloniality and the ongoing realities of Imperialism is bloodless.

[14] Horst W. J. Rittel, and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973): 155–69.

Cook inspired the missionary imagination of William Carey, including his account of the Māori in Aotearoa. Carey affirmed with gusto the "great brutality and eagerness" with which "cannibals feed upon the flesh of their slain enemies," the truth of which was "ascertained, beyond a doubt, by the late eminent navigator, Cooke, of the New Zealanders… Human sacrifices are also very frequently offered so that scarce a week elapses without instances of this kind. They are in general poor, barbarous, naked pagans, as destitute of civilization, as they are of true religion."[15] When I stand under the statue of Cook, read the insipid inscription, I too feel disdain. His gaze is directed up apparently towards that not yet seen, as of course befits a great explorer who discovered 'nothing' (*terra nullius*). In reality, his gaze follows its inscription, staring towards the seat of empire, the ongoing generational beneficiary of sanctioned and excited theft and murder, towards Buckingham Palace. I feel distain for the bleached version of history, the imaginary, the mythos, it represents. As people pass by me going about their day, I feel shame for the loss of Indigenous lives, cultures, languages, ancestors, and memories. Britons might never be slaves, but they love(d) enslavement. In this, they not simply wrote history, but destroyed histories – histories past and histories future.

Choy is correct: history is a central issue. To de-territorialise Christianity (to de-identify Christianity and Europe) demands its de-historicization. She is also correct that the writing and reception of Christian history is soaked through with imperial imagination. But Choy also inserts a sense of inevitability into the discourse: via colonization, the British did bring Christianity to the global South. She rejects the idea of a lineal history – except on this one point.

Indigenous histories and storytelling are absent from the history Choy deploys. Her "solution" constructs a "problem" which is itself located in England as the point of "homage" and "belonging." She observes the absence of voices of those migrants who visit sites of history, but omits the multitude of non-Britons who translated, guided, navigated, nourished, resupplied the ships as they journeyed. There is nothing about people groups who understand the arrival of the Britons as something their ancestors lead them to – it was the ancestors who called, not the British who came. Then we have a question of the nature of time itself. In 1993, Kosuke Koyama too observed how Christians justify imperialism using a "linear image of history": "the image of straight line, the image of efficiency, and that of the Biblical *hesed*, steadfast love, cannot go together. It is the *hesed* that wakens people to the truth about history." While Choy may object that this represents a theological approach that avoids what she construes as the "historical" (57), Koyama permits all peoples to give their account of history via all images, "be it a straight line or circle or triangle or pendulum or zigzag or a point."[16] Time is construed differently in different places and these differences belong also to the construction of history – and to its relativisation.

Three examples may suffice. I offer them to Choy as someone with a different form of fragmented memory, a different location within the colonial reality. First, while Choy differentiates the colonization of land (place) from the colonization of time (56), for many peoples the very possibility of this differentiation constitutes the problem.[17] Second, Choy introduces Israel Kamudzandu's argument that Paul's rereading

[15] William Carey, *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens, in Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings, Are Considered* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press Ltd., 1961 [1972]), 63.

[16] Kosuke Koyama, "New World – New Creation: Mission in Power and Faith," *Mission Studies* 10, no. 1-2 (1993): 73-4.

[17] As but one example, see Ilaitia Sevati Tuwere, "Emerging Themes for a Pacific Theology," *Pacific Journal of Theology, Series 2* 7 (1992): 49-55.

of Abraham as the spiritual ancestor of all peoples liberates Christians from all other heritages to introduce their own spiritual ancestors. Her response to this proposal is as decisive as it is dismissive: it is "not only *not* postcolonial but fundamentally colonial" (58). Choy's response is due to what she sees as a supersessionist logic underlying Kamudzandu's argument. Citing William Jennings, a "supersessionst reading '[jettisons] Israel from its calculus of the formation of Christian life', replacing Israel with the Church; in so doing it positions Christian identity fully outside the identities of Jews and makes its own election and inclusion the primary matter" (58). But is Kamudzandu replacing Israel with the Church, or is he denying the primacy given to a certain embodied history, that is, the identification of the body of Christ and the Church with western history – and so the destruction of his own history in becoming Christian?[18] Third, as stated above, I learnt a great deal from Choy's critical account of genealogy, and yet Whakapapa (genealogy) remains basic to the life systems of Indigenous peoples, with the Māori as one example. Indeed, basic to the process of "cultural colonization" was the textualization by westerners of these Whakapapa and so their reduction to superstition – a process of infantilising their histories and so their destruction.[19] Choy's text is short, innovative, and personal, but for me the solution construed the problem, or, the personal truncated the histories and attendant voices.

I write as an Anglo settler, a person whose family moved from Scotland to Aotearoa in the post-war period. In terms of the complex interconnectivity of the wicked problem of colonization, where does the Anglo-settler stand? According to Choy's stated problem, the biological and the spiritual histories are already one in me. I am a manifestation of the ongoing colonial reality. The land on which I theologise, on which I worship, is stolen and in a most murderous fashion. Yet, the 'antipodeans' only appear on the English radar when they need something. Choy's own account of settler-colonialism amounts to the observation that "[s]ettler immigrants in the Anglosphere (the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) often wish to discover their ties to the UK" (79). No. Whatever 'bond of attachment' might still exist for us settler immigrants needs to be irrevocably destroyed. The fragmentation of histories experienced by settlers needs to be resolved by investing interest in local histories, the telling of local stories. This necessarily must privilege Indigenous stories, and, more than this, their own ways of constructing history and time, and so place. While reading Choy's proposal of an intergenerational narrative, I imagined treating Māori culture, language, and history as my spiritual history, and interweaving it with my biological history by which I might become an invisible successor to that heritage. It is a preposterous proposal due precisely to the generational biological history itself – the ongoing realities of colonisation (Indigenous land dispossession, systemic racism, cultural erosion, economic and health disparities). Colonisation is a wicked, wicked problem.

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[18] See here the work of Choan-Seng Song, "From Israel to Asia: A Theological Leap," *Ecumenical Review* 28, no. 3 (1976), 252-65; and, Steve Charleston, "The Old Testament of Native America," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies From the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 69-81.

[19] Nēpia Mahuika, "A Brief History of Whakapapa: Māori Approaches to Genealogy," *Genealogy* 3, no. 2 (2019), 32, https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020032.

The Author's Response

Renie Chow Choy

Perhaps a good indication of a worthwhile project is that no sooner have you begun to reflect on it than it is already leading you elsewhere, opening up new avenues for exploration through the generous engagement of those who have found something useful in the work. For me, the publication of this book led to invitations to join a number of Church of England committees responsible for the conservation and interpretation of historic church buildings and cathedrals, and to appointments working with historic collections at St Paul's Cathedral and now as Public Historian at Westminster Abbey. These roles, relatively recent in my professional life, satisfy a passion for public history and the heritage sector I did not know I had until writing this book. Perhaps to my surprise, my interest in questions of heritage from a postcolonial lens has, by and large, been welcomed within the Church of England. The day I was handed my key to Westminster Abbey, a friend said to me, "you're an insider now – institutional access is important." But what is this "insider" status really good for? The three profound, productive, and deeply generous engagements with my book presented in this book forum not only moved me through their personal sharing and honest critiques, but highlighted for me that these questions are pressing globally – far beyond just a small group of Anglicans from diasporic communities living in the UK. While writing, I worried that my experience was too unique, my questions too eccentric. But since its publication, the many people who have shared how the book has resonated with them have underscored one of the stranger ironies of colonial legacies: that what once divided and dominated now gives rise to new solidarities, and diasporas and homeland communities are entangled in ways we still scarcely comprehend. So, this is not a matter of me working on questions about the Christian West's cultural heritage from the "inside," while you, in the Uniting Church in Australia, do so from the margins, "down under." Instead, what our shared labour reveals is that centre and margin are no longer geographically – or even institutionally – fixed: the real work is happening wherever people are willing to confront the contradictions of their inheritance, wherever they are rearranging the meanings of faith, memory, and belonging to serve future generations.

Sunny Chen's recounting of his childhood dismissal of his glorious genealogical ancestry as "irrelevant," and the instinctive coping mechanism of compartmentalisation of which this is just one example, carried a heartbreaking poignancy. What use was this inheritance, after all, in the context of Western Christianity? Chen finds hope in the idea of "cultural rearrangement" which I had discussed in the book citing Liu Xiaofeng. For Liu, the encounter between Chinese culture and Western Christianity cannot be reduced to negotiation; it must be an existential transformation of both cultures, a fundamental reordering of meaning. Applying this to multicultural communities within the Uniting Church, communities shaped by dominant Anglo traditions, Chen suggests that categories like dialogue, inculturation, or assimilation are less useful than the possibility of full-scale "cultural rearrangement." These days, I'm preoccupied with what this actually looks like – literally – in cultural institutions, where the "rearrangement of culture" refers to concrete acts like shifting interpretation panels or inserting new ones to rebalance the dominant discourse, to engage in a literal reconfiguring of curatorial space. Readers of this journal will know more than I about the strides made in Australia's museum sector, where rearranging culture means honestly tracing the provenance of heritage objects associated with Indigenous Peoples, recovering their original functions, restoring relationships with originating communities, and returning to them the authority to define what their heritage means today. This curatorial 'cultural rearrangement' is more than metaphor:

it affirms the general direction being pursued by other disciplines moving toward public interpretation, including public theology. These are practices that resist compartmentalisation by ethnicity, education, race, gender, sexuality, etc., and instead insist on their relevance to the conservation and interpretation of heritage assets. The challenge is how to apply the literal model of 'cultural rearrangement' in broader disciplines more generally. The cultural rearrangement of museum objects might mean restitution or recontextualization, but that of theology – of making Chen's "glorious ancestral history" meaningful and generative in the encounter with Western Christianity – demands the far more abstract task of reshaping conceptual categories.

Joy Han's response presents a profound challenge to historians. The cliché "learning from history" is frequently invoked in the UK to justify ongoing investment in addressing contested heritage. But Han seems to suggest that, for marginalised communities, there is a deeper dignity in refusing to be defined by historical contingency and historical inevitability. Drawing inspiration from Fanon and from Papuan wisdom, she suggests that our true "roots" lie not in the past, but in the unborn future, so that we reach backwards from a vision of what we long to be, in order to re-narrate what has already been. This is a revolutionary idea, and one that I find deeply inspiring as I turn my mind, once again, to my current professional preoccupations in the cultural sector. Historic conservation assumes a duty to protect the past: it is patrimony, stewardship, custodianship, guardianship, and so it is, by its very nature, conservative. And yet, the sector is relentlessly future-oriented: who are we preserving heritage assets for, what are we preserving and why? Han has reframed this task as reimagining the past through the lens of the future we hope to create, and allowing that to influence what we preserve and how we describe its purpose. When I began writing *Ancestral Feeling* in 2020, public reckoning with offensive statues to traders in enslaved peoples (such as of Edward Colston in the UK) had not happened yet. My book says nothing about statues or memorials – such a glaring omission in hindsight. Only after the book's publication did I realise how many memorial objects embody, in the form of marble and bronze, the theoretical dilemmas with which I wrestled. At the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, there was anxiety within the Church of England about an unmanageable volume of calls for the removal of church sculpture and memorials. But the flood never came: apart from a small number of high-profile cases, nearly all church memorials to colonisers, imperialists, officers, and governors engaged in violent campaigns remain *in situ*. Most people today – including those with whom I worked to interpret memorials linked to colonial campaigns at St Paul's Cathedral – recognise their value for public education and critical reflection. Yet the heritage significance of such objects continues to be defined almost exclusively in aesthetic terms by statutory conservation frameworks within the Church of England. What Han highlights is the agency of future generations: we should not pre-emptively foreclose what they may yet make of difficult histories. It may be counter-intuitive to define the heritage value of sensitive objects in terms of a future generation's capacity to navigate the complexities of the past – but withholding that opportunity may be its own form of erasure.

John G. Flett observes that James Cook, Indigenous voices, and settler violence are entirely absent from my book – and indeed, to my great shame, this is an omission I've only come to grasp gradually over the years since its publication. That I could have written such a book without reference to settler violence in the so-called 'white Dominions' despite having lived for so many years in Canada reveals just how 'optional' these foundational violences remain for historians of Western Christianity. Ignorance persists, just like the days when one could stir tea and add sugar without thinking about where it came from. Here in the

UK, Anglicans are still largely unaware of the ways in which the church in Oceania has sought to redress harms done to Indigenous Peoples. For myself, it was only when Aotearoa New Zealand theologian, Dr Steve Taylor, reached out to discuss my book, that he was able to explain that what I was calling "the Anglican Church of New Zealand" is now in fact a three-Tikanga model which recognises the equal partnership of Tikanga Māori, Tikanga Pasifika, and Tikanga Pākehā. Since the book's publication, I have realised how narrow my definition of "colonial" was, both chronologically and geographically: how is it possible, only five years ago, for my account of England's cultural-religious heritage to have been, as Flett describes, so "wistful" and "romantic" – and so "bloodless"? And yet, before this fact has even had the chance to sink in, there is already a new intellectual challenge being made, even (or especially) from theological circles, that Empire has been a constant in human civilization and bloodshed is par for the course. This view argues that the British Empire was not uniquely or especially evil, and so is undeserving of the intense critique and disproportionate scrutiny which it receives today. The "woke mob," critics allege, overstates settler violence and the ills of enslavement relative to what other historical empires did. While Flett might state that "Britons might never be slaves, but they love(d) enslavement," yet some voices in the UK would argue conversely that Britons hated enslavement so much that they spent more time, more money, more manpower, and more naval power in ending slavery than profiting from it. Moreover, it was from the British Empire, and the ideas shaped by Western Christianity, that many of the liberal values we now cherish – such as the rule of law, human rights, and humanism – first gained global traction. Therefore critics argue that the "disproportionate" scrutiny on the ills of British Empire risks eroding these very values. Moreover, it seems to have become increasingly acceptable to suggest that it is the "native" white population in Europe and the Anglosphere that is being displaced now by migrants, both demographically and culturally. In this environment, Flett's profound, radical, and moving call will be a hard sell:

> Choy's own account of settler-colonialism amounts to the observation that "[s]ettler immigrants in the Anglosphere (the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) often wish to discover their ties to the UK" (79). No. Whatever "bond of attachment" might still exist for us settler immigrants needs to be irrevocably destroyed.

But if you are the Dean of a cathedral or historic abbey reliant on admission fees from tourists, mainly of the middle-aged white demographic from the US, Canada, and Australia, to keep your doors open, what incentive is there to undo the "bond of attachment"? The settler colonialism which (to use a much-loved euphemism) underpins the "special relationship" between these nations and Britain is as good for tourism as it is good for trade deals: "irrevocably destroying" these bonds of attachment is not going to keep the ecclesiastical sites open (or the trade tariffs down). Under such conditions, the power of Flett's argument lies in its uncompromising demand that white settler audiences relinquish their role as sole arbiters of these bonds; the urgent task is to expose how those ties are far more violent, painful, and complex than the naïve notion of "attachment" I had employed.

I've selfishly linked my responses to all three pieces back to the cultural heritage sector, because this is where history and theology are experienced and consumed by the public – and where, I am discovering, the practical difficulties of implementing the worthy and important ideas proposed by Chen, Han, and Flett are most acute. Colonisation – and any attempt to reckon with it – is, as Flett says, a wicked, wicked problem: "damned if you do, damned if you don't," a colleague once said to me with a helpless sigh. I don't know what

our shared labour will produce in heritage spaces still largely defined by traditional dominant voices and the realities of money and tourism – Chen's faith in the cultural rearrangement of theology, Han's faith in the radical translatability of Christianity, Flett's faith in the privileging of Indigenous concepts of history, time, and place, not to mention the countless efforts across churches worldwide to include more voices, integrate more memories, diversify histories, de-linearise temporalities, and de-territorialise mentalities. But if there is a coherent goal we share across continents and contexts, perhaps it is this: to keep remaking the interpretive ground itself – the terms, categories, and commitments through which meaning is made – so that what was once marginal, belated, or optional is not included out of moral obligation or sense of duty, but because it is recognised as foundational. To cite another part of Kosuke Koyama's article quoted by Flett, though we may assume mission is about making outsiders insiders, in fact it is the outsiders who are at the center of the gospel itself: "The reason for this is that Christ the outsider is the new center."[20]

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[20] Kosuke Koyama, "New World – New Creation: Mission in Power and Faith," *Mission Studies* 10, no. 1-2 (1993): 75.

Reviews

Pacific Well-being: (Is)Lands, Theologies, Worldviews

Jione Havea (Ed.), Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024 (ISBN: 978-1-6667-6218-1)

Review by Te Aroha Rountree

Pacific Well-being, (Is)Lands, Theologies, Worldviews edited by Jione Havea is an ambitious work that attempts to explore the intersection of Pacific Islander well-being, spirituality, theology, and the concept of land. The book's title suggests a multifaceted investigation into how indigenous Pacific peoples relate to their lands, how their theological frameworks shape their worldviews, and how these in turn contribute to the overall sense of well-being within their communities. From a Māori perspective, this work presents an intriguing opportunity to explore the shared and distinct connections between Pacific peoples relationships with land and spirituality, while also reflecting on the broader implications for indigenous identity and autonomy in a post-colonial world.

The book is structured around three central themes: well-being, land, and theologies, with a focus on the Pacific context. Each chapter deals with how these elements are intertwined in the lives of Pacific peoples, particularly within their spiritual practices, cultural values, and community health. Through the lens of theology and native (indigenous) worldviews, the book discusses how native peoples across the Pacific maintain an interconnectedness with the environment and the cosmos, asserting that well-being is not just an individual pursuit but a collective one that involves the land, community, and spiritual realms.

As the title implies, the book focuses on the concept of "lands" in both literal and metaphorical senses, exploring how the very concept of land underpins identity, relationships, and health. Theologically, the book explores the role of spirituality in promoting well-being, with attention to how these spiritual practices can shape ethical frameworks that govern the relationship between individuals, community, and the environment.

For Māori readers, the various authors treatment of Pacific theologies is of particular interest. The theological frameworks discussed in the book often resonate with Māori concepts of spirituality, especially in relation to te tapu o te whenua (the sacredness of land) and whakawhanaungatanga (the interconnectedness) of people, nature, and the divine. In Māori thought, whenua (land) is not simply a physical resource but is imbued with mauri (life force) and wairua (spirit). It is through these concepts that Māori understand their reciprocal relationship with the land: the health of the land is intrinsically tied to the health of the people. Māori spirituality recognises that tangata whenua (the people of the land) are not merely inhabitants of a place but guardians of it, responsible for its care and maintenance.

In conclusion, *Pacific Well-being, (Is)Lands, Theologies, Worldviews* offers a comprehensive exploration of the intricate connections between land, theology, and well-being within the Pacific Islands. The book provides valuable insights into how indigenous Pacific communities understand their relationship to land and spirituality, emphasising the communal nature of well-being that transcends individualistic frameworks. From a Māori perspective, this work offers both resonances and limitations. While the authors successfully highlight the shared importance of land and spiritual connections in the Pacific context, the

work does not always fully address the unique theological nuances that characterise native Māori or Aborignal Torres-Strait Islanders thought and culture. These are valuable perspectives that are not always considered in depth when framing a Pacific view or context. Māori perspectives on land and well-being, emphasise the deep interconnectedness between humans and their environment. The Māori worldview teaches that the health of the land directly influences the health of the people, with the well-being of both being inextricably linked. This concept of *hauora* (health) is holistic, encompassing the physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of life, which aligns closely with the book's discussions on the interconnectedness of well-being and spirituality in the Pacific.

Māori readers may appreciate the book's overall respect for indigenous ways of knowing but may also critique any oversimplification or homogenisation of Pacific worldviews. It is essential that works like this continue to respect the specificities of each indigenous culture, recognizing the diversity of practices and the need for self-representation.

Despite these critiques, *Pacific Well-being, (Is)Lands, Theologies, Worldviews* is an important contribution to the field of Pacific and indigenous studies. It presents a valuable platform for discussing the intersections between land, theology, and well-being from a broader Pacific perspective. For Māori readers, the book provides both a source of connection and a call for more specific engagement with Māori theological traditions. It offers an opportunity to deepen the conversation on indigenous knowledge, spirituality, and the importance of land, while also highlighting areas for future scholarly exploration. Ultimately, the book serves as a stepping stone for further dialogue on how indigenous Pacific worldviews can shape contemporary conversations on environmental guardianship, community health, and spiritual well-being.

Te Aroha Rountree Ngai Tūteāuru, Ngā Puhi (tribal affiliations) Perehitini/President | Te Hāhi Weteriana o Aotearoa Methodist Church of New Zealand

He Kaiako ki te Whare Wānanga o Trinity. I ngā wā o mua, he Kaiako, he Kairangahau hoki ia mo te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau, i te reo Māori, me ngā kōrero o neherā. He mātanga hāpai hoki ia mo ngā rōpu o te kawanatanga,i te reo Māori me ngā tikanga, me te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Te Aroha is President of the Methodist Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and a Senior Lecturer in Moana Studies at Trinity Theological College. She was previously a lecturer and researcher for the University of Auckland, focussed on Māori language and manuscripts. Te Aroha has also been a consultant for local government agencies, providing sessions on Māori language, customs and protocols, as well as Treaty workshops.)

After Method: Queer Grace, Conceptual Design, and the Possibility of Theology

Hanna Reichel, Louisville, KY: WJKP, 2023 (ISBN: 978066426890)

Review by Geoff Thompson

I wish this book had been available at the start of my own academic career. After absorbing what I now understand to be an intellectually naïve approach to method during my own doctoral studies, on entering the academy as a faculty member a decade later, I was unsettled, not by the academy's more ideologically-aware attention to method, but by the confidence placed in ideologically-aware methodologies to produce

good theology. Hannah Reichel's impressive book forcefully interrogates that confidence.

"Method will not save us" is a refrain which regularly punctuates this book. Reichel, Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, argues that attention to method does not guarantee "good" or "better" theology. Their argument is not, however, a reactionary response to the academic focus on method. It is, rather, a constructive, probing and even teasing exploration of the significance of the strangeness, norm-deviating nature of the locations of grace for the task of Christian theology: a grace that constantly risks disrupting the boundaries that even "radical" methods set up. In short, grace is queer. Or, as Reichel says at one point: "[G]race is messy, and it messes with those it touches" (128). Including the theologian.

With this deconstructive theme in place, it is unsurprising that one of Reichel's main conversation partners is Marcella Althaus-Reid whose Indecent Theology is a prominent source. More surprising, at least to some, will be their other main conversation partner: Karl Barth. Barth's insistence on the impossible possibility of theology, on the demonstrated propensity of theology towards idolatry, and on revelation's capacity to disrupt theological systems do indeed place him and Althaus-Reid in an overlapping conceptual space. Reichel profitably develops this overlap as they draw on both authors throughout the book. (The surprise of Barth's inclusion in this conversation may be heightened in the Uniting Church where the dominant modes of both resistance to and promotion of Barth have focused on him as a positive theologian of the Word, with little attention to the politically- and ideologically-charged apophatic dimension of his thought.) Reichel draws on many other conversation partners from a range of disciplines, many eras, and diverse contexts. The result is a strikingly inter-disciplinary and impressively sourced argument.

Much of the force of the book's argument, and the power of Reichel's use of Althaus-Reid and Barth, is derived from the early observation that Systematic Theology and Constructive Theology (which mostly stands for what would be recognised more broadly as Contextual Theology) are equally prone to ideological captivity and the "hubris of dogmatism" (80): "Methodologically-secured orthodoxy and methodologically-secured orthopraxy equally embody a general confidence in the human ability to discern right from wrong, better from worse, and to make progress along these ideals" (81).

Yet such assumptions about progress can, as so much queer theory demonstrates, obscure the complexities, ambiguities and sheer diversity of reality. Reality is after all, "by definition and experience, that which cannot be integrated into the symbolic order of our lived experience or meaning-making, even as it pushes them to frantic and diffuse activity" (113). This is equally true of the reality of grace.

So, with all this emphasis on deconstruction and boundary-breaking, and the capacity of method to be held ideologically captive, why should any attention be given to it? Her answer to this question lies in the structure of the book. Its three parts (consisting of 2, 3 and 4 chapters respectively) follow the three uses of the Law as articulated in classical Reformed theology: Part I, "How (not) to get along (*primus usus legis*)"; Part II, "How (not) to lose hope (*secundus usus legis*); Part III, "How (not) to do better (*tertius usus legis*). Or more fully:

> Method cannot save us, but this does not mean that it cannot do anything for us. For starters it can allow us to glean a more precise outline of our need for redemption without ever achieving

> it....Subsequently, it can continue to accompany our endeavors to strive for relative peace under conditions of finitude and fallenness (*primus usus*), it can help us understand our own need for redemption (*secundus usus*), and it can (!) guide the pursuit of relatively better forms of theology after grace (*tertius usus*). (127)

What, then, might characterise such chastened but "relatively better" theology? It is a theology which displays a realism that is hamartiological, material and incarnational.

> In hamartiological realism, it takes seriously the reality of sin in which the theologian, too, remains complicit, and which prompts her to anti-idealistically engage in apophatic or critical epistemic practices. In material realism, it takes into account how both grace and sin express themselves in the trajectories of real people. In incarnational realism, it does not content itself with the conceptualization of reality in language or thought but embodies the anti-docetic commitment that conceptual work, too, must like God, "become real" in its commitment to it in its concrete realities – realities both of grace and of pain, of holiness and suffering. (159)

Such theology also produces "affordances of doctrine". A chapter is devoted to this theme (Chapter 7), drawing the notion of "affordances" from its use in both ecology and design theory. It is an idea that points to the way designed objects can have purposes which are a function of their design, but which were not envisaged in the design, only emerging in the course of their use. Reichel uses this as a way of allowing theologians to be validly committed to conceptual (systematic) design, so long as the designers are open to the "epistemological importance of misfits to reveal the ways in which theological designs...work (or not)" (194). This idea of affordances serves as something of a bridge between the respective concerns of systematic and constructive theologians. Arguably, it is the most suggestive part of the book.

By any measure this is an impressive book. It is a demanding read, and it is pitched at those already immersed in the technical demands of academic theology. But it brims with stimulating insights and provocative proposals. In good Queer (and Barthian?) fashion, it cuts through convention and many of its binaries. And it does all this in the name of grace. Reichel's disruption of the mutual suspicion between Systematic Theology and Constructive theology is illuminating for the Uniting Church, where only one of our theological colleges now has a teaching position named Systematic Theology. To the extent that that development represents an outworking of the standard criticisms of the discipline in the name of rightly attending to context, *After Method* offers reasons to think that the mutual suspicion of the last few decades could itself be profitably interrogated.

Geoff Thompson is a retired Uniting Church Minister, having served in congregational and academic placements. The author of various books on Uniting Church theology, he has also published essays and journal articles on Karl Barth and more general matters of doctrine. He is the author of *Christian Doctrine: a guide for the Perplexed* (T&T Clark, 2020). Thompson is a Research Fellow of the University of Divinity, a Fellow of the Wesley Centre, and Editor of *Uniting Church Studies*.

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