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# REVOLVE

## RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY II WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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# Religion & Spirituality II - Where do we go from here?

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## Introduction to Part II

It is obvious to say that all young people are different, and therefore different styles of mission will engage different young people. However, this often means that debate about methods of mission is stunted, because for every missional method that is criticised, there is always someone who it transformed.

So, is this paper doomed from the start because of the diversity of Christian experience? Perhaps. But it is also true that we find ourselves in a particular moment in history, serving a particular part of Australia's population. This narrows the range of missional methods that can be deemed valid and effective.

So before we plunge into models, values, strategies and approaches, let us remind ourselves of what is important in mission, as well as a few qualifying remarks.

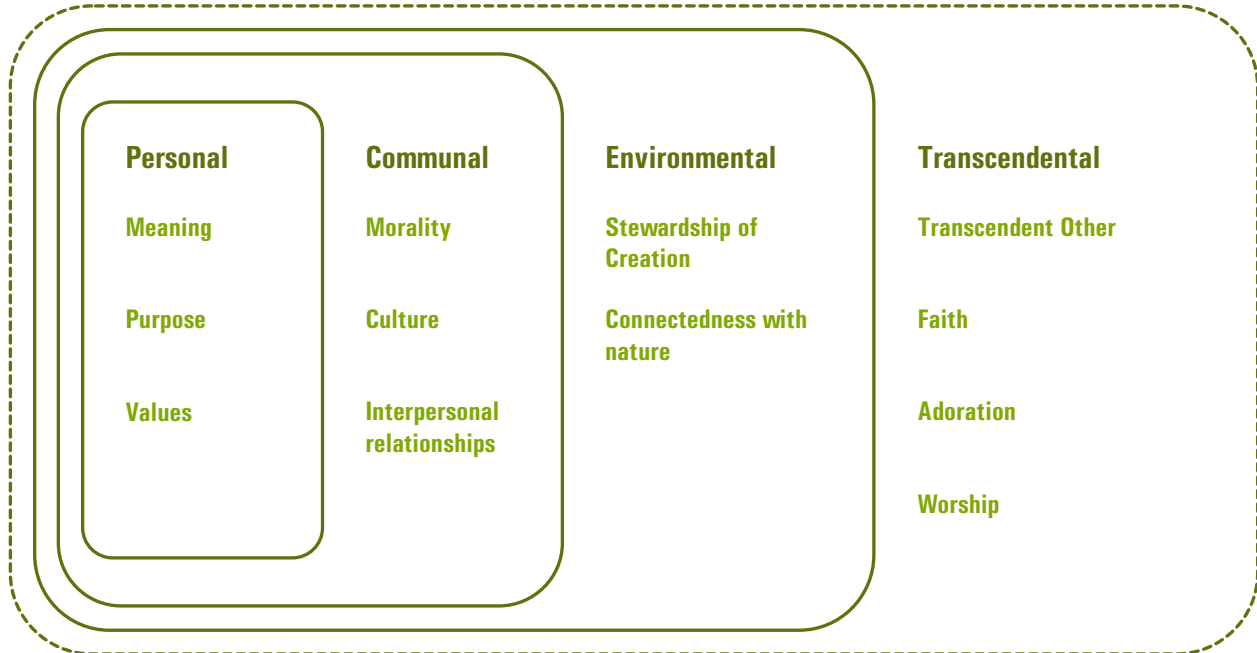
### How do we measure success?

Any holistic **missional** approach must take into account the whole of a young person's life, and the whole life of a young person's community. John Fisher has given us a rubric for explaining spirituality, and I think it is helpful as a judge of our missional ventures (see Figure 1).

He says that spirituality has three dimensions, and that all need to be seen within the context of a "transcendent other", which for Christians is God. The three dimensions are: personal, communal and environmental.<sup>1</sup>

- **Personal:** meaning; purpose; values.
- **Communal:** morality; culture; interpersonal relationships.
- **Environmental:** stewardship of Creation; connectedness with nature.

**Missional**  
An approach to church that emphasises reaching out to those outside



**Figure 1:** Fisher, J (2000) *Enhancing university students' spiritual well-being*

<sup>1</sup> Fisher, J (2000) *Enhancing university students' spiritual well-being*

These three dimensions provide a guide to our "effectiveness" and "success". For example, a church may succeed in attracting large numbers of young people to a drop-in centre or worship service, but is it successful in discipling? A para-church organisation may be able to mobilise young people around narrow goals or projects, but can it inspire integration of the personal, communal and environmental within a context of faith and discipleship? A small group may help young people discern true meaning, but can it encourage them to change the world around them?

### Contextual Issues

It is impossible to take successful strategies from other times and places and simply plonk them into our time and place...and expect them to work. We recognise that people and sub-cultures are unique, and that means that the way we work among them must be unique. God became a Jewish man living in 1st century Middle-East in order to reach the world of Jesus' day; we must take pains to do the same today.

Another contextual issue is related to the cultural moment we're in. No-one really knows how things will turn out - all we know is that we're in a time of change. We need to be unafraid to experiment, knowing that God is with us even if our efforts fail.

### Biblical Reflection

The most important "missional strategy" we need to practice is actually not a strategy at all. It's more of a way of life. It is "constant critical reflection", on the Bible, our world, ourselves and how we co-operate with God in the world.

## Summary of Part 1

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In order to make sense of Part 2, a summary of Part 1 of this paper is necessary. Please feel free to skip this section if you feel you understand these topics.

### 1. Christendom

Christendom is the idea that the church is at the centre of our culture, and that it should seek (and deserves) political, economic and cultural power. Christendom aims for a society where Christian values are legislated, and the church has a privileged place in Australian society. Part I of this series argued that Christendom no longer exists.<sup>2</sup>

However, many Christian agencies still continue to work as if Christendom exists. That is, they use the language, forms of church and mission that may have been appropriate when most people recognised the validity of the inherited church<sup>3</sup>, but are no longer appropriate now.

Many Australians still have a weak attachment to Christianity because of our Anglo-Saxon heritage, and so some churches will continue to grow. However, this attachment will grow weaker and weaker as time goes on. We cannot rely on a ready pool of spiritual seekers who sympathise with Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

### 2. The key trends

- *The Death of Christendom*: this is the disintegration of Christendom. It does *not* refer to the death of Christianity! It means that Christianity is no longer central to Australian society. Some of the consequences of this trend are: biblical illiteracy; suspicion of Christian faith in the public sphere; decline in church numbers; dissatisfaction with traditional models of church. However, there are positives, as Ross Langmead points out, such as "less nominal faith", "the freedom to experiment" and "openness to faith".<sup>5</sup>
- *Postmodernity* is a way of approaching the world that tends towards:
  - ◆ seeing absolute truth claims as exclusive, even oppressive.
  - ◆ a concentration on the self as the supreme measure of truth
  - ◆ an emphasis on knowing only part of the truth.
  - ◆ being open to spirituality, particularly traditions that have been suppressed by the church.
  - ◆ an attraction to people's stories, rather than to belief systems

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<sup>2</sup> [Revolve Part 1](#)

<sup>3</sup> "Inherited church": this is a term from Stuart Murray, referring to the form of church that has been handed down to us.

<sup>4</sup> Murray, S (2004) *Post-Christendom*

<sup>5</sup> Langmead, R (2005) *Mission Horizons*

- *Multiculturalism*: 35% of Australian young people have non-Anglo backgrounds. 38% have a non-Christian religious background. Therefore, church forms that originated in England may not connect with them. A multicultural environment also means young people have to negotiate many different belief systems. A diversity of worldviews tends to discourage a belief in absolutes.
- *Consumerism*: Consumerism is a way of life that is centred on the self. Consumerism encourages people to 'shop around' for what they want. Therefore, young people build their identity through buying goods and services, and this will impact on their approach to religion and spirituality.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. *The key impacts on young people*

The above trends impact young people in a variety of ways, including:

- *A suspicion of established religious communities*
- *An emphasis on personal experience, rather than 'truth'.*
- *A concentration on the self*
- *The need to make sense of conflicting belief systems.*
- *An openness to questions of spirituality*

For a fuller exploration of these themes, go to [Revolve 10: Religion & Spirituality - Part 1](#)

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<sup>6</sup> This theme will be explored in Revolve 12

# Religion & Spirituality II

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## Ethos: What Values should guide our efforts?

### 1. A Missionary Movement

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For most of the past few hundred years, the mainstream church has believed that Western culture was basically "Christian". People were familiar with the church, they recognised Christian language, rituals and traditions, and would call themselves Christians if asked to identify themselves religiously. Mission was not needed in our nation. Mission was something that happened in "heathen" nations, dark places where the gospel's light had not shone. This view of things is now changing.

Western culture is now seen as a "mission field". Why? Because our culture has evolved/progressed/decayed (depending on your point of view) to such a point that we can no longer say it is "Christian". Our philosophies don't use Christian reference points, our politicians refrain from 'God-talk', churches are in numerical decline and increasing numbers of people identify themselves in censuses as 'no religion' or a non-Christian religion. As David Bosch says:

*We have truly entered into an epoch fundamentally at variance with anything we have experienced to date.<sup>7</sup>*

The Australian church can no longer focus on simply sending people overseas, but must focus on mission 'in its own backyard'. The question for Christians who work with young people is not *whether* we should be engaged in mission amongst them. The question is: *what kind* of mission is needed? Here we explore two aspects of the answer to that question.

#### A. Incarnational mission over Extractional/Attractional mission

**Extractional/attractional mission** focuses on two things: 1) *Extracting* new Christians from their current cultural environment and placing them in an environment that is "more Christian"; 2) *Attracting* people to the community and activities of the church, such as youth groups, child-care groups, worship services, men's breakfasts, evangelistic events etc.

Mission is seen primarily in terms of "getting people in the door" of the church, where they can then be exposed to the witness of the Christian community and the message of the gospel. It is a centripetal force, meaning it draws people in. It therefore puts an immense amount of energy into developing the infrastructure, technology and programs of church.

**Incarnational mission** gains its name from God's action in sending Jesus, of God becoming human. It refers to a way of mission that focuses on sending:

*When the "Word became flesh," God's method was to communicate directly with people by becoming one of us.<sup>8</sup>*

People are sent out into different places to be witnesses to the gospel in those places. When they incarnate into a community, they take on as much as possible of the life, language and cultural practices of that community. Just as God became human for our sake, so incarnational missionaries give up their own comfort and cultural norms for the sake of others.

It is a centrifugal force, meaning it sends people out. It therefore puts an immense amount of energy into resourcing people to be witnesses for the gospel in a variety of contexts.

Of course, this is not to say that incarnational mission does not aim to attract people or that extractional/attractional mission does not attempt to be relevant to the surrounding culture. I am simply saying that these are two different emphases in mission.

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<sup>7</sup> Bosch, D (1995) *Believing in the Future*

<sup>8</sup> Lausanne (2004) *The Thailand Report on Religious and Non-religious Spirituality*

### Why is incarnational mission preferable to extractional/attractional?

1. Firstly, most young people won't come to an inherited church.
2. Secondly, when they *do* come to church, there are massive cultural barriers to overcome - language, dress, music, service style, socio-economic and ethnic differences.
3. Thirdly, incarnational mission aims to instigate discipleship communities that reflect the concerns, needs and cultural forms of the target group. They will then be more able to make discipleship understandable and attractive for their community.
4. Fourthly, incarnational mission is more appropriate to a post-Christendom context. Attractional/extractional modes of mission assume that people will come to us. This assumes that the church is still at the centre of the culture, and of people's hearts and minds.

### B. Relational mission over programmatic mission

Relational youth ministry is nothing new, but why is it important? Because of young people's disconnection from biblical stories and their mistrust of the church, mission will be a long-term process. We also live in a world that has been immersed in advertising; there is a natural mistrust of anyone who is 'bringing a message'. The time-frame of the journey from mistrust to curiosity to real interest to personal commitment will be more extended.

The only "mission strategy" that can cope with such an extended timeframe is friendship. Programs are relatively short-term and aim for a concrete result by the time they finish. We can no longer expect programs to achieve substantial change.

That is not to say that programs are useless - a well-structured program can have a powerful effect on a young person's life. However, the effect will probably be lost unless there is a trusted relational contact with whom that young person can make meaning of the experience. This is particularly true when we remember that young people must negotiate meaning in an often confusing pluralist context.

#### Relationships in a Christendom mindset

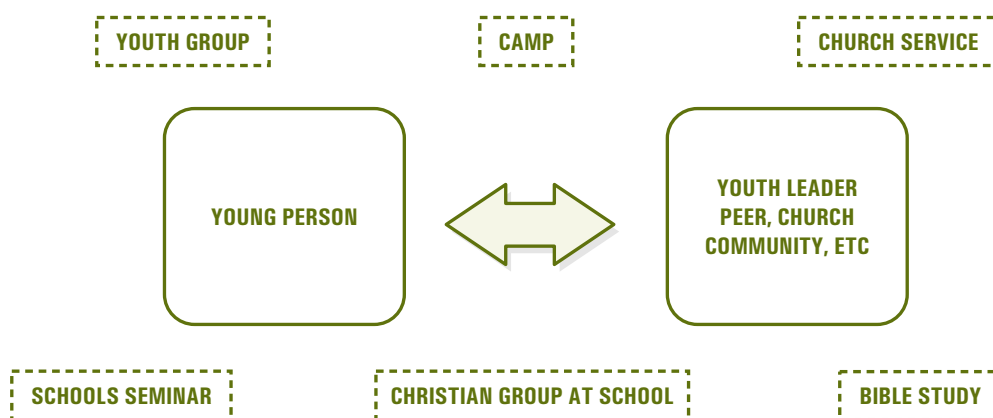
Most Christian programs factor relationships into their performance, in terms of "follow-up" and "connection with a local church". Large numbers of young people are contacted through programs, and then those who respond positively are followed up. It could be represented like this:



This view of relationships is a *Christendom* one, because it sees the success of the *program* as primary, and therefore puts most energy into the program. The positive response by the young person is evidence that the program has succeeded for that young person, and hence they will be pursued.

### Relational Mission for a post-Christendom context

In contrast, relational mission sees the success of the *relationship* as primary, and programs as an adjunct to relationships, only useful insofar as they extend and deepen the relationship. In this view, relationships exist *before* any programs, and will continue to exist *after* the program has ended, regardless of the young person's response to the program. It could be represented like this:



### C. Integrity over information

Why is this important? We are confronted with young people who want genuine connection, rather than information about God.

Christendom mission assume that there is a body of knowledge that is static and stable, and that this needs to be communicated. To a certain extent that is true - there are core beliefs and values that are non-negotiable for Christian discipleship. But very few young people will take up the cross because they received accurate information about Jesus. The public perception of the inherited church is that it is too corrupted and irrelevant to trust. People who are deeply cynical about the inherited church will not trust information supplied to them without a witness to those truths, lived out in front of them.

Jesus' injunction to "Come and see"<sup>9</sup>, given to the first disciples is instructive. He did not give intellectual information first, but instead invited them to observe his life. Therefore, we need to have integrity, both as individuals and institutions. Integrity does not mean having all the answers, but it means that people can see that we are making a real attempt to embody our beliefs.

### D. Story Evangelism

Information is not nearly as important to young people as someone's story. Postmodernity is a way of describing the fact that young people now are less interested in "10 reasons to believe in the resurrection" than they are in "10 ways that the resurrection affects your life". The truth of religion no longer seems to depend on logical, scientific proof...and we can legitimately question whether it ever has.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, this is a biblical viewpoint: the Bible consists of stories told in response to communities trying to live out the will of God. Even the books of law and Paul's more "theological" letters were written in the context of an ongoing story of God's people struggling to work out what it meant to have faith in God. They are chock-full of practical questions, theological implications, exhortations to live in a certain way, references to earlier conversations and arguments. Paul, in particular, continually refers to his prior relationship with the community he is writing to, urging them to imitate him, remember what he has taught them, reminding them of times he has been with them.

The Bible is a record of an impassioned story, not told for the sake of a story, but out of *necessity*. Evangelism needs to move away from communicating information about Jesus, and towards connecting our story and the story of our friends, and connecting those stories with the story of Jesus. Later, we'll look at two models that incorporate this emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> John 1:37-39

<sup>10</sup> Christianity is internally reasonable. But that is very different from insisting that Christianity measure up to scientific standards of truth.

### A. Why must new missional ventures be simple and sustainable?

#### 1. Simplicity

They must be simple because they are new, and therefore susceptible to failure. It is difficult to begin anything, and it is therefore wise to start with projects and ventures that can be done well. It is no use creating the ultimate emerging missional strategy if it fails in 6 months. It is infinitely more preferable to begin with something small, simple and achievable.

In addition, any new venture will immediately be examined for cracks, flaws, holes. Any failure will be used by entrenched interests to dismiss the entire emerging missional church.

I am not suggesting that we need to be constantly fearful of criticism and questions, or not take risks. But it is true that emerging missional ventures are seen as a threat by some, and the only answer to such a perception is their longevity.

#### 2. Sustainability

They must be sustainable because alternatives will not be supported, at first. Ventures that require large financial investment, large numbers of people and significant institutional backing are likely to face increased examination and expectations of success.

I think that our conception of what is "significant" is important here. We often feel that missional ventures need to have large numbers of people involved and organisational backing in order to be considered successful. This is also a Christendom notion. If we look back to the early church, we see a marginal, illegal and struggling movement, held together not by institutional bonds but by a few itinerant apostles and the fervent commitment of its members. I am not advocating the abolition of larger church bodies, but pointing out that these are not as crucial as we are sometimes led to believe, and are only useful insofar as they support what God is doing in the world.

### B. How might missional ventures be more simple and sustainable?

#### a. Recovery of spiritual disciplines

Apart from the early church, there was also another movement that attempted to renew the church in a time of torpor and accommodation to the surrounding culture - the monastic movement. In response to the medieval church's obsession with worldly influence and wealth, monasteries were formed that attempted to call the church back to its roots. In order to sustain such a costly venture, they enlisted spiritual disciplines that we can re-form for our context.<sup>11</sup>

#### b. Stripping away of non-essential elements of "church business"

So much of church members' energy is invested into activities, meetings and programs which have little connection to mission. We need to question whether the status quo can sustain mission, particularly as the church becomes more marginal.

*Fundamentally, inherited churches need to ask two questions. How much time are we wasting on activities that do not sustain a missional community and will soon become unsustainable? And how much time do we devote to internal activities at the expense of mission beyond the church?*<sup>12</sup>

#### c. Refocussing commitment

In Part 1, we recognised that post-modern culture does not lend itself to commitment. A more accurate comment would be that commitment looks different in post-modern culture. In churches with a Christendom mindset, commitment means attending meetings, coming frequently to Sunday worship, serving on boards and committees etc. Often these activities are exercises in maintenance, which is necessary to some extent. But once maintenance becomes the focus, young people are likely to avoid such commitments.

Missional ventures need to refocus commitment around essential elements of missional church, rather than activities that maintain an institution.

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<sup>11</sup> Barker, A (2000) *Collective Witness*

<sup>12</sup> Murray, S (2004) *Church After Christendom*

## Shape: What could church look like?

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### 1. Centred-set

Most churches are "bounded-set" communities. That is, you are either in or out. There are stated and unstated markers defining who is in and out. An example of a stated marker may be baptism or church membership. An unstated marker may be refraining from smoking, political or ethical ideology, a dress code or language. One's spiritual status is measured by whether you are in or out.

"Centred-set" churches are different. Instead of defining people by their position (either inside or outside the boundaries), it defines people by their orientation to the centre. What is the centre? The story and person of Jesus Christ. In centred-set churches, belonging is defined by whether or not people are moving towards the centre. Of course, this way of seeing church means that church would put more energy into relationships, rather than into maintaining boundaries. It also would put more energy into maintaining the centre of the community, rather than the boundaries.<sup>13</sup>

Developing a centred-set church is a huge challenge, given our tendency to create boundaries. Steve Taylor lays bare the tensions involved:

*Perhaps the greatest question facing the emerging church is how to integrate spiritual tourism with the notion of redemptive community. How do we create communities flexible enough to weather the constant influx of new people and ideas, yet stable enough to provide consistency for those who commit themselves to those communities? How do we create communities that are open enough to welcome the tourist, yet orthodox enough to remain grounded in the triune God? <sup>14</sup>*

### 2. Indigenous to culture

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What someone becomes a Christian, they usually attempt to integrate into a church that is foreign to them. Or, a church may be planted in their context that imitates church forms that are foreign to that locality.

If our missionary movement is to be incarnational in ethos, then any expression of the Body of Christ will be indigenous to the culture into which we have incarnated. By indigenous, I mean that the form of church will take on the cultural features of the community that it is in. Mode of gathering, place of gathering, communication of the Word, dress, seating, time, food, worship, prayer etc etc etc...all of these will be as consistent as possible with the cultural features of the host community.

The body of Christ will not look the same in differing communities, particularly given Australian's multicultural environment. There will be commonalities, because we all belong to Christ, but there will be differences. This process requires "critical contextualisation"<sup>15</sup> - not unthinkingly shaping churches in the flawed image of the host community, but accepting all that is not contrary to the spirit of Christ.

### 3. Believing/Belonging/Behaving dynamics

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As a youth pastor, I once participated in an induction for newcomers to our church. The senior pastor began the session by turning to the "39 Articles of Faith of the Anglican Church" and proclaiming that these were the benchmark for anyone wishing to belong to the Anglican Church! While his intent was to focus on the core beliefs of the church, it's doubtful that anyone present would come to an Anglican church because of the 39 Articles.

Inherited churches usually expect the following process when people become members of their church: 1) the person believes in a creed or set of **beliefs**; 2) then they **behave** in a way that is consistent with the church's religious, social and cultural norms; 3) once they have satisfied those two conditions, they **belong** to that church. It is a very rare church that will allow people to belong if they are behaving in ways contrary to their norms, or who believe things that are overly different from acceptable beliefs.

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<sup>13</sup> Andrews, D (1999) *Christi-Anarchy*; Murray, S (2004) *Church After Christendom*

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, S (2005) *The Out of Bounds Church?*

<sup>15</sup> Frost M & Hirsch A (2003) *The Shaping of Things to Come*; Lausanne (2004) *The Thailand Report on Religious and Non-religious Spirituality*

Considering the long timeframe that missional churches will need to allow for people to come to faith, and the suspicion most people have of the institutional church, we need to rethink this process. In fact, most people will come to faith by belonging in some way first, not believing. This belonging is most likely through friends who invite them to church-sponsored events and gatherings, if not worship services. Through these, they experience belonging and usually, behavioural changes in line with the group's cultural norms (sometimes in order to keep belonging). Believing will usually come later, as they begin to reflect on the source of the group's solidarity and shared purpose. Belief then becomes the act of taking on the values of Jesus and entering into a relationship with God.

Missional ventures must be aware of several different categories of believing and belonging in our culture:

- a. *Belonging but only partly believing*: people who are willing to be part of a church community, but for whom the integrity of the Christian story is not crucial.
- b. *Believing but not belonging*: people who profess a faith in a higher power, or even in orthodox Christian faith, but for whom belonging to the church holds no value or benefit.
- c. *Believing but no longer belonging*: people who believe, and once belonged, but now no longer belong.
- d. *Believing but belonging less intensely, or intermittently*: this definitely applies to an increasing community of the young adult population, who were brought up in the Christian community, but who belong less intensely, or to a variety of expressions of church.
- e. *Belonging but not yet believing*: many churches are cognisant of this dynamic, and have created programs that cater for it - youth groups that create hospitable communities; evangelism course like "Alpha" that emphasise community and dialogue over event-oriented evangelism; and worship services that are more low-key and contain less alien language and structure.
- f. *Believing but not yet belonging*: as forms of incarnational mission increase, people will come to faith through relationships with individual Christians, or smaller Christian groups, rather than through inherited churches. Belonging may not be an automatic follow-on from believing.
- g. *Neither belonging nor believing*: people who have never belonged to a church, and have no sympathy with its beliefs.

#### 4. Linked to, auspiced by larger bodies

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Missional groups that attempt such localised and incarnational mission may quickly find themselves on the fringe of the church, captive as it is to broad "initiatives" and programs that can be easily replicated in myriad localities.

Missional groups will need to find support in larger bodies that can provide administrative support, accountability, recruitment and training opportunities and, most of all, credibility in the eyes of the Australian church. This support may be found in individual churches, denominations or parachurch bodies.

#### Summary

There is a multiplicity of ways that people relate to faith and to the church. A multiplicity of challenges requires a multiplicity of responses. Missional strategies that are "one-size-fits-all" will not work, particularly as those who have some affinity with the church decrease in number. Missional strategies will need to be local, contextual and specific. We must avoid missional strategies that are not shaped by local conditions and needs.

## Some Examples of Strategies, models & approaches

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### 1. Incarnational Mission: UNOH, InnerCHANGE, Frontier Servants

All of these groups are engaged in incarnational mission. They become part of the communities they are trying to serve, taking on changes in language, dress, income and location. They then work to serve those communities, and plant indigenous churches in those communities.

UNOH and InnerCHANGE are missional orders, whose members have made vow-like commitments, similar to the way monastic orders operate. They serve in geographically-based communities, who are socio-economically disadvantaged. Frontier Servants focuses on "subcultures", such as the rave scene, Goths, New Agers, students, as well as Hindu and Muslim communities.

#### Links

[UNOH](#)

[InnerCHANGE](#)

[Frontier Servants](#)

### 2. Evangelism as Story

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- "6 Windows": *Naomi Swindon - Scripture Union* <sup>16</sup>

Frustrated by the way traditional evangelism focussed on a narrow view of salvation, Naomi identified 6 biblical metaphors of salvation:

1. *Creation*
2. *Kingdom of God*
3. *Covenant/Agreement*
4. *Family/Home*
5. *Holiness*
6. *Law*

These provide a way in to the good news for different people. Each metaphor uses different language and images to explain to someone what the good news is. For example, the window of "Law" may not make much sense to someone who feels that they have little to be guilty about, but the window of "Family/Home" may connect with someone for whom family is important.

In addition, these 6 windows provide a wider range of vocabulary with which to discuss faith. This is essential given that most Australian young people are not familiar with biblical language and imagery.

- "Three Story Evangelism": *Youth For Christ Australia* <sup>17</sup>

YFC are developing a way of evangelism that focuses on stories, not steps. It also focuses on relationships, a driving force in the lives of post-Christendom young people. Evangelism is thus:

*It's not working through some tips and techniques to manipulate the gospel into a conversation at the earliest time, but it is about being led by God's Spirit to bring those parts of Jesus' story that He wants at that given moment.* <sup>18</sup>

Three Story Evangelism emphasises the interrelationships between, not surprisingly, three stories!

1. **My story + God's story:** focussing on our own discipleship means that our lives are more authentic witnesses to God's love.
2. **My story + Your story:** friendships that offer trust and acceptance, and that are not subject to the success of an evangelistic goal.
3. **God's story + Your story:** introducing friends to the possibility that God is already present in their lives.

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<sup>16</sup> [naomis@suvic.org.au](mailto:naomis@suvic.org.au)

<sup>17</sup> [chris.harding@yfc.org.au](mailto:chris.harding@yfc.org.au); [linda.harding@yfc.org.au](mailto:linda.harding@yfc.org.au)

<sup>18</sup> Harding, C & L (2005) *Three Story Evangelism Briefly Explained*

## 2. Emerging Church

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These are experiments in church that have a more or less loose connection to denominations or parish churches. It is difficult to make generalisations about this model, as there are myriad forms. Some are basically cell groups, some are missional in focus, some comprise people on their way out of the church, others consist of members who are very positive about the church. However, it can be said that they are attempting to meet the communal and spiritual needs of people who do not feel they belong in a mainstream church.

They usually have the following features:

- Small numbers of people
- Limited positional leadership
- Meet in homes or buildings such as community centres, pubs etc. They rarely have purpose-built facilities
- Using ancient/future forms of worship<sup>19</sup>
- Focus on building of community
- Minimum institutional trappings

### Links

[The Red Network](#) (Melbourne, VIC)

[Northern Community Church of Christ](#) (Melbourne, VIC)

[City Wesleyan](#) (New Farm, QLD)

[Mars Hill Café](#) (Sydney, NSW)

[Small Boat, Big Sea](#) (NSW)

[Upstream](#) (WA)

[SALT](#) (SA)

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<sup>19</sup> Ancient/Future worship is a participatory approach to worship that combines ancient Christian spiritual practices with modern images and technology.

## Key Tensions and Questions

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It is easy to criticise what is inherited, to rock what is established. So, we must recognise the measures outlined above are meagre and provisional, and there are many questions and tensions to be addressed:

### 1. Consumer Appeal

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The approach I have outlined above is "anti-consumeristic". That is, it does not advocate a religious-missional "product" that can be franchised and replicated in myriad contexts. But, there is evidence in Australia that such a 'consumerist' approach is having phenomenal success, particularly amongst young people.

I am speaking specifically here of the mega-church, most famously practised by Hillsong Church, but attempted in smaller versions everywhere. The combination of a crowd experience, professional music performances and charismatic leaders is attracting thousands of young people, and encouraging others to attempt similar styles in their own contexts. One reason for the success of this model is that, as one observer has put:

*If there's one reason for Hillsong's numerical success, it is that it appeals to young people in their natural mode - as consumers.<sup>20</sup>*

That is, postmodern and post-Christendom young people are most comfortable when they can choose to be involved in something through purchasing a product. Churches such as Hillsong are, from one point of view, doing a fantastic job of contextualising the gospel for their audience.

But is it possible for authentic faith to begin with a consumer appeal? In fact, in an age where young people increasingly identify themselves by what they buy, is there any other way to do mission? Incarnational mission might be an appropriate way of mission for communities held together by bonds of ethnicity, locality or common struggle, but will it work for communities of young people held together by the power of a brand?

The converse question is: can a missional approach built on the sandy soil of consumerism ever encourage a deep discipleship that enables people to leave consumer approaches to faith behind?

### 2. Emerging churches...are they sustainable?

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The movement of so-called "emerging churches" is growing: small, creative, marginal expressions of the body of Christ that often seem to have little connection with inherited churches, and few mechanisms of accountability and support. Some hail them as a "new monasticism", a source of sorely-needed renewal in a decrepit church. Others deride them as maverick diversions from the true task of attracting people back into the established churches.

Whatever the case, it seems that they are at least attempting to experiment with new, and hopefully more effective, forms of mission and church. Emerging churches will need to build and maintain links with larger bodies if they are to establish themselves.

### 3. Inherited churches...are they redeemable?

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Many elders in the emerging missional church movement advocate links with inherited church bodies, desiring the renewal of the established church, and the support needed for struggling, embryonic missional experiments.

Can inherited churches begin to deal with a post-Christendom context when so many members still treat their churches as existing for themselves, rather than missional incubators?

For the sake of unity and solidarity, it is crucial that old and new expressions of mission and church talk to each other. But the expectations and structures of inherited churches will always conflict with some aspects of the emerging missional churches. We need to be clear about these expectations, and not take on partnerships that will be unfulfilled.

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<sup>20</sup> personal email to author

#### 4. Old Wineskins....New Wine.

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Many established churches have realised that society is changing, and are attempting to modify the way they do mission and church. This is admirable and needs every encouragement.

However, new and experimental practices cannot be simply "bolted on" to established churches without any structural changes. For example, an evangelistic course like Alpha is generally very-well suited to our context: a focus on asking any questions, friendship, dialogue, food. But usually it is very different to the "real" church. So if any Alpha participants convert, their experiences of Alpha and of the church services they now attend will be extremely divergent. Most church services are not focussed on dialogue, friendship, food and asking any questions!

Again, we need to be wary of "tinkering" when the system needs a complete overhaul.

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