

GROWING CHURCHES IN AN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Pilot Convocation in Sydney

Friday 16 May 2008

at the Salvation Army Eastern Territory HQ, 140 Elizabeth Street

An Acknowledgement of Gadigal Country was given by Pastor Ray Minniecon.

Introduction – John Henderson, General Secretary of the NCCA

John outlined the development of the Growing Churches' initiative; as a new departure after the closure of the old NCCA Commission on Mission. After discussion with the NCCA Executive, a Working Group has been exploring the issues of Growing Churches in an Australian Context and this is the second pilot convocation, arranged to widen the dialogue among Australian Churches.

Kingsley Nowell was introduced as the facilitator for the day and thanks were expressed to the Salvation Army for the provision of facilities and to the NSW Ecumenical Council for assisting with the arrangements.

Initial 'getting to know you session':

creating community - towards a healthy church

sharing responses to the questions, information and experience -

Why are you in the room?

What do you bring to the room?

Whose shoulders are you on?

What was your first thought when you heard the topic?

Second session – what is health and growth?

Paul Cameron led into Scripture-based reflection (Matthew 13) in small groups on what is understood by health and growth, concluding with a commendation of the discussions to God in prayer.

after a morning tea-break -

the question was then addressed in small groups (composition changing):

What is a healthy church?

Key points –

(first round of discussions)

A healthy church

- * is loyal to its purpose
- * invites Indigenous and marginalised to believe with us that we can be inclusive
- * deals with generational issues
- * contextualises – is inclusive and engaged with culture
- * integrates tradition/family and freedom/individuality
- * has humility, respect and is better grounded in the Gospel
- * has appropriate symbolism in the Australian context
- * is about quality – having a clear focus on God and others
across generations and cultures

(second round)

A healthy church is

- * inclusive
 - Indigenous
 - multicultural
 - cross generational
- * creative
- * committed to being a means to serve God's ends
- * welcoming and inclusive
- * open to others
- * retaining children
- * accepting of weakness and not perfect
- * working for others, in church and world
- * alive, growing, unpredictable, spontaneous
- * healthy church local church?
- * multi-cultural
- * (marked by) commitment – long term
- * about quality and quantity but numbers aren't the 'be all and end all'
- * mission-focussed
- * (seen in) quality worship and nurture
- * about conversion
 - personal
 - church
 - ongoing

(third round)

A healthy church

- * has healthy leaders
- * speaks to the heart
- * recognises they are a gift
- * is able to be 'good news' to their community
- * is able to resolve conflicts
- * reflects their theological life in life-communion to deal with differences
- * has respect
 - for each other
 - difference
- * depends on how we see the mission of God or the church
 - this influences how 'healthy' is seen
- * 100 sheep. One lost gets 100% attention. 99 left in the wilderness because all are equally loved and any lost would receive 100% attention in order to save all 100.

Observations - Key things which were said (and heard) included:

- Total focus on the lost (?)
- Right focus on God and others
- That's great if you are white
- You can let go when you are secure
- The church in Australia needs to address its whiteness
- Inviting the marginalised to believe with us

High points felt in the morning discussion:

- The similarities
- The same journey
- Thinking about the church as a gift to the world
- The pleasure of having Duncan here and experiencing common ground
- The generosity of Joan
- The remarkable amount of agreement
- The willingness of others to listen

Questions to continue:

- *What are we prepared to let go?*

Table discussions

Re. healthy churches:

- * quality worship
- * nurturing fellowship
- * Mission-focussed
- * continuing conversion
 - culture of church that cultivate sit
 - conversion of the church itself
- * quality and quantity are not separate entities and healthy churches grow
- * numbers are an indication but not 'be all and end all'
- * healthy church is a local church (don't cross parish boundaries)
- * long-term commitment to community
- * reflect and witness to a healthy pluralism

What does it mean to be a healthy church?

- * qualitative or quantitative
 - healthy disciples – integrate whole of life
 - theologically reflective
 - reflective practitioners
 - biblically literate – aware of tradition
 - missional community
 - people striving together in love and service
 - sense of purpose and articulated
 - across generations and cultures
 - NCD/NCLS healthy church measures
 - limits of self perception
 - live for those beyond ourselves
 - how do we welcome people into our 'life'
- * Christ is risen – re-member – in-deed – total; focus on the lost because all 100 are equally loved - leading to 'ewe are here'- J 20 as the Father sent me

After the lunch break...

Afternoon

Looking at the question of:

What issues in the Australian context are impacting the identity and life of the/a church?

Small group discussions

Key points identified:

- Colonial Memory
- Consumerism – and impact on church and society
- Aboriginal issues
- Morality
- Individualism rather than Community
- Commuter/Dormitory Communities
- Rural Decline – Suburban Growth
- Virtual Communities/Networks – ‘Facebook Culture’
- Youthful/hopeful nation
- Globalisation/localisation tensions
- Post-Christian Society
- Multi-Cultural/Religious/Secularised Society
- Power of media editors
- Affluence – leading to desire for wealth creation as a normal value
- Island mentality/isolation
- Multi-cultural communities
- Cross-cultural tension
- Multi-faith communities – challenges to the uniqueness of Jesus
- Sunday sports
- Other options – church one of many options
 - need for community?
 - Internet; TV
 - Appeal of new ‘religions’
- power of choice over sense of obligation
- breakdown of geographical community
- cultural change – mistrust of institution
 - way we educate
 - mobility
 - discipline/parenting
 - women’s roles
 - materialism erodes spiritual
 - higher level of affluence & satisfaction
- restricted role for churches in public life
- environment
- changing families – singles, blends, nuclear minority
- recognition of culture
- Identity
- The loss of our children
- Wanting more substance but ending with paraphernalia (substance to formalism)
- A desire for simplicity , certainty and authenticity
- Wanting to find/return to the founders – to go back
- Rediscovery of founding ‘charism’
- Our cultural memories as Christians

- Here we are mostly as migrants – but what does it mean to be ‘here’ – pluralism
- Community and government
- Impact of culture in church – are we holy and different? Biblical/theological
- Technologist culture – how does faith talk today?
- Private/public square
- Church and State
- Media as cultural interpreters – makes conflict normal and framing expectations

Full group discussion took place about how we relate church and culture in connection to the issues identified

- Can we fit, for instance, such issues into a SWOT analysis?
- What framework and perspectives should we be seeking to use to look at church in relation to culture?
- Are strengths and weaknesses just different parts of the same glass (half empty/half full?) for example? (is Sunday sport a curse or a blessing?)
- How do needs and relevance relate to such things as critique of culture and cost of discipleship?
- Does the ecumenical question and ecumenical space help to keep us honest in these things, listening to one another and our context and thereby strengthening us in telling the ‘whole story’ of the Gospel, sharing and ‘being the answer’ to the genuine questions and showing authentic love?
- How far are we seeking to share the story via the church and/or celebrating God at work in world and church?
- God is at work in the world *and* the church
- What do people hope for, and, for church, what is our story of hope?
- Different definitions of ‘orthodoxy’ are being articulated
- What is appropriate cultural accommodation?

Teabreak

Concluding question:

What have discovered about growing healthy Churches in the Australian Context?

Participants each listed their key responses and the following were offered by each as the most significant from each of them.

These were then grouped under three headings.

Firstly:

- Leadership – having vision, having courage, story-telling
- Shared Ecumenical leadership
- It will require growing healthy leaders
- The mission of God for us includes growing churches in the Australian context
- Growing healthy churches requires growing healthy leaders
- We need to be committed for the long-term
- Church life is 10% about what happens and 90% about how to deal with it
- Attention to resources will act as a catalyst

Secondly:

- Older (or younger?!) is not (necessarily) better or truer
- We are all passionate about the message

- Like performances of Romeo and Juliet, we play the same stories as churches (hope and redemption) but we play it in different ways
- Self is at work in church and context
- Love the context – the context is a gift ‘for God so loved the World’
- There are many contexts and it is complicated
- God is at work in church and context
- It is all about Jesus and his Way
- God and neighbour emphasis

Thirdly:

- Accepting others
- Dialogue with others is important
- Five words are not enough
- Love the context
- A community which listens before it tells
- Make connections
- How to share the love of Jesus Christ with all the world
- Being relational with people
- Will to connect
- Shared stories
- Need to critically engage church and culture

When assembled together in these groups of responses with similar emphases, significant discussion then took place working towards three summary statements seeking to express the common ground found during the day.

Conclusion

Paul Cameron then drew the program to its conclusion, thanking everyone for their participation and indicating that this was the first encouraging step in a continuing dialogue and thanking Kingsley for his facilitation. Minutes would be sent out in due course to participants.