

Growing Churches in the Australian Context

Brisbane, 11th November 2008

An initiative of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA)

Hosted in Brisbane by Queensland Churches Together (QCT)

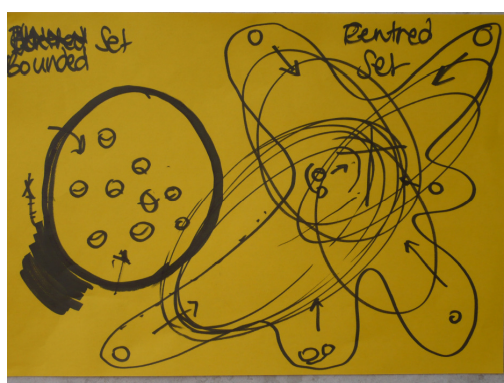
Purpose: to explore together the ongoing mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in Australia

Focus: What do growing, healthy churches look like in the Australian context?

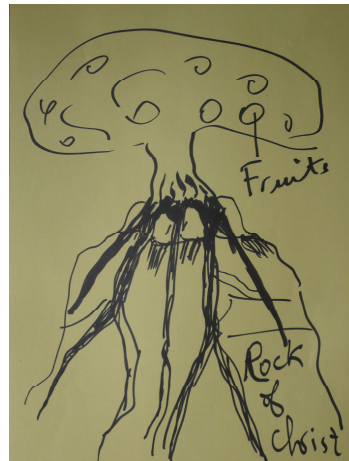
1. Group session in the morning

a) What is the church?

- A community gathered in the name of Jesus
- Community and authenticity are important
- Church is relationship, vertical and horizontal (the cross)
- Relationships are key
- Today people participate – then belong – then believe
- An organization, not an organism (caution against stretching the growth motif too far – may not fit the organizational aspects of church)
- A ‘centred set’ (centred on Christ) – multi-dimensional - as opposed to a ‘bounded set’ – going in to the centre and out again (the labyrinth image) except that going out from the centre is also going to Christ, not away from Christ – not able to control a centred set (fear us the underlying motive behind the need for control and certitude) – but who decides what is baggage and what is not?



- A community on the move (image of a bus) – on a journey – movement involves God’s change
- Moving into Christ – moving out into the world with Christ – a rhythm inward and outward
- A tree bearing fruit, with its roots going deep into the rock of Christ – the fruitful community of Christ



- Part of society – need to be ‘in the mission’ – engaged
- A sense of wanting to be the church of Christ

b) What does a healthy church look like?

- Fullness of life
- Absence of dysfunction
- Synergy
- Consciousness of health as it relates to ill-health - health is recognized in relation to ill health
- Requires discipline
- Capacity to reproduce
- “Would you be willing to bring someone to your church?”
- Community / relationships
- Healthy individuals help build healthy communities
- Coming together of the riches of traditions – transcending tribalism
- Unity in diversity – unity is not conformity
- Hospitality:
 - openness
 - welcoming
 - not afraid to open arms
- Involvement in community rather than just institutions
- “Good” Christians in public life
- Healthy churches are “growing” churches (“growing” needs defining)
- “Growth” when defined as bringing people to us is going in the wrong direction – need to take the message out.
- To discover what a healthy church looks like, turn to creed – “one holy, catholic and apostolic church” – unpack these.

Health is:

- Gift from God, for other people
- Deep and abiding relationship with Christ
- Recognizing the reality of church

- Giving life to others
- Need to recognize the slow drift even where congregations are “healthy”

2. Significant thoughts (arising out of group session feedback)

Unity in Christ – Christ as the centre

Growing in faith and serving in faith belong together.

The church as a centred set with movement – elliptic – centred on Christ.

Richness in diversity.

Hospitality is a sign of a healthy church.

Love

Discipline

Strength lies in root depth

Truth

Engagement in the community

Movement – journey – pilgrimage

3. Feelings of participants related to the sharing in groups/feedback

- Christians from various expressions spoke of common experience
- A concern (to remember) that the church is for others, not just for us.
- Felt energy around the “centred set” concept.
- Concerned about the idea that we are only church when we gather.
- Encouraged by the willingness to step outside the boundaries – outside the comfort zone – let the Spirit work in new ways.
- A spirit of adventure in our conversation.
- Sensed Jesus as the life of the world.
- Pleased by the richness of diversity of ideas/expression – but also acknowledging the hidden challenges in that – starting to surface.
- Surprised how little traction the idea of the “one holy, catholic and apostolic church” (creed) received as a definition of a healthy church – needs unpacking.
- We have not really touched on what our commonality looks like – might be interpreted in different ways by those in the room.

4. Issues impacting on the Australian context

Changing forms of communication

New technology (IT)

Electronic digital age

Media shapes opinion

Insularity

Lack of meaningful awareness of being a global citizen/Christian

Materialism, consumerism, hedonism etc

Wealthy, self-reliant

Sectarian origins of British settlement – us & them

Individualism

Society has changed – single households, ‘cocooning’, introspective living

Loss of community

Post-modernism

Expectation of participation, having a say, being heard

Polarisation of expectations

Tendency to go back to secure, known position

Seeking after experiential spirituality

Post-modern preference for narrative over theory-of-everything

Cultural diversity in mission context

Multi-cultural, religious pluralism

Recent migration – cultural animosity in Europe, Middle East – leads to animosity in Eastern churches – love in action speaks louder than words

Presence of other faiths – tolerance – “one is as good as another”

Shifts in society

Resurgence of fundamentalism

Has the idea of denominationalism died a ‘natural’ (or supernatural) death?

Preparedness to give resources locally for big picture matters?

No church – not members – causes: not committed

Relevance to modern life?

Disconnect between church speak and real life

Church’s current reputation as judgmental

Rebellion against authority

Credibility of church (church vs Jesus)

Conflict of perception by society – ‘hypocritical’

Suspicion of institutions

Has the idea of denominationalism died a ‘natural’ death?

Geographical issues

Distance

Stresses in rural Australia

Geographic challenges, regionalization

“Post traditional” environment (of society, reflected in churches)

Mission context – widespread ignorance of biblical narrative

Biblical, theological (dumbing down) – ignorance – including ignorance of one’s own tradition

Capacity and confidence to personally communicate basics of the faith
Dependence on paid, trained clergy – viability issues
Collaborative leadership

Changing demographics

Ageing population
Dissonance of community and church demographics
Changing workforce participation
Early retirees
Mobility
Rapidity of change

An issue on its own:

Need for healing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – and underlying ‘racism’ issues

5. Way forward: some questions

How does the church both institutionally and non-institutionally contribute health and life to the missional context?

What opportunities does the context give the church for mission?

How can we focus on the Kingdom of God, not just the church?

What language is accessible to Australians? (inclusive language, not only in terms of gender)

How long have we got to do this?

How will the church know that it has made a difference?

6. What happens from here?

Value of today’s conversation in the Christ centredness of what we’re on about.

Don’t lose sight of the diversity of understanding of Church.

Can the material from the 4 events be put ‘raw’ on the NCCA website, and public comment be invited?

Plans towards 2010 might include regional and local discussions around themes arising.

Things are happening around the country e.g. schools. Also, a lot of leaders trained together. The issue now is not dialogue but action.

Is the real value the process rather than the end product? In Sydney people did not have as many existing connections or relationships as in Brisbane.

It is more important to focus on how the Christian Church in Australia benefits to the maximum than on the question of working together. Variety can be more important than the unity – we need to think this through from a neutral stance. Should the question rather be how the mission of God benefits, not the Church?

What we take away from the room (individual contributions):

- The day's discussion brings together lots of reading done on the topic of mission
- Good to be part of the process – all struggling with similar issues
- Centrality of Christ for all of us
- Afternoon less helpful but comments about growth and health helpful
- Wealth of theology and history (e.g. of early church) / experience (e.g. being church in a war) evident in Orthodox participants' reality
- Dealing with issues of change – realization that our response is less about solving problems than about helping people to cope with change – and the predisposition of the church is not to do that – the desire for the comfortable status quo is the core idol of Australia – not wanting to face change
- No one phrase will ever describe the gospel completely
- The question on the invitation was: What do growing churches look like? Surprise that this was not the main focus. National Church Life Survey – list of 12 qualities. But the day's discussion went deeper.
- “Christians in Dialogue” is the programme used locally – needs also to be “Christians in Action” – locally.
- Questions created at the end were particularly helpful.
- Talking about the church in *Australia* was good – engagement of many minds helpful. Be careful not simply to walk away and go on to the next thing.

(Notes will be available to all invitees in their raw form. Notes from other states will also be made available.)