

GROWING CHURCHES IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT  
A Convocation

Thursday 20 November 2008, 10am - 5pm  
The Market Place (Churches of Christ), Cnr Vinrace Street & South Tce Adelaide

What: A 'convocation' on **Growing Churches in the Australian Context** - a first step in a project sponsored by the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). It is born out of the vital interest all our Churches have in the ongoing mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in Australia today.

This event on 20 November 2008 took place in South Australia with the support of SA Council of Churches.

**Question:** What do healthy, growing, Australian Churches look like?

**For whom:** Church leaders, mission practitioners and policy makers from a number of Churches and denominations.

Following a welcome, introductions and prayer, the meeting reflected on and discussed questions posed by Kingsley Nowell, facilitator. Below are the questions and responses.

**Q: What does it mean to be a healthy church?**

**Q: What is Church?**

It's about people, not structures

Engagement, identity – who we are – what are we here for

Empowering leadership – to empowering people

Vision

Different people fit with different groups

Building trust and relationships to make space for people to be truly human...vulnerable

The gathered community for vibrant worship

A community of people learning about/discovering the extent of God's love for them and for the whole of creation

Relevant preaching and faith sharing

People and places of delight and serenity

Delight in the other

People of faith who support others wherever they are in their faith journey

Social holiness

Radical generosity

Ears to hear – hearts to respond

Engagement with local community

Poor and marginalised – home for the homeless

A healthy church promotes healing for those within and without

Responding to real needs

The expression of Christ in the community

Christ centred

Creating openness to presence of God – embracing

Experience presence of God

A healthy church allows people to be authentically and truly human, whole human beings

Responding to the crisis of identity

Does question reflect therapeutic model of church?

Debunk 'dominance' model

Authentic

Self awareness

Self aware

Alive

Be

A healthy church is where its members become vulnerable

Fluid – adaptable – changeable – dynamic – incontinent – journey

Embracing chaos

Listen! (stupid)

'Yes' culture rather than no

Moves beyond its comfort zone, willing to take risks

### **Stand out statements that -**

#### **a) you heard:**

Read Psalm 88

I spend a lot of time with young people (I value their meaningful life)

A Quaker that doesn't like silence

Obedience

Leadership (different takes on this word) is important

Church is listening

Christ is the centre

A place where people feel safe – being able to express vulnerabilities

Incontinence

Deification

Vision

Ignite

#### **b) pleased/surprised you:**

Encouraged

Dissatisfaction with status quo but not from a position of anger

We're all in the river – encouraged

The commonality of this diverse group

#### **c) disturbed you:**

Can't define what Church is

Felt spent by third session because I've been talking about this all this century

Frustrated that we are still asking the question but encouraged that we are still asking the question

### **Having heard this, what does it mean?**

We are not alone in our desires about what the church can become

Church is undergoing change in the Spirit and we are wrestling in it

What does a question like 'healthy church' tell us about our own self perception?

How do we make this conversation contagious?

Need a lot of prayer

Need a lot of talking so we can understand one another better

Listening

After 2000 years this thing called the Church is still experimental

How much do our institutional structures stand in our way?

Mesh of physical and spiritual – ‘what do you ask of me?’

What did Jesus mean when he said “This is my church...” – how much is up to me?

How may we engage in the resurrection experience of God in order that we respond to the needs of the world for love?

*Afternoon/*

### **Q: What issues in the Australian context impact Church?**

#### **Positive**

ANZAC spirit of mateship

Search for spirituality

Migrants/refugees – cultural enrichment

Positive outcome from ecumenism

There is an opportunity for church at the loss of the transcendent in society – embracing the mystery of life - the ‘thin’ place

#### **Negative**

Class affects responses to the Gospel

She’ll be right mate – close enough is good enough

It’s not manly to go to church

Consumerism in society and in church

Cynicism – suspicion and ‘tall poppy’ issues

Narcissistic – inward looking

We are deaf to the outsider – to the insider – the abused – who has been silenced

The ageing of Australia – effect of this on personnel in church – how we minister

Anglo-Saxon White 50+ and churched and clean

The great Australian dream of owning home – financial pressure and negative effect on time availability

Journey – keep on keeping on through the desert of society of quick fixes

Australia is 90% coastal – population is 90% urban

Buildings are quaint

Regulatory, compliance, costs, governance

Clergy misconduct

Church is not masculine – women/children orientated

#### **Both positive and negative**

Environmental issues – over-consumption – global warming

Multifaith – diversity

Mistrust of church leaders

Authority/hierarchy

Definition of family

Change to ‘family’ – divorce, blended, de facto

Competing priorities – Sunday sport, work demands, overwork

Sunday is family day - not church day – 7-day trading, sport

Growing separation between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ – increase of social justice issues

Consumer society but Church defines content, way it's presented - not engaging  
Sexuality  
Diversity of faiths  
Gender  
Sense of us being 'down under' – inferiority, cringe, low self image  
Need for services relevant to life experiences

### **What did you hear...**

Church and culture are moving wider apart  
Yearning to be Australian rather than medieval European  
Australian context is different from American context  
We are getting older and tired  
The Australian context varies from place to place – temptation to transplant models

### **What did you interpret...**

What is the relationship between church and culture  
Every problem an opportunity and vv  
There is no answer – only more questions  
Not one size fits all  
Is it just possible to do what we need to do – not what we thought we ought to do  
Authentic to my faith in a way that encourages others  
Working together we can paint a bridge  
Are we in the bridge-building business anyway?  
Engaging with context requires **will** and being **in touch** with ideal community  
Need to separate message from methods

### **What did you feel...**

Overwhelmed by enormity of it  
Frustrated at the excitement of the challenges and frustrated at the lack of resources to take them on  
Curious about what it'd be like to have a conversation around 'family Sunday'  
Overwhelmed/hesitant by size of issue  
I feel that there is one thing I can do amongst all the enormity  
Expectation that the churches should be getting on together

### **Ways Forward**

The courage to facilitate a conversation with people outside the Church and with grass-roots Church about the Church  
Conversations beyond the Church experts.  
Time for the conversation and feeling appropriate are key issues  
What is it other than 'church'  
The institutionalisation of what we are trying to communicate  
Letting go of the need to be in charge  
Letting go of the desire to survive.