

# DARE TO BE DIFFERENT



## bring Jesus

### Making sense of mission

by Rev Dr Steen Olsen



*Steen also blogs at LCA eNews. To sign up to his newsletter go to [www.lca.org.au/enews](http://www.lca.org.au/enews), insert your email address and tick the box next to 'bring Jesus'. He would also love to hear your thoughts and stories about mission in your context.*

*You can email him at [steen.olsen@lca.org.au](mailto:steen.olsen@lca.org.au) with 'bring Jesus' as the subject line.*

**When we engage with non-Christian family, friends and neighbours, we often run into attitudes that are very different from our own. People may have opinions about issues such as refugees, homosexuality, morality, abortion, euthanasia, evolution, the Bible and racial matters that make us feel uncomfortable. That is not surprising.**

How do we respond?

Often, both extremely conservative and extremely liberal Christians seem to fall into the trap of seeing the church's role as one of changing society and its people. And, in a way, what we do leads to such change—but that comes at the end of a process, not at the beginning.

Being truly Lutheran helps here. Lutherans are firm at the centre and flexible at the edges. We stand firm concerning the central issues of the faith, with the centre being justification and what God has done for us through Jesus. We are flexible on many other things. For example, we can choose to have bishops or not. It is also true that some things in Scripture are clearer than others. Christians may have differing views on social welfare and how to deal with refugee issues. We may sometimes feel that the Bible is clear on a topic, and so we have definite views on the right and wrong of the matter. Yet we remain pastorally flexible and patient when we relate to those with a different point of view. We recognise that our first priority is their relationship with Jesus, not their morality or their views on social issues.

Let's look at the issue of divorce and remarriage. We are clear about what God's will is. Marriage is between one man and one woman for life. That doesn't change. But we also recognise

that in this fallen, broken world things sometimes fall apart and we have to find ways of moving forward. So, unlike some other Christians, Lutherans don't say that if you are divorced you can't remarry until your former spouse has died, nor do we deny communion to those who have remarried. Our LCA statement on divorce and remarriage focuses on reconciliation and healing of relationships—but it also recognises that sometimes people need to be supported through divorce and remarriage.

When new friends have views that differ from our own, we listen to them. We ask questions. We seek to find out why they feel the way they do and what values lie behind their opinions. As our relationship grows, we are also able to share what we think and why we believe the things we do. We share our values with them in a realistic way. So we might say that we understand what God's will is in regard to marriage, but we also know from our own struggles and experiences that things don't always work out the way God intends. And that, after all, is why God sent Jesus to suffer and die for us, so that we might be forgiven and restored. Yes, my marriage may have failed and that is done now; I can't undo it. But I can be forgiven for my part in that failure and I can move on in my life as a child of God, which might include marriage in the future. I live under grace, not under the law. I can do no other because I am far from perfect.

So we can welcome people to worship and the life of our congregation, even though they come with different approaches to things. There will be people we don't always agree with; people who hold views that are not yet fully shaped by God's will. As



 **The church is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints.**

In time the Holy Spirit will show our friends what needs to change in their lives.

Christians, we too find our lives are still being moulded by the will of God. He is working in each of us, making us more like Jesus. We haven't arrived yet. The church is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints. In time the Holy Spirit will show our friends what needs to change in their lives, just as he addresses the issues in our lives.

Of course we need to protect the vulnerable. We work to stop others being hurt and so don't let child sex offenders have contact with children. We want our churches to be safe places for all.

Beyond that, it sometimes gets a little tricky. Do we try to protect our children from being exposed to what we see as non-Christian opinions and lifestyles? Or do we help them to understand and deal with the diversity and corruption in our world as they grow older? We

all know that only the second option is possible. We simply can't protect our children from exposure to all the bad influences that are out there. We need to help them to grow strong in their identity as children of God, so that they learn to evaluate and deal with different points of view.

Our children will be helped to mature as they see our imperfect but real example of Christians relating to others. As they witness us bringing Jesus to people and not getting caught up in all sorts of side issues, they will learn about God and his grace and love for the people he created. We help our children to see Jesus by showing them how his life is being formed in us.

**Steen Olsen serves as the SA/NT Director for Mission and as a member of the LCA Board for Local Mission.**

The Board for Local Mission meets this month, with the revitalising of congregations the main agenda item. How do we encourage good, healthy habits that keep a congregation focused on engaging with its local community?

