



bring Jesus

**Making sense
of mission**

by Steen Olsen

Preface

These articles were first published as **bring Jesus**, a regular column in the Lutheran Church of Australia's magazine **The Lutheran**. Biblical references and discussion questions have been added to make them easier to use for small group discussion or personal reflection.

First read the column and the biblical text. If you are doing this in a group it is good to get someone (or take turns) to read it out loud reasonably slowly. As it is being read underline or highlight anything that strikes you or that you want to talk about in your group. After the column and text have been read allow a couple of minutes for personal reflection and further thought. Then take some time to discuss the column. What surprised you? What made you uncomfortable and why? What are you going to need to think about some more?

It is most important to listen to God, both directly as we study his Word, and as we hear that word through others. The goal is not to find answers to particular questions (if fact, feel free to ignore the questions if they are not helpful) but to hear from God. Therefore bathe everything in prayer. And listen for the Spirit at work. Be prepared to be surprised. Be open to new directions in your life as you continue to grow as a disciple of Jesus.

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Steen also blogs at LCA eNews. To sign up to his newsletter go to 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 with 'bring Jesus' as the subject line.

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Wherever I go I bring Jesus

When I am doing well, but also when I am making a mess of things, I bring Jesus. When I am good and when I am bad. When the Spirit of God is obviously at work through me in bringing the love and mercy of God to others, and when I fall into the depths of sin, I bring Jesus.

I can do no other. It is who I am as a child of God. Wherever I go, whatever I do, I do it with Jesus because he has promised never to leave me. Jesus said, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20) and, 'I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you' (John 14:20). St Paul writes, 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:19f).

I have this treasure in the broken vessel that I am. Yes, it is truly treasure, and one day my old nature will be done away with as I stand with you and all the people of God in his presence. Even now, as I am both old and new, my new nature is my true identity because it will continue forever. While it is true that I continue to sin, the fact that I am a child of God is my primary identity.

This means that the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing Jesus into and through my life is not a reward for my obedience. Jesus doesn't leave us when we sin and fail. He remains with us even in our weaknesses and struggles.

Jesus comes along with me when I do the routine things, not just on special occasions. We are not Christians only when we are worshipping or praying.

We live out our faith in our vocations, that is, in the things God calls us to do in the world. We are parents, children, neighbours, friends, workers, students and more. We also play sport, go to gyms, hang about in cafés and engage in other leisure activities. Everywhere we go and in everything we do, we bring Jesus. That is the nature of things. We can't do anything else. Jesus lives in us and we are in him, so everywhere we go Jesus comes along. It is an ordinary, everyday reality.

That doesn't mean we need to cram Jesus down everyone's throat at every opportunity. In fact, in the first place it is more about who—and whose—we are, than about what we do. It is about our identity. It is part of our story which communicates who we are.

Friends are real with friends about what makes them tick. Personally, I enjoy carpentry and caravanning. My friends know this. I try not to be a bore about it. Sometimes they ask for help with fixing something. That's good. Friends help each other.

My friends also know I am a disciple of Jesus. They may think of it as a hobby of mine. I wouldn't put it that way, but that is okay. Once they get to know me as a friend and discover that I don't appear to be a complete nut-job but that I have problems like everyone else, then we can be friends. Everyone needs friends. At the end of the day bringing Jesus to others is all about relationships. It is not about programs, as good and helpful as they may be. It is about the people of God developing genuine friendships with those who are not Christians.

God has also made me part of a Christian community or congregation, where we bring Jesus to one another.

Bringing Jesus to the world is something that we do together with other Christians. We encourage and support one another, gathering together to worship, grow and pray for those who do not yet know the love of God in Jesus, the Messiah. We do that, not just as we gather in a building that is rather strangely called a church—after all, the church is actually a group of people—but also as we work to form Christian community out in the world.

Every neighbourhood or network needs clusters of friends that form authentic community that is inclusive of others. Our world is hungry for community that is real. And because we bring Jesus everywhere we go, Jesus naturally finds his way into conversations, and his blessing on us becomes a blessing for others.



Read 2 Corinthians 4:6-12. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

⁶For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you. [2 Cor 4:6-12 NRSV]

 **Jesus doesn't leave us when we sin and fail.** He remains with us even in our weaknesses and struggles



1. You **bring Jesus** wherever you go and whatever you do. How does that make you feel? In what ways do you find it encouraging?
2. In your own mind do you mostly think of yourself as a clay jar or as a treasure? As a saint or a sinner? How does God see you?
3. Describe some of your genuine friendships with people who are not-yet-Christians.
4. What do your non-Christian friends think about you being a Christian?
5. How do you **bring Jesus** to them?
6. What are you doing to grow inclusive genuine community in your neighbourhood or networks?

God at work

Although I was baptised as an infant in an 800-year-old Lutheran church in my home town in Denmark, I had no relationship with a congregation until I started confirmation classes in Auckland, New Zealand.

Confirmation instruction with Pastor Ed Koch taught me what Christian faith is all about. I was serious about my faith and wanted to share it with others.

I went to Auckland University and there joined a couple of Christian groups. We did courses on witnessing and learnt what to say; then we got together and talked about how it had gone. The only problem was that I wasn't doing any witnessing.

One day the guilt got too great and I decided that if I was going to be able to live with myself I would have to do something, so I went looking for a suitable 'victim'. Not anyone who looked too intelligent and definitely not someone standing in a group—after all, if you were going to make a fool of yourself, why do so in front of an audience? I found someone who looked suitable, unloaded my witness and then asked for a response, just as we had been taught. To be honest, I think we were both relieved when he said he wasn't interested!

It was all too hard. I don't remember the guy's name but I still pray for him. I came to the conclusion that there had to be a better way. Little did I know, I had already found one.

Jonathan, my best friend at high school, was not a Christian. We hung out, played football together for the First Eleven and did the things friends generally do.

We went to university, and then I moved to Australia and we lost touch. Ten years later I wondered what he was doing, so I tried to track him down, but without success. I tried again a decade later with the same result.

More than 35 years went by. I was preparing to chair the annual general meeting of New Zealand's main ecumenical body, Vision Network. The meeting was about to begin when a guy walked up, looked intently at me and asked, 'Steen?'

Jonathan had come to faith in Jesus about 18 months after we lost touch. He thanked me for the part I had played in his journey to faith. I was confused. I didn't remember doing anything. He reminded me of a couple of things I had said and done that he considered important steps along the way.

I had taken him to our Lutheran youth group meetings and to a Billy Graham Crusade. Back in the sixties Billy was a social phenomenon, and many came to hear him just out of curiosity. Inviting someone along was not as big a deal as it might be today.

Six months after the Holy Spirit brought Jesus into Jonathan's life, his girlfriend (now wife) became a Christian. Today their children and grandchildren are also part of the church. Now, here he was, a leader in his denomination and representing them at this annual meeting of Vision Network.

God had been at work. All I did was the ordinary things that one does with friends. It wasn't difficult; in fact it was quite natural. Maybe if our focus is on what God is doing rather than on what we think we have to do, we will find it

easier to talk about Jesus and why God sent him into the world.

We can't convert anyone. That is the Holy Spirit's job. We are not even in charge of the process. We bring Jesus wherever we go and whatever we do. Sometimes the Holy Spirit uses us as the 'midwife', and we are present when a person comes to faith. That is a great joy and privilege.

Often the Spirit just uses our witness in word and deed as part of the journey that will one day bring someone to Jesus. It doesn't depend on us. We don't need to create artificial situations in which we try to convince someone to believe. We're not running the show, the Holy Spirit is.

All we can do is witness to the truth we know and give an account of the hope we have. We are open about who we are and what we believe, but we don't need to ram it down unwilling throats. Rather, when God gives an opportunity, we speak with family, friends, workmates and those we meet.

We are confident that God is at work in their lives and we are part of that work. God is loving them in word and deed through us. We bring Jesus everywhere we go. It is who we are.



Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-21. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before?

What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. ¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[2 Cor 5:11-21 NRSV]



1. Describe a time in your life when something caused you to think seriously about what it means to be a Christian who brings Jesus to others?
2. When you think about bringing Jesus to your friends how much do you focus on what you have to do and how much on what God is already doing?
3. Discuss the two examples of Steen's witnessing. To what extent can you relate to each of them? What did you learn? How will you apply what you learned in your life?
4. How does "the love of Christ compel you" to **bring Jesus** to others? (2 Cor 5:14)
5. When has bringing Jesus to someone felt most natural for you?



We're not running the show, **the Holy Spirit is**

It doesn't depend on you

'What text in the Bible first comes to mind when you think of evangelism?' It is a question that I like to ask congregations and other groups.

Invariably the answer is the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 19,20), where Jesus says, 'Go! Make disciples! Baptise! Teach! ... and I will always be with you'.

While this is a great word from our Lord that is important for our understanding of mission, I am no longer sure that it is the best place to start when we talk about bringing Jesus to people.

It seems that when most of us hear this text our thoughts immediately go to what we have to do. Mostly we don't feel that we are doing very well and so we feel guilty.

Worse, for many of us Aussie and Kiwi Lutherans, it puts witnessing firmly into the Too Hard basket. We tend to hear the Great Commission as law and it leaves us feeling condemned. The law brings no power for change, so we just feel guilty—and guilt never helped with anything except repentance. In our day it is not even a good motivator. We just feel guilty.

It is not the fault of what Jesus said, but that we have become so used to hearing Matthew 28:19,20 in a particular way. Even our name for this text 'the Great Commission' places the focus squarely on what we do, not on what God does.

At times it has also led to rather over-confident assertions. People have declared that we will fulfil this command 'in our lifetime' or even 'in this decade',

as though that were within our power and ability. Once again, the emphasis is on us and what we do—or, in many cases, don't do.

Moreover, it doesn't sound like something that someone like me would want to do. Or something I would be good at. I had better keep my mouth shut because it is likely I will get it wrong. It is all too scary! Better leave it to the paid professionals.

So, is there a better place to start? What else does Jesus say?

What if we started towards the end of John's gospel? Consider the following words of Jesus to his first disciples:

'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you ... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven' (John 20:21–23).

In Luke 10, when Jesus sends the 70 to visit the places where he himself intended to go, he encourages us to 'pray to the Lord of the harvest to send workers out into his harvest'. This is the Lord's harvest. We are not in charge. The Holy Spirit is the director of the mission. In John 14, Jesus says, 'The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you ...'.

The Father sent his son Jesus into the world; Father and Son sent the Spirit; Father, Son and Holy Spirit send us to join them. We become part of God's mission to his world. We are therefore called to join Jesus in what he is doing, not to go out and work for God.

Somehow that doesn't seem so difficult or scary. We can be at peace, just as

Jesus promised. God is at work in the lives of people and he graciously invites us to be part of what he is doing. That doesn't feel like being pushed in the deep end and told to sink or swim.

The LCA's new Board for Local Mission is working to help grow the missional culture in the LCA. We are not looking to produce another program; we have had lots of those—good ones—but this goes much deeper. It is about growing our sense of who we are as the people of God who participate in God's mission to his world.

It is not so much about inviting people to programs at church or talking with strangers whom we never expect to meet again. It is more about living our lives together with our family, workmates, neighbours and friends. The 70 were sent out to receive hospitality, to enter the turf of others and to share life with them there.

We are called to be friends with those who are not yet Christians. It is a normal, natural thing, not a set of steps we are trying to take them through. And, when the time is right, and the Spirit gives us the opportunity, we share something of God's story and how it impacts our lives. Next month we will dig a bit more deeply into that.



Read 2 Corinthians 4:6-12. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." [John 20:19-23 NRSV]



1. In the past how has hearing the great commission or sermons about witnessing made you feel? Why?
2. Why does Jesus repeat "peace be with you" in this text where he sends us out? (verses 19+21 and also in v26)
3. Most testimonies about witnessing seem to involve talking with strangers. Have you ever done that? How did it go? What did you learn?
4. What non-Christian friends, work mates, neighbours or family members are you currently praying for? How is God giving you opportunities to **bring Jesus** to them?
5. What do you understand by a "missional culture"? What would your congregation be like if it had a much stronger "missional culture"?



We become **part of God's mission** to his world. We are therefore **called to join Jesus in what he is doing**, not to go out and work for God.

Inviting others to believe

Sometimes we are told that you become a Christian when you invite Jesus into your heart or life. But I am not sure that it is helpful to think of conversion in this way. The Bible never speaks of non-Christians inviting Jesus in, making him their Lord, or dedicating themselves to serving Jesus.

Now, don't get me wrong. I am sure that this has been part of a process which has seen many people become Christians. The Spirit of God can use all manner of things to lead us along the road to faith. I just said that it is not particularly helpful—and the accounts we have in the Bible never take this approach.

Yes, I know that Revelation 3:20 says, 'I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you ...'. But if you look carefully, you will see it is addressed to the church at Laodicea; that is, to Christians.

So what does the Bible say? Well, there isn't just one formula or approach, but in general we can see that the Bible speaks of repentance to God the Father, believing in Jesus the Son and receiving the Holy Spirit. The Bible also speaks of being baptised in the name of all three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or sometimes, just being baptised in the name of Jesus.

What do we find in the Acts of the Apostles? People were told God's big story—or parts of it—and then the witnesses looked for the Spirit's work in the listeners. At Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter quotes from Joel before pointing to Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection. The crowds say, 'Brothers, what should

we do?' Peter's answer is instructive: 'Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'.

Stephen begins with Abraham and Moses (Acts 7) and Philip starts with the passage the Ethiopian Eunuch was reading in Isaiah and then they both proclaim the good news about Jesus (Acts 8). The Jews stone Stephen but the Eunuch asks to be baptised, which Philip promptly does.

In the home of the gentile Cornelius (Acts 10), Peter doesn't bother with a long Old Testament introduction. Instead he tells them about Jesus and his death and resurrection, concluding with 'everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name'. The Holy Spirit interrupts proceedings by falling on those who heard the word, and Peter, perhaps a bit surprised, says, 'Can anyone withhold water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'

In Athens (Acts 17) Paul begins with a local altar to an unknown God and says that this is what he is going to tell them about. He uses their own literature as he tells them about the One whom God raised from the dead.

What do we see in all these examples? They speak the word of God by telling something of God's dealings with people and then, where the Holy Spirit works faith, they recognise it. As a result sins are confessed, faith is professed, the Holy Spirit is poured out and people are baptised. No-one is told to pray a particular prayer or to invite Jesus into their heart.

The focus is on God and what he does through the Holy Spirit at work in the word. It is not our decision to believe. We can only recognise the faith that the Holy Spirit creates and celebrate the new life that has begun. I like the way C S Lewis described it as being 'surprised by joy'.

If it were my decision to believe then I would be vulnerable to Satan's attacks in regard to my sincerity. When I recognise that in spite of myself God has planted faith in me, then my confidence rests in God's work, not my own. It is a miracle of God's grace that I believe that Jesus died for me and therefore I am forgiven and will one day rise to live with him forever.


So, how do we witness to others and so bring Jesus to them? When the time is right we tell them something of what God has been doing in our world, including the death and resurrection of Jesus for us. You might then ask if your friend believes this, and if they confess faith, rejoice with them, help them to understand what the Spirit has done in their lives and pray with them, thanking God for his mercy and grace.

If you would find it helpful to use a simple overview of God's big story, then I recommend the Crossways witnessing tool, *The Divine Plan*. I have some available for 50 cents each (or whatever you can afford). You can also order them from <http://www.crossways.org> [go to store/additional resources]. It comes in a little envelope that is easily carried in a pocket or purse.



Read Acts 2:36-42. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

³⁶ [Peter said,] "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." ³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" ³⁸Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." ⁴⁰And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. [Acts 2:36-42 NRSV]

 It's is **a miracle of God's grace** that I believe that Jesus died for me and therefore **I am forgiven and will one day rise** to live with him forever.



1. If you did not grow up in a Christian family tell the others how you came to faith. Let them ask you questions about it.
2. How does seeing coming to faith as a 'decision' we make leave us open to doubt and Satan's attacks?
3. A literal translation of Eph 5:18b is "be continually filled with the Holy Spirit". What does that mean to you? How is the Holy Spirit active in your life?
4. While recognising that the Spirit works through the Word in many ways and does not just use one method; how is the general approach we find in Acts helpful for you?
5. Do you find it helpful to think of becoming a Christian as an encounter with the Holy Trinity involving four things? Namely,
 - i repenting towards God the Father,
 - ii believing in the Lord Jesus Christ,
 - iv receiving the Holy Spirit and
 - iv being baptised in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
6. What do you think CS Lewis meant when he spoke of becoming a Christian as being 'surprised by joy'?

No clones here!

Almost everyone in the Lutheran Church of Australia would agree that as members of a congregation we should seek to bring Jesus to the community round about us, in the neighbourhoods around our church buildings and where we shop, work and play.

We have tended to do this in three somewhat different, often overlapping, ways, all of which are good and may be effective in some circumstances.

The first is the attractional approach. We invite others to come and join us in our congregations as we worship, study and fellowship. We advertise our worship service times and run courses on topics such as parenting teenagers, which may be of interest to the wider community. We invite family and friends to events such as picnics, Shed Men and the Longest Lutheran Lunch.

That is good; but when non-Christians come, in addition to the stumbling block of the cross, they also have to navigate a number of cultural barriers which can make 'church' seem like a foreign land to them. We rejoice when some are able to make that journey, but today many will never come to a Christian event or enter a church building. If we are going to reach them, we need to use other methods.

The second is the engaged approach. As we go about our everyday callings, we seek to engage with non-Christians and befriend them, so that we can invite them to come with us to worship or some other church event. We may set up community playgroups or work through a school or kindergarten, in the hope that one day we might bring our friends into the welcoming arms of our Christian community.

Again, this is good, and we accompany our friends to help them navigate the cultural issues, but we are still expecting them to do the hard 'cross-cultural lifting' as well as to work through the scandal of the cross. For many people in our society today, that is a journey too far. We thank God when people are prepared to come with us, but many will not.

The third approach is incarnational. As we go about our lives, we seek to engage with non-Christians, listening to them, serving them, forming community with them, engaging in witnessing and disciple-making where people live, work and play—and then finally beginning worship services. That often takes us into foreign territory, where we are the ones who feel uncomfortable, unsure how to speak or act. As we go onto their turf, we traverse the cross-cultural divides, just as if we were missionaries in a foreign land—which in effect we are.

When people want to know more about Jesus, we don't seek to bring them back to our home congregation. We let Jesus become flesh and blood in their cultural context, not ours. Maybe we find other interested people and form a discussion group, or maybe we just keep the discussion going informally, while inviting others to join us. The point is that this is not a strategy to eventually get them to join us at 10.00 am on Sunday morning in our local congregation.

Our goal is to form a 'church', in the full and proper sense of the word: with sacramental worship, teaching, service, witness and fellowship. But to form it in a way that minimises unnecessary cultural barriers, so that the gospel of Jesus, crucified and risen for us and our forgiveness, is clearly heard.

We have talked about this as church planting, new starts or forming a fresh expression of church, which is primarily for the benefit of those who are not part of any church.

The point about the incarnational approach is that we are not trying to clone the church from which we have come, nor are we trying to establish a church that better suits our own musical tastes or relational styles. If all goes well, we will probably become a member of two churches as we retain our connection with the congregation that sent and supports us.

It is also important that new congregations are connected with the body of Christ in a concrete way, with pastoral support and oversight. Why should a congregation that may host two different Sunday morning services not also have under its auspices a number of additional Christian communities that meet in other times and places? Ultimately, all congregations need to mature into multi-cultural, diverse communities that welcome all people. This is not about forming more cultural ghettos—we have enough of those! Rather, we need to diversify the cultural bases on which such congregations are built, if we are going to bring Jesus to more people today.

Finally, the cross and Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5) is a necessary biblical stumbling block or scandal that we should not water down to make more palatable for our non-Christian friends. Whatever a church may sound, look and smell like, the important things remain. All congregations should be Christ-centred, faith-filled, Scripture-based, Spirit-led, gospel-focused and grace-bringing. That doesn't change!



Read Acts 18:1-11. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ²There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers.

⁴Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks. ⁵When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. ⁶When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

⁷Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue.

⁸Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized. ⁹One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; ¹⁰for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.” ¹¹He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. [Acts 18:1-11 NRSV]



We are not trying to clone the church from which we have come, no are we trying to establish a church that better suits our own musical tastes and relational styles.



1. There was of course no congregation at Corinth when Paul went there but we can still learn from how he reached out to non-Christians. What features of an attractional, engaged or incarnational approach do you see in Paul's approach?
2. Did Paul insist that Gentiles become Jews like him before they could become Christians? If not, why not?
3. Do you know people who would never come near any church and its programs? How can we **bring Jesus** to them?
4. Why is it important for new faith communities to be firmly connected to the wider church rather than being independent congregations? Why is mutual accountability helpful?
5. The final paragraph of the article lists six things that should be true of all Christian communities. They should be Christ-centred, faith-filled, Scripture-based, Spirit-led, gospel-focused and grace-bringing. Do you want to add or subtract anything from the list? In what areas does your congregation need to grow?

What are we waiting for?

Let's partner with ten LCA congregations to start 30 new missional churches in the next decade! What's more, let's expect that each 'new start' congregation will plant another church within five years. Starting churches that start churches, that is the plan.

It is not often that someone writes in The Lutheran that sitting in a meeting for two days was an awesome experience. But it was. Really! I could also add 'inspiring', 'encouraging', 'exciting' and 'hope-filled'.

It was the second face-to-face meeting of the LCA's Board for Local Mission, held in Adelaide in May. The board's new mission facilitator and church planting mentor Dean Eaton explained his dream and unpacked the proposal. As he did so, many of those around the table were thinking, 'This is what I signed up for!'

The plan is not to follow Lutherans into new suburbs but to reach out to new parts of our society with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We don't want to clone our existing congregations but we do want to ensure that our essential DNA is transferred. We want to establish new congregations that look, smell, sound and feel different, but which are still Christ-centred, Spirit-led, grace-bringing, gospel-focused and faith-filled: Scripture-based expressions of the one holy catholic Christian church of all times and places.

Each new start needs an existing congregation that sends out the church-planting team and supports this new venture with prayer, encouragement, finance and the sort of oversight that is freeing and permission-giving, with

a true Lutheran approach to unity and diversity.

We Lutherans are united by our common confession of faith. That keeps us focused on the gospel of forgiveness and the grace of God. Within those parameters there is incredible freedom in being Lutheran. We want to keep the main thing as the main thing—and then give each local community of Christians the ability to shape their life of worship and discipleship as best suits their context. We Lutherans are firm at the centre and flexible at the edges. We don't insist on a particular way of saying things but we want the gospel to give shape to our worship, to our life and witness.

At the Board for Local Mission meeting, almost a whole day had been set aside to discuss this proposal. We agreed to seek ten congregations who would partner with the board in this venture. We will match these congregations dollar-for-dollar up to \$30,000 for set-up costs. The new starts will be established as 'tent-making' ministries, so there will initially be no salaries to pay. (To express an initial interest in being one of these ten congregations, contact Dean Eaton dean.eaton@sa.lca.org.au)

We will provide training support for our ten partner congregations to help them to prepare to become healthy sending churches. The board will also fund the equipping of evangelists and church planters/mission developers with two new training programs. Once these projects begin we will bring together their leaders for mutual support and learning from each other, as well as providing on-the-ground mentoring

for each location.

All this is financially possible because of the LLL's permanent Mission Personnel Fund, which currently provides the board with yearly income of about a quarter of a million dollars. We thank and salute the LLL!

This means that we are changing our model for starting new congregations. In the past we first called a pastor to work in a new field. Now our pastors will be providing support for teams of lay people being sent as missionaries into our own neighbourhoods and networks. Our previous 'church planting' program could only support a small handful of projects at any one given time. We are still doing that in places like Newcastle in New South Wales, Hillcrest and Springfield in Queensland, and Pakenham in Victoria. As grants for these projects conclude over the next few years, we will redirect our resources into this new direction.

The first day of this Board for Local Mission meeting was drawing to a close. Ideas had been discussed and decisions made. The members of the board, who come from each of the LCA's six districts, began to share their excitement. We are passionate about growing the LCA's mission culture so that it is also focused on our local communities in Australia and New Zealand. We want to see more and more people come to faith in Jesus Christ. This is why we agreed to serve. This is why General Synod created the Board for Local Mission.



Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-9. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? ⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. ⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. [1 Cor 3:1-9 NRSV]



In the past we first called a pastor to work in a new field. **Now our pastors will be providing support for teams of lay people** being send as missionaries into our own neighbourhoods and networks.



1. Who is the real builder of the church? Why is that important? How did the Corinthian congregation get off track?
2. What makes a 'sending church' healthy? What would improve the health of your congregation?
3. What does it mean to be a Lutheran Christian? Are we true to our nature as described in this article? What are our strengths and weaknesses?
4. "We don't want to clone existing congregations but we do want to ensure that our essential DNA is transferred." What does this mean to you?
5. What did you 'sign up' for? What area of Christian ministry and mission would you really like to be involved in? What is God calling you to do?

Evangelism must die!

‘What needs to occur is nothing short of the death of evangelism.’

That got my attention. It’s a quote from the last chapter of a remarkable little book called *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution*¹.

The authors go on to explain, ‘By this we mean that the prevailing opinion about evangelism as one program in the church among many other programs, must die’ (p. 114).

I remember when any congregation worth its salt had an evangelism committee. Mostly the committees talked about what others should do and perhaps they organised a program or two every year. Sometimes they tried to get willing people involved in ‘dialogue evangelism’ or ‘friendship evangelism’. These were good programs in their day, and those who participated learned a lot, but—with some wonderful exceptions—they were never very effective in Australia and New Zealand.

We valued the practices of worship, pastoral care and fellowship as fundamental to being church together. Evangelism hopefully flowed out of those. It was part of what we did as a church. But too often it was left to those who were interested in that sort of thing—a sort of bolt-on extra to the life of a congregation. Nice to have, but not essential. That is the understanding of evangelism which needs to die.

But if we let evangelism die, then what happens in the church after that? The authors write, ‘We pray for the resurrection of an evangelising church culture by the power of God’. What might an evangelising church culture look like?

An evangelising church will be more like a mission outpost than an institution. Constitutions and committees will be seen as a means to an end. Coming together as church will be more about relationships than rules and procedures. An evangelising church sees buildings, equipment and other resources as gifts to be used. If we have lots of assets, we thank God for that blessing. If we don’t, we get on with the task anyway.

Not only do we work with God, we are drawn into the life of the Holy Trinity. God is three persons in community who dwell in each other and are interdependent—yet they remain three distinct persons. We share in that life and we live it together in relationship with one another and those around us as a community. It is who we are—part of our identity, not just something we do.

We are a community who gather around word and sacrament in the power of the Spirit. We worship an evangelising God who sent his son Jesus into the world on a mission. As we share life with God, we are also sent into the world to be part of what Jesus is doing. Through us, Jesus once again becomes flesh and blood in real and concrete ways to the people of our communities. We are the body of Christ. Through us, others are drawn into our fellowship with one another and with God.

An evangelising church has people with different gifts and abilities. All play important roles and each has a common sense of purpose and direction. Perhaps only a few will be evangelists with the gift of regularly walking with others on the journey to faith, but all will be

witnesses who speak of their faith in Jesus to their families, friends, workmates and neighbours. All pray. All serve in various ways. All will see themselves as a part of the mission of Jesus to their community.

In an evangelising church we will constantly remind each other that, through the work of the Spirit, the centre of our life together is Jesus and his mission. Our most vigorous discussions will be about opportunities to join Jesus in his mission to the world, not about how much authority to give our church councils, our struggling budgets or the maintenance of our buildings.

The evangelising church is not perfect. It is not some grand ideal that we cannot possibly live up to. Rather, an evangelising church is full of broken, sinful people who nevertheless, by God’s grace, live the life of God together as a community. An evangelising church is real. It is not perfect. Therefore it has forgiveness and reconciliation at its heart.

Evangelism must die! No longer can evangelism be one program or ministry function alongside others. Rather, in an evangelising church culture, speaking the name of Jesus Christ and telling the story of what God has done for us will become as natural as talking about our families. It is who we are.

¹ *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* ed. Richard H Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, Augsburg Fortress, 2005.



Read Ephesians 4:7, 11-16. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ... ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. [Ephesians 4:7, 11-16 NRSV]



We worship **an evangelising God who sent his son Jesus into the world** on a mission. As we share life with God **we are also sent** into the world to be part of what Jesus is doing



1. Paul describes the church as a body made up of different parts. When each fulfils its function the body is united in its combined work. What does this say about how a congregation goes about bringing Jesus to its community?
2. What, according to Paul, is the role of pastor/teachers, evangelists and other leaders in the body of Christ?
3. Does your congregation in the way it actually functions, treat evangelism as a bolt-on extra to its life – not essential but nice to have?
4. What is your response to the statement that evangelism needs to die so that the evangelising church can be born? What do you understand that to mean? What would it look like?
5. Our God is three persons who are in relationship with each other in the one God. What difference does this make to the life of a local congregation?
6. What would be different if every congregation saw itself as a mission outpost, placed in its community by God's design, to **bring Jesus** to the people around it?

Let Jesus speak!

You are relaxing with friends. Most of them are not Christian. They know you are involved in the Lutheran Church. One of them says, 'I saw on the news that another clergyman has been charged with abusing children.'

What do you say? Do you get defensive and say that it really is only a very small percentage of clergy who engage in this sort of disgusting behaviour? Or maybe you go on the attack and point out that non-Christian teachers and others who work with children also offend in this way? Maybe you don't say anything or just offer a brief comment like, 'Yes, that's terrible.'

How about another approach? You say: 'When I see such reports I am reminded of something Jesus said. One time people were bringing children to Jesus to be blessed and his followers tried to stop them. Jesus was indignant and said, "Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them." Another time he warned, "It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea, than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble"' (Mark 10:14; Luke 17:2).

Then you do a difficult thing. You don't say anything else. You resist the temptation to add a comment or to explain. You let your friends grapple with the actual words of Jesus. Let them respond to what Jesus says.

Or perhaps one of your mates tries to bait you: 'There's going to be a Sexpo at the Showgrounds next weekend. Are you going?' Maybe you respond: 'Very funny. Actually Jesus sometimes said some quite surprising things. For example there was this time when they

brought a woman to him who had been caught committing adultery. (I always wondered where the bloke was, but that is another story.) Anyway, they told Jesus that the law demanded that she be stoned to death. Jesus replied, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." We are told that starting with the eldest, one after another they all left, until Jesus was alone with the woman. Jesus looked at her and asked, "Who condemns you?" She said, "No-one, Sir". Then Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more" (John 8:1-11).

Again, you let the words of Jesus stand and do not try to improve on them. Don't say more than you need to. Let people wrestle with Jesus and what he said. Don't answer questions that they haven't yet asked. Respect people and let them engage in further conversation when they are ready.

Artificial approaches to talking about our faith turn people off. In the past we often started with a question like, 'Will you go to heaven when you die?' and then tried to get from there to talking about Jesus. We started from the outside and then tried to work in, until we could bring the message of Jesus. Why not start at the heart and centre with Jesus and what he said and did, and then work outwards and see where that leads?

Evangelism is best understood as any process that allows Jesus to bear witness to himself in his own words. The Spirit works through the Word. In essence, we don't need to defend Jesus with our arguments; we just need to turn him loose.

Rather than put forward arguments and try to prove the Christian message, we tell stories. All the world loves a story. Stories engage us and draw us in.

In times past we have developed rational arguments seeking to prove the existence of God; issues like creation versus evolution or philosophical arguments that the Bible is inerrant. Most of today's non-Christians reject all claims to absolute truth. They simply say, 'Not convinced!' The other tack we have used is the subjective testimony approach, which is all about our own experience and what it means to us. Many today will simply say, 'That's nice for you! You have your experience; I have mine. When we direct attention to Jesus and let him speak, we reveal the truth about God from within the Christian story. The story is its own authority. It authenticates itself. It is not proved by arguments about the reliability of the Bible. The story of Jesus stands or falls on its own merits. It is the word of God, through which the Spirit works to bring faith 'where and when he pleases in those who hear the gospel'. You can be confident about that.

(This column is based on *The Word's Out: Speaking the Gospel Today* by David Male and Paul Weston. brf:Abingdon UK, 2013)



Read Isaiah 55:8-11. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. [Isaiah 55:8-11 NRSV]



We don't need to defend Jesus with our arguments; we just need to turn him loose



1. "Evangelism is best understood as any process that allows Jesus to bear witness to himself in his own words." What benefits do you see in letting Jesus speak for himself? What does the quote from Isaiah say about this?
2. Have you ever done an evangelism course or been part of an evangelism team? What was involved? What difference has it made to your life as a disciple of Jesus?
3. Do you remember a time when you used a rational argument to try to prove something about God to a sceptic? Or have you shared a testimony about your experience of God's grace? How did it go? What are the strengths and weakness of each approach?
4. The article suggests that we sometimes try to say too much. We want to explain more fully and so answer questions that the person isn't asking yet. When did Jesus leave a bit of mystery in what he said to someone and so encouraged them to talk some more?
5. How would you let Jesus speak through you in a natural conversational sort of way? Maybe you can practice with a friend.
6. What are other comments that people sometimes make about Christians and the Christian faith? What has Jesus said that would speak to your examples?

A welcome peace

Many years ago I was a Lutheran Chaplain in a large city hospital. We saw many patients who had come to Australia after the Second World War with a Lutheran background but no connection with a congregation. That's how I met Anja. She was 52 years of age, married with no children, baptised as an infant but not confirmed, had no real knowledge of the story of Jesus and with no active involvement with the Church.

Anja was admitted with terminal cancer. Over the weeks I visited her we became quite good friends, but she always refused my offer to pray for her and resisted any attempt on my part to bring God, the Bible or spiritual matters into our conversations. I guess some would have said I was wasting my time.

One day she was crying when I walked into her room. I asked her what was the matter and she said that a social worker had come to see her 'to tell her how to die'. I responded that I was there to talk about how to live. Pretty clever I thought. At least nine and a half out of ten! Guess how far I got with that? Absolutely nowhere.

I kept on visiting and we kept talking about many things. I also spent time with her husband Wolfgang.

Then one night the phone rang at 4.00am. A nurse from the hospital apologised and asked if she had wakened me. (When that happened I always wished that I would wake up fast enough to be able to say, "No, I have been sitting up waiting for your call." That never happened.) The nurse went on to say that Anja had been crying 'I want to die; I want to die' all night and they didn't

know what to do with her. I agreed to come in to see her.

The nurse met me when I arrived and we walked into Anja's room together. As soon as she saw me Anja asked, 'Will God accept me when I die.' I responded that we can only come to God in repentance and faith. Anja closed her eyes, folded her hands and began repenting out loud. The nurse made a very quick exit from the room.

When Anja was finished I turned in my Bible to the end John's Gospel where it says, 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven' and I assured her she was forgiven. I then simply explained that faith is not just believing that God exists but trusting his promise that when Jesus died on the cross he took our sin upon himself and died for us, so that we are forgiven and even though we die we will live with him forever. I asked if she believed this. She said yes.

I prayed for her and we talked a bit more. She was on a substantial dose of pethidine and by now she drifted in and out of consciousness and after an hour or so I went home.

I was back in the hospital around 9.00am and ran into Wolf in a corridor. He was radiant. 'Have you seen Anja this morning,' he asked, 'She is so peaceful.' Wolf had only come to the hospital after the night staff had left and he knew nothing of the dramas of the night before. We sat and chatted, and I explained what had happened.

The next night the phone rang at 1.00am. I had told her to get the staff to ring me if she needed me. She didn't really; she just felt like chatting a bit, which I guess is fair enough when you are into your last

couple of days on the planet. That day I left instructions for the night staff that if she really did need me to ring by all means, but that I also had a day job. I visited her each day. The following night the phone didn't ring. The night after that the phone rang again and Anja had been called home.

What happened? A clever pastor with just the right words at the right time? Not at all. I had tried that. It didn't work. Rather, it was the Holy Spirit's time. We had become friends and when she was ready I very simply spoke the Gospel of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit worked faith and peace in her.

The Holy Spirit is the director of mission and the midwife. Our task is to build the relationships and to be available. We don't have to force the issue. I think almost every Christian I know could have said and done what I did. It was simple.

*names changed



Read Ephesians 2:1-10. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ —by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. [Eph 2:1-10 NRSV]



1. What did you learn from the story of Anja? In what ways did it encourage you?
2. Paul writes in this passage that God made us alive with Christ. What does Paul say about how this happens?
3. Why was Anja prepared to talk with Steen when she reached her lowest point? Why not earlier?
4. We can't convert anyone. That is the Spirit's work through the Word. How did the Spirit use the 'resources' at his command to **bring Jesus** to Anja?
5. Are you praying for a friend or a relative who is a non-Christian? (Should you be? Who?) If you are part of a small group, will you agree to also pray for one another's friends?
6. Maybe you can also pray in your group now. Remember to update each other when you next meet.



Have you seen Anja this morning?

She is so peaceful

We want to grow!

Is your congregation on autopilot?

Maybe it is time to pause and reflect on why your congregation does what it does. The fundamentals of what we do don't change. It is still all about God giving us his love and grace through his Son Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work through the word, the water, the bread and the wine. But how effectively that happens in, and through, your congregation might need some work.

Over the last three years the Church of England has conducted a rigorous research project on the effectiveness of their mission in the United Kingdom. The report, *From Anecdote to Evidence*, was released earlier this year.

When it comes to questions of faith, Australia and New Zealand are more like the United Kingdom than they are like the United States. Our cultures and contexts have more in common. Reflecting on these findings from a mainline denomination in the UK has the potential to help us in our congregational and local mission initiatives.

While recognising that there are different kinds of growth, including 'growth in holiness, transformation and commitment', this report is about increasing the number of disciples of Jesus Christ in Church of England congregations and other faith-communities. They ask how effective their various strategies and approaches have been.

'Church growth' is a phrase that has had some bad press over the years—and there are reasons for that—but let's not forget that when we are talking about numerical growth in the church, we are talking about people coming to

faith in Jesus. Every page of this report quotes St Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:6:

'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow'. This is not about techniques for church growth, but about bringing Jesus to our families, friends and workmates.

We need to be intentional in prioritising that sort of growth. And when people join us, we need to be intentional about nurturing them as new disciples of Jesus. In fact, intentional is a word that is used again and again in this report—in particular, in being intentional about bringing Jesus to those around us who do not know him.

The research found that 'there is no single recipe for growth; there are no simple solutions to decline. The road to growth depends on the context, and what works in one place may not work in another. What seems crucial is that congregations are constantly engaged in reflection; churches cannot soar on autopilot. Growth is a product of good leadership (lay and ordained) working with a willing set of churchgoers in a favourable environment.'

In another place they say that 'growth is not mechanical but results from deep reflection and commitment, a desire to experiment and a desire for renewal'. Knowing why you do what you do is more important than what style of worship you adopt. 'Vitality comes with reflection and choice; the particular style is less important than the fact that it has been considered and embraced rather than adopted by default.'

Here is another discovery: 'A church where volunteers are involved in leadership, and where roles are rotated

regularly, is likely to be growing—especially where younger members and new members are included in lay leadership and service.'

So how is it going in the UK? Cathedrals and large churches are growing overall. As part of this study the researchers also investigated 477 new faith communities (often called fresh expressions of church or 'fxC') that had been established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church. To be included, an fxC needs to have come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples, and to have the potential to become a mature expression of church, shaped by the gospel, the enduring marks of the church and its cultural context.

The total attendance of these fxCs is now the equivalent of one medium-sized Church of England diocese, or 21,000 people; with an average attendance of 44. Of these people, just under half had not attended church before and around another third were lapsed Christians who had attended church sometime in the past. Only about a quarter were active Christians when they joined an fxC. More than half of these communities are led by lay people, most of whom have not had any formal training for this role.


That is impressive, especially since this is happening in the post-Christian, post-modern West. Why not also in Australia and New Zealand? Our LCA Board for Local Mission's church planting program is learning from their experience.

What is God calling you to do? Read from *Anecdote to Evidence* in full at churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report



Read Luke 10:1-12. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ²He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' ¹⁰But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' ¹²I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town. [Luke 10:1-12 NRSV]

 **Growth is not mechanical but results from deep reflection and commitment,**
a desire to experiment and a desire for renewal



1. How ripe for harvest are the fields where you live, work, shop and play?
2. Pray, then go (v2). Why? What is the role and importance of prayer?
3. Today we mostly invite non-Christians to join us on our turf. We like to offer hospitality. Why does Jesus send the disciples out to receive hospitality?
4. Why does Jesus make the disciples dependent on those to whom they witness? How does that impact on the relationships that are formed?
5. As you read the article did it prompt any thoughts about your congregation? What would you like to see your congregation do to **bring Jesus** to others?
6. Do any of the findings of the UK report surprise you? Which and why?

Christmas at the margins

I was just seven years old. It was my first day at Hillsborough Primary School in Auckland, New Zealand. I was a migrant kid who didn't speak a word of English. They didn't know what to do with me. There were blackboards all-round the wall, so they gave me some chalk and let me draw.

Then we got to lunchtime. All the other kids had their clapped-together white bread sandwiches that were customary at the time. Every sandwich was the same with whatever spread Mum was using on that day. I had open sandwiches on heavy, dark ryebread. Each one had something different on it. They felt sorry for me. I felt sorry for them.

I was a stranger in a strange land. I felt very much marginalised; living at the edges of the established culture of my school; neither understanding nor understood. I was well and truly out of my comfort zone. It was as though I was on the doorstep between two very different rooms. One I understood. The other was a foreign, alien place. The people were nice enough, but it was threatening never-the-less. Two worlds were rubbing up against each other and I was caught in the middle.

Eventually I discovered that living on the margins brought growth and understanding. I learned to speak kiwi. I asked different questions because I saw things a little differently. I discovered that people could be happy living differently to the way my family lived. I still thought their lunches were a little sad.

Jesus was conceived in an unmarried young girl, in an obscure country, at the edge of civilisation. Heaven and earth meet. The Son of God had become a

human being. The angel choir flew in for a short concert. Strangely, it seems they only performed at another margin, to shepherds who were just recovering from an announcement by one of their angelic colleagues. The shepherds were out in a field watching their flocks at night. They were on the edge of their society, considered untrustworthy and probably criminal in their behaviour.

The first gifts for the newborn came from a group of foreigners, magi, who had followed his star from the east. The events on earth changed the course of the stars. Another margin. Another cultural clash. What mystical arts did these magi practice? That makes me a little uncomfortable, even now.

The Son of God was soon persecuted and fleeing 1st century state terrorism. With his parents he became a refugee in Egypt. When they returned they settled in a country town, well away from the centres of commerce, government and religion. Jesus spent much of his public ministry living on the margins and crossing boundaries. Samaritans and Gentiles. The Gerasene demoniac and the Syrophenician woman. Tax collectors and prostitutes. Even his disciples were hardly the sort of people that a self-respecting rabbi would welcome. Jesus lived and worked on the margins.

For us, these edgy places bring learning and growth. They also tend to make us feel a bit uncomfortable. When we are active on the margins we are never completely at home. But we find Jesus there. As we go we grow. We don't grow much when we sit in our church buildings with our Christian friends. We really begin

to grow when we take our faith on the road, into our neighbourhoods, schools, homes, workplaces, shopping centres, parks, sports venues and other public and private spaces.

Mission happens at the margins where two worlds bump into each other. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus when we meet people on their turf. We bring Jesus to the places where their world intersects with ours. We need to let go of our fear and go joyfully to such marginal places, confident that the Spirit is still at work through the Word and therefore through us.

We begin to do that when we listen, love, and build relationships with those who do not yet know Jesus. As we have opportunity, we speak of the one who humbled himself and was born in Bethlehem. Then the Spirit does his work and love comes to life. That is what Christmas is all about. When we bring Jesus we share the best Christmas present of all.



Read Luke 2:8-15. Once again, do it out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." [Luke 2:8-15 NRSV]



1. When you read the Christmas story after reading the column opposite, did you notice anything new about the circumstances around the birth of Jesus?
2. Have you recently been anywhere where you felt quite out of place and uncomfortable?
3. Have you ever found yourself "on the doorstep between two very different rooms"? Describe the experience.
4. Have you found such marginal experiences to be times of growth and greater understanding? Tell your group about it.
5. What ways are open to you to "take your faith on the road"?
6. How might you work with others to **bring Jesus** to those on the margins of our society?



We follow in the footsteps of Jesus when
we meet people on their turf

I'm making all things new!

Back in our New Zealand days, my then vice-president gave my wife Ruth a fridge magnet that says, 'Living with a Dane builds character'. That just about sums it up—except that it doesn't just apply to those who, like me, were born in Denmark. All of us can be hard to live and work with. We are capable of bringing hurt and pain into the lives of those we love the most.

In the second-last chapter of the Bible, God the Father, seated on his throne in heaven, says, 'See, I am making all things new' (Revelation 21:5). It is my favourite text. I hope that someday, someone might preach it at my funeral. I am so glad that our heavenly Father did not say, 'See, I am making all new things'. There is a world of difference between making things new and making new things. Making new things would mean that there was no room for this old thing, namely me. God would destroy me and start again, creating someone new.

God promises to make me new in spite of all my faults and problems. Our heavenly Father is a specialist at new beginnings. He has redeemed us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore he renews us, to make us like Jesus. That renewal will be complete only in heaven, so (if you are preaching at my funeral) feel free to make the point that all the bad things about Steen, all the things that made him hard to live and work with, are now gone. That should lead to considerable thanksgiving to God, which is appropriate at a Christian's funeral.

But this isn't just about heaven. Our new life begins with our baptism. The Spirit is

at work now. That doesn't mean that we will sin less and less until we become almost perfect. That is an underestimation of the seriousness of our problem. If anything, as we mature we become more aware of the depth of our depravity. As a young Christians, we may view sin primarily as doing things like drinking too much, not telling the whole truth or disliking someone. Then, as we grow, we come to understand the depth of our sinful pride and selfishness. Even our best actions are spoilt by our mixed motives.

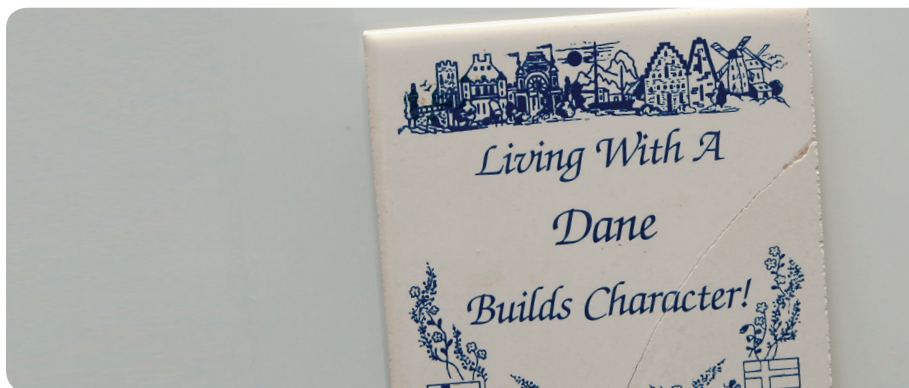
Sin's grip will continue to hold us while we remain in this world. We are not part of some human improvement crusade to make us flawless and the world a better place. Rather, it is in the midst of my weakness and failure that God makes me new by the power of the Spirit at work in the word, through the water that was poured on me so long ago and with the bread and the wine.

Bringing Jesus to others flows out of who we are. Not a program. Not a technique. That means that renewal is at the heart of mission. We don't bring Jesus to others because it is our duty. As we pray, 'Create a new spirit within me, Lord', the love of God for others grows within us. We will want to find ways of sharing the best thing we know. The Spirit's renewing work is giving us a new heart and mind, and nudging us to share the good news about Jesus with others.

A renewed congregation is a congregation of renewed people. Changing structures and programs is a waste of time if the life of each of us, individually, is not also being renewed. That means going back

to basics. We read and study the word. We pray, both together and alone. We encourage one another in these things. We gather to worship and are strengthened in faith and love. God is at work. He is making all things new!

So do we focus on our renewal so that one day in the future we might be ready to bring Jesus to others? Not at all. That will never work. Quite simply, most of us will never feel ready. No, it is as we bring Jesus to our family, friends and workmates that we are renewed. As we go, we grow.



You might like to read Revelation 21:1-5. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."
[Rev 21:1-5 NRSV]



A renewed congregation is a congregation of renewed people.

Changing structures and programs is a waste of time if the life of each of us, individually, is not also being renewed.



1. What does our heavenly Father's statement "I am making all things new" mean to you personally?
2. Do you feel that you sin less as you grow more mature as a Christian?
3. "A renewed congregation is a congregation of renewed people." Why? What implications does this have for your congregation?
4. Do you have a text you would like preached at your funeral? If so share it with your group and tell them why.
5. What does "as we go, we grow" mean to you? Have you been waiting to 'grow' some more before you 'go'?

Prayer: As individual as you are

If we were attending a leaders' retreat and it was announced that instead of the planned program we were to be silent for the whole weekend, my wife Ruth and I would respond differently.

Ruth would say, 'Great! Let's get started.' I, on the other hand, would be driven to prayer: 'Lord, send me a headache or a dodgy stomach or something ... Help! Get me out of here!' A whole weekend without being able to speak is not my idea of heaven.

There is no doubt about it. We should all pray. We all need a real devotional life. St Paul exhorts us, 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you' (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). We should pray regularly, indeed 'without ceasing'.

However, we do not all pray the same way. Each of us finds some styles of prayer easier to practise than others. That's why asking everyone to sign up to a congregation's preferred devotional resource rarely works.

The following four types of prayer are named after four leaders in the ancient church. As you read them, pick the one that seems most natural for you and then find devotional aids that help you to pray in that way. If you ask others to do the same, you will grow in your appreciation of the diversity in the body of Christ.

AUGUSTINIAN PRAYER

Saint Augustine has had a powerful influence on the church in the west. Those who pray in this way make strong use of intuition and feeling. They see

the Bible as a personal letter from God and ask, 'What do these words mean to me in my present situation?' They seek the hidden meanings in events and relationships. They are creative and imaginative and have a natural hunger and thirst for spirituality. They are usually best cared for spiritually; but they also need this special care, because without spiritual growth and development they wither, fade and die, just like a plant without water. They are not averse to risk and experimentation.

THOMISTIC PRAYER

Saint Thomas Aquinas is best known for his scholarly approach to prayer, characterised by an orderly progression of thought from causes to their effects. Those who pray in this way seek to attain the whole truth about the subject chosen for consideration. They take a theme and 'walk around it', studying it from every angle. It is similar to the approach of a detective trying to solve a mystery. They are intuitive and may see connections not obvious to all. They bring an investigative, analytical approach to Scripture. They want to connect with the wisdom of God. To others this may seem more like study and reflection than prayer.

IGNATIAN PRAYER

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, was a great teacher of prayer. He taught his followers to strive to participate in the actual event by projecting themselves back into the historical situation. Discipline, order and the historical perspective are highly valued. Those who pray in this way see the journey of faith as a spiral which again and again comes back to the

same point, but at a deeper level. They often find following the liturgical year to be helpful; practices such as the stations of the cross assist them to walk with Jesus through his passion. They can become gloomy if they do not also focus on resurrection themes.

FRANCISCAN PRAYER

Saint Francis of Assisi practised an attitude of openness to the leading of the Spirit. He wanted all his actions to be marked by a spontaneous, informal praise and a loving dialogue with God. Prayer is not seen as a routine; set forms and the lectionary may not be much help. Those who pray in this way prefer free-flowing informal prayers and worship that is spontaneous and action-filled, and involving art, movement and the senses. They pray best when doing something with their hands: shaping clay, painting a mandala, making a church banner and so on. They see God in creation and find it easy to meditate on a flower, a tree, a waterfall or other natural things.

As we mature, it is good to explore ways of praying that don't come so easily to us. We learn more about God and ourselves, and we grow in our appreciation of others.

God has made us to be different. Insisting on one approach to prayer will not help all of us to relate to him. As we learn from one another, our walk with God is deepened and enriched. We need each other!

(This column is based on the books *Prayer and temperament* by Chester P Michael and Marie Christian Norrissey and *Personality type and religious leadership* by Roy M Oswald and Otto Kroeger.)



You might like to read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-25. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil. ²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. ²⁵Beloved, pray for us.
[1 Thess 5:16-25 NRSV]



1. According to the text how might we avoid 'quenching the Spirit' (v19)?
2. Ask each member of your group which of the four types of prayer seems most natural to them personally. What do you learn from those with a different preference?
3. What other types of prayer do you think you should be exploring at this point in your journey through life?
4. Why is it not helpful when Christians expect everyone else to pray the way they do?
5. How can you deepen your devotional life?

 **We do not all pray the same way** and each of us finds some styles of prayer easier to practise than others

Gospel glimmers in unlikely places

Anzac Day is perhaps the most 'holy' day of the year in modern secular Australia.

We get up early to remember. We make pilgrimages—some even to the distant shores of Gallipoli. We hear speeches about sacrifice. 'No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:13) is ripped out of context to become a secular truth, lauding the value of mateship and the ultimate sacrifice. Prayers are prayed, some of which have an explicit Christian content. If we are lucky, we might hear a sermon that links this sacrifice to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Two events touched Australia deeply at the end of last year. The first was the tragic and untimely death of cricketer Phil Hughes in late November. We grieved together. Many spoke of prayer, especially while Hughes lay in a coma in hospital. In the weeks that followed, players reaching milestones raised their bats heavenwards, in a salute to their fallen colleague who was now 'up there'. The atheists fell silent; no letters to the editor declared that all this was absurd.

Then in mid-December a mad lone terrorist took hostages in central Sydney, in the service of his god Allah, or so he claimed. Two of his victims died when police ended the siege. Again, we grieved. Worse things happen most weeks in other parts of the world, but this was close to home. Many claimed to be praying for the hostages and then for those who grieved over the loss of loved ones. Again, the militant atheists were silent. Again people pulled together, and for a while the nation seemed united.

None of this should be sneered at.

I also grieved. I am also amazed at those who willingly served overseas one hundred years ago and since, often in conditions too horrible for me to contemplate. But we should also ask, 'What does this mean?' What is this spiritual longing that finds expression on Anzac Day and at times of national tragedy? Why do so many otherwise secular people seem to need the language of faith to express how they feel?

For some, perhaps, this is the lingering trace of a Christian heritage. Like a distant memory that comes to mind when something triggers it. For others it is simply a religiosity that has no content. A vague hope that the dead 'have gone to a better place', that maybe there is some sort of god out there—somewhere. It is something they consider in times of crisis or deep significance, but which otherwise has no importance in their everyday lives.

It is important that we distinguish between a Christless religiosity and Christian faith. They are not the same. All religions are not same either—in spite of what we hear so often today. The fact that someone believes something and is a generally decent human being does not mean that they have a ticket to heaven.

How do we bring Jesus to Anzac Day? First, I think we need to acknowledge those who are already doing so, and in fact have always done so. Our Australian defence forces have a deep Christian tradition that finds expression in what our chaplains and others do every day of the year. We thank God for the witness of Christian people in the military.

But beyond that there is another question: How do we bring Jesus to the general,

non-specific religiosity that finds expression from time to time in our culture? That question brings us very close to the first-century world of Jesus and the apostles.

St Paul found himself in just this situation when he visited Athens. In Acts 17 we read that Paul was deeply distressed by the idolatry of the Athenians. He noticed that there was an altar dedicated 'To an unknown god'. Taking this general religiosity as his starting point, he told them that he was going to make known to them the true God whom they were worshipping in an anonymous sort of way. He tapped into their natural desire to believe in something, in order to bring Jesus to them.

We don't have the space here to unpack in any detail how Paul did this. I just want to make the point that Paul did not condemn them for their Christless worship, but instead used their religiosity to invite them to come to know the one whom God sent, who suffered and died and then rose from the dead.


Too often today Christians are known for their judgementalism, not their love, and for the hardness of their hearts, not their compassion. In Acts 17 Paul does speak of a judgement day and clearly says that people will be held to account, but he does so in a way that offers hope and he is respectful of the beliefs of his audience. He leaves the way open for further conversation. He doesn't immediately say all that there is to be said, but finishes with the hint of the resurrection.

Let's bring Jesus to our world as the one who makes sense of our desire to pray and our wish that there might be a God and a better place for those who die.



You might like to read Acts 17:22-34. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' ²⁹Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." ³²When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³At that point Paul left them. ³⁴But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. [Acts 17:22-34 NRSV]

 **Paul did not condemn them for their Christless worship** but instead used their religiosity to invite them to come to know the one whom God sent, who suffered and died and then rose from the dead.



1. How would you describe in your own words the spiritual longing that finds expression on ANZAC Day and times of national tragedy?
2. How would you explain the difference between religiosity and faith?
3. Rather than confront them about their blatant idolatry, Paul tells the people of Athens that he knows this God they were afraid of overlooking. How does Paul at the Areopagus help you when speaking with non-Christians today?
4. Why doesn't Paul explain the resurrection immediately (v32-34)?
5. What distresses you spiritually about the area in which you live? What might God be calling you to do about it?

Making room for more people

We had seventeen members. It was a congregation in my first parish. One lovely older guy had bought the land and built the church, largely with his own hands. He no longer held any official position in the congregation.

All decisions were made by quick meetings after the service. One day we made a small decision. Months later, it had not been implemented. I discovered that our senior member (who had not been at the meeting) disagreed with the decision. There was no subsequent meeting to overturn the decision. It just didn't happen. We all got on well, but nothing in my seminary training had prepared me for this way of doing church.

If you have belonged to a number of different-sized congregations over the years, probably you will have noticed that they function differently. Some are small 'family-size' congregations, most often with fewer than 35 people at worship. They tend to be like a cat: tough, independent, aloof and self-assured. You never own a cat and you can't herd a mob of cats. Often such congregations have a parent figure, who is in charge—as I discovered in my first parish. My role was to be the chaplain, who took care of spiritual needs. I wasn't their leader.

We also have large 'corporate-size' congregations, with 250 or more people at worship each week. They are more like a city: complex and staff-driven, with a lead pastor who focuses on vision and quality worship. The board makes most decisions. Only calling a pastor, major building issues and setting the budget are done by the congregation.

In between we have the 'pastoral-size' congregation, where the focus is on

the pastor. They usually have between 25 and 140 people at worship. The congregation sees itself as one family, though it contains a number of different groups. They tend to be like a domestic dog: loyal, personal, cohesive and focused on its 'owner', who is the pastor. The pastor is the centre of things, is present at most events and regularly visits the homes of members. The pastor needs to be a 'people person'. If he isn't, there is often trouble. This is what we train pastors for, and so our congregations tend not to grow any larger than what one pastor can care for. People join by getting to know the pastor, often through a pastor's class (which, when you think about it, is a really strange name for a new members course).

The remaining congregations are 'lay-ministry-size', typically with 100 to 300 people at worship (you will notice that the numbers for each group overlap). These congregations are more like a house, where things happen in many different rooms. Lay volunteers are very active in ministry and mission. The pastor now spends more time in training and mentoring other leaders and less time in direct ministry to individuals. A house needs to be managed, and each ministry group needs a fair amount of autonomy, with leaders making significant decisions. Houses are more like cities than like cats or dogs.

So, if a congregation is to grow from 150 to 350 people at worship, it needs to do more than find another 200 people to fill the pews. It needs to change the way it operates and its expectations of its pastor, or it will never grow. This is the most difficult size transition of all. It is difficult because people still want an in-depth

relationship with their pastor. Many feel the church doesn't care for them if the pastor doesn't visit them.

So, if we are going to add new people, we need to learn to receive ministry from each other. Members who are dependent resist this change, as do pastors who are controlling or co-dependent (who need to be needed).

For pastors this transition can feel like playing in the grand final every week. Pastors often have expectations of their role based on the pastoral-size church. Their congregation is now too large to have the intimacy of a family or pastoral church, and too small to meet all the expectations of a lay ministry church. The pastor needs to move from individual pastoral relationships to coaching and mentoring a team of pastoral carers, while still providing at least some hands-on care to those facing the most serious issues. Unless there is a high-trust culture, the pastor often slides towards burnout because of unrealistic demands on his time, often by the pastor himself.


This is not to say that all congregations need to be big. We need healthy congregations of every size. But healthy congregations see new people coming to faith in Jesus Christ, and so in most places they tend to grow. As they do, they need to change the way they do some things. Other things of course remain the same. All congregations should be Christ-centred, faith-filled, Scripture-based, Spirit-led, gospel-focused and grace-bringing.

(Lyle Schaller popularised this way of looking at congregations with his seven categories named after animals and places, but it is the slightly earlier work of Arlin J Rothauge that has prevailed. Rothauge has just four categories.)



You might like to read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. ⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? to all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. [1 Cor 12:12-31 NRSV]

 If a congregation is to grow from 150 to 350 people at worship, **it needs to do more than find another 200 people** to fill the pews. It needs to change the way it operates and its expectations of its pastor, **or it will never grow.**



1. Think of diverse sized congregations you know well. How are they different in regard to the role of the pastor and other things?
2. Does your congregation fit one of these categories or is there some overlap?
3. How does your congregation make decisions? Is there any tension around this? Why?
4. Depending on the size of your congregation, how do you help your pastor reduce stress?
5. How does your congregation encourage its members to use their spiritual gifts for the common good? Has this caused any difficulties?
6. How could your congregation prepare for growth?

Welcoming the stranger

For three months we worshipped at a different church each Sunday. Ruth and I had just moved back to Adelaide so I could begin work as the SA/NT Director for Mission. When we arrived for a service I would go and stand by myself in a corner and wait to see what happened. In those days, if I could manage to avoid the pastor, more often than not, no-one else recognised me.

Being a stranger is, well, strange. I am not going to reveal names, but in some places I managed to stand by myself until after the service started. I then found my own bulletin and joined Ruth in a pew. It seemed like I was invisible. People looked right through me. They were busy greeting their family and friends. Others obviously had important tasks to complete. It was clear that they thought their tasks were much more important than talking with a stranger. Sometimes the person who came up to talk with me was another stranger.

In other places I hadn't even managed to put on my 'vaguely disinterested' face before someone was there introducing themselves and asking where I was from. Even then, I didn't make it easy for them. My face was less recognisable than my name, so I didn't part with my name unless I was specifically asked. If someone just wanted to know what I did, I mumbled something about having been a grazier—you know, I ran sheep. Oh, and a few goats.

The writer to the Hebrews says, 'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it' (13:1,2). Obviously, as my story shows, I am no angel. But this is still about hospitality to strangers.

It was a deliberate attempt to experience being a stranger in our congregations. You should try it sometime. Like me, you might find that it makes you more conscious of others, particularly in places where you feel at home.

How do we form a Christian community that is open to the world and inviting to others?

A good place to begin is by asking how we think of our congregation. Often the answer is, 'We are one big happy family'. St Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, does refer to the Christian church in the world as 'God's family' and the 'family of faith' (Galatians 1:2 and 6:10). Scripture declares we are sisters and brothers with the same heavenly Father. In spite of this, I don't think 'our church family' is a good way to describe a local congregation.

Families can be awkward beasts. They are all about intimacy and privacy. Joining a family is difficult. Even if we join by marriage, it takes a long time to really become an insider. Families have their own peculiarities and processes. There are often 'in-jokes'. If you are at someone else's family gathering it is easy to feel like an outsider. A family is about belonging. But it usually takes a long time before you belong.

What would happen if, instead of thinking of our congregation as 'one big happy family', we thought of it as 'a company of strangers'?

We are part of a congregation because we have something in common with others who are there. That 'something' is not that we particularly like each other—though I guess it is nice if we do. It is not that we agree about politics or about which team to support. Sometimes our

idiosyncrasies annoy others (just ask me about yours!). It is not that we all have the same levels of responsibility at work or that we move in the same social circles. In church the labourer meets the company director as an equal. In many cases we would not choose to be friends, let alone family members, with those with whom we worship.

We are a company of strangers who have all been baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is what we have in common. That is what unites us. A healthy congregation is a company of strangers who depend on God's hospitality. That gives us a stronger bond than the ties of family or friendship. We are one for all eternity.

Belonging is certainly important for a congregation. But a congregation also needs to be joinable—it needs to be open to strangers. That is why even healthy families make lousy congregations. Most families have clear boundaries. Unless we are related, I am not part of your family.

A congregation, on the other hand, needs to be fuzzy-edged. People come and go. Sometimes it is not entirely clear who belongs and who doesn't. Both wheat and weeds are present, as Jesus teaches. A stranger can come and be invited to participate as an equal.

Families are fundamentally private entities. A congregation needs to be a public space. You are welcome even if you haven't been before or don't come very often. Our bond is Jesus. He is the one who makes us one. Not all those other things. Unless we build a missional community—that is, one that is focused outwards as well as inwards—then our congregation will just be 'one happy family' that looks after its own. Mission brings life.



You might like to read Hebrews 13:1-6. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." ⁶So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" [Heb 13:1-6 NRSV]



1. Talk about a time when you have really felt like a 'fish out of water' because you were a stranger. What did you feel at the time?
2. Discuss the terms 'family' and 'company of strangers' as a metaphor for a congregation. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each term?
3. How does your congregation show hospitality to strangers?
4. Would you describe your congregation as a 'missional community'?
5. How easy is it for strangers to join your congregation? How long does it take for them to be really accepted?
6. What can you do to improve the integration of new people in your congregation?



A healthy congregation is a company of strangers who **depend on God's hospitality**

Pregnant congregations bring life

A healthy tree produces fruit. God created it to do just that.

Jesus tells the story of a man who owned a fig tree that produced no figs, so he instructed the gardener to cut it down. The gardener replied, 'Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down' (Luke 13:8,9 NRSV). Otherwise the fig tree is just a waste of space, or as Jesus said, it wastes the soil.

What is the fruit of an apple tree? An apple? Sure! Another apple tree? Yes! But more than that, the fruit of an apple tree is an orchard. An apple tree has within it the God-given potential to produce a whole orchard of apple trees. A healthy tree bears fruit.

What does God produce through a congregation? Christians who are baptised, gather at the table and live in the word? Of course. People who are cared for until they get to heaven? I definitely hope so. A steady stream of new people coming to faith and adults being baptised? We would expect that to be the case when the word is at work. People who live out their vocations as Christian parents, students, workers and volunteers in the world? Certainly. But more than that, a healthy congregation reproduces itself. It plants churches that plant churches.

Like the seed that falls into the ground and dies, it is only as we give away our life that it grows and multiplies. Sometimes I hear congregations say things like: 'We couldn't plant a new church because we can't afford to lose good members'. Or: 'We don't have

enough members to fill all our positions now; we couldn't possibly release some to start a community outreach'.

Good health implies looking outward. If your congregation is concerned only about itself and its members, then someone has been messing with your minds—and it wasn't the Holy Spirit. It is only as we go into the world that we grow as the people of God. Your children's ministry, ladies fellowship, men's shed, small groups, Longest Lutheran Lunch and church picnic are hopefully bringing blessing to those who attend. When they are also means of bringing Jesus to those who do not yet know him, the blessing is multiplied, not only for the new people but also for the Christians who attend.

How much of its time, energy and money does your congregation spend on reaching out to those who are not yet members? Thirty per cent? Twenty per cent? Maybe less than five per cent? That is a good question for you to ask. What if your congregation doubled the share of its resources used to bring Jesus to your local community?

Prioritising mission makes for a pregnant congregation. One that is bursting with new life. A congregation with people brimming with new ideas and enthusiasm for bringing Jesus to their friends, families, neighbours and workmates. Would the care of the widows and orphans get neglected? I don't think so. That probably hasn't happened very often since Acts 6. We are good at looking after our own, even if we don't do it perfectly. Let's become just as good at bringing good news to the world.

Does your congregation see outreach to your community as part of your pastor's calling? What if he skipped a few meetings so he could play golf with some non-Christian friends or meet them for a few drinks in a pub in order to build the relationships that allow him to witness to them? Would you say, 'Do that on your day off, Pastor. You are paid to care for our members.'

One older pastor told me some years ago that he was trained to be an aquarium keeper. Then he added, 'This place needs a fisherman'. That was undoubtedly true, but it is not just the pastor's job. A pregnant congregation needs members who fish for people. If you have members whom God has gifted to lead others into the kingdom, then free them to do that. Don't weigh them down with many other tasks and responsibilities. Encourage them, pray for them and support them.

There is hope, even for a barren fig tree. That is the message of Jesus' parable. We can 'dig and dung'. The word of God and the Lord's Supper are fertiliser and nutrients for the baptised. Use them well. Don't clip the Spirit's wings. God has planted congregations so that they reproduce.

A pregnant congregation has the ongoing joy of witnessing the birth of new children of God. What could be better than that?




You might like to read Luke 13:6-9. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

⁶Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" [Luke 13:6-9 NRSV]



1. What does the parable of the fig tree teach us about a healthy congregation?
2. What proportion of its budget does your congregation spend on reaching those who are not yet Christian? How much of the time and energy your people have for church things is focused on outreach?
3. Is your congregation 'pregnant'? How many new Christians are you expecting to be born this year?
4. How will you 'dig and dung' in your congregation?
5. A person's 'Christian journey' begins before they come to faith. How do your people relate to non-Christians to help them on this journey?

 **If your congregation is concerned only about itself and its members**, then someone has been messing with your minds —and **it wasn't the Holy Spirit.**

Dare to be different

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 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.



You might like to read Galatians 6:1-5. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ²Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. ³For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵For all must carry their own loads. [Gal 6:1-5 NRSV]

 **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.



1. What attitudes and opinions have you heard recently that have left you feeling uncomfortable? How did you respond?
2. What does it mean to you that Lutherans are 'firm at the centre and flexible at the edges'?
3. How do the first two verses of Galatians 6 illustrate ways of helping someone 'keep in step with the Spirit'?
4. How can we be pastorally flexible in dealing with others when we have firm convictions about the topics we discuss?
5. The 'law of Christ' is living humbly in the power of the Spirit. How is this different from obeying a set of rules?
6. In our society and context how do we help our children grow up with a secure Christian identity?

Set free

‘I slept in and so didn’t get to do my 20-minute personal devotion this morning. I feel like God is disappointed with me.’

When I was a young Christian in high school and university, I understood that God’s law convicted me of my sin. Then at some point in confirmation class I got it. Jesus died for me and I was forgiven. Nothing could now separate me from the love of God.

And yet, at the time, it still seemed to me that having settled my salvation, God now gave me a new set of rules to obey. Some were in the Bible, others were not. Apart from the morning devotion thing, there were rules about witnessing, about love and about my unruly thought life. Some of my evangelical friends had other rules about smoking and drinking, not going to the movies and not playing cards. In the old days, Lutherans believed women should cover their heads in worship and they were not allowed to speak or vote at congregational meetings or to serve on committees. They were allowed to play the organ, teach Sunday school and form women’s guilds. Men should not have long hair. Dancing was also out of bounds for some (but I never understood how the Twist would lead to immorality).

The trouble was that I was never very good at keeping all these rules, so I constantly felt guilty. In my mind’s eye, God was frowning on me. Around that time I did manage to read the whole Bible in a year. God must have been pleased with that! I could almost hear his ‘well done, good and faithful servant’. I had performed well, and surely that is what God wanted and how he evaluated

my life. Most of the time though, I was sure that God still condemned me for my feeble attempts at discipleship.

My approach to Christian living was performance-based. When I thought I had done well I could kid myself for a little while that I was finally succeeding. Mostly, that was not the case. It was all about how well I kept the rules. For all the talk I heard about grace, the law, it seemed, still had the final word and that was a heavy burden to bear.

I have since discovered, that in his letter to the Romans Paul clearly tells me I am now under grace and not under the law (6:14) and that I am therefore not condemned because I am in Christ Jesus (8:1). In his letter to the Galatians he puts it bluntly: ‘For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery’ (5:1). Jesus died to set me free from the law, not to give me better rules. Therefore I should not make myself a slave once again. I should not surrender the freedom which Jesus died to win for me. Quite simply, I should not be living under a burden of guilt. Martin Luther was very clear about that. He didn’t bring back the rules, or God’s law, as God’s final word to us after we had heard the word of forgiveness.

Galatians and Romans are also clear that I should not use my freedom to gratify the desires of the flesh. But if I am honest I still do that in so many ways. The good news, however, is that when I fail I am already forgiven and I live in God’s grace because of Jesus. How wonderful! That is God’s last word to me. I am to let God’s Spirit work in my life, not to try my best to get it all

together. When I fail, as I surely will, I am not to sweat it. God forgives me, so I should also forgive myself and move on in God’s grace. God is still smiling on me.

When we bring Jesus to others we need to make sure that they understand that being a Christian is not about obeying a whole lot of restrictive rules. God is no kill-joy. He wants the very best for us and that is what his will for us is all about.


Of course we do learn about God’s good intentions and his will for us when we read the Bible. But we don’t see that as a series of rules we now need to try to obey. We understand that this is a picture of what God is doing in us by his Spirit at work through his word, as he makes us more like Jesus. As Paul says, ‘If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit’ (Galatians 5:25). Rather than finding rules to obey, we can ask what good habits we need to embed in the fabric of our lives so that the things we believe truly shape who we are as his people. Jesus died to take my guilt. I am free.

While we are still in this world we remain both sinners and saints. God uses broken people like us in his mission to his world. Thank God for that!



You might like to read Romans 8:1-17. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. ¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. [Romans 8:1-17 NRSV]

 **I should not surrender the freedom which Jesus died to win for me.** Quite simply, I should not be living under a burden of guilt.



1. Have you ever felt that God condemned you for your feeble attempts at discipleship?
2. How do we make ourselves slaves of the law even after being set free by Jesus Christ?
3. How do Paul's words in Romans 8 help us with our feelings of unworthiness?
4. What roles does the Holy Spirit play in discipleship?
5. How do we Christians, who remain both sinners and saints, practically deal with our weaknesses and sin?
6. In this world, is your primary identity one of being a sinner or being a saint? Why?

Christmas blows away fog about God

You can't focus on fog. Many have rather foggy ideas about God. For some, God is vaguely tied up with our religious feelings. For others, 'god' is an impersonal force that works through all religions to bring peace on earth and goodwill among people.

Even the Australian prime minister (at the time of writing) has been quoted as saying that 'every religion, every faith, every moral doctrine, understands the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. Really, Mr Turnbull? That is certainly true of the teaching of Jesus. Other religions teach that only spiritual realities matter and physical things are not important. Do they follow the Golden Rule?

We hear a lot about spirituality today. It is certainly a more positive term than religion. It can therefore be a good place to start when talking about God, much as Paul did when talking with the Athenians in Acts 17. But it is still a foggy idea for most people. 'Modern spirituality is centred on the "deepest values and meanings by which people live". It embraces the idea of an ultimate or an alleged immaterial reality. It envisions an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his/her being.' So says Wikipedia. What does that actually mean?

Talking with others about God is difficult because everything you say is passed through their foggy filters. You say, 'God is love', but what does that mean for me and my struggles and fears? How is that going to help me when I am in a crisis? What practical difference does it make? Does it mean that if I love God then he will love and help me? What do I need

to do to get the love?

Christmas blows away the fog. God is not my religious feelings, a religious system, a distant intelligence or a moral principle. God became a human being. That is the message of Christmas. The God who created the universe, who called Abram and Sarai, who formed a people and spoke to them through prophets, has become one of us in Jesus.

God has therefore become touchable. Not a disembodied spirit but a real human being with flesh and blood like us. If you lived in Palestine at the time of Jesus you could talk with him and touch him. Maybe even give him a hug. You could sit with him in the evening and enjoy a glass of wine together as you talked over the events of the day. You could hold the other end of the timber as he cut it in his workshop. The eternal Son of God became a fair-dinkum bloke. And he still is. Truly God and truly human. That's the message of Christmas.

So what about now? True, you can't touch Jesus as they could when he lived in Palestine. But you can still talk with him. He touched you when he made you his own through the water and word of baptism and still gives you his body and blood when you come to his table. Some things are even better now than they were then. He is present everywhere in our world. You don't need to travel to one spot and join the queue in order to strike up a conversation. The Holy Spirit is at work through the word of God in your life and in your Christian community. The Spirit brings Jesus to you.

The message of Christmas is that Jesus is God who is Immanuel, which means


'God with us'. Again and again Jesus promises to be present with us: 'I am with you always to the end of the age'. 'If two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' 'Abide in me as I abide in you.' '[The Spirit] will take what is mine and declare it to you.' (See Matthew 28:20; 18:20; John 15:4; 16:14.)

Christmas means we can't talk about God as though he was a code name for a religious philosophy or a moral system. Take people to meet the child born in Bethlehem. It is not a question of joining a religion and practising a particular form of spirituality. It is a question of faith, and faith is a relational term. There is nothing you need to do to get the love. It is God's Christmas gift to you in Jesus Christ. Your family, friends and neighbours need to meet this Jesus. God's Christmas present to you is also the best gift you can give to others. Take your friends to Bethlehem this Christmas. Get past the romantic setting and the wrapping and look at the gift. Ask the question, 'Who is this child born in Bethlehem and crucified on Golgotha?' Blow the fog away. Bring Jesus to your friends this Christmas.



You might like to read John 1:1-18. Once again, out loud and slowly, with a pencil or highlighter in your hand. Try to listen to it as though you were hearing it for the first time. What haven't you noticed before? What questions did the text raise in your mind?

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. [John 1:1-18 NRSV]

 Christmas blows away the fog. God is not my religious feelings, a religious system, a distant intelligence or a moral principle. **God became a human being. That is the message of Christmas.**



1. When have you recently heard someone express foggy ideas about God?
2. If you were sitting with Jesus, enjoying a glass of wine on a quiet evening, what would you talk about?
3. As you read the introduction to John's Gospel, what strikes you most about Jesus?
4. Why is it very important to focus on Jesus when talking with non-Christians about God?
5. How do you experience Jesus coming to you personally?
6. How do you keep your relationship with God alive?

