

bring Jesus

Making sense of mission

by Rev Dr Steen Olsen



Steen also blogs at LCA eNews. To sign up to his newslist 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.

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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 around the walls, 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, customary at the time. Every sandwich was the same, filled 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 nevertheless. Two worlds were rubbing up against each other and I was caught in the middle.

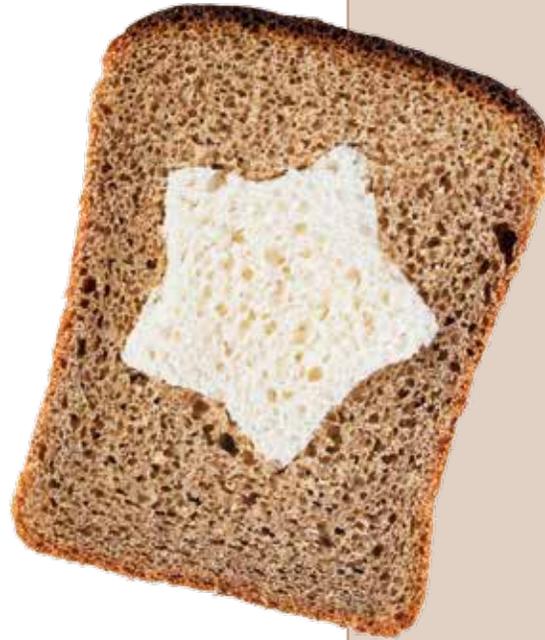
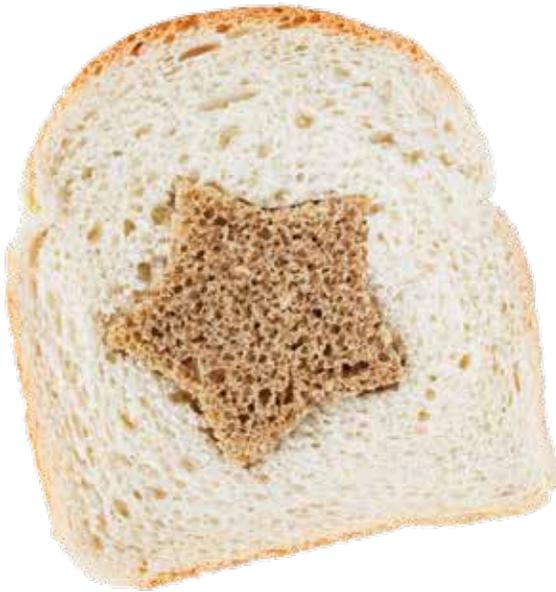
Eventually, I discovered that living on the margins brought growth and understanding. I learnt to speak Kiwi. I asked different questions because I saw things a little differently. I discovered that people could be happy while living differently to the way my family lived.

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 met. 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 to be 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. Events on Earth changed the course of the stars. Another margin. Another cultural clash. What mystical arts did these magi practise? That makes me a little uncomfortable, even now.

The Son of God was soon being persecuted, having to flee from first-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.

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

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.

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



As a church where love comes to life, we effectively engage with people in growing a culture of 'going as God's people'.

LCA Strategic Direction 2013–2018, p17.
www.lca.org.au/sd



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