



# bring Jesus

## Making sense of mission

by Rev Dr Steen Olsen



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# 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 **attributional** 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,



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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!

**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 develop proactive strategies to seek and open new mission fields to which God is leading us.

LCA Strategic Direction 2013-2018, p14. <http://www.lca.org.au/sd>