

Theological reflections on the Vision and Mission Principles

A paper of the Major Strategic Review, with contribution from Rev Dr Geoff Thompson and Rev Dr John Flett in Mission Principles reflection

Our Vision and Mission Principles express our core purpose. They speak to who we are and where we are going as life-giving communities of faithful people.

Together, they answer the ‘why’ of *Church the Movement* – offering us a basis to discuss both our diversity and what gathers us together in unity, our personal and collegial faith, and our thinking and practice of mission. They are not a creed but a tool to provoke questions and examination of the Church as relevant in the different contexts within the life of the Church.

The Vision and Mission Principles provide a focus and starting point for spiritual discernment as we look to participate with Christ in realising God’s wonderful purpose for the world.

Vision

Following Christ,
walking together
as First and Second Peoples,
seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation

Our vision statement articulates the passion and desire for the future direction of the Synod expressed by people across the Church in Victoria and Tasmania. It is a statement of who we are and our collective inspiration as the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. It is the story we are living as a pilgrim people on our way.

The vision statement is a call to:

- Renew commitment to, and confidence in, following Christ;
- Follow practices that help us focus on both the “being and doing” of following Christ (including worship, witness, service, discipleship and evangelism);
- Follow Christ by taking personal responsibility for life-long learning, reflection and thinking about our faith;
- Have a good and just relationship between First and Second Peoples in this land;
- Commit us to seek hospitable community where people can belong and become;
- Seek to act compassionately in the world towards all creation; and
- Always seek justice.

Theological discussion on the Vision statement

The statement can be explored in more detail by considering each of the elements separately.

Following Christ

This inspires us to start out on the right foot because our faith does not begin with us but with Jesus Christ and his Way. We follow in his footsteps, called to a Way that leads through a Cross to New

Life. Jesus sets the pattern and by the presence of his Spirit nurtures us and transforms us as we follow him into the world. We are people committed to the way of Christ. People respond to the call of Jesus “Follow me” seen in Matthew 4:19. This call is strongly anchored in other writings of the New Testament and echoed in paragraphs 3 and 4 of the *Basis of Union*. It is a call to focus on who we are, and who it is we follow.

We believe that in order to follow Christ there is a need to put Christ at the centre of our personal and community life, to engage in practices that encourage us to be renewed and to follow Christ into the world where God is at mission. Following is continuous and therefore following Christ is a constant call to hope, to renewal and recommitment.

Walking together as First and Second Peoples

The Gospel is expressed and lived out in relationships – individually and collectively. Unity expressed in love is one of the attributes that Christ prays for his followers in John 13 and 15. Walking together strengthens our growth in mission and discipleship. Our many communities, in all their exciting diversities, work better together than they do alone.

The Uniting Church includes both First and Second Peoples. We walk together with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress both in Victoria and Tasmania in a covenant relationship. To follow Christ in the context of Australia we feel the weight of history and injustice between First and Second Peoples crying out for attention (Genesis 4:10). The nature of justice is to find that ‘right relationship’ which brings peace to both First and Second Peoples in this land. This is discovered when First and Second Peoples walk with one another; listening, understanding and finding answers together. Our walk begins with this commitment to one another in Christ but our hope is for all Australians.

Seeking

As followers of Christ we believe that we are always seeking. We do not have all the answers. We will continue to seek, indeed some of us struggle with following the way of Christ (for example, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not do what I tell you?” Luke 6.46). That is our experience and understanding as people of God and is expressed in paragraphs 11, 13 and 18 of the *Basis of Union*. It was also the experience of the first disciples, most particularly perhaps as described by the writer of Mark, who constantly portrays the disciples failing to understand, and yet seeking to do so. We want to acknowledge that reality as part of who we are.

Seeking also reminds us of our ‘pilgrim character’ as strongly referenced in the *Basis of Union*, paragraph 3. Seeking is not aimless wandering but a hope filled yearning emerging from faith in Christ and drenched in God’s love.

Community

This is the natural outcome of following Christ. The love and grace of Christ proves stronger than the simple differences and negative influences that pull us apart. Our hunger for community is enabled so that we become a “place of belonging”¹. The place of belonging then is also the place of becoming². In communion with other people we can grow, be challenged, be accepted, love others

¹ Jean Vannier (1979) *Community and Growth* p 13 pub St Paul Publications

² *ibid*, p22

and be loved, care for others and be cared for in our turn. It is the practical embodiment of the great commandment to love one another (John 15:9). The early community around Jesus embodied this, as did the early church.

Walter Brueggemann the scholar of the Hebrew Bible wrote that “Hope requires a community of faith and action” and we are called to hope³. Perhaps the most influential missiologist of the last century, David Bosch wrote “the community is the primary bearer of mission, which is the good news of God’s love incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world”⁴. Creating community is God’s hope/mission for all humanity and therefore is frequently at the heart of the mission activities we do together.

Compassion

Compassion is the heart of the Incarnation. God saw our helplessness and in compassion sent Christ not to condemn us but to bring us the new life and grace found in God. This is the glue that binds our community together. There are many times in the gospels where Jesus had compassion on people (for example Mark 6:34, Mark 8:2-3, Matthew 9:35-38, Matthew 20:34, Luke 7:13, John 11:34-36). It is at the heart of the nature of community we seek: community in which we can encounter the other and become ourselves irrespective of race, gender, sexual orientation or theological perspective. It is welcoming and loving of the other without putting a price on that welcome and love.

Justice

At the heart of the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus (for example Matthew 12:18-21, Luke 18:1-8, John 4:27 and 2 Corinthians 5:10) is the idea of justice. The concept is more than righting wrongs, it is a statement about the nature of the community that we want to see created. It is when all are in ‘right relationship’ with God, each other and the whole creation. It is closely associated with ‘shalom’, the peace of God.

Justice takes its place in the Vision statement empowered and seen through the lens of the terms before and after it – following Christ; walking together; community and compassion; for all creation.

For all creation

The community of compassion and justice is for the whole of creation, not just for one part of humanity, or indeed, just for humanity, but for the whole created order. All life, all environments are included. We therefore care for those beyond our shores (for example *Basis of Union* paragraph 2) and for the environment of this planet. This is a commitment to a connection beyond our local community, beyond our shores and a statement to the world that the state of the planet matters.

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann (1980) *Experiences of God* p20 SCM Press

⁴ David Bosch (1991) *Transforming mission*, Orbis Books

Mission Principles

God in Christ is at mission in the world and sends the Church in the Spirit to:

1. share the Good News of Jesus Christ
2. nurture followers of Christ in life-giving in communities of reconciliation
3. respond in compassion to human need
4. live justly and seek justice for all
5. care for creation
6. listen to each generation and culture so as to live out the Gospel in fresh ways
7. pursue God's mission in partnership

Our Mission Principles seek to capture God's big purposes for the loved creation and the mission of the Church within those purposes. They reflect on the vision within the New Testament that tells of a loving, gracious and merciful God who desires a living relationship with the whole of God's good creation. The church, empowered by the Spirit is called to serve as ambassadors of the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus Christ.

The Mission Principles have been derived from scripture, and draw inspiration from the Basis of Union and the mission principles from the Anglican Communion's "Five Marks of Mission"⁵.

Theological discussion of the Mission Principles⁶

As God's movement to us in Jesus Christ is intrinsic to who God is, so the Christian community finds its identity in moving beyond itself. Mission is not optional or secondary to it, but is at the heart of its calling in the power of the Spirit to follow Christ.

Mission is defined in correspondence to the nature of God which is revealed in loving, creating, reconciling and redeeming the world. Though this language might be familiar, the implications are quite radical. If mission follows who God is, or if God is in and for Godself 'missionary', then mission is without end. Mission is not a provisional activity undertaken in the period before the end, but describes the very nature of God and so human relation to God (I John 4:7-10,16b).

In this context, mission describes the very nature of the Christian life in all its communal, liturgical, institutional, spiritual and service dimensions. It also means that the body of Christ, those who would identify with Jesus Christ's own body broken, is missionary. The community called by this God exists only in likewise moving beyond itself, following its head as it is impelled to do so by the Holy Spirit.

Setting this theological point within the context of world Christianity, seven guiding principles for mission present themselves. Each of these apply first to the church because it stands under and is formed by God's own missionary acting. The church is the object of God's mission and its response is to be a missionary people. The last five principles derive from the first two.

As God wills to bless creation and sent the Son in the power of the Spirit to this end, so the church is

⁵ *Bonds of Affection*-(1984) ACC-6 p49, *Mission in a Broken World*-(1990) ACC-8 p101

⁶ Major Strategic Review 2015 *Mission Principles with commentary on the Basis of Union*, with contribution from Rev Dr Geoff Thompson and Rev Dr John Flett, Centre for Theology and Ministry

to share the good news of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God, and thereby interrupt the wisdoms of the world. The vision presented within the New Testament is cosmic in scope. It tells of a loving, gracious and merciful God who desires a living relationship with the whole of God's good creation. The church is called to service as ambassadors of the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus Christ. In this service, the church does not pretend to possess something the world does not, putting itself in a position of arrogance and power. It acknowledges that its reconciliation with God means reconciliation with all, even with those that would be its 'enemies' (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21).

The church, in other words, finds its identity as it moves beyond itself, and so sharing the story means telling it to those who have not yet heard it. And like the encounter between Cornelius and Peter (Acts 10), it occurs in the expectation of what we ourselves will learn about what it means to be followers of Christ and the demands of the obedience of the Spirit.

Such reconciliation follows Christ's command *to teach and nurture disciples in communities of reconciliation*. This applies first to those who would assume the name Christian and who would participate in the community of disciples. The church is given the Spirit as the promise of the new creation and is itself called to live as a manifestation ("firstfruit") of that creation. Discipleship thus takes place within the community, and while it is necessarily personal it is never individualistic. The life of the church community is a witness to reconciliation as barriers are overcome and all find a place at God's table. This witness to the world is the mutual love which is Jesus' mark of discipleship (John 13:34-35); anything less undermines God's work and urgently needs to be made right. The Spirit confirms the witness of the gospel by sending the church beyond itself and into the world.

This is the nature of Christian maturity, the following of Jesus Christ to those marginalised and oppressed. It means seeking in hope and creating space for those who would also participate in Christ's mission. The church's witness lies not in withholding itself from the broken and alienated, but in fellowship with these. In this the body of Christ (Col. 1:18, 24) discovers the nature of its holiness and unity.

God in Jesus Christ identifies with the marginalised, poor, and oppressed, and calls his body *to respond in compassion to human need*. This response is not something to be handed over to institutions, it occurs in like identification with those in need, in feeling the pain with those in pain, and in responding in the hope, joy, and promise of the kingdom. The church is to be a place of healing not injury. The power of God promised to his people lies not in political or economic might. Though this is a temptation to which the church has too readily succumbed.

God's own righteousness rests in justice, and God calls his people *to live justly and seek justice for all*, to struggle against the "principalities and powers" (Eph. 6:4), to seek liberation from all forms of oppression, and to be a people of peace. As the church exists in its being reconciled, so it is to bring light to those who would live in the shadows and exploit the darkness for their own gain. In this the church will shine the light on itself, and in humility and repentance acknowledge that it too must fight the darkness found within it.

God desires the healing of God's creation. In following the witness of the First Peoples, the church is called *to care for God's creation*, to uphold its integrity and to protect the life that comes from God as gift and blessing. Too often the church has sided with those who have sought domination, and who have used the land in irresponsible and destructive fashion.

God in Christ desires reconciliation with people of all cultures, times, and places and leads Christ's church to subject all forms and traditions of church to this mission. In making God's mission first and church forms and traditions secondary, the Spirit teaches us to respectfully listen to other cultures and new generations. The Spirit frees us from cultural captivity and leads us to be open to new words, deeds, and forms of church. The Gospel is for all peoples, and cultures across time and history. Therefore the church must always be looking to *listen to each generation and culture so as to live out the Gospel in fresh ways* and, in love, remove all obstacles no matter how cherished.

God's reconciliation is manifested in the life of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, so divisions and rivalries of denomination are an offense to God's mission. The name of the *Uniting Church* represents our desire to be part of God's healing of denominational divisions. Ecclesial traditions, including the Uniting Church, must see themselves aright in relationship within the whole Body of Christ, work to this end, and *pursue God's mission in partnership* with the church universal in the name of the God of reconciliation. Furthermore, God's mission is larger than the church and there are many on the way who work for justice, compassion and care for the creation who do not own the name of Christ. It is proper that God's Church work in *partnership* with all people of good will to fulfill God's purposes.