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ON MISSION

For this edition, we asked our contributors for their thoughts of what being On Mission in our own backyard can, and might look like.

Our contributors for this Issue are drawn from church and partner organisation contexts. It is interesting to read about the diverse ways people are thinking and working out as to what it means to be faithful to Gospel mission.

The purpose of our On Mission Journal is to foster good conversation and thinking across our movement of churches. Our hope for this journal is that it can be a means of thinking and contending well together in matters of Christian faith and mission.

If you believe you have something to offer, either in response to our contributors, or by way of an article yourself, then we would love to hear from you at admin@cocwa.com.au.

Tania Watson

THE MISSION AMONG US

Tania Watson

Around the COCWA Team, we've been talking for some months about being On Mission in our own backyard.

As Churches of Christ, we have a strong heritage of engagement in mission across all of the spheres of our world: from the local community to supporting missions overseas. So why the focus on our own backyard? Firstly, because the nations have come to live in Australia: the mission field has come to live with us.

Australia is now one of the top 10 multicultural countries in the world. Since the end of the White Australia Policy in 1972, the diversity of Australian culture has changed dramatically. Older generations have witnessed significant changes in the ethnicity of their neighbours. As a peaceful society, for the most part, Australia has traversed the change without significant racial tensions. This does not mean that change has not been difficult or challenging. Neither does it mean that Australians have warmly welcomed people to this land. My point here is not to talk about the implications of government policy neither

am I wanting to reflect on the general social fabric of contemporary Australia. My point is to simply note the rapid change and to open up a conversation about what this means for the local church.

In some suburbs, the local church is not so much local anymore. People who have a strong tie to a church may drive to the church but not live in the actual neighbourhood anymore. In some suburbs, individual ethnic groups have naturally gathered together and established themselves either through social housing or by simply buying homes near their friends so that a whole neighbourhood demographic changes. This means that there can be a disconnect between the people who attend the local church and the people who actually live in and around the church. This is a problem if we hold to a memory of a "suburban neighbourhood church" framework and it raises questions for us about sharing the message of Jesus with our neighbour.



“AT THE CENTRE OF ALL THIS, CHRIST RULES THE CHURCH. THE CHURCH, YOU SEE, IS NOT PERIPHERAL TO THE WORLD; THE WORLD IS PERIPHERAL TO THE CHURCH. THE CHURCH IS CHRIST’S BODY, IN WHICH HE SPEAKS AND ACTS, BY WHICH HE FILLS EVERYTHING WITH HIS PRESENCE.”

(EPHESIANS 1:2-023 MSG)

So, who is my neighbour these days anyway? Is it the people who live in my street that I rarely see or probably don't know? Are my neighbours the people that I work with or play sport with or are they the people who I see most days in the shopping centre? Am I a neighbour to people who are different to me or am I closely relating only to those people that I find it easy and convenient to connect with? Is my neighbour the people I connect with on Facebook? Is it easier these days to avoid my actual physical neighbours?

The second reason we want to be thinking about mission in our own backyard is because we have to get real serious about the fact that younger generations of Australians are choosing to leave their Christian heritage (if they are even blessed to have one) or are choosing not to engage at all with the Church. I have often heard it said that it is easier to do missions overseas and to see lives transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ than it is to see lives transformed here in Australia. This may well be true, but it doesn't make it acceptable.

We're all well aware of the immense cultural squeeze in Australia. Our society actively presses the church to the margins and people, especially our young people, are held captive to a world-view that has no time for the kind of freedom that can only be found in and through Jesus Christ. This is both our great challenge and our great opportunity.

For over 15 years now, I've been asking the Lord, "What does the Gospel sound like for Australian people?" It's the first question that any On Mission person asks when they look across the mission field into which God places them. Behind this question lies the assumption that Jesus is building His Church (Matthew 16:18) and that Jesus is "using us all – irrespective of how we got here – in what he is building" (Ephesians 2:19-22 MSG). All of which brings me to the magnificent vision of Ephesians

1 that constantly reminds me that we simply must press into mission in our own backyard and we must not let contemporary culture dominate how we view ourselves as the church. We must not let the raucous voice of culture swamp the peaceful sound of the Gospel in our hearts, minds and souls. The Gospel of Jesus is just too precious, too life-giving not to share with our neighbours however and whoever we might understand them to be.

"At the centre of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence." (Ephesians 1:2-023 MSG)

In our time, let's be faithful to the mission of Jesus in our own backyard.



About the Author

Tania Watson

Tania Watson is the Executive Minister for Churches of Christ in WA



REFLECTIONS ON MATTHEW 16: 15 – 18

Steve McKinnon

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? PETER REPLIED, “YOU ARE GOD’S ANOINTED SON”.

BLESSED ARE YOU SIMON, SON OF JONAH.....

**AND YOU WILL BECOME PETER (LITTLE ROCK) AND UPON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD
MY CHURCH AND THE GATES OF HELL WILL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT.**

(PARAPHRASED)

Through the above passage, I wonder if God might be saying to the Australian church;

1

FIND YOUR IDENTITY IN ME

Australians, I love you as you are but I still have more for you to become. I am Uluru, put me, the big rock in your red centre of your heart and find the stability, security and identity you are craving. I have no qualms about who I AM. I have always been; I will always be. Go back and hide in the rock from which you were mined, cut and hewn ⁱ.

2

ADMIT YOUR BROKENNESS

Satan has asked that he sift you like wheat, grind you from wheat into flour. This is happening as we speak; but I have prayed for you that your strength may not fail ⁱⁱ. Yes, you did deny me three times and you are broken, your history has some very black spots. Admit it, don't pretend you aren't and don't tell Indigenous people to just move on. My people, I want you to find a small support group of believers that are open and honest and transparent about their brokenness. Renewal of my church will not come through the mega church but through groups where intimacy, accountability and community begin.

And in your recovery group, use the beatitudes and my teachings to detox from the dominant values of this society and find your saltiness, your distinctiveness again ⁱⁱⁱ. You have become too much like the world which surrounds you. You have the same consumer values as they do. You have lost your saltiness. If you have any love for me; and I know you have; then feed my sheep ^{iv}. I can use whatever love you have for me and I will forge your identity and you will become my small rocks and Hell's gates will not overcome you.

3

BE MISSIONAL AND MY CHURCH WILL BE BUILT

You will build my Kingdom, you will become part of my blessed revolution when you go to the neediest people, in the most desperate situations, thinking globally acting locally, shining your light in the darkest of places. I will forge my identity in you as you sit with and listen to Indigenous people, as you repent on behalf of previous generations. As you go to the homeless, mentally ill, broken and poor you will advocate for mercy and justice and point people back to me. Neighbour by neighbour, friend by friend, street by street, suburb by suburb I will build my ecclesia. I will call people out of their communities to work for the benefit and welfare of those communities. This is my quiet and blessed revolution that will go under the radar; like mustard seeds that grow in unlikely places, like a sneeze that infects others for good.

4

YOU WILL BE MY PROPHET TO THE WORLD

Eventually your deep seated desire for fairness and justice will be revived. You will eventually become the boyish, bold, prophet to the rest of the world I intended you to be. You are far enough away, to be more objective and speak out against evil whether in economic, or socio-political matters and stand for what is right. Fight for justice for the global underdog, love mercy for the widow, orphan, refugee and poor and walk with humility with God. As a refiner's fire burns off the rubbish I will be able to see my reflection in you. You will be like the red centre where the red rocks and dirt are very red, where the sky is very blue, where the white gums are very white where the leaves are very green. You will become the bold, stark, fluorescent red of Uluru as my light shines through you.

ⁱ Isaiah 51:1

ⁱⁱ Luke 22:31

ⁱⁱⁱ Dave Andrews paraphrases the Beatitudes; "If you want to be part of my blessed revolution; Identify with the poor in spirit, enter into their pain empathically, to get angry but never aggressive, channel the rage creatively and constructively in working for justice, let your justice be freighted with mercy so you would do for others that you would want done for yourself, act with integrity even when there is no publicity, work for peace in the midst of war, suffer violence but never inflict violence and persevere through persecution".

^{iv} John 17: 21



About the Author

Steve McKinnon

Steve McKinnon is WA Co-ordinator of TEAR Australia. For the last 20 years he has ran AMUC (Among the Urban Community) – a camp that invites Christians to do a local short-term exposure program in Perth city.



A CRISIS IN THE BACKYARD

Peter Barney

Irony is the sharpest when it is meaningless and cruel.

The (UN) World Refugee Day is observed on June 20, and this year the Australian Government commemorated the day by presenting awards to people who have sought asylum in Australia. The awards recognised that these people who were forced to flee their homes are strong, courageous and showed great perseverance.

The irony is that during the week of honouring these people, the living allowance of \$35 a day that many asylum seekers received from our Federal Government was cut. These are strong and courageous people. But, they are also people whose qualifications are not often recognised in Australia and who are suffering physical and emotional damage from the circumstances that required them to flee from their homes. These Government cuts are putting this group at immediate risk of homelessness, further sickness and despair.

People displaced from their homes is a global crisis. 31 people are displaced from their homes every minute. There are now 68 million people across our globe who have fled their homes because it is too dangerous for them to live there, according to UNHCR figures. Locally we have created a crisis in our own backyard for the people who are seeking asylum.

The church has responded swiftly to this crisis here in Perth. A callout was made to all churches and others to give non-perishable goods to CARAD (Coalition for Asylum Seekers Refugees and Detainees) on World Refugee Day and drop goods outside our Foreign Minister and Government Cabinet member, Julie Bishop's electoral office. Goods came in by the car load with thousands of dollars' worth of collected within hours. The church leaders and members positioned themselves with signs outside the Minister's office to protest the cuts. The office sent the Federal Police down to have them removed.

The church response was swift. This is not a surprise, Christians have responded in this way since the beginning of the church. While direct care for those who are at risk of harm is not exhaustive of the good news of Jesus, neither is it peripheral to that good news. Bruce Longnecker, a New Testament and Pauline Theologian writes; "Care for the poor was thought by Paul to be a necessary hallmark of the corporate life of Jesus followers who lived in conformity with the good news of the early Jesus movement." This corporate life of supporting those in need gained positive attention from the wider community. At one point the Roman Emperor Julian forced the pagan priests to give alms to the poor in the hope of outdoing the Christians.

Another hallmark of the life of the early church is they challenged the systems in place in their community that were creating suffering. They preached (talked in public spaces) about a kingdom (system of community) where God was the king and not a particularly small group of wealthy or powerful humans. This was a system to be held together by peace, a system where everyone has food to eat and place to call home. This also caught the attention of those outside the church, particularly by the few who held all the wealth and the power. These acts gained a negative response, Christians were put in jail or thrown out of town.

It is a quirky crew that can flourish while giving to those who are suffering and then going further to risk suffering themselves in the name of challenging unjust structures. But the early followers of Jesus increased in number dramatically. I suspect that this flourishing is because this is where the people who say they follow Jesus truly encounter Jesus. Christ hints at this in his message to his followers in Matthew 25 and it is captured in the hymn of the early church recorded in Phillipians 2.

It is likely we will be given more opportunities in our local communities to be like the early church. McCrindle report that in Australia the wealthiest 20% own 80 times that of the lowest 20%. The Gini coefficient measures income divides. Zero equals perfect income equality and the number increases as income divides. This number has been increasing over the last 20 years. History shows that in seasons where small groups of people control most of the wealth and thus the power, they will do all they can to maintain this. This creates a pressure cooker where violence and chaos is a likely outcome, a church community that is seeking to encounter Jesus in the ways that Jesus himself suggested could be good news indeed.



About the Author

Peter Barney

Peter is the COCWA Ministry and Mission Developer. You can find more writing by Peter at www.cocwa.org.au

BUT SUCH AS I HAVE GIVE I THEE

Tamara Pilgrim

'SILVER AND GOLD HAVE I NONE, BUT SUCH AS I HAVE GIVE I THEE'.

I grew up singing about the lame beggar from Acts 3.

I loved the way the song caused me to dream with childlike wonder as I heard about a seemingly ordinary Peter performing an extraordinary act while walking to the temple one afternoon. 'What if..?' I remember thinking. But then I grew older and the dreaming stopped.

I continued attending church, loved Jesus and served at every opportunity, but I had no thoughts that lives around me could be incredibly changed just as I walked down the street.

One day in my early 20's I sat in my backyard looking out to the stars with tears in my eyes because life, church, and the world just didn't make sense. It was in that moment I heard God's gentle whisper, 'what if...?'. A reminder that God has a dream for this world that He invites us to be part of. A reminder that the dream isn't some distant dream but, like in that moment, it can start in our own backyard. An opportunity to imagine the possibility of His Kingdom, here in my own community, just as in heaven.

That day seems like both a lifetime ago and only yesterday. I've learned much, yet still know so little. We don't need to turn too far into scripture before we encounter passages that speak of God's heart for the poor, the forgotten, the marginalised. Jesus not only saw those who were marginalised by law and society but by his actions, he moved them away from the edges and reinstated them as individuals of worth. He sees Zaccheus in the tree and invites himself to dinner, extending an unfamiliar hand of kindness. He sees the man suffering from leprosy and touches him; perhaps



the first touch in a long time. He welcomed the children, shared with the Samaritan woman... there are an overwhelming number of stories where Jesus spoke with, ate with, touched, sat with, saw and heard those on the outskirts of society.

Nowadays, I live and walk alongside a growing number of individuals who would be considered poor or marginalised; the broken, those haunted by the ghosts of abuse and childhood trauma and neglect, individuals stuck in places of poverty, addiction, homelessness and so many more who need to know freedom, who need to know the love and grace of Christ that I treasure so dearly. I pray that they might encounter that Jesus who dined with those who society sought to ignore. I pray "Lord, your Kingdom come".

I wrestle with the reality that as Christ followers there are times when those same lips that pray for the coming of the Kingdom, then speak of boundaries, protection and fear of 'those' people; a people labelled by circumstance and status. I wonder, when we seek to protect ourselves from such, are we in fact 'protecting' ourselves from the Kingdom? From the loving heart of God?

I don't have all the answers and I cannot meet all the need around me. But I have learned to embrace the words of Peter "I don't have what you've asked for but I am willing to share with you what I've got" (paraphrased). And so, I love. I love until it hurts and then... I ask God for the grace to love some more.

Sure, this love might also come with sharing time, an ear to hear a story, words of encouragement, a hug, clothes, food, my home, but without love it's all just 'stuff' (1 Corinthians 13).

When it comes to helping move someone from the margins towards reinstating them as a valued member of our society, I've learned that the first step happens in our heart, in believing that they are indeed a valued member of society.

I have learned that as much as we can gift someone from what we have, there is transformational power in humbly allowing them to share what they have. Here, in the mutual sharing, people are empowered and community develops.

So, my daily prayer is that I might love boldly and radically, free from prejudices. That I might live courageously rather than comfortably. That as I walk down the street I would be willing to say 'such as I have give I thee', expecting to see moments where the Kingdom of love penetrates earth.

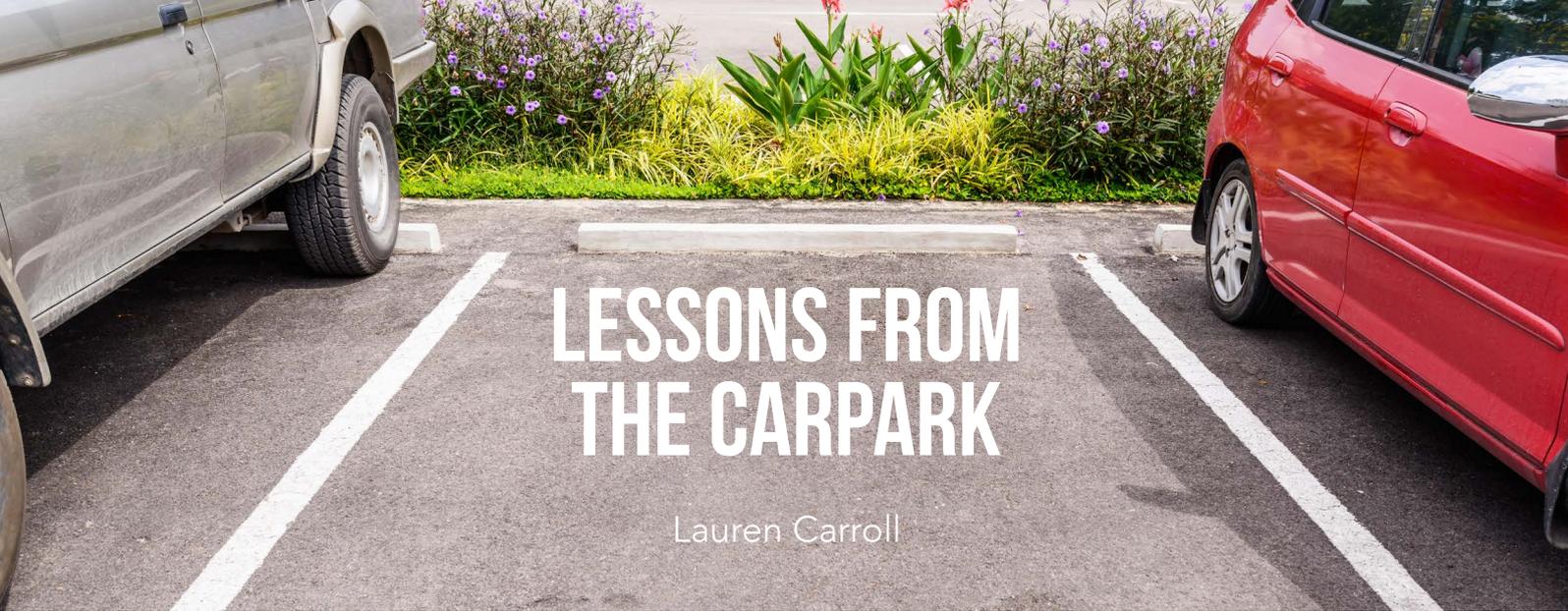
WHEN IT COMES TO HELPING MOVE SOMEONE FROM THE MARGINS TOWARDS REINSTATING THEM AS A VALUED MEMBER OF OUR SOCIETY, I'VE LEARNED THAT THE FIRST STEP HAPPENS IN OUR HEART, IN BELIEVING THAT THEY ARE INDEED A VALUED MEMBER OF SOCIETY.



About the Author

Tamara Pilgrim

Tamara Pilgrim is a Churches of Christ Minister working with the Salvation Army in Rockingham overseeing the community outreach ministry.



LESSONS FROM THE CARPARK

Lauren Carroll

My office at church literally looks over our backyard, and sometimes I watch it transform from a church car park to a safe refuge for our homeless neighbours. I am getting good at noticing a car that has become a home on wheels. Some of these car homes are a stop gap to a crisis, and others a more permanent arrangement.

At first, I assumed that those living in their cars desperately needed our help, and the thing for me to do as a Christian and Pastor would be to rush to meet their immediate needs.

It didn't take me long to understand that each story is unique and complicated, and required far more than food and a roof. Some of these situations were so complex I was overwhelmed with the entirety of the situation and struggled with the hopeless feeling that we will never be able to do enough to provide solutions. While the practical part of me struggled to solve problems, my heart was asking, 'why even try?'

One Sunday we had one of our homeless neighbours come and join us for our Sunday service. Lesley (not her real name) has been making our car park home on and off for quite a few months now. Lesley has often come upstairs during the week for a shower, and then sits for a while in our foyer on our comfy sofa. She is often quite content in her own company reading a book she has picked up from the op shop.

Each time I see her, I wrestle with my own responses to her homelessness. My gut response to try to play the role of benefactor role speaks loudly, yet I have learned to fight this instinct and instead be present in a way that is not as intrusive yet feels much more passive. As I walk away from these encounters I can't help but hear the internal battle in my head saying that if I was a better Pastor I would know what to do, what to say and would be having a deeper impact.

What struck me on Sunday as I saw Lesley come into our service and make herself a coffee, sit on our couches and talk graciously to people she hadn't met before, was that she seemed to feel at home.

She apparently didn't feel the need to defend herself or explain her situation, as she felt the freedom to be in our building and be curious about us. Lesley made herself right at home in her now familiar surroundings.

I also realised that my lack of previous deep and meaningful conversation with Lesley meant that she didn't see us as her benefactor who she has to rely upon to get by but as her neighbours, her peers whom she is a welcome part of.

I would love to end this by saying that Lesley gave her heart to the Lord during that service and now she has a house to call home, but that didn't happen. (Although she did come up for another shower this morning though and was so thankful for the warm water on a cold morning).

What I do wonder is whether our quick and simple instinctual response to homelessness, which feel like the 'Christian' thing to do, may not always invite people into our midst like we think it does. I wonder if I had begun my relationship with Lesley months ago in a way that communicated, you are in need and I am the helper, whether she would have seemed so comfortable and at home during our service last week?

I am not sure what Lesley's future holds and how long she will call our car park home. In my heart I hope she finds peace with her creator and a fullness of life in Christ that is more than she could ever hope or imagine. In the meantime I will keep being the student as she teaches me about my prejudices and assumptions of what Christian love 'should' look like.



About the Author

Lauren Carroll

Lauren is currently the Associate Pastor for True North Church at their Mullaloo Campus.

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

David van Leen

In April 2017, 'Peel Two' (Bethanie's 98 apartment extension to its Peel Social Housing property) officially opened, and I think this was the time when I really took notice of the significance of this mission in our own backyard.

Maybe I realised how much this excites me. I grew up in churches that had a focus not only on the overseas mission field, but also the local one. My parents worked in the mission in our own backyard, which eventually extended to Southeast Asia and beyond. I now have the privilege of seeing on a daily basis the impact of people who are serving in their backyard.

All that Bethanie does is about this, as over 6,000 individuals are directly impacted every week. The Bethanie mission is "To Demonstrate the Love of God." From caring for people in their homes, looking after people in one of our aged care facilities, providing social and meaningful interactions in our social centres, or accommodating people in one of our villages, Bethanie's mission ties us to the one in our own backyard.

Bethanie's Social Housing is something special. It links us to our heritage and is the reason why COCWA established Churches of Christ Homes (now known as Bethanie) in 1954: to help those in need and accommodate seniors. Since 2011, Bethanie has had Social Housing in its' offering - being a recognised Community Housing Provider by the WA Government. Approximately 680 people can be accommodated in the 500-odd properties set aside for housing those need low rental properties or are on the waiting list for public housing.

Bethanie's Social Housing is more than just providing a roof over someone's head. It is about starting to facilitate the idea of true community, like that which is found in Acts 2:42-47.

All those who live in Bethanie Social Housing have something in common - a new place to call home. They meet together regularly for cuppas, craft, and chapel, and they give to those in need - finding items of furniture for new residents, sewing and knitting for hospitals and refugees. These are communities that I believe reflect those found in Acts 2.

Creating the Acts 2 sense of community helps provide avenues for chaplains to minister. The Chaplains have

seen Relationships restored, Generosity grown and Faith renewed. They have seen the broken-hearted healed, the isolated enveloped and the unlovable loved, all because of a roof over a head by an organisation whose mission is at the very heart of what they do.

In Luke 9:58 it says, "Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'" I know I am out of Context but I hope that if Jesus was visiting WA today, Bethanie would provide a place for him to rest, and that He would experience the love of God by what is said and done by our staff and volunteers in the comfort of our facilities.

In Acts 1:8 it says "8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." I recently heard a sermon on this highlighting that Jerusalem was linked to the suburb, or in some contexts the state, then Judea was the Country and Samaria was overseas. Not sure if you agree or not but for me, the idea of Acts 1:8 is: start being God's witnesses where ever you are. Bethanie, I believe, ministers to groups of people often forgotten by society, even the church, and they are definitely in our own back yard - Jerusalem. This group of people still needs to experience and know the Love of God despite their history and age. They too need the opportunity to know Jesus in a real and personal way. Whilst mission in our own backyard can be hard, it is still important and rewarding.

About the Author

David Van Leen



David is the Coordinator of Chaplains for the Bethanie Group. David has served in ministry positions in Churches of Christ in WA and Queensland.



MORE THAN A GAME

Jeremy Bourdon

A lifelong passion for global mission lead me, at just 21 years of age, to move to Australia to take on a position at Lakeside Baptist Church and Recreation Centre. During my time at Lakeside, I grew to see the local church as the heartbeat of the community, engaging people through a common love for sport and fitness. My focus of global mission shifted and I was seeing ministry needs on our doorstep.

Despite Australia being a multicultural and diverse society, the language of sport is a commonality. The Australian Sports Commission estimate that 11.6 million Australians participate in sports and physical activity 3 times a week or more, and 3.2 million children participate in organised sport or physical activity outside of school. That's 14.8 million people (or around 60% of the Australian population) who are dedicating regular time and effort to sport and physical activity on a weekly basis. What other space offers this opportunity to connect with so many people?

Jeremy Treat, an LA pastor and a professor at Biola University, CA, writes in 'More than a Game: A theology of Sport' that, "Sports have captured the minds and hearts of people across the globe but have largely evaded the attention of Christian theologians. What is the meaning of sports? There seem to be two polar responses: some dismiss sports as merely a game, while others worship sports as nearly a god. ... when viewed through the lens of Scripture, sports are more than a game, less than a god, and when transformed by the gospel can be received as a gift to be enjoyed forever."

Treat argues that sport isn't just a neutral realm. Christians often view sport as not good nor bad and may not hold an opinion on the topic at all. Others might say that if you are really good at sport you can use it as a platform for Christ. I believe it is so much more than that. It is a way for us to connect with God's creation all around us, and to be creative in it. It is an opportunity for us to connect with others in a way that instantly builds trust, friendship, and community. It is an opportunity to build each other up, to strive toward a common goal, and to just be together.

The problem lies in our failures in this space, such as when we are called to a higher moral standard and we lose our cool in sporting situations. Or when from the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. Or when the game becomes our idol. When we put winning over care for others. This is what needs to be redeemed in the sporting world.

In Australia, I believe sport offers unique opportunities for community evangelism. I would love to come speak with you about what this could look like in your community, come up with ideas for your context, try some new things and journey together in being missionaries in our own backyards. I invite you to get in touch to explore this.



About the Author

Jeremy Bourdon

Jeremy Bourdon is the On Mission Games Sports Minister. He is originally from Massachusetts, USA

1 <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/more-than-a-game-theology-of-sport>



TRUTH-TELLING AND RECONCILIATION - IN OUR OWN BACKYARD

Colin Battersby

In Alice Springs, 1986, Pope John Paul II presented a vision for the future of the church and its ministry in Australia. In his address, he urged all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to share their vibrancy and vitality, embedded in their unique understandings and ways of being, as the First Australians.

THE CHURCH HERSELF IN AUSTRALIA WILL NOT FULLY BE THE CHURCH THAT JESUS WANTS HER TO BE UNTIL YOU HAVE MADE YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO HER LIFE AND UNTIL THAT CONTRIBUTION HAS BEEN JOYFULLY RECEIVED BY OTHERS. ¹

Thirty two years have passed since these words were uttered and yet a deep wound remains at the heart of our nation, leaving this vision only partially realised. It is a wound that stems from more than two hundred years of European colonisation; a wound that can only be healed through acts of truth-telling and the acknowledgement of past and present suffering.

The church in Australia cannot claim innocence with regards to this suffering. According to Anne Patel-Gray, the church has 'refused to speak the truth in the face of dispossession, massacres, cultural genocide, physical and mental tortures of many kinds' ². It has contributed to racism 'through its roots, heresies, theological imperialism, hypocrisy, collusion with the

Government, and its tacit and often active support of racist institutions, individuals, theology and teachings, and violence’³. While the 1967 referendum and the 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations mark significant moments when the country has sought to listen to Australia’s First Peoples, symbolic gestures of reconciliation are not sufficient to heal the deep wounds that lie at the heart of our nation’s psyche. For many First Peoples, the approach to reconciliation supported by the church rings hollow. The Australian church has often disregarded the agency of First Peoples in the reconciliation process, preferring to impose its “own version” of reconciliation. Hence there is growing suspicion and apathy toward non-Indigenous-led reconciliation agendas.

In *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, Robert Schreiter outlines three conditions required for “genuine reconciliation”. First, reconciliation cannot be a hasty peace, where an oppressor ‘tries to deal with a history of violence by suppressing its memory’⁴. Second, reconciliation cannot exist without liberation. Denying the existence of systemic injustice also denies the reality of pain and suffering experienced by Australia’s First Peoples. Third, God initiates a reconciling work within the lives of victims, those who have been disempowered and traumatised, not the oppressor. He suggests that wrongdoers ‘are rarely willing to acknowledge what they have done or to come forward of their own accord’ and if ‘reconciliation depended entirely upon the wrongdoers’ initiative, there would be next to no reconciliation at all’⁵.

If Indigenous Australians are expected to initiate reconciliation, it appears that the church is without a meaningful role. There is, however, work that only the church can do, as it anticipates the initiative of First Peoples. It is the work of breaking down internalized, privileged narratives about “our own backyard” through participation in spaces where truth-telling, listening and lamenting are allowed to flourish. As stories are shared and historical assumptions are challenged, the Church in Australia can begin to walk in greater solidarity with Indigenous Australians, in the pursuit of justice and renewed relationship. Personal and communal stories of suffering and celebration can speak truth to power, disrupting our cultural and historical bias and enabling us to enter more fully into the memory of “the other”. As Emmanuel Katongole reminds us ‘reconciliation without memory’ is a failure ‘to remember well ...by forgetting the wounds of history’⁶.

I recently had the opportunity to join a group of Catalyst students for a cultural tour at the site of the Pinjarra Massacre. Often referred to as the Battle of Pinjarra, the Pinjarra Massacre was instigated by a detachment of 25 white soldiers, police and settlers led by Governor James Stirling, on the 28th of October, 1834. While reports vary⁷, it’s estimated that up to 80 Nyungar men, women and children were

murdered while camping along on the banks of the Murray River⁸. George and Frank Walley, Noongar elders of the Bindjareb people, led us through a time of story-telling and reflection around a large memorial stone and then along the riverbank where the attack took place. We listened to stories – silently observed the sounds of the bush - and prayed together. This was a profoundly moving moment. Our own version of “official history” had been disarmed by a new memory that left us feeling disorientated yet filled with empathy.

Schreiter contends that ‘[f]or a past truly to be overcome, people must come to a common memory of it. Otherwise, the present perpetuates the divisions of the past’⁹. For the church to question its own history is to acknowledge the unreliability of its own memory and assume a posture of humility and vulnerability as it listens to uncomfortable, counter-histories and counter-memories. Only then, will the church in Australia be able to celebrate and embrace this most precious God-given gift of the world’s oldest continuous culture, that exists in our own backyard.

For more stories from our own backyard, join the conversation at [Friends of IMA-WA](#)

1 http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia.html

2 Anne Pattel-Gray, *The great white flood: racism in Australia; critically appraised from an Aboriginal historico-theological viewpoint* (Atlanta, GA.: Scholars Pr, 1998), 121.

3 Pattel-Gray, *The great white flood*, 18.

4 Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 18, Kindle.

5 Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, 14.

6 Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 149.

7 Henry Reynolds, *Forgotten war* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2013), 59.

8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinjarra_massacre

9 Robert Schreiter, *Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality & Strategies* (Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 94-5, Kindle.



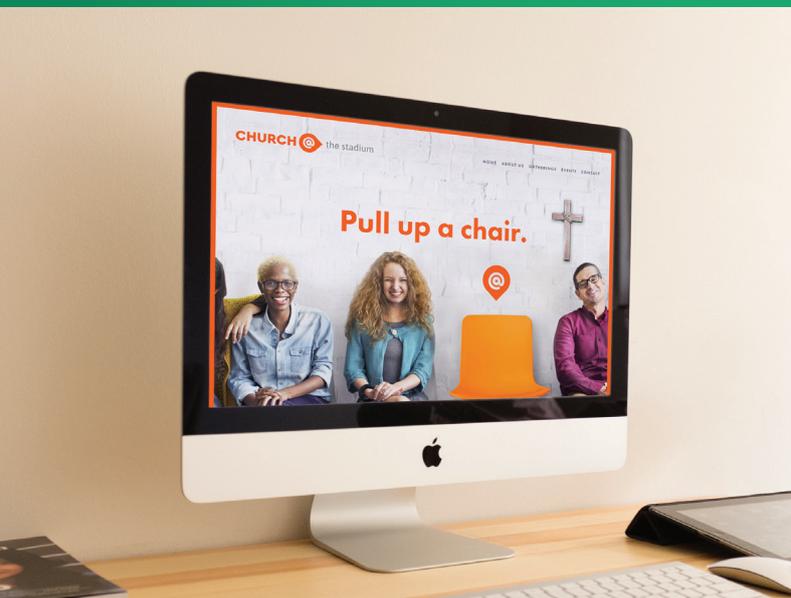
About the Author

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Colin Battersby is the W.A. Partnership Coordinator for Global Mission Partners.



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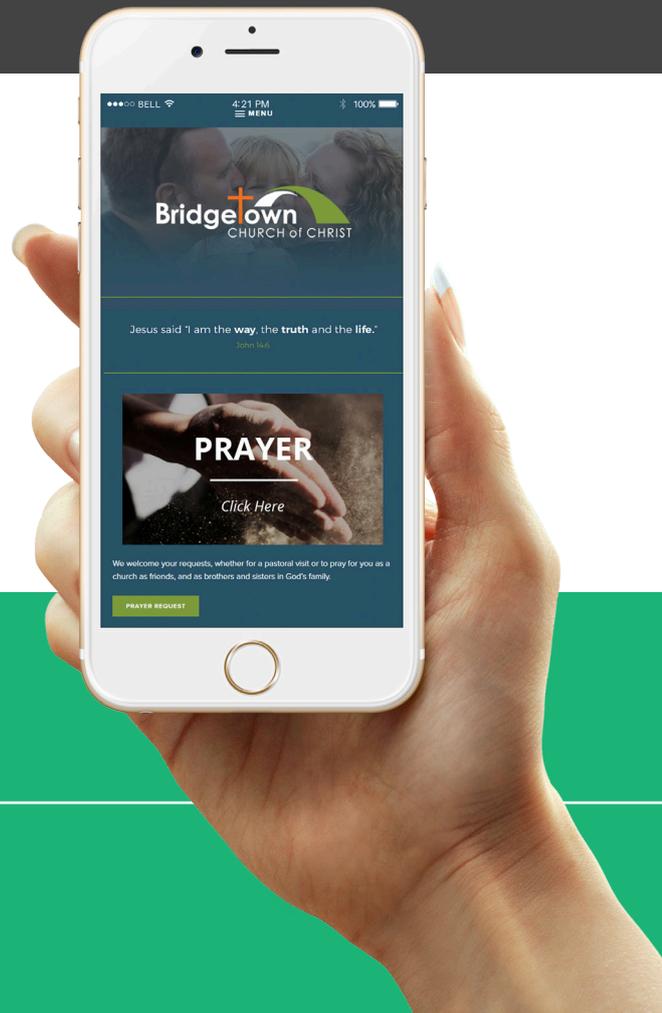
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