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Case Study: A Church with a Heart for the City

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Biography

Dean Eland, a Uniting Church minister has served urban and industrial parishes for fifty years in three Australian states. In 1967 he was called to inner city Sydney and for 12 years was a community development activist based at Redfern. Other calls to urban ministry followed including Whyalla, Port Adelaide and Sunshine-St Albans in Melbourne's western suburbs. Since retirement Dean has completed Doctor of Ministry Studies with MCD and provided leadership in establishing the Urban Mission Network within the Presbytery of SA. For the past 10 years has been associate minister at Pilgrim Church Adelaide.

Abstract

This paper will identify contextual factors and learning experiences that have been instrumental in developing new forms of ministry for a liberal and historic Uniting Church city congregation. In the past five years Pilgrim Church Adelaide has been involved in a reorientation and re traditioning process based on a vision of mission as prophetic witness. The leadership the congregation has managed to negotiate a fine balance between the expectations of its members though creative worship, pastoral care and the newer emerging innovative mission practices. Creative and new mission directions have emerged by building partnerships with other city groups and agencies working for the common good, the welfare of the city. The congregation's theological work and ministry practices are now expressed though a fivefold framework of generosity, nature, encounter, solidarity and cooperation. Pilgrim has become a church with a heart for the city by looking outward, engaging with social issues and coming to appreciate the significance of the flows and trends of city life.

Introduction

On Monday June 23rd 2014 the two ministers of Pilgrim Uniting Church, Flinders St Adelaide were arrested after sitting and praying peacefully in the electorate office of federal Liberal MP Jamie Briggs at Mount Barker, S.A. Along with three other UC ministers and leaders of other faiths they were seeking the release of 938 children in detention and were partners in a campaign to put an end to Australia's inhumane asylum seeker treatment.¹ Their decision to participate in this campaign was personal and ministers, Sandy Boyce and Jana Norman were supported by a core group of members from the Pilgrim Uniting Church who were present at the later court proceedings. On August 13th, "the Magistrate dismissed the religious leaders with no conviction and no fine, commenting 'you are a credit to your faith and an inspiration'."² This faith in action episode is one example of Pilgrim's growing and diverse public ministry, one expression of its vision of being a "prophetic witness in the city."

The aim of this paper is to describe the process that has generated a renewed sense of commitment to city ministry by Pilgrim Uniting Church Adelaide. The paper summarises the various contextual factors that have assisted the congregation express its mission

vision through consistent ministry practices. In adopting a renewed emphasis on being a public church the congregation has worked with a mix of ingredients, events and ministry practices to reinforce and set new directions. This model of city ministry has also emerged from the creative combination of ideas, demonstration events and experimentation by applying inherent gifts and resources.

Expanding the congregation's ministry has involved striking a fine balance between the conventional expectations of its gathered Sunday community and developing partnerships with others to become a church with a focus on its city neighbourhood. Through the leadership of its two ordained ministers and a group of lay leaders, known as "mission advocates" the congregation's culture and outlook has changed. New purposeful directions have not been imposed by leaders but generated by negotiating a way forward through a complex and inherent decision making process characterised by both conservative and radical tendencies. As a result of this experience the congregation has become a more engaged, open, supportive and hospitable community as new forms of ministry are expressed through partnerships with a range of community groups and agencies working for the common good, the welfare of the city.

Heritage context and liberal church tradition

Pilgrim Uniting Church is a city congregation with a 177 year history and a liberal theological tradition expressed through the diverse and articulate opinions of its 226 members.³ Five weekly worshipping communities meet on a heritage listed property and the congregation has maintained a range of conventional ministry practices similar to other traditional middle class churches. Over the past forty years the congregation has developed high and diverse expectation of worship and routine pastoral care. A seasonal liturgical pattern is the basis of the church's gathered life, a rhythm of gathering and sending and during the working week members of these communities have become more connected to the city's weekday neighbourhood.

The origins of Pilgrim Uniting Church Adelaide are bound up with the colonial settlement of South Australia. As the "first" congregations of Wesleyan Methodism and Congregationalism its lay leaders and ministers were closely associated with the province's self-determining ethos. The Wakefield vision of a free society was based on economic opportunity, social reform and freedom from class and the restrictions of the established church in Great Britain.⁴ Both congregations were founded in 1837, a few months after European settlement, the Wesleyan Methodist Society on 11th May 1837⁵ and the Congregational church at a covenant service on 19th December 1837⁶.

After several moves the two "first" congregations settled on back to back sites, neighbours with the Adelaide Town Hall and the growing commercial and business centre of a City-State, sometimes called "the Athens of the South."⁷ The 1851 Methodist building faced north on Pirie St and the 1867 Gothic style Stow Memorial faced Flinders St and Victoria Square. In the second half of the 19th century both congregations had high expectations of their preaching ministry and ministers and lay leaders were active in denominational life and public figures in the city's commercial and civic life.

In the first half of the 20th century the social influence of the congregations declined along with the depopulation of the city and changing cultural attitudes. In the post WW2 years

ministers were expected to develop creative solutions to membership decline.⁸ By facing common challenges the two congregations decided to merge on the Flinders St site and on “Trinity Sunday 1st June 1969 the two churches merged to form Union Church in the City, with the Stow building as their home.”⁹ Now, thirty seven years later the style and diversity of several traditions is implicit in the life of the present congregation, through three Sunday morning worshipping communities, a 8.00am chapel service with weekly communion and breakfast, the 9.30 experimental or “family church in the round” and the 11.00am high church liturgy with grand organ and robed choir!

In the past twelve years leaders have adapted this legacy but have also reinterpreted the congregation’s core cultural characteristics through a “retraditioning” process, new wine in old wine skins. “While some denominational leaders promoted the church growth movement, developed as a new form of evangelism, Pilgrim adopted an alternative vision of being a church “called by God to be a prophetic witness”, committed to public ministry, social justice and theological openness.” (ibid).

In effect the church has opted for a contextual, incarnational and praxis approach, working with Asset Based Community Development principles (ABCD). It has also maintained a decision making process engaging its members through the Church Council, committees and meetings of the congregation. Since 2002 six ministers have contributed to this new ethos including the Rev Dr Jenny Byrnes and the Rev Dr Jonathan Barker who began their ministry in January 2002. The current ministers, the Rev Sandy Boyce, a deacon, began her ministry in October 2009 and the Rev Jana Norman in August 2011.

Aspects of its re traditioning, its new forms of public ministry, has come to involve a range of activities, events and programmes including public forums, bridge building activities and the use of the grounds to enhance civic life and provide a neutral or shared meeting space. City mission has evolved and is now expressed as incarnational witness, a “church of the open door” though its street presence and the imaginative use of its surrounding lanes and forecourt.

Changing city context

In many ways a growing appreciation of the city centre context has helped leaders of the congregation to ground their more general or aspirational vision. Pilgrim’s new impetus for mission has involved a growing awareness of the significance of its location along with the implications of a changing city landscape including population growth and a renewed emphasis on civic and cultural life. This has been in part reinforced by an increase in the number of members who have relocated and live in city apartments or have easy access to the city centre.

A renewed emphasis on city ministry has emerged at a time when both local and state governments are committed to revitalise the city’s role in the drive for economic growth and employment opportunities. The residential population of the CBD has grown with the arrival of international students and increase in visitors is the result of capital investment and the growth of the arts community and popular cultural events. The promotion of sporting, arts and community festivals attract participants from the metropolitan area and tourists from interstate and overseas.

The city’s recent revitalisation program has expunged the once popular term, “The City of

Churches” and replaced it with the dominant “Festival State” narrative. Over the past decade returning visitors are surprised to see the changes in Adelaide’s built environment, the changing skyline and the growing 24 hour seven days a week pattern of city life. The State government and the city council have committed significant capital investment in repopulating the city, in providing new facilities and festival, arts and sporting programs to re-establish the city as vibrant, young and exciting place to be. Growth policies have involved marketing Adelaide as a safe and exciting tourist and cultural destination. Examples of this investment, along the north-south axis of the city grid, King William St, include the redeveloped Adelaide oval and at the northern end and the redesigned Victoria Square at the southern end now a meeting place for public rallies and forums.

Similar to other Australian cities the social context is both diverse and pluralistic with sub cultures expressed through the many traditions, interests and values. Quantitative and demographic data has assisted in understanding social trends and changes to the composition of the population. Qualitative research, based on observation and involvement has also informed mission planners about the significance of location and place making. The sociological makeup of the city includes international tertiary students, tourists, shoppers, residents, commuters and the commercial and business community along with those who are socially isolated and homeless. Day to day encounters with the faces on the street, has informed the choices about ministry priorities and have led to a closer relationship with those living on the margins.

The city centre is also the home and meeting place of voluntary groups, vested interests, peak bodies and many functions of civic life are co-located in the Victoria Square precinct. As the centre of power, with its administrative and decision making functions and responsibilities, the city becomes associated with policies that impact the welfare of the State. The representative functions of government, cultural interests, media, sport, health, industry and commerce are almost all located in the city and yet often distant from one another because of their specialised roles.

Pilgrim’s precinct includes the Town Hall, law courts, State government administrative centre, central market and new commercial and media agencies. Those working in these institutions make up the flow of pedestrian traffic and prompt questions about social policies and the relationship this has in sharing the good news. While this changing landscape, the built environment is geographically defined, the city context also symbolises changing social and cultural attitudes and community values, the post-colonial, post secular and neo-capitalist consumption driven economy.

Re imaging: ingredients in the mix

In response to its historic and geographical context the congregation is renegotiating its relationship to its neighbourhood, the city’s civic life and is being driven by innovative and generative practical ministry commitments. Ministry framework has been set by an agreed threefold strategy, “building partnerships, enhancing connectivity and enriching capacity.” Expressions of these new directions include an emphasis on being an open, welcoming and inclusive community and this has contributed to Pilgrim’s growing public presence and mission character. The term, “from club to hub” is one phrase being used to describe this changing relationship.

A great deal of research, discussion and experimentation has contributed to this model but no one, single solution describes the process used to shape Pilgrim's city ministry. The following summary is an outline of the ingredients that have contributed to conceiving, discovering and determining new directions.

1. Implications of the context

In identifying new opportunities for ministry Pilgrim has become a learning community, attentive to the rhythms of city life and to the insights and gifts of its members. Mission directions have been influenced by working with quantitative social and demographic data and by learning from the personal observations and involvement of members. Planning groups meet and dialogue with neighbours, take into account the conversation flows within the city council and network with agencies and groups. New forms of local and social media inform members about social trends and directions and opportunities are provided to reflect and learn from experience.

Approximately forty activities, programmes and events have stemmed from these disciplines. Some of these practices are daily, others weekly and others are now part of the annual calendar. Programmes include Open Church, community garden, peace pole installation, and lounge ministry. Many recent activities and public events have taken place on the Flinders St forecourt and the three lanes on the eastern, northern and western sides of the building. In describing these activities minister, Sandy Boyce suggests that the new framework for engagement is based on partnerships, enhancing connectivity and enriching capacity.¹⁰

2. The 2040 Vision

Pilgrim's core values and ministry preferences were well articulated by the '2040 Vision' process led by Jenny Byrnes over a two year period. General directions for the future were formally adopted at a meeting of the congregation in May 2006. While members accepted these broad directions many joked about not being present when these objectives came to fruition in thirty years' time, a long way off!

The visioning process identified key ministry areas and initiatives in the eight years since are often linked to the vision categories. Conversations and planning sessions frequently return to the 2040 Vision statement and apparently incidental events are often recognised as components in the eleven identified directions.

Ministry directions of the 2014 vision include...

- Becoming a prophetic voice. Proclamation from a Christian perspective on important issues.
- Developing networks of support and action for social justice, for example in relation to asylum seekers, homeless people, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
- Being a centre for spiritual resources and for music and the arts.
- Being a refuge for despairing worshippers from other parts of the church or other parts of Adelaide.

- Being a 'cathedral' of fine worship.
- Hosting a wide range of public events and civic occasions, in cooperation with other city organisations.
- Being involved in conversations stimulated by thinkers in residence, by the expanding tertiary education sector, by the aspirations of the residential population and by multi-faith initiatives.
- Being a space for exploring Progressive Christianity, ecotheology, urban ministry, social change and church renewal.
- Becoming a cyber-church by using technology to expand ministry locally and globally.

A summary comment suggests that this requires “Pilgrim to be a community ready to support growing edges of ministry, while simultaneously nurturing its own membership within the traditions and ethos of the Uniting Church. It’s a tall order and a fine balancing act!”¹¹

Following the adoption of the statement clear directions were not pursued in a consistent or dogmatic way but became a reference point for the range of project proposals that came to occupy the attention of members. Perceptions and commitment to the vision were also influenced by changes in the placement of ministers who arrived bringing their own gifts, passions, style and preferences.

3. Comparative studies, learning and conversation

Pilgrim congregation along with other nearby congregations was formative in establishing the Urban Mission Network in 2005. The Uniting Church in SA decided to merge seven regionally based Presbyteries and merge into one state wide Presbytery-Synod Council. This decision was in part an attempt to respond to conflicting views regarding the ordination of gay ministers and congregations were invited to join networks that reflected their theological views. While many questioned this departure from the UCA ethos of “unity in diversity” leaders of Pilgrim and other more liberal congregations came together and expressed their objectives in the following terms.

“(1) Share together in discerning trends in the social environment and encourage each other in our individual responses as well as acting together where appropriate. We will support each other by sharing their missional objectives and strategies to meet these goals. We will also engage in honest evaluation of outcomes and celebrate together the mission of God.

(2) Share a holistic understanding of the church’s life and mission whereby social justice, evangelism and spirituality (for example) are related together. We will encourage each other to address issues of social justice, articulate the Gospel for 21st century hearers, explore new insights in mission together and as appropriate take joint action to further the mission of God.”¹²

Collaboration between UMN congregations led to a range of conferences, workshops and study programmes with an emphasis on public church-public theology. The Network

invited researchers and leaders in urban theology from the UK and the US to visit Adelaide and stimulate discussion.

In 2006 the first guest from the UK was Ann Morisy and Pilgrim members studied her 2004 book, "Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission." Ann arrived in Adelaide a few days after the release of the report from the Commission on Urban Life and Faith, a major report on urban mission in the UK initiated by the Church of England.¹³ Ann was a member of the commission's secretariat and her insights and experience drew on the significance of local innovative and creative responses in the post-Christian urban environment.

In April 2008 Pilgrim's "thinker in residence" was ecotheology author Michael S. Northcott, Professor of Ethics at the University of Edinburgh. The title of Michael's series of public addresses "Clouds of Witnesses: Truth, Lies and Climate Change" drew on his 2007 publication, "A Moral Climate: the ethics of global warming" and his visit provided the impetus for continuing discussion about the church's commitment to social justice and eco theology.

In June 2009, with the support of the Synod's mission resourcing team, Diana Butler Bass, researcher from the USA led sessions based on insights from her extensive research of mainline congregations in the US. Her research affirmed the importance of ministry practices, from "the bottom up not definitions down" and identified a range of styles and innovative activities fostering vitality. Intentional practices were affirmed not as "grooves of habit" but as the art of adaptation, new expressions of tradition accompanying the re-examination and refashioning of congregational culture based on coherence, authenticity and transformation.

In June 2012 Pilgrim hosted Donna Schaper, minister of Judson Memorial New York City. Donna's inspiration focused on aspects of personal growth, purpose in life and ways for churches to provide spiritual nurture for public capacity. "She likes to 'kick hope into high gear' and show people what is possible through the magnificence of human community strategically focused and spiritually filled."¹⁴ Donna's input focused on issues of political engagement, interfaith relations and public rituals to support action for social change.

In 2013 Dr Chris Baker, Director of Research with the William Temple Foundation, University of Chester was the guest speaker of a three day conference with the theme, "The Postsecular City: Implications for congregations and their community engagement." As a leading researcher and published author in the field of religion and public life Chris focused on the hybrid nature of urban communities and the role of religion in public policy and social welfare. A leading theorist and exponent of the postsecular nature of the city Chris' insights explored the place of religion and spiritual capital in the wider social context. His lectures added to earlier insights about the place of religious traditions in civil society and the way churches are redefining their place in the urban environment. Again a small group, "a Pilgrim brains trust" studied Chris' published works including, "Postsecular Cities: Space Theory and Practice" (Continuum 2011) edited with Justin Beaumont, "Christianity and the New Social Order" (SCM 2011) and "The Hybrid Church in the City-Third Space Thinking" (Ashgate 2007).

Other conferences and workshops have contributed to action based theological reflection.

Leaders of Australian city churches shared their experience at the “The Church at the Centre of the City” conference held at Scots Church in September 2010. Speakers included Tim Costello, former minister at Collins St and St Kilda Baptist churches in Melbourne. The conference involved 24 UC ministers and lay leaders from most capital cities and the programme included a range of electives where practitioners shared their experiences. In October the UMN organised a one day workshop on the implications for ministry of heritage listed buildings and two years later, September 2012, a follow up, “Church on Main Street” workshop was held at St Andrews UC, Glenelg with guest resource participants from Melbourne.

In 2009-2010 a group of UC Adelaide based ministers met monthly to reflect on conference themes and to develop personal support. They adopted a charter and a city mapping grid to describe the complementary nature and style of the four UC congregations within the city bounds. In 2013 Pilgrim and the North Tce Scots congregation signed a memorandum of agreement to work together in developing city ministry. The vision statements of several congregations in this wider framework reflect similar hopes and dreams and affirm common directions a response to, “the imagined city...a space of openness, tolerance, and justice in which the nations of the world can gather and live in peace.”¹⁵

These and other regular quarterly gatherings of the Urban Mission Network provide continuity and in conversation leaders are encouraged to share insights, find support and inspiration and develop collaboration. Theoretical and academic sources in becoming a learning community include systems theory, appreciative enquiry and asset based community development. Biblical and missiological insights are generated and shared through imaginative liturgical material including new musical compositions and prayers. The 9.30 community songbook is an ongoing process and authors and composers have produced several versions since the early 70s.

4. Public forums

While Pilgrim has provided leadership for other churches it has also maintained an ongoing commitment to host public events in the city with a wider non-church audience in mind. A series of annual symposiums began in April 2006 with well-known Australian social researcher, author and popular commentator, Hugh McKay. In October 2009 symposium guest was Associate Professor Marion Maddox of the Macquarie Centre for Social Inclusion at Macquarie University NSW. Marion was author of several publications including, "God under Howard" and the theme of this series of meetings was, “Politics and the Public Good.”

In 2011 Pilgrim entered into an ongoing partnership with RUSSLR, the Research Unit for Society and Law at the University of Adelaide. Guests at subsequent symposiums have included Robert Miller in October 2012 on the topic of first peoples. “Islam and Multi Faith Relations,” was the theme of John Strawson in November 2013 and in August 2014 the symposium topic was, “Influencing Public Discourse for the Common Good” with Prof Steven Smith. Each symposium has included a panel conversation and audio records of these and conferences are accessible through Pilgrims web site.¹⁶ Developed over a number of years by one voluntary lay leader the web site has become an important communication tool and provides access to conference report in addition to Sunday

services.

5. Partnerships and networking

As Pilgrim's city ministry has expanded there has been a renewed emphasis on the use of the outdoor space surrounding the church's two buildings. Pilgrims weekday street ministry has come to emphasise its visibility, public presence, a "inside- out" engagement with passing pedestrian traffic. The grounds include a community garden, a peace pole installation, yarn bombing and is the venue for Monday lunch time "music in the lane" series. Outdoor liturgies include Sorry Day, Easter vigils, including Holy Week Stations of the Cross and walks to Victoria Square.

One of the most recent monthly Flinders street, "Light the Dark," event is a candlelight vigil held on the first Thursday and this draws attention to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. The congregation's commitment to refugees grew from visiting the former Baxter detention centre and the activities of the Circle of Friends movement. Members also join in street meetings, marches and public rallies associated with this social justice campaign.

These initiatives in part have grown out of long term and well-established ministry practices including the lounge ministry. The "Open Church" program provides access for visitors and complements the hospitality based lounge ministry for those living on the streets or in sheltered accommodation. Early in 2015 this ministry has extended and includes a Sunday evening meal. Other free events include Thursday lunch time organ concerts.

Other aspects of mission as hospitality aim to nurture partnerships, grow connectivity and enrich capacity. In February 2014 29 project proposals were listed and include one off events and other more long term commitments. Examples include an Amnesty Hot desk, membership of Shelter SA and Rec link, hosting visiting school groups, pop up office, wisdom of senior's project, Persian music night and commitment and partnership with the Congress (UAICC), the Aboriginal church within the UCA. In March 2015 38 mission practices are listed in the notes of the Mission Development Committee.

Some projects are part of an annual calendar of events. These include Pancake Day on Shrove Tuesday and a range of community based special days. Hospitality and liturgical events are now part of this calendar including reflective liturgies for staff and recipients of homeless services, those affected by injury and accidents at work and the more traditional World Day of Prayer, Spring Festival and History Month in May. Regular art and photo exhibitions and festival events are staged during the year including Sunday afternoon organ recitals with interstate and overseas guests. New expressions of public liturgy and community gatherings are in addition to traditional liturgical events of Advent, Christmas and Ester plus conventional pastoral services including funerals and marriages.

There is a new sense that Pilgrim has become a church of the open door through becoming a meeting place, a hub, based on core values summarised as encounter, nurture, solidarity, generosity and cooperation.

6. Decision making and management process

This paper has not set out to describe the internal or church life patterns that maintain and support Pilgrim's worship and pastoral care routines and has focussed on new expressions of being a church with a mission from the margins. It is however helpful to outline the steps taken to develop a commitment to mission in the city and how this has evolved and received widespread support from members.

Pilgrim's decision making process includes an informal continuous conversation flow alongside of the more formal deliberation of committees, working groups, monthly meeting of the church council and quarterly Sunday meetings of the three worshipping communities, many meetings!

Officers of the church council are lay members and ministers are not expected to be executive officers or impose directions. Ministers provide leadership by encouraging members to reflect theologically and take initiative by developing and promoting new expressions of the church's week day ministry. Weekly sermons, printed news sheets, written proposals, conversations and consultation all contribute to shaping a local theology and a sense of direction and purpose. Leaders do not underestimate the importance of the one to one and cluster groups conversations and these conversations support active volunteers and express the congregation's theology, every member gifted and called to share in the ministry.

While the decision making process is complex, mission activists, individuals, groups and ministers take the initiative in planting seeds of an idea and in sharing hunches. Allocating financial resources is based on budget planning that ensures support for two full time ministers, a music ministry for the 11.00am community, week day administrative management and reserve funds for property repairs including long term maintenance of a heritage listed building. The expenditure estimate for the 2015 budget is over \$500,000. It is of interest to note that there have been many changes to the membership, name and function of the task groups and committees involved in mission planning while property and finance committees have continued their work in a more consistent and routine manner.

Members expect to be informed and so pastoral care and worship planning continues alongside the growing city ministry. The tone of meetings have changed as members have come to use UCA consensus decision making processes and by providing documentation, explaining objectives, telling stories and celebrating achievements.

The planning process is not closed or linear and does not involve rigid implementation of a tight set of objectives. Change and movement is described as "organic", a process that looks for opportunities and takes risks. Those responsible for planning and implementing the mission vision have come to understand that resourcing new ministry commitments does not only depend on the loyalty of long term members but are opportunities for new members and other partners to become involved.

Conclusion

This case study has set out to describe the tradition, context, learning experience and the decision making process that has led a historic city church to a renewed mission vocation.

Its partnerships with other community groups and causes, networking and innovation have led to a growing sense of direction and purpose. Once at the centre of denominational and civic life Pilgrim's journey now begins with a vision of justice, generated by standing with others on the margins, in affirming and partnering with others who are working for the good of the city, those committed to making Adelaide a place of shalom, a safe home and a community of hospitality and welcome for all. (Jeremiah 29:7).

During the past five years active members of the congregation have set out to embody practical expressions of an earlier vision statement, "We are called by God to be a prophetic witness in the city of Adelaide, so that new life and vitality will be generated in our city and in its people. We celebrate in our unity and diversity, our shared beliefs and past experiences and value worship, teaching, creativity and justice." Ingredients in this evolutionary process have included social or contextual analysis, theological reflection and finding ways to articulate and rehearse core ministry practices and values. While geographically located at the centre of the city's commercial, cultural and political life the congregation's witness has emerged from the margins in the context of a changing social landscape.

Endnotes

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