

## Still Open?

*'Really? That church is still open? It always looks closed to me and I thought it was no longer used as a church'.*

This conversation took place soon after I began my ministry placement in a large church in the centre of Adelaide. The conversation was with a man who regularly walked through the public laneway alongside the church on weekdays. His observation was a fair enough, since there were no obvious signs of the church existing beyond the four walls. The doors at the front were usually closed apart from two hours on weekdays. That said, there were A-frames in the laneway, but they simply served to add to the clutter of general signage in the laneway and the church signs could be easily overlooked. But for this man, the physical building served merely as a 'place marker' for where a church had once been active, but had, he presumed, gone the way of many other churches which are now used for a variety of purposes including nightclubs, real estate agencies and so on.

The conversation struck me as significant.

I was reminded of the insights of Dr Ann Morisey speaking about 'flows' around church buildings. In the case of a city church, these 'flows' are those people who move through and around the space. Calculating the number of people who walk along the adjacent laneway, we discovered that in a working day it would be well over a thousand people. And each of these people may also have perceived that this large, historical church was simply a shell, a 'place marker' for the life, vibrancy and energy of the Christian community that had once gathered in the building.

Of course, the church has indeed maintained vibrancy within the walls – five worshipping communities each week, a lively ministry with the homeless and disadvantaged and lonely, supporting refugees and other involvement in social justice, music recitals and so on. We take seriously the mission of the church *'to be a prophetic witness in the city of Adelaide so that new life and vitality are generated in the city and its people'*. But little of that would be evident to those walking the laneway each week, past the imposing structure of the glorious church in Gothic architectural style.

Ann Morisey remarks that it's the flows that make places special, and that city centre churches need to be aware of the flows near church buildings and to think about the flows that might be initiated to create special – spiritual – places. She proposes the notion of 'vicarious religion', whereby people who would not usually participate in the church community are pleased that a minority of other people are committed to religious practice, and see that this minority is 'holding a holy place' for them.

As a city church, we have purposely considered about how our outdoor spaces could be used in a way that intentionally connects church and community – not as enticement into the church on a Sunday as a main objective, but to locate ourselves within the community, where people work, live and play. We began with several activities that heightened the possibility of connecting. On Monday lunchtimes in the warmer months, the church provides free live music at lunchtime on the large plaza

area alongside the laneway – an eclectic range of musicians, including individual singer-songwriters, school choirs and bands, rock groups, and folk groups. ‘Music in the Lane’ has become well known and valued, and is supported by Adelaide City Council personnel and volunteers. We organized ‘Soundbites’ at lunchtime, with guest speakers on pertinent topics, in the same plaza area. Each speaker has 5 minutes to speak about a topical issue, providing an enriching environment for people during the lunch break. We gained a small grant from the City Council to create a community garden, which generated considerable interest and conversation, and regular planting and harvesting by those who live or work in the city. Importantly, these activities were all beyond the church walls.

In September last year, the church organized a national city churches conference, with a guest speaker from the UK, Dr Chris Baker, author of *The Hybrid Church in the City*. He spoke about the relationship between public life and religion, and the impact religious ideas, identities and practices have on politics and public policy. He has an interest in the intersection between urban space and public religion. During the conference, we also organized a multi-faith service of lament for refugees and asylum seekers. Chris affirmed the service, but challenged us to think about why we did not consider holding it in the public arena, at the front of the church where people actually would vicariously experience the event. Taking on that challenge, we have continued to host monthly services of lament, on the forecourt of the church adjacent to a very busy street and opposite Government offices, during the ‘rush hour’. As people walk from office to home, or wait at the traffic lights in their cars, they observe the church taking on a very public role. It is our hope that they may see the church is also ‘holding a holy place’ for them in the lament.

These are examples of moving beyond the four walls, while still continuing worship and ministry within the church walls. In the process we have learned some basic principles. The first is ‘**building partnerships**’. In connecting church and community, it is essential to build relationships with community ‘partners’ to work on projects. For us, that includes Amnesty International, the Adelaide City Council, homelessness agencies, and many other community groups. As partners, initiatives are planned and developed, with shared ownership for the outcome of a project. This has placed us in the company of some surprising and wonderful relationships with community groups. It requires the church to be a community player in the issues of the day in collaboration with others.

One outstanding example is the partnership with RUSSLR, the University of Adelaide’s Research Unit for the Study of Society, Law and Religion. Together, we have now hosted three international speakers at our annual symposium, the last one being a global expert on the peace of Islam along with an impressive interfaith panel of speakers. Speaking into the issues of the day, with church and a secular religious educational centre working together.

We have a different sense of how our space is used inside the church. Although the usual practice of ‘hiring space’ still happens for some outside groups with commercial interests, we are much more strategic in being partners with community groups that share a concern for the common good. It has involved a shift to understanding our role as host offering hospitality and welcome, rather than a commercial hiring arrangement for the space inside the church. As such, we have become host for the

annual memorial service for people who have died while homeless organized by Homelessness SA, and the annual service for International Workers Memorial Day for people who have died at work. This invites collaboration - with the church offering ritual and spiritual practices for people who look to the church to provide a 'holy space' for them in times of loss and sorrow but who may not usually cross the threshold of the church. It also invites us to develop 'apt' liturgies (Ann Morrissey) that help community groups to mark moments of crisis or joy with 'non churchy' rituals which nonetheless help people to connect with God and the Christian story.

These examples illustrate our second principle of '**enhancing connectivity**', using and developing our space to be able to provide hospitality for initiatives and events. We are developing a program of photographic and art exhibitions, with the capacity for displays inside and outside the church – including along the laneway. We collaborated with the Royal Society for the Arts (SA) in a major art exhibition on solar energy. During Homelessness Week, we plan to develop a new collaboration with agencies in the homelessness sector to mount a photographic exhibition of the city through the eyes of those who sleep rough in the city.

The third principle is '**enriching capacity**', helping people to respond to their heartburst – a term I first heard used by Tom Bandy on a visit many years ago. The idea captivated me – freeing people up to respond to their 'heartburst' rather than the ministry team focused on identifying people to 'plug' into pre-fabricated roles within the church community. It invites collective discernment about what God is up to within the community, and within people's lives, and to cooperate with God in responding to leading edges for mission and ministry. The church leadership supports people to discern and respond to their heartburst, and encourages and develops new ideas and initiatives in response. It may be necessary for some things that have been done previously to be put aside for a season, or longer, in order to make space to respond to ongoing discernment and activity. Enriching capacity is an inside-outside commitment to authentic, life-enhancing relationships with simple points of connection that help people flourish.

These three approaches – building partnership, enhancing connectivity and enriching capacity – provide generative ways to frame our activities and approach to ministry and mission as a congregation in the centre of the city. In our community engagement, we are able to integrate our core Christian practices of welcome and hospitality, humility, generosity, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation, thus enriching the community through our common work together. 'Church' may be re-imagined as a vibrant eco-system that is able to respond, evolve and grow – sometimes in surprising and innovative ways, but always with a focus on our mission together: *to be a prophetic witness in the city of Adelaide so that new life and vitality are generated in the city and its people.*

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