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President of the Australian Association for Mission Studies:

Mrs Helen Stewart

Editor of the Australian Journal of Mission Studies:

Rev. Associate Professor Michael A. Kelly CSsR

Correspondence regarding articles:

Email: m.kelly@ytu.edu.au

Correspondence regarding subscriptions:

Dr Peter Wilkinson, AAMS Treasurer

Email: pjw52@bigpond.com

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- Promote the theological, biblical, historical, practical, and contextual study of mission, local and global.
- Promote engagement with the cultures and people with whom Christians share and explore the gospel, including, in particular, Australian Indigenous voices.
- Encourage cooperation and sharing of research and experience among individuals and institutions engaged in mission.
- Bring together, through networks, conferences, and seminars, those engaged in mission studies.
- Stimulate publications in missiology, including a journal.
- Affiliate with the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), work in partnership with the Aotearoa/ New Zealand Association for Mission Studies (ANZAMS) and build links with those engaged in mission studies in the South Pacific.

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Contents



Editorial <i>Michael A. Kelly CSsR</i>	4
ARTICLES	
Missio Dei: Today's Mission Paradigm and the Conversions It Requires <i>Rev. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD</i>	6
The Missio Dei according to Colossians 1:9-23. <i>Reverend Professor Vicky Balabanski</i>	16
'Unity in Faith and Mission': Reflections on the Current Work of the Methodist Roman Catholic International Commission <i>Rev Professor Glen O'Brien</i>	27
Interreligious Dialogue – A Hidden Treasure <i>Rev Dr Patrick McInerney</i>	36
Shincheonji in the Pacific: a threat to Christian harmony in Pacific communities. <i>Dr Terry Pouono</i>	45
BOOK REVIEWS	
What is Happening to Religion in Australia? <i>Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon</i>	56
SVD Mission in Contexts: Creative Responses in a Wounded World <i>Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon</i>	58
The Christ Who Embraces: An Orthodox Theology of Margins <i>Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon</i>	60
The Missionary Kids: Unmasking the Myths of White Evangelicalism <i>Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon</i>	62

Editorial



In 2025, the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) of the Australia Province (Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and Myanmar) celebrated the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of their foundation which began in 1875 by a German priest, St Arnold Janssen. Across the world today, there are almost six thousand members serving in more than seventy countries.

As a way of celebrating this milestone, the Australian Province had a gathering of the confreres for three days in October 2025 and then gathered for an ecumenical conference at Yara Theological Union in Box Hill on Thursday and Friday 2-3 October for a Conference with the theme of “*Missio Dei*: An Ecumenical Conversation.”

We were graced by scholars from a variety of Christian traditions, and this issue of the journal contains four keynote addresses, one workshop address, and a paper from a New Zealand scholar who was not a participant in the Conference, but who offers us a valuable introduction to a new religious movement in the Pacific Islands.

The opening article by Antonio Pernia, a former Superior General of the SVD’s, offer us an historical review of the concept of *Missio Dei* and then invites us into a number of conversions in our understanding of mission in the contemporary context: from activism to contemplation, from individualism to collaboration, from superiority to humility, from evangelising to being evangelised, and from burden to privilege.

The second paper is from Vicky Balabanski, a biblical scholar, who examines the concept of *Missio Dei* using an analysis of the longest Greek biblical text in the New Testament which is from Colossians 1:9-23. This is a technical but fascinating reflection on biblical textual analysis on the concept of mission.

As a scholar of Methodism, and a member of the Methodist Roman Catholic International Commission which began meeting in 1967, Glen O’Brien offers us insights into a fruitful ecumenical dialogue. The desire of the internal commission is ‘full communion’ between the churches, but Methodism is a union of ecclesial communities that speaks with a variety of voices. He also proposes a communion that might be achieved through the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults.

Vatican II pioneered a new approach to other religions. However, for many Catholics, interreligious dialogue remains a “hidden treasure” (Matt 13:44). In this workshop presentation, Patrick McInerney helps us to walk with others in our common pilgrim journey of life, learn from them, support them, and work for the common good, being enriched by mutual encounter and together building the Kingdom of God.

In a paper that was not part of the SVD-AAMS Conference, we learn from Terry Puono from the University of Otago about a relatively new religious movement in the Pacific Islands originating in Korea and known as *Shincheonji*. This is something of which I was unaware but am grateful for Terry’s introduction to this new phenomenon of what is essentially a cult where the leader claims to be the only interpreter of the Book of Revelation.

Our usual generous book reviewer, Ross Mackinnon offers us reviews of four very different books that enrich our missional perspectives.

Michael A. Kelly CSsR

Editor

ARTICLES

***Missio Dei*: Today's Mission Paradigm and the Conversions It Requires**



Rev. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD

Antonio is a native of the Philippines, and was superior general of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) from 2000 to 2012. He holds a master's degree in Philosophy from the Divine Word Seminary in Tagaytay City, Philippines and a doctor's degree in Fundamental Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He has taught philosophy and theology at the Divine Word School of Theology (DWST) in Tagaytay City and the Regional Major Seminary (REMASE) in Davao City. At present he is the Vice-Director for Studies of the Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies (DWIMS) in Tagaytay City and teaches fundamental theology at DWST and mission theology at DWIMS.

In view of the theme of this Mission Conference, which is “*Missio Dei*: An Ecumenical Conversation,” I would like to offer, in this keynote address, a reflection on “*Missio Dei*: Today's Mission Paradigm and the Conversions It Requires.” This reflection comes in three parts: (1) first, a short review of the notion of *Missio Dei*, (2) secondly, an exploration into the implications of *Missio Dei* on the understanding of mission today, and (3) thirdly, a reflection on the changes in the way of doing mission implied by *Missio Dei*. And so, *Missio Dei* and its impact on the theory and practice of mission today.

1. *Missio Dei*: Today's Mission Paradigm

Although the notion of *Missio Dei* may be traced as far back as St. Augustine in the 5th century or St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century,¹ as a modern missiological concept, it is generally agreed that it goes back to the work of Karl Barth in the 1930's, particularly to a paper he read at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932, in which he articulated the idea of mission as an activity of God himself. This was picked up by Karl Hartenstein, the director of the Basel Mission, who introduced the notion of “*Missio Dei*,” although not the exact term itself, at the International Missionary Conference (IMC) at Wellingen (Germany) in 1952.²

After Wellingen, however, two distinct, and even opposing, perspectives on *Missio Dei* emerged, namely,—the “Christocentric” and Cosmocentric” points of view, or the “church-centric” and the “world-centric” perspectives.³ The Christocentric view sees God's mission as centered on the work of Christ through the Church, whereas the Cosmocentric view conceives of God's mission as being active in all of the cosmos. For Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, the Dutch missiologist who was the most prominent proponent of the Cosmocentric view, the church is “an appendix to God's work.” He is

¹ See Eddie Arthur, “*Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church,” [posted 06-2013], www.wycliffe.net/missiology?id=3960.

² See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (20th Anniversary Edition, New York: Orbis Books, 1991/2011), 398-402; Eddie Arthur, “*Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church,” Theo Sundermeier, “Theology of Mission,” in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, ed. by Karl Muller, et al. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 434; Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 290-292.

³ See Eddie Arthur, “*Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church.” Also, David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400-402; Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 290-291.

quoted as saying that “When one desires to speak about God’s dealings with the world, the church can be mentioned only in passing and without strong emphasis.”⁴

Despite the debate on its exact interpretation, *Missio Dei* since Welligen “has been embraced by virtually all Christian persuasions,”⁵ becoming thereby the new paradigm of mission, whereby mission is seen not primarily as an activity of the Church but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God, and mission is a movement from God to the world. The Church is viewed as an instrument for this mission. Thus, the classical doctrine of the Trinity, whereby the Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit, is expanded to include yet another “sending,” that is, the Father, Son and Spirit sending the Church into the world. And so, the Church, instead of being the “sender” is the one “sent.”⁶ Thus, there is Church because there is mission, and not vice-versa. Or, it is not the Church of Christ that has a mission, but the mission of Christ which has a Church.⁷

However, the idea of *Missio Dei* did not gain prominence in missiological thinking until the 1990s, perhaps because of a certain passivity with which it became associated in some circles. In other words, if mission is God’s work then perhaps it is best left to God, without our interference.⁸ As David Bosch puts it, “those who supported the wider understanding of the concept [i.e., the Cosmocentric view] tended to radicalize the view that the *Missio Dei* was larger than the mission of the church, even to the point of suggesting that it *excluded* the church’s involvement.”⁹ In the 1990s, however, it was increasingly seen as an important expression of mission spirituality - that is, that those involved in mission must be “conformed to the mission and ministry of Jesus.”¹⁰

Two things should be noted regarding the notion of *Missio Dei*. First, *Missio Dei* shifts the approach to missiology from ecclesiology and soteriology to the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In other words, it shifts the understanding of mission from that of Church expansion (or “*plantatio ecclesiae*”) and of the saving of souls (or “*salus animarum*”) to one whereby mission is seen as the “overflow” of Trinitarian love into the world. Secondly, *Missio Dei* expands the scope of mission. Mission embraces not just the Church but also the world as a whole. In other words, *Missio Dei* refers not just to God’s action in the Church and through the Church, but also to God’s action in the world.¹¹

2. *Missio Dei* and the Understanding of Mission Today

Today’s paradigm of mission, *Missio Dei* has important implications for the understanding of mission today. In particular, it clarifies the understanding of four fundamental questions about mission, namely, the questions about the origin, goal, mode and motive for mission.

⁴ In T. Englesviken, “*Missio Dei*: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology,” *International Review of Mission*. Vol. 92, Issue 367, 2003, as cited by Eddie Arthur, “*Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church.”

⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400.

⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

⁷ See Adrian Hastings, “Mission,” in *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 967-969. See also Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 8.

⁸ See Robert Kisala, “Prophetic Dialogue as Life and Mission,” *Verbum SVD* 47/4 (2006), 332.

⁹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 401.

¹⁰ Robert Kisala, “Prophetic Dialogue as Life and Mission,” 332; Also, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 291.

¹¹ See Eddie Arthur, “*Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church.” Also Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

2.1. The Origin of Mission

The central assertion of *Missio Dei* is precisely that the origin or source of mission is not the Church but the Triune God. In Catholic theology, this is articulated by *Ad Gentes* (AG),¹² Vatican II's Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church. The decree traces the origin of the mission of the Church to the sending by the Father of the Son and the Spirit in order to bring about God's universal plan of salvation (see AG 1-2, 9). As paragraph two puts it: "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father."

Paragraph nine of AG parallels *Missio Dei*'s insistence that mission is primarily God's work by saying: "Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God's decree, and its fulfillment in the world and in world history, in the course of which God, by means of mission, manifestly works out the history of salvation." Both statements from *Ad Gentes* form the basis for what is now known as the "Trinitarian origin of mission."

The framework for this is the theological vision of the Triune God as communion and communication, interaction and dialogue, between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And this inner communication or dialogue overflows into - or better, embraces - creation and history. Mission, then, is the Triune God's ongoing dialogue with the world and with humanity, a dialogue that invites and draws humanity and all of creation into full communion with the Divine community. Thus, there is mission not because it is mandated by the Church, but because God is a Triune God. Before being about what the Church does, mission is about who God is.

So, while traditionally, the origin of mission was traced back to the "mission mandate" received by the Church on the day of the Ascension (see Matt 28:18-20), *Missio Dei* pushes the origin of mission back to the very beginning, i.e., to the very heart of the Trinity, the inner communication or dialogue within the Divine Community itself.

2.2. The Goal of Mission

Traditionally, based on the "Mission Mandate" of the Risen Christ, the goal of mission was "making disciples of all nations." This entailed establishing the Church in those places where it did not yet exist. "Plantatio Ecclesiae" or the "implanting of the Church" was how the goal of mission was expressed traditionally. Mission, therefore, was a matter of the extension of the visible Church in those areas where it was not yet present.

The notion of mission as *Missio Dei* enlarges the scope of mission. Its goal is not so much the expansion of the visible Church as the realization of God's mission itself or God's universal plan of salvation. This salvific plan of God is universal and cosmic, embracing the whole human race and, indeed, all of creation. St. Paul speaks of it as "uniting in Christ all things, things in heaven and on earth" (Eph 1:10) or as reconciling all things in Christ (see Col 1:20). The Book of Revelation speaks of it as the emergence of a new heaven and a new earth (see Rev 21:1-4). Jesus proclaims it as the good news of the coming of the "Kingdom of God."

¹² See Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

The biblical text that brings this out clearly is Luke 4:16-21 which narrates Jesus' programmatic discourse in the synagogue of Nazareth at the start of his public ministry. Applying to himself and to his ministry the prophecy of Isaiah (see Isa 61:1f), Jesus outlines the features of his ministry: "bringing good news to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed." This chapter of Luke ends with Jesus telling the people: "To the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent" (Luke 4:43). The Kingdom of God was Jesus' vision of God's plan for a world of justice, peace, reconciliation, and love, requiring both personal conversion and social transformation.

David Bosch believes that this text of Luke "has, for all practical purposes, replaced Matthew's 'Great Commission' (see Matt 28:16-20) as the key text not only for understanding Christ's own mission but also that of the Church."¹³

2.3. The Mode of Mission

Traditionally, particularly during the era of colonization, mission was carried out in the so-called "conquest mode."¹⁴ In those days, missionaries often came on "the coat-tails of the colonizers."¹⁵ Friars and colonizers stood side by side each other - the one with cross and the other with sword in hand - to evangelise the natives, but also to subdue them to foreign rule. This way of doing mission operated out of medieval theology where the Church believed herself to be the one and only bastion of truth. Other religions were regarded as in error at best and demonic at worst. And the Church saw it as her moral obligation to conquer, dominate and replace these religions.

The understanding of mission as *Missio Dei* acknowledges that God has been in dialogue with all peoples from the beginning. Other religious and cultural traditions, therefore, contain "seeds of the Word" (AG 11) or "rays of the Truth" (NA 2).¹⁶ They are not entirely evil or totally in error. Thus, Vatican II introduced the theme of dialogue. Several of its documents state that the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions, and urges Catholics to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.¹⁷

Post-conciliar documents underline the idea of dialogue even more strongly. For instance, the 1984 document, *Dialogue and Mission*, of what was formerly the Secretariat for Non-Christians, states that,

Dialogue is...the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it....Any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the Gospel.¹⁸

¹³ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 85.

¹⁴ See Edmund Chia, "Mission, Dialogue and Missionary Congregations," in *SEDOS Bulletin* 34, No. 2 (February 2002), 52-53.

¹⁵ This was the era of the marriage between Church and State, when the missionary work of the Church was undertaken under the patronage of Catholic kings of Spain and Portugal (i.e., the *Patronato Real*).

¹⁶ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

¹⁷ For instance, *Nostra Aetate* 2, *Ad Gentes* 11, 12.

¹⁸ See Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Mission: The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), no. 29.

In other words, dialogue is no longer simply an option that we are at liberty to do or not do. Dialogue is now a missiological imperative which we cannot do without. Other post-conciliar documents underline the same thing. For instance, Pope Paul VI's first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, (ES)¹⁹ paragraph 72 says:

God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. "He hath first loved us." We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men, without waiting to be summoned to it by others.

Or, Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* (RM)²⁰ paragraph fifty-seven which states that "Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way."

2.4. The Motive for Mission

Traditionally, the motive for mission was the salvation of non-Christians who, if they were not baptised and brought into the fold of the church, would risk eternal damnation. "Outside the church there is no salvation" ("extra ecclesiam nulla salus") - this was the assumption which launched the great missionary movement in the sixteenth century and which motivated the great missionaries of the past to go to foreign lands. "Salus animarum" or the "salvation of souls" was how the motive for mission was expressed traditionally.

Today, however, we no longer share the anxiety of the past. Vatican II recognizes other religions - and even only the sincere effort to seek the truth (see LG 16²¹) - as channels of grace and ways of salvation. We now believe that God has not abandoned, nor will abandon, his people. Thus, we do not carry Christ to places where he is not already present in some way. Christ and his Spirit are there everywhere before us and ahead of us, in ways unknown to us.²² The task of mission today is to discover and strengthen the presence of Christ and the action of the Spirit in the world.

Today the motive for mission is seen in terms of discipleship. Mission is there not because we need to save the non-Christians from eternal damnation, but because we are called to discipleship in Jesus. And to follow Jesus is precisely to follow him in his mission of bringing about the realization God's salvific plan.

This entails a shift in the way the motive for mission is understood. In the past, the motive for mission was located in a need on the part of the recipients of the good news or the objects of evangelisation, i.e., the need of the non-Christians to hear the good news and thus attain salvation. Now, the motive for mission is located in a need on the part of the bearers of the good news or the subjects of evangelisation, i.e., the disciple who follows the Lord and shares in his mission. In other words, the disciple is one who experiences the Gospel as good news, so good that he or she needs to share it with others.

This, in fact, seems to be the "logic of good news." If something is really good, then it needs to be shared with others. In the Gospel of Luke, when Mary experienced the good news of her election as the mother of the Son of God, it was so good a news to her that she needed to share it with another. So, she travelled in haste over the hill country of Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth and share this good news with her

¹⁹ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html

²⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html

²¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

²² See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 496.

(see Luke 1:26-45). Or, in the parable of the lost coin, the woman who finds the coin she had lost is so filled with joy, that she calls together her friends and neighbors and shares this good news with them (see Luke 15: 8-10). As Pope Francis puts it in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG),²³ the experience of the “Joy of the Gospel” is the basis and fountainhead of mission (see EG 20-23).

Already in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN),²⁴ Pope Paul VI had signaled this shift. In paragraph eighty, he says:

It would be useful if every Christian and every evangelizer were to pray about the following thought: men can gain salvation also in other ways, by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame – what St. Paul called "blushing for the Gospel" – or as a result of false ideas we fail to preach it? For that would be to betray the call of God, who wishes the seed to bear fruit through the voice of the ministers of the Gospel

Thus, more than the salvation of non-Christians, the motive of mission is the salvation of Christians. As St. Paul puts it, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16).

3. *Missio Dei* and the Practice of Mission Today

A change in theory leads to a change in praxis. A change in the way we understand mission leads to a change in the way we do mission. Thus, *Missio Dei* as the new paradigm of mission entails some fundamental conversions in our way of doing mission today. In my view, five such conversions are required, namely, (1) from activism to contemplation, (2) from individualism to collaboration, (3) from superiority to humility, (4) from only evangelising to also being evangelised, and (5) from burden and sacrifice to privilege and gift. A word on each of these five conversions.

3.1. From Activism to Contemplation

The first conversion is from activism to contemplation. Sometimes, or even quite often, we are very “Pelagian”²⁵ in our way of doing mission. We act as if mission depends more on our efforts than on God’s grace. And so we frequently fall into the danger of “activism”- that is, the danger of thinking that the best way to do mission is to become effective in what we do. And so we work and work and work, and give our attention almost exclusively to the effectivity of what we do, and no longer have the time to care for the quality of our lives and the credibility of our personal witness.

Seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realise that our participation in mission is fundamentally an encounter with mystery - the mystery of the Triune God who calls all of humanity and all of creation to share in his life and glory, the mystery of God’s salvific plan for the world, the mystery of the presence and action of Christ and the Spirit in the world. Thus, the very first challenge in mission is to seek out,

²³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, On The Proclamation of the Gospel In Today’s World, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

²⁴ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html

²⁵ The reference here is to the controversy in Church history between St. Augustine who emphasized the primacy of “grace” and Pelagius who, in contrast, emphasized the primacy of “human effort.”

discern and strengthen the presence of Christ and the action of the Spirit in the world. But it will be impossible to discern if we do not approach mission in contemplation. For to contemplate is precisely to look, to listen, to learn, to discern, to respond, to collaborate.

The missionary, then, evangelises not primarily by doing things for the people but by being with them and enabling them to do things themselves. The missionary's mission method will be marked not by frenetic activity but by contemplative presence among God's people. The missionary will not be tempted to explain away the mystery of God, but rather lead people into this very mystery through signs and symbols in respectful dialogue. The missionary will give priority to being missionary over *doing missionary things*.

Thus, one expectation of missionaries today is the development of a contemplative spirit in mission. We need to abandon the idea that contemplation is the opposite of mission. We need, rather, to promote the idea that contemplation is a constitutive dimension of mission. In fact, experts tell us that contemplation entails not just an "ascending moment" of prayer, meditation, adoration but also a "descending moment" of gazing at the world with the eyes of God.²⁶ The ascending moment of gazing at God's face leads to the descending moment of learning how to gaze at the world with the eyes of God. For it is only from the perspective of God's larger world that we see how much the world is in need of redemption, liberation and salvation. Only from the perspective of God's larger world do we see how much the world suffers, how many are the people who hunger, how often children die an untimely death. Only from this perspective do we see how much the world needs mission. How different would our world be if we learned to see the world with the eyes of God. Under the gaze of God's eyes, enemies become friends, separating walls become open doors, strangers become brothers or sisters, borders become bridges, diversity leads not to differences and conflict but to harmony and unity. Indeed, only if people learn to see the world with God's eyes would our mission truly bear fruit.

3.2. From Individualism to Collaboration

A second conversion is from individualism to collaboration and teamwork. Sometimes we think that we are the only ones called to mission - whether in the sense of the individual or in the sense of one's congregation. "Rugged individualism" has long been a description of our early missionaries. This description came with the notion of the missionary as a "bush missionary" who single-handedly tried to create a Christian community in the midst of a hostile environment. Indeed, very often, we do our work, and do it well, but it is our work and no one else's. Another missionary is only a nuisance or a hindrance to our work.

Seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realise that our call to mission is a call to share in God's mission, which implies a call to collaborate with God, first of all, and with all others who are similarly called by God. *Missio Dei* implies that mission is larger than what each individual or each congregation can do. It is even larger than what all of us together can do. Collaboration, then, is not just a strategy for mission. We collaborate not just because we want to be more effective in mission. Collaboration is, in fact, an essential characteristic of mission. Collaboration is a statement about the nature of mission. By collaborating we are saying that mission is God's in the first place and that the primary agent of mission is God's Spirit.

²⁶ See, for instance, Donna Orsuto, "Dialogue: Optional Activity or Way of Life," in *The Religious: A Person of Dialogue* (Dialogue in the Church and with the Church), Semestral Assembly of the USG (Union of Superiors General), 28-31 May 2003, Rome, 19-41.

Thus, another expectation of missionaries today is the promotion of a collaborative attitude in mission—collaboration among religious congregations, collaboration between religious and diocesan clergy, collaboration with the lay faithful, collaboration among the different Christian Churches, collaboration with followers of other religious traditions.

3.3. From Superiority to Humility

A third conversion is from superiority to humility. I was once talking with an African colleague who decried the fact that missionaries in the past preached the gospel as if they owned the faith, dictating thereby the terms by which it must be understood (doctrine/dogma), lived (morals/ethics) and celebrated (liturgy/worship). Coming largely from Christian Europe, many missionaries in the past indeed acted as if the gospel was “theirs” - part and parcel of their European heritage and of their European identity. Coming, likewise, from what was assumed to be a “higher” culture and from economically developed and technologically advanced countries, missionaries are evangelized from a position of power and superiority. And apparently, this assumed superiority - religious, cultural, economic and technological - gave them the right to impose the Christian gospel on peoples who were considered “culturally primitive,” “religiously pagan,” “economically poor,” and “technologically backward.”

Seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realise that the Christian gospel is not the possession of any one people of a particular culture, but that it is meant for all peoples and cultures, of all times and generations. The missionary is never the “owner” or “master” of the gospel, but only its “steward” and “servant.” Today, then, the missionary is called to preach the gospel not as if he or she owned it, dictating thereby the terms by which it must be understood, lived and celebrated. The approach of the missionary today must be to share the faith not as one’s possession but as a gift received from God through others.

This entails that today the missionary is called to evangelise from a position of powerlessness, lowliness and humility.²⁷ He or she will not seek power - economic, cultural, technological, or even media power. The only power he or she will need is the power of the Word and of the Spirit. And that power is the power of love, which is manifested in self-giving. The ultimate reason for humility in mission is that mission is God’s and not ours. Put differently, the Kingdom of God is an eschatological reality. And, even if we are called and sent to work for it, we do not know how, when and in what form the God’s Kingdom will finally emerge in the world. Thus, another expectation of missionaries today is the development of the spirit of humility and powerlessness in mission.

3.4. From only evangelising to also being evangelised

A fourth conversion is from only evangelising to also being evangelised. In the past, mission was conceived as a one-directional activity. Evangelisation was like a one-way street, where everything was done by the missionary for the people. The missionary was the evangeliser, the people the evangelised. The missionary was the bearer of good news, the people the recipient of the gospel. The missionary was the subject, the people the object. The missionary was the preacher who proclaimed the truth, the people

²⁷ In his first letter, Peter says that Christians should “always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks ... for a reason for your hope,” but that they should do so with “gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet 3:15-16). Likewise, David Bosch speaks of doing mission in “bold humility” or “humble boldness.” See *Transforming Mission*, 430 and 501.

the ones who needed conversion. The assumption was that the people were completely devoid of any spiritual treasure and therefore had nothing to share in return.²⁸

Seeing mission as *Missio Dei* changes our view of mission. It corrects the notion of mission as a one-way street which puts the emphasis almost entirely on the great work done by missionaries, with little attention paid to the recipients of this gift. It underlines the fact that the Spirit is at work in the people being evangelised as well as in the evangelisers themselves, and that mission is a two-way exchange of gifts between missionaries and the people.²⁹ Consequently, missionaries must be ready to evangelise and be evangelised, to give and receive, to speak and to listen. They must be prepared to change and be changed, to form and be formed, to invite to conversion and be converted.³⁰ Thus, a fourth expectation of missionaries today is the promotion of the openness to being evangelised. We need to promote the idea that mission entails not only the evangelisation of the people but also the ongoing evangelisation of missionaries themselves; that mission is not just what God does to the people through the missionary but also what God does to the missionary through the people. St. Joseph Freinademetz, the first SVD missionary to China,³¹ used to say that “the greatest task of the missionary is the transformation of one’s inner self” - greater even than the transformation of the people. We can expect the people to be converted to the Gospel and become disciples of Jesus only if missionaries themselves are likewise converted in re-discovering the Gospel and encountering Jesus anew in the life and culture of the people.

Pope Francis strikes a similar note in paragraph 198 of EG:

That is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us... We need to let ourselves be evangelised by them. The new evangelisation is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church’s pilgrim way.

3.5. From Burden to Privilege

A fifth conversion is from undertaking mission as a sacrifice or a burden to experiencing it as a privilege and a gift. As mentioned earlier, in the past, the origin of mission was traced back to the “Mission Command” of risen Christ given to the apostles on the day of his ascension (see Matt 28:18-20). A consequence of this was seeing mission as originating from a command, and the carrying out of mission as obedience to that command. And obedience to this command entailed sacrifice - particularly, the giving up of one’s home and country in order to go to far-away lands, the giving up of a life of comfort and the readiness of live a life of deprivation and hardship in conditions of life regarded as “primitive.” Thus, mission was largely seen as a burden and a sacrifice - the heroic giving up of so much and the willingness to face so much hardship in order to fulfill the Lord’s command to preach the Gospel. For instance, in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul lists the numerous difficulties he underwent in his mission of preaching the Gospel of Jesus:

²⁸ “We are not the ‘haves,’ the *beati possidentes*, standing over against the spiritual ‘have nots,’ the *massa damnata*.” David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 496.

²⁹ See Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today’s World* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2000), 202 ff.

³⁰ This idea is also sometimes expressed as “mission in reverse”, i.e., “we need to be evangelized by the people before we can evangelize them; we need to allow the people among whom we work to be our teachers before we presume to teach them.” See Claude Marie Barbour, “Seeking Justice and Shalom in the City,” in *International Review of Mission* 73 (1984): 303-309, as cited in Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2011), 59.

³¹ See Josef Hollweck, *Joseph Freinademetz: Serving the People of China*. Short Biography for the canonization. Trans. by Jacqueline Mulberge. (Città di Castello: GESP, 2003), 12-14.

... with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, far worse beatings, and numerous brushes with death. Five times at the hands of the Jews I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, through cold and exposure. And apart from these things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor 11:23-28).

Generation after generation of missionaries have similar stories of the difficulties and hardships encountered in mission. Volumes have been written about the great sacrifice offered by missionaries for the mission. However, seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realise that mission is not just a burden and a sacrifice but a privilege and a gift. Mission is God's mission, and our call to mission is a call to participate in God's mission and share God's dream for the world. And participation in God's mission and sharing in God's dream cannot just be a burden and a sacrifice. It must be, above all, a gift and a privilege.

If I may refer again to St. Joseph Freinademetz - when he learned that he was being sent to China as a missionary, he wrote to his family: "Thank God ...that the Lord has given us the grace of having a missionary in our family...I do not consider this as a sacrifice that I offer to God, but as the greatest gift that God is giving me." And again, from China he wrote: "I cannot thank the Lord enough for having made me a missionary in China""When I think of the countless graces that I have received and continue to receive until now from God...I confess that I could cry. The most beautiful vocation in the world is being a missionary."³²

Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* (see 1-13) that every genuine encounter with Jesus is an experience of joy. The Gospel therefore is an invitation to joy. Thus, proclaiming the Gospel must also be an experience of joy. It cannot just be sacrifice and burden, but privilege and gift. In mission, Pope Francis says, "God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us" (EG 12).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe it can be said that understanding mission as *Missio Dei* (God's Mission), in contrast to understanding it as *Missio Ecclesiae* (mission of the Church), makes us realise that mission is not just an external obligation that comes from our membership in the Church, but an inner exigency that arises from the fact that we have been created according to God's image, a God who is a missionary God. Pope Francis expresses this beautifully in EG 273. He says:

My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an "extra" or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by ... mission.

Missio Dei, indeed, stresses the reality that we are "sealed, even branded" by mission.

³² Giuseppe Freinademetz, *Lettere di un Santo*, a cura di Pietro Irsara (Bolzano: Impresa, [no year]).

The Missio Dei according to Colossians 1:9-23.



Reverend Professor Vicky Balabanski

Vicky is a New Testament scholar at the University of Divinity and the EO/Principal of Uniting College for Leadership and Theology in Adelaide. Vicky is an ordained Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church. Her expertise is in the Synoptic Gospels, John's Gospel, Colossians, Receptive Ecumenism and Ecological Hermeneutics. She is the General Editor of the Earth Bible series, collaborating with Professor Gerald West in South Africa; the series emphasizes interpreting Scripture in harmony with the Earth, the interconnected web of life. Her Earth Bible commentary, "Colossians: An Eco-Stoic reading" (Bloomsbury T & T Clark 2020), draws on Stoic philosophy to enrich ecological interpretations. Prof. Balabanski was elected to membership of the international Society of Biblical Studies (SNTS) in 2017. Her international keynotes include World Diakonia conferences, the UCA President's Conference in Fiji, 2019, and the Christian Conference of Asia, Kerala (2023).

If you were to close your eyes and imagine what a picture of the *Missio Dei* would look like, what would be the key components? Let me invite you to do that now – close your eyes and imagine the *Missio Dei* as an image. What do you see?

The central player would be God – but how do you imagine the unseen God? And the focus would be all of humanity, or indeed all of creation; how do you depict everyone and everything? And there would need to be some sense of movement, or embrace, or yearning...the movement of the Spirit in love...and a sense of all things restored and renewed.



This image is a woodblock print from the Luther Bible of 1534.¹ The artist is known to us only with the initials MS, but the prints came from the workshop of Lucas Cranach in Wittenberg.²

Of course this is the depiction not of the *Missio Dei* as such, but of creation. Yet it has many of the key elements that we might seek in an image of the *Missio Dei* – a depiction of heaven and earth with a loving God delighting in the creation; humanity and all creatures living together, both domestic and wild, with all things in harmony; the majesty of God and the fiery Spirit embracing all.

One of the most fruitful biblical texts for offering a *word picture* of the *Missio Dei* is the Christ Hymn found in Colossians 1:15-20. Here too we

¹ Die-Luther-Bibel-von-1534 - Category:Luther Bible (1534 edition) - Wikimedia Commons

² According to Prof. Dr. Hans Dickel and his team at Friedrich-Alexander University, Cranach's workshop 'invented a new style of Protestant religious art'. Lukas Cranach the Elder and his workshop | FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg

have the invisible God made visible, a focus on creation and indeed all things, reconciliation and peace-making in heaven and on earth. However, what we see in this word picture is much more explicitly connected with the person and work of Jesus Christ, and in particular with the blood of his cross.

The other striking difference between the Cranach picture and the word picture of Colossians 1 is the significance of the church as Christ's body. Here is another image, this time from Rev. Mark Hewitt, where both the cross and the church are depicted.³



Mark Hewitt © 2020

When we look at the Christ Hymn with a lens of seeking the *Missio Dei*, we find key themes encapsulated in these six verses:

- We read how through Christ God has created all things visible and invisible;
- we hear how in Christ all things are sustained and find their coherence;
- we grasp that the Church as Christ's body is integral to God's purposes;
- we learn how the fulness of divinity was pleased to be revealed to finite humanity in the person of Christ,
- and finally, we discover how the reconciling event of the cross is efficacious not only for humanity but is reconciling all things in earth and in heaven 'through the blood of his cross'.

In these few verses, we see the Divine Origin of God's mission in and to the world. We see Divine Agency at work, giving us insight into the centrality of Christ's person and work. We see the necessity of the Church's role as Christ's body in the mission of God. We see the holistic scope of God's purposes to redeem and restore the whole creation and indeed we see the overarching purpose of the *Missio Dei*: God's enduring plan is to reconcile all creation back to God. Creation, the *Missio Dei* and New Creation are therefore closely connected. We could of course focus on any one of these aspects and not plumb the depth of them.

With such riches at hand, why would someone exploring the *Missio Dei* choose to cast their gaze more broadly to include the verses that surround the Christ Hymn?

The reason that I have chosen to do so springs from the Letter to the Colossians itself. The authors of this letter have embedded the Christ Hymn into a long and significant sentence running from verse 9 through to the end of verse 22. As the grammatical structures of Greek can carry much more nuance than they can in English, it is possible to weave many more ideas into the one movement, tying them together in a way that invites the reader to notice their connections. This paper will trace some of these nuances.

I will begin by presenting this passage in my own translation, published in my Earth Bible commentary on Colossians. I haven't tried to replicate the one long sentence in English. Nevertheless, please note that verse 23 is a separate sentence, indeed a separate paragraph. A little later I will give an account of why that is so.

³ This image is from in V. Balabanski *Colossians: An Earth Bible Commentary. An Eco-Stoic Reading*, Bloomsbury, T & T Clark, 2020, 123.

In this paper, I will say a few words about the authorship and context of the passage. Then I will draw out four points that are important for our exploration of the *Missio Dei*. In my final section I will then return to why verse 23 is separated from the long sentence (or let's call it a paragraph in the English) and conclude with the significance of that particular verse for our understanding of the *Missio Dei*.

Colossians 1:9-22 and 23.⁴

9 Therefore we also have not stopped praying for you from the day we heard [about you]. We are [constantly] asking that you may be filled full with the knowledge of [God's] will in all wisdom and spiritual insight

10 to live [your] lives worthily, desiring to please the Lord in every way, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God,

11 being empowered in every capability according to his glorious strength for all steadfast endurance and patience. And [may you] joyfully 12 give thanks to the Father who has made you fit to receive a share in the saints' inheritance in the light.

13 He has rescued us from the authority of darkness and transferred us to the royal rule⁵ of his beloved Son,

14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

15 He [who] is embodiment of the unseen God
'Firstborn' of all creation

16 For all things in the heavens and on the earth were created in him
The things seen and the things unseen
Whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities
All things were created through him and for him.

17 And he is before all things
And all things hold together in him

18 And he is the head of the body of the church;
He [who] is primacy
'Firstborn' from the dead
So that he might become preeminent in all things

19 In whom all the fullness [of God] was pleased to live

20 And through him to reconcile all things to him [God]
Having made peace through the blood of his cross through him –
Whether things on the earth or things in the heavens.

⁴ V. Balabanski *Colossians: An Earth Bible Commentary. An Eco-Stoic Reading*, 58-59, 71, 85-86.

⁵ The term *basileia* is often translated as kingdom, reign, realm or empire. Some terms, such as realm, have spatial connotations. As the divine presence is in all places, so a translation needs to convey that the transfer to Christ's *basileia* has to do with allegiance, rather than any place. I have chosen 'royal rule' rather than the alternatives, as reign has connotations of time limitation, kingdom can, in common usage, imply one among others, and empire has overtones of violence.

21 And you who were at one time strangers and enemies in your mind-set as expressed through your evil actions, 22 he has now reconciled in the body of his flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before [God].

23 Since this is so⁶ remain securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the Gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.

It is of this Gospel that I, Paul, became a servant.

There are perhaps some surprises in the choice of words, but even more surprising is the fact that the whole passage from verse 9 to 22 is one grammatical unit, then verse 23 stands on its own.

First of all, then, some comments about authorship and context. The Letter opened naming Paul and Timothy as the letter writers and also emphasizing the role of Epaphras as the evangelist and leader of the Jesus community at Colossae. Having spent a great deal of time and attention on the question of authorship as I worked on my commentary, I concluded that a theory of ‘co-authorship’ or ‘partial pseudepigraphy’ best suits the evidence.

This correlates the claim that the letter is authored by Paul and Timothy (Col. 1:1) with the letter’s stylistic distinctiveness vis à vis the undisputed letters of Paul.⁷ This position sees Timothy as the primary composer of the letter, though with Paul’s presence and co-authorship real rather than fictional. This view offers a simple and elegant hypothesis for the authorship of Colossians.⁸

The letter indicates that neither Paul nor Timothy knew the recipients of this letter personally (Col. 2:1). Epaphras is the connecting link between the Lycus Valley communities of believers and the Pauline network (Col. 1:7, 4:12-13). It is Epaphras who is the evangelist and leader of the Colossian community of believers, who has worked hard for the believers in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well, but who is now with Paul and upholding the Lycus Valley believers in prayer (Col. 4:12). The letter is written from a prison context, which I see as located in Rome. The mention of Tychicus and Onesimus as the letter bearers in Col. 4:7-9 draws Colossians into close connection to the Letter to Philemon. It also suggests that the letter post-dates the writing of Philemon, as Onesimus is now fully part of the Pauline team.

I see Colossians as a letter primarily intended to strengthen the concord and connections between the Pauline churches.⁹ It is a carefully formulated circular or encyclical letter, intended to be heard by more than one community (Col. 4:15-16). It is also intended to distil and confirm the key aspects of the Pauline proclamation. If you turn to your handouts again, please notice the words that conclude this section:

⁶ The reasons for this translation are set out in Vicky Balabanski, ‘Colossians 1:23: A case for translating ἐπιμένετε (continue) as imperative, not indicative’, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 70.1 (2019).

⁷ The stylistic distinctiveness has been analysed by Walter Bujard, *Stilanalytische Untersuchungen zum Kolosserbrief*, SUNT 11 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973).

⁸ For a more detailed discussion, see V. Balabanski *Colossians: An Earth Bible Commentary. An Eco-Stoic Reading*, 7-9.

⁹ This differs from the hypotheses that see Colossians as primarily tackling controversies in the fledging Pauline communities. For a detailed reasoning of this case, see Vicky Balabanski and Michael Trainor, ‘Learning to be Church. Virtues and Practices Leading towards Koinonia in Colossians and Acts’, in *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning: Walking the Way to a Church Re-formed*. Edited by: Paul D. Murray, Gregory A. Ryan, and Paul Lakeland, Oxford University Press. (Oxford University Press 2022) 393-403.

The recipients of the letter have never met Paul or Timothy, but they are left in no doubt that verses 9-23 are intended to be a distillation or epitome of Paul's vocation and the Pauline Gospel. As verse 23 states, 'It is of this Gospel that I, Paul, became a servant.'

So with that, let's turn to our passage. The first thing we notice when we read verses 9 and 10 is how the deep theological truths of the Gospel and God's mission are embedded in prayer.

Timothy, Paul, Epaphras, along with the other co-workers we read about in chapter 4, are in constant prayer for this fledgling community. I know that it's hard not to assume that these prayers are due to a crisis that the communities are facing – perhaps the syncretistic issues that will be set out in Col. 2, but in fact their prayers described in verses 3-8 are confident prayers – thanksgiving for their embrace of the Gospel, their love for the saints, and their comprehension of the grace of God. In verses 9 and following, the prayers are intercessory, primarily that the believers may go deeper into the knowledge of God's will and spiritual wisdom and understanding. The Pauline leadership team are praying that the Colossians' deepening spiritual lives will have practical outworking – living worthily of the Lord, desiring to please God in every way, bearing fruit in every good work. These are holistic prayers in verses 9-12 for strength, endurance and patience, that ask God to enable the Colossians to joyfully return thanks in every circumstance.

It may seem to be a truism, but what I see here is that the *Missio Dei* must be similarly embedded in a rich ongoing communal prayer life modelled by the leaders themselves. They are the ones who are not too busy to pray for the maturity and integrity of faith among the ones under their care and guidance. The *Missio Dei* needs leaders who pray like this – prayers of thanksgiving and holistic intercession, constant and indeed confident prayers in the light of the fact that it is God who makes those whom we seek to reach 'fit to receive a share in the saints' inheritance in the light' (Col. 1:12). It is, first and last, God's mission, and prayer connects us directly into that mission.

The second thing that I notice in the opening part of the letter is that Timothy and Paul acknowledge the spiritual wisdom of those they haven't met or disciplined.

Here we see spiritual leaders willing and eager to acknowledge the grace and wisdom of God in others. I find this an encouragement in a time when churches tend to be concerned for their own traditions and members. I am glad for a conference such as the SVD-AAMS conference in 2025, which sought to enable dialogue across ecclesial divisions. I am glad for the Papal Encyclicals which are also addressed to me as an outsider to the Roman Catholic Church!¹⁰ I am prompted by the opening of Colossians to expect and value spiritual wisdom and understanding from God in others. The *Missio Dei* is going on through many parts of Christ's body the church, and I am encouraged by the grace that sees Christians notice and celebrate the work of others.¹¹

The third thing I notice is the emphasis on endurance and patience in verse 11. The significant word here is *hypomonē* (ὕπομονή), which means a number of things: a frame of mind of patience, steadfastness; showing perseverance, endurance and fortitude, as expressed in adhering to a course of action in spite of difficulties and testing. It also can express a component of hope and confidence expectation, so patient

¹⁰ For example, *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) by Pope John XXIII (1963), *Laudato Si'* (Praise be to You) On Care for our Common Home by Pope Francis (2015), *Fratelli Tutti* (Brothers and Sisters All) by Pope Francis (2020).

¹¹ One key way is the movement of Receptive Ecumenism, which delights in the gifts of other denominations and confesses that our own tradition has not always been faithful to its call.

waiting.¹² The early church valued this quality as distinctively Christian, as we read in Cyprian's *De bono patientiae* (On the Good of Patience):

But for us, beloved brethren, who are philosophers, not in words, but in deeds, and do not put forward our wisdom in our garb, but in truth—who are better acquainted with the consciousness, than with the boast, of virtues—who do not speak great things, but live them,—let us, as servants and worshippers of God, show, in our spiritual obedience, the patience which we learn from heavenly teachings. For we have this virtue in common with God. From Him patience begins; from Him its glory and its dignity take their rise.¹³

The present era, by contrast, demands quick results. There is no quick fix offered by the *Missio Dei*; this is a journey on which there are no short cuts, but only faithful accompaniment. There would be no active exploring of faith if we as church members and leaders did not both model our faith and speak of it as well. As Christ's body we have an integral part to play in the mission of God, always bearing in mind that endurance and patience are part of the picture.

The fourth thing I notice is that in verses 13 & 14 the attention moves to summarizing what God has done in Christ for us, particularly liberating us.

We have been transferred to the royal rule of God's beloved Son – rescued, redeemed and forgiven. These truths are so familiar to us that they hardly seem surprising or remarkable. However, in contemporary Western culture more generally, there seems little need for rescue, redemption and forgiveness of sins, as popular culture has embraced the notion that we are neither subject to any authority of darkness, nor in need of forgiveness.

Yet when we look at people's wellbeing in our contemporary society, we find that people are more fragile, more touchy and easily offended, less resilient and more subject to addiction, loneliness and hopelessness than before. The *Missio Dei* is to offer liberation from all the things that bind us, including sin, guilt and shame as well as loneliness and hopelessness too. Being a citizen of God's royal rule does not exempt us from experiencing these things, but rather it enables us to access the strength of God, to know ourselves as rescued, redeemed and forgiven, and to be part of a community of care. It is indeed communities rather than individuals who are the means of the Triune God's mission.

Now let us turn our attention to the Christ Hymn, which is seamlessly attached grammatically and logically to what has gone before.

The structure of this material, with a strophe naming Christ as the firstborn of all creation, and a second strophe with Christ as firstborn from the dead, is one of the many indications that this is indeed a hymn. In the broadest terms, the first stanza concerns Christ in relation to creation, and the second concerns Christ in relation to reconciliation. Christ is 'firstborn' of all creation, v. 15; Christ is 'firstborn' from the dead, v. 18c. In two divine 'movements', Christ's work in creation and redemption are summed up.

It's likely that the verses 15-20 present a hymn already familiar to the Colossian believers. In Col. 3:16 we read an exhortation to 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.' Such a hymn or spiritual song as we find in our passage is a way in which the Colossian believers let the word

¹² Timothy & Barbara Friberg, *Analytical Greek Lexicon*, Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2000, ad loc.

¹³ Cyprian of Carthage, [https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0200-0258,_Cyprianus_Carthaginensis,_Liber_de_Bono_Patientiae_\[Schaff\],_EN.pdf](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0200-0258,_Cyprianus_Carthaginensis,_Liber_de_Bono_Patientiae_[Schaff],_EN.pdf).

of Christ dwell in them richly. Of course in the absence of a ‘New Testament’ as we know it today, ‘hymns to Christ as to God’¹⁴ had a central role to play in shaping the faith of believers.

So Timothy and Paul have segued to a shared articulation of the faith by incorporating this Christ Hymn (Col. 1:15-20). And what an articulation it is – an immense vision of Christ’s role and significance in the creation of all things seen and unseen, Christ’s sustaining of all things and Christ’s pre-eminence in all things. At the same time, the vision is grounded in the particular and specific work of Christ on the cross. While the Good News spans all time and space, nevertheless the work of Christ is grounded in a particular place, time and act of faithfulness. I think that encourages us to see the particular things we do in the service of God’s mission as significant too. All depends on God, yet our acts of faithfulness – whether big or small, seen or unseen – they matter too.

Notice how often ‘all things’, *ta panta*, are named in this Hymn – no less than six times! All creation is the scope of Christ’s reconciling work not just of humanity, but of all things. As we hear in v.23, the Gospel has been proclaimed to all creation¹⁵ under heaven. This is central to the big picture of Christ’s work, and one of the reasons that the Season of Creation that we are in is so important. This is a season of the church calendar alongside Advent and Lent, also known in some circles as ‘Creationtide’, which has now been widely adopted across the world by the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and many Protestant churches.¹⁶ Learning to see ourselves in God’s big picture alongside creation (rather than over, or over against creation) is a crucial shift in our times. All things matter to God, and so valuing creation is directly relevant to the *Missio Dei*.¹⁷

According to verse 20, reconciling *all things* to God is at the heart of Christ’s work, and hence also at the heart of the *Missio Dei*. This is also picked up in the summary verses that follow the Hymn, verses 21 and 22, applying the theological insights of the Hymn to the Colossian believers, who are now reconciled to God in the body of Jesus’ flesh by his death.

We live in a world where reconciliation and peace-making often seem to be further from the values of the leaders of some nations than before. They seem to be values that run counter to the national aspirations of increasing numbers of leaders. All the more, then, do we as the Church universal and Christ’s body need to work for the central purpose of the *Missio Dei* – the reconciliation of all things to God and peace to all.

I want to turn now to verse 23, which is set apart as the missional culmination of this passage. In our regular translations of this passage, you’ll read something different from the translation given above. In the New Revised Standard Version, for instance, this verse runs straight on from v. 22 and reads “provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard...”

¹⁴ These words echo Pliny the Younger’s Letter to Trajan, where he describes Christian worship in Asia Minor at the beginning of the 2nd century CE.

¹⁵ Or ‘every creature’. My choice of ‘all creation’ here reflects the same words in v. 15, ‘firstborn of all creation’. This repetition ties the passage more closely together.

¹⁶ Season of Creation resources 2025 – National Council of Churches in Australia; Season of Creation | World Council of Churches

¹⁷ Cf. Joseph Coleson ‘The Creation as Missional Paradigm’ asks ‘How, then, is creation missional? It is (among other purposes) the setting in and through which God’s people learn to deduce God’s character manifested in the continuing goodness of creation, and the magnitude of our privilege of mirroring God’s character, because we are created in God’s image.’ In *Missio Dei*, eds. Keith Schwanz and Joseph Coleson (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 2011), 35.

I would like to tell you about a journey that I took that has led me to translate this differently. In 2017, a new edition of the Greek New Testament was published by Tyndale House in Cambridge. Using advances in the study of ancient manuscripts, a team of scholars under the leadership of Dirk Jongkind and Peter Williams published a significantly different edition reflecting – among other things – the paragraphing of the ancient manuscripts. They took what they called a rigorously philological approach to re-evaluating the standard text.

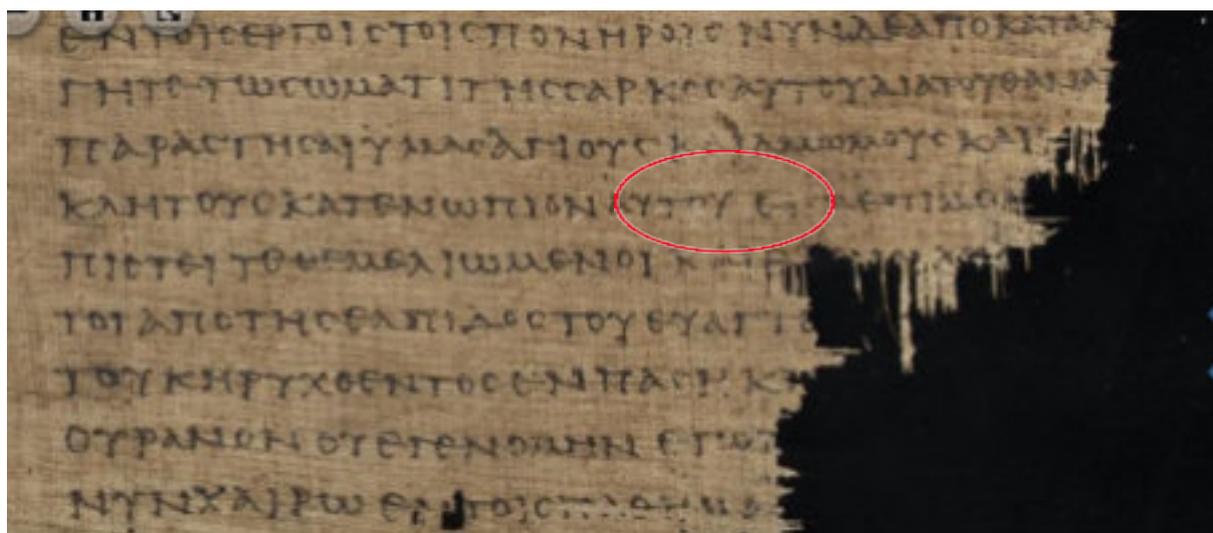
In 2018 I had Outside Study Leave which I took at Tyndale House, as I was working on my Colossians commentary. One of the delightful things about working there is that twice a day, at 11am and 4pm, everyone stops for half an hour or so to have a cuppa, and there is a lot of scholarly interchange over those times. I was introduced to the new edition of the Greek NT. As Dirk Jongkind put it,

‘The Tyndale House Greek New Testament surprises. This is what Scripture does in general, yet it is remarkable how details such as a different paragraphing allows us to see things in a new light.’¹⁸

In the course of using the Tyndale House edition, I noticed a substantial difference in the paragraphing of Colossians 1; verse 23 was a paragraph in its own right. I therefore went on a hunt to discover why this was so, and what difference it makes to the meaning of the verse.

Three prompts led me to suspect it could mean something different. The *first*, as mentioned, was the Tyndale House Bible, which gave this passage such a different layout. This edition emphasises the importance of examining the divisions found in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. This approach is relatively novel in biblical scholarship and allows for a deeper understanding of how early Christians might have read and interpreted the text. I realized that I needed to do my own examination of the reasons that the editors had made such a substantial change.

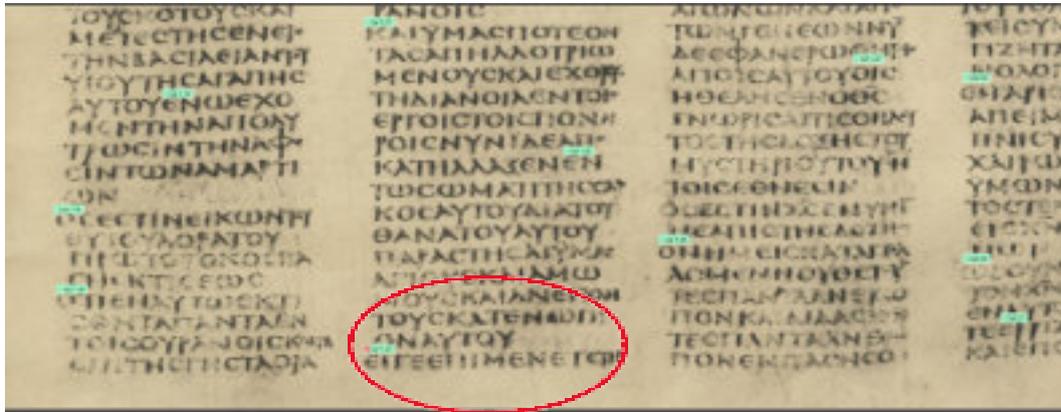
The first manuscript I consulted was an image of the very early Chester Beatty papyrus, P46 (2-3 century), which showed a small gap before verse 23. In general, P46 does not do much in terms of paragraphing or interpunction (the insertion of a point between words or sentences that could signal a new paragraph).¹⁹



¹⁸ Private communication with Dirk Jongkind, 2018.

¹⁹ These descriptions are given in more detail in Vicky Balabanski ‘Colossians 1:23. A Case for Translating ἐπιμένετε (continue) as Imperative, not Indicative’, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 70.1 (2019), 85-94. This first image is publicly available through the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts: Manuscript P46 - CSNTM

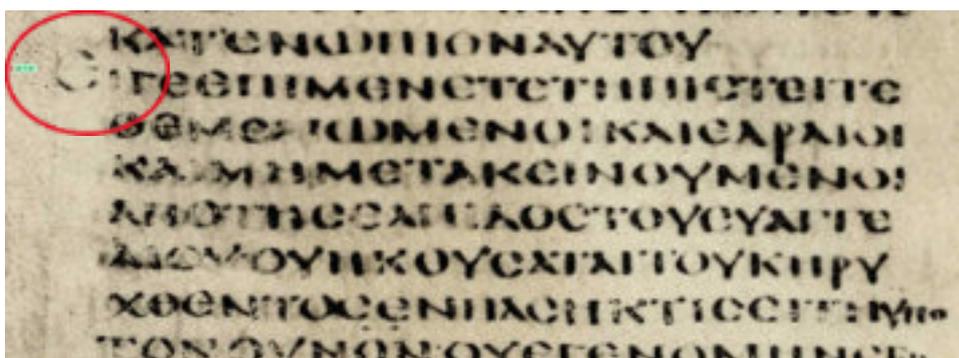
The famous uncial manuscript known as Sinaiticus (Alef 01), dated to the mid-4th century (circa 350 C.E.), isolates v. 23 from vv. 21-22 with ekthesis (i.e., when the first letter projects into the left margin), indicating a new paragraph.²⁰ Prior to verse 23 there is a gap of half a line. Both these things are significant:



In Codex Vaticanus B (03) dated to the 4th century (c. 325-350 CE), v. 23 begins a new line; there is interpunction (a Greek semi-colon) at the end of v. 22, which could signal a new paragraph:



Another famous uncial manuscript known as Alexandrinus (A(02), 5th century (circa 400-440 C.E.), indicates a new paragraph at v. 23 by means of an enlarged initial and ekthesis as well as space at the end of the preceding 'section':



Finally, another 5th century manuscript known as Ephraemi rescriptus C(04) clearly signals a division between v. 22 and v. 23. The image below is rewritten, as this text was overwritten in the 12th century (and is hence a palimpsest). This one separates v. 23 with ekthesis (the enlarged initial ε protruding into the margin) and also has a Greek semicolon after αὐτοῦ, indicating a new paragraph.

²⁰ This image and the following ones are available through the BibleWorks 10 program, which has added the verse numbers. All these images are in the public domain.

23 as the distinct missional climax of this material, calling on us to remain secure in the Gospel, and together with Paul and Timothy, to serve this Gospel.

In conclusion, this article has invited us to think about the *Missio Dei* by means of the word picture set out in the Colossians Hymn, Col. 1:15-20, and has set the context of the Hymn according to the Greek grammar of the letter to encompass verses 9-22 and also verse 23. We have considered how the *Missio Dei* as depicted here is embedded in prayer, how the leaders acknowledge the spiritual wisdom of others, including those they haven't met or disciplined. We have noted the emphasis on endurance and patience and seen how the passage focusses on what God has done in Christ for us, including liberating us. The remarkable repetition of 'all things' (*ta panta*) ensures that the reconciliation and peace-making of God's mission is not just for humanity, but for all of creation, as stated explicitly in Col. 1:20. We have then considered the evidence for translating Col. 1:23 as a separate paragraph exhorting us that 'Since this is so, continue in the faith'. The Pauline leadership team reflected in this letter had been grasped by the grand vision of God's good purposes for the whole creation through Christ's reconciling work and together they proclaimed and served this Gospel. As verse 23 puts it:

23 Since this is so, remain securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the Gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven. It is of this Gospel that I, Paul, became a servant.

‘Unity in Faith and Mission’: Reflections on the Current Work of the Methodist Roman Catholic International Commission



Rev Professor Glen O'Brien

Glen O'Brien is Professor of Christian Thought and History in the University of Divinity. An ordained Uniting Church minister; he has been employed by The Salvation Army as a theological educator for the last sixteen years. He currently serves as Research Coordinator at Eva Burrows College, Melbourne

Abstract:

The Methodist Roman Catholic International Commission (MERCIC), which commenced its work in 1967, is the longest standing ecumenical dialogue that the Catholic Church has with any other church. Its twelfth five-year round commenced in Rome in October 2022. This paper will explore a participants' reflections on the discussion, highlighting both the challenges and the signs of the Spirit's work pointing us toward the unity we seek.¹

Seeking 'Full Communion'

There is a proverb about teaching a child learning archery to aim their arrows at the moon. They will never hit the moon but their ability to hit less ambitious targets will surely improve. The goal of full communion between Catholics and Methodists is a little like that. The obstacles to such a goal seem insurmountable, yet the attempt to achieve it will at least result in progress. The Methodist Roman Catholic International Commission (MERCIC) is the longest running dialogue between the Catholic Church and any other ecclesial body and the first to be established (in 1967) after the Second Vatican Council. The Dialogue is between The Dicastery for Christian Unity and the World Methodist Council (of which the Uniting Church in Australia is a member). Participants are sixteen in number, eight Catholics and eight Methodists led by one Catholic and one Methodist co-convenor. It has been an honour to have been a member of MERCIC for the previous four years. Over that time, we have gathered in Rome, Seoul and San Salvador. Our planned gathering in Jerusalem in 2023 was disrupted by the tragedy of hostilities between Israel and Gaza, necessitating an online gathering. We will return to Rome for a symposium and a formal reception of our forthcoming Report and Synthesis document in October of 2026.²

¹ This paper began as a keynote address presented at the Conference of The Provincial Council of the Divine Word Missionaries and The Australian Association of Mission Studies on *Missio Dei in Today's World: An Ecumenical Conversation*, Melbourne, 3-5 October 2025.

² *We Believe in One God: Sixty Years of Methodists and Catholics Walking Together (Collana Ut Unum Sint 9, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025).*

One of the stated advantages to our dialogue is that there is no historic dividing point between the two churches as there is (for example) between Catholics and Lutherans or Catholics and Anglicans. And yet, in its eighteenth-century origins, Methodism was a movement within the Church of England which *did* constitute, at least from a Catholic perspective, an historic schism and an explicit rejection of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. John Wesley, for all his reputation as a proto-ecumenist, and notwithstanding the Catholic shape of much of his theology, shared in the anti-Catholic sentiment of the cultural Protestantism of eighteenth-century Britain. While he could be warm toward individual Catholics, and recommended many Catholic writers to his followers, he believed the Roman Catholic Church to be a false religion, and he resisted every one of the Parliamentary acts designed to give Catholics greater civil and religious liberty in Georgian Britain.³ It has to be admitted with regret that, during the nineteenth century, both Catholics and Methodists played an active part in the bigotry of a sectarian age.

One of the challenges for Catholic participants in MERCIC has been the nature of Methodism not as a single church but a movement made up of many ecclesial communities, each one Methodist but no two accountable to the same denominational authorities and regulations. While there are Eastern rite Catholic churches that are quite distinct in their culture and liturgy, essentially there is only one ‘Catholic Church’ engaged in the dialogue. The formal partners in the dialogue are The Dicastery for Christian Unity (the Vatican body charged with responsibility for all Catholic ecumenical dialogues) and The World Methodist Council (a non-legislative body of over eighty Methodist denominations in fellowship with another but without one having any authority over another).

The goal of our dialogue is ‘full communion’ a goal which brings to mind important matters such as the mutual recognition of orders, Eucharistic hospitality, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, and the role of Mary in the drama of salvation. Yet there is also an urgent need to consider the theme of *unity in mission*, especially in those parts of the world where identification with any Christian church, Catholic or Protestant, has seriously declined. In what ways do Catholics and Methodists share in a common Christian witness in an increasingly post-Christian world?

The idea of ‘communion’ is drawn from the New Testament concept of *koinonia* which is a sharing among believers of all the riches of grace. All that is ours is gifted to us and held in common for the good of all. Though this was a characteristic way of speaking of the earliest Christian communities (Acts 2:42-47), through the accident of historical circumstance, that sharing has been disrupted. Even in the New Testament period, congregations were often divided by disputes, sometimes along party lines, as believers cried, ‘I am of Paul!’ or ‘I am of Apollos!’ (1 Cor 3:1-9). Even those who cried, ‘I am of Christ!’ displayed a similar spirit of sectarian disregard for their siblings. In that Catholics and Methodists have each been given access to the fullness of grace, yet they do not share full Eucharistic hospitality, or recognition of one another’s orders of ministry, ‘full communion’ remains an aspirational quest that must be given high priority in both ecclesial communities.

The Preamble to *A Gift to the World*, a proposal for Full Communion between The United Methodist Church and The Episcopal Church defines Full Communion as:

[A] relationship between two distinct ecclesiastical bodies in which each maintains its own autonomy while recognizing the catholicity and apostolicity of the other and believing the other to hold the essentials of the Christian faith. In such a relationship, communicant members of each would be able freely to communicate

³ Glen O’Brien, “I Wish Them Well but I Dare Not Trust Them”: John Wesley’s Anti-Catholicism in Context,” *Journal of Religious History* 45:2 (June 2021): 185-210.

at the altar of the other, and ordained ministers may officiate sacramentally in either church. Specifically, this includes transferability of members, mutual recognition and interchangeability of ministries, mutual enrichment by one another's traditions of hymnody and patterns of liturgy, freedom to participate in each other's ordinations and installations of clergy, including bishops, and structures for consultation to express, strengthen, and enable our common life, witness, and service, to the glory of God and the salvation of the world.⁴

To engage in the work of seeking full communion is to participate in the prayer of Jesus that his followers might be one, caught up by the Spirit into the relational unity that exists between Father and Son, 'so that the world may believe' (John 17:20-21). The desire for full communion is not, therefore, simply an expression of our desire for harmony among ourselves. It has a missional focus. God is the sending God (the *missio Dei*), and the church is an apostolic community of 'sent ones.' A fuller communion results in a fuller witness to the world that God is love. Christ draws people to himself in many and varied ways without the need of the church's management of grace (John 12:32). Yet it is also surely the case that Christ is 'lifted up' in our praise, our confession, and our service for the world. Charles Wesley exulted in this missionary sharing. "Oh, that the world might taste and see the riches of God's grace! The arms of love that compass me would all the world embrace."⁵ It is through such divine embrace that the communion we enjoy is widened and enlarged.

The Trajectory of Methodist Union

It was inevitable that I would speak today largely from the Methodist side of the dialogue as that is what I know best. Ecumenism is part of the DNA of Methodism. Before entering successful unions with other Protestant churches, including The United Church of Canada (1925), The Church of South India (1947), and The Uniting Church in Australia (1977), Methodists had learned much from intra-Methodist unions. Contrary to popular belief, John Wesley was not 'the founder of the Methodist Church.' Eighteenth-century British Methodism was a religious society ancillary to the Church of England, not a church in its own right. In America this connection was disrupted partly as a result of the Revolutionary War when all Anglican clergy returned to Britain. Much to John Wesley's initial chagrin, the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in the newly established United States as a separate ecclesial body in 1784. British Methodism only separated from the Church of England after Wesley's death and then only gradually and almost by default. No formal Conference decision to separate was ever made but, by the late eighteenth century, Methodism had developed a unique ecclesiology in which most of its constituents had little connection to Anglicanism, and its preachers had become clergy in their own right without any episcopal oversight, other than what was provided by their own Conference.

The first schism in Britain Methodism occurred in 1797, leading to the formation of the Methodist New Connexion. This was followed by a series of other breakaway groups, all of whom reacted against what they considered the autocratic powers of the Conference and its Presidents. The term 'Wesleyan Methodist Church' was never formally adopted but came to be used to distinguish the original (and always by far the largest) community of Methodists from the breakaway groups. In America, Republican Methodists, Protestant Methodists, and others emerged with similar demands for a more representative,

⁴ 'A Gift to the World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of Brokenness 2 The Episcopal Church and The United Methodist Church 3 A Proposal for Full Communion,' 1. https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/files/websites/www/pdfs/a_gift_to_the_world.pdf

⁵ Charles Wesley, 'Jesus! The Name High Over All,' Hymns and Sacred Poems (1749).

less clergy-controlled Methodism. Slavery split the Methodist Episcopal Church into northern and southern varieties in 1843, almost twenty years before the American Civil War. All these competing Methodist churches held to the same doctrines and shared a common revivalist culture, though they differed over what constituted the best model of church government.

Beginning at Wesley's Chapel, London in 1881, several Methodist denominations joined together to hold World Ecumenical Conferences every decade over a thirty-year period up to 1931. Despite the name, these were intra-Methodist rather than genuinely ecumenical events. The World Methodist Council (the participating Methodist body in MERCIC) would eventually (in 1951) emerge from the organising committee of these conferences and establish its headquarters in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. The series of Methodist Ecumenical Conferences mentioned above provided an opportunity for parent bodies in both Britain and America (as well as their colonial 'possessions') to settle their historic differences and begin to conceive of a single Methodist Church. This was achieved in Britain in 1932 (and earlier in Australia where union was achieved in 1902) and in the US in 1939. Of course, there were 'stay outers' in such union proposals and (particularly in America) further new denominations emerged, as a result of the Wesleyan-Holiness movement, including The Church of the Nazarene and The Free Methodist Church. It should be noted, however, that the major Holiness churches were all themselves the results of mergers between smaller denominational groups, missionary bands, prayer leagues etc. so they should be understood not just through the lens of schism but also of union.

All the negotiations involved in bringing the various strands of Methodism back together paved the way for the possibility of the various United and Uniting churches in which Methodists had a part in the twentieth century. Both phases argued that uniting the varying strands of Methodism or Protestantism would enable more effective mission. The earliest union discussions were, at least in part, driven by a Protestant cultural assumption that a 'United Protestant Church' would act as a bulwark against Roman Catholicism and served to further such notions as the 'Nonconformist Conscience.' This meant that in a sectarian age, they were simultaneously expressions of both catholicity and entrenched division.

Recognition of Orders

Any Full Communion agreement between Catholics and Methodists would need to include a recognition of orders. The recognition of ministerial orders across the varieties of Methodism has taken shape around two central features. The first is the existence of formal agreements between churches. The second is a shared theology that a calling to ministry, while it must be tested by the church, is essentially a divine vocation enabled by the Spirit.

The United Methodist Church (the largest Methodist body in the United States) currently has Full Communion Agreements with eight other churches, including several African American Methodist denominations,⁶ as well as The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, The Moravian Church, and The Uniting Church of Sweden. Such agreements mean that, "we recognize in each other's churches that the gospel is rightly preached, the sacraments are duly administered, and the ministry of the clergy is ordered in such a way as to allow for the orderly exchange of some ordained clergy among us, as defined by the agreement reached between The United Methodist Church and each of the denominations with whom we are in full communion."⁷

⁶ African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, African Union Methodist Protestant Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

⁷ United Methodist Communications 'United Methodists At-A-Glance,' <https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodists-at-a-glance> published May 26, 2019. Last update: October 13, 2022.

Five of the eight churches on the dot-point list above are historic ‘Black Methodist’ churches, which were formed (beginning from the late eighteenth-century) as an expression of self-determination over against white domination, a trend that was accelerated in the Reconstruction period, especially in the Southern states. It would be naïve to think that absorbing those churches into the larger white-majority UMC would be an easy matter. The UMC and the Episcopal Church began a Bi-Lateral Dialogue in 2002, one result of which is a proposed Full Communion Agreement.⁸ This has been placed on hold, however, due to the schism over the inclusion of LGBTQI+ Methodists that has split the UMC and resulted in the formation, in May 2022, of the Global Methodist Church.⁹

What does all this mean for the work of MERCIC? It is clear that Methodists bring a track record of ecumenical mergers driven by missional concerns. Full communion with the Catholic Church is an aim that is a logical extension of Methodist commitment to church union. It might represent a third phase in its achievements after intra-Methodist and intra-Protestant unions, and an opportunity for Methodists to move beyond those assumptions of cultural Protestantism that were deeply enmeshed in both British and American anti-Catholic imperialism. Full Communion would also offer to the Catholic Church an opportunity to live more fully out of the promise of the Second Vatican Council expressed in part in the decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) which declared “the restoration of unity among all Christians” to be “one of the principal concerns” of the Council.¹⁰

One of the challenges for MERCIC, however, is to negotiate the reality of pluralistic ecclesiology among Methodists. Among the member churches of the World Methodist Council there are those, like the United Methodist Church and the Uniting Church in Australia, who have established formal ecumenical relations with other churches based on established views of church, ministry, and sacraments. Other member churches are comfortable in partnership with fellow Methodists but less so with other traditions. Even those Methodist denominations with formal position papers on church order, host individual congregations that have scant regard for the ecumenical work that stands behind such work. Many of the United Methodist congregations that left to join the Global Methodist Church in May 2022, had probably ceased decades ago to be Methodist in anything but name only and have embodied a kind of ‘cultural Evangelicalism’ with little regard for classic American Methodist features such as Episcopal authority and Connexionalism. In the treasured Methodist balance between ‘order’ and ‘liberty’, liberty all too often turns to license. However, the path to Full Communion between churches is paved with questions relating to ministerial orders, so, overcoming the misplaced perception that the absence of regulation around ministerial orders is a sign of the Spirit at work would seem a first order priority. It might be possible for a Full Communion agreement to emerge between The Catholic Church and one particular member church of the World Methodist Council, such as The Methodist Church of Great Britain and Ireland, The United Methodist Church, or The Uniting Church in Sweden (Equemeniakyrkan).¹¹ Such an agreement would be only a partial achievement but would constitute a significant (though perhaps fragile) signpost toward our fuller unity in Christ.

⁸ ‘A Gift to the World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of Brokenness 2 The Episcopal Church and The United Methodist Church 3 A Proposal for Full Communion’ https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/files/websites/www/pdfs/a_gift_to_the_world.pdf

⁹ Glen O’Brien, ‘John Wesley’s Catholic Spirit and United Methodist Schism,’ *Holiness: An International Journal of Wesleyan Theology* 10: 1 (April 2025): 20-30.

¹⁰ Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html accessed 15/12/2022.

¹¹ For a good recent article on the Uniting Church in Sweden, see Erik Lennestål, ‘A Twenty-First Century Uniting Church: The Ongoing Work of Union in the Uniting Church in Sweden,’ *Uniting Church Studies* 27 no. 1 (2025): 89-98. <https://unitingchurchstudies.org.au/index.php/ucs/article/view/550>

The Possibility of a Shared Order of Christian Initiation for Adults

I stated earlier that the goal of Full Communion was not simply about seeking a unity that we might enjoy among ourselves. It is also an expression of the *missio Dei*, and a particular answer to the prayer of Jesus that his followers may be one. In this section of the paper, I would like to explore the possibility of a Shared Order of Christian Initiation for Adults between Catholics and Methodists. This proposal did not find much acceptance in the dialogue, but I remain drawn to the idea, even if it turns out only to be an interesting thought experiment.

The Order (until 2021 ‘Rite’) of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) is one of the most significant resources developed by The Catholic Church to meet the realities of a post-Christendom world.¹² Its reinstatement of ancient catechetical processes is a recognition of the parallels between the first and the twenty-first century worlds, in which the church sits, not at the centre of culture and society but as a minority religion in a religiously plural world. It can no longer be assumed (at least in the developed world) that children will be baptised and raised in Catholic households, congregations, and parishes, before presenting for Confirmation at the appropriate age and then continuing a life of service in the church and to the world. Many adults wishing to join the Church have not been baptised as infants or confirmed as adolescents, presenting the need for an alternative approach to initiation. In the early Christian centuries, a person was initiated into the church by first entering the catechumenate. Before being baptised they would undergo a period of learning, on the assumption that Christians are made, not born. During this period (which could last as long as several years) the catechumens attended the earlier part of the liturgy (prayers and readings) but were not admitted to the Eucharist until they had been baptised at the culmination of the catechetical process. The baptismal rite encompassed both the washing (remission of sin) and the invocation of the Spirit (for strengthening grace). Once infant baptisms came to outnumber catechumenate baptism, the two stages of the single rite came to be separated into two separate sacraments – baptism and confirmation, where originally the two actions belonged together in a single rite.

In early Methodism, something akin to the catechumenate was instantiated through class and band meetings. Typically, a person would be drawn to faith through a Methodist preacher’s declaration of the love of God in Jesus Christ. They would come under conviction of sin, experience remorse, and, curious to learn more about what they had heard, would be directed to join a class meeting. Here their spiritual formation would take place in a context of accountability to fellow believers. The culmination of this process would not be in baptism, as it was in the ancient catechumenate, but in a direct and immediate personal experience of the ‘new birth,’ accompanied by the witness of the Spirit that one was now a child of God. Though large crowds gathered to hear Methodist preachers and often responded with great emotion, warmth of feeling and even physical responses, the experience of the new birth typically came only after from one to three years of participation in a class meeting. This mirrors the ancient church’s conviction that Christians need time to be formed, to learn a new set of responses to the offer of divine grace and to undergo a process of conformity to the divine will. Though the objectivity provided by baptism was absent, when a person was ‘saved’ it was evidenced by enthusiastic testimony and a renewed life marked by holiness and an earnest pursuit of perfection. At least notionally, the earliest Methodist converts were expected to be connected to their local Anglican parish church where their Eucharistic life was to be nurtured.

¹² Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults: Introductory Material, <https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Rites/RCIA.pdf>

Methodist churches today practice infant baptism and provide a rite of confirmation. However, many, influenced more by their revivalist than their Anglican heritage, have given so much attention to instantaneous experiences of conversion and sanctification that sacramental means of grace have sometimes been neglected. The model of organised revivalism, adopted on the American frontier as well as throughout Britain in the nineteenth century, was an effective model of gaining new converts and a cycle of continuous revivals was the lifeblood of Methodism in its glory days. Arguably, the model has been taken up and used to good effect by Pentecostalism, which could be seen as the continuation of the earlier Methodist revivalism. However, many Methodists and most Uniting / United churches consider revivalism a spent force. The challenge is to find an appropriate substitute rather than continue to languish with shrinking congregations and little missional impact on an increasingly non-Christian world. The OCIA seems to offer a fruitful model in our present context.

The period of early Christianity with its ancient apostolic practices from which the OCIA draws its inspiration was also an ideal period in the mind of John Wesley.¹³ The early Methodist class and band meetings provided a model of Christian nurture that provided a period of several years of initiation overseen by fellow travelers. It was essentially a catechetical process where the class leader and fellow members functioned as sponsors for the initiates. Of course, Methodists have more recently offered study materials and educational programs designed for Christian initiation and nurture, but none of these has become constitutive of Methodist identity in the way the earlier class meetings functioned. In my view, the Catholic Church has simply done a better job at providing a catechumenate model of evangelization in the contemporary context.

What if Catholics and Methodists were to arrive at a shared OCIA? This would offer a valuable resource to Methodists and be a concrete example of that unity in mission that MERCIC is tasked with exploring. It would also be a significant ecumenical achievement in itself, as well as constitute an exciting step toward the full communion we seek. Imagine, if you will, a Catholic parish and a Methodist, United, or Uniting congregation together leading a cohort of catechumens through a shared OCIA. The participants would learn from the very beginning of their formation that being ecumenical is a constitutive element of being Christian. They would learn that, though there presently exist distinct ecclesial communities known as ‘Catholic’ and ‘Methodist’, there is only one church, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and it is to this church that they are preparing to be joined. They would learn that Marian devotion takes a particular form for Catholics that differs from Methodists, but both honour Mary as the Mother of Our Lord and accept her as a model of holy love. Methodists and Catholics alike gratefully receive the pastoral care of the Bishop of Rome, even if they differ on the extent and reach of that pastoral authority. In the recent Synod on Synodality the Catholic Church has adopted models of Synodality that recognize in similar ways to Methodists that discernment comes not only from the personal charisma and official sanction of individual shepherds but from the consensus arrived at by the people of God gathered in community. These are things we can talk about together; they are things we share.

At Easter, and in one shared physical location, the catechumens gather to be received into the church. Though our present ecumenical realities would require that those joining a Catholic parish are baptised by a Catholic priest, all could be baptised from the same font, using a shared baptismal rite. Alternatively, there could be separate ‘stations’ provided. There could conceivably be a Catholic OCIA and a Methodist OCIA for those who cannot accept the ecumenical version but a shared Catholic-Methodist OCIA would be the ideal.

¹³ Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

John Wesley's missional pragmatism led him to distinguish between 'established' means of grace and 'prudential' means of grace and between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' forms of ministry. He believed Methodists had been raised up to use both in a particular mission 'to spread scriptural holiness'. Catholics recognize emergency circumstances in which even a non-believer may administer the sacrament of baptism. Martin Luther insisted that if stranded on a desert island, a group of Christians would select one of its number to serve as their priest, even in the absence of episcopal authority. These are all examples of 'missional pragmatism'. Christianity is now a minority faith in the United Kingdom, and a similar pattern seems to be emerging in Australia. Perhaps we now face a missional 'emergency' that requires creative new approaches to Christian initiation. A shared Catholic-Methodist OCIA may serve as one such approach as well as take us further along the path to full communion.

Conclusion

MERCIC's 12th five-year round commenced in Rome in October 2022. We were invited to an 8 am audience with Pope Francis. He seemed weak, and needed to be helped to his chair, his face seemed glum, perhaps even gruff and we wondered if we might have met him on a bad day. However, as soon as he began to address us (in his native Spanish) his face lit up with joy and humour. In fact, he began with a joke, apologising for the early meeting time, and explaining that, "We Jesuits like to get up early, so we have more time to waste." Referring to the image of the Prodigal Son on the cover of the Report of the previous Dialogue with which we had gifted him,¹⁴ he told us that some people think that ecumenical dialogues are all about the Catholic Church saying to other churches, "'Come home to Mother Church', but they are wrong. Catholics and Methodists alike have strayed from the Father's house and must return to God." It seemed to me an extraordinarily generous statement and has stayed with me more than anything else from that day. His Holiness also encouraged us with the words, "May your discussions be a gift for Christians everywhere to become ministers of reconciliation. Let us prepare ourselves with humble hope and concrete efforts for that full recognition which will enable us to join one another in the breaking of bread together."¹⁵

Throughout its week of meetings, MERCIC members gather together for Eucharist. One day is the Catholic Mass, the next day the Methodist Holy Communion service. Yet it is not a full experience of Eucharistic hospitality because the present reality is that Catholics are not permitted to communicate at a Protestant eucharistic service or to serve non-Catholics the eucharistic elements. This is a feature of a particular kind of ecclesiology in which membership of the Catholic Church and participation in the Eucharist go hand in hand. When one contrasts this with the frequent Methodist practice of an 'open table' in which even the unbaptised are welcome at the Lord's Table, one can see the distance we still have to travel toward a Full Communion agreement. Members of MERCIC represent those most likely to desire the practice of full Eucharistic hospitality. However, it is not the ecumenical way to breach current protocols but to live within them while working for change. To disregard them even for as worthy a cause as unity would be to fail in our task of working toward Full Communion. This entails much pain and regret but is necessary if we are ever to arrive at our goal.

¹⁴ God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments, and Mission: Report of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue Between the World Methodist Council and the Catholic Church 11th series (2022), <https://meorome.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/god-in-christ-reconciling-göthenburg-2022-final-text-19.11.21.pdf>

¹⁵ 'Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission Meets in Rome,' Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst, 10 October 2022, <https://sandhurst.catholic.org.au/item/2287-methodist-roman-catholic-international-commission-meet-in-rome>

We know that Eucharistic hospitality is currently practised in many grass roots settings in ways that break official protocols. Teachers in the Catholic school system regularly participate in Mass even if not Catholic. MERCIC member Father Danny Pilario serves Mass to members of a community living on a rubbish dump in the Philippines. He does not ask those he serves whether they are Catholics or Protestants. Some see these as breaches of order that should come under the authority of episcopal correction. But might we also see them as signposts of the Spirit, pointing toward the future 'unity in faith and mission' that we seek?

As we aim at the moon, our arrows inevitably fall short, but we grow in our capacity to live more fully out of the unity that is Christ's gift to the church. In a world once dominated by the assured place of the Christian churches at the centre of culture, we had the 'luxury' of arguing for the superiority of our own brand of Christianity. Such a time has passed, and a new apostolic era is upon us, one in which unity in faith and mission must be given a higher priority than ever before. We cannot take short cuts around doctrinal difference (we have to work through those) but we must take the journey together for the sake of the world God loves.

Interreligious Dialogue – A Hidden Treasure



Rev Dr Patrick McInerney

Rev Dr Patrick McInerney is a Columban missionary priest. He was assigned to Pakistan for over twenty years. He is the Director of the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, editor of its quarterly newsletter, Bridges, and an interfaith advocate on its social media platforms. He is a member of the Australian Catholic Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Religions for Peace, the NSW Council of Christians and Jews, the Australian Association of Mission Studies (AAMS), the International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM) and the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS). In October 2025, the Holy Father appointed him a Consultor to the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue's Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims.

Fr Patrick's life-long commitment to interreligious dialogue was recognized by his being presented the inaugural Interfaith Peace Award from the Indian Crescent Society of Australia in November 2019, and the inaugural Interfaith Dialogue Award from the University of Notre Dame Australia in September 2025.

Ecclesiam Suam

My topic is interreligious dialogue. I begin with Pope Saint Paul VI, who dramatically and emphatically introduced the word “dialogue” into the magisterium of the Catholic Church in his 1964 magisterial encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, the purpose of which was:

.... to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that **the two should meet together, and get to know and love one another**. (ES, 3,¹ bold emphasis mine)

He envisaged a series of four concentric circles.

- The first is all humankind (ES, 97 - 106)
- The second is worshippers of the One God (ES, 107 – 108)
- The third is all Christians (ES, 109 – 112)
- And the fourth is all Catholics (ES, 113 – 115)

The Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, adopted the same schema, but in reverse order.

All are called to this catholic unity of the people of God, which prefigures and promotes universal peace. And to it belong, or are related in different ways: the catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all of humankind, called by God's grace to salvation. (LG, 12)

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html

It then treats in more detail:

- the catholic faithful (LG, 14)
- all the baptised i.e. all Christians (LG,15)
- believers in other world religions (Judaism, Islam, God-seekers) (LG, 16)
- those who do not know God but strive to lead a good life (LG, 16)

The same schema and the same order are also found in paragraph 92 of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

What is crucial is that Pope Paul VI envisages each of these circles as an arena for dialogue. Thus, we have:

- Intra-religious dialogue
- Ecumenical dialogue
- Interreligious dialogue
- Religious-secular dialogue

Fifth Circle

I have five points to make about this schema. First, in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis invites us to open ourselves to creation:

The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. ... (LS, 84)

God has written a precious book, "whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe." (LS, 85)

... "for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice." (LS, 85)

In other words, Pope Francis has added a fifth circle, the circle of all other creatures (insects, animals, birds, fish, plants, hills, rivers, habitats, environment...)²

And correspondingly, there is "ecological dialogue."

Breathing In and Breathing Out

Second, these concentric circles are dynamic. As a preliminary to explaining this, I invite you to do a simple exercise. It is a straightforward breathing exercise; it involves no health risk, but if you have respiratory or coronary issues, please do NOT join in.

Sit up straight.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. No problem. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe out. Breathe out. Breathe out. Breathe out. Breathe out. Relax!

² The Parliament of the World's Religions did the same when in 2018 it added to its 1993 signature document, 'Towards a Global Ethic', the 'The Fifth Directive: Commitment to a Culture of Sustainability and Care for the Earth'. See <https://parliamentofreligions.org/globalaethic/>.

OK, let's change it. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in.
Breathe in. Breathe in. Breathe in. Breathe in. Breathe in. Relax!

Now back to Pope Paul VI's concentric circles. They are not just static images. They represent living people: Catholics, other Christians, believers in other world religions, and believers in other worldviews. Like all people, they breathe in and breathe out.

- If they only breathe out, they will literally 'expire', as we experienced in our exercise.
- And if they only breathe in, they will 'suffocate', as we also experienced in our exercise.

They must breathe in **AND** breathe out.

- The members of the church must **reach out** to other Catholics, to other Christians, to believers in other religions, to believers in other worldviews, to all things - to listen, to learn, to dialogue, to show Christ's mercy and kindness and forgiveness, to bestow the blessings they have received in Christ, even as Jesus Christ breathed on his disciples (c.f. John 20:22).
- The members of the church must **gather in** the harvest from other Catholics, from other Christians, from believers in other religions, from believers in other worldviews, from all things, the riches and grace and blessings that God has bestowed on those others, that Catholics may be enriched and find new life and new insights into God's presence and action.

In missiological terms:

- The 'reaching out' is "missio ad extra"
- The 'drawing in' is "missio ad intra"³

If the members of the church only ever engage in reaching out ad extra - busy about the apostolate, engaging in dialogue with others and the world, working for justice, building the Kingdom, and never take time to "come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while" (Mark 6:31), to savour the fruits of their endeavours, to nourish themselves on what they learned in their apostolic outreach- then they will exhaust themselves and die.

If the members of the church only ever engage in gathering in to themselves ad intra -pastoring the faithful, filling the pews, defending the faith, shoring up the church, censoring others' immorality - they will become isolated and self-referential, reiterating the same formulae, and become anaemic, sickly, wither and die.

To live, the church must do both: breathe in AND breathe out; mission ad extra AND mission ad intra.

JD Vance and Pope Francis

Third, these concentric circles are not an "order of love." On 30 January 2025, JD Vance, the Vice-President of the USA, to defend the Trump government's shameful treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, appealed to what he claimed was a Christian *ordo amoris*:

.... you love your family, and then you love your neighbour, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then after that you can focus and prioritise the rest of the world.⁴

³ c.f. Rev Dr Ormond Rush at the launch of the Diocese of Parramatta's Pastoral Plan; Bishop Tim Norton 13/07/24: <http://bit.ly/4nMb9mw>.

⁴ <http://bit.ly/4m7y0br>

Just ten days later, Pope Francis firmly rebutted this position in his 10 February letter to the Bishops of the United States:

Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups....The true ordo amoris that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the “Good Samaritan” (c.f. Luke 10:25-37), that is, by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception. (#6)⁵

We hear the cries of the poor and the earth - whoever, wherever, and whatever (people of all cultures, ethnicities, religions, beliefs, genders, abilities; insects, fish, birds, animals, habitats, the environment) - and we respond with mercy and compassion.

Synodality

Fourth, these concentric circles are a geometric analogy for a word that Pope Francis reintroduced to the church, “synodality.” My criticism is that much that is written about synodality is limited to the baptised, to “the inner circles,” as if these are the only bearers of the Holy Spirit. If the church is to be truly synodal, then it journeys not only with Christians, but also with followers of other religions, with secular believers, and with all creatures, who are all bearers of the Word and moved by the Holy Spirit.

Fraternity

Fifth, another word to describe the concentric circles is “fraternity” (and “sorority”), another of Pope Francis’ themes, the God-inspired universal solidarity that embraces everyone and everything.

Nostra Aetate

The Vatican II document that addresses the Church’s relation with other religions is Nostra Aetate.⁶

This Declaration is a watershed. It is ground-breaking. It is the first time the magisterium has made positive comments about other religions. Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have referred to it as the “Magna Carta” of the church’s new direction in interreligious dialogue. But, along with the rest of the church’s teaching on interreligious dialogue, Nostra Aetate too often remains a “hidden treasure” (Matt 13:44), another of the church’s best-kept secrets, rarely if ever mentioned from the pulpit. Let’s change that!

Good Neighbourliness

I make two comments.

In Nostra Aetate, the motive for reaching out to believers in other religions is good neighbourliness, being on good terms with others. It urges Catholics:

⁵ <http://bit.ly/47nbcjq>

⁶ <http://bit.ly/4fzEayP>

.... to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions (NA, 2)

.... to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding [with Muslims]. (NA, 3)

.... to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation [with Jews]. (NA, 4)

.... to "conduct themselves well among the Gentiles" (1 Pet 2:12) and if possible, as far as depends on them, to be at peace with all people (see Rom 12:18) (NA, 5)

It's nice. It's polite. But it lacks drive! It lacks power! It lacks passion!

Questions

After the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, there was a flurry of activities embracing this new approach to other religions – exchanges, meetings, encounters – all of which raised a host of questions:

- Had dialogue replaced conversion?
- Was mission still necessary?
- What of the Great Commission?

To answer these questions, in 1984, the then Secretariat for Non-Christians published *Dialogue and Mission*. Even though interreligious dialogue is named as one of the “principal elements” of mission (DM, 13) and “finds its place in the great dynamism of the Church's mission” (DM, 30), nevertheless the title of the document, “Dialogue and Mission,” and the structure of the document - Section I on “Mission”; Section II on “Dialogue”; Section III on “Dialogue and Mission” - give the impression that dialogue is one activity and mission is another completely different activity, and “ne'er the twain shall meet”!

If that is the case, my forty-five-year career in interreligious dialogue has not been ‘mission’! As a Columban ‘missionary’, I am a failure! My life has been wasted!

Where does dialogue fit?

Where does dialogue fit? It's not an easy question? Three Popes got it wrong!

In his magisterial encyclical on mission, *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II wrote:

All of this [God's presence to other religions] has been given ample emphasis by the Council and the subsequent Magisterium, without detracting in any way from the fact that salvation comes from Christ and that dialogue does not dispense from evangelisation.⁷ (RM, 55, italics in original)

⁷ https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html

Pope Benedict XVI, in his 21 December 2012 Address to Roman Curia, said:

Dialogue differs from evangelisation, from mission; (bold emphasis mine)⁸

In his magisterial encyclical on mission, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis wrote:

Evangelisation and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another.⁹ (EG, #251, bold emphasis mine)

Each of these quotes is a dagger in my heart, as they imply that my Columban work in interfaith is NOT mission!

Where does interreligious dialogue fit? Where does it plug in? From where does it get its energy? It took twenty-five years of experimenting, reflecting, writing, making and correcting mistakes, to find the answer to these questions.

Dialogue and Proclamation

The 1991 document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, co-authored by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, provided the breakthrough. By defining “evangelisation” in a broad sense as ‘the whole mission of the church’, and “evangelisation” in the narrow sense of “proclamation” (DP, 8), and using these terms consistently, it was able to affirm:

Proclamation and dialogue are thus both viewed, each in its own place, as **component elements** and **authentic forms** of the one evangelizing mission of the Church. (DP, 2. bold emphasis mine)

.... dialogue [is] one of the **integral elements** of the Church's evangelising mission. (DP, 9; 38, bold emphasis mine)

Interreligious dialogue and proclamation, though not on the same level, are both **authentic elements** of the Church's evangelising mission. (DP, 77, bold emphasis mine)

By the similarity of language used in *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dialogue and Proclamation*, it is clear that Pope John Paul II had seen earlier drafts of the latter when, a year earlier, he affirmed:

Inter-religious dialogue is **a part** of the Church's evangelising mission of the Church, connects with the mission of Jesus Christ, with the mission of the Word, with *missio Dei*, to the life of the Trinity.

⁸ https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia.html

⁹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#_ftn197

All Called to Dialogue

Plugged in to this concatenation of mission, cascading from the Trinity, for Christians, interreligious dialogue is not just good neighbourliness. It is not just a social nicety. In answer to my earlier question from *Nostra Aetate* about where dialogue fits in the mission of the Church, it is a divinely mandated, faith-filled, Spirit-driven, Word-seeking Christian apostolate that demands fidelity and constancy. It is a missionary task. As such, it is the responsibility of all.

Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way. (RM, 57, bold emphasis mine)

All Christians are called to be personally involved in these two ways of carrying out the one mission of the Church, namely proclamation and dialogue. (DP, 82, bold emphasis mine)

The implication is that if you, your parish, your school, and your diocese are not in some way engaged in interreligious dialogue, you are not engaged in the full mission of the church. You are indulging in Catholic sectarianism!

Modality of Mission

When I speak of mission, it must be acknowledged that the Vatican II account of mission tended to be unilateral. It was one-way, as indicated by the title of the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, “to the nations.” To today’s sensitivities, it suggests an imbalance of power, benefactor–beneficiary, sender–receiver. It is an imperial/colonial mode of mission. Missiologists today speak of mission *inter gentes*, “between the nations.” It is mutual, relational, and dialogical. It is an incarnational mode of mission.

The Path of Mission

Too much of mission in the past has been speaking – teaching, preaching, sermonising, and expounding. We need to remember that before Jesus spoke, he first listened – the thirty years of near silence in Nazareth!

The Trinity, source and model of mission, is a communion of total giving and receiving. All that the Word is, is first received from the Father, and only then is it given. Missionaries need to follow the same kenotic path, emptying themselves, and listening, seeking the Word and the Spirit already present in other religions, and only then speaking.

St Columban

The fifth-century Irish monk, St Columban, said: “A life unlike your own can be your teacher.” When you think about it, it is only from those who are not like us that we can ever learn anything. If we only ever mix with people like us, we will hear the same things, see the same things, read the same things, and do the same things. We will be in an echo chamber, hearing our own voices, learning nothing. We

cannot learn from those who are the same as us. We can only learn from those who are different from us. As Pope Francis wrote in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*:

Identity and dialogue are not enemies. Our own cultural identity is strengthened and enriched as a result of dialogue with those unlike ourselves. (QA, 37)¹⁰

Christian-Muslim Relations Today

A couple of words on Christian-Muslim relations:

Especially since 2001, Muslims have been battered by being labelled “terrorists.” Islamophobia has been rampant. Muslims have been verbally and physically abused. Muslim women have had their hijabs torn from their heads. The attack on the Christchurch Mosque on 15 March 2019 killed 51 people and injured 89 others. Justice demands overcoming ignorance and rebutting stereotypes

The truth is, Islam was hijacked by extremists such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah, and their offshoots, who, contravening explicit Quranic texts and clear Islamic injunctions, bombed, raped, and killed their way into infamy - giving Muslims a bad name in the process.

In the past two years, the Israeli response to the Hamas-led 7 October 2023 attacks that traumatised Jews, has, in turn, traumatised Muslims, whose family, relatives, and co-religionists in Gaza (along with Christians) have endured unimaginable suffering. All people of goodwill are appalled at the horrors unfolding in Gaza and act and pray for an immediate ceasefire, for distribution of humanitarian aid in quantities to meet the desperate need, for release of the hostages and detainees, and for a just and lasting peace settlement to end the cycles of violence and war.

In these challenging times of the Israel-Hamas war, when Jews and Muslims are deeply polarised, interreligious dialogue may seem paralysed or even useless, but it is more important than ever.

Now may not be the time for speaking, but we must at least LISTEN – and LISTEN DEEPLY – to the suffering of both sides and try to absorb and so defuse some of the pain, the anger, the hurt, the animosity, and the enmity.

And we must also SPEAK – SPEAK UP for all the victims, for human rights, and for international law.

If we, who are called by name in God’s age-long dialogue of salvation, cannot dialogue in this time of interfaith crisis, then we have failed God’s invitation and interfaith dialogue has failed.

Conclusion

Although an integral part of the evangelising mission of the church, mandated by church teaching, by popes, and by local and international church synods, although essential for weaving our multicultural, multi-religious society into a vibrant, cohesive, resilient whole, interreligious dialogue does not get the traction in the church it deserves and that society needs.

To rise to the global challenges facing us today, we cannot afford to retreat into our tribal silos. We must journey together. As an African proverb has it:

If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together.

¹⁰ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html

Interreligious Resources

Some useful interreligious/interfaith resources:

- McInerney, Patrick J. "Nostra Aetate: The Catholic Church's Journey into Dialogue." *The Australasian Catholic Record* 90, no. 3 (2013): 259–71.
- Australian Catholic Bishops Conference; Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Relations. "Nostra Aetate: 50th Anniversary." (28 July 2015): <http://bit.ly/4lmWs7O>
- Columban IRD (Inter Religious Dialogue) website: <https://columbanird.org/>
- The Sydney Statement: Building Bridges Between Believers from Different Religions: <https://www.thesydneystatement.org.au/>
- Bridges, quarterly newsletter of the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations: <https://www.columban.org.au/our-work/interfaith-relations/bridges-newsletter>
- Columban Interfaith e-Bulletin: <https://www.columban.org.au/our-work/interfaith-relations/columban-interfaith-ebulletin>

Shincheonji in the Pacific: a threat to Christian harmony in Pacific communities.



Dr Terry Pouono

Terry is a New Zealand-born Samoan. He graduated from Malua Theological College with a BDiv and then studied at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute and the University of Geneva, completing a Master's degree in Ecumenical Studies. From there, he taught in the Practical Theology department at Malua from 2006 to 2011. Terry then pursued a PhD in Theology at the University of Auckland, researching the dynamic experiences growing up as a New Zealand-born Samoan in diaspora. He taught at Laidlaw College between 2014 and 2024 before becoming a Pacific Lecturer in Theology at the University of Otago in September 2024.

Introduction

The Pacific Island communities are currently grappling with a pressing issue—a religious movement that is actively but covertly infiltrating our churches in New Zealand and gradually spreading to the shores of the Pacific Island nations. This is not a matter to be taken lightly. Like many other cult movements that have attempted to penetrate our religious and cultural villages in recent years, these groups stir up an element of suspicion, raising speculation about their potentially harmful motives.

This article will examine a Korean religious movement known as *Shincheonji*. This movement came to my attention in March 2023, when a former member informed me that *Shincheonji* in New Zealand had formed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with some Pacific churches in Auckland. Another former senior leader said it numbered two dozen.¹ This is an indication of their vision for networking and growth. A 2022 document revealed a conference attended by 1,500 church pastors worldwide, who had created MOUs with *Shincheonji*.²

Before 2023, I had not heard of the movement, which, in hindsight, is not surprising given its highly secretive approach to proselytising. This secrecy makes it particularly challenging to identify and counter its influence. At the time, I was a staff member at Laidlaw College, and we decided to host a session to inform our Pacific communities about their identity and values. We held a workshop on May 27, 2023, for Pacific leaders at LifeChurch in Manurewa, South Auckland. On my panel, we had an ex-member, a Korean Christian who grew up in the Presbyterian Church in Korea and studied theology; Rev. Dr Imoa Setefano, a staff member at Laidlaw College at the time; and Pastor Lui Ponifasio of LifeChurch. The session was not only informative for the participants but also raised alarm bells.

Following the workshop, community leaders convened an urgent meeting. Their message was clear—we must continue to warn our Pacific communities about the dangers of *Shincheonji*. There was unanimous agreement that our churches need to be more vigilant in defending the faith and educating our members

¹ Indira Stewart, 'Purity' or 'harm and control'? Inside the Shincheonji church By Indira Stewart, 1News In-depth Multimedia Reporter, December 17, 2024. Accessed 26 August 2025.

² 1,500 Pastors Establish MOUs with *Shincheonji* Church

about what they do and why. As a result, two additional sessions were held at Mt Albert Baptist Church in Auckland and Wellington Central Baptist Church. Furthermore, I served as an advisor on a documentary for Television New Zealand, hosted by a journalist who was concerned after her co-worker quit her job at TVNZ following her conversion to *Shincheonji*.

My essay is divided into four areas. First, I will provide an overview of *Shincheonji* within its original Korean context. Second, we will explore its structure, biblical interpretations and theological convictions. Third, we will examine their motives and processes of proselytism, with particular emphasis on our Pasifika contexts. Fourth, I will provide an analysis of the threat *Shincheonji* poses to the harmony and well-being of our Pasifika churches and communities.

Origins of Shincheonji?

Shincheonji is a unique Korean religious group, established in 1984. Its name, a Korean translation referring to “new heaven and new earth,” reflects their belief that their community is the visible manifestation of the new heaven and new earth prophesied in the Book of Revelation. They uniquely interpret this significant text in their religious doctrine.³ It is also known by other names, such as the *Shincheonji* Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony,⁴ the Zion Christian Mission Centre,⁵ or the New Heaven and New Earth.

Shincheonji (SCJ hereafter) is recognised in Korea as a new religious movement. However, this label is not without its implications. The Korean Presbyterian Church, as the dominant Christian church in Korea, views New Religious Movements, such as SCJ, with suspicion and caution.⁶ These allegations are not unfounded. Their distorted theology and aggressive recruitment tactics that lead to the intentional stealing of members have raised alarm bells in Christian circles. The negative discourse is not only directed by the church, but also through public discourse, which has implications for government policy-making in the Korean context.⁷

David Kim and Won-il Bang categorise SCJ alongside other second-generation Korean New Religious Movements, including Guwonpa and the World Mission Society Church of God (also known as the Church of God).⁸ The first-generation Korean New Religious Movements emerged during the era of Japanese colonisation (1910s–1930s), so their spirituality reflected the disposition of that time. Inversely, SCJ was launched during the transition phase of social democratisation between the 1960s and 1980s—a time of religious renewal and an alternative religious vibe to the conventional spirituality of the mainstream churches.⁹ This was reflected in the new teachings of the leaders, which were focused on the prophetic and mystical theology. The Korean leaders, dissatisfied with mainstream Christian churches, collectively experienced a transcendental, mystical encounter with God, leading them to establish a more contextually relevant form of religion.

³ Kim, David W, and Won-il Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji: Three Dynamic Grassroots Groups in Contemporary Korean Christian NRM History.” *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 10, no. 3 (2019): 11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030212>.

⁴ Kin Cheung & Minjung Noh (2022) COVID-19, Shincheonji, and the limits of South Korean secularism: The Devil in Patient 31, *Religion, State & Society*, 50:3, 316. DOI: 10.1080/09637494.2022.2096996.

⁵ Kim, David W, and Won-il Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 12.

⁶ Cheung and Noh, 318.

⁷ Cheung and Noh, 318.

⁸ Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 5.

⁹ Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 8.

SCJ did not emerge from a vacuum but was a product of the mix Cheung and Noh call ‘Protestant Christianity and South Korean modernity’. This unique blend of indigenous religious tradition and modernity in South Korea played a significant role in shaping the community's beliefs and practices.¹⁰ Its leader and founder, Lee Man Hee, was involved in other religious movements, such as the Olive Tree Movement, a faith-healing group in the 1950s.¹¹ He later joined the Temple of the Tabernacle, founded in 1966, which was later integrated into the Presbyterian church - a move which prompted Lee Man Hee’s departure from the group.¹²

Interestingly, he was a former member of Olive Tree, but departed when its founder, Park Tae Son, claimed to possess healing power and professed to be the last prophet before the millennium. Park started teaching that he was the Messiah and that the Bible was wrong. Lee Man-Hee disagreed with Tae Son, and, like a weekday afternoon soap drama, there was a plot twist. Lee Man-Hee despised Tae Son's actions, but cunningly did the same thing. Lee Man-Hee took the reins and elevated himself to the pedestal.

What are the unique and exclusive beliefs of Shincheonji?

To understand their beliefs, it's crucial to grasp the founder's vision and intentions. As shared by an anonymous former member who actively warned people of the cult's dangers in New Zealand, Lee Man Hee positioned himself as the central figure in the group's beliefs and practices. The divinisation of Lee Man Hee is deeply ingrained in the church's teachings, with many believing he is immortal and infallible, a testament to his personal authority.¹³ It is not unusual for cult followings to divert teachings and worship away from God toward themselves, or to partly deify themselves. In such cases, the interpretation of Scripture is heavily subjective and biased, often leading to a biblical hermeneutic that not only elevates the founder to a divine or semi-divine status but also promotes religious practices that align with its theology.

Lee Man Hee claims he has been chosen as the chosen messenger,¹⁴ receiving a prophecy declaring that he possessed the gift of instruction to decipher Jesus’ parables, biblical secrets, and the Book of Revelation. He asserts that he alone holds the correct interpretation of the book of Revelation, which he claims has been sealed in figurative language. Revelation 22:16 reads, “I, Jesus, sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the root and offspring of David, * the bright morning star.” On November 23, 2024, Lee addressed the 200 pastors at the Peace Training Institute in Cheongpyeong, a significant event in Shincheonji's history, saying,

For 2,000 years, no one has testified to the reality of Revelation because only those who see and hear the events can do so, he stated. “Revelation has been fulfilled today, and Jesus has chosen a spokesperson to deliver this message. I testify according to His instructions.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Cheung and Noh, 319.

¹¹ Kim, David W, and Won-il Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji: Three Dynamic Grassroots Groups in Contemporary Korean Christian NRM History.” *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 10, no. 3 (2019): 9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030212>.

¹² Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 6.

¹³ Indira Stewart, 'Purity' or 'harm and control'? Inside the Shincheonji church.

¹⁴ Lee Man Hee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, 54.

¹⁵ Shincheonji Church of Jesus Successfully Concluded Its "Shincheonji Word Seminar: Testifying to the Fulfilment of Revelation" Leaving Pastors Astonished. ANAHEIM, Calif., Nov. 26, 2024 /PRNewswire/ --

To Kim and Bang, the self-glorification of the Promised pastor suggests that Lee Man-Hee is regarded as a real messiah, even superseding Jesus. The theological affirmation denies the Trinity because their understanding is that Jesus is not God.¹⁶ The movement elevates their leader to divine status, affirming that Lee Man-Hee is “the one who overcomes” in the Book of Revelation, the faithful and wise servant in Matthew 24:45, and the promised pastor of the New Testament whom Jesus has chosen.¹⁷ This is verified in his book, “The Creation of Heaven and Earth.”¹⁸

Shincheonji's beliefs stand in stark contrast to traditional Christian doctrine. Lee Man-Hee teaches that he is the sole possessor of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, the only one capable of correctly interpreting the Bible, emphasising the extent of his authority.¹⁹ With this belief, all other interpretations of Scripture are deemed invalid and must therefore be rejected.

Shincheonji's minority is represented in two ways: numerically, compared to the more established Christian churches, and politically, through the influence of Protestantism in Korea on religious freedom and other state affairs.²⁰ Public discourse categorises religions as legitimate and illegitimate.²¹ New Religious movements, like SCJ, tend to be grouped as hostile. Additionally, they received unfavourable attention from the Korean Presbyterian church and the broader Korean public for their role in the rise in COVID-19 cases. SCJ counters the adverse claims, declaring that the devil has deceived the Christian church, and it, therefore, is in spiritual darkness. There have also been more antagonistic labels directed to Christians, such as cult, devil, or a deviant group.²² This understanding leads them to believe that there is no salvation for those who believe in Jesus, a belief that is both controversial and thought-provoking.²³

Generally, the global Christian church has been accused of being hypocritical, arguing that people who insist without reservation that they have already been saved and that they have received the Holy Spirit are nothing but lies.²⁴ Accused of being corrupt and old-fashioned,²⁵ Christian churches were considered 'false seeds' that were not from 'the true river' and, therefore, were not the harvest field for SCJ missions.²⁶

Today, spiritual Israel [The Christian World] has come to an end, roughly 2000 years since Jesus planted the seed of heaven. It is now time for New Spiritual Israel, which is the generation of Shincheonji, to create God's Kingdom on earth by harvesting wheat-like believers (church members).²⁷

According to Lee Man Hee, attending the SCJ Bible course is the only way to learn the secret pairings found in the Bible and to gain a proper understanding of the book of Revelation. Adherents, therefore,

¹⁶ Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 9.

¹⁷ Chong, “A Korean Sect.”

¹⁸ Lee Man Hee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*.

¹⁹ Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 9.

²⁰ Cheung and Noh, 317.

²¹ John G. Grisafi. "A Marginal Religion and COVID-19 in South Korea: Shincheonji, Public Discourse, and the Shaping of Religion." *Nova Religio* 25, no. 1 (2021): 41.

²² Cheung and Noh, 318.

²³ Anonymous ex-member of Shincheonji.

²⁴ Lee Man Hee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, 398,

²⁵ Carrington Clarke; Sook-young Lee; Mitch Denman Woolnough, “Cult or church? This Korean sect has thousands of devotees, but ex-believers lost faith and money: It’s a church with more than 200,000 devoted followers, promising salvation from Armageddon. The catch? There’s only room for 140,000 ‘high priests’ in the afterlife,”

²⁶ Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 20.

²⁷ Lee Man-Hee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, 45.

need to know their interpretation of each passage. Anything different is considered pointless - the mere teachings of men. He believes that when all nations come to SCJ, they will be saved through him and his revealed word.

The Book of Revelation

Central to the belief of SCJ is their leader's interpretation of the Book of Revelation, which they consider the ultimate truth. They teach about hidden messages—fruits and trees—symbols closely connected to their leader. These understandings reaffirm that their leader is a divine figure or god. Even the year of its launch, 1984, was perceived as the fulfilment of the biblical prophecy: “the year that the universe completed its orbit and returned to its point of origin.”²⁸

It was stated earlier that the New Religious Movements drew their inspiration from indigenous Korean leaders who underwent mystical experiences, sparking new prophecies. Another contextual prophecy emerges from the “theory of Realism”, surveying themes of apostasy, destruction, and salvation, suggesting that the prophecy recorded in Revelation was fulfilled in Korea in the 20th century, at Jae Yul’s Temple of the Tabernacle in Gwacheon.²⁹ This prophecy avows that SCJ is the heavenly kingdom on earth.

SCJ revised and established its structure in 1995 to accommodate a hierarchical leadership including seven education chiefs, 12 regional leaders and 24 elders. The regional organisation, aligned with the 12 disciples of Christ, have been assigned to recruit 12,000 members. The goal of such a task is to recruit the 144,000 members designated for eternal salvation in the Book of Revelation.³⁰

The organisation of the church itself aligns with signs in the book.

Under the theory of ‘unity and physically eternal life,’ Shincheonji consists of four divisions (four creatures), seven superintendents (seven spirits), and 24 chiefs (24 elders). When the multitude of priests (shepherds: 144,000) was completed through the fruits of 12,000, the flesh of the martyrs and saints (unmarried people) became one body (unity of God). Since then, people from all over the world come in white clothes, so that the prophecies of the Bible are fulfilled as in Revelation 7.³¹

Recruiting members through deception

In New Zealand, SCJ employs aggressive and deceptive tactics. They target people in public areas, infiltrate churches as guests, and lure members away from Christian churches. University campuses are another hotspot for their recruitment. Urgent recruitment to SCJ has theological motives, aimed at ensuring the Salvation of souls by adhering to the correct teachings and practices. It is also believed that the greater numbers will benefit the social and economic growth as SCJ continues to become self-sufficient and self-propagating.

Shincheonji's recruitment is not haphazard, but a meticulously planned operation. They employ a systematic approach that involves extensive planning and manipulation, all driven by the belief that they

²⁸ Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 9.

²⁹ Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 11.

³⁰ Cheung and Noh, 319.

³¹ Kim and Bang. “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji, 11.

are doing God's will. According to my panel members at the workshop, the approach to proselytise typically involves working in groups of six or more, with one individual making face-to-face contact with a non-member. The others in the group observe the engagement as spectators but network in the vicinity. I have collected stories of people who have been approached at various locations, including bus stops, supermarket car parks, and university campuses.

Monica Alice Quirk coined this process as 'spiritual espionage', and she uses other more striking terms like 'sheep stealing' and 'deceptive evangelism.' Spiritual espionage, in her words, is...An attempt by a missionary group to infiltrate what they consider to be a "target" community and undermine their beliefs by slowly disseminating their own practices to individuals within said community.³²

In Korea, members have defended these secretive methods, conceding that a more explicit and straightforward approach would have adverse effects.³³ In other words, to lure someone into your trap, it is better to fool someone by dropping implicit messages than to tell the whole story. However, the deception is further reinforced by the community's welcoming and charismatic approach. Quirk writes:

Missionaries must maintain not only their own core sense of identity but also the identity of the group they are targeting. This demonstrates the strength of identity necessary for a group to engage in spiritual espionage...spiritual espionage exploits the role of signifiers in identity. The aesthetics of an identity are intended as a manifestation of the experience of ascribing to a particular belief, and when such an adherent sees another with the same expression, they will naturally assume that the other person holds a similar worldview. Aesthetics bolster a sense of community through signification.³⁴

In simple terms, the idiom "they are like the wolf in sheep's clothing" suggests the hidden motives of SCJ under the guise of kindness. Quirk iterates this when she says, 'The aim is to be perceived not as outsiders approaching the target, but as a member of the target group engaging with peers.'³⁵

Due to the covert and deceptive recruiting strategies, SCJ were blamed for the rapid increase in COVID cases in 2020. Following a high-profile incident where members of the SCJ cult withheld information from the health authorities, members were missed in contact tracing and thus were accused of spreading COVID-19; their leader was imprisoned. In response, a new law was enacted that requires members of the SCJ cult to disclose their affiliation when meeting people in public. Previously, they did not disclose their identities, making it difficult to determine their activities. This law was designed to increase transparency and accountability, particularly in the recruitment process.

Theology of Lying

In New Zealand, SCJ members have strategically integrated themselves into Christian churches, with the intention of converting. As new friendships are forged, the next step is to invite potential members to their Bible studies. This systematic approach is designed to gradually draw individuals into the group, making it more difficult for them to leave once they commit. Typically, attending Bible study brings

³² Monica Alice Quirk, Cuckoos in the Nest: Christalignment and Conversion through "Spiritual Espionage" in *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 11.2 (2020) 159. ISSN 2041-9511 (print) ISSN 2041-952X (online) <https://doi.org/10.1558/ijnsr.19188>

³³ Quirk, Cuckoos in the Nest, 162.

³⁴ Quirk, Cuckoos in the Nest, 171-172.

³⁵ Quirk, Cuckoos in the Nest, 172.

comfort to new members, assuming there are other new students in the room. However, this is part of the deception, as the supposed new members are usually long-term members putting on an act. With recruits, leaders can gather new information about potential members.

Recruits are encouraged to lie to their parents and family about their whereabouts. They would even provide step-by-step instructions on denying your involvement with SCJ if approached by family and church. The theology of lying is justified by moments in the biblical story, where lying, or keeping a secret, ultimately led to a positive outcome—for example, the narrative of Abram’s deceiving the Egyptians, saying that he was Sarai’s brother, not her husband, to spare his life in Genesis 12: 10-20. The story’s outcome saw Abram’s family released by Pharaoh because of the harm inflicted on Pharaoh’s household, a result of the lie. This 'theology of lying' is a key part of SCJ's recruitment strategy, as it allows them to justify their deceptive practices as being in line with God's will.

These selected texts of deception set the tone for lying to save themselves from being drawn away from SCJ by detractors. They believe that lying is acceptable when it serves God's will, a belief that has sparked controversy and criticism. This includes lying during recruitment by failing to disclose the group's identity and intentions fully. Taking their deceptive tactics to the next level, they have impersonated Christian agencies and colleges using various front groups like Heavenly Culture, World Peace, and Restoration of Light (HWPL).³⁶

The process of deception mentioned by experts at my workshop, which includes luring a new person to their Bible study, is also iterated by Quirk, who further elaborates on the process by stating that regular attendance at Bible programs aims for conversion to their community—the final stage, confirming one's acceptance into SCJ, is through a Bible study exam. According to one source, the graduation exam at the Zion Christian Mission Centre consists of about 100 questions on the gospels and Revelation. The objective is to ensure that graduates possess a thorough understanding of the Book of Revelation.³⁷

Steve Worsley, a former Baptist Pastor in Auckland who has researched the cult for many years, was firm in the idea that seeking biblical truth and a well-organised bible study programme was a key attraction to SCJ. The testimonies of ex-members further reassert this; Bible-based classes were found to be both compelling and intense. This was a drawcard, particularly for Christians who had not received the same teaching at their previous churches. As their engagement increased, the older members would encourage the new members to cut ties with their churches. After months of training, the new members undergo a confirmation ritual into the cult. The ritual of being “passed over” is a significant celebration in which new members are instructed to bow down to a screen displaying an image of Lee Man Hee.³⁸

Health and Well-being among current and former members

During my workshops in Auckland and Wellington, our participants had the opportunity to hear the stories of two former members of SCJ. As they shared their experiences, it was evident that they had gone through a painful and traumatic experience. Life after SCJ is not the same for these ex-members, who choose to keep their distance from organised religion, whilst going through a painful and emotional transition to full recovery. Rebuilding and renewing trust with the outside world, including the Christian church.

³⁶ Unpublished writings by former member of SCJ – name anonymous.

³⁷ “Shincheonji Church of Jesus: The Only Church in the World Where All Believers Fully Understand Revelation.”

³⁸ Chong, “A Korean Sect.”

In qualitative research conducted by Carrington Clarke and co, they interviewed an ex-member, who shared:

I quit my job, I devoted all my time & started living in the *Shincheonji*... When I was there, I was like a robot... I could not think by myself, I just listened to what I was told - brainwashed - followed what I was told. I would perform like an actress & promote the religion to others.³⁹

Why would one quit their job to join the movement? Byun Sang-Wook, a Korean news anchor, believed that, with limited space in eternal life, members were encouraged to set aside their personal lives and commit to their community by doing more work and giving more money to support the cause before the apocalypse.⁴⁰

SCJ: A threat to the collective harmony of Pacific communities

SCJ is growing as a global religion, with an increasing number of members outside of Korea. According to William Chong, SCJ expanded internationally in 1990. The first overseas branch opened in Los Angeles in 1996, followed by branches in Berlin (2000), Sydney (2009), Cape Town (2012), and other locations. By 2019, SCJ had established mission centres in 29 countries.⁴¹ Their efforts to create a memorandum of understanding with global church leaders serve as a catalyst for growth, with teachings filtered into churches through their pastors.⁴²

My concern is not just theological; as conveyed in Korea, it also has implications for church mission, individual health and wellbeing, and community relations. SCJ is actively expanding its reach in the Pacific. They are also deliberately seeking to infiltrate Pacific Island churches in New Zealand. Furthermore, an increasing number of members of Pacific communities are embracing the mission, underscoring the urgency of the situation. A former leader in Christchurch reported that 'Pacific people are the fastest growing demographic in SCJ New Zealand.'⁴³

SCJ is not just a distant concern on the other side of the world. It's here, in our communities, and it's growing more aggressive in its recruitment tactics. In 2024, three Auckland pastors who attended my workshop reported being approached by representatives of the group. One group targeted Pastor Chris Sola of the Dream Centre in Papatoetoe, and another the Congregational Christian Church in Papakura, right before their Sunday worship. They didn't just knock on the door; they wanted to form a relationship. Who were the messengers? Pacific Islanders, supported by members from other ethnic groups. Our people were known for their passion and commitment when spreading the Christian gospel to other Pacific Islands. Their subtle, covert approach may change as our own people are at the forefront of their missional endeavours.

One of the most disturbing aspects of Shincheonji's tactics is its impact on family relationships. One of the red flags identified by Indira Stewart in her television documentary was the gradual change in

³⁹ Clarke, Young-Lee and Woolnough, *Cult of Church?*

⁴⁰ Clarke, Young-Lee and Woolnough, *Cult of Church?*

⁴¹ William Chong, "A Korean Sect Targeted New Zealand Christians. Did Churches Respond Effectively?" *Christianity Today*, December 13, 2023. https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/12/shincheonji-new-zealand-korea-christian-church/?utm_medium=widgetsocial

⁴² PR Newswire. "1,500 Pastors Establish MOUs with Shincheonji Church." Apr 05, 2022. <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/1-500-pastors-establish-mous-with-shincheonji/docview/2646934125/se-2>.

⁴³ TVNZ, 1News. 'Purity' or 'harm and control'? Inside the Shincheonji church By Indira Stewart, 1News In-depth Multimedia Reporter

behaviour and withdrawal of a dear friend.⁴⁴ New members are led to believe that their families' salvation hinges on their unwavering commitment to the movement. If their families object to their involvement, they are left with a stark choice: either convert their families or sever ties. The group instructs its students not to disclose their bible study to friends and family until they have become sufficiently conditioned to accept its more controversial teachings. The cult's ultimate goal is salvation, and they are taught to do whatever it takes to achieve it.

In Korea, family tensions and breakups are common among younger people who join SCJ, leading them to abandon their family and career to pursue their new goal. Bryn writes, "We see people running away from home, dropping out of school & donating college tuition to *Shincheonji*." Another document notes the sad story of a mother searching for her adult daughter, who went missing after joining the cult. Even though they were separated, she would regularly keep an eye on her. She noted that her daughter had lost a lot of weight before she went missing. Fortunately, in Korea, with the high number of members leaving, support groups and a church called the Ansan Sangrok Church have formed, consisting entirely of ex-members. For our communities, being aware of the threats and providing the necessary support for outgoing members are critical to the health and well-being of recruits, their families and the wider community.

We must be cautious of these new religious movements. The Grace Road Church, established in Fiji in 2014, has built a reputation as a cult that engaged in unethical actions towards its members and the local community. The Fijian authorities have cracked down on this cult by deporting its leaders back to Korea.⁴⁵

In New Zealand, former members are actively warning communities of SCJ through collaboration and literature. The Olive Leaf Network in Wellington provide aid, advocacy, and awareness to former members of high-demand religious groups.⁴⁶ Our third workshop in Wellington in 2024 involved working with their team.

Pacific Island people are inherently religious communities, and we are also more likely to move from one church to another if we are dissatisfied with the spiritual feeding provided by our churches. The SCJ Bible study programme is an attractive proposition for our people, hungry for knowledge of God's Word. Furthermore, Pakeha Christians are more independent, individualistic, and sceptical. Whereas Pacific Christians, and other ethnic groups who tend to value community and shared responsibility, may find the SCJ environment more easily adaptable and to their liking.

Implications for church mission ... be diligent!

Christian churches in Oceania, including Pacific communities, must be more alert to religious movements that actively proselytise and should be aware that their church members may be targeted outside the church environment, such as in universities or public areas. Given the awareness of what these movements represent, we must educate our church members about the warning signs. These red flags may include secretive behaviour, pressure to cut ties with non-members, and a focus on recruitment

⁴⁴ TVNZ, 1News. 'Purity' or 'harm and control'? Inside the Shincheonji church By Indira Stewart, 1News In-depth Multimedia Reporter

⁴⁵ Donald, Kirk. *A Fugitive Cult's Dream Life in Fiji Threatens to Fall Apart: Domsday Cult that Bought Up Huge Swathes of Fiji After Fleeing South Korea Faces Annihilation as the Pacific Nation Turns Against them*. New York: The Newsweek/Daily Beast Company LLC, 2023.

⁴⁶ Olive Leaf Network, in collaboration with founder and facilitator Lindy Jacomb. <https://nz.oliveleaf.network/>

rather than spiritual growth. This knowledge will empower us and prepare us to recognise and respond to the tactics of SCJ and similar groups.

The preservation of our Pacific family and village networks is more critical, grounded in an interconnected sense of belonging. If we lose one, the impact affects the entire village. Our love for one another, our *koinonia*, our open and welcoming culture, our passion for sharing the gospel with others, and our deep desire to learn and grow from God's Word-these are the values we hold dear, and these groups are twisting them.

What are the implications of this topic for Christian mission? The objective of Christian mission is to fulfil the responsibility to promote hope, justice, and peace in situations of political, social, and economic injustice. In twenty-first-century ecumenical theology, there has been a shift to understand mission as an attribute and activity of a Trinitarian God. Participation in God's saving activity, or *Missio Dei*.⁴⁷ It is understood as bearing witness to God's love towards all people and working for the promise of God's reign. If any cult or religion diverts our focus from this, we need to stand up and stand firm for the sake of the gospel through both theology and praxis.

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⁴⁷ James A. Scherer, "Salvador Bahia 1996: What will it mean?" *International Review of Mission* 84, no. 334 (1995): 226.

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BOOK REVIEWS

What is Happening to Religion in Australia?



By Philip Hughes

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Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon

Past editor of the *Australian Journal of Mission Studies*

Philip Hughes is a Uniting Church minister, theologian and scholar who has researched the connection between religion and society for many years. He has published widely and **What is Happening to Religion in Australia?** is his latest book.

The book concentrates on changes in attitudes to Christianity in Australia from the end of World War II to the present day, but some attention is given to other religions as well. Hughes analyses results from various surveys, especially the Census returns, and has a gift for seamlessly weaving his statistics into the text.

Hughes' main conclusions are that church attendances have been declining since the 1970s and the number of people opting for "no religion" on Census forms has risen. Further, the churches were once respected and determined society's values, but they have lost society's confidence (recent scandals have not helped). There have been increases in numbers attending Pentecostal and mega churches, but these are a tiny percentage of all Protestant churches. Since World War II, the prevailing societal changes have been from religion to secularisation and from focussing on family, community and helping the needy to personal fulfilment. The new goal is enjoying life as much as we can. Immigration has brought rises in the numbers of members of other faiths, but time shows us that the children of the original immigrant parents are increasingly opting to join the "no religion" camp. Other conclusions are that declining congregations tend to become more conservative and exclusive, and liberal churches have had significant drops in the number of regular attendees because they give their members the freedom to think for themselves and members decide they do not need to attend church.

The Australian churches are failing to connect with society. God has become irrelevant, and more people are following other "spiritual" paths. What can be done? Hughes suggests these things. Do not be afraid of small groups – small groups can do great things. Look outwards, not inwards. Churches should become community centres. Open church buildings to the local community and offer activities the community needs. Do not let old buildings be a burden – move out and, if necessary, hire a building. Let lay people, men and women, take on more leadership roles. Come to grips with new values – welcoming immigrants who belong to other faiths, gender equality, racial equality, same-sex marriage and inclusiveness for people with disabilities. The church still has a prophetic role and needs to actively champion care of the environment and animals.

Hughes provides useful summaries at the end of each chapter. At the end of the book, we are given the references used, the data used, and suggestions for additional reading.

I have been able only to highlight the main themes of this book. Hughes covers much more, and the evidence he provides for his conclusions is fascinating, compelling, sobering, and challenging. I recommend this book to all readers – church members or not. There is a great deal of material in this book for us to ponder and act upon.

SVD Mission in Contexts: Creative Responses in a Wounded World



Edited by Anthony Le Duc, SVD

Published by: Mission, Education and Research (MER) Society of the Divine Word, Australia Province, 2025

Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon

Past editor of the Australian Journal of Mission Studies

SV D is shorthand for Societas Verbi Divini which is the official name of the Society of the Divine Word known more generally known as the Divine Word Missionaries or the SVDs. The Society is a male missionary Order within the Catholic Church. It is an international Order with almost 6000 members from seventy-eight countries.

This year, the SVDs have been celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the foundation of their Order in 1875, and the theme they chose for their celebrations is: *Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*.

The publication of SVD Mission in Contexts is part of the Australian Province's 150th celebrations and comprises a series of essays written by twenty-four SVDs and one Holy Spirit Sister. These can be read independently.

The Book is divided into two parts.

Part One gives us perspectives on the Jubilee Theme. Like an exegete, each contributor draws out the meaning of the theme. The Light is Jesus, the light of the world, and it is the task of each SVD (indeed, each Christian) to radiate this light. The context in which the SVDs work is a world of multiculturalism and interculturality, and a world which is wounded – working with people in need is a top priority and joyful proclamation and advocacy for social justice are key factors in SVD mission. The starting point for becoming an SVD is a close relationship with Jesus. Action is important in the life of an SDV missionary, but they must make time for the study of Scripture, prayer, meditation and contemplation. The paradigm for mission has changed – Vatican II saw mission as *ad gentes* (to the people), but the SVDs see mission now as *inter gentes* (with, among the people). Further, each local church is now responsible for mission, and the laity have a crucial part to play in this. The growing push for Synodality should help to give the laity more say and more responsibility in leadership. Finally, SVDs must witness by how they live – their behaviour is a vital factor here.

Part Two is a series of scholarly essays on a variety of topics some of which are: SVD founder Arnold Janssen's leadership style; The Anthropos journal and the importance of anthropological research for SVD work; synodality; a critique of Benedict XV's little known apostolic letter *Maximum illud* which was written in 1919 and gives sound advice to missionaries. Benedict was ahead of his time in mission thinking and was definitely an *inter gentes* man; communication; an illuminating account of life, culture

and mission work in Papua New Guinea where the writer sums up living in another culture by saying, “I must learn to eat sweet potatoes”; a fascinating study of the four servant songs from Isaiah; spiritual direction and mental health; the economic changes needed to help poor farmers in The Philippines to get a fair go; and a perceptive comparison of views of the cosmos from different faiths (inter-creationality) which all come to the same conclusion – everything is connected.

This book reveals much about the current thinking of an important missionary organisation and is full of creative responses in a wounded world. The impression given to the reader is that the SVDs are forward-thinking, progressive, open to new ideas, compassionate, committed, adventurous, intrepid and joyful. This is an impressive work and a major contribution to the study of Christian mission.

The Christ Who Embraces: An Orthodox Theology of Margins



By Jacob Joseph

Published by: Brill: Leiden/Boston, 2024, pp 237.

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Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon

Past editor of the *Australian Journal of Mission Studies*

Jacob Joseph is a Syrian Orthodox priest, scholar, and theologian. This book is a revision of his doctoral thesis from the University of Divinity. Jacob Joseph is especially interested in Orthodox Theology of Mission and lectures at St Athanasius College.

Syriac Christians are thought to have arrived in India as early as the First Century CE and in this book, Jacob Joseph traces the long history of Syriac Orthodox mission theology in India with special attention to the Dalits (the untouchables) on the margins of Indian society. Until the late 19th century, little attention was given to the Dalits. The Syriac Christians had aligned themselves with the top caste Brahmins who believed that Dalits were polluted and only the pure (i.e., the Brahmins) could worship God.

Towards the end of the nineteenth Century, some Syrian bishops tried to include the Dalits in their Christian communities but met stiff resistance. The Dalits who had become Christians were obliged to worship separately. And it wasn't until Liberation theology emerged after World II, that a Dalit Christology began to emerge. The Dalits realised that if they were to make progress, then they needed to develop their own Christology to counter the "official" Christology. The key aspects of Dalit Christology became clear. The Dalits identified with the suffering Jesus on the cross. Here was a god who knew what suffering was. The Dalits saw Jesus' wide-open arms as a symbol of embrace and an invitation to come to him. The story of Jesus healing the leper became important to the Dalits as it shows Jesus healing an untouchable man by touching him. And the kiss of peace in the Orthodox Liturgy which represents the embrace of Christ for all people became a vital part of Dalit Christology. The drum has also become an important part of Dalit Christology. It was once a symbol of oppression, but it is now used to assert liberation and freedom. Significantly, all these elements of Dalit Christology incorporate touch.

Dalit Christology is relatively new. It represents a real challenge to the centuries old caste system. Joseph's conclusion is that there is still a disconnect between the church and the Dalits' plight, and a new theology of the margins is needed. The Dalits need to be embraced, and the Syrian Orthodox Church will only succeed in its mission when the Dalits are equals.

Joseph's book is written with deep theological insights, and reading a book on Orthodox theology was a new and refreshing experience for me. The book is dedicated to Severus of Antioch who was head of the Syriac Orthodox Church from 512 to 538 CE, and I was fascinated by the chapter devoted to Severus' Miaphysite Christology which is fundamental to Syriac Orthodox theology. I found many parts of the book moving, especially the chapter on the significance of the kiss of peace, and I am grateful for having had the opportunity to be introduced to a non-western view of theology and mission in such a compelling way.

The book has an Index and an extensive bibliography. Finally, to state the obvious, the title of the book is a stroke of genius.

The Missionary Kids: Unmasking the Myths of White Evangelicalism



By Holly Berkley Fletcher

Published by: Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis, 2025, 291 pages (Kindle edition)

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Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon

Past editor of the *Australian Journal of Mission Studies*

Holly Berkley Fletcher grew up in Kenya when her American Southern Baptist parents were posted there as missionaries. This made her an MK (Missionary Kid) and she writes this book from a Southern Baptist background. She contends that experiences of MKs have been overlooked in missionary narratives and has written this book to correct that omission.

Fletcher is an historian who has used impressive sources for this book – her own experience and research, the research of other scholars, over eighty interviews with MKs, hundreds of responses from MKs to a survey she developed, and consultations with historians, sociologists, psychologists, missiologists, theologians, legal experts, journalists and child protection experts. The book includes personal accounts from many MKs.

American Southern Baptists take a literalist interpretation of scripture, they emphasise personal conversion and hold that eternal life is only available to believers. Accordingly, it is important to convert the heathen to save them from hell. They hold that their interpretation of Christianity is the right one.

The author wishes to expose four myths.

1. The Myth of Calling. This is the idea that God needs the American church to spread the gospel so that any hardship or danger, even the sacrifice of one's children, is justifiable. MKs were often neglected and lonely and were frequently sent to mission-run boarding schools. The concept of calling is rarely scrutinised.
2. The Myth of Multiculturalism. The MKs point out that missionaries and their families lived in bubbles. There were few opportunities for MKs to form cross-cultural friendships and to socialise with the locals. Racism was always under the surface. MKs struggled for belonging as they didn't belong in foreign countries and didn't belong in America because they weren't brought up there.
3. The Myth of Saints. Southern Baptists place their missionaries on very high pedestals and regard them as saints. Regrettably, too many missionaries were not saints. The number of MKs who experienced physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse is shocking. And further, when

complaints were made, these were ignored and brushed under the carpet. Only recently are complaints being taken seriously. There are legal difficulties when dealing with crimes committed overseas, but these are being tackled.

4. The Myth of Indispensability. As the author puts it: “It is deeply embedded in our self-concept as Americans that we are essential” and it comes as a shock to consider that when it comes to winning the world for Christ, it doesn’t have to be Americans anymore. Slowly, more mission work is being carried out by indigenous people. The author contends it is time for Americans to get out of the way.

This powerful book is a valuable addition to the study of missiology and should be read and discussed by as many people as possible. It has the added advantage of being written in an engaging way. The book has an extensive Bibliography.

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