Mission and spirituality at Solace emerging missional Church

An interactive network for everyday faith

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Solace EMC is an emerging Church grappling with expressing its mission and spirituality in contemporary society. Started by Olivia Maclean as an additional congregation of a large Anglican Church, it has since branched off on its own with ongoing Anglican and also Baptist relationships. Its founding was to create space for theological questioning and develop interactive worship for all ages and all stages of faith. It has a focus on celebrating everyday spirituality and the vocation and mission of all members of its network. As such it sees itself as an interactive network more than a Sunday-centred group. Its own book, *Remaking*, and the seven ways of Jesus-centred spirituality are key tools it has developed for nurturing people for mission in everyday life. It helps people reflect on their passions and dreams, and celebrates people being better neighbours, friends, advocates, businesspeople, teachers, nurses and environmental stewards. It expresses its reason for existence in its mission statement: To Enable a People to Thrive as Followers of Jesus, Celebrating and Re-making their Everyday World

The Shaping of Things Now research

Emerging Churches are exploring new ways of being Church, which engage missionaly with their communities and that exercise innovation in their expression. Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost in their influential book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, argue for the need of multiplying new missional structures, offer a theological paradigm for emerging Churches and share innovative Church stories from around the world.[1]

They argue for missional spirituality, by which they mean a non-dualistic approach to faith that does not limit faith to the sacred sphere and avoids warning against too much secularism or compartmentalization. They draw on Hebraic thought and reflect on the implications of Jewish monotheism—that God is the one God over all of life and not just religious zones.[2]

They founded Forge Mission Training Network[3] to help birth and nurture the emerging missional Church (EMC) movement in Australia. Forge has played a key networking and training role in helping many, but not all, of the new emerging Churches get started. One of the Churches they have influenced is Solace EMC, an interactive network for everyday faith in Melbourne’s north-eastern and eastern suburbs.

There is a great deal to learn from observing what is actually happening in emerging Churches like Solace. The emerging Church literature contends that new models are the way to reach people in a postmodern society, but do the results match the rhetoric? Instead of looking at the theory and ideals, I am interested in examining the present and local perspective of what is happening in particular congregations. What innovation is happening and where is it taking Churches in their mission and spirituality? What can we learn from the new and creative ways emerging Churches? How is the shaping of things now?[4]

I participated at Solace for a month in September 2006, interviewed key leaders and conducted five focus groups with participants. What follows is an initial part of the Solace story and the key cultural features I observed and from which I am learning. This is part of my larger research project into emerging Churches in Melbourne and how they are expressing mission and innovation.[4]

A Solace liturgy

Solace was planted in January 2000 as an alternative worship congregation out of one of Melbourne’s largest Anglican Churches, St Hilary’s Kew (SHACK). Olivia Moffat (now Maclean) was on staff at St Hilary’s and discerned a need for different approaches to worship and theological reflection for young adults.

Describing themselves as a Church for the unchristian and the over-churched, they were influenced by alternative worship forms and postmodern leadership ideas.

Solace now meets on Sunday mornings at St Paul’s in Station Street, Fairfield. In the midst of a busy shopping precinct, between a restaurant and a bread shop, the 90-year-old church building, built in 1916, presents as a traditional Anglican church. Yet Solace and St Paul’s are dreaming about how to make best missional use of their space.

On 10 September 2006, I participated in the Solace liturgy that invites several people to lead parts of the service. People mingle or sit around St Paul’s on lounges, chairs and steps. Stuart Davey,[5] one of the pastors, greets us and explains we may go to different parts of the room.

We can prayerfully read the psalms on the wall—which that Sunday included articles about the deaths of Steve Erwin and Peter Brock. There is an option of contributing to one of many offering boxes—with symbols of our money, time, environmental care or encouragement of others. Or we can respond by writing, painting or moulding play-dough, pour a fair-trade plunger coffee or engage in quiet conversations.

After this, choose-your-own adventure liquid Church experience, Stuart calls everyone together and asks, “Where have you seen God at work this week?” Con had visited a Church in Queensland and appreciated the welcome he experienced. Stuart had weeded his garden and reflected on what God was taking out of his life.

CRONSHAW 38

Australian Journal of Mission Studies

Integrating faith with everyday life is a feature of Solace and was the theme for this morning’s service. The worship continues with more questions interspersed with songs and a Michael Longing poem.[6] Annette presents teaching about Transforming Grace and being enthralled by God, rather than primarily seeking conformity, doctrine, Church activities or special experiences.

Discussion follows about what holds people back from knowing God’s love or learning from God or others: self-sufficiency, pride, an anti-music bias or a bias against traditional forms or experts. Toni says whenever she sees someone die, her reaction is to think how terrible God is. Miriam admits she naturally responds in fear to Arab men, but she wants instead to smile and be ready to express a warm greeting.

One person says she responds to disappointment with God by avoiding prayer; another that she does the opposite and seeks to do more spiritual disciplines. Maybe a third of the people who are present contribute to discussion, but most listen with interest. Well-constructed questions lead to thought-provoking discussion and people do not criticize responses or seek to immediately resolve differences. People are reasserting their commitment to traditional evangelism like prayer, bible reading and compassion to the needy, but express wanting to do these things with right motives and not out of obligation. They pray for phrases, prays and invites contributions to tidying up.[8]

The origins and ways of Solace

Despite their distinctly alternative approaches to worship, the real focus of Solace is not any Church event or pastor, but on Solace participants living out the ways of Jesus. The most basic principle of Solace is that it exists "to enable a people to thrive as followers of Jesus, celebrating and re-making their everyday life."[10]

They have developed seven ways to be Jesus-centred and relevant to everyday life. They are based on *Transforming Grace* inspired by Dallas Willard and an approach to historical spiritual traditions outlined by Richard Foster: the contemplative, holiness, charismatic, evangelical, social justice and sacramental traditions.[10] Solace has added a seventh way about relational wholeness:

- **The Way of the Everyday** is about acknowledging that God is both above all things and in all things.
- **The Way of Contemplation** is about living a life that does not lead to burnout.
- **The Way of Seeking the Spirit** is about joining with the Spirit in the work of God in the world.
- **The Way of Relating** is about relational wholeness.

CRONSHAW 39
DECEMBER 2008

- The Way of Holiness is about living a life that works.
- The Way of Justice is concerned with the welfare of people, the state of our society, and the environment.
- The Way of Learning and Understanding involves applying new knowledge to enable change and growth.

Olivia hopes that the Ways will be an entry point for people into Christian faith and the Solace community, linking spirituality and mission for people outside the church.

A network-based approach to Church

As a network forming around a Jesus-centred spirituality that is remaking the world, Solace is intentionally broadening its efforts beyond Sundays. The main gathering, in terms of attendance, is Sunday morning at St Paul's, which is the focus of their inner northern focus in Northcote/Fairfield. Community members also meet in small groups, at the annual festival weekend, on Tuesday nights over a meal, in a monthly Taize service, on the email network, and in informal contexts. They invite people to find the right balance of what to be involved in:

One person may be a part of a small group and go to Taize Fridays once a month, another may join to Tuesday nights, another still may interact with the online community through the email group, and now of the community, not necessarily meet or interact with the other two, although all [are] equally a part of Solace.

Some Solace members are opting out of Sunday stuff for the sake of being Church in the world and finding spiritual nourishment in other-than-Sunday expressions.

Distinctive features

I observed four features of Solace that were distinctive about their identity and what they celebrate: interaction, questioning, everyday spirituality and dreaming.

Interactive worship

Solace started with a group of people who felt the traditional sermon and worship styles did not fit. They wanted worship and teaching that was interactive rather than merely a sing and a talk and prayer book readings.

Informed by adult learning principles and multi-sensory worship, they planned gatherings that were informal, participatory and authentic. The symbols that represent Solace culture include candles, labors not bread, play dough, relative absence of music and painted mugs. Olivia says worship becomes like a game of Hacky-Sack—anyone can start or contribute to the conversation, people learn by doing and the game is not successful until everyone participates. As well as teaching input with lectures, they have an open microphone and encouragement to ask and explore questions. As well as practising communion traditionally, at times they share meals together. Instead of meeting inside for worship every Sunday, once or twice per year they plant trees or clean up the hillside at Kew. There were questions about what people might say in the open microphone, whether lunch can replace Eucharist, or whether Greening Up Australia can replace a service. But participants say these interactive practices help them connect with God and one another in new ways.

Deborah recalled a highlight for her of interactive worship and allowing voices of pain to be heard was the post-September 11 service. She was rostered to preach on Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 21), but instead said, "Well, let's everyone say what they want to say, read what they want to say, pray what they want to pray." Deborah explained that a Solace principle is that you cannot disagree with people's contributions, which led to a painful, but special time that morning.

A Rwandan said, "When all my people died, why didn't we hold a special service for them?" Someone else who had been killed in South Africa spoke of all the children who die everyday. Two Americans asked, "Why had this happened to our country because America is God's hand in the world?" Deborah said they listened to one another's grief, not always agreeing, but not answering or arguing either.

Interactive worship was part of Solace's founding charisma, but it soon developed a complementary interest in intergenerational worship. It sought to be family-friendly, but not family-focused.

The ideal of Solace is to embrace and include children, but the reality does not always match the rhetoric. Some parents still laugh when they remember services they turned up to with candles on the floor and hot drinks left beside chairs. Most Solace gatherings, though, make space for children, and a lot of Solace parents, who are not parents, take responsibility for nurturing and interacting with children.

Anna is the new integration worker at Solace, a role description that expresses Solace's desire to integrate children, families and all ages in worship. She organizes the intergenerational services and Pancake Sunday for young families, and runs a programme for children on other Sundays.

Anna herself grew up in Church and says she matured as she left behind her desire to be told what to believe and subsequently explored questions of faith for herself. She appreciated reading Mr God this is Anna, an amazing story of God meeting the little girl Anna where she is at and realising that God is everywhere. When Solace asked her to consider working with children, she remembered the organic faith she had in the book and wanted to work with God to bring out what children know about God. Solace has a healthy ministry to youth too. They used to meet as a small group during Sunday stuff at Solace and discuss issues of faith and life, but they have started now to join the Solace gathering. All people— including youth—are encouraged to take responsibility for their own spiritual growth.

Some young people go to other churches to enthusiastically sing and join in with a larger youth ministry, but come to Solace to have space to think about their faith and participate in deep discussions.

Barb Tollett still suggests that key values of the emerging Church movement—allowing questions, engaging culture, celebrating stories, serving the community—are values that ministries to children and youth need.

Theological questioning

Solace has always attracted people who wanted to question assumptions about God and explore issues of faith. The HT-Hann's five o'clock service of young adults, that Olivia first worked with, included a group who were dissatisfied with routine answers.

They baulked at the perception that the solution to any problem was to pray and read the bible. Solace started, with permission, to ask any question and acceptance of people who were at any stage of faith or no-faith. Leanne commented that she has never seen anyone shocked by someone else's question and that honest sharing is encouraged because Solace is not the glossy brochure that pretends everything is perfect.

Solace has intentionally wanted to deal with complex issues and different people's stages of faith. Jamieson would appreciate Solace as a lessener-sensitive Church that recognises the complexity of faith maturation and allows space for expressing questions and emotions.

Solace participants say that it is an important part of their culture that space is made for any stage of faith, including no faith. Diane commented:

I don't know if our church does it perfectly, but one thing our church does well is to allow people to come in and explore God and spirituality without

commitment or criticism, and to leave when they are ready or to stay and ask questions. No question is silly.

Traditional boundaries of who is in and out are less important for Solace. For some, this would simply be about life and another creation. For others, it is based on an articulated approach to social set theory.

People, whose partners are not believers, particularly appreciate this approach. Their spouses can come and feel a sense of belonging, indeed choose their own level of belonging, and not be judged or preached at.

Nigel explained that he is not a Christian because he has not had a convincing experience of God and God being real, but he is committed to Solace because Christianity is important to his wife Leanne. He often contributes practically, is a regular participant and is being asked to help with teaching on contemplation and meditation.

One woman said that it has been helpful for a young person wrestling with her inherited faith to be able to ask Nigel, "So why you not a Christian?" and talk through issues of faith and non-belief.

Solace's theological questioning is part of a broader rethinking about the place of faith in contemporary society. Solace is committed to holding to the essence of the gospel, but still being authentic to the experience of its culture. It describes it as an ancient Christian, the traditional Church and reinventing the way it engages with postmodern culture.

Everyday spirituality and vocation

A third discernable feature of Solace is the celebration of everyday spirituality and vocation. Its guiding principle that Solace exists to enable a people to thrive as followers of Jesus, celebrating and remaking their everyday world, has developed over time.

Olivia said that the first year of Solace focussed on developing an authentic Sunday gathering with many-to-many interactive worship, and the second year they started exploring what Church and faith meant beyond Sundays, inspired by Foster and Willard.

They held courses and collected resources, and in 2006 published Remaking as a collection of stories, artwork and exercises from 20 writers and ten artists, structured around the seven Ways of Jesus-centred spirituality.

Australian journal of mission studies

The first of the seven ways focus on this sacramental tradition of celebrating God in the ordinary events of everyday life and work; "that there exists no separate categories of spiritual and unspiritual, and that God

AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF MISSION STUDIES

CRONSHAW

CRONSHAW
can be found, and has an integral interest, in all that happens in the world.\textsuperscript{33} Theologically, an understanding of the mission of God and the incarnation is an inspiration for Solace as it lives out being sent as was Jesus. As well as articulating the context of our cultural era, the Solace constitution articulates some of this theological foundation:

*Just as Jesus lived among a people of a particular time and culture so do we seek to live amongst people of our time and culture. Furthermore Jesus engaged in every aspect of life and taught that the work and reign of God encompasses the entire world, all things are or can be sacred and made new.*\textsuperscript{34}

Stuart said they are influenced most significantly in this by James Thwaites, who teaches that the church as the body of Christ is the work of God in the entire world and not just the institutional church.\textsuperscript{35}

They applaud the work of God inside Church programmes, but also, and perhaps more importantly for mission, beyond the congregation. Remaking explained that their approach is based on Christ’s body filling everything (Ephesians 1:23), and as the body, the Church is called to remake the world, not to be focussed on a building or list of programmes, but people seen into their everyday world.\textsuperscript{36}

Solace celebrates the way of the everyday in people who want to remake their world in their work and relational lives. Jude, a pastor from 2004 to 2006, celebrates a physics teacher who started an ethics class for students, a businessman who cuts profits by 15 percent to check that overseas manufacturing is as ethical as possible, and a student who attends the Christian group at school even though it is not his peer group.\textsuperscript{37}

There is a research scientist who is part of Solace who dedicates herself to malaria research, conscious it does not attract huge funding, but is one of the largest killers of poor people. A young couple is investing in housing that gives preference to marginalised renters.\textsuperscript{38} Then there are a couple of people who have a weeknight set apart for writing to politicians.\textsuperscript{39} The naming and celebrating of these things reminds members of the community of their identity and how they are living out their purpose of remaking the world.\textsuperscript{40}

Friends of Abigail spoke of the example of her passions. She is passionate about Australian native plants and wildlife areas, and has organised the involvement of Solace in Friends of Glass Creek, Greening Australia tree-planting and Clean Up. Up until recently, helping people to go beyond their given dreams to remake the world for good—whether to start a business or pray for a neighbour.\textsuperscript{41}

Furthermore, as a parent, Abigail seeks to help her children, though not explicitly Christian, to orient their lives the way God would want them. She also expresses a strong sense of call to her work, teaching English as a second language.

She appreciates that Solace validates that and says that part of the purpose of Solace is to support people and their work, rather than expecting them to go somewhere else if they want to be involved in mission.

Whether through hobbies, relationships or work, she has a Solace snipped or at least Solace-approved understanding that if you are bringing the life of the kingdom of God, then that is valid mission whether or not you mention the name of Jesus.\textsuperscript{42}

The model of ministry of Solace leaders and the structure of Solace as a network is directed towards helping facilitate everyday spirituality. All staff are part-time, so they have a foot in the world.\textsuperscript{43} They give priority to encouraging people to find and live out their vocations, rather than operating Church programmes.

Olivia said she have a saying, “Jesus Christ bled for this earth, so go and bloody do something about it.”\textsuperscript{44} They take time to intentionally ask questions like, “Where is God taking you?” “What are you enjoying?” “What are you afraid of?” “What is it about this community you are living in that you connect with?” and “What are you challenged about within your relationships with people around you?”\textsuperscript{45} Solace wants to help people dream about how to remake their everyday world.

**Dreaming**

Solace started with dreaming about new ways of being Church and remaking the world, and has developed its capacity for dreaming with focussed training and programmes. In 2005, three Solace members, Ursula, Stuart and Olivia, did Catalyst Innovations training, a programme that helps Christians develop innovative business plans and integrate business with faith. Olivia said Catalyst gave her skills in emergence and entrepreneurship, and confidence to keep going and not close Solace in the mists of the difficulties.\textsuperscript{46}

Dreaming nights are a service sponsored by Solace EMC designed to help individuals and groups who are yearning to change the places where they live and work. They foster questions, encourage plans to be balanced with healthy spirituality and concerns for justice, and can assist with business plans, seed- funding or whatever else is needed to help make a dream become a reality.\textsuperscript{47} They are broadly conceived to help people in their awareness that “restoring the world in God’s intent” is seen as part of their mission.

One of the big dreams about neighbourhood that Solace is exploring is SPACE or SPACEmakers, the group of eight St Paul’s and Solace people, and an employed project manager, who are looking at how best to develop and use the space at St Paul’s.

The name SPACE suggests the partnership between St Paul’s (SP) and Solace (ACE), and the hope for creating more community-friendly space. They use their regular meetings as an opportunity to discern what is happening in their community. These are the topics for discernment used by SPACEmakers in their first hour of meeting together:

- Things to cheer
- Changes to be part of
- Conflicts in which to be a peacemaker
- Celebrations to join in
- Crowds or coincidences to pay attention to
- Conversations that lead somewhere.

In their second hour of meeting they discuss the building and its redevelopment. They have had a number of architects offer proposals and quotes, and are in the process of selecting one and applying for a denominational grant to remake the space and open up to the street.\textsuperscript{48} They still try to avoid being building-centred, but hope that the building they do use will better communicate their openness to the community.

**Conclusion—Bridgeing the gap**

Solace does not need convincing about the importance of checking whether reality meets the rhetoric of emerging Church Thinking. In a congregational discussion, Anne suggested that Solace is prone to see its shortcomings and the gap between reality and practice.\textsuperscript{50}

Olivia admits that there is a big gap between ideals and who the members are.\textsuperscript{51} They say mind the gap working undergirding more philosophically the theory of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance says that when attitudes and behaviours are inconsistent and showing dissonance, something must change, and usually the attitude changes to match the behaviour.

The leadership agenda is to help people cross the gap in the other direction—to help match what people say they believe with what their lives show about what they really believe, and to help people move on from who they are to become who they are in Christ.\textsuperscript{52}

Solace has distinctive theological reflections and approaches to Church, particularly in the areas of spiritual formation and everyday theology. It has had some struggles in disseminating its approaches to mission and innovation, which will be explored further in other writing, but it is in the process of articulating its ideals of remaking the world and encouraging another along the way(s). One of Solace’s quintain poems articulates some of its hope:

**Church**

People gathered
Expressing God’s grace
Finding hope in disappointment
Community.\textsuperscript{53}

**END NOTES**


2) FROST and HIRSCH, Shaping, p111-162. See also FROST, Michael, Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture, Pyxbod: Hendrickson, 2006; HIRSCH, Alan, The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005, pp3-100


5) I refer to Church engagement with a first name pseudonym, except when quoting published documents or pastors. For pastors, I use the full name for the first reference and thereafter first name only.

6) First names may suggest a level of familiarity normally inappropriate for academic reporting. However, first names distinguish case study participants from literature sources, and participant-observers are represented by a first name only of familiarity between the researcher and participants

7) Cf. WARD, Pete, Liquid Church, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002


9) Solace Sunday stilt at St Paul’s Fairfield, 10 September. This and other primary documents are submitted in a Solace Research Journal at MCD


12) SOLACE, Website, 10 November, 2006. (Transcript stored at MCD on CD)

13) ‘Getting involved in SOLACE, Website’

CRONSHAW 43
14) 'The paradigm of the Solace Community' in SOLACE, Website
15) MACLEAN, Olivia and DAVEY, Stuart, Solace Creative Worship Workshop, (North Fitzroy), 8 September 2007
17) SOLACE, participants, 'Focus Group #3 by the Author', Balwyn, 25 September 2006. The digital audio recording and transcript of this and other interviews quoted below are stored at MCD on CD;
STORIE, Deborah, 'Solace Research', Email to author, 28 August 2006
18) SOLACE, participants, 'Focus Group #1 by the Author', Rosanna, 16 September 2006
19) FYNN, Mister God, This is Anna, London: Collins, 1974
20) ANNA, Solace integration worker, 'Interview by the Author', Fairfield, 3 October 2006
21) SOLACE, participants, 'Focus Group #2 by the Author', Fairfield, 17 September 2006
22) TOTTERDELL, Barb, Children and the Emerging Church, Zadok Perspectives 89, Summer, 2005: p6-7
23) WALDRON, Jude, Solace pastor, 'Interview #1 by the Author', Balwyn, 1 August 2006
24) See 'The Paradigm of the Solace Community' in SOLACE, Website.
25) SOLACE, participants, 'Focus Group #4 by the Author', Rosanna, 14 October 2006
27) DIANE, Solace member, 'Mission and Innovation at Solace', Email to the author, 21 August 2006
29) SOLACE, #4
30) SOLACE, #1
35) DAVEY, Stuart, Solace pastor, 'Interview by the Author', Balwyn, 7 September 2006; THWAITES, James, Renegotiating the Church Contract: The Death and Life of the 21st Century Church, Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2002; THWAITES, James, The Church Beyond the Congregation: The Strategic Role of the Church in the Postmodern Era, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999
36) SOLACE, Remaking, p18-19
37) WALDRON, #1
38) MACLEAN, Olivia, 'The Ways of Solace', paper presented at the Forge Spirituality, Discipleship & Sustainability conference, Tabor College, Melbourne, 8 July 2006
39) LEWIS, Cate, 'Just Letters', Email to solacecommunity@yahoo.groups.com.au, 23 November 2005
40) TOTTERDELL, Barb, 'Edge of Chaos Solace', unpublished class paper, Melbourne: Ridley College, p4
42) SOLACE, '#4', SOLACE, participants, 'Focus Group #5 by the Author', Fairfield, 25 October 2006
43) WALDRON, #1
44) MACLEAN, 'The Ways of Solace'
45) SOLACE, #1
46) MACLEAN, #1
47) SOLACE, Website
48) MACLEAN, #1
49) DAVEY, #1
50) Solace Sunday service, 10 September 2006
51) MACLEAN, 'The Ways of Solace'
52) MOFFAT, 'What Kind of Church?'
53) This quintain is used at Solace events to illustrate the set structure
54) First line: one word = subject
55) Second line: two words = subject explained
56) Third line: three words = subject in action
57) Fourth line: four words = a feeling about or produced by the subject
58) Fifth line: five words = subject, but a different word to first line

CRONSHAW