Strengthening the congregation for service in the community

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Introductory thoughts

Church leaders often reflect on the relationship between church and society. This is especially focused in Australia every five years when there is a national census. As the results of the 2011 census are released, social and religious commentators are busy sifting and analysing the data for information and trends to further understand the Australian religious profile. It has not been hard to see one continuing trend.

Since the first census, the majority of Australians have reported an affiliation with a Christian religion. However, there has been a long-term decrease in affiliation to Christianity, from 96% in 1911 to 61% in 2011. Conversely, although Christian religions are still predominant in Australia, there have been increases in those reporting an affiliation to non-Christian religions, and those reporting ‘No Religion’. In the past decade, the proportion of the population reporting an affiliation to a Christian religion decreased from 68% in 2001 to 61% in 2011.

The purpose of this paper is not to further analyse those religious trends or to contribute to the despair that sometimes emerges in the face of such trends. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to briefly explore how our understanding of the church guides us as we participate in God’s mission at this time. What is the church and how might the church and congregations continue to serve the communities in which they live?

The church

In the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) we have been able to assume unanimity on what we understand by the church. God calls his church together, God converts and gathers people by, and to, his means of grace. The church is defined in liturgical terms;

1 An initial draft of this paper was first presented at the Queensland Pastors’ Conference of the Lutheran Church of Australia, 7 and 8 June 2012.
it is the assembly amongst whom the gospel is proclaimed purely and the sacraments are administered faithfully.\(^5\) This is quite helpful when considering things like the nature of the church as hidden yet revealed, or the way in which the church is ordered and structured. It is also clear, though, that we live at a time when questions and challenges are raised by various church movements, and it is always necessary to keep re-thinking the issues in light of what the Lutheran Confessions, the LCA’s Theses of Agreement, and Lutheran theologians such as Werner Elert and Hermann Sasse say about the church.\(^6\)

Are we used to thinking of our definition of the church as a pillar of our religious thought, or as something that assists us as we respond to current challenges? Whichever is the case, Australian Lutherans involved in diagnosing church and society issues today, and in proposing theologically sound responses, do so knowing Augsburg Confession 7’s definition of the church, and the LCA’s ‘Theses on the Church’ in the Theses of Agreement. Those teachings ensure that we always reflect on aspects of mission, including congregations connecting with and serving their local community, with word and sacrament and the ministry of word and sacrament clearly in focus.

One of the obvious keys, but one worth repeating, is that it is God’s church. It is God who makes alive (Eph 2:4,5). It is God who calls, gathers and enlightens (Eph 2:13–22). It is God who knows his sheep (John 16:14–15). God builds a spiritual house to offer spiritual sacrifices, one of which is to tell the world what he has done (1 Pet 2:4–9).\(^7\)

This is worth remembering in an era where statistics are continually collected and trends are regularly predicted. The future of the church, as with its past, is in God’s hands. Where each generation is often looking at religious trends within a decade or two and from the vantage point of a specific location, the history of the church throughout the centuries reminds us that decline in one location is sometimes accompanied by the unexpected revival and renewal of the Christian faith somewhere else. God builds his church (Matt 16:18).

**Christian community**

In an article in the early nineties Dr John Strelan reflected on the impact that the contemporary culture was having on the church at that time, and the way the church

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5 Kolb, 42.
6 Werner Elert, *Eucharist and church fellowship in the first four centuries*, CPH, St Louis, 1966; Hermann Sasse, *We confess the church*, CPH, St Louis, 1986. When discussing questions of church and congregation, Dr Sasse reflected on the task for the church in mission in the previous century in this way: ‘… the task which stands before us in this century is the construction of a theology (and as everybody knows, a theology always has to be something more than a theory) in which the problems of modern culture are thought through in a manner consistent with the two pillars of our religious thought: justification by faith and the Lutheran definition of the church’, ‘American Christianity and the Church’, *The Lonely Way*, Vol.1, CPH, 2001, page 38.
7 John Kleinig has reminded us of the significance of this initiating activity of God for the church, worship and Christian spirituality, *Grace upon grace*, CPH, St Louis, 2008, 59–63.
was tending to respond, especially with respect to the privatisation of worship and public ministry. The article interacted with insights from Francis Mannion and others and explored the influence of the prevailing culture’s tendency towards individualism on the public liturgical life of the church.\(^8\)

Given that one of the developments since then has been the continued growth of the house church movement and with it, one could argue, an increase in the privatisation of worship, the article makes very interesting reading for those keen to reflect again on the role of the communal and public nature of the church.

Corporate worship is public; public worship is corporate. In public worship Christians together confess their faith before God and the world; together they are served by God; and together they pray for the world—for in the sense of ‘on behalf of’ the world.\(^9\)

As part of a solution, which is still relevant today, the article points to a need in the church involving ‘re-educating pastor and people concerning three doctrines of the church: the public ministry, the priesthood of all believers, and vocation’.\(^10\) An understanding of the church as a communal and public gathering around the means of grace will also assist with understanding genuine Christian fellowship in a world which seems to value personal relationships highly.\(^11\)

This understanding is helpful. The focus is in the first place not on the relationships with one another within the church but on God’s relationship with his people and the fellowship Christians have together in and through Jesus Christ. That Christological heartbeat gives life and shape to Christian community as Christians are called to serve and care for those whom God gathers rather than those whom we might prefer to choose. The Sacrament of the Altar is then necessarily at the heart of a Christian understanding of fellowship and is a constant reminder that as Christians we are part of a wider, universal and even heavenly community.\(^12\) Ted Kluck tells of an interesting conversation with Chuck Colson which views this from another perspective.

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9 Strelan, page 14.
11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that the church is an assembly of people brought together with one thing in common, fellowship through Jesus Christ. ‘So between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and Sacrament’, Life Together, SCM Press, 1954, page 8. Bonhoeffer continues: ‘Christianity means community through Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ’, Life Together, page 10.
12 See the Preface and Sanctus in ‘The Service with Communion’, Lutheran hymnal with supplement, LPH, Adelaide, 1989, 15, 16.
We live in a therapeutic age where everything is measured by how much I get out of it ... And we live in an era of rampant individualism. So, in a very individualistic culture, the whole idea of being part of a community is countercultural.\(^\text{13}\)

Later, Kluck asks Colson, who founded Prison Fellowship, what he suggests inmates look for in a church. Interestingly, Colson starts with the work of God through the Word of God and not with what we might call the horizontal dimension, the quality of human relationships.

Number one is a church that believes in and preaches the Bible ... Calvin said that the number one task of the church is to preach the gospel. Second, it should be a place where disciples are made. Is this a place where I'm going to be discipled and grow as a Christian? The classic marks of the church, at least to the reformers, were preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments, and number three, discipline. Discipline in terms of both holding people accountable and teaching.\(^\text{14}\)

It is not that the relationships Christians have with one other are insignificant, but that at the core of Christian fellowship, as with all things in the church, there stands not human intimacy but divine initiative, the work of God in the means of grace through which Christians are in fellowship together in and with Jesus Christ. The challenge, then, is to love and care for the sisters and brothers in Christ God calls together, and to receive love, care and admonition from them.

**House churches**

One additional phenomenon that has developed in recent years in the church is the house church movement. Much further analysis and exploration is needed, but a good place to start is to reflect on the actual situation in the early church with respect to house churches and what we can and can’t make of them. Recently Greg Lockwood wrote a brief introductory paper on the house church from Acts to Augustine.\(^\text{15}\) The article interacted with a significant essay by Bradley Blue who wrote of the need to consider carefully the design and evolution of house churches in the early church, and to remember the context when considering why early Christians worshipped in houses.\(^\text{16}\)

One significant issue for the contemporary discussion, however, is not just the location where Christians gather, since that is sometimes determined by resources, persecution or other historical or contextual phenomena. Nor even is the issue simply the presence of the means of grace in that location, although that is of course essential. Rather, there is also the question of the ministry of the means of grace, the oversight of that ministry,


\(^{14}\) DeYoung and Kluck, page 148.


and the connection of the worshipping assembly with the wider unity and catholicity of the church.

Jim Belcher writes as a Presbyterian somewhat sympathetic to many of the contemporary concerns about the church, but he comes to the conclusion that the church needs authorized leaders.

As enticing as the idea of leaderless groups and home churches is, it is hard to get around the biblical teaching of official elders and deacons. Yes, we want to be organic and missional, and we want the priesthood of believers to be a reality. But at the same time we realize that no local church can survive long and stay true to its calling without explicitly recognized leaders and, I would say, offices. The long history of the church bears this out.17

House churches are not necessarily leaderless or disconnected from the wider church, and it is not as though leaders in this movement are unaware of the issues raised. However, in this context the ministry of oversight in particular does need further exploration. God has given the church the ministry of oversight (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1,2; Heb 13:17), even if different denominations might say that and order it in different ways. The question then remains, how is the ministry of oversight being exercised in the house church, because it is not just about overseeing others, but also working under oversight?

The challenge to love the church

A while ago I went into a Christian bookstore to buy something on the church. As I searched, some of the books were well known, but what surprised me was the long list of titles, and the diversity of the discussion, as illustrated by the small sample that I have included in the footnote (below).18 It seems Sasse is right. The doctrine of the church is a key in diagnosing the culture accurately and in constructing a faithful theological response. It also seems evident that there are many opinions about the way ahead for the church, and also some voices not quite so eager to join the chorus of those despairing about the congregation and its current role in God’s mission.

For example, consider the book Why we love the church by DeYoung and Kluck. The back cover invites the reader to explore further. To quote one entry: ‘Community is hip, but the church is lame. Both inside the church and out, organized religion is seen as oppressive, irrelevant, and a waste of time. Outsiders like Jesus but not the church. Insiders have

17 Jim Belcher, Deep church, InterVarsity Press Downers Grove, 2009, 175. See also the comments about apostolic ministry in the early church by the Baptist Church historian E Glen Hinson, The evangelization of the Roman Empire, Mercer University Press, Macon, 1981, 9,10.
been told they can do just fine with God apart from the church’. And then presumably the publisher: ‘Authors and friends Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck love both the church and their church. They unapologetically—and often humorously—endorse “organised religion” and take on contemporary ideas about church-at-Starbucks or church-on-the-golf-course. And they remind us that “being part of a church”—and learning to love it—is good for your soul, biblically responsible, and pleasing to God’.

DeYoung and Kluck are well aware of reasons not to love the church, but they also reflect on the fact that in some sense it is Christ’s church, Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it, and the church is the body of Christ with Christ as its head. Therefore, they write a challenging book called *Why we love the church*.19

These books are part of a larger discussion that is trying to lead a way into the future for the church. There is much discussion about the institutional nature of the church and the organic nature of the church. From one side comes the challenge to push the boundaries and respond to current cultural challenges. From the other side comes the tried and tested theology and practice of centuries of church experience. What is significant is that there are voices in the ‘emergent’ discussions that are urging church leaders

- to remember that church and congregation are not simply human constructs
- to consider the theological connection between Christ and the church (Eph 1:22,23) and to be inspired by Christ’s love for the church
- to reflect on the connection between loving Christ and seeking the Holy Spirit’s help to love other Christians (Eph 5:1,2)20

**Implications for congregations as they seek to connect with the wider community**

This leads us to the final thought for this paper and it is to offer some specific suggestions in light of what precedes for congregations as they seek to connect with their wider community. The focus is on aspects of congregational life that are transportable and applicable to all congregational settings. As each congregation reflects on its own resources and its own community needs, each will find its own unique avenues of service. But I think there are at least five things that suggest themselves for now.

**Regular word and sacrament liturgy**

At 1 Corinthians 11:26 St Paul says that Christians proclaim the Lord’s death when they receive the Lord’s Supper. In a call to Christians to persevere in the face of suffering, the writer of Hebrews urges them not to give up the habit of meeting together (Heb 10:25). The early believers devoted themselves to the word, fellowship, the breaking of bread

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19 DeYoung, pages 11–17. On a similar theme see an earlier work by William Willimon, *What’s right with the church: a spirited statement for those who have not given up on the church and for those who have*, Harper and Row, 1985.
20 See for example, DeYoung, page 12; Belcher, page 174.
and prayer (Acts 2:42). The Theses of Agreement say that it is clearly God's will that Christians unite and assemble in congregations to hear and learn God's Word, celebrate the sacraments, practise Christian love and fellowship and exercise private and public admonition.\(^\text{21}\)

It might seem an obvious thing to say, but one of the most concrete expressions of the church and of the church’s love for the community is when Christians continue to gather regularly to do exactly what the Theses refer to. The word, the sacraments, Christian love and fellowship and care for one another’s spiritual journey are at the heart of what it means to be church, and congregations ought to be encouraged by the fact that this is their core purpose, and this is to be their main focus in congregational life.

**Prayer for the community**

One of the most significant ways the church can serve its community is to pray for its leadership. We are aware of 1 Timothy 2:1–5. A commitment to pray for leaders will also be reflected in a willingness to seek and take opportunities to get to know leaders. Some congregations may plan a service to which the local council leaders and relevant state and national politicians are invited and prayed for.\(^\text{22}\) The general prayer that day can simply be an expansion of what is prayed every week with respect to government and leadership working for truth and justice for all, but it is also an opportunity to thank God in preaching and prayer for civic leaders, and to catechise the church by modelling this aspect of the role of the church. So the questions then are:

- Who in the local community are those in positions of authority?
- Is the congregation taking its opportunities to pray for them?
- How else might we serve the community in this way?

**Hospitality and mercy\(^\text{23}\)**

As fellow members of the church, Christians walk together, they share joys and sorrows, needs and resources, and they act towards one another with charity and love. Many Christians are also blessed with the gift of hospitality (Rom 12:13). Many Christians are hospitable at the table. Many Christians respond well to crises. Sometimes they don’t see how those gifts can also be used by God to assist in connecting with and serving the wider community, and how ‘normal’ hospitality can simply be extended to a wider group. Rather than a new hospitality program, maybe congregations firstly need to encourage members in the gift of hospitality, pray for them, and free them from other tasks to practise their gift. In addition, when there are communal food events at a congregational

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\(^{22}\) I am indebted to a colleague pastor for teaching me about this and modelling an appropriate civic service.

\(^{23}\) Matthew Harrison has helpfully drawn attention to the need to be involved in mercy or human care together with a faithful word and sacrament ministry, *Christ have mercy: how to put your faith into action,* CPH, St Louis, 2008, 171–182.
level, set an extra place or two and see how God fills it.

There are many ways to use God’s gift of hospitality in service. If people have a BBQ at home or a pizza night or go to their favourite Indian take-away, they could consider the usual crowd, plus one or two more. When the congregation has a dinner they could set the tables at eight or ten and include places for others. When the small group has a fellowship BBQ they could plan enough meat and salad for the number of the group plus a few extras. Then, if there are no obvious people to invite, they could wait and see whom God brings to fill the spot(s). At 2 Corinthians 8:1–8, a passage about Christian giving, Paul offers the following advice:

> Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need (2 Cor 8:13,14).

This is written in the first place to encourage Christians to take care of one another. It is written at a time when modern government support programs we take for granted were yet to evolve. But this is also where we can think of extending our care not only to brothers and sisters in Christ, but also to those in need wherever we find them. Why leave human care to others? After the sacrament we pray that we would be strengthened in faith towards God and in love towards one another, and that encourages us to see human care as a natural outflowing of word and sacrament ministry, a practical demonstration of what happens when people are forgiven, restored, healed, inspired.

**Christian discipleship in station and vocation**

By far the main way congregations connect with their communities is as Christians live their lives where God has called them. This is taken up for example in the Small Catechism in the so-called Table of Duties, the context where the faith is lived. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the way the priesthood of all believers live out their faith in their daily life.24 1 Peter 2:11,12 and 1 Peter 3:15 are key texts.

The main issue for Christians to think about at this point is the simplicity of Christian faith and life. God calls, gathers and feeds his church through the means of grace, and God sends his people to live as his people where he has located them, in marriages and families, congregations, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and particular regions of a vast world. In a time when the church can strain under the weight of needs and expectations raised by information overload and cultural expectations, there is a simplicity in the call to be Christians specifically where God has placed us. But however simple it may be, easy it is not.

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Taking opportunities to connect and disciple through practical catechesis

What has surprised me in recent years is how often I hear of people reconnecting with the church because they have come to the congregation initially for various rites, or for ministry, and then been invited to share in basic instruction in aspects of the Christian faith.

It can be through

- youth and adult confirmation ministry
- pre-baptism explanations of the rite of baptism
- pre-marriage discussion of the rite of marriage
- well conducted funerals that lead to questions about the Christian faith,
- the whole spectrum of small group studies, especially those that study the word of God and bring the life-giving water that never fails

A key is that catechesis needs to be practical. The church teaches by doing, and the church teaches people to actually live the faith in daily life. So if our focus is prayer, for example, we need at least to begin and end our time together with prayer, model praying the Lord's Prayer, teach how prayers can be said at table, and develop a personal pattern of praying Luther's morning prayer and evening prayer so they are an integral part of our own rhythm of life which we will then naturally model to others.

The church is to be a teaching church, and discipleship is always oriented to assisting people to live and to practise the faith. And so, for example, the church listens to the faith questions that arise from within the church and from the world, it seeks to respond with an explanation, a defence of the gospel (1 Pet 3:15), and it assists people with a practical living faith. In congregational life there are built in opportunities for this practical catechesis—pre-baptism, pre-marriage, pre first communion, confirmation, assisting new parents, the elderly and the suffering—to explore God's wisdom for their current stage in life.

Conclusion

There may sometimes seem to be reasons to despair about the future of the church, and congregations may sometimes wonder what they are doing in a world that offers so many alternative ways for people to gather and spend their time. When we reflect on just what the church is, on Christ's love for the church, and on some specific ways in which congregations can serve their local community, we are at the same time reflecting on God's purpose in calling and gathering his people, and discovering or re-discovering the church itself as a community of faith and service.