By giving newcomers a voice we have learnt more about their experiences of both faith and church life. The evidence does not support the image of the "wild-eyed convert". Newcomers come to faith in a range of ways, often over time, with the help of close family and friends. They tend not to visit many churches, which makes it vital to keep them in mind for the normal activities of church life. While they do not necessarily adopt certain Christian beliefs or practices immediately, they are generally open to learning and growing in faith. Those who have managed to find their way into a faith community are among the most positive attenders, valuing the leadership and future directions, and getting involved in new and different ways. For those committed to supporting new followers of Christ, this is an encouraging profile of a group of people who have found some local churches to be places of welcome and nurture, and who can also make a valuable contribution to the church's ongoing mission.

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The Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV), in common with many churches and denominations in the Western world, is realising it needs to revisit its purpose — what is its earthly use? Inspired by Micah 6:8, the BUV Mission Catalyst team has developed a contemporary theology of local church mission, in global perspective. Local church mission is firstly spiritual and starts with discipleship and listening to God (walking humbly with God). Second, local church mission is radically inclusive of people and groups across all sorts of boundaries and especially cultural diversity (loving kindness). Third, local church mission is transformational and fosters peace or shalom in our neighbourhoods and our world (committed to doing justice). The local church in mission ought to be good news and caring for individuals, communities, society, and the environment.
A recent radio talkback episode explored the question “of what earthly use is the church?” We might ask that question with more focus, “of what earthly use is our church?” or “What is our particular contribution to our neighbourhoods and to our world?” We like to ask this of our churches. What would be your response?

Goma’s painting: The Waters of Baptism

What do you see when you look at this image of Robin (Goma) Conlon’s painting “The Waters of Baptism”? Maybe just shapes, dots and wavy lines? Perhaps the title helps you to see the river running down the centre of the picture? Humans, in indigenous artwork, are depicted by curved crescent shapes, which reflect the pattern a man or woman makes when they sit in the sand. On the right hand side the shapes are slightly larger — reflecting the elders in a community. Men and women of faith and wisdom are calling others to leave the darkness of the world (the smallest black edging dots) and, washed in the blood of Jesus (the red dots which surround the crescents), they should commit themselves to a new life following Jesus, mediated by the Holy Spirit (the white dots) by coming through the waters of baptism (the central river of blue) and joining the community of faith. The large black circles are the traditional symbols of initiation so the three circles show being baptised and starting a new life in the name of the Three — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is an image of the mission of the church. The people of God call others to turn around and start a new allegiance and live new values. We are to transform the darkness of life and bring light, love, and healing in Christ, and so build a new community of grace and peace.

This is the earthly use of the church. This is the earthly use of our Baptist tribe of churches. This is, firstly and foundationally, a spiritual activity — it can only take place in partnership with the living God. David Tacey writes that, in contemporary postcolonial Australia, spirituality is entering our life from below, and the feet play a more important role than the intellect. Tacey quotes Barbara Blackman as saying that if we want to “under-stand” spirituality in this country we have to “stand-under” our habitual logic and our usual perceptions, since that is the vantage point from which the spirit is found. Understanding calls us away from our conscious conventions.

It is also, secondly, an inclusive activity, for all are called into God’s kingdom and the life of Jesus must be accessible to all.

It is also, ultimately, a transformational activity because change is at the heart of the good news of Jesus. Tacey encourages us to learn from Indigenous Australians:

We are witnessing the rebirth of an ancient experience of the spirit. The spirit is holistic, embodied, mystical, and immanent rather than transcendent. And while the process has only just begun, and will take a great deal more time to be realised, Australia could provide important spiritual leadership to the Western world, because what we are undergoing here is a transformation that all Western nations will eventually have to undergo if civilisation is to recover a creative relationship with the earth.

We are changed, and the world around us is changed, when we accept the call and allow God’s love to work in and through us.

Our Theology of Mission is thus encapsulated in this lovely image — we encourage churches to use it to imagine and tell their story of call and transformation.

Reimagining the BUV

Just over 350,000 people or 1.64% of the population identified as Baptist in the 2011 Australian Census. Of that number, 60 percent participate in church monthly or more, which equates to 1 percent of the Australian
population participating in Baptist churches. In Victoria our Baptist church started in 1837. Since 1862 Baptist churches have associated and resourced one another as the Baptist Union of Victoria. In 2014 our tribe of Victorian churches numbers 216, with about 15,000 formal members and 30,000 participating. And we are growing although mainly through immigration. Compared with other denominations, Baptists are going okay, but these figures are disappointing given the "greatest cause" in the world we have to share.

A recent re-imagining process for the BUV identified mission as the key organising principle for the church. A missionary is not only someone who is sent overseas. We are all missionaries. Michael Frost writes that mission is the unstoppable program of God’s unfurling kingdom on earth; both the announcement and the demonstration of the reign and rule of the triune God. Our goal is to alert people to God’s reign by demonstrating (justice, love, reconciliation) and announcing (heralding, worship, evangelism) that reign.

We read of this invitation in Micah 6:8:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice [be transformational], and to love kindness [be inclusive], and to walk humbly with your God [be spiritual]?

(NRSV)

Or in the words of an Australian paraphrase:

Come on people! God has told us what is good. We know what the LORD wants from us: To make sure everybody gets a fair go; To be passionate about caring for others; And to stay on track with God without getting full of ourselves.

(Nathan Nettleton LaughingBird.net@2002)

We love this verse and how it shows the earthly use of the church in all different directions. Does your church tend to focus on one or two of these, rather than all three? Sometimes we focus more on wanting to demonstrate care with mercy, or changing the world for justice, or personally relating to God and helping others do that. Yet they are all equally important and necessary expressions of the church showing the dream of God.

Historically there has been an unhealthy tension between the “announcing” and the “demonstrating” of the kingdom because it has been reduced to singular concepts of “evangelism” and “social action”. Many Christians believed that evangelism was more important than social action. Frost helpfully points out that evangelism and social involvement are so entwined that you can’t unravel them. They are both equally important and necessary expressions of alerting people to the reign of God: “We feed the hungry because in the world to come there will be no such thing as starvation. We share Christ because in the world to come there will be no such thing as unbelief.”

Mission is everything God is doing in the world to restore the world to God’s dream. Thus mission is the overarching purpose of God, which includes evangelism, mercy, advocating for justice, and caring for creation. According to David Bosch mission is a larger, more expansive, all-encompassing enterprise of which there are many subsets including evangelism and social action. This is important to understand in order to transform the Christian mindset to be kingdom orientated.

In announcing and demonstrating the kingdom we need to reflect God’s justice. Understanding the justice of God and the call of the local congregation is best demonstrated as “shalom”: the fullness of life and delight and wholeness that come with God’s kingdom. Our template is shown in Jeremiah 29 and Isaiah 65 which hold up the hope of a whole new world of peace, fulfilment, and belonging. The people of God are continually called and sent to fulfil this agenda of God’s, and to cooperate in its fulfilment.
Thus, the key question for the church is not what can we do for God? It is what is God already doing and sending us into? Where do we see evidence of God already at work? Our goal and desire are to join with and enhance what God is doing in the world.

Let us explore three principles to help us identify kingdom living and what it means in terms of mission in local church(es). Like a three-legged stool, we need all three legs to be useful and balanced. Yet we need to begin by realising that as churches we are of earthly use when we are most authentically spiritual.

A. Local church mission is spiritual

The invitation of a loving God is to walk humbly with God. John wrote: "We love, because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). This is the starting point of mission. Our voluntary joining in with all that God is doing in the world is first and foremost a response of gratitude to the generosity of God. If our lives are not filled with the enormity of all that God has done for us in Christ, then any attempt at "doing mission" will be an awkward addition to church life — yet another "should" or "ought" on our agenda. Paul had this in mind when he admitted:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

(1 Corinthians 13:1–3, NRSV)

If mission does not naturally flow from our life in Christ, then we should stop thinking about mission and start thinking about prayer and discipleship.

Mike Breen, who founded 3DM as a movement to refocus on discipleship and mission, comments:

People want to create missional churches or missional programs or missional small groups. The problem is that we don't have a "missional" problem in the Western church. We have a discipleship problem. If you know how to disciple people well, you will always get mission. Always.

Our experience confirms Breen's observation. We need to invest in our spiritual lives and the spiritual lives of our people. A church that loses its soul will be unable to conduct effective mission. Recent literature about revitalising churches and helping them recover a mission-focused ministry tells us that it starts with people rediscovering a passion for Jesus, and a fresh encounter with God. Let's honestly ask, are we running on empty as far as relationship with God is concerned? When we tell our testimonies are they all about events that happened years or decades ago, or are we telling stories of what we are experiencing God doing this week?

The 3DM questions for accountability groups are, "What am I hearing God saying?" and "What am I going to do about it?" These questions are a good starting point for renewing discipleship for mission by starting with God. Local church mission is essentially spiritual. We therefore need to be spiritually renewed before we can begin to do effective mission in God's way.

Simply making time to stop is a key issue in our busy lives. Jesus regularly withdrew to be on his own with God. In Matthew 14, Jesus heard John the Baptist was murdered and he "withdrew ... to a solitary place" (v.13) until 5000 people needed feeding and healing. He sent the disciples on in a boat and "went up on a mountainside to pray" (v.23) till the disciples' boat needed help from a storm. Jesus was in demand but he needed to get away regularly for prayer and solitude. It was obviously difficult for Jesus as the crowds tended to follow him and people were constantly interrupting his
retreats, but it was still a clear aim. If it was important for Jesus, how much more do we need to make space to hear God?

In what ways can we cultivate a closer attentiveness to what God is saying to us, and cultivate mission that is spiritual?

Spending just ten minutes a day being still and silent — slowing your breathing, listening to the birdsong, noticing the hum of the house or street outside and simply being present to God — can begin a new journey. Most of us have grown up being told that prayer meetings are good for us, but for many, reciting the round-robin shopping list of needs is no longer a satisfying and life-giving experience. The wordiness of prayer meets our needs in the early days of our faith journey, and it’s important as a congregation to pray for one another and the world around us, but God often invites into an intimacy with God that goes beyond words. The invitation is to move beyond “communication” into “communion.”

Others are finding new life in various spiritual disciplines. The traditional “quiet-time” can be life-giving for some, but others are finding disciplines from the monastic traditions, including alternative ways to prayerfully read Scripture, to be helpful — lectio divina (slow contemplative reading), the examen (asking what is life-giving and life-draining), and fasting are just a few examples.

Often it is hard to begin new rhythms alone. Deliberately meeting with a couple of others can be valuable. Being silent with others can help the discipline, and being accountable to each other for how we act on what God is teaching us can be key spurs to testing out hunches and taking small steps of faith.

Telling the stories of what God is doing in people’s lives can also be deeply encouraging. Let’s do more to promote and publicise stories of faith, answers to prayer, and the transforming effects of God’s initiatives amongst us. This is where our family of churches can be really helpful. It may seem as if God is not moving amongst us, but once we hear what God is doing in other places it begins to heighten our awareness of divine activity on our own doorstep.

Another factor to consider is our environment. When we survey people and ask when do they most frequently encounter God, the top answer is usually “in the natural world — mountains, beaches, forests.” Creating the opportunity for people to be in the most appropriate setting, at retreats or camps, or inviting people to wonder about God while we walk bike paths or parks, may be really important for our community’s spiritual life.

Many churches are finding that doing prayer walks in the wider community is a great way to get to know your area better and is yet another way to broaden spiritual life and open our eyes and hearts to what God is doing and saying in our neighbourhood.

Balwyn Baptist had always been a place that relied on prayer. The pastor, Gayle Hill, acknowledged that the church’s emphasis on the leading of the Holy Spirit for mission could become more focused if they included prayer walking during their evening prayer meetings. She was concerned that none of the new people coming to church were local — they were all driving across suburbs to come to the church. So a small group began prayer walking the neighbourhood around the church: being attentive to what was happening, noticing the people they encountered, and discovering new things about the immediate streets around the church. This they did once a week over twelve months at night (so no one would see this strange mob at night in the dark!). All the time they lifted the people, places, and their sense of what was happening before God and prayed God’s blessing on their neighbours. The following year Gayle and others suddenly realised that the new people who had come to church over the last few months were all local. Something had changed — praise God!

Some honest questions about our spirituality, followed by a willingness to experiment with new ways of discerning where God is at work, might be the beginning of fresh missional transformation for our church(es).
Ideas for discussion and action

1. What examples could you add from your own experience at church or from other places about where local church mission is spiritual?
2. Talk to a sample of 5–10 people in your congregation. Ask them to tell you honestly about their prayers — What works for them? What is a struggle? Do they mainly talk or listen? What do they long for in their prayer life?
3. Could you find two or three people prepared to experiment with different methods of prayer and listening together?

The second principle is that we are of earthly use as local churches when we are inclusive.

B. Local church mission is inclusive

Micah 6:8 invites us to walk humbly with our God and love mercy, and one implication of this is that our community needs to be inclusive, like Jesus. During his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, Jesus outlined his mission manifesto:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

(Luke 4:18–19 NRSV)

Jesus came not merely to stretch popular boundaries of who was acceptable in the community of God — he came to remove those boundaries altogether. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed would be radically inclusive. We use categories like goodness, education, occupation, social status, politics, ethnicity, ability, and physicality to draw boundaries around who is in and out. Jesus made it clear that the kingdom was an open invitation to all. His announcement was to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed, and it was good news. Everyone who would come is welcome at Jesus’ table.

Jesus not only announced a kingdom of radical inclusion — he demonstrated it. He recruited a band of disciples, not from the religious elite, but from those of the “out-crowd” — Galilean fishermen, tax-collectors, and extreme zealots. He travelled with women, ate with tax-collectors and sinners, touched and healed the unclean. Jesus upset Jewish conventions of who “made the grade” within the Jewish community. This was the main reason they crucified him — he messed with their carefully constructed definitions of righteousness.

But Jesus went further and confronted ethnic and religious boundaries. He initiated conversation with a Samaritan woman of questionable morals. He healed Samaritan lepers. He told a story which cast a Samaritan man, not merely in a sympathetic light, but as the hero! To the Jewish lawyer whose question, “Who is my neighbour?” prompted that story, Jesus made it clear that, in the economy of God, no-one is excluded on the basis of ethnicity. Jesus allowed a Gentile, Syro-Phoenician woman to catalyse a deeper understanding of his calling. He sent the twelve to the tribes of Israel, but he sent the seventy to the nations. Jesus’ mission was radically inclusive. Sara Miles suggests: “When you let the wrong people in, the promise of change could finally come true?” The kingdom Jesus came to establish challenged socially exclusive boxes. To say, “All are welcome at the table” was Jesus’ practice.

Beyond middle-class Bible studies

Ryan Smith belonged to a small group that modelled inclusiveness. He was the designated leader, but through the influence of a young woman whose heart was clearly shaped by kingdom values, it included a diverse
array of people. There were two men with acquired brain injuries who come in wheelchairs and so it was an exercise transporting them and getting them into the house. There was a single mother with four children from multiple fathers, a financial planner, an older man with severe and chronic bipolar disorder who could be both delightful and also massively inappropriate, and a few professional people. And then there were the not infrequent guests who accompanied them. Ryan recalls it was chaotic, fun, and completely unpredictable. They frequently had to throw out the agenda and deal with spontaneous issues. Yet God was there, often in surprising and unexpected ways, and the group loved and connected with each other. They prayed, sang, read Scripture, laughed, and cried together.

They once hosted a celebration meal to conclude a term together. They had a guest, a foreign doctor, who, unable to practise yet in our country, was working as a carer in the home of one of the brain injured men. After the meal, which was punctuated by frequent near-choking episodes from this same man, and no doubt caused the doctor some concern, they gathered in their usual circle. Ryan asked a question, “How have you grown through our group this term?” The answers were varied, and often not related to the question at all! But this didn’t matter, they were listening to each other. When they came to the doctor, Ryan politely offered him an out, recognising that the question was not so relevant for him. “But feel free … if there is anything you’d like to say?” He paused for a second, and then simply said, “What is this?”

There followed a moment of laughter as it dawned on the group what this doctor had landed himself in that night. The doctor had got a glimpse of the welcoming kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is radically inclusive — Jesus welcomes all who would come. But by its very nature, it is counter-cultural and confronting. It challenges our neatly constructed boxes. For Jesus that meant standing up against those who drew boundaries around the community of God, and who by doing so, found themselves excluded: the religious elite opposed to Jesus (Matt 23:13–15), the proud who wouldn’t humble themselves (Mark 10:14–15), and the rich (Mark 10:17–31). It seems that while all are welcome, some are not able to accept the terms of a radically inclusive kingdom.

Propelled beyond borders

Our picture of an inclusive community of God demonstrated by Jesus inspires our missionary venture. This was so in the early church where the disciples, inspired and propelled by the Spirit of Jesus, saw the influence of the kingdom spread from Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria, out to the ends of the earth (following Acts 1:8). Exclusive Jewish boxes had been blown apart through Jesus, and Paul was able to proclaim:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26–28 NRSV)

Inclusion in the kingdom of God was now defined, not by race, religion, social status, gender, or whatever else we might use to box people, but by simple faith in Jesus Christ. As Australian Baptists, we are compelled by this same mission conviction that in Jesus, all are welcome. Jesus described the kingdom of God as being like a great banquet or wedding feast (Luke 14:15–24; Matthew 22:1–14). The only ones excluded are those who reject the invitation. The hospitality of God offers a place to the poor, crippled, blind, and lame but more than that, we are to go out into the “highways” and “byways” seeking those on the margins of society who don’t yet know they are welcome. There is an outward dynamic to kingdom activity: like the refrain from the Narnia books, further on and further in.

This hospitality of God has inspired some Victorian Baptists to move out
from their conventional meeting places and offer hospitality in the name of Jesus in varying and interesting ways. One community started an alternate "gathering" in a local pizza restaurant which they called "Banquet" based on this parable. It included food, storytelling, celebration, prayers, teaching — many of the same elements familiar in a conventional church service, but "delivered" in a way which is inclusive in a post-Christian context.

**Inclusion of cultural diversity**

In what areas do you and your church most want to stretch with being inclusive?

One area all our churches need to grapple with is inclusion of cultural diversity. The main reason — and almost the only reason — Baptist churches have grown over the last decade, 2001–2011, is from immigration: 42,430 immigrants have come to Australia who have then identified as Baptists. On the Census figures, this is 98 percent of our growth as Baptists over the last decade! If not for immigration, we would be well below population growth. This underlines how important it is to welcome and celebrate the contribution of newcomers from other cultures. Today 29.8% of Australian Baptists were born overseas, and we need to give fresh thought to helping shape church to welcome and include them. Moreover, the fact that most of our growth (and a lot of our youth and most committed members) comes from immigration strongly suggests we need to give fresh attention to how we include and nurture the faith of our children and youth, many of whom don't make the step into an adult faith and church involvement. And it shows the importance of giving fresh focus to reaching and including other Australian-born people. The immigration growth masks the fact that we are not connecting so well with "average Aussies" and younger generations.19

But how well are we doing in including people of diverse cultures, as well as diverse ages, and people with diverse or no experience of church?

Jesus was largely crucified for his inclusion of those whom others excluded. We are called to follow him and be like him. Would they crucify our churches for their radical inclusion?

**Ideas for discussion and action**

1. If the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14 is a picture of the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God, who are those in the highways and byways in our communities?

2. What patterns and structures can you identify in your own community that knowingly or unknowingly exclude people from exploring or entering the hospitality of God?

3. In what ways can we challenge and move out of our exclusionary boxes?

**C. Local church mission is transformational**

We are convinced that local church mission is firstly spiritual — founded in love. Secondly it is inclusive — embodying the practices of Jesus. And finally we as local churches will be of earthly use when we are transformational — resulting in peace, or shalom.

Transformation is one of those huge, all-inclusive terms. It touches every aspect of our lives: from personal renewal and restoration of our relationships with God and with others, to changing communities, social structures, and cultures; indeed, to the re-creation of creation itself. Transformation is implicit in everything that changes by being touched by the Spirit of God, and yet, in its purest form, the word transformation is rarely found in the Scriptures: in the transfiguration of Jesus, in the command to "be continually transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2) [literally, “keep being metamorphosed”], and finally in 2 Corinthians 3:18 where the veil of the old covenant is lifted and set aside in Christ, through the Spirit.
If the term “transformation” is so wide that it applies to everything that changes or so narrow that it applies only to the renewal of our minds, how may we more easily embrace the vision of Mission as Transformation? Perhaps one way to do this is to centre on the word “peace”; not just the Greek word from which we get the term “eirenical”, but the Hebrew word that encompasses all of our lives, our relationships, and our surroundings: “shalom”. Shalom is the vision of wholeness that enables us to enjoy all of our relationships. As Nicholas Wolterstorff says, “Shalom is the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships... to dwell in shalom is to enjoy living before God, to enjoy living in one’s physical surroundings, to enjoy living with one’s fellows, to enjoy life with oneself”.

What does “the good life” look like? Plato saw it in terms of order or orderliness; Aristotle saw it as happiness; and the Enlightenment placed emphasis upon freedom. More recently social researcher Hugh Mackay postulated that the good life is encapsulated in Jesus’ golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:31). There is truth in all this. But the biblical vision of transformation that comes closest is captured in the concept of shalom/wholeness/peace.

If mission is transformational, then mission brings shalom, or complete peace:

- Peace with God
- Peace with self
- Peace with my neighbour; my enemy; peace in all my relationships
- Peace in our structures
- Peace with creation

The biblical record begins with a perfect creation and ends with a perfectly restored creation. But we live in in-between times, times of tension, disharmony, brokenness, and sin. We have a foretaste of what can be through Jesus, our Prince of Peace, and through the prophets glimpse a tantalising vision of what a transformed creation looks like: when the lion lies down with the lamb, when swords are beaten into ploughshares, when God wipes tears from eyes, and death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more (Isaiah 65).

Is this view of mission as transformation so distant and utopian that we either dismiss it as a dream or, with Woody Allen, turn it into satire: “the lion shall lie down with the lamb, but the lamb will get no sleep”? Or will we be captivated by the hope that comes from Jesus, that the kingdom of God is like that smallest of all seeds, a mustard seed, that grows ... or like seed that a farmer sows that, even while the farmer is passively asleep, sprouts, and begins its growth towards harvest? Will the struggles of life, around us and within us, squeeze the hope of peace out of us, or will we sing with the angels, “peace on earth” and proclaim with the Apostle Paul that Jesus himself is our peace; that he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility and made peace through the cross?

The dividing wall that separated and that is now broken down in Jesus calls us to an inclusive community where we live out the truth that we are all one in Christ Jesus. Paul framed this in the dividing categories of his day: Jew/Gentile; male/female; slave/free. How might you and I express that in categories that are relevant today as we seek an inclusive community that welcomes all who are held in the embrace of God?

Transforming neighbourhoods and beyond

Several years ago, Indian students studying in Australia did not feel safe travelling outside at night. A local Anglican church, St Columbs in Hawthorn, was not content to sit and let this be the case. They took action and remodelled their church hall, turning it into a cricket pitch. They formed a couple of teams to play against each other, put out a sign, and put out the word that hospitality and welcome were on offer to Indian and other students. Today, the St Columbs Premier League (SPL) has grown dramatically with 400 players in 33 teams. Our AuburnLife Baptist Church
is partnering with St Columbs in fielding teams and helping run the program.  

Our vision of local church mission as transformation has terrifically good news for individuals, but also for our neighbourhoods and society, for nations and the environment. How broad do you see the transformational influence of the gospel reaching? 

As the BUV Mission Catalyst team, we have reflected on the transformation that came to us as individuals when we came to faith at different ages and stages. We recall the transformation that occurred and the peace that came when we first placed our hope in Jesus. We recall how it transformed our relationships with our family and with our work colleagues. It transformed the way we lived our lives and the choices that we made with money and time. With more maturity, we recall how it transformed our view of nations and nationalism, of artificial boundaries and landmarks that we set up to divide people. It transformed our views of war and peace. It transformed us and the environment around us. 

Sadly, one of the transformations that did not occur early in our faith for many of us was an ecological transformation in our view of creation. Some of us held a false theology that this world did not matter because it was going to be destroyed by fire. Our more recent transformation is the way in which we see ourselves and others being called to be stewards, caretakers, and curators of creation. 

The Micah Challenge states: 

In integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. 

Our theology informs our minds, actions, and emotions. When we see mission as transformation, and are captivated by the biblical image of peace as the restoration of all creation, we see ourselves, others, our culture, society, and world in a whole new light. 

Mission as transformation impels, cajoles, and prompts us towards the hope of wholeness, a shalom bought by Jesus, and empowered by the Spirit, for the glory of God. We dare not give up on this hope as we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done” and as we live out our mustard-seed faith. 

Ideas for discussion and action 

1. What does mission as transformation mean as we learn to love and accept our self, and live in the peace that God gives us? 

2. What does mission as transformation mean as we choose to be at peace with others, praying, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”? 

3. In what ways can local church mission transform our neighbourhood? And our world? 

4. What does mission as transformation mean as we seek to live as stewards of creation, transforming the brokenness resulting from selfishness and sin? 

Conclusion 

John Hus was a priest and martyr of the fifteenth-century reforms, precursor to the Protestant Reformation. Hus served in the Bethlehem chapel in Prague. Legend has it that prostitutes and swindlers spoiled the local water source, in part from making it a place for unwanted babies. It was a horrific loss of life and loss of good water. The church was compelled to respond to this very real local need. They dug a well near the pulpit inside the church, added a side door for access, and it was even available for locals to use during worship services. They also arranged for art to adorn
Conclusion

Does the Future Have a Church?

Darrell Jackson

My earliest memories of attending church are as a three-year-old. I was taken by my parents to a parish church, named for St Francis, in the north-west of England. My memories of the church building are vague and impressionistic but they are nevertheless real.

Over the last twenty-five years I have been a member of four Baptist churches. Each of these has had a vision for their future and in each of them I was invited to become a part of imagining what that future might be. In each instance this has involved trying to discern the mind of God’s Spirit for the congregation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conclusions drawn have typically been somewhat vague and impressionistic, but the vision that has emerged in each instance has nevertheless been real.

It seems to me that memories and imagination are closely related. Each is a way of creating mental maps of reality; of the past and of the future, respectively. We pour our energies, time, resources, as well as prayer, into shaping a future that gives concrete expression to our shared hopes and aspirations concerning the coming of God’s kingdom “on earth as in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Jesus taught his disciples about the coming kingdom using parables and metaphor. In doing so, he was teaching them the centrality of imagination as a way of anticipating God’s future purposes. John’s apocalyptic vision in the book of Revelation is arguably an indication that Jesus was successful in imparting this practice to his disciples.

Imagination is central to Gerard Delanty’s account of the nature and
Congregational Transformation in Australian Baptist Church Life

New Wineskins Volume 1

Edited by
Darren Cronshaw & Darrell Jackson
Morling Press
Foreword
Keith Jobbersn

A surprising resilience but a need for new forms

Over the last decade the Australian Baptist movement has proven a resilience that has surprised informed observers of the state of the church in Australia.

Recent analysis of the 2011 Australian national census and the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) has underscored the continued growth of the Baptist movement in Australia.

Philip Hughes addressed Baptist state leaders recently and commented that, “Over the years, it has been interesting to see many of the other denominations shrink, but the Baptists have continued to grow at about the same rate as the population”.

Hughes suggests some probable reasons for the resilience. I have found it helpful to express these as our:

Christology … the emphasis on personal commitment to faith — the lordship of Jesus as expressed in baptism. The centrality of baptism ensures that Baptists are highly committed: 63 percent of Baptists are at church once a month, compared with just 20 percent of Uniting, and 9 percent of Anglicans.

Ecclesiology … flexibility due to the emphasis on the local church; flexibility to try different things, to be innovative, to adapt to the needs and interests of the local people; and to be flexible in finding the right leadership for the local congregation.

Hospitality … more importantly and recently, Baptists have been hospitable to people of all races and all backgrounds. Migrant communities
Congregational Transformation
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This first volume of the New Wineskins series introduces the very best of current research and reflection on congregational transformation among
Australian Baptists. This volume's authors share the conviction that Baptist
congregations must find new ways of engaging with the increasingly secular
context of Australia. Collectively, they take the view that this requires
congregations to remain spiritually vital, practically engaged, missionally
relevant, and theologically authentic.

The New Wineskins Symposium created a platform upon which our authors,
shared findings, made recommendations, and engaged in lively dialogue. The
benefit of proposals and recommendations points to the need for an ongoing
conversation. The volume's editor hopes that this series stimulates such a
conversation and stimulates practical ministry among the many church and
agency leaders who were unable to attend the original Symposium.

Darren Crowshaw is mission catalyst and researcher for the Baptist Union of
Victoria, Melbourne. Darrell Jackson is the Senior Lecturer in Missiology at
Morling College, Sydney. Both Darren and Darrell hold earned doctorates and
are ordained Baptist ministers.

I am delighted that the outcomes of the very stimulating New Wineskins
Symposium are now available in this volume.

Ken Heath (President, National Ministries Director, Australian Baptist
Ministries)