

## Practicing Ubuntu with International Students

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### Abstract

This article uses the concept of Ubuntu to analyse the experience of international students studying in Australia with the “AuburnHub” initiative of AuburnLife Baptist Church. The Hub was instituted to cater to international students’ need for community, hospitality and conversational English. We propose that “I am because we are” is a valid way of understanding being. International students, dislocated from their previous networks, present an opportunity for churches to utilise the concept of Ubuntu to guide community-building initiatives as well as an opportunity to investigate the utility of this understanding of being. AuburnHub presents a model for a Western application of Ubuntu in a globalized context. “I am because we are” helps us to welcome the fact that as we change the makeup of our “we” through effective ministry we will also be changed ourselves.

KEYWORDS Community development, Hospitality, Interfaith relations, Student ministry, Ubuntu

### Introduction: Ubuntu and International Students

We live in a complex world facing extraordinary political, economic and environmental challenges leading to severe inequality and huge movements of population. The scale of these problems and needs are so huge that they can easily become paralyzing for small local groups to even attempt to address. Frequently the response of churches in the West is to simply withdraw into a closed system of worship with little connection to the broader world. We need to create a future we can hand on to our children with pride (Hames 2007). We need a revelation of our connectedness to help both mobilize and shape action.

“Ubuntu”, or “I am because we are,” the African concept of identity as being inextricably a function of our relationships, is capturing the imagination of AuburnLife Baptist Church in Melbourne, Australia. It presents an antidote to the individualism of modernity, an individualism which is not itself biblical but which is so embedded within Western culture that we allow our reading of the gospels to be squeezed through an individualism which is at odds with the gospels themselves. (cf. Rah 2009) The practice of Christianity was always relational: in order to minister, Christ called disciples and the trinity of God’s self is itself a relationship. Church at its best reflects this (Volf 1998).

We are attracted to “I am because we are” because while it is a simple and understandable idea it has profound consequences. It would suggest that any

relationship we enter into changes both us and the other. Indeed it removes the boundary between us and the other. It tells us that if we, as a church, relate to each other in the way that God intended then we not only change ourselves as individuals, *we necessarily open up a new way of being human* to those who come into contact with our community and enter into a relationship with it. It fundamentally challenges the individualistic assumptions that underpin much of evangelical Christianity, assumptions that have led to a situation where witnessing is reduced to a patronizing and essentially one-way transmission of information from “right-thinking” isolated subject X to “wrong-thinking” isolated subject Y.

Additionally, the ontology of “I am because we are” has enormous utility in understanding the choices of individuals when the subjective “we” of any “I” is undergoing change. International students, who have been removed from their social networks, present an opportunity for local churches to offer community built around an understanding of Ubuntu as well as an opportunity to investigate the utility of this understanding of being.

Our interest in ministry with international students and migrants came from both a needs analysis of our community and an assets-mapping exercise of our congregation. As a church we knew of thousands of international students and migrants in our neighbourhood, struggling with loneliness, food security and desire to learn English. The concept of “I am because we are” helped us to understand the difficulties these people and the profound challenges to the self (“I”) that develop after the radical change to the individual’s “we” that results from moving to another country. We realized that we had people in the church who could teach English, cook meals and simply offer friendship. So we opened the doors midweek for English conversation classes and a community meal.

It is important to emphasise at this point that “I am because we are” is not offered as some kind of belief or solution to subscribe to. Rather “I am because we are” is posited as a powerful way of understanding the degree to which a given “we” constructs an individual’s “I”. It is simply a means of understanding the relationship between a given social structure (or lack thereof) and a given individual’s sense of self. In and of itself “I am because we are” is morally neutral. It is a useful way of gaining insight into what makes a healthy team or church or family work as a group and also allows us to understand how that group impacts and shapes the identities of the individuals within it. However, “I am because we are” is just as useful in understanding how cults control people, why solitary confinement is a punishment, why abusive parents are so destructive to a child’s sense of self. “I am because we are” is thus a mechanical process that is always in action to some degree in shaping a given individual’s sense of self, for good or bad. Whether that is positive or negative in terms of its impact on the “I” is entirely dependent on the quality of the “we” in the equation.

In the context of Auburn Baptist, beginning to understand the self in terms of “I am because we are” allowed us to do a number of things: 1) gain insight into why the process of moving away from friends and family to a different country where you don’t speak the language and don’t know anyone is so difficult for many international students studying in Australia; 2) gain insight into what kinds of solutions or help to offer those students; 3) it gave us a framework for understanding when our solutions were working and what to do about it when they were not. That is, it gave us insight

into the shape of the problem we were trying to solve as well as allowing a flexible approach on how to do so.

“I am because we are” is not just an idea – it is an idea which implies a way forward. That way forward will necessarily be different in different contexts but in all cases “I am because we are” opens up new answers because it implies new questions about our neighborhoods and how we relate to them. In a globalized world of competing worldviews, religions, ideologies and philosophies what claim can evangelical Christianity have to be anything more than another doctrine demanding attention? Ubuntu is a way forward – if the way we as a church relate to those we come into contact with is different to the world then no claim of uniqueness is necessary: anyone who enters into that relationship will *experience* the uniqueness of it and will be changed by it, as will we. Specifically, in the case of AuburnLife it has led to the development of AuburnHub, a weekly initiative for the exiles in our midst, focusing on relationships, hospitality and the practical need of English language classes.

## **Methodology**

This investigation adopts Theological Action Research (Cameron et al. 2010). Written as a narrative theology and case study of our ministry experience, we want to explore the real life challenges of international newcomers to our community and the challenges of a local church shaping itself around a mission of hospitality. We want to work collaboratively with others from the church and AuburnHub networks in order to propose and develop new action plans. These kinds of collaborations and conversations are the essence of Theological Action Research. This involves adopting an action-reflection “pastoral cycle” with the church, starting with the experience of hosting AuburnHub, reflecting on it together, and learning from the experience in order to lead us to renewed theology and participation in God’s mission. Change is presupposed.

What is different to most Theological Action Research is that we are not outsiders collaborating with an organization, but insiders working with our fellow church members. We are practicing “reflection-in-action” (Schön 1983) in the midst of the action of ministry and in this article describing a case study of our church life with a narrative practical theology.

## **Church Background and Context**

As a church we became familiar with Bishop Thomas Msusa’s English rendering of ubuntu (umunthu) as “I am because we are” (Sharra 2007) after the following poem was shared with the congregation during a sermon by one of the authors:

### In Memory of Corey Tottenham, 1973-2005

*Ubuntu*

An African word

Roughly it means:

*I am because we are*

A lovely idea, and true

An idea with a view

Of all of us  
And how us makes us I

A lovely idea, but if true  
Then no word will ever do  
Or description describe  
What it meant when you died

For now that you're gone  
There is no us, there is no we  
So now I am not. You're dead.  
And I am no longer me.

(Jackel 2012)

Our engagement with “ubuntu” was thus serendipitous, and preceded the opportunity to reflect on the life and student ministry of the church at a conference themed around Ubuntu. Another time during worship we were considering our response to inequality in access to clean water and sanitation. Understanding our prayers and action in the context of Ubuntu helped focus our prayers and mobilise our giving in solidarity with our global neighbours – our sisters and brothers – who lack this basic right. The ethos of ubuntu underlined for us the importance of praying not just for “me and mine”, but for “we and all of us” in the world. This is reflected in the Lord’s Prayer, since we pray in the first person plural “*Our* Father”.

The idea of the indivisibility of the self and the other resonated as Auburn Baptist has been a place of hospitality for international students and migrants for almost three decades. The church noted this focus when we did a congregational timeline exercise in May 2014 (Cronshaw 2015). Like the West African Akan people’s mythic Sanfoka bird which looks back in order to retrieve wisdom from the past before flying forward, we wanted to learn from our past as we looked forward to the future (Speller 2014). We conducted oral history interviews with a couple who had been in the church for 40 years as well as the broader congregation. We mapped the church’s history in four eras. The church was founded in 1887 and went through a period of growth before a decline and plateau typical of inner-suburban churches (1887-1949). From 1950-1990 the church functioned as a “leadership farm”: most of its pastors were student pastors. Ross Morgan (1987-1990) pioneered a new era of hospitality for an increasingly multicultural church, which later pastors continued. The current era, under Darren and Jenni Cronshaw’s leadership (2010-), has focused on replanting a multicultural mission-shaped community. Today the church is still proud of being a leadership farm, providing interns and leaders-in-training a permission-giving space for learning, but hospitality is a dominant model for our ministry.

Another exercise that helped clarify our vision was to consider what parts of the biblical story particularly resonated with us as a church in order to engage with Scripture as a story we continue to improvise for our context (Wright 1991). Scripture shows us the tradition we inherit, the base from which to innovate. We invited the congregation to discuss what passages of Scripture were particularly relevant to our story as a church. A dozen passages were suggested as particularly applicable to Auburn’s story. On a case by case basis the passages were interesting, but of the dozen stories shared, ten concerned hospitality and welcoming people who are “outsiders”.

In 2012, Auburn leaders started learning about the challenges international students in our area face. We looked at our largest neighbour, Swinburne University, and learned that in 2011 a third of students were from overseas. This is not atypical in Australia after successive government policies encouraging the tertiary sector to act as an export commodity. Yet international students in Australia rarely make friends with local Australians and do not normally ever see inside an Australian home (Morton 2007). Other reports have identified a range of stressors these students can be exposed to including isolation, discrimination, communication, housing, work, finances and food. In 2010, 72% of Swinburne University students reported experiencing difficulty around accessing healthy and affordable food on a regular basis (City of Boroondara 2013). We thought: this is not how things should be. Starting to understand the self in terms of “I am because we are” helped us see how difficult it was for many of these international students at a point in their lives where their “we” had been largely removed. We determined to offer a better expression of hospitality (Cronshaw 2015).

Although Hawthorn is a prosperous suburb for many, largely because of the student population, the neighbourhood in which AuburnLife is located is among the 10% most disadvantaged in Victoria in terms of access to economic resources. The unemployment rate in the area is approximately 50% higher than that for the whole of Melbourne. Locals are twice as likely to have a household income below \$20,799 and more than three times as likely to have arrived in Australia since 2005 (City of Boroondara 2013). So while Hawthorn is prosperous for many, that very prosperity can mean that it is even harder for those who don't share it to connect with others, to become isolated and then “fall through the cracks”. Hub coordinator Rob Hand recalls that part of the motivation for launching the Hub was a local tragedy. The Swinburne University chaplain visited AuburnLife and spoke about an international student who had been living with two others. His flatmates noticed he had been missing and when they finally opened his door they discovered he had killed himself and had been dead for a several days.

### **AuburnHub as Community Development: Implementation and Responses**

We were drawn to consider starting the Hub both in response to our analysis of local needs and out of awareness of our strengths as a community – our desire to express hospitality and our range of volunteers with gifts in cooking and teaching. Thus from the beginning it was an exercise in Christian community development as well as an experiment in missional church or fresh expressions of church; movements that have inspired us and from which we borrow inspiration and frameworks for adventurous mission (e.g., Frost and Hirsch 2013; Gordon and Perkins 2013). We wanted to shape church around community mission focused on others, rather than start with our own worship and other needs. Yet we also wanted to shape our mission around our own passions and strengths as a community.

With support from Baptcare we started AuburnHub on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2013 as an inclusive space for midweek hospitality offering free coffee and Wi-Fi, a community meal and English classes (“AuburnHub - Hawthorn, Victoria - Club | Facebook” 2015) (“AuburnHub | Study, Relax or Catch Up with Friends at Your Public Lounge” 2015). Interns Julia Rhyder and Mark Payne initiated some of the initial program planning and Robyn Song coordinated from 2013-2014, assisted by a team of volunteers including AuburnLife's intern Tim Hunter and lay leader Rob Hand. In

2015 Rob took on the role of coordinator. From the beginning, our aim was to host a safe, inclusive environment that engages international students, immigrants and their families in friendship, hospitality and advocacy. Located just 400 meters from the Swinburne University campus, it initially opened each Tuesday from 11am till 3pm, then in 2015 transitioned to Wednesday evenings 5-9pm. AuburnHub has formed valuable partnerships with Swinburne Chaplaincy, Global InterAction, Swinburne Overseas Christian Fellowship, Swinburne Christian Union, Boroondara Multi-Faith Network and some other local churches. In 2014 a Chinese congregation was planted in our building, and in 2015 an Indonesian congregation started worshiping in our space on Saturdays. Volunteers from both congregations have since become involved with the Hub and a related Alpha course.

Hub programs have developed in response to needs and demands. We provided WiFi so students could work, yet only one student in three years has come to study with their computer at the tables: they already have ample opportunity to work alone. So we began offering a meal and friendship, but students soon asked about their need for help with English. Hence our first English conversation class started, which has grown to two or three weekly classes which are now integral to the program.

The Hub has succeeded beyond our own optimistic expectations: the need for this kind of community building and engagement for international students and their partners, as well as others who are disadvantaged and socially excluded by language, is greater than we had thought. Typically there are more people attending the Hub than the church itself. Moreover, a number of people who irregularly attended Sunday church have stopped doing so and are now regular attendees of the Hub: plainly they are finding something there that they were not finding in church. These volunteers find greater satisfaction in volunteering and practicing mission than in gathering to talk about it. The Hub is connecting with a rich and diverse mix of cultures and beliefs. The largest cultural group has been Chinese, predominately from non-faith backgrounds. The next largest group is from the Middle East, predominately from Muslim backgrounds. Some have come from various South American countries, often with a nominal Catholic background.

While the Hub started for students, recently more partners and family of students have participated. Students are busy with their studies and at least have some kind of community around them at university, some kind of “we” validating their “I”. Often, however, their partners or family members have little contact with anyone other than the student they have moved countries to support. A Hub volunteer commented that “some people who are regular do not appear to have much of a life apart from Wednesday, as their spouse is flat out getting a PhD and they are just house bound... and they don't have transport”. The Hub provides a network of community that the family members of international do not otherwise get, providing a “we” that helps support and nurture a healthy and functional sense of “I”. This was one area where the shape of what we were offering being driven by the need to provide a healthy “we” for individuals who were effectively undergoing a voluntary form of ostracism allowed us to quickly adapt our program: we were not primarily about helping students, we were primarily about helping isolated strangers in our community form connections, thus there was never a question of whether or not it was appropriate for people who were not studying to attend the Hub. Rather the Hub was quickly adapted to accommodate their needs.

We have sought to utilize the contributions of students and migrants themselves, many of whom assist with cooking and tutoring. The core group are very consistent and contribute with cooking and welcoming others. Initially, a volunteer arranged dinner on the majority of evenings, with participants helping with the preparation. Now Hub participants cook most Wednesdays. Newcomers who are willing to cook readily get invited by other Hub participants to join the cooking roster. For example, two friends, Pakistani Muslim and Nepalese Hindu mothers who study together, came and on their first time said, “this is fantastic, can we bring the food next time?” The second time they cooked. Another participant expressed her thanks for the English and the cooking practice: “I like AuburnHub where I have learned a lot of cooking skills as well as improving my English. Every Wednesday is a fun day.”

Two Hub volunteers who were international students and have since graduated are now Hub volunteers. Chris works as a software engineer and initially came to the Hub after he and his mother, who had been talking about her need for English classes, walked past the church and saw the sign for the Hub. Chris now helps each week tutoring the introductory conversation class and has enrolled in an Adult Migrant Education Service English teaching course. Lucy, another volunteer, commented, “Thank you for making AuburnHub community a warm place for new migrants like me. I really enjoy spending time with all my friends here. I feel really happy that I can contribute to the community.” This kind of community building positively influences how the church is seen within the public sphere.

A feature of the Hub is its witness in a multi-faith context. The broad context of Auburn is a multi-cultural and multi-religious world. Christian churches may be the most common local places of worship but an increasing number of people belong to or are turning to other beliefs, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and an eclectic mix of do-it-yourself alternative spiritualities. Our parish is a multi-faith neighbourhood. But the Hub, and AuburnLife as a church, is intentionally hospitable and inclusive of people of all faiths, and all stages of faith or none. Borrowing from missional church frameworks, it seeks to foster a “centred-set belonging” where people do not have to believe or behave in certain ways before they belong (Frost and Hirsch 2013). Rob Hand, Hub coordinator since 2015, describes the intercultural and interfaith discussions as among the most life-giving aspects of the Hub. He also observes that students from other cultural backgrounds, particularly Middle Eastern Muslims or Chinese atheists, seem more prepared to discuss faith than our Australian born neighbours. He comments on why the Hub is the “highlight of my week”:

Beautiful interesting people from all over the world who we can, I was going to say help, but befriend, and I feel like there is purpose in it. Personally I am motivated to have faith discussions that come up – sometimes raised by them or by a question from me. Sometimes in response to architecture like stained glass windows or a Bible lying around. But connecting and making friendships and honouring each other means it is so satisfying.

Rob commented he has learned a lot about other faiths and how to discuss matters of faith. Participants also report appreciating the opportunity not just to practice English in conversation, but to learn from one another’s cultural backgrounds. Jet, a Chinese research student from Swinburne University, enjoys the Hub because it is “like a family” and provides the opportunity to befriend students who are studying different

disciplines and who come from different cultural backgrounds.

One Muslim research student appreciated the Hub for the English classes and social connections for his family and families of fellow Arab students. When he first heard of English classes at the church, close to his apartment, he suspected it was a Christian proselytizing project, so visited to check it out. What surprised him was the quality and multiple levels of the English classes he observed, the food offered as an expression of hospitality “so that the guest feels the opposite and away from the style of charity”, and no evidence of proselytizing. It is interesting that he was concerned about and watching for this, but commented that when asking about Christianity was told there were seminars available on religion, as well as the culture and history of Australia in general. He compared this to mosques in his home country, and said they did offer food but it was mainly by way of charity, and no language courses for Muslims let alone non-Arabs, who are generally treated with contempt. He thus affirmed the practical role the church played in hosting the Hub, commenting that mosques in his home country could learn from the hospitality he has observed and experienced here. As an aside, we are hoping to co-host some inter-faith dialogue events and visits to an Islamic museum with this student.

Other Hub members also express appreciation for the community and intercultural relationships:

I can't thank you enough for your efforts to help people who are from different cultures. Frankly, I will strive to transfer this experience for my country in order to spread the humanity issue.

AuburnHub has helped me so much. As a housewife I stay at home every day trying to study English by myself. The Hub offers me the opportunity to communicate with local people who are also learning English and I have gained lots of knowledge about Australia. Thanks! I really appreciate it.

AuburnHub is a lovely place to enjoy friendship and hospitality I have loved meeting new people and learning about them and where they are from.

AuburnHub is always a home for me in Melbourne. Thank you so much!

Thank you AuburnHub. I have met many new friends here. It made me feel happy and no longer lonely. Thank you.

Chris, who came with his mother and stayed as a volunteer, comments:

For me it feels like a family here – just a great experience. You get a bonding with everyone. It feels like I want to come here a bit more often to get to know more people. It's a good experience for me. AuburnHub has served a greater cause for everyone because it's not just spreading the message for religion but also serves as a place for people of different backgrounds to come here and make a new family and help settle in a new social setting here.

It is notable just how often those who attend the hub compare it to family. Chris also commented that sharing meals together offers a “laid back” time to “feel at ease with talking to each other” with deeper discussion than in his classes.

Cai, a Swinburne student, has been a regular Hub visitor since 2014. He appreciates the English conversation classes starting with topics of daily life, news and sports. He said Chinese scholars are often not well practised in expressing themselves in English. They may be able to read formal English but find colloquial English difficult. Cai came to the Hub firstly for English practice, but now appreciates the space outside busy University life to make new friends. He noted that isolation was a particular problem for post-graduate students who typically do not have classes with other students. Hearing about a number of people’s different religious experience aroused Cai’s interest in exploring his own experience with religion and was part of what led him to join an Alpha course to explore Christianity with the church.

### **Jesus’ words and actions**

Over half the bibles sold in English are “red letter” editions, with the words of Christ printed in red. An example of what this looks like, using bold instead of red, would be the story where Jesus

sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, **“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.”**

(Mark 12:41-43, NRSV)

Almost without exception all discussion of this passage focuses on the rich/poor absolute/subjective value of the donations, that is, all discussion centres on what Christ said and what that means. The “red letter” practice of Christianity is all about a truth-giving teacher transmitting information to the unenlightened.

It is simply not possible to find a bible printed like this:

**He sat down** opposite the treasury, **and watched the crowd** putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. **Then he called his disciples** and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.”

What does evangelical Christianity look like when it pays attention to the fact that Jesus Christ Himself thought it was a good idea to sit down, shut up, watch people and learn? What difference does it make when discussion of this passage (and every other passage) focuses on how Christ related to those around him rather than just what he said? It does not become an entirely different religion but it certainly has a very different flavour.

AuburnLife is seeking to engage with the streams of biblical scholarship and inspiration of other Christian communities that take community ministry and exegesis

seriously, and that want to reflect Jesus' actions in relating to others, and not just his words. The idea of focusing on what someone thinks, what someone says, over what they do or how they relate to those around them, is built on individualistic assumptions about what it means to be that permeate Western culture: "I think therefore I am". These assumptions seem so self-evident that we apply them to the very fonts we print our bibles with, without stopping to consider what that decision represents or how significant it is.

"I am because we are" offers us a way around those assumptions, offers a way of understanding the self and how the self is defined by relationship. This allows us to understand what is needed in terms of ministry and provides a template on how to address that need. Rosemary Dewerse notes that intercultural witness is not about taking Christ to others, but "bringing your relationship with Christ into your relationship with another human being" (Dewerse 2013, 62): the connections with the concept of Ubuntu are clear. Of all missional practices open to churches in West, perhaps the most necessary is hospitality to the stranger, welcoming culturally different voices rather than marginalising them, or passively allowing them to become marginalised. If we contend that "I am because we are" is valid then this will transform not just the people we are seeking to reach, but us as well: as our "we" changes, so will our concept of self.

## **Conclusion**

AuburnHub offers English teaching, a community meal, a space for friendship and a context for respectful witness and dialogue: "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" (Frost 2011). In 2015 approximately 80 new people came through the Hub. They come for English. Those that remain stay for the community. The core group are consistent and contribute with cooking, tutoring and welcoming new people. While the Hub is bookended by English classes, the centre of the program is the meal. The meal is a highlight as students, migrants, volunteers and visitors share conversation and food around a big table. In *God Next Door*, Simon Holt proposes nurturing the best of what we can find in local spaces – cafes, playgrounds and trouble spots (Holt 2007). AuburnHub is developing as a "third place" expression of church, modeled on secular third places that are open and hospitable (Cameron 2010). It is neutral and hospitable, without expectation of any particular religious allegiance. In *Eating Heaven* Holt concludes that "it is through the daily practice of the table that we live a life worth living. Through the table we know who we are, where we come from, what we value and believe. At the table we learn what it means to be family and how to live in responsible, loving relationships ... At the table we celebrate beauty and express solidarity with those who are broken and hungry". (Holt 2013, 150)

Building a ministry on an "I am because we are" understanding of being is not only effective, it will necessarily change our own practice: the community experience and meal of the Hub has changed the way AuburnLife functions as a church. AuburnLife sees the Hub as its most important ministry. It is also our largest gathering as a church. Across January 2015-June 2016 Hub attendance averaged 24 people while Sunday worship attendance averaged 15. Half of our Sunday members are involved in volunteering at the Hub, and approximately ten people from the Hub have started engaging in Sunday gatherings since we started Alpha to intentionally welcome Hub

participants to explore Christianity.

Learning from the sense of community the Hub fosters and wishing to be more accessible to our new student and migrant friends, church has changed from a 10:30am service to gathering at 5pm. The reimagined format for church includes a simple liturgy with simplified English. The formal part of our service was initially shortened in July 2015 to 50 minutes and followed by a simple meal together around the tables. After Easter 2016 we changed the format again by hosting an Alpha course. Instead of hosting it as an extra program separate to Sunday church as we have done twice in the past, we adopted it as our Sunday service – inviting church members and Hub participants to explore the basics of Christian faith together.

As Alpha finishes we have decided together to continue the Sunday gathering with the same format of meal, video and discussion. We plan to start with the Alpha prayer course, and add in some other worship ingredients of occasional sung worship aware that most of the Hub students love Karaoke. Our hope is that the Hub participants will also adopt more leading roles in Sunday gatherings – including hospitality, cooking, facilitating discussions and leading prayer times – and thus feel fully part of the church and not just warmly welcomed “guests”. As a small church we have realised if we are going to do one thing well, we want to be a place of hospitality for students and migrants. Our identity is largely now defined by ministry to students and migrants as our *raison d’être*. With that in mind, we have reshaped Sunday worship with the aim of being more accessible for visitors from our midweek Hub community.

While it is outside of the scope of this paper to formally argue that the practice of church in a Western context is built around an individualism that is substantially at odds with the gospel, we would contend that this is the case. Symptoms of it can be seen in red-letter bibles, in witness and evangelism being conceived of as a one-way broadcast from those who know to those who don’t, in churches retreating from broader society into a closed circuit of worship, in sermons that typically focus on personal growth and redemption. While there is nothing wrong with personal growth *per se* it is difficult to deny that what it means to be a church in a Western context has become severely unbalanced. In the context of AuburnLife Baptist church, thinking about the self in terms of “I am because we are” has helped us to identify the issues in our community that need meeting, helped us to understand how to meet them and, just as importantly, helped us to be open to being changed by the broadening of what we mean by “we”.

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