**Being the Church**

**An exploration of mission**

Sally Douglas

---

Sally Douglas is a theologian and Uniting Church minister. Her interdisciplinary research across biblical studies and systematic theology currently focuses on early Church Christology and soteriology. She is the minister at Richmond Uniting Church and is engaged in teaching at Pilgrim College, and elsewhere, periodically. Her forthcoming monograph, *Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine: The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity*, will be published in the Library of New Testament Studies series by T&T Clark—Bloomsbury Press in 2016.

This article emerges from within the specific context of an inner city Uniting Church congregation that is seeking to understand its mission afresh. Uniting Church suspicion of mission as colonisation is discussed. Common understandings of mission in relation to doing are also examined. By re-engaging with the Basis of Union and through reflexively focussing on the specific context of a local congregation, sacred Christian texts, the evidence of the early Jesus movement and the intersection of these sources with theology and real life, an understanding of congregational mission in relation to being is offered.

---

Mission impossible?

Mission has deep roots in the early Church. In the contemporary west, this language is made to bear multiple meanings. In the secular context, mission has been co-opted, as companies, schools and hospitals proudly display their mission statements on corporate documentation.

Concurrently, and perhaps ironically, in the strand of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church that is woven into the language of mission, it sits uncomfortably for many.

This article emerges from within the specific context of an inner city Uniting Church congregation that wrestles with this discomfort about mission while at the same seeking to faithfully respond to the invitation of Jesus to join in G*d’s mission of reconciling and bringing homecoming for all things. It is hoped that by paying attention to the intrinsic aversion to old forms of mission and paying attention to the desire within this congregation to find authentic, non-colonising ways of sharing in Christ’s homecoming mission insights may be offered.

It is not pretended that the problem of mission at Richmond Uniting is solved. Rather this article offers an exploration of mission in our 21st century global context, which reflexively is informed by the specific context of an Australian local congregation, sacred Christian texts, the evidence of the early Jesus movement and the intersection of these sources with theology and real life.

**Allergic reactions**

In the Uniting Church mission is not uncommonly equated with missionaries and the devastating effects of colonisation. On the macro level this is evidenced in the Preamble of the *Basis of Union*, the Uniting Church of Australia’s foundation document, which openly acknowledges the, often, devastating impacts of mission on First Peoples in Australia.

On the micro level this is evidenced in the regular conversations I have with members of the congregation. For many members, the language of mission is associated with images of *bible bashing*, biblical literalism, narrow theology and embarrassing evangelism practices such as door knocking.
Alongside these allergic reactions towards mission, at both the macro and micro level, and perhaps at times propelled by these reactions, in many parts of the Uniting Church commitment to social justice and care for the marginalised has become the acceptable form of mission. The import of both advocating for social justice and caring for the marginalised cannot be underestimated.

Furthermore, the importance of offering material aid without attaching expectation of a faith response is essential if authentic freedom and justice are to be honoured. However, if that is all that the Uniting Church has to offer or say in relation to mission it would make sense to abandon the rest of our Church trappings and get on with this work of social justice unencumbered by God talk.

Some in the Church may warm towards a move in this direction. In contrast, I continue to share the heart conviction that the Church’s mission is bound up in the life of G’d whose love courses towards all things and for whom we creatures long for, and that this longing is not addressed in community strengthening initiatives or in material aid alone.

The reality that many within the Uniting Church are uncomfortable with older models of mission is both a source of consternation and inspiration. Some may believe that this reality supports the claim that the Uniting Church has lost its way, and at times this may be true. However, this discomfit also denotes healthy distrust of past forms of Church and awareness of the disjuncture between aggressive forms of mission and the way in which Jesus embodies and proclaims the humble kingdom of G’d.

**The context**

Before embarking upon this investigation, a brief history of mission at Richmond Uniting Church will be traced. The congregation, which I have served for over a year, has a rich and varied history of mission.

In years gone by, Richmond Uniting Church was part of a bigger Parish Mission, which eventually became known as the Yarra Parish Mission. This Parish Mission’s work included establishing and running accessible kindergartens and child care centres in communities facing disadvantage. It established and helped fund a Neighbourhood House located alongside high-rise commission housing.

The Mission also facilitated a variety of programmes, including support groups for young unemployed people and Creative Living workshos. The Richmond Uniting Church precinct gradually became an arts hub. For a time this arts hub was coordinated by the Neighbourhood House it had seeded. Each of these enterprises brought gifts and challenges. However, as a result of various factors, by the time I had been called to the congregation these expressions of mission were past history.

Within the congregation, views about these former expressions of mission vary. Some people continue to hold deep sorrow that these past expressions of mission are no longer present. Others hold the conviction that this was never really Church mission in the first place. Still others have come to re-evaluate their original understandings of Church mission in relation to social justice and now believe that Church mission needs to be essentially bound up in creating non-threatening spaces for people to encounter the divine.

The closing of these former expressions of mission and the various views about whether they were mission in the first place have left wounds in the congregation. While the scars remain, one of the many gifts of this congregation is its ability to maintain respectful and loving relationships with one another, despite holding wildly different understandings of their past and of mission. As missiologist John Flett states:

> The formation of a reconciled community is internal to Jesus’ act of reconciliation, and equally internal to that act is the missionary form of life in reconciliation. The community’s failure to act in this reconciling, missionary way ruptures the ontological relationship.

The reconciling way embodied within this congregation is, for me, a sign of Christ at work in our midst.

While the Yarra Parish Mission finally concluded and formal links with the Neighbourhood House and kindergarten were cut, Richmond Uniting Church has continued to make significant contributions to mission, as understood in relation to social justice, working with the disadvantaged and the arts. This is evidenced in a variety of ways.

Richmond Uniting Church is a key financial contributor to the Richmond Hill Food Centre, an ecumenical initiative that provides food security in the local area for over 300 people a week. As well as financial support, each week, congregational members bring food to worship for the Food Centre which is blessed, members of the congregation are volunteers at the Food Centre and I am on the board of management.

This is also evidenced in the congregation’s welcome of asylum seekers into the worshipping life of the congregation. Far beyond tokenism, worship now includes weekly bible readings in different languages, translated bible studies after worship, authentic friendships within the congregation.
between asylum seekers and non-asylum seekers and providing asylum seekers with subsidised housing when possible. The congregation intentionally continues to support the arts by providing low cost spaces for the diverse local artistic community to utilise. Richmond Uniting Church also seeks to advocate for justice.

**Self-understanding**

Despite all this, Richmond Uniting Church’s self-understanding of being at mission is diminished. For some there is a sense of inadequacy: “We used to do so much, and now we do nothing.” For some a sense of despair pervades: “There is so much need in the world and we are so few.” For still others, alongside this existential weariness is the desire to actualise mission in relation to the Jesus story, rather than simply in relation justice. Former Uniting Church president, Andrew Dutney, reflects on the commonality of this feeling of inadequacy across Uniting Churches:

…”at a time when many of our congregations are visibly and dramatically aged—experiencing a decrease in their relative prosperity as members move onto fixed incomes, and finding that many, or even a majority of their members now live with physical impairments of one kind or another – this emphasis upon missionary activism can be experienced as unfeeling goading. A

When purpose and identity are bound up in doing and a group is no longer able to do what it once did, it is natural that uncertainty and despair will flourish.

**What are we here for?**

A painful gift of being Church in the 21st century is that assumptions about the Church, its purpose and identity, are no longer valid. As Christendom crumbles and the societal influence of the Church disintegrates, the Church is given the rare opportunity to examine the rubble and excavate the foundations to discern what is core to being Church and what was, after all, cultural accoutrement.

For this process of investigation to be authentic, we who remain in the Church are invited to engage afresh with our sacred texts, to reflect on the ways Jesus communities were living before the Church became entwined with the state and to inhabit a reflexive theological dynamic in which questions and real life intersect with sacred texts and theology. The final paragraph of the Basis lays open, and even prays for, this kind of difficult examination which includes admitting fault:

*The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God’s eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen (Para 18)*

Dutney highlights one such erroneous tendency within the Uniting Church. He rightly challenges the supposition that the Church’s identity is bound up in its doing: *“the Basis’ affirmation [is] that the Church’s identity is to be found primarily in the life of God, in its being, rather than in its obedience to God, its doing.”*

The life of G’d that we are swept up into in the Church is bound up in the divine’s reconciling, as the Basis claims:

*The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is the Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation (Para 3).*

It therefore correlates that our being as a Church is bound up in receiving the divine’s gift of homecoming and being strangely, transformed by this. The Basis expresses it accordingly:

*Christ reaches out to command people’s attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church (Para 4).*

If we in the Church are to take seriously that the divine’s intent, as embodied in Christ, is to do with homecoming for all, it naturally follows that a core priority for Jesus communities is to *experience, radiate and embody* this divine reconciliation in their lives.

As Flett states: “The life of the community, as such, is not external to the message, but it exists in the act of reconciliation.12

Congregations are not asked to do reconciliation. Instead, they are asked to be pockets of reconciliation. It is important to underscore that reconciliation does not equate with homogenisation. This is not a call to be clubs in which everyone agrees, dresses and votes in the same way. In contrast, the challenge for Jesus communities is to be transformed into radical communities (no matter how small) that are supple
enough to stretch open the welcome for people who are vastly different from one another in status, culture, wealth, beliefs, age, tastes and experiences in order that each can discover a place around the table of Christ.

This radical diversity was a hallmark in Jesus’ own ministry (eg. Matthew 11.18-19). This was also core within the early Jesus movement. Writing between the 130s and 160s CE, Justin Martyr became a Christian as an adult and describes the Jesus community he was a part of:

...we who once valued above everything the gaining of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and share with everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and would not share the same hearth with people of a different tribe on account of their different customs, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies (First Apology 14).13

For a contemporary congregation to ask itself, first and foremost, how it is being rather than what it is doing, is a useful way to begin to liberate theological understandings of mission from cultural misappropriations of mission.

While the congregation at Richmond Uniting Church is small, it embodies a startling diversity. Among us there are those who have high levels of education and those who have limited formal education, those who are asylum seekers, those who are dealing with mental health issues, those who are retired and those who are battling with addiction.

We have children, young adults, middle aged people and old people and we come from diverse cultural settings including the Middle East, Islander communities, Asia, the United Kingdom, Africa and Australia. Some of us would identify with fundamentalist views, others of us would identify with progressive views. As discussed, very different ideas of purpose and mission coalesce. Some people attend worship weekly others attend infrequently due to the demands and challenges in their lives.

All are welcome whenever they attend, even if it is half way through the service, and each person’s voice is valued. This is evidenced week by week in worship in which there is space for all to contribute. After the reflection (sermon) there is space for people to respond. In the prayers for the earth, space is offered for people to light a candle and share their own prayers (aloud or in silence) in whatever language they wish. We also share the practice of having an open table for Holy Communion.

**Being what?**

While it is an important corrective to emphasise that the Church is not primarily about doing but rather about being, the nature of this being invites deeper consideration. How is a Jesus community to embody the reconciling compassion of the divine? Once again, the **Basis** is instructive. Here, it is stated that: “The congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ” (Para 15a). The **Basis** claims that at the core of being a reconciling Jesus community is **worship, witness and service**.

This again correlates with evidence of the early Jesus movement. In Acts, one early community is summarised as follows: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2.42). The text goes on to detail the ways in which witness and service flow from this (Acts 2.44-47). This early Jesus community focusses its life around worship; learning together, breaking the bread and prayers, and communicating something of this with others so that, by grace, their numbers are growing “day by day”, as they live in radical forms of reciprocity.

The mission of this early Jesus community is not understood to be in addition to Sunday worship, but rather the mission of the Church is bound up in being a reconciling community in worship, through which witness and service flow. That is, worship is the pump-house through which the divine’s reconciling energy flows in witness and service.

I suspect that we each, naturally, tend to favour one of these elements of worship, witness or service. The evidence of this is demonstrated at Richmond Uniting Church by the reality that some people grieve past forms of mission, as it related to serving disadvantaged communities, while others believe that this was never mission in the first place, because it was not to do with worship or witness.

Reclaiming the importance of mission in relation to worship, witness and service is further complicated due to the weight of cultural overlay. For many within and beyond the Church, a word like **worship** elicits images of uncomfortable pews, irrelevant sermons and outdated music. Likewise, for many, a word like **witness** immediately calls to mind crazed eyed preachers whom so many people, including Church people, dread. While service may be a slightly more amenable word, it too, can be soaked in paternalistic overtones and thus rendered void.14

While the language of worship, witness and service has been made to bear much cultural baggage, the content behind this language is strong. Not only...
does this language feature prominently in the Basis, the origins of this understanding within the early Jesus movement challenges 21st century Churches to reconsider again what they are actually here for.

**Being brought home—worship**

There is not a shred of evidence that pews, sermons and dowdy music were central to worship in the early church. Instead, evidence indicates that worship was lively and often shared around meals (eg. 1 Corinthians 11. 17-22; Didache 9-10). Within this early Christian worship, various voices were heard and people claimed to be sharing in experiences of divine nourishing, illumination (eg. 2 Corinthians 3.17-18; 4.6; Didache 10.5) and homecoming (eg. Romans 8.9-17; Colossians 3.11-21).15

Rather than these experiences of divine nourishing, illumination and homecoming being individualistic or self-serving, these experiences catapulted early Jesus communities into seeking to actualise the kind of love they were experiencing within their fledgling communities. As the author(s) of the early Church text 1 Clement states:

*The one who experiences love in Christ should do what Christ commanded. Who can explain the bond of God’s love? Who is able to recount the greatness of its beauty? The height to which love leads is beyond description. Love binds us to God; love hides a multitude of sins; love bears all things and endures all things. There is nothing vulgar in love, nothing haughty. Love has no schism, love creates no faction, love does all things in harmony (1 Clement 49:1-5a).*16

Discovering oneself scooped up in the embrace of the divine, fed, nourished and brought home to the divine, to others and to self, is the kind of experience that reverberates through the rest of one’s life. These are the kind of experiences that cannot help but be embodied and shared. It is these kind of experiences that are witnessed to within New Testament and early Church texts (eg. Ephesians 3.7-21; Philippians. 2.1-11; Galatians. 5.13-26; 1 Clement 49).

The challenge for the 21st century Church is whether there is openness to the possibility that the divine continues to reach out in this way. If so, the question becomes whether there is sufficient hunger to reclaim what is core in worship: space to experience the reconciling divine embodied in Jesus.

To speak of reclaiming the place of experience in worship is not to advocate for the insertion of emotional manipulation or self-serving mysticism in worship services. However, reclaiming the place of experience will be challenging, because cultural trappings that have concealed around understandings of worship, for example that only one person should teach, may need to be severed. In short, if worship is not creating space for people to be encountered by the divine, who is bringing homecoming for all things, it needs to change.

At Richmond Uniting Church we have recently completed an evaluation of the last 12 months and one of the questions that people were invited to respond to was: “What assists you to encounter and connect with God in worship and what detracts from this?”

People repeatedly, stated that the elements that assist them include: increased spaces for silence in worship, the choice of songs (which are increasingly sung unaccompanied), addressing hard topics in relation to sacred texts and the opportunity to share their thoughts in worship. Paying attention to what we are here for in worship—to encounter and commune with the reconciling divine—allows our patterns of worship to be set according to this priority rather than cultural habits.

**Radiating homecoming—witness**

Authentic worship and authentic witness are intrinsically linked. As Flett states: “Mission is this living, divine, and human fellowship which actively reaches out, sharing in God’s reconciliation of the world and thus with God’s own life from all eternity.”17

However, if people are not actually sharing in G*d’s reconciliation within their lives and beings, they will not know how to reach out to others with this. That is, if people, across our denominations, are (often) not experiencing themselves as being reconciled to the divine, it will be difficult for them to share the good news of being reconciled with others in any meaningful or authentic way.

Without justification, the account of the risen Matthaean Jesus saying: “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew. 28.19) has been relied upon to understand and to justify mission in relation to witness. Whatever the author’s intent, as history reveals, this language can easily be massaged into colonising interpretations of mission. While the other canonical gospels also conclude with commissions, there are other models of being Church within the New Testament that deserve attention.

Far removed from the model of converting nations, in the Sermon on the Mount the Matthaean Jesus speaks about being disciples:

> You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and...
trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matthew 5.13-16).

Here the imagery is not of take over. In contrast the Matthaean Jesus speaks of the community being like salt: the ones who bring spice and taste to blandness and who preserve the good. You do not need much salt to actualise a transformation of taste. This understanding appears to undergird this saying. Jesus is not offering a model of discipleship as empire, but rather a symbol of Jesus communities as a small, yet transformative presence.

Likewise, in relation to the light imagery, darkness still exists. The city on the hill and the lamp on the lampstand do not extinguish all of the dark. However, the lit up city and the lamp on the lampstand bring light where they are, as they maintain an illuminating presence.

There is fecundity in reclaiming this imagery of being salt and light in relation to witness. Not only does this negate the notion of mission as colonising force, this imagery gives symbolic power to an understanding of Church that is to do with being rather than doing. From this perspective, witness is not about changing whole nations, but rather witness is about being little pockets of small, spicy and illuminating presence in the world around us.

As anyone who has had the lid fall off a salt shaker knows, too much salt spoils taste. It is perhaps no accident that the Matthaean Jesus uses this imagery in relation to communities of disciples. It is in the wise sprinkling of our words, in our actions, in our listening and in our being that the countercultural reconciling of the divine is radiated and transforms. That is, it is in our spicy, reconciling presence that an authentic alternative to the blandness of the world’s messaging—that to be valued, we must compete and consume—is offered.

At Richmond Uniting Church we are seeking to be salty by creating open space to engage and wrestle with the countercultural way of Jesus. Not only in worship is there space for conversation and differences of opinion, we are also beginning to open the doors of the Church and share a little of this saltiness outside.

This is evidenced, for example, in hosting Dipping In seminars that intentionally explore aspects of Christian faith and tradition aimed at being non-threatening spaces for people with no connection to Church. This is also demonstrated in re-engaging ancient Christian meditation practices that are open to all. A series of oversized posters has also been initiated. These speak of the countercultural news of Jesus, the most recent of which states: “Jesus was a refugee, would we welcome him?”

Embodying homecoming—service

From the perspective of being, servant-hood is also recalibrated. We are not called to serve those around us from the smug perspective of paternalism.

Rather, as reflected in the early Jesus movement, because Christians experience the divine in Jesus, reaching out to nourish, heal and reconcile and, through the mysterious work of the Spirit, are being transformed through this, they seek to embody this kind of love for those around them (eg. 1 Corinthians 13; 1 Clement 46). The invitation of the Triune God is into reciprocity, of being served and of serving, rather than of only serving ourselves, or of only serving others whom we assume have nothing to give.

If we take this understanding seriously in the Church today the power dynamic in relationships with those around us will be changed. Here we will discover that we are invited into vulnerability. Our expectations of ourselves will be re-wired as we discover, not only that G*d feeds us, but that others have treasures for us as well. As Jesus communities, we are called to embody the wide-open welcome of Christ in our being and to simultaneously receive the (sometimes) challenging gifts that emerge from this.

We, as a Church, do not have to do it all on our own. In contrast, we are invited to be alert to what the divine is already doing and to join in with the divine’s dynamic flow of giving and receiving, trusting that the work of G*d is active elsewhere as well. This way of being is not an easy cop out.

Rather, yet again, this is a salty countercultural way of being in mutuality in a world that is often saturated by messages of the most important person is you or that seeks to divide the world into categories of leaners and lifters.

At Richmond Uniting Church this shift in understanding from doing servant-hood into embodying homecoming is emerging in little ways. Those involved at the Food Centre speak openly about being nourished by this experience.

I also observe the congregation celebrating the ways in which it is being enriched by its welcome of asylum seekers. The gift of reciprocity in relation to the arts community at Richmond Uniting Church holds potential. One of the ongoing challenges, as I
DECEMBER 2015

see it, for this congregation is for them to lay down their guilt about what they are not doing and to embrace the invitation into saltiness—of embodying Christ’s radical welcome.

Pockets of spice

In a world that is bound up in doing and competing the invitation for the Church into being is radical. Rachel Held Evans challenges the Church accordingly:

Church was alive and well long before we came up with the words relevant and missional, and church will go on long after the grass grows through our cathedral floors. The holy Trinity doesn’t need our permission to carry on in their endlessly resourceful work of making all things new. That we are invited to catch even a glimpse of the splendour is grace. All of it, every breath and every second, is grace.18

The challenge for Richmond Uniting Church, and for all contemporary Jesus communities, is to put down concepts of mission contingent upon colonisation, or doing, or programmes and to instead dare to be open to the divine who will not be contained. In this, we may yet experience the divine’s homecoming, radiate this homecoming and embody this homecoming and thus join in G*d’s dreaming for all things. If we allow this to happen within us as Jesus communities, we may yet be little pockets of small, spicy, illuminating presence for the world. ■

END NOTES

2. The centrality of reconciliation is celebrated in the early Jesus community hymn commonly known as the Colossians hymn (Colossians 1.15-20). SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, Elizabeth utilises the language of G*d in order to highlight the “inadequacy of our language” in relation to the divine. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, Elisabeth, Jesus Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (London: SCM Press, 1995), p191. Within the confines of this article engagement with debate about the nature of God is not possible. I have, therefore, chosen to utilise SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA’s “G*d” in order to underscore that the divine I speak of is not the God commonly sketched within Christendom and post-Christendom imagination
3. GRIERSON, Denham summarises past forms of such mission: “Coinciding with the age of imperialistic expansion, the church set out on a renewed endeavour to Christianise the globe. The desire to conquer the world for Christ was intimately related to the colonising intentions of the Western nations.” GRIERSON, A People on the Way, p24
4. The Preamble of the Basis acknowledges that many in the churches that formed the Uniting Church in Australia “were complicit in injustice that resulted in many First Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land” (Preamble, 5)
6. Within the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania there has been a move towards centralising care provision services. The remaining kindergartens and child-care centres, are now under the management of Lentara, the UnitingCare agency. The Neighbourhood House continues to offer its services at its own, and other, locations
8. DUTNEY, Andrew Where did the Joy come from? Revisiting the Basis of Union (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001), p18
9. The Basis of Union (Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1992)
10. DUTNEY, Where did the Joy, p19 (italics original)
11. Likewise, see DUTNEY, Where did the Joy, p16
12. FLETT, ‘Missio Dei’, p14
14. It may be no coincidence that in parts of the Uniting Church the only acceptable form of mission appears to be service
15. For a detailed analysis of experience in the early church see my forthcoming monograph: Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine: The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity, LNTS (London: T&T Clark, 2016)
17. FLETT, ‘Missio Dei’, p15