

Countdown to Mission

One Reason:
1. Jesus Christ



Two Directions: 1. Out 2. In

Three Priorities: 1. Communion 2. Community
3. Commission

Four Emphases: 1. Recognition 2. Resourcing 3. Releasing
4. Reinforcement

Five Flavours: 1. Spirituality 2. Scripture 3. Simplicity 4. Sustainability
5. Sent-ness

*“... to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”
(Ephesians 4:12,13)*

A Final Word

One of the most commonly articulated frustrations that I hear from people in churches is that church members struggle to understand their part in their church’s ministry. Apart from giving money, or relatively mechanical tasks like mowing lawns, making coffee, counting money or pushing a button on a data projector, (though not wanting to diminish these essential tasks—but many wonder, is there more?) few Christians really feel their gifts, abilities, intellect and strength are being used for eternal kingdom purposes. In traditional churches only 5% of members are actively involved in conducting church business. Seeker sensitive models increase that participation to 10% and some alternative, highly participatory churches approach 20%.* This is not enough. I believe Jesus wants to see 100% of his people, all of his body, mobilized. Most outsiders, viewing the body of Christ today, would legitimately assume Jesus has had a stroke, with so many of his members lying flaccidly in passive dependence on an active few. God forbid!

Have you met Christ? Have you found your place in his body? Are you joining him in his Kingdom work? Are you loving God in communion, loving others in community and responding to Christ’s commission by sharing his love and goodness with others?

COUNTDOWN TO MISSION TOOWONG UNITING CHURCH 2010

Reflections on Future Directions for Toowong Uniting Church in 2010

*“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”
Aotone de Saint Exupery.*

Welcome! At Toowong Uniting Church we want to make ourselves available to God for his use according to his good purpose and pleasure. In this post-Christendom era, as Christians find themselves increasingly marginalised, the Holy Spirit seems to be mobilising his world-wide church to reverse the tendency toward self-absorption and, as in the first century, seriously engage in the missional task (Latin: *missio* = to send) of sharing God’s justice, love and grace with a troubled world. As Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recently said, “It is not that the Church of God has a mission, rather the Mission of God has a church.”

We have been reflecting on our need to participate in this with a *Countdown to Mission*. Contained in these pages is a summary of that material including some of the key illustrations that have helped to shape our imaginations for this task.

By counting down the Five Flavours, Four Emphases, Three Priorities, Two Directions and One Reason for the mission to which God calls us, we hope to live responsively to the breeze of God’s Spirit, setting our sails to be empowered by his divine Breath.

Join us in dreaming what the Church can be. Then, if you wish, join us in fashioning those dreams into reality.



Chefs love to discover complimentary flavours. Various herbs and spices blend pleasantly with one another. Others clash. There are five flavours we want to characterise Toowong Uniting Church. Together these complimentary flavours can produce a marinade, in which if we soak, we will find ourselves becoming increasingly tender (useful to the Spirit of God) and tasty (attractive to those not yet a part of the church).

Flavour 1: Spirituality

For many people today, church is the last place they think to look for a living spirituality or vibrant faith. Too often, they associate it with formality, ritual, tradition, and routine. Most don't go to church expecting to meet with the Living God. The 2006 National Church Life Survey (NCLS), found that where people in a church have a sense that their faith is vibrant, alive and growing, the church will also be healthy and growing. If people have a sense that their faith is static, the church will be declining. If faith is more caught than taught, what do people catch when they come to Toowong Uniting?

Flavour 2: Scripture

The 2006 NCLS also found a direct correlation between church health and growth and attitudes to the Bible. Where the Bible was consistently treated as a reliable, authoritative source for life and church practice (intelligently interpreted to be sure) and there was an expectation that God would speak through its pages in a living manner, then churches had significantly higher levels of growth in attenders and higher levels of retention, especially amongst young adults.

Flavour 3: Simplicity

From the single-buttoned iPod to Google's uncluttered homepage, busy people with busy lives are choosing simplicity. Jesus was simple. He taught crowds, ate with sinners, gathered disciples for shared living and prioritised time with his Father. Can church be this simple? Many models of church organisation suggest not. Complexity is too often embodied in unwieldy vision statements; mission statements; purpose statements; strategic plans; process diagrams; short, medium and long-term goals; desired outcomes; preferred futures. Churches need to be simple. Not simplistic, but simple. More is not always better. Sometimes 'more' stops you doing the most important things. We always need to be asking: can we find a simpler way to do this?

Flavour 4: Sustainability

We must be constantly assessing how sustainable our various plans, tasks and activities are. We need to keep asking: is what we are doing building people up or burning people out? We cannot afford for it to be the latter.

"Out of complexity, find simplicity."

Albert Einstein



Bio-logos or biology is looking for the 'reason why' life functions as it does. Psychology explores the 'reason why' humans behave as they do. Meteorology investigates the 'reason why' weather patterns occur.

John's prologue steps back and asks about the *reason behind everything*. His answer is clear: In the beginning was the *logos* (reason why) and the 'reason why' was with God and the 'reason why' was God. That 'reason why' became flesh and dwelt among us.

In Colossians 1, Paul vividly describes Jesus supremacy, not just in the church, but in the whole of creation:

"¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (Italics mine)

What is the ultimate point to the Christian agenda? Is it to meet people's needs, to create an institution, to dispel darkness from the world? Paul's response in Ephesians: "He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times reached their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

Of necessity, our agenda must be so much bigger than handing people a ticket to heaven and leaving them sitting at the station for the train of death to carry them home. Jesus resurrection heralds the beginning of a completely new order of creation that we can participate in as God's Holy Spirit begins his work of transformation in us, commencing in this life, but being completed in the next, so that all things will find their ultimate meaning and purpose in relation to Jesus Christ.

Peter puts it well in his first epistle: "If you serve you should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."

"All things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together."

Colossians 1:16,17



In a tolerance-worshipping world, many question God's right and ours to intrude in peoples' lives. Therefore motives for mission must be carefully weighed, so our actions proceed from conviction rather than confusion. What motivates us to seek God's presence, build community in the church and do our best to live as missionaries?

Of least importance is the benefit *wē* receive from sharing good news. In the Christian life, only that which is given away can be kept. Thus, hedonism rarely satisfies. The world is replete with unhappy people spending vast quantities of time, money and energy trying to please themselves. In the Christian life, you can only keep what you are prepared to give away. The best way to experience real joy is to offer joy to someone else. The best way to experience the abiding presence of Jesus is offering him to others, as the Great Commission implies. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and make disciples . . . and I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Mission and Jesus' presence are two sides of the same coin.

We also share faith for *others'* benefit. Reflecting on the difference Jesus has made to us and desiring the same for others. When best-selling novelist Jack Higgins was asked what he would have liked to know before becoming a celebrity millionaire, he replied, "I wish someone had told me that when you get to the top, there's nothing there." Quite apart from issues of eternal justice and destiny (heaven and hell), without God's influence we can never reach our potential or find peace. As Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Most importantly, mission is for *God's* sake. John Dickson paraphrases Psalm 96 to suggest the ultimate purpose in missional living: "There is one God to whom all people belong and owe their allegiance; the worshippers of that Lord should therefore promote this reality throughout the world." Dickson suggests that promoting the gospel in the world is more than a rescue mission. It is a reality mission. "It is God's call to the people of the world to realise they are his sole and beloved possession."

Investing in the church is about so much more than building a social organisation and we have to make sure that we don't fall into the trap of settling for the lesser goal of *socialising people into the church* instead of *introducing people to the living God*.

When John chose *logos* to describe Jesus before his birth in the preface to his Gospel, it is likely that he had in mind the teaching of Hiroclitus who encouraged his students to search for the 'reason why' some aspect of their world operated in a particular way. But instead of referring to the 'reason why', he called it the *logos*. Ever since every scientific discipline has its *logos*.



Flavour 5: Sent-ness

Sent-ness refers to a significant mental rewiring, where we must no longer only see mission as something that happens overseas, to which we give money, but as something happening right here in Toowong, or more specifically in the street where I live, in the school where my children attend, in the supermarket where I purchase my groceries. And we have to view ourselves, not so much as church members who occasionally do mission but as missionaries who also go to church. If 'missionary' is our essential identity, then every part of our lives are engaged in God's service. The home, workplace, sporting field, school, university and supermarket all become places where God fulfils his divine purpose through us. Seeds of life and faith are sown and nourished in people's hearts through our words and actions. Too many Christian today are keepers of the aquarium rather than fishers of men!

FOUR EMPHASES

It's all very well to identify flavours that will combine well, but how do you use them to create the meal? How do you combine these five flavours of the church to begin to generate mission? To make this happen, four things need to be emphasised

Emphasis 1: Recognition

We need to live with our eyes open to see the opportunities for mission when they occur. Whether you are in a secular workplace, babysitting your grandchildren, relating to your neighbours or helping out at your kid's school, God has put you in that place with a purpose, he wants the values, flavours and influence of his Kingdom to be increasingly seen in that place so that people's hearts are changed as they become more aware of the reality of God and are drawn to him. But you first have to see the world the way God does. You have to listen carefully to the pain that lies behind people's sarcastic or caustic comments. You need to see the often unnoticed ways in which God is at work in people's lives. You need to be able to feel for them with a heart that is beating with God's love. The famous Baptist preacher in London, C.H. Spurgeon, was once approached by a young man who announced he was ready to give himself for service in the ministry. Spurgeon asked him, "What is your occupation now?" He indicated he was a train driver. "Is your engineer a Christian?" asked Spurgeon. When he replied negatively, Spurgeon responded, "Then there is your Christian ministry!"



Emphasis 2: Resourcing

How would you respond if someone asked you about your faith? Have you thought through your own beliefs sufficiently that you are ready to dialogue with people about both their beliefs and yours. If not, what are you willing to do to make yourself ready to "always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15) Paul says in Colossians 4:5-6, "Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; making the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Emphasis 3: Releasing

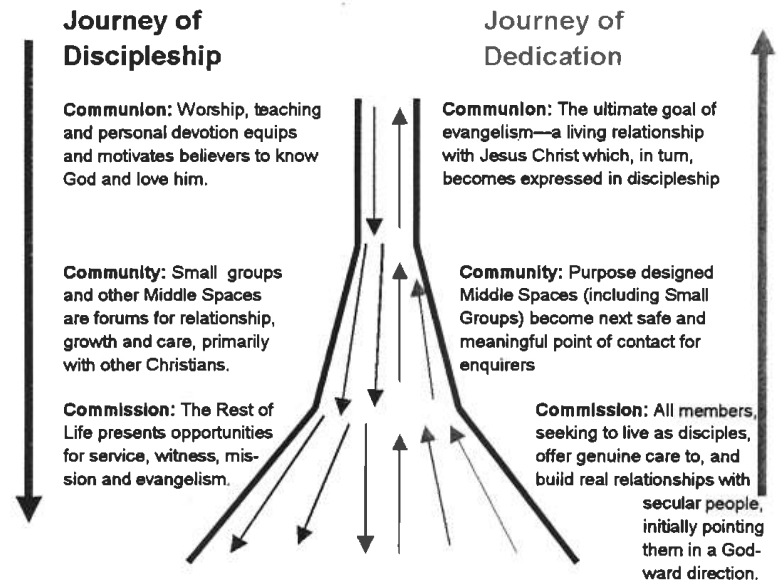
It takes time, real time to get to know people and care for them in authentic ways and avoid treating people like evangelistic targets. A minister once said that his goal was to create a 24-7 church. He wanted activities for church members every day of the week so that the church could become a safe and godly alternative society. His motive may be commendable but not the method. In his high priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus said, "My prayer is *not* that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one." "Go into all the world and make disciples." "As you have sent me I now *send* them." If Salt is going to do any good it has to get out of the salt shaker. We have to release people. There is no point in having a church program that is so full that people are always here at church.

Emphasis 4: Reinforcement

We bought a house once where all the concrete paths around the house had no reinforcing at all. With large tree roots and very reactive soil, the result was broken up chunks of cement all over the place. Without reinforcing, the cement simply had no capacity to resist the pressures and forces of movement it found itself under. If we to spend our time living missionally – serving others – always giving, then it won't be long before we run dry and find ourselves burning out. Which is why God has given us the gift of 'one another' and designed us as human beings to function best in community. When you take a coal out of a fire it goes cold very quickly on its own. But you can warm it again. All you have to do is put it back in the fire. And after it has been reignited, the heat from the other coals will reinforce it's glow for a long time to come.



Two Directions



At the Heart of Things

Max Lucado tells of a week long, high school fishing trip with his father and best friend. The secluded mountain destination overlooked a picturesque lake. Arriving late at night, dreaming of warm sunshine, easy boating and rigorous fishing, the trio awoke instead to horizontal rain and sleet. Three days of bad weather, endless Monopoly games and out-of-date Readers Digests frayed the friendship. Patience tired, tempers shortened and when the father called it quits on day four, no-one disagreed. Lucado reflects on the lesson he learned: "When those who are called to fish don't fish, they fight!" Like youngsters kicking a football inside, external intended energies used internally quickly become destructive.

Lucado likens his high school experience to that of Christians - called to be 'fishers of men' - sitting inside the church misusing their energy. They miss the point. God *calls* people in, to *send* people out. Our coming to God is not an end in itself. Yes, we enjoy His forgiveness, love and transforming power. But, like Jesus and his disciples, he *draws* us, in order to *dispatch* us. Most Christians know they are called. Not all seem convinced they are sent.



The Journey of Dedication

When a secular person who has no knowledge of the Christian faith and no experience of church comes here, they essentially experience a foreign culture. That is difficult to conceive if you've been in the church your whole life, but it's true. Imagine if you, for example went to a strip club, or a meeting of a motorcycle gang, or even if you went to an Islamic service in a mosque. Your level of discomfort and uncertainty in those unfamiliar contexts is similar to an 'unchurched' person coming into church.

The National Church Life Survey (2006) indicates that very few people over the age of 40 are joining churches. The people most likely to find faith for the first time and join the church are between the ages of 18-39. And that fits well with our experience at Toowong this year. Most of those who have joined this church in 2009 are within that demographic. So, what is the experience of coming to Toowong Uniting Church like for a person in that social category? Are there things we do to make it harder for them to feel comfortable here? Are there things we could be doing to make the transition easier?

In the next twelve months we need to be carefully thinking about all sorts of aspects of our church activities and facilities, our liturgical traditions, music and furnishings to see if we can discern where any unnecessary barriers might lie.

"Too many Christians today are keepers of the aquarium rather than fishers of men."

Anon



A Practical Question: Discerning the Spirit's Direction

One of the questions people often seem to struggle with is whether the church is an organism or an organisation. Some people want to assert that the church is primarily organic. To be successful, we need to let its life spontaneously emerge. It's like a plant which will grow by itself, but if we handle the plant too much with human effort we'll probably damage it. The emphasis here is on God's sovereignty. "If God is at work, we must step back and let him do his thing," say those who see the church in organic terms.

At the other end of the spectrum there are those who think of the church as an organisation and it needs lots of human attention and energy to improve the way it works. Like tending to a well oiled machine, we need lots of planning, lots of committees, lots of effort and lots of strategies to make the church achieve what it should.

So, what do you think? Should we see the church in organic terms, or as an organisation?

These two opinions seem to rarely meet in the middle, but I'd like to suggest that the church needs to be marked by both the spontaneity of organic life and the order of organisation.

When Jesus sat on a rooftop in Jerusalem late one night trying to explain to Nicodemus how God's Spirit worked, he said, "It's like the wind, you don't know where it's coming from or where it's going to but you can feel its effect on your face and in the swaying of the trees." God's Spirit is like the wind.

So, the church needs to be a yacht. We need to be organic in the sense that we are powered by the wind of God's Spirit, but we need to be organised enough to hoist our sails at the right time and set them in the appropriate way to make use of that wind.

If we're too organic, allowing any old thing to happen at any time, we'll be like a little dinghy, without oars or outboard motor, spontaneously bobbing on the waves, completely free, unfettered but generally going nowhere. Free to move but having no direction.

If we're too organised, too structured, too fixed in traditions and plans and committees, then we'll be more like an oil rig, highly ordered but fixed in the one spot. The wind can blow all it likes but an oil rig is not going anywhere.

But imagine if we could be a yacht: organised enough to hoist our sails, free enough to move with the wind of God's Spirit.

The trouble is, though, sometimes we raise our sails but the wind is not blowing. So often in the church we hoist our sails with a good idea and then find there's no wind, so what do we do? We start blowing ourselves, and when the yacht doesn't go very far or very fast we blow harder. Before long we're either exhausted or we've hyperventilated. What we need to do is have the courage to drop our sails when the Spirit's wind is not blowing and to better tune ourselves into the prevailing breezes.



On three occasions, Jesus used the language of commandment. He referred to the *Great Commandment*: Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength. He referred to a *New Commandment*: A new commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you. By this shall the world know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another. And he also issued a *Final Commandment*, often called the Great Commission: Go into all the world and make disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.

So, there is a commandment of **Communion** - connecting with God in a living relationship. Not just knowing about him, but *knowing him*: to relate, to communicate, to worship and express our love and adoration, to have an awareness of his presence, to notice him at work in our lives. There must be a personal dimension to our relationship with God, leaving us as eager to experience his presence as we would be to spend time with a spouse or friend. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God." (Psalm 42:1)

There is a commandment of **Community** - to be together with other Christians in community is about knowing and being known by other disciples, participating in a small community of believers. The teaching of Paul and Jesus often focused on relationships between Christians. Galatians 6:10 is a classic example: "Therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, but *especially to those who belong to the family of believers*." It was always embarrassing as a Chaplain when my students would point out those phrases where Christians were singled out to receive special care from one another. To secular minds, it smacked of looking after one's own rather than altruistically caring equally for all people. But the NT is full of such statements (Matthew 25:40; 1 Corinthians 6:1-5; Galatians 6:2,10; Ephesians 4:32, 5:31; Colossians 3:12-15; 1 Timothy 6:2; 1 Peter 3:8; 1 John 3:16) Christians are repeatedly told to love and care for one another in special ways.

Finally there is a commandment of **Commission** - sharing life-saving Good News with people and demonstrating the truth of that Good News as we learn to utilise God's resources within, co-operating with God to represent him to others, allowing the reign of God in our lives to be observed in places where that rule and reign are not normally seen. Perhaps the church could be thought of as a reservoir. We receive God's love, we share that love with each other, but then that love has to flow out of the church as well. To remain healthy, a lake, dam or reservoir must have a source river flowing into it and an outlet flowing from it. For our love and faith to stay fresh and real in the church there must be outlets, every one of us needs to be a little tributary, carrying God's love to our own home, workplace, university or bowls club.



There is an obvious two way movement in the account of Andrew and Phillip in John 1:35-46 (see previous page). Jesus says to Andrew, "Come and see." So Andrew moves *in* and, when he sees, he immediately goes out to find Peter and says to him, "Come and see." Peter comes *in*. Phillip also comes *in* to Jesus and then goes *out* and comes back *in* with someone else.

If every member of this church did that just once per year, brought someone to Jesus and then equipped them to go and bring someone else; and they kept doing that each year, then the entire population of Australia would be converted in just eighteen years! It's such a simple thing. To just *go* and tell someone so that they can *come*. This is the movement that indicates there is life in the body of Christ. Unless the church is breathing: exhaling those who are *speaking Jesus* and inhaling those who are *seeking Jesus*, then there will be no life in it.

As a church we have to be aware of this two-way movement and ask ourselves: are we facilitating movement in both directions or are we hindering movement in one or both of these directions?

Communion with God has a fairly narrow and vertical focus. We concentrate on God and pursue him and love him in prayer, worship and devotional activities. But when we genuinely connect, we discover that God immediately broadens our horizons and places in our hearts a love that overflows to our brothers and sisters, to other Christians. So the focus widens. Sadly this is where many churches stop . . . and they die because of it. They commune with God, they love one another, but they never get on with the task of sharing that love with the rest of the world. And that task has the widest focus of all because it involves the whole of the rest of our lives. God calls us to represent him in every situation and circumstance.

This involves movement out from the intimate presence of God, through the fellowship of the church into the whole world. Such movement describes the *Journey of Discipleship*.

The majority of people who had a Christian conversion but didn't grow up in the church, end up coming to church primarily as a result of a personal invitation from a friend. Someone had said to them, "Come and see". If we meaningfully connect with people and are able to offer that invitation, it begins another journey from the world, through the fellowship of the church into the presence of God, the *Journey of Dedication*.

The Journey of Discipleship

We need to structure our Church so that we support movement in both these directions. There is some equipping and training required so that people better understand their faith and have a capacity to articulate that to others – which is one of the things I'm planning to work hard at next year. We also need some small groups of people to take on particular projects that have an outward focus and help people connect with others beyond the church.



Goal and Process		Biblical Reference	Sphere of Expression
Communion	The Great Commandment	"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." Matthew 22:37	Church service & Personal Devotional Times: emphasis on worship, teaching and prayer usually in the company of believers
Community	The New Commandment	"My command is this: love each other as I have loved you . . . May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me." John 15:12; 17:23	Small Groups & Other Middle Spaces: emphasis on relationship and pastoral care, sometimes with believers, sometimes welcoming secular people
Commission	The Final Commandment	"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19,20	The Rest of Life: emphasis on mission, evangelism and service, primarily in secular, non-church contexts, supported by some church activities

John 1:35-46 (Today's New International Version)

³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"

³⁹ "Come," he replied, "and you will see."

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.



How the Three Priorities Might Work In a Church

A Case Study: Karen

Karen has been attending her church for two years after coming to Christ during an Alpha Course. She has three active kids, a part-time job and always feels guilty that she's not doing enough at church. At various times she had helped out with numerous ministries: data projection on Sunday morning, setting up for Women's breakfasts, transporting kids to youth group, Sunday school teaching and pricing items for the trash and treasure. She enjoys Sunday worship and catching up with people at church events, yet deep down feels disengaged from others at church and dissatisfied and bored with her faith. She would like to do more but also knows that extra activities push her into a zone of over-commitment, leading to emotional exhaustion.

Then Karen's church embraced The Three Priorities: Communion, Community and Commission and encouraged the members of the church to participate fully in these three things. The first thing she noticed was that the Sunday services changed in flavor – there was a much greater emphasis on worship and prayer and the sermons changed from interesting or inspiring talks to teaching that attempted to help people listen to what God might be saying through the scriptures. It was hard to put a finger on, but somehow the whole thing has less of a performance feel and more of a focus on God. Over a number of months, Karen found the change of direction affecting her private life. The new focus on prayer was energizing her personal devotional times and the 'Bible teaching' messages in church were equipping her to make much more sense of bible passages when she read them on her own. The Scriptures were coming alive.

One of the pastors visited Karen to help her think through the personal implications of the three priorities. She realized that she wanted to express this new spiritual energy and the pastor suggested she join a small group, which met two out of every three weeks. She was surprised to discover that after joining, the group membership was closed off for about a year, allowing the group to get to know one another well, build significant trust and, over that time, really begin to support one another in prayer. In a years time the group would be expected to birth another group, releasing some of its members to offer leadership for the new group, and making space to welcome new members. But not all small groups were structured this way. Some only met for short, fixed periods of time and based their life around a particular project. For example one group met fortnightly to pray for and write letters to a prisoner who was about to be released. They were collecting furniture from people in the church so that when released, the ex-prisoner would have something to start with. Another short term group were meeting for several months around the desire to deepen their prayer life and were exploring this through a particular set of studies in a workshop format, another was meeting for six months to work very specifically to pray for, raise awareness and raise funds for the fight against the inhuman practice of modern slavery, often called people-trafficking.



At first Karen was worried that her small group might become insular and self-focused. However, she actually experienced the opposite. Her small group pushed her to take risks in the way she lived as a Christian. As she related to her family and work colleagues, her small group prayed for particular people and situations, gently encouraging Karen to say and do things in Jesus name that she never would have otherwise. And they usually checked on how things went, creating a mostly welcome but sometimes unnerving sense of accountability. They helped her brainstorm parenting solutions with her own kids; and listening to other's work experiences fuelled her imagination about how she could be salt and light in her own workplace. She also learned to pray for others 'out loud' and loved finding out how the prayers for the other group members were answered. The small group also became a place where she could ask questions about her faith and found it a wonderful context to begin to articulate what she believed. Rather than seeing herself as a church member who sometimes helped out with mission activities, she came to view herself as a missionary who also went to church.

Many of the other church activities Karen often felt guilty about not doing ceased to be a problem. Some of them simply fell away as more and more people in the church became committed to participating in small groups and doing mission through their normal life-context. Karen still helped with data projection, but it seemed like a minor thing she didn't mind, in comparison to the excitement of sharing her faith and seeing God at work. She still transported kids to youth group but even this took on a new significance. One small group session had identified Karen with the spiritual gift of encouragement, so she now loved praying for the kids she carried in her car, asking about their lives and encouraging their faith.

In relation to this, several members of Karen's group actually chose church activities as their primary areas of mission. One lady saw her gifting mainly in Children's ministry, so most of her spare time was taken up teaching Sunday school and Religious Education. The group loved praying for her difficult students, as they loved praying for a young builder in the group who felt called to help with the church's youth ministry. He saw the youth group as a mission field and prayerfully decided to pour most of his time and energy into these kids rather than his colleagues at work. Strangely, telling his mates about the antics of the youth group often led to conversations about God and church.

Four times a year Karen's small group deliberately hosted a 'middle space' event allowing them to invite their friends to mix with the other members of their group. Karen had become particularly close to one woman at work, Tammy, who after 12 months of working with Karen came to a movie night, and enjoyed coffee with the group afterwards. The next such evening saw her attend a women's event on parenting, which she got a lot out of. Karen was planning to soon ask her to come to church. Her small group was praying for the right opportunity, keen to make sure many of them were on hand to welcome Tammy, whom they had already met several times.



Another Case Study: Brian

Brian never had any time for church. A bloke's bloke, he was far more comfortable behind a BBQ or on the touch footy field. That's where he met Jim. It took a while to notice, but Jim seemed different to the other guys on the team. He certainly wasn't the best player, but always gave his best effort and was by far the most encouraging. He was good to chat to also. He constantly asked about Brian's family and when his son had some minor surgery, he rang on the day to find out how it went and delivered a meal that his wife had cooked shortly afterwards. He never swore or lost his cool, but was a tenacious player none-the-less. Brian wondered if Jim was 'religious', but he didn't seem nerdy enough.

Jim was though, 'religious' that is! One day he asked Brian if his church group could pray for Brian's son as the boy experienced some post-operative complications. Brian hesitantly agreed. He couldn't really tell whether the prayer made any difference, but it was nice to think Jim was concerned enough to ask. Then one day, after the game he decided to invite Jim's family around for a swim with his own wife and kids. The topic of faith came up in conversation. He used the opportunity to gently grill Jim about what he believed. This became the first of many conversations. It was like putting a jigsaw together. Sometimes he asked Jim a question that he would go away and think about, then come back with an answer next time they met. Sometimes Jim would ask him questions about his own beliefs, but he didn't always like that. It was a respectful dialogue. Jim listened as much as he talked. When Jim finally asked him to their church's family camp, Brian was in two minds. He wanted to find out more about God but the thought of a weekend with religious weirdo's seemed unbearable. Then, if there were more people like Jim, it mightn't be too bad. Jim assured him the people who prayed for his son would be there and they were dying to meet him. He had, after all, prayed for his son once or twice himself now, and there was a contentment about Jim that Brian longed to share.

The family had a great time at the camp. They met Jim's other friends – thankfully mostly normal people – though not all the types Brian would see himself hanging out with. But Jim seemed to enjoy their company and Brian's family was certainly made to feel welcome. The kids had a great time too. They especially hit it off with a young builder who had all sorts of fun activities planned for them.

When Brian asked Jim if he was interested in coming to church a few weeks later, it almost seemed like the natural thing to do. The kids were keen, and he couldn't think of a good reason not to. Not everything they said in the service made sense but Jim explained it afterwards. Brian was now noticing an annoying logic to Jim's beliefs. The thing he respected most was that Jim never pretended. He said when he didn't know something and seemed to struggle with some things, just like Brian did. They didn't go every week, but when one of the pastors rang and asked if he could visit, Brian was surprised by his openness to respond when the pastor helped Brian notice the ways God had been at work in his life. He was certainly on a journey, and gave thanks that he'd met someone like Jim.

