

Nairobi: Now and Next

Among the Nations - Where's Australia again?

(and what does this have to do with Children and Families?)

There's a classic YouTube clip that has made the viral circuit in which a vox pop interviewer combines questions about basic world politics and geography, using a world map on which the names of the countries have been mislabelled. The responses from the passing American public are hilarious, though perhaps a little tragic, with faux pas after blooper. They cannot name a country beginning with the letter U (United States of America might have been an obvious one); and quite notoriously, a man who is so keen to blow up (the whole of) Iran struggles to find it on the map, but then is relieved to point to it – but is actually pointing to Australia – and he is none the wiser. Others happily point to our continent, misnamed, but confidently call it North Korea or Canada. On one level it is hilarious, but also revealing. Where is Australia – where do we fit in the world's consciousness – and is it where we think of ourselves? Are we a western country? Are we global? Are we a 'developing' nation? Yes, Yes and Yes?

The past 5 months have included two global conferences in Africa which have been (predictably) stimulating, enriching and admittedly **confronting** for this little Melbournian.

The Lausanne 3 Congress on world evangelisation in Cape Town (Oct 2010) and *Now and Next International Theological Consultation on Children* Nairobi; March 2011) each gathered leaders, theologians and practitioners of many kinds from all continents, with large delegations from the churches of African nations, Latin American Nations and the Asian church. In Nairobi the face of the Northern/Western church was in the minority, and DJ Konz (from Compassion) and I were the only two Australian voices.

I have begun to consider the particular voice that Australia brings to international gatherings: 'the centre of gravity of gospel has shifted to the Global South' has been a common catch cry gaining swell over the past couple of decades and firmly reiterated in Cape Town 2010, (including the abundant writing and publications arising from these gatherings).

As I heard this claim over and over again, I became aware that **I thought of myself as a global south person**. Here I live in this great south land, filled with peoples of the globe. But when the missiologists and theologians speak of the Global South, I have realised, they don't mean me. Christians from Africa, Latin America and Asia **think of Australia as a Western church**. A bit like the man in the YouTube Vox Pop, we struggle to locate Australia.



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We have a western, enlightenment heritage, but it is only half an inch thick. We have large 'Christendomesque' cathedrals in all our capital cities – except our nation's capital, by which the others are betrayed as being juxtapositions on our landscape, but **not integral to our culture**; a bit like our systems of education, our relationship to land and space, the military, food and agriculture.

But we are not one culture, with either North America, or the UK. These societies, particularly in terms of religion are characterised by a far more obvious Christian backdrop. So as I listen to the theologies of North America and the UK, there is much to learn, but like my African, Asian and Latin American brothers and sisters, it is not an indigenous theology to me.

Nevertheless, my Global South siblings look upon a white Aussie girl like me as a westerner. In fact, if I can manage to keep my mouth shut (which I can't) British, rather than Australian, is their first guess.

So beyond feeling a bit lost in the middle, **what does this awareness teach me?**

3 things:

1 . The church in other parts of English speaking western culture is struggling with what its mission will look like when Christendom crumbles. Needless to say – we are already there. Not all of the church in Australia has actually noticed this, or if noticed haven't chosen to respond, but there is no doubt that we cannot take biblical literacy or Christian cultural values for granted. There are good, and I think merciful, historical reasons for this. In our history, establishment has been regarded with a wary eye – we are quick to lop the tall poppies – and where religion has positioned itself with the establishment, the powerful, the privileged, it has been held at arms distance. Occasionally Christians in Australia lament this, and from time to time a politician or a collective will make a run for a mainstream overtly political platform as an expression of Christian law making, governance and civility. This is comforting for some, but cringe-worthy for others, and very rarely a unifying experience for the church, and this only serves to underline the post-Christendom state of both the church and our country.

So we are left with our missionality well-exposed. And a good thing too. While America seems to labour under the expectations that their society is '**one nation under God**' and their missional task is to fulfil that vision more truly, or more powerfully, or more righteously, or as I would like to pray, more justly, Australia's missional agenda can only be a **fresh, invitational call**. Come and meet Jesus. He's the (welcome) stranger. He's the unknown quantity. The whole process of revelation is required anew in Australia. I think we are well-attuned to the need for clearing the decks of presumptive mission and beginning the conversation with 'G'day, how's it going?', and I think in a really healthy number of contexts and ways Australian local community missionaries have been giving this a red hot go. We have some runs on the board and perhaps some coaching tips to share with the world.

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2. We are a 'third way' – well, perhaps a 103rd way. Too often humans are prone to finding one thing, finding something that is not like that thing, and defining them in opposition to each other, developing a polarity between them and leaving the thinking there. This is essentially very lazy thinking. Left and Right exist, but so do east and west and north and south and then there are the other dimensions of depth and space and time, by which we might orientate our direction. In theological thinking we also fall prey to dichotomisations – Global South and East is contrasted against North and West. Evangelicalism against Social Actioned gospel, Proclamation against Demonstration, concern for eternal human suffering in hell against concern for temporary human suffering in the world now...and on it goes. But our texts and traditions are full-bodied, real life, real thinking, really inspired and really complex, offering a much stronger matrix of truth than a simplistic either/or black and white box. And the Australian voice, that is Western, but not European, invisible to the US radar, yet doesn't quite fit with the Global South consortium fills out the matrix, and of course makes room for other variations from the binary pairs. This helps in reconciliation and in validation and in the creation of fresh ways of thinking about how God is moving in the world.

3. Thinking more directly about children and families, we find these themes with arms and legs on and getting a good workout. Australian Children and Families ministry has a prophetic voice with which to speak globally. Children and Families ministry expressions are often, by necessity, engaging at the margins, located in community, missionally, rather than ecclesially oriented, strong in non-clergy/non-staff facilitation participation, gospel and discipleship centred, built on relational foundations, holistic and incarnational. There is lots of good experience, wisdom, theology that has been hammered out over years through addressing the short fall of theological engagement with the issues of children and families, and the need for practitioners in this area to become 'practitioner-theologians' of their own making: gathering resources, engaging in debate, stretching the envelope of mainline theology to make the grade for developing, dependent, relationally constructed human beings.



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Children and families models converse easily, but still critically, with the methodologies, arts and sciences of secular life. Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, Physiology and Pedagogy are all bread and butter for those who serve with children and families, many of whom bring gifts from the education and human sciences sectors.

Where the church at times struggles to find a common language for conversation with the ordinary everyday human, the academy and civics, a forum exists in concern for the holistic nurture of our young and their primary care systems (family, community and school).



In the background of both the Cape Town conversation and the Nairobi negotiations is the question of the fundamental call of the whole gospel for the whole world – and some question of what this gospel is.

There are suggestions that the fundamental priority of the gospel is:

- calling converted souls to a future life outside of this world, for the sake of the glory of God.

At this point I will nail my colours firmly to the mast and declare my bias: **the fundamental priority of the gospel is:**

- making disciples, who are made disciples for the sake of the world (which is the object of God the creator's passionate and faithful love), and who are called into it, deep into it.

Children and Families ministry embraces and embodies this gospel discipleship.