**From Vanilla Church to Smorgasbord**



Baptist Church life was so much simpler when it was monochromatic – from four hymn sandwiches to Wednesday night prayer meetings there was a pattern and predictability that was comforting. You knew that after the last hymn was sung and the benediction pronounced, you would be farewelled by a warm hand-shake from the pastor at the front door. Globalisation has seen the move from one culture to many cultures; post-Christendom has seen an end to common Sunday (Sabbath) practices; no-one expects their neighbour to turn up to Sunday Services because of a witty church notice board or a neighbourhood letter-box drop. The changes that we have perceived intuitively and recounted anecdotally have been quantitatively confirmed by the hard data from consecutive National Church Life Surveys – the decline in church attendance despite no matching decline in  spirituality. The church has lost its role as moral policeman (perhaps a good thing?) – and has forfeited her prophetic voice (definitely not a good thing!)as we have lagged in matters of ecology and been called to account over matters of sexual abuse and, even more recently, domestic abuse.

Baptist Churches in Victoria are responding to the challenge to embrace a more wholistic spirituality.  We are seeking to move beyond form to function; to understand anew what it means to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt 6:33); to live again the ancient call to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly (Micah 6:8), and we are seeing a reorientation of our priorities, our perspectives, and our understanding of spirituality and mission. Changes in society and culture are causing us to listen deeply, to ask questions about what is good news to our communities, and to contextualise Scripture as we seek to understand and live ancient truths in a rapidly changing world. This has several implications, one of which is that our diversity increases even more as we seek to form faith and live faithfully in the increasingly varied contexts and cultures in which we find ourselves. I acknowledge that some will struggle with this lack of uniformity, and others will question some of the ways in which this finds expression, but overall the smorgasbord of faith expressions and spiritual practices gives space for a deeper and more authentic engagement with God, neighbour, and self.

A Trinitarian understanding of mission – founded in relationship, lived in love, and with God as the missioner, a wholistic understanding of the gospel (good news), deeply engaged with ancient text and current context, under the authority of Jesus, open to and empowered by the Spirit, gives rise to communities of faith that grapple with the practical and experiential theologies for each of our contexts.  What is Reconciliation? Liberation? Transformation? How does exclusion become embrace? Where do I see the face of God in the face of the Other? Who is my neighbour? These are some of the questions that should uniquely shape each local church and lead to diversity as we seek to Advance the Kingdom. The old adage, “It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people”, and it’s newer expression, “To reach people we have never reached before we must do things that we have never done before” are much more than slogans about new models for church and mission. They are about incarnating the love of God through church planters, social entrepreneurs, community developers, all people of good will, networks of social relationships, partner service agencies… as we pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”.

If this article inspires you to engage more about Models for Mission please contact our BUV Mission Catalyst Team on missioncatalyst@buv.com.au or david.chatelier@buv.com.au