

CONFERENCE REPORT

Australian Missiology Conference, 2005 “Re-imagining God and Mission within Australian Cultures”

A diverse group of 150 mission leaders and teachers from many Christian denominations met from 26 to 30 September 2005 at Whitley College, Melbourne, to rethink mission in the light of the rapid changes in Australian society.

One keynote speaker, Alan Hirsch (national director of Forge Missional Training Network), predicted that the traditional church will die within twenty years, but was optimistic that a new movement of small missionally-shaped churches will spring up to take its place. He urged the church to be shaped by a mission which is in turn shaped by Jesus.

The opening keynote speaker, Professor Stephen Bevans SVD (from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago) set the scene by suggesting that all revelation and talk of God is inspired by imagination and metaphor, and that seeking fresh metaphors is needed for every context. He explored the ideas of God as dance, as stranger and as persistent widow (Luke 18). He encouraged those present to re-imagine God and mission, emphasising that our view of God is intimately connected to the way we join the mission of God.

Dr Anne Pattel-Gray (Principal of Tauondi Aboriginal College in Adelaide) told her journey of pain and hope as an indigenous person and encouraged Christians to travel alongside Indigenous people, listening and offering solidarity. Whether the church is part of the problem or part of the solution depends on the path it takes in the future, she said. Betty Pike, of Aboriginal Catholic Ministries Melbourne, opened the conference acknowledging the indigenous custodians of the land. Lorraine Erlandson, of Nungalinga College in Darwin, gave a paper on exploring indigenous Christianity, one of several papers on the theme.

Rev Dr Philip Hughes (Senior Researcher for the Christian Research Association) outlined recent statistical trends in Australian religion. He said that the four fastest growing types of religious identification, in order of size, are “no religion”, ethnically-based religion due to immigration, Charismatic Christianity and nature religions. Philip characterised the undeveloped religious views of many young Australians as “Whateverism”. Huge changes in Australian culture are being seen, including becoming an “options society” and dismissing the church, along with other institutions. Ways forward in mission, he suggested, include offering spiritual options; identifying contact points and pathways towards belonging; and encouraging people to take their spiritual journey more seriously.

Dr David Tacey (Associate Professor of English at Latrobe University) said that younger people are interested in spirituality but not religion because religion had neglected its spiritual heritage. He suggested that we need to stop preaching the Word of God to people and start listening for the Word in other people. The faith journey is really a mystical journey of interiority, opening our spirit to the Spirit of God.

Dr Maryanne Confoy RSC (Lecturer in Practical Theology at the Jesuit Theological College) considered education for contextual mission. She suggested a model of “interculturalism”, meaning the process of respectful conversation across and within diverse cultures and belief systems. It is grounded in context and story. It involves listening deeply. “Teacher/learners” interact with “learner/teachers”.

Dr Cathy Ross (newly Mission Interchange Advisor with the Church Mission Society in London, but until recently leader of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Mission Studies) also addressed educating for contextual mission. She noted that Western males still occupy the main stage in theological education and that it is often conducted as if one approach fits all, whereas taking context seriously turns our educational methods on their heads. Cathy explored in challenging terms what it means for the four themes of mutuality, solidarity, marginality and hospitality and the stranger to permeate mission education.

More than forty workshop papers were given (still available in full on the conference web site during October 2005), on a wide range of topics from analysing the Australian context to indigenous issues, justice, congregations, evangelism, welfare, multiculturalism and public theology.

The purpose of the conference was to encourage new approaches to Christian mission. Many themes came through frequently, including these:

- listening before speaking
- engaging with those around us in daily lifestyle for the sake of transformation (“incarnational mission”)
- loving people into new life
- new ways of gathering as church
- dialogue with those of other faiths
- mission as conversation
- taking the Australian context seriously
- reconciliation between Indigenous and non-indigenous people as critical to Australia’s soul
- responding creatively to the common attitude encapsulated by the slogan “Yes to Jesus but No to the church”
- developing a public theology and
- re-framing our God-talk in fresh metaphors.

Other aspects of the conference included:

- discussion groups where participants discussed what they were hearing
- presentations on the final day by two “conference reflectors” (Bev Fabb and Fr Trevor Trotter) who listened throughout the week and distilled some of the central themes
- a “hypothetical” evening, where Rev Jim Barr (minister of Canberra Baptist Church) threw mission scenarios at a panel—a humorous and yet challenging way of acting out the strengths and weaknesses of some of our approaches to mission
- daily worship from various traditions
- two book launches: Dominic O’Sullivan’s *Faith, Politics and Reconciliation: Catholicism and Indigeneity* (ATF Press), and Philip Hughes & Sharon Bond’s *A Handbook for Cross-cultural Ministry* (CRA/Openbook/VCC)
- an evening tasting Melbourne’s multicultural food and entertainment
- a bookstall by Openbook and ATF Press

An Australian Association for Mission Studies (AAMS) was formed out of the former South Pacific Association for Mission Studies (SPAMS), with plans for new ways of networking

Australians interested in mission studies. Dr Cyril Hally, president of SPAMS since he founded it in 1986, and Rev Seton Arndell, long-serving SPAMS secretary, “handed on the baton” to a younger generation. The new association will have a Melbourne-based committee and an editorial board to continue the publication of the *South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies*. An interim committee will be formed in early 2006.

A book containing the plenary presentations and a selection of the workshop papers will be edited by Ross Langmead so that the wider church can tap into the fruits of the conference. It is planned for publication within twelve months.

The conference was marked by diversity. About half of the participants were theological teachers or postgraduate students. The other half were pastors, missionaries, denominational leaders and church agency leaders. The four largest groups were Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist and Uniting Church, with others from the Churches of Christ, the Salvation Army, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Presbyterian Church, Mennonites and others. About a third were women. All states and territories in Australia were represented, with seven participants from New Zealand and guests from the USA and UK.

As with most conferences, many said that they gained most from networking—the encouragement of meeting many others engaged in mission a variety of ways.

Conference Director Dr Ross Langmead said that the conference achieved all of its aims well and was a significant event in Australian mission studies, the first for many years. It is likely that such events will become regular (perhaps every second year).

For further information on the Australian Missiology Conference, contact

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