

The Missional Malaise

'Something Completely Different'

A Response to the Crisis



Missional Community Networks

Dr Martin J Bragger

unboundedchurch.com

Something Completely Different

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Something Completely Different' is written in the light of the now decades old Missional Malaise, indeed Crisis, that now affects Western Christianity with the prayerful hope of contributing to a significant rethinking of missional strategies.

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Time For Something Completely Different

"The significant problems we face can't be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them."

Albert Einstein

The motive for writing this booklet is threefold. First, is a passion for the more effective proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus in order to bring many more men and women into the Kingdom of God. Second, is a great concern even despair, shared by many, at the low and decreasing missional fruitfulness of churches over now several decades. Thirdly, and consequent to the first two points, is a desire to analyse and address the reasons for that decline in order to facilitate the design of much more missionally fruitful mission paradigms. The proposal here being that those new paradigms will take the form of networks of, what we will describe as, 'Missional Communities'.

Before anything else, it is important to acknowledge the fact that for many years (indeed decades) large numbers of godly, committed, faithful Christians engaged in local church gospel ministry have worked hard in 'Mission' campaigns and events, and in the development of new evangelistic strategies. However while we must honour those endeavours, the regrettable reality is that the fruit has generally been significantly and persistently less than what is urgently needed, and continues to be so. This amounts to a Crisis.

One thing should be noted is that, while this essay argues that we are now at a point where a tectonic shift is required in our approach to mission, it is likely that the traditional local church network will continue for some time to provide a nurturing spiritual environment for the tens of thousands of Sunday service attendees in Australian churches. That network will also no doubt continue to have some missional success in reaching (perhaps optimistically) up to 20% of the population, a figure

however that as entrenched current trends show will certainly decline. None of this however in anyway avoids the conclusion that it is time for *'Something Completely Different'*.

This booklet contains an analysis that highlights some very unpalatable and unpopular truths that are little discussed yet urgently require response. Then on the basis of that analysis moves on to propose, as at least part of that response, the creation of networks of 'Missional Communities' (Micro-churches) embedded in the multitudes of 'Live, Work and Play' subcultures into which 21st century Australian (indeed Western) society has now shattered.

The Missional Malaise – 1. We Have Been Warned

"We have to understand our history in order to not repeat the mistakes of the past. I have seen too many instances where people continue to pursue wrong courses of action because they do not take the time to think critically about what has happened in the past"

Winston Churchill

The fact is that we cannot say we have not been warned! Many of the issues central to the current missional challenge have been raised at various points over nearly half a century. Those warnings provided opportunities to instigate a process of substantive change, tragically however they were opportunities that largely went begging.

One example of an unheeded warning that suffices to make the point can be cited from as long ago as the early 1970s. This is contained in a remarkably prescient report entitled *'Looking Into The Parish'* commissioned by the 1970 Synod (Parliament) of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.¹ A few quotes are highly relevant to today's church as a whole.

*"If the work of the Gospel is to continue with **effectiveness in a rapidly changing society** it is imperative that the present rigidity of structure be removed so as to permit the introduction of varied forms of ministry to meet differing needs and situations. . . . **With the emergence of new kinds of community we must be able to adapt our ministry and do so quickly.** New patterns of ministry can be required **at very short notice.**"²*

Many similar warnings have been issued over the last half century. Yet it is hard to see that this *'rigidity of structure'* in denominational churches has significantly reduced, despite it being the very antithesis of the

¹ 'The Parochial Ministry and Organisation Commission' 1972

² *'Looking Into the Parish'* p.37 – Clause 141. Author's emphasis

'Flexibility' so essential for 21st century mission. This rigidity is one reason that the ability to adapt quickly and at short notice is something current church structures are generally not capable of.³

Then there is probably the most prescient statement in the report-

"In changing the structure we must be careful not to merely substitute one rigid form for another. However much we may be convinced that a particular new form of structure will remedy existing deficiencies, there can be no guarantee that it will still be appropriate for the further changes in society yet to come. And such changes, no doubt beyond the range of present thinking, will most certainly occur."⁴

Here is an awareness, even if embryonic and not described as such, of the issue of the 'Knightian Uncertainty' cultural environment, evident even in the latter decades of the 20th century, in which missional strategy must be developed.⁵ That 'uncertainty' environment is now even more 'uncertain', and is one where a large number of the parameters that will shape the future cultural, and therefore missional, landscape simply cannot be known. This is an essential, yet rarely acknowledged, consideration for missional strategic thinking for a future cultural landscape where the only thing 'certain' is 'uncertainty'.

Motivated by a deep concern in regard to the chronically very limited missional fruit produced by churches of all denominations over the last 50 years, the author has persistently argued the need for '*Something Completely Different*'. This being the creation of new forms of church specifically designed for mission to the pagan cultural universes that comprise Australian (Western) society.

³ As is more fully argued in '*Unbinding the Church*' - [Unbinding the Church- Missional Realities and Better Options](#)

⁴ p.37 – Clause 143. Author's emphasis.

⁵ A term named after the American economist Frank Knight. It describes an environment where decisions for the future need to be made in the present but where the available data is insufficient to be sure about the future that is being planned for. This is a description of our current missional context.

Such new forms, while essentially being shaped by the principles for Christian community voiced to us by the New Testament, will be Missional Communities that are specifically designed to penetrate and engage with the multiplicity of non-Christian spiritual and cultural worlds in which the majority of Australians now live. Further they will not be required to owe anything to the current traditional (Christendom-form) church model.

Despite the many warnings given over several decades, spoken, written and evidential, of the need for change, together with the chronically declining levels of missional fruit, substantive changes in the generally employed missional strategies are very rare. Fundamentally, the prevailing thinking re 'church' and 'mission' across the whole ecclesial landscape continues in much the same vein as it was in the 1970s.

A 2013 church conference submission comment on the *'Looking Into the Parishes'* report was that-

"the reality of change was being shelved for another day".

Tragically, nearly half a century later, it is still generally the case that there has been minimal substantive change, if any!

The Missional Malaise – 2. Symptoms

'It's crucial to look not only at the symptoms, but the causes'

Carol Anne Wright

It is now indisputable that, despite the hard work and commitment of large numbers of Christians in many missional endeavours, there has been for nearly half a century a failure to respond to irrefutable evidence of the need for, and various studies calling for, significant change in missional strategy. Consequently, there is now an entrenched and chronic decline in missional fruitfulness, as the following 5 significant symptoms of this missional malaise indicate.

1. The longstanding and persistent decline in the 'Unchurched and De-churched' in congregations, defined as 'Newcomers' by the 5 yearly Australian National Church Life Survey.⁶ The 'Newcomer' statistic is arguably the best measure we have of Missional fruitfulness.⁷

2. The Decline in Church Attendance and Affiliation

This trend of decline is now well entrenched across the Western world.

In **Australia**, according to the 2016 National Census, the number of those indicating no religious affiliation rose to 30% from 22% in 2011, a 13% increase in only five years. The no religious affiliation statistic for 18 to 34 year olds in 2016 was even higher at 39%.

According to McRindle research, of the 52% who still claim affinity with Christianity, just under half never attend church at all.⁸

⁶ 'Newcomers' means those who have joined their present congregation in the last five years but had not previously attended a church for many years or have never attended. This is arguably the best measure of missional effectiveness we have.

⁷ A strong indicator of the ailing health of the Australian church is the 'Newcomer' statistic for the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, still arguably the largest part of the Australian church. This fell by 35% between 2001 and 2016, and continues to do so.

⁸ Faith and Belief in Australia Report_McCrindle_2017

The picture for the Anglican Church, arguably still the largest non-Catholic denomination, is bleak with the number of Australians in 2016 identifying as Anglican declining by a million people since 2011.⁹

In the **United Kingdom**, according to the 2017 the British NatCen's Social Attitudes survey,¹⁰ the proportion of people in Britain who describe themselves as having no religion is at its highest ever level.

More than half (53%) of the British public now describe themselves as having "no religion", up from 48% in 2015. The proportion of non-believers has increased gradually since the survey began in 1983, when the proportion saying they had no religion stood at 31%.

The fall in religious affiliation has been driven, at least in part, by young people. In 2016, seven in ten (71%) of young people aged 18-24 said they had no religion, up from 62% in 2015, with less than 3% identifying as Anglican.

In **New Zealand**, data from the 2018 national census shows that 48.59 per cent of New Zealanders have 'no religion' - up from 41.92 at the 2013 Census. Further, the number of people identifying with the Christian faith has collapsed from 47.65 per cent in 2013 to 37.31 per cent in 2018.

In the **United States**, the same decline trend is evident. According to a 2019 [Pew Research Centre](#) report,¹¹ 65% of American adults now describe themselves as Christian, down from 77% in 2009. Meanwhile, the portion that describes their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular," now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009.

⁹ According to the ABS 2016 National Census

¹⁰ www.natcen.ac.uk/

¹¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

In Canada, A Report submitted to the Anglican Church of Canada, Council of General Synod meeting in November 2019 stated that *"Projections from our data indicate that there will be no members, attenders or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately 2040."*

The church health metrics across the whole of the western world indicate a now long standing catastrophic decline which can only be described a Crisis.

This is a clear indication of the Church's chronic and entrenched failure in its mission to western society, yet it beggars belief that churches in general show no Crisis response. Viewing this, it is hard to avoid the words 'Nero, Fiddle, Rome and Burn' coming to mind!

A Case Study

As a case study the Anglican Diocese of Sydney in NSW (arguably still the strongest part of the non-Catholic Australian church), can be used to illustrate the enormity of the challenge faced by the church generally.¹² Given the approximately 10% increase in the Sydney population over the 2013-2017 period,¹³ and (generously) assuming flat aggregate attendance over the same period, just to stand still against the population trend, the Diocese needed to have increased by 10% the 2013 weekly attendance of 53000, that is 5300 attendees over the four year period, or 1325 per year.

This amounts to 26 new 50 attendee strong congregations a year, or about one a fortnight.¹⁴ This is a challenge that the standard churches are not even remotely capable of meeting.

¹² Sydney is used here because it is arguably the strongest part of the non-Catholic Australian church and is also the area for which the best data is available.

¹³ Population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics

¹⁴ Most significant Australian population centres face a greater challenge.

3. 'The Transferee Mirage'

There are of course churches and congregations that claim to be bucking the trend and are seeing numerical growth. A caveat here however, the reality is, one very rarely acknowledged, that such growth is mostly if not entirely 'Transfer Growth' not 'Kingdom (i.e. new converts) Growth' that has taken place.

In such churches analysis will usually show that at the same time there has been numerical growth the percentage of 'Newcomers' in congregations has actually declined. This indicates that any alleged 'success' in terms of missional fruit is really a '*Mirage*'. This is because any growth or even stability in attendance is largely due to people transferring from other denominations, or regions, and in major population centres probably mostly due to high immigration, NOT the result of missional strategies.

4. The Average Age of Congregations. This continues to rise decade on decade.

5. Reducing Youth Attendance.

As well as the chronic overall attendance decline there has been a parallel erosion of Youth involvement and attendance.¹⁵ This will be a very significant factor both in declining attendance levels as well as in the rising average congregational age as the current and subsequent reduced youth cohorts flow down through the years to come.

The Desalination Effect.

The above data is limited but is symptomatic of the catastrophic trends in vital church health metrics and is cited to highlight what can only be

¹⁵ This NCLS Data supplied by Dr John Bellamy, Senior Researcher, Communications, Marketing and Research, Anglicare, Sydney. 10/10/2018 and relates to the Anglican Diocese of Sydney which has poured a great deal of resources in to youth ministry over the last 20 years.

described as a Crisis. Further, this Crisis has broader and seriously negative consequences for society as a whole, resulting from the decline in the SALT Index (SI).

The 'SI' is the ratio of Church Attendance to Population in any given population centre,¹⁶ and its decline represents a trend of diminishing Gospel influence on Australian society. This effect is further exacerbated by the evidence that what 'Salt' there is has to a great degree lost its 'saltiness' (Matthew 5:13), with surveys indicating that less than 20% of church members are willing to talk about their faith.¹⁷

This ongoing decline in the SALT index, the Gospel influence in society, has practical negative outcomes as shown by what is being taught in schools and universities, as well as the legislation being enacted in parliaments.

The inescapable conclusion from all of the available evidence provides a 'Reality Check', the reality of a now long entrenched catastrophic trend of decline in the number of converts, and a continuing loss of gospel influence on society. All of this can only be described as a Crisis, one which cries out for a Crisis response, something the Australian church at least has not shown itself willing to make.

Yes, the Denominational and local church networks will continue to provide a nurturing spiritual environment for current, although dwindling, Sunday service attendees and will have some limited, but declining missional success. However, this clearly cannot be the main vehicle for future mission.

¹⁶ A stark example is the Diocese of Sydney where the SALT Index declined by about 20% in the 10 years to 2016, and had fallen to 0.98% by 2017, i.e. where church attendance amounts to less than 1% of the population .

¹⁷ NCLS 2016

The brute reality, regrettable though it is, as canvassed above, is that only a combination of extreme optimism and wishful thinking can argue against the truth of the following statement.

'Unpalatable though it may be, the current denominational, local church structure has not been for over 20 years, is not, nor can it be made to be, capable of achieving the trend-reversing missional goals so urgently required'

The only realistic conclusion can only be that *'Something Completely Different'* is required.

The Missional Malaise- 3. A Diagnosis

"We must always look forward, but we have to understand our history in order to not repeat the mistakes of the past. I have seen too many instances where people continue to pursue wrong courses of action because they do not take the time to think critically about what has happened in the past"

Winston Churchill

Before making any proposals as to how the entrenched decline in missional effectiveness might be addressed it is important to explore reasons for that decline. This would help avoid repeating the 'mistakes of history', and once more look back on this time of Missional Crisis and once more be condemned by the statement that the "*reality was that change was being left for another day*".

The argument here (brief for the sake of space) is that there are generally unaddressed, serious and systemic factors militating against missional effectiveness which will continue to vitiate missional endeavours. While not claiming to be exhaustive, the following is a list of what I would argue are some of the most significant reasons for the chronic missional malaise.

1) The 'More and Better' Delusion

After now decades of disappointing results from heavily resourced missional endeavours, the belief that continuing with a 'More' of what we have been doing and trying to do it 'Better' missional strategy (as seems to generally be the case) will achieve different outcomes is surely a 'Delusion'. To keep on doing this would appear to have at least a whiff of Einstein's definition of 'Insanity' about it.

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results"

2) The 'SIC' Church Model

A major reason for the missional failure is the almost ubiquitous persistence with the Sunday-Centric, In- Drag, Christendom-Form (SIC) church model. This despite the obvious fact that it was originally designed for the maintenance of Christian congregations in a European Christendom society, and never for the challenge we face, that of local mission to our own, now Pagan, culture.

- **Sunday-Centric** – This is the mindset that limits the main focus for growth to Sunday services. This despite the fact that 40% plus of Australians can't attend on Sunday even if they wanted to because of work, sport or recreational commitments.
- **In-Drag**- Nearly all, what are generally called, 'Outreach' strategies try to get (drag) people into Sunday (at least weekend) services, an approach that has now generally been failing since the last century.
- **Christendom-form**- Continuing with what is basically still the same centuries old model of church as the main platform for mission. This despite the fact that it is now in almost every way alien to, and culturally inaccessible by, the vast majority of 21st century Australians

3) Reinventing Square Wheels¹⁸

The [Square Wheel](#) concept comes from a very old comedy movie in which a caveman is the first to invent the bicycle. However, his design had square wheels, and of course he discovered it didn't work that well! The 'Square Wheel' is the design (mission strategy) that didn't work very well the last time we used it!

¹⁸ <https://wordpress.com/post/unboundedchurch.com/1523>

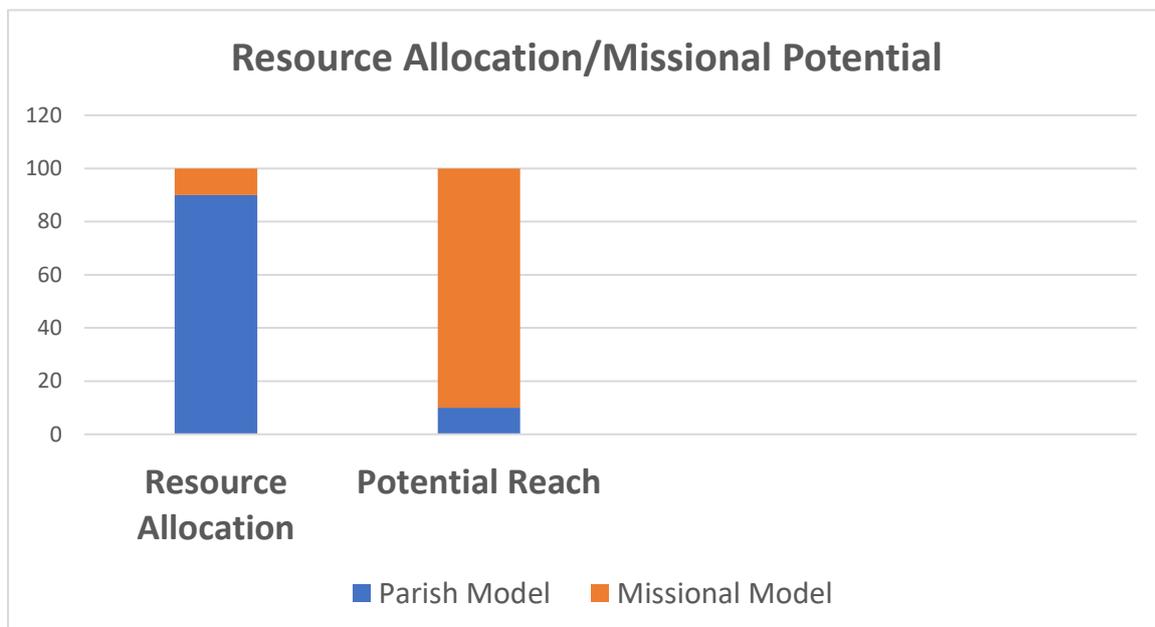
The vast majority of current missional endeavours are largely a continual reinventing of the 'Square Wheel', i.e. 20th century missional strategies and evangelism 'events', that were only significantly effective in what was the more 'Christianized' society of the last century. This despite there being ample evidence that they now haven't been greatly effective for a long time. Regrettably, there continues to be a steady flow of such failed and failing examples. It may well be that a good rule of thumb to use when assessing missional strategies is-

'If we were doing it in the 1990s then we probably shouldn't be doing it now!'

4) Upside-Down Resource Allocation

While not claiming to be precise, the following chart is indicative of how resources available for ministry and mission are generally distributed. Around ninety percent of resources continue to be focused on our missionally failing local church-centric model, which will (at best) only reach 20% of the population, whereas the focus should be –

"to redirect ministry from congregational gatherings to 'mission'.



5) A 'Cultural Intelligence Deficit'

There seems to be a general 'Cultural Intelligence' Deficit in church leaderships, i.e. failure to exegete and truly understand the mosaic of culture(s) comprising 21st century Australia.¹⁹ Cultural Intelligence is a measure of the ability to understand the times and the churning kaleidoscope of church-alien, now increasingly hostile, socio-spiritual cultural universes that Australian society has now become.

The reality is that the Christendom society, in which and for which our church 'model' developed, is long gone and importantly, increasing numbers of Australians, even those born in the country, are from cultures that were NEVER IN IT!²⁰ So there is a decreasing proportion of the population that has any affinity or knowledge of the church.

The fact is that History has not previously presented anything like our rapidly and constantly changing culture (realistically now 'cultures'), changes being inexorably driven by brilliant technological innovation and the people flows reordering society's ethnic mix. The Christendom society is now shattered into a **Kaleidoscope** of 'Live, Work and Play' micro-communities, cultural 'universes' that are alien to the 'church' universe.

Thus, the **Key** missional challenge is to grasp the reality that our ever morphing Kaleidoscope society is truly unique, and that for the church to be effective in mission, intrinsic to its DNA must be an ability to constantly reinvent itself.²¹ Here is the key 'Mind-set shift' required,²² because the missional church must not be locked into any specific shape. So perhaps Darwin may provide food for thought?

"It's not the strongest of species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change"

Charles Darwin

¹⁹ See - <https://unboundedchurch.com/2018/01/08/cultural-intelligence-understanding-the-times>

²⁰ See Appendix

²¹ A challenge implied by the 'Looking Into the Parish' report 50 years ago!

²² Midpoint Report p.4

6) The 'Prior Question'

In assessing the future needs of 'Mission Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Manchester or Toronto or wherever our area of mission is', it is not evident that, what might be called, the 'Prior Question' has commonly been asked. Yet the asking of such a question is essential, in *any* organization, for a Vision for the future to be developed. The Prior question that needs to be asked might take the form of-

'If we were to develop a Mission strategy for a (insert city/region) where there were no churches what would it be?'

In part, the answer to that question most certainly will not be *'the strategies currently being followed'* which would confirm that 'what we are currently doing' is not what is required. Such a conclusion should instigate a process of critical analysis as to what we actually do need, which would enable the development of a strategic Vision for the increasingly difficult missional challenges ahead.

To put it another way, strategic mission planning should start from what is needed for effective 21st century mission, not from what we have now or from where we are now!

7) Multiplication Mathematics

A simple mathematical analysis of church attendance and population trends in virtually any significant population centre in the western world, indicates that just to match population growth there would have to be a very large annual increase in the number of standard sized congregations.²³

There is simply no possibility that this can be achieved by 'Classic' church planting which is far too slow and expensive. Strategies for

²³ For example, the Anglican Diocese of Sydney would have to create around 26 or more **additional** 50 attendee-strong congregations **EVERY YEAR**.

effective mission in the 21st century culture need to be ones that enable the rapid multiplication of Christian fellowships. It is beyond argument that these will, by necessity, be low cost, lay-led and small.

8) The Dead Hand of Apathy

'Only 1 in 5 Church members are willing to talk intentionally about their faith. This is equivalent to trying to win a war with an army where only 20% of the soldiers are willing to fight!'

A few years ago, as part of a thesis I was writing at the time, I carried out a small survey in regard to the level of passion in congregations for reaching the community with the gospel. The format was that I asked a number of church leader colleagues to respond to the following statement.

"My Congregation has a real passion for the mission of the Gospel to the Australian community" with the following results (rounded figures)-

Strongly Disagree –	21%
Disagree -	50%
Neutral -	7%
Agree –	7%
Strongly Agree –	14%

While it is acknowledged that it was only a small sample, it does indicate that very few congregations were considered by their church leaders to have significant passion for mission, this despite decades of teaching on, and exhortation in regard to, the importance of this matter.

The conclusion reached here, actually just confirmation of my own observations from experience of leading churches, is that there is a general mission-blocking apathy and lack of real passion for mission to the Australian community among the vast majority of congregational members. This concern is given weight by the fact that, according to the

2016 NCLS, less than 1 in 5 Church members are willing to talk intentionally about their faith. This is equivalent to an army where only 20% of soldiers are willing to fight! The idea that such an army can win the war is surely little more than wishful thinking.

This missionally deadening 'Dead Hand of Apathy' is very prevalent and is one reason why it is difficult to think that the standard (SIC) church model can be reinvented, at least fast enough, to achieve the radically increased missional fruitfulness so urgently needed. As the former Bishop to the Australian Defence forces Tom Frame has commented-

"the culturally compliant strain of Christianity promoted in Australia does not. oblige (people) to embrace lifestyle choices that might involve discomfort."²⁴

9) The 'Success' Illusion

There is a general lack of preparedness on the part of many to consider something different, in part perhaps because they allow themselves to be lulled into a false sense of security by some limited missional success. Success does and will occur as we harvest the 'low hanging fruit', that is largely those in the community who have some affinity with the traditional church for some reason. That however is a shrivelling orchard, and reality is still defined by the negative trajectory of ALL of the key indicators of missional effectiveness as previously discussed which warns us against being seduced by occasional localized reports of success, and the '*Transferee Mirage*'.

It is important to note that alleged 'successes' are often illusory as a result of a lack of critical analysis. For example, claims may be made for the missional success of a 'Greenfield' church plant in a growth area where the increasing number of '*bums on seats*' looks good. However, if the question is asked 'where did all these new members come from?'. It is mostly the case that the vast majority were previously members of other churches before moving into the area of the 'Greenfield' church

²⁴ Tom Frame, *Losing My Religion* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009) p.15

and have in fact been lost by their church of origin. This is not Kingdom growth!

Then there is the example of the large church with a thriving and growing youth ministry, held up as a great 'success'. That is until one puts it in the context of the diminishing, even folding, youth ministries of the surrounding churches from which the 'successful' church has 'poached' its growth. An example of the '*Transferee Mirage*' on a local scale.

Another area of usually illusory success is in regard to special '*In-drag*' outreach events. Large numbers of attendees and a well-run event can leave the 'Christians' with the 'illusion' of missional success. However, critical analysis usually reveals little or no gospel fruit (i.e. how many of those attending were not members of another church **and** became an ongoing member of any Christian fellowship) in return for what is often a large investment of resources.

One more example of 'Success' often cited is the growing church led by what can be called the 'Rock Star' minister. This is the especially gifted, visionary, energetic and often charismatic leader who by dint of exceptional gifts, personality and drive grows a dynamic church. For such we praise God, however this is not a model that will be a vehicle for general missional success for it is rarely replicable. Rock Stars are few and far between!

Yes it does have to be said that some 'success' is occurring and must be celebrated. However, the fact is that this is usually little and isolated and it is not legitimate to argue a general conclusion of missional effectiveness from isolated particular 'successes'. The 'big picture' reality still is, despite such 'success', that '*Newcomers*' are still declining in our congregations!

10) A New Mindset²⁵

All the data on church decline calls for a fundamental mind-set change that will initiate a paradigm-shift.²⁶ However, and most regrettably, the totally new 'Mind-set' required for effective mission in our 21st century western culture is still little in evidence.²⁷ This is where this Einstein quote is helpful-

"The significant problems we face can't be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them."

The great concern is that if we continue to operate at *"the same level of thinking"*, and particularly the same level of thinking about Church (ecclesiology) and Mission (missiology), as we have in the past, we will keep on with the same failed mission strategies of the last 20 years and longer. If so we will certainly see a continuation of the now chronic lack of missional fruit.

In Summary

As has been highlighted earlier, alarm bells in regard to the urgent need for change have been sounding for nearly half a century, yet there has still to be seen any real evidence in mainline churches of that change occurring to any significant degree.

Consequently, the key metrics of the 'unchurched and de-churched' percentage in congregations, the 'Attendance/Population' ratio (SALT index), Youth decline and the rapid fall in the percentage of those affirming Christian affiliation, have for a very long time indicated falling missional effectiveness and decline in the Gospel influence on society. Is

²⁵ Midpoint Report p.4

²⁶ Midpoint Report p.4

²⁷ The point was made in Sydney Anglican Diocese's 'Midpoint' analysis of its ten year mission in 2008. Now TEN Long years ago, yet there is little evidence of such a changed mindset!

it not therefore time to implement '**Something Completely Different**' and engineer the '**Paradigm Shift**' the 'Crisis' demands?

The urgent need is, whatever form it takes, to specifically develop a mission strategy that can be the platform for the task of 21st century 'pagan mission', something that western mainline denominations have arguably never really done 'in our own culture', or even thought we had to do. Is it not long past time to ask the question as to whether it is not just '*thinking outside the box*' that is needed but to actually '*get out of the box*'?

It is this challenge that led to the '*Unbounded Church*' 'Concept' (not model) of Missional Community Networks.

The Missional Malaise 4. Missional Community Networks

*"The current predicament of churches requires more than a mere tinkering with long-assumed notions about the identity and mission of the church."*²⁸

Darrell L Guder

As already outlined, there is an entrenched and longstanding trend of declining missional fruit as measured by the proportion of 'unchurched and de-churched' people in congregations as well as the plummeting numbers acknowledging Christian affiliation.²⁹

A major factor in the challenge we face is that we live in a truly 'Unique' time of a rotating kaleidoscope of ongoing, rapid and accelerating cultural change. This is a tectonic cultural shift that many, including those in leadership, seem unable, or unwilling to grasp, yet which requires the creation of new culturally appropriate 'designer' forms of Christian fellowships. Indeed '*Something Completely Different*'; missional entities, with many characteristics in common with the northern European [Celtic](#) mission movements of the 5th and 6th centuries.³⁰ Essential to these is that they be highly flexible and adaptable, have an inbuilt capacity for self-reinvention and a facility for multiplication.

Another aspect of the challenge, not sufficiently considered, is that Australia is now fundamentally a 'Pagan' country and so the task is one of '*Pagan Mission*'. This is something that quite frankly the Australian (Western) church has yet to learn how to do *in its own culture*.

To meet this challenge requires three things (among others) – The development of a completely '***New Mindset***', one quite frankly alien to

²⁸ Darrell L. Guder (Ed) *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998) p.77

²⁹ 'Newcomers' means those who have joined their present congregation or parish in the last five years but had not previously attended a church for many years or have never attended. This is arguably the best measure of missional effectiveness we have.

³⁰ See <https://wordpress.com/post/unboundedchurch.com/284>

the majority of current missional thinking, that would create '**New Paradigms**' in regard to Mission, and involve the '**Redirection of Resources**' into new forms of Missional endeavour.

In terms of those '*New Paradigms*', the argument here is for them to take the form of Missional Community Networks.

Key Requirements

In the current rapidly revolving 'Cultural Kaleidoscope' and in the light of the previous analysis, certain things can be said about the '*Something Completely Different*' (whatever form it may take) if it is to be missionally effective— i.e. It must-

- **Not Be Sunday-Centric-** For large numbers (over 40%) of Australians are simply not free to attend on Sundays, because of work and locked-in Recreational and Sport activities. In the UK where there are now thousands of Missional Communities **the majority do not meet on Sundays.**³¹
- **Be able to enter and penetrate the constantly morphing multiplicity of socio-spiritual cultural universes** that comprise 21st century Australian society. That is, it is able to implement a '**Go, Penetrate and Stay**' in the community strategy.
- **Be Easily and Rapidly Multiplied.** This is simply a mathematical necessity if the declining trend in the SALT Index is to be reversed.
- **Be led by a new breed of Leaders** who are both gifted and trained to be 'Missionaries' in a 'Pagan' society.
- **Be largely a Lay movement,** due to the large number of MCs required.
- **Be very low cost.** Given the high rate of multiplication of new fellowships needed, and the high funding

³¹ For more on the UK experience see [Gleanings](https://wordpress.com/post/unboundedchurch.com/2220fs) at-
<https://wordpress.com/post/unboundedchurch.com/2220fs>

requirements, 'Classic' church planting is simply not capable of meeting the challenge.

- **Be Small** missional units in order to be low cost and for ease of multiplication.
- **Be functionally separate from the traditional church.** This is because the DNA of the standard church and those in it is with very few exceptions, generally governed by the old, 'SIC' church missionally constraining, mindset not the radically 'New Mindset' required for a 'New Paradigm'.
- **Be capable of Self-Reinvention.** This is because the current missional environment/landscape is one of 'Knightian Uncertainty'.³² That is one where the future missional landscape is not, and cannot be, known with any certainty because of the ongoing cultural ferment.³³

Indeed, the only 'certainty' about the future is 'uncertainty. For this reason, we generally cannot plan to plant (as in Classic Church Planting strategies) a certain fixed type of new church, in a certain fixed place, that will meet at a certain time, in order to reach a certain community. Rather, to be missionally effective, the Missional Communities of the future must be able to regularly adapt themselves for a constantly changing cultural landscape.

³² See foot note on page 4

³³ As was recognised by the Diocesan Report "*Looking into the Parish*" 50 years ago.

Missional Community Characteristics

"You don't get to new places by following established tracks"

Carlo Rovelli

The above set of 'Key requirements' can be met by the creative development of Missional Community Networks as we will describe in the following pages, but firstly, we should ask the question as to what is a Missional Community?

A Missional Community can briefly be defined as -

'A Live Christian community embedded or constructed in, and for, places where non-Christians already gather or are comfortable to gather'

Some of the main characteristics required for such a Community to be missionally effective are that it will be⁻³⁴

- a) **An Organic, Mission-Fluid** community not locked into *any* specific shape so that essential to its DNA is an ability to 'flow' into any form required for the mission needs of any cultural context.
- b) Highly '**Flexible**' – This is one more like a skeleton-less unshaped *Amoeba* than a skeletoned mammal that has the flexibility described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:22.
*"I have become ALL things to ALL people so that by ALL possible means I might save some."*³⁵
- c) '**Adaptable**' - a community with the rapid adaptability of a Chameleon to fit into its background because of the constantly turning cultural Kaleidoscope

³⁴ For fuller explanation of this see [Unbinding the Church- Missional Realities and Better Options'](#) Booklet downloadable from unboundedchurch.com resources and events section.

³⁵ Author's emphasis

- d) **'Visible'**. The principle is that MCs need to meet as much as possible where non-Christians already gather or can easily be gathered. Over time this enables relationships to be established and *real* 'Connections' to be made (not the 'Brief Encounters' of 'Event' evangelism activities) and 'favour' to be gained. (Acts 2:47)
- e) **Dispersed and Embedded**. This is in order to reverse the flow from traditional 'Go and Bring' into church services strategies, to 'Go and Stay' in the community. This means going to those who will not, often cannot, attend on Sundays and create networks of small missional Christian fellowships of variable sub-congregational sizes. These will be dispersed throughout and embedded in the Kaleidoscope of 'Live, Work and Play' micro-communities in which non-Christians already spend their time.
- f) **Culturally Accessible** – in the sense of reflecting, using and relating to the cultural forms of, and the 'street' language of, the context in which they are set. The *Key Mindset* required here is –

Their style, Their language, Their place, Their time!

As opposed to what is currently mostly the case of the 'old church' mindset which is-

Our style, Our language, Our place, Our time!

- g) Defined by **Spiritual DNA** not any particular **Form**- i.e. are shaped by the principles for Christian community voiced to us by the New Testament.

A group defined by such NT DNA can be of any shape and of any size as is appropriate for the context, can meet at any time in any place, all or any of which can be changed quickly and at will.

- h) **MESSY** in development process and form. A *'Start and See what*

the Holy Spirit does' strategy' (John 3:8).³⁶ Those developing Missional Communities must be prepared to shape and reshape them such that they will be appropriate for an ever morphing missional landscape where the only thing 'certain' is 'uncertainty'.

- i) A **Gathering** of people, seeded by a 'Core' group of Christians-
- Which meets intentionally in the name of Jesus
 - Where the Bible is learned
 - Where 'Newcomers' hear the gospel and are discipled in Jesus.
 - Where there is Prayer
 - Where there is mutual (Pastoral) care
 - Which meets on a regular basis as much as possible where non-Christians already meet or can easily be gathered
 - Which is publicly accessible
 - Which is as much as possible observable by the lost people around its location, in order to make real 'Connections'.
 - Which is Missionally intentional, that is it-
 1. Seeks to 'Serve' i.e. actively show God's love to those around, so is looked on with favour (Acts 2:47).
 2. Deliberately seeks to make disciples (Matthew 28:19, 20)
 3. Multiplies- i.e. Forms a 'Movement'³⁷ (Acts 1:8)

Part of Something Bigger

It is important that MC members are aware that they are part of something bigger than their own group. For this reason, the MCs in a Network should gather together at some regular (but not too frequent) interval, perhaps 3 or 4 times a year. This larger celebration would also provide an opportunity for deeper teaching and the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

³⁶ An 'Effectuation' process rather than the mostly 'Causational' approach of 'Classic' church planting.

³⁷ There are many ways to multiply – not just by cloning. See <https://wordpress.com/post/unboundedchurch.com/524>

To Conclude

As we conclude, it is important again to acknowledge the hard work and gospel commitment in the cause of Mission of large numbers of church leaders and members over many years. However, the tragic reality is, as demonstrated by the statistical evidence, that missional fruit is not only less than is desperately needed but continues to decline.

For 50 years the alarm bells have been sounding, warning of the need for substantial change in missional strategy. Yet they have largely been unheeded, the result being the decades long chronic decline in missional fruit. Critical analysis reveals a significant number of systemic issues that militate against missional success, which if left unaddressed will continue the decline.

The only conclusion to be reached from the above analysis is that '*Something Completely Different*' is required because-

Unpalatable though it may be, the current denominational and local church structures have not been for over 20 years, are not, nor can they be made to be, capable of achieving the trend-reversing missional goals urgently required'

All the evidence indicates that for significantly greater missional effectiveness what is needed is '*Something Completely Different*' i.e. the long-required but yet to eventuate '*Paradigm Shift*'. That is a missional community platform specifically designed for the very difficult missional challenge we face, a challenge the current 'SIC' church model, despite great effort, has failed to meet for a generation or more. Given all the evidence, to believe otherwise can be nothing more than baseless wishful thinking.

For a more missionally fruitful future I want to suggest the use of '**Four Keys**' that will unlock and shape the '*Something Completely Different*'.

- **The Key Reality** – Frankly acknowledge the Key Reality that the 'SIC' church model, in terms of Mission, hasn't worked, isn't working and cannot be made capable of working, and heed the alarm bells which have been ringing for at least half a century.
- **The Key Verse** - "*I have become ALL things to ALL people So that by ALL possible means I might save some.*"
(1 Corinthians 9:22)³⁸
- **The Key Mindset** '*Their style, their language, their place, their time*'. Missional effectiveness requires a significantly increased 'Cultural Intelligence'.
- **The Key Strategy** 'Go, Penetrate, Stay and Multiply'

A sobering quote from a 2013 Mission report to a large church conference should keep our minds focused-

"While the ideas for a new approach to Mission have been circulating since the early 1970s, the reality of change continues to be shelved for another day".

The question and challenge is - Will future generations look back on this time and make this same condemnatory statement on us.

"The reality of change was being shelved for another day"?

³⁸ Author's emphasis

Appendices

1. Standard Church and Missional Community Characteristics Comparison

Characteristic	<i>Missional Community</i>	<i>Standard Church</i>	
Place	Anywhere	Fixed	
Time	Anytime	Scheduled*	*Still mostly on weekends.
Visibility	#Open Observable (No walls)	Bounded -Closed (Walls)*	*Members=those who come through the door #Members=those who attach themselves
Style	As required	Relatively fixed	
Flexibility	High (Amoeba)*	Low (Skeleton)	*Mission Fluid
Cultural Accessibility	High	*Low	* A Parallel alien cultural Universe
Mindset	Post Modern-21stC*	Modern-20thC	*'Humpty Dumpty' mindset i.e. A word means what I say it means!
Mobility	High (Guerrilla Units)	Low (Standing Army)	
Adaptability	High (Chameleon)	Low	
Change Readiness	Very high	Very limited	
Mission DNA	Missional	Church with Mission 'Add-ons' *	*Usually called Outreach activities
Mission Strategy	'Go and Stay' Community Presence Relational Dispersed Kingdom focus	'Go and Bring' 'In-Drag'- Programs Events Campaigns Church centre focus	
Leadership	#Star Trek (Entrepreneurial)	Pastoral/Maintenance*	*Focus on Members #Focus on the Lost
Nature (Ontology)	Organic Movement	An Institution	

2. The Cultural Reality of Christendom Lost

Christendom - A society-

- *Ethnically and linguistically homogenous*
- *Where the majority went to Sunday services. This would have included no doubt many non-Christians, and so there was no need for 'Outreach' activities.*
- *Where all had a biblical world view (even if sub-consciously)*
- *Where the church was the centre and integrating hub of community life.*
- *Where everybody worked locally, and not at all on Sundays.*
- *Where church structures and ministries were constructed not for mission but for the maintenance of existing Christian congregations.*
- *Where **Change** was so slow as to be imperceptible.*

In contrast

21st Century Australia is a Society that is—

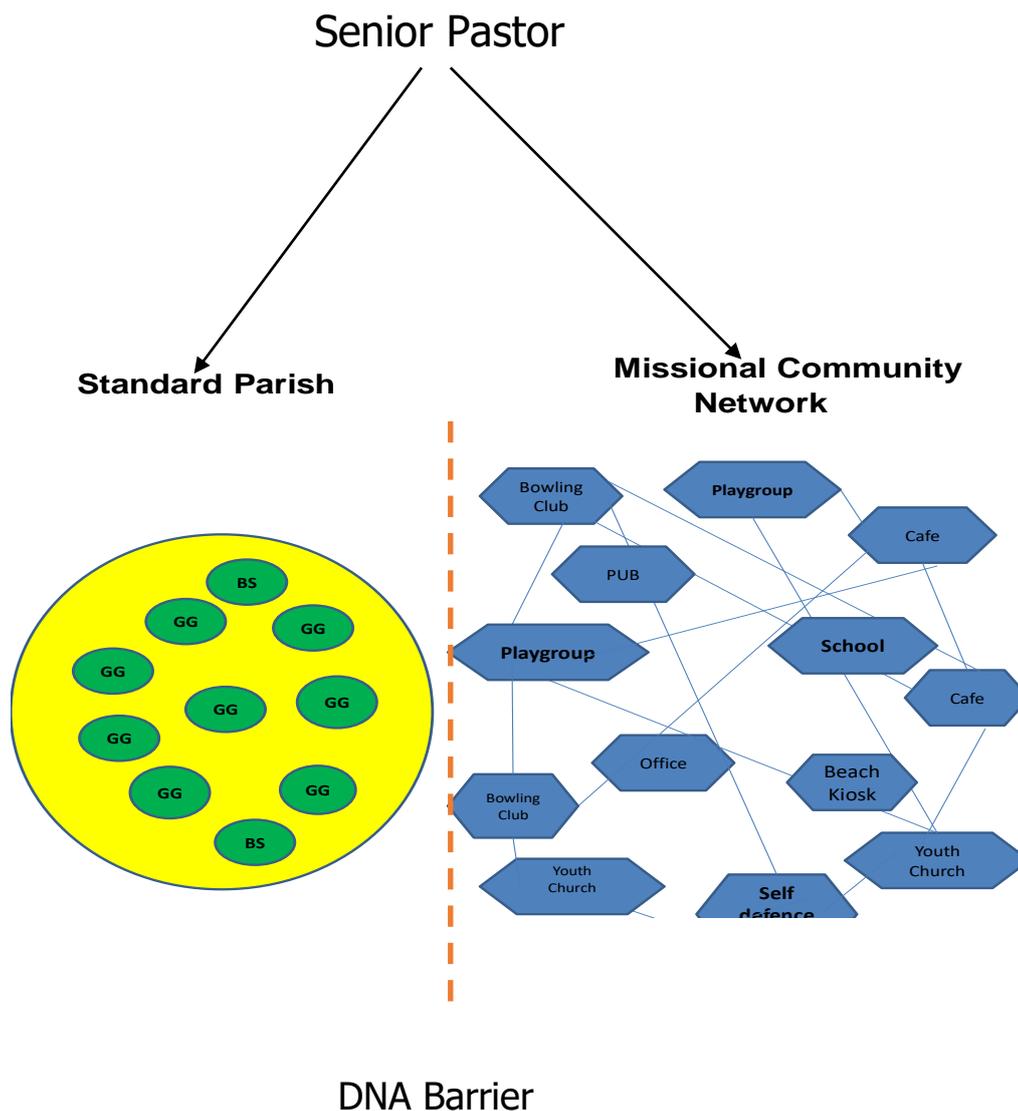
- *Neither ethnically nor linguistically homogenous-(26% and rising born overseas).*
- *Where the pool of Europe-originating people that has formed our natural constituency is shrinking as a proportion of the population.*
- *Where few go to Sunday services.³⁹*
- *Where the biblical world view has disappeared.*
- *Experiencing the rampant collapse of religious affiliation.⁴⁰*
- *Where the church is on the retreating periphery of a society increasingly hostile to it.*
- *Where 'work and play' micro-culture activity has consumed the erstwhile activity-free zone of Sunday.*
- *Where **Change** is rapid, ongoing and accelerating*

³⁹ Less than 1% and falling in Sydney Anglican parish churches.

⁴⁰ According to the ABS national census of 2016 around 30% of Australians indicate no religious affiliation.

3. A Mixed Economy Church

The Graphic below indicates how the Missional Community concept can be adopted by a standard local church by the development of what is known as a Mixed Economy church. In this a MC Network is developed in parallel to, but functioning separately from, the standard church



BS – Bible Study Group

GG – Growth Group

 - Missional Community