

MISSION AND MINISTRY IN CRANBOURNE:
EPHESIANS AND PROCESSES OF DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION DEVELOPMENT

REV WENDY SNOOK

wsnook1@iinet.net.au

Introduction.

In Christendom, the goal of Christian formation and leadership development was to raise up new Christians, who were usually the biological children of Christian believers, to follow the lifestyle and spiritual patterns of their ancestors. The exact shape of the lifestyle and spiritual patterns varied in different geographic contexts. But the overall outcome in general produced congregational members gathering in village sized units, led by a priest/ minister/ pastor to be faithful members of the flock, caring for one another.

Now in the Post Christendom period, it means we need to rethink both the outcomes desired for our Christian formation and the methods by which we do it. While we can never reproduce the early Christian period, we can learn from some of the early Christian writers' insights as they sought to form new disciples in the pre-Christendom era. One such source is the letter of Ephesians.

Ephesians and Ephesus.

Briefly, Ephesians is a book or letter written to the people of Ephesus, the Roman capital of Asia Minor, near Selcuk in Turkey today. While tradition accords the writing of Ephesians to the apostle Paul, who was in Ephesus from about 54 to 57 CE (A.D.), his authorship can be debated by scholars. Dates suggested for the writing range from 59 CE to 85 -90 CE. The book of Ephesians was certainly part of the Muratorian canon, as accepted by the early church in CE 200, by Origen in CE 250, by Eusebius in CE 300 and the Council of Carthage CE 400. So it was a very early source of teaching and has always been included in the New Testament as Scripture since. The church of Ephesus is one of the seven churches named in the book of Revelation (2:1-7), and is also associated with Johannine literature.

Historically the city of Ephesus was the site of a major Church Council meeting at the Church of Mary in Ephesus in June and July 431 CE, which was an assembly representing all of Christendom. Convened by Roman Emperor Theodosius II, this third ecumenical council was an effort to attain consensus in the church, confirmed the original Nicene Creed of 325 CE, and condemned the teachings of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople that the Virgin Mary may be called the *Christotokos*, "Birth Giver of Christ" but not the *Theotokos*, "Birth Giver of God". So the church of Ephesus has always been an important source of wisdom and guidance to the wider church.

The book of Ephesians was written to form Christian disciples in the missionary centre of Asia Minor. The city of Ephesus was known for its Temple of Artemis/ Dianna, and the temple provided employment through the production and sale of votive statues. Present in the city were also Jews, Jewish exorcists, trade unionists, Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, and priests, priestesses and followers of other deities such as Mithras, and many other gods of the Roman and Greek pantheon. In other words, Christianity was a new seed in a hotbed of many faiths. it was one option amongst

many available to the spiritually inclined of Ephesus, much as it is for people in multi-cultural Australia today.

Missional themes in the book/letter of Ephesians.

There are key themes in Ephesians that are helpful for the development of missional thinking in Christian formation. I used these in my work with Cranbourne Regional UCA, (CRUCA) since I first arrived in the placement in 2008.

First, the writer expects his listeners to know the basics of the gospel as Paul understood it, and so the essentials are recapped in Ephesians chapter 1: 3-14. He also expected them to be filled with the Holy Spirit, (1:13), and so able to love others, (1:15), to be given wisdom and revelation, (1:17), hope and power (v 18-19), all coming from God in Christ, who is above all things and above all names (v 21,) meaning all other gods and the power of their names, and has made Christ the head of his body, the church. (v 22). By grace we are saved, through faith. (2: 8-9). So over the first three years in CRUCA, I preached weekly from the gospels, led bible studies and Alpha groups, and encouraged the then existing Know Your Bible (KYB) group.

Secondly, the book of Ephesians teaches that Christ is the living head of his body, the church, leading us in God's way. (Ephesians 1: 22 and chapter 4). How can a church be a well- functioning body when parts of it are in great pain? Issues needing attention in the early days at CRUCA included bullying, domestic violence, financial lack of accountability, poor knowledge of UCA policies and administration, some peoples' over-control of worship and music, emotional blackmail by some members to gain power over others, and ongoing issues of mental illness, sexism, and racism. The church needs to be a safe place for all. If the church is hurting badly, it will not be able to prayerfully discern God's call on them, nor to walk in God's path of mission.

So for healing to take place in the congregation, the Eldership and Church Council needed to be formed and educated to its own roles and responsibilities, taught how to face conflict and resolve issues, ("speaking the truth in love" as in 4:15, and living the new life in 4: 25 ff), and taught use the resources of Presbytery and the Synod's pastoral resource, The Bethel Centre, as needed. For that, over time, we elected new congregation leaders, and at the start of every meeting of Church Council, I used a short bible passage, case study and discussion questions from the 'Building Church Leaders : your complete Guide to Leadership training', (1998: Christianity Today folder, with photocopy permission). Topics included : vision, building a team, assessing church (I added 'and community') needs, character of a leader, reaching people, church health, spiritual care, handling conflict, recruiting and staffing, finances, motivating leaders, worship etc. We also went through the UCA Basis of Union and the UCA Regulations about the roles and responsibilities of Elders and Church Councillors. Sometimes we had guest speakers come to the congregation to help us and the community with specific issues.

Thirdly, for some years, we have had 6 monthly Elders/ Leaders Retreat, on a Saturday, with half the day set aside for ongoing missional education, and the second half of the day, for learning and practising new forms of prayer and spirituality styles. Mission education included ideas from David Bosch, Darrell Guder, Paul Borden, Tom Bandy, Alan Roxburgh, Leonard Sweet, Kenon Callahan,

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, Lyle Schaller, Eric Law, Diana Butler Bass, Speed Leas, Alban Institute books and Consultancy training by Alice Mann and Speed Leas, Loren Mead, NCLS data, Ross Langmead and the Australian Journal for Mission Studies and conference material, and secular writers like Jim Collins 'Good to Great' and his second volume for social enterprises, Steven Covey, and Daniel Goleman. Spirituality and prayer resources include Richard Foster, Richard Rohr, Margaret Silf, Phillip Yancey, Parker Palmer, Willowcreek / Bill Hybels resources and various bible studies from Mediacom and Alpha. We also considered Christian education and formation processes, using ideas from John Roberto, the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets training, John Westerhoff, Kohlberg, Thomas Groom, Gabriel Moran, Godly play resources, Messy Church resources etc. Through this the leadership were being empowered to see things in new ways, and be willing to act in new ways.

Some people left the congregation though this challenging and healing process. They did not like the changes. Others left for the usual reasons such as aging, death, or work location changes. Many other people joined us, as we healed over time. There was a shift of power and leadership from people in their 60's and 70's to people from 30 to 60 years old. There was also an increase in people from non- Anglo backgrounds joining and participating in the congregation's life and mission. This is like the call for the Christian community to be open to Gentiles becoming equals in Christ, built on Christ the cornerstone in Ephesians 2: 22.) This openness to the Other in the community was a significant growth over the eight years, whether the issue was ethnicity, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, disability or gender/ sexual orientation, and is still growing.

Fourthly, if the church is a body with Christ as its head, then what is the role of the congregation's minister? Most Christendom congregations expect the minister to be their boss/ authority figure, shepherd and 'the paid performer of the church's ministry'. Often they think 'shepherd' means 'chaplain', or 'personal carer for the member's times of weakness and distress'. Influenced by Ephesians 4: 12, I offered a ministry based on 'equipping the saints for their work of ministry, as well as building up the Body of Christ'.

Often CRUCA people didn't think they had any gifts. So using the "Discovering & Using God's Gifts" bible studies by Rev Dr Graham Beattie, from the UCA Qld Synod, (now out of print, but I have permission to use their CD), we explored natural and spiritual gifts and passions, so that people could understand their callings from God. (4:11 'The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers..'). This allowed us to 'do a census' of the gifts and aptitudes that we had among us. I believe God will not call us into a mission for which we do not have the skills or ability amongst the people or their partner organisations.

Fifthly, we connected peoples' gifting with the multiple mission planning and dreaming/visioning sessions. Many resources are available for congregational mission planning and analysis. They include the Vic TAs Synod Mission planning booklets, the NSW-ACT Synod Mission Planning resources, those taught in the Intentional Interim Ministry course (such as "Studying Congregations: a new handbook" by N Ammerman, J W Carroll, C S Dudley, and W McKinney) and Alban Institute material, such as 'Holy Conversations' by G Rendle and A Mann.

I ran mission planning events about every 18 months for 5 years. The first two times in any congregation usually raise the gripes and immediate concerns of members. After the first MP session, where they could be addressed/fixed, they were, and matters were reviewed 18 months

later. When issues raised were unfixable, or were one person's desires, but not agreed by the rest of the congregation, they took about 18 months to address. One of the biggest problems was people expecting 'the synod' to give us a lot of money to either build a 1960's box-like hall, a new church, or some other dream. Eventually I invited the Synod Moderator to come and speak to the congregation about the realities of the Vic-Tas Synod's shrinking finances.

Sixthly, the congregation already understood and acted in service to others. (Ephesians 5:1-2). For example, we ran a weekly bread run. Also when the Brooklands Green (Cranbourne West) Methane Gas Emergency was declared, and we (along with another church and the Red Cross) were asked to visit house to house in Brooklands Green on behalf of, and with information from the Police, the City of Casey, the Department of Human Services and the Country Fire Authority. Many were active in local service clubs and community activities, including Cranbourne Rotary Club, Cranbourne Lions Club, the Cranbourne RSL, the Cranbourne Information and Support Services, and others. However for them, mission was something done by missionaries overseas, or in Northern Australia, or by a few people able to go on short term mission trips overseas. CRUCA supported missionaries in Thailand, Cambodia and Northern Australia, and had sent short term missionaries there. But in 2008 there was little concept of mission as thinking globally and acting locally as a congregational and individual participation in the *missio dei*, the Mission of God at work in the world.

Most of the younger members understood the changing times of post Christendom. But older folks had not had a chance to reflect upon it. So in 2012 retired minister Rev Ted Curnow and I prepared and presented 4 Sunday evening sessions on "Why things have changed, and what we can do about it." This covered people's experiences of Australian contextual patterns and technological change, Christendom and post Christendom contexts, and God's call to us all to be involved in God's mission. I asked Tom Bandy's question, "What would this community miss if we (the CRUCA) was not here? If the answer is 'nothing', then we are not doing our job as Christians". Using Paul Borden's thinking, we made space for others to come up with new mission directions. But as their minister, I included stories of our local experiences to point out certain strengths we had, certain challenges I saw, and asked questions to help us discern future directions.

Seventhly, one of the identified key strengths of CRUCA was the ample provision of food. Something practical to do with food resonated with them. It was inclusive of people from many cultures, and was needed, particularly by the homeless, the vulnerable, needy and mentally ill. We summarised our call as a congregation: "We are a multicultural church, called to provide Christ's living bread in physical and spiritual ways".

After an encounter with a homeless father and son (aged 16 years), living in the bushes between Cranbourne Racecourse and Cranbourne Botanic Gardens, in a sermon I challenged the congregation that we needed to do more than just hand them a loaf of bread, as they had no bread knife, bread board, butter, no fridge to put butter in, and no house for a fridge. One parishioner was energised, and felt God was asking us to run a Food van. Even if we only provided noodles and a cup of tea or coffee, it would help those in need. There was no other agency open at night in Cranbourne. After a small group did a needs analysis, and we talked with other service providers in town, the Church Council agreed and we started the search.

After many months, God answered our prayers through our local connections. A local Country Fire Authority station was selling their old (but little driven) food truck, as they had stripped it and used

the equipment in their new food vehicle. We offered to buy the old Food Truck and keep it in the district, offering to add our services to theirs when they needed extra assistance to feed bushfire fighters in an emergency. In return, they donated a generator and continue to help us maintain the vehicle.

Mission in action.

In November 2012 we bought the vehicle, and it has been operating ever since. We did not have much money ourselves. But through generous donations and partnerships, over the next six months, we set up the equipment in the Food Truck, obtained all necessary permits and licenses, we established a night team of 50 people on roster to serve food now four nights per week, 6.30pm to 8.30pm. We have a team of about 8 people help during the day to collect, sort, load, and cook food. Hot meals are cooked in homes and brought to the truck. Fresh fruit and vegetables and 6 tinned and packet foods are available at the truck, (enough to feed someone for 2 days). There are no restrictions for who can come or how often. By staying in one place for 2 hours, we are able to build relationships between locals and the volunteers, and so build and strengthen community.

There is always an orientation for new volunteers, and as part of that we talk about the UCA ethos. However our Christian friendship evangelism approach through the BLESSEM model (see Appendix) means that our Christian volunteers are building relationships and witnessing to their fellow non-Christian volunteers, as well as feeding those in need.



We also bought a 40 foot shipping container, and business partners helped insulate and line it, add flooring and internal doors, and a commercial cool room was added at one end. Fridges and freezers operate in the church hall. We regularly get fresh, frozen, packets and tinned food from Foodbank and sometimes from Second bite organisations, plus tins, packets and money donations from church members, local schools and local organisations. We get local produce donated from farms, and a local cafe weekly donates 11 litres extra of their 'Soup of the Day.' We have nearly 60 partner

organisations, including Unitingcare Harrison, with whom we have an MOU for financial guidance and charitable status for tax-deductibility /grant applications , Synod SHARE Appeal, other UCA congregations, and other denominations' congregations, City of Casey, Feed Melbourne Appeal, Cranbourne Rotary, Lions, and other local charitable groups, businesses here and interstate. A notable partner is Cranbourne RSL. This is a pilot project for the RSL in Victoria. They have never partnered with any other organisations before. But they have been strong and active supporters of the project. We also have partners working alongside us. Opportunity 12 brings a table to the truck weekly and offers toiletries and personal hygiene items. The Orange Sky laundry service is about to start beside us on Fridays, offering free laundry and drying services to the needy while they eat with us.

Many other activities and partnerships have grown over the last few years, such as the UCA's South Casey Mission Area, with Hampton Park UCA and Rev Deacon Mat Harry, and the South Casey Fresh Expressions / community development/ faith community full time position, half funded by and connected to Unitingcare Connections staff and clients. Inside and outside CRUCA's buildings, we have the Mondays walkers at Cranbourne Botanic gardens, the CUPS patchwork quilters who make personal and charity quilts, the Cranbourne United Camera Club, the Bread Run, multicultural FUN music nights including our folk- pop-gospel band Journey Bound and the regular Sunday worship and bible studies. At Christmas we have the annual Food Truck Christmas Party, with carols and a jam session. On Australia Day in January we have the Food Truck Volunteers Thank you party. In 2013 and 2014 we started Messy Church, and also with Federal Government Department of Veterans Affairs' funding, a group of Cranbourne UCA and St John's Anglican Cranbourne quilters made a 4m x 2m Anzac Centenary Quilt triptych, "1915-Gallipoli-2015" designed by Rev W Snook which will probably tour Vic RSL's and finally settle on display at Cranbourne RSL, where it is currently.



Hampton Park UCA has free Thursday lunches for Woollahra disabled people and needy people, a free Christmas Day lunch, Connections' run Music playgroups and resource room, Messy Church

fortnightly, a community garden, a bread run, and a new Tuesday lunch program supporting carers of those with mental illness.

Discipleship formation.

Apart from the organised training listed earlier, another development was the implementation of BLLESM in both Hampton Park and Cranbourne Regional UCA's. BLLESM is a development from Michael Frost's BELLS model. BLLESM stands for Blessing, Listening, Learning, Eating, Service, Money. Each of these involves a weekly discipline to be followed by us as Christian disciples. See the Appendix.

The aim is for intentional Christian living by our members in both congregations to build up their faith beyond Sunday mornings, and to share their faith with others. When we live with BLLESM patterns, we help to break down the walls between the church and the world in reconciliation (Ephesians 4) and assist living in good relationships in marriages, families, communities. (Ephesians 5).

When a church is flourishing, we attract both the mentally ill, and those less well-disposed towards us, ("evil"), and we need training and discernment to help those who come. This aspect is mentioned in Ephesians 6 and in the Lord's prayer, and we need prayer alongside psychological training for leaders to help others, particularly suicidal and depressed people, and those with severe mental illnesses in our midst.

We struggled to gather people together for group prayer meetings. Long days of work commuting to the city more than an hour away twice daily, and long work hours or shift work are usual in a low socio-economic area. So CRUCA organised the phone text chain 'Monday Prayer at 10am', with the prayer points sent by text by a lay person, and everybody, wherever they are, praying at the same time together.

Traditional pastoral care done by home visitation is also difficult, due to long work hours, and few people available to travel to visits. So we use Facebook a lot for pastoral care, education and reflections. We have two Web pages for the official information; www.cranbourne.unitingchurch.org.au and www.cranbournefolkuniting.org. The Food Truck is contacted by thefoodtruck00@gmail.com. And our band page is www.journeyboundmusic.com. But the Facebook pages are the places most often used by the Cranbourne community and congregation. Even the local schools use FB for school announcements, rather than paper. We have the official church FB page- Cranbourne Regional UCA, and the Cranbourne FUN, Cranbourne United Camera Club, Cranbourne Messy Church, Mon walkers, and Journey bound music FB pages. We also have small FB groups limited to small groups of people in the church, not open to the public. At least one private FB group is dedicated specifically to supporting one person with a major medical situation.

Each of these FB pages (and the Messenger app) allow me to keep track of the flock, where ever they are around the world, connect easily with the community, and post prayers, reflections, videos, cartoons, ideas and engage with other people who may ask questions in return. People can ask for practical help or prayers quickly and easily, and as communication it is favoured by the middle aged and younger people in the community.

Phone texts or mobile phone conversations are preferred by the non-Anglo members because their English language proficiency is sometimes a problem. Our worship has specifically included banners with other languages on them, and songs and dances from other countries in worship and at FUN nights.

Some people went to Synod's CTM Leadership and Lay preacher training. However we had CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) members who were unable to handle the level of English language used at CTM. So I coached some, and mentored others, both formally (through Period of Discernment) and informally to be lay preachers or other callings. So CALD peoples' inclusion remains an ongoing challenge for our discipleship and formation processes.

Finally, Ephesians 6: 23-24 says, "Peace be to the whole community and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ." I believe Cranbourne Regional UCA is following this calling. Recently I was contacted by a young woman with a disabled baby, who asked if we had anyone in our congregation who could be a 'grandmother' for her children, which we did. Two relatively new congregation members were happy to visit her and assist, and play 'grandmas'. When I asked why she chose to contact us for a grandma, as we were strangers to her, she said that her husband knew about our Food truck, and thought we must be caring open-hearted people, and so we might be able to help them too. For me, that was a sign that we were indeed making a difference through our mission and ministry in the Cranbourne region.

Appendix- BLLESM SUMMARY

Discipleship is the task and focus of ministry for all Christians – to replicate Christ's way of living, and to invite and teach others to do the same. Being a disciple of Jesus is a definite and obvious thing – a person is an apprentice of Jesus, attempting to apply all of his teachings in their life. The present day church then ought to have a system of supporting apprenticeships in Christian living. BLLESM is a set of spiritual disciplines which attempts to do this, with a clear discipleship path and supported by a BLLESM small group of committed individuals.

BLLESM is an acronym which stands for; Bless, Learn, Listen, Eat, Serve and Money.

BLESS is to significantly help at least three people each week.

LISTEN requires a person to spend at least one hour a week praying, meditating and/or reflecting.

LEARN is the practice of studying the Bible for at least one hour a week.

EAT is to share some form of hospitality with another (or others) at least once each week.

SERVICE means to be involved in at least one project that serves the community.

MONEY reminds the disciple that we are to use our money as a disciple of Christ.

Discipleship Path:-

Through the practice of Bless, Eat and Service we **connect** with people as we serve their needs and then **invite** them to participate in a BLLESM small group. As they grow in “belonging” to the group, they take up the rhythm of BLLESM themselves and are **equipped** as a disciple. In time they are **sent** to begin or participate in other new BLLESM small groups themselves.

