



THE LIGHT OF CHRIST IN QUEENSLAND.

Background

After an extended period of difficulty and internal conflict, the Churches of Christ Queensland council^[1] was uncertain. There were seventy affiliated local churches in 2009, but half were very small, involving under fifty members. Overall congregation numbers were declining. Conversely *Churches of Christ Care*, a separately governed agency, was thriving but was disconnected from the Church. There was a view that the Queensland Church of Christ council was irrelevant. Significant distrust and organizational silos were everywhere. It was wryly quipped that the mission department were so poor that they 'reused the teabags', whereas the Care and Property departments could afford very different standards.

The Interim Executive President was quoted in the 2009 Annual Report as saying: 'Churches of Christ

stand at a moment in their history to grasp the future with needed changes and demonstrate to others (churches and denominations) the way forward for them as well. If Churches of Christ fail to seize this moment in their history, the decline of Churches of Christ will be rapid'. There followed a major overhaul of our organisation.

Church of Christ Care was thriving, but fragmented. It had a number of separately managed services – aged care and retirement villages, childcare centres, foster care services, and social housing units. None of these areas worked together. Each had separate strategies and these were aimed simply at their own expansion. Their questions were limited: How can we start a new nursing home? How can we start a new childcare centre? How can we start a new church? How can we expand our current services by doing things better?

In the context of the overhaul in governance and personnel, it became possible to rethink things more fundamentally. We needed to involve all key stakeholders in a process of healing – ending the divisions of the past and exploring the possibilities of a new beginning based on deep dissatisfaction with the way things had been, and a desire for a new future. Our processes did help leaders to realise that the status quo was not what they wanted.

One Mission

In a three day residential all key leaders tackled some deeper questions: who are we as Churches of Christ in Queensland? What is our DNA? What do we all stand for? Why do we exist, and what does this say we should be doing? What emerged from this was a realization that as Churches of Christ, we wanted to focus on three essentials of Christ's teaching as set out in the Bible: 'The Greatest Commandment', the 'Golden Rule' and the 'Great Commission' (Matthew 22: 36-40 and 28:18-20).

We eventually managed to get a consensus around a common mission statement that encompassed these three essentials – an overarching mission that everyone could own regardless of whether they were involved in an aged care service, child care service, housing service, local congregation or simple faith gathering. Our mission statement became: 'Bringing the light of Christ into communities'. This mission statement shifted the language from planting new churches or services, to a focus on neighbourhood and what the light of Christ may look like there.

Kingdom Access Points.

We created a new description that encompassed *all* of what we were doing in the Churches of Christ. Instead of the divisive language around labels of established church versus emerging church or care service we called all of these Kingdom Access Points. This language invited a different set of expectations. We asked ourselves: 'what would it look like if every place or point associated with the Church of Christ was a place where people could access the Kingdom of God? How would people behave if they were trying to live out the three scriptural essentials? What would it look like if this place, church or care service, were truly a place where people could encounter God?'

Two Stories.

In 2010 we realized that there were two Stories that could describe who we were as Queensland Church of Christ, and that both Stories were true. The first Story that most people had come to live in was that we were a small, nondescript, poor denomination of 70 autonomous churches (half of which were dying), and Care was a separate organization with lots of different services, lots of money and little connection to the Church. The second Story, which was equally true, was that Queensland Church of Christ was made up of more than 200 Kingdom Access Points all with the goal of bringing the light of Christ into their communities. In many smaller communities we provided the only care for older folks, and the only care for children. In some communities we were the largest employer. We were in fact a major player in our State with both local and State Government regarding us well for the positive difference we were making in many communities.

Communications and Branding.

We recommenced an old newsletter title called 'Networking' and sent out monthly editions to all our Kingdom Access Points highlighting stories that reinforced our new Story of one organization working together to bring the light of Christ into communities. We rebranded all of our care services with the common Churches of Christ name, and encouraged all of our congregations to reclaim and feel proud once more of the name of Churches of Christ – as it stated clearly and beautifully exactly who we were and what we were about. We highlighted successes and gradually shifted how the church and care services were perceived. Every month we told the stories that were arising amongst us of God's blessing as lives were transformed in communities through us working together and focusing on bringing the Light of Christ rather than running services.

Theology.

Finally we clarified some key theological underpinnings that emerged from many collective leadership reflections and discussions. We retained the idea of the three essentials, the 'Greatest Commandment', the 'Golden Rule' and the 'Great Commission'.^[2] We held that faith and works cannot be separated. They are two sides of the one coin.^[3] We wanted to affirm that there is one body. All parts of the Body are equally needed and important. Each contributes to the whole.^[4] We reminded one another of the promise of God's presence^[5], and that God desires that we should flourish.^[6] We have continued to draw on these so that in all our different roles we build a sense of call in every employee and volunteer that is helping him or her to find a way to personally connect with our mission of bringing the light of Christ into communities.

Strategic Action Learning Teams (SALTs).

Even though many of our Ministers started to come on board, it was clear that most of our churches had little capacity to launch new initiatives on their own. So, we invited people to participate in local discussions, in particular where we had church and care leaders working in the same communities.

The initial meetings were simply to get to know each other and to rebuild some trust. Arising out of this we then formed Action Learning groups called SALTs (SALT is a play on Jesus' challenge to be salt and light in the world). The Action Learning question was: How can we enable more of the light of Christ to shine in this community? The SALTs consisted of 6-8 local leaders who were passionate about finding an answer to the question, and who agreed to meet on an ongoing regular basis to grapple with the issues.

An early example was the Sunshine Coast where we had three churches plus several aged care services, a retirement village, several childcare centres, foster care staff and housing units. Previously all these had operated independently. But now we had each of the relevant leaders around the table getting to know each other, developing respect and trust, looking at the needs of their wider Sunshine Coast community rather than just their own service, and wrestling and problem solving together on improving life for their community. We researched areas of darkness.

On the Sunshine Coast it emerged that there was a significant problem of men's depression and suicide. So, the idea of a men's shed was born, and collectively the SALT, with other Church of Christ staff, together looked at how we could get this off the ground. Our retirement village manager identified some land adjacent to our retirement village. A large company donated a shed that had been written off during floods when they heard about the local community goal. A large Hardware chain got on board and donated equipment. Men from our local churches and retirement village got on board and worked together to build benches and shelving... and so forth. The new men's shed was born.

From the start we wanted this to be a genuine Kingdom Access Place – a place where men could access all that the kingdom of God has to offer. So together with the SALT, we appointed a coordinator that we called a Mission Action Partner (MAP). This person was a trained minister with a passion for Men's ministry. Within six months there were over 100 men coming regularly. Men's health sessions were held; unofficial counseling and spiritual guidance were provided; mate-ship and a sense of belonging grew. A number started filtering back into our local churches. There were new commitments of faith and some decisions to be baptised. It was a remarkable success. More SALTs were formed in other regions.

We went on to commissioned research into Australian culture and spirituality.^[7] Each SALT was encouraged to digest the research together with their local knowledge of particular needs in their community; and to take this and develop a Mission Action Strategy (MAS) that would forward mission in their region. As the relationships between local church leaders and care service leaders developed, and they shared a common heart for making a bigger difference in their communities, new possibilities emerged about integration and sharing facilities and resources. It became clear that larger hubs could support smaller regional congregations, services, groups and new KAPs. We started to work towards the idea that each hub would have a community centre, worship congregation, care facilities and services, with other mission enterprises relevant to the community for example a Men's shed or community garden.

Conclusion

In 2014 we found that across Queensland Churches of Christ there had been a twelve percent increase in Kingdom Access Points since 2010.^[8] The number of people engaging in them had increased by more than a quarter. Attendance at affiliated churches had increased by nearly a fifth. In Queensland we are currently developing the next Strategic Plan to guide our collective efforts for the next three years for 2015 -2018. It is our desire that the light of Christ will break into many more areas of darkness in this part of Australia.

Read also a Theological Reflection on this story by JR Rozko: '[Re-narrating as Missional Practice](#)', Journal of Missional Practice, Issue no.7, Spring 2016.

^[1] Formally known as Churches of Christ Conference

^[2] Matthew 22: 36-40, and 28: 18-20

^[3] James 2: 14-26

^[4] 1Corinthians 12: 12-31

^[5] Matthew 28: 20

^[6] John 10: 10

^[7] McCrindle, *Australian Social Trends & Implications for Churches*, (Sydney: McCrindle, 2014).

^[8] An increase from 207 to 232.



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