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Good news and godly action: Anglicans and Lutherans working together in God's mission

Steen Olsen

Anglicans and Lutherans in Australia have engaged in formal dialogue since 1972. Over that time statements have been adopted by both churches, covering the Eucharist, ministry, baptism, Anglican Lutheran marriages, and *episcopate* and unity. Then in 2001 the churches adopted *Covenanting for Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation*, including appendices on our *Agreement in Faith and Order*, and *Agreement on Ministry*. All these statements were published in a booklet called *Common Ground*. In 2013 the dialogue was reconvened and given the task of producing a statement on mission. Covid-19 intervened and a third addendum to *Common Ground: Perspectives on Mission*, was endorsed by the Anglican General Synod in 2022 and the Lutheran General Synod in 2023.

Dialogue brings many blessings. We receive the understandings and insights of our dialogue partner, which sharpen our understanding of ourselves. Sometimes we also discover that, while we may have developed different terminology, our conclusions are not that far apart. The purpose of such dialogues, however, is not simply to produce statements that enunciate where agreement exists, where there remain different understandings, and where more work needs to be done, but also to open the way for greater cooperation, and joint ministry and mission. While the organic union of churches is no longer anticipated any time soon, we have discovered sufficient agreement to allow us to work together in many ways.

The fruit of previous discussions and agreements

Common Ground reached a new level of agreement:

We recognise each other as churches that, despite our failings, stand in the continuity of apostolic faith and ministry. We acknowledge that in each other's ordained ministries gospel oversight and administration of the means of grace are authentic and effective. We pledge to work together to develop joint participation in mission and witness, and to continue to seek ways of manifesting the unity that is ours in Christ. (CG 4.1)¹

In particular, we believe the agreement in faith and order that we have reached is

¹ References to *Common Ground* are cited by paragraph numbers with the prefix CG. *Common Ground* can be accessed at <https://www.lca.org.au/cticr/> under the 'Anglican-Lutheran Dialogue' tab, where other agreed statements can also be found.

sufficient basis for a national covenant by which regional agreements for eucharistic hospitality and recognition of ministry may be entered into, by which each church may invite and welcome the members of the other church in that region to share in Holy Communion and pastoral care according to pastoral need. (CG 4.1,2)

The uptake of this process has been disappointing. Formal Anglican–Lutheran local covenants have been established in Tennant Creek (2002) and Katherine (2006) in the Northern Territory, and more recently in Charleville, South-West Queensland (2023). Negotiations are also currently underway in Mt Isa, Queensland. In addition, the Anglicans formally joined the Lutheran-Uniting covenant in Wudinna, South Australia, in 2013.

While formal covenants have been few and far between, informal local arrangements are many and varied, particularly in rural and remote areas. Sometimes they just involve Anglican and Lutheran congregations agreeing to worship together on particular Sundays when one or the other church has a pastor or priest in attendance. That may also involve Uniting and other congregations. At other times, such as in Coffin Bay on Eyre Peninsula, South Australia, there is a community church building where various denominations take turns to lead worship, but where most attend worship, no matter who is leading. In many smaller communities there is only one resident clergyperson who often functions as the ‘community pastor’. Sometimes, as in Coober Pedy, South Australia, there is now no Lutheran congregation; therefore, the Lutherans worship with the Anglicans. Sometimes there are no resident clergy at all. In many cases people make whatever arrangements seem right to them, irrespective of formal agreements between denominations. Whether or not we think that is appropriate is probably beside the point. More important is how we can guide and support people in this situation. Resources are needed that speak to individuals in diverse local contexts and assist them to discern the best ways to proceed.

What do we mean by mission?

Common Ground notes that ‘Anglicans and Lutherans all over the world are sharing together in mission and service’ [CG 2.7], and that we share ‘a common hope and mission’ [CG 3.1]. On that basis it commits the two churches to ‘work together to develop joint participation in mission and witness’ [CG 4.1] and looks forward to a ‘future growing together in God’s mission’ [CG 5]. The most recent convening of the dialogue was given the task of preparing a statement that addressed the topic of this common mission.

That immediately raises the question of what we mean by ‘mission’. On one level it is just a word that also enjoys widespread use in different organisations and groups. In that context it is often a brief statement of purpose and why an organisation exists. Ideally, structures, strategies and plans then flow from that mission and its associated vision of what the future should look like. Mission is then understood to be fundamental and the basis on which action is taken. Obviously businesses, sporting groups, government bodies, community organisations and the like will have very different mission statements.

In the context of the church, the great South African missiologist David Bosch credits Stephen Neill with formulating the adage, 'If everything is mission, nothing is mission' in 1959.² Christopher Wright, however, concludes, 'If everything is mission . . . everything is mission.'³

Missio Dei

The contemporary understanding of *missio Dei*⁴ is perhaps hinted at, but not developed, when *Common Ground* says, 'We believe that all members of the church are called to participate in its apostolic mission' [CG 15.1]. The received history holds that, in 1934, Karl Hartenstein, a German missiologist, coined the phrase *missio Dei* in response to Karl Barth. This language, it is argued, was picked up at the 1952 Willingen conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC) and developed theologically by Lutheran theologian, Georg Vicedom in his book *The Mission of God*.⁵

Van Gelder and Zscheile identify four missional themes that appear fairly regularly in contemporary North American literature:

1. *God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world.* This understanding shifts the agency of mission from the church to God. It is God's mission that has a church rather than a church that has a mission.
2. *God's mission in the world is related to the reign (kingdom) of God.* This understanding makes the work of God in the world larger than the mission of the church, although the church is directly involved in the reign (kingdom) of God
3. *The missional church is an incarnational (versus attractional) ministry sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context.* This understanding requires every congregation to take on a missionary posture for engaging its local context, with this missionary engagement shaping everything a congregation does.
4. *The internal life of the missional church focuses on every believer living as a disciple engaging in mission.* This understanding makes every member a minister, with the spiritual growth of every disciple becoming the primary focus as the body is built up to participate more fully in God's mission in the world.⁶

2 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 511; citing Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension*. London: Edinburgh House Press, 1959, 81.

3 Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 26.

4 *Missio Dei* is usually translated 'the mission of God' or the 'sending of God'. *Missio* means to send, and we find it in the Latin version of Jesus words, 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21; see also John 12:44–50).

5 Georg F. Vicedom, *Missio Dei: Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958); Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, translated by Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (St Louis: Concordia, 1965).

6 Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 4.

The Anglican co-chair of our Australian dialogue, Bishop Tim Harris, notes:

Other dimensions of Trinitarian thought are less prominent in *missio Dei* formulations: more than imitation, the recognition of mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) leads to a participation and communion (*koinonia*) in the mission of God that avoids an emphasis on human agency and the failings of human nature (both personal and corporate). To participate in the *missio Dei* in God's grace is to participate in the fullness of God's purposes from creation to new creation, with all that the work of Christ and the Spirit entails in both redeeming and transforming all creation to the fullness of the Kingdom of God.⁷

A contemporary problem

Taken together, the discussion of what we mean by 'mission' both clarifies and clouds some central issues. If 'everything is mission' then, if our focus as church is fundamentally on justice and making the world a better place, we can argue that we are therefore doing what a church should do in participating in God's mission, even if little, if any, attention is given to inviting people to faith in Jesus. (Though it must be recognised that Christopher Wright does not do this.) In some contexts, this is even pejoratively described as proselytising. Yet that was the specific priority of the early church. They did much to support and help people in their society, but first and foremost, they brought Jesus to people who did not yet know him.

More broadly this raises the question of what is meant by the Kingdom of God. Scot McKnight argues that for many, 'Kingdom work' has been reduced to 'good deeds done by good people (Christians or not) in the public sector for the common good'.⁸ He comments:

First, this gauzy definition of one of the Bible's strongest words is not what 'kingdom' ever means in the Bible. Second, this word's meaning matters because its meaning shapes what happens when we do kingdom 'work', or kingdom 'mission'. Third: when people do kingdom 'work' in accordance with this understanding of kingdom, they fail to do kingdom 'mission'.⁹

More recently, an Australian study, *Keeping Faith*,¹⁰ reflects on the journey that many ministries make from being established by Christians on a biblical foundation, to becoming to all intents and purposes a secular educational, welfare, advocacy or other organisation. Over time the word 'Jesus' is replaced by a more generic 'God' and biblical

7 Timothy J. Harris, 'The notion of the *missio Dei*: some historical and theological background.' Unpublished paper presented to the dialogue, 2013. He notes that this paragraph is indebted to Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 106–120.

8 Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014), 4.

9 *Ibid.*, 5.

10 Stephen Judd, John Swinton and Kara Martin, *Keeping Faith: How Christian Organisations Can Stay True to the Way of Jesus* (Sydney: Acorn Press, 2023).

content is replaced by 'the Judean-Christian heritage' or 'human values'. Even phrases such as having a 'Christian ethos' or 'Lutheran ethos' can get watered down over time. Doctrinal statements are then easily sidelined, or even removed from the organisation's rationale.

Typically, the attempt is made to extract values and principles from the bible, as though that is somehow an adequate expression of Christian faithfulness. In the end the person of Jesus is redundant, *why* this is being done is unimportant, and all that matters is *what, where, when* and *how* things are being done. The authors of *Keeping Faith* suggest that the way forward is for each organisation to develop a deep and contextual 'Statement of Organisational Theology'. Our understanding and practice of mission ceases to be Christian when it no longer flows out of profound biblical and theological reflection. This context forms the background to the 'Perspectives on Mission' statement produced by the dialogue.

What do Anglicans and Lutherans believe about mission?

The third appendix to *Common Ground*, 'Perspectives on Mission',¹¹ builds on the previous agreements. It states our belief in one triune God and then summarises our understanding of God's purpose for human beings and the rest of creation [PoM 1,2]. God's mission is revealed to us in the Old and New Testaments. The work of Jesus in bearing the sins of the world and bringing reconciliation with God through his death, resurrection and ascension

is conveyed to us, in the word and experience of the gospel, by the Holy Spirit, through the gifts of repentance and faith, bringing us into direct relationship with the Son and the Father, with the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control that are the fruit of the Spirit, as a present foretaste of the sure and certain hope of the resurrection life to come. [PoM 3.3]

The church is God's witness to the world and a foretaste of God's promise to bring that countless multitude of worshippers into his presence. God has therefore commissioned his church to 'convey in word and action the good news to the whole creation and make disciples of all nations' [PoM 4.2]. As people respond, community is formed, and 'practical life together flows from the love of God—within the church, and out into the wider community' [PoM 4.3].

An Anglican perspective

Contemporary Anglicans express their understanding of mission in 'five marks of mission':

1. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom.
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.

¹¹ References to *Common Ground*, Appendix 3, 'Perspectives on Mission' are cited by paragraph numbers with the prefix PoM.

3. To respond to human need by loving service.
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

As noted on the Anglican Communion website, the first mark of mission 'is really a summary of what all mission is about, because it is based on Jesus' own summary of his mission (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14–15, Luke 4:18, Luke 7:22; cf. John 3:14–17). Instead of being just one (albeit the first) of five distinct activities, this should be the key statement about everything we do in mission', encompassing both evangelism (encouraging people in gospel faith) and evangelisation (the outworking of the gospel within society and culture), empowered and transformed through the Holy Spirit [PoM 5.1–3].

A Lutheran perspective

The Lutheran understanding of mission prioritises justification by grace through faith through the forgiveness of sins and understands other matters of service and justice to flow from this central dynamic. The statement continues:

When we reflect on service, justice, equality and care of creation, Lutherans distinguish between two aspects of God's work; often spoken of as the work of God's left hand in providing government, law, structure and care for the world (Rom. 13:1–4, Eph. 6:1–9), and the work of God's right hand through the law and the gospel of Jesus Christ to bring people to repentance and faith so that they may be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18–21; John 20:21–23). These two aspects of God's work are to be distinguished but not confused or separated. It is the same God who works in both spheres and Christians participate in both spheres. The church is primarily called to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world [PoM 6.1–2].

We found common ground on mission!

Both Anglicans and Lutherans affirm that mission is centred in God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ, and the good that Christians and the church do in the world, flows out of this. The fact that we come at it in different ways only blesses us as we receive from each other fresh expressions concerning the mission of God in which we participate. The Anglican perspective makes it plain that the first mark of mission should also be understood as a key aspect of marks 3–5. There is no 'Jesus-lite' mission. This understanding is founded on Jesus' own summary of his mission, with supporting biblical references.

The Lutheran perspective does not begin with a series of marks, but with an understanding of how God works in the world. The emphasis on distinguishing but neither confusing nor separating these two aspects of God's work has the same effect as saying that the

first mark must also be included in the marks that follow. God, and therefore his people, are involved in both, but the church is primarily called to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. This is mirrored in the first two scriptures referenced in the Anglican perspective where Jesus announces his mission, saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news' (Mark 1:14–15, NRSV). The other scriptures referenced by the Anglicans are picked up in what the Lutherans say about the work of God's left hand.

The church is both the object of God's mission and the agent of that mission to the world

The mission of God's right hand is directed towards the baptised as they are formed by the Word of God in catechesis and other instruction and as they are nourished in the Eucharist. All members of the church participate in the apostolic mission according to their God-given gifts [PoM 7.1–5]. Both Anglicans and Lutherans affirm the divinely instituted ordained ministry of word and sacrament and the priesthood of the baptised in worship, witness, and service [PoM 8.1–3]. Both churches recognise and authorise auxiliary offices and the callings of every Christian. Anglicans have established the order of deacons, while Lutherans have established a wide variety of lay worker roles [PoM 8.4–7].

These are not just individual but also collective callings, exercised in partnership with others, in local congregations and other gatherings, as well as schools, aged and community care and other organisations. Neither do our congregations and other entities function as independent units. They are organised into dioceses or districts under episcopal oversight [PoM 9.1–6].

Full unity and communion is not the ecumenical goal in and of itself. It is a spiritual reality already established in Christ. Our mandate by God's grace is to most effectively participate in the mission of God. *Koinonia* in mission serves that end as a sign, foretaste and instrument of that mission, the full realisation of the Kingdom of God. [PoM 10.1]

God has placed us on the same mission field

Anglicans and Lutherans have been called by God to the same communities across Australia and New Zealand. That means we share the same opportunities as well as common challenges as we participate in the creational and redemptive mission of God. This is not just the case with our congregations, but also our various institutions and other ministries. The potential for greater cooperation and partnership is vast. While each church brings its own approaches and perspectives which are valuable and should not be lost, in some situations both churches are also hindered by limited resources and facilities [PoM 11.1–3].

The decline of rural populations in Australia, and even greater decline in the number of active Christians in these areas, makes the need for working together even more

urgent than it was in the past. It is heartening to see that this is well under way in many places.

Where can Anglicans and Lutherans work together in mission?

Many good things are already happening. *Perspectives on Mission* lists a number of possibilities, many of which are already being done:

- Rural and remote ministry and mission.
- Congregational renewal in mission.
- Greenfield, inner urban and suburban church planting.
- Joint establishment of missional communities.
- Workshops, seminars and mentoring for evangelists and church planting teams.
- Joint sponsorship of events with significant local and international presenters.
- Defence force and industrial chaplaincy.
- Joint enlistment, training and resourcing of catechists.
- Training of teachers and staff for schools, and staff for aged and community care ministries.
- Training of clergy and church workers. [PoM 12.1]

For the potential of this relationship to be realised the active support of bishops, mission directors, and other wider-church resourcing and educational leaders is needed.

Our commitment to greater and intentional *koinonia* in mission

Perspectives on Mission concludes with a declaration that looks forward to more and deeper local partnerships in practically working together in God's mission:

Informed by the above, our respective churches hereby commit ourselves to encourage greater awareness and understanding of each other's self-identity, values and commitment to gospel mission and ministry, as expressed in local contexts. Fellowship is a relational term, so we undertake to explore opportunities to pray, study, worship, evangelise and serve with one another. As we recognise the grace of God in and through each other, we affirm our calling to consult, encourage, support and collaborate in our discernment of mission and ministry vision and strategic priorities. We encourage greater use of covenants for eucharistic hospitality, pastoral care, evangelistic endeavours and local shared ministry or team arrangements. [PoM 13.1]

Keeping good news and godly action together

Of course, those who receive our care should include people of all faiths and none. That has been the case with such Christian work since the time of the early church. It is also clear that while responding to the gospel can never be a requirement for receiving the church's care, Christians seek to bring the love of God to people in both word and deed:

Christ's ministry serves as pattern for the Christian's life of service that grows out of love in response to God's love in Christ. It includes evangelism and welfare. Christians are called to use their God-given gifts to provide evangelistic witness and service. Since these are both legitimate ways of showing love and care, having their own integrity and purpose, they should be seen as complementing each other, not as standing in competition or isolation.¹²

Some Christians have understood their role almost exclusively in terms of making the world a better place. While there is no evidence that St Francis of Assisi ever said, 'Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words', it still gets quoted. However, at some point the gospel needs words. Otherwise, people will have no idea why Christians do what they do, and we will be guilty of keeping God's greatest gift to ourselves.

More recently, many governments and other institutions in Australia have asserted that, in effect, Christian organisations should be free to bless others with material and other support, but not to bring them the greatest blessing of all, the gospel that is Jesus Christ. From a Christian perspective that is unacceptable. We are called to bring good news to the poor and marginalised, not just to provide for their other needs.

Is it valid for a church to say that it has some organisations that are concerned with the work of God's right hand in reconciling sinners to himself and it has other organisations that are exclusively concerned with the work of God's left hand in bringing care and justice? Of course, individual Christians should work with and in organisations that have no Christian commitment or understanding. We are called to cooperate with people of goodwill for the welfare of all people and creation itself. Likewise, congregations can provide financial support to secular bodies that do good work. The question is whether denominations and congregations should 'own' ministries that privatise, or even exclude, Christian witness to the gospel. Can we apply the name Christian, or Lutheran, to something that is not wholistic in its approach to God's mission?

Practical difficulties in contemporary Australia

This is a complex issue. We accept government and other funding for work that we do ranging from local projects in congregations, to schools, aged care, community care, and overseas aid. We simply could not do what we currently do without this funding. The problem is that such funding increasingly comes with conditions. There are conditions that relate to standards of education or care and that, at least for the most part, help us to deliver a better service. That is not a problem. The dilemma is when these conditions impact our ability to deliver the ministry in a biblical God-pleasing way.

That includes the freedom to employ people, who at the very least, support the Christian identity of the organisation. One would not expect a political party to employ people who

¹² LCAZ statement *One loving God: two hands—saving and caring*, adopted in 2003. Cf. Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions (DSTO) Vol 3H under the 'Ethical and Social Issues' tab. Paragraph 2.4., accessed at <https://www.lca.org.au/commissions/cticr/>.

support their opposition, but in effect, that is what they want us to do. This is not to say that we should never employ non-Christians in our organisations, but at the very least those who exercise leadership and have oversight of other workers need to understand and enthusiastically embrace the heart and soul of why we do what we do.

A way forward

We have many sincere and committed people working in Christian organisations. Nothing we do should be seen as an attack on them. We need to do all that we can to support and encourage them in their vocation. But action needs to be taken. We are where we are, and there are no simple answers available to us at this point of time, but we must push back against governments and donors who demand we become Jesus-lite. Sad as that would be, maybe we will need to cut loose some of our organisations and ask them to take Christian or denominational references out of their names.

Care and justice cannot flow from justification if the latter is not present or is only represented by the inner motivation of those workers who happen to be Christian. That is an issue of faithfulness and integrity. It is not adequately addressed by having a statement of faith or enunciating a series of values. When Christians are working in organisations which make overtly Christian claims, in order to nurture and sustain the Christian identity, employees and leaders of organisations need to be able to reflect on their work theologically. We routinely bring in people with expertise to assist with legal and organisational matters. That also applies to a process for articulating the biblical and theological basis on which any Christian organisation operates. Most of our ministries will need assistance from those trained and formed in theology. If that is to be effective, it can't be generic. It must be specific to the work of that organisation, be it a school, an aged care institution, or a community care provider. Too often such processes result in something that represents the lowest common denominator—that which we can all agree on. A helpful approach can be adapted from the Australian study *Keeping Faith: How Christian Organisations Can Stay True to the Way of Jesus*.¹³

They summarise their suggested approach of each ministry developing a 'Statement of Organisational Theology' as follows:

We believe that what is needed is a detailed Statement of Organisational Theology. Such a statement will take our knowledge of God and articulate how it applies in every activity of an organisation, be it a school, overseas aid agency, pension fund, welfare organisation, health and aged care service, or whatever endeavour that Christian organisation is engaged in.¹⁴

What we mean by a Statement of Organisational Theology is a statement which

¹³ Judd, Swinton and Martin, *Keeping Faith*. A summary and comments on this book is available from steen.olsen@lca.org.au.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

articulates the ethos of the organisation. It is a statement that:

- undergirds how an organisation's policies on human resources, finance, risk or strategy are developed,
- is reflected in the organisation's policies and processes, and even more importantly, its behaviour,
- takes the knowledge of God and articulates how that is applied to every activity of the organisation, and
- is frequently referred to, facilitates a continuous ethos audit, and helps to shine light on the faithfulness of the organisation.¹⁵

We need to state our understanding of human nature clearly, as well as God's promise of healing and the limits of human agency. We also need to be forthright and faithful in proclaiming why we do what we do, and the hope that is in us, namely the good news that is Jesus. Such a theology-first approach will be reflected differently in each organisation according to its particular context.

Conclusion

The mission of God establishes the church and continues to shape it, nurturing and sustaining it in the world. The Father sent the Son; Father and Son send the Spirit; and Father, Son and Spirit send the church—the people he has called—into the world. Therefore, the relational nature of the Trinity is also reflected in the church. The sending God gives himself to the church and the world.¹⁶ It is embedded in the very identity of God, and not just one of God's actions among many. Likewise for the church participating in the mission of God, like worship, is not just one activity among many, but part of its nature. It cannot be a nice-to-have add-on extra. The church by its nature is an outwardly focused community. The mission of God comes to the world with good news and godly action working together. We cannot do one without the other.

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¹⁵ Judd, Swinton and Martin, *Keeping Faith*, chapter 3.

¹⁶ Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM, 2012), 125.