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THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT, PART ONE:

TEN THINGS I KNOW ABOUT AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

I agree with John Fuellenbach that the central mission of the church is the central mission of Jesus: to announce and live into the kingdom of God.[1]

This leads us directly into the nitty-gritty of life around us, because the kingdom is about a new order of relationships, including personal relationships, social relationships and political relationships.

The gospel interacts with its context. The Good News will take different shape in first-century Athens from twenty-first century Geelong.

In a society where there is political oppression and violence, for example, the gospel speaks loudly of peace and human rights.

In a society where there is suicide, loss of meaning and drug abuse, the gospel speaks loudly of purpose and meaning and abundant life.

In a society where there is affluence and environmental crisis, the gospel speaks loudly of justice and living simply in harmony with creation.

So, just like cross-cultural missionaries who enter another society and try to learn its language, culture and customs, we, too, need to hear the heartbeat of our own culture.

We are often like fish in a bowl, unaware of the water we swim in. If Christian mission is to be effective, it helps greatly for us to read our context. It's especially important at a time when the churches are being pushed to the edge of society. Why is it happening? What are people saying to us? Does the gospel have anything relevant to say to Australians in 2008?

I believe very strongly that it does, but we may have to listen first. In my two sessions I aim to "read our context" a little. In this session I'll look at ten things I know about Australia. In the second session I'll look at ten things I know about religion in Australia, In both cases we'll come across things which call for the kingdom and, at the same time, show signs of the kingdom.

[1] John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The message of Jesus today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 4.

1. The European invasion still haunts us

There are two foundational facts about the European settlement of Australia in 1788 which affect us to this day.

The first is that none of the first settlers really wanted to be here. They saw this place as a harsh outdoor prison, situated at the end of the world, for the scum of Britain and those who had to look after them. As a result, Australians are not as patriotic as the Americans. We don't have a long and proud history like Britain. And we've generally clung to the edge of the continent, living in cities, while at the same time admiring the pioneer spirit of those who live in the bush. We've been called exiles, migrants, Europeans in Asia. Who are we and do we really belong here?

The second foundational fact is more important. We Europeans

- invaded this land without a treaty,
- shot and killed the indigenous people when they resisted,
- moved them off their land,
- introduced diseases which wiped them out by the thousands,
- destroyed most of their culture,
- treated them as invisible,
- discriminated against them,
- led them to despair and hopelessness,
- introduced them to alcoholism and welfare dependence,
- let them languish in third-world conditions,
- removed their children and
- denied their claims to land.

Only this year has an official apology been given by the federal government for one aspect of this mistreatment, the removal of children. It's a good start and the political mood is changing.

I agree with Norman Habel that Australia will only find its soul as a nation when the long journey of reconciliation is taken, involving personal relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people, symbolic actions of healing, justice, a treaty, compensation, and practical steps in health, education, housing and so on.[2] The churches have a central role in this, because reconciliation is at the heart of the kingdom of God.[3]

2. We swing between brashness and uncertainty

I once visited a seminary in the US where two Australian doctoral students had studied. Both were politically radical and had big personalities. One looked like a bushranger and the other you may know —John Smith, of the God's Squad Motorcycle Club. He went around in leathers and was always analysing rock music and the popular culture scene. When I turned up the Americans said, "You're not very Australian. You're quiet!".

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[2] Norman C Habel, *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's soul* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1999).

[3] Ross Langmead, 'Transformed relationships: Reconciliation as the central model for mission', *Mission Studies* 25.1 (June 2008), 5-20.

The world often sees us as a bunch of Crocodile Dundees or Steve Irwins. Some of it is endearing. We're informal, egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, and so on. Some of it is ugly — the drinking, the low-brow behaviour, the loud Australian.

But if we peel back the layers a bit, we find a great deal of cultural uncertainty. We constantly compare ourselves to others. We excel in sport rather than science or the arts. We sell Uluru and uranium to the world — things that are there, rather than things we do or invent.

Our culture is relatively young. Like an adolescent we swing between overconfidence and being unsure of ourselves. Binge drinking is widespread, particularly among young people, which suggests that in order to socialise and feel OK we need to get smashed first.

How will our culture hear that because God loves and accepts us as we are, we don't have to try so hard or be so anxious. Fifty years ago Richard Niebuhr wrote a little book called *Christ and Culture*, in which he suggested that the gospel neither totally condemns any culture; nor does it baptise any culture. Some like the idea of the gospel "fulfilling" a culture. Niebuhr chose the term "transforming" a culture, which involves challenging what is bad and fulfilling what is good.[4]

Australian culture, like any other, is a mixture. It partially reflects some aspects of the kingdom of God — such as our egalitarianism and mateship — and at the same time (we would say from our Christian perspective) it will search for its soul until it grows up into maturity, caring for its poor, passing on meaning to its young people, realising that its ugliest characteristics reflect a shallow and destructive side of our national psyche.

3. We're swept up in global trends

Even though we have a distinct Australian culture and are unique in being in the Southern Hemisphere right next door to Asia, we're also a classic example of wider western culture. We borrow from Britain, particularly in our heritage. And we borrow from the US, whose global cultural influences are incredibly widely felt.

You can get most American TV shows in the jungles of Africa or villages of Asia. The main characteristics of most western nations are that we are rich, former colonisers, Christian in heritage and of broadly Caucasian stock. If the world were a village of a hundred people, only two or three people in that village would be as wealthy and powerful and educated as we are in this room today.

The first result of being in the rich corner when most people are in the poor corner is that others want to *migrate here*. All over the world people are starving, dying through violent conflict and oppressed by undemocratic governments. As a nation we've had our moral fibre tested by desperate asylum seekers landing on our shores. The church has been a consistent voice for tolerance and welcome, based on the gospel call to care for the needy.

The second result of being western is the historical baggage of being known as Christian, imperialistic and thinking we run the world. We are *caught up in conflicts* such as in the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan. For some reason Australia has been historically eager to

[4] H Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

fight other people's wars, from the Boer War to World War One and Korea. Now that militant Islam is engaging in terrorism all over the world, we are caught up in that too, with many Australians targeted in the 2002 Bali bombings and lots of low-level tensions in our society since the September 2001 massacres in the US. There is a global atmosphere of fear in the West, and we're spending billions on anti-terrorist measures. We're giving up certain civil liberties in order to capture terrorists. Some people are even defending torture, so strong is the sense that we face a new and insidious threat. The gospel message of love overcoming fear is very relevant here. What might the churches contribute in dialogue and peacemaking?

The third global trend we are caught up in, particularly as a rich, industrialised nation is *the environmental crisis*. It is, of course, saturating our news at the moment as we adjust to the costs of addressing climate change. I'll say a bit more about this later.

4. The young think differently from their parents

The time has come for me to be more careful in talking about "Australian culture" as if there is one such culture, because we live in a complicated pattern of overlapping cultures or sub-cultures. Indeed the fragmentation of society is one the results of the individualism of modern culture.

I'm not going to use the term "postmodernism", because no-one agrees on what it means. And I'm not going to say that all members of the "Builder Generation" and "Baby Boomers" think one way and all of "Generation X and Y" think another way, because that is simplistic. But there are real differences between the generations, even if there is also real diversity within each generation.

If the church is to listen to the younger generations we will need to appreciate what world it is they live in. Anything I say here will be too simple. But their world is one of fragmentation and choices. They value their individuality. They are highly-stimulated by media — mobile phones, SMS, iPods, DVDs, CDs, TV, computers, the Internet, Facebook, Youtube. They are the best educated generation. They face economic barriers their parents never faced as housing and education gets more expensive. They live with constant change. Their world is saturated with images, celebrities, information overload and rubbish alongside quality. They highly value connecting with friends and family, and they seek community in various ways. They don't much go for institutions and long-term commitments. It seems natural for most of them to see truth as relative rather than absolute. They often see knowledge as partial rather than complete, and they have learned to see who's saying something before they decide whether it's true. They are less interested in overarching frameworks of belief than in what works or what brings a satisfying experience. They are less sceptical about God, the mysterious, the supernatural and alternative therapies than previous generations. Hugh Mackay calls them the "Options Generation", but paradoxically, they are facing many obstacles in exercising the options ahead of them.[5]

[5] Hugh Mackay, *Generations: Baby boomers, their parents and their children* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1997), 135-176.

I'd like to add that I have the privilege of knowing many young people who share some of these characteristics but also show characteristics of every younger generation: idealism, abundant energy, resilience and hope.

Given that the age profile of church attenders is older than that of Australia generally, we need to listen carefully to the young. Not only are they the future of our society, they may be bearing aspects of the gospel message *to* the church, particularly in seeing the world in relational terms rather than institutional terms.

5. Our lifestyles and social roles are changing rapidly

As recently as the 1950s the place of a woman was in the home. The term "feminism" has come and gone, and now we have a paradoxical mix of feisty female independence and a revival of the raunch culture, including some who even argue that prostitution is an example of a woman choosing to earn big money and be independent.

After a slow start, the "sensitive male" has grown as a species. The big litmus test, I reckon, is whether an AFL footballer attends the birth of his baby or plays footy, and more and more the mother and baby come first.

The recent sexual revolution has been huge. In one generation marriage has gone from the norm to optional. Extra-marital sex and homosexuality, once matters to hide, are now so widely accepted as to be hardly worthy of notice in the media. Divorce and remarriage is now widespread, even within the church. We all know from personal experience how complicated life can get, simply organising who is invited to a family wedding or where the kids are spending Christmas dinner.

Households are smaller and vary much more. About a quarter of Australian households are one-person households, and another quarter consist of just two people.[6] Households containing mum, dad and kids have shrunk from being the vast majority to less than half of all households.

We used to work for one employer for many years, even our whole working life. Now, we not only change frequently, but many of us are part-time or casual. Shifts are at all times of the day and week and our lives are complex. A large proportion of us are working longer hours, affecting our relationships and our availability to contribute to the church and community.

Summing up these and dozens of other lifestyle trends, there is no longer one moral framework which guides society as it did a hundred years ago and stretching back for centuries. Moral relativism means we have to construct our own ethics and our own path in relationships. For some this is liberating; for others, the ambiguity and confusion is deeply threatening.

Is the gospel an absolutist option, laying down the rules, or does it give guidelines such as love and justice in helping us to grow towards moral autonomy? The church's response so

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[6] Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia — where?: How we've changed, why we've changed, and what will happen next?* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2007), 210-211.

far has generally been characterised as negative and life-denying, whereas we see our message as life-giving and bringing freedom through obedience to God's ways.

6. We abound in cultural diversity

We all know that Australia is one of the world's most multicultural societies. I travel by train in the western suburbs a lot and on some trains you'll hardly see an Anglo-Aussie face. I shop in Footscray and the world has come to my door. I eat in Sydney Rd, Brunswick and there are a dozen cuisines within two or three blocks.

We've undergone an astonishing transformation since abolishing the White Australia policy only thirty-six years ago and adopting multiculturalism as the official policy, the only nation other than Canada to do so.

- Since 1945 more than six and a half million migrants have come, which means that half of our population increase since 1945 (from seven to twenty million) has been due to migration.
- Nearly one in four Australians were born overseas.
- Melbourne and Sydney are the most multicultural. In Melbourne 29% were born overseas, and 25% speak a language other than English at home.[7]
- The Geelong figures are lower, with 21% born overseas and 14% speaking a language other than English at home.[8] I noticed from the Geelong figures that, other than from the United Kingdom, there is no one large migrant group — they're spread thinly and evenly, so the multicultural reality of Australia has affected provincial cites less than the capital cities, and country towns even less.
- One in ten have come under the humanitarian program (refugees and their families).[9]
- Now migrants come from all over the world. In 2005-6 they came from 200 countries.
- This year more than 150,000 will come under the 'skilled migrants' program and 13,000 under the humanitarian program.[10]

There has always been an undercurrent of racism in Australian history, and inter-racial tension surfaces from time to time. But I find it remarkable the extent to which we are able to live in harmony in Australia. The challenge to the churches is to reflect that diversity in our membership, because many churches are Anglo-Australian enclaves. Some Anglo-Australian Christians complain that migrants form their own mono-cultural churches, but the most numerous mono-cultural churches are actually Anglo-Australian.

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[7] www.about-australia.com/facts/victoria/demographics.

[8] http://www.geelongaustralia.com.au/library/pdf/5054/60.pdf.

[9] These figures and most of those that follow are from "Key Facts in Immigration, Fact Sheet 2", www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/02key.htm.

[10] "Migration Program Planning Levels, Fact Sheet 20", www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/20planning.htm.

Despite the resistance of Israel in the Old Testament, the Bible clearly points to the mission of God to both enjoy diversity and express unity across cultural and ethnic barriers, and parts of the church are reflecting this mission very well, while others remain comfortable in isolation.

7. The wealth and power gap is growing

A significant shift has occurred in Australia since the 1960s, when more than half of the population were "middle-class" in more ways than one but particularly in terms of income and wealth. Those who were poor and those who were rich were small percentages.

But now the middle has shrunk and there are many more rich people and many more poor people. Our sense that we are all equal in value has taken a battering as we've become a society of "haves" and "have nots". People in Braybrook always experienced life differently from people in Brighton, but now their worlds are completely different.

As our economy has boomed the rich have become much richer. Trade Unions have been weakened, workers' conditions have been stripped away and wages have been kept low in some jobs while they have climbed in others.

The top 20% of households earn 45% of the income and hold 60% of the wealth. It's true that we've all become better off. Compared to ten years ago we are on average 25% better off in real terms. But the average increase for the poorest 10% has only been $29 per week (in real terms), whereas the top 10% are $256 per week better off.[11]

What does this mean for a society built on the myths of pioneers helping each other in drought, flood and fire?

We still dig deep and give generously in emergencies, but in terms of regular philanthropy — systematic giving to charities — we lag behind both America and Europe. While Australia became significantly more affluent in the last ten years, giving to charities hardly grew at all.[12] Despite our government committing decades ago to the United Nations recommended level of overseas aid — 0.7% of our national Gross Domestic Product — we got as low as 0.24% five years ago and only in the last budget has there been a recommitment and a substantial increase to 0.32%.

The gospel has a great deal to say about justice and the way we treat the poor. It even has lots to say about sitting on wealth and not giving it away. Will the church, by its example as well as in its preaching, lead the way in addressing the growing gap between the rich and the poor, or will our society continue to grow apart, straining and exploding as the poor grow resentful and the rich barricade themselves behind gated properties?

8. Politically we hover around the centre

Within this room we probably vary greatly in how we assess the centrist politics that dominate Australia. By "centrist" I mean that governments, whether Liberal or Labour,

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[11] Mackay, *Advance Australia — where?*, 84.

[12] http://news.smh.com.au/business/australia-stingy-on-philanthropy-front-20080310-1yfz.html.

don't vary much in policy terms. They tend to play safe and are afraid to launch visionary plans.

Labor governments still fund private schools because the last time a Labor leader spoke out against their privilege he copped heaps and lost the election.

Liberal governments would love to cut welfare allowances but end up guaranteeing that pensions and allowances will keep up with inflation and not lose real value.

Some of us on the right might long for some clear policies that reflect social or economic conservatism. Some of us on the left might long for some clear policies that reflect social or economic progressivism or radicalism. But the way democracy works in Australian society, with its voting system and three or four year terms, favours two main parties which will always appeal to the middle-ground. To some extent they need to keep big companies onside to survive. They also need to stay onside with the establishment, the media and the unions. Does the church figure in this? Do we have moral authority in the democratic debate?

Can Australia ever escape its political captivity? Can it make long-term visionary decisions for the genuine benefit of its citizens or the world, or will it always be dominated by the next ballot box? Could we ever take a stand as New Zealand did, to become a nuclear-free zone, or decide to be non-aligned internationally so that we can act independently as a peacemaker rather than as a minor ally of the US or the United Kingdom? On a not-very-important but symbolic issue, when will we shake off our ties with the hereditary monarchy of Britain and become a republic, with our citizens not having to pledge loyalty to someone else's sovereign?

9. We are just bracing for climate change

As I mentioned before, we are caught up in movements which are global rather than national.

On a per capita basis, Australia is the second highest emitter of carbon in the world after the US. Like so many rich nations, our footprint on the earth is huge. The church has been slow to see the importance of caring for creation, but in recent decades Christians have done a lot of reflection on what a right relationship with God's creation might look like.

As Australians scream about rising petrol prices, what will the church say? What does the gospel say about the use of a limited, non-renewable resource such as oil? Indeed, what does the gospel say about over-population, the economics of growth, the view that technology can fix everything? If Australians are to take the church seriously, we will need to see environmental questions as integral to our faith and roll up our sleeves and be part of developing solutions. My family is buying a water tank, putting solar panels on the roof and riding bicycles. "Think globally, act locally" is a relevant slogan here.

Australia is in a dilemma. We hold vast reserves of a dirty fuel — coal — and a moderately harmful fuel — natural gas — as well as a dangerous fuel — uranium. We've become rich by selling what we can dig up, cut down and suck out. Now we're told that these things are bad. It will hurt us to do the right thing by climate change.

This may sound a very impractical suggestion, but it isn't: I believe that the gospel addresses this problem first and foremost at the level of spirituality. A sense of long-term sustainability is a spiritual commitment. Relating to creation is a spiritual journey. Living with enough is a moral and spiritual decision. Beginning with ourselves is a spiritual perspective on solving social and environmental problems. Limiting our emissions so that developing countries can, for a while emit more, is a selfless moral stance. Will the church be able to provide these spiritual resources to a society that is alarmed, worried about costs, disconnected from the earth and largely seeking its own comfort and ease?

10. The opportunities for Christian engagement are enormous

The last thing I want to mention in my list of things I notice about Australia is simply this: In a time of rapid change and widespread anxiety there is enormous scope for Christian leadership in society. Prophets are those who discern what God is saying in their times and in their context. Sometimes they "foretell", that is, make predictions. More often they "forthtell", that is, tell it like it is.

We will have the moral authority to speak out if we do at least three things.

- If we develop a mature and reflective faith so that we begin to understand what the vision of the kingdom of God might look like;

- If we listen to those who analyse our society and discern where things are going and what will lead to our society's health and what will lead to our society's dysfunction; and

- If we work humbly and co-operatively with those of goodwill in all parts of society in a constructive way,

Then we will find ways of being salt and light in our context. We will be signs of the kingdom of God, imperfectly working towards this dynamic reality that begins here and now and stretches into eternity. Australia needs mature people of faith. It needs discerning analysts and commentators — such as Tim Costello, if I may say so. And it needs armies of people of humility and hope who will roll up their sleeves and work together towards a society that will at least partly reflect the values of the kingdom of God.