

# Our missional and intercultural natures are to be found in the world

by Joy J. Han

Joy lives on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. She is a panel member for the Walking Together as First and Second Peoples Circle and is a contributor to the monthly webinar *Black Lives Matter and its implications for our Australian context* that is jointly hosted by Uniting Church Chaplaincy at Charles Sturt University and Pilgrim Presbytery (NT) - Social Justice. She is a lay person working full-time in information technology and will complete her Master of Theological Studies at the end of 2023.

I aspire to offer a provocation focusing on our understanding of lay people and their capacity for mission; and more briefly on the question of interculturality.

## Lay people

### Texts

Our texts affirm the centrality of lay people *qua* people called to Christ's ministry and mission *in the world*:

- the Basis of Union, considered the cornerstone text of what makes us theologically distinctive, affirms that Christ's life and mission and therefore the initiation of the baptised thereinto is *in the world*;<sup>1</sup> and
- we have formal, written commitments to the representation of lay people on our decision-making councils and committees.

### Practices

Despite this, I believe we have a tendency in our practice to devalue if not ignore the missional capacity of lay people, and our theological culture is complicit in this predicament:

- ministry and mission *in practice* draw lay people *out* of the world instead of utilising their capacity *in* the world;
- to take up leadership in ministry and mission typically requires a lay person to take time out of their ordinary working hours to even attend a committee meeting, or to take leave from work to attend a wider council meeting. This precludes most people's involvement, not least that of young people (that is, anyone under retirement age);
- lay people who are considered to have leadership capacity are encouraged to spend time in what is essentially unpaid resource ministry, i.e. *less* time in the world and not more; and
- lay people who manage to accept such leadership roles i.e. roles in para-resource ministry are presumed and encouraged to be on a pathway to

---

<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the research of Dr Damian Palmer for the trace and implications of the phrase "in the world" in the Basis of Union. But the present intent to provoke and any inaccuracies are my own.

candidating for a specified (usually ordained) ministry. The Period of Discernment in practice normally supports people considering candidature for ordained ministry and remains unknown to most lay people.

### Theological culture

Theological culture should articulate and address the contradictions between our texts and practices, and ours is not up to this task when it comes to lay people's capacity for mission. We lack the theological language to even inquire after people's entire "Monday to Saturday lives" that take place in the world, let alone affirm and build up the latent missional capacity of lay people.

Our ministry and mission are governed and managed for risk and compliance within and by the Church, despite the fact that lay people are already in the world, in contexts (e.g. workplaces) that more often than not have their own risk controls in place. Lay people could therefore safely be deployed to witness to Christ in those contexts with little-to-no risk and compliance overhead. We needn't and oughtn't "equip" lay people on how to operate in their own contexts.

We could start by articulating theologies that enable us to listen to their experiences in the world. This in time would help the Church to support lay people to better recognise where God is moving and calling in the places where they already are. This would eliminate much of the administrative burden for the church that is a known resourcing challenge, but this requires the theological courage to affirm that lay people are capable and don't need *direct* instructions and oversight from a resource worker on how to be in the world.

Resourcing work ought to respond to the needs of lay people and in this way pastoral care ought to be understood as part of, and not separate from, mission resourcing.

To such ends, lay people who are in the world would benefit more from greater access to theological education (not from another generic church-led programme that has no capacity to read the kaleidoscope of lay people's respective contexts). This empowers them to develop their own articulation of how to join in with mission in their own specific contexts.

Out of my own experience across a couple of Synods:

- if theological libraries must close at 5pm, we must urgently digitise more books and library resources; and
- we must increase the number and diversity of classes that are available after hours, *offline-asynchronous*, and completely digital.

Lay access to theological education is too difficult, which perhaps accounts for much of what I have outlined above.

## The cost

Finally, I would like to underscore two perverse effects of the blindness of our theological culture to lay people's being in the world, which particularly concerns younger people (this time I mean people under 35-ish):

- lay people who fail to find affirmation for their role serving Christ in the world may be funnelled, with some reluctance, into candidature for ordination, and this only results in much heartbreak due to our overengineered processes for, and outdated theology of, ordination, and that is even when people do reach the point of ordination;
- even those of us who have never considered candidature for ordination end up burnt out from unpaid para-resource ministry.

In my personal case, it seems to have been several years since I last remember taking annual leave for a holiday and not for a council meeting or intensive subject for study.

Being called upon to share my professional skills with another church committee for free is my pleasure but not my privilege and does not count as an affirmation of my role as a lay person in the world.

This is not a pattern of time commitment that I can commend to my other sisters and brothers in Christ, let alone those who would seek or explore commitment to communion with us, nor to myself anymore.

## Intercultural church

My concern under this heading is related to that under the earlier heading. The fact that colonial missions required Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to leave their culture at the church door is in part because our ways of worshipping still struggle to give voice to the experiences – both joyful and painful – of lay people in the world.

It is still almost impossible to talk about the personal experience of racism in an Anglo congregation. This is due to multiple complex reasons, but among them is the fact that I believe our worshipping language and liturgies make it difficult even for Anglo people to talk about their lives in the world *as their context for worship* and not as source material for small talk after the worship service is over.

So our theological culture still struggles with colonialism, and colonialism as always affects all people, both dominant and non-dominant, albeit in different modes and with different levels of awareness.

Briefly, a few points which I and others have elaborated elsewhere:

- the average Church member's lack of awareness of the Covenant is shameful; and

- "multicultural Church" as articulated in the Uniting Church's 1985 statement remains the primary paradigm for the Anglo centre of the Church to relate to not only CALD people but also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and this is a paradigm rooted in the multiculturalism of the 1970s, which is a racist, colonial, essentialist and extractive ideology.<sup>2</sup>

I would like us to move on from the 1970s and start listening to our lay people's real experiences of racism.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, only justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, not just within the Church but within the wider community i.e. *in the world*, can form the proper basis for intercultural relations on these lands.

---

<sup>2</sup> Joy J. Han, "The Call to Transcend Racial Boundaries: An Analysis of the Language in Paragraph 2 of the Basis of Union" in *The Basis of Union at 50: Its Present and Future*, ed. Ji Zhang and Geoff Thompson (Bayswater: Uniting Academic Press, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> This need not be confrontational. I have shared some of my own experience here: <https://uniting.church/like-sun-rays-over-water/>