

Theological Culture - A Reflection on Needing God

by Dr Sureka Goringe

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I wrote this piece before I read [Rev Prof Glen O'Brien's paper](#) for the Act2 Theological Culture discussion.

I now offer this paper as a response to the Professor's argument. I think he is correct in noting that we lack resources for initiating people into the faith. But I propose that this arises from a deeper gap in our theological culture.

I have no pretensions to being a theologian. I'm a scientist and I have lived, loved and served in the Uniting Church for over 30 years. What I offer is a general pattern based on my empirical observations. I'm not going for nuance; I'm going for blunt and provocative.

In the main, I don't think we as a church believe that other people need God.

We may individually acknowledge our own need for a connection with God.

But our theological culture is not one where the good news of Christ is the pearl of great price.

I don't think we have a theology that articulates why ALL people might want to experience the love of God.

Our understanding of God compels us to love our neighbour, serve our community and fight for a more just world.

But we're not convinced that the love of God, the offer of grace, the redemption of our personal and communal brokenness, are things that others might need or want.

As a result, we do not invite others to taste and see that the Lord is good. In fact, most of us suspect that our friends and neighbours are perfectly happy without a religious faith, and we don't think we have anything to offer them that they might be interested in. Except perhaps our own efforts at justice and community.

I think that the Uniting Church has amazing theological insights that are uniquely valuable contributions to Australian society. A lot of that has been picked up in the submissions to Act2.

This precious theological culture has led to the open table, the leadership of women and men as equals, the commitment to reconciliation with our First Peoples, the embrace of the queer community, the battle for the stewardship of creation, and the dogged fight against all forms of structural and systemic injustice against marginalised groups of every kind.

However, without a theology of why every person needs God, we cannot be the spiritual resource for those who are seeking the deeper story. Could it be that we are salt that has lost its savour?

Why would anyone need the Uniting Church in Australia in a post-Christendom society?

Unlike the early church, or even our partner churches in China and Southeast Asia, we are surrounded by a society that has internalised and secularised several of the most radical truths first introduced by Christianity. The equal value of every person and the obligations of the privileged to the powerless are taken for granted. Even the superiority of reconciliation over retribution is acknowledged in theory.

People don't need to join the church to fight injustice or support a good cause. There is plenty of that going on outside the church.

There are also many organisations formed around sport, recreation and social service that offer warm supportive communities. And while none of them have unimpeachable leadership and governance, they have not suffered the fall from grace that the Christian church has in recent years where corruption, abuse and dysfunction has been laid bare within institutional religion.

People don't need us to provide welcoming and supportive communities, they can get that elsewhere too.

How did we lose the idea that Jesus came for everyone?

Were we so keen to avoid the limitations of a gospel reduced to personal salvation and a ticket to heaven, that we lost the ability to speak of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in the reformation of our own heart and soul?

Were we so preoccupied with being the solutions to society's problems that we've forgotten that the divine is part of the solution?

Were we so focussed on a world that needs healing, that we forget that each one of us needs healing too?

In defining ourselves as the ones who fight for justice and serve others, have we effectively masked our own vulnerability and need?

Perhaps we don't believe that others need God because we have forgotten how much we need God?

Can we discover a new language, one that allows us to confess to ourselves and each other our own dependence on God without straying into an unhelpful focus on sin, damnation and hell?

Can we speak of God's offer of healing for our own hurts, of forgiveness for the harm we've caused others, the fruit of the Spirit to overcome the flaws in our own character, of strength to fight the limitations of our own good intentions, and of love enough to give us a million second chances every day?

If we cannot speak to each other of our personal and communal need for God's transformative presence, then how can we speak of it to those outside the faith? How can we sing of an amazing grace without admitting our own brokenness?

D. T. Niles once said that evangelism was just one beggar telling another beggar where to get food.

Perhaps we need to learn again our own identity as a beggar who has been fed by God. Perhaps only then can God give us the language to invite others to the feast.

What good news can we offer the people of Australia?

The public perception of Christianity in Australia is dominated by the profiles of the larger churches both mainline and Pentecostal, heavily tainted with misogyny, anti-queer sentiment, corruption, and abuse of power.

Fortunately, the Uniting Church is not often associated with those things.

Could it be that we, in our unique position, are called to preach the gospel in a way that is currently not being preached in Australia?

Imagine that God lit us up with a theology of love, grace and reconciliation at a personal and interpersonal level, and we coupled it with our theology and praxis of inclusion, welcome and social justice.

Radical, inclusive, justice is the hallmark of the Uniting Church's identity. We have been fighting to lengthen the table and widen the tent for God's Kingdom since our inception.

But we haven't figured out how to talk about God as something that might be relevant to people's inner being. Have a look at the 'Shaped by Jesus' section of uniting.church - there is nothing there about Jesus' offer of personal reconciliation with God, of grace or forgiveness, or of the Holy Spirit who transforms us from within. Despite our Methodist traditions, we do not speak of our hearts being strangely warmed, of that inner assurance of God's love.

We know that our society is full of hurting people - loneliness, relationship breakdown, the trauma of what life has done to them, and the pain of choices that have led to loss. And yes, they need practical support - but they also need to know that they are a beloved child of God, offered love, grace and infinite second chances (not judgement and condemnation). They need to know that they don't have to fix everything by themselves, because God is with us as Spirit, offering us all we need. They are just like us. They need what we need.

I dream of the Uniting Church having the language and the spirit-filled fervour to share this good news, while keeping alive the prophetic practice of justice and radical hospitality.

This is a sweeping generalisation to make a point. I know there are pockets of the Uniting Church where the love of God is freely offered and received, and many come to follow Christ. Some of these are not places where radical inclusive social justice is the order of the day. But I dream of a time when these two parts of our church can teach each other the precious piece of the gospel that drives their mission, and that together we will have the ability to share the whole gospel.

Also, a short note on what I'm not saying:

I am under no circumstances arguing that faith is not something that we practise as a community. I am merely pointing out that faith is ALSO something that has meaning and potency for individuals.

And I am not arguing for a gospel that is limited to personal reconciliation with God. I am suggesting that the renewal and reconciliation of all creation does in fact need to include the renewal and reconciliation of individuals. We shouldn't just fight for the liberation of the poor, the blind and the oppressed, we should also proclaim to them the Lord's favour.