Missiology at Home:

The Role of Faith Communities in the Wellbeing

of their Local Area

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Abstract: A suburban area with a high percentage of low income households has a high level of health and welfare intervention by government and philanthropic organisations but a low level of community engagement. It also has a high number of faith communities, most of which are Christian churches. What kind of missiology could motivate faith communities towards a cooperative focus on enhancing the wellbeing of this suburban area?

This paper seeks to propose in summary form a theology of mission for faith communities concerned with the wellbeing of people in the wider local community, i.e. beyond their own membership. In particular, it deals with opportunities for faith communities to become actively and cooperatively involved in responding to the needs of a local area that suffers from relative economic deprivation. The paper originates in my own experience of living and working both in pastoral church work and in community development projects in a suburban area described below. In this sense the paper is an exercise in practical missiology.

The suburban area: deprivation and strengths

The local area which has stimulated these reflections is a suburban area within the city of Auckland, New Zealand. It has about five thousand households with a high proportion of single-parent families and large families; it has a high level of state housing and a low level of home ownership; it is ethnically diverse; and its population is relatively young compared to the rest of the city.

The area is considered to be a 'concentration of deprivation' where the indicators of deprivation are low levels of educational achievement, low labour force participation, low incomes, high unemployment, and high dependency on social welfare benefits. There are many resultant social issues related to housing, education, employment, health, crime and safety.

There are also strong indicators of strength or opportunity such as the area's history, the strengths of diverse local communities, its relative youth, wide green spaces and proximity to coastal environments, availability of rail and road transport, and proximity to the city's central business district.

A role for faith communities in urban regeneration?

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A number of government and non-governmental agencies have attempted in recent years to bring about urban regeneration in this suburban area either through responding themselves to the perceived needs of the area or by attempting partnerships with existing local organizations. Is there are role for faith communities in such urban regeneration? Or should faith communities confine themselves to meeting the religious needs of their own membership and in recruiting new members?

A 'faith community' as understood here is a group of people who meet on the basis of a common religious bond. In this it is distinct from social or community service organizations which are organized to meet specified social objectives.

In mid-2012, we conducted an enquiry among representatives of a range of community service organizations and among local faith community leaders. The enquiry was concerned with two issues:

1) How local faith communities might contribute to the wellbeing of people in the local area; and

2) Whether there was local support for an *association* of faith communities for this purpose.

Faith community leaders showed considerable agreement on what such a role *could* entail. It could:[2]

i) Address critical issues in the community along with or in support of other agencies, for example: youth suicide and other youth issues, gambling, alcohol and drug abuse and availability, violence especially domestic violence, debt, no provision for savings, loan sharking, houses shortages, unhealthy houses, issues with rental housing, displacement of families in state rental houses, immigration problems.

ii) Enhance health and wellbeing in the community (preventative action before critical issues arise), again in cooperation with other agencies, for example, recognition of *tangata whenua* and *mana whenua* (indigenous dignity and the rights that flow from it) in the area, financial literacy and budgeting, community based and affordable housing, socially responsible lending, encourage realistic family and cultural policies on how to deal with pressure to donate money, continuing education such as parenting skills and budgeting, drop-in centre or hand-in centre, support for school attendance, services for the elderly.

iii) Promote communication between faith communities and service agencies to positive effect such as awareness among faith community leaders of resources to address the kind of issues noted above and more formal and equal communication between faith communities and service agencies on a mutually accessible basis.

iv) Be a voice of the people and advocacy, such as advocacy to government and through public media for the benefit of the local people, advocate for individual cases to government agencies, address the issue of poverty.

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[2] Faith community leaders interviewed for this enquiry included local congregations of the Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Samoan Methodist, Samoan Congregational, Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventist, Pacific Islands Presbyterian, Baptist, Tamaki Community, Sanctuary and Grace International Churches, and the Dhamma Rongsoi Mon Temple. Those interviewed did not include the local Tongan congregations for whom there is already a recently established Tongan association of churches who had already expressed views on these issues. The enquiry was sponsored by the Tongan Tamaki Langafonua Community Centre, a community service organization. A serious attempt was made to identify and interview all faith communities in Tamaki. In two cases, interviews were not conducted because attempts to arrange an interview were unsuccessful during the period of the enquiry.

v) Encourage to attend/participate. Since faith community leaders are often in touch with people who are not currently involved in service organizations, they could encourage people to participate in agencies as volunteers or as local support; encourage participation in community events and community engagement forums; encourage parents to make more use of early childhood education opportunities.

Most faith communities do already have some outreach into the community in the form of welfare or general community work such as the activities described above in addition to the more obviously religious activities of prayer, preaching, community-building, and religious education. That is, while there are considerable differences of belief and organization among faith communities, nevertheless faith community leaders see a common cause in working for the wellbeing of people in this suburban area.

Most faith community leaders were in favour of an *association* of faith communities but were also clear that it should not duplicate what is already being done by other agencies or individual faith communities and that it should not set up an organization independent of existing organizations.

The views of faith community leaders differed on whether such an association should put emphasis on providing welfare and community services or rather put emphasis on active involvement in political advocacy. That is, there were differences about the degree to which an association should focus on local community development and welfare or focus more on being a lobby group to influence central and local government.

The strategic position of local churches

The rest of this paper will focus on Christian churches only rather than the wider category of faith communities. Non-Christian faith communities in the area (Buddhist, Muslim and Baha'i) are quite small and not sufficiently involved at this stage to allow generalizations to apply with any validity outside of Christian churches.

Government agencies are organizations of salaried professionals who begin with an acknowledgement of responsibility for (some of) the conditions in the urban area. Their direct accountabilities are either to central (national) or to local government rather than to those who live or work in this suburban area. Their activity in the suburban area is inherently an *intervention* from the outside. The intentional language of the public service does indicate nevertheless a belief in the principle that client participation in decision-making leads to better decisions. In effect this means they believe officially in 'consultation' of the people affected by agency planning.

Local churches begin from a different point. They begin with already existing organized relationships and a common bond. Their outreach in the local area is not primarily an intervention there. Most of them live, and some work, in the area anyway. Insofar as there are existing deficiencies or deprivation in the local community, church members are themselves part of, or victims of, those deficiencies.

In principle then, church communities are in a good position to initiate local programmes for community wellbeing, to collaborate with other local programmes, or to be partners in the interventionist approach of government agencies.

In general, church community leaders are in favour of a church outreach to the wellbeing of the broader local community beyond their own members. The critical question is whether such an outreach has sufficient theological backing for it to become more of a priority in church attention and planning than it is at present. In other words, is their theology of mission sufficiently articulated and sufficiently strong to attract the expenditure of energy, time, and perhaps funding, from church leaders?

Is the church leader's primary responsibility the good functioning of the church itself and its service to its own members? Is the local pastor (as one local pastor already expressed it) already overworked in looking after the worship and community needs of the local congregation - Sunday services, marriages, funerals, festivities, personal and family crises, social welfare, Sunday school, youth group, etc.? A 'church-focused' theology is one which puts primary emphasis on conservation of its own heritage or tradition, on the church community itself as mutual support among believers, or on opposition to what is seen as the growing secularization of society. A 'mission-focused' theology, on the other hand, would imply a reorganization of the church's ministry job descriptions and budgets to focus more deliberately on an outreach to local community wellbeing.

Note that the theology outlined below is a theology for *Christian* churches. The larger objective is to develop a 'mission' for an association of faith communities that includes local religious communities other than Christian. We are not yet in a practical position however to develop such a theology.

Theology of mission: What kind of theology could enable and guide local church action for the wellbeing of the wider local community?

The theology of most local church communities includes some idea of mission. The issue here in terms of action for the wellbeing of the neighbourhood is whether such mission is a minor element or a major focus. Where does the *emphasis* lie in terms of the local church's vision, the responsibility of its ministers, and the priorities in its budgets? There are a number of points where the choice of emphasis becomes decisive. What then are the key features of such a theology of mission within a local community?

In attempting to answer that question, I need first to make a preliminary note about language. The church's mission has some of the same or very similar objectives as those of other agencies. Local churches need to be able communicate with, and should often ally themselves with, other organized action for social transformation. In practice this means wherever possible using language that is in the public forum rather than the specialized language of theology or church discourse. Words such as concentration of deprivation, wellbeing, transformation, aspirations, place-based, strength-based, social capital and capacity-building are either not commonly used by theologians or are not commonly used in this particular sense. For the main part, this is community development or public service language. One of the challenges to theologians is to articulate more clearly the beliefs and commitments of theology into a public language that does not require a prior degree in theology or even a prior church involvement.

The challenge here to a mission theology is to state explicitly in as public a way as possible what the impact of its understanding of God has in the world of social, economic, and environmental wellbeing. In terms of the concrete realities that affect people's lives, what do we mean by the 'kingdom of God', 'salvation', or 'redemption'? In these terms the primary question in *theo*logy then becomes not so much Do you believe in God? or What kind of God do you believe in? but What are the concrete impacts in our world of this belief in God? From this it will become clear what God we believe in.

For the most part this 'public' language will be the language of the public service and community development. I will incorporate some of this language into the rest of this paper.

Once we have made progress in such language, however, we almost immediately face another challenge. The language of public service or community development is also a specialised language that seldom communicates well to local communities. To the local community it often appears esoteric, disabling, and even deceitful – a covering up of the real agenda. I have been at perhaps hundreds of meetings where this mis-communication has occurred. We need also then to be able to communicate in the vernacular of the local people. (I do not attempt it in this paper which is

addressed to practical theologians rather than to a public meeting.) But, by way of consolation, this is a language in which local pastors and practical theologians are probably better skilled than are public service professionals and community development experts.

Key features of a local missiology

1. A theology of transformation

A church outreach that is concerned with the present time and with the local community (rather than a distant future on a world scale) is concerned to transform the present reality into something better, something closer to the reign of God as presented in the Gospels. A contemporary term that we can use to indicate this change for the better is 'transformation'. It is a term that can be used both in theology and in public discourse. It also captures the sense of a realm of God that is already-but-not-yet and of wanting something better for people who live in relative deprivation. It indicates a search for justice in access to basic needs like housing, health, education, and safety where people are engaged in the decision-making that affects their lives. Such aspirations are ones that Christian belief in the realm of God can support and commit to.

The realm of God as understood in the Christian scriptures and later mission theology is a much larger and more complex reality than simply the transformation of people's lives here and now. But any theology of mission is abstract and perhaps delusory if it is unable to say what the realm of God would look like now in our own current circumstances. It further needs to articulate some specific objectives for those who participate in bringing about this coming realm of God. The description given in the earlier part of this paper of the potential role of churches in contributing to the wellbeing of the local area provides some of the objectives of mission. This may be described as transformation in terms of wellbeing.

The idea of transformation also has a time component. The realm of God is an already-but-not-yet reality in the world. Some outcomes of transformational action need to be in place before others can be attempted. It is a transformed continuity from the past, through present action, towards future long-term results. Some steps need to be in place before another step can be taken. A second step is made possible by the direction, size, and momentum of an earlier step. Thus, for example, community engagement in a project may require some prior capacity building within the local community before such engagement can be successful.

2. A place-based theology of wellbeing

A *place*-based approach to wellbeing recognises the value of *neighbourhoods*. The local area in which people live and work is important to their welfare. This is as well as, not instead of, the organizations, networks, movements, and state agencies that also contribute to (or diminish) human wellbeing. The idea of neighbourhood further directs our attention to the importance of the natural and built *environments* which are part of our neighbourhoods and whose own wellbeing has effects on human wellbeing. The 'place' with all its human and natural dimensions is a contributor to human wellbeing as well as, not instead of, other contributors. But the idea of 'place' or 'neighbourhood' has received less attention from practical theology than most of these other contributors.

Practical theology often begins from 'issues', that is, from an active engagement, or at least a well founded concern, for a particular problem of, for example, justice or peace or environmental degradation. A *place*-based theology limits its analysis and praxis so as to focus on a particular geographically confined area – a town, a city, a neighbourhood. In the case that I am considering here, this 'place' is a suburban area that has fairly clear geographical, economic and social boundaries. Within such a place there are a number of 'issues' that are intertwined. What a place-based theology recognizes is that *solutions* to these issues may often be found to be particular to that area, to require that the issues be addressed together (in a 'joined up way'), and they do not

need to be applied at a national level. They may be viable solutions in this place but not in other places. Local solutions do not always need changes of national policy where they often become lost or removed from local control. One can, for example (and this is a live local issue), develop protocols for removal of abusive tenants from state-owned properties that is worked out locally, without those protocols having to be national protocols applicable everywhere. Nevertheless, local solutions can provide examples or precedents for solutions in other localities.

A key ingredient in a place-based approach is that the 'agents', the people who can bring about a solution, are the residents and workers of that place, rather than agencies from outside the area. As far as the outside agents are concerned, the 'engagement' of the local community (residents and workers) is a requirement for success because they have the local knowledge, local sensitivities, and local networks to make any programme or action effective. Outside agencies are important for their money, their expertise in certain areas, and for their contacts with the wider society. But they lack local knowledge of how things can work, and they lack the particular knowledge of those most affected by any action.

Some of the action for wellbeing is liberating people from the damaging actions of governmental and other outside agencies, some of which is systemic to those agencies. Neighbourhood networks and neighbourhood organizations can often provide that counterforce to dysfunctional public agencies.

The local churches for the most part recruit their members from local residents. In most cases, they live in the local neighbourhood, they use the local shops, the local schools, the local health professionals, and they work close by if they can. They are strategically positioned, then, to engage in a place-based theology of mission that is built on a foundation of familiarity with the local neighbourhood. They are part of the build up of trust among people that is often foundational in the good functioning of society – a key ingredient in 'social capital'. By way of contrast we can note the difference between this local mission activity and that more common in overseas missions where the missionary is unfamiliar and unskilled in local protocols and sensitivities.

3. A strength-based theology of well-being.

A *strength*-based approach to community transformation stands in contrast to a deprivation-based approach. The deprivation-based approach notes and analyses a state of deprivation, then looks for resources from elsewhere to push or pull people out of that bad situation. In its best form this is includes 'consultation' with local community groups.

A strength-based approach acknowledges deprivation in a local community then looks for the strengths of the local community that can contribute directly to local community well-being. Programmes or actions for transformation aim then to be local community led or at least to be co-designed and co-led by members of the local community along with outside agencies. In this it contrasts with programmes and actions fully designed and led by outside agencies whose accountability is to their governing bodies outside this local community and ultimately to the taxpayers or the ratepayers.

Public agencies are often required to show they have 'consulted' the people affected by their actions. But such consultation can be reduced to seeking the views of some selected people from the community followed by a later agency decision on what if anything can be done with this collection of varied and scattered opinions. In theological terms, this is a theology of 'rescue' (a 'redemption' theology of the crudest sort) though it does at least attempt some show of respect for the local people. Nevertheless this kind of 'show' of consultation leads quite quickly to loss of trust and, to that extent, a diminishment of social capital.

A strength-based theology is grounded in belief in the basic goodness and competence of people who make up society. It seeks to empower and enhance that goodness and those gifts. To avoid simple romanticism it needs to include a realistic acknowledgement of evil and wrongdoing. And indeed the state of deprivation is itself at least in part the result of evil. The state of deprivation itself causes evil, disability, diminishment in the lives of the people who live in it. Hence a strength-based theology includes capacity building within the local community in order to counter the already existing effects of diminishment in the local people, their environment, their networks, their family relationships and their community groups. Yet, that capacity building can and should itself be co-designed and co-led from within the local community albeit with outside assistance. Local community groups, including churches, are in a good strategic position to use their own strengths and that of their members to engage in this capacity building.

A theology that believes in the radical corruption of human beings would oppose such a strength-based theology of mission. Similarly a theology that makes a strong distinction between the 'saved' and the 'unsaved' by some obvious criteria such as a profession of Jesus as personal saviour or membership in a Christian church also has difficulty with a strength-based theology of mission. Such theologies are akin to deprivation-based approaches to community development and imply a missiology of 'rescue' rather than of transformation.

4. A theology of 'agency': Who are the agents of transformation?

Who are the agents of this mission, that is, who are the people who bring about this intended transformation? Are some people better as agents of mission than others? Can some people bring it about for others?

Christian theology understands mission as the action of God in the world (*Missio Dei*). But the question asked here is the sense in which human beings may participate in this action of God and so, in that sense, become agents of this mission.

From the point of view of a local church, we may note firstly the different *levels* of agency.

- The 'citizen theologian' may operate simply as a private citizen, or may occupy a position of influence within a community service organization, a government agency, or a private company. The local church needs to recognize such 'citizen theologians' amongst its own members who may require support, encouragement and opportunities for reflection and education.
- The local church itself as missionary operates at a different level from that of the citizen theologian because it requires a community with agreed objectives and mission priorities. As an organized group rather than an individual it may have greater (or lesser where its motives are distrusted) civic or political influence.
- At another level again, an *association* of churches or faith communities in a particular area has a capacity for stronger action and more widespread communication than individual communities on their own, but requires more complex processes for representation, decision-making, and public identity.

An important ingredient in consideration of agency is attention to *cultural sensitivities* in theology and church practice. Churches are often multi-ethnic and sometimes also multi-cultural in their theology and protocols. This may be one of their strengths in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood since they may already have developed skills at cross-cultural communication and be in a position to offer cross-cultural representation in development programmes. To this degree their outreach can be both sensitive and effective in that very delicate area of cultural differences. Where a local church is not multi-ethnic, an association of churches can compensate for this lack in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood. What is important for churches to take account of is that all their church and

mission theology is culture related. The trap for churches is to imagine that their traditional church theology is culturally neutral.

Underlying any attempt at community transformation is the possibility of *alliances* between churches and other agencies that have the same objectives. This does not mean that the objectives will be exactly the same, but that there is sufficient agreement for partnerships to become valuable. Sometimes Christian churches are unwilling to engage in partnerships with non-Christian agencies on the basis that their Christian theology will be watered down or compromised. But if local churches see themselves as agents of transformation, they are not the *only* agents. The 'mission of God' is not just a mission of the churches. It includes other agencies. Local churches need to be actively looking for who those other partner agencies might be.

Deprivation is real and debilitating. I have noted previously that there may be a need to develop the *capacity* of local people to become agents in their own transformation. Such capacity may be such things as self-confidence, communication skills, cross-cultural skills, management ability, and technical expertise. Churches often have such strengths within their members or the ability to organise programmes that can achieve this.

5. A self-critical theology

This consideration of agency brings us to the need for a theology that is self-critical, attentive to its own weaknesses, and prepared to deal with its own failures.

In the course of the enquiry described earlier, some social service agencies offered their own critique of existing church activities and organization:

- Some churches appear to have a control-at-all-costs attitude rather than a 'with and for' approach to other organizations and communities. Churches themselves may need to take steps to be more clearly accountable to their own congregations and to the wider community before dialogue with non-church community organizations can take place in a climate of mutual cooperation and learning.
- The churches should make more use of the expertise and knowledge of local service organizations including resourcing and programmes for the good of their own people.
- Churches could take significant steps to increase awareness of cultural differences and knowledge of cultural protocols in promoting cross-cultural awareness outside their own cultural membership.
- Some local organizations have already approached church leaders with a view to mutual cooperation but with little result.
- Some churches are themselves the cause of deprivation in the area in, for example, their fundraising activities and excessive financial demands on their members.

It appears that, although church members often have need of the skills and services of local community organizations, many church leaders are not alert to directing them towards these resources.

In order for there to be more cooperation between churches and community service organizations, churches may need to attend carefully to the negative ways in which they are sometimes perceived by other local organizations. A self-critical mission theology needs to be attentive to religious dysfunction, particularly to religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, and issues of power and control within the churches themselves.

Conversely, while attending to their own dysfunction, local churches may also need to be respectfully aware of defects within other organizations. Such defects might be problems in the

public service where careerism rather than altruism is rewarded, the principle of a 'flexible' labour force meaning a loss of trust as personnel change jobs and go elsewhere, government agencies working in silos, policies or attitudes that are not place-based, short-term commitments, inaccurate outsider viewpoints on the local community, the strong tendency of government agencies to be risk averse. Churches can then build on their own potential strengths such as local focus, altruism, long-term commitment, multi-ethnic (especially in an association), and the fact that they are largely made up of local people.

Churches along with community service agencies (particularly those that rely on successful funding applications) may have a tendency to inflate their own effectiveness, over-estimate their importance, exaggerate their local connections and over-state their ability to represent the local community. The language of community service organizations is commonly a language of self-promotion. Churches can also operate within the same self-deception where they believe their own rhetoric. A self-critical theology takes note of the differences between intention and practice; it is ready to acknowledge failure, and it is prepared to change. In the medium term it can contribute to a realistic building of trust between churches and other agencies that work within the local community. And ultimately it is directed towards the church's own accountability before God.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted an outline of a local mission theology stimulated by a perceived need for local churches to become involved in action for regeneration of a local area characterized by relative deprivation.

The key features of the missiology outlined here is that it be a theology of *transformation* for wellbeing, that it be *place*-based and *strength*-based, that it give particular attention to issues of *agency*, and that it be *self-critical*.