

## **Mission and Hospitality at Westgate : Re-Visioning 4**

### **A Talk by Rev. Anne Wilkinson-Hayes (Area Minister – Baptist Union of Victoria)**

**Text: Mark 2. 13-22**

I believe that Mission is central to church life. I know that lots of people hate the word because it has associated images of men in pith helmets insisting that African tribes wear trousers, or it makes us think of TV evangelists who make us cringe, but the bottom line is that unless we are making a difference in the lives of men, women and children around us, and in the fabric of human society, then our faith is of little value to us or to God.

For me mission is not something **we** do at all. Mission is what God does. God is constantly at work in the world, touching lives, stirring up imaginations, nurturing compassion, and love, and change, and God invites us to join in that work, and in moving in step with God we become a missional church. We are called into mission because God is missionary, and God's love draws us into an adventure of risk-taking and change-making.

The responses to the first stage of the re-visioning process revealed a very varied understanding of mission here at Westgate. There were some who missed the community projects of the past, and who seemed to feel in their guts that that kind of radical service of the poor was the real thing – class A mission, and that anything less was a bit of a sell-out. There were others who saw the hospitality you are able to offer here as a relevant mission for today, but others were uncertain about putting all our eggs into the attractional – come to us- basket. Some saw our youth work as an important mission of the church, but others felt excluded by that emphasis.

All these perspectives are valid, so the key question is not what would we like to do, but we need to tease out is what is God calling us to do in the next 5 years. Where do we perceive God moving around us in the community and in the wider world, because that is where we should be too.

Lets look at our passage to help us in this task.

The way Mark constructs this passage give us 4 clues about Jesus's priorities in discipleship

**1. We are called to be followers.** 'Follow me' Jesus says to Levi. This is the constant refrain of Jesus to those who inquired of him. Do as I do, live as I live. If we lived like Jesus we wouldn't even be talking about mission, because it would be happening all around us, as it did around him. Jesus changed people's lives by simply engaging with them. He challenged, confronted, healed and transformed people's social circumstances, by incarnating the Kingdom of God in their presence and enabling people to access divine resources. He led the way in

vulnerability and self-sacrifice for others, and offered a wholly new perspective to humanity through his death and resurrection. So if we want to make a difference, we have to look within first. Our spirituality, our sense of God's presence within and without, the inner discipline to keep seeking to make the way of Jesus normative – these are crucial starting points for mission.

If our activity doesn't flow from a sense of gratitude for all that God has done for the world in Jesus then it can get easily diverted into meeting our own needs.

Is Jesus still good news for us? Because if he's not, then we'll find mission very difficult. We need to re-look at Jesus, and let his words and actions inspire and re-energise us afresh.

We are called to be followers, and mission begins from that inner desire to be more like Jesus.

**2. We are called to be those who put the marginalised at the centre.** Jesus is criticized for eating with the tax collectors and other sinners – in the minds of the religious people he was polluting the purity of the Jewish faith by being inclusive of those who dishonoured Yahweh.

Ross preached an excellent sermon last week, so I'm told, on the call to keep the poor at the centre of our life. This is a core value of Jesus' ministry, and has been formative in the life of Westgate. We need to value all that has been done in the past in this community, and give thanks for the prophetic ministry of those who held these values in an even more hostile climate. We must never lose this commitment to social justice in the fabric of this church, but how we express it may need to change, because our life has changed.

This place has changed:

We are no longer in a poor neighbourhood; we are placed in an affluent suburb.

There are still needs here, but they are not as in your face as they once were.

This congregation has changed.

We are a different congregation – we no longer have people with a lot of time to give. 20 years ago there were people here who could make ministry here part of their work, but today people are tied up with demanding careers that consume the majority of energies, or people have got older and frailer. We don't have people who are able to run activities during the day, so whilst some might look back nostalgically to the past and long to do similar things again, we have to get real – who here has the time to start running a playgroup, or develop a lunch club for the elderly? You can't moan and criticize others unless you are willing to give your time. I think the reality is that we cannot sustain that kind of project-based work at this time, but that it not the end of the road.

If we have a commitment to the poor, maybe instead of running our own projects we need to be more supportive of those of others. Maybe there are initiatives locally that we can get involved in – supporting other churches or voluntary groups. Further afield there is the outreach mission in Footscray; the church plant in Altona Meadows lets be helpers rather than initiators for a while. The BUV has

been running 2 appeals for Sudan and for Sudanese refugees. There is an appeal for goods to fill a container to go to Dafur, and there is also an appeal for money to support a loan scheme for airfares to enable refugees to bring the rest of their family out to Australia. Lets be a church that encourages the initiatives of others.

Lets get more involved in campaigning for the poor – in endorsing the Micah Challenge and lobbying the government; in assisting the struggle of the Karen in the camps in Thailand. Such things are not so all consuming, but they are vital.

Others will see in these verses that Jesus sat down and ate with people. The meal table is crucial in the Kingdom of God, and making our tables welcoming is a significant aspect of mission. Westgate has experimented in hospitality as mission over the past couple of years – offering good and generous food to people as symbolic of the generous love of God, at breakfasts, talks, film nights, cabarets, but it's a huge amount of work for a few, and we have not been that good at inviting friends and neighbours to such events.

Maybe we should be thinking about working in smaller groups and helping each other host a meal for neighbours, even a streetparty! A friend of mine in Sydney had a birthday party for her daughter and invited the same number of children as those currently in detention. Each child was given a balloon with the name of a child in detention, and it caught the attention of the press. That is Kingdom hospitality and I'm sure that we have the creativity and imagination here to do even more amazing things! Lets intentionally help one another in making connections with friends and neighbours.

**3. Jesus did not follow religious norms.** He was criticized for not fasting and for not following accepted religious practice, and I think that this is very significant for us today. The world has changed and the way we have inherited church was designed for a different era. Stuff that we used to think was important may not be important for this day. We are encouraged here not to keep doing things just because we have always done them. In the past we have thought about church mission as that which the gathered community does ie what we do together – projects, events etc.

Look at these 3 overheads.

What I think that the YP have discovered is that huge amounts of life-changing stuff is being done by you all during the week.

This is an extraordinary congregation in many ways in that so many are involved in caring professions – teaching, counseling, protecting the environment, social housing and other work that is about making life better for those on the edge. And those who are not working are volunteering in the office, in old people's homes, in helping with shopping and cleaning for others, in looking after children, helping with homework classes and in a host of other ways. Are these things not also the mission of this church? We are serving others because we have been touched by God's grace and want to make life better for others.

I would like to see us affirm this mission – hear more about each other’s work & volunteering and find ways to support each other in being Jesus in the workplace and in our own locality.

Why beat ourselves about trying to do more, without recognizing what is already happening amongst us. This is already a very missional community and we need to celebrate that. Maybe this is a time for doing things differently?

**4. And finally – Jesus echoes the need to do things differently by talking about new wineskins.** The Jewish tradition of his time had got hardened and inflexible – it couldn’t accommodate new ideas and fresh initiatives. I don’t think that Jesus wanted to start a new world religion – he wanted Jewish believers to be marked by graciousness, compassion and openness to new possibilities. He wanted them to move with God’s spirit and be open to the new demands provoked by love. But the religious tradition couldn’t do it.

The challenge to us is how flexible is our religious tradition here? How willing are we to see and do church and mission differently in this time and place? Will we give permission for experimentation? Will we take some risks? Will we refuse to criticize when some ventures fall over?

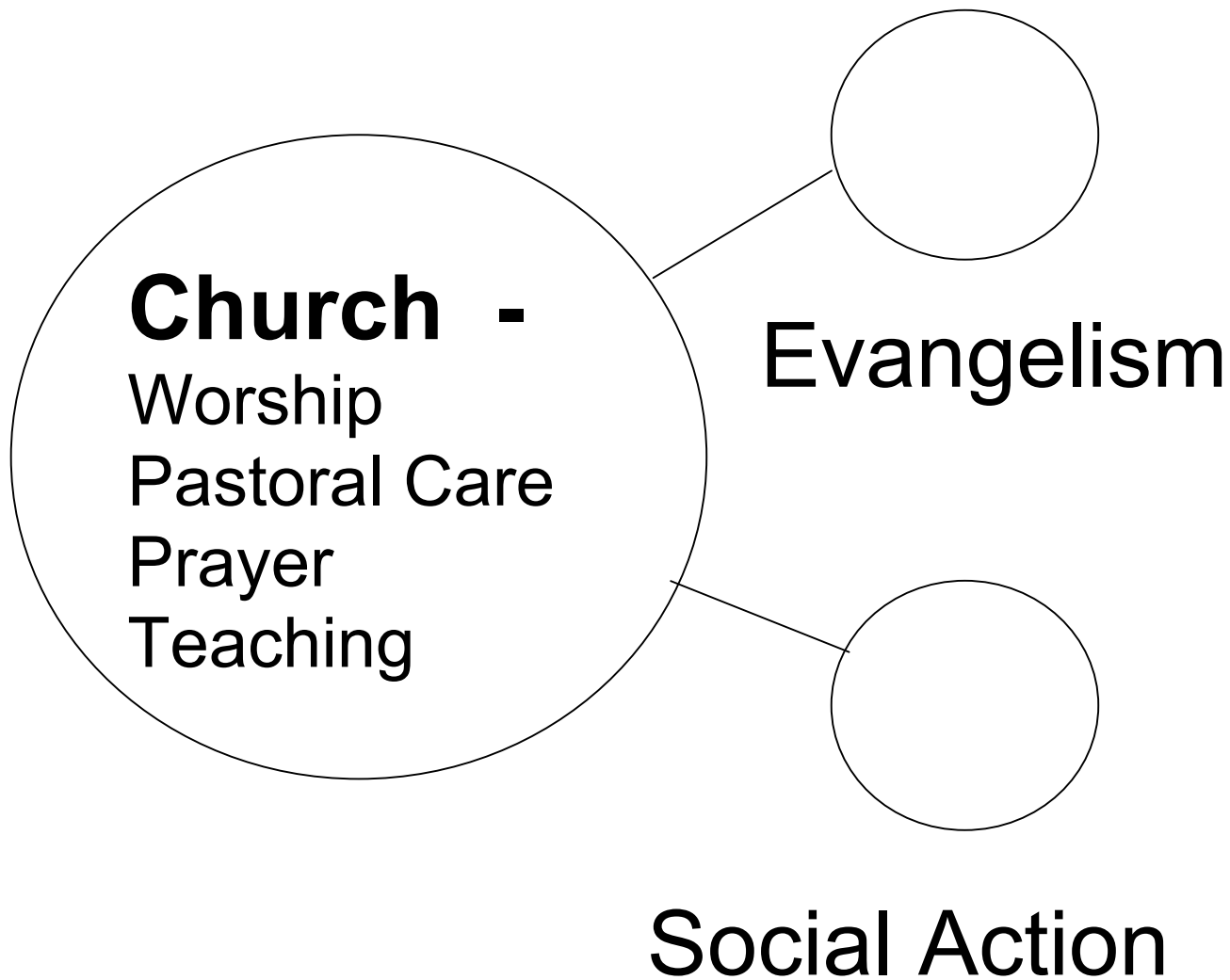
God is calling us to move on, but where is God leading? Given the changes here, what sort of mission do you dream of in the next few years? Where is God working in the community around us? Where is God working in the wider world? Where is God calling us to work with him?

And what about your own commitment to respond to God’s invitation to join in her work of mission? Does your soul respond with gladness, or with apathy? And is it time to do something about that? I think that so many of us live very safe and controlled lives - and there is little room for risking our credibility by talking about our faith, or for taking a risk of faith, and maybe that is the opportunity for growth that God holds out to us?

God is constantly offering new sparkling wine, that fizzes and delights, but it requires a response of open, receptive spontaneity, or the wine will quickly go flat and eventually evaporate. Too much thinking, deliberating, procrastinating kills the spirit and our safe lives harden and shrivel. New wine calls for new and flexible wine skins – how does God find you as a vessel?

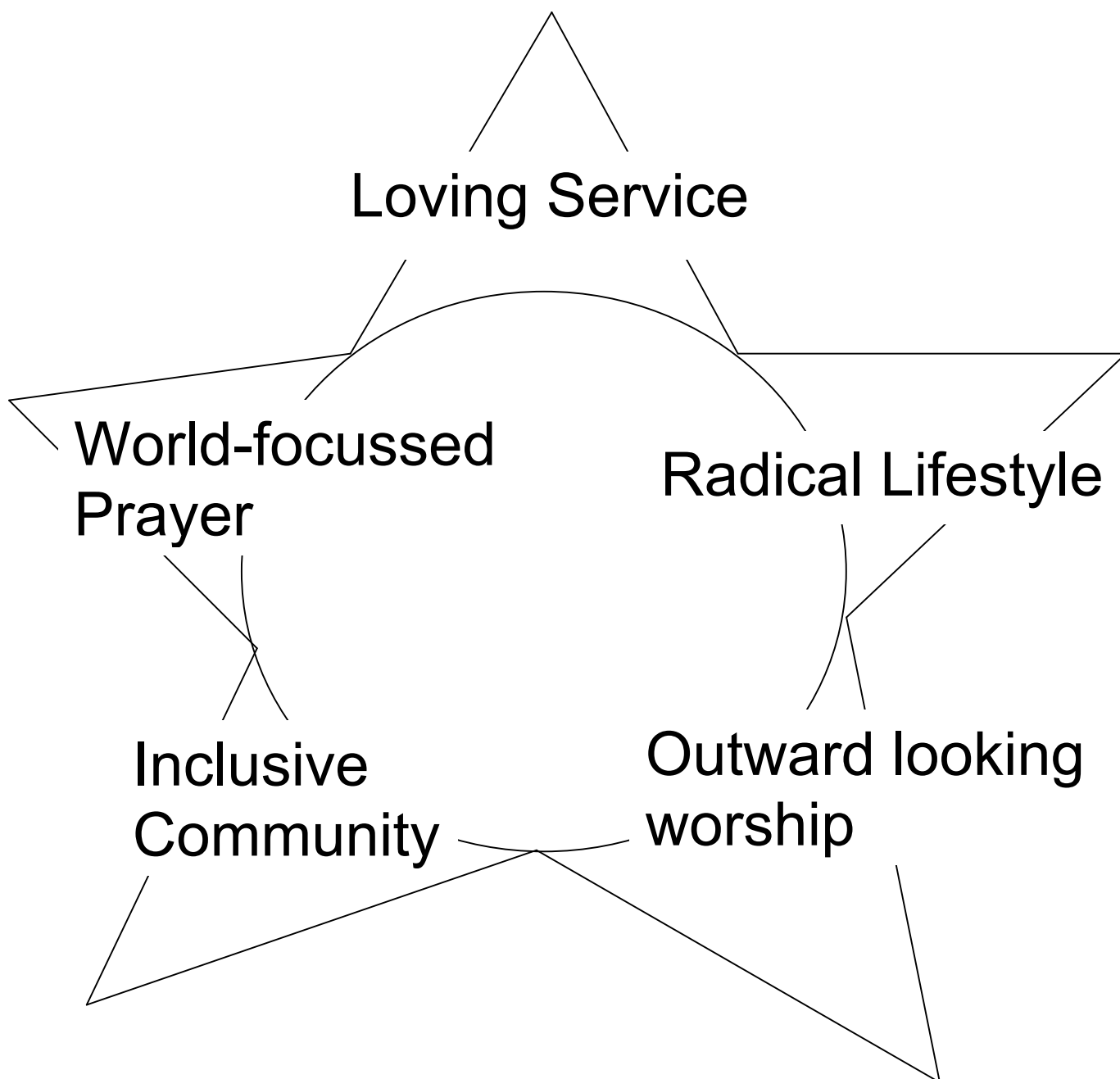
Lets be quiet and listen to some music and you may like to be thinking about the questions on your card.

# Models of Mission 1

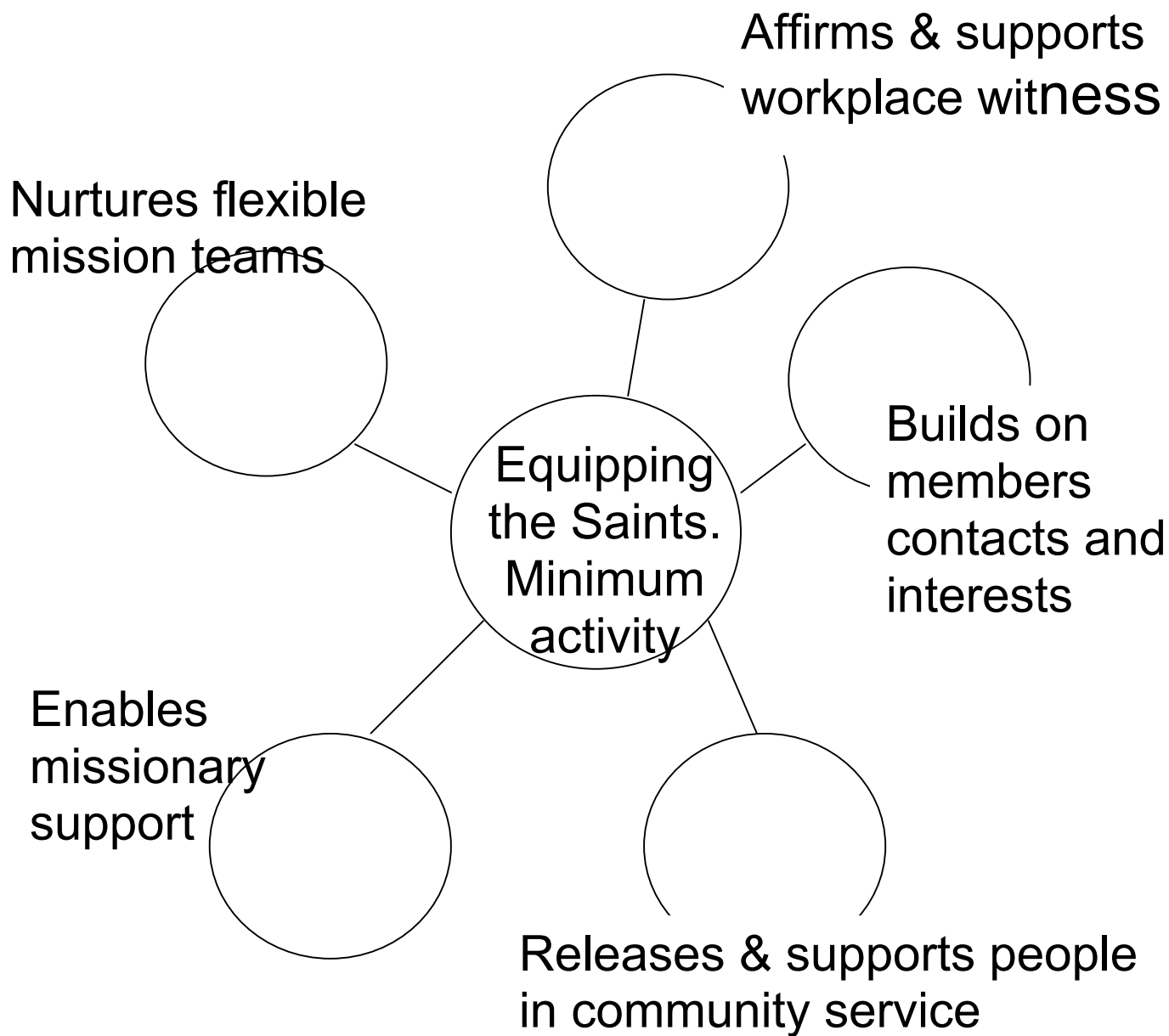


Mission as an activity of  
the Church

# Models of Mission 2



# Models of Mission 3



The Dispersed Church as  
Mission