

# **Why the Church?**

**An Agreed Statement of the Australian Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue**

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## Introduction

In the last ten years, media coverage of 'the church' in Australia has expanded significantly. Even though the coverage inclines towards controversial issues, including the pronouncements of contentious church leaders and the relationship between fundamentalist religious groups and right-wing politics, it seems that the media has discovered unexpected signs of life in the church.

One aspect of this vitality is the role of the Christian church in national public affairs. The infrastructure that church agencies provide for many community welfare programs and the church's involvement in debates on social policies attest to the high level of the church's participation in the life of contemporary Australia. Although the church's profile in such matters is unwelcome to those who believe that all dimensions of the state's activities should be exclusively 'secular', the Australian community at large seems to value the church's commitment to the promotion of justice in social and political life and to service of the poor.

Aspects of the church lacking an overtly political dimension rarely attract media interest, even though they might be thriving. One such area of growth in recent years is the involvement of young people in various religious communities. Many young people approach their faith with considerable fervour, displaying an enthusiasm for vibrant liturgies, a longing for spiritual wisdom, and a willingness to engage with the needs of those living on the margins of our society.

At first glance, it might appear that such developments would not only vanquish any prophets of gloom about the church's present and future, but also render superfluous a document entitled *Why the Church?* The full story of the Christian church in contemporary Australia, however, is not one of unalloyed good news. It is the existence of light and shade in the life of the church that supports the need for this document.

The authors of this document recognise that the indicators of growth in some Christian communities exist alongside the continued waning of identification with what have become known as 'mainstream' or 'traditional' Churches, including the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. Here the harbingers of decay are well known, especially the fact that attendance at Sunday church services, already viewed as primarily the province of the aging, hovers on the verge of single-digit percentages.

Beyond mere figures, however, the burgeoning popularity of marriage by civil celebrants, 'naming' ceremonies for babies, funerals in the form of 'celebrations of life', and a preference for various forms of secular 'spirituality' and pastoral care, all imply a crisis for Churches. These trends suggest that some Christians have either never appropriated or have drifted away from the conviction central to Christianity: that we live our whole life in the context of God's nurturing and saving love, which we receive as a gift that is both beyond our manipulation and a challenge to our priorities. This situation raises serious issues for Anglicans and Roman Catholics concerned to promote the flourishing of their communities in faith and mission.

In response to these developments, some Anglicans and Roman Catholics choose to rage against what they characterise as the selfishness, even 'neo-paganism', of contemporary society. While such critiques emphasise that self-centredness hardens us against the challenging liberation offered by Christian faith, they rarely acknowledge that the attitudes and actions of Christians themselves can fail to manifest an attractive vision of faith lived within the church.

In fact, nothing does more damage to the church than the accusation that its members are hypocrites. The revelations of sexual abuse perpetrated by ordained ministers, as well as some flawed responses to that abuse by those in authority in the churches, have fuelled that accusation in recent years.

The sexual abuse issues have deepened the perception of the church's hypocrisy. That perception, however, will always have currency as long as the Churches remain divided while proclaiming that unity is an irreducible dimension of Christian faith. In addition, the divisions between the Churches are a constant source of frustration for those who hunger for a church able to model reconciliation to a divided world. Although many milestones have been reached in the journey to full communion among Christians, continued division damages the church's witness in a world that itself knows too well the cost of fragmentation.

Perceptions of hypocrisy lead many of our contemporaries, who might consider Jesus appealing, to reject contact with 'the church'. People in this group are likely to contrast Jesus and the church: Jesus is inviting, generous, and forgiving; the church is unattractive, self-absorbed, and judgmental. Unlike Jesus, the church, viewed as comfortable, middle-class, and untouched by the pain of life, seems to have little empathy for people in difficult personal situations. That perception often expresses alienation from multiple aspects of the church: its structures, traditions, and ethical teachings, as well as its style of language and forms of worship.

As if all of the above were not enough, even those who maintain a connection with the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches can struggle to be truly at home in their Church. For Roman Catholics, this struggle often centres on how to reconcile a searching or questioning faith with their Church's doctrines and structures of authority. Equally, there has been a struggle for Anglicans in recent times over the maintenance of unity within their communion.

In such circumstances, some members of the Churches experience others within their own 'family of faith' as unwilling to listen, let alone to enter into respectful dialogue. Similar tensions in the Churches also arise over contemporary social issues - the environment, war, government accountability, industrial relations, and issues of gender and sexuality.

Taken together, the features described above highlight why contemporary Australians might question the value of seeking or maintaining a connection with the church. *Why the Church?* will address that issue. *Why the Church?* is a document written jointly by members of the Australian Anglican—Roman Catholic Dialogue (AustARC). From the common faith of their different traditions, the authors of this document seek to articulate a positive appreciation of the Christian church in today's Australia.

## Chapter One

### The Church: The Living Memory of Jesus

The church matters because it is the living memory of Jesus. The church is the community that tells the story of Jesus today. In spite of all its tragic failures, its human limitations, and the terrible sins committed in its name, the church embodies the story of Jesus.

The church proclaims and witnesses to Christ and to the great biblical narrative that moves from creation to final salvation. The church holds, proclaims, and passes on Jesus' preaching of the reign of God, his command to love the enemy, his healing ministry, his priority for the poor and the sinner, his challenge to the wealthy and to the religious establishment, his formation of a community of disciples, and his life-giving death and resurrection.

To say that the church is the *living* memory of Jesus is to say that, like the memorial (*anamnesis*) at the heart of the Eucharist, it not only recalls the past, but also acts in the present and anticipates the future. The church tells the story of Jesus not simply as a reminder of what happened two thousand years ago, but as a story that brings forgiveness, healing, and liberation in the present. It is a story for this place and time, a story of grace and hope, a story that challenges us to live the way of the Kingdom in the here and now. This story goes on in our lives and in our time. And it is a story of resurrection, the promise and the beginning of the future when we and, with us, the whole of creation will be taken up and transformed in Christ.

Without the church and its Scriptures, the *living* memory of Jesus would disappear from the earth. Of course, there would still be a historical record of Jesus of Nazareth. He could still be remembered as an important religious leader. Without the church, however, there would be no access to the *living* memory of Jesus. There would be no community to mediate his presence and action now, no community to witness to, and to participate in, his future transformation of all things. Although the Spirit of God is mysteriously at work in creation and in the lives of all human beings, it is through the church and its Scriptures that we have access to God's explicit self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. Through the church, we encounter the Word made flesh; we meet Jesus who is the human face of God in our midst.

The story of Jesus embodied in the church matters. It is a story of God's self-bestowal to us. It tells of God's compassionate, healing, liberating love, of Jesus' faithful love to the point of death, of death transformed with Easter life, and of the Spirit poured out upon the church. It is a story that promises that we, and the universe we inhabit, will be transfigured in Christ. The church exists to witness to this story. The story of Jesus is not simply remembered in the church: it lives in the church, even in the church's brokenness.

#### The Church as the Place of Encounter with Jesus

In John's Gospel, we find a beautiful story of the encounter between Mary Magdalene and the risen Christ. Jesus calls Mary by name, she recognises him, addressing him as *Rabbouni* (Teacher). Then, Jesus says to Mary: 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to

the Father (John 20:17). In her encounter with the risen one, Mary must learn to let go of the old way of being with Jesus. Mary, however, is also sent to report to the disciples the message of the risen Lord: 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary, a faithful witness and, as she was later called, 'apostle to the apostles' goes to the other disciples and announces: 'I have seen the Lord' (John 20:17-18).

Radically transformed by the resurrection, Jesus is no longer to be encountered as he was in his ministry. From now on, he is to be met in a new way: in the Spirit, Jesus is present in the life of the community, above all in Word and Sacrament. The risen Christ is always with the church (Matt 28:20). As Christians, we encounter him on the road of our daily lives (Luke 24:31). He is with us when two or three gather in his name (Matt 18:20). We meet him when we listen to his Word and receive the Eucharist from his table. It is the risen Christ who opens the Scriptures for us and breaks the bread. Through the gift of the Spirit, we are transformed in him (2 Cor 3:18).

### **The Whole Christ**

Jesus did not act simply as an individual. He called a community of men and women together to participate in his life. They were to share with him a ministry that involved preaching the good news, bringing healing, proclaiming forgiveness, reaching out to embrace the poor and outcast, and celebrating inclusive meals that anticipated the coming Kingdom. After his death, they encountered him again as the risen one who brings life and who calls them to go out as his witnesses to the world.

The church springs from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This community, formed in the Spirit, embodies Jesus' life-giving death and resurrection, which the community also preaches to the world. Through the witnessing community, the transforming power of the resurrection can be proclaimed as good news for the world. The community of the church called together in the Spirit is the expression in our world of the resurrection of the crucified.

The Spirit makes us into the Body of Christ. We are made one in Christ through baptism: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). The Spirit is given to each disciple in a particular way for the good of the whole community (1 Cor 12:4-11). In all of our diversity we make up the whole Christ: 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ' (1 Cor 12:12).

By participating in the Eucharist, we are brought into profound communion with each other: 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Cor 10:16-17). Every Eucharist is an event of communion not only with Christ, but also with each other. It is an anticipation of our final sharing with all things in the communion of the Holy Trinity. As St. Augustine expresses it:

If, therefore, you are the Body of Christ and his members, you will find your own mystery set on the Lord's table. It is your own mystery that you receive. You say 'Amen to that which you are, and by replying you give your consent. You hear 'The Body of Christ' and you reply 'Amen. Be a member of the Body of Christ that your 'Amen' may be true. (*Sermon 272*)

We are what we receive: the Body of Christ. We are the Body of Christ in the world. The Christian community, transformed by listening to the Word of God and sharing the Eucharist, is called to be the sign and the agent of the compassionate and healing love of God. God depends upon the members of the church to be Christ to the world: 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it' (1 Cor 12:27).

The real answer to the question 'Why the church?' is that God has chosen to reveal Godself to the world in an incarnate way. The Word is made *flesh* in Jesus of Nazareth. This is shocking enough for those who ponder it. But God has gone much further. Today, the Word of God, the risen Christ, is present in and revealed through the church. And this is not through some ideal church, but in the church as it is: composed of finite, human beings, wonderfully made in the image of God, but still marked by limitations and sin. As a church, we hold in vessels of clay the treasure that is God revealed in the face of Jesus (2 Cor 4: 7).

To embrace the risen Christ fully, it is necessary to risk embracing his community. To do so, is to risk all that human communities can do to us. They can inspire, but they also bring real disappointment and pain; we will feel let down, just as we let others down. To enter wholeheartedly into a human community is to commit oneself to what is beyond one's control. Yet the invitation of God is to embrace this community, to risk the embrace, because it is at the heart of this community, in all its humanity, that we find the living Christ.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Why Belong?**

Human life is essentially social. We are fundamentally interpersonal beings; we are always in relationship with other human beings and the rest of creation. Our individuality is shaped by this context. Since we do not live in isolation, our connection to others affects every aspect of our identity, including our interior life. In a culture that stresses individualism and competition, the social dimension of life is often lost or played down. Nonetheless, it remains true that the desire to belong, to know others and to be known by them, is inseparable from the richest experiences of our humanity.

Christian faith too is radically social. Indeed, Christians believe that human communion finds its source in the Trinity, a loving communion of the three-person God. Accordingly, the Scriptures, from the creation narratives - 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Gen 2:18) - to the parables of Jesus - such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) - highlight the social implications of identifying God as the giver of life. To share in the divine life is to share in the life of all those who also share in that divine life.

The faith journey, therefore, is a shared journey. The mystery of God is revealed to us as a mystery of communion and we are called to respond to God in a communal way. Through the history of Israel, God established covenants with the people, not with a myriad of individuals. To be part of the covenant was to be part of the faith community with whom it was made. Similarly, Jesus called together a community of disciples, called them to a relationship with him and with each other. 'Discipling' and 'belonging' go together.

The New Testament describes as 'church' the community of believers, the body of which Jesus is the head (Col 1:18). This community is not simply a random gathering of people; it is a gathering of believers integrated through baptism into communion with the risen Christ. The community is alive, sharing the gifts and experiences of its individual members, and calling them to account for the responsibilities their membership entails. The Christian community discerns and expresses common values, nurtures practices that foster and support Christian living, and reinforces members in their identity as followers of Jesus. In and through the community, we encounter Christ in word and sacrament and are called to live as disciples in our daily lives.

The church is always more than the particular group of Christians alive at this moment. The church is also the present incarnation of our Christian past, as it has been lived and handed down over history. It is through the Church that we come into contact with the living faith of those believers who have gone before us. The church is embodied history; it brings present-day believers into contact with the ways in which Christians of other times and cultures have understood and expressed their faith. Membership of the church, therefore, can free us from the limits, the narrowness, of our immediate experience; it offers us a broader and deeper perspective on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

A community of faith develops structures, practices and regulations that help it live the life of faith and reflect a particular religious culture. These shared understandings guide the faith

community of today in developing a living and authentic response to the love of God expressed in Jesus. The great spiritual figures of the past were not individualists: their growth in faith was nurtured and nourished by the communities of faith to which they belonged or which they founded. Through this common life, they came to a greater intensity and depth in their faith than they would have done alone. The generations that have gone before us witness to the conviction that we can live the Christian life more richly and more fully within a community of faith than is possible in isolation.

The emphasis on community is not to play down the personal religious experience of the individual, but to foster it and support it. Membership of the community of faith can also help to prevent personal experience from succumbing to eccentricities and subjectivism. It reminds us of the objectivity of the event of salvation, of the fact that God is not a product of our own construction. This is not only an affirmation that our interdependence extends to our life in God, but also a reminder of the value of the checks and balances that come from being in community.

As Christian life is shared, the worship of God is also shared. The liturgy of the church is the common worship of the whole Body of Christ as a covenanted people. Eucharist is the covenant meal in which we share in the fundamental mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, which gives us our identities as Christians. The link between Jesus' death and the covenant underlines the essentially social nature of the invitation that comes to us from God through Jesus. We are a covenanted people; we belong to this group of fellow believers. As a eucharistic rite in the Anglican Prayer Book for Australia, drawing on the liturgical forms described in the *Didache*, an ancient Christian text on prayer and discipleship, reminds us:

As this broken bread was once many grains,  
which have been gathered together and made one bread:  
so may your Church be gathered  
from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.

The Eucharist, as the covenant meal, brings us into contact with the self-giving of Jesus, which establishes the new covenant. When we accept the Lord's invitation to eat and drink together, we commit ourselves to the covenant instituted by Christ. This common sharing in the mystery of salvation through word and sacrament signals our belonging to a covenant people. The Eucharist is an event of grace in which divisions are overcome and we are brought into a communion that is the taste and promise of our ultimate communion in God.

The mission of the assembled community is to reach out to others as agents of reconciliation and healing. This mission challenges Anglicans and Roman Catholics to work tirelessly for the full communion demanded by the Eucharist, rather than to be content with the continuation of their divisions.

The church remains a broken body: it is an earthen jar that contains great treasure (2 Cor 4:5-7). Our sense of belonging can be limited by hurtful experiences and unchristian treatment. Whether it be offence given or taken, the result can be to weaken our sense of belonging, and distance us from the community of faith. Even though this is understandable, we need to acknowledge the fragility of the church and its humanness, and yet strive to look at it with the eyes of faith, to see and to rejoice in the treasure that it embodies in the fullest possible way.



## Chapter Three

### The Humanity of the Christian Community

And the Word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'. (Matt 1:23)

It is in and through the humanity of Jesus that God is fully present to us and known by us. God did not spurn our company, nor merely send messages from heaven. Rather, God embraced and affirmed humanity in love, grace, and truth, calling us back into right relationship. God chose to take on human flesh and live among us in our world, even while we were yet far off from God. If God regards humanity as precious and worthy of God's love and grace, then we are to do no less.

Since Jesus' death and resurrection, the Spirit makes present the risen Christ in the community of believers. As the Body of Christ, the church is called to be the presence of God in the world, in and through its human life. This calling is dynamic; it is a calling to 'be transformed' more and more into Christlikeness (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18), as individuals and in our lives together in gathered community. In and through our humanity, we come to know the love, forgiveness, and grace of God, and to mediate God to each other and the wider world.

The church is ambiguous in the way it lives out its calling. The church is at times capable of great deeds, able to shape world events for good: it offers people support, guidance, vision and encouragement; it offers signs of life and hope. Nor is it difficult to find among members of the church examples of inspired leadership, outstanding behaviour, and unswerving commitment to the gospel. At other times and places, the church seems to be riddled with the same malaise as the society with which it is intertwined; members of the church can display petty human attitudes, ambitions and divisions.

In the church's history there are examples of inadequate, even deplorable, leadership, unworthy behaviour, and great inconsistency among its members. What is often apparent in the church is the gap between the message that it preaches and the limits, failings, ignorance, or hypocrisy of those who are the bearers of this message.

The humanity of the church, then, speaks of both our capacity to mediate God to others and of our inadequacies and failings. What is important is that both individual Christians and the Christian community as a whole are aiming toward being a compassionate, merciful, forgiving, and grace-filled presence in history, that they seek to journey with God in their life together.

While the Holy Spirit works in the Christian community and in the hearts of all believers, the reality of human sin shows that we are not always open to the Spirit. At times, we let the glory of the gospel message shine through; at other times, we obscure it by our inadequate living of that same gospel. Our transformation in the Spirit is a lifelong process through different stages of faith.

This process of transformation is a communal activity, and not merely an individual Christian's journey. The church is constituted to be a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), within a new covenant

(Luke 22:20), following a new commandment (John 13:34). We do not become human in isolation. Nor can we be re-created in isolation. As the community of the new creation, the church has a part to play in reconstructing us as a people whose relationships are based on a new foundation in Christ.

We are all too aware of the terrible violence that results from religious and political intolerance, fear, and exclusion. Such human habits, so ingrained in our natures and societies, belong to the old creation. Jesus established a new creation, a new society founded on God's love and forgiveness offered to all. In this new creation, all the boundaries of exclusion have been broken (Gal 3:28). Peter comes to understand this in Acts 10 as he discerns the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality' (vv 34ff). In the new creation, our identities should not be forged over against each other, as if we were rivals. Rather we are all included in God's free grace. We need not compete for this grace, just as we can do nothing to earn it.

Standing on our foundation in Christ, the source of our being, makes a difference to the kinds of human beings we are to become. Belonging to the church as the community of the new creation is meant to cultivate new habits and characteristics of the new humanity. The exercise of authentic compassion, for example, if it is to be more than an idle notion that we dream about when sitting in our lounge chair at home, must be learned, practised, and given and received in relationship with others. The foundation of our compassion with others rests on the compassion of God in Christ, who dwelt among us full of grace and truth. Even in the face of abandonment, betrayal and death, God in the risen Christ offered humanity forgiveness and peace. This same Christ remains present to us in the Holy Spirit.

Gathering together for Eucharist is a way of cultivating the habit of thankfulness for this gift. The Eucharist also helps us to learn to be really and gracefully present to others, which is central to being renewed people of God. The Eucharist reminds us that our lives are constituted by God's grace, through which we receive the freedom to let go of old ways, and the freedom to go into the world 'thankfully and with courage', as the Anglican eucharistic rite expresses the mission of the church.

The Holy Spirit forms the church, in its humanness, to be a reflection of Christ and a sign of God's presence in the world. This is the calling and privilege of the church. Accordingly, the church is to hold itself accountable before God and the wider human community when it falls short of its high calling. Even in its divided and faulty state, however, the humanity of the Christian community is to be loved and taken seriously, while being called to repentance. We are to act towards each other, in the Christian community and beyond, with no less love than God displayed towards us in Christ.

## Chapter Four

### Sent into the World

Being sent is an integral part of both Roman Catholic and Anglican liturgy. The Mass itself derives its name from the final words of the Latin service (*Ite, missa est*), which send out the gathered congregation into its work and worship in the world. The Holy Communion services in the Anglican Church conclude with the prayer: 'Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory'. The liturgical rites in both traditions also include the exhortation: 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'. Indeed, good liturgy will help those participating to make the connection between their Sunday lives and their Monday lives, between being gathered and being sent.

Mission, then, is as much the daily sending of every Christian into the ordinariness of life as it is about the sending of missionaries to foreign lands. All Christians are sent to bear witness to the reality of the reign of God by the way they live. There will be times when this mission requires Christians to speak explicitly about Jesus; it will always require them to live according to the way of Jesus. The witness of Christian living cannot be ignored or underestimated.

Christians are sent, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim and live the kingdom of God in the world, working for justice and the welfare of all. This mission has its ultimate foundation in the one God, the Maker of heaven and earth, and the belief that all people are created in the divine image and are answerable to that one God alone.

God's purposes for humanity unfold throughout the Bible: God restores and renews creation after the intrusion of human sin. God's mission came to a climax by sending Jesus who lived as one of us, died for us, and was raised for us. Through the risen Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit to give us the new life and purpose that God has achieved in Christ. The disciples of Jesus are sent to be a light to the nations, to be a healing presence among their neighbours (Luke 10), and to baptise and teach in Christ's name until he returns (Matt 28).

Indeed, each of the Gospels ends with the challenge to mission: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Matt 28:19); 'Go, tell his disciples and Peter ...' (Mark 16:7); 'Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations' (Luke 24:47); 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21). Other texts of the New Testament witness to the ways in which these mandates shaped the ministry and mission of the early church, just as they continue to shape the church today.

Christians are called to lead authentic lives that are attractive to those around them. Jesus wants the renewed people of God to be like a city built on a hill, drawing in others who would also give glory to our Father in heaven (Matt 5:16). The apostle Paul reminds the Corinthians that believers are to be the 'aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved' (2 Cor 2:15). Similarly, the apostle Peter reminds his readers that others should be won over by the quality of

Christians' lives (1 Pet 3:1-6), by the fact that they conduct themselves 'honourably among the Gentiles' (1 Pet 2:12). Just as the witness of the earliest Christian community generated the 'goodwill of all the people' (Acts 2:47), our behaviour today ought to be an 'ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour' (Titus 2:10).

In both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, the recognition of the missionary vocation of each baptised person has always accompanied a stress on the missionary activity of the church as a whole. Indeed, both communions draw inspiration from the great missionary figures of the church before the Reformation: St Patrick, from Wales, who brought the gospel to the Irish in the fifth century; St Augustine of Canterbury, a Roman, who was sent by Pope Gregory the Great to evangelise the English in the sixth century; St Boniface, a Briton, who evangelised the Saxons and the Frisians in the eighth century.

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, there was a long history of missionary journeys from Europe to many parts of the Americas, Asia, and Africa. In recent years, Christians have become more critically aware of the ways in which some of this missionary activity was intertwined with European colonialism. This awareness has sparked new models of engagement that aim to inculturate or contextualise the gospel through listening, service, and liturgical expressions that are attentive to local cultural forms and respectful of all God's children.

Mission has as its ultimate goal the gathering of God's people into a new creation, where righteousness shall dwell (2 Pet 3:13). At the same time, it has a more immediate goal of serving the kingdom of God in this world so that the peace, love, and justice of God may reign in daily life: 'The Church serves the Kingdom by establishing communities and founding new particular Churches and by guiding them to mature faith and charity in openness towards others, in service to individuals and society, and in understanding and esteem for human institutions' (Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* [1990], n 20). We are sent out, having been gathered as the people of God, the Body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, to honour God with prayer, worship, praise and thanksgiving, and to honour our sisters and brothers in Christ with mutual service, encouragement, and edification.

In response to both the Great Commission to love God and our neighbour (Matt 22:34-40) and the Great Commandment to make disciples of the whole world (Matt 28:19), mission must address every part of human life. It includes, therefore, the appeal to individuals to turn to Christ and repent of their sins. Believers are to be ready with a 'defence for the hope that is within them' (1 Pet 3:15), but to do so with 'gentleness and reverence' (1 Pet 3:16), so that their conduct might confirm their confession of faith. We are sent as Jesus was sent: to serve God's kingdom through responding to physical needs and speaking words of life and hope. We are to point others to God's work of calling all people into his kingdom (1 Cor 1:26-31).

## Afterword

The church is not an 'optional extra' for the disciples of Jesus. It is an integral part of God's revelation in Jesus. It is through the church that the mystery of our Risen Lord in all its fullness comes to us today.

However, the church is not only the object of our faith; it is also the test of our faith. In the Incarnation, God chose to come to us in human nature. This mode of communication remains the medium of God's actions. In the human nature of Jesus, we see a model for all to pursue. In the human natures that are the church, such a model can often be difficult to find.

Perhaps the church is the chief expression of the principle that God's ways are not our ways. We would not have done it this way. Yet our response to God is not to improve on the divine means of communication, but to try to understand and respond to how God chose to come to us. The words of Augustine come to mind: 'The one who serves you best is not he who listens for what he wants to hear, but the one who shapes his life according to what he hears.' (*Confessions*, book 10, chapter 26)

The church is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship. We cannot ignore it. The thoughts contained in this agreed statement challenge us to embrace the church as central to our journey to God in Jesus.

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