

## **Discerning the Missio Dei in a Local Church's Engagement with Its Community**

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### **Abstract**

While theologies of missio Dei and their divergent missiological developments have been refined and contested in the academy over the past seven decades, the theoretical discussions and even the term itself are still far from commonplace in the life and discourse of many local congregations. Nonetheless, among such congregations there are examples of changing practice and new modes of local mission engagement that seem to be in alignment with aspects of a missio Dei orientation. In this article the experience of one congregation will be considered, asking whether a missio Dei perspective might be discerned in recent initiatives and developments in its engagement with its local community.

### **Keywords**

Missio Dei – local church – missional orientation – Māori and church – Māngere – postcolonial

### **1 Church, but not as you know it**

Visitors who arrive at Māngere Baptist Church in South Auckland expecting to attend a conventional church service are either startled or delighted (or both) by what they find. They don't get far into the building before being gathered warmly into the clamor of welcomes, hugs and kisses as people arrive and move around the room greeting each other. Slipping in unobtrusively at the back is not an option because the seating is arranged in a shallow U-configuration, so that those who gather both see and are seen by everyone else. There are Pacific mats on the floor and children rummage through a big box of toys or are already busy with paper and crayons. In due time (but probably not at the advertised start time of 4.30pm)

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someone stands, a hush falls, and solemn words ring out in te reo Māori (the language of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand). If visitors are present the *whaikōrero* (speech) will probably be followed by an explanation in English of its elements, that include acknowledging God, greeting the dead and the living, welcoming the visitors, and declaring the purpose of the gathering. The speaker might be *tangata whenua* (indigenous “people of the land”) or *pākehā* (non-Māori), such as its English pastor, John Catmur, who has become a fluent speaker of te reo Māori.<sup>1</sup> Again, someone stands, and this time the congregation stands with her and joins in as she begins a *waiata* (song) in Māori in support of the speaker, perhaps reaffirming or extending something that has been said. There are no words to follow on a screen or in a printed order of service as the *waiata* will have been chosen in the moment as seemed appropriate, but most of the congregation seems to know it.

As the service continues, many voices are heard, with news shared, prayers offered, and songs in Māori, English and other languages reflecting the diversity of the congregation. But whereas it might be the use of te reo Māori or aspects of Māori *tikanga* (customs) that first strike the visitor, the deeper impression that they carry away might well be that this church loves and cares deeply about the Māngere community, among whom most of them live or work. Furthermore, there is an unmistakable conviction that God also loves Māngere and is at work by the Spirit to bring salvation and wholeness to that community. This might be detected in the news that people bring, the concerns they share, and especially in their prayers. Indeed, “open prayer” is often the climax of the service, inspired by the teaching brought by the pastor or another member of the congregation, or, informed by input, in place of a sermon, from people who may not necessarily profess a Christian faith but who know and serve Māngere and its people, and have insights to share into the nature of the community and what is involved in

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<sup>1</sup> The story of John Catmur’s commitment to the Māori language is told in a recent documentary film, “John the Baptist” <https://loadingdocs.net/johnthebaptist/>.

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working for its well-being. With such an emphasis, a visitor might expect to hear of a profusion of programs and community services offered by the church, particularly because this community is often characterized as disadvantaged and needy, but there is surprisingly little. Rather, there might be news of what other groups or agencies are doing, with the encouragement to pray for them and, if appropriate, to join them in it. Or occasionally the church building might be empty at the time of the regular weekly gathering because the members are elsewhere, learning, relating, worshipping and serving in partnership with other churches or groups in the community.

## **2 Discerning the *missio Dei***

To what extent does the life and practice of that local Baptist church reflect a *missio Dei* orientation? In the wake of the upheaval of World War II, and chastened by the growing critique of Western mission's association with the colonial enterprise, an International Missionary Conference was convened in Willingen, Germany. Its stated purpose was to consider "The Missionary Obligation of the Church." What emerged from the presentations and discussion was, however, a different emphasis and orientation. The conference affirmed that mission is God's in its source, purpose and realization. The effect was to displace the church from its central place at both the start and the end of mission. Although it was not used in the conference statement, the expression *missio Dei* quickly came into use to capture that reorientation: "The final and real goal of the *missio Dei* ... is not the Church, but the establishment of God's kingdom, to which the Church as *ecclesia viatorem* is on its way" (Andersen 1961:304). The recognition that God's mission both precedes and operates beyond the church's involvement in that mission has profound implications for the church's understanding of her role and the mode of her engagement in mission, and also for how human history beyond the story of the church might be interpreted in terms of God's salvific purpose.

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Divergent trajectories of theological and missiological development emerged even in the reports of the Willingen conference and they continue to be contested (Andersen 1961:306-09; Newbigin 1995:18; Engelsviken 2003). Van Gelder and Zscheile express it thus:

Should the *missio Dei* be understood primarily in relation to God's work of redemption and thereby see the church as the primary way in which God works in the world – a specialized way of understanding God's work in the world? Or should the *missio Dei* be understood as the broader agency of God in relation to all creation and God's continuing care of that creation – a generalized way of understanding God's work in the world? (2011:35)

They go on to categorize this “generalized” understanding as “a secular version of the *missio Dei*” (2011:36; cf. Andersen 1961:308). Such binary thinking requires development and application of a *missio Dei* perspective to proceed in a linear fashion along one or other of the two trajectories that they identify. Accordingly, they find frustrating inconsistency in the practical expressions of *missio Dei* represented in the book *Missional Church* (Guder 1998). They ask, “Which version of the *missio Dei* did the authors of *Missional Church* propose?” (2011:54) and, in the absence of a clear option for one or the other, they are critical of the “inadequately developed concepts, unresolved theological issues, and unexplored themes.” “Confusion tends to reign,” they lament, “where a lack of precision resides” (2011:60).

While acknowledging the concern to speak rightly of God and God's mission, such treatment of the idea of *missio Dei* and the enactment that it catalyzes is vulnerable to the critique offered by Carmen Rae Lansdowne:

The concept *missio Dei* was intended to liberate theology of mission from its tendency to reinforce the systems and structures of colonialist oppressors. But the failure of *missio Dei* was that for the second half of the

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twentieth century, it only incorporated the worldviews and the theological perspectives of american and european<sup>2</sup> theologians who, at best, saw multiculturalism and an ethic of tolerance as ‘far enough’ in addressing contextual inequity. Rather than give up on the concept as Wickeri and others argued - I believe that we are now closer than ever to being able to articulate some of the divine mystery which we contemplate through *missio Dei* as a theological construct. From an indigenous perspective, *missio Dei* must incorporate nonbinary/nondualist approaches to our theologizing - there is no ‘right way’ to define god’s mission. It must also be grounded in right action - towards the earth, towards each other, towards our histories, stories, cultures and values. If *missio Dei* is captured, not as a systematic concept, but as a constructive call to right action and is expressed in all the wondrous diversity of the world (stories, songs, art, the natural world, theology, liturgy, preaching and prayer, to name a few), our relationships will benefit from it and we may, with god’s grace, be transformed towards liberation and justice. (2016:220)

For the present enquiry into whether a *missio Dei* orientation might be discerned in the life and practice of a particular local church, this is a valuable corrective. We shall not proceed primarily by analyzing written or oral articulations of the church’s theology and polity, looking for a definition of *missio Dei*, locating it within one or another stream of theological development and asking how it has been translated into practice. In fact, the term *missio Dei* is not found in the church’s literature and is rarely, if ever, heard in its gatherings for worship, learning or decision making. Rather, we shall consider some examples of the decisions, actions and practices that have become characteristic of the church in recent years and ask whether and

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<sup>2</sup> Lower case proper nouns and adjectives in the original.

how they correspond to aspects of a *missio Dei* orientation. Is mission understood to begin in God, not the church, and find its goal not only in the building of the church but in God's saving intention for the world? Is it experienced as the work of God by God's Spirit, not only through the church but also beyond and before the church's involvement in that mission? Does its immersion in God's mission take ownership of mission away from the church and free it to recognize others as co-participants in what God is doing? Insofar as the articulation of a *missio Dei* perspective in the mid-twentieth century represented a response to the emerging postcolonial critique of the modern western missionary enterprise, how might such a re-orientation work out in that local context? This, then, does not set out to be an evaluation of a local church's stated theological stance; it is an attempt to discern and describe theologically certain dispositions and assumptions that might be revealed in that church's decisions, practice and ethos.

### **3 Mission beyond the church**

The "Copernican revolution in the discipline of missiology" (Van Gelder and Zscheile 2018:177) captured in the term *missio Dei* had its counterpart in the recent history of Māngere Baptist Church. Founded fifty years earlier in what was then an outer-Auckland suburb, it had become a flourishing local church with a growing membership, successful programs, and a vision for mission both local and international. As the area underwent profound demographic change, however, the church experienced numerical decline and faced challenges concerning its identity and purpose. By 2014 the church had reached crisis point. The group of members, already small, had shrunk further during a period of pastoral vacancy and questions were asked about whether it was feasible for the church to continue. What emerged from many discussions and much prayer was a shared conviction that if God had a purpose for that church in that place it was not primarily about meeting their own needs for nurture, pastoral care and involvement

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in Christian activity: that purpose could be served quite easily by dispersing and joining other, apparently better resourced churches that offered more attractive programs and did not seem to demand so much of so few. As one member put it, “If God wants Māngere Baptist Church to continue it is not for the sake of the church, it is for the kingdom of God in this community.” Increasingly, discussion came to focus less on how the church could keep going and more on how that small group of Jesus followers could discern and fulfill their part in God’s saving, transforming activity in that locality. With that disposition, the decision was made to call a pastor who was willing to come on a part-time salary to join and lead that group in looking beyond the internal life of the church to extend and deepen its engagement, relationships and partnerships within Māngere. For two couples who were part of that group, committed to the church but living outside the area, this clarification of the church’s purpose in relation to its local community led to decisions to relocate in order to integrate more fully with the community.

Meanwhile, John Catmur was undergoing a similar reorientation. He had come to New Zealand some years earlier to join the ministry team of a large city center church, in a church-facing role utilizing his gifts in worship leading, music, and leadership of a large group of young adults. Increasingly, however, he had been drawn to engage with people outside the church, particularly among those who for various reasons find themselves on the streets or in the hostels of the inner city. When his ministry in that church concluded, Catmur had some months out of formal pastoral ministry in which to reflect on the direction of his future ministry. When he visited Māngere and met with the church members, both they and he sensed a strong synergy in relation to the outward orientation of ministry that the group affirmed, and that Catmur himself was ready to adopt. In April 2014 he moved into the area and commenced pastoral leadership of Māngere Baptist Church.

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There might have been no overt mention of *missio Dei* in the discussions over the church's purpose and role in relation to the local community, but the decision the church made, and the attitudes and considerations that shaped it, are indicative of a shift from preoccupation with the maintenance of the church and strategies to build its numerical and financial viability. They had come to locate the community rather than the church at the center of God's concern and activity in that locality, to see the church in the role of one participant among others in what God was doing, and to resolve to look for indications of success not in the growth of the Māngere Baptist Church itself as conventionally measured but in signs of the kingdom being realized in their community. As Catmur (2018) describes it:

When it comes to mission, if we start with the community we have different questions and different priorities to when we start from the church. When we start from the church we tend to end with the church; that is, the growth of our church tends to be our goal. ...

When we start with the community, however, the question becomes not, "How can I grow my church?" but "How can we transform the community?" In fact, taking another step back again, we realise that mission really starts with God, so we ask, "How can we follow God as he transforms this community?"

As Catmur began his ministry, he and the church took seriously the conviction that God cared about and was present and at work in their neighborhood. This was enacted not only through prayer for the community but also by seeking to appreciate, learn from and support people and organizations working for the good of the community. As mentioned above, some of this was achieved through inviting a wide range of people to share their stories and insights with the church during its Sunday gatherings. As well as becoming better informed about local



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needs and challenges and various organizations that were attempting to address them, the church gained a growing confidence that God was at work in the community beyond the church. An unexpected discovery was how many of the people working to bring justice, well-being and hope in this much maligned community were actually motivated by Christian faith. A leader of the local council shared her sense of a call from God to serve her community; an MP spoke of the role of faith in his family's life, and asked the church to pray for them; two constables from the local police station declared, "Isn't it great to be in the house of the Lord!" and spoke of their desire to see young people's lives transformed; a probation officer told of a young man on home detention in a nearby street leading Bible studies for his friends when they came to visit; the manager of a community services organization revealed that he had first come to the area as a priest but had come to see his ministry as best fulfilled through community work. In some cases their faith-motivated concern for the community had actually taken them out of church involvement, weary of church services and programs that seemed disconnected from the real issues that mattered so much to them. Delight at finding a church that shared their concerns was not infrequently expressed. Other visitors who did not profess Christian faith might have been initially surprised and even suspicious when they were first invited to come and speak to the congregation. Attitudes visibly shifted, however, as they sensed the church's interest to be genuine and without exception they were grateful to be prayed for.

One strand in early reflection on the *missio Dei* was attention to the incarnation as the mode of God's mission towards, in and in solidarity with the world (Andersen 1961:308). While the derivation of the church's being and acting in the world from a theology of incarnation is not straightforward (Andersen 1961:310-312), the notion of incarnational mission has been fruitful for mission practice in a number of ways (Ott et.al. 2010:97-104; Hirsch 2007; Greenfield and Greenfield 2010). Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch present the first objective of incarnational mission as "real connection," whereby people come to see that "Jesus

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is ‘for’ the host community. That is, Jesus has the host community’s best interests at heart; he is on their side and is against anything that might cause them harm” (2003:73-74). The second step is “to demonstrate that Jesus is ‘with’ the host community.” The community has to see God’s love demonstrated in humility, mercy, and concern for justice in order “to completely reframe the community’s perceptions about Jesus and the church” (2003:74). Such a reframing did seem to be taking place. One speaker was a youth worker who had himself been born into and brought up in the local gang environment and now worked as a drugs counselor with young people in the gangs. He confessed that although he could go into any of the notorious gang houses without fear, he was terrified to be inside a church building – “the first time in my life I’ve been in the Lord’s house!” After sharing his story, and the group had gathered round and prayed for him and for the young people he worked with, he insisted on taking a selfie with the congregation on his phone. “I’m going to show this to the kids I work with,” he said. “I want them to know that inside this building there are people who love them.”

#### **4 Mission led by the Spirit**

In its historical development the theological formulation of *missio Dei* depended on the possibilities created by reflection within a Trinitarian framework on the relationship of God to the world (Tennent 2010; Dodds 2017). It may be objected that the Trinitarian impulse was not worked through with sufficient precision and coherence. In Flett’s view, “*Missio Dei*, with its critical necessity, flawed Trinitarian basis, complex range, and lack of cohesion, conspires to create a concept that mires any constructive potential in a bog of elasticity” (Flett 2010:76). Nonetheless, as Flett also recognizes, “*missio Dei* has a peculiar force,” despite or even because of its lack of theological development (Flett 2014:69). The idea that the expression attempts to capture might have a potency for mission practitioners and congregations that does not depend on conceptual precision (Ott et.al. 2010:64). Considering that practical effect, Van Gelder

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writes: “A trinitarian understanding shifts the focus such that the Spirit-led, missional church participates in God’s mission in the world,” and accordingly, “In living out of this identity and living into this role, the focus for the church shifts primarily to one of discerning and responding to the leading of the Spirit – being a Spirit-led, missional church” (Van Gelder 2007:19). At the local level in Māngere it could not be claimed that the church’s missional approach has been derived consciously from a coherent Trinitarian theology. Father, Son and Spirit feature in worship, teaching and discourse but it is unlikely that a rationale for the church’s mission participation would be given in terms of the ontology and economy of the triune God’s being with and for the world. Van Gelder’s anticipated outcome, however, of a church focused on discerning and responding to the Spirit, may certainly be recognized.

On arriving in Māngere, John Catmur adopted an approach modeled on his reading of missionary biographies, and in particular on the place of prayer and dependence on God in their lives and ministries. He resolved to begin each day with prayer, not inside the church building but while walking around the community, practicing attentiveness to God and openness to the Spirit to stir specific prayers and prompt actions. He writes, “I found a very strong sense of vision for the community developing as I sensed the Spirit inspiring specific prayers and dreams for different sectors and groups (Catmur et.al. 2015:98).” Very quickly this practice of attentive prayer while physically present in the community (or occasionally gathered around a map of the area, praying for the streets that they were getting to know so well) became a hallmark of the church’s life. On some Sundays part of the gathering time would be given to that activity, and people would return with insights, concerns or thanksgiving to share. Individual members made time in their weekly routines to walk and pray. For theological college students on placement with Māngere Baptist Church in recent years, such “prayer walking” has become a distinctive and highly impacting feature of their Māngere experience. The outcome for Catmur was that “the constant exposure to and preoccupation with the

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community displaced the church as my centre of attention” (Catmur et.al. 2015:98). It is to this more than anything else that Catmur attributes the paradigm shift described above becoming real and effective for him and the church: “Instead of starting with the church as our main focus and concern, we started with the community” (Catmur et.al. 2015:98).

Does this reflect a *missio Dei* framework? Perhaps not in developed Trinitarian terms, but the living theology of the church’s practice demonstrates a confidence that God has a saving purpose for that local community, the conviction that Jesus has chosen to dwell there, and an expectation that the Spirit of God will be at work in the homes, schools, businesses, people and families of that community. With that understanding they depend on the Spirit to stir them to pray in alignment with what God wants to do, and to prompt and enable their practical participation in it. Many of the ministry initiatives that the church has embraced and the relationships which now flourish between the church and local marae (centers of Māori community), political bodies, local council, schools, community services, police, other churches, local mosque, etc. have begun with a sense of specific leading of the Spirit to pray, learn, initiate contact, or speak or act in particular ways. If a Spirit-led church is enacting a *missio Dei* orientation, then such may be discerned in Māngere Baptist Church.

## **5 Mission preceding the church**

“It was at the Willingen conference . . .,” writes Timothy Tennent, “that a new model of mission was proposed that clearly articulated that God’s redemptive action in the world *precedes* the church, meaning that the church should not perceive itself as the starting point for mission activity in the world” (Tennent 2010:55). In this respect the narrative of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10:1-11:18 has often resonated with practitioners involved in mission or intercultural relating (e.g. Van Engen 2004; Wieland 2015). “Acts 10 is the story of a double conversion – Cornelius became a follower of Christ, and Peter gained deeper insight into the fullness of the

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missio dei [sic]" (Tennent 2010:88). Pascal Bazzell describes the process as one in which two individuals each encounter God, then discover the divine in the other, and go on to interact with their respective communities on the basis of what has been discovered (2016:121). Bazzell urges mission practitioners to "look for Cornelius encounters" in which the missio Dei may be discerned, keeping in mind that "it is crucial for all to participate and to see the moment through to its end" (2016:122).

For the Māngere Baptist congregation, a particular "Cornelius encounter" has been highly significant in the development of its life with the local community and in its understanding of God's mission. Only a few Baptist churches in New Zealand include significant numbers of Māori among their members or can claim deep mutual relationships with local Māori populations.<sup>3</sup> Churches that want to see that situation change might develop a mission strategy to "reach out" to local Māori or try to adapt their service styles or church buildings to be more amenable to Māori. The pastor and members of Māngere Baptist Church congregation adopted a different approach. Out of their practice of prayer in and for the community a desire was stirred to see local marae flourish as centers of spiritual life and community well-being (Catmur et.al. 2015, Catmur 2018). Soon after beginning to pray in this way the pastor came into contact with the manager of a marae just a few hundred meters from the church building. It transpired that just at the time that the church had felt moved to pray for the marae, the manager herself had begun to hear from God in dreams and, with no apparent intervention from the Baptist or any other church, had made a commitment to follow Jesus. She felt she had been charged with the responsibility to nurture the spiritual life of her marae, but did not know how to begin. For both the pastor and the marae manager, their encounter seemed to come as an answer to their prayers.

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<sup>3</sup> On the history of Māori with New Zealand Baptists see two recent Carey Baptist College Masters theses, Haurua (2017) and Auty (2019).

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Bazzell's third phase, in which the two participants in the "Cornelius encounter" take what is being learned into their respective communities, ensued. The marae manager and the church pastor shared with their communities their discovery of God at work in each of them separately and in bringing them into contact with each other, and a plan for the church members to be received onto the marae with a powhiri (formal welcome) that would establish a relationship between them, with the prospect of continuing to journey together wherever God might lead. The marae community had reason to be cautious about what a relationship with this Pākehā (non-Māori, mostly European) church and its English pastor might involve, and not all saw the Christian religion in a positive light. Among the church members were some who were uneasy about engaging with what they saw as non-Christian spiritualities or simply uncomfortable about moving out of the familiar environment of the church building into which they could welcome others as hosts, and taking on the more vulnerable role of manuhiri (visitors) on the marae, required to conform to tikanga (protocols) with which they were unfamiliar conducted in te reo Māori which few of them understood. Nonetheless, on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2014, the Baptist church did not hold its regular service in the church building. Instead the congregation made its way to the local marae where they were welcomed through powhiri, shared whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) and worshiped together. The church members listened in astonishment as the marae manager related her story of God's dealings with her and the significance of her encounter with the pastor, and for the marae one of the other leaders spoke of his gratitude for the wairua (spirit) that the people from the church had brought onto their marae. The relationship that has continued and grown from that point has produced significant transformation for both the church and the marae.

Has this been an experience of the *missio Dei*? For John Catmur *missio Dei* theology played no conscious part in the actions or decisions that led to the forming of that significant

relationship. In retrospect, however, he sees in the process an example of how the *missio Dei* operates:

The experience ... with our local marae is just one example of being led in prayer for an area of concern and finding out later that God has already been at work. When this happens, the way forward is much clearer, as we are responding to a specific divine act and so are able to synchronise our support more naturally. It's like joining a game of sport that is already in progress – it's pretty clear what you need to do as you come onto the field. (Catmur et.al. 2015)

## **6 Mission in appreciative partnership**

Once the *missio dei* becomes the generative center of all missiological reflection, it changes the way we think and conduct ourselves as ambassadors of God's mission in the world. We find ourselves transcending the competitive aggrandizement of a particular denominational work. Instead, we become heralds who embody the inbreaking of the New Creation. The triumphalism of human agency and ingenuity are replaced by a deepened humility and awe that God would use us, alongside Christians from all over the world, in the accomplishment of His unfolding plan of redemption in the world. (Tennent 2010:101)

Tennent's observation is borne out in John Catmur's experience. He writes:

It soon became apparent to me pragmatically and spiritually that our church of fifteen people was not going to be the saviour of Māngere! So once again the "start with the community" principle changes our attitude and

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interactions with other churches. To us every church and every believer in Māngere is as relevant and important as our own church as stakeholders of the vision for transformation. This is reflected in our prayer life as we ask God for the strengthening, purifying and empowering of all our hundred plus churches in the community. Because our vision is not for our church but for the community, more than one church can embrace it. I have been able to begin building relationships with other churches in the area and, for the first time in twenty years, local pastors have begun gathering together, specifically for the purpose of praying for our community. Once again God has gone before us as the passion our other pastors displayed immediately was quite unexpected and has even grown through our early meetings. (Catmur et.al. 2015)

The non-competitive stance that Māngere Baptist Church adopts in relation to other churches is enacted in a number of ways. One is the frequent prayer offered for all other churches, regardless of how dissimilar they might be from the Baptist church in doctrine or practice. Over 70% of Māngere's population is comprised of people of the various nations of Oceania and this is reflected in the presence of many churches most of which serve Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island and other specific linguistic and ethnic groups. On arriving as the local Baptist pastor, Catmur made a point of visiting personally many of the other local churches across a wide range of denominations – Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Wesleyan, Adventist, Mormon, Ratana (indigenous Māori denomination), non-denominational Pentecostal churches and others. To varying degrees relationships began to be built. When the marae manager whose story is described above wished to be baptized, the baptismal service took place on the marae, conducted jointly by the Baptist pastor and a Ratana minister, with the joyful participation of several others, including an Adventist friend who encouraged the manager on her journey to



faith in Jesus. In place of any concerns about Baptist “ownership” of the event or the doctrinal and ecclesiastical alignment of the participants, the Baptist church members felt that they were privileged onlookers as God’s mission was realized through them and through others in ways that they could not have anticipated. To some extent this might be said to indicate that the church, rather than doing mission is being (re)constituted by mission in its practice, self-understanding, and what it affirms about God’s presence and activity in the world.

## **7 Mission in a postcolonial context**

The articulation of *missio Dei* in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century represented in part a chastened response to the critique of the modern missionary movement as inextricably intertwined with the Western colonial enterprise. As Chung writes:

After World War II the church as the sent people began to face a postcolonial challenge on the part of newly independent nations and young churches throughout the Third World. These dissenting voices attempted to dismantle the colonial worldviews of the European nations embedded within Western missionary agencies and institutions. ... [T]here occurred a shift from an ecclesiocentric view of mission to a theocentric one, that is the view of *missio Dei* as translation. (Chung 2012:119)

If not carried through with sufficient rigor, the affirmation that mission belongs not to the church but to God could even be taken as authorization for the continued practice of mission according to the old paradigms (Flett 2010:8-9). Properly understood, however, the recognition that God’s mission was operative not only beyond but also before the participation of the church involves a disavowal of the hubris inherent in readings of the history of mission that fail to allow for God’s presence and activity prior to the arrival of the missionaries, and

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correspondingly see no trace of God's self-revelation or redemption in the histories and cultures of the peoples to whom the missionaries went or continue to go.

Māngere Baptist Church seeks to discern its way of faithful participation in mission in a specific postcolonial context marred by severe historic injustices perpetrated against tangata whenua (people of the land, the original Māori population). The continuing effects are incalculable but are seen in every measure of disadvantage, poverty, disempowerment and exclusion. In the relationship that has grown between church and marae, and as a church whose membership includes increasing numbers of tangata whenua, Māngere Baptist Church has become deeply aware of issues of justice. This awareness yields both prayer and action. On a recent Sunday the congregation gathered not in the church but on ancestral land nearby at Ihumaatao that is threatened by a proposed residential development. Taking others with them, they went to walk the land, learn its story, and worship with and support members of the local hapu (sub-tribe) who are resisting the encroachment.<sup>4</sup> A leader of the resistance movement, who has admitted to having a troubled relationship with Christianity because of its colonial history, welcomed this act of solidarity on the SOUL Facebook page:<sup>5</sup>

Awesome to see kaupapa [agendas/topics of discussion] highlight the whenua [land] and whanau [family] at Ihumaatao. Instead of the Mangere Baptist Church normal service on Sunday 27th Jan they will be heading over to the coast to catch the vision of what Io [God] is doing at Ihumaatao and Makaurau marae. Check it out.

The "call to right action" that Lansdowne (2016) sees in the *missio Dei* corresponds to a number of ways in which Māngere Baptist Church has felt impelled to participate in what

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<sup>4</sup> See "Save our unique landscape," <https://www.protectihumatao.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Save-Our-Unique-Landscape-campaign-SOUL-834778129949716/>

they understand to be God's desire for good in their community and indeed for the earth. Alongside the concerns that stir to action, however, there has also been an enriching of faith, life and relationships through a greater openness to receiving gifts of Māori culture, knowledge and spirituality as blessings from a God whose presence and activity before and beyond the church's involvement they have come to recognize more fully.

## **8 Concluding thoughts**

This reflection on the recent experience of one local church has identified a number of features of its life and practice that are congruent with certain *missio Dei* insights and emphases. These have not been developed into a coherent theological system or mission strategy. There are, however, some clear convictions: that mission is God's, not the church's; that God is already present in and desiring good for the community; and that the church is one of many partners whom God draws by the Spirit into participation in realizing that good purpose. In alignment with these the church has adopted dispositions of attentiveness to God in and for the community, openness to encountering God at work in surprising people and ways, and a preference for supporting what they perceive God to be doing through others rather than initiating and owning its own programs of community transformation. Those are ideas and dispositions characteristic of the understanding of mission that the term *missio Dei* attempts to capture.

How have such ideas come to be imbibed and enacted by this local church? Notions of "joining God in the neighborhood" are prevalent among those who are enthused by ideas of missional church, and church members have seen inspirational examples of deep community engagement elsewhere in the city. Theological students on placement with Māngere Baptist Church, and in particular some who moved into the locality to live as an intentional missional community, have had opportunity to practice presence, prayer neighborly relating and Spirit-

prompted action, and to reflect on it in relation to their studies on the Mission of God and other aspects of theology, culture and ministry.<sup>6</sup> In Pastor John Catmur the church has a missional leader who has purposefully taken the church with him on a journey of community-oriented relating in attentiveness to the Spirit. While Māngere Baptist Church's missional orientation and its specific practical expressions cannot be traced back to the conscious adoption of a particular missiological stance, it might plausibly be located within a more general shift over the past several decades in the Church's understanding and practice of mission. The continuing *missio Dei* conversation provides validation of and ways of reflecting upon the local church's instincts and experience. At the same time, that experience serves to confirm and nuance aspects of a developing understanding of the mission of God.

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<sup>6</sup> A core course on *The Mission of God* serves as a gateway course to Carey Baptist College's Applied Theology curriculum, and at both undergraduate and postgraduate level an integrative ethos is cultivated, seeking to serve participation in the life and mission of God through attentiveness to faith, context and practice in conversation..

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