



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

This edition:

BIBLE & ECONOMY

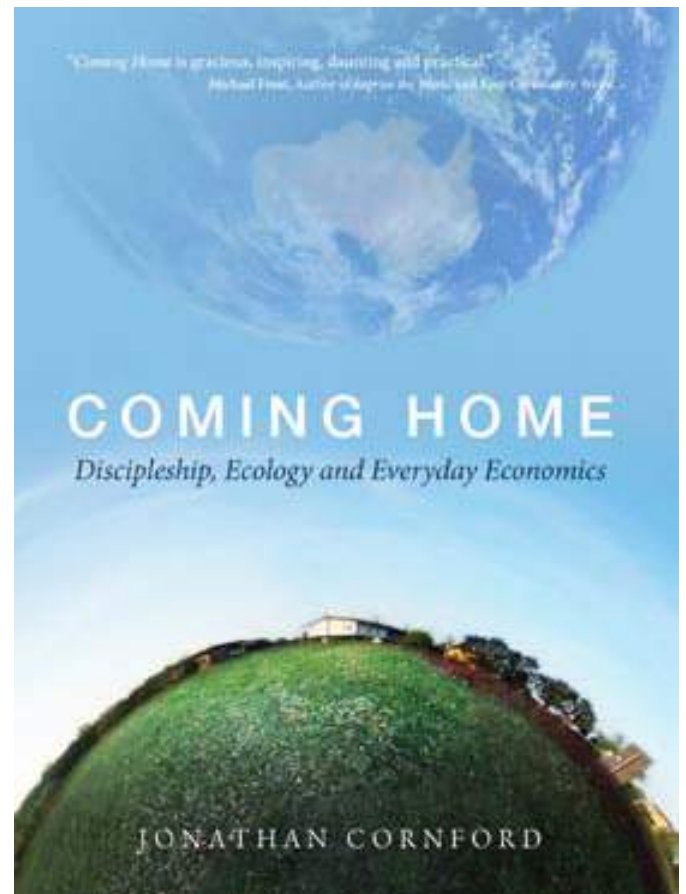
The Cities We Need: Shalom and neighbourhood mission

Jonathan Cornford (p.2)

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

Talking about the weather ... : Towards constructive climate conversations

Ben Thurley (p.9)



News from Long Gully

The big news this year has been the publication, at long last, of my second book, *Coming Home*, which explores a Christian approach to household economics. It has been a long time coming, so it is a relief to have it out. We have had a couple of small launch events to mark and promote the publication, one at the Surrender Conference involving Matt Anslow and Joel McKerrow and one in Bendigo involving Rose Vincent and Mick Pope. There will be one more at Whitley College, with Rev Simon Holt in Melbourne on August 14, in conjunction with a public lecture I will give on "The Gospel in a Consumer Culture".

You can buy *Coming Home* through the Manna Gum website for \$20, including postage.

In January, I had the good pleasure in participating in the bi-annual get together of the Anabaptist Association in Sydney. I ran a couple of workshops, but, more importantly, I was blessed to spend some quality time with some fellow travellers.

We are now taking registrations for this year's *A Different Way* week which will run from 17-22 November (see back page). More information can be found on the website.

The Cities We Need

Shalom and neighbourhood mission

by Jonathan Cornford

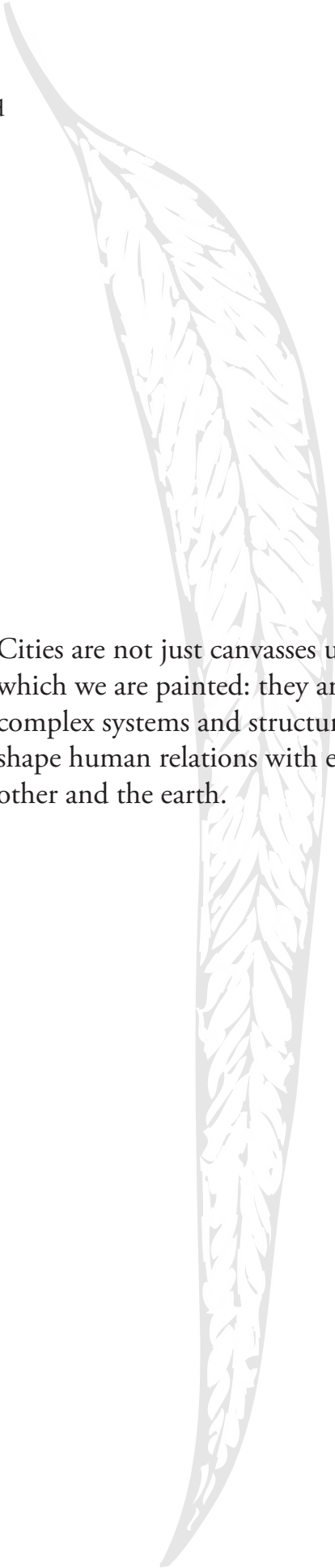
2008 was a momentous year for humanity. While the affluent world was preoccupied with the Global Financial Crisis, three other events of perhaps even more moment were taking place. In that year, a food crisis was gripping the developing world, leading to food riots in over thirty countries across three continents and playing a role in igniting the Arab Spring, of which the conflict in Syria is an ongoing legacy. Although some of the drivers of the food crisis were a coincidence of so-called 'cyclical' factors, the larger part was driven by the deeper structures of the global food system that sounded an ominous note for the century to come. Another great event of moment in 2008, so UN demographers tell us, was that humanity became an urban species, with over half the population of the planet now located in cities and that figure growing inexorably towards 75% by 2050. And finally, 2008 was also the year that world leaders dropped the ball on climate change, setting the cause of decarbonising the economy back by years.

These were not unrelated events. The financial crisis, the food crisis and climate change are all symptoms of a global economic system that is tearing apart the fabric of human community and natural ecosystems. And the throbbing engine of this economic system are cities, those great behemoths that suck in people, resources and even human souls (Rev. 18:13) and spill out their waste upon the planet.

What do these great affairs have to do with the humble world of local churches and faith communities? If we take seriously Paul's proclamation that we are being called as ambassadors of Christ's work of reconciling the world (*kosmos* in the Greek), then it suggests that we need to think about cities not merely as *contexts* for our mission, but as *subjects of* our mission. Cities are not just canvasses upon which we are painted: they are complex systems and structures that shape human relations with each other and the earth, and they can do so in highly destructive ways. Can we envision urban structures and systems that are not destructive, but wholesome and nurturing? Can we work for the shalom of the city in ways that take the structures of the city itself seriously, and not just the individuals found within cities? To do this we first need to have a clearer view of the problem.

Seeing cities clearly

From its origins in ancient Sumer, the city has been an expression of humanity's struggle to achieve *insulation from nature*. It emerges from the shadows of pre-history already defined by intensive exploitation of nature, economic specialisation, social stratification and the centralisation of violence and authority. But



Cities are not just canvasses upon which we are painted: they are complex systems and structures that shape human relations with each other and the earth.

even the earliest city-civilisations cannot be understood by looking merely within their walls, for these cities were predicated on the reorganisation and control of their *hinterland* and by long-distance trade. Their food was grown to a large extent, although not exclusively, by people who were not residents of the city but were nonetheless under its thumb, and scarcer resources came through networks of trade, primarily with other cities that were reorganising and controlling their hinterlands.

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century and the map of the world-economy is little different. Our habit of drawing the map of the world according to the political divisions of nation-states has obscured the fundamental structure of economic power that undergirds human history. If we were to map the flow of goods and money in the world today, it would reveal, in effect, a network of interconnected urban centres, each drawing in resources from their hinterlands, distributing them and *increasingly concentrating them through a hierarchical chain of regional, national and global cities.*

Thus, whenever we are looking at economic inequality or exploitation, or at despoliation of nature through over-exploitation and pollution, we are primarily considering the economic effects of cities. But, some will object, the greatest single driver of our planetary ecological crisis is the destruction of habitat and release of carbon into the

atmosphere that has come as a result of land conversion for *agriculture* and not from cities. This is true, but *the particular form of agriculture* that has done this damage is precisely that which has been called into being by the demand of cities.

In the modern era, cities have entered into a new phase. Right up until the mid-nineteenth century, London – then the apex global city – still fed itself overwhelmingly from its hinterland of the Home Counties and, to a surprising extent, from urban agriculture within its own

bounds. It was in the second half of that century that London grew beyond that possibility, drawing in grain and meat from Ireland, North America and Australasia. This also solved the problem of supplying cheap food to low-wage industrial labourers upon which

modern urbanisation was predicated. With the spread of industrialisation and industrial agriculture in the twentieth century, and facilitated by new technologies in transport and storage, there have now grown up a series of monster cities around the world which can no longer live off a hinterland, but which instead have become dependent upon the planet.

But here I have only described the material and sociological aspect of the city; what about its spiritual aspect? Jacque Ellul, in his classic work, *The Meaning of the City*, has masterfully described the spiritual essence of the city

From its origins in ancient Sumer, the city has been an expression of humanity's struggle to achieve insulation from nature.





The story of Babel is a potent symbol of humanity's ongoing project of 'self-creation'.

as rooted in humanity's stubborn project of 'self creation'; that is, our ongoing effort to *define ourselves* apart from our creator. 'Just as Jesus Christ is God's greatest work, so we can say, with all the consequence of such a statement, that the city is man's greatest work.' And just as sociologists read cities as attempts at insulating humanity from nature, so Ellul (via the Bible) reads cities as attempts at insulating humanity from God. Thus, we find in both the material and spiritual structure of cities, forces that are continually working to separate people from God, from each other and from creation. In other words, the city as a structure and a system has been characterised by forces of *disconnection*.

It is not surprising, then, that the Biblical text is full of prophetic denunciations of cities – Babylon, Nineveh, Tyre, Sodom and, not least, Jerusalem. What is shocking though, is that although the city represents the culmination of man's choice, man's work and man's rebellion, God nevertheless says 'yes' to it. In a move that pre-figures the incomprehensible grace of God's movement towards us in Christ, God enters Jerusalem and makes it holy. Thus, alongside all of those denunciations of the city, we also

find in the Bible a host of wonderful visions of the city *as she ought to be*, the city as a place of *shalom*. Within the Biblical vision, the redeemed city, the holy city, is a force for peace in the world and brings harmony and economic security to its rural hinterland:

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. (Micah 4:2-4)

Even more strikingly, and more directly relevant to our own missiological context, when the exiled people of God find themselves in the archetypal fallen city – Babylon, the great enemy of God – they are instructed to live lives that are manifestations of *shalom* and to work and pray for the *shalom* of Babylon itself (Jeremiah 29:1-7).

What would a vision of *shalom* look like for today's cities? If we take seriously the material and sociological structure of cities, and the underlying *spirit* this expresses, what would it mean to live for, work for and pray for *shalom* in a modern city?

Cohesive Territorial Development: a new urban possibility?

Given what I have said above about the material and sociological structure of cities, it is not surprising that the UN-Habitat's World Urban Campaign declares that *'the battle for a more sustainable future will be won or lost in cities'*. Central to the 'new urban agenda' being promoted by the World Urban Campaign is the idea of 'cohesive territorial development'. Recognising how cities have dominated and shaped physical spaces and social structures, they seek

to direct the city's power over space and place towards more socially and ecologically positive development. This requires having a comprehensive perspective of how people, places and resources are being treated

and utilised within the *entire spatial zone* that a city draws on, including its hinterland and beyond. It is an ambitious agenda:

The City We Need coordinates sectoral policies and actions, such as economy, mobility, housing, biodiversity, energy, water and waste, within a comprehensive and coherent territorial framework. [...] The City We

The battle for a more sustainable future will be won or lost in cities



Need is a catalyst for sustainability planning across jurisdictions within the region it occupies. It actively seeks to coordinate and implement policies, make investments and take actions that retain local autonomy while building and enhancing regional cooperation. It actively seeks cross-sectoral coordination and cooperation and promotes mutually beneficial and environmentally sound linkages between rural and urban areas.

It does not take great prophetic imagination to realise that this statement represents a secularised vision of urban shalom. There is a strong recognition here that 'human wellbeing' – which may be as close to a spiritual idea as is possible in a secularised context – is bound up with the material structures of our life, the nature of human community (or lack of) and the ecological health of the planet. In essence, it is articulating a need for overcoming the systemic disconnection that characterises the structures of urban life. It would not be going too far to suggest that the cumbersome language of 'cohesive territorial development' is really a grasping for a vision of healing and wholeness, if not quite of holiness.

What might cohesive territorial development mean, then, for how we think about urban mission? Surely, if we are to think about cities not just as *contexts* for Christian mission but also as *subjects* of Christian mission, then we need to be thinking about this sort of subject matter. Unfortunately, despite bearing a Biblical story that is characterised by *wholism* – a story that continually makes the connection between the spiritual and the material, the individual and the communal, the human and the non-human – Christian mission has at times been guilty of a certain narrowness of vision. True, William Booth's observation that no one ever got saved with a toothache has been taken heed of, and a great deal of mission these days seeks to address, in some way, material needs as well as spiritual needs. However, Christian mission has rarely taken notice of the fact that those material needs take place within the context of *economic systems*, has taken even less notice that those economic systems take place within the context of *ecological systems* and hardly ever is it recognised that economic systems are in themselves *spiritual forces*.

So what might Christian mission learn from cohesive territorial development and in what way might we contribute to it? The scale of the challenge it poses is daunting, calling for cities 'to coordinate very diverse agendas related to land use, housing, energy, water, waste, mobility, health

and education, economic development and the promotion of gender equality, cultural vitality and social inclusion'! And despite the confidence of the World Urban Campaign that 'new predictive planning and modelling tools based on systems approaches' will make all this possible, it is hard not to feel that the task of comprehensive territorial development might become a technocratic black hole. Nevertheless, the 'new urban agenda' in which this vision is couched calls for the involvement of not just the multiple levels of government, but also civil society, academic, business and grass roots organisations and even affirms the principle of 'subsidiarity' (the devolution of responsibility) stemming from Catholic social teaching. How might we locate Christian communities and mission work within this mish-mash?

Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon provides a helpful hint. The task of comprehensive territorial development is huge and, let's be honest, the role that Christian communities play in most cities is tiny. Nonetheless, just as Jeremiah asked a small, marginalised and powerless community to contribute to the shalom of the great

Christian communities should have a realistic appreciation of their own social location within cities and yet still feel they can have some sort of life-bringing leavening influence

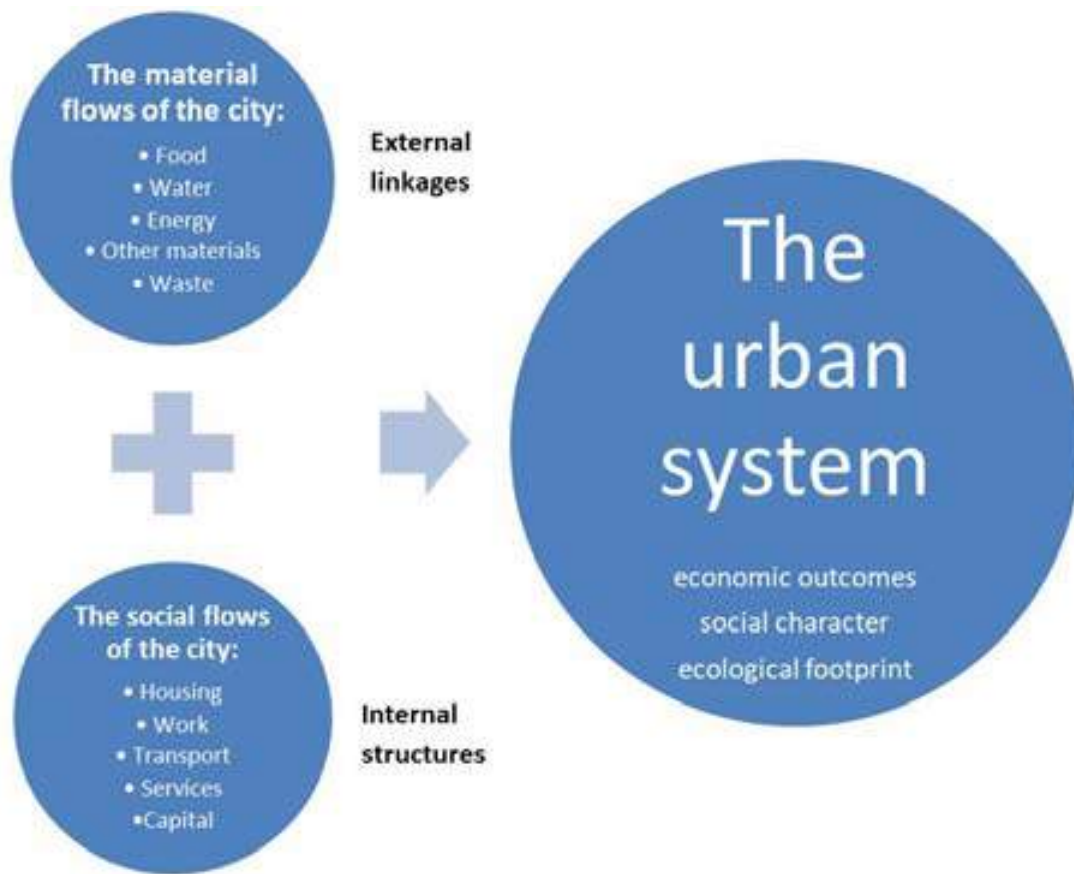
city-empire through the vehicle of their homes, gardens, families and communities, so, too, Christian communities should have an appropriately humble and realistic appreciation of their own social location within cities and yet still feel they can have some sort of life-bringing leavening influence.

Contributing to the shalom of the city must therefore firstly begin by working with what we have and where we are; and, secondly, it must involve working in partnership with others beyond the bounds of our own communities and faith. Let's consider each of these in turn.

Working towards healthy neighbourhoods

If the structures of the city tend towards *disconnection*, then a key missiological task for Christian communities within cities must be to seek *re-connections*. The language of comprehensive territorial development is a bit too grand, cumbersome and technocratic to be of much use in mission; however, its core ideas can nonetheless be enacted in very practical ways at the local level. The essence of this new urban agenda can be described more straightforwardly as working towards healthy neighbourhoods, where the 'health' of a neighbourhood is holistically understood to include its material, social, economic, communal, spiritual and ecological context. In practice, this means paying attention to the fundamental elements of life in the city, paying attention to the dis-connections between these elements and paying attention to how these disconnections manifest in our neighbourhoods.

It may be helpful at this point to simply map out what those key elements look like:



As has been said above, it is clearly inconceivable for most Christian groups to work at *the system level*; however, when these elements are translated down to the neighbourhood level there is an abundance of possibilities. Take, for example, the Casa de Videira community in Curitiba, Brazil. Here, a small Christian group has made the connection between the ill-health caused by modern Western diets, especially amongst lower socio-economic groups, the ecological damage caused by industrialised agriculture and by urban food-waste and their own disconnections from creation, meaningful work and good food. In response, the community has undertaken to make a series of re-connections, via their own labour, collecting organic waste in their immediate neighbourhood and growing food using that waste. Claudio Oliver, pastor of the community explains:

Eating is connected with our treatment of the dejected and rejected - the leftovers. Our major concern, as Christians living in the city, is how the relationship with food in the city reveals our neglect of creation. Every day, tons of nutrients arrive, are delivered, cooked in the city and more than 30% of it is wasted. Every day, we collect organic waste in a 3 kilometre radius from our homes: gardening clips, grocery stores

greens, leftovers, wood chips and ground coffee. We collect three to four tons of organic garbage a month - the refuse of roughly 150 households - and compost it all in our 0.08 acre back yard, turning it into beautiful soil. From this we produce around three tons of organic vegies per year and feed 25 chickens, 4 goats, 30 rabbits, giving us protein in the form of meat, eggs and milk. All this provides food for ourselves and our neighbours, shared every day in a communal meal.

In the western suburbs of Melbourne, a group of Christians have begun a social enterprise that specialises in re-using, recycling and even up-cycling office waste and e-waste, at the same time providing employment opportunities for the long-term unemployed and welfare dependent (see May 2018). In my own community, the Seeds Community in Bendigo, we have recognised the connections between the social dysfunction of welfare-dependent families, the behavioural issues of their children, their physical ill-health and their dependence on cheap, unhealthy, highly-processed foods. By providing an open community garden, basic cooking classes, a people's pantry and a kids' garden club, the church has opened avenues of relationships with broken families who have complex

needs. The role that the church plays in their lives is still small, but it is simultaneously material and spiritual.

Indeed, the potential connections that can be made between food, waste and employment at the local level are huge. As has been mentioned above, the modern city is a peculiarity to the extent that it has excluded food production from within its bounds. Within an increasingly volatile global food system, the door is opening for a re-emergence of urban agriculture that offers simultaneous opportunities for improving urban nutrition, providing employment and decreasing greenhouse gas emissions (through the composting of food waste and reducing food transport). When Cuba's oil-dependent agriculture was suddenly thrown into crisis in the 1990s, the spontaneous rise of organic urban agriculture – by necessity rather than design – was able to supply 80% of the fruit and vegetables of Cuban cities. In Detroit, a city crippled by deindustrialisation and 'white flight' to the suburbs, there has been an efflorescence of vacant lot gardening that has been supported by marketing cooperatives, community health care and youth training.

These developments are all characterised as small-scale, bottom-up, grass roots ventures and, as is evident from

the examples above, Christian communities are often well placed in terms of skill sets, energy, a ready-built cooperative structure, and access to land, to play an entrepreneurial role in supporting and stimulating such ventures. In the US, the New Parish Movement has been building a network of churches and Christian groups who are beginning to see themselves in just such terms. They talk of 'refounding church in the everyday context of the neighbourhood', rooting it in a locality and linking it to the real needs of the community.

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The founders of the movement have gone one further and launched a Neighbourhood Economics network that seeks to attract 'social investment capital' into supporting grassroots local ventures. While the nexus between food, waste and employment is perhaps the most readily exploitable opportunity in such

a neighbourhood approach to mission, it is not hard to imagine that by leveraging more of the under-utilised (or poorly utilised) capital within churches, Christian communities could play similar roles in the development of local business ventures, local renewable power generation and water harvesting and distribution projects, especially in developing countries where the urban poor are chronically underserved in terms of energy and water.



Urban agriculture in Detroit. The potential for food production within the bounds of cities has barely been tapped.



Working in partnership

If we have an appropriately humble and realistic appreciation of the social location of Christian communities within cities, and if we appreciate that seeking *re-connections* is critical to their missiological task, then these two things suggest that Christian communities should embrace the opportunity to work in partnership with groups and bodies who do not share their faith convictions.

Let me stress that I am not here suggesting that we adopt a version of secular pluralism which blandly assumes that differences in values and worldviews are irrelevant. Rather, where we have identified in concrete and practical terms various 'goods' that will contribute to the health and wholeness of our neighbourhoods, not only does it make good sense to work with others who have also recognised those goods, but many of those goods will simply not be achievable without cooperative action. For example, we do not need to share all of the same ideological convictions of a particular environment group to recognise that working towards more local renewable energy is a good thing and that it makes good sense to work together towards such a goal. In doing so, we are likely to discover that we actually share some deep loves, which in turn will help us to more clearly and more kindly understand our differences.

In my hometown of Bendigo, the Cornerstone Community, has played a not insignificant role, punching above its weight in catalysing a 'regional food alliance' between the municipal council, the local university, local businesses and various community groups. These groups clearly represent a diverse range of interests and ways of working; however there is a simple common recognition that strengthening the local food economy brings with it a range of economic, ecological, social and nutritional benefits. The fact that a local Christian group has played a role in hosting (within a church!) some of the key meetings of this coalition has the potential to tie together these concerns with an awareness of a deeper wholism and charitable spirit that it can only be in the interests of Christian mission to foster.

As the World Urban Campaign has recognised, the particular and urgent demands of the ecological crisis, the food crisis and various other modern malaises are beyond the scope of governments alone to address, but rather require cooperative action across government, business and civil society. In particular, there is a need for a whole host of commonsense policies around food, waste, water and energy that will only come through the political lobbying of coalitions. It is time for Christian groups to lose their squeamishness for working in such partnerships, where we can identify common goals. As theologian Luke Bretherton has suggested, working in partnership amid diversity expresses a grace and Christian hospitality that need not sacrifice the distinctiveness of the Christian vision.

The crises of the twenty-first century are characterised by a series of disconnections: the spiritual from the material, the economic from the ecological, the urban from the rural, food from the soil, the individual from the community, and the soul from the body. Cities, as the definitive form of human organisation, represent these disconnections in their most intensive form. In many ways, the city is characterised by humanity's disconnection from God. The scandal of the Biblical testimony is that God is yet willing to work with humanity, to take what they have built in their rebellion and to bring healing and wholeness to it. The great challenge and vocation that is given to God's people is to be a people who live, work and pray for the *shalom* of the city, no matter how marginal they may be.

The agenda for cohesive territorial development laid out by the World Urban Campaign in many ways approximates a secular vision of *shalom*, working towards re-connection of multiple spheres of community, locality, economy and ecology. It is a program for which Christian mission should feel a certain affinity and, as such, should be prepared to work in partnership with and even, humbly, to accept guidance from. In many ways, the health of Christian faith into the twenty-first century will be dependent upon its ability to re-connect the multiple spheres of life under a single, coherent vision of the gospel.

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Talking about the weather ...

Towards constructive climate conversations

by Ben Thurley

The meal we ate last night. The latest episode of *Game of Thrones*. How our kids are doing. What we're growing in the garden. The book we're reading. The latest political scandal. Whether or not we're worried about the mole that's appeared on our arm.

What we talk about gives us a pretty good window into what we, both as individuals and as communities and society, take seriously. What things are considered worthy of attention and conversation? In choosing what (and what not) to talk about, there's a complex and often unconscious process of selection that takes into account not only our own attitudes and beliefs, but also our feelings about what will be of interest to others, what will build affinity and strengthen relationships.

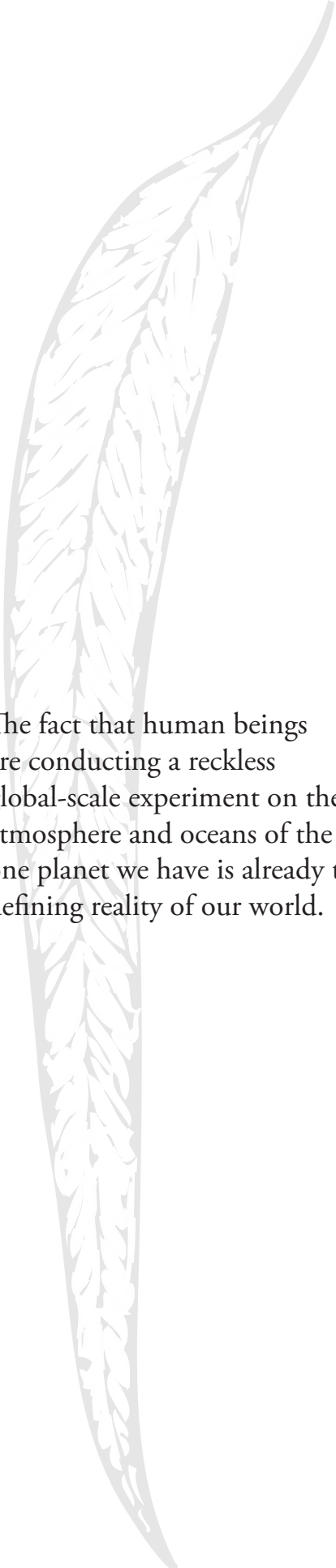
As social, communicative creatures, talking about something signals to others not only that it is a topic worthy of consideration, but also opens up avenues for action and collaboration, for change, which do not exist until we start to name them. 'All talk, no action' can be a real problem in many areas of life. Equally, though, it's virtually impossible to take meaningful action without deep discussion and real conversations to motivate and direct our energy.

Where does climate change sit in this picture? Is the climate emergency that we can see clearly, but which somehow eludes our full recognition, something that we personally and socially consider worthy of attention and conversation?

The fact that human beings are conducting a reckless global-scale experiment on the atmosphere and oceans of the one planet we have is already the defining reality of our world. At just the 1°C of warming we experience today (from the pre-Industrial average), the Great Barrier Reef and other coral systems are dying, the world's glaciers are melting, while more and more people all over the world are bearing the brunt of more frequent and more severe heatwaves, bushfires and droughts, floods and storms – all turbo-charged by the heat-trapping gases being pumped into the atmosphere.

And all current projections, even the best-case scenarios, indicate that these impacts will only increase in frequency and severity. Even if every country were to meet its Paris Agreement targets, which we are not on track to achieve, the world is still projected to warm by 3–4°C within the lifetimes of children born today, with likely catastrophic impacts. At these temperatures, large parts of the world would be rendered uninhabitable and major food-growing regions ruined by drought (like parts of Australia and the USA) or rising seas (such as Vietnam and Bangladesh), causing massive displacement of entire communities across every continent and even losses of entire countries in the case of some of our most vulnerable Pacific neighbours.

Research conducted by Yale into attitudes about climate change



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in the USA indicates that only four in ten Americans talk about climate change ‘regularly’ or ‘occasionally’ with family and friends (*Climate Change in the American Mind*). While that number has shown a steady increase since the survey began in 2015, that still leaves a disturbingly large number of people – a majority of the population in fact – who ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ talk about climate change.

The same question hasn’t been asked of Australians, but I suspect that the numbers here might be slightly better, but not by much. When was the last time you talked about climate change with friends? When was the last time you heard a sermon relating to climate change in church?

Four broad reasons have been put forward to explain why talking about, and taking action on, climate change has proved so difficult: the limitations of human psychology and reasoning, socially-organised denial, political tribalism and decades-long campaigns of deliberate misinformation and disempowerment. I suspect they all play their part, but it’s worth considering how each one works.

Dan Kahneman (*Thinking Fast and Slow*) and George Marshall (*Don’t Even Think About It*)

have highlighted some of the ways human psychology and thought processes make it difficult for us to respond to climate change. It turns out that people are pretty good at responding to immediate, nearby threats with an obvious cause or agent. But we are less able to effectively evaluate and respond to risks or threats which seem distant in time or space, seem to affect others (but not us) and which have complex causes and/or no obvious ‘villain’.

Kari Norgaard (*Living in Denial*) has outlined ways in which entire societies organise what may be talked about and the ways larger social fears (around economic uncertainty or rapid social change, for example) shape what are acceptable topics for thought and conversation. People avoid difficult topics in order to protect a cherished identity (like nature-loving, good-hearted Australians), maintain a sense of control and agency and maintain shared cultural assumptions about what is true, what is good and what *works*.

Dan Kahan, one of the scholars of Yale Law School’s Cultural Cognition Project, has shown that people conform their beliefs about disputed matters of fact to fit with values that define their cultural and political identities. Because climate change has been made a matter of contention, an opinion about climate change is a way of indicating a person’s political and cultural identity. So people will often align their opinions with the

beliefs that predominate in that person’s primary cultural communities (political affiliation, church group, etc.). Evidence suggests that higher education and scientific literacy doesn’t change people’s views on such topics – it merely provides an opportunity to do a better job of ‘confirming’ the views of one’s group, even if their group is wrong on matters of fact.

Authors like Naomi Oreskes (*Merchants of Doubt*) and Guy Pearse (*High and Dry*) have exposed how fossil fuel companies have used funding and promotion of supposedly objective studies, think tanks and civil society groups to spread doubt and misinformation about climate change in media and public discourse. They also highlight ways in which these companies have corrupted democratic decision-making and undermined the duty of governments to protect people and the environment in order to increase their profits and delay or diminish planned actions to address climate change. Australia, with a highly concentrated ownership of media and an outsized influence of the mining and fossil fuel industries in our national imagination and politics, has proved particularly vulnerable here.

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Given these factors, and the polluted political and social environment that has been created around discussions of climate change, is it any wonder that we find it difficult to talk about? Or that conversations about climate change can be so frustrating and contentious?

Yet none of these factors in themselves determine our response and all of them can be overcome. We are people with many identities and our concerns and their priority shift over time and as we enter different life-stages.

For me, there are many signs of hope. The first is that the national conversation is moving into a new stage of public concern. According to Lowy Institute polling in 2018, 59% of Australians consider climate change a ‘serious problem’ on which we should take strong action. That’s a return to roughly the level of public concern expressed in 2008, before then Opposition leader, Tony Abbott, launched his divisive, scorched-earth political assault on climate policy-making in Australia. On the back of this rising concern, political independents (particularly Liberal-leaning ones) are being elected, largely on the basis of their commitment to press for action on climate change.

The global school strikes for climate action in 2018 and 2019 – which saw over a million students take to the streets world-wide, including thousands of students in dozens of rallies across Australia – have also strengthened a sense of urgency and made climate change a political



priority and topic for discussion. Polarising they may have been, with many politicians and broadcasters lining up to lecture the students about the importance of staying in school. But that was largely the point – students contrasting their own concern and action to secure a better future against the increasingly discredited moralising of older people intent on preserving the status quo.

The school strikes were a great catalyst for quality climate conversations, too. An opening to discuss with parents and young people, their hopes and fears for the future and what we should *do* about that. Because quality climate change conversations are not, primarily, conversations about *climate change*. They are conversations about *us*.

The best climate change conversations affirm and reinforce shared values, like caring for creation, or standing alongside our vulnerable neighbours, or ensuring that children have a cleaner, safer world to inherit. They draw on, and strengthen, the best aspects of our shared identities: Australians who love nature, parents who love our children, students with a passionate commitment to the future, Christians who stand with the poor and the marginalised, people who want a fairer economy and society. They are honest and open and direct, drawing on our own concerns and fears, hopes and dreams. And they are action-oriented, aimed not merely sharing information or overcoming disagreement, but at generating shared commitments to action and change that can match the scale of the climate emergency we are in.

We need to be strategic and thoughtful about who we talk to and how we talk to them. We often think of climate conversations as confrontations between a passionate activist and an equally passionate denier. Parts of our national conversation, including flagship programs such as the ABC's *Q&A* and even the performance of our Parliament, reinforce this dispiriting and demoralising view. However, despite the heat and noise these disputes generate, they are generally a waste of time and energy.

With our most supportive friends and colleagues, we should be discussing and doing the most significant and ambitious things we are willing and able to do – whether it's meeting a politician, contributing to a campaign, calling our banks to divest from fossil fuels or blockading a coal mine. For those who might be supportive but not terribly active, our conversations should raise the level of concern about our climate emergency and increase our willingness to act, posing opportunities to get hands-on in concrete and personally meaningful ways – invitations to an event, a rally, a meeting, having a discussion about how you will vote.

For friends and neighbours who are unsupportive,

or unconvinced, often the best we can hope for is to challenge ways that their passivity might conflict with identities and values they cherish and offer small opportunities towards being less passive or less oppositional. But don't spend too much time and energy. *Q&A* is already broadcast Australia-wide once a week. You don't need to replicate it yourself at morning tea, or the pub, or the dining table.

For Christians, there is also theological work to be done to better ground our climate conversations. Views of God's sovereignty that encourage passivity or quiescence need to be challenged. God, in His sovereignty, has blessed and bestowed on human beings a role and a responsibility to be His image-bearers in the world, exercising tender care and rule over creation. We should not be surprised when, first, human beings live up to that God-given mandate and, second, our fallibility and fallenness mean that some have misused and abused that role and responsibility.

We will need to challenge our society's dominant stories of wealth and development. The story of our 150-year binge to dig up and burn as much coal, oil and gas as we possibly can is not merely a story of economic transformation and human power. It is, like the story of Adam and Eve's temptation in the Garden, or like the story of an alcoholic who can't tell when enough is enough, a story of refusing to live within limits and the consequences that flow from that.

We will need to adjust our often naïve theological endorsement of business and politics as usual. Mining companies and the media and political interests that support them have not been servants of the people, nor have they promoted the common good, as God commands all rulers and authorities to do. Rather, they have become the 'destroyers of the Earth' whom God has promised to destroy.

In a disrupted climate, we will need to think again about what it is to be the church – the global body of Christ – which is always and everywhere called to 'love our neighbour', especially the most vulnerable people and communities who are being hit first and worst by the impacts of climate change. As we talk and act together, alongside all people of goodwill, against the forces that harm people and God's creation and in order to preserve a safe climate, we bear witness to our hope that God is 'making all things new' and that God's kingdom of grace and peace overturns all earthly powers and shatters the idol of greed which harms so many.

We will need, in short, a little more conversation which leads to a lot more action.

The best climate change conversations affirm and reinforce shared values

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About Manna Gum

Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. Help Christians reclaim and practise Biblical teaching on material life; and
2. Promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others and the earth.

Manna Gum is motivated by a vision of renewal of the Church in Australia as an alternative community that witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

Please contact us if you would like us to speak to your church, group or organisation; or if you would like more information about our work; or to discuss how we could support you and your church/group/organisation to explore some of these issues.

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