



# **An incarnational agency in an evangelical world**

***(A theological consideration of  
Anglicare's role in mission)***

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### **History**

*Anglicare Tasmania* had its origins in 1983, following a study into welfare needs by the Anglican Diocese of Tasmania. The study identified a gap in the financial counseling area, leading to the formation of *Anglican Family Care Services*, providing a counseling service in Hobart for those struggling with debt and low income. It was the first service of its kind in Tasmania.

As the fledgling agency grew, it expanded rapidly to other parts of Tasmania and into other areas of need, a process which accelerated as governments of all persuasions sought out reputable not-for-profit organizations which could effectively deliver social programs. In 1988, the name was changed to *Anglicare Tasmania*.

### **Anglicare today**

Anglicare Tasmania is today one of the leading welfare and social justice agencies in Tasmania, with an annual budget around \$31 million and 700 plus staff members.

Most of Anglicare's programs are funded by the Federal and State governments, or agencies such as the Motor Accident Insurance Board, through a competitive tendering process, one impact of the emergence of market economics.

Anglicare's work is almost wholly with groups it believes are the particular focus of God's unconditional love : the poor, young people, parents, families, the homeless, addicts, the unemployed, the disabled, the mentally ill, and those with acquired brain or spinal injury.

As well as working directly with the disadvantaged, Anglicare also sees it as part of its mission to speak out prophetically on issues of poverty and injustice, and to offer alternatives to decision-makers to help build a more just society. Through Anglicare's *Social Action and Research Centre* (SARC), unique among Tasmanian welfare agencies, professional and well-researched advocacy gives the church a respected voice, reflecting God's concern for justice.

There are strong constitutional connections between the Anglican Diocese of Tasmania and Anglicare as an incorporated association. While members of the association, representing the wider community, elect four Board members, eight of the twelve Board positions are appointed or elected by the Bishop (two, including the Chair), the Synod (three) and Diocesan Council (three). These members must be on the Electoral Roll of an Anglican Parish. The Bishop appoints the Chief Executive Officer on the nomination of the Board and the Diocesan Council has to approve changes to the Rules of Association. These constitutional requirements serve to assure the protection of Anglicare's Christian basis.

### **Anglicare's mission**

Anglicare's mission statement places its basis in Christianity in first place :

*Anglicare, in response to the Christian faith, strives to achieve social justice and to provide the opportunity for people in need to reach the fullness of life.*

This is affirmed by a key statement in Anglicare's Ends Policies:

*Anglicare is a distinctively Christian organization and exists to love and serve the Tasmanian community in the name of Christ.*

In a leaflet on Anglicare's mission and values, largely used as an introduction for new staff and volunteers, the mission statement, and the relationship of Anglicare to the wider church, is spelled out:

*Anglicare is an agency of the Anglican Church, and its mission is shaped by Christian teaching. The Anglican Church is a fellowship of those who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Anglicans believe that engaging with the world and serving others is one way in which they can live out those teachings. [1]*

### **Is Anglicare wholly Christian?**

Justice and welfare agencies of the church are sometimes critiqued, particularly by evangelicals, for not encompassing the whole of God's mission, specifically evangelism, in their work.

David Tolputt, State Director of Scripture Union Victoria, has written :

'Mission takes many forms. For some it is in acts of mercy and kindness; for others it is taking on oppressive regimes. Some believe that mission is creating community, while others are convinced it is growing churches. All of these are aspects of God's mission and worthy pursuits of his people. However, there is ultimately one unique calling for God's people – making the message of forgiveness and reconciliation known to all people everywhere.

'If I have a concern, it is that God's people might give up on spoken evangelism (some don't even like the word) and instead opt for a purely incarnational approach (making Christ visible in our actions). Yet if Jesus is the first incarnation, then his pattern should inform us. Jesus engaged in both word and deed. I'm not advocating evangelism outside the context of meaningful relationships ... but I am concerned that God's people don't drift into relationships with no evangelistic intent'. [2]

It is this 'purely incarnational approach' and the absence of overt evangelism which is at the core of evangelical critiques of Anglicare's mission.

### **The doctrine of the incarnation**

The doctrine of the incarnation specifically refers to God's coming to earth in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Literally, 'incarnation' refers to God's 'enfleshment' in human form. Some would see this specific, one-off action of the Son of God as the full content of 'incarnation'. Glenn Davies, for instance, describes any extension of the doctrine as a 'theological confusion of categories'. [3]

Many other theologians, however, extend the doctrine to include ways in which God continues to be incarnated in the world and, in relation to God's mission, the ways in which the gospel is proclaimed and lived out in the world.

For many theologians, incarnational mission is characterized as 'presence', essentially 'being' Christians in the world, living moral and upright lives on a personal level. Most would extend the meaning of incarnational mission further, encompassing good works, loving actions, works of mercy and a striving for justice. In these circumstances, to characterize incarnational mission as mere 'presence' seems too passive a description, when God's love is being actively shared and demonstrated in such a way.

Evangelical theologians would mostly agree that 'so far, so good', but that even an active presence in the world does not encompass the entire mission of God. An issue of *St Mark's Review* in 2006, incorporated a number of scholarly responses to a seminal English report, *Mission-Shaped Church*. Although addressing a wider mission, these evangelical responses are helpful in understanding the evangelical critique of organizations such as Anglicare.

Peter Adam, Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne, writes: 'I believe that incarnation is fundamental to mission, though that does not mean that the word 'incarnation' can be used to justify policies, actions, or theologies without further qualification. There is a bad use of the incarnation as a principle of mission, as there is also a good use'. [4] Adam's idea of 'a good use' is the doctrine of incarnation alongside what he describes as 'complementary and correcting themes within Christian theology'. [5]

### **The doctrine of creation**

The first missing theological theme Adam identifies is the doctrine of creation. To ignore or sublimate it 'leads to incarnation taking all the weight of God's involvement with the world'. [6] Thus incarnation 'is transmuted into the permanent and universal immanence of God'. [7] ignoring the ways in which God relates to his world, both before and after the historical particularity of the incarnation. Anglicare would claim that it does in fact incorporate the doctrine of creation in its mission, particularly in recognizing the worth and equality of each human being, made in the image of God, in adopting a realistic stance towards human fallibility, in promoting right relationships between people, and in protecting human dignity in a largely secular society.

### **The doctrine of the atonement**

Adam is also critical of an incarnational missiology without a doctrine of the atonement. He writes: 'Incarnation without a theology of the atoning death of Christ on the cross soon becomes adrift because it easily turns into an affirmation of the world, and loses the conflict of the cross, God's judgement on sin, the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and takes on a falsely optimistic view of humanity'. [8] Adam quotes from Australian Baptist theologian Ross Langmead's critique of Anglican versions of incarnational missiology: 'It tends to neglect the cross. It reflects a more optimistic view of the world, and the hope of gradual evolution for the cosmos'. [9]

While this is a predictable and expected criticism from any evangelical theologian, it is not without merit when directed at the work of organizations such as Anglicare. It is somewhat inevitable that those engaged in the helping professions will take an optimistic view of the human predicament and the capacity of individuals to lift themselves out of it; that they will redirect the idea of Christian hope away from the work of Christ and towards the ability of humanity to bring about its own redemption.

Such a tendency is, however, somewhat counterbalanced within agencies such as Anglicare, where the daily experience of human frailty mediates against an over-optimistic view of humanity. The constant encounter with sin and failure must lead away from optimism and towards either despair, or a growing recognition that human redemption cannot rely entirely on our own efforts but, ultimately, only on the work of Christ.

### **The doctrine of the Word**

Finally, Adam is critical of incarnational mission which is separated from proclamation of the Word, the good news of the Gospel: 'Incarnation without verbal revelation means a dumb incarnation of uninterpreted presence ... This leads to a church which is incarnate but reluctant to speak of God to the world' [10] No evangelical theologian would be critical of the value of 'good works', nor would Adam or others deny that 'good works', such as the activities of agencies like Anglicare, can convey something of God's love to the world but, as Adam says, 'There is no reason to be content with a notion of incarnation which is only personal or sacramental, and which does not value verbal revelation in Christ's ministry and in our own ... I am not arguing for unincarnated words, for messages without presence. I am claiming that verbal revelation is part of Christ's incarnate ministry, and that our incarnated ministry should also include incarnated words, the message of the Gospel'. [11]

Writing on the website of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, Jodie McNeill, Director of Camping and Conferencing at Anglican Youthworks, writes : 'Those who find it hard to come up with words to speak find comfort in the reality that their good works alone are preaching to the world. However, if we never open our mouths to preach Christ, then we end up preaching ourselves. For whenever we show random (and not-so-random) acts of kindness, we end up commending our own character, not that of our creator. The outsider notices our good works and ends up glorifying us, not God. The result is that we inadvertently commit divine plagiarism. For, whenever we fail to credit the creator with our good character, we fail to 'footnote' the Spirit of God, who works within us to produce the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do'. [12]

Al Stewart, Bishop of Wollongong writes : 'I think Christians today can make two mistakes : the first is to do good without mentioning Jesus; the second is to follow Jesus but fail to do good or to engage with the needs of the people around us.' [13]

More liberal theologians would claim that there is only a fine distinction between what evangelicals call 'verbal revelation' and the revelation of God's love and justice which characterizes the work of organizations such as Anglicare. Yet it is a distinction which evangelicals, understandably, hold dear. Peter Kell, head of Anglicare Sydney, for instance, distinguishes the Gospel itself from what he describes as 'the fruits of the gospel', the work which his agency does.

Bishop Robert Forsyth of Sydney, while vigorously defending the priority of proclamation, writes: 'This kind of discussion about 'proclaiming Christ' vs. 'good works', as important as it is, has the potential to separate that which in real life goes together. The mature Christian does not operate with two distinct categories when dealing with others in order to switch between them, this time good works, that time proclaiming Christ. Doing good for others will so often involve applying the insights of the gospel to a situation. Proclaiming Christ will so often [mean] involvement in acts of kindness. [14]

### **The constraints on proclamation**

Welfare and social justice agencies like Anglicare have long been constrained in their capacity for overt evangelism, to provide deliberate and sustained verbal proclamation of the Gospel as a core part of their work.

First, constraint has increasingly been felt from the fact that such agencies source almost all of their funds from Federal and State governments. While governments accept the Christian basis and principles of church agencies, at least those of mainstream churches, they are not prepared to have their funds used for overtly evangelistic activity. In itself, this attitude is no bad thing, since it emphasizes the separation of church from state and frees the church's evangelistic activity from any dependence on secular funding and thus influence. While it constrains the agency from open proclamation on the part of its government-funded staff or in government-funded programs, Anglicare believes it is at least able to embed better, more Christ-like values than any secular or governmental agency.

In these circumstances, it is vital for agencies such as Anglicare to stay focused and avoid 'mission creep', where the core Christian principles of the organization's mission can be compromised. A key defence is to maintain a level-playing-field relationship with government, which allows for challenging values and even declining co-operation.

The second constraint on agencies such as Anglicare in engaging in verbal proclamation, is an inability to find Christian staff with the professional capacity to do the work required. The experience of Anglicare Tasmania is that it is often difficult to recruit appropriately qualified staff in any circumstances,

let alone favouring those who practise the Christian faith, even where the law allows such positive discrimination.

A third constraint, usually unspoken, is the ethical dilemma around introducing a verbal proclamation of the Gospel to clients who are often in vulnerable or emotional situations. A corollary of this constraint is the risk that vulnerable clients may see acceptance of a spoken gospel message as a 'condition' to be met before they are assisted with their presenting issues. Seeds scattered in such circumstances may well fall on thin soil. Many in need may feel reluctant to even come into contact with Anglicare if they believe they will be evangelized.

These constraints are real but are they unavoidable? If they are unavoidable, it begs the question as to whether the church should sponsor agencies which are not able to bring the Gospel to people in the fullest way, which, for evangelicals, must include the verbal revelation of the good news.

### **A doctrine of the church**

Anglicare is constitutionally and culturally a part of the church, specifically of the Anglican community. Yet it is not 'a church' in the sense of being a local congregation, or 'the church' in the sense of being wholly distinct from the rest of the body of Christ.

Any sound theology of the church recognizes that no one part of the church encompasses the whole, nor does any individual Christian operate in isolation. Biblical images of the church represent it as organic, dynamic and interdependent.

The image of the church as the body of Christ, particularly in Paul's writings, is one of the more graphic depictions of the total interdependence of individual Christians on one another and the interdependence of each institutional expression of church on each other part.

Clearly, for Paul, there is no expectation that each Christian, or every group of believers, will serve God in precisely the same way, each encompassing the whole range of possible expressions of faith [see especially 1 Corinthians 12]. Indeed, Paul's point is that there are a variety of gifts given to God's people, and that our faithful response is to express those gifts we are given to the best of our ability, rejoicing in the different gifts of others, and not deprecating or envying the fact that God calls others to express their faith in a different way. Scripture calls us to respect all expressions of mission.

Glenn Davies writes: 'Clearly not all members have the task of mission as their spiritual gift. Some have word gifts, others have gifts of service'. [15] He is commenting specifically on Paul's words to the Corinthians:

*'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?' [16]*

Perhaps even more seminal are Paul's words to the Ephesians:

*'Each of us was given grace according to the measure of God's gift ... The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.' [17]*

Thus not every part of the body is expected to encompass every aspect of God's mission to the world. The constraints on organizations such as Anglicare, in verbal proclamation of the good news, become an issue only when such agencies are considered in isolation from the rest of the body, the church. Paul's theology of the church consistently argues against isolating one part of the body from another,

and argues for seeing the parts of the church as complementary. The work of Anglicare in doing good works complements the work of other parts of the church in evangelism.

Indeed, Anglicare's work does more than complement: it also authenticates the verbal proclamation of Jesus Christ by demonstrating effectively the fruits of the good news.

John Thew, Federal Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, writes: 'The credibility of any message is often first judged by the credibility of the life of the messenger. A life that is shaped by the grace of God is very persuasive, a great recommendation for the essential message of the gospel. Actions can speak louder than words.' [18] 'Our message must never be separate from a demonstration of the love and grace of Christ through a life of service'. [19] Thew's words can surely be applied to the church as a whole, as well as to individual Christians.

### **Anglicare's contribution to mission**

As a part of the whole, Anglicare brings several significant assets to the entirety of the church's mission.

First, it provides an advantage of scale. The work, especially intensive, long-term support, which Anglicare can accomplish is far greater than is possible for any single congregation, arguably even greater than can be achieved by all the congregations of the Diocese of Tasmania together. The whole incarnational mission of the Anglican Church is thus on a much greater scale than it otherwise could be, and so the fruits of the gospel are practised at a level that is clearly evident to the community.

Second, with well-researched advocacy, Anglicare is able to offer a significant prophetic voice for the church – well heard if not always well accepted – in a way which the rest of the church does not have the capacity to do. Anglicare provides opportunities for the church to speak out prophetically, in a manner which is acceptable to our society because it comes from a basis of knowledge, experience and commitment to the causes it espouses. Speaking out fearlessly on issues of poverty and justice is a vital part of the totality of God's mission to the world, in which his church is called to play its part.

Thirdly, because of the nature of its work, Anglicare provides a point of contact between the church and groups of people who may never otherwise relate to organized religion: the 'missing generations' in church life, those whose economic status or disability isolates them from our congregations, those of other cultures.

Anglicare engages, on a major scale, with what the New Testament terms 'good works', an activity which is strongly and consistently urged on the church throughout the scriptures. [20] Such activity is entirely consistent with the proclamation of the good news, and complements and authenticates the good news which evangelists proclaim.

The Missionary Diocese of Tasmania has as its vision statement:

*A healthy church ... transforming life.*

Anglicare makes an effective and substantial contribution to the mission of transforming lives. And the Anglican Church would be less than healthy if it did not engage, in Christ's name, in ministries of service and justice, through the work of Anglicare Tasmania.

1. Anglican leaflet, *Working for a Just Tasmania: Mission and Values*, Anglicare Tasmania Inc., February 2006.
2. David Tolputt, *Evangelism by Word and Deed*, in *Outreach*, Scripture Union, Victoria, Autumn 2008, page 2.

3. Glenn Davies, *A Theology of Church*, in St. Mark's Review No. 200, 2006, Barton ACT, page 11.
4. Peter Adam, *Incarnational Theology for a Missionary Church*, in St Mark's Review, No 200, 2006, Barton ACT page 15.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid, page 17.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid, page 18.
9. Ross Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh: Towards an Incarnational Missiology*, University Press of America, Lanham, 2004, pp 182-188.
10. Peter Adam, op.cit., page 17.
11. Ibid, page 18.
12. Jodie McNeill, *Divine Plagiarism*, on [www.sydneyanglicans.net](http://www.sydneyanglicans.net), June 2008.
13. The Rt. Rev. Al Stewart, in *Care* newsletter, Anglicare Sydney, April/May 2008, page 2.
14. Bishop Robert Forsyth, *Proclaiming Christ and Acts of Kindness*, based on an address given to the Sydney Anglicare Festival, May 2005, page 7.
15. Davies, op.cit., page 12.
16. 1 Corinthians 12:27-30.
17. Ephesians 4:7,11.
18. John Thew, *Delighted to share ... gospel and life*, in Checkpoint, CMS, Sydney, Autumn 2008, page 2.
19. Ibid, page 3.
20. Jesus said to his disciples:  
*'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'* [Matthew 5:14-16].  
 See also Titus 2:11 and Ephesians 2:8-10.