

I'll have what she's having



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**Thursday lunchtime. North Island café, Fitzroy North, Melbourne.
8 women, 8 prams, 8 babies, 8 variations of 'coffee'.
One of those women, Susan Campbell (mother of Lucy),
explains how loving church and engaging in mission go
together like poached eggs and hollandaise sauce.**
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The addition of one tiny person to my family has led to the addition of 16 new friends to my contacts list. Half of them are learning how to fit their fists in their mouths while the other half are learning how to feed-shower-settle-clean-feed-change-pack and get to the North Island in time for lunch.

Non-Melbournian readers may need a profile of a Fitzroy North mothers' group: Women in their late 30s. Brief breeding breaks from careers in academia, graphic design, environmental science and alternative medicine.

Exorbitant rent or mortgages for warehouse-turned-apartments or century-old terraces. Vegetarian. De facto partnerships. Funky haircuts. Independent. Arty. Politically active. Designer clothes with op shop accessories. Discuss landscaping designs for the 2x3 metre courtyard; absorbency of modern cloth nappies; personal post-natal Yoga instructors; organic baby foods; nanny services and pram-friendly cafés to take baby Django, Jemima, Celeste, Jasper, Harriet or Poppy.

This is my 'hood', this is my context, and these are my wonderful friends. And as the only follower of Jesus in the group, this is my mission field. We have recently formed, so the level of sharing hasn't progressed further than opinions about the child health nurse's new hair do or nappy-explosion-in-the-café stories, but as the summer rolls on I'm sure we'll be sharing our lives on a deeper level. My hope is that through our relationship, my new friends will be able to recognise the transforming work of Jesus in their lives.

... but then what? What happens if they begin a relationship with Jesus?



I live in one of the most secular postcodes in Australia. Developers and restaurant entrepreneurs are eager to get their hands on church properties. Tiny congregations are struggling to survive, and like most places in Australia, young adults and families who grew up in the church are leaving in droves. This creates challenges for maintaining church functions, but an even greater challenge for being effective in mission.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf wrote: **“The interest of the people of God in transmitting their faith will not be much greater than their interest in the Christian congregation in which they actually live out their faith.”**¹ In other words, we’re unlikely to share our faith if we’re disengaged, embarrassed or disappointed by the friends and experiences we have with our church community. If a new believer asked about connecting with church and we awkwardly reply, “Um...ahh...well...I used to go here... I sort of go there but the people aren’t that great...” it doesn’t give a fabulous impression or encouraging start. Yet the sad reality is very few people I know actually love their church community.

How stark is the contrast to the picture of the church in Acts? “The whole group were of one heart and soul...everything they owned was held in common...with great power they gave their testimony...there was not a needy person among them...great numbers of both men and women were added to the Lord.”² Those were the days!

I am currently looking for a church to belong to and a friend asked what I was after: Solid teaching? Yep. Inspiring leadership? Definitely. Opportunities to get involved? Absolutely. But one of the most important factors for me is a place where there may be some connection, resonance and relevance for my North Island friends. ‘Place’ might mean a service or event they come to, or it could mean that during parties and picnics they experience welcome and acceptance from church people, and the friendship networks spread.

We face two big challenges: The first is to invest time and energy into our church, to make it a thriving, mission-focused, Acts-like community...yet still have time and energy to maintain quality relationships with those ‘outside’. The second is to be a people who are different from the crowd, noticeable by our characteristics of love, justice and peace...yet similar enough to make sense to those around us.

I’m excited by the vision of the Global Interaction teams working among unreached people groups. They empower communities to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus. The vision is for people movements, whole families and social networks to follow Jesus in personally meaningful and relevant ways.

There are places around the globe where faith communities are beginning to take shape – a handful of new believers meeting in a rural area in Thailand and small discipleship groups sprouting up in African and South Asian villages.

It’s a significant time, as the new believers are making choices about the form, style, character and function of their faith community. They are deciding who and what they want to be. The process of reading how the first church in Acts started, waiting on the Holy Spirit, and discerning their way through many situations is a fascinating process. With so much ‘buy in’ at such a formative time, the new believers are passionate about their community and keen to share their faith with others. With the focus on whole communities, the gospel will spread like butter on hot sourdough!

How much we have to learn! Imagine if we adopted a similar approach as we invest in our churches here in Oz. **Imagine if our generation could wake from apathetic slumber and make some bold and radical decisions about who we are, what we do, and how we do it.** Not just to make us more satisfied and comfortable. Not just to grasp a tighter hold on those joining the exodus from the church. Instead, let our motivation be for mission. **Just like the new believers overseas and those in Acts, let’s love our faith communities and strive for relevance, cultural sensitivity and an unswerving commitment to those who don’t know Jesus.**

May our generation see mothers’ groups, tute classes, footy teams and Facebook friends experience transformation through Jesus, and may my North Island friends slip into Christian community as smoothly as organic honey slips into a soy chai latte.



¹ Miroslav Volf, *After our likeness: the church as the image of the Trinity*, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998, 18.

² Bits from Acts 4 and 5 - go on, read it, it’s inspiring!

