

Interview with Mark Pierson Pastor of Cityside Baptist Church, I pioneer
community in alt worship.

It was a bit of a shock when I heard you were moving from Cityside in Auckland to Melbourne - there has been talk about you wanting to focus more on liquid church - and wanting to be out there more on the margins - so does this relate to what you feel is next?

Not really! The move from Cityside comes out of my growing awareness that I needed another challenge or two before I get put out to pasture at retirement age. I have maybe 15 or 20 years of significant working life left and I want to do as much as I can in that time to encourage new forms of church so that there is some hope that my grandsons, now five years old, will be able to find a community of Christian faith that communicates the Jesus story in forms that they can understand when they get a bit older. I don't have a lot of hope currently. While Cityside seems to me to exhibit a lot of the values and characteristics of Liquid Church as described by Pete Ward, my focus is on people rather than any particular form of church, liquid or otherwise. There is in Melbourne a community of people who are followers of Jesus who are not connecting in any meaningful ways with any faith community I want to see if I can work with them to grow a community that will change that. The form that takes will be determined by the desires and sub-cultures of those people.

You have been involved in alt worship for sometime, and the Parallel Universe and Cityside: church developed because of your vision and empowerment of these both to develop into faith communities for new forms of being church - what is your vision for Cityside now, and new forms of church?

It would be unfair of me to suggest a vision for Cityside now that I am leaving. That task belongs to the congregation – even more than it does to whoever might follow me in pastoral leadership of the congregation. Maybe that suggests what I think is vital for any new church form. We must keep asking what the purpose of church is and working to keep it simple and on track. We are not good at asking this foundational question and then having determined an answer, working out the best ways to fulfill that. It has long been my belief that a church exists to sustain the people who are part of it's community in their following of Christ in the world. (Mission is inherent in the following.) And that the worship life and structures of the community should reflect the ordinary everyday lives of those who make it up. This community should make the decisions relating to its life and carry them out at every level. I have no time for leader-driven models, corporate business models, authoritarian leadership or any structure that assumes someone else knows best what the rest of us need in order to mature as followers of Jesus. I'm not denying the value or role of leadership, just the current models we're being sold.

Offering real participation (why should I have to use an adjective with 'participation'?) and the ability of every community member to influence the direction and outcomes of the community's life are foundational as far as I am concerned. I hope that Cityside will always continue to have that principle at

its core.

Why Melbourne - what draws you? Loads of my friends and my brother have been drawn there - what's its charm?

Melbourne isn't the primary draw. I have for sometime felt that I was running out of steam at Cityside. I have been unsettled. At the same time I have been feeling a bit too comfortable at Cityside and feeling that Cityside was likewise with me. If it wasn't Melbourne it would be somewhere else. Moving there will be extremely difficult for my wife and I as we leave behind family, friends, a church we have loved for 11 years, and 35 years of contacts in the Christian community in New Zealand. Melbourne may be a charming place but we haven't been charmed by it! We go simply because it seems right to us at this time. Maybe we're wrong. Only time will tell. Whatever the outcome I won't see it as success or failure. Just as doing what we believed was best, given the information we had.

You are aware of the growing UK developments in new forms of church - particularly focused in the Anglican church. Given that NZ & Australia have been doing this sort of thing for a while what is you take on where the UK are at?

It would be exceptionally arrogant of me to presume to have even a rudimentary idea of what is going on in the UK. It is fair to say that the NZ/Australian scene doesn't have many examples of new *church* forms yet, but that the possibilities are increasing. There is a wave building up out the back. It will be almost entirely made up of modified solid church congregations, and they will be only the first wave of the needed change, but it will roll through in the next 5 years, making it easier for the following waves of greater change to get through. I think the alt.worship movement was a distraction. Maybe a necessary one, but a distraction none-the-less. It hasn't and can't deliver what many of us expected of it. It was an early swell. I think we need to be looking at developing new forms of *church* rather than *worship* alone. As important as worship is, worship reform is like moving the deck chairs on the Titanic if it doesn't have behind it a renewed understanding and practice of church leadership and ecclesiology. To offer just a monthly worship event and the occasional small group meeting is not going far enough. Our vision needs to be broader than that and must include pastoral leadership that builds community in a multitude of ways, always taking cognisance of the changing culture and spiritual desires of people. The problem is with current church leaders. They hold the power and also have the responsibility to maintain current forms as well as support emerging ones. 95% of the pressure comes from those who not only want their current form sustained but they see any alternative as a challenge to their faith! They hold the power and the resources and it is a brave or foolish pastoral leader who stands against that pressure. We need more brave and 'foolish' pastors.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself in this new job?

My hope is that we have made the right decision and that in the longer term this is a good thing for my family, for Cityside and for Urban Seed who have taken a risk in offering the job to me (www.urbanseed.org). Only time will tell that. I will be continuing working with Cityside alongside Urban Seed until the New Year.

At a practical level I am looking forward to working with the staff and others connected with Urban Seed to grow a new (compared to what already exists) kind and style of worshipping community of faith in downtown Melbourne. A community that incorporates and sustains the significant social, social justice and mission involvements of Urban Seed. I'm also keen that this community builds on what I have learnt about using the arts and participation as well as AncientFuture reframing and high levels of openness and creativity. Liquid church concepts are important to me. I'll be looking to see what principles come out of my experiences with Cityside and might be transportable, rather than the specific practices.

Thanks Mark - much appreciated. I am looking forward to you coming over to UK in the summer

Thanks. I think I'll be doing a seminar or two at Greenbelt on some aspect of the arts and worship and a three-day seminar at the Ark-T centre in Oxford after Greenbelt on similar themes. It will be great to renew connections with people.

Mark Pierson 18 March 2004