

Pelican Foundation Launch

‘Sun King casts shadow on solar solution.’ Thus read the front headline of the Canberra Times on the day I was invited to speak at this launch. The accompanying article explained how entrepreneur Zhengrong Shi, China’s richest man, had cast doubt on the Federal Government’s decision to means test the solar panel rebate. Reporter Rosslyn Beeby noted that Shi, known as the “Sun King,” a former University of NSW engineer and senior research scientist, now heads a Shanghai-based global solar empire worth \$7.6 billion. His company Suntech, which started in 2001 with modest backing from Chinese investors after failing to attract Australian Government support, is now the world’s largest photovoltaic manufacturer. It employs 8000 people, has grown at an annual rate of 227 per cent these past three years and was the energy provider for the Beijing “Bird’s Nest” Olympic stadium.

Now, I know nothing of the details of Shi’s failed attempt to gain support here in Australia, but I imagine, after reading of his success in China, that certain members of our previous government are rueing their decision not to back the venture. Of course, stories of *missed opportunity* abound in all areas of life, including the church. It is a commitment to *affirming opportunity* that we are here to announce tonight, for this is what the Pelican Foundation is about – supporting innovative Christian engagement with society.

It will come as no surprise to you to hear that these are challenging times for the Church – things have changed. In a relatively short period (perhaps fifty years) the Western church has been largely displaced from its previously secure and culturally-privileged position. ‘Living in a post-Christian and pluralist society has sent shock waves through the psyche of our churches,’ comments George Hunsberger, Professor of Missiology at Western Theological Seminary, ‘shaking loose our long-accustomed security in the heritage of Christendom.’ This change is prompting us to explore the terrain of an identity beyond that of being merely a “vendor of religious services.” We’ve been thrust into the search for a renewed sense of our mission.

Change, of course, is the one constant element of life. The issue confronting the church is not so much *the fact* of change as its *extent and rapidity*. After the relative stability of the Christendom period – an era of perhaps 1600 years, our world

has entered a season of dramatic and *discontinuous* change. What do I mean by this? Continuous change is incremental, predictable and manageable; discontinuous change is *radical, momentous and disruptive!* It is akin to being completely blind and then suddenly being able to see light, shape and colour for the first time. ‘Discontinuous change is dominant in periods of history that *transform* a culture forever,’ write Roxburgh and Romanuk in their recent book *The Missional Leader*. Our society is passing through just such a time, a disruption not unlike the experience of the Israelites in the periods of the Exodus and the Exile some 2500 and 3000 years ago.

In situations of *discontinuous* change, previously dependable assumptions and practices prove increasingly unreliable, no matter how hard they are pressed. We are discovering this in the church. Working harder and smarter with the same old methods, within the same old structures, is not getting us where we need to go, nor helping us to become what we need to be. Neither is jumping on the bandwagon of the latest religious fad or program. If the church is to remain faithful to her God-given vocation to be a means of *blessing* in the world (a vocation first entrusted to Abraham in the earliest chapters of the Bible), we need to do more than rehearse obsolete expectations, we must adapt. It’s not that Christians are unable to have a life-giving impact on society; it’s just that society no longer comes to the church with a fulsome expectation of what we have to offer.

To continue to embody faithfully the *costly, boundary-breaking, self-participating* approach of Jesus, (which is how God intends for divine blessing to be conveyed), it is imperative that we, (*the community of Jesus*), embrace new ways of being *in* the world; ways that will only emerge as we venture from the safety of established patterns and risk new levels of involvement with the people, problems and possibilities of our time.

In this context, the Pelican Foundation has enormous potential to supply essential financial support for creative new initiatives. But how might the Foundation gauge the worthiness of such endeavours? Beyond basic ideas of financial efficiency, I’d like to highlight four values that undergird faithful Christian mission - mutuality, solidarity, marginality and hospitality. These values are essential for the church because they reflect the manner in which our founder Jesus Christ engaged with the

world. When such values are preached but not practiced they are rightly dismissed as mere sentiment. And yet, when such values are *incarnated* (to use a theological term) - fully embodied - they become profoundly transformative.

Mutuality is built on humility and respect. It is founded on the belief that all of creation is deeply connected, and that all human beings are created in God's image and held equally in God's embrace. Mutuality entails a genuine willingness to open up and listen, a willingness to *work with* others; to *learn from* others. A commitment to mutuality protects us from disempowering notions of assistance and leads quite naturally into partnership, shared engagement, and collaboration.

Solidarity, true solidarity, is costly; it requires us to *stand with*, to *care for* others, to seek to suspend our personal, cultural and religious notions so that we can be enriched by the experiences, ideas and practices of others. Solidarity facilitates a form of engagement that is responsive, compassionate and sacrificial. Such a stance inevitably connects us with those most vulnerable in society, ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances who bear the burdens of poverty, displacement, disability or mental illness.

Solidarity will also lead us into the experience of **marginality**. 'The Gospel frees the church to live in vulnerability in relation to the world,' says Craig Van Gelder of Luther Seminary, Minnesota, it leads us to the *margins* of society. Standing with those deprived of power and privilege we discover new ways of *seeing* and *knowing* and *being* in the world. Stripped of our familiar props and protections we discover new forms of trust, new ways of working and new companions with whom to work.

And, of course, the experience of displacement with its accompanying sense of *strangeness* opens up new possibilities for receiving and extending **hospitality**. As Anthony Gittins reminds us in his book *Ministry at the Margins*, being a stranger is never easy. It is necessary, however, if we are to succeed in crossing boundaries and encountering new relationships. As those who've found themselves to be strangers in a strange land will readily testify, the risk of strangeness is regularly rewarded with generous hospitality. When church congregations step beyond their comfort zones they too will find themselves invited into new relations with exciting possibilities for the healing of the earth and the wholeness of its people.

Missed opportunities and misplaced expectations have diminished our church's potential to be an agent of blessing in the world. The Pelican Foundation can (and I believe will) play a vital role in fostering an effective reengagement with our primary vocational tasks by supporting initiatives that reflect authentic and faithful engagement. The four values of mutuality, solidarity, marginality and hospitality offer a helpful guide for evaluating the worthiness of new initiatives.

Of course, it is a risk for the church (and the Foundation) to adopt such an approach. Some attempts will founder or even fail. Then again, for lighting the way in times of uncertainty, so called 'failure' can be as important as success. To invest successfully, some risks are *worth* taking. Zengrong's solar power plan is a case in point. If a proposal is creative and exciting, if it is consistent with our ethos and values then it may be worth supporting even when the precise outcome is unclear. The Pelican Foundation is being launched at a time when the church can ill afford to play it safe. As a recent visitor to St Marks (where I work), Bishop Stephen Sykes said, 'the people of God are carriers of a blessing intended for the whole world.' When this blessing is shared by a courageously engaged church supported by a generous Foundation, it will make a world of difference. I warmly commend the Foundation and its objectives to you and to all who long for the church to discharge its divine calling with vigour and boldness.

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