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Finding Common Ground: A Contemporary Challenge for the Church

In public life, Christians are seeking answers to fundamental questions: Where are we? Who are we? What's happening? How should we respond?

In late 2016, I reflected on the way in which, in recent times, the most prominent responses to these questions had uncritically adopted the position of *exile* for the contemporary church. I had observed the way prominent Christian leaders, some Church institutions and a good number of local Churches in developed countries were adopting an exilic mindset, while still enjoying a privileged position in society. As if this were an imaginative option open for us today, when it is not.

In response, I published an essay on ABC Religion and Ethics, 'No Place for Exile: How Christians Should (Not) Make Sense of their Place in the World.'

I noted the way in which Christians invoked "exile" as the way to make sense of who they are, where we are and how we are to respond, a state of emergency is being invoked, and a rationale is created for the use of extraordinary powers.

I cautioned that when Christians believe that they are in exile in Western societies, contrary to the evidence of our position and power, it points to the fact that Christians are experiencing a collapse in sense-making. And I argued that the effects, if not remedied, will be disastrous for Christian witness, and for society.

How widespread was this trend, and how widespread does it continue to be?

In 2016, it was common to see Christian ministry framed as taking place in the context of exile. So common, in fact, that David Starling, writing in *Eternity News* in August of 2016 mused that "exile, it seems is the flavour of the year." The seriousness with which this framing has been adopted is reflected in one of the numerous examples Starling cited: a [post by Steve McAlpine](#), on a blog read widely by Australian evangelical church leaders, in which McAlpine argued that his readers needed to brace for "Exile Stage Two."

And, of course, in 2017, Rod Dreher published his book, *The Benedict Option*, with which many of you will be familiar. David Brooks of the *New York Times* said that '*The Benedict Option* is already the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade.' A champion of Christian culture-making, Gabe Lyons, the president of Q Ideas commented that the book is 'deeply convicting and motivating. This book will be a grounding force for the Church in the decades ahead.'

Since writing that essay, we have had a run of political events in Australia with direct relevance to the relationship between the Church, society and culture. Top of mind, for many of us, is The Royal Commission into the Institutional Responses to Child

Sexual Abuse, which handed its report to the Governor General in the middle of December 2017. The Royal Commission heard more than 8,000 personal stories of abuse in private sessions and found that ‘many of our society’s institutions failed our children.’

Moreover, the Royal Commission found that ‘society’s values and mechanisms which were available to regulate and control aberrant behaviour failed.’ The Royal Commission placed responsibility on institutions, including Churches, and on governments to acknowledge children are vulnerable to abuse and to do all that they can to protect the. Some 409 recommendations were made. Public trust in the institutions of the Church in Australia has never been lower.

Given that the extent of abuse and the institutional failings were largely known before the Royal Commission handed down its report, the Church’s existing reputation problem was only solidified further during the debate surrounding the Same Sex Marriage Postal Survey. The co-option of the Church into a campaign for ‘no’ in the Same Sex Marriage Postal Survey that failed almost *entirely* to discuss the good of marriage – God’s good gift and design – could only have increased the problem. But the core issue that the carriage of both the ‘yes’ and the ‘no’ campaigns revealed was – as my husband commented to me - the Church had long since vacated the field of political engagement, and the hard, but rewarding work of political theology. How could the Church hope to enter into a single-issue debate when it had relinquished its authority in matters of public life so completely?

If the Church entered the fray at the last moment on the Same Sex Marriage Survey, it was absent and asleep when the government provided a summary rejection of the Uluru Statement. The contempt with which the government treated the work of the Referendum Council amounted to what Scott Stephens searingly described as ‘soul blindness’ – a ‘fundamental incapacity to see the humanity of another.’

Together, these political events in our nation demonstrated: the loss of the Church’s grounding in public life; shattered public trust in the institutions of the Church; the Church’s obsession with institutional self-preservation; and a fundamental loss of Christian confidence in our identity and our prophetic role in public life.

For those watching, how can we but question the ability of the Church to steward the gospel, and take God’s message of salvation and reconciliation to the world? And so, we must ask: what is going on here? How can we make sense of who we are, where we are, and how we are to behave?

If exile is not an option, is the answer to find common ground? When speaking about those outside the Christian faith, Christians invoke the call to ‘find common ground’ as a way to relate to others – those of no faith or another faith - in a radically plural society. Implicit in this call to find common ground is a sense that shared values or preferences might be identified, and ‘unbundled’ from more complex identities – that we should seek to be ‘marshalled,’ in the words of [Charles Taylor](#), ‘by mutual displays of identity.’

The title of this lecture seems to suggest, on first reading, that the Church *should* find common ground with others. I do have a great deal sympathy for such a view. Yet

that is *not* what I mean. I deliberately gave this lecture the title ‘Finding Common Ground: A Contemporary Challenge for the Church’ because I wanted to provoke a conversation questioning the assumption that we should find common ground, and suggesting that the *relevant* contemporary challenge for the Church is in fact to resist such calls and offer what only we can.

I think this conversation needs to be had because I believe that the assumption that we need find common ground to make sense of our situation, suggests that we have an even greater misunderstanding of who we are, and where we are than first thought. So, I have given this lecture that title to open up a conversation; to provoke an opportunity to reflect on our sense of the intersection between our Christian faith, our identity and place, as I share some questions I am currently considering.

The senses of territory

As I’ve watched the debate within the Church about whether or not we are in exile, and seen the counter-offer being made that we are a people who must find common ground, I’ve been struck by the personal and institutional reality of grief, and by the lack of sense of worthiness. Both the metaphors of exile and of common ground are used for their cognitive meaning and for their emotive effect, as your very own Brian Rosner’s recent work on identity, *Known by God*, has explored more fully.

The biblical framework of exile is slippery because, as David Starling has pointed out, it can be used both literally and metaphorically. It thus appears to help us make sense of an ambiguous situation, without having to be clear about what we mean. Do we mean that we are literally in exile? Do we mean that we are now becoming a minority? Or do we mean that we are experiencing something similar to physical exile by being a minority that is without power, relying on the mercy of the oppressor?

But it is not only the biblical framework of exile that is slippery, what do we mean by the metaphor of finding common ground? The concept of ‘common ground’ is a broad one. All that the concept conveys is that there is difference, and that there is some hope of finding commonality amidst that difference. It does assume, of course, that difference can exist, outside of communality, or some other form of absolute.

The call to find common ground is usually made when the world is considered in terms of competing values, and when a conciliatory frame and an activist posture is given primacy. As ANU Professor John Warhurst described recently in an article in *The Age* on the concept of a ‘Broad church’ in party politics, implicit in a call to common ground is a desired end: that a negotiated consensus or agreement would emerge amidst the diversity. Also implicit is a belief that if common ground can be found, then, what would otherwise be distinct competing teams locked in ideological battle, can win collectively, and then divide the spoils of battle.

There is a more specific sense in which the call to common ground is made by some Christians. Barney Schwartz, a former religion editor at *The Age*, and a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Public Christianity, advocated in an article in 2014 for Christians to adopt this as a strategy. He argued that with new research from The Brookings Institution showing that only 49 per cent of religious conservatives are under 49, compared to 66 per cent of progressives, and that religious diversity, on the whole, is

likely to increase, religious progressives at the forefront of battles for social justice *should* find common ground with secular progressives.

The affective impact of territorial metaphor is quite particular. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, reflected on the ‘need to revive and preserve a scriptural imagination capable of deploying decisive and classical narratives in the interpretation of the human world,’ particularly since there is no ‘doubt of the present weakening of such imagination in our culture.’ Despite this interest, he expressed how ‘perturbed’ he is ‘by the territorial cast of the imagery used’; Are we simply to accept a ‘framework’ within whose boundaries things - persons? - are to be ‘inserted?’

Not only is the sense of territory problematic, but H. Richard Niebuhr argued, more than 70 years ago now, that ‘isolationism’ is simply ‘the heresy opposite to worldliness.’ The exilic framework is profoundly isolationist in its attempt to make sense of who we are, where we are and how we are to respond to the world. And the alternative commonly offered in reaction, ‘to find common ground,’ can be profoundly worldly in its unreflective adoption of a liberal, cosmopolitan emphasis on discourse, and the politics of identity and lifestyle choice.

Moreover, both the exilic and common ground frameworks are being used to scaffold what [Luke Bretherton](#) describes as three of the most common ways by which churches try to make sense of the intersection between Christianity, identity and place: *co-option*, *competition* and *commoditisation*.

When Christians try to *read* their situation as either one of exile, or as one that demands that common ground be found, they need to pay close attention to both social trends and biblical texts.

The key social trends being read include the decline in the proportion of those identifying as Christian in the West. In the United States, the [Pew Research Center](#) found that Christianity has declined sharply, with un-affiliated and other faiths rising. In England and Wales, [NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey](#) showed that people of no religion outnumbered Christians in England and Wales. And in Australia, we await the latest census results, with an acute awareness of a [decline over the past forty years](#), to 61% of the population in 2011.

Understanding what it means when there is a declining proportion of people within society who identify as Christian is, however, complicated by the fact that in developed countries, while Christians are becoming a minority, we still have a majority culture.

While Christians in the West feel as though they are in an increasingly marginal position, Christianity is [growing rapidly in the world's fastest growing region](#): Africa. While this could counteract concern in the West, it seems that this change in the geographical locus of growth serves in fact to disorient further many Western Christians, and compounds the sense of loss. This sense of loss is also expressed by Christians who believe that the declining majorities, the minorities or the “losers” best band together, or at least fix their identities, and forge coalitions of the willing.

Among the key biblical texts Christians should read is the Book of Jeremiah (Jeremiah's pastoral letter to the Israelites removed to exile in Babylon in 598BC) - and chapter 29, in particular. It is a rich passage that has provided inspiration for the Church throughout the centuries, from the writings of Augustine to the sense of mission at Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City today. Moreover, this chapter provides the launching pad for Bretherton's [Christianity and Contemporary Politics](#).

Yet in its everyday use in Christian communities, both leaders and lay people are reading texts such as Jeremiah 29 in oddly literal ways that account for neither biblical theology nor the genre of the book. As [Walter Brueggemann](#) has argued, Jeremiah must be understood as poetry in order to see the affective, imaginative possibilities it opens. The poetry must be relished, rather than re-enacted directly.

Christians should also pay particular attention to the epistle of 1 Peter. As Miroslav Volf pointed out, in his article on *Soft Difference* and theological reflections on the relation between Church and Culture, 1 Peter is central to Christian self-understanding. The epistle, as Volf notes, the metaphor of "alien" for which the epistle is known, has been potent throughout the history of the Church: 'essential to monastic and Anabaptist movements alike, to Augustine and Zinzendorf, and in our own time, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer... no less than to Jim Wallis ([of] *Sojourners*), or Stanley Hauerwas ([in his] *Resident Aliens*).'

Yet, again, much like the misuse of Jeremiah 29, both leaders and lay people are reading parts of the New Testament in oddly literal ways, along the lines offered by German theologian Ernst Troeltsch who suggested that metaphors in the New Testament should be assigned to 'different social types of religious communities.' In contrast, Volf has argued, that 1 Peter, as a whole, 'pulls together "social-ethical traditions" of the NT as a whole' to speak to the 'nature of Christian presence in a given culture.' Volf argues that 1 Peter creatively integrates these metaphors and transforms the questions Christians must ask.

How to *make sense*

That the exilic mindset seems to be fashionably *au courant*, and the call to find common ground seems to be a popular reaction, indicates that there has been a collapse of "sense-making," as described by [Karl Weick](#) in his sociology of organisations. In Weick's analysis, organisations are in lethal danger when the individuals within them lose the ability to make sense of the complex, ambiguous reality in which they operate, and they question their own capacity to act.

The adoption of an exilic mindset is not only poor biblical theology. It can also be disingenuous and profoundly hazardous to the Church and its mission. Christians cannot make sense of our current reality simply by super-imposing the framework of exile. The same, of course, could be said of the appeasing, conciliatory mindset that seeks to find common ground.

Rowan Williams described, in his *The Judgment of the World*, how great might be the potential if the Church were to 'immerse itself in its 'text' and to 'engage' in a sophisticated way 'with those appropriations of biblical narrative on the frontiers of the Church and beyond,' rather than simply remaining 'committed to interpreting the

world in terms of its own foundational narratives.’ Williams suggested that if the church could locate what happens when, for example, the ‘Exodus story ... is absorbed back into the black slave culture of America,’ without conducting the engagement as if it were ‘purely intratextual,’ with ‘terms fixed by the primal narrative,’ and also without allowing for a ‘liberal’ translation into an extraneous frame of reference, then there is an opportunity for a ‘generative moment.’

We have such an opportunity for a generative moment in Christian witness, as we encounter trends in our own social contexts, and discover (and recover) the world of scripture. In other words, old tools can be used in new ways to interpret our current reality. One tool that lends itself to such use is Jeremiah's pastoral letter to the Israelites. But it must be used carefully.

The second tool that lends itself to such use is, as I have mentioned, the letter of 1 Peter. In 1 Peter, we find Peter re-telling the ‘story’ of Israel in terms of its complete fulfilment in Christ, superseding all earlier versions. And we find, as Volf has identified in the epistle, a challenge to complete transformation.

We might ask what could happen if the contemporary Church accept the challenge of transformation posed in 1 Peter, and to relish, with wisdom, the patterns of Jeremiah? The Church could respond appropriately in mission, and avoid a collapse in witness.

More broadly, in a time in which Christian idealists and activists seeking justice and virtue in public life feel deeply threatened by those in power and deeply uncertain, the heuristics of Jeremiah, and of 1 Peter, are a gift to those who need new sources for understanding their power to believe and to act in the world as it really is.

Realistically embracing our position

The residence of the Israelites in Babylon was limited. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles makes reference to them being in exile for an additional seventy years. So God's words to them in exile were part of his plan to help them "make do" with what they had, and to come to terms with where they were. The Israelites would not be in Babylon forever. But, as we know, measured in the span of a lifetime, it could seem like that for an individual. Life in exile could consume the experience of any one person's lifetime, and possibly the lifetimes of more than one generation. Jeremiah urges those in exile to come to grips with this reality, not to live in denial.

In a moving [theological tribute to Rowan Williams](#), Stanley Hauerwas highlighted his wisdom that "the hardest thing in the world is to be where we are." For the Israelites, it was the hardest thing in the world to be where they were in exile. And it is the hardest thing in the world for the modern Church to be where it is. But that does not mean that the place in which we find ourselves is "exile."

The similarities between where we are today, where the Israelites were, and where the Church has been in past eras are multiple, but there are also important differences. The strong tendency in the Church is to go even further than our general historical amnesia by adopting, directly, the identity of the Israelites. The Church is tempted to inhabit an identity other than our own, and to claim a position of exile.

We are not in exile like the Israelites were. To be in exile means to be living in a state of being banished from your home country, usually for punitive or political reasons. There is an important sense in which to be living in exile means to have been banished from the dominion and power of your homeland.

However, we live on the other side of Christ's institution of the Kingdom of God. In Jesus's death and resurrection, God fulfilled the promises he made to Israel and became King. With God as King, his dominion is not only coexistent with earthly dominion and power, but extends beyond it leaving no remaining wild plurality. Earthly power, politics and culture are both constrained by God's rule, and given their best possibilities. It is not open to us to go back, and inhabit the identity of an exiled people.

Why is the Church so tempted to assume the identity of a people in exile? It is because we utilise a process of pattern recognition to create our present reality. In his classic *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick used the example of the Mann Gulch fire disaster in which fire fighters in a forest fire interpreted the fire through the pattern of their past experiences, and could not respond as a new scenario emerged. However, the forest fire did not act like the fires they had experienced previously - it was a very fast-moving forest fire. One of the fireman was able to see that they were in a situation that was different from what they had ever experienced, and that they would, therefore, need to respond differently. The single fireman lit a fire ahead of the group, extinguished it, lay down in the space created by the burnt out fire, and called on all of the fire fighters to join him, to allow the fast-moving forest fire to pass over them. The other fire fighters did not join him, and most of them died.

Can Christians read their current situation through the lens of what has been experienced previously? As descent into exile? We cannot. We now stand on the other side of Christendom. That is how our present reality is best characterised – not as post-Christian or a 'secular future.'

With the realisation that the position of exile is no longer open to us, comes grief. This grief is compounded by the fact that it is largely unacknowledged. It may present in a confrontational posture, or as Christian concern over impending chaos. At heart, however, it is a grief about a loss of ascendancy, and it is the result of us living in denial that we no longer have a majority position.

As we make sense of the rise of radical pluralism, we attempt to put on identities that are no longer ours (that of being in exile), or were never ours (those able to adopt values or identity markers to foster communality). Hence, the deep illogicality found in what can often be heard being bemoaned by Christian leaders at gatherings: that the Church has become a victim of its own success. And the deep illogicality found in what can often be heard amongst Christian activists, that we are outsiders who should stay on the margins of power, making friends with those who have similar social preferences.

We must read our situation through the poetry of Jeremiah, and the epistle of 1 Peter, and realise that this is not the time for victimhood. Defensive, confrontational faith, lacking in imagination, will get us nowhere. Nor will an insipid faith that seeks accommodation. Instead, we must be schooled in the wisdom of prophets like

Jeremiah to understand that new vistas can be opened if the Church is to realistically embrace our position. And in the message that Peter brought to the exiles who were scattered in the provinces and needed to understand they were insiders to a living hope.

Intentional ecclesial focus

Both Jeremiah and Peter's letters are to exiles. In the case of Jeremiah, the exiles had been scattered but were now gathered, and it is through this group of exiles that Jeremiah says that the Lord God Almighty will bless the city of Babylon. God carried *them* there in order to fulfil his purpose. His will is that they would be outwardly focused, that they would "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" and that they would pray to him for the city. The logic that is set in place is that their good is to be bound up with the good of the city. The Lord tells them if the city prospers, they too will prosper.

In the case of Peter, the exiles have been 'reborn' – once they were not a 'people,' but nor they are 'the people of God' - 'chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.' Their rebirth has been secured by God and there is a clear, expected outcome. They have 'purified their souls,' *for* love of one another.' They have been 'born again,' *so* they are to 'put off evil practices' and 'grow towards salvation.' Peter urges them, as friends, to remember that they are foreigners and exiles and to 'live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.' For those who are 'fellow elders,' they are to shepherd God's flock until the Chief Shepherd appears.

It is because of the time in which we find ourselves that we need to see our own situation through the frames provided in Jeremiah and in 1 Peter. *We were not* a people, but now *we are* the people of God. In an era when there has been a loss of depth in Church engagement, we need to regain an ecclesial focus and see our public engagement as something we do as Church, not just as Christian individuals, or even as para-Church organisations, cut-loose (in the way that Troeltsch would have had us think).

If we were to regain an ecclesial focus, we would see new ways to be more deeply engaged in society, supported by Christian organisations, in order to bring holistic gospel ministries to those who are our neighbours. We should emphasise acting *together* as a Church in local communities, or in concert with other churches, rather than just as individual Christians - part of the Church "scattered." This would, in turn, require that local churches conceive of their mission not just as tending the flock that gathers, but as tending to those who are lost.

We would also see Churches regain a sense of authority that they would exercise in public, and a reduction in self-limiting beliefs manifested in a retreat from "the secular" or in embrace that is un-thinking (at best), or utilitarian (at worst). In turn, this could promote an increased vibrancy in our engagement as we share the in-breaking of God's Kingdom with the broader community, by bringing the gospel of Christ, in its fullness.

Enter the journey

The Israelites were on a journey with God. God sent Jeremiah to these people. He came as a prophet to speak truth to those in exile about what lay ahead of them. The truth was that God did have a strategy, that he would restore, and that he would do that *in* and *through* their exile in Babylon. Taking this pattern and pushing it further, [Luke Bretherton](#) has suggested, following [John Howard Yoder](#), that we could see Jeremiah as proposing that exile in Babylon was a return to the true vocation of God.

Christians, however, cannot return to God's true vocation by re-claiming the position of exile, or by re-claiming the powerful position of Jerusalem (a point made by [John Dickson](#)). Instead, we can and must mirror, as Bretherton suggests, the theo-logic of Jeremiah 29 by following the way of the cross. It is in *that* journey into exile, we find the beginning of new life and new hope.

The way of the cross provides the most comprehensive of challenges to those who hold up the retrograde option of dwelling in exile, and to those who hold up the seemingly progressive option of finding common ground.

The way of the cross challenges the exilic option as the way to maintain purity in community practices in the face of what is described as general moral degradation in society. It also challenges the assertion that exile is the only option left in the context of radical pluralism when there are real (or perceived) challenges to Christian identity and practice.

As Christians, it is important that we emphasise the fact that we do not remain *in exile*, as if it were a place. We follow Jesus and the journey continues in the way of the cross: we make an offer and invitation to wider humanity to join the journey with us through prayer and service (see Brueggemann's [Journey to the Common Good](#)). In this way, we participate in God's blessing of society.

In no uncertain terms, the way of the cross also challenges the call simply to find common ground. Sarah Bachelard, writing at the end of 2017 on *The Ego-Driven Church* and the perils of Christian activism, sounded this caution when she wrote: 'for Christians, the possibility of reconciliation and liberation aren't primarily *values* we believe in, but *experiences* we know in our own lives. Our church's work for justice, for the liberation and reconciliation of all people, springs from this experience. What is essential, then, is that this remain a "live" experience, a process of transformation we continue to be nourished, renewed and changed by, rather than itself becoming just another fixed identity.'

Volf, through his close reading of 1 Peter, provides further detailed theological reflection for this stance. Most poignantly, Volf asserts that 'Christian difference from the social environment is therefore an eschatological one. In the midst of the world in which they live, they are given a new home that comes from God's future. The new birth commences a journey to this home.'

Returning to the key theological issue of identity, and Christian social identity, Volf offers this deeply transformative notion: 'Christians do not come into their social world from outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second

generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonisers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would).’ No, and this is the key contention: ‘they are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the *insiders*.’ By this, Volf means they are the people ‘diverted from their culture by being born again. They are by definition those who are not what they used to be, those who do not live like they used to live. Christian difference is therefore not an insertion of something new into the old from the outside, but a bursting out of the new precisely within the proper space of the old.’ This is the bursting forth that new life in Christ offers; A bursting forth from within that overcomes the deep reservations that you will remember Williams held about territorial language.

Rather than seeking common ground, we are a people who, through faith in Jesus, have entered into events that have changed us decisively. We are new creations: new beings and new communities - with a new human identity.

This newness, it must be remembered, is entirely contingent upon radical loss. As Williams has warned, ‘the transfiguring of the world in Christ can seem partial or marginal’ if we have not learned a willingness to ‘lose the identities and perceptions we make for ourselves.’ This, Williams argues, is what the parables, as the most serious of stories, teach us to do. If we are able to accept a very general definition of parable that Williams suggests – a narrative ‘both dealing with and requiring ‘conversion,’ radical loss and radical novelty’ then this is exactly the type of tragedy needed in a ‘culture of false communality.’

Faced by the loss of a majority position in culture, our task as Christians is not to seek self-preservation, but just by other means – by finding common ground. Whatever the intent in doing so – whether in the belief that by positioning ourselves with others’ whose values we could purport to share we can escape persecution or even express solidarity – by giving primacy to self-preservation we will actually lose ourselves entirely. We must resist the pull toward false communality, and follow the way of the cross, radically losing ourselves for Christ’s sake. Our task as Christians is to get comfortable with this radical decentring of ourselves and radical recentring of Christ in the midst of our society so we can hold out his offering offer of new birth and new life.

Liberate the imagination

The Israelites had been plucked up, torn down, almost destroyed and definitely overthrown. They had been alienated from their land and from all that they thought mattered. Their daily existence was filled with despair. And, yet, through Jeremiah, God enters their chaos and brings them new words: words that transformed their understanding of where they were, and what was possible.

The poetry of Jeremiah connected their present daily reality with a future reality. God liberated them from the belief that the possibilities of life were to be determined by Babylonian rule. And he showed them an alternative way to perceive their present situation, and how it could lead them home.

For us today, even the hopeful words of Jeremiah are not words that we should apply directly to our own lives, and to the situation of the contemporary Church, as if they were a manual. As poetry, Brueggemann argues that the words are intended to be relished. We need to allow the words to provide the kindling so we can be both realistic about our present situation *and* anticipate the future - reframing the big picture of what is at stake. Unless we do so - nourishing a desire for a future that we do not yet fully inhabit - we will miss the signs of God's in-breaking Kingdom: the message that we are not home yet (as the dominant culture believes we are) but are being brought home.

This poses a particular challenge for the Church in the developed world, as Brueggemann has long since warned, because maintaining imagination for a homecoming forces us into the very depths of the interface between despair and hope. Western Christians live within a dominant culture that denies that there are limits to resources and life, a culture that does not know how to mourn and grieve. Yet, in order to uphold an imagination for homecoming, we must be able to live with the finitude of life, embrace our own position and believe that the God of the infinite has triumphed where we are unable to go.

In a time when Ministers of local Churches feel so keenly the urgency of the good news of the gospel that they bear, and the debilitating mundane realities of parish life that can undermine one's sense of the power of proclamation to transform, 'the urgency must often be channelled into listening and waiting, and into the expansion of the Christian imagination itself into something that can cope with the seriousness of the world' (Williams).

We need to seek out meaningful models for ourselves of how to grieve, and how to live a life that is realistic about the fact that we're all preparing to go home. And we need to let them fire our imagination so that we do not live for earthly rule, but have an imagination for the Kingdom.

Create gardens in the city

To offer one such model this evening – we are called, in what will most often be a metaphoric sense, to create gardens in the city.

The other practices of the pattern of Jeremiah were necessary preconditions for the Israelites to come to terms with their reality: that the place of exile was now the place in which God would fulfil his purposes of bringing justice and blessing through his people to the world.

The Israelites had come to understand in the tradition of Deuteronomy that they were bound to the good of the city. In exile, they were pushed even further to see that they were bound to the good of the city of the oppressors. While once they had been commanded to build and to plant the cash crops of grain, olives and grapes (giving the alien, orphan and widow among them access and gifts), now their world is enlarged even further: the Israelites were commanded to settle down, to plant gardens and to eat what they produce. They were to "put roots down."

Then the Israelites were commanded to invite the most open-ended possibilities for what will happen next. They were to seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God had carried them into exile. They were to pray to the Lord for it, because they were told that if the city prospers, they too would prosper.

The Israelites in exile were not just to tithe their cash crops, or to seek the good of their Babylonian oppressors as neighbours. Instead, they were to pray actively that the city would prosper, even before they did as a community in exile.

This is a challenge for us today - to situate ourselves firmly in local community (when the tendency is always toward the cosmopolitan) and to bind our good to the good of our neighbour and city through active investment and prayer. This has to be where we plant ourselves as individuals, families and as the Church, putting down roots for the long term, and seeking creative ways to move amid and among those who think the city or the nation represents supreme authority.

And as we do so, Christian presence must not simply slide into the adoption of another shallow identity – the urban agrarian hipster, for example. Rather, Christian presence requires that we wield power responsibly in the public arena, understanding fully that it is a political realm – a place, in Williams’ words, ‘of spiritual decision, a place where souls are made and lost.’ This will mean that we devise schemes that embody the concept of planting a garden, that we invite immersion in the process we are in of being transformed, and that we earn the right to speak.

At ADM, we use this metaphor of ‘creating a garden in the city’ to speak about our gospel work. This evening, I want to offer a concrete example to discuss some opportunities for application. I would love to be able to cite more developed examples, but I believe that they are yet to be created in our time.

As a Christian women’s foundation, we look at the exposure of domestic violence, including its prevalence within Church communities, and the exposure of structures within Hollywood that enabled sexual harassment and we must ask, ‘how could the church share with unbelievers the “live” process we are in of experiencing the high value God places on women?’ Given the depth of grief that women (and some men) feel about the starting point for this journey, the lack of value that they commonly experience in the church, I think there are two particularly important things to learn in this missional endeavour.

The first is vulnerability in sharing the process of formation. How do we do this? I can think of a rare, but incredibly important example of how to do this. Following Julia Baird’s coverage of domestic violence in faith communities, Julia published a follow-up piece in the Sydney Morning Herald in August on the male clergy who are willing to listen. Michael Jensen, the rector of St Mark’s Darling Point in Sydney, was quoted as saying, ‘the message for the church is simple: "it's not good enough"..." I am just learning how to listen, and the power of words like 'I believe you' and 'I am here for you if you need me' and 'I'll pray for you.'”

The public *mea culpa* that he and a small group of male clergy made – in articles, and at events like Time to Listen, hosted by Northside Baptist Church in Sydney’s Crows Nest, and interviews (such as some deeply humble interviews and [speeches](#) given by

Canon Sandy Grant) – as well as the General Synod and Sydney Synod’s historic apologies were examples of Christians finding power in witness by being vulnerable. The clergy acknowledged that they were still in a process of being transformed that Bachelard spoke of – of being shown to be wrong and becoming more just.

The second is engaging with political and social events as *insiders*, by holding out new life, and inviting nonbelievers into the “live” process we are experiencing of God’s transformation – in this case, the high value that God places on women. For example, Nicky Gumbel, the Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton in London, this past month, on the 100th anniversary of women’s right to vote in the UK, tweeted the following to his 122,000 followers:

'Women finally won the right to vote #100years ago today. 2000 years ago Jesus repeatedly liberated and affirmed women - treating men and women as equals. Women were the first at the cross and the first at the tomb - the first to be entrusted with the news of the resurrection of Jesus.'

For the good of the city

Finally, we are to devise these schemes for the good of the city (for the good of others, and for our communal life), and we are to do so with humility and sincerity. This differs greatly from the under-theorised, modern assumption, as Charles Taylor describes in *A Secular Age*, that Christians should seek common ground with other actors, in a ‘display of mutual projection,’ collaborating ‘in peace for mutual benefit.’

Our task as Christians, as Taylor put it in his *Sources of the Self*, is to uncover the ways in which the turn inward is the result of Western societies’ long efforts to define and reach the good. As Christians, we must not simply make or heed the call to form coalitions for social justice. Rather, we must keep our Christian identity central, and make secondary to that opportunities for communality; inviting others, made in the image of God and known by God, into that, helping them to uncover the meaning of the good, and how it is obtained.

A final, and beautiful example of that invitation can be found in another Christian leader’s engagement with the #metoo movement. Bobbie Houston, the Global Lead Pastor of Hillsong, wrote to her 206,000 followers on Instagram, in response to the Oprah Winfrey’s Golden Globes speech in January this year:

'Ok. Haven't seen the Golden Globes yet, nor the speeches ... but just for the record, the "preciousness and value and sacredness and wonder of women" has always been on God's agenda. Sin has a lot to answer for, and one day it will. But in the meantime precious one ... if you've ever suffered such violence, this post and this bouquet image is for you. It may seem like a small token of understanding but nevertheless, it's a gesture of caring and embrace from me and my world. In Isaiah we catch a glimpse of Heavens redemptive heart found in our beloved Jesus Isaiah 61:1-7 MSG...'

It is a project seeking community and collaboration based on the grace of God which is common to everyone. God can and will work through whom he chooses, and we are called to partner with them for his purposes.

As Christians, we simply do not have the option of seeing ourselves as victims of the public square, or as outsiders – resorting to equally problematic calls to exile or to seeking common ground.

It's now more than 10 years since Theos Think Tank in the UK published their Doing God Report that argued that 'the secular public square, properly understood, is a Christian legacy and one that requires an ongoing Christian presence in order to remain true to itself.' Our responsibility is deep.

Yes, there are new challenges.

But what we learn through the heuristic of Jeremiah, by allowing the words to affect our interpretation of our own reality, is that we have a God who has a history of helping his people to imagine and to pursue patterns of faithful witness.

And what we learn from Peter's letter to God's elect, the exiles who were scattered, is that we are to embody our identity as insiders to a new creation – children of God who are God's new people. This, Peter reminds the exiles was one for us at great cost. We are to invite others to enter into that living hope. For this, we are responsible to our redeemer, who served others and who in his sufferings experienced radical loss.

God has been before us, and he is with us today. We have the opportunity for a generative moment of "live" transformation, as we learn what it means to have a living hope. God gives us the ability to make sense of our context, and commands us to learn to bless from a position of diminishing worldly power, but from within the power of the new and living: to love our neighbour, and work for the good of the city.

Thank you to my colleagues at Anglican Deaconess Ministries who provided much food for thought for this paper, and to Scott Stephens at ABC Religion & Ethics for his publication of my original essay, 'No Place for Exile: How Christians Should (Not) Make Sense of their Place in the World,' on which this lecture is based.