

# Missional Imagination: What is God calling us to be and to do in the 21st Century?

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A changing and challenging world calls us to use imagination in our thinking and acting in mission. Stephen's sessions will provoke us to open ourselves to new ways of seeing, being, dreaming and doing in response to all God is calling us to do and be in the 21st Century.

## Session 3: What do the neighbours think? Understanding our community and context.

Missional imagination requires us to know deeply the context and community we live within. In this session we will explore what it means to become students of culture and how it might shape our action in mission.

### **Suggested Reading**

MCrindle Research - <https://mccrindle.com.au/>

NCLS - <https://www.ncls.org.au/>

### **Introduction**

I love words. In particular I love useful words from other languages that can't be translated into a single English word. Words I wished we had in English. For instance...

Shemomedjamo (Georgian)

You know when you're really full, but your meal is just so delicious, you can't stop eating it? The Georgians feel your pain. This word means, "I accidentally ate the whole thing."

(we do have a word for this – buffet)

Iktsuarpok (Inuit)

You know that feeling of anticipation when you're waiting for someone to show up at your house and you keep going outside to see if they're there yet? This is the word for it.

Pana Po'o (Hawaiian)

"Hmm, now where did I leave those keys?" he said, pana po'oing. It means to scratch your head in order to help you remember something you've forgotten.

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/28915/14-more-wonderful-words-no-english-equivalent>

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/28315/15-wonderful-words-no-english-equivalent>

Now it's interesting that some cultures have words for these complex things. But the really funny thing is...we have words, concepts in English that we can hardly define no matter how many words we use.

Words like: community, love, justice.

Words that people throw around; but rarely define. Words we assume we have a shared meaning for... but do we?

And when we dig into this idea of shared words with a diversity of meaning we might also ask the question...how much culture do we actually share with people?

We think we share culture with the people around us? But to what degree?

## **The culture making system**

### **Bioecological Systems Model**

- How do people develop in the various aspects of their life?
- What are the processes that enable growth?
- What factors positively or negatively influence development in any particular domain?
- Are there processes that can shape and enhance development?

Urie Bronfenbrenner provided a mechanism to answer these questions by creating a unique way of understanding and investigating human development. His bioecological systems model demonstrates how people's development is shaped by many factors, including their

environment. While Bronfenbrenner did not discuss the spiritual domain, his model and ideas are applicable to the exploration of faith development as it is developed in a social context.

Bronfenbrenner's model also can show us how culture is developed.

In Bronfenbrenner's model there are four key elements that influence development. They are:

- the characteristics of the person,
- the process driving development,
- the context the development occurs within, and,
- time factors.

It is helpful to consider each of these so that a full picture of the person's environment can be drawn.

### **Process.**

For Bronfenbrenner development is driven by processes. These are interactions that occur between people and the objects in their environment. A process may be anything that a person does that leads to their growth in a particular domain. For instance reading is a process that leads to intellectual development. Processes can be designed to have an optimal beneficial impact. In this tool processes are central and refer to the things we do to help young people grow in faith.

### **Characteristics of the person.**

While every person is different, many will have things in common with one another such as their level of physical and cognitive development. These characteristics influence the way that a person responds to a particular process. Practitioners can use their understanding of these characteristics to create, shape and choose more effective processes. For example reading picture books might be an effective process for a preparatory age student but not for a Year 11 student.

### **Context.**

The environment a person is embedded in also influences the nature of development. Bronfenbrenner divided the environment into a number of systems. These systems include

those the person acts within such as home and school, as well as those that are distant yet still influential, such as a parent's work or government. Being aware of how these contexts influence people aids in the shaping of developmental processes. For example students who are habituated to being autonomous at home will have a greater ability to be so at school.

### **Time.**

Time is also an important element in development. The frequency, duration and repetition of a process will influence its effectiveness in a number of ways. Frequency and repetition will contribute to reinforcing the effect the process has on the individual. They will also allow for the process to become more complex as the person grows. The duration of an activity will signify its importance and will enable the person to become proficient more quickly.

<https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/publications/all-the-pieces-matter-a-framework-for-evaluating-mission-in-angli>

### **So what does all this mean?**

People and culture are more complex than we can imagine.

People who live in Australia have more culturally in common with those who live in Japan or the USA. The macrosystem shapes the broad cultural brush strokes in these countries.

But when we come down to the local community level we may not all be as similar as we think.

Which is why it is important to understand both what is happening at the macrosystem level as well as the local level.

On the one hand you can look at statistics and see broad trends across the country – but these may not be occurring where you are in the same way.

But it hasn't always been this way....at least not to the same degree.

## **Cultural Change**

### **Activity:**

**What are the changes and issues affecting the people you work with in the areas of:**

## **Technology/Relationships/Leisure/Family/Society/Mass Media**

### **How might these changes or issues impact their view of spirituality, church or religion?**

Fifty years ago culture was largely unified. The macro and microsystems were largely aligned. Today culture is extremely pluralistic.

One of the key changes was the loss of religions centrality in public life.

So when we use words like God we can't assume people have the same idea in their head as us.

Examples:

Religious Education changes from early 2000's

Wave 1: Loss of Bible knowledge.

Wave 2: Loss of religious concepts

Loss of Church Experience: Do I need to RSVP?

We need to go back to learning about our culture as if we were in a foreign land.

Watch this:

### **I'm a Mormon, Publicist, and Aussie Country Girl**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1ULLtuajkU>

I wonder if you have seen these videos. They are a bit old now but the LDS made them across the world to rehabilitate the image of Mormons. Although this video maybe hasn't aged well it does capture something of Australian culture...but would it play well everywhere.

The point is....it doesn't need to. If it captures enough of the macrosystem people will get it.

But at a local level it could be tweaked in a million ways to connect with a specific community.

The key thing is we need both macro and micro understanding.

We can get the macro from stats....but we need a more immersive approach for the micro.

And in a way I think we need to act as if we were:

### **Missionaries in a strange land**

The best missionaries were those who sought to deeply understand the language, culture and way of being with those they went to.

They drew on anthropology, sociology, linguistics and other social science disciplines.

This then helped them to communicate more clearly the beliefs and ideas of Christianity.

And ironically it also changed Christianity in the process.

This happened the most in the early centuries and particularly as it travelled through the Greek and Roman worlds.

We are in a time when we need to go back to understanding the culture we are in because in so many ways it is alien to us. Particularly when it comes to religious or spiritual ideas.

This also means learning from the social sciences the same way community workers, ad executives and pretty much every smart business does.

### **Startling Stats**

So let's have look at the macro...at some things about Australia as a whole...

This is only a tasting plate...the main meal is online and needs to be consumed regularly

ABS /McCrindle / NCLS this should be part of your regular diet.

[View Stats on PPT]

## Australian Statistics

### Video: If Australia was 100 people...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBPnay87F8Y>

Today's baby boom is twice as large (exceeding 310,000 annual births) than when the original Baby Boom began in 1946 (less than 150,000 births).

The number of Australians identifying their religion as Christianity is 8 times larger than all other religions combined.

Within a decade, couple only households (currently 30% of all households) will be Australia's most common household type – more numerous than couple and kids households (currently 33%).

The average street of 100 households has 10 babies (aged under 3), 27 cats and 45 dogs!

1 in 10 households has a net worth exceeding \$1.6 million, and 1% of households have wealth above \$5 million.

Three decades ago the median age of an Australian was 30.5, today it is 37.3 and in 2044 it is projected to be 40.

The average Australian spends 10 hours and 19 minutes each day on screen time – and due to 'multi-screening' this is achieved in just under 8 hours of linear time.

By the time Generation Z (5-19 year olds) begin to retire (beginning in 2063) the average annual earnings will exceed \$222,000 while the median capital city house price will be \$2.5 million.

If you lived on an average sized street in Australia comprised of 100 households, on that street there would be a marriage every 9 months, a death every 7 months and a birth every 14 weeks.

Over half of Australians (54%) go down the health food aisle as part of their weekly shop.

Of meals consumed at home, over one third of Australians (36%) eat most of their meals on the sofa while watching TV.

More than half of the population state that they are about average in happiness, 29% say they are happier than average, and 17% are less happy than the average.

<https://mccrindle.com.au/insights/blogarchive/50-surprising-statistics-about-australia/>

So that is the macro level...what about the micro?

### **The spiritual ecology of your town**

#### **Activity:**

**What about the ecology of your town might make it a little different to other places?**

**Think about any issues to do with work, family, local context...**

### **Stats are not enough**

No longer good enough just to hear a bunch of stats....you need to be in relationship with your community.

Go out into your community as learners.

- Street Teams
  - Learn while doing
- Ask people
  - How can our church make a better community
  - What does all this stuff mean to you?
- Projects
  - Photo Opportunity [What would you take]
  - A questions a month.

#### **Activity:**

**What others ways could you learn about your community.**

## **Answering the wrong question/Responding to non-existent needs**

So the reason for learning about the macrosystem and microsystems around us are manifold:

- It is about being engaged with the community
- Letting the information shape our mission
- Ensuring we are not:
  1. Responding to non-existent needs.
  2. Responding inappropriately to needs[ABM – Ethiopia]
  3. Saying things no one understands, or
  4. Answer questions no one is asking. [Who is Jesus]

## **What can we learn from others**

Being on ABM Board taught me that our partners are often more connected with their local community than us, and have a great sense of the wholeness of mission. They do evangelism and community development seamlessly.

### **Video: Wellsprings of Opportunity**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebY7Z82scJ8&t=21s>

How can we be in partnership with our local community this way?

### **Story:**

Two men who were both very ill shared a small room in a hospital. It was just the pair of them, a door opening on the corridor, and one window looking out on the world. One of the men whose bed was next to the window was allowed to sit up for an hour in the morning and the afternoon. But the other man had to spend all his time lying down flat on his back. Unable to move about in their condition they would talk endlessly about their wives and children, their homes, their jobs, where they'd been on holidays. And every morning and afternoon when the man in the bed next to the window was propped up he would describe what he could see outside. It was a time of great joy and anticipation for the other man.

The window apparently overlooked a park, with a lake with ducks and swans, children were feeding them bread and sailing model boats, people walked hand in hand beneath the trees. And there were many beautiful flowers. In the far corner was a tennis court, and at times the games were really good. The man on his back would listen to all of this, enjoying every minute and he got to the point where he could almost see what was happening out there.

Hearing the pictures and almost seeing them sustained him

through many long days. Then, one night, the other man suddenly woke up, coughing violently. In the morning the nurses found his body and later quietly took it away. The man asked if he could be by the window and the nurses moved him there. The minute they'd gone, he lifted himself up on one elbow, painfully, torturously, gasping . . . and looked out the window.

He saw only a brick wall.

He slumped back to the bed with a crash.

"A brick wall.

It's just a brick wall," he said when the nurse returned.

"Yes that's right" replied the nurse.

"His stories really fed me, and gave me hope.

I really thought he was looking out a window."

The nurse stopped and looked at the man with her kind face and said, 'It wouldn't have mattered if he was.

Bert was blind.'

'Bert was not blind, he was profoundly sighted.'