

# The Gospel and the Cultures of Footscray

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It is curious that overseas mission is called 'crosscultural' while mission in a multicultural society such as we find in Melbourne is not usually seen in these terms. Overseas missionaries learn languages and study other cultures. They try to understand religious beliefs and embark on their mission knowing that for some time they will need to be learning all they can just to begin to understand what the gospel means in another culture.

Meanwhile, the world has come to our own doorstep. In Melbourne suburbs such as Footscray, Christians find themselves in a crosscultural situation without even moving. What are the different cultures we find in Footscray? How is the gospel present in these cultures? How does the gospel challenge them? What is its special relevance to these groups? And what are the challenges for the church?

These are the questions that drive this brief sketch of Footscray and consideration of how the gospel interacts with its cultures. It is only a beginning, as cultural analysis needs to be deep, multi-textured and ongoing. It risks some generalisations, in the hope that just as experience has led to these reflections, so also will the reflections lead to deeper experience, in a spiral of action and reflection.

## Footscray: the background

Footscray is a proudly working-class inner-western suburb of Melbourne. It has a long history as a place where 'honest Aussie battlers' have struggled and often succeeded. It has been the home of famous institutions such as the Bulldogs (the Footscray Football Club), known for its grit if not for its on-field success, and Forges, a department store known for its bargains.

In a shake-up of local governments in 1994, the City of Footscray was renamed the City of Maribyrnong, with a few areas from Sunshine added to it. It is a small city with a fairly stable population figure of about 64,000. It has a high proportion of older people and a low proportion of children under fifteen.

In the last forty years, Footscray has become one of the most striking multicultural centres of Australia. Forty-five per cent of Maribyrnong's

residents were born overseas (compared with twenty-eight per cent for Melbourne as a whole) and the same percentage live in homes where English is the second language. The big non-English speaking groups are those from Vietnam, the former Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece and the Philippines. In the 1990s the Vietnamese are still arriving in by far the greatest numbers, with those from the former Yugoslavia, the Chinese, Filipinos and Ethiopians following.<sup>2</sup>

With its history steeped in manufacturing, Footscray has always been a suburb of factories and small houses. Incomes are low and many persons are on social security pensions or allowances. As manufacturing has declined and jobs have been lost, the area has suffered deeply. Footscray has the highest unemployment rate in Victoria.<sup>3</sup>

The centre of Footscray has always been a transport hub and the regional focus of the inner west, but the success of the huge Highpoint City shopping centre at the northern boundary of the City of Maribyrnong has sucked life from the Footscray shopping centre, which now has a vibrant Asian section but also many shabby discount stores and empty shopfronts. Economically speaking, Footscray is on hard times, as it has often been in its battling history.

The region suffered decades of political neglect by both Labor and Liberal governments, due to its reputation as a solid Labor-voting community. But things have improved and it is now well serviced in terms of facilities and social services. For example, Footscray boasts the Victoria University of Technology, a new library, a good swimming pool, the Western Oval, a large office development called Quay West, a progressive council, an innovative Community Arts Centre, a Migrant Resource Centre, five neighbourhood centres, a YMCA recreation centre, good public transport, and a wide range of social and support services, many of them regional but based in Footscray.

## Some Footscray types

The cultural diversity in a multicultural city like Footscray is overwhelming. Some people, such as returned servicemen in their clubs or Italian grandmothers who still don't speak English, stay within their own cultural boundaries. Others cross the boundaries daily, working, eating and shopping in a colourful world where the mosaic of cultural differences is accepted as a part of life.

Let us consider four types of Footscray residents.

### Old Footscray

We could call the first group of Footscray residents 'old Footscray', in which the men are more vocal than the women. Anglo-Celtic working-class men

are a prominent voice and have a subculture of their own. 'Old Footscray' men are traditionally proud, family-oriented, simple and hard working. They typically work in factories or small businesses, are good with their hands and have known hard times. They tend to be fiercely loyal to their family and friends, the Bulldogs, the western suburbs, (perhaps) the Masonic lodge, and the underdog in all walks of life. Mateship is a central value, and they are usually generous and straightforward, rough diamonds who swear like troopers but will stand by others in need. They may treat women badly, and paradoxically, cherish them at the same time in an old-fashioned way. This species of male can be found outside working hours in its natural habitat at the pub, the football, the lodge, the TAB (gambling shop) or at home keeping the garden spick-and-span. 'Old Footscray' males are Labor-voting unionists but are conservative in their values. They are stalwarts in the local council, upholding 'Footscray values'. Because they have known what it is to struggle against odds to get what they have, they either have great sympathy for the unemployed and migrants, or none at all. They can be opinionated, nationalistic and parochial, and even at times racist or violent.

Women from the 'old Footscray' group are typically hard-working and home-oriented, used to being servants of others. They use their networks well and may mix with others through bingo, loyal community service in second-hand charity shops, or perhaps attending elderly citizens centres. The home unit is highly prized in old Footscray, and local papers regularly feature pictures of weather-beaten and simple couples in front of their small houses, celebrating fifty or sixty years of marriage. Although the churches have never been very successful among the working class, 'old Footscray' people are represented in the churches, often holding together small congregations, often tired and defensive, but utterly dependable and loyal.

### New Footscray

Into this culture has come the second type of Footscray resident, which we might call 'new Footscray', referring to young professionals. They include stereotypes such as Young Upwardly-mobile Professionals (Yuppies), couples which have a Double-Income and No Kids (Dinks), and Sensitive New-Age Guys (Snags). The economic forces driving young couples to buy in previously unfashionable Footscray are the low house prices and its proximity to Melbourne's centre, fifteen minutes away. The social forces include the growth of professional Labor supporters, who feel politically comfortable in Footscray, and a change in fashion that makes it socially acceptable to buy a small cottage and renovate it.

'New Footscray' residents buy houses cheaply and restore them to original condition (with all modern conveniences, of course). They tend to

be involved in progressive local politics, and the Maribyrnong City Council has echoed this style of government, consulting residents in recent years on issues such as environmental planning, public health and better service for people of non-English speaking backgrounds. Whereas 'old Footscray' people are generally poorly educated and feel intimidated by teachers and bureaucrats, 'new Footscray' people serve on kindergarten and school committees, challenge council planning permits, stand for council and make their presence felt in every social and political forum. They are well represented in the churches of Footscray and provide much of the leadership. Teachers, social workers, public servants, academics and health professionals are all to be found in the culture of 'new Footscray', forcing supermarkets to stock health foods and stimulating craft shops, antique shops and restaurants.

Those who are 'new Footscray' are a bridge between 'old Footscray' and new migrants. For example, when I was employed by the former City of Footscray in a community relations project seeking to improve the Council's services to groups of non-English speaking background, a large part of my role was to convince 'old Footscray' councillors that it was worthwhile. Another large part was convincing migrants that Footscray valued their presence in the community. My role was to address the mutual suspicion from both groups using the political vision of multiculturalism.<sup>4</sup>

## Migrants

The third group in Footscray, that of migrants, is really a group of groups, and certainly represents many cultures. We are forced to group them because there are so many. Almost a hundred countries of birth were represented in the new arrivals to Footscray between 1991 and 1995 alone.<sup>5</sup> Another reason for grouping them, especially those of non-English speaking background (NESB), is that they face similar hurdles in surviving in Australian society. Many are refugees or migrants received on humanitarian grounds and have known great suffering or oppression.

The Asian groups, particularly the Vietnamese, are the most numerous, and Footscray shoppers cannot miss the Vietnamese traders dominating the shopping centre. Of all Melbourne municipalities, Maribyrnong has the highest proportion of residents born in Asia or South East Asia. Many Vietnamese people have experienced great trauma, either in war or on treacherous boat trips, and many are only now being reunited with their families. The longest settled group (since the late 1940s) is the Polish, and the proud but frail elderly Polish can be seen on the street or attending their cultural centre. Another cultural centre, a huge building, belongs to the Croatian community. The various ethnic groups of the former Yugoslavia (the Croats, Serbs and Macedonians) have worked hard to overcome

political and ethnic tensions spilling over from Europe. The Greek and Italian communities are numerous and well-established, and their issues are often to do with the assimilation of the sons and daughters of migrants into Australian society. Ethiopians and others from Northern Africa, although not as numerous as other groups, have arrived much more recently and are very distinctive due to their dark skin. They are growing groups, many of them well-educated and having experienced terrible political oppression.

Different areas of Footscray are dominated by different groups. At my son's high school the Macedonians form the majority of the eighty per cent who are NESB students. Where I live, the Lebanese are the most common migrant group. Where ethnic diversity grows, so does religious diversity. Muslim customs are common at the local primary school, where many children have to fast during each day for the month of Ramadan. I no longer assume that at the outdoor street party we organise in our block at Christmas time we will sing Christian carols, though curiously they are still demanded by the local residents, Muslim, Christian and atheist alike.

Multiculturalism is not only fact but policy in Maribyrnong. The council works closely with the Migrant Resource Centre and various ethnic groups on a range of multicultural issues, working deliberately to try to create a culturally rich society, where people are encouraged to express their culture freely and yet find a common set of values in being part of Australian society.

## Those unemployed

A fourth major group in Footscray, sad to say, consists of those who are unemployed. Officially, nearly twenty per cent of the labour force is unemployed in Footscray, but those who live in the area know it to be higher. According to most experts the figure would double if we added to this group those who are not represented in the official figures because they have given up looking for work, work casually a few hours a week, are in labour-force programs with little prospect of finding work at the end, or are on invalid pensions but who could work if jobs were available. The culture of long-term unemployment is dehumanising and difficult to defeat. Most unemployed people live in poverty, suffer difficulties in dealing with authorities, suffer chronic sickness, face regular conflict in relationships, lose their self-esteem and fail to climb the usual career ladders. Many also suffer from alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, homelessness and problems with the law. Some drift to the edge of society and live in despair or even commit suicide.

Unemployment touches a majority of homes in Footscray. I have an unemployed son and a boarder who came to us unemployed and homeless. The boarder completed his secondary schooling a year ago and wanted to be

an apprentice. Wherever he has turned he has been rejected. He now sleeps until lunch time and watches a lot of television. Assurances that he is a valuable person do not count for much when he is beginning to doubt he will ever find work.

## How is the gospel present in these cultures?

How is God already at work in these cultures? What resonances are there of the Good News in the various cultures we see in Footscray? Here are a few unsystematic observations.

The working class knows solidarity and, often, community. To see the way 'old Footscray' people care for friends who have been bereaved or sacked is to marvel at the close-knit friendships that battlers know. Western-suburban people also welcome others without fuss. They do not tend to have strong cliques and they do not reject a newcomer if they sense that the person is genuine. Of course, there are always examples where people find Footscray as anonymous as a big city, feel they are not locals unless they were born there, or feel an inverse snobbery against professionals. But the story of people from other areas feeling accepted for who they are, and not what they do, can be told many times.

There is an earthy and concrete life-perspective that is suspicious of fine words (considering them 'bull-dust'), and values practical help and lives that match people's beliefs. This is an Australian trait that is particularly found in working-class and struggling Australians. People seem to have time to help each other, more so than in areas where people are caught up in a host of wider involvements and the 'rat race' of self-advancement.

For the most part there is a tolerance of the alien and the migrant, on the basis of a shared history of struggle and poverty. This brings to mind some of God's exhortations to the Israelites to remember the aliens and sojourners because Israel, in its weakness, had also received God's liberating mercy. The vibrant mix of colour and customs, particularly at multicultural festivals in Footscray, is resonant of the biblical idea of shalom, in which the wellbeing and harmony of people is based on interdependence and difference. The same idea is echoed in the strong networks that exist in the social-service sector of Footscray and the western suburbs. In Footscray there is general sympathy for the 'down and out', and seldom is the unemployed person denigrated as a 'dole bludger'. In migrant groups there is often a deep well of suffering and hence gratefulness for Australian society, where political freedom can be exercised and economic goals reached.

To a certain extent (and maybe this is too bold) it is common in Footscray to see the world from the underside and feel sympathy for all those who are downtrodden. In this lies the seeds of gospel justice and love.

## How does the gospel challenge these cultures?

In all cultures human sin is inscribed socially. Footscray, like all places, shows a dark side. Its cultures deny the gospel in many ways as well as resonate with it. How does the gospel challenge cultures such as we find in Footscray? Of course, the gospel challenges tendencies that all humans share, and some that are shared particularly by Australians, and so on. But following are just a few that come to mind in the cultures of Footscray.

There is a latent racism in many residents of the 'old Footscray' group, who often demand that migrants learn English rather than be provided with translated materials, sometimes demand that migrants assimilate immediately, and sometimes refuse to share facilities with people with other customs or tastes in food. This attitude can be found in the churches too. One Baptist woman told me that her church had declined in numbers because although there used to be lots of people in the neighbourhood most houses now had migrants in them. The gospel challenges these attitudes head-on.

Materialism is common to all income levels in society. Low-income people seem to want what everyone else has, and some work very hard to the exclusion of all else in order to succeed financially and then to spend.

Sexism is often found, particularly in traditional Anglo-Celtic culture and in some migrant cultures where women are bound to the home. A strong 'Aussie' male culture thrives in which men are often found drinking, gambling and pursuing recreation with their mates, at the expense of their marriages and families. As has often been observed, mateship in Australian society is a two-edged sword, great for those who are mates and yet an exclusive custom as well. The equal value of men and women is a gospel issue for many people in Footscray.

As part of the cycle of poverty and low self-esteem that afflicts many people in Footscray (whether on pensions, unemployed or in dehumanising jobs) there is a lot of addiction to drugs, gambling and unhealthy food. There is much violent, abusive and self-destructive behaviour. The gospel promise of full humanity is in direct contrast to the trapped existence that many people in Footscray feel.

There are many times when provincialism and parochialism rear their heads, preventing possibilities for change and global thinking. The Good News lifts horizons and is a global message with a big horizon and the promise of transformation. This is a challenge to a small-thinking culture and groups that have struggled so much to survive that they find it almost unthinkable to thrive.

## How is the gospel relevant to these cultures?

There are many ways in which the gospel speaks good news to the people of Footscray. Above all it is a message of hope and transformation, particularly for those who are poor, unemployed, rejected, aliens in a new society, refugees and chronically ill. It is the good news of a new community in which all are valued and, through the Spirit of God, all are drawn into a new reality in which God's gracious ways are the ways of God's people. It is a practical and wholistic message of love for the whole person, particularly good news for the poor, because when understood it leads to the mutuality of the Christian community and compassionate outreach to others in working for justice and love. This will express itself in acts of compassion, social services and action for structural change.

A genuine multiculturalism is a part of the vision of the kingdom of God. It seems that a place like Footscray already has a glimpse of this new reality of shalom, and can contribute to it greatly. In monocultural situations the gospel has to break in where the groundwork has not been laid. The gospel, properly understood, broadens and deepens cultural acceptance and racial tolerance.

The gospel is relevant because so many people are trapped by their own situation and inability to change. For many there is a desperate need to break the cycle of poverty. There is a need for the miracle of self-acceptance, forgiveness, hope, non-destructive modes of relationship, and support from others.

## Challenges for the church

Reflecting on the challenge of the gospel and its relevance reminds us that (flippantly speaking) Jesus came preaching the kingdom and what we got was the church. So the vision we have sketched is only partly realised in Footscray. There are great challenges for the church working in the cultures of Footscray. The churches have generally hardly begun to face the task of developing a contextual theology. We have not done the listening and analysis required. And we have not ventured into society enough to rub shoulders with the great variety of people literally living in our street. So the churches are often Anglo-Celtic ghettos or gatherings of other single ethnic groups.

We have never really reached the working class nor the 'non-working' class, and while young professionals are significant in church life, numerically speaking the churches are not reaching 'new Footscray' either. Those who grow up in Footscray churches have, until recently, left the area when they have entered careers, married and bought homes. This has left churches without trained leadership and lacking in young adults. So churches in Footscray tend to be weak and hardly surviving.

Some ethnic churches struggle with nominalism, cultural religion and ethnocentricity, and are often unable to effectively hold the second generation of migrants.

Many Footscray residents know little of God and God's love, and the churches need to work hard to demonstrate unpretentious care, recognising the missionary situation we find ourselves in. Some local people feel resentment towards God, blaming God for the struggles and pain they have experienced.

There are no easy answers in relation to the men of 'old Footscray', whose culture is fairly self-contained and not generally open to the church.

We have a wide opportunity to welcome the stranger, with so many newcomers to Australia landing in our neighbourhood. The response when we do is always humbling. This a great opportunity to live out the gospel.

It is easy to advocate working-class leadership and the 'church of the poor', but difficult to actually cultivate it, especially when there are middle-class professionals around. Even progressive churches tend to be middle-class enclaves in a largely working-class neighbourhood.

The overall challenge is common to all cultures: to be a sign of the kingdom of God (or perhaps the commonwealth of God), signalling open community, the justice and mercy of God, shared joy, shared resources and a welcome for all, but especially the outsiders and the poor.

## Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, figures are from *City of Maribyrnong Compared with the Western Region and the Melbourne Statistical Division*, Maribyrnong, Vic.: City of Maribyrnong, 1995. Apart from the population figure, which is from a 1994 estimate by the Victorian Department of Planning and Development, the figures in this publication are based on the 1991 Australian Census, recalculated for the new local government boundaries.
- 2 Maribyrnong City Council, *New Arrivals: City of Maribyrnong, Summary data*, Maribyrnong, Vic.: City of Maribyrnong, 1995, p. 2. Over four years about 1600 Vietnamese arrived, compared with 200-300 for each of the other four groups.
- 3 Tim Colebatch, 'Footscray facing toughest battle in search for jobs', *Age*, 1 June 1996, p. 7.
- 4 See Ross Langmead, *Report on the Footscray Community Relations Project*, Footscray, Vic.: Footscray City Council and Footscray Migrant Resource Centre, 1992.
- 5 Maribyrnong City Council, *New Arrivals*, p. 3.