

# Build a bridge and get over it

*Balancing holiness and mission*



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**The relationship between holiness and mission can be a source of misunderstanding that can hinder a parish’s missionary fruitfulness.**

In the past, the call to holiness and the call to mission were primarily seen as being the role of priests and religious. However, Vatican II firmly located the calls to holiness and mission not in the sacrament of holy orders or in religious profession, but in the sacrament of baptism. Every baptised person is called to be holy—to have a close and personal relationship with Jesus. Every baptised person is called to mission—to bring others into a relationship with Jesus. Each Christian is called to both holiness and mission simultaneously; they are not opposed.

## The church and the world—three ways of balancing mission and holiness

The models below describe different ways that the balance between holiness and mission have been understood over the centuries.

### 1. Isolation

Imagine a community that lives on an island. The islanders have been explicitly told that they are to go to the people across the water to tell them about their way of life. However, the water is cold and it’s frequently stormy, and at other times the weather is too hot. The journey across the water seems dangerous, and the people on the other side have ideas and lifestyles that make the islanders feel uncomfortable. Therefore, instead of using boats or a bridge to cross the water, the islanders build high walls around their island and shelter behind them for protection. They develop a system of impenetrable rituals and obscure language which prevent others from accessing their community. The islanders will only allow others to join their community if they find their own way past the walls and if they learn their language and rituals first.

In his new book *Beyond the Parish*, Fr James Mallon uses this simple allegory to describe an ‘isolationist’ church—one afraid to move out beyond its walls to take the risks necessary to engage with the world. Too often we see holiness as something that necessitates a retreat from the ‘tainted’ secular world into some sort of ‘Catholic bubble’. We think of the ‘holy’ person as different, intense, morally perfect, maybe even slightly odd or strange. Holiness is not seen as something the average Christian would aspire to, or desire. It is for ‘other’, perfect people.

### 2. Accommodation

An alternative scenario is that our islanders place their beliefs, traditions and rituals at the service of their mission to the mainland. They build a bridge from the island and they assiduously assume the culture and behavior they observe there, in order to attract new members to their island community. They see compromise as integral to their missionary endeavor.

The church experiences much pressure, both from within and from without, to interact with modern culture in an ‘accommodationist’ manner. Such a view maintains that in order to be relevant, to successfully ‘go out’ and be a credible voice in today’s world, the church needs to accept the values predominant in modern culture. That we need to ‘get with it’ or we will be irrelevant. That we will not attract people to our communities unless we embrace prevalent views on sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, gender fluidity and the like.

Our experience in Australia, however, is that denominational groups that have embraced accommodation are declining at even faster rates than the Catholic Church. As Fr James notes, ‘Accommodation does not lead to fruitfulness.’ St Paul warns us in Romans 12:2: ‘do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, pleasing and perfect.’

In the meetings and dialogues held to prepare for the Plenary Council, many responses received are on either extreme of the pendulum between the ‘accommodationist’ and ‘isolationist’ stances. Our church appears to be divided.

On one extreme, we have a significant number of Catholics who see our very survival as being predicated on the radical acceptance and integration of current cultural norms in order to achieve relevance in a world that rejects so much of what we believe. Love towards our neighbour is seen as acceptance and even adoption of their cultural norms.

On the other, we have those who long for a 1950s style of church, which saw devout Catholic enclaves in the midst of our cities, characterised by self-sufficient communities where the faithful could live, attend school, socialise, marry and be buried together. It sees the church as an inwardly focused club, with a suspicion and even paranoia towards secular society and any type of engagement with it.

We will struggle to reconcile either of these images of the church with the images of the kingdom that Jesus described. Jesus upset everyone—those who thought that the kingdom was only for the ‘pure’ ones and also those who thought ‘everyone’ belonged by virtue of their country of birth, regardless of personal faith or repentance.

### 3. Engagement

Imagine, then, that our islanders build a bridge to the mainland, and then 'send' missionaries out over the bridge to the mainland to meet the people there and get to know them. They live among them and show them the beauty of their island lifestyle and how it is lived. The people they are meeting there speak French, so the islanders learn French in order to engage with them effectively. The missionaries do well and the community flourishes both on the island and the mainland.

In contrast to the pendulum extremes of 'isolationist' and 'accommodationist' views, 'engagement' seems to best describe the way that Jesus communicated the truth of the kingdom during his earthly life. Jesus did not live in isolation; he lived and worked among the people of his time. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, yet never himself sinned. Jesus consistently and lovingly communicated an unrelenting message of love, repentance and radical forgiveness.

Returning to our islanders, however, over many years the predominant mainland language changed to Chinese. The islanders love French, though. French is how they do mission. They decide that they don't want to change their language, and therefore their message becomes increasingly incomprehensible to the mainland community they are trying to reach. Their missionary effectiveness and their community experiences decline. What the islanders fail to comprehend is that to effectively engage with the mainlanders, they need to be prepared to change their *method* of communication (not the message itself). What worked well when they started (French) is not effective now, and they need to learn Chinese.

#### Balancing holiness and mission

When contrasting mission and holiness, [David Gundersen](#) comments that we can be confused between our goal (God's mission) and our missional methods (cultural engagement, pursuing relevance). He asks, 'Why must the pendulum swing between holy and separatist, or missional and worldly? As soon as we start thinking that the way to be missional is to be a little less holy, or that it is possible to be holy without being missional, we have missed the biblical boat entirely.'

God's ultimate mission, and hence the mission of the church, is not just to connect with culture but to transform it; not to pursue relevance in the eyes of humanity but to open their eyes to see eternal relevance. In Jesus, we clearly see God's holy and missional character. Jesus shows us that transformation produces ethical conduct that is increasingly holy, and that holiness is not a deterrent to mission but

is the actual vehicle for mission. They depend on each other. Don't let the Pharisees define what it means to be holy. Let Jesus.

To achieve balance requires that we be deeply embedded in the community of faith where we are nurtured, formed and sent. Within the community, we pursue an increasingly close relationship with the God who sends us. A parish that intentionally grows holy disciples will be a parish that consistently sends missionary disciples—because holiness impels us to mission.

As Fr James notes, 'we worship a missionary God who sent a missionary Jesus who sends a missionary Church.' We have a holy mission. May the Lord grant us a missional holiness!

#### SIX HINTS FOR EFFECTIVE MISSIONAL HOLINESS

##### Don't talk 'churchese'.

1. If you're trying to connect with people who don't go to church, don't use language they don't understand. They won't be impressed; they'll just dismiss you.

##### Don't pretend to be something you're not.

2. Be honest, be authentic, be real. Be prepared to talk about your struggles. Be prepared to talk about your relationship with Jesus.

##### Be known for what you're for, not what you're against.

3. Don't rant against the world either verbally or on social media. Would you rather listen to someone who hates you or someone who loves you?

##### Be humble.

4. Resist the temptation to act 'holy' or to offer answers to questions no one has asked.

##### Serve alongside others in the community.

5. Sharing what you have with others and taking the 'low' place of service can make a big difference.

##### Pray.

6. A lot.

**The Archdiocesan Animation Team is available to discuss strategies with you and/or your team and to facilitate sessions (remotely) on many topics and issues.**

**Just ask!**

**Contact Lorraine on 0402 217 123 or at [lorraine.mccarthy@cam.org.au](mailto:lorraine.mccarthy@cam.org.au).**

**NEXT ARTICLE: 'You'll need a team to realise your dream'**