

Mathew Hale Public Library Annual Dinner Guest Talk

# The Fourth World in the First World: Missiology and Aboriginal Churches in the Northern Territory

by Bishop Greg Anderson  
Diocese of the Northern Territory

*Delivered in Brisbane*  
on Friday 3 June, 2016



Bishop Greg Anderson

PO Box 13675  
George Street Post Shop  
Brisbane Qld 4003  
[info@mathewhalepubliclibrary.com](mailto:info@mathewhalepubliclibrary.com)  
[www.mathewhalepubliclibrary.com](http://www.mathewhalepubliclibrary.com)

## About Greg Anderson

Greg Anderson's first introduction to the Northern Territory was in 1986 when he began fieldwork to research the traditional songs of central Arnhem land. He was adopted into a Rembarrnga clan and worked with musicians who had become Christian through the Elcho Island revival of 1979. This led to Greg studying theology with a view to being involved in the growth and the development of the Aboriginal church.



He returned to the Territory in 1995 with his wife Annette and their three children, Paul, Zac and Lucy. Their fourth child, Jane, was born in Darwin. Greg and Annette worked as CMS missionaries for the next twelve years.



Anglican Diocese  
of the Northern Territory

Greg trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander church leaders at Nungalinya College and for the Diocese of the Northern Territory. The Andersons returned to Sydney in 2007, where Greg was the head of the Department of Mission at Moore Theological College.

The Consecration and Installation of Greg Anderson as Sixth Bishop of Northern Territory took place on Saturday 29th November 2014 in Christ Church Cathedral, Darwin. Since then, the Bishop has visited and worshipped with each of the 18 communities and parishes through the Northern Territory

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Talk published in September 2016 by The Mathew Hale Public Library.

**National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry.**

Creator: Anderson, Greg Bishop author.

Title: The fourth world in the first world : missiology and Aboriginal churches in the Northern Territory / Bishop Greg Anderson.

ISBN: 9780995398702 (paperback)

Subjects: Church of England--Missions--Northern Territory.

Missions--Theory.

Christianity and culture--Northern Territory.

Aboriginal Australians--Missions--Northern Territory.

Other Creator/Contributors:

Mathew Hale Public Library, issuing body.

Dewey Number: 223.3

**Mathew Hale Public Library annual dinner, June 3, 2016**  
**Bp Greg Anderson, Diocese of the Northern Territory**

***The Fourth World in the First World: Missiology and Aboriginal Churches in the Northern Territory***

***Introducing the Fourth World***

Many of us are familiar with the expression the First World, meaning the Western countries of Europe, the UK, North America, Australia, New Zealand and so on. That label was developed during the Cold War and contrasted with the Second World which meant the countries under communism. The Third World referred to the non-aligned countries in the rest of the world – which the Communists and the capitalists often fought over or fought within! But what is the Fourth World (FW)? It is a label originally used as long ago as the 1970s to refer to indigenous minorities in countries that are dominated by a different ethnic mainstream and therefore a different culture, often a culture that has invaded or colonised the indigenous people's land. Australian Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders, Maori, First Nations peoples in Canada, Native Americans, the Ainu of Japan, the Sami of Norway, the Uyghur in north-western China, the Guarani of central South America, are all examples. The West has in some ways become more sensitive in some ways to these people groups in recent years, but that is not always the case.

There are some particular things about FW people groups that mark them out as being in a different place from others, politically, socially, economically and even spiritually. They are also in some ways a neglected group in missiological thinking. In other words, as missionaries think about and reflect on their work, little space seems to have been given to the possibility that there are particular characteristics of FW people that might mean their interaction with Christian faith is different relative to other communities.

The following features characterise many FW communities.

- Because they are often a small minority, and different from the ethnic mainstream, identity is important. When people are in the minority, identity become a much stronger focus than when they are in the majority. If you are in the powerful majority, it perhaps does not occur to you to want to make other people know what you are – I do not feel it is so important that you know I'm a white, middle-aged, middle-income, middle-class, married male. But if I'm in the minority, or in a position of less power, that place is much more important to my identity: "I'm a woman, hear me roar", "I'm out and proud", "I believe the Bible is the Word of God". And if you are in an ethnic minority, you will often feel the pull and push of being swallowed up by the mainstream, or not being accepted by the mainstream.
- Historically, there is often a degree of marginalisation of FW people. The FW is by definition in the minority, but there is more to it than that, because they were there first. There has often been hostility, and in many places there still is hostility towards FW people. The mainstream may try to assimilate them, which is an act of hostility itself; or denigrate them, or even deny them. In due course, I will mention some examples of the degree to which FW people in the Northern Territory (NT) are disadvantaged relative to the mainstream.
- The FW link with location is often very strong – being indigenous, their connection to country spans many more generations than those who have colonised them. In my experience, even those who no longer live on their own country (and often this is not their own choice) feel strong links with it.
- Language contrasts with the mainstream population that dominates them, and even when traditional languages have been lost, there is often a strong sense of grief about

that loss. Language is important because it serves not just as a means of communication, but as an identity marker that contrasts with the mainstream. A recent PhD thesis on the traditional Aboriginal language roots of Northern Territory's Roper River Kriol language points out that the descendants of Marra language speakers continue to some degree to identify as Marra, even though they don't speak the language or live on their country.<sup>1</sup>

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### ***The Fourth World in the Northern Territory***

Like many FW situations, the position of Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders can be seen as one of marginalisation and alienation from mainstream Australia in many ways. Of course the situation for Indigenous Australians across this continent is incredibly diverse, and making generalisations risks marginalising the lived experience of individuals. Marginalisation is visible everywhere, but since the Territory is what I am most familiar with, let me present some statistics that demonstrate what is happening there.

- These statistics were supplied by the Hon. Gerry McCartney, MLA for the seat of Barkly in the NT parliament.
  - 30% of the NT is indigenous (cf Australia 2%); 25% of indigenous Australians live in remote or very remote areas;
  - the life expectancy gap (LEG) in NT between indigenous and non-indigenous people is 18 years for men, and 15 years for women;
  - the kidney disease rate is 17-20 times higher for remote and very remote indigenous relative to the mainstream (3-4 times higher for urban indigenous)
  - 80% of children placed in Out of Home Care in the NT are Aboriginal people
  - the imprisonment rate in the NT is 4 times higher than the Australian average (847 per 100,000 against 182 per 100,000) and 86% of the total daily average number of prisoners was indigenous in 2014.
  - 96% of sentenced youth detentions in 2014 were indigenous
- There might be all kinds of explanations for these statistics, including systemic discrimination, lack of access to services, and cultural factors; but regardless of this, they reflect a great amount of disadvantage, as well as distance from the mainstream
- that has significant implications for Christian ministry in the Territory, and many other places as well.
- The situation of language in the Northern Territory is complex. Almost fifty languages are still spoken by more than 100 people, and fourteen by more than 500 people. This means that it may seem 'non-strategic' to care about particular languages, or to translate the Bible or Christian material into them (as is indicated by the rate of completion of New Testaments in Aboriginal languages); but such a view ignores the often crucial role of language as an identity marker, and the enormous significance of hearing God's word in one's own language.

### ***Mission and the FW***

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant ideology and method of Western mission derived from the 'Three Self' principles, which were articulated in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, separately and coincidentally, by two leading mission administrators, Henry Venn in England, and

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<sup>1</sup>Gregory Francis Dickson, 'Marra and Kriol: The loss and maintenance of knowledge across a language shift boundary'. PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2015, p. 114.

Rufus Anderson in the United States. Venn was the head of the Church Missionary Society, and Anderson the head of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission. The Three Selves languished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, largely because white missionaries were not prepared to sit under non-Western leadership. But the principles were reclaimed by early 20<sup>th</sup> century missiologist Roland Allen, and have been dominant in many missionary endeavours ever since.

- The three Selves were that the planted church should become self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating.
- Much of mission rhetoric and practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century followed these principles. In the NT for example, the history of CMS in Arnhem Land was documented by Keith Cole, the first principal of Nungalinga College in Darwin. His book *From Mission to Church* is a highly optimistic account that celebrated the belief that mission had been completed in Arnhem Land, because church had been handed over to local control.<sup>2</sup>

But are there particular situations where the Three Selves are not going to work well?

It seems to me that the FW may be a situation, because of the degree of disadvantage and marginalisation, that ongoing partnership is going to be the better method, rather than Three Selves. The greater the degree of disadvantage, perhaps, the more likely ongoing partnership is to be the appropriate method. Although the original proponents of the Three Selves argued strongly that it was *the* biblical method of mission, it seems to me that the biblical case for ongoing partnership is equally strong; not to mention the very different cultural situations of the New Testament, which mean that it is not necessarily valid just to mirror New Testament practice in all contexts in the contemporary world.

What is the goal of mission?

- If the goal is to create Three Self churches, this shapes mission strategy:
  - Mission may be more likely to concentrate on structures, leaders and externals, because what happens in these areas is easier to measure against Three Self goals. Have I ordained local clergy, are the Bible and the liturgy translated, does the local church have a bank account?
  - but actually in the FW, structures are never likely to be truly indigenised, because of the interface with the dominant mainstream. For example, in the NT, our six Aboriginal parishes, and three further ministry areas in and near Arnhem Land are still part of synod – they are not cut off from the main stream, don't want to be cut off, and shouldn't be cut off. Similarly what if indigenous leadership is not like mainstream leadership – the Three Self methodology is more likely to seek mainstream leadership, because that is what the mainstream recognises.
- But I want to suggest that the biblical goal of mission is not to create Three-Self churches, rather it is to make disciples of Jesus. That will have implications for mission strategy, in particular what is emphasised:
  - The focus will be on the message of Jesus.
  - The focus will be on the implications of that message for individual and community life – and the results may be less measurable, because the outcomes of following Jesus in contextually appropriate ways may be very variable.
  - This approach sees that a strong church is first of all the fruit of discipleship, rather than the primary cause of discipleship – as the saying goes, “if you make disciples, you will start a church, but if you

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<sup>2</sup>Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church: The CMS Mission to the Aborigines of Arnhem Land 1908–1985*. Bendigo, Vic: Keith Cole Publications, 1985.

start a church you won't necessarily make disciples".

- In short, it might be that there are sociological realities in the Fourth World that mean that the autonomy of the Three Selves is not the most appropriate goal, but instead ongoing partnership with outside agencies.
- We want FW people to lead their churches, but because of the sociological situation of the FW, they might always need support to do this, and if that is the case, the wider church must be ready for it.

### ***Obstacles in Fourth World mission***

If mission methods appropriate to FW are different in some ways from our usual mission rhetoric, we need to be aware of some of the difficulties and pitfalls to avoid. For example:

- Neo-colonialism:
  - the gospel often came to FW in colonial dress and mission was entangled with cultural encroachment, which can still confuse people. The gospel is not Western!
  - The implication of this is that outside partners must not dominate in FW settings, but need to stand alongside. It is very easy for the dominant mainstream to adopt its own methods, and not leave space for FW people to lead, develop their own ideas, and use their own methods.
  - We need to recognise that one size doesn't fit all. What works for the majority doesn't necessarily work in the FW; and there is great variety in the FW.
  - Minority identity is important – that means there might be resistance to the dominant majority, as well as the majority exerting a magnetic force on some FW people – there is often a tightrope between FW people resenting the encroachment of the dominant group and wanting to maintain their own cultural identity, and FW people wanting to embrace the dominant world because it seems to offer power and wealth.
- Rarely in FW settings are there the facilities for outside partners to learn local languages through a course or educational institution. Historically missionaries often just got along in the majority language, with only a few learning a local language with a great degree of depth and competence. That means that a special effort is needed if there is to be deep engagement with FW in their heart language or language-of-identity
- Dominant culture ministry partners may keenly feel discomfort because their culture is responsible for the disadvantage of the FW, and the desire not to dominate can mean that they are reluctant to use their own skills, experience and culture<sup>3</sup> – but actually, they need to embrace what they can offer, at the same time as being open to learning from FW people.
- In many places, dominant culture thinking wants to focus on 'strategic' and 'big', and FW seems to be the opposite. We need to realign our values with God's care for the poor, weak and marginalised.

### ***Learning from the Fourth World***

But these obstacles can be dealt with, when they are acknowledged. If ongoing partnership is an appropriate mission strategy in FW settings, we need to keep in mind that genuine partnership is a two-way street – that benefit flows both ways. There are significant blessings

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<sup>3</sup> Such a phenomenon is described in the domain of health and medicine in the NT in Emma Kowal, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2015.

that flow back from FW engagement to those from the dominant majority who partner with them.

- The first one applies more widely than just in the FW context, but is always worth mentioning. All of us respond to God's revelation within our own cultural place. We don't read the Bible with 'pure' eyes, but our reading is shaped by the effects of our culture (eg individualism v. group orientation). There is great benefit in reading the Bible with people who are different from us, because we have the opportunity of having our own cultural blinkers removed/reduced, as well as having the opportunity of removing/reducing the cultural blinkers of others. (And that must be done within the challenging words of Jesus about logs and specks [Matthew 7:3-5].)
- There are three particular ways that the FW situation can help somebody like me in my response to God's revelation:
  - So much of the FW dynamic is that it is not in control of its own destiny – it is perpetually overrun by the dominant majority. I learn from FW people more about what it is like not to be in control. Fundamentally, of course, I am not in control of my destiny, God is – but so much of my dominant culture acts as though this isn't the case.
  - Understanding what it is to be subject to others. The Bible tells Christians to submit to one another, but our culture is not used to submitting. FW people are constantly in submission to dominant rules (whether they like it or not), and have something to learn from their first hand experience of this.
  - Dominant majority people usually feel comfortable in their context, because they are in charge, whereas FW people, even in their own land, often feel 'in exile' and like aliens, because of the domination of others. Their experience reminds me that all Christians are actually exiles on this earth (see 1 Peter), waiting for their true home. In this way FW and majority have a significant shared experience

My hunch and experience is that there is much about FW settings that mean our usual methods of mission engagement are inadequate. Ongoing partnership may be a better model, and with no less strong a biblical basis, for our engagement with people like those in the Aboriginal churches of the Northern Territory. That will require people who are prepared to recognise and face the obstacles, and who are open to genuine learning from those they partner with.

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- supporting for ministry to youth and young adults, in school, university and congregational settings.
- publishing articles and books about people and themes relating to historical and contemporary ministry.

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The Secretary  
The Mathew Hale Public Library  
P.O BOX 13675  
George Street Post Shop QLD 4003  
Australia