

ENGAGING THE ISSUES, 2022

Tim Costello's Three Exhortations for the Australian Church to Engage with in 2022

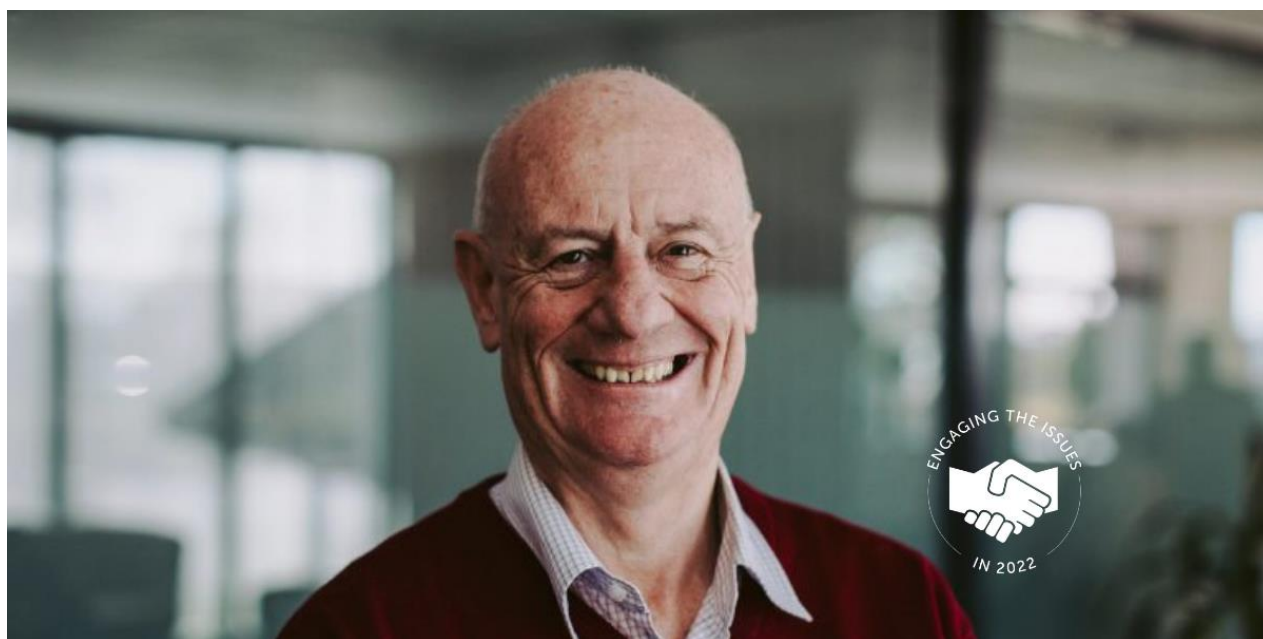


Photo: Tim Costello (image supplied: Micah Australia)

by Josh Gibbon, Fresh Hope (Churches of Christ in NSW)

Josh Gibbon: Tim, what do you see as critical social and cultural issues for the Church in Australia to engage with as we enter 2022?

Tim Costello: I think our leaders always have to keep their eyes on Jesus. In Jesus we get the answer this God is not only good and loving but has been the victim of the worst injustice. Therefore, Christian faith is particularly on the side of the victims – of those who are the poorest, the most vulnerable, who are suffering the worst injustice.

In focusing on Jesus, I think if I could talk frankly to church leaders, we do have a problem in understanding the Christian faith and the stress and fractures of the faith under the pandemic. I have

been personally very depressed, really discouraged. So many Christians didn't trust their church leaders who said get vaccinated. They trusted other conspiratorial Christian voices on social media and the Internet.

Look, I get that as Christians we spend a lot of our time in Revelation 13 trying to work out what and who the 'beast' is, the number '666', so we're a little bit prone to conspiracy. But when I hear Christians actually reversing their Christian worldview, which is we are interdependent, all created in the image of God and utterly connected, equally vulnerable, and talking in Enlightenment language of body sovereignty and self-sufficiency, and "my autonomy"; some of those Christians were the very ones who were condemning humanism and secularism and enlightenment thinking.

It's even more pointed when Christians who have been strongest, and I admire them, being anti-abortion anti-choice, (are now) saying "my body, my choice". (They are) literally reversing a Christian worldview which is always about serving the other. The son of man came not to protect his life, but to give his life as a ransom for others.

But, when Christians join in that libertarian, autonomy, 'my choice' language... I think it's an issue because church leaders, pastors I know are quite terrified. I know pastors who want to say "I'm vaxxed, get the vax," and they feel that's somehow not being even handed. They know they'll get carved up by a minority in their church who are really angry saying, "You're not trusting God."

I think getting our house in order – which is affirming Jesus, a Trinitarian God, meaning a community God. And if we made an image of a community God, we are made for community. That's the truest thing we can say about ourselves.

And the health of others and their well-being – I think requires me to get the vax.

So that's the first issue, that I think Christian faith in its witness, which has become a little fractured, needs to address.

Josh: Thanks Tim. I know you are a minister and you have been a minister to a congregation in the past. I would imagine you understand the complexity then of the things you're talking about – how difficult it is for a pastor to address vaccination in their community. Do you have any

thoughts on how can we go about that in a loving way? In a way that encourages community connection?

Tim: “Yeah, look, I know pastors are worried that they’ll split their church. I see a parallel, sadly, with some of the Trump evangelicals in churches in America, where if a pastor uses the word ‘justice’, they storm out saying that’s left wing. Well, actually, Isaiah, Amos, and Micah all talked about justice and let it roll down.

I know that at a certain point, after you have been explaining the doctrine of the Trinity and why Christian faith is for others, you will still at times have to take a stand.

And quietly with the right tone say, “Why aren’t we rejoicing that God has empowered scientists in this pandemic to come up with a vaccine? Why aren’t we praising God for that? Rather than saying it’s Bill Gates and mega chips and it’s a world government and ‘God protects me’?” As you know by American evangelicals, the biggest group saying I’m not taking the VAX, “God protects me”, to which the retort is, “So why do you need a gun?”

So, it’s those anomalies in the faith that mean that a pastor still needs to lovingly still take a stand and to remind us of a communitarian, Trinitarian God.

Josh: Thanks for that challenge, Tim. Is there another big issue that's on your mind and heart that you'd like to share about?

Tim: I believe the climate change is not just real, but it clearly is addressed by the questions: “Is it real?” Answer – yes. Or, “Is it happening? Is it bad?” Answer – yes. “Is there anything we can do about it?” Answer – yes. “Has it been us contributing to it?” Answer – yes.

Because the earth is the Lord’s, I believe Christians have sometimes again been the doubters, the deniers, the delay is our need to step up and address this in terms of creation care and scripture. So, I feel that issue remains a tussle of faith in the Christian Church when it shouldn’t be.

I mean, I often say I wish Christians would surprise me. I’m anti-abortion and pro-life – but I wish rather than being predictable, they wouldn’t just stop there and they would say “And I’m anti-coal. I’m pro the environment.”

Just surprise me, give me the whole gospel - not these false choices. That certainly is the case when it comes to climate change with me.

Josh: Is there are third topic that you believe is critical for the church to engage with this year?

Tim: The third big one is the refugee in Scripture.

‘The Deuteronomic and the Levitical code’ it's called sometimes by the scholars – the priestly code in the five first five books of the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures. They're very clear on – “God loves the stranger”. So clear that 28 times in Scripture it says God face is seen in the stranger. Now the stranger is the refugee in today's language. God's face is to be seen in the stranger.

I think our cruel refugee policy is a is a blight on what we as a nation are and is a challenge for Christians to say: “We can protect our borders. Yes, we can't take everybody, but, we're being unnecessarily cruel to refugees who can't be sent back to Iran and other places and keeping them locked up. This is appalling.”

I think that's the third big issue that I think Christians should be just rereading their scriptures again on because they're very clear there.

Josh: And how do you think that pastors and leaders in our movement could be engaging with this at the moment, in a practical way?

Tim: Well, many churches have been magnificent. They've actually done some great care for refugees and reached out and visited detention centres. There's a side of the church that's been really ‘on gospel’.

But the real problem that we Christians have, I think is this: “I want my faith to inform my politics, but I don't want the reverse.”

The reverse is when my political instincts, you know, I'm fearful I want to be harsh, starts to inform my faith.

That's when I start to actually see 'the tail wag the dog' politics. And my political instincts 'wag' what is a generous faith that has the dignity of all people, certainly, those fleeing persecution and refugees as much in their scope and vision of God as Australians protected and born here.

So that would be my challenge to pastors. Always remind the congregation: it's our faith that informs our politics. When it's the reverse, that's a corrupting of faith and that's a loss of hope for the world because the gospel is the only hope for the world.

