



VIEWPOINT

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Mission Planning

Seeing God At Work

Stories from Canberra Region Presbytery

Collected March 2022 (continued)



Participants at the Canberra City Uniting Church Picnic in the Plaza on 4 April 2021. Photo by Richard Scott.

The congregations at Canberra City Uniting Church are seeking to be present and active in our physical location in Civic. This includes the excellent Picnics in the Plaza organised by the leaders of the church's Action Groups.

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Indigenous Acknowledgement

Acknowledging the people of the Ngunnawal, Ngambri, Ngarigo, Yuin, and Gundungurra peoples, custodians from time immemorial of the lands on which the people of the Canberra Region Presbytery worship, serve and witness.

Welcome!

The Canberra Region Presbytery of the Uniting Church has decided to make mission planning a focus of discussion for 2022. As we seek to discern how God is active in our communities, our Presbytery meetings in February and May have shared stories about how we see God at work, helping us see how we are called to mission. The Autumn 2022 issue of Viewpoint ([link here](#)) included a number of mission planning stories from across our Presbytery. The Winter Viewpoint, this issue, continues this missional theme, with stories from Jindabyne, Tathra, St Ninians, Mt Dromedary, North Belconnen, Canberra City, ANU, To e Talatalanoa and the Presbytery Property Committee.

The rich heritage of the Biblical prophets culminated in the presence of God in the mission of Jesus, bringing the good news of God’s unconditional abundant overflowing gracious love for the world. In our own mission we are called to be transformed in the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2) through experience of the good news in Christ. In our mission planning, Canberra Region Presbytery has been blessed by the wise counsel of retiring Presbytery Wellbeing Minister, Rev Dr John Squires. In his article for the Autumn issue of Viewpoint John made some points that are well worth noting to help us reflect on the theological leadership he has brought to our Presbytery.

John wrote in our last Viewpoint that “we are called to communicate our personal experience of the good news carefully, in contextually relevant ways, and in respectful relationship with others. The story is ours to tell!” This means mission is about open dialogue, with the humility to learn as much as teach, requiring active initiative to create mutual ongoing conversations leading into the truth of

God. Bearing witness to the truth of our faith is about building relationships of integrity and recognition, quite different from how churches have often approached conversion.

Picking up how mission can be understood in the Uniting Church, John wrote that our call to mission celebrates engagement through the ministry of presence in the community, and that developing faithful disciples means working intentionally to deepen understanding, enliven passion, broaden commitment and strengthen capacity. We can grow our church through mission by working with others to develop the worship, witness, service and fellowship of the local community of faith, while advocating for the least by taking a stand on issues of justice, seeking the common good for all.

These theological ideas about the practical priority of building communities of faith can help us to reflect on the inspiring stories of God at work in our Presbytery in this latest issue of Viewpoint. Thank you for reading. The discussions here aim to inspire you to further conversations about the mission of Christ in our communities and in our world.

In Christ

Robbie Tulip, CRP Secretary and Viewpoint Editor

To contribute to Viewpoint, please email Robbie at Secretary@cruc.org.au

St Ninian's Uniting Church, Lyneham – "The Waterhole"

Jane Allen (Church Council Chair)

The hub of any church is its people. This is certainly the case at St Ninian's, whose people over almost 150 years have shown their faithfulness and commitment to following the teachings of Jesus Christ. A number of people at St Ninian's have been associated for 50 years or more. They are proud to belong. The bonds in the congregation are strong, and this goes for everyone, whether earlier or later arrivals.

However, while ever energetic and committed, until recently the congregation was ageing and shrinking. Only a few years ago, fears surrounded its longer-term viability, with the NCLS indicating that without some kind of change, the congregation would continue to shrink. The question was, how could St Ninian's move forward, while retaining the traditional forms of worship, commitment and strong social connections that defined the congregation?

Over the last four years, we have worked hard, and successfully, to develop new pathways. Presbytery provided some original ideas and optional plans to get us started, and have been there for support as and when needed. Our financial management has always been strong and our budget has improved.

In 2017 St Ninian's established a Futures Committee to help us imagine, plan and guide. This turned out to be a critical factor in our decision-making. Almost immediately, it transformed our mind-set from one of resignation regarding our (apparently) irrevocable decline, to one of energy and hope. Our first major decision, working to Church Council and in consultation with the Congregation, was to develop a collaborative relationship with another like-minded group or congregation. In the early days we all wondered where this change might lead us, and whether we would 'lose' all the traditions we held dear. However, as time has passed, we have come to learn that we can change some things while retaining all else that is of such value to us.

In 2019, we formed a cooperative partnership with Benedictus Contemplative Church, an ecumenical Christian community with a practice of silent contemplative prayer at its heart, which was seeking a new and preferably longer term 'home' from which to operate. Information about Benedictus is at www.Benedictus.com.au. The contributions of Benedictus members, together with their Spiritual Director and our Minister, helped with galvanising our collective energies. Where we can, we share activities, costs and income. However, while we function side by side in very practical

and positive ways, we remain independent organisations, albeit growing all the while in appreciation of each other.

St Ninian's has been re-imagined as a 'Waterhole' of refreshment and replenishment in the city, a sanctuary for all, where people can participate in worship and other activities, or just sit or walk the grounds, and find peace. An extensive landscaping project is well under way, and many small changes have been made to décor and storage in the buildings. Kitchen and bathroom refurbishments are the next possible step. Sunday worship remains at the core, with all other activities continuing. In addition, we have started to engage with activities conducted jointly with Benedictus, such as occasional workshops, and there is a modest cross-over of attendance between St Ninian's and Benedictus' worship services. Jointly held carol services in 2020 and 2021 have been particularly successful and were attended by a very large group from both congregations, as well as the local community.

Benedictus and St Ninian's work side by side. Benedictus has been generous both financially and in spirit, and their enthusiasm and energy has complemented that of St Ninian's. This success is at least partly responsible for St Ninian's embarking on another collaborative arrangement, with O'Connor Uniting Church in the adjacent suburb. In the future we hope to trial a mid-week service at O'Connor, with associated social events such as a Men's Breakfast.

We value highly our collaboration with Benedictus, along with the heart and soul of what that sharing brings to all. The preamble to the MOU with Benedictus eloquently speaks to our ongoing relationship and our pathways to the future:

"... In conversation with each other, we have come to the view that cooperation between our communities offers rich possibilities for enhancing each community's distinctive identity and activities, as well as allowing for a sharing of life that will support more fruitful engagement with the community around us."

For both communities, the image of an outback waterhole encompasses many of our hopes and dreams. We desire to become a place of refreshment and replenishment, an open sanctuary in the midst of our city...

Biblical texts

Do not be afraid, I am with you
(Isaiah 41.10)

Seek and you will find (Matthew 7.7)



From Saane To'uli of To e Talatalanoa Congregation

When I was a Youth Leader, I took 6 young people to the National Christian Youth Convention in Melbourne (2008 or 2009). Being a mum, and with two of my children in the Youth Group, I was starting to learn more about Jesus and what he does in simple ways. We found we could just pray anywhere, any time. I am still moved up until now, recalling when during the NCYC camp the loudspeaker announced that we should kneel wherever we were and pray for Gaza and Israel. In the war at the time, children were killed every hour!

God is near, and he is Emanuel! God is everywhere, God is a healer! Malo, Saane

God At Work at Alpine Uniting (Jindabyne)

God seems to be moving by preparing the soil for our congregation to think outside of the church building to what feels like yet unknown ways of bringing God to our community by using our church grounds and buildings differently. It feels like God is planting some seeds and things are going on, but below the surface. There is hope and anticipation and excitement for what is to come.

It feels like people are being softened and structures are being softened and relationships are growing through honest conversations. God is reminding us church is the living body of Christ, and not a building. Although our Church community is small in number we compensate by widely using our different gifts and talents. God is at work challenging each of us to think differently, to do differently, to go into spaces that are uncharted.

Our Church outreach to the community is via the Op Shop, and this is growing at a steady pace with huge donations and increasing sales. It is the only Op Shop in our small town and is well visited and known. The Op Shop sits next to the church hall and church, and is both small and sort of cute and not scary to people who aren't Christians. A grassy area outside the Op Shop next to the hall is a beautiful place for people to sit and talk and eat and rest.

One challenge is how to make better connections and build relationships between us as church and the Op Shop volunteers/shoppers. Our Church is a living body of Christ, it is not a building.

Bible reflections: James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 1 Corinthians 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Property and Mission – Mike Evans

All Canberrans remember the events of 20 January 2020 and where they were, even if they don't remember the date. That morning Keith Thomas and I from the Presbytery Property Committee left to visit Crookwell. We travelled the shortest route, stopping at Murrumbateman to check out the Church Community Centre there. Arriving at Crookwell we were welcomed by Daniel, the minister, and Barry, Gillian and Allan from the congregation. We spent the rest of the morning looking over the property the church has in Crookwell and hearing about their plans for it for the future. The discussion continued over lunch at a café in the main street. Whilst the mood was light, outside towards Yass the skies were darkening with dense clouds and the occasional flash of forked lightning.

We decided to return the longer way round via Goulburn so we could call in at Kialla to see the church the Crookwell congregation were looking at selling, and also to see the repaired steeple of the church at Goulburn. This was fortuitous! Despite the heavy rain we encountered it became apparent that we had skirted the worst of the hailstorm that devastated Canberra and other areas. A return the way we had come might well have left us out in the country in the hail with a shattered windscreen.

Looking back on the day it is not only the hailstorm that comes to mind but the enthusiastic spirit of the people of the Uniting Church at Crookwell to develop the church property there for the mission of the church. And it is not only those at Crookwell. In the last year or so there seems to be a move in lots of places to develop church property to serve the mission of the church. To mention just a couple, there is Evan with the Woden Valley Congregation looking to develop the land near the Curtin shops and Ruth and the Plan Agora Team from the Queanbeyan congregation with exciting ideas to repurpose the church centre at Queanbeyan.

Is this all coincidence or something more? Here is a thought from CS Lewis in his book *Miracles* -

“Did God bring it about or would it have happened anyway as part of the natural course of events? What would you reply if anyone asked “Did Ophelia die (in the play Hamlet) because Shakespeare for poetic reasons wanted her to die at that moment or – because the branch (she climbed on) broke (resulting in her falling in the river and drowning)?”

The presence of God in mission at Canberra City Uniting Church: **Being active in Civic, by Rev Paul Chalson - PICNIC IN THE PLAZA**

A story of God at work in and through the people of Canberra City Uniting Church

One of the focal mission questions for Canberra City Uniting Church is how we are present in and to the people of Canberra Civic. This is especially crucial given our very public location in Civic. We have been engaged in mission in broader ways including public symposiums on social issues such as Climate Change and domestic violence. However, this story relates to a recent innovation coming out of the leadership of our Action Groups, the Picnic in the Plaza.

A photo of attendees is on the first page of this issue of Viewpoint. This event is exactly what the name implies. It is a picnic conducted in the plaza upon which the church opens. It includes food, live music, some games for those who wish to take part and dance presentations. The event is organized by the leaders of the congregation’s action groups with the assistance of others. Richard Scott, Church Council chair, has been a prime mover.

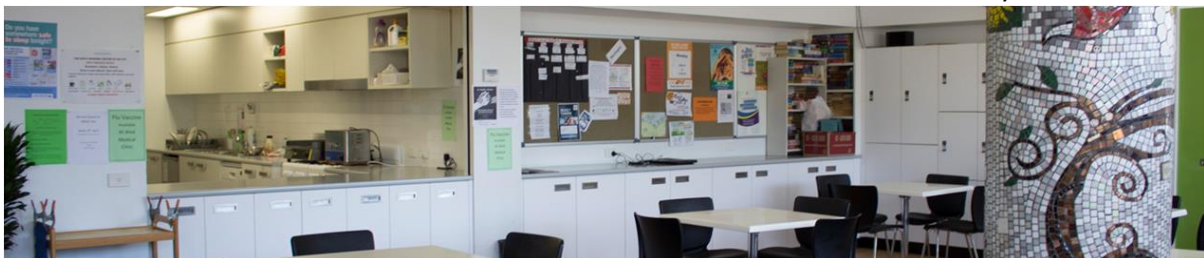
Attendance includes many members of our congregations and some from other congregations. There are also friends and family members who have been invited along and folk from the community, some of whom were just passing by. Some rough sleepers in the area often come and join in for a feed and some conversation. We have had between 70 and 120 people.

Our intention is to build community within the congregation and between the congregation and the greater community. So far, we have held three picnics over the last year or so and they have been quite successful. Our plan is to hold more in the future as part of a broader plan of how we use our very public physical space to lift the presence and visibility of the congregation and engage into the community. Letting the love of God as experienced in Jesus shine in our life as the church in Civic – Bible reflection, Matthew 5:13-16: “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Early Morning Centre, By Jenny Rowland

On behalf of Margaret Watt (convenor of the Friends of the EMC) and Canberra City UnitingCare

Photo: The attractive layout of the EMC.



The Early Morning Centre is run by UnitingCare Canberra City to address issues of homelessness. The hand of God may be seen in the wide and varied community support received by the EMC,

especially from other churches, faith groups and organisations who come there and work together. For example, Christmas lunches for the Early Morning Centre’s guests are catered for by the Uniting Church’s Greenhills Centre, with support from the Egyptian Coptic Church and Helping ACT, which was begun by a Muslim man Mohammed Ali, who has just been named Canberra’s Citizen of the Year. The EMC has just launched the “Feel Good Feed” which offers opportunities each month for different businesses and community groups to provide lunch for the guests. Ethnic food is especially popular.

Of particular importance has been the dedication and care provided by staff, led by Director Nicole Wiggins and volunteers throughout the long months of COVID, even when vulnerable people have been ignored by many in the community. Guests have known that they could always come to the EMC and receive food and a smile. Even with a mask on they could feel the warmth. We give thanks too for the service providers who attend the EMC on different days of the week and respond to the needs of the guests.

The EMC has just had its funding for weekend opening confirmed for another year. These weekend openings are popular, because they give the guests seven-day-a-week access to food and support. Although the EMC has been unable to fundraise in traditional ways, the broader Canberra community has donated generously through the Hands Up for Canberra Day sponsored by Hands Across Canberra and a now-annual EMC “Non-Event”.



Photo: EMC Director Nicole Wiggins (far left), other staff and volunteers preparing to serve Christmas lunch for EMC guests in the Riley Hall on 19 December 2018. Photo by volunteer Jenny Rowland.

Student Ministry, by Jenny Rowland on behalf of Dennis Martin

Photo: Graduating Master degree students Irena Ni (left) and Barbara Tan, supported by Tim and Dora Chapman (left) and Dennis and Margaret Martin (right), at the ANU’s world-wide Grand Graduation event on 8 February 2021.



Canberra City Uniting Church supports Christian Students Uniting, a club affiliated with ANUSA, the Australian National University Students Association. Our proximity to the ANU means we see a steady stream of student visitors to our morning service. One of our members, lay pastor Dennis

Martin, an ANU chaplain, is brilliant at connecting with these students. Dennis invites students to participate in fortnightly Bible studies, as well as providing pastoral care and, with others in the congregation, assistance in proof reading assignments (for correct English usage). As well he organises social events and day trips to such places as Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and the coast. While our Christian Students Uniting membership has dropped with the border closures of the last two years, the welcome return to ANU by many students has seen an encouraging upturn in numbers. Dennis and his wife Margaret given a substantial amount of time and effort to student ministry, supported by a group of church members in the Student Action Ministry. Their work has clearly borne fruit.

Dennis says the chaplaincy’s move from a central area at the ANU to individual Halls of Residence has made chaplains more visible. A student came to his office at Toad Hall. He knew Dennis was a chaplain, but they did not talk religion. They chatted about other things and the student asked for assistance with spoken English. (Dennis is a teacher of many years standing and has a qualification in teaching English to overseas students). The student had a major English test on the horizon. He was conscientious and highly motivated to improve, a teacher’s dream student! Dennis conversed with the student in English by Zoom each week and was stunned that the student responded to his enquiry about how he was going by asking him how he (Dennis) was! The student became a good friend for Dennis, and he passed his English test with good marks. Dennis then missed their weekly meetings. But this wasn’t the end of the story. Instead, the student asked to learn more about Jesus and now attends the Bible studies with other students. Dennis had set out to do no more than help him with his English, but the Holy Spirit was at work and Dennis now hopes that the student will become a Christian. He gives thanks that in a small way he was part of the process.



Photo: Tertiary students and the Student Action Ministry at the koala enclosure at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, December 2020.

Activities as individuals, by Jenny Rowland

Photo: Tongan garden inspection 28 November 2020. Photo by Jenny Rowland.

Many of us at Canberra City Uniting Church are involved in activities as individuals, which also show the presence of God at work in our congregations and/or within the bounds of the Canberra Region Presbytery.

In my own case such pursuits include much loved connections with members from our wide range of ethnic heritages at City Church, including Tongans, West



Papuans, Sri Lankan Tamils and Koreans. I also provide pastoral care and belong to the Student Action Ministry. I attend a broad range of ecumenical and interfaith events, including annual World Day of Prayer services and on 6 March 2022 a service at the Ukrainian Orthodox Centre in Turner ACT. I belong to a Women's Interfaith Network as a Uniting Church member. I knew that we had much to celebrate and ran the festivities for Canberra City Uniting Church's 90th anniversary on 16 January 2019.

When requested personally, I provide information about Canberra City Uniting Church's history and arrange events for such bodies as UnitingCare Australia. This organisation of the Uniting Church Assembly sought my assistance directly for the national launch at Canberra City Uniting Church on 19 June 2021 of its new network called Uniting Friends of Ageing. For a year I have been worshipping with the Canberra Aboriginal Church in Lyons, as well as with City Church. I find it amazing to wonder where I will be called next by the Holy Spirit to walk with God's people.

As you may be aware, I regularly tell stories about some of these and other activities in Contact, Canberra City Uniting Church's monthly magazine. At the meeting of the Canberra Region Presbytery on 19 March 2022 the importance of storytelling was emphasised by the Synod guest speaker, Rev. Dr Cameron Eccleston, who is assisting the Presbytery to develop its mission plan for the next five years.

Di White (Mt Dromedary) – Monty's at Narooma

For three years I'd been striving to find the means to extend the Narooma Hall to make working conditions safer and easier for Monty's volunteers. In 2017 Monty's was invited to apply for a \$30,000 Government Grant but received incorrect information about submission date. Invited again in 2018 (now for \$20,000) I calculated we could just make it with pledged donations, and made a successful application. The Board were not all agreeable and the Chair insisted that we not proceed without a large contingency and receipt of all pledged donations within a week.

We asked. Monty's Board members (even some who had not been enthusiastic about the project) contributed, and a frequent visitor to our church from Wagga who had previously offered to assist Monty's contributed. Within a week \$19,000 had been deposited in the project account.

Then donations started coming in from community groups, most notable from Rotary and the Katungul Aboriginal Corporation (which used our facilities for various activities). While there were more hurdles to jump, by the end of 2019 we had a beautiful extension known as The Scullery with a commercial dishwasher (courtesy of a grant from Uniting), huge storage capacity and room for commercial freezer and other equipment. Consequently, more space in the existing kitchen making it a safer environment. Katungul will be restarting programs this year and the representative who attended last week was amazed at how much the facilities had improved since early 2019. We also have a similar story about funding the installation of a gas powered generator at our church facility.

Bible Reflection: Matthew 7: 7 and Luke 11: 9 – "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find: knock and the door will be opened to you."

Sapphire Coast Uniting Churches – Merimbula/Pambula, Wyndham

The Merimbula congregation is responsible for two outreach programs that put into practice one of the strong tenets of the Uniting Church – demonstration of Christian faith through service to the community. One is the establishment of an Op Shop that offers pastoral support to many of the people who come to buy and sometimes to the volunteers who run the shop. The other is the management of the government funded Community Volunteer Service, organising visitors to the lonely in aged care facilities and private homes.

The Op shop started with a dual purpose. It is both a self-help initiative by the congregations to raise funds to enable the employment of a minister, supplementing the income from congregational contributions, and a venue for interaction with vulnerable members of the community. The shop is succeeding on both fronts, evolving into a widely appreciated and supportive community asset, while the congregation benefits from a full time ministry. There is also the wider outreach as surplus stock has been delivered to outback First Nation communities and on a regular basis, saleable goods are packed to be sent to an organisation in Mozambique. The Op Shop also sponsors a Ugandan child and assists the local Social Justice Group in its work with the homeless.

The Management Board of Community Volunteer Service is chaired by our Minister and comprises members of the congregation as well as volunteers and the Coordinator of the Service. There is not an overt Christian influence in this outreach program but the ethic of service to fellow human beings in need of social support is inherent in the volunteers' involvement.

From Kate Thorne of North Belconnen Uniting Church

My story is of a time when I searched and found a way to listen for and hear God. I had grown up in the Catholic tradition, and had ceased participating in church because it was not relevant to my teenage experiences. I was a Christian, but it was crowded out by living a full and busy teen life. When I was 19, I started my first career as a student nurse, and found I needed a faith discipline structure in which to practise Christianity that didn't estrange me from God, like petitioning a saint always felt like. One that wasn't about me, me, me... and it had to be relevant to the experiences I had in a busy hospital where I was washing and wrapping dead bodies, pumping alcohol overdoses out of other teens' stomachs, dodging workplace bullies and dealing with drug gang war injuries.

Through friends, I was introduced to the Uniting Church and its strong ethos of social justice. I wound up at a Uniting Church in South Australia, with a 'house church' running in the church hall. The church itself was the usual colonial sandstone wedding church but the hall was your basic besser block edifice with an auditorium & stage, carpeted activities room and a kitchen separating the two.

Wonderful things happened in that hall. Here I was introduced to the Bible in a new and unusual way - the lectionary. Actual reading of the Bible hadn't been encouraged in primary school and that's pretty much where my Christian education started and ended. Studying the New Testament and Epistles in the company of adults that actively questioned its meaning and relevance took my breath away. I was pretty sure this would lead to amazing things. Or to a lightning bolt as I exited the hall!

We sat in a circle of chairs to worship, this small group of 20 or so, and the Spirit came. We, the small congregation, were the worship leaders, and we divided into workshop preparation groups. What, lead worship?!? Yes, with 3 others I did. And my experiences and interpretation were valued, challenged, and met with more than one truth. In these small groups we figured out how we were going to demonstrate what we'd learned about God, Jesus and humanity to the worship group. Services were attended by the Minister, but his presence was more to provide alternate commentary to our biblical interpretations.

Our music led our communal and silent prayers. I was introduced to Iona and Taize chants, and other (then!) contemporary songs that actually spoke to me. It was probably because the whole of the community knew them well and sang them with gusto and reverence, not the previous mumble of hymns I'd been exposed to. So many instruments and such gentle cradling of prayer. Through these worships, God was immediate, Christ did more than die on a cross and the Spirit was most definitely blowing through me.

Biblical Reflections - Philip and the Ethiopian, Acts 8:26-40; Road to Emmaus: Luke 24:13-35; Leviticus 25:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:13-18.

From Peter Howe of Tathra Uniting Church

A couple of years ago we were lucky enough to walk in the English countryside. At breakfast in a B&B the host told us enthusiastically about what was happening in her village. I asked her what was happening in the church. "Oh them", she said unenthusiastically. "I don't know".

A week later we went to a Sunday service at New Road Baptist Church in Oxford. We heard an unforgettable sermon from Paul Fidess who I later googled and found was Professor of Systematic Theology at Oxford University. I had a coffee with him after the service and in the middle of our conversation he pointed through the door to the shopping mall across the square, and said "Jesus is doing something in that mall. We have to listen to people to find out what it is."

A year or so later I experienced my first Fresh Expressions Zoom in our Presbytery and heard exciting stories about churches that grew outwards into their communities rather than trying to bring people in to worship situations that were comfortable for the church, but not so for newcomers. My eyes are beginning to open to the fact that God is already at work in my community, and we can be involved. We have something that people in every community long for, whether they know it yet, or not. It's an exciting time to be humble, an exciting time to pray, to meet, to go to people and open our eyes to find God in them. In each other.

Exciting.

Carols at Tathra Beach: Engagement in Community

At Tathra Uniting Church, under the leadership of our gifted composer and musician Dr Douglas Simper, we participated in a community event, Carols at Tathra Beach. Douglas drew a vast array of local musical talent together, with various community groups, to ecumenically celebrate the birth of Jesus. On Tuesday 21 December 2021, in the Hobbs Corner area of the Tathra Beachside Caravan park, Frankie J Holden OAM was master of ceremonies for this open-to-all community event. Bands, individual singers and a school choir enjoyed the music and the sense of joy together. The Tathra Rural Fire Brigade, Tathra Surf Club and Pambula Rotary Club supported the event by bringing their resources, such as parking attendants and stage/lighting/sound, to the celebrations.

The Christmas message was read from the Bible to help people understand why they celebrate Jesus' birth. At Tathra Uniting Church, though we are comparatively few in number, we are blessed to have Douglas and his wide network of community contacts, who - whether they know it or not, are responding to God's work in the community, drawing us all together to prepare for Christmas and build on our love and respect as a caring community.

I Clearly Saw God At Work In Prison, by Richard Scott



Genesis 1 says, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth'. And God created order out of chaos when He said, "Let there be light," and there was light".

In Genesis 2, we read that people walked, or had a relationship, with God in the Garden of Eden. And they experienced peace.

However, as we all do, those people sinned, and God banished them from the Garden of Eden. Many people no longer walk with God.

If people are not 'walking with God', are they in chaos? I think they can be, and it can be painful, not peaceful. People might hide from their pain by using drugs and alcohol to make it go away for a while. They may have anxiety or depression as they experience a spiritual hole. They may be in the wrong place physically too. Prison, for instance, brings proximity to people they would not choose to be with. Hell is other people, as Jean-Paul Sartre said.

God wants to have a relationship with us all, even prisoners. Jesus tells us we are blessed if we visit prisoners. At Matthew 25:36, he gives 'I was in prison and you came to visit me' as an example of the works of mercy that bring salvation. How do we assist prisoners in having a relationship with God? So they can walk in the metaphorical Garden of Eden? To experience Heaven on Earth? To have order in their lives? To be at peace?

I have led the Uniting Church's services at the Alexander Maconochie Centre, Canberra's prison, for about eight years. The ACT Government opened the AMC in 2008 to provide adult correctional services in the ACT and promote the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders into the community. It has cell blocks with permanently stationed correction officers, less supervised room blocks also known as 'cottages', and high-security buildings with the

women in one area and the men in many others. These include remand, sentenced, and another where people are separated for their safety. The number of detainees has increased to such an extent that the accommodation is overcrowded and no longer conforms to the original intent. It's organised chaos. The limited visitor access due to Covid-19 has contributed to considerable mental and physical pressures on the staff and prisoners. It can be an unpleasant place full of unhappy people who may have been murderers, robbers, paedophiles, fraudsters, drug dealers, and the mentally ill. Weak people are prey. This disturbing video shows a prison assault -

<https://youtu.be/60DiGfPGeuE>

A full-time prison chaplain provides Christian services, counselling, religious publications such as the Bible and study guides, and the Quran. The detainees and the staff regard her highly. The Anglican, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Uniting Churches take services on a roster basis, involving taking a service on a Friday morning in the women's section and three in the men's sections on three consecutive Sunday afternoons.

People who know the 'despair of guilt' (Theologian P.T. Forsyth), who are mentally frightened or at their lowest state, are open to receiving help. Some detainees are ready to hear the 'Good News' of the New Testament, of forgiveness from sin, brokenness, and estrangement from God. God reveals this good news through Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection (Mark 1; Romans 1:1-4), as in Matthew 11:4-5: "Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.'" Who is poorer than a prisoner?



The Uniting Church service includes conversation, Bible reading, discussion, communion and prayer. I encourage fellowship, encouraging the prisoners to follow the Golden Rule in their block. I support the chaplain and encourage like-minded prisoners to hold daily small groups, share Bible passages and prayers, and be kind to all people in their block. These practices will lead to an opportunity for



them to enjoy peace. And perhaps others will see them at peace and want to participate.

Clearly, God is at work when a group of prisoners meet daily for Christian fellowship. There is a less aggressive atmosphere and more respect for others within that block. However, the moving of people between blocks and the release of others means a constant effort of bringing the good news.

I also participate in the Kairos prison ministry four-day program, explained at <https://kairos.org.au/>. On the first day, the team and participants get to know one another in team-building exercises; on the second day, the participants learn about the love of Christ, which can be powerful to those who haven't experienced love before. The third day concentrates on forgiving others and ourselves, and on the last day, the team encourages the participants to lead. There are prayers, meditations and talks on the need to stop hanging onto guilt after receiving God's forgiveness and persevering in God's grace. In a 'Cross' ceremony, each participant is given a leather cross to wear, and upon receiving the cross, the participants respond with "I am counting on Christ." In the closing ceremony, the participants receive graduation certificates and share what they learned. The forgiveness, 'Cross' and closing ceremonies can be mighty, and I am confident of being in the presence of the Holy Spirit as hard men weep.

At these times, I clearly saw God at work, reaching out to his people in love and offering those separated from him the opportunity to walk with Him. And they have accepted the offer. They recognise that continuing to walk with God will stop them from returning to their previous ways and living in unhappy chaos.

In Mark 16:15, Jesus told us to 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation'. So our mission is to gently offer those unhappy people in AMC an opportunity to move from chaos to order, from despair to peace through having a loving relationship with God through prayer, Bible study and being kind to others.



And I need other Uniting Church members to assist me in this ministry. Please consider joining the prison ministry.

Richard Scott is Council Chair of Canberra City Uniting Church

The Mission of the Australian Student Christian Movement, by Robbie Tulip

In addition to serving as CRP Secretary and Viewpoint Editor, Robbie is National Director of the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM) and manager of the ANU Chaplaincy. This article is adapted from an article in Jubilee Grapevine, the magazine of the ASCM, available at <https://ascm.org.au/article/ascm-magazine-autumn-2022-jubilee-grapevine>.

The university students of today are society's thought leaders of tomorrow. Influencing the views of students has a crucial effect on the priorities and values that will percolate through the whole community. The reputation of Christianity among university students should therefore be a critical mission priority for all who see Christian faith as an essential moral virtue and who wish to transmit the faith of the church to emerging generations.

The mission of the ASCM is to promote thoughtful and active dialogue about Christianity among university students. We look to the Bible as inspiration for a rational faith in God, helping us to engage effectively with modern ethical concerns. We strongly encourage students to engage in conversation about religion, to explore and debate how theological understanding can relate to all our concerns. As the Australian affiliate of the World Student Christian Federation, ASCM is uniquely placed to help Australian university students engage with a world community of Christian students who seek to be active, open, ecumenical and critical in their values.

Jesus Christ as presented in the Gospels is a unique model for our life today. The courage, vision and wisdom of Christ have a liberating power and clarity and relevance. The message of the Gospels resonates down through the ages, challenging us to see how the great example of Jesus can live in our world. Theology has to be controversial, or it becomes empty. There are many questions posed by the Gospels that people would prefer to avoid. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) is among the most controversial texts in all world literature. Christ there calls for an extraordinary and seemingly impossible transformation of the values of the world to bring our society into accord with the will of God, recognising how the blessing and grace of God reveal our true potential and purpose. The simple familiar line in [The Lord's Prayer](#), 'thy will be done on earth as in heaven', is an equally astounding call for human liberation, seeing the eternal values of God in heaven – love, justice, peace, truth - as our moral compass. This call for liberation is equally political and spiritual.

One of the most controversial lines in the Bible is the prophecy at [Isaiah 53:3](#) that the Messiah would be despised and rejected. This 'Isaiah Principle' presents the paradoxical idea that our salvation comes from something we hold in contempt. Our habits of pride and prejudice create powerful assumptions that lead us to ignore the message of Christ. The problem for normal psychology is that people want to claim they accept what is good for them. Instead, the Bible tells us people suffer from a perverse blindness to the message of healing and justice from the prophets. The dangerous implication is that our blindness puts the world on a pathway to destruction, requiring a transforming change to find a path of healing.

The story of the crucifixion of Christ exemplifies this theme of how human society is incapable of engaging constructively in discussion of how to repair and restore the world. When Jesus called on his society to transform its values, the response was derision, denial and execution. And yet the amazing story of the resurrection tells of the victory of divinity. The immense symbolic meaning of the [passion story of Christ](#) is that corrupt power in our world can be conquered by divine love.

Jesus represents the outcasts of the world. He tells us that what we do to the least of the world we do to him ([Matt 25:40](#)). This expression of solidarity and identity with all who are ground down by injustice and oppression is a message of hope and inspiration for the poor and marginalised. This call from Christ to respect those on the margins clashes with the view that looks only to prosperity within the current dominant paradigm. As a poor rural Jew living under the Roman Empire, Jesus was in a similar social position as Australian Aborigines under the British Empire.

In bringing the message of Christ to students today, ASCM's core values are that our faith must be critical, ecumenical, active and open. These are deeply challenging principles. An open theology respects all human traditions in a spirit of humble enquiry. An active theology sees that the Gospel is political, that the story of Jesus calls us to work for justice, peace, truth and reconciliation. An ecumenical theology is exemplified by the SCM international credo of the [World Student Christian Federation](#) from [John 17:21](#) "That all may be one".

A critical faith is among the most challenging and controversial principles. Critical thinking recognises how badly the church has been corrupted, and how conventional theology fails to express the true mission of Christ. A critical theology engages with philosophy and science, open to dialogue with modern radical opinion, looking for the truth that sets us free ([John 8:32](#)).

Critical theology applies scholarly historical method to reading the Bible, putting everything into radical doubt. A growing body of opinion in modern critical Bible scholarship is the highly controversial idea that the New Testament story of Jesus is entirely fictional. This argument is presented for example in [Richard Carrier's On The Historicity of Jesus](#). I was recently able to speak to a leading author of this strand of opinion, David Fitzgerald. [Here is our conversation](#).

Questioning the existence of Jesus is a line of thought that Christians tend to despise and reject with shock and scorn. Yet on the 'Isaiah Principle' of recognising that things we reject will be our cornerstone ([Psalm 118:22](#)), an approach of humility and respect can engage even with such surprising suggestions. Perhaps our conventional literal approaches to scripture have been corrupted by the values of the world? Have church traditions been grounded more in emotion than in evidence? How much did the early church distort the record? Do we really know what the original Gospel authors intended? How do our beliefs really sit against historical and scientific evidence and logic? Does Christian faith depend on Jesus being real? Several committed Christian scholars, such as [Tom Harpur](#), [Hermann Detering](#) and [Thomas Brodie](#), have examined such questions to reconcile faith and reason, finding that the most profound messages of Christian faith are entirely compatible with a sceptical historical method.

A Christian theology grounded in the message of Christ that the last shall be first in the Kingdom of God ([Luke 13](#)) supports contemporary values of diversity, equity and inclusion. ASCM recognises that our church and society should repent for the structural injustice and prejudice that have excluded women, Indigenous people, GBLTI people and many others from full participation and equality. The world faces massive crises, under pressure from climate change, environmental collapse, a remorseless pandemic, political and economic polarisation and war. We look to Jesus Christ, our prince of peace, as providing the inspiring message of love, truth, justice and reconciliation that can enable us to work together, in the words of the [SCM Solidarity Song](#), to build a new just world.

At the Australian National University, we are blessed by the support of a multifaith chaplaincy, working with the counselling service, able to reach out and engage with students. This year the chaplaincy space at Kambri on ANU has welcomed regular Buddhist meditation, Christian Bible study and Muslim prayer. A weekly ASCM Bible Study Group is led by Uniting Church Minister Rev Miriam Parker-Lacey, using the DVD resource [Living The Questions](#). These videos feature leading progressive theologians such as John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Such discussion seeks to engage students in a context of rising secularity where the entire concept of religion is widely regarded with deep suspicion. Since the easing of pandemic lockdown, we have been able to engage more in face to face contact this year.

Christian faith offers a big vision of world history, opening profound ethical questions. And yet the centrality of this story has been largely forgotten in modern culture. Often this is for good reason, that the church has become corrupted in its telling of the story and has not been coherent. This problem suggests that new approaches to systematic theology will be needed to inspire our sense of mission, to find paths to reconcile faith and reason in the modern world through open dialogue.



Australian
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BURGMANN COLLEGE
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ANU Chaplaincy Annual Lecture

Dr Monica Short: A Pedagogy and Theology of Kindness - Educating the Mind Whilst Caring for the Heart

7pm for 8pm, Tuesday 24 May 2022

Burgmann College Chapel

University educators, students and their networks can work together to nurture communities of teaching and learning filled with hope. Dr Short will remind us that such communities are attractive places, supporting people to achieve their educational dreams and to flourish holistically during uncertain times.

Dr Monica Short is a social science researcher and senior social work lecturer at Charles Sturt University. She facilitates the International Network of Co-operative Inquiries and is a member of a think tank 'Project Kindness in Teaching and Learning' in the School of Social Work and Arts at CSU. Dr Short has received a number of prizes and awards, including for meritorious research in Christianity and Australian Society. She is a member of the Anglican Church of Australia and a Centre Scholar with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.

Burgmann Chapel is at the rear of Burgmann College, at 52 Daley Road, Acton. **[EventBrite booking is required](#)** using the QR code below or the **[event link](#)** at the ANU Chaplaincy Facebook Page. The evening will begin at 7 pm with drinks and food. Dr Short will present at 8 pm, followed by discussion and supper. Maximum 50 in-person attendees. The lecture will be livestreamed and recorded.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83951217505?pwd=aHJSaFlFMHRMVGJTcG5VMFN6NFpwQT09>

ANU Chaplaincy is supported by the University and by churches and faith groups to provide spiritual and pastoral support to students. Enquiries phone 0407 866 777

Chaplaincy Website:

<https://www.anu.edu.au/students/contacts/chaplaincy>

ANU Chaplaincy Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/anuchaplaincy/>

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