

GREVILLEA

November, 2009

Welcome to the fourteenth edition of **Grevillea** an e-magazine to stimulate your thinking!

Why "Grevillea"? The Macquarie Dictionary defines "grevillea" as any shrub or tree of the very large, mainly Australian genus Grevillea family. Many are attractive ornamentals and a number are useful trees. It is also worth noting that grevillea can be very toxic.

So Grevillea is an Australian e-magazine which will cover a large range of subjects as time goes on. We trust they will be interesting (not just ornamental), useful and stimulate (not irritate) your thinking. We aim to have articles that will be short, practical and worth your opening them as attachments.

This edition focuses on **Hope**.

I have invited people from different perspectives and situations to write on this subject. Dean Drayton writes from his perspective as a theologian and past president of the UCA, Bron Murphy gives us hope from her rural location and Rick Dacey writes out of his US and West Epping context. Then Geoff Brown gives us his thoughts on hope drawing on his experience at Richmond and in the Parramatta-Nepean presbytery, Sarah White shares out of her involvement at West Epping Uniting Church and finally Christine Bayliss Kelly gives us some insightful thoughts on hope compiled from conversations with several young people in Parramatta-Nepean Presbytery.

Email me if you have some thoughts to share. My email address is chrisw@nat.uca.org.au. If you want any previous editions of Grevillea let me know. Camden library at the Centre for Ministry has a full set in hard copy. Grevillea is also available on the Theology and Discipleship website: www.assembly.uca.org.au/theology.

I hope you are encouraged by this edition of Grevillea.

Grace and peace
Chris Walker

Hope

Rev Professor Dean Drayton
United Theological College, Charles Sturt University

In the 1980's the category of Hope hit the headlines in books, international meetings and conferences. For centuries this vital word received little attention. Migliore claims "two devastating world wars, the Holocaust, the development of nuclear weapons, the ominous signs of ecological disaster and powerful movements of social unrest and revolution in many parts of the world"¹ shattered the dreams of an ordered understood world. With the unleashing of powerful forces the future was no longer under control. In the midst of potential chaos, or drastic change, the hope for new life or a new order emerged in the midst of the threats of death and destruction. And yet hope is a common word that has always found its way into our conversations. We hope for fine days, good crops, a great holiday. But there was a greater depth to this word that was emerging. What do you find yourself saying when you use the word hope?

For the Church, the word hope has been bracketed with love and faith. How powerful 1 Cor. 13:13 is: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." This is in answer to Paul's direction to the disciples in the Port city of Corinth to seek the best gifts, the most excellent way.

The dominant attention has been on love and faith Hope dropped by the wayside. But Paul writes about faith in another way that faces the nature of an apocalyptic or dangerous world.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom 8: 22-25).

Paul is not concerned here with what are the most excellent gifts but is setting out Christian life in the context of discipleship in the world. In a way that echoes with our present experience, we live in a world subject to futility, groaning in labor pains, with the Holy Spirit praying within us in groans too deep for words. This world besets civilisation with overwhelming threats (war, nuclear power, ecological disaster) as well as personally limited time (perhaps 70 years), limited resources (family and geography), limited opportunities (jobs, future). Yet most of us in the West are shielded from the direct consequences of these limitations as they work their way out in the awful issues of poverty, hunger, sickness, that affect so many of our brothers and sisters in the developing world. We may be shielded, but the media has provided a new way for the unexpected and threatening to invade our lives. As well, other crises, accidents and sickness bring home to us our fragility. It seems easier to turn in upon ourselves and our immediate life. But then these apocalyptic issues break in upon us with life and death issues in a groaning world.

¹ Migliore, Daniel L, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, p. 233

In this passage in Romans 8 it is clear that God's salvation is concerned for the whole earth, society and each one of us. Here we read the apostle grappling with a global view of what is happening. It is in this setting that Paul refers to the importance of hope in the action of God. This is a hope with depth and life. He states, "In hope we were saved". It is a hope that carries salvation, healing, wholeness.

For many years the horizon I had for hope was a distinctly personal one. It is summed up in a surprising way in a story from World War 2 that I heard years ago. A young British radio officer in the Air Force radio room had the task of relaying messages to the bomber squadrons on their missions over Germany. She was in love with a crew member on one of the planes. She was ever alert to hearing their particular call sign with the thought, 'I hope he gets back home safely.' And one night the message she had always dreaded came through that the plane had been hit by an attacking fighter and was in trouble. 'I hope he is not injured,' she prayed. Then the signal to jump was given as the stricken plane went down. 'I hope he got out' was her next hope. 'I hope his parachute opened', was followed by 'I hope he landed safely', and 'I hope he was not captured'. When the next day she learned from other crew members that he had been dead when his parachute hit the ground she said, 'I hope it was quick and he did not suffer'. I was struck by the way hope adapts to whatever happens. Hope can be an infinite regression as the news gets worse and worse. Yet hope remains within the unfolding story of grief and death. And here too hope is wrapped in love, for it is love that hopes for the other. This is the hope of 1 Corinthians 13:13.

This was my view of hope. Yet as in the story such a hope is highly individual, as one person lives with hope through the loss and the grief. What happens when the 'sky falls in' and the whole future of a society is threatened with nuclear annihilation, a people are sent to the gas chamber, or revolution threatens to turn life upside down.

This is the sort of hope Paul is writing about. It is hope that is the key when the whole world is groaning under the threat of what could come. There is one major difference between Paul and the sort of future we have been considering. Paul is not expecting disaster; he is sharing about a world that is groaning in labor pains. It is the hope that God in Christ is giving birth to a new world. Yet this too can be a threat to the way we live our lives.

What does this new world look like? The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church spells it out in this way: "God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation"(par 3). What a vision! What a hope!

In all the dark threats of destruction and chaos as change upon change piles in on us, we can hope for God's light upon the hill drawing us on to the day when the birth of this new world comes into being. It was the death and resurrection of Christ where that hope was born for Paul. There we were saved in hope for God's future. Already the Holy Spirit is at work in the redemption of our bodies, that is our whole selves, as well as the creation itself.

My view of hope was drawn further into this fuller picture when in 2003, as president of the Uniting Church I attended a communion service in the detention centre for Asylum Seekers at Port Hedland. The service was conducted in Farsi, the heart

language of Persians. I heard the most terrible accounts of families and persons who had arrived in Australia full of hope for a new life only to find themselves spending years in a detention centre. They had fled terrible situations, their applications had been rejected and they were due to be sent back to their homelands where they risked being killed. Slowly we collected their accounts, including some of their baptisms as Christians in the detention centres, and made representations to the government on their behalf. It seemed impossible, with public opinion against them as queue jumpers. (You cannot jump a queue if there is no embassy in your homeland). Slowly as some parliamentarians heard of their plight, the intractable government attitudes began to soften, with children released first and eventually all whom I knew were given visas. In October 2005 I attended a service of Thanksgiving in Adelaide, when more than 40 former detainees lit candles celebrating their newfound freedom. We had spoken a word of compassion and hope against all odds, and within two years it had happened despite impossible odds. I learnt that hope is stronger than prison walls and public sentiment.

Jesus calls us to live lives of hope giving ourselves in reconciliation and renewal as signs of the gospel in the big issues, and the everyday opportunities, like the smile that crosses cultural and religious boundaries, the street party that invites the strangers in the street, the willingness to name prejudging for what it is. It is a looking beyond the suspicion and the threat of the so called 'other' and growing neighbours and sometimes finding friends.

We are each invited to enter into this rich sort of hope that has been given by God in Christ Jesus that will be fulfilled in and through the Holy Spirit that deepens the scope of our prayers and aligns us with the will of God. Attention is focussed less on ourselves and more on what God has brought into being, and brings to pass. This is what we pray about all the time in the Lord's Prayer, 'Your Kingdom come'. The further the hope within us draws us into both personal and global matters, then even more we realise we need a God given and a God nurtured hope.

For Christians our hope is that the reign of God 'is already inaugurated in Jesus Christ but is not yet complete'. As Migliore goes on to state,

Christian hope in God's final triumph over sin, evil, and death is multidimensional – personal, corporate and cosmic. The final victory belongs to God, not to death.²

So the journey of discipleship goes on in hope, discovering the greater depths of hope, the wonder of a hope that God has called us into for the world as well as for ourselves.

Hope in the Rural Context

Bron Murphy

Presbytery Resource Minister

Macquarie Darling Presbytery

We are told in 1 Peter 3:15 to be ready to give an account of the hope we have within us!

² Migliore, *ibid.*, p. 239.

Yet, when confronted by 10 years of back to back soul destroying drought, have our farmers and rural people got any hope left? One could be forgiven for thinking not – but they would be wrong!

Hope (unlike rain) is something that seems to spring eternal – as the following stories tell!

On being sent a very large donation by a Sydney congregation, a rural village in NSW was able to distribute numerous \$50.00 vouchers over Christmas to the local farming community. We put a brief note with the vouchers saying that while this wouldn't fix the problems of drought, we hoped it would remind them they weren't alone.

The response was overwhelming. Farmers (the men, not just the wives) rang me to say thank you – I didn't know most of them and they didn't always tell me who they were on the phone - but they willingly talked about what it had been like. The pain at watching another crop perish; the endless looking at the skies, the perpetual listening to the forecast, the desperate praying for a miracle, the increasing anxiety and sick feeling in the belly, the gradual tightening of the spending; the school excursions that had to be cancelled; the trips to town that stopped, the get-together over coffee that couldn't be afforded; the hairdresser visits that couldn't happen, the fights that erupted in families as the tension grew, women going back to work so the family could buy basic groceries.

Listening to these anonymous conversations, I would ask things like 'so how do you keep going?' 'When will it be enough.' 'How much longer can you hang on?' Each time I would get answers like: 'this too shall pass', 'it won't be like this forever', 'It's been bad before – we'll survive', 'We breed 'em tough in the bush.' Many were able to say (in various ways) that God helps them hang on. Most of the people on the other end of my phone don't go to church but they seem to have an awareness of God that is very real and personal. I suppose it comes from working with creation day after day, year after year. You couldn't help but be aware of the glory of God when your life is spent caring for God's creation.

It struck me powerfully that after ten years of drought, these people were not devoid of hope! They had massive debts, no income, barely the essentials of life, and endured stress-challenged relationships – but they still knew hope. One farmer spoke of the isolation and desolation and considered 'topping himself' but then he remembered better days and thought of how life, like the seasons, has a rhythm that peaks and dips and 'you don't check out just because you've hit a low patch – wait long enough and it will pick up.' He knew hope – despair could not hold him.

Another spoke of his family – he would look at them as the purpose of his living and that countered his feelings of failure as a farmer.

Another said how he never gets over the knowledge that within the seemingly barren and dry earth, there still exist seeds of life that are just waiting to spring up. No matter how long the drought, there is still life waiting for a few drops of rain to emerge – that kindles hope all by itself.

But it isn't just the farming community who live as people of hope. The rural villages and towns are full of people who continue to live with hope and courage. Many church people are learning to do for each other what they once had a Minister do for them. They offer one another pastoral care; they train to conduct funerals and offer the Sacraments. Several rough & tough

blokes who had left school in 5th or 6th class came to learn about the Sacraments so they could 'feed' their congregations. They felt inadequate, embarrassed about their lack of education, scared of failing, worried about not being able to keep up – but they came. They came because they believe in something bigger than themselves. They know and rest in and find hope in a God who isn't won over by exam results or academic prowess; a God who they believe loves them and is committed to them and, as one man said 'if God can do that for me – why wouldn't I at least have a go!'

Women who have struggled with low self esteem and whose strong sense of inadequacy has kept them in church kitchens are standing up and doing amazing things!

One lady, very quiet and softly spoken, began by helping plan the occasional worship service for a tiny congregation of elderly people. 'No sermons...I can't manage that' she said. '... but maybe a reflection or a reading... that would be okay...' It went well, people found value in her little reflections and readings. They encouraged her so she decided to learn more about Baptism and Holy Communion – to see 'what they were on about.' She fell in love with God all over again, heard a renewed call that told her she didn't have to be anything she wasn't already – who she was right now was exactly the right person God needed for right now– and so her congregation sought a license for her to conduct the sacraments. She continued to grow and risk and seek and before long had studied and was conducting funerals for the town. She actually rang me to check if she was a bad person because she found it all so fulfilling! Was it really okay to feel good about being able to help people in the really painful time of death? Then a couple of weeks ago she rang to tell of a recent funeral. It was one of the church ladies who had said 'Yes, she does a lovely funeral, but when I go, I want a 'real' minister!' Well, the family felt this lady was a 'real' minister and asked her to conduct the service. It all went well. A few days later this lady was stopped by another person who worked as a nurse in the local hospital. She said how much she had enjoyed the funeral service then added. 'I hate funerals! The first one I ever went to was my mother's and I never got over it. In my job, I go to a lot, but I never listen. But as I sat and listened to you 'I felt for the first time that I really understood what Christianity is on about.' My lady went home walking on air. It was what she hoped for, but somehow didn't really expect! This timid, shy, reserved lady who was driven by a hope bigger than her inadequacy and fear and had proclaimed the gospel in such a way that it touched the life of a hope-starved person – hope does that! It spreads and multiplies and touches people lives, bring refreshment, renewal and growth.

This world is starving for meaning and purpose and hope. If nothing else, we, as people of the gospel, stand as beacons of hope in a despairing world. For we know there is a tomorrow! We know there is a God who not only created the world but loves it passionately and is committed to its well being no matter how battered and broken it is.

In my eyes that puts a certain responsibility on us. We don't get to hide behind excuses of how busy we are, how over worked, how inadequate we are, how old/young we are. We have experienced the power and grace of God and know what it is to be transformed. We know what hope is – how can we stay silent?

Rural people have taught me so much about what it is to be a person of faith, integrity and hope. I marvel at their resilience and faithfulness and can't help but feel we are all missing out when we fail to listen to one another and hear each other's stories.

Mary's Hope

Rick Dacey

Minister, West Epping Uniting Church

The town of Flagstaff, Maine was a quintessential Colonial American village. Set among the majestic pine trees and rolling slopes of central Maine, Flagstaff had its village store, its quaint old homes and farms, and its charming little white congregational church. Over generations, the people of Flagstaff built a tight knit community, farming the land, working at the little water powered mill, raising families, sharing milestones.

Flagstaff, like most of central Maine, was a window into an earlier age. In 1940, people in Flagstaff lived their lives in pretty much the same way that their forebears had in 1840. They did have electricity in 1940, but only for about an hour a day. That one hour of electricity was provided for free to residents from surplus power generated by the little mill. It wasn't until 1949 that central Maine saw the introduction of regional electric power from large hydroelectric dams. Electricity brought a lot of wonderful things to the people of central Maine, but it destroyed the town of Flagstaff. Literally.

You won't find Flagstaff on a map today because the town of Flagstaff is no more. What remains of the town—old stone walls and the foundations of homes and barns and the village church—all lies at the bottom of Maine's largest human-made lake. In 1949 a dam was built and the banks of the river that ran through town began to rise. Before long, Flagstaff was just a memory. But in truth the community of Flagstaff was destroyed long before the waters started to rise.

Three years earlier, the people of the village were informed that the dam would be built and that they would have to vacate their homes. They would be financially compensated, but they had no choice in the matter. They would all have to move. It was that news itself, not the rising water that destroyed the community of Flagstaff. The news carried with it a sense of unavoidable and inevitable loss.

Not much had changed in town for 100 years. Then in those three years following the news of the dam, everything changed. The people of Flagstaff had always taken great pride in their community. But in the

wake of the news, all that changed. A village that once would have made for a beautiful magazine cover fell into neglect and ugly disrepair. Buildings that needed paint began to peel. Gullies and ruts and potholes formed on the main street and no one bothered to fix them. The church roof started to leak and no one cared enough even to catch the dripping water in buckets.

Imagine what your neighborhood would feel like if families started moving out, and no one was moving in. One after another, the houses around you left empty and deserted, yards left untended. People weren't about to invest their time and energy and money in maintaining a town that was soon to be no more.

And that, honestly, is what destroyed the town of Flagstaff. Not the rising water, but the loss of hope. By the time the waters did rise, covering the main street and then empty houses and finally the steeple of the little congregational church, the destruction was really a blessing. Because it was more than just the buildings that started to decay with the news of the coming dam. The community itself began to fall apart as one by one, families moved away and scattered. Connections were broken; traditions were abandoned; hope was lost.

Hope is an absolutely essential element of community. Without hope, a community will invariably wither and die. Hope is one of those things that we all want to have. But the realities of the world around us, and the brokenness of our inner lives can strip our hope from us. We all know that hope is a good and vital thing. We know how important it is for individuals, for families, for communities to live in hope. The important question then isn't whether we ought to have hope. The core question is where can we find hope if the circumstances of life have taken our hope from us?

A young woman, 14 or 15 years old gets some life-changing news. From an angel, no less. She is to bear a child, and this child is to be the Saviour of the world. The story is so familiar to us that we don't stop to consider how traumatic and devastating this news would be to an unwed teenager in first century Palestine. We tend to imagine Mary as she has so often been depicted in Western art, serenely looking down with hands outstretched, a gentle Mona Lisa smile on her face and a golden halo hovering about her head.

But the young woman who gave birth to God incarnate was just a human being like anyone of us. Like us, she had plans and expectations for her life. She was just entering adulthood and was looking ahead to the next phase of her life. She was going to be married to a young carpenter in her village and raise a family with him.

She would participate in the predictable but secure rhythms of rural Semitic community life.

All her plans and expectations were turned on their head when she received that news from the angel. Her life would turn out to be neither predictable nor secure. As an unwed mother, she would face ostracism in her community. Jesus would soon be seen as a potential threat to the power of the established order and she would be forced to flee and become a refugee to protect her small child. As mother of the Messiah, the suffering servant, she would endure the unimaginable grief of witnessing her son's gruesome execution.

Her life is turned upside down by the angel's news. All the predictable, secure plans and expectations she had for her life were shattered. And what is her response to all this when she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth? She sings:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever (Luke 1:46-65).

What can we make of Mary's extraordinary response? It is possible, of course, that Mary is responding to an overwhelming situation with a delusional sense of false hope. False hope (which often masquerades as optimism) either naively or willfully looks on the bright side of things; even when there is no bright side. So are these beautiful words (echoing Hannah's song in the Old Testament) Mary's version of "Gray skies are gonna clear up; put on a happy face?"

A family building an addition on their home in 1948, in Flagstaff Maine, hoping that the dam will never be built is living in false hope. When we hear only what we want to hear, see only what we want to see, believe only that which makes us feel comfortable and self satisfied,

we're living in false hope. False hope is rooted in the belief that however things look now, they'll ultimately turn out the way we want them to.

False hope is easy to identify because it's all wrapped up in self. It is self-centered and self-absorbed. And finally, it is self-defeating. When we buy into false hope, we ultimately end up disappointed and disillusioned.

Mary's song of Hope doesn't have a false note in it. It isn't a self-centered hope; it's other-centered. The song isn't finally about her. It begins with a celebration what God has accomplished, is accomplishing, and will accomplish in and through her. And it ends with a joyful proclamation of God's coming kingdom.

Mary is an ordinary person chosen by God for an extraordinary purpose. Her life is turned upside down. She's embarked on a journey without knowing where God will lead her. In the face of risk, trial, uncertainty and loss she is . . . *overjoyed!*

Mary's voice carries a powerful message of Hope. Real, honest-to-God, genuine Hope. Real Hope doesn't say that things will turn out the way we want them to. Real Hope trusts that things will turn out the way God wants them to. Real Hope is not a fatalistic resignation to a controlling deity. Real Hope is a living confession of faith in the promises of God. It is a bold expression of trust that dares to take God at God's word.

How blessed are we to be part of a struggling church in the midst of an increasingly secular society? How blessed are we that our numbers, our resources and our influence are in alarming decline? How blessed are we that some see the church as a generational, theological, and cultural battleground?

How blessed are we that in the midst of those very real circumstances, God is calling the Uniting Church in Australia to be an instrument of genuine hope? We are being drawn ever more deeply into the mission of God. We are being called to take a vital part in what God is up to: transforming lives, healing communities, reconciling all Creation to God in Jesus Christ. How blessed are we? Are we as blessed as Mary?

Hope: Not a Four-Letter Word

Geoff Brown

former Lay Ministry Worker at Richmond Uniting Church

Hope is a paradox for anyone in ministry. Whilst we operate with confidence in the certainty of the Grace of God, expressed in the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross, we share our lives and ministries with so many where hope is tested or apparently lost.

Being involved in Lay Ministry within my own congregation at Richmond for the last five years has been one of those amazingly privileged experiences for which I will always be grateful. My partner, Sandra and I had always both sensed that, towards the end of our 'useful' working life (whatever that meant!), we would be active in some form of ministry together in the life of the church. This became a reality. Following our conclusion at Richmond, I have become involved in a Mission, Property and Finance Review of the congregations of Parramatta-Nepean Presbytery.

So these reflections and discoveries that relate to the topic of Hope are a result of some of my experiences in these two recent assignments.

Attitude Change

My Methodist background set me up with a fairly conservative theology. Yet, during my time spent with people over coffees, in homes, at shopping centres, University campus or at church, I journeyed with those who shared deep, personal issues which constantly challenged and stretched me. Some people at the church thought that pastoral coffees seemed a little novel! Today, much pastoral care is carried out in a café.

Many pastoral situations in which I shared would rarely afford opportunities for a standard answer or quick solution. Sometimes the situations were quite confronting (eg. "Does your church believe it's okay to have sex with someone so long as you wear a condom?")

Sometimes, the sharing of prayer was totally inappropriate as it would have created greater anger and confusion. Hope was a four-letter word for some.

Most of these situations required much discernment and my Reformed Evangelical attitudes just did not complement the shape of forming relationships. Yet the Spirit of God and the care given me by my Peer Supervision group steadily chipped away at my attitude, to the point where grace has now become an active part of my sharing, enabling me to listen more intently and journey with people more gently.

Many people discovered that they could share their hurts, pain, grief and deep personal yearnings with the security that they would not be judged and that their private information would not be shared with anyone else.

Over time, I began to understand that my narrow attitude would have been a blockage to hope for the person with whom I was journeying. The hope that I saw growing in other people and the trust they placed in me (and in Sandra) to be prepared to share their deepest and private feelings was a major factor in my growth in grace. This was a freeing discovery for me.

The Importance of Space

People need a Sacred Space to grow in Hope.

Throughout the Presbytery Review we discovered that each culture, interest group or generation looks to the church for a Sacred Space to meet their needs. People can look to the church for a number of things. These may include community and friendship, help and support, sharing and

encouragement, worship and education, searching for God, answers, meaning etc.

We often talk of safe space, physical space, OH&S needs, child protection, polity and ethos and removal of nuts from our kitchens to protect all who venture into our buildings. But we are less adept at analysing what are the hidden needs of individuals or groups so that each person can find a Sacred Space and connect in the life of the church and discover the reality of the living God.

The church needs to recognise how to assist people to move from the Safe Space into the Sacred Space.

In the community, we observe young mums, rocking into Gloria Jean's on a Monday morning after they have delivered their primary schoolers to the local public school. They, and their pre-schoolers, find a safe space for positive sharing and a nice coffee (or baby chino). We see seniors attending gentle exercise, computer classes or a lecture on ethics at the local Community Centre each week. This is a safe space for wholesome activities, formation of good friendships and for education.

In the local congregation, we see seniors gathering for a monthly luncheon where people come from not only the local area but outside the Hawkesbury to enjoy good food, pleasant company and a non-threatening, positive program.

Mothers-of Preschoolers (MOPs) join together fortnightly to share a sumptuous morning tea, and then to join in an educational program for their interests and needs whilst their pre-school children enjoy a separate program designed especially for their needs. Meanwhile, babies and toddlers are cared for in another space. (It's wonderful to have useable, well-maintained buildings and facilities!).

High-schoolers call in after school every Tuesday – the kids call it “an oasis in the middle of the week”. They hang out, eat pizza and chat and share about things that are important to them and affect their lives. They connect in a relaxed, non-threatening environment and set their own agenda to meet their needs.

Each activity is designed for Community participation. In each of the three examples at Richmond, a Sacred Space is provided or forms naturally and organically. Sometimes things are simple, sometimes subtle but always filled with love and grace. A Sacred Space may be highly structured (eg seniors lunch), relaxed but programmed (eg MOPs) or largely unstructured (older high schoolers).

The church's task is to ensure that a Sacred Space is provided and protected. The Sacred Space has to be meaningful and helpful for those involved. It has to be honest with no strings attached or undeclared motivations. The Sacred Space openly declares its values and offers grace and love. The facilitators of any Sacred Space (sometimes, no facilitation is necessary) have had to put traditional thinking aside. Sacred Spaces may not include worship as a formal corporate activity, rather gentle encounters with God. Sometimes the Sacred Space involves a comfortable room (or a home) food, the ability to create a sense of freedom, openness, privacy. Sometimes a Sacred Space is not limited by physical buildings or facilities – eg bushwalking, canoeing, environmental discovery. In a Sacred Space, however, God is encountered and Hope is discovered.

The High-Schoolers refer to Tuesday as “Their Church”. So with my desire to help create positive and meaningful worship I have had put the brakes on as I am reminded not to underestimate how God’s presence will become personal and real for people. Pre-conceived ideas as to what worship should look like and for doing churchy things with people basically has to be re-thought on a regularly basis.

Celebration of Gifts

It seems that churches that are able to identify where the gifts and talents are located and to help people discover that they can grow in discipleship as they serve their congregation in their gifting areas, there will be multiplication of the energy and effectiveness of mission.

At Richmond, In the Lay Ministry Roles for Children, Families and for Young Adults, Sandra and I built ministry teams to support and develop each portfolio area. These volunteers provided an invaluable source of practical ideas, creativity, hands-on support, encouragement and generally set the vision, direction and pace of the two ministry areas.

What I learned was to ensure that when someone offered to help in a particular way, every effort must be made to facilitate that to happen. It is not good to help people discover a Spiritual Gift and then to not use it. When a person’s gift is discovered, valued and applied, there is Hope. It is a most uplifting feeling for a person to be recognised that their contribution, no matter how small, is valued and celebrated by the Body of Christ.

As I considered the volume of data gathered during the Presbytery Review, I was confronted by the figures that show the decline in numbers of people declaring themselves to be Christian. I wondered what this would mean for the Uniting Church as it attempts to undertake relevant mission in the community. Alongside this, in our Presbytery we have substantial resources available to us through our Properties, our People and many other Assets. Every one of these God-given assets is a resource to be used for the Mission of God. We continue to celebrate these blessings and the rich diversity and possibilities for the best use and application of these gifts into the future mission of the church.

We are looking to facilitate the setting up of Mission Partnerships to strengthen the church in mission, free up the “untapped” resources, work at discipleship building and equip people to share together for the sake of the Kingdom. While we may be confronted with negative census data, financial challenges and questions about the future of the church, there is still much to celebrate and for which to look forward in hope.

Stories of Hope from West Epping Uniting Church

Sarah White
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Hope is a story in itself. Like any good story, it has twists and turns, up and downs, highs and lows. But the story of hope is never-ending...

In the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 we find a story that seems hopeless....

After the flood, the sons of Noah had descendants and populated all the nations of the earth. At this time, the whole earth spoke the same language.

But the people then started to ignore God, and spoke about their plans to make themselves great:

“Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches heaven. Let’s make ourselves famous so we won’t be scattered here and there across the earth.”

Now God, upon seeing that the people were going their own way and rejecting his will, intervened to thwart their emerging, man-made design for their lives:

“One people, one language; why, this is only a first step. No telling what they’ll come up with next – they’ll stop at nothing! Come, we’ll come down and garble their speech so they won’t understand each other.”

Then God scattered them all over the world.

This action was intended to humble people and prompt them to turn back to God but as human history shows, people continued ignoring God’s design for how we are to relate to God and to each other. We have long witnessed, and sometimes participated in, the tragic breakdown between different religious, ethnic and cultural groups over past millenniums. Lack of relationship and acceptance of each other has led to suspicion, distrust, hatred and conflict. Overseas, we have witnessed frequent invasions, catastrophic wars, perpetual human rights violations and long-term exploitation of poor nations by the rich minority. In Australia, we have seen divisions between people of different backgrounds, from the genocide committed by invaders against indigenous people through to the treatment of refugee boat people that continues today. Today, in our local area of northwest Sydney, racism and division between ethnic groups is evident in our marketplaces, schools and even our churches.

Given the ever present reality of our deeply broken world, the ideal of people of different religious, racial and social backgrounds being *all one in Jesus Christ* (Galatians 3:28), may seem beyond possibility.....beyond hope.

Do we really believe that a future where there is *“neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”* is possible? We’d be forgiven for giving up on God’s dream of reconciliation ever becoming a reality on the earth. It would be easy to conclude that God is losing the fight for creation and all humankind to be reconciled to God’s self. Does it make sense to simply comfort ourselves with the knowledge of the reconciliation that Jesus will bring about beyond earthly existence, in the fullness of eternity? Is that the only happy ending we are ever likely to see?

Unfolding hope in 2009!

Around 18 months ago, a small group of lay people here at West Epping started praying for the mission of God to renew us. Spirits brooding, we came together to seek revival, suspecting that answers would lie in prayer. We longed to hear afresh God’s call to us in this time and this place.

Just four to six of us came together every Monday to pray. We prayed simple prayers of thanksgiving and intercession. They were ordinary prayers for each other, our church leaders, our church activities and the vulnerable members of our community.

Our constant prayer was for God to lead us into new directions and embolden us to be the people of God for our community today.

18 months on, we are seeing how God has heard our prayers and is inviting our church community into new mission in a way that we could never have anticipated or achieved. We are seeing developments that could not have been accomplished by our own striving.

Our local community has a very high proportion of people of Asian heritage for whom English is a second language. Yet, our worship community does not reflect this diversity. The need to connect cross culturally has been obvious, but that hasn't made it happen. While we've wanted to forge real relationships and community across cultures, we had not found the means or the motivation that is required.

But...God is reconciling! This past year we have been remarkably blessed with new partners to share the journey of discipleship with - young first and second generation Korean Australians with incredible gifts and desire to serve God. These young people have been instrumental in the creation of a new cross-cultural evening service and played a key role in the renewal of youth ministry.

God is calling us clearly into a cross cultural community and inviting us into new expressions of church and mission. God's purpose and timing has made what once seemed so difficult, now seem inevitable and natural. People from diverse backgrounds are coming together, in a new way, for a new era, with renewed hope. There is still a long way to go, but the new chapter of God's story is being written as we speak.

Last month, we saw two glorious events in the life of our church community..... events that would not have been possible even six months before. These events were beautifully ecumenical, inter-generational and inter-cultural.

The first was a vibrant participation of the church in the local community festival that attracts 85,000 people. The day began with two Uniting Churches combining to take part in the street parade, with people of different ages and cultures donning *Jesus All About Life* t-shirts, walking, dancing and singing alongside the Jesus Racing Ute, provided by the Bible Society. Walkers handed out lollies and vouchers for 1200 free fair trade coffees which were served all day, in partnership with the Salvation Army's Justice Coffee Van, at the Uniting Church. Later, 500 free sausage sandwiches were lovingly distributed to the community, particularly to young people. An open air worship concert followed throughout the afternoon and evening with eight young worship bands from different denominations playing for and praying for local people. Comments such as "Our church should be doing this!" and "It's so great to see the church doing something great for the community!" demonstrated the blessing of taking the church to the people, as Jesus did.

The following week, our church organised 'Life to the Max', a 4 hour interdenominational youth event attended by over 200 young people from the local area. Christian and non-Christian youth, from different religious cultural backgrounds came together to share in a truly uplifting celebration of young people. The church extended Jesus' gracious hospitality by providing a plethora of multi-cultural

entertainment, a plentiful feast and an outstanding worship concert including bands, drama, music and powerful preaching. All those that gathered were challenged and touched by different elements of the service.

These two events were only possible because of the partnership of people from very different backgrounds and sectors of the community. The rich diversity of cultures and traditions made these occasions spectacular. The coming together of denominations, cultures, generations and traditions made for amazingly joyful participation in, and witness to, the mission of Jesus Christ.

Yes, we have heard an invitation to enter the narrative of hope and be part of the story of reconciliation that is continuing to take shape.

What have we learnt about hope from our engagement in the mission of God these past months and year? We have tried to heed the lessons vital for God's people in every time and place - to listen to God's will for our lives and to let God lead us in the mission to which we are called. We are learning to place our trust in God and follow in the way of Jesus in new ways as God reveals them to us.

Yes! There is hope for us. Discover it now in the embrace of community, whatever yours may be!

Hope

Some views from young people in the Parramatta-Nepean Presbytery
compiled by Christine Bayliss Kelly

30 years ago I can remember a rather heated conversation with my parents about the importance of humans living sustainably to prevent global warming and the effect of the depletion of the ozone layer. I was in high school and trying to express myself as an individual but one with information and responsibility for myself, my family and my part in the world. Sadly my parents still do not believe that global warming is a fact- they see it only as a part of the long term climate pattern of the world- and they choose to ignore the cataclysmic levels of CO₂ and the evidence of melting polar icecaps. Thankfully they are careful with water usage and do recycle (a legacy from growing up in the country). My hope was (and is) that one day they can actually see and share in the collective responsibility we must have to work together to make a difference.

A lot has changed since then but just like the relationship between my parents and me, there is some difference in the things we hope for and how we understand hope in a world in which the instant global news brings so many messages without hope! Below are some reflections and observations from conversations with young people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

Hope as a concept:

'I think hope is what keeps us going in difficult times. I hope my parents will stop fighting with each other, even though I know that is unlikely to happen. I hope that we can be a normal family like everyone else- and so I pray my hopes to God and try hard not to be disappointed.' (E age 14)

'I hope one day my dad will change- that he will stop hitting my mum. I hope he will stop drinking and stop hurting me. I hope that one day I can sit in church and not worry about people guessing. Even though it keeps happening and he keeps hurting us- I keep hoping one day God will make it all better.' (T age 9).

'Hope is the 'feeling' I have that is in conflict with my 'thinking'. Hope is the reflection of what I desire- informed by what I read in the bible about the spiritual gifts and fruits of the spirit. It is what I can experience when I get together with my friends and just chill. We often talk about it together and can feel it when we are with each other. It just doesn't seem to happen when we are with older people as much. The 'thinking' is in trying to rationalise what I usually see and experience in Christians within the church talking about loving others but acting in ways which are far from loving- too full of bigotry and judgement and limitation. Our church has a value of being tolerant- but it sure isn't good when we young people are only tolerated because we are 'the church's hope for the future-as if we aren't part of the church today!' (J age 19)

'I see hope as something which is a bit esoterical. It is too often an ideal which is unattainable in the way we live as selfish people. I mean 'hope' is that everyone on earth has enough to eat. The reality used to be that there was enough food to feed everyone but the affluent were too selfish and had more than enough resulting in so much obesity while others were starving. The reality is now that many older people are worried about the Global Financial Crisis as it affects their shares or superannuation or money, when we should be more worried about the Global Food Crisis because there is no longer enough food to feed the world. Too many crops have been turned to bio-fuel which is good- but it has taken the food out of people's mouths. There are no easy answers but surely we can not only hope we CAN do something about the big issues in the world but if we were serious about it we would actually DO something about it. Our individual action stops hope from remaining an esoteric concept and increases the chances that hope can become a reality!' (T age 15).

As adults we do not always understand or appreciate the insights of children. Yet here we have young people understanding the discrepancy between hope and experienced reality- some of it a very sad reality!

So what are some of the hopes of young people?

Hopes and dreams:

'I hope my family will be happy and healthy and won't have fights or stuff like that' - (S age 8).

'I hope there will be no more wars or fighting and people can live together in peace' - (J aged 6).

'I hope we, as a human race, can come to the realisation we are dependent on each other and there is a global responsibility we have to each other. I believe God has given us the capacity to do this, and the free will to do so but we must take responsibility for our own actions. It isn't easy and too often we are too selfish or self-centred. I suppose we have to keep being reminded of what God wants and how we keep getting it wrong. But I think eventually we will start to get it.' (T age 16).

'My hope comes about because of the conflict I experience (like most kids with Islander background) every time I walk in my front door. My parents aren't too bad but most of my friends have what we call 'front door syndrome'. I hope that one day my parents and their generation can begin to understand the difference between their hopes and life-choices and my generation's. I once did an assignment at school which

meant researching some of the hopes and expectations between the generations. I had to ask the same questions of parents and of kids. But often the parents would get angry with me when I asked some of the questions because they thought I was challenging them as parents, instead of trying to get some information and understanding. We young people are expected to listen to them, to do what they want us to do, to learn their language and follow their customs but they don't really want to know about what is important to us. They almost want us to be more Samoan than they were in Samoa, or Tonga or wherever they came from. But we are here in Australia. I really hope we can work out some way where we can learn from each other. I hope we can respect each other yet be different. That way we young people can respect their customs and learn about them rather than being forced to accept stuff which we are not interested in.' (J age 19)

Hope as faith lived out:

'We talk about the coming Kingdom- the Vision of what is yet to come but we are living the vision now! The hope of the world has already come in the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't just get glimpses of the good things to come we can actually experience it now!' (S age 24)

'Hope is a reminder of God at work in the world- and God doesn't give up. No matter how ludicrous we become, no matter how selfish we are, God's incredible grace in Jesus Christ reminds us of God's presence in the world. Hope is the reason we don't need to give up- it keeps us going and holding on. Hope is the light in the middle of darkness. It is the rainbow in the middle of a storm. It is the smile in the midst of sadness. Hope is life in the midst of death. We are called to be a people of faith, hope and love and to live that out in our lives- in the things we say and do no matter what our differences are- no matter what our circumstances are. Hope keeps us going!' (M age 23)

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