

NOVEMBER 2019



InterSections

An Australian journal for Christian encounter and encouragement

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Editorial

Welcome to the November 2019 issue of *InterSections*.

The theme for this issue is Christians and the culture wars. A culture war typically refers to an ideological conflict between groups of people with different ideals, values, and beliefs. In the West, the culture wars are generally between those with a Judeo-Christian worldview and those who hold to a different worldview. In the midst of a culture war, what might a Christian response look like?

In our *Feature* article, Christian Bargholz examines Jesus' interaction with a Samaritan woman recorded in John 4 to explore how we can navigate a culturally tense situation. In *Food for Thought*, Dale Christensen reflects on the recent saga involving the outspoken professional rugby player, Israel Folau, and his religious comments on social media. Harold Shank writes our *International Letter*, reflecting on his recent trip through Australia and South East Asia and reminding us that hope crosses cultures.

We interview Frank Cunningham from the Southwest congregation in Campbelltown, NSW, who shares his spiritual history from England to Australia. Benny Tabalujan reviews *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*, a biography by Eric Metaxas about the nineteenth century English politician and social reformer, William Wilberforce.

For our *ChurchScene*, Graeme Offer tells us about the Cairns Church of Christ in northern Queensland. Finally, our *News* section includes updates about Camp Revive in Victoria, the 50th anniversary celebration of Belmore Road Church of Christ in Melbourne, the Toowoomba Lectureship in Queensland, and the Bankstown Family Seminar in Sydney.

We offer this issue to honour God, uplift you, and provide help and hope for everyone living in a time of great cultural upheaval.

The Editorial Team

ChurchScene

Cairns Church of Christ, QLD

The Cairns church began in 1964 when Joe Cassella (father of Carmello Cassella) was baptised. At that time he was the only church member living in Cairns and was unable to speak English. Cam LaSpina, usually with his family, would travel from Innisfail 1½ hours each way every Sunday to worship with Joe and converse in Italian. This continued for many years until Ron & Margaret Doyle and their family moved to Cairns in 1976. Shortly before that Ian & Beth Harland and Yvonne Manning had arrived in Cairns.

The small church met in the Doyle home, then in numerous rented school halls, and then back to the Doyle home until 2006. Since 2006, the church has met in a rented facility, the Cairns Junior Choral Society Hall in Grove Street, which is close to the city centre.



In those early days the church grew to a regular attendance of about 20, with Sam and Margaret Kirkpatrick working with the church for a year in 1984. However, with the very transient population in Cairns, the numbers dwindled largely due to people moving away.

With the opening of Cairns international airport in the late 1980s, the church was greatly encouraged by frequent international visitors to the congregation. Cairns also became a stopover for missionaries flying into and out of Papua New Guinea. It also marked a turning point for a remarkable increase in the population of the city and, with that, the growth of the church.

During the 1990s Adolf & Dia Momberger moved from Port Moresby. They were followed by some of their children and their families. Then David & Dianne Hodgkinson moved from Darwin. Outreach into the community saw some people converted. While some moved away others, sadly, fell away.

In the early 2000s Graeme Offer and his late wife, Carol, moved to Cairns. Graeme preached every second Sunday in Cairns and alternate Sundays in Innisfail. Through the efforts of Adolf & Dia, several people from the PNG community in Cairns were converted and the congregation grew to about 30. Since Graeme retired in 2010, he still spends several months a year in Cairns, with the remainder spent elsewhere.

Jason & Sheryl Moriarty worked with the church for three years from 2012 until 2015. However, in mid-2015 they returned to America. Around the same time, Adolf died, and David Momberger moved to PNG for work. Without strong leadership, the numbers dwindled again as a lot of young people fell away.

In 2017, Vani and Millie Igo moved from PNG to Cairns and the church has greatly benefitted from strong teaching and outreach into the PNG community. There have been several recent baptisms and personal studies with many families are continuing. Sunday morning assembly numbers are again around 30. Marcel van den Bos has also recently moved back to Cairns and is a great help to the congregation.

The church has had (and continues to have) a focus of helping Christians in PNG and, in the past, has supported several preachers there. At present, although numbers are growing, very few members are working; so there are very limited financial resources available to send elsewhere. Hence the current focus is directed towards supporting the local work. ◇

Graeme Offer and his wife Judy spend several months each year in Cairns and count themselves as members of the Cairns congregation.
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InterSections is a quarterly journal designed to inform, inspire and unite Christians in Australia seeking to restore New Testament faith and practice. The editors are responsible for selecting material for publication, but each article reflects the views of its author(s). Advertisements in *InterSections* are broadly consistent with the ethos and goals of the journal; however, they do not necessarily constitute endorsement by the journal. *InterSections* is published by Klesis Institute (© Klesis Institute, 2019). Copyright permission is given to anyone wishing to reproduce an individual article for non-commercial purposes, as long as due attribution is given to the author and *InterSections*. Klesis Institute is a division of CommAsia Australia Pty Ltd (ACN 097136171 ABN 53702023602).

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Feature: *Jesus in the Midst of a Culture War*

For a number of decades, Western culture has been labelled 'post-Christian'. Inherent in this label is the notion that, while retaining a degree of Judaeo-Christian philosophy at root level, Western culture is almost thoroughly otherwise at the level of social policy and practice. Christians, whose values once ran concurrent with the values of the culture in which they resided, are now often finding themselves at odds with the very civilisation they helped to create.

This has been evidenced most obviously in the recent cultural debates – ideological conflicts known as the 'culture wars'. Christians, by and large, have often sided against pervading Western cultural thinking on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and Islamic extremism. This has made them the target of widespread public ire amid accusations of bigotry, intolerance, and homophobia. Given the gravity of such accusations, and the hazardous political climate, how should Christians manifest themselves in a culture that is post-Christian? How can Christians meaningfully contribute to a society they are increasingly at odds with?

Recent examples suggest Christians are still struggling to answer those questions. Israel Folau has demonstrated the polarising dangers associated with public declarations on social media of some of the Bible's more confronting passages. Rod Dreher, in his book *The Benedict Option*, goes to the opposite extreme in suggesting the solution lies in Christians disengaging from the culture altogether for the sake of the church's survival and the preservation of the faith as a whole.

The potential flaw in these two Christian approaches to the culture wars of a post-Christian society is the failure to ask the most important question: what would Jesus do? How would Jesus behave in a culture hostile to him, with people of differing values to his own? Thankfully, a story in the Gospel of John provides a window into Jesus' attitude towards those for whom matters of culture were causes for tension and division.

John tells the story of Jesus encountering a Samaritan woman of uncertain character (John 4:17-18). This encounter is significant. First, as John notes, Jews and Samaritans were not people who shared pleasantries. Jews viewed Samaritans as second-class citizens: an estranged community marginalised by a dubious history of foreign contacts and associations.

“*Jesus offers Christians a third way. It's neither engagement nor disengagement. Rather, it's re-engagement.*”

Second, the Jews saw in the Samaritans not a remnant of Israel, but rather a people to be avoided. This attitude was demonstrated earlier in the Jewish refusal of Samaritan help in the rebuilding of the temple after the return of the first Judean exiles under Zerubbabel in 538 BC (Ezra 4). This contributed, thirdly, to a divisive animosity between Jews and Samaritans over matters of tradition, ethnicity, and religious observance. In this simple encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Jesus finds himself in the midst of a centuries-long culture war between his own people and the people to whom this woman belongs.

The Samaritan woman knows this. When Jesus initiates a conversation with her by asking for a drink (4:7), her response demonstrates the tension between the two ethnic parties: 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?' (4:9). Before the conversation has even begun, the Samaritan woman brings up an ethnic tension between Jews and Samaritans in an effort to draw Jesus into the culture war. As the conversation progresses, she continues this effort by bringing in historical tensions: 'Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.' (4:12). When the conversation reaches its climax, she raises the most divisive issue of all: tradition. The woman says to Jesus: 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.' (4:20). She seems to want to determine whose religious history is right.

Despite the Samaritan woman repeatedly seeking to draw Jesus into a divisive culture war conversation, Jesus, in each instance, refuses to engage with her about culturally divisive topics. In every case, Jesus responds to her provocations with an answer that addresses a different, more real issue.

In the first instance, instead of talking about a Jew needing a Samaritan for help, Jesus addresses her need for him: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' (4:10). In the second, instead of debating the finer points of history, Jesus emphasises the need for true nourishment: 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.' (4:13-14). And, finally, instead of arguing over the true location of worship, Jesus asserts the importance of the true quality of worship: 'The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...' (4:23). In the midst of a culturally tense situation, instead of entering into a potentially incendiary conversation, Jesus focuses on drawing her closer to him. Jesus doesn't answer any of her questions because, while culturally significant, they are irrelevant to the real issue: humanity's need for true spiritual nourishment that is only found in him.

Christians today often find themselves in conversations not unlike Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman. Too often, Christians will stoop to the level of cultural debate with those whom they disagree, resulting in little more than unproductive arguments. This gives the impression of Christians who speak at people, telling them all the ways in which they are wrong, preaching a message of guilt and judgement. Because of this, Christians tend to double-down on their position or disengage altogether.

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Food For Thought

Take up your Cross and Folau me...

Since his debut in 2007, Israel Folau has popped up in various locations on the Australian sporting landscape: first playing rugby league, then Australian football, then rugby union. In recent months however, he has drawn the cultural spotlight in a bitter dispute with Rugby Australia that even now rages on in the Federal Court of Australia.

Space here is limited, but a brief summary of the key events that brought an end to his rugby career is in order. In 2018, Folau responded to a comment on his Instagram post, saying '[God's plan for gay people is] HELL ... unless they repent of their sins and turn to God'. Then in April 2019 he posted a meme warning 'drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists, [and] idolaters' to repent or 'end up in hell'.

As a result, Rugby Australia decided to terminate his contract for a 'high level' breach of their code of conduct. Folau appealed this decision internally before taking his case to the courts, claiming wrongful dismissal. The Australian Christian Lobby helped raise \$2 million from the public to pay for Folau's legal expenses, after his own GoFundMe campaign was shut down by the crowdfunding site.

While the Folau saga has become a proxy for a larger culture war, it's important to realise that it bears little resemblance to the workplace discrimination more likely to befall Christians today. Very few of us will encounter the mix of contractual requirements, corporate sponsor pressure, and international media attention that make Folau's case so complex. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned from his situation that will help faithful Christians navigate a hostile world.

The most obvious lesson has more to do with the completeness of Folau's message than its truthfulness. Imagine the difficulty of convincing a man to 'sell all he has and buy that field' without telling him of the riches hidden therein. Escaping hell's torments can be a strong motivation, but this motive often degrades over time compared to the fullness of the love of God and blessings he brings.

Bridget Eileen, a same-sex attracted woman who has embraced celibacy for the love of Christ, said 'I never chose to be celibate. I chose to follow Jesus. And Jesus brought me into celibacy the way a teacher leads their student to their homeroom. I followed him there. And he made me desire to be there.'¹ She contrasts this with the 'white-knuckle' approach of many Christians, who are taught to view celibacy – rather than Christ – as their ticket to heaven.

It's painfully obvious, however, that Folau could have delivered the truth as faithfully, masterfully, and beautifully as Jesus himself, and he likely still would have lost his job. The backlash from his posts has arisen from a culture that's not only hostile to Christianity but also profoundly religiously illiterate. Far beyond simple ignorance of biblical stories or of God's redemptive plan, the average Australian is fundamentally oblivious of what religion is. Because our disagreements are rooted in such elementary questions, no presentation of the Gospel – however eloquent – will sate the ravenous secularism of our culture.

In the end, then, the lessons to draw from the Folau saga are the same as always: 'Put not your trust in princes' (Psalm 146:3); '[speak] the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15); and 'be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching' (2 Timothy 4:2). Take up the burden of Ezekiel who was told '... you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear ... be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house' (Ezekiel 2:6). Above all, be prepared to 'count all things as loss' – including lucrative careers! – compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ. ◇

¹ Bridget Eileen, "Why Celibate Gay Christians Don't Need to Fear Hell" (29 May 2019), www.meditationsofatravelingnun.com/celibate-gay-christians-dont-need-fear-hell

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Feature cont.

Jesus offers Christians a third way. It's neither engagement nor disengagement. Rather, it's re-engagement. Jesus' way of navigating a culture war is to reframe the conversation around real issues: not of culture but of spiritual need and fulfilment. Following Jesus' example means being humble enough to put aside cultural differences and interested enough in a person to have a conversation about Jesus. The result of Jesus' conversation is that the Samaritan woman puts aside her entrenched cultural positions and goes away interested in Jesus and his message.

For Christians living in a post-Christian culture, following Jesus means following his example. It doesn't mean taking up a position on every cultural issue. It means re-engaging a divided world with Jesus, preaching a message of grace and spiritual fulfilment in him. ◇

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News

Camp Revive, VIC

In early October, 35 people came together at Lyrebird Park, about 70km east of Melbourne, for Camp Revive. The theme this year was *Around the Bible in 48 Hours*, and we were blessed to have Nathan Wilson from The Point Church in Brisbane as our main speaker. A special mention goes to Joanna Banyard, who battled flight delays and weather to be our only other interstate camper this year!

The format of the camp was quite different to our normal fare: while Nathan did a little bit of teaching, he and his wife Katrina filled the bulk of the sessions with interactive exercises designed to immerse small groups in different elements of God's redemptive plan throughout the Bible. Nathan and Katrina used their theatrical backgrounds to great effect to put us into the shoes of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac, Moses, David, and Jeremiah, culminating in each group performing a 'critical moment' in the stories for the whole camp. Nathan then brought everything together on Sunday morning to show how it all pointed towards the coming of Christ and his salvific gift.

On Saturday night, Bryce Christensen took us to the story of Esther and showed how it fits into God's wider plan. Campers also participated in crafts, soccer, games both physical and mental, singing, and a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. We left camp with friendships made and strengthened, a deeper understanding of God's unfolding plan throughout history, and our place in his continuing story. ♦

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50th Anniversary – Belmore Road, VIC

More than 160 people participated in the 50th anniversary lunch celebration of Belmore Road Church of Christ in Melbourne on Saturday, 24 August 2019. Fifty years earlier on Sunday, 24 August 1969, the fledgling congregation held its first worship assembly at the current premises. (Prior to that, the congregation was known as the Balwyn Church of Christ and met in a rented hall in nearby Balwyn.) Present at that first assembly were three families: the Hardcastles, Sheas, and Montgomerys. The building had been purchased from the Presbyterian church earlier in 1969 for \$22,000.

Five decades later, among those celebrating were Christians from sister congregations, former members, and visitors. Former members Michael & Norainie Bargholz, now with the Eastside church in Sydney, were present and Michael delivered the sermon the next day to a combined BRCOC English and Chinese assembly. There were 117 present. It was a wonderful time of worship, praise, and reminiscing.

Not unlike other churches, BRCOC during the past five decades has experienced good times as well as challenging times. Signs of growth include becoming self-supporting by the mid-1980s; the appointment of the first eldership (Trevor Baker and Charles Hooi) in 2004; the launch of a Chinese ministry in 2008; and building extensions in 1976 (five classrooms), 1992 (new auditorium), and 2010 (expanded auditorium and office).

Today BRCOC has around 90 congregants in the English assembly and 20 congregants in the Chinese assembly, with more than a dozen ethnicities represented. God has indeed been gracious to his people! ♦

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Toowoomba Lectureship, QLD

The 2019 Gipps St Lectureship was held on the last weekend of September. Over three days, the lectureship consisted of 10 encouraging and spiritually insightful lessons focused around 'The Big Picture' of the history of the world and God's redemptive plan. So often, Christians are distracted and discouraged when we focus on our immediate surroundings and forget the eternal perspective.

The lessons traced the history of time, reminding the audience what God was doing to bring about redemption: Eternity, Paradise and the Fall, Promises, Deliverance, Disobedience, Exile, Good News, Redemption, Reconciliation, Eternity.

We had numerous visitors from Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, and New Zealand. For our Sunday morning service we had over 120 attend. The speakers included: Albert Gyamfi, Ian Coker, Brett Rutherford, Daniel McDonald, Trevor Major, and Daniel Smith. We were truly blessed by the visiting brothers and sisters who came and encouraged us with their presence and example. The lessons and manuscripts are available at www.gippschurch.com ♦

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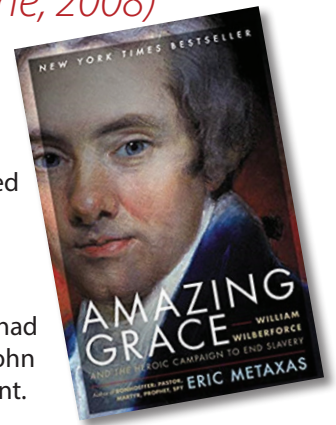
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Book Review *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery. Eric Metaxas, (New York: Harper One, 2008)*



Famous for his subsequent biographies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2011) and Martin Luther (2017), Eric Metaxas' first biography focused on William Wilberforce – the 18th century British politician and philanthropist who played a key role in abolishing slavery.

Wilberforce was born in 1759 in Hull, East Yorkshire, into a wealthy merchant family. Shortly after his father died, his mother, Elizabeth, sent the 9-year old Wilberforce to live in London with his father's brother (another William) who had married Hannah Thornton. Hannah came from a wealthy family, her father (John Thornton) being a director of the Bank of England and a member of Parliament.



The childless William and Hannah were deeply spiritual people. They were close friends of George Whitefield, the famous preacher who, although ostracised by mainline Anglicans, helped prompt the First Great Awakening—the spiritual revival which swept 18th century Britain and the American colonies. William and Hannah were also close to John Newton, a former slave-ship captain who became an evangelical Anglican clergyman. Newton is famous for authoring the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Newton was a regular visitor to the home of William and Hannah, often undertaking 'parlour preaching'; through these visits the young Wilberforce grew to revere Newton (p 11).

However, being mainline Anglicans, Wilberforce's grandfather and mother were disturbed by the influence of non-conformist evangelicals upon young Wilberforce. At 12, Wilberforce was promptly recalled to Hull to continue his schooling. At 17, he entered Cambridge University. By then, his religious interest had waned. Instead, he joined in the worldly pursuits available to a young, clever, well-to-do gentleman living in privileged circumstances.

Wilberforce subsequently graduated from Cambridge. In 1780, he became a member of Parliament. However, in 1784-5 he experienced a turning point. Metaxas describes this period in a chapter titled 'The Great Change'. The change began during an extended tour of Europe when Wilberforce was accompanied by his friend, Isaac Milner. A brilliant Cambridge philosopher, mathematician, and clergyman, Milner was later appointed Lucasian Professor of Mathematics (other incumbents include Isaac Newton in the 17th century and Stephen Hawking in the 20th century). Milner and his brother, Joseph, also gained fame subsequently for their seven volume *Ecclesiastical History of the Church of Christ* (1818).

Wilberforce's conversations with Milner during the European tour played a key role in re-igniting Wilberforce's interest in the Gospel. Then a visit with John Newton—whom he had not seen for twelve years—helped restore his faith. Wilberforce's life change was reflected in his new attitudes towards money, time, and politics (Chapter 5).

The rest of Metaxas' book describes the impact of Wilberforce's renewed faith upon his political career and family life. Specifically, Wilberforce sought to reform 18th century British society—described as 'brutal, decadent, violent, and vulgar' (p 77). At that time, slavery was common. Crowds enjoyed witnessing public hangings. They engaged in the bloody sport of bull-baiting where dogs—called bulldogs—were trained to

taunt and kill an enraged bull (p 84). Prostitution was rife: it was estimated that around 25% of 'all unmarried women in London were prostitutes' (p 85).

In this milieu, Wilberforce and a circle of religious friends emerged as social reformers. Active between 1780s–1840s, the group became known as the Clapham Circle because members lived around Clapham in southwest London. Relatively few in number and including Methodists and evangelical Anglicans, the Clapham Circle had a disproportionate impact on society. Clapham members eventually founded or were affiliated with the British & Foreign Bible Society, Church Missionary Society, Anti-Slavery Society, and Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (now RSPCA).

Wilberforce's greatest contribution arguably was spearheading the anti-slavery movement. He used his money and political status to campaign for abolition. His devout compatriots included Charles Middleton, later First Lord of the Admiralty, and Josiah Wedgwood, the famous pottery-maker. With the support of his Cambridge friend, prime minister William Pitt (the Younger), Wilberforce introduced a bill in 1789 to abolish Britain's participation in the slave trade. However, due to persistent opposition from entrenched interests, the bill only became law in 1807. The actual abolition of slavery took much longer. It was not until August 1833 that the Slavery Abolition Act was passed. Counting from 1789, it took 44 years to outlaw slavery in Britain. Meanwhile, Wilberforce had died in July 1833, aged 73, leaving his wife, Barbara, and several children.

Metaxas' biography provides a readable account of not only Wilberforce but the social and political environment of 18th and 19th century Britain. While some may quibble with elements of Metaxas' telling of the story, it's clear that Wilberforce's ultimately successful campaign to abolish slavery marked a turning point in history.

Prior to 1833, slavery in various forms had been accepted for millennia in virtually every culture. Today, slavery still exists. (Currently between 20-40 million people are estimated to be in involuntary bondage, including sex trafficking and child labour.) The key difference is that virtually everyone today views slavery as inhumane.

For this change in public opinion, we should thank Wilberforce and his circle of friends. ♦

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International Letter

A Living Hope

“Hope comes through Jesus and it turns up in the most unexpected places”

Many Christians who find themselves living in an increasingly secular world look to 1 Peter for a model on how to be faithful in a society that does not support their faith. Peter addresses his letter to those who feel like aliens and outcasts in their own neighbourhood. He addresses the issue of how we survive when many around us are hostile to Christianity.

One important piece of his response is hope. Four times in this letter Peter mentions ‘hope.’ He talks about how through Jesus we have a ‘living hope’ (1:3). As a result he urges his readers to ‘fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you’ (1:13). He reminds all Christians that our ‘faith and hope are in God’ (1:21). With that in place, he challenges those who live as aliens in their own society to ‘give an account for the hope that is in you’ (3:15).



A theological education pathway for Churches of Christ around the world.



In February-March 2019, my wife, Sally, and I completed a 22-day visit to Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia. Our purpose was to share the vision of Global Christian Studies (GCS). GCS offers a pathway for church leaders outside of the US to pursue a master's degree in Bible from an accredited university associated with non-denominational Churches of Christ. By gaining an advanced degree while studying with fellow Christians, GCS aims to help prepare the next generation of leaders to reach our secular world.

Yet, something happened to us on this journey that went beyond our sharing about GCS. We expected to give to others, but we found others giving to us. Peter's lines about hope summarised what we saw, how we grew, and what we appreciated. We experienced a network of people who rely on their ‘living hope.’ Repeatedly we witnessed delightful men and women with a hope fixed on grace. Their lives of faith and hope were built on God. In every place, we saw evidence of Christian people going on the record for the hope within them.

Such hope is contagious. At each stop, we encountered wonderful Christian people who have not given up, who have not quit, who have not assimilated into the local culture, who resolutely claim Jesus as their living hope. Out of our own culture and far away from our own family, our own hopes were rekindled and strengthened over the meals we shared, the hospitality we enjoyed, the deep discussions we joined, and even the recreational endeavours we engaged in.

We were reminded that hope does not depend on multi-staff churches, living in the US Bible belt, or being part of megachurches. Hope comes through Jesus and it turns up in the most unexpected places. We found it in a small restaurant ‘Then Sings My Soul’ in Singapore's Chinatown, in the lively revival singing at a Kuala Lumpur church, in the thoughtful spiritual discussions at a Melbourne weekend church camp, and in the smile of a young professional recently baptised into Christ in Sydney. I think we went with small bag of hope packed in our suitcase, but we came home with a trunk full of this rich spiritual quality.

My wife, Sally, put it this way: ‘As we spent time with Christians in Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia, I thought of Paul's words to the church at Philippi, and realised we too were “partners in the Gospel.” Several mentioned that we had encouraged and blessed them by coming and teaching, but I quickly realised it was the other way around. We are the ones who came, and left encouraged by the faithfulness of our brothers and sisters on the other side of the world.’

People who are filled with hope have magnetism. We felt pulled toward these Christians because of their experiences with God and their walk with the Lord. Whether they were generously sharing a meal with us or offering a room in their home, we felt the pull. Whether they were telling the story of how they came to Christ or sharing about a person they sought to influence for Jesus, we felt the pull.

I spoke nineteen times to people from about twenty different congregations. Sally spoke to three classes of women. Here's our report: *We found people filled with the living hope.* ♦

Harold Shank was a longtime preacher, Bible professor, and president of a Christian university. In his retirement he helps direct GCS (www.gcspathway.org). Harold and Sally are members of Memorial Road Church of Christ in Oklahoma City, USA, where he serves as an elder. drharoldshank@gmail.com

News cont. Bankstown Family Seminar, NSW

The Bankstown Family Seminar, held on the 29 September 2019 in Campbelltown, NSW, was a joint effort of the Bankstown, Southwest, and Windang congregations. Lessons were presented by David Payne and Michael Bargholz. Around 76+ people attended including visitors from the community. David Payne spoke about establishing and maintaining a godly marriage. Some of his key points included: marriage is a momentary existence in the context of eternity; marriage points to God being united with man; our goal whether married or single is undivided devotion to God; the point of marriage is to put the Gospel on display and we must establish and work on a mission in our marriages. Michael Bargholz spoke about raising godly children, explaining that ‘instead of thinking in terms of raising godly children, it may be better to think of raising children godly.’ We also need to make time to talk to our children about everything! It's also useful to create a network of Christian parents to share ideas with one another. Finally, the participants were reminded to always keep God at the forefront and seek first his kingdom. ♦



Interview

Frank Cunningham

Please share your life story and your journey towards Christ.

I was born in England of Irish Catholic parents. Their marriage didn't succeed and they separated. At four, I was placed in a boy's home. Mum came most Sundays and took me to Sunday school and church, where I gained a belief in God. When I was 11, Mum came and told me she was moving to Australia but couldn't take me with her. As you can imagine this was upsetting to me at such a young age. I prayed hard for God to stop her from leaving for Australia. He didn't – she left. From then on, I believed God didn't care about me and I told God I didn't want anything to do with him. Instead of going to church I would hide or go to the park. I was moved to a foster home when I was 12. This wasn't the happiest time and it convinced me even more that God really didn't care about me.

I moved into a bedsitter at 17, lived alone, and spent most of my time working, partying, and playing soccer. Paid on Thursday, broke on Monday. God was not in the picture at all. I met a girl at a pub who became my wife. We migrated to Australia in 1973. We found Australia much like England, and we spent our time working and partying.

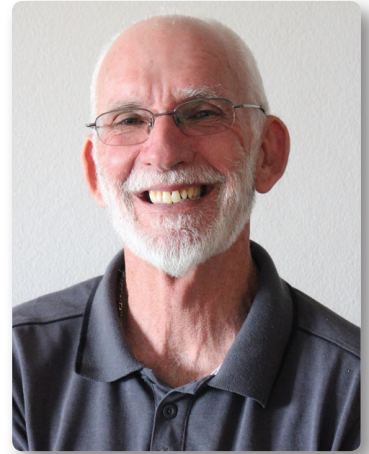
Eventually we had two beautiful girls: Stacy and Emma. I decided it was time to become responsible – the partying had to stop. I was able to change but unfortunately my wife wasn't able to. She went into rehab in 1983 and received the help she needed. She's still sober today! After rehab she searched for God, going to a number of different churches. In her search she met Sheila Hartman at our local neighbourhood group. Sheila invited her to a Bible study and worship with the Southwest Church of Christ.

My wife and girls enjoyed the church group and began attending services. I was invited to go but I wanted nothing to do with it: 'once a Catholic always a Catholic'. But my family's interest in the church stirred something in me and I started going to the local Catholic Church. My wife was baptised in 1985 and I was asked what I thought about it. My response was 'ok for her, not for me'.

I soon learned that the Southwest church people were normal, everyday folks, and I started coming to activities and worship services. Then at a church family camp I was moved to ask someone to help me understand the Bible. Dale Hartman invited me to a Bible study which helped me understand the Bible, Jesus, salvation and, most importantly, that God did care about me. I was baptised in March 1987 – a great day. My life's journey has been rocky but with God's patience, guidance, and the love of Southwest, I'm standing firm today.

You served many years working as the full-time minister at Southwest. What were some of the challenges after the US team returned home? What have been some memorable moments in the work there?

The challenges were numerous. Losing strong, influential Christians such as the Hartmans left big holes to fill. Keeping the congregation encouraged and together was another big one. Being outwardly focussed – rather than on what we had lost – was another. Memorable moments: the joy on the faces of those baptised! Seeing babies grow up to adults, baptised,



and remaining faithful. The youth and young adult camp we started in 2002 is still going strong 17 years later. Our paved footpath at the building was stolen overnight – that was memorable!

In more recent years, you have reconnected with your family in Ireland. How has this impacted your life?

As I said earlier, Mum left for Australia in 1963, when I was 11. In 1991, I found Mum again in Sydney. We spent the next 20 years trying to reconnect. In 2011 Mum died. However, I was aware of one sister that she had. Through God's help I was able to contact her. I then received a letter from a cousin in Ireland who wrote and told me about my family. In 2012, I took Mum's ashes back to her family home in Ireland. The impact on me has been incredible. From a boy's home, not knowing any family or family history and feeling unconnected most of my life, I now feel very much connected. I feel I belong. I'm more grounded and confident than I have ever been. Praise God.

You've supervised many HIM (Helpers in Missions) workers over the years. How do these programs help congregations and what advice would you give to a congregation considering such a program?

From my experience, HIM workers help congregations by bringing energy and fresh ideas. They encourage younger and older Christians and are great examples of getting involved in church work and community outreach. The main advice I would give is: remember they're 'helpers' in missions. They're not here to do all the work! Give them a structure to work with but allow them to express their own ideas, try new things and, importantly, remember what they've sacrificed to come and help your congregation.

Reflecting back on the many trials in your life, are there any important lessons learned that can encourage Christians on their spiritual journey?

There are two things. Hebrews 12:2 encourages us to 'fix your eyes on Jesus...'. Taking my eyes off Jesus when trials come is when I get into trouble. Jesus is our best example when trials come: Jesus did not look at the obstacle but the goal. We ought to do the same. And when we do fail, remember 2 Timothy 2:13. '...If we are faithless, he will remain faithful...'. Our God is always ready to forgive and welcome us back. ◇

Frank Cunningham was interviewed by Jenny Ancell. stand_firm@hotmail.com