

# InterSections

An Australian journal for Christian encounter and encouragement



## Editorial

Many churches in Australia are small. The smallest ones can meet in a house and some do. When we make comparisons with larger churches in the United States, we can sometimes see ourselves as inferior and characterise the work here as struggling to survive.

When we look at the earliest churches, however, it's a very different story. The very first church in Jerusalem was numerically large, but they 'broke bread in their homes' (Acts 2:46). During his missionary journeys, the apostle Paul would typically begin to teach in a synagogue, but when religious leaders opposed him, he would either go to the house of a believer (eg. Acts 18:7; 20:20) or he would rent a suitable meeting place (eg. Acts 19:9). We know from Paul's letters that there were house churches in Rome (Romans 16:5) and in Asia (modern Turkey) – such as those meeting in the homes of Priscilla and Aquila (1Corinthians 16:19), Nympha (Colossians 4:15) and Philemon (Philemon 1:2). So it seems from early church history that house churches were common!

Today many live under the modern belief that bigger must be better and that this applies to churches. Granted, larger congregations do have advantages, particularly through their financial resources (although contributions in many medium-sized churches can be soaked up by loan repayments or maintenance costs on their buildings). Smaller congregations, on the other hand, have the advantage of greater intimacy, especially those that meet in homes. They can also be more inviting to non-Christians.

The point we want to make is that while church size is optional, small churches shouldn't be regarded as inferior. Church plantings almost always have small beginnings. There's also evidence that they can grow faster than many larger churches. Sure, some of our smaller churches may need to renew their approach from an attitude of 'hanging on' to one of outreach. Conversely, our larger churches should also accept some responsibility for supporting and encouraging nearby smaller churches. In this way, all churches – smaller and larger – can do their best to expand God's kingdom. Our banner photograph was taken by Rowan Bestmann. We hope you enjoy this issue. ■



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## Feature

### Is bigger better?



A common growth goal for a church in any part of the world is to replicate the first church described in Acts 2:41 with an instantaneous 3,000 converts. Our culture reinforces that message: bigger is better. Others assert that bigger churches have many advantages over smaller churches: greater resources, greater community profile, and greater impact in the community through various programs. And, of course, a bigger church means more people being saved.

#### But how do we define 'big'? And how do we measure growth?

I'd like to suggest that, for non-denominational Churches of Christ in Australia, the most effective way to become bigger is to plan on becoming smaller. Let me explain why.

Firstly, Australian churches are generally smaller. According to the Australian National Church Life



Survey (NCLS) 2001, the average congregation size across all denominations and regions is 60-70 people.<sup>1</sup> This is still double the average of our churches – which is around 28.<sup>2</sup> The NCLS average is also considerably lower than comparable figures from the United States.

Although I now live and minister with a 100+ member congregation in upstate New York in the US, I spent the first 18 years of my life in Tasmania in a church that was usually closer to 25 members than 50. From my childhood, I understand the drive to grow a church bigger. But at the time, I didn't recognise the strengths of smaller churches: intimacy, authenticity, accountability, genuine care and relationships, and more room for personal growth. As our society becomes increasingly isolated, the relational strengths of small churches become increasingly valuable. In fact, big churches spend a lot of energy finding ways to create and maintain smaller groups.

Secondly, in Australia there's the tyranny of distance. Churches of Christ, quite rightly, distinguish ourselves from other churches on certain doctrines. As a consequence, many of our members drive considerable distances to meet for worship and fellowship, eschewing other churches nearby. While this commitment is admirable, this distance makes local evangelism difficult. Churches often struggle to impact local communities because few, if any, members live in the actual suburb where the church meets – which makes it difficult to establish relationships.

Our members frequently have most of their relationships in the neighbourhoods in which they live and work, but find it difficult to bridge the distance and connect these people with the congregation which meets 30 minutes drive away. I strongly believe that Christian love opens the door to God's truth (John 13:34-35). If we can't consistently engage our local neighbourhoods and build relationships and credibility with individuals, we'll find very few opportunities to share God's truth with a receptive audience.

The tyranny of distance isn't unique to Australia or to small churches. Willow Creek is a community church in suburban Chicago with around 24,000 attendees each week. In 1995 about 33% of the congregation drove 30 minutes or more to worship together. Through research and surveys 'they learned that these people were not inviting their unchurched neighbors and friends to services.'<sup>3</sup> Anecdotally, their primary dilemma seems to be this: 'How do I invite my unchurched neighbour to drive 20-30 minutes to participate in a church event? How do I explain that the 50 churches we'll pass on the way aren't equivalent alternatives?' For us, the comparable question is: 'Do I really want my first spiritual

conversation with this person to involve the doctrines of denominationalism, infant baptism, weekly Lord's Supper and instruments in worship, when this person just needs people to take an interest in her life and love her as a person?'

Thirdly, my impression of church planting in Australia is that we generally use a compass approach to evangelism. If there's a congregation on the north, east, south and west, then we feel that the city is pretty well covered. But is it? In our larger cities, that might result in one congregation trying to share the Gospel with a region containing 200,000+ people. That's an unrealistic goal.

What if, instead of planting one church in a quadrant of the city, we have a goal of planting three? What if, instead of trying to grow one congregation of 100+ members, we aim to plant three churches of 30? Wouldn't this allow these churches to better connect with the local community? Wouldn't this reduce the likelihood that members live more than 30 minutes from the meeting place? Wouldn't this make it easier to connect friends and neighbours with the church? Wouldn't this make it more likely that one of these congregations would attain above average membership?

I believe we need to set our vision higher than 'one church per 200,000 population is better than nothing'. We need a vision for more churches everywhere, meeting in locations just 10-15 minutes away. We should recognise suburbs where we have a cluster of members and consider planting a congregation there. I believe that two smaller churches encouraging each other with the same goals can have a greater impact in the Australian context than one larger church trying to cover the same area. Perhaps we can define 'big' and measure 'growth' by the number of congregations, not just the size of each congregation.

Finally, a fourth benefit I wish to highlight is that if we can make intentional church planting part of our DNA, the kingdom of God will become bigger. Congregations have a life cycle and research has found that younger (typically smaller) churches generally grow faster than more established congregations.<sup>4</sup> Although church planting is a difficult task, members of new churches tend to have a stronger sense of mission and greater enthusiasm for that mission.

In all the above, I don't wish to imply that planting churches and sharing the Gospel is a simple task. It isn't. Neither am I saying that there aren't any benefits at all in having bigger congregations. I also recognise that this 'small church model' raises many other questions. But I do want to encourage us to re-evaluate the common view that a bigger congregation is always a better congregation. In this way, we can reconsider our vision for church planting in Australia. ■

1 <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=131> (visited August, 2011)

2 See the 2010 survey of non-denominational Churches of Christ in Australia, available from [www.klesisinstitute.com](http://www.klesisinstitute.com)

3 Hawkins, Parkinson & Arnson, *REVEAL Where You Are*, (2007), 21.

4 NCLS, *Build My Church*. (1999), 84.

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# Letter from America



*Delightful times were shared around the kitchen table. And if we travelled so far that we couldn't return that night somehow or other they could always find a place in the house to stay.*

## The Church 'in the House'

Recently I have begun to notice several articles and studies about a current trend among young adults in America of student age. It appears that more and more in this group have no desire to invest in membership or have a direct connection with organized communal groups in the places where they live. Instead, they prefer informal networks and loose affiliations. Often the internet is the vehicle of choice for this kind of interchange. They are interested in spiritual issues but wish to sample them from a non-committed distance.

This poses a major challenge to the local church. I look in my Bible at 1 Corinthians 12. I lose track of how many times it speaks about believers as members of the one body: the assembly or church (at Corinth). It even says in 1 Corinthians 12:26, 'If one member suffers all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.' Paul's whole use of the image of the body in his letters signals that we are part of a vital family. We do not have to go much deeper into this teaching to find Christ is the head of the body. We connect with him by being part of the body. Thus it is clear that life in the body is a *sine qua non* for the believer. To sit back and prefer to be unaffiliated with a loving community that honours Christ is indeed disturbing – even if it met in a house as most of the early Christians did in the ancient world.

Growing up in Australia one of the joys in being part of what we called in those days 'the brotherhood' was to travel and visit members of the body of Christ in other places. These believers, often a good distance away, had as much an impact on my life as members of my own natural family. Delightful times were shared around the kitchen table. And if we travelled so far that we couldn't return that night somehow or other they could always find a place in the house to stay.

This is why it was a little bit disturbing to me to note a point made by Benny Tabalujan in the May/June *InterSections*. Addressing the problem of the leadership crisis in non-denominational churches of Christ in Australia, he drew attention to a disturbing statistic. It is clear that in the past decades the number of congregations has 'flat lined.' New congregations are not starting in significant numbers.

Like America, Australia is a fast-paced society. People are in a regular process of transition. In short, we move around a lot. In New Testament times they did too. When this happened in the Greco-Roman world Christians established a church in their house (1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). Where are the new churches in the house today? How many are in the process of being established as new communities sprout up around our cities? And we should not forget the vast lonely distances

of rural Australia where isolated believers cry out for some presence of Christians who embody the truth of the Gospel.

Sometimes it is the case that we genuinely struggle with issues such as whether we have the gifts to be able to sustain a church in our house. But I suggest that usually other factors are at work. A major problem, especially with young adults who have the energy to make things happen, is that they are succumbing to the ethos of the age. They do not wish to be involved. For Paul the church was far too important to go down that road.

One thing more. Besides a reluctance to affiliate with others there may be another reason why so few among us are establishing a church 'in the house.' In both America and Australia the influence of evangelicals is ubiquitous. This widespread movement presumes that acceptance of the lordship of Christ automatically transfers one into a universal spiritual community. To have some kind of personal and spiritual relationship with Christ is the important thing. Participation in the life of a local assembly is a personal preference.

In recent days evangelicals have begun to weave this theological position into several new movements. They talk about 'the emerging church.' These people seek to make Christian symbols applicable to the contemporary generation shaped by postmodernism. A somewhat similar perspective called 'the missional church' features a turning away from concern for maintaining the machinery of traditional church life in favour of total focus on mission to the outsider as the *raison d'être* of the church.

These function as renewal movements. Frequently one may find such people gather in neutral places with friends. Through engagement in such things as discussions about arts or politics people in such movements seek to draw others into consideration of a Christian worldview. Only with the most generous reading of the biblical perspective could they be called church.

At the end of the day you cannot have the spiritual version of Christianity without an actual visible working Christian community. Often the church in the house appears to lack various accoutrements or trappings of power so dear to the heart of modernity. But it does have one thing: the words of eternal life incarnated in the souls of real people. This old world has seen many things come and go. That expression of the Gospel will never suffer a loss of attraction. ■



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*There has always been a strong sense of truly belonging to the family of God. We have helped and supported each other through good and difficult times.*

The Bairnsdale Church of Christ was first established in the early 1970s when Colin & Dorothy Pill and their family came to settle in Bairnsdale, followed by David & Gloria Hanley and their three children. The Wickham family arrived approximately eighteen months later. The Pill family moved on and John & Judy Wall took their place around 1982. After the Hanley family left, Terry & Melissa Hoehn, an American family, arrived. Since that time there has always been a small group of two or three families. Sometimes when a family moved on there was a huge impact on the congregation, but the Lord always sent another family to add to our number.

My family has now been here just over thirty years. Although our five children have moved on and are active members in other congregations throughout Australia, we still remain constant and strong with eleven members in our small congregation today. This includes Mrs Dow, a long-standing Christian, Rod & Barbara Poynton and family, Barbara's mother Lois Thomson, Mrs Greta Perry, Ms Jenny Smith and John & me. Most Sundays we have two visiting members from Sale (70km away) boosting our number. At times Graeme & Carol Offer also visit from Traralgon (120km away).

Over the years we have endeavoured to involve the community by holding missions with visiting preachers, tracting the inner and outer regions around Bairnsdale and advertising in the local newspaper. Through advertising, the Lord has blessed us and added to our number.

### **What are the benefits of belonging to a smaller congregation?**

There has always been a strong sense of truly belonging to the family of God. We have helped and supported each other through good and difficult times. When we first arrived in Bairnsdale we had not long been Christians. We learnt so much from the other members, especially the Wickham and Hanley families. It's because of their dedication and patience in teaching God's Word that we remain faithful today.

The men have a great responsibility in the congregation and have each taken turns at preaching and leading Bible studies. This has helped to give them many opportunities to expand and improve their knowledge and presentation skills. We were also blessed with having wonderful,

knowledgeable and inspirational preachers like Bob Wickham and Ron Graham. The young men were encouraged to prepare and present lessons and this wasn't so daunting with a small group.

At Bible study every member is there. We need each other. As Christian parents, one of the major responsibilities is to equip our children with the full armour of God. My children recall how wonderful the Bible studies were as they were all able to ask questions and have an input to discussions and it didn't matter how young they were.

On the first day of the week there was strong competition between the boys and girls to remember and recite the many Bible verses they were asked to learn. Each week a new verse was given and I still remember many of them to this day. When it came time for all the children to leave the nest, they were well prepared and strong in their faith in the Lord to face the many challenges of a worldly environment.

One could say that the children did not have the opportunity to mix with others their own age from Christian families. This was compensated by going to different church camps each year. Apart from the wonderful lessons given to feed our souls, many friendships were formed that continue to this day. We adults also enjoyed meeting other Christians from many congregations around Australia and other countries.



Bairnsdale Church

One of the greatest benefits of being in a small country congregation is being able to show hospitality to the many visitors who come to Bairnsdale. We often have families and groups of young people from Melbourne who stay over.

We are in the enviable position of being three hours from Melbourne, two hours from the snow at Mount Hotham and twenty minutes from Lakes Entrance, the Ninety Mile Beach and the Gippsland Lakes. This makes Bairnsdale a great stopping off place for those travelling to Sydney and beyond or to come for a holiday. This gives us a wonderful opportunity to form strong bonds through our faith in the Lord Jesus. Often there are more visitors than the local congregation. Of course, when family members visit, we double in number.

Are we blessed? Indeed we truly are. Yes, we are a small group. Although families continue to come and go, we remain strong and faithful and God continues to watch over and guide us in all truth and add to our number. So please come for a visit – you will be most welcome. ■

*Judy Wall is a member of the Bairnsdale church in Victoria. This article is written with input from Dorothy Pill, Gloria Hanley and Rod Poynton. [jwall@wideband.net.au](mailto:jwall@wideband.net.au)*



# Food for Thought



## House churches as places to live out the gospel

In response to Jesus' accurate (and probably embarrassing) portrayal of her private life, the Samaritan woman in John 4:20 seeks Jesus' opinion on a long-running dispute between Jews and Samaritans. This dispute is essentially around the question, 'Where is the right place to worship?'

The concepts of 'worship', 'assembly', 'sacred place' and 'ritual' have been closely related amongst God's people since the time that the Tabernacle was constructed during Israel's wilderness wanderings. Our language of 'worship service' today, referring to our assemblies of God's people on the first day of the week, seems to hark back to that ancient concept of a sacred time, place and ritual. The outward dressings may have changed, but the concept remains largely the same.

Jesus uses his reply to her question to indicate that with him and through him the nature of worship itself was changing – no longer tied to sacred time and place and physical things. He said, 'The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him' (John 4:23).

I believe Jesus was *not* saying that 'true worship' was going to move out of the Temple with its ritual and sacrifices into the Sunday assembly of Christians (with all that that implies, including getting everything about the 'worship service' just right – according to pattern – in order to be pleasing to God). I think Jesus was saying that the very nature of worship itself was changing – from the shadow of the Old Testament to fulfilment in Jesus Christ: from type to truth (John 1:17); from physical ritual (animal sacrifice, incense, musical instruments of praise, priestly mediation, etc.) to being in accordance with the very nature of God (John 4:24).

What has all this got to do with the concept of a 'house church'? It's important to point out that the concept of a house church is about far more than just a change of venue from a church building or rented hall into the home. If that's all it is, then it's likely that what we do in the home will look just like what we do in the church building and we would have missed an opportunity to more closely be like the New Testament church.

Being a house church is an opportunity to re-think the whole modern concept of church itself. This necessarily includes what we might do on a Sunday morning, but also includes how we live our lives in relation to one another day by day. We re-think our understanding of church by re-thinking our understanding of worship. This necessitates asking ourselves the question (always a good one to ask), 'What's the Gospel?' and the related question, 'What's God's plan of salvation?'

From the very beginning of the outworking of God's plan of salvation, God's intent was to create a people for

himself, a family springing from Abraham (Genesis 12:3) and encompassing people from all nations on earth (Romans 4:9-17). Thus the good news that this was accomplished through Jesus' death and resurrection points to the saving of individuals (and then giving them the church as something to help them along in their individual relationships with God). It also points to the saving of a people, and with them, 'the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay' (Romans 8:18-25).

It's clear both from the record in Acts, as well as the various letters by early Christian leaders, that those who responded to the Gospel joined the new covenant community. They met in both public areas (e.g. the Jewish temple at Jerusalem: Acts 2:46) as well as from house to house (Acts 2:46; Acts 8:3; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). The concept of 'from house to house' encompassed more than just the Sunday assembly – it was about communal life together as the one people of God: eating together (Acts 2:46, 20:7-11), praying together (Acts 12:12), learning together (Acts 20:20).

This is why it was such a big deal for Peter, a Jew, to enter the house of Cornelius, a Gentile (Acts 10) to share with him the good news about Jesus, the Lord of all, not just of the Jews. This is why the withdrawal of table fellowship on the basis of ethnic divide was described by Paul in such stark terms as 'not in line with the truth of the Gospel' (Galatians 2:11-14). This is why it was such a serious issue for the Corinthian brethren to not wait for each other to eat when coming together as a church (1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

In fact, when we consider the 'one another' passages scattered throughout the New Testament, it is clear that they are intended to be fulfilled not so much in a formal Sunday assembly but in life lived together. This will better demonstrate our love for one another to the world. One of the primary ways we can do this is to open up our homes to one another, as we spend time together studying the apostle's teaching, fellowshiping, breaking bread and praying, whether that be on Sunday or on any other day throughout the week.

When the Gospel so changes lives that those who would not normally get along with one another (due to differences in race, social position, etc) are able to sit and eat at the same table as family, then God's wisdom to redeem all in Christ is made clear to the 'rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 4:10). House churches are the ideal venue to live out the Gospel in this way. ■

*Gabriel Hauber helped plant the Sunshine Coast church as a house church almost two years ago. [gabriel@hauber-family.net](mailto:gabriel@hauber-family.net)*



## Macquarie School of Biblical Studies (MSOBS) Lectureship



The theme of the MSOBS Lectureship in July 2011 was 'Fingerprints of God'. The lectures presented spiritual realities where God's 'fingerprints' are found – from the glories in the heavens to the saints shining as lights in today's darkened world. Speakers included Dale & Sheila Hartman, Les Totman, Ron Bainbridge, Bob Marks, Graham Wall, David Carr, Roy Courtney, Karen Giles, Yvonne Rossiter, Sharon Kelly, Marvin & Jenny Ancell, Lesley Christensen and me.

This annual event spiritually enriches those who attend, providing an uplifting time of edification, encouragement and fellowship. This is why I try to get my family there every year. The range of speakers and other attendees also offers some 'sharpening' time (Prov 27:17), so crucial for spiritual growth, as brothers and sisters are challenged and spurred

on to love and good deeds. One summed it up very well when he told me that he had missed last year's lectureship, and being there this year caused him to realise how much he had missed. 'The variety of speakers and topics – it's just so encouraging.'

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## Mission Moree 2011

Mission Moree (MM) 2011 involved Christians from QLD, NSW and overseas travelling to Moree, in far western NSW, to engage with aboriginal children in activities designed to educate spiritually and physically. Most importantly, it was about the development of one-on-one relationships between children in need and individual members of the team. The group lived the very best and worst of outback Australia. We experienced hospitality, encouragement and a sense of unified purpose with the local community. We also saw the results of generations of misunderstanding and outright hatred.

Our team of fifty people was diverse: a youth group joining us from Tauranga, New Zealand, ably lead by Nick LaSpina; a US Harding University group organised by Todd and Debbie Gentry; and the balance of the team being Aussies from Queensland and New South Wales. MM had a secondary aim of providing leadership training and evangelistic experience for young people. Some of our team were looking for adventure and personal growth with a desire to see, experience and discover their faith in new and meaningful ways.

Our daytime program of activities involved a series of Bible skits and singing, art, crafts and sports. On the night of our arrival, Paul and Erin Straughn, who run the aboriginal Drop-In centre in Moree, gave us a comprehensive brief of the town and the children we would be encountering. Each evening, diverse activities took place such as an open-mike night and hip hop concert, a trip out to hot mineral springs to soak and watch the sun go down, and a farm visit & traditional outback meal. Our group lived the scriptural principle that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We worked with groups of children as large as fifty-five and were able to meet parents as well.

There appears to be growing support for this type of ministry. The Brisbane based organising team will be carefully and prayerfully thinking through how the overall philosophy & service program in this context can grow and develop over time. This will involve establishing new events, follow up activity and looking for other effective ways to serve other remote communities with a similar context. The Lord's bountiful provision for this trip was an inspiration to everyone involved. We offer our sincere thanks for your love, prayers and support of Mission Moree.

*Brad Johnson is a member of the Cleveland church in Brisbane. bradjohnson@tpg.com.au*

## Calling all Marriage Celebrants ...

There are brethren scattered around who are registered marriage celebrants. But because God's people have no earthly headquarters, the government puts us into a category marked 'others' – a soup containing all sorts of religious types. We're called NARCs - Non-Affiliated Religious Celebrants. We're expected to fulfil the same requirements as professional civil celebrants, requirements from which denominational celebrants are exempt. I can understand why the government has had to deal with us this way, but I believe there is a good case to be made that this imposes an unfair distinction upon us.

I'd like to round up all brethren who are marriage celebrants to see if they would be willing to band together to lodge a submission with the Attorney-General's Department regarding 'Obligatory Professional Development'. The aim of this is to seek an exemption from this training. Other religious celebrants, for example those associated with Baptists, are already exempt.

Barry Hume and others in Tasmania have already put forward a submission through a Federal MP. But apparently this hasn't gone anywhere. It seems we need to mount a larger-scale campaign of similar (or joint) submissions, right across Australia, to make headway on this issue. So if you're a marriage celebrant and are interested to discuss this further, please contact me.

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## Acapella Singing Workshops

In June, San Francisco song director, John Wiegand, led two Acapella Singing Workshops at both the Cairns church in North Queensland and the Coffs Coast church in northern NSW. The inspiring three-day workshops provided opportunities for brethren to improve their singing harmony and enable song leaders to lead more confidently. The sessions included the learning of new hymns in both a relaxed and joyful atmosphere as well as the more serious contemplation of a deeper worship experience. Participants were led to reflect on the soul's thirst for communion with God in Psalm 42 as well as the holiness of the worship experience conveyed in Isaiah 6.

Thirty seven participants attended the Cairns workshop.

Both events generated interest from brethren in the North Queensland region and locals from the Coffs Harbour community. A booth set up in Coffs town plaza enabled brethren to sing praises to the community as well as invite interested people to the workshop. Thirty six people attended the Sunday worship at the Coffs Coast congregation. *'And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.'* Psalm 40:3.



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## Interview

### with Rowan & Shannon Bestmann

*We're both well aware we are 'works-in-progress'. We want to be fully convinced and act by faith....*

*Family friends as children, Rowan and Shannon (nee Collingwood) married in 2009. With similar backgrounds within the church, both knew their calling in God, but it was only after years of solo travelling and deep soul searching that they found their calling together. Their journey has been and continues to be anything but ordinary. We pick up their story in 2008.*

#### **Shannon, what had you been doing before you re-connected with Rowan?**

I had trained in Melbourne as an occupational therapist and worked there for two years before leaving to travel in Africa and then move back to my home state, Queensland. My home church in Maryborough had supported a church in Zambia for more than a decade and I had long wanted to visit the country. I also spent time in Botswana, visiting friends and working with a church there. It became evident to me, particularly in Zambia, that God is very much at the core of their lives. The people are passionate and truly trust God in every aspect of life. Brethren there openly repent and are restored to congregations and they are so willing to give, despite their poverty. These were good lessons for me. I came home to Australia more appreciative of my life, returned to work and began meeting with the Holland Park church in Brisbane.

#### **Rowan, what had you been doing before you re-connected and how did you re-connect with Shannon?**

I had been brought up in a traditional Christian home but had been living away from my parents with others who were not Christians. Over time I formed a critical view of people in Churches of Christ whom I felt were making claims that they had absolute truth and never seemed to acknowledge other perspectives on 'disputable matters'. By my late teens/early 20s, I had left the Christian life, was looking for fulfilment in all the wrong places, struggled with my sexuality and experimented with drugs.

I inwardly hated myself for my sin and hypocrisy, all the while continuing to attend church services.

In 2004, I realised I needed to make some big changes in my life but I could see no way to escape except to leave my life in Australia. That year, I left to live in Thailand and then China. My plan was to be successful in share trading and currency exchange. That did not eventuate. While in China, I started teaching English to people of a variety of ages, mostly children. Their simple vocabulary helped me learn Chinese. I enjoyed this work, but lived a hermit lifestyle and was spiritually isolated.

After three years in Asia, I returned home for several months to spend some time with my family. I was fortunate to be re-employed by the shipping company I'd worked for prior to leaving Australia. I quickly tired of office work but in that time discovered my gift for photography and purchased my first digital SLR – a Canon 400D.

I took the opportunity, being in Australia, to share with my father the fact that I'd been keeping some struggles to myself because I didn't think I'd be understood. I recall we were on Carlo Sand Blow at Rainbow Beach photographing an evening storm headed out to sea. I said that the only way I felt God really spoke to me was through nature. I'm grateful for my father's response, which was instrumental in guiding me back towards a relationship with God.

My father not only apologised for not helping me with my struggles, he turned me from the naturalism I seemed to be heading towards by asking me something I will never forget. He asked: 'God can speak to us through the beauty of nature, but what does he say?' He had made a crucial point. I could only confirm God's way and will through Scripture.

That year I also went to Camp Harmony in Gympie. There I met a grown up Shannon, who interested me. I soon learned, however, that she was already committed to a relationship. I returned to China. Now with a full teaching load, I was earning

about forty times a typical Chinese income and was quickly paying off debts at home.

In 2008, I learned Shannon was no longer in a relationship. We began corresponding and having long phone conversations. Our lives, despite the distance between us, were moulding into one. Eventually, I invited Shannon for a two-week holiday in China. I planned a 16-hour train trip into the centre of China followed by a 7 ½ hour trek up *Huangshan* ('Yellow Mountain') – 15,000 steps! In the incredible beauty of a foggy morning on the mountaintop, I proposed and Shannon accepted.

When Shannon returned to Australia, I stayed on to complete my teaching contracts in China. I also started getting contracts for photography assignments – shooting production facilities for foreign companies that had taken over local factories, menu items for the Hyatt Regency hotel chain, and earthquake damage for the Chinese government. I also was contracted to shoot the International Awards for Liveable Communities (LivCom), which brings together delegates from local governments from around the world. All this international work created a conundrum because I wanted to return to Australia.

### **Shannon, eventually Rowan did return to Australia and revealed marriage plans. What then?**

We continued growing. Rowan was struggling to re-establish his faith – and we both had begun sifting through issues of conscience versus core Christianity. In my free time, I enjoyed listening to instrumentally accompanied songs of faith that inspired and encouraged me but Rowan (like me) had long been taught this practice was wrong. Working through issues like this was confronting but healthy.

**Rowan:** I was also struggling to come to terms with going to church again until I read a book about discerning God's will which helped validate my questioning of some things I had been taught. Together, Shannon and I continue to reason through these things. We're both well aware we are 'works-in-progress'. We want to be fully convinced and act by faith because 'everything that does not come from faith is sin.' (Romans 14:23).

### **Shannon, what has happened since your marriage?**

The early months of our marriage were somewhat unusual. We spent much of our first few months living in a tent in the outback. Circumstances and Rowan's prior work for LivCom led to him landing photography assignments with local councils in Australia and then overseas. Even now, we lead a rather nomadic life, taking on projects far and wide – western Queensland, China, Saudi Arabia... These past two years, we've also been coming to terms with great struggles within my own family. We spend as much time with my mother in Maryborough as work allows and we've become involved with the church there. I'm keenly aware of how blessed I am to have a husband who cares for my family as though they are his own.

**Rowan:** Sometimes I have to complete assignments without Shannon. Six weeks in Saudi Arabia on my own was really hard.

But it was even harder for Shannon when we went back to Saudi Arabia together as she had to deal with the oppressive expectations placed on women there. In such a strict Islamic country, where a permit is required to photograph anything, there were situations in which I could 'legally' be killed for doing my job. Adding difficulty, everything in Saudi Arabia closed five times a day for prayers.

I observed many Saudis to be devoted to their religion but I found it hard to fathom what I see as their rule-bound, fear-driven society. They don't seem to know the freedom of being forgiven and wanting to live righteously out of a grateful heart.

As a photographer, engaging with people from all walks of life, I try to live like a chameleon.

I spent one morning in Saudi Arabia with the most powerful man in the country and that afternoon with a poorly paid, migrant Afghani construction worker.

Sometimes in my work I face moral dilemmas but together Shannon and I are discovering the ways God is calling us to serve and the joy of this. As we re-discover and grow in our faith, we want to be sure we love and serve people first 'so that in every way (we) will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive' (Titus 2:10). ■

*Rowan and Shannon Bestmann were interviewed by Warren Holyoak. warren@klesisinstitute.com*



### **InterSections**

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