

InterSections

An Australian journal for Christian encounter and encouragement



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Editorial

In Australia, as throughout much of the world, there is a great deal of conjecture about the role of women in the church. We do not have to enter this debate to acknowledge that women play a vital role in the kingdom. The articles in this issue illustrate the rich contribution women can make through their own reflections on Scripture and church life, and in their lives of service.

Our articles include a reflection on the life of Elvera Smith, who lived a long and influential life of 'quiet strength in the Lord'. We also carry an interview with Rebecca Wall, a young Christian woman who has begun a fruitful journey in the Lord's service. Daphne Gibbins offers some food for thought in her article about Jesus' interactions with and teachings regarding women. And Jeanette Dyer, a missionary wife, reflects on her experiences of working with her husband, Jerry, in Australia in the 1970s.

We asked Christine Payne to take over as editor for this issue and most of the material has been written by women. Sadly though, this will be the last issue of *InterSections* to benefit from Christine's input as an associate editor. She is stepping down because of family responsibilities, and we agree that this deserves greater priority.

Christine will be greatly missed on the editorial team. We have worked so well together. A reader might have seen Christine's contributions in the quality of each issue. What is not as visible is her individual work that has gone into the editorial process, the late-night teleconferences among us, and the harmonious synergy and fellowship that has made it such a joy for us to work with her. Accordingly, it is only right that we acknowledge, honour and thank Christine for her valuable contribution. We look forward to Christine continuing to contribute to *InterSections* in other ways in future. ■

Warren Holyoak

Churchscope:

The church in Coffs Harbour, NSW

The church in Coffs Harbour has not been here all that long. It was started when Daphne Riccobono moved here with her husband Bo. Not long after this Colin and Judy Bebe began to come up and visit and to check out the situation and it all just started to click together. They both became enthused by what they saw, by the prospects and by the amenities offered. It was a very good place to plant the church anew. They began to plan towards a move to the area.

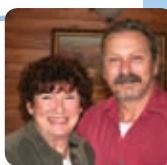
Several other people considered coming as well, but for various reasons none of them were able to do so at that time. It finally turned out that by 2007, Heather Cox, along with Marvin and Jenny Ancell, had joined the team of Colin and Judy Bebe and Daphne and Bo Riccobono. It was all off and running from that point.

After the Ancells and Heather moved up to Coffs Harbour, the work started in full with the first real attempt being to publish a set of small advertisements in the newspaper that asked people to come along to a worship service in member's homes. Those advertisements were based around the idea that this is just a group of people who are

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ChurchScope

The church in Coffs Harbour, NSW



Bo & Daphne 2006

We work as a family and not as individuals here. We share the love of Jesus to all who will let us open it up to them. We go to those who need food, to those who need a shoulder to lean on...

simply Christians, and nothing more. It was made clear that this was not a sectarian group – just a bunch of simple Christians who wanted to worship God in the manner of the first century.

We made it clear that we were eager to start up a worship group for everyone tired of all of the struggles of organised religion. It worked quite well. We soon had three additional family groups who joined us. Some of these stayed for a time, before moving on to Queensland to be near children, and others stayed for a longer time.

By 2009 we were in need of finding a larger facility. We found it at the CWA hall here in Coffs. The cost was right, the location was right, and the facilities were right: you could not have asked for a better situation. We took the offer and have been there ever since. The hall is located right in the CBD. This gave us a located presence and a central shopping exposure.

Since then, special programs have been initiated and pursued. These programs have varied greatly: free movie nights using Christian based movies, a singing workshop, a DVD development project that was to help autistic children and their families, doing community activities to help promote the public profile of the church, and a special archaeological evening where we looked at the question of whether or not Joseph and the Exodus were real people and events.

All of these have helped to put the face of the church before the community. We have also knocked all of the doors in the town three times now, inviting people to come and join us. It has had positive effects. General bible studies, established in Sapphire Beach and in Woolgoolga, have led to baptisms.

The secret to the work here has been to make it as 'family focused' as we can. That means leaving all of the big-business mentality at the office and treating people as family and not as human resource items. This, combined with a very strong Jesus centre in all of our preaching and teaching, has seen the congregation grow numerically, spiritually, and in confidence. We are now at 27 members in attendance on a Sunday morning, plus many visitors. Not bad for three years of work. Visitors are always welcome. Coffs Harbour is a great half-way stop between Sydney and Brisbane.

We work as a family and not as individuals here. We share the love of Jesus to all who will let us open it up to them. We go to those who need food, to those who need a shoulder to lean on: we do not stay behind our castle doors at all. We go out to the people rather than expect them to come in to us. We invite our neighbours in for tea and coffee, for fellowship and for anything else that will open up a door into their world. It is our belief that every member of the congregation must be evangelistic, praying and working towards the growth of the church. ■



Worship at Moonee Beach March '02



Original group at Daphne's Coramba Home March '05



The church meeting currently in the CWA



Two new families joining the work in 2011.

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InterSections

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Reflections

Our life is like
a storybook,
each day is like
a page

We must be
thoughtful
in our deeds
and not in sin
engage

When we start
upon this life
our first page
is a blank

For the beauty
that surrounds us,
our Heavenly Father
we thank

Our childhood days
pass quickly
filled with happiness
and pleasure

As time goes by
and loved ones pass,
these memories
we will treasure

Be positive
in all you do
for strength
turn to the Lord

And set your sights
on heaven
and make it
your reward

Praise God
for all his blessings,
his love shines
everywhere

The way that he
protects us,
we surely know
he cares

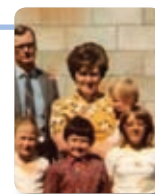
And when this life
is over
and we must take
our rest

Our reward
for all our labours
can be heaven
with the blessed.

Joan Stone

Letter from America

'He was able to supply...'



When we arrived in Sydney on Jerry's 25th birthday, 6 June 1969, we had no idea of the tremendous blessings God had in store for us. We were so young and, at times, scared. But we knew in whom we believed and that he was able to supply every need.

We knew we had a job to do but did not know exactly how to do it. So we went to God in prayer and to his Word for answers. He chose us a team, first Ron and Edna Wallace to get us there, and then Cliff Shepherd and his family to open great opportunities for service to the kingdom.

With one other Christian family in Blacktown, we enrolled our daughter, Jill, in school, rented a place to meet and started printing leaflets to letterbox our vineyard for the Lord. Jerry got his exercise putting them into mailboxes every week all over the area, while I was at home taking care of Jill and our newborn, Dana. Soon, we were joined by Tom Fairley and his family and, for a brief time, the Fullertons. We were blessed to have the Ropers and the Youngs at Macquarie, who were a great source of encouragement and inspiration.

We taught Scripture classes in schools every week and made friends in the neighbourhood. God led us to lost souls and his Word produced fruit. We began to see honest hearts obey him and be added to his body.

When we outgrew the meeting hall, the church purchased a house, where we met for a while and later built a meeting place. New Christians led us to others who needed the gospel and some had Bible studies in their homes. Two of our neighbours obeyed the Gospel. Eventually they served as elders along with Cliff. Conflicts and challenges came, but our love for God and each other saw us through, and we continued to grow.

Aussie fellowship mostly consisted of 'tea', 'cuppas', picnics, barbeques, and camping. We played cricket, ate eel, found snakes, leeches and various wildlife, and bonded with each other. We raised our children together, prayed together, laughed and cried together and showed the world by our love that Jesus was our Lord. Blessings like that cannot be taken for granted.

Blacktown was known as a strong church that cared about lost souls. Area churches were also growing and sharing their fellowship with us. MSOP (Macquarie School of Preaching – now Macquarie School of Biblical Studies) was

teaching men to go out and preach the gospel, as well as providing lectures and classes for area churches. Jerry wrote a book on the Pentateuch in preparation for the class he was teaching in MSOP – because he could not find one on the subject.

Youth and family retreats gave us opportunities to study and grow closer to each other. The Anzac day picnic was a highlight of the year when Christians from all over NSW came together for a day of fun, fellowship and good food. Those were the days!

When we decided to return to the US in 1975, it was with much sadness because we were going to miss being a part of the work there for the next few years. However, we had confidence that God's church would continue to grow and thrive as they used their talents and kept their faith in him. Now we look back with such joy and thankfulness at the growth of the church there and memories flood our minds. Never have we had a moment since that day that Australia has not been in our hearts and prayers.

We tried lots of ways to reach the lost in the 1970s. Whilst methods may change over the years, there are some things I believe we must always remember. The simple truth of Jesus planted lovingly in honest hearts will bring forth fruit. Patient faithfulness is the key. If we live the life he teaches us to live and sow his seed, it will happen. God will bless the effort and give the increase.

However, Satan is a formidable foe and the world pulls at us in so many ways. Unless the message is scriptural, it is like the foolish man building on sand.

You are blessed with opportunities to let your lights shine and, as you do so, the church *will* grow. There is no other way. Jesus said that he is the way and that no man can come to God except through him. He expects us to tell others his wonderful story. Providing we follow his model, he will bless our efforts. Church leaders and fulltime workers cannot and will not get the job done. It is only with every member involved that we can.

'Go into the entire world and preach the gospel' was not a suggestion. It was a command from our Lord. And Jesus expects every Christian to do it until he comes. Amen. ■

Jeanette Dyer and her husband, Jerry, live, work and worship in Knoxville, Tennessee, USA. They still visit Australia regularly encouraging churches to grow whenever the opportunity arises. Photo sourced from Facebook jj.dyer@frontiernet.net



Biography

A portrait of the life of a godly woman Elvera Mildred Smith: 1908 - 2006

Elvera Morton was born on 25 November 1908 in Hobart, Tasmania, of parents Valera and Benjamin Morton, the second of ten children – eight girls and two boys.

Elvera's mother was a visiting nurse and her father a tailor. Elvera excelled in sewing and singing. She had a broken schooling because of the need to help her mother with newborn siblings.

She was baptised into Christ at the age of 16 in the Associated Church of Christ in West Hobart. She wanted to be a missionary – maybe in India – but instead became a preacher's wife!

She married Colin Byrne Smith on the 14 August 1937 in West Hobart, at age 28. Colin was preacher for the Associated Churches of Christ in Hobart. After their marriage, Elvera and Colin went to live on a dairy farm at Bream Creek, 30 miles from Hobart. Before their marriage, Colin had met John Allen Hudson from the US who was exploring the potential for growth of the Restoration Movement in other countries.

This resulted in Colin leaving the Associated Churches to study at Abilene Christian College in Texas. On 29 July 1938, their first son Norman was born. Although Norman was only 9 weeks of age, Colin left to go to the US for what turned out to be three years of absence from his family. Warren, their second son, was born on 3 December 1941 in Sydney.

In May 1941, the family came to work with the Merrylands congregation, Sydney, whose founder, J.W. McGregor, died within a few months of their arrival. They also worked at Kurrajong and, in 1945, started a congregation in Westmead. In 1953, the church moved from Westmead to Strathfield, then to Parramatta in 1960 and subsequently to Blacktown in 1962.

A series of long trips to Queensland in 1957 eventually resulted in congregations in Wynnum, Gympie, Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Armadale in NSW. They moved to Wynnum in March 1959 to work with a group of five adults who came out of the Associated Church and they started meeting together on 4 May 1958. The church grew with God's help through Colin and Elvera.

Elvera was a great homemaker and cook. She supported Colin well in keeping her household. Throughout their work together, they were known for their hospitality, despite having little income. The Smiths, especially Elvera, had a soft spot for children in need. Besides taking an interest in all the children they met (large Bible Schools are perhaps a part testimony of their interest in children), they personally cared for children in their own home if there was the need. Not only did the Smiths take on one child at a time, they also chose to nurture a whole family of six children – our family, the Barkers, after our mother died in 1963 – for a period of 6 years!

Elvera found that the life of a preacher's wife was a busy and demanding one, often requiring being on call 24 hours a day. However it was enjoyable, especially

having the opportunity to host people in her home. The work of establishing a congregation was hard. There was a lot of learning to do. Highlights included the joy of seeing people baptised into the Lord. Helping those in need was central to her work for God and she practised what she taught: 'If you see someone in need, just help them in whatever way you can.'

Elvera was most widely known for her quiet strength in the Lord. She was often described as a great encourager, saying the right things at the right time.

In 1966, Colin Smith was diagnosed with cancer. After a long battle, he died on 24 July 1969. He was well respected by the community and church. Elvera had worked alongside Colin for about 32 years. They were grandparents to 6 children and Elvera then became a great-grandparent to 11 children.

Elvera faced the death of Colin with strength and dignity, choosing to remain a widow. She continued to support the work of the Lord at Wynnum. Over 47 years she saw many changes in the church. Over time, Elvera battled health problems. She eventually had to face amputation of her legs in 1988 because of the severe pain and threat to her life from poor circulation. With the Lord's help, she always pulled through. Until 97 years of age, she lived her life independently in her own home in Wynnum. Then she moved to live with her son Norman in Killarney Vale, near Gosford. She died at Gosford on 29 November 2006, shortly after she turned 98 years of age.



Throughout her life, Elvera taught Bible school classes, ladies Bible classes, and a special teenage girls class in which she helped teenage girls to consider what was godly living. Elvera was well known for her beautiful singing voice and willingness to sing to glorify the Lord.

She also had great sewing skills. She taught these to many of the young people she helped. If there was any important occasion and a cake was necessary to celebrate it, Elvera always offered to make the cake and icing and decorate it. She made many birthday, wedding and engagement cakes.

Elvera Mildred Smith's life was one that genuinely reflected the biblical passages that describe a godly woman. In 1 Timothy 2:10, Paul describes a godly woman as not being dressed with braided hair, or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. And of course who can forget the description of the wife of noble character: 'A wife of noble character, who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.' (Proverbs 31:10 – 11).

To have known and shared Elvera's and Colin's lives has been one of my greatest privileges. ■



Judy Bebe is a member of the Coffs Coast Church of Christ, NSW. Sketch by Col Bebe. cbebe@inet.net.au



Food for thought

Jesus' interactions with and teachings regarding women

We know that Jesus travelled throughout Galilee from village to village with the twelve apostles sharing the Good News. However, what is often skimmed over is that he was also accompanied by a group of women.

In Luke 8:1-3 we learn of this group of women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, including Mary Magdalene from whom seven demons had been exorcised, and also Joanna, wife of Chuza, who was Herod's household manager.

In addition there was Suzanna, and many other women, who provided for Jesus and the twelve out of their own means. These women were paying for food, accommodation and travel expenses so that Jesus and the twelve could freely conduct their ministry. Jesus' ministry extended for up to a period of three years during which he would not have been earning a wage, so it was necessary that his support came from others.

It is important to remember that although Jesus offered a revolutionary message and rebuked the Pharisees for their onerous rules and hypocrisy, he remained a Jew operating within the boundaries of Judaism. He was faithful and obedient but never self-serving in his use of miracles – which were intended to direct people to salvation rather than provide funds for his ministry.

Women stepped into the role of faithfully funding that ministry. Whilst there may be some social awkwardness to the situation, it fits within the framework of good manners in the first century. For example, we see in Luke 7:39 that the Pharisees are more concerned about the stigma attached to the touch of a *sinner* than that of a *woman*.

'Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet he would know who and what this sort of person is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.'

To my knowledge, there is no contemporary record of any scandal associated with Jesus' accepting financial support from women (some with questionable backgrounds) to provide for and travel with him and his party.

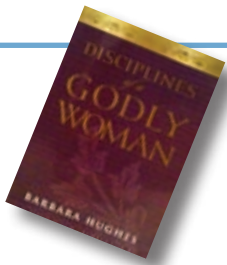
There are many testimonies of faithful loving support of Jesus by women interwoven throughout the Gospels. Some women followed Jesus to Jerusalem and also witnessed his crucifixion (Mark 15:40-41). Jesus saw them as reliable witnesses, while other followers fled in fear. Women found the empty tomb (Matthew 28:1-8 and John 20:11-18). Jesus formed friendships with Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene.

Jesus' teaching includes references to the ordinary lives of women thereby making the role of women more public. Women's equality before God is encouraging:

- The woman with the twelve-year haemorrhage (Mark 5:21-34) was an untouchable (unclean) yet she touched Jesus and he showed compassion. Her faith healed her and gave her freedom through his power:
'And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed from your affliction."'
- The Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30), a pagan, accepted an apparent insult by turning it around to pursue Jesus' help. Jesus responded by verbally exorcising the demon from her daughter to conquer darkness.
- A woman mixing yeast (Luke 13:20-21) is Jesus' means of demonstrating how a soft and pliable heart will grow with God's love;
'And again He said, "To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."'
- The woman and the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) portrays the diligence and perseverance of Jesus in searching for the lost, followed by the precious joy once it was found.
- The woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Mark 14:3-9) had been overwhelmed by her worthless broken past life, but the hope offered by a fresh start through Jesus drove her humility and service to him. Jesus memorializes her action:
'Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.'
- The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-30) was a beautiful example of openness, forgiveness and mercy for an outcast who became instrumental in spreading the Good News.

Jesus embraced the daily lives of women in his stories to clarify a point and proclaim his message to the world. He did not put women in any disadvantaged group, such as *the poor* or *sinner*s. His Good News liberates all who respond to the light. Yes, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have different roles and so do men and women who honour his created order. Today, as Christian women, we have wonderful opportunities to demonstrate daily Jesus' principles. So let's continue in joyful service to God as did the women of old. ■

Daphne Gibbins and her husband, John, are members of Gosford Church of Christ, NSW. Daphne practices law in Sydney and has a masters degree in early Jewish history. gibbjd@bigpond.net.au



Book Review

Disciplines of a Godly Woman: Barbara Hughes, Crossway Books (2006)

Disciplines of a Godly Woman deals with a number of issues with which women in the 21st century must, if we are to be honest with God and ourselves, struggle. In reading the book, the reader must be discerning with erroneous teachings in a number of areas, including salvation. That said, valuable biblical principles can still be derived from Barbara Hughes' work.

Much of the book relates to general principles all Christians would do well to consider. The author's main premise is that to live disciplined, godly lives requires the Christian (and, in this context, Christian women) to be submissive. It flows through Scripture from beginning to end and we must come to terms with this foundational teaching. It seems countercultural; yet, as Christians, we are called to be countercultural in this current age as were the Christians of the first century.

In dealing with any Scripture, one of the biggest obstacles we strike is where the will of God comes into conflict with our will. We can respond to this in a few ways. We can ignore what the Word teaches in regard to a given subject; we can try and massage the Word to fall into line with what we already believe; or we can submit to what the Word teaches. The solution, then, to following God is embracing submission.

'Many Christians have a foggy understanding, thinking submission has something to do with marriage and a woman's relationship with her husband (which it does), or perhaps a woman's role in the church (which it also does). But the call to submission is much more extensive than these narrow applications.

Submission is yielding to the authority of another. Puritan teacher Jeremiah Burroughs wrote: "to keep under, that is to submit. The soul can submit to God at the time when it can send itself under the power and authority and dominion that God has over it." (p 34)

Barbara Hughes does not tiptoe around the idea of submission as a discipline. She discusses it in relation to all areas of our lives. She considers it in relationship to the Gospel:

'In a day when everything (including theology) is decided by popular opinion, how easy it is to believe another gospel. How easy it is to shape our god according to what we think he should be like and not allow the whole of Scripture to explain him.' (p 23)

And to prayer:

'...few of us capitalize on this opportunity to draw from "home base" the power we need to press on or to have our wills bent to God's.' (p 42)

And to worship:

'Every woman who calls herself a Christian must understand that worship is the ultimate priority in her life. Worship is what God wants from you and me – every day.' (p 62)

Hughes goes on to discuss the renewing of our minds, developing contentment, perseverance and propriety in our behaviour.

There are certainly times in the book where Hughes does not shy away from the controversial. She tackles submissive frameworks for the church as well as questions on being single, being married and the topic of generosity. She specifically discusses tithing, expressing an important attitude in relation to generosity:

'Giving from a heart overflowing with God's grace, whether the giving be mandatory or voluntary, has always been the ideal for God's people – before and after the coming of Christ. When a heart overflows in the grace of giving, a substantial amount of income goes to God.' (p 202)

As the debate about the role of women in the church rages, we have a responsibility to consider this controversial subject and be prepared to accept what God has to teach us in his Word. Many of the teachings of Christ are controversial when seen through a secular lens. They were in the first century and they are now. Choosing to be ignorant is of no spiritual benefit.

Whether you agree with her conclusions or not, one of the most valuable aspects of this book is the fact that she has the courage to deal with the controversial issues facing women of God. This gives us the opportunity to examine Scripture, wrestle with what is being said and come to some conclusions or at least be prepared to discuss our understanding.

Hughes' overarching philosophy in writing this book, I believe, is in regard to the attitude of the Christian woman and obedience to the Word. She highlights the difference between discipline and legalism, words which are often used interchangeably in postmodern culture. She writes:

'But true discipline is a far cry from legalism – thank God! The difference lies in motivation: legalism is self centred; discipline is God centred. The legalist heart says, "I will do this thing to gain merit with God." The disciplined heart says, "I will do this because I love God and want to please him." The true heart of discipline is relationship – a relationship with God.' (p 14)

When you to read this book, chew over it, discuss it and study it with your Bible open in front of you. Be discerning, but be open to those concepts that are firmly rooted in Scripture.

If nothing else, we can use this book as a springboard to a deeper, more satisfying study regarding the will of God in our lives as women. ■

Christine Payne is an associate editor of InterSections and, with her husband David and their family, are part of the Gosford Church of Christ, NSW. christine@klesisinstitute.com

2011 Saving Light Series – West Heidelberg Church of Christ

The annual Saving Light Series held by the Heidelberg West congregation in Melbourne from 4-7 November 2010 was once again a success. The series is particularly special because 2010 marked the 50th anniversary of the church at Heidelberg West meeting publicly in the area.

Speakers presented five powerful lessons based around the theme 'The Church that Christ Died For'.

The topics and speakers were:

- 'Was the Church God's Plan from the Beginning?' (Ted Paull)
- 'Jesus' Teaching about the Church' (Philip Dow)
- 'The Beginning of the Church' (Graeme Offer)
- 'The Church at Heidelberg West' (Ted Paull)
- 'Why be Involved with the Church at all?' (Steve Burgin)

Four speakers were men who have been members at Heidelberg West in the past but have since moved on to other congregations. The time and effort they put in to the lessons was much appreciated.

The series was a time of fellowship and edification for the congregation and for brethren from other congregations who were able to attend the sessions. There were several visitors and the church hopes to be able to follow up on these. The series concluded at the Sunday morning worship service, after which a fellowship lunch was held. ■

Joan Thomas is a member of Heidelberg West Church of Christ, Victoria. joanthomas1@gmail.com

2011 Floods in South-East Queensland

The week commencing Sunday 9 January 2011 is a week that captivated many Queenslanders.

It started with a flood that rushed through the township of Toowoomba in the Darling Ranges, which then cascaded down into the Lockyer Valley inundating farming communities on the way. Residents were caught completely unawares until it was upon them. Sadly, a number of people lost their lives in these floods.

People in Brisbane knew only too well that all that water was heading our way. It all arrived between 12-13 January. The dam that had been built to prevent a repeat of the 1974 flood proved inadequate.

As is always the case when major disasters happen, many ask 'Why?'. Many blamed God; some even suggested that it was God's way of payback! But all we know is that in catastrophes like this Christians have an opportunity to help out in the community and to quietly reassure people of God's love for them.

There was a relative of a member of The Point Church family who had a property affected by the flood in Hawthorne. Thankfully, their property was nearly one kilometre from the river and not completely overcome by floodwaters. But the ground floor of the house was.

Some of our men, both young and old, from The Point Church turned up to help on the Monday and Tuesday after the flood. Early on the first the morning, we were broken up into groups so we could help other neighbours along the street as well. Conditions were oppressive as the weather was now hot and humid. There was the prevailing smell of rotten water. And slugging away in the mud was hard work.

But our men did us proud. The neighbours put on a fine morning tea that was consumed in minutes by the hard working team. It was during this casual time that we were asked about 'our' church. It was a great opportunity to show our concern for people in the community by getting in and offering a helping hand when they needed it most.

Over the past month, much of the rest of Queensland as well as states to the south also experienced floods and much heartbreak. More recently, Northern Queensland suffered a monster cyclone. We are thankful that, to the best of our knowledge, God's people in all the affected places have been spared. We are aware that many other churches have been quick to do what they can to help those in need. For that we're thankful. ■



Peter Searson is an elder of The Point Church in Brisbane, Queensland. Peter@searsongroup.com

Interview with Rebecca Wall

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feel strongly connected to Japan, I believe that there is much that I can do in Australia to encourage and uplift other young Christians in their walk with Christ.

It is my hope that one day there will be many young people like myself who will go to Japan to encourage the Christians there and be strengthened in their own faith as they witness the lives of faithful Japanese brothers and sisters.

I feel that I can do more to work towards this goal while I'm in Australia and that is why I came home.

Do you have any counsel for others thinking of stepping outside their comfort zone?

My advice would be to trust in Philippians 4:13 – 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' I truly believe in these words of God and live by them. They have given me the courage to step out and try many things that I thought were far beyond me. Without Christ I would not have been brave enough to travel across the world to a different culture to live there. Nor would I have been able to understand, appreciate and love the people there. Christ has proven himself faithful to me and I put my trust in him. ■

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Interview

with Rebecca Wall

Name: Rebecca Wall
Occupation: High school teacher
Congregation: Yackendandah, Victoria



Tell me a little about your experience growing up in a small country church.

The best part about growing up in a small country church was that we knew everybody. It was impossible to get lost in the crowd because there were so few of us. For the most part our congregation consisted of just my family and another family. Other people came and went but in general it was just the two families.

The benefit of this was witnessing all the adults actively preaching, teaching and serving in the church. Being such a small congregation meant everyone had to participate. The men alternated in preaching every Sunday and the women taught our Bible classes. Our mid-week Bible class was held in our homes and again the men took turns in leading these studies. Everyone was encouraged to participate and contribute and because of this I believe we all grew in faith and understanding.

While I had a very strong church family, I think one of the biggest challenges was having very few peers that were Christian. At school most of my friends had little or no belief in God. At times it was hard standing up for what I believed, especially when no one else supported me. Thankfully, God blessed me with a good group of friends who came to respect my beliefs, even if they themselves didn't believe.

What led you to the studies you undertook?

I have wanted to become a teacher since high school. I took a gap year after Year 12 but when I applied for a teaching course at the end of the year I didn't get in. I was devastated because other than studying to be a teacher I didn't have any direction for my life. I was terrified I was going to be stuck in the same job (a job I didn't really enjoy) for the rest of my working life. My only solace was prayer and a hope that God would help me.

I took to writing a prayer journal and what started out as a plea for help turned into a wonderful, comforting and deep relationship with Christ. I still keep a journal and I never cease to be amazed by how much I am blessed and by how often he answers my prayers.

Prior to this, I believed and had been baptised but I had never fully relied upon God or trusted in his power to help me. I eventually applied for a standard Arts degree and was accepted. I chose to study English because I love reading and Japanese because I had studied it all through high school and really enjoyed it.

What prompted you to teach English in Japan?

During my studies I realised that if I was to ever be fully confident in Japanese I needed to go there. So I went on a 5-month student exchange. The town that I went to didn't have a church I could go to so I had to be strong in my faith on my own.

While I do not recommend going somewhere without the support of a church family, fortunately during this period of time my relationship with Christ was forged even deeper. All of my friends were non-Christians and they always tried to influence me in the ways of the world. I was often tempted to join them but what kept me from doing so was the power of God's word.

Each Sunday I would set aside time to spend in worship and reading my Bible. Every Sunday, without fail, the passage I happened to be reading was relevant to the temptations I faced. It was Christ alone that kept me strong and faithful. While this experience brought me closer to Christ, I knew that if I ever went back to Japan I would only go where there was a church. God heard my prayers and after I finished university I got a job teaching English in a town called Mito, where there was also a large (by Australian standards) Church of Christ.

What were some of the challenges and rewards of teaching English in Japan?

Apart from adapting to a different culture, the biggest challenge I faced whilst living in Japan was being so far away from my family. I come from a very close-knit family and had never lived so far away on my own for such a long period of time before. I used to be rather shy and I always had a brother or sister around whom I could hide behind in social settings if I needed.

However, in Japan there was just me and I had to stand on my own two feet. This challenge actually turned out to be one of the biggest rewards of living in Japan. I came out of my shell and learnt to be confident and comfortable with who I was. I also made some wonderful and amazing friends who soon became my family away from home. Through them I came to appreciate and understand different cultures.

Not only did I make friends with many Japanese people, I also met other English teachers from countries such as the US, Canada, England and Indonesia. I now have a network of friends all over the world, many of whom are a part of our Lord's family. Japan is my second home and the friends I made there are my extended family.

What similarities and differences are there in Australian and Japanese congregations?

In many ways the Churches of Christ in Japan are very similar to the Churches of Christ in Australia. This is why I am keen to build a strong relationship between them. Missionaries helped build up the church in Japan and while there are missionaries still in Japan, I believe Japan is at a point where they are starting to raise up preachers and teachers from amongst the Japanese people. I think Australian churches are also at a similar stage.

Churches in Japan are also rather small and the rate of growth is slow. Because the churches are small, often there are very few peers of the same age group within one congregation. Sometimes young people fall away because they do not have the support of their peers to keep them strong.

Many Japanese Christians do not have the support of their families. This is quite different to Australia. In many instances in Japan, new Christians are completely cut off from their families. It is a big sacrifice for them to make, but they make it because they believe in Jesus and that he is the Way.

I really feel that if we can build a bridge between our churches and establish a good relationship, we can do a lot to encourage and build up each other to keep us strong in the Lord.

What brought you home and what do you see your future holding?

While living in Japan I grew a lot in my faith and learnt so much about what it truly means to be a servant of Christ. While I still