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Journey

Cover: *The Road to Bethlehem*
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Closing date for editorial and advertising for February *Journey* is Monday 13 January. The next issue of *Journey* will be available on Sunday 2 February.



Looking forward

Christmas tends to be a time we stop and spend time with the people close to us. It's a time we take holidays and look inwards, to our own homes and families.

It's also a time we look outwards. At Christmas, all eyes turn to Bethlehem—and by extension, Palestine and Israel. Christian pilgrims gather in the Holy Land *en masse* at Christmas time and we are reminded of the political, religious and ethnic tensions there. Our cover this month is a collage of familiar images depicting the Christmas story patched together from images of modern Bethlehem. In the corresponding story, we speak to Bishop Munib Younan, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and Jessica Morrison from the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network about the peace process (page six).

Christmas also means that we have come to the end of another year. We look back on the year that has passed and look forward to the one to come. Being the Cross-platform editor of *Journey* this year has been a real privilege. I look back at all the stories we have covered and I am very proud of the team that works on this magazine. I look forward to further developing *Journey* into a truly cross-platform publication in 2014.

Thank you for all your feedback this year, and I hope *Journey* continues to inspire, resource and engage all parts of the Uniting Church in Queensland and beyond well into the future.

Merry Christmas and have a happy New Year. Go out with joy and be led forth with peace!

Rohan Salmond
Cross-platform editor



WELL, I'VE ALWAYS BEEN ONE FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY,
ESPECIALLY AT CHRISTMAS TIME,
BUT AS LONG AS IT'S ON MY TERMS.



Reveal the kingdom

In Queensland at Christmas time, poinciana trees are in full bloom. The explosion of red colour against the green leaves means that trees not normally noticed during the year suddenly get my attention. Families gather under those trees in parks and backyards to renew bonds of love and care, to remember who is missing and to make new memories for the generations to come.

This year the Queensland Synod is looking at Christmas through the lens of Isaiah 55. At first glance this passage may not seem like a Bible reading for the Christmas season. There is no mention of angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph or Jesus.

It was set in a time when God's people were away from their homeland, living under the power of a foreign ruler. Some people were in deep despair and many felt that God had forgotten them. There will come a time, announces the prophet, when you will "go out with joy and be led forth in peace".

The prophet imagines that if they could, all the trees in the fields would clap their hands! He describes a picture of the whole cosmos cheering about the new way of being when the Messiah, God's promised ruler, would be in charge.

Since Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God, the rulers of this world have not disappeared

and wars have not ceased. We, as people of God's kingdom, bear witness to the coming of Jesus within, beside and alongside, (and sometimes in spite of) the regular structures of society.

The kingdom of God is like a poinciana tree, sometimes bursting forth with colour, yet often not obvious except to those who know how to recognise it in parks, backyards and maybe even in shopping centre car parks.

How might we become personally involved in making God's kingdom obvious? We can pray for those people whose homeland is a war zone or where people are so scared to go back to their neighbourhood that they would rather become refugees. We can give from our abundance to assist people affected by disasters far away as well as those having a hard time in our own district. We can write to politicians about the things we see happening that reveal that God's reign is not fully in effect in our nation.

God's peace and joy are there all year round, but like the poinciana trees may not be noticed as you go about life. This Christmas, try taking the joy of Christ into your community and make the peace of God evident in your relationships.

Rev Kaye Ronalds
Queensland Synod Moderator

Monday Midday Prayer

*Lord of life,
birth in us a desire to help broken
people to be transformed by Jesus,
and break out with peace and joy.*
Amen

Moderator's diary

4 December
Schools Commission thank you
lunch for school principals

16 December
UnitingCare Christmas service in
Uniting Church Centre chapel

25 December
Christmas Service at Brookfield
Uniting Church

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Ormoc city in western Leyte. Shops are closed and streets are full of debris.

Photo: Arlynn Aquino EU/ECHO, Leyte, Philippines, November 2013 (CC BY-ND)

Church solidarity after typhoon

The Uniting Church is working to support the people of the Philippines through its agencies and partner churches after the devastating arrival of super typhoon Haiyan, but needs your help, writes **Marnie Frost** from UnitingWorld.

Super typhoon Haiyan—one of the worst storms ever recorded—crossed the Philippines on Friday 8 November, killing, injuring and displacing thousands of people and destroying whole communities.

The Philippine National Government estimates that 9.5 million people have been affected, with almost 620 000 displaced. The most severely affected communities are along the coast.

The Uniting Church relief and development unit UnitingWorld remains in close contact with its partner church, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) and its volunteers. They are reporting back with scenes of complete devastation; entire communities have been damaged, whole families lost and livelihoods destroyed. The full extent of typhoon Haiyan's damage will remain unclear for some time, but media reports in the days after suggest as many as 10 000 people have died.

UnitingWorld National Director Rev Dr Kerry Enright is calling for support.

"People in the Philippines are familiar with natural disasters but this is on an unprecedented scale. We are shocked by the extent of the damage and the

impact on people and their communities," he says. "We need to stand with our partner church and the people of the Philippines with prayer and practical support at this time."

UnitingWorld is seeking support for emergency relief efforts to respond to ongoing critical needs, and is working through the ACT Alliance network to coordinate relief efforts.

The Filipino National Conference of the Uniting Church is also calling its members and congregations to help using whatever means they have as the devastation continues.

Gabby Ocampo, Convenor of the Filipino National Conference, says financial assistance is vital.

"People are in need of emergency food and water, clothing, shelter and medicines," he says. "They are running out of resources and are panicking frantically in search of food and clothing amongst the debris left by the typhoon. Whatever financial assistance we can raise we will send via UnitingWorld."

Please donate to the UnitingWorld Philippines Emergency Relief Appeal at unitingworld.org.au/philippines-typhoon-appeal or call 1800 998 122. All donations to this appeal are tax deductible.

“People in the Philippines are familiar with natural disasters but this is on an unprecedented scale”

Rev Dr Kerry Enright



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Hope for the

The Holy Land is stitched into the fabric of the Christmas story. Could Mary and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem in today's conflict-ridden West Bank? **Mardi Lumsden** explores hopes for peace in Israel and Palestine.



Bishop Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, in Brisbane in September
Photo: Mardi Lumsden

From its beginning, Jerusalem has been a city in conflict, and the regions around have been conquered and fought over for centuries. Despite this, people of different faiths and cultures have lived side-by-side for hundreds of years. Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories are the backdrop of much of the Bible. Consequently, each Christmas thousands of Christian pilgrims journey to Bethlehem.

Bishop Munib Younan is the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and the President of the Lutheran World Federation. Based in Jerusalem, he is also on the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land, a group comprised of Jerusalem's Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities.

The bishop was in Australia in September fresh from receiving the Al-Hussein Decoration for Distinguished Service from the King of Jordan for his work promoting peace in Israel, Palestine and Jordan between Christians and Muslims.

Calling for peaceful action

Australian media coverage of Middle Eastern conflicts focuses on religious extremism, but the bishop insists the problems in the Holy Land are political conflicts, not religious ones.

‘The security of Israel is dependent on the justice of Palestinians and the justice of Palestinians is dependent on the security of Israel’
Bishop Munib Younan

“What is going on in Jerusalem is different to many parts of the world. In Jerusalem, I would say that we have freedom of religion, in Jordan, Palestine, Israel. Certainly we have some issues with our government, like any church in the world,” he says.

The Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network (PIEN) is a network of Australian Christians who seek lasting peace for the people of Palestine and Israel. Past Uniting Church President, Rev Gregor Henderson, is the co-convenor. Executive Officer Jessica Morrison says Palestinians' daily lives are impacted in many ways by Israeli occupation.

“Israelis control whether Palestinians can build houses, where they can live, whether water flows



Church of the Nativity, graffiti on the West Bank barrier and an Israeli soldier at a baptismal site near the Jordan River
Photos: Mardi Lumsden

Holy Land

in their taps, whether they can travel overseas, and indeed whether they can even get through a checkpoint to work in the morning. Perhaps access to water is where the disparity is most stark. Palestinians in the West Bank live on one sixth of the water than the illegal Israeli settlers on their land, and in Gaza 90 per cent of the water is undrinkable. This is not due to a lack of water, but the lack of access to water resources.”

There are currently 4.8 million Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations (UN) Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees living in 60 camps in the Middle East. Some camps are in cities, including Bethlehem, making the refugee crisis part of daily life in the Holy Land.

In 1979 and 1980 numerous UN Security Council resolutions called Israeli settlements (the building of mini cities on Palestinian land) illegal. In 2004 the International Court of Justice, the UN’s primary judicial body, also found the settlements to be illegal under international law.

“Settlements are a claim on land,” says Ms Morrison. “Each announcement of a settlement expansion reduces the chance of a viable Palestinian state.

“While the building of settlements is condemned around the globe, there has been little action to back up these words. Israel and the USA together are very powerful—militarily, financially and therefore diplomatically. If we really want to condemn settlements we need to follow the lead of the European Union who is refusing to trade with settlements.

“We must challenge any theology that suggests that God condones a military occupation, or requires anyone to leave lands for God’s will to be fulfilled.”

The Uniting Church in Australia Assembly Standing Committee resolved in 2011, on behalf of the Assembly, to join the boycott of products produced in Israeli settlements within the West Bank. This resolution was made in answer to a call for peaceful action from Palestinian Christians and in response to resolutions of the World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches in Australia.

Christians make up around two per cent of the population of the Holy Land. Bishop Younan says many Christians are leaving (if they can) in frustration or fear.

“They don’t see that peace based on justice is at all on the horizon. They have lost hope in any solution because they believe that the process is only for the sake of the peace process, not for finding a solution,” says Bishop Younan.

Ignoring a solution

“Every politician in the world, who is in power, knows the solution,” says Bishop Younan. “Who of those politicians—Australian, United States, European Union, Arab countries or in Israel—dares to implement those?

“Some politicians think that we must solve the Arab Spring before they can solve the Palestine-Israeli conflict.

“If there is no solution and no peace in Jerusalem, the whole Middle East will not have a solution. Jerusalem is the core of the whole problem.”

The bishop says the Palestinian church is very clear on a peace solution.

“We believe in the two-state solution: the state of Palestine living side-by-side with the state of Israel on 1967 borders, living in peace, justice and reconciliation.

“Jerusalem must be shared. This is not only my position; it is the position of the 13 heads of churches in Jerusalem. It must be a city for Jews, Christians, Muslims, Palestinians and Israelis. No walls, no soldiers; an open city with free access to holy places for every human being.

“Our role as a church is also to create the atmosphere of peace for our people in order that they can see hope in a hopeless situation. For this reason I continue to believe that the security of Israel is dependent on the justice of Palestinians and the justice of Palestinians is dependent on the security of Israel.

“Neither Israel nor Palestine can live on their own.

“The value of the two-state solution ... is a bless[ing] for both Israelis and Palestinians. If we

miss that this year or next year, I am afraid we are getting into a darker stage.”

Absence of the global church

The bishop is alarmed at what he sees as the abandonment of the global Christian church.

“Sometimes we feel that western churches abandoned us. They give us lip service, they exchange smiles, but they don’t see the importance of keeping the Christians,” he says. “They talk to us about finances and the difficulties they are facing, but I think the difficulties we are facing is a question I would put to all Christian churches. If there are no Christians in the Middle East, and if all of us were to emigrate from Jerusalem, what is Jerusalem without the Christians?”

Indeed, what is the Holy Land and what claim do Christians have on holy places if there is no Christian presence there?

“The world is responsible because they did not solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to date. You cannot abandon the church that is trying to witness in this difficult and harsh reality.”

Learning about forgiveness

Bishop Younan knows a thing or two about the plight of displaced people. Both his parents were displaced as children after the creation of the state of Israel.

“They never taught me to hate the Jews or the Muslims. They taught me to love them. To love is not weakness. In such a political situation, to have the spirit of love is the strength.

“This is what my parents taught me and this is what I continue to carry in my heart, in my DNA; to love the other who is different.”

Bishop Younan’s message to the Australian church is clear.

“We are your sisters and brothers in Christ. Our mission is yours and yours is ours. Don’t leave us alone.”

For more information and resources visit assembly.uca.org.au/resources/prayerforpeace or the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network in Australia’s website pien.org.au

For information on Jewish-Christian dialogue visit the Relations with Other Faiths section of assembly.uca.org.au



Adela in class at Charbagh-E-Safa Girls High School in Jalalabad
Photo: Act for Peace



Giving the chance to learn

Afghanistan has been wrought with conflict for over 100 years, but supporting girls' education is helping overcome injustice and oppression, writes **Karen McGrath**.

December in Australia is characterised by the Christmas spirit, but for Afghanistan December will be characterised by uncertainty as Australian and international troops withdraw after 12 years of occupation.

This will be a pivotal moment in Afghanistan's history. Irrespective of whether Australian military occupation was a success or a failure, our true test as a nation comes now. Our true test is whether our country, our community and we as individuals will dedicate our efforts towards the security, freedom and prosperity of the Afghan people.

Act for Peace, the international aid agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia, argues the key lies in education—and more specifically, girls' education.

Afghanistan is one of the hardest places in the world to be educated if you are a girl. Thirty years of chronic instability and conflict, and the almost complete lack of educational opportunities for children under the Taliban, have had a dramatic

impact on children's education and wellbeing in Afghanistan.

But things are changing and a new generation of Afghan women is being empowered to build a better future for themselves and their country. There are now 2.4 million Afghan girls enrolled in school, compared to just 5000 in 2001.

While the numbers are encouraging, Afghan girls still face barriers to receiving an education. Act for Peace is working with its local partner, Church World Service to confront injustice on the grassroots level.

Nine-year-old Adela is part of this program.

Without an education, Adela would face a future scarred by poverty and violence. Fortunately Adela has a brighter future ahead of her.

Going to school means that when she grows up, Adela will have the power to earn a decent living and support herself and her family. She will be able to stand up to discrimination, know her rights, and have the confidence to confront injustice and help build a more peaceful society.

Education confronts injustice head-on and is giving girls in Afghanistan the opportunity to escape a future of conflict and poverty. This year Act for Peace plans to reach 14 more schools and empower 3000 more girls like Adela to transform their futures.

This December we have an opportunity to give many more young girls like Adela the chance of a better future. As such, Christmas Bowl, the national Christmas Appeal from Act for Peace is supporting girls' education in Afghanistan.

We believe education is the greatest Christmas present anyone could give.

The Christmas Bowl Appeal has been running for almost 65 years. Each year, the funds raised go towards supporting Act for Peace's work around the world in the most conflict and disaster-affected communities.

To give, please free-call 1800 025 101, visit www.actforpeace.org.au/christmasbowl, pick up a Christmas Bowl envelope at your church or write to Locked Bag 199 QVB NSW 1230.



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World churches reconnect

Upon returning from the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, South Korea, President of the Uniting Church in Australia **Rev Dr Andrew Dutney** reflects on the Uniting Church's relationship with the global church.

I was part of the team from the Uniting Church in Australia that went to Busan, in South Korea, to participate in the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The Assembly has been described as one of the most diverse gatherings of Christians in history and I can believe it, too.

Participating in ecumenical bodies such as the WCC is an important part of who we are as the Uniting Church. I've studied the ecumenical movement for over 30 years, trying to properly understand its contribution to the Uniting Church's history, theology and ethos, and this was a great opportunity to see it up close.

The Korean churches were our hosts. This year is the 60th anniversary of the Korean Armistice, and the Korean churches shared the unrelenting pain of the division of the Korean people into North and South—a division which has suited the great powers of the world but brought misery to so many on the Korean peninsula.

Korean congregations and ministers are now also a significant part of the Uniting Church in Australia. It's important for all of us to try to understand these sisters and brothers of ours—their joy and their sorrow—and being at the WCC Assembly brought that home.

All our other partner churches were in Busan—from Asia, Africa and the Pacific. All our

Australian neighbours were there too—Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Pentecostal. It was a level playing field for us to reconnect, to renew our fellowship, and to hear each other's concerns and insights in a setting where we weren't guest and host, but just friends.

The majority-world church was represented in Busan in proportion to its actual strength. Largely poor and frequently persecuted, the suffering churches of the global South are vibrant and growing. It is crucial for churches like ours to hear their witness—to learn and to be encouraged.

And the united and uniting churches were all there too. From the United Church of Canada (founded in 1925) to the Uniting Church in Sweden (founded in 2011) we took time to get together and share what we have learned and are learning from all the different stages of daring to be one.

I haven't even mentioned the important decisions made and statements issued by the 10th Assembly. These will inform and guide the church around the world for years to come. They matter. But the personal, human, body-of-Christ work done in Busan goes right to the heart of who we are in the Uniting Church.

I'm so glad I was there!

For more information about the World Council of Churches, visit oikoumene.org and wcc2013.info

‘It was a level playing field for us to reconnect, to renew our fellowship, and to hear each other's concerns and insights in a setting where we weren't guest and host, but just friends’



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When I was in prison you visited me

UnitingCare Community Prison Ministry coordinator and senior chaplain **Beatriz Skippen** talks to **Dianne Jensen** about her life behind bars.

Beatriz Skippen talks quietly on Monday mornings. As UnitingCare Community Prison Ministry coordinator and senior chaplain, her Sundays are spent either speaking in churches or preaching in prisons, sometimes participating in between four and six services a day.

Her day has started early, drinking coffee at 6.30 am with homeless people under a bridge in Brisbane.

After more than 30 years of ministry, including in prisons across South America, Ms Skippen has witnessed first-hand the wretchedness of life behind bars. She understands the vagaries of life which lead men and women to become locked away, and the heavy price paid by their families.

Now the mother of three and grandmother of five, her compassion for those forsaken by society is undiminished.

Ms Skippen is the driving force behind Prison Ministry, a UnitingCare Community service based in north Brisbane which provides mainly volunteer pastoral care to prison inmates and their families across Queensland. Services have recently expanded to include early intervention and post-release mentoring projects.

Called to care

Ms Skippen discovered that ministry behind bars was not for the faint-hearted when she walked into a Colombian prison at the age of 21 years.

"In the beginning I thought, what am I doing here? I haven't got anything in common with these people. I'd never even smoked, gone clubbing, nothing ... every time when I was leaving the prison I would say, 'Oh Lord! Are you sure you want me here?' and have this strong sense of 'Yes, you need to be here'."

Ms Skippen grew up in Argentina under the dictatorship of Jorge Videla, when an estimated

30 000 people disappeared or were killed between 1975 and 1981. Many of her high school colleagues were among them, paying the price for political or social dissent.

After graduating from theological college, she served as a missionary in Paraguay, and later in Bolivia, Colombia and Brazil.

The Presbyterian Church brought Ms Skippen to Australia in 1991 to work with Spanish, Portuguese and Italian groups in Melbourne as well as ministering in Pentridge, Metropolitan and Fairley Prisons. Later she moved to Queensland, and the opportunity to work for Prison Ministry opened up in 2005.

A bridge to grace

Her faith story is rooted in the Catholic faith of her family and the influence of her Plymouth Brethren neighbours, together forging a deeply spiritual faith with a strong sense of the presence of God.

Growing up in a Catholic church "was like a bridge for me to understand grace", says Ms Skippen, who is now a member of the Uniting Church.

From Brethren theology she drew her understanding of a personal God, the one who called her to minister in some of the world's darkest places.

Decades later, she remains convinced that even the worst offender can be transformed by grace, and that every prison chaplain walking through those locked gates is the bearer of that hope.

"I don't think I'm tough," she says, reflecting on the sometimes brutalised and violent inmates to whom she has ministered. "I just think that I want my relationship with God. I just think about him walking before me, and try to be Jesus' feet and Jesus' hands."

The stories about people who have been empowered to change their lives seem to pour out.

“There’s not a lot of compassion in society for prisoners or their families. Neither is there sufficient understanding of the complex social and mental health issues behind anti-social behaviour”



UnitingCare Community
Prison Ministry
coordinator and senior
chaplain Beatriz Skippen
Photo: Dianne Jensen

One former prisoner, Mark, was encouraged by Ms Skippen to finish high school while in prison. He went on to study criminology and is now writing a PhD. He is married, and runs a support group for men. But Mark's real transformation began when he was welcomed and accepted by a church community.

Another man, young, angry and rejected by his family, found a new direction when he knew that Prison Ministry staff would be there to help him get his life back on track after he was released.

"His mother called me and said, 'He's changed. What did you say to him?' Nothing spectacular. Just 'we'll be there for you. Just come'.

"One guy we've been supporting, he and his wife, are now going to a church. They have five children and they are turning their life around."

Breaking the cycle

"Breaking the cycle of offending is about investing time in people," says Ms Skippen "and sometimes the little things—like sharing coffee at dawn with homeless people—can make a difference to someone's life."

The Prison Ministry location a few doors down from the Brisbane North probation and parole office means that it is sometimes mistaken for the latter, providing the opportunity to connect with the often nervous parolees.

Some come back for coffee and a chat, and take up the offer of help to reintegrate into family and society.

"First we have to identify a desire to change and then we can work with them," says Ms Skippen.

"You really have to be willing to put yourself in that position and to work through those issues."

Working with families is key to facilitating generational change, she adds. Helping out with household essentials, school needs and small gifts at birthdays and Christmas makes a huge difference to financially-strapped carers. Support also keeps stigmatised and vulnerable families intact so that inmates will have a home to which they can return.

"There's not a lot of compassion in society for prisoners or their families. Neither is there sufficient understanding of the complex social and mental health issues behind anti-social behaviour."

Ms Skippen says that a very high percentage of people in Queensland's prisons are suffering from a mental health disorder of some kind.

"I would like the Queensland government to put more resources into early intervention and post-release programs. I think that we are missing the target. People come out of prison every day; we can't keep everyone in prison forever. At the moment we have a punitive approach when the people come out."

Just down from the Prison Ministry office there are a few young men milling around or sitting alone outside the parole office.

"I don't look at what they've done. I just know that they're broken people," says Ms Skippen. "No matter what the circumstances, it's not up to me to judge people. Who am I?"

For more information visit ucommunity.org.au/prison-ministry or call 07 3867 2550.

Prison Ministry provides:

- chaplaincy services in Queensland correctional centres
- practical family support
- carer emotional support
- emergency assistance
- early intervention and post-release programs
- mentoring.

Christmas wish list:

- non-perishable groceries for hampers for families of inmates
- toiletries for female inmates
- small gifts for children and mothers on the outside
- volunteers to help pack and deliver hampers and gifts
- donations of funds.



Fashioning compassion

Who makes the clothes you wear?

Human trafficking is usually associated with the sex trade, but it forms a key part of the textile industry as well. On a recent *Women of Strength* trip to India, **Bindy Taylor** saw first-hand the working conditions experienced by the people who make our clothes.

The connection between clothing production and human trafficking is one of the world's best-kept secrets. As a general rule of thumb, if you're paying "not much" for a piece of clothing, it's likely someone has been trafficked somewhere in the production process.

‘I began to understand why around 80 per cent never make it to the end of their contract’

The Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh on 24 April this year was a tragic incident that made the world stop, look and listen. The scenes splashed across our television screens, social media sites and smart phones presented horrific images of bodies amid rubble from the eight-storey building collapse—a collapse that claimed the lives of over 1000 people; young men and women who were taken far too soon.

The garment workers were well aware of the deathtrap they were entering on the day of the collapse, having witnessed large cracks in the building walls the day before. Warnings to avoid using the building were ignored by the factory supervisors and managers, who threatened staff with pay cuts and job loss if they chose not to enter. Some reluctant workers were beaten with sticks and herded into the building.

The incident at Rana Plaza exposed the ugly reality of cheap fashion to a largely unaware audience of global consumers. The underhand workings of many well-known fashion labels were

exposed to a worldwide audience, and people wanted to know why these brands were shirking their responsibilities.

The lucrative Bangladesh textile industry injects A\$20 billion into the economy each year; similarly, the textile industry in neighbouring India contributes A\$62 billion annually.

A passage to India

India was the destination chosen for *Women of Strength*, a human trafficking prevention trip operated by Stop the Traffik and Amor Ministries. These organisations, dedicated to justice and mission, developed an inaugural eight-day program that would delve deep into the murky underground of the billion dollar textile industry. In August this year, a small contingent of women, including me, undertook this journey into India. What we experienced over the course of this trip had a powerful impact on all of us.

The program took our group into the region of Tamil Nadu, the manufacturing hub of India's clothing and textile industry. Situated in the central south of India, this region comprises over 2000 textile spinning mills.

Young girls growing up in the Tamil Nadu region have few employment options and are commonly contracted by the mills for a period of one to five years. A “broker” organises the contract,

A worker in a clothing cooperative in Tamil Nadu. Ten women own the cooperative which is currently making t-shirts for Body Glove. The cooperative produces 1000 garments a day, six days a week. Each shirt sells for \$25 in America—the equivalent of this woman's weekly wage
Photo: Bindy Taylor

and receives a royalty in addition to an ongoing commission for the term of the contract. The broker is an expert in wooing girls into factories, often showing pictures of resort-style factory scenarios that include swimming pools, gourmet meals and exciting activities.

The majority of girls are employed under contracts referred to as Sumangali schemes. Sumangali means “happily married woman” in Tamil—its name relates to the lump sum payment (usually between A\$500–A\$1000) made at the finalisation of the girl's work contract. This payment is often used as a dowry. Dowries are prohibited under Indian civil law, but providing a dowry remains a common illegal practice.

In addition to the lump sum at the termination of their contracts, girls are sometimes paid a miniscule wage throughout the period of their employment. Once missed working hours have been tallied and expenses such as accommodation and food have been taken into account this wage usually equates to just A\$5 a week.

Sign your life away

Upon visiting Tamil Nadu to hear stories from girls employed in Sumangali schemes, I began to understand why around 80 per cent never make it to the end of their contract.

The girls our group visited shared stories of physical and verbal abuse. During the course of their frequent 15 to 16 hour work days, six days a week, many were yelled at or struck by supervisors who wanted them to work harder and faster.

On an average day, the girls were not provided with protective equipment. When an audit was scheduled they would don a complete set of protective clothing—a mask, hat and apron. However, as soon as the auditor left, the clothing would have to be returned. One girl shared a story about a friend who repeatedly asked supervisors for medical help. When she was finally taken to a hospital, it was discovered that she had 2 kg of cotton in her stomach—she had inhaled this in the workplace.

Inadequate training also led to fatalities. One girl was scalped to death after the manager failed to inform her that the spinning loom would take half an hour to wind down once it was powered off.

In addition to the harsh conditions suffered during the work day, girls are also often abused outside their working hours. Pills are given to them, disguised as vitamins. The drugs stop the girls from menstruating, which factory managers think will make them more productive. The food served is bland—meals often consist of plain rice, and occasionally a dahl. The girls are not allowed to leave the confines of the factory property unless it

is a special holiday. Many are denied any contact with the outside world, including family contact either by phone or face-to-face.

Ethical fashion

So, why hasn't anyone stopped this? Why are major brands continuing to fuel modern day slavery through their negligence? There are several reasons. Most prominent is the ownership of the factories—they are entirely owned by Indian politicians. In addition to this, exposure of malpractice occurring within spinning mills can lead to closure, which is not usually very effective. Mills and factories that are shut down simply relocate to a neighbouring country, such as Bangladesh, and the trafficking process is repeated in that location. The closure also leaves the people of Tamil Nadu with few employment options, resulting in extreme poverty.

The spinning of yarn is only one part of the 14-stage clothing production process. It is difficult to pinpoint unethical behaviour in each stage of the process, and this poses a challenge for consumers wishing to purchase an entirely ethical piece of clothing. In an attempt to help consumers confronted by this problem, Baptist World Aid recently released the *Ethical Fashion Guide*, which details as closely as possible the ethical authenticity of a number of big brand retailers and clothing brands.

My experiences in taking part in the *Women of Strength* trip, and the stories I was privy to whilst in India, have altered my own behaviour and outlook in many ways.

My clothing purchasing habits have changed significantly as I strive to avoid unethical brands—or “human traffickers”, a term which now feels more appropriate. These are commonly brands or stores that continually offer low prices. If you dig a little deeper into the workings of these labels and organisations you will discover their disregard for human life, fuelled by greed and a determination to grow profits with wilful ignorance.

Christmas is an opportunity to think about purchasing gifts with an ethical mindset this year. As consumers, we can make a difference.

Bindy Taylor is the Communications Manager for Uniting Church South Australia.

In 2014, Stop the Traffik will launch a trafficking free cotton campaign. To find out more about Stop the Traffik or to donate, visit stopthetraffik.org/Australia

To learn more about global mission trips operated by Amor Ministries, visit amor.org

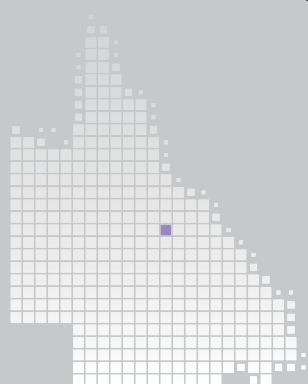
Baptist World Aid's Ethical Fashion Guide is available online at baptistworldaid.org.au/behind-the-barcode

“My clothing purchasing habits have changed significantly as I strive to avoid unethical brands”

Charlotte and Arnold Reuben are Mary and Joseph in Emerald Uniting Church's Walk through Bethlehem event
Photo: Emerald Uniting Church



Emerald Uniting Church



Fast facts:

Community:

- > Population of approximately 12 900
- > 271 km west of Rockhampton
- > Varied economy—cotton, citrus, grapes, grain, livestock and mining

Mission focus:

- > Volunteer and spiritual support for local Uniting Church agencies
- > Tien Shan International School in Almaty, Kazakhstan
- > Ecumenical and interfaith work with other faith communities in the area

What's on:

- > Youth ministry—Mission is Possible (MiP) for students in Years 7 to 10.
- > Cafe 126 on Sunday afternoon for aged-care residents
- > Walk through Bethlehem Christmas event

Online:

- > emeraldunitingchurch.org.au

Emerald shares the love

Emerald Uniting Church is passionate about sharing the good news of Jesus by serving the community in all its diversity. **Rohan Salmond** spoke with **Rev Suzy Sitton**.

What is happening in your congregation?

There's regular vibrant worship, youth activities, Bible study and lots of care and support for each other and for those in the community. Our local mission focus is to provide volunteer and spiritual support for the local Blue Care aged-care facility, UnitingCare, the Lifeline thrift shop and Remote Area Family Services. Our global mission focus is the Tien Shan International School in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where two of our members now teach.

Our annual Walk through Bethlehem event is on Friday 13 and Friday 20 December. The people of Emerald will be able to see, touch and hear the Christmas story through our depiction of first century Bethlehem. There will be a woodworker, a candle maker, a leather goods worker, a baker, a weaver and Mary and Joseph on hay bales.

What does discipleship mean to your community?

Making disciples for us is about serving the community: being a loving, active church; taking part in car parking duties at the Emerald Show;

helping on the cleaning roster at the Multicultural Fair and participating in Relay for Life and the Easter Sunflower Parade. It's about showing God's love in such a way that others want to be part of the community we have and share in Christ's love. We are passionate about the good news of Jesus Christ and in our prayer life we listen and discern God's leading for our community.

What does Christian unity mean to you?

We work together with the local churches in Emerald, providing spiritual care to the whole community through hospital chaplaincy and emergency relief. There's also ecumenical worship at the Australia Day ceremony and the Good Friday service in the Botanical Gardens. Our worship is multicultural. There are Bible readings and singing in Tongan, Filipino, Tok Pisin and Fijian. We're also developing interfaith relations with the small Muslim community in the area by providing the church hall for Friday afternoon prayers. Multi-faith dialogue is something Jesus engaged in, as did Paul.

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Redcliffe artfully engages community



Artwork: David & Goliath
by Joy Harris

Rev Paul Clark is blazing the path for innovative worship in the south-east corner. Ashley Goetze talks to the “art church” minister.

From Genesis to Jesus, over the course of 52 weeks, Redcliffe Uniting Church commissioned artists from within their church and wider community to journey together through the Old Testament.

The year-long art project, inspired by a desire to address and help tackle the difficult questions surrounding Old Testament themes, saw the involvement of cross-generational, Christian and non-Christian artists, providing a rich array of biblical insights.

Fitting in with the church's vision of growing disciples, Rev Paul Clark truly believes that “If people had a robust understanding of the Old Testament it would enhance their discipleship.”

Mr Clark says Redcliffe Uniting “wants to be a church that isn’t inward-looking but one known in the community for our heart.”

From the circumcision of Abraham to Noah’s ark, novices and experts alike signed up to interpret a wide range of Old Testament themes in their own unique way. The opportunity to mull over a particular piece of scripture caused participants to revisit passages often taken for granted.

“Some people have said ‘I haven’t read the Bible in 20 years and I went back and read it,’” says Mr Clark.

According to Mr Clark around 80 per cent of people participating in the art project were from outside the Redcliffe congregation with 50 to 60 per cent attending no church at all.

Mr Clark recalls the story of one lady who hadn’t been to church in over 20 years.

“One day her granddaughter came home from school—from RE—and said, ‘grandma I want to go to church’ and she said ‘I’ve been thinking of going back to church but the only church I know is the ‘art church!’

“So she came and said she’s really loved it. She loves being part of the church,” says Mr Clark.

The 52 complete artworks were presented at an art exhibition held on 30 November, an opportunity the church used to once again invite the wider community inside.

redcliffe.unitingchurch.org.au

‘If people had a robust understanding of the Old Testament it would enhance their discipleship’

A friend at your side

If you find yourself in the delicate position of having to arrange a funeral, one of the greatest things you can have with you, is the Alex Gow Funeral Planning Guide.

It explains everything about funerals in simple English and sets out all your options to plan a service that honours, remembers and celebrates a life well-lived.



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Bundaberg: the advent of hope



As Bundaberg Uniting Church members begin the familiar Advent journey, many will reflect on a year of working and waiting for a new beginning. **Dianne Jensen** reports.

The people of Bundaberg and the nearby towns in the Wide Bay Burnett region had their lives turned upside down by the floods caused by cyclone Oswald last January. An estimated 9000 houses as well as businesses, farming properties and community facilities were affected.

When the mud army had been and gone, it was left to the battered community to begin the long process of recovery.

Local churches working together as the Combined Churches of Bundaberg played a key role in what followed, delivering a wide range of services and earning the Christian community a new voice in the rebuilding of the city.

The initial church response was the coordinated delivery of 10 000 donated Woolworths hampers in early March.

Church Council secretary Frank Millett, whose own house was flooded, was one of the Uniting Church team which delivered hundreds of hampers in the central city and east Bundaberg.

He remembers the elderly man sitting in his flood-damaged room at a rental retirement villa.

When asked why he had come back before repairs were made, the man replied "Where else can I go?"

Working together

Rev Ray Nutley describes the work of the churches as "absolutely brilliant", as they quickly utilised

their networks to respond to the crisis. In the aftermath, they worked together to support those who fell through the cracks in the system.

The school chaplaincy service provided by the Combined Churches was a critical element, he says, as chaplains used established relationships in schools to connect with dislocated students and their families. The chaplains provided food vouchers, school supplies and uniforms as well as a sympathetic ear.

"The evacuations created a bit of difficulty for the children at school, and some had to move school," says Mr Nutley. "One of the other difficulties is that people moved in with family and friends thinking that it was only going to be short term. So there's a lot of tension."

As the first anniversary of the disaster approaches, it is clear that many people will not be back in their homes by Christmas, if at all, he adds. The most vulnerable such as the elderly and low-income families with mortgages are still in dire straits.

The Combined Churches of Bundaberg and the Salvation Army have responded to the need by forming a Community Rebuild Group, using volunteers and donated materials to help people return houses to a safe and habitable standard.

They are also developing a chaplaincy program to provide ongoing community support and to work with local groups.

The Bundaberg Ministers' Association, of which Mr Nutley is chairperson, has set up a service



Frank Millett, Heather Donald and Rev Ray Nutley use Uniting Communications' Christmas postcards to spread the news about the Bundaberg Uniting Church Christmas services
Photo: Right Image Photography

Building on a strong foundation

The image of the 77-year-old Bundaberg Uniting Church awash with 60 cm of putrid water was a symbol for many of the devastation wrought by the January floods. It was the end of September before the congregation gathered in the refurbished church for worship.

The damage to the Bundaberg church property was extensive. As well as flooding the church, water washed through McNaught Hall and the Stirling Centre, and the storage shed was swamped. Kitchen facilities were lost, including the commercial facilities used at Andy's Place to provide meals for the disadvantaged.

Aided by support from churches and individuals near and far, the congregation got stuck into the clean-up. The church office was moved into the home of Rev Ray Nutley and his wife, and the hall was cleaned out and set up for worship. Andy's Place community meals outreach was up and running on a reduced basis only a few weeks after the flood.

Even under the trying circumstances, ministries such as Sunday school, Crossroads disability outreach, Boys' Brigade, and Coffee on the Deck continued to function, some in a modified form.

As the rebuilding got underway, the congregation took the opportunity to repair the chronically leaking roof and install cabling in waterproof material. All electrical and data points are 1.2 m above the floor.

Church Council secretary Frank Millett says that it was truly amazing that despite all church property going under, services and other aspects of church life continued.

"The church here has a good record of serving the community and has continued to do so. We are key players in providing food at annual events such as Agrotrend and the local show. Another outreach is the day camp week for children, this year attracting over 100 participants. We introduced Messy Church in April, and a successful ladies'

breakfast was held near Mother's Day where over 80 attended."

Many church members were themselves affected, including Heather Donald from north Bundaberg. In spite of the fact that her house had been built to withstand the record 1942 floods, the water quickly rose and she and her husband took shelter with a neighbour. Both families found themselves stranded when the front steps collapsed after a freezer smashed into the house.

Rescue came when some young men arrived with a boat and braved the chest-high waters to carry her and her neighbours to safety.

With almost 70 cm of water through it, her house walls had to be completely stripped. Mrs Donald and her husband spent 20 weeks living with their daughter, moving back home at the end of June. She is grateful for the kindness and generosity of so many, including the gift of a quilt from a church craft group.

"I am still noticing things that are missing, just common things that aren't there. I go to get something, and remember that it is gone," she says.

Also gone is a good chunk of her neighbourhood, with three houses demolished in the immediate vicinity while others are vacant, still waiting to be renovated.

"I suppose we've come to terms with it, but the first couple of months were strange," says Mrs Donald. "At the school crossing there are still only half the number of children there."

Like most people, she will join family at Christmas time. "It's important to be together. You know how precious they are."

to help people struggling to deal with the bureaucracy of banks, insurance companies and government agencies.

A new voice

Mr Nutley agrees that the high visibility of the churches has provided new opportunities to have a say in civic life.

"We have a voice that we struggled to have before. We now have church representatives on the groups involved with flood recovery and future planning."

As Christmas comes, the Ministers' Association and the Combined Churches are gearing up for ways to help the community through the tough times that lie ahead.

Bundaberg Uniting Church, like other congregations who have lived through heartbreak, will do the things that it has always done at Christmas. The traditional decorations may have been lost, but there will be celebrations by church groups, projects to raise money for the disadvantaged, and music and worship in the restored church.

"In lots of ways this has been a life-changing experience and the opportunity for new life to begin," says Mr Nutley. "This Christmas time we'll talk about joy and hope—because the Christian faith is about hope, even in amongst all the troubles. And we will all pray."



Edmund Gwenn, Natalie Wood and Maureen O'Hara in the 1947 classic *Miracle on 34th Street*
Photo: Twentieth Century Fox

Making room for ~~Santa~~ Jesus

‘Is it a case of crass cultural theft, or is imitation the sincerest form of flattery?’

“Aren’t we forgetting the true meaning of Christmas? You know, the birth of Santa,” asks Bart Simpson.

We wince, and wonder if this is how the post-Christian world really sees us. Have Santa and Jesus coalesced into a single mythical character of indeterminate age and girth, a miracle worker who is great with kids?

There is no denying that the nativity story has been incorporated into the cult of Santa, and milked for inspirational concepts and appealing images of angels, stars and babies. It makes for great family viewing, and our Christmas favourites include films such as *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), *Love Actually* and *Elf* (2003).

We all love stories about redemption, reconciliation and resurrection. The average viewer might not recognise the theological concepts but the salutary tale of Dickens’ curmudgeonly Scrooge is relished by successive generations, from *A Christmas Carol* (1938, 1951), *Scrooged* (1988), *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992) to *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000).

Is it a case of crass cultural theft, or is imitation the sincerest form of flattery?

Consider Santa Claus himself. Since the original St Nicholas inspired the Victorians to create the jolly gift-giver, Santa has evolved into a character

best personified by Tim Allen in *The Santa Clause* (1994). Like any contemporary hero he has become a sensitive creature, confronting evil and exercising courage and sacrifice in order to prevail. Has Santa become more like Jesus, and less like a hypocritical Victorian who sentimentalises childhood but ignores child exploitation?

ABC broadcaster Rachel Kohn told religion journalists at a symposium in Brisbane last October that “people fear being disconnected from spiritual life, even if they are not practising”. Other commentators have noted that the numbers of people attending Christmas services is increasing, especially in cathedrals.

Believer or non-believer, we all long for peace on Earth and goodwill to all. We want the lost to be found, families to be reunited, and that which is broken to be restored.

The nativity story is our cultural lens through which we understand the nature of God and his relationship with humankind. Surely the message of grace and redemption transcends our attempts to confine and define how it is delivered.

As the Grinch says, “Blast this Christmas music. It’s joyful and triumphant”.

Dianne Jensen



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Journey cartoonist wins Rotary Award

Long-time *Journey* cartoonist Phil Day, above, recently won an award at the 25th Annual Rotary Cartoon Awards at the Bunker Cartoon Gallery, Coffs Harbour. Almost 1500 cartoons were entered by 300 cartoonists from around the world.

Mr Day won a merit award for his cartoon, *Maggie*, entitled “A Different Perspective” which was entered in the open section for Australian cartoonists.

“It was a huge honour for me simply because of the number of entries. I’ve still got a smile on my face,” said Mr Day.

Mr Day has contributed a cartoon to *Journey* every month for the last 20 years.

Queensland Government heritage grants

The Queensland Government Everyone’s Environment grants program is accepting applications for a range of heritage projects with a focus on protecting Queensland’s built heritage. If your church property is listed on either the Queensland Heritage Register or a local government heritage register, your congregation may be eligible for a grant under this scheme. Grants of between \$2000 and \$10 000 are available.

For more information on how to apply visit ehp.qld.gov.au/funding/everyones-environment

Calling all evangelists

The first National Conference on Mission and Evangelism for the Uniting Church will be held on the weekend of March 28–30 2014.

Named *A Clear Call*, Uniting Church in Australia President Rev Dr Andrew Dutney will be hosting this inaugural event in Adelaide.

“The Uniting Church is going through a time of tremendous change,” he says, “Some of it we have chosen but much of it is simply generated by the force of circumstances. In this time of change it is critical that we keep in front of us the point of it all—mission and evangelism or, more properly, participation in the mission of God in Australia today.”

A Clear Call is for everyone who would like to share their faith and would benefit from conversation, information and practical examples of mission and evangelism in their local places. It is for all people: lay people, ordained, ministry teams, young adults, all cultures and the full spectrum of theology of the Uniting Church.

For more information go to www.clearcall.org.au or contact Matthew Signore at mignore@sa.uca.org.au or Peter Armstrong at pfarmstrong@bigpond.com or call 0488 334 520.

Advent video resources share joy and peace

During this season of Advent we wait in anticipation to celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who frees us to go out with joy into the world. This year, Uniting Communications is making five one-minute videos for Advent to inspire, engage and provoke people to think more deeply about Christmas.

Videos will be made available in time for each Sunday in Advent, and will be promoted throughout December on the Synod Facebook and Twitter pages and in *Uniting News*. Congregations are encouraged to download these videos for use in Christmas and Advent services, or as part of Bible study.

For Christmas postcard artwork or videos visit the Christmas 2013 section of the Synod website ucaql.com.au/christmas-2013



2014 synod calendar

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