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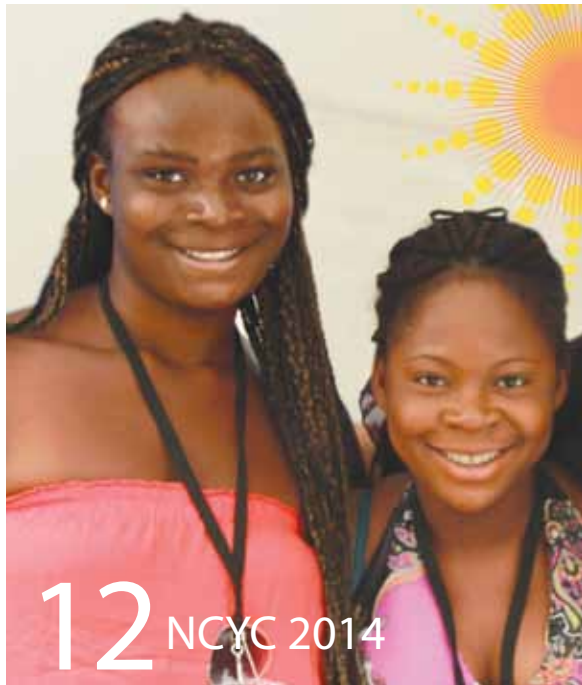



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Journey

Cover: NCYC delegates
Photo: Uniting Church National Assembly



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Closing date for editorial and advertising for March *Journey* is Monday 10 February. The next issue of *Journey* will be available on Sunday 2 March.



A year to grow

Welcome back to another year of *Journey*!

We have a lot to look forward to this year. There are plenty of exciting new developments, including a revamped *JourneyOnline*! Visit journeyonline.com and tell us what you think. The site is a new, flexible way to digitally display *Journey's* content—text, photos, audio and video. This has always been a passion of mine, and I'm really looking forward to continuing to develop this side of the Queensland Synod's resources.

This year the Synod is pursuing a year of growing faith, and *Journey* is ready to dive right in.

Not only do we have a feature this month exploring ways to deepen and grow personal faith (page six), we will be running a *Growing faith* series throughout the year on different ways we can express and grow our Christian faith. This will link up with the monthly themes found in A Big Year, a digital discipleship program for people of all ages. Check it out at abigyear.net

The National Christian Youth Convention (NCYC) happened in January, and we are still buzzing. Our cover story celebrates the diversity of NCYC and some Queensland delegates reflect on the experience (page 12). I hope you are just as encouraged by the life and vitality of Uniting Church youth as I am.

We had some great feedback about *Journey* last year. I hope we continue to encourage and resource people across the Uniting Church in Queensland.

Rohan Salmond
Cross-platform editor



Growing faith in 2014



It's hard not to be excited about 2014 having begun it in the company of that great crowd of passionate young Christians who gathered at Yuróra, the 2014 National Christian Youth Convention (NCYC) in Parramatta. Their love of Jesus and each other, their commitment to discipleship and excitement about ministry is infectious and inspiring. So what does the year ahead look like?

There are two core events in March that will set the compass. One is the national week of prayer and fasting for justice for Aboriginal Australians—*A Destiny Together*. Information is being distributed widely and I encourage every Uniting Church congregation and member to take part. It's a key moment in the history of the church and the nation for us to truly be the body of Christ together.

The other key event in March is the national conference on mission and evangelism—*A Clear Call*. The initiative for this conference came from the National Young Adult Leaders Conference (NYALC) in 2012. They saw the need to give priority to sharing our faith; giving our neighbours opportunities to know Jesus and the transforming love of God for themselves and our world. They felt under-equipped for evangelism and asked for help. In response, their seniors admitted they felt just the same, so we're going to work on this together. Not everyone can participate in the conference but we will all be encouraged and resourced by it.

But the event I'm most looking forward to in 2014 is the national ministers' conference I'm holding in Charleville. I'll also be holding the conference in Sydney and Jerusalem—which are significant too!—but Charleville is special to me. I was born in Charleville and grew up there until my family moved to Brisbane when I was seven. I've never been back, yet I've come to recognise over the years that Charleville made me the person I am today. You know the saying, "Give me the boy until he's seven and I'll give you the man".

So this is a pilgrimage for me—a return to my roots. I hope many ministers will choose to come with me on this journey and find in the conference an opportunity to return to the roots of their own calling to ministry; to be encouraged, renewed and refocused for their next season of service and leadership.

There are so many opportunities for the Uniting Church to grow our faith in 2014. Come join with me in the journey ahead.

Rev Dr Andrew Dutney
President of the Uniting Church in Australia

Moderator, Rev Kaye Ronalds, is on holiday this month. Her usual column will return in March.

Monday Middy Prayer

*Creator God,
teach us to be a church that
nurtures souls and grows faith.
In Christ Jesus
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Moses Leth's family and friends eagerly awaiting his return.
Photo: Ashley Goetze

South Sudan tensions endanger Brisbane pastor

Moses Leth, pastor of the Uniting Church's South Sudanese Nuer Faith Community in Brisbane's Coopers Plains narrowly escaped death under fire. **Ashley Goetze** reports.

As the world's newest sovereign state struggles to navigate tensions between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups, media outlets speculate that South Sudan runs the risk of mirroring nearby republic Rwanda's 1994 genocide.

Yet the true issue lies not in tribal discrimination but a fearful head of state, whose desperate actions to cling to power have resulted in an estimated death toll of 10 000* and left more than 413 000** displaced.

Brisbane Nuer Faith Community pastor Moses Leth was there when tensions flared in December. His wife Elizabeth Leth and their eight children, who live in southern Brisbane, feared for his safety.

"It was a very very terrible thing when first I heard because he just plan it so shortly. He wasn't meant to go to Sudan this year but he just came one day to tell me he wants to go to build a school," says Mrs Leth.

Just two days after arriving in the capital city Juba, Moses, a Nuer man, found himself a target of President Kiir Mayardit's Dinka-loyal military.

"When I ring I hear the bullets going on *toot toot toot toot!* I can hear the bullet on the phone!" says Mrs Leth.

"Then Moses, he told me, 'Elizabeth, I don't know if we will meet again' and I say 'What!' and he close the telephone. My heart cut down and I just want to throw my heart and I start to cry. I don't want to tell my kids, so I stay in the garage."

Although news arrived days later of Moses' safe passage to Kenya, many were not so lucky.

Duol Thian, a Nuer Faith Community member is mourning family members. "We heard from our relative there. All of us, we have some relative who was killed in Juba. I have had four relatives [killed]. Very terrible, very hard," he says.

"If you speak my language, they will kill you even though you are not armed and even though you are not a politician. And this is why you can see that it has gone from politics to tribes," says Mr Thian.

UnitingWorld has created an appeal to help provide safety, food and water for people fleeing their homes in South Sudan. For more information go to unitingworld.org.au

**According to the International Crisis Group*

***According to the United Nations*

“Then Moses, he told me, “Elizabeth, I don’t know if we will meet again””

Elizabeth Leth



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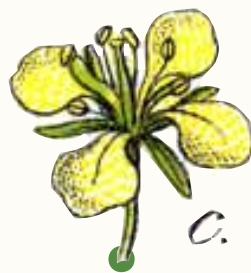
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Growing faith

In the wake of 2013's year of discipleship, the Queensland Synod continues to invest in the spiritual life of the church by designating 2014 the year of growing faith. **Rohan Salmond** explores what it means to have faith and how faith can grow in the face of adversity.

‘I think unless you know who God is through reading the word and being familiar with it, you can't really nurture that relationship’

Dr Iain Johnston

“My faith really is a Paul on the road to Damascus-type experience,” says Dr Iain Johnston, an intensive care specialist living on the Gold Coast. “In 2005 I had a fairly abrupt and amazing experience of coming back to God.”

Now attending Newlife Uniting Church Robina, Iain is devoted to developing his relationship with God and helping other people do the same.

“I started to lead a small group probably around two years ago now,” he says. “We come from very disparate backgrounds ... yet watching us grow together, praying for one another, helping one another is a beautiful thing.”

Gotta have faith

Faith, as described by the Westminster Confession of Faith (itself affirmed by the Uniting Church *Basis of Union*), is a gift of God. Rev David Baker, Bremer Brisbane Presbytery Minister and Queensland Synod Moderator-elect, says developing and growing this gift is a part of the Queensland Synod's *Together on the way*, *enriching community* journey.

“[It's about] growing in the faith that is the gift of God to us in Christ. My sense is that growing faith is a word to the church about how it lives its life and understands itself—and how it orders its life, particularly for Christian communities,” he says.

Rev Dr Wendi Sargent, Director of Studies of Apologetics and Evangelism at Trinity Theological College in Brisbane, says having faith in God is about learning about God and forming a relationship.

“It's finding out more about God so that we can enjoy God and enjoy our faith. It's not merely about

proving that God exists, but to get to know God like you get to know a friend. It's something you want to do and are excited by—it's fun!” Wendi laughs.

In order to really nourish his faith, Iain delved into the Bible.

“I think unless you know who God is through reading the word and being familiar with it, you can't really nurture that relationship.

“It's very tempting to read outside of the Bible and there's a lot of very, very good literature expanding on the Bible. That's all well and good, but there's no substitute for going back to the primary text,” he says.

Iain adds that having faith includes having faith in doctrine, as well as in God.

“I think you can equate the thing we call faith with a world view,” he says. “Our faith is our faith in the building blocks [the ideas that influence how we see the world]. If you don't get the building blocks right, you can end up believing some extraordinary things.”

Nourishing challenges

In an increasingly pluralistic society, Christian faith is not the only world view in the market of ideas. Even within the church, differing world views are common, and tensions can arise when we encounter ideas that challenge the received understanding of our faith.

David sees new ideas as an opportunity. “We need to be able to honestly dialogue with other world views and see them and understand them for what they are and appreciate them,” he says. “But we will only do that really fully as we understand the depth and the quality of what's being handed to us in the Christian tradition.

“Hopefully any engagement we have will call us into some questions and a deeper engagement with our own tradition.”

Wendi agrees. “When we have things that challenge our faith, it’s a real opportunity to develop our faith more and to say, ‘Well God, what do you think about this?’

“Let’s have a look at the Bible, let’s have a look at what people have said in the past and how have they dealt with this? And also—speaking as a practical theologian—how does science deal with this? How do psychology and social sciences like history see this? All those kinds of things can be drawn together and discussed with scripture and reason and tradition.

“As you go on with your faith I think it broadens out, I don’t think it narrows in—because you’re seeing more of God, and God is more than we think,” she says.

Stretching faith

When unexpected and sometimes calamitous events happen in our lives it can lead us to question whether God has let us down, but these can also be times faith grows, says Iain.

“I think another crucial aspect you don’t hear talked about in the church that much is how we react to adversity and what happens to your faith in difficult times,” he says.

“The Bible talks about purification through trials, and that’s when our faith is really put to the test. It brings us closer to God because it’s at times like that we really get down on our knees and seek his face when we might neglect him otherwise. That’s a key aspect of growth: adversity.”

But whether it’s a challenging world view or a challenging life event, growth happens best when surrounded by people who can help, says Wendi.

“Faith is struggling with stuff and engaging with other people. It’s finding out their stories and seeing what they’ve done in different situations. It’s hearing what they think about different things.

“That’s people around now and people from our history too.”

“It’s very simple,” says David, “[Growing faith] means loving your neighbour as you love yourself. It means standing in empathy and solidarity with those around you and the issues and challenges that they face.

“Proverbs 27:17 says, ‘As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.’ How are we encouraging one another to be the best disciple we can be?”

Beyond comfort zones

A few years after his conversion experience, Iain volunteered for two years as a doctor in West Africa.

“I did some work with Mercy Ships, and as the usual thing with missions, you go over there to change the world and you end up coming back having changed yourself.

“I think if you step out of your comfort zone—and I was definitely out of my comfort zone in West Africa!—that’s where God’s really able to partner with you.

“I think the real danger living in Australia is you tend to think you’re independent and immune from needing God’s help. That’s a dangerous place to be! I think you need to stretch yourself a little bit,” he says.

A little goes a long way

The year of growing faith is an important part of the Queensland Synod’s journey, but Iain is keen to remind us that, like a muscle, faith grows when it is used.

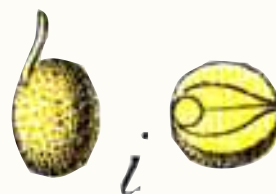
“When you hear Jesus refer to faith, he says you don’t actually have to have very much, but you’ve got to use it. You might only have a little faith, but the important part is putting it into practice,” he says.

Wendi is ready for the growing faith adventure.

“It’s never smooth,” she says, “It’s fraught with all sorts of exciting things.”

“As you go on with your faith I think it broadens out, I don’t think it narrows in—because you’re seeing more of God, and God is more than we think”

Rev Dr Wendi Sargent





Faith grows through hospitality

By opening her home to asylum seekers, **Margaret Landbeck** has stretched and grown her faith.

Hospitality has always been a largely subconscious expression of my faith—it is my instinct to offer hospitality when and where I can. As the writer of Hebrews says, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”

Offering hospitality has certainly grown my faith, just as my faith has encouraged my hospitality—and it has done so in surprising ways.

I have lived in many different countries, which is an experience that taught me to appreciate and respect different cultures and faiths. This has made me determined in recent years to do what I can to counter the current xenophobia and hostility that has been levelled at asylum seekers and refugees in Australia.

My husband and I have had the opportunity to offer many kinds of hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers and have observed others doing much more. We have ourselves experienced many kinds of unforgettably generous hospitality over the years also, which has been a valuable gift. These experiences of offering and receiving hospitality are part and parcel of what it means, for me, to be a Christian.

These experiences of offering hospitality to people different from myself have led me to ask questions:

- What is distinctive about my Christian faith, and what elements are shared with other faiths?
- Is God bigger than my particular faith expression and belief system?
- How can I be challenged by the way others live out their particular religious beliefs?
- Is my faith informing my humanity and my politics?

Wrestling with these questions has been an important part of my journey and a valuable part of my spiritual growth.

Offering this particular type of hospitality has been a learning experience. I have learned to respectfully accommodate other people's beliefs and resulting cultural requirements. I have learned that giving people a safe and pleasant home experience and showing love without proselytising can counter some of the negative experiences these people have had from a so-called Christian country.

I am challenged, for instance, by God's servant Job, who opened his house to strangers so that no one would be without a place to stay. We, likewise, should aim to always show God's love to people who have come seeking help. This will not only be of service to them, but will enrich our faith as well.

Margaret is a member of Caloundra Uniting Church. Find more grow faith resources by registering at abigyear.net

“My husband and I have had the opportunity to offer many kinds of hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers”

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The secret life of us

Trevor Jordan on adoption and ethics

Jigsaw Queensland President Dr Trevor Jordan knows from experience that secrecy casts a long shadow. **Dianne Jensen** reports.

Now semi-retired from his role as an academic and consultant in professional and public ethics, Dr Trevor Jordan devotes much of his time to the Queensland branch of Jigsaw, the volunteer organisation providing a range of services to those affected by adoption.

He and his wife will celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary next year. Together they have three adult sons and their first grandchild.

The news that Trevor and his brother were adopted was revealed by his father following the death of his mother in 1978, when Trevor was nearly 24 years old.

Years later, when he became involved in adoption advocacy, Trevor found the words to describe his childhood intuition that he was a stranger in his own family.

“Psychologists tell us that there’s this thing called ‘mirror loss’, where you look in the mirror and you don’t see in your reflection either your parents or your uncles and aunts or your brothers and your sisters. You are actually looking at a unique individual who is not reflected in any other person in your immediate or extended family.”

While the news shook him, there was little that Trevor could do with the revelation about his origins. Adoption reform was beginning, but information could only be accessed if both birth parents and adopted children were on the voluntary Jigsaw contact register.

“Eventually the laws changed and you could get non-identifying information, and then you could get identifying information, and of course we successfully lobbied and now everyone has a right to their information,” says Trevor. “My first non-identifying information was that I had nine other brothers and sisters, and that my mother had never married. That certainly threw me a bit!”

Winds of change

Trevor and his wife were new parents, members of the House of Freedom Christian community in Brisbane and deeply involved in the radical Christian political movement emerging from the 1960s.

His early years at Graceville Methodist (now Uniting) Church had nurtured a practical, personal faith with a strong social dimension. And as the Vietnam War became increasingly unpopular and anti-conscription sentiment grew, Trevor and other

Jigsaw Queensland
President Dr Trevor Jordan.
Photo: Holly Jewell

Christian students began calling for a Christian social critique which would embrace non-violence.

“The emphasis then was on the radical Jesus, that there is a Christian counterculture, and that being a Christian was not about pulling a holy shroud over capitalism or the status quo but something different to the culture and the values of the day.”

He became part of the new coffee shop movement springing up in cities across Australia.

“That’s how I got involved in the House of Freedom, because they were running social and political forums as well as the traditional coffee house thing where you did music. In fact that’s where I met the person who became my wife.”

The couple became members of one of the first shared Christian communities set up by the House of Freedom. He and his wife went even further, joining with like-minded Christians to live in a common purse community where they shared income and decisions about their lives. The group endured for more than a decade, during which time the Jordans had their own young family.

Trevor pursued postgraduate study in arts and divinity, doing his PhD on non-violence. He also worked as an educator, team trainer and political organiser at House of Freedom, and later as an academic teaching the new Applied Ethics subject at Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

The experience of teaching ethics to police in the post-Fitzgerald Inquiry era, later including a range of healthcare and social services practitioners, was enlivening, he recalls.

“People tend to think of ethics as personal but forget that there is a social ethics dimension. Applied ethics is about applying principles to our public role. It’s also about relationships and how to maintain them to be mutually beneficial. It’s about identity, who we are and the kind of person we want to be. It’s the ethics you acquire because you put your hand up to be a doctor or a nurse or police officer.”

Ties that bind us

Trevor’s journey took a new turn about 15 years ago, when one of his birth sisters contacted him.

“I then met a couple of my sisters and eventually we found out that we had missed meeting our mother by two years. I’ve since met most of my brothers and sisters.”

Not only did he discover new siblings, he found a network of extended relationships and a connection to his birth mother’s family history. Information about his birth father has not been released.

He understands the anxiety and fear behind his mother’s refusal to tell him that he was adopted.

“I have two sets of parents, some I grew up with and some I never knew, and I acknowledge and respect them. They are all my mothers and my fathers and they did things for whatever reason they felt they had to.”

Trevor’s professional and personal interests came together when he was asked to speak about the ethics of adoption at a national conference in 1997. He joined Jigsaw and became an advocate for adoption reform and the right of people to have full access to information about their family of origin.

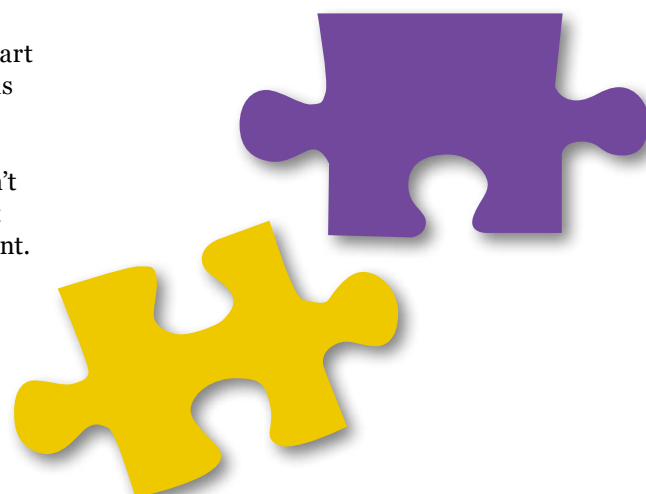
Inter-country adoption, single parent and same-sex families, and evolving reproductive technologies are creating new policy challenges, says Trevor.

“My bottom line message is that the way to do these things ethically is to never cut off the possibility of knowledge for people about where they came from and to whom they are related biologically ... the basic principles are truth and openness and honesty.”

Bringing together people without biological links to form family is not only possible, it’s part of ordinary life, he adds. “After all, marriage is defined by two people who aren’t biologically related learning to live together and create a family. It’s the same with families; biology isn’t necessary to make a lifelong commitment but it’s not natural and it does require commitment. People romanticise the role of love. It’s really about commitment.”

To find out more about Jigsaw visit jigsawqueensland.com or call 07 3358 6666.

“You look in the mirror and you don’t see in your reflection either your parents or your uncles and aunts or your brothers and your sisters ... you are actually looking at a unique individual”





What is your *yuróra*?

NCYC 2014 was a vibrant celebration of the life and diversity found among Uniting Church young people. **Tilly South** reports.

“Faith is a practical thing,” preached Rev Julian Hamilton, chaplain at Trinity College, Dublin and guest speaker at the 2014 National Christian Youth Convention (NCYC), a biennial event held by a presbytery or synod of the Uniting Church.

“We must perform the text, and when we do, God turns up,” he said.

Young people from across the Uniting Church in Australia did just that in January, taking part in a week full of worship, song, dance and social justice, mixed in with a healthy dose of *yuróra*—a word meaning “passion” in the Dharug language, and the theme for NCYC 2014.

As over 1000 delegates and volunteers pulled up outside the Centre for Ministry, Parramatta, Sydney, it was clear their *yuróra* was calling them. It was with this passion that the Parramatta Nepean Presbytery and the NCYC committee brought together a diversity that members of the church rarely see in their day-to-day life.

There were a wide range of speakers and events with delegates bustling about the Centre for Ministry and Tara School attending workshops including *How green is your God?*, *The face of poverty: why God cares and you should too* and *Honouring Australia’s First Peoples*.

Delegates attended worship held by different community leaders from around the Uniting Church including the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, theological colleges and many multicultural congregations.

But what was most exciting was the Indigenous presence on Burramatagal land.

From the 1000 delegates registered, 150 of them were Indigenous, coming from as far as Port Augusta (South Australia) and Elcho Island (Arnhem Land).

Bradon French, NCYC chairperson, said that this diversity was an integral part of the theological basis for NCYC 2014.





Young people from all over Australia gathered in Parramatta for NCYC. Photos: NCYC 2014 and Josie Nottle

Connecting, learning, sharing

Queensland NCYC delegates **Eliza Childs**, **Ashley Wood** and **Faith Chitongo** tell their *yuróra* story.

The National Christian Youth Convention has been the highlight of our year so far.

Our group of 20 travellers, aged 16 to 24, from Burdekin and Brisbane (plus one new friend from Adelaide), shared many interesting and exciting experiences at NCYC. In addition, we shared this time with our incredible youth leaders, Josie, Alison, Sam, Moa and Greg. But it wasn't just about us. In our times before and after the convention the congregation of Thornleigh Hillcrest Uniting Church in Sydney provided us with fellowship, wholesome meals, a place to sleep and amazing hot showers. We feel blessed to have spent this time with them.

Before NCYC it was important for us to consider what it meant to be a young person in the Uniting Church. Many in our group answered that they felt they were in a position that allowed them to be a positive influence that extended to their peers. That is, they are able to encourage others to engage in worship and experience faith through the gospel. We realise that being a young person in the church gives us the ability to introduce new ideas and concepts and be the next generation of leaders.

However, often in our own church communities we feel isolated from the rest of the congregation due to the generation gap. NCYC provided us with the opportunity to connect with other young people of faith across Australia and with these new connections we felt part of something larger. First Timothy 4:12 says "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity." This was reinforced throughout the week as we were encouraged to live out our faith through actions rather than words, as we all too often do.

Our involvement in electives at NCYC has given us a lot to think about. It has reminded us that living a life of faith isn't just about reading your Bible, praying, going to church or being a good person. Living a life of faith is about loving God and trusting him with all your life. All the other things will come as a result of loving God.

NCYC has encouraged us to continue being young people within the church speaking and showing God's love in all that we do.

ncyc.com.au

"The Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* tells us that we should seek to be inclusive—of men and women, young and old and of all our different gifts and skills.

"It's this inclusion that has driven the *yuróra* spirit; bringing together people of different cultural, theological and linguistic backgrounds to worship and praise God together.

"It's amazing to see, and a humbling privilege to be part of," he said.

For young people from Indigenous backgrounds, the vibrant mix of cultures and languages was just as exciting for them as it was for the NCYC organising team.

"I've really enjoyed meeting new people," said Dre Ngatokoruo of Port Augusta, "especially meeting a range of people from different cultures and backgrounds."

For Dre, it wasn't just his own learning that was so important to him.

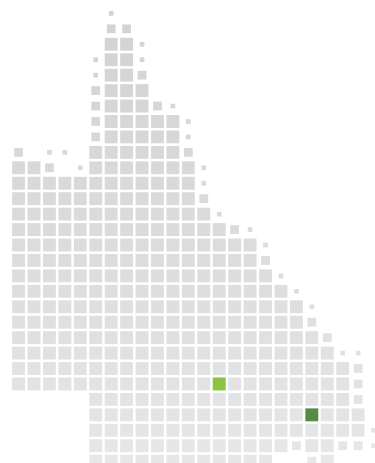
"I will try and take back the things I've learned here to all the kids that weren't able to come, so I can teach them the same things."

A public rally on the final night of the conference affirmed this multiculturalism and insistence for the common good that is so ingrained in the Uniting Church psyche.

If NCYC 2014 is the future of our church, then it looks to be one that is multicultural, inclusive and diverse.

“The Uniting Church’s *Basis of Union* tells us that we should seek to be inclusive—of men and women, young and old and of all our different gifts and skills”

Brandon French



Church partnership supports rural families



Children enjoying the facilities at the new Mitchell Early Childhood Education Centre.
Photos: ECEC Director Gavin Symonds

An innovative partnership between Queensland Uniting Church congregations over 400 kilometres apart has resulted in a new early childhood centre serving isolated families.
Dianne Jensen reports.

The \$1.25 million Mitchell Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) was opened in September last year on the grounds of Mitchell State School with the help of a \$58 000 state government grant and the provision of a refurbished building.

Lifeworks Outside Hours School Care, a ministry of the Lifeworks Uniting Church in Toowoomba, is the service provider. Mitchell ECEC will be fully funded for 22 kindergarten children for three years.

Management team chair Pauline Newton, now living in Toowoomba, was born and raised in Mitchell and knows first-hand about the isolation faced by families. When Lifeworks launched an appeal for the Mitchell community following the devastating floods of 2012, she knew that there was more that the congregation could do to help.

“The state government was tendering for the running of kindergartens in targeted communities—Mitchell was one. I knew that Lifeworks could not successfully operate a centre on our own; we needed to have local community input and involvement, especially around offering pastoral care.”

The conversation began between Rev David Ellis, former minister at Lifeworks and Rev Linda Hamill from Maranoa congregations and The Downs Presbytery, and a successful long-distance partnership was launched.

“Our management team meetings are held via conference calls. The presbytery representative is in Stanthorpe, Maranoa members are in Roma, Lifeworks is in Toowoomba and our centre director is in Mitchell. Lifeworks is responsible for all

administrative matters; Maranoa congregations for pastoral care.”

The Mitchell community has welcomed the new facility, says Ms Newton, and it is already having a positive impact.

“Children will be entering Prep more ‘school ready’ for the first time in Mitchell. Children from outlying properties are being given the opportunity to play with other children.”

The ECEC director has been able to identify learning needs, and to encourage parents to seek medical advice and parenting support before children begin school.

The local Indigenous Bidjorra people are working closely with the management team, and the Indigenous community has donated resources from the former Anduna Kindergarten Association, including a generous donation from asset sales.

Another major benefit for the small community is the creation of eight jobs, generating income across the community.

For members of the Uniting Church in Mitchell, the facility is an important reminder that “although their place of worship has been closed, the church has a presence in the town once again,” says Ms Newton. “Not only does the ECEC offer childcare and employment but through the Maranoa congregations we provide spiritual input and offer pastoral care to the Mitchell community.”

Rev Faye Talatonu will commence ministry with the Maranoa congregations in February.

maranoaunitingchurch.org.au
lifeworkstoowoomba.com



Vebui Bala with family members (L-R) Paia Ingram, Kinibo Bala and Lilly Manega. Photo: Ashley Goetze

Churches unite to form brain trust

In an active demonstration of Christ’s love, different parts of the Uniting Church worked together to change the course of one man’s life. **Ashley Goetze** reports.

Last October, a team of specialists from St Andrew’s War Memorial Hospital, Brisbane performed a rare life-saving operation on Vebui Bala, a 21-year-old man from a small village in Central Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG).

In response to the deadly tumour behind Vebui’s right eye and a financial burden too large to bear, St Andrew’s, a UnitingCare hospital; Gaba Gaba United Church in PNG and Glasshouse Country Uniting Church on the Sunshine Coast worked together to support Vebui financially, emotionally and spiritually.

The tumour had grown through Vebui’s eye sockets, into his cranial cavity, sinus, and wrapped itself around brain structures.

“I was very scared,” says Vebui, “one time I told my aunt I didn’t want to have the surgery.”

Vebui’s aunt, Paia Ingram remembers his doubt well.

“To say the truth, Vebui gave up three times,” she says.

Overwhelmed with worry about the strain he felt he was placing on loved ones, it was ultimately the support of Glasshouse Country church members that helped him pull through.

“They put their hands on Vebui and pray all over him. While they were praying Vebui said that he had the feeling a heavy burden on his chest was released and his tears rolled,” says Paia.

Later that afternoon Vebui approached his aunt to give his consent to the operation.

“If everyone is praying for me and God is with me I will go through with it,” he said.

Church members came forward to give and prayers were answered when St Andrew’s covered his \$100 000 operation costs pro bono.

“Without the generosity and compassion of Professor Sullivan (Brisbane ophthalmologist), the other doctors and St Andrew’s who covered his stay in hospital and operating theatre costs, Vebui would have had a very short future,” says Vebui’s uncle, John Ingram.

The seven-hour surgery conducted on 16 October has been described by Professor Sullivan as one of “only a few cases that have been described in world literature”.

Discharged on 30 October, Vebui returned home to PNG in time for Christmas with family, and with extra money in his pocket to begin business studies in the New Year.

“While they were praying Vebui said that he had the feeling a heavy burden on his chest was released and his tears rolled”

Paia Ingram



A time to remember

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A matter of life and death



The Book Thief

Directed by Brian Percival

Starring Sophie Nélisse, Geoffrey Rush

2014, PG

Photo: 20th Century Fox

The Book Thief, written by Sydney-based author Markus Zusak, is one of Australia's most successful recent cultural exports. It is a story set in Nazi Germany, narrated by Death and follows a girl who loves to steal books. The film adaptation, directed by Brian Percival (best known for directing several episodes of *Downton Abbey*) is a mixed success, but still manages to capture much of what made the original novel so great.

Illiterate and newly orphaned, Liesel Memminger (Sophie Nélisse) is fostered by the Hubermanns (Geoffrey Rush and Emily Watson) after her birth mother is taken away by the Nazi regime for being a Communist. The Hubermanns are hardly a shining example of Nazi ideology however, and they shelter Max Vandenburg (Ben Schnetzer), a Jewish refugee, in their basement.

"In my religion we're taught that every living thing, every leaf, every bird is only alive because it contains the secret word for life. That's the only difference between us and a lump of clay. A word. Words are life," Max tells Liesel.

Life and death are inseparable in this world strangled by an all-controlling social dogma. But life, often in the form of words, springs from unexpected places. Death narrates the film, breathing life into the story with his words; Liesel learns to read by studying *The Gravedigger's Handbook* with her foster father; an air raid siren, which causes the residents on Liesel's street to flee underground for their lives, gives Max an opportunity to rise from his basement and once again see the stars.

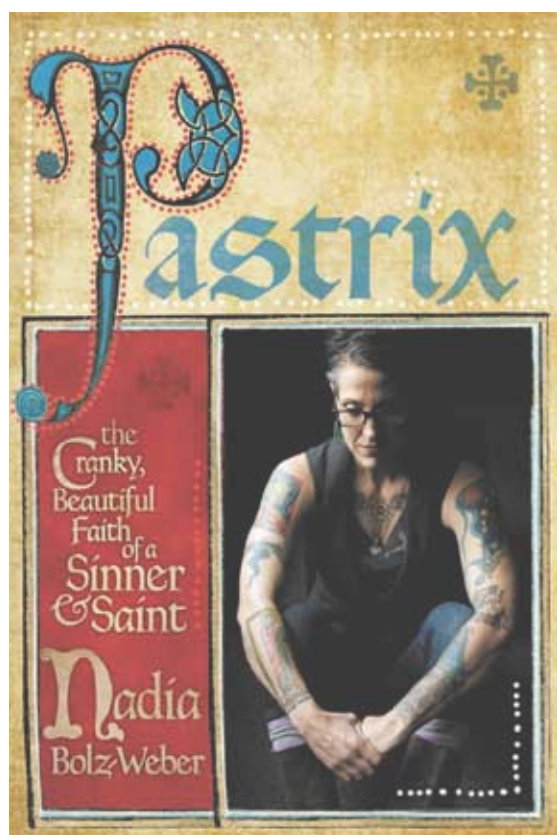
Death and destruction deliver opportunities for new life to emerge—which comes as no surprise to those familiar with the biblical narrative.

Unfortunately, *The Book Thief* is let down by awkward moments. The narrative feels slightly bloated; for example, Liesel's father is conscripted off to war, then returns a few on-screen minutes later, seemingly for no reason. Most disappointingly, Death's narration never quite rings true on screen, which was part of what gave the original novel its power and charm, prompting the film adaptation in the first place.

The Book Thief is a flawed masterpiece. With such superb performances by everyone on screen, audiences will surely be moved by this film. It's doubtless the story of Liesel Memminger has taken its place in Australian literary history, but the film, sadly, does not reach the same heights of greatness.

Rohan Salmond

Cross-platform editor



*Pastrix – the cranky, beautiful
faith of a sinner and saint*

Nadia Bolz-Weber
Jericho Books, 2013
RRP \$22

Confessions of a reluctant saint

Frank, amusing and profoundly moving; this book is Nadia's faith journey told through anecdotes from her life, with vulnerability and disarming simplicity.

The theme of death and resurrection weaves through the book, as Nadia tells her story of the down-and-out alcoholic who planned on being dead by 30, but was "interrupted" by God, who called her to be pastor to her people.

The book contains some strong language, but don't let that stop you. This story of the amazing grace and transformative power of God in one person's life is an inspiring read for anyone looking for a spiritual pick-me-up. Nadia writes with no pretension; her ironic wit is used against herself, as she describes the reluctant and desperate journey of a sinner relentlessly wooed by a loving God. Vignettes of her life are sketched out with ruthless honesty, self-deprecating humour and a lively narrative, till you're laughing, crying and realising that God is indeed "bigger, more nimble and mysterious" than you could contrive.

Many stories in the book are based on Nadia's ministry with her congregation. Her candid

accounts of her struggle to found and nurture a community of social outsiders include refreshing insights into universal challenges such as inclusive hospitality, loving your enemy, admitting failure and dealing with suffering.

But this book is much more than that. It is a powerful and eloquent telling of the gospel that strips away much of the clutter that the church has foisted upon it. Nadia bears tenacious witness to God's kingdom breaking into the underbelly of acceptable society where the rejects and anti-heroes dwell. Her understanding of grace extends beyond the mere forgiveness of sins, to God as a source of wholeness and beauty that transcends and compensates for our failings and brokenness. She rejects ideas of piety, purity and conformity that constrain God's extravagant generosity. Her stories poignantly juxtapose the tenacious love of God, who gives us identity as God's children with the clear light of Christ that confronts and reveals our true selves, shattering our facades, but allowing us to rebuild ourselves by submitting to truth.

Sureka Goringe

Convenor of UnitingWomen 2014, the national Uniting Church women's conference to be held in Sydney, where Nadia Bolz-Weber will be the keynote speaker.

unitingwomen.org.au



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Rev Dr Andrew Dutney and Rev Rronang Garrawurra lament with members of the 13th Assembly in front of Parliament House in Adelaide, 2012.
Photo: 13th Assembly media team

A Destiny Together Justice for First Peoples

Uniting Church members are invited to engage in the Week of Prayer and Fasting for Justice for First Peoples, writes **Jennifer Whyte**.

One of the most poignant events of the 13th Assembly of the Uniting Church in 2012 was the silent walk of members through the streets of Adelaide to the South Australian Parliament. Prompted by the stories of anguish told by members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), the Assembly prayed and sang in grief at the effects of the Federal Government's "Stronger Futures" laws.

Assembly also resolved to call the Uniting Church across the country to come together for a week of prayer and fasting for justice for First Peoples. That week will be Monday 17 to Sunday 23 March 2014.

A Destiny Together, the theme for the week, is a phrase from the Uniting Church's new preamble and speaks of the Church's belief that we all share responsibility for building a reconciled nation. It is an expression of hope that justice will prevail for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a reflection of the Uniting Church's commitment to bear witness to the genuine transformation of relationship that is possible through God's love in Christ.

The heart of the week will be a nationwide movement of Uniting Church members, small groups and congregations exercising a daily practice of prayer, fasting and reflection. Presbyteries and congregations are being encouraged to plan local vigils during the week and special services on the Sunday.

On 18 March a public prayer vigil will be held on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra, led by the Chair of the UAICC, Rev Rronang Garrawurra, and the President of the Uniting Church, Rev Dr Andrew Dutney. All Uniting Church members are invited to Canberra to be a part of this historic public witness to justice and reconciliation.

The Assembly, led by UnitingJustice working in partnership with UAICC, will provide a variety of resources for the week.

Visit the Assembly's website assembly.uca.org.au/adeitytogether to find out more and sign up to receive further information.

‘We all share responsibility for building a reconciled nation’

Australia Day honours

Three Queensland Uniting Church members were recognised on Australia Day for their extensive service to the community.

Robert Savage from Sherwood, Brisbane was appointed a member of the Order of Australia for significant service to business and the community for his work as an account. Robert is a former member of the Aged Care Committee at Garden Settlement Nursing Home and Central Parish Mission, Townsville.

Ailsa Moyle and Zita Sidaway were awarded medals of the Order of Australia. Ailsa, from Innisfail Uniting Church, was recognised for her service to the arts in Innisfail. She has served as a religion teacher for 30 years at Innisfail Uniting Church and 42 years at South Johnstone State School.

Zita was awarded an Order of Australia medal for service to the community, particularly women's affairs. She has been a volunteer at Balmoral Uniting Community Centre and Wesley Mission Brisbane for more than 30 years a Team Leader at the Hairdressing Group and the Podiatry Group and a volunteer at Friday Friendly.

The Australia Day honours are another example of Uniting Church members enriching their communities. Congratulations to all.

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Uniting Church hymn writers shine

The Australian Hymn Book's first international hymn competition saw poetic and musical creativity shine in 128 submissions from across and Australia and beyond. The competition required songwriters to express theological aspects of Paul's writings in ways that can be understood and sung by contemporary congregations.

Three of the four finalists across the two categories were Uniting Church members.

Helen Wilshire (text) and Norm Inglis (tune) from Pilgrim Uniting Church in Adelaide were the winners of the "general" category with their hymn, 'The gift that all may give'.

The winner of the category requiring a text based on specific passages of Paul's writings was Rev Rod Horsfield, Victoria, for his hymn 'New life in Christ'.

Brian Hill of The Billabong Uniting Church, Western Australia, received an honourable mention for his song 'Come, Spirit God'.

The Australian Hymn Book is looking into possibilities for publishing these songs and supplementary works to *Together in Song (Australian Hymn Book II)*. Details will be available from togetherinsong.org



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