



The Uniting Church in Australia
QUEENSLAND SYNOD

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Journey



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this Christmas

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Planting
tomorrow's
church

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no-noes

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Closing date for editorial and advertising for February *Journey* is Monday 12 January. The next issue of *Journey* will be available on Sunday 1 February.



Making space

Most of us know the feeling of relief finding a car park brings after driving around and around for what feels like forever during the Christmas shopping spree.

The Synod Christmas postcard theme this year is *Find refuge this Christmas*, and at its best, this is what coming to church feels like—finally, a space for me!—especially if other places have been hard and inhospitable. Christmas itself can feel cluttered and loud, with constant music, intrusive decorations and bustling crowds, undercutting the real meaning of Christmas, so even the most well-off need a space to rest and get some TLC this time of year.

Mary and Joseph could only find a stable in which to rest, but it still gave them the reprieve they needed on their journey. When people come visiting this Christmas, give them whatever hospitality you can. You never know who they might be!

By the way, thank you to the 102 people who took the time to fill out the *Journey* readership survey last month—the data has already been used as part of our planning for next year.

One overwhelming message was to include more letters to the editor, to which I say, get writing! More letters would be great, but I can only publish them if I receive them. *Journey* accepts letters of up to 150 words and a full set of guidelines can be found in the submissions section of *JourneyOnline*.

I look forward to hearing from all of you when *Journey* returns in February.

Happy Christmas!

Rohan Salmond
Cross-platform editor



Monday Midday Prayer

Lord,
show us how we can be places of
refuge and hospitality for others;
remind us that in Christ you are our
refuge and our safe place.

Amen

Moderator's diary

8 December

Opening of St Stephen's
Hospital, Hervey Bay

11 December

Christmas reception at
Government House, Brisbane

12-19 December

Trip to Cunnamulla

25 December

Karana Downs Uniting Church,
Brisbane

Surprise! It's Christmas

Here we go again, Christmas is coming. Families looking at their budgets, kids looking at catalogues, grandparents looking at new opportunities for indulgence. Some people are looking at options to help them just survive it. Retail stores are looking for the boost that they've already accounted for to get to the year's projected sales.

One of the issues for ministers in the Uniting Church is that the lectionary readings—set readings to cover the great themes of the Bible over a three-year cycle—designate this time of year as the time of Advent. “Advent” means coming, so although the congregation wants to sing Christmas carols and hear of babies and love and peace on earth, the Sundays before Christmas are about the second coming: the return of Jesus, the apocalyptic scenarios that are a shock and a disturbance to our well-secured life in the Western sphere of humanity, and the repentance this inevitable event calls for.

It's said that the themes of the four Sundays before Christmas used to be death, judgement, heaven and hell, so that by the time we arrived at Christmas Day we were hanging out for a Saviour! Looks like the folk in marketing have pulled us away from those nostrums.

There's a sense in which Christmas should be intrusive. If God is coming to be amongst us, present amongst us in the babe, in the boy at the temple, in the pharisaic rabbi who had to be executed for the safety of the people, then that should shake our plans and our presumptions.

Luke puts it this way: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

That is, when everything was in order—all the right people in the right places, according to human wisdom, that larrikin God of the desert, first revealed in a burning bush to a fugitive called Moses, sends his messenger to tell people to get ready, God is visiting his people.

And even the messenger will be surprised! God comes as a baby, God comes as a peacemaker, God comes as one of us. Are you prepared to be surprised?

Rev David Baker
Queensland Synod Moderator

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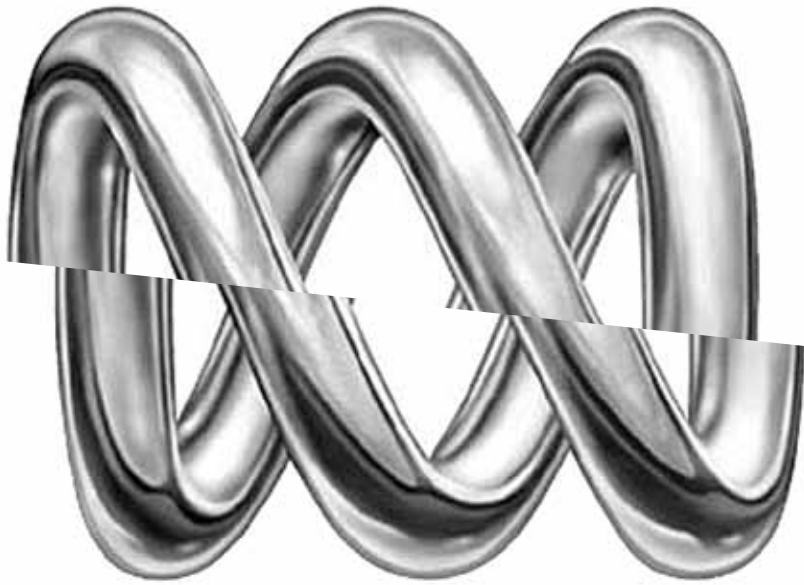


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Religion survives ABC budget cuts

As the public broadcaster pares back its spending in response to budget cuts, religious programming has maintained its tenuous presence in the public space. *Journey* reports.

Religious programming at the ABC has survived major cuts in the fallout from the federal government's decision to strip \$254 million from the national public broadcaster over the next five years.

Of the five radio programs and one television show (*Compass*) dedicated to religion, Radio National's *Encounter* is expected to be the only casualty.

Federal Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced the loss of funding—a cut of 4.6 per cent over five years—in late November, following the Lewis Review into the public broadcaster. Details of specific savings and programming changes were released by ABC managing director Mark Scott at the Ultimo Centre in Sydney on 24 November.

Mr Scott told staff that the Adelaide television production studio and five regional radio offices will be closed, and remaining non-news television production in other states wound down. More than 400 staff—close to 10 per cent—could lose their jobs.

Radio National's *Bush Telegraph* program will be axed and there will be an overhaul of local sports coverage, particularly women's sport.

Mr Scott also proposed the creation of a new regional division and ABC Digital Network, to begin in mid-2015, and a \$20 million digital investment fund.

Scott Stephens, ABC Online Religion and Ethics Editor, sees the retention of the bulk of religious programming as a positive move.

“With religion journalism now everywhere in decline, and the ineptitude of mainstream media when it comes to understanding the interrelation of theology, ethics, science and politics at an all-time high, it is significant that the ABC's religion programs have remained largely intact,” he told *Journey*.

ABC executive producer of the religion unit Jane Jeffes told the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania newspaper *Crosslight* that religious programming continued to play an important role in social debate.

“In order to be able to understand people of different cultural and racial backgrounds we need to be able to understand the role that religion has played past, present and future.

“If you wrote a list of the things that have played the greatest significant role in shaping who we are culturally, religion would come out top of that list ... The mess of life is where religion is; that makes it so exciting.”

abc.net.au/religion

“With religion journalism now everywhere in decline ... it is significant that the ABC's religion programs have remained largely intact”

Scott Stephens



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There **is** room at the inn

What would it take for your church to become a place of refuge? Think carefully, because God's hospitality demands that we welcome the outsider with open hearts and minds. **Dianne Jensen** reports.

Kieran is an ex-prisoner who went looking for a church where he would be welcome. He was a new Christian whose life had taken a radical about-turn in prison, and he needed a spiritual community which would offer a safe space.

‘A local church community is a place where people from all journeys can feel accepted and respected; where broken people have the opportunity to start again without judgement’
Beatriz Skippen

The inner-city congregation at Wesley Mission Brisbane Albert Street Uniting Church became the refuge Kieran needed. The congregation is led by Rev Dan Skippen, whose wife Beatriz Skippen is Senior Chaplain State Coordinator for UnitingCare Community Prison Ministry.

“[At Albert Street] there was no reason for me to be anything else except what I was and that was a great relief,” says Kieran. “That’s an important thing for someone who needs help to reintegrate into society.”

He now works as a volunteer and part-time employee at Prison Ministry. The job includes connecting former prisoners with churches through the Onesimus Second Chance program, an initiative based on Paul’s challenge to Philemon to care for Onesimus (Philemon 1: 8–18).

Kieran knows first-hand that inviting others to step into our lives is an act of faith.

“In my case, my crime involved property and I was solely involved in what happened. That’s not true of everyone. And it’s completely understandable that it would be difficult and challenging for an individual church to open its doors to all. But I don’t think that there is another group or belief or philosophy which is better suited to offering that refuge than a Christian church,” he says.

“I don’t know what other people see in the Bible but I think it says clearly that Jesus came for the sinners, not the righteous. It [the Bible] tells me that there’s nothing that you can do that will make God love you more or less.

So if the righteous person finds that applicable, how could they not apply that to someone else?”

It’s not easy to walk through those church doors, and Kieran says that it is important to remember that the right to privacy is fundamental to those who have experienced disempowerment.

“Refuge means choice. Freedom. A welcoming church community lets the person coming in disclose as much or as little as that person feels comfortable with. It’s not necessarily useful for a person with the best of intentions to come over and say ‘Tell us all about it so we can forgive you,’” he says.

“I’ve seen faith-filled people bumble around these issues. And it would be better for them and the community to take a step back and take things quietly. Quietly ask God, and sit with the question: ‘What do you want me to do with this person, with this situation?’ And if the answer is nothing, just to sit next to them in church, well that might be all that is required.”

Prison Ministry Senior Chaplain Beatriz Skippen is passionate about congregations providing safe places for ex-prisoners. She knows that there is a lot of trepidation on both sides.

“Hebrews 13:3 says, ‘Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering’. Scripture doesn’t say any particular congregation. It’s an invitation to the body of Christ. Prison Ministry can journey with congregations willing to support an ex-prisoner. When the congregation has an emphasis on restorative justice, and the process is well implemented, there can be positive outcomes for both parties.”

Beatriz reminds us that churches are places for new beginnings.



Sunday School teacher Elaine Hawthorne with the children at Aspley Uniting Church.
Photo: Katy Edwards

“A local church community is a place where people from all journeys can feel accepted and respected; where broken people have the opportunity to start again without judgement. A church can be a place where there’s a tangible peace, like a place of refuge; where there’s no discrimination for who they are or what has been in their past.”

There’s always room at our place

When the Tamil families first turned up two years ago to worship at Aspley Uniting Church in Brisbane’s northern suburbs, they sat almost unnoticed in the back row. After a few weeks people began leaving food and clothes for them.

Rev Subramaniam Manopavan (Mano) recalls that the mainly elderly congregation were friendly but a little unsure about what to do with real live “boat people”.

“They came without a single word of English and they were totally dependent on the congregation, who did everything possible to make them feel welcome,” says Mano, who is Sri Lankan-born. “There was also some curiosity ... the Aspley congregation never had such a thing happen to them to my knowledge, so this was a totally new experience and they grabbed it.”

The two families have eight children: one couple with four children (one born in Australia last year) and the other couple with two children plus two nieces orphaned by the ongoing violence in Sri Lanka. Both families are being housed by the Red Cross but have limited resources and no work visas.

Currently the older children are attending the local primary school and one pre-schooler is being sponsored by the congregation to attend the Aspley Early Childhood Education centre operated by the Aspley Uniting Church.

After the initial outpouring of help, relationships began to form and the newcomers became part of the church community, says Mano. The Sri Lankan mothers brought food along to celebrate birthdays and people greeted each other with a hug.

“The children come and sit with some of the older people, and some of the families spend a lot of time with them [the Tamils]. They really show affection to these little children and wonder where they are if they don’t come on a Sunday ... When they had the baptism for their children I did it in Tamil and they appreciated it very much, the whole congregation appreciated it too.”

The influx of children has boosted the Sunday School, which now has a dozen or so attendees and regular holiday activities run by volunteers.

The children are enthusiastic about their new church community, as one explains:

“I’m happy because the church people treat us like a part of their church members. The church people help me to forget my old things and treat us like other families.”

Katy Edwards, who is the congregational elder for the two families, says that the personal stories of the families have helped many church members to understand the issues faced by asylum seekers.

“Both children and adults have been traumatised by doors battered down, guns at their heads and witnessing bloody beatings,” says Katy.

“Before you often heard people go on about the boat people and how they should be stopped and so forth ... That ceased, people are far more understanding of what they have been through.”

Katy says there is growing disquiet among church members about the precarious situation faced by the asylum seekers as a result of government policies to deny them permanent residency or work rights.

Find out about the Prison Ministry Christmas activities to support prisoners and their families at uccommunity.org.au/prison-ministry or call 07 3867 2550.

For more information about asylum seekers contact Synod Research Officer sue.hutchinson@ucaqlld.com.au or call 07 3377 9774.



Generosity is a gift

Every year in the lead-up to Christmas there is an increased focus on giving, but **Jane Frazer Cosgrove** says generosity is more than that.

‘I think it is important to also remember the great value of other expressions of generosity of spirit’

When we think of “generosity” our thoughts usually go first to gifts of money, goods, and charitable acts. These kinds of giving are important to us all. However at this time of the year, when such emphasis is placed upon the giving of money or gifts, I think it is important to also remember the great value of other expressions of generosity of spirit.

I think of a spirit of generosity as closely aligned with “wholeheartedness”, in the sense of “singleness of heart” or “an undivided heart”.

Ezekiel 11:19–20 says, “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”

I believe a spirit of generosity is a gift that we are called to develop in our relationships with our God and our neighbours. For me, being generous in spirit is very much about having “a heart of flesh”—a responsive heart. It is about relating with an open heart and mind. It is closely aligned to a listening heart, obeying the gentle whisper of grace and truth.

Author Anne Lamott tells the story of a little boy who is afraid of the dark. He tells his mother she needs to come into his bedroom with him, because he does not want to be alone. His mother tries to reassure him by telling him that God will be there all night. The boy replies, “But right now, I need God with skin on.”

I’m sure that we all have times when we need “God with skin on”. The gift of presence is among the most valued of gifts.

Henri Nouwen captures this very well: “When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness. That is a friend who cares.”

Jane Frazer Cosgrove is part of West End Uniting Church. She is the volunteer facilitator for A Nouwen Network, a cross-denominational outreach to those whose lives are affected by mental health issues. For more information visit nouwen-network.com

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Photos: Supplied

Maleny branches out with Christmas tree festival

Traditional Christmas celebrations complete with nativity scenes and religious carols might be too much for people used to an increasingly-secular Christmas, so Maleny Uniting Church is using the humble Christmas tree to bridge the gap between church and the wider community. Rohan Salmond reports.

Christmas time is a great opportunity to share the love and hope of Jesus with people who might not normally hear it. Maleny Uniting Church in the Sunshine Coast hinterland is about to launch their third annual Christmas tree festival, an event which encourages the public to raise money for community causes and get involved in the Christmas story.

“As a prayerful, listening church we look for opportunities to reach out with the message of Jesus to our community,” says festival organiser Murray Robertson.

“People relate to Christmas and the message of God coming into the world as a child. A Christmas tree festival is a way to do this in a manner that is not threatening but decidedly tells the Christian message that God loved the world so much.”

Nancy and Malcolm Baker have been involved with the festival since it began three years ago.

“The idea was that we opened the church to people and groups who knew we existed but probably didn’t come in the door very often,” says Nancy. “We’ve been overwhelmed by the support; it’s been a bit of an eye-opener actually.”

“We haven’t found people to be uncomfortable about coming in and cooperating with us at all ... last year’s beneficiaries, the hospital auxiliary committee, made sure they had two of their workers with us every time the doors were open. It was just a really lovely spirit of cooperation.”

This year all proceeds will go to Blackall Range Care Group, a local aged-care and respite care provider.

“As the years go by we are able to donate more money as more people come through the door,” says Nancy.

The Christmas tree festival is just one aspect of the community engagement Maleny Uniting undertakes at Christmas time.

“We’re involved in the community through the Maleny Street Carnival,” Nancy says. “That’s a regular occurrence where we have a stall in the middle of the town. We distribute pieces of Christmas cake and an invitation to our Christmas services printed on the Synod Christmas postcards. We also have a display in the local library and have had Christmas art in our church.”

Malcolm Baker says they want to share the spirit of Christmas with as many people as possible. “This is one way of doing it and encouraging people to actually come to a church at this time of year,” he says.

malenyuniting.com.au

“We’ve been overwhelmed by the support; it’s been a bit of an eye-opener actually”
Nancy Baker



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Ring in the changes

After a career in media **Phil Smith** has found himself lay pastor to a kind of faith community not often found in the Uniting Church. **Rohan Salmond** talks to him about faith, ecumenism and the future of church.

“I have just turned 53 and really would not have expected to be in this activity in this season of my life,” says Phil Smith.

“I have always felt fellowship and belonging in a much broader sense in the body of Christ; I have never been particularly brand conscious”

Phil is a part-time campus minister at Unity College, a combined Catholic-Uniting school in Caloundra on the Sunshine Coast. He is also community pastor of BELLS faith community which, although only one year old, received considerable attention at the 31st Queensland Synod meeting in October for being an alternative form of church and a potential model for the future of ministry.

Before undertaking his current lay ministry positions, Phil spent most of his life in communications roles, first with the Royal Australian Air Force and most recently ABC radio, where he worked as an announcer on 612 ABC Brisbane. He is also a highly sought after speaker and MC.

Lay ministry seems like quite a departure from his previous work in communications, but Phil sees a common thread.

“For me, I’m a story teller. That has always been a gift of mine. Whether I use that in radio terms or in television terms or in information terms or in preaching, there is

something in that which seems to be a gift that God can use in different circumstances,” he says.

Growing up

Phil grew up a “PK” (pastor’s kid) and at 16 was one of the last people to be confirmed in the Methodist Church in 1977.

“I look back on that period in the 70s—my high school years. There was the charismatic revival under way, there was a lot of powerful stuff going on in Queensland. A lot of cheese cloth, a lot of long hair, the Jesus bus,” he laughs.

“It’s funny, I look back on it now and there are a number of people who came to faith at that point who are still on the journey in different places and different ways but are still believers and we still stay connected.”

Phil met his wife Kayleen through the Uniting Church. Kayleen boarded with Phil’s parents in Townsville when she moved there to attend dental college, while Phil wound up worshiping with Kayleen’s parents at North Rockhampton Uniting Church while he completed his arts degree. “But it was a lot of years later that we decided we were in love,” he says. They’re now grandparents and have been married for 29 years.

Ecumenism—a rewarding challenge

“The Uniting Church and its ethos has in one sense been formative and important to me,” says Phil, “but my life journey has been such that I have always felt fellowship and belonging in a much broader sense in the body of Christ; I have never been particularly brand conscious.”

Phil’s ambivalence about denominational identities gives him a lot in common with Generation Y, members of which—data from Barna Group and National Church Life Survey suggests—do not strongly identify with a particular denominational tradition within Christianity.

“I think if we are honest, there is an aspect of denominationalism that is just ego-based; we make certain choices and stand by them. On the other hand we are born into some of this stuff and it is just part of who we are, it’s just a cultural thing.”

Even so, his work as part-time campus minister at an ecumenical school like Unity College has been illuminating and at times, challenging.

“There have been a lot of good things in that but equally there are challenges in an ecumenical school such as ours,” he says.

“Working cheek-by-jowl with Roman Catholics, I probably had a whole bunch of Protestant preconceptions, stereotypes when I started. Some of them have been confirmed, others have been incredibly challenged.”

It’s not your grandma’s church

Working at Unity College in Bellvista opened a lot of opportunities for Phil and influenced the founding of BELLS, a faith community in Bells Reach, a new Stocklands housing estate in Caloundra South. In addition to referencing its location, BELLS stands for: belong, eat, listen, learn, serve.

“There were people at Caloundra Uniting Church, which is our mother ship, who said ‘What do we do when 50 000 people move to this part of the Sunshine Coast in the next 15 years? We are never going to have another million for another building!’

“Rev Dr Rob Bos, who is currently in central Australia, has been thinking and exploring the idea of fresh expressions of church that don’t have buildings and what that would look like in the 21st century.

“Other pastors and ministers from around the Caloundra area said, ‘We think it’s the Uniting Church [who should start this community], and Phil you have already got this connection with the neighbourhood, is it you?’

“I was studying with Adelaide College of Divinity about chaplaincy in the neighbourhood, incarnational ministry and all these things. The pieces really came together. Kayleen and I happened to be the two people in the right place at the right time, so I said yes, look this is exciting we need to pick it up and run with it.”

Phil says that although the Uniting Church could be a natural home for more church communities of this type, there are some attitudes that need to change.

“Sadly I have had people come and tell me, ‘I have seen this fail before, it’s not going to work’” he says, “but I sensed

something happening at Synod this year that indicates a large part of us is now ready for something like this.

“If we go back to our roots and the basic documents, the Uniting Church says we want to be engaged with other people, we want to do things ecumenically and we want to do it at a local level. Those things matter a lot.

“But the challenges are, how do you do things without a building and on a shoestring? And how do we train people for this kind of thing that isn’t the same as what we thought people’s ministry experience would look like?”

Something exciting is happening

The demographic changes affecting churches mean the future is uncertain, and a more adaptable, pan-denominational idea about what makes a church is necessary in order to grow.

“We had a table full of young people last Sunday [at our dinner meeting] and I looked at that group and thought, ‘I don’t think we can run a youth group for them. What would that even look like for us?’ But I had breakfast with the Salvation Army guy and asked if he would mind us sending them along. It’s just next door at Sugarbag Road, so cooperating makes sense.

“Last night I was down in the community garden and half the people there had actually had contact with BELLS. We could be there digging veggies together on Sunday afternoon—would that be church? I don’t know what we would call it but I think we have to explore this stuff.”

Ultimately Phil is optimistic about the future of the Uniting Church.

“We’ve got a lot of smart people with all kinds of skills at the moment. That’s a part of my sense that there is something new and exciting is happening in the Uniting Church in Queensland.

“The next couple of years are going to be really important.”

As part of their 1.2.3.4 campaign BELLS is asking Uniting Church members to empty their change jars and invest in the mission of their fledgling community. Find more information at bells.org.au

The BELLS glow stick stall at a Stockland-run concert in a Bells Reach park.
Photo: Supplied



How can I help?



All giving should be rooted in relationship, writes **Ashley Thompson**.

Last year your aunt gave you ice tongs for Christmas. You didn't want or need them. In fact you weren't even aware ice needed tongs! So today, like many other misguided gifts from relatives, they live in a spare cupboard waiting to be re-gifted. You're positive you're not the only one who's been given something you never asked for, and now that you think of it, you're probably guilty of doing it yourself.

Do we give to charity like we give to family?

As Christians we are called to show compassion to the poor but sometimes we forget that there are a great variety of ways to give, or that a gift without consideration for its recipient is meaningless.

Rev John Ruhle, minister with The Gap Uniting Church in Brisbane and UnitingWorld National Committee member, understands the damage an ill-informed gift can cause, particularly when Westerners give to developing nations.

"We cause damage when we disempower a local community by doing something for them that they can do for themselves," says John, "or when we leave them with a resource that they have to physically put their own energy or resources into maintaining. If the local ownership is not there it can actually harm a community."

Genuine relationship with local churches in Africa, Asia and the Pacific has been crucial to UnitingWorld's success in developing sustainable projects.

"What happens with UnitingWorld is that it will begin with relationships and then down the track it might turn into projects or programs but it doesn't begin with projects, it begins with relationships," says John.

"For me Christmas is about Jesus coming to us and God saying I want to be in a relationship with people. Jesus is God incarnate physically with the world and when he formed relationships with people he waited to find out what their needs were—then if he had an opportunity to respond and help with those situations, he did. But the giving that he did with people began with relationships."

“For me Christmas is about Jesus coming to us and God saying I want to be in a relationship with people”
Rev John Ruhle

When helping hurts

While short-term missions are commonly becoming a means for linking communities, there is evidence that they can do more damage than good. Fikkert and Corbett's critically acclaimed work *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself* (2009) cites the potential damage short-term missions can do when lacking cultural sensitivity or putting projects above people.

"By definition, short-term missions have only a short time in which to 'show profit', to achieve pre-defined goals. This can accentuate our [Western] idols of speed, quantification, compartmentalisation, money, achievement and success. Projects become more important than people. The wells dug. Fifty people converted ... Individual drive becomes more important than respect for elders, for old courtesies, for taking time," say Fikkert and Corbett.

Among a group of 12 from The Gap Uniting Church, John Ruhle recently returned home from a visit to UnitingWorld's north Indian partner, the Church in North India Amritsar Diocese. In acknowledgement of these concerns, he believes a trip based on relationship, without an agenda, is the key.

"It is bridging the gap between us and our partners, bridging the gap between the rich and the poor and bridging the gap in our understanding. Lives have been changed because of the interaction we had and people have come back as advocates," says John.

This two-way relationship sees a genuine growth in understanding the needs of our geographical neighbours and likewise invites them to experience Australia's cultural and economic systems.

Relationship informs giving

Back home, Lifeline Darling Downs' Chief Executive Officer Derek Tuffield remembers how giving during the 2011 floods sometimes caused more grief in places than good.



(Left) Katherine Bizzell, member of The Gap Uniting on a short-term mission trip to north India.

(Right) Ria Joubert, member of The Gap Uniting on a short-term mission trip to north India in October. Photos: Hugo Joubert

“We were in the centre of the Toowoomba floods and Lifeline Darling Downs managed a staggering 75 tonnes of donations that came from all over Australia, from as great a distance as Far North Queensland all the way to Western Australia,” he says.

Derek recognises the heartfelt intent behind the giving and the fact that people needed to feel connected to the Darling Downs during this time. In this scenario however, money would have been easier to manage.

“It took us three years to process it from start to finish,” says Derek. “I certainly had staff crying and distressed when all the stock was arriving and I remember one of them saying, ‘No more Derek, tell them to stop. Where are we going to put this?’ But you can’t say ‘stop’, people needed to be able to donate and we were the vehicle it went to and we had the responsibility to sort it and process it and so that’s what we did.”

Every year at Christmas time, Australians are bombarded with endless charitable campaigns—all from worthy causes. Relationship with a charity or affiliation to a cause however informs us for better and more decided giving.

“Recent statistics show an excess of 56 000 charities are registered in Australia right now so people have a wide choice about where they want to put their dollars and what we are seeing in more recent times is that people limit themselves to maybe three to five charities,” says Derek.

Derek and John both agree Australians are generous and want to give but that they also want to be confident that their giving is going to make a difference.

“One of the strengths of UnitingWorld is that it is actually quite small,” says Rev John Ruhle. “We don’t have the scope of some of the huge relief and development organisations but it is all based on relationships and a very small chain between the support a congregation gives and those we are supporting on the ground.”

Listening

The importance of listening cannot be overstated in a space where people tend to assume the needs of another’s cultural group.

Louise Thomas is a theological student and a member of Townsville’s West End Uniting Church. As a member of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress she too believes relationships inform us for better understanding of each other’s needs.

“Understanding is the key for who we are so we can both learn from each other thoroughly and not just the tip of the iceberg. The Aboriginal people need to understand our white brothers and sisters and our white brothers and sisters need to understand who we are culturally,” says Louise.

“Understanding brings unity and it brings support and it also brings help ... through churches we are doing it slowly; it is a slow process.”

Louise says the greatest need of her people is social welfare and that while help should be offered it is also up to them to reach out and accept that help.

Understanding, listening and researching the needs of who you’re giving to, whether that is a family member or not-for-profit, is at the heart of better giving this Christmas. Volunteering, unsorted donations, cash and bequests are all helpful but don’t be shy in saying “Thank you but no thank you” to the smiling young advocate at the charity kiosk this December.

“The easy thing to do is slip them a couple of dollars because you feel better and they feel better,” says John, “but the hard thing is to actually say ‘I am saying no because I am already supporting somebody else and I am committed to them and I have a relationship with them.’”

For more information visit unitingworld.org.au, lifelinedarlingdowns.org.au and uiacc.org.au

“Understanding brings unity and it brings support and it also brings help ... through churches we are doing it slowly; it is a slow process”
Louise Thomas



God's house should be a safe house

‘With pure hearts, let us see every person as a brother or sister in Christ, just as they are’

“Mum, I just want to tell you I’m gay.”

These are the heart-stopping words that greet countless parents both inside and outside the church. As a Christian with pretty black-and-white views on homosexuality, I never thought this would happen to me because my son was a Christian! But it did happen. Late one night 12 years ago my son drove 650 km to the small conservative town in which we lived to tell me that he was gay.

Through my fundamentalist haze, which was a mixture of confusion, disbelief and grief, I heard my son say that he had once thought it would be better to commit suicide than to be gay. It was then I knew the only thing I needed to do was love him. All but one of his Christian friends had deserted him and were sending him text messages telling him he was going to hell. His pastors were unhelpful as he wrestled with the tension between his faith and his sexuality.

Despite being an elder in a Confessing congregation, I found myself standing up at the recent 31st Queensland Synod to seek ways to make church a safe place for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender and their families. I know there are many people occupying our pews feeling trapped in private struggles relating to their

own sexuality or that of their friends and family but not feeling safe to share their pain.

The recent marriage paper discussions have shone the spotlight on the issue, but it doesn’t matter whether you believe in same-sex marriage or whether homosexuality is right or wrong. As followers of the Lord Jesus, who constantly operated out of his compassionate heart and denied love to nobody, surely the love of Christ should burn through our prejudices and judgements so that we see before us only the one for whom Christ loved so much and died for.

Let us be the church of God. With pure hearts, let us see every person as a brother or sister in Christ, just as they are. Let us love and value them as he does, with unconditional love, so that all will see church as a safe place to be who they are in Christ. Church should be a place where we can bear each other’s burdens, and in that nurturing love of God, allow God to do his work. Our work is but to love.

Wendy Campbell
Paradise Point Uniting Church

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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We all know that you should never work with children or animals, yet the annual nativity play is a cherished tradition in which church communities across Australia re-enact a story precious to our faith. *Journey* staff present the following tips to ensure that your nativity play is an angelic experience.

1

Apocalypse now

Much wailing and gnashing of teeth is caused by lack of planning. Afflictions such as Droopy Wing Syndrome, Beard Peel and Tea Towel Tilt can be avoided through attention to detail. Adequate supplies of safety pins and masking tape (do not pin directly onto heads, torsos or limbs) will ensure that angel wings achieve the correct celestial angle and that costumes remain intact.

2

Overfeeding and overwatering

To prevent accidents in the sanctuary, live animals and small children should be fed only after the performance, and then sparingly. Remember that red cordial is not your friend.

3

There's only one star, and it's over the stable

Keep a long shepherd's crook close to hand and deal promptly with any internecine conflict or over-acting. Keep a close eye on the wise men and always separate the sheep from the goats.

4

Eschatological angst

Everyone wants to be Mary and nobody wants to be Herod. Since the leading characters are fixed, finding enough roles for everyone and allocating parts requires theological flexibility and a keen sense of natural justice. It's okay to broaden the range of secondary characters and animals but stay away from drummer boys, lobsters and Australian fauna.

5

Contemporary creep

Unless you have the resources of the Bell Shakespeare Company, and actors with a memory span of more than 10 words, think hard before you decide to update the classic story. Watching the nativity unfold is a powerful, sacred moment; the wonder and the sorrow of what lies ahead breaks our hearts, yet we join with Christians around the world to proclaim the message that love still comes down at Christmas, every year. It's okay the way it is, honest.



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Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures

Interstellar

Directed by Christopher Nolan
Starring Matthew McConaughey,
Anne Hathaway, Michael Caine
2014, M

The world is dying. Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* is set in a world where crop blight and rapidly changing temperatures has caused the United States to become a dust bowl, and humanity is on the brink of extinction. Space flight has officially been abandoned as wasteful and pointless, so former NASA pilot Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) runs a corn farm (the only thing that grows). But when a "ghost" starts sending messages to Cooper's daughter Murphy (Mackenzie Foy), they are led to a secret NASA base, and find there is hope for humanity's survival after all.

Epic in both its scale and ambition, *Interstellar* is clearly aiming to nestle itself beside *2001: A Space Odyssey* as a classic sci-fi masterpiece. It references *2001* visually and thematically, making it a kind of spiritual sequel to that film. Unlike *2001*, with its treacherously practical robot antagonist HAL 9000, *Interstellar* proposes a future in which robotics and technology are actually humanity's greatest allies. Here they are willing to undertake the self-sacrificial action for the greater good which humans are so often unwilling to carry out.

Interstellar is essentially a film about the tension between personal and communal survival, and what that says about humanity. Later in the film, Cooper is faced with a choice: If he pragmatically completes his mission, he will never see his children again—which feels soulless—but if he turns back to Earth and repairs his broken relationship with his children (who are upset he has left Earth) the whole human race will die out. Should we aspire to the cool, utilitarian way of robots? It might save our species, but it could mean we lose what it means to be human.

Most interestingly for a Christian audience, *Interstellar* also explores the question of who is responsible for humanity's survival—is it purely up to us, or is there an alien power (or higher power) involved? There's plenty to chew on, but it doesn't quite live up to Christopher Nolan's previous movies. Ultimately *Interstellar* feels a little flat and cerebral, and the sense of plausibility which is so carefully cultivated in the first two-thirds of the film is thrown straight out the window towards the end. Still, we are unlikely to get another sci-fi movie as polished as this for many years.

Rohan Salmond
Cross-platform editor



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(Left) St Mary's by the Sea in Port Douglas.
Photo: Elizabeth Clark

(Right) Rev Russell Clark and his wife Elizabeth outside St Mary's by the Sea.
Photo: Supplied

Strangers love this church in paradise

When was the last time the sound of singing drew passers-by into your church? **Dianne Jensen** discovers why people can't walk past St Mary's by the Sea in Port Douglas, North Queensland.

At the picturesque St Mary's by the Sea in Port Douglas, the worship service is relayed by loudspeaker to the markets just outside. The voices from around the world raised in song usually bring a surge of tourists through the door to join the small Uniting Church congregation led by Rev Russell Clark.

The former Catholic church dates back to the 1880s and was moved by the Port Douglas Restoration Society to its current site in 1988. Its location in one of Australia's top tourist spots at the confluence of the Great Barrier Reef and Daintree National Park makes the non-denominational building a popular spot for weddings and other occasions.

When the opportunity arose to conduct regular Sunday worship in St Mary's, Russell says that the Uniting Church jumped at the chance to have a presence in the heart of town. And once the doors were open, the people came in.

"On Sunday we have anything from 30 to 130 people; about ten locals and the rest from all around the world. We have people from all faiths and all denominations, and we try to make the service as interdenominational as possible," says Russell.

"We have had people come up from Victoria and want to be married here ... recently we had a couple who came and sat before church started because they got married here last year. We just had a team from a cruise boat."

Many visitors stay behind for a quiet moment in the beautiful sanctuary overlooking the sea.

"We give an opportunity at the end of the service to stay behind for prayer. A lot of visitors do take up that opportunity and quite often someone from the local congregation will form a link with people and pray with them," says Russell.

The church community has grown to include holiday-makers who regularly return to St Mary's during their annual winter sojourn. Others have simply walked through the open door of the church in the marketplace.

"One of our regular attenders, he tells me that he was never a church-goer but one Sunday in the markets it poured down raining and he finished up in the church for shelter. That was about ten years ago and he has been coming back ever since."

The next time you visit Port Douglas, drop in to St Mary's and say hello.

“... he was never a church-goer but one Sunday in the markets it poured down raining and he finished up in the church for shelter. That was about ten years ago and he has been coming back ever since”

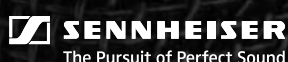
Rev Russell Clark



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Than holding Aung outside a refugee camp, Thailand.
Photo: Act for Peace

Giving differently

Sick of giving people socks or undies for Christmas? **Mardi Lumsden** explores gifts that give more than once.

Christmas gift giving can be a stressful and expensive exercise, especially if purchasing for people who already have so much. A number of organisations provide alternative Christmas ideas and ways to help others when it comes to gift giving. Here are a few Uniting Church and church partner options.

UnitingWorld

National Uniting Church agency UnitingWorld has one solution for those who want to give gifts that have a wide impact, the *Everything in Common* gift guide.

With everything from chickens to toilets, the range of gifts in the *Everything in Common* catalogue expresses UnitingWorld's connection with our church partners in Asia, Africa and the Pacific in the most practical of ways providing access to health care, education, water and nutrition.

everythingincommon.com.au

UnitingCare

The Target and UnitingCare Giving Box (formerly Operation Santa) appeal encourages people to buy gifts and make donations to help spread Christmas cheer.

UnitingCare and Target have collected over 1.7 million gifts in the last 23 years, with 61 488 gifts and \$78 665 worth of gift cards donated at Target stores across the country last year spreading Christmas cheer to thousands of disadvantaged Australians.

The appeal runs across the country in Target stores until Christmas Eve. UnitingCare staff and volunteers collect the gifts and ensure they are distributed to those who need them in time for Christmas morning.

givingbox.com.au

Uniting Church Foundation

The Uniting Church Foundation's \$10 for 10 appeal supports learning pathways for academically competent but financially disadvantaged Year 10 Indigenous students in Uniting Church schools across Queensland.

This is part of the Foundation's mission area of Indigenous Education and aims to assist students to complete their studies or training, assisting in their dreams to study and pursue professional employment.

missionpossible.ucaqld.com.au

Act for Peace / National Council of Churches

Uniting Church President Rev Dr Andrew Dutney has called on people to support refugees and vulnerable people around the world by making a gift to the Christmas Bowl, an activity of the National Council of Churches' international aid agency Act for Peace.

Funds raised by this year's appeal will provide food rations, as well as vegetable seeds, tools and training to help families living in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border have enough to eat until it's safe to return home.

actforpeace.org.au/christmasbowl

Other Christian organisations that provide gift catalogues include World Vision and Compassion.



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To the editor

Not diversity, but unity in Christ

It looks as if we should change the title of our church.

Instead of the Uniting Church, it should be the Diversity Church according to what the *Journey* editor has written in November *Journey*.

That may be a way for journalists to go, but those who had the vision of unity, based on the Bible, didn't have this kind of "strength" in mind when they set up the new name at union.

They saw unity in Christ as the emphatic desire of the Word of God and the action of the Holy Spirit for the church.

Rev Bruce Gulley
Moggill

A letter of thanks

My husband and I are new to Brisbane and have been looking for a new church/group of people who appreciate the importance of community, inclusivity, justice, and love. I was pleasantly surprised when I flipped through your November issue of *Journey*. Thank you for your notes about strength in diversity, local community projects, love for our neighbours and your reminder regarding the importance of being an inclusive church. Also, rather than shying away from potentially tense topics, I was pleased to see content about current political issues. Lastly, the mention of pub-based lecture sessions also seemed to communicate an appreciation for welcoming diverse opinions and openness to fresh perspectives.

All that to say—thank you for sharing such a nice assortment of articles. I feel encouraged as my husband and I strive to learn more about how God is at work in both our new community and within the church.

Thank you and keep up the excellent work.

Denae Barlott
Oxley

Submission guidelines for letters to the editor can be found at journeyonline.com.au/contact/submit

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Seeking wisdom research participants UQ PhD student, Dr Leander Mitchell is seeking participants aged 50 years and over to participate in a research project aimed to define the core qualities of

wisdom. To participate fill out the online questionnaire at <http://ow.ly/DLCNI> or request a hard copy from Dr Mitchell on 3040 8464 by emailing leander.mitchell@uqconnect.edu.au

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