



SEPTEMBER
2019

Southern CROSS

THE NEWS MAGAZINE FOR SYDNEY ANGLICANS

Sunday Wars

THE WEEKLY BATTLE FOR DEVOTION

PLUS

Ministry growth on Norfolk Island

To tattoo... or not?

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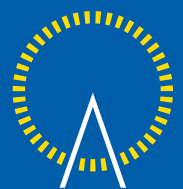


**“[Pray] that we might
have grace, grit and
gumption...”**

Rev Greg Harris
Australian News

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PO Box W185
Parramatta Westfield 2150

PHONE: 02 8860 8860
FAX: 02 8860 8899
EMAIL: info@anglicanmedia.com.au

MANAGING EDITOR: Russell Powell

EDITOR: Judy Adamson

ART DIRECTOR: Stephen Mason

ADVERTISING MANAGER: Kylie Schleicher

PHONE: 02 8860 8850
EMAIL: ads@anglicanmedia.com.au

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: Garry Joy

PHONE: 02 8860 8861
EMAIL: subs@anglicanmedia.com.au

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Christians speak up for the unborn

STRENUOUS EFFORTS HAVE BEEN MADE BY PRO-LIFE GROUPS, CHRISTIAN LEADERS SUCH AS Archbishop Davies, and rank-and-file Christians to try to stop the passage of a bill liberalising late-term abortion in NSW.

As *Southern Cross* went to press, the pushback had forced a delay in bringing the Bill to a vote in the Upper House of State Parliament, which will now occur in mid-September. Petitions were circulated across the state and in just two days Sydney Anglicans collected more than 10,000 signatures.

This petition called on the Upper House of Parliament to reject the Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill 2019, saying it "will put both mothers and their unborn babies at risk by increasing access to abortion up to 22 weeks, with no effective restrictions on late-term abortion."

Earlier, Archbishop Davies and the Social Issues Committee of the Diocese made a submission to the Legislative Council hearing on the abortion Bill. Archbishop Davies told the inquiry that the catchcry of new legislation has been "decriminalisation" but it skated over the details that it radically extends abortion in NSW.

Abortion is not unlawful in NSW under certain circumstances because of a precedent set by the ruling of a District Court Judge in 1971. The new legislation had minor amendments in the state's Legislative Assembly before going to the Upper House.

After two weeks of media appearances and joint appeals with other religious leaders, Dr Davies was able to speak directly to the Upper House Committee that reviewed the Bill.

Dr Davies said the Bill had been rushed and that many people did not know what it contained, adding: "I'm not opposed to changing the Crimes Act with regard to abortion – not removing it because [even] this Bill doesn't remove it completely."

He told the committee it should consult properly and "come back with a bill which is actually going to care for women who are pregnant, with all the concerns and the emotions involved with that, and care for the unborn as well. And care in a way which establishes that we, as a society, care for the most vulnerable. That is how society is judged, not by the way it treats the rich and the powerful."

When it was put to the Archbishop that women weren't trusted to make decisions about their own bodies, Dr Davies replied, "When a pregnant mother holds a genetically distinct unborn child, it is not merely her own body".

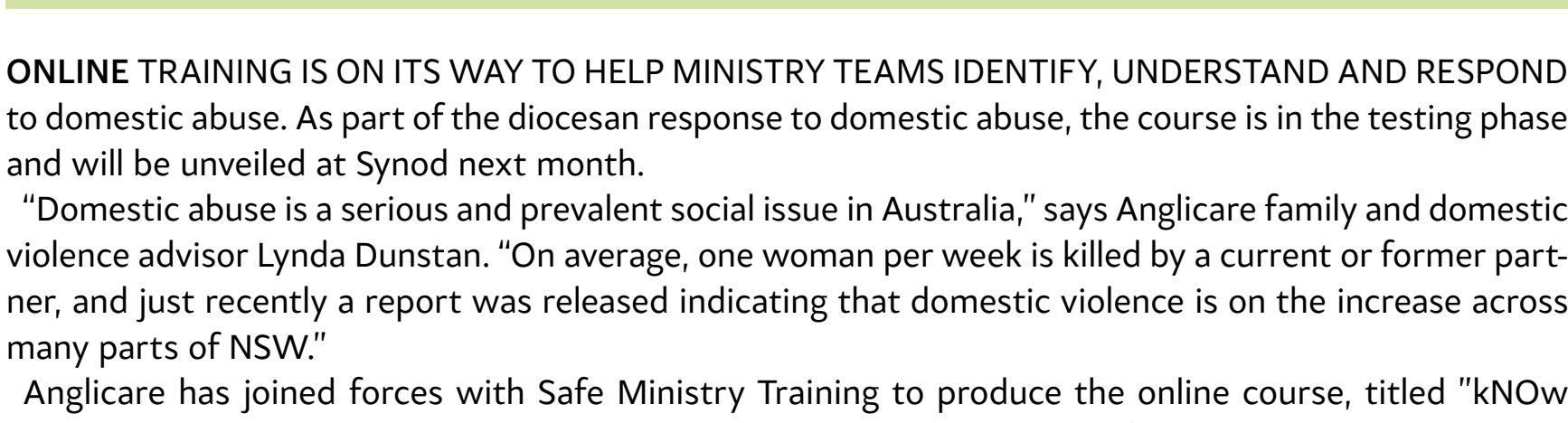
The submission by the Social Issues Committee of the Diocese argued against the legislation on several grounds, including its impact on women. "Women who contemplate abortions do not do so lightly," said the submission, signed by the committee's chairwoman, Emma Penzo. "Women who have had abortions often struggle with the implications of having done so.

"We do not seek to condemn women who have had to make this tragic choice, but there should be every opportunity for women not to have to make this choice. The problem with this Bill is that it will have the effect of normalising the termination of human life in the first 22 weeks of pregnancy."

The submission also details the way in which the Bill allows for the abortion of a baby up to 5½ months, for any reason or no reason at all. Abortions up until birth are possible if allowed by one medical practitioner who has "consulted" another.

"Most Australians do not support abortion at this late point because they know instinctively what biology tells us: that a baby of this age is able to survive outside the womb," the submission said. "The baby is fully formed, she can hear, taste, move and suck her thumb."

To "kNOw" domestic abuse



Left: Anglicare family and domestic violence advisor Lynda Dunstan. Right: a scenario from the domestic abuse online course.

ONLINE TRAINING IS ON ITS WAY TO HELP MINISTRY TEAMS IDENTIFY, UNDERSTAND AND RESPOND to domestic abuse. As part of the diocesan response to domestic abuse, the course is in the testing phase and will be unveiled at Synod next month.

"Domestic abuse is a serious and prevalent social issue in Australia," says Anglicare family and domestic violence advisor Lynda Dunstan. "On average, one woman per week is killed by a current or former partner, and just recently a report was released indicating that domestic violence is on the increase across many parts of NSW."

Anglicare has joined forces with Safe Ministry Training to produce the online course, titled "kNOw domestic abuse". It will help ministry teams understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and how it affects victims, including children.

"The training focuses on how to recognise domestic abuse, how to respond sensitively to victims while prioritising their safety, and how to hold those who perpetrate abuse in their intimate relationships accountable for their behaviour in the hope that they would repent and change," Ms Dunstan says.

"The goal of the training is to have those in ministry well informed about domestic abuse and to know where to seek professional advice to support those impacted. It is not designed to make ministers' experts' but equipped and supported to respond well, and refer [to professionals] appropriately."

The course builds on the Domestic Abuse Policy that was passed by Synod last year. The online training can be completed by an individual but has been particularly designed to be completed in groups by ministry teams, with opportunities for discussion and learning together. It leads participants through a range of topics with interactive activities, videos and text to read.

While the new course will be accessed through the Safe Ministry Training website, face-to-face training for congregations will continue to be offered by Anglicare.

"Those in ministry are well placed to support victims in both the church and local community: listening, believing and providing ongoing pastoral support," Ms Dunstan says.

"A caring, understanding response can be the first step to a victim feeling able to reveal their story and taking steps toward safety and healing, whereas an uninformed response can put the victim at greater risk of serious harm as well as doing great spiritual damage."

For inquiries about face-to-face training for congregations contact Lynda Dunstan at lynda.dunstan@anglicare.org.au. For information about the kNOw Domestic Abuse course see <https://safeministry.training>.



Joined together: Bishop Ivan Lee with Granville rector the Rev David Wong (right), and Pastor Benny Ho.

THE PEOPLE OF ST MARK'S, GRANVILLE HAVE WELCOMED 44 NEW ADULT MEMBERS, PLUS CHILDREN, following the merger of the Chinese-speaking People's Christian Church into the Anglican Church. The rector of Granville, the Rev Canon David Wong, says links between the two churches grew over the past few years – from leaders sharing fellowship, to PCC members involved in St Mark's summer camps and St Mark's leaders helping out with PCC's youth ministry.

The policy of the independent church had been to eventually join an established denomination. Canon Wong says when leaders approached St Mark's about joining the Anglican Church, "We opened our arms wide!"

He adds: "They went back and had their vote with the whole congregation and almost every one of them agreed to join and come, to merge with St Mark's church."

The independent church has boosted the ministry possibilities of St Mark's even more, as the parish seeks to reach out to its local community in a practical way.

Bishop Ivan Lee, who officially welcomed PCC members into the Anglican Church on June 30, says, "As a bishop, it has been wonderful to see how a very traditional church can have a heart for mission and has been willing to make the necessary changes to reach out to such a multicultural area."

"Bill, one of the wardens, said to me with great delight: 'For years we prayed that we could somehow reach the local community, but it started when David Wong arrived as our new rector. One of the first things he did was to change the church sign to both English and Chinese, and now we have multiple congregations and so many people of different nationalities and backgrounds coming from the community.'"

Canon Wong, who also has responsibilities as a church planter with the Archbishop's Advisory Board for Chinese Ministry, agrees that such a simple act as changing a church's signage can bear fruit for the gospel, particularly in a suburb where the vast majority of people speak a language other than English at home.

"One of the first Chinese people to come to the church was a non-Christian woman who saw the sign, and she called me asking how she can become involved," he recalls.

"I told her we were about to start up a Mandarin service, so she came and played piano for us... and she's still at the church! She didn't live far away and every time she walked by, she thought it was this Anglo place – but when she saw the sign, she called me. A few others saw the sign and just walked in."

St Mark's now has five congregations: two in English, two in Mandarin and one in Cantonese. Canon Wong says the next step for the parish is to have more intensive training in leadership – to prepare the younger generations for future responsibilities in the church – and personal evangelism.

"Outreach is important," he says. "Through our [Anglicare] mobile pantry we are connecting with a lot of people but we don't have a clear strategy to reach out at the moment. We have English classes and a playgroup – there are many Indian families in the playgroup. The next level for us is not only how to connect to these people groups but also reach out to them with the gospel."



Future vision: parish warden Barry Roots chats with Silverdale church plant leader the Rev Craig Hamilton at Mulgoa.

WHAT INITIALLY BEGAN AS A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN TWO PARISHES IS ABOUT TO GIVE RISE to a new church in a Sydney growth area south of Penrith.

Thanks to the long-term vision of the saints at St Thomas's, Mulgoa, and a church planting team from Glenmore Park, this church will be a physical building as well as the body of Christ that will meet in it.

"It's pretty exciting," says the rector of Glenmore Park and Mulgoa, the Rev John Lavender.

"At Glenmore Park we've got the people resources and Mulgoa had the land resources. Combining the two meant we could go ahead and establish a new church on a block of land in Silverdale.

"The Mulgoa people really need a big rap. They've contributed a lot of time, a lot of money, a lot of energy and effort – and sacrifice – to make the Silverdale building happen."

The land at Silverdale has been owned by St Thomas's for a number of years, after the parish sold other buildings and land in areas where few people lived and there weren't opportunities for growth.

Mulgoa churchwarden Barry Roots says St Thomas's is a small congregation, also not in a growth area, but for many years "there's been a heart for mission... and now in Silverdale all this land has been released and young couples have started moving in!"

A ministry partnership between Mulgoa and Glenmore Park began a few years ago. The parishes officially merged in April and this has accelerated the planting of the church at Silverdale.

Led by the Rev Craig Hamilton, the members of St Thomas's and about 30 people from Glenmore Park will move to the new church. They have been meeting to pray, sing, plan and prepare for the church to begin as soon as December or January, in a collection of permanent demountable buildings.

Says Mr Roots: "We've just been blown away by the quality of these demountables, and we think they're affordable, too. But we know there will be a human cost to Mulgoa in creating the church at Silverdale."

The human cost is because, generally speaking, once the Silverdale church is in place, it will become the focus of ministry at the southern end of the parish.

"St Thomas's is such a beautiful old church, in a rural setting at the top of a hill," Mr Roots says. "It will certainly still be used but not in the same way, and this is naturally causing great sadness for some people."

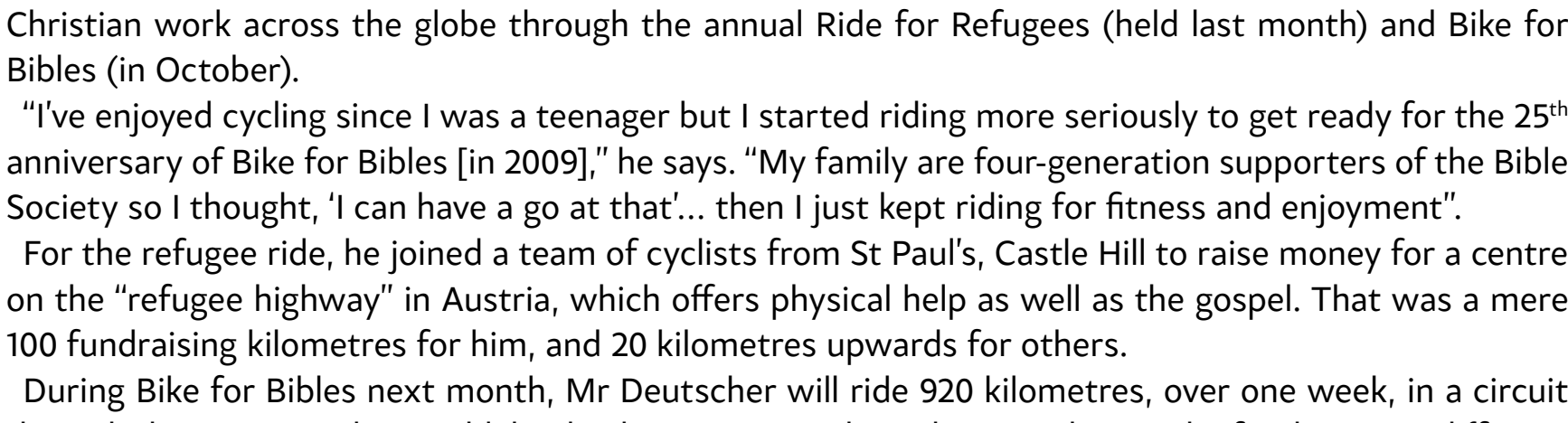
"This is not an easy thing for them to do. But God's call to us is to grow the church and we just can't grow it where we are."

The assistant minister at Mulgoa, the Rev John Mahoney, has already been knocking on doors in the Silverdale development, welcoming new residents with biscuits made by Mulgoa members and letting them know a church will be opening up the road very soon.

And Mr Hamilton says the response to these doorknocking visits has been "super positive".

"People are just generally interested in things Christian and God, and willing to talk and happy for us to be there," he says. "They're simply not as 'anti' as sometimes it seems that they could be. It's been awesome."

Biking for Jesus



Cycling with a purpose: the Rev Geoff Deutscher.

WHILE SOME OF US MIGHT FIND IT AN EFFORT JUST TO CYCLE DOWN TO THE SHOPS OR AROUND the local park, the Rev Geoff Deutscher is one of that rare breed for whom cycling seems almost as easy as breathing.

He also puts it to good use, joining fundraising efforts a couple of times a year to raise money for Christian work across the globe through the annual Ride for Refugees (held last month) and Bike for Bibles (in October).

"I've enjoyed cycling since I was a teenager but I started riding more seriously to get ready for the 25th anniversary of Bike for Bibles [in 2009]," he says. "My family are four-generation supporters of the Bible Society so I thought, 'I can have a go at that...' then I just kept riding for fitness and enjoyment".

For the refugee ride, he joined a team of cyclists from St Paul's, Castle Hill to raise money for a centre on the "refugee highway" in Austria, which offers physical help as well as the gospel. That was a mere 100 fundraising kilometres for him, and 20 kilometres upwards for others.

During Bike for Bibles next month, Mr Deutscher will ride 920 kilometres, over one week, in a circuit through the NSW Southern Tablelands, the Riverina and South West Slopes. The funds go to a different location each year – this year to Bibles and literacy programs in South Africa.

"The Bible Society realised that it wasn't much good giving people a Bible if they couldn't read, so part of the program is teaching people to read in order that they can read the Bible," he says.

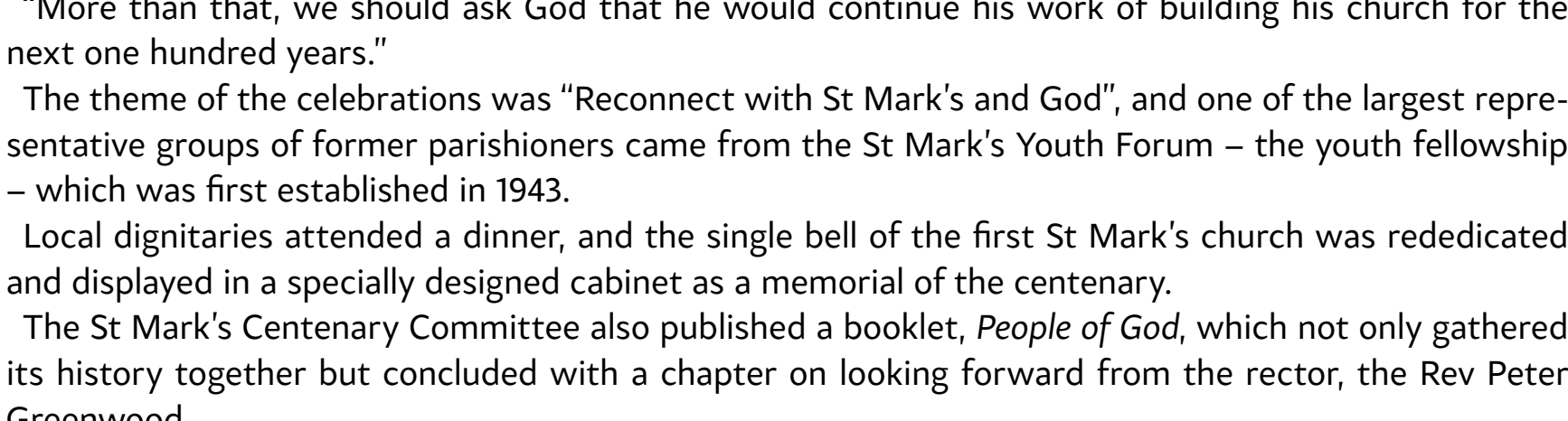
The training regime in the lead-up to these events is pretty punishing. An average week has him riding about 50-60 kilometres, but he ramped that up to 150 kilometres a week before the Ride for Refugees.

By the time Bike for Bibles rolls around, he'll have doubled that.

Cheering Mr Deutscher on for each event are the congregations of St James' Chapel in Anglicare's retirement village at Castle Hill, where he is the minister. Members sponsor him for the rides each year, and he always makes sure he takes photos so he can report back and thank them for their generosity.

Church members have also gone out of their way to support him in his role as a volunteer chaplain at Castle Hill Police Station. "A couple of years ago two ladies' Bible studies wanted to raise funds so that I could give a special Bible to police free of charge, and they raised \$600," he says. "That was just brilliant."

A century for South Hurstville



Rejoicing together: members and friends of St Mark's, South Hurstville gather for its 100th birthday celebration.

AFTER TWO BUILDINGS AND TWO WORLD WARS, THE ANGLICAN COMMUNITY AT SOUTH Hurstville had something to celebrate last month with special services and a welcome back for former parishioners and clergy.

What is now St Mark's, South Hurstville began meeting in a house the year after the Anzacs landed at Gallipoli, but it wasn't until August 2, 1919 that a church building was dedicated.

The first St Mark's was a daughter church of St George's, Hurstville and hosted services until it was outgrown by the congregation in the 1950s. Land in the same street, The Mall, was purchased and the second and larger St Mark's was dedicated in 1960.

In 1969, the adjacent Christian Education Centre was dedicated – part of which now houses St Mark's preschool kindergarten.

"God is building his church upon the foundation stone of Jesus Christ, and so it is right and proper for us to rejoice and thank God for all that he has done in and through the people of God at St Mark's," said Archbishop Glenn Davies as he preached at the centenary service.

"More than that, we should ask God that he would continue his work of building his church for the next one hundred years."

The theme of the celebrations was "Reconnect with St Mark's and God", and one of the largest representative groups of former parishioners came from the St Mark's Youth Forum – the youth fellowship – which was first established in 1943.

Local dignitaries attended a dinner, and the single bell of the first St Mark's church was rededicated and displayed in a specially designed cabinet as a memorial of the centenary.

The St Mark's Centenary Committee also published a booklet, *People of God*, which not only gathered its history together but concluded with a chapter on looking forward from the rector, the Rev Peter Greenwood.

"The velocity of change in our society seems to be only increasing – including changes in family structures, in technology, in the workforce and in workforce participation, in cultural mores, political and religious affiliation, just to name a few," Mr Greenwood said. "And yet, there is little consideration given to the toll of change – including the increase in marriage breakdowns, higher suicide rates, mental health issues, social dysfunction, alcoholism and gambling addiction.

"So, the future of St Mark's lies in its capacity to be a light on a hill in a time of turbulent spiritual, moral and relational darkness."

Centenary books are available from centenary@southhurstville.anglican.asn.au



Community: David Fell (far right) and his wife Crystal celebrate Bounty Day with their rector's warden, David Buffett.

JUDY ADAMSON

IT'S NO EXAGGERATION TO SAY THAT NORFOLK ISLAND IS HUNDREDS OF MILES FROM ANYWHERE. The local chaplain to the Church of England, the Rev David Fell, says you can't even buy a Bible on the island. And it's not like there's another shop just up the road.

"You can't just drift to the next parish when you live 1600 kilometres from Sydney!" he says. "It's a remote place. We explain it to people like this: Cameron Corner [on the borders of NSW, Queensland and South Australia] is remote but, if you need to, you can get a semitrailer there in 12 hours. Here, if the weather turns in a certain way, no one can get on or off the island."

This makes ministry to the 1800 residents of Norfolk Island, and its regular visitors, pretty different to what most Sydneysiders would experience. In addition to the distance issue, there's the culture of the place: its history of settlement by descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers, the impact of American whalers and sealers, the constant influx of tourists, and the independent spirit and pride of the locals (see below).

But the Church of England on Norfolk Island wants to grow in faith and numbers, so its parish council reached out to Archbishop Glenn Davies with a plea to help them save the island's Christian ministry.

The result, in 2014, was the arrival of Mr Fell with his wife Crystal and their children, to provide the first full-time Anglican ministry on the island for some years.

"The parish council explained that all denominations were struggling but the Church of England is the biggest and we were struggling," Mr Fell says. "For the Church of England to close down would mean that Christian witness on the island would be significantly impaired, at least."

"When we got here there were no kids in any church on the island. There were kids connected to church families... but no kids in regular gospel ministry. We started a Sunday school with our three kids and, together with the ministers' fraternal group on the island, we employed another person for youth ministry."

In the years prior to the Fells' arrival on Norfolk Island, C of E ministry had been undertaken by short-term locum ministers – who were always appreciated, but not around for long enough. Now, in addition to the usual rector's role, Mr Fell also helps out with kids' club and youth group. And the ministry is slowly bearing fruit.

"We have 18 kids at our kids' club, often 15-16 in the Sunday school and youth group is about the same," he says. "They're pretty solid numbers, so we're punching above our weight... some Sydney parishes with 18,000 people would be jealous of our numbers! So, we just keep chugging away and remember that sustained witness is the key."

"The fact that the doors have been open on a youth group and kids' club for four to five years means there's been the chance for kids to grow up in the faith rather than just be taken to church a couple of times a year by their parents... And the gift of being here means there is the time and opportunity for pastoral ministry to open up to you."



Bethlehem via Norfolk: church kids ready to celebrate at one of last year's Christmas events.

The Fells are now a solid part of the community, in a church that has a different place in the islanders' consciousness than your average parish. Norfolk Island lost its limited self-government in 2016, which caused a great deal of distress for the locals, but Mr Fell was there while it happened: hosting prayer meetings, times of lament for islanders and public servants who had lost their jobs, and being a visible, tangible presence of love and support.

He's linked up with an amateur theatre group, plays touch football and is even invited to take part in historical re-enactments on Bounty Day, while Crystal Fell now co-owns a local real estate business.

"That was a big deal," Mr Fell says. "A local saying is, 'We see them come, we see them go, some too fast and some too slow!'"

"Having been here for these years, having the kids start school here, Crystal buying a business and so on, is leading us to a place where, under God, we've been pretty well accepted. So, we're in a position to do an increasing amount of personal pastoral work with people who trust us more than perhaps they would otherwise."

The Bishop of South Sydney, Michael Stead, says the South Sydney Regional Council initially committed to subsidising the Fells' ministry on a reducing basis over five years. This officially comes to an end in a few months but, with such a positive response to the ministry, the SSRC will now consider providing further ongoing support to the island parish.

"The council and I are delighted with the flourishing ministry on Norfolk Island – particularly to families – as a result of the ministry of the Fells, and the greater contact that the church now has with its local community," Bishop Stead says. "We're looking forward to seeing this continue to flourish for the next season under their leadership."

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT NORFOLK ISLAND?

"The Pitcairners came to Norfolk Island as Christians and the reason they were organised to come... is that on Pitcairn Island they'd gone from [*Bounty*] mutineers to this almost Edenic Christian community," the Rev David Fell says.

"It was the time of the Industrial Revolution and a lot of people were like, 'Look what can happen when you have a bunch of people on an island with a Bible away from the evils of society!' They were amazed to find the Pitcairn people, the descendants of these mutineers, saying grace before meals and schooling their kids in faith. So, the place was established with this Christian ethos."

He adds that to think of church on Norfolk Island in the same way as a parish in Sydney is "just wrong".

"It's almost like they've got this founding Christian story, like America... and we still celebrate Thanksgiving here. It's probably our biggest service – even bigger than Christmas and Easter. We still sing some classic revival hymns like 'In the Sweet By and By', and 'Let the Lower Lights be Burning'. The churchmanship is Anglican but the influences are not the same."

"The Pitcairn islanders also want to be known as ethnically different to Australia. You do need contact with the mainland from time to time, but some of the island families used to go to New Zealand for that. They'd say, 'I'm not Australian – my background is Tahitian and English. I've never been to Australia; I don't want to be Australian... Of the convict history the islanders will say, 'That's British history'."

Norfolk Island also has its own UNESCO-recognised language, Norfuk, which developed on Pitcairn Island and is a blend of 18th-century English and Tahitian.

Even the links to the Sydney Diocese are out of the ordinary. The Church of England on Norfolk Island, Mr Fell explains, "is like a 'parish peculiar' that belongs to the Archbishop of Sydney himself... I don't go to Synod because I'm not part of the Sydney Diocese – I belong to Glenn Davies!"

Being a Christian on the island is also different. Mr Fell says anyone who comes to church on Norfolk Island is a public Christian, because everybody knows about it.

"You can have a range of evangelical contacts but there's no relational safety to check out Christianity at your own speed," he says. "Anyone who visits church, the word gets around quickly. So, it's hard to take those first steps and find your way as just one of the people in the church, because everyone knows where you are!"

"Some people don't care about that, but others do. I think in some ways that slows down efforts... it doesn't stop them, but people want to suss things out. Some of the younger people, they call us the 'God Squad'. A guy about my age started coming to church and his friends said, 'Oh no, you're part of the God Squad now!' But that doesn't bother him."

Keeping rural families “away from the precipice”



“Some of these local dams... are down to 5 per cent and 2 per cent: the Rev Hugh Cox at the dried-up Manilla River.

“PEOPLE TALK ABOUT WARRAGAMBA DAM [SYDNEY’S MAIN WATER SUPPLIER] BEING DOWN TO 50 percent of capacity – some of these local dams out here are down to 5 per cent and 2 per cent – in other words, the water has virtually gone.”

That’s the blunt assessment from former Sydney rector, the Rev Hugh Cox, who now lives in drought-stricken north-western NSW. Mr Cox is the locum minister at St Laurence’s, Barraba in the Armidale Diocese, and has helped distribute funds from the drought appeal run by the Archbishop of Sydney’s Anglican Aid.

Since the Drought Relief Appeal was launched in July 2018, more than half a million dollars has been raised for distribution by churches in drought-affected areas of NSW and southern Queensland. Anglican Aid hopes there will be another surge of generosity considering the worsening conditions.

Despite some slight periods of rainfall over the past six months, the situation is critical for those living on properties. Major centres such as Tamworth, Armidale and Bathurst have all identified “zero day”, when their dams will run out of water. In Bathurst, if present conditions continue, there will be no usable water left in its primary supply by July next year. Tamworth says the city can’t be allowed to run out of water because relying on water tankers would be impossible, given the daily demand.

“As I have talked to locals, I have been checking how various farmers are going and it is not good,” Mr Cox says. “Barraba itself has water but businesses, of course, are suffering and the town is hurting. On the properties, bores have dried up and dams are empty. You see big tankers carting water into farms and big cubes on the back of utilities carting water just to keep stock alive.”

The Barraba area is just one region to benefit from the drought funds and Mr Cox says they make every effort to make sure it reaches those most in need. “We try to be even-handed. We have not wanted to discriminate, whether they are people with some connection to the church or no connection.”

Drought relief activities can include paying bills for farmers, supply of vouchers for food or household water, dog food, feed for animals and even counselling support. Mr Cox notes the positive aspect of being able to personally engage with people who are receiving the aid.

“I have consulted with local people to get a list of the 15 or 20 most needy farms and I have visited them,” he says. “Each situation is different. One family lived in a very marginal area and when I visited I thought it was a wonder anyone had cattle out there at all. They were in serious strife.”

In addition, the amount of debt is ballooning. Mr Cox gives an example of one family that has had to sell their cattle. They received \$22,000 for the herd but had already spent \$50,000 on feed for them.

Yet for those who wonder whether their donation will do any good, Mr Cox is in no doubt.

“Yes, it will help, and I can give you story after story. For example, one church family said the money given to them would buy fuel for the next six weeks. So it is quantifiable in terms of quite specific needs. It makes such a difference and people are incredibly appreciative.

“But as much as anything, it is the fact that someone cares enough to do something. That is keeping people away from the precipice, where otherwise they would fall off the precipice completely.”

“The best job in the Anglican Church”

YOU COULDN’T HAVE SCRIPTED IT BETTER. THE Bush Church Aid society came full circle as its new chief was commissioned within metres of the last resting place of its first missionary, S.J. Kirkby, and in the society’s centenary year.

Like Kirkby, BCA’s new national director, the Rev Greg Harris, arrived from Bendigo to take up his position and was commissioned at St Philip’s, Church Hill – Kirkby’s final parish and burial place.

“Karen and I are always amazed at how God orders our steps,” Mr Harris said. “He never reveals the whole picture, probably not to scare us off, but he just keeps putting the pieces together – an experience here, an opportunity there, a passion here, a desire there, a random seed of thought that later takes root.

“It’s been our experience as we look back over the years that all those jigsaw pieces coming together have led to this.”

Mr Harris has ministered on Sydney’s North Shore, at rural parishes in the Diocese of Armidale and later in Bendigo, where he served as archdeacon as well as rector of South East Bendigo.

Bendigo’s bishop Matt Brain, registrar Naomi Fountain and representatives of South East Bendigo travelled up to support their former rector. “Greg and Karen come as skilful builders of God’s kingdom, able to see clearly where the people in their care need to go,” Bishop Brain said. “Greg and Karen also come as patient people. They are prepared to stick it out because they pay attention to people.”

Archbishop Glenn Davies, speaking on the parable of the lost sheep, said BCA was called to seek the lost: “We are going to be praying for Greg that he would embody this compassion of Christ in seeking out the lost”.

After the commissioning, representatives from areas across the country where BCA is at work took part in an official presentation, which included the BCA Indigenous ministry officer, the Rev Neville Naden. Mr Harris was also given a BCA hi-vis vest to represent gospel outreach to mining areas.

“I have been told by a number of people, including my predecessor Mark Short, that this is the best job in the Anglican Church,” Mr Harris said. “But I have huge shoes to fill – Mark’s shoes, Brian Roberts’ [former national director], who is here tonight, [former missionary] Ernie Carnaby who was my rector when I was a catechist at Turramurra, and a number of links going all the way back to another gentleman named S.J. Kirkby from Bendigo.

“He is the one who coined the phrase that to work for BCA you need ‘Grace, Grit and Gumption’. Please remember those three words every time you pray for BCA... that we might [all] have grace, grit and gumption to go the distance to reach this nation for the Lord Jesus.”



Ready to serve: BCA national director the Rev Greg Harris and his wife Karen.

BAXTER’S PASSION

I was saddened to hear of the passing of the Rev John Baxter in April, as reported in the August issue of *Southern Cross*. It was mentioned that John was involved in school-based education. His work in this field helped shape the school curriculum in Christian schools with a Christian emphasis and understanding, for many years. I was privileged to work with John on the board of both Wycliffe Christian School in Warrimoo and Gateway Christian School at Blackheath (now called Blue Mountains Christian College), where I was principal and he was also chairman for some years. John had a passion for the Christian school movement and the role it could play in the proclamation of the gospel, both to children and their parents. He saw the Christian school (the parent-controlled Christian school) movement giving Christian parents a choice for their children to be educated in a Christian environment that supported the Christian values they believed and practiced in their own homes.

Phillip Huthnance
Penrith



UNDERSTAND OUR FIRST PEOPLES

Thank you to Judy Adamson for her thought-provoking, honest and challenging review of *The Australian Dream* (SC, August). I, too, have read Stan Grant's story about the AFL game where Adam Goodes was abused and the abuse that continued afterwards, but the review touched my emotions and gave a greater sense of what it is really like to be an Indigenous person in Australia. I hope I can see this film. I hope I will also feel challenged and uncomfortable and pained. I hope that my children and grandchildren will see it. I hope that all of us will begin to understand just a little of what it means for the First Peoples of our nation to be who they are, and that we might slowly move towards acknowledging our history AND their history, accepting our past, celebrating our differences and rejoicing in this beautiful land to which we all belong, thanking God for his blessings to all of us.

Jan Adeney
MacMasters Beach

One of the films reviewed in the August edition of SC is about retired Sydney Swans footballer Adam Goodes. For many years Adam, as a leading scorer for the Swans, was a hero to this typical family of AFL Swans supporters and we wish him well. What then can be said about the film *The Australian Dream*, which was written by fellow Aboriginal and media personality Stan Grant? It persuasively presents an explanation, albeit a contested explanation, for Adam Goodes' loss of public acclaim that contributed to his retirement. Firstly, few would deny that the film medium can often be more emotionally powerful than accurate. The "slighter" and the "slighted" can be presented in role reversals such that tender-hearted people, Christians are such, could at times be easily manipulated to support a spurious course of action. Above all we should remain aware that Australians are a very tolerant people, and Christians are racially colour blind and, as such, might well be wary of calls to give special recognition in our Constitution to an Aboriginal or any other racial group. Our present system of representative government is fair in welcoming all successful candidates regardless of race. Would it be Christian to change this and include something like a race-based House of Lords? The film reviewer closes well by writing: "Our Aboriginal people are created in God's image, equal in humanity and soul to everyone else. If we see them as any less" [perhaps meaning inferior or, contrarily, superior to everyone else] "we put ourselves above God's word".

Brian Doak
Lindfield

WORKING HOLIDAY, ANYONE?

I write to commend considering serving as a locum on Flinders Island, Tasmania (SC, July). The advertisement, co-sponsored by BCA and the Diocese of Tasmania, does not exaggerate the beauty, opportunity for relaxation, or warm welcome. Catherine and I commenced our long service leave with a two-week locum in May-June. We enjoyed the comfortable rectory and 4WD vehicle, and serving in Sunday services, mid-week Bible study, a nursing home communion, and having some meals with congregation members. The average service numbers were in the early 20s. I was only the third clergy to visit the island in 2019, so the members are accustomed to sharing the leading and preaching in services. They seemed to enjoy "being ministered to", as one commented. And we enjoyed learning about island life from different church members as well as visiting different sites in that beautiful place. We lost count of the number of wombats met on our travels. My regret is not living close enough to regularly offer to help out. So, I welcome anyone to contact me for more detailed information about having a working holiday on Flinders.

The Rev Terry Bowers
Freshwater

Letters should be less than 200 words.
newspaper@anglicanmedia.com.au
PO Box W185, Parramatta Westfield 2150



THE SOWER

I rise each day to sow the seed and fling it far and wide.
I cross the field, and make my way, and take it in my stride.

I've done this job so often I've nearly lost my drive;
I wonder is there any way to make it come alive?
I wonder, if I put a face to every type of soil,
I wonder, would that give it life and freshen up my toil?

When I come to that hard place I'll think of Uncle Ted
whose mind was beaten down by things on which it always fed,
the thoughts that murmured in his ear, "It is no use to pray",
which circled round like hungry birds and took the seed away.

When I come to rocky ground I think of Sue and Jay
and how they both began so well until they lost their way.
And why did early joy and peace be theirs until it fled?
Or was it that their heart soil was just too thinly spread?

The thorny patch can speak to me of many folk I know,
whose busy lives have stunted them and will not let them grow:
the cares of life, the search for wealth that eats up every day
and does not leave them any time to bow their heads and pray.

But oh, the joy of good soil! How it sets my spirits high!
The little seed that puts down roots and reaches for the sky!
Its fruitfulness, which multiplies and brings a mighty yield
and covers up the open bits till greenness fills the field.

That good soil always speaks to me of faithful folk and true,
who hear God's word and take it in and give the Lord his due.
Their lives are rich and fruitful, and tell a gracious story
of truth and love and peace that daily gives the Lord his glory.

David Hewetson

FAMILY PARISH WELCOMES DICKSON

The **Rev Jaime Dickson** moved from Seaforth to become rector of South Turramurra on July 29.

When a nominator friend at South Turramurra asked him for some suggestions of ministers to contact, "I said, 'I'd happily talk to you'... so, my name got put in the mix, and what resulted was a good meeting of minds and hearts".

"We were at Seaforth almost nine years and we had a great time there. We really loved our church family there – and still do! It has been a real wrench to pull away from Seaforth, but I just felt... it's a heart thing more than head thing: that it was time for them to have new leadership, new vision, plus I just really felt led to this place.

"I felt I could bring that something the church needed, and the nominators felt the same."

Having taught at Barker College a little further up the train line for seven years, Mr Dickson has good local knowledge and even knows a number of church members already. His wife Katrina has a passion for women's ministry and was involved in planning events at Seaforth, as well as, at different times, running a playtime ministry and co-hosting a Bible study.

He says the people at South Turramurra are keen to reach out locally. "They're a 'family' – and that's been their culture. Their focus is very local, but they have always had a passion for international mission as well and those two things coexist quite happily."

Mr Dickson is particularly excited by the "legendary" Green Tent kids and youth mission, which has been run in January for decades and brings the whole parish together.

"It's something they all love and are committed to, and I was just told today that for the 2020 mission they have 68 potential leaders – and most of them are from St Philip's!" he says. "It really highlights their desire over a long period of time to reach local people and local families.

"We're excited, I'm excited, and filled with energy and optimism about this new season of life and ministry. And people have been really welcoming and have gone above and beyond in paving the way for us to come."



CHAPLAINS FOR BANKSTOWN AND CONCORD

Two new chaplains have begun working for Anglicare in Sydney hospitals.

The **Rev Kerrie Newmarch**, who has a teaching background, has been a chaplain at the Professional Standards Unit and manager of church engagement and training at Anglican Deaconess Ministries, will be working part-time at Bankstown Hospital.

"I was encouraged by my local ministers to apply for the position, and we only live a couple of blocks away," she says. "So, coming back to where we've lived for the past 35 years, working close to home and working with ministers in the Georges River Region, is a delight for me.

"It is such a multicultural area and we as a family have really been able to embrace that... it's a beautiful thing to be with such a diverse group of people. I really enjoy that diversity and I've learned that people are open when their life takes a turn that they don't expect. And God gives us the ability to be there for them and care for their needs."

Mrs Newmarch and her husband Graham attend the Church of the Good Shepherd in Greenacre, so Bankstown Hospital is their local hospital. She describes it as a real "community" place – and would love to hear from ministers in the region when one of their parishioners is in hospital.

"As I've told my neighbours I'm doing this, many are very excited that I'm going to be working at the hospital," she says. "They're not Christian but they know there will be a local person who they can call on if they need to – they're very happy about that! So, I feel like God's already preparing the way."



Bridget Roberts began working part-time at Concord Mental Health Hospital in June.

She has been a long-term volunteer in a range of chaplaincy areas – including hospital, prison and disaster recovery – and also spent a number of months over the summer as a locum chaplain at Concord, so is very happy to have taken up a more permanent role there.

Although she remembers feeling apprehensive as her locum role at Concord began, "when it came to being on the ward it was as if all my fears left me. This confirmed to me I was where God wanted me to be.

"The needs are great among all those who are marginalised in our society. The great gift we have as chaplains is time... being present is crucial, [being] there to listen to whatever it may be. There is much to be said for a friendly face that speaks, 'I care and I'm here for you'.

She adds that people are most comfortable when they feel their lives are under their own control, "but when everything we rely on is stripped away the question can often be, 'Why?'"

"As chaplains we often have the privilege to speak into people's lives the love, hope and peace found in Jesus and share the great gospel of God's grace.

"I feel there are so many amazing opportunities to minister in this setting, and that's exciting."



LAYSON TO INVESTIGATE MORAL INJURY

After 11 years as rector of Ashbury in the inner-western suburbs, the **Rev Mark Layson** has stepped down from his leader's role to study for a graduate diploma in Psychology, in preparation for doctoral research. The focus of his study will be moral injury in the first responder community.

"I'm a former policeman and former firefighter, and I've been a chaplain with NSW Ambulance for seven years now – five of those with the aeromedical unit – and I've just seen so many people diagnosed with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]," he says.

Mr Layson believes that something is missing in our current understanding of PTSD – hence his research.

"The idea of moral injury has come up in the United States, of things that cause a big dent in your soul," he says. "It does overlap with PTSD, although PTSD is more about fear and anxiety, while moral injury is more about shame – a guilt and, I think, also an anger at those who've perpetrated the wrong, if you're a victim of the wrong.

"So, the plan is to spend a decent amount of time trying to work out a theology of where moral injury comes from, a good framework for chaplains to respond to it and provide counselling in relation to it, to recognise it as distinct from what's now called PTSD. To give the psychologists just a little bit of a nudge that there's something else going on here as well."

The Laysons haven't left Ashbury, as they plan to attend its evening service as a family for the immediate future.

"We got there when the kids were very young and they're all teenagers now, so they grew up at Ashbury," Mr Layson says. "It was a St Matthias' church plant from many years ago, which moved into the empty church building about two years after the church had closed.

"When I took over some years later there was a thriving children's ministry but no youth, so we've managed to develop a youth ministry over these years. There are now 30-40 youth and an evening service, which is small but growing, and the kids feel at home there.

"We've had a great time at Ashbury. It's been a really good group to do ministry with and to watch it grow from a church plant into a parish."



SHEADS OFF TO CAMBRIDGE PARK

Next month the **Rev David Shead** will become rector of the parish of Cambridge Park, north-east of Penrith.

He has spent the past eight years as assistant minister of Lower Mountains Anglican Parish, after a fairly peripatetic existence with his wife Bronwyn and their children while they were missionaries in Slovenia with CMS.

"We moved around a lot and moved the kids a lot with CMS, and when our oldest son got into Year 8 it was the first time in his life he'd had a second consecutive year without a schooling change!" Mr Shead recalls.

"We moved here [Lower Mountains] when he was in Year 9, and said we'll let you all get through the rest of high school and then we'd think about moving."

Any potential moves before that time were placed before the Lord anyway, but while the Sheads were open to going elsewhere they were also content to stay and serve at LMAP. However, when the nominators from Cambridge Park made contact, they got Mr Shead's attention pretty quickly.

"There were certain things that impressed me – first of all, their genuine care for one another," he says. "The nominators represented, I felt, the different congregations and generations, and when I asked them – apart from what they sent out in the parish profile – what they each individually wanted from their rector, they tended to answer on behalf of a group other than their own. I thought that showed a lovely generosity of spirit.

"Also, in that context, they were very keen to move forward in gospel ministry and, again, that's a healthy thing to do... They're looking for someone to teach them carefully and faithfully and they're looking for someone to get alongside them to encourage them, to give them some direction and vision for reaching Cambridge Park for Christ. In a sense, anyone could go there, but I'm pleased they've invited me to do it."

Bronwyn Shead works full-time as a speech pathologist but, Mr Shead says, over their years at LMAP has also co-ordinated kids' ministry in a branch church, led Bible studies and "just been behind the scenes relationally caring for people".

"At Cambridge Park that's part of the excitement: to see what shape her ministry will take without kids in tow. We're looking forward to doing a fair bit of hospitality in the first instance, but will wait and see when we get down there what kind of discipleship or outreach that Bronwyn will be involved in."

The parish is already busy with SRE commitments and children's work, and Mr Shead is hoping to provide greater resources for ministry to adults.

"I'm also looking forward to an opportunity to encourage and mobilise a team of lay people at the parish... encouraging the saints and pulling together in ministry," he says.



Who makes a good prison chaplain?

STEPHEN GIBSON

IT'S A GOOD QUESTION TO ASK IF YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT WAYS IN WHICH YOU CAN SERVE God in the future. Those in prison are out of sight, and most definitely out of mind, of most Australians. But they still need to hear about the love of Jesus.

There are certain skills and life experiences – even a certain type of background – that you might expect a prison chaplain should have. But let's look at three people working in the area for Anglicare and see if this doesn't shift your thinking a little.

Does a former Kings Cross bouncer make a good prison chaplain?

Steve House serves as the Anglicare prison chaplain at Silverwater Correctional Centre. Steve has met guys in jail who he has had contact with, good and bad, in his employment as a doorman in the clubs of Western Sydney and Kings Cross.

But the more important thing about Steve is that he is gripped by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which changes lives on the inside.

Steve came to Christ at Minchinbury Anglican, where he recently went back to preach on an Anglicare deputation. He now goes daily into Silverwater MRRC (Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre) and walks and talks that gospel of God's grace in prison.

I was with Steve on a recent Sunday morning chapel and more than one prisoner shook my hand (as his manager at Anglicare) and said, "Thanks for sending us Steve".

Does a former tradie and missionary make a good prison chaplain?

Geoff Boye grew up in the Shire and worked as an electrician, and in youth ministry, before studying at Sydney Missionary and Bible College and serving as a missionary with CMS in Tanzania. Geoff and his family have now returned to the beautiful South Coast of NSW, but each day Geoff "goes to jail" at the South Coast Correctional Centre.

The SCCC is often not seen behind the furniture shops in South Nowra as you head down the Princes Highway, but it is a large prison that has just increased in size, and the NSW Government has increased the subsidy for chaplaincy. The Presbyterian Church has just appointed Todd Galvin, a pastor from Newcastle, who trained at Moore College.

Geoff and Todd are new colleagues together, seeking to witness to Christ's love and grace, and support prisoners and staff, in a ministry that is often hidden but vital.

Of the 36 Anglicare chaplains in health and justice, we have half a dozen who are former missionaries. Why? Missionaries are used to crossing cultures. Prisons and hospitals have their own culture, which must be understood if your ministry is to be effective. Former missionaries get that.

Does a former chartered accountant at Price Waterhouse make a good prison chaplain?

The Rev Colin Sheehan has been a rector and assistant minister at Seaforth, Cairns and Holy Trinity Adelaide, before going to jail 10 years ago as one of our two Anglicare chaplains at Long Bay.

Colin, as an assistant minister at Seaforth in the early 1990s, helped our Diocese bring in Ministry Expense Accounts (MEAs), for which all clergy and church workers are very thankful. He brings to prison ministry a very pastoral heart and a caring precision. At Long Bay, Colin has his small notebook in his top pocket and pastoral notes are made – an eye for detail to follow up prisoners' concerns and inquiries in a wonderfully helpful way.

Colin's pastoral follow-through has been an example to other chaplains, and a blessing to Anglicare more broadly, as we seek to integrate our services and assist people so that no one slips through the cracks or is hidden in the shadows.

So, who makes a good prison chaplain? Perhaps you do. As you can see there is no stereotype – our God can use us all in his service. What we need most is a love for Jesus and a pastoral heart.

Here are three ways to help our prison and hospital chaplains:

- 1 **Adopt a chaplain as a link missionary.** Each chaplain is seeking at least two link churches where they visit at least once a year and give an update on their ministry.
- 2 **Pray for prison and hospital ministries.** Include a chaplain in the cycle of prayers at your church and individually (eg. pray for Tanzania one week and Long Bay the next).
- 3 **Volunteer.** There are opportunities to volunteer in prison or hospital chaplaincy. Anglicare offers training through its Introduction to Pastoral Care course.

The Rev Stephen Gibson is the manager of Health and Justice Chaplaincy at Anglicare Sydney. For information about training as a volunteer, click on "events, courses and training" at www.anglicare.org.au

Giving voice to the voiceless

DR GLENN DAVIES



LAST MONTH I WROTE ABOUT DISABILITY IN MISSION. MY REASON FOR WRITING was to explore and explode the myth that those who have disabilities are prevented from serving Christ in his mission. Rather, I argued that opportunities to serve Christ abound for everyone who has put their trust in the Saviour.

Undergirding these remarks was the fundamental truth that all humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9), regardless of any physical, emotional or psychological disabilities. They are precious in his sight and so they should be precious in ours. Sadly, this is not the case in Iceland, which is leading the world in the eradication of Down Syndrome, not through medical research, but through abortion.

Little did I realise that at the beginning of August a private member's Bill would be introduced into the Legislative Assembly of NSW which would legalise the prevalence of abortion where a mother is up to 5½ months pregnant. Touted as merely "decriminalising" abortion, it effectively opens the flood-gates to abortion in NSW.

Couched in the misleading language of "reproductive health care" the Bill seeks to normalise abortion in our society without any respect for the unborn child, but merely at the indiscriminate wishes of the mother. She does not even have to give a reason for desiring the termination of her baby's life.

There is no doubt that the subject of abortion is an emotive topic. When discussing this issue we need to be mindful of those who have had an abortion. It is never an easy decision, and it is one that we should only discuss with compassion and care for those who have chosen to have this procedure or are facing the prospect thereof.

Yet, it takes two to conceive a child, and therefore in my view it should not be the decision of the mother alone (cf 1 Corinthians 7:4). The child is not part of her body, as some would argue with the misleading and vulgar slogan of "My uterus, my choice!" The baby in the womb is a distinct, genetic entity temporarily living in her mother's womb.

This is where we all began – in our mother's womb. We were vulnerable, but safe; we were alive, but dependent; growing but not sufficiently grown; awaiting the day of our birth and our entrance into the outside world.

The intentional death of a child outside the womb is not just a matter for the mother or father to decide; it is a matter that concerns all society. A few months' difference in gestation does not change this perspective.

The Bible is very clear about the value to God of a child in utero. Apart from the legislation in Exodus 21, a careful reading of which recognises the inherent worth of a child in utero with penalties applying to a person causing a miscarriage, the psalms speak eloquently of our formation in the womb and of God's knowledge of us.

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.*

Psalm 139:13-16

Likewise, David recognised not only his personhood from conception, but also his culpability as part of rebellious humanity (Psalm 51:5).

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit even before he was born (Luke 1:15). Upon Elizabeth's hearing of Mary's pregnancy, the "baby leaped in her womb" (Luke 1:41). This was no mere foetal kick, for John "leaped for joy" (v.44), a Spirit-inspired response to the announcement of the Messiah's coming into the world.

Indeed, just as John the Baptist was described as a "baby" before he was born, Scripture regularly uses the same language of those in the womb as would apply to those already born (cf Genesis 25:22; 38:27ff; Job 1:21; 3:3, 11ff; 10:18f; 31:15; Isaiah 44:2, 24; 49:5; Jeremiah 20:14-18; Hosea 12:3). We do the same when we declare: "You're having a baby".

When I appeared before the Legislative Council's Committee on Social Issues last month, I argued that decriminalisation was not our chief concern. Our concern was for the life of the unborn, which could be callously terminated through this legislation, for no given reason.

Christians have long recognised that where the life and safety of the mother is jeopardised, then the removal of the baby, the unintentional aggressor from within, justifies abortion.

While some Christians may wish to expand the categories of exceptions, the inherent value of the unborn must not be minimised, even if the child does not fit the expectations of a "perfect baby" without chromosomal deficiencies.

Life is God's gift, and the taking of life should be in God's hands alone. We honour God in the public arena when we reflect his virtues and stand up for the most vulnerable in our society and, in this case, the voiceless and unseen.

SC

A PRAYER FOR MISSION 2020

Our heavenly Father, fill our lives with the fruit of your Spirit, so that we may walk in joyful obedience, share your love by word and deed, and see Christ honoured in every community as Lord and Saviour.

Amen

The weekly church battle

It's hard in our modern world to be at church each week – but there are good reasons why we should be, writes **ANTONY BARRACLOUGH**.

HERE'S AN OLD JOKE THAT GOES LIKE THIS:

A minister arrived late for his clergy fraternal meeting, bursting through the doors saying: "Sorry I'm late, guys, I've had a huge problem with bats in my bell tower. No matter what I try I just can't get rid of them."

The Catholic priest was the first to speak, saying: "Brother, I can help you there. I'll bring some incense over and stoke it up – I mean, to toxic levels, and we'll smoke the bats out". To which the Pentecostal pastor pipes up and says: "If that doesn't work, I can come over and we'll cast them out in the name of Jesus!" To which the Presbyterian minister responded, "No, no, that wouldn't be proper. We'll form two committees. One to investigate the nesting behaviour of bats and the other to report on the structural aspects of your bell tower. We'll devise a sure-fire plan to get rid of them within two months."

Finally, the Anglican minister speaks up. "Friends, you have no idea what you are talking about. We'll baptise them. Confirm them. We'll never see them again!"

Boom-tish!

The truth is that every Sunday morning, in the hours before church services start all over our city, there is a real and deep spiritual war taking place. It is not overt. It is not remarkable. In those hours, committed Christians are deciding whether or not to attend church. Many will be at church rain, hail or shine but, for an increasing number of us, there will be a pause to think, to question if we'll go to the beach, to kids' sport, to the car club outing, to the family party or to church. The list goes on.

I think Satan is at play here. Good things are interfering with our commitment to the public worship of the Lord.

We are aware that nominal Christians have left the church in droves over past decades. At the same time, many ministers will tell you that committed Christians are attending less frequently. Anecdotally, the committed Christian used to go to church twice a Sunday, whereas now it seems the same group averages about twice a month.

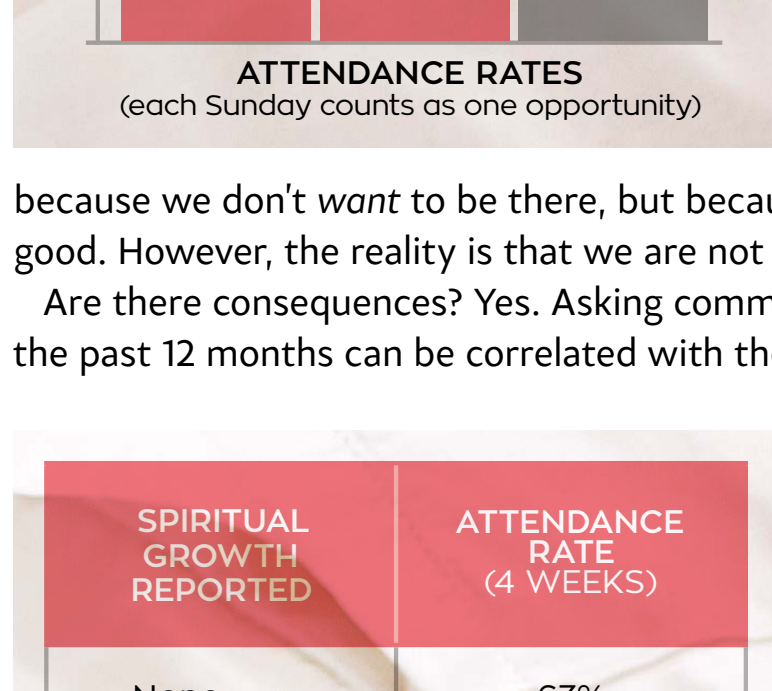
Is this a new malaise in Christian discipleship? Or is the world so much busier than before and we need to go with the flow a bit? Or is it something else?

Let's look at what the attendance figures show, explore what might be behind them and then conclude with some pointers to begin to address the situation.

HOW OFTEN ARE WE ATTENDING CHURCH?

Before you read any further, take a moment to reflect how often you've been to your church in the past month – not at all, once, twice, or three or four times? Now, think a bit further back into the past three months. How many weeks have you missed (out of 12) and why?

In my doctoral studies on the issue I surveyed a number of Sydney Anglican parishes. I asked a good number of committed Christians (not new converts, who considered parish X to be their church and served and/or supported the ministry in a range of ways) to report how often they were at church in a one-month and a three-month period. They self-reported the following:



It's interesting how the figure rises over time.

Anyway, this averages out at an 84 per cent attendance rate. When I asked the rectors how often the same people attended church, the average attendance rate fell to 67 per cent. Not an insignificant difference.

In every case, the rector reported that the people in the survey were at church less often than their self-reported figures. In other words, we have a positive bias or inflated opinion about our attendance rates.

I suspect this is due to the commitment we have made in our hearts to our local church. We're in, we're committed, we give, we go to Bible study

and a failure to attend church once in a while is not

because we don't want to be there, but because something else got in the way. At one level this is good. However, the reality is that we are not attending church as much as we think.

Are there consequences? Yes. Asking committed Christians to report their own spiritual growth over the past 12 months can be correlated with their attendance rate.

| SPIRITUAL GROWTH REPORTED | ATTENDANCE RATE (4 WEEKS) |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| None | 63% |
| Slight | 82% |
| Moderate | 81% |
| Much | 90% |

There is a correlation between lower church attendance and lower spiritual growth. It stands to reason. If you are not consistently placing yourself under the sound of the gospel or in the fellowship of believers, you'll notice a spiritual impact. Notice, too, how those who experience much spiritual growth attend more often than the average. It's interesting that the only passage in the New Testament to directly address the question of church attendance is immediately followed by one of the strongest warnings of the whole book:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching. If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God (Hebrews 10:24-26).

The point is that church attendance is one of those necessary spiritual disciplines – not for salvation, but because of salvation, so we may continue well in the faith. Therefore, Hebrews exhorts us to not give up meeting together. This is much more than friendly advice.

BEHIND THE FIGURES

What's the story behind the story?

There is no doubt the world has changed since the '50s and '60s, when the only thing to do on a Sunday was go to church or a church-run event. A number of our older parishes would have cupboards full of sporting trophies from the days when church organised the Saturday tennis comp, the cricket matches and so on.

Back in the day church was the only social organiser. But with the mass availability of the car and TV, things began to change. Now there are alternatives, now there is competition to church. Today, in a post-Christian climate, people gather at the modern temples: shopping centres, beaches, fun runs, restaurants...

However, the change in society is deeper than the accessibility of alternatives to church. Sociologists and commentators have pointed to the influence of radical individualism since the sexual revolution. We are swimming in a culture which preaches "be true to yourself".

In his book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes us as living in the Age of Authenticity while Glynn Harrison, in *A Better Story*, says that this age of "freedom [is] for the sake of authenticity and becoming your true self. This moral quest isn't simply being honest about your inner feelings and thoughts. It is saying that when you express these inner realities truly, authentically, you work with the grain of who you really are. Expressing your inner self in this way, being who you really are, is about being fully human. It is your moral duty".

So, when nominal Christians began to live "authentically" they left the church! Of course! They weren't committed to Jesus. But when committed Christians breathed in the second-hand smoke of the same authentic/individualistic culture we changed our attendance frequency. We tried to keep up with the non-Christian Joneses. To an extent, we filled our lives with what they filled their lives with, but without stopping church altogether, and got exceedingly busy in the process. Something has to give.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to clarify the gospel against spiritual forms of works-righteousness, we taught from our pulpits that you don't have to go to church to be a Christian. True, but the message received was "Great, I don't have to be at church every Sunday". Conclusion: "I can be true to myself and fit it all in without compromising my commitment to Jesus". Result: we attend church, on average, at 67 per cent of all possible opportunities but think we go more often.

REASONS GIVEN FOR MISSING CHURCH



When asked why they missed church, people's answers were interesting. By far, the main reasons a committed Christian misses church are holidays and illness. But then there were many other reasons given:

- tiredness
- sunny weather
- inclement weather
- kids' sport
- Granny's birthday party
- kids' illness
- sporting commitment
- a chance to get ahead with work
- no one spoke to me last week
- car club outing
- feeling overwhelmed and needing more down time
- work trip
- depression
- divorce (shame and complications)
- anxiety
- working bee at school

Of course, some of these things are beyond our control, like illness. And consider how hard it is for a divorcee who has the kids this weekend to get to church if just one child is sick. If that illness goes through the family, it could be a while before they can make it to church.

On the other hand, there are many factors within our control and the question becomes why we choose kids' sport or a car club outing (both good things) over God and his people?

WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

It's actually quite hard to be at church every week in the modern world. If I have four weeks' leave a year (which is usually taken away from home these days), and am sick for, say, two Sundays a year, have just one work trip on a weekend each year, have just one family event on a Sunday and then throw in one more Sunday taken out for some other reason, then that's nine missed opportunities to be at church in that year – or 17 per cent of possible opportunities.

On average we are missing more than one that. We have not taken into account long weekends, nor the fact that we have more than one family birthday party to attend, nor that – in my neck of the woods at least – business trips are more frequent. There's also the fun run(s), never mind the reality that there are some Sundays when I'm simply too tired to go to church. It is really hard to be regular at church, even for a committed believer. Ministers need to appreciate this as they care with gentleness for their flock.

Yet we must pause and ask what is at the heart underneath these difficulties to get to church more consistently. Is it that the world has crowded in and it is just impossible to get to church consistently any more? Or is it that we have a problem with our devotion to Jesus that expresses itself in poor Sunday church attendance? Is the spiritual battle "out there" with a secular world or is the problem in my heart? What is the nature of the Sunday wars?

The answer is that it's very likely a mixture of both – that the world has changed and that my heart is "prone to wander". We've seen that the failure to fight this battle has spiritual implications. This is where the book of Hebrews ministers to us.

Hebrews was written to a congregation that was sorely tempted to give up its faith in Jesus.

Members were tempted to retreat to the safety and acceptability of the synagogue. They were not giving up their belief in God, just their commitment to Jesus. If, for us, the reason for giving up meeting together is a mixture of individualism and busyness, for them the reason was persecution. Either way, like them, the outcome is to give up meeting together. The author of Hebrews was written as an exhortation to keep going in the faith of Christ (Heb 13:22). The author exhorts his congregation with a series of encouragements, mixed with warnings of what it would mean should they retreat from Jesus.

As Peter O'Brien says in his commentary: "The function of the [exhortations] is to challenge the listeners to right action. By encouraging words, stern warnings as well as positive and negative examples the author hammers home the importance of faithful endurance in order to reach the eternal rest in the heavenly city"

The issue is a spiritual battle! One of Hebrews' strongest warnings (Hebrews 10:24f) urges believers to continue meeting together. This is one of the main means of grace to keep travelling well in the faith. Peter O'Brien explains this is a strong statement – that "they must not stop meeting together regularly. The admonition is put strongly. The failure of some to continue attending the gatherings of the community is cast not simply as neglect but as wrongful abandonment".

We need to be at church – we really do. Not to merit grace, but as a means by which we continue well in the faith. So, here is a tip for ministers and concerned laity. The pastoral approach to those under pressure to not be at church is not a Sabbath commandment or rule (not legalism), but an exhortation with appropriate warnings of what will happen should the habit continue.

We need to recover this in our congregations today. We need to teach one another of the cost of discipleship. We need to do better at living lives in contradistinction to the non-Christian world around us. We need to have devotion to Christ as the motor driving our lives, rather than the individualism that drives the lives of our age.

We need to learn to say "No" to the world more and more. We need to understand the cost of discipleship again. I rarely hear Christians today echo the sentiments of Ps 27:4:

One thing I ask from the LORD,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.

Since Christ, we the church are that temple. We need to recover a deep desire to be with our Lord and each other, otherwise our prayers become insipid: "One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek, a fulfilled, healthy and happy life".

Hebrews 10 also has the Christian look forward. The return of Christ (the approaching Day) should spur us, drive us, to church. Eschatology drives the urgency for us to meet. So, Christians have a mutual obligation to encourage one another in the face of pressure to give up the faith. Our task is to specifically "spur one another on towards love and good deeds", to struggle against the habit of some – which is not to meet together – and to "encourage one another".

Earlier in Hebrews (3:13) this ministry of encouragement is urged to be a daily one. We need to take up this ministry with fresh vigour, for the encouragement consequences are dire.

Let me try to spur you to choose Christ and his people on a Sunday with one tiny story. As our kids grew up, they got invited to birthday parties on a number of Sundays. They desperately wanted to go. We decided that they would be at church (Sunday school) and that straight after church my wife would take them to the party. So, we often accepted invitations but informed people our child would be a bit late. In the end this was fine – the kids went and had a ball, though they did protest along the way. They were disappointed not to be there at the start but at least they had a powerful reason as to why.

There was one party however, where the mother drilled deeper into the reason for the delay and, to our great surprise, changed the time of the whole party to suit us: "Oh, we really want your son there for the whole party". Delightful. Praise God for this gracious surprise.

We got to teach the importance of being at church. They had their faith spurred on. Often our children paid a cost for their devotion to Christ, but they never lost a friendship over it. ☑

The Rev Dr Anthony Barraclough is rector of St Matthew's, West Pymble.

Tattoos:

A SPIRITUAL TABOO OR A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE?

Body art can be a touchy subject, and it's good for Christians to consider what the Bible says about these disputable matters, writes **PAUL WILLIAMSON**.

AS A TEENAGER I WAS VERY KEEN TO GET A TATTOO. MOST OF THE OLDER BOYS in my village had one or more, and I longed for the day that I'd be old enough to get my own skin inked.

Finally, when I was 18, I made my way to Sailor Bill's – the only tattooist within 100 kilometres. There I stood outside for what must have been half an hour or more, trying to pluck up enough courage to enter the premises and have myself indelibly marked.

However, there was one major hurdle: ever since I was a small child, I've been terrified of injections. The thought of having needles penetrate my skin, not to mention the considerable pain anticipated, kept me from pressing ahead, much to the chagrin of my mates who were egging me on.

Some 40 years later I have no regrets. More than once I've noticed the faded and less impressive images on my pals' arms, and quietly breathed a sigh of relief. I was that close to doing something I'd most likely regret in later life.

Of course, that's not necessarily the case with everyone. Indeed, getting inked doesn't carry the social stigma it once did. It's no longer just criminals, sailors and rebellious young men who get themselves tattooed. My brother-in-law is currently getting a huge tree tattooed on his back – and he's in his mid-fifties!

Perhaps he's having some kind of mid-life crisis, or possibly he's thought long and hard before making such a permanent decision. In any case, he's certainly not in the minority camp nowadays. Some of my Christian friends have had their skin tattooed, and it's something that is increasingly common in today's church.

A previous generation typically assumed that such a thing was prohibited by Scripture. After all, in the midst of a passage that includes prohibitions on stealing, lying, taking revenge, prostitution and witchcraft, Leviticus seems quite categorical: "Do not... put tattoo marks on yourselves" (Lev. 19:28).

However, as others quite correctly point out, there are at least three problems with using this particular verse as such a "proof text". First of all, there is the immediate context, which may well suggest that this prohibition relates to something more specific than so-called body art.

The preceding injunction seems to be associated with some kind of mourning ritual ("Do not cut your bodies *for the dead*"; cf. Deut 14:1; Jer 16:6; 47:5; 48:37), and this may implicitly be so in the case of this prohibition on "tattooing" also.

Understood in this way, the cutting or marking of the flesh refers to a pagan custom practiced by Israel's neighbours (cf. the self-slashing of the prophets of Baal as they tried to arouse the attention of their "sleeping" deity in 1 Kings 18:28). In Leviticus, it may allude to actions thought to ward off the spirits of the dead.

A more precise rendering of the text is as follows: "an incision *for the soul* you must not put in your flesh and an imprint of a tattoo/cut you must not put on you". English translations generally understand "the soul" here to refer to that of the dead. Accordingly, both practices here prohibited arguably concern the threat that the dead supposedly posed to the living.

In any case, what we have here is probably not a biblical injunction against simply getting a tattoo, but a prohibition on engaging in pagan superstition – whether relating to the Canaanite fertility cult or warding off the spirits of the dead.

Thus, the first problem with this Levitical injunction relates to its rationale: rather than a blanket ban on tattoos, it most likely alludes to a pagan practice or idea. In other words, a careful reading elevates this text beyond a social taboo to a theological and moral injunction that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries.

The second problem relates to the precise meaning of the terminology employed here. While many English versions use the term "tattoo", the exact meaning of the underlying Hebrew noun is somewhat unclear. It occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament, and its derivation is uncertain.

Rather than alluding to the use of indelible ink, the phrase used here may simply refer to *marking* one's flesh with deep cuts (i.e., "do not put *the mark of an incision* on you"), making it broadly synonymous with the previous injunction. Admittedly, the related verb (the common Hebrew verb meaning "to write") is employed in Isaiah 44:5, where it possibly alludes to the ancient Near Eastern practice of inscribing an owner's name on the hand of a slave.

While some point to the latter text (and Isaiah 49:16) in support of body art, particularly that which identifies a person as a Christian disciple, others rightly object that the language of these two texts is figurative or metaphorical: the people in Isaiah 44:5 – whether Gentile proselytes or biological Israelites – are metaphorically depicted as publicly confessing their new-found commitment to the Lord, just as in Isaiah 49:16 the Lord is figuratively expressing his commitment to Zion.

Thus, even if Isaiah 44:5 does allude to self-inking, the concept is certainly not intended literally – unlike Leviticus 19:28 where physical cutting or inscribing of some sort is undoubtedly in view. Thus understood, Isaiah 44:5 does not contradict or overrule Leviticus 19:28, however the latter text should be applied.

But perhaps the most obvious objection to formulating a Christian attitude to tattooing on the basis of Leviticus 19:28 concerns the Christian relationship to the Old Testament law. While undeniably the latter (like all Scripture) is written for us, it was not written to us. Rather, the Mosaic law was addressed to God's old covenant people, and we must therefore be careful not to apply its stipulations naively or selectively to those of us who are "not under the law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14).

While it is relatively easy to extract timeless truths about God and his values from the Torah, we must think carefully before taking all the various commands and injunctions of Israel's covenant code and applying them directly to ourselves. This is something that we, as God's new covenant people, understand instinctively, at least to some extent. After all, few of us would think of applying some of the surrounding legislation in Leviticus 19 to Christian believers.

For example, none of us think Leviticus 19:27 prevents Christian men from trimming their sidelocks or their beards, or Leviticus 19:19 proscribes Christian women from wearing mixed fabrics. While the precise rationale for some OT laws may sometimes be lost on us today, the most important inference to draw from all such material is the importance of God's people being profoundly distinctive from the surrounding culture.

And perhaps that's the most important question we should really be asking with respect to body art and the like: am I simply wanting to fit in with and conform to the culture around me, or am I seeking to express my spiritual, social and ethical distinctiveness (i.e. holiness) as a disciple of Christ?

As a young man, my main reason for wanting a tattoo was to blend in; yes, I liked the idea of a permanent colourful image on my arm, but mainly because of the kudos I assumed this would bring. Like many adolescents, I simply wanted to conform.

I realise, of course, that such is not the case with everyone who decides to get a tattoo. Indeed, in some cases, the very nature of their tattoo (e.g. a biblical text or symbol) is designed to make a bold countercultural statement or an undeniable profession of their commitment to God and his word.

While we might well debate the pros and cons of getting a tattoo for such a laudable purpose, what we must not do is judge another's motives – that's between them and the one who will judge the motives of all our hearts on the last day. As Christian disciples, we do not all share the same attitude to tattoos. Some Christians love them; others hate them. But regardless of our personal stance, the important thing is that in this, as with other such disputable matters, "whatever we do, we do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31).



How active is your God?

GARY O'BRIEN

WAS IN THE CAR WITH A YOUNG DRIVER RECENTLY WHEN THEY REACHED FOR THEIR phone. This led to a sermon (sorry, conversation) by me on the dangers of touching a phone while driving.

A few moments later a young driver veered out from a side street right in front of us, not noticing we were there, and guess what? She was on her phone! My instant (half-serious) response was to say, "See, that was a sign from God about how dangerous it is to touch your phone while driving!" My young driver said, "God doesn't work that way; he is not that involved in our lives".

Well, is he? How active is your God in your daily life?

A few years ago, I read the excellent book by Paul E. Miller called *A Praying Life*. Early in the book he writes, "Many Christians haven't stopped believing in God; we have just become functional deists, living with God at a distance". I have been pondering those words ever since. Is that true of me? Is that how I live? I'm certain that this is God's world; that he made it, rules it, has come in Jesus to save it and will come again to judge and renew it. He is clearly involved in the big things. But for me, is it just a matter of getting on and doing the best I can, living as a functional deist?

I think the answer is often "Yes". I am so easily pulled into the secular thinking and practices of those around me; thinking it's all about me and what I'm doing. How about you? Do you get pulled into this way of living, too, where God seems distant and you just get on with things, living as a... well, functional deist?

This is why I need to be in my Bible each day, and reading good Christian books that challenge my creeping, latent deism. When I go to the Bible, I'm reminded that God is active in my world and life. I don't go there because it's my duty but because I need to. Here, I am reminded that God is not distant but present and active. For example:

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

"... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10).

"For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil 2:13).

See, in the Bible, I find that God is not distant. Rather, he is with me and constantly at work in my life and the world around me (even providing lessons about phones while driving).

Good books help me, too. I recently found this great quote from John Calvin in a book by Nancy Guthrie called *Be Still My Soul*:

"The Christian being most fully persuaded, that all things come to pass by the dispensation of God, and nothing happens fortuitously, will always direct his eye to him as the principle cause of events, at the same time paying due regard to the inferior causes in their own place."

Everything that happens to you comes through the dispensation of God, the big and the small things, the easy and the hard things, but always for your good.

Finally, I read another book this year that really challenged me to see more of the activity of God in my life and in the world around me. Tim Chester's book *Enjoying God* will surely be a Christmas gift this year from me to my friends. He writes,

"What is the key to actually enjoying God? Christians talk a lot about having a relationship with God – but what does it actually mean to have a relationship with someone we cannot see? We talk a lot about having joy – but for many, the Christian life can feel like a dutiful slog. We talk a lot about knowing God – but it's easier to know more about God rather than to know God more. If these things bother you then this is the book for you."

I found it a really good book to help me be more aware of what God is doing around me and, along with Paul Miller's book mentioned earlier, make me want to pray more to my God who is at work.

How active is God in your daily life? The Bible's answer is that he is constantly and completely active, if only we would notice and, as Calvin says, direct our eye to him.

SC

The Rev Gary O'Brien is the director of Ministry Training & Development.

Culture and the "how-to" of our church life

PETER HAYWARD

'VE JUST COME BACK FROM A TRIP TO THE UNITED STATES, AND IT GOT ME THINKING, again, about how the influence of American Christianity on Australia has grown over the past 20 years. With an abundance of resources, access to technology and communication, the Americans have been influencing our church life – or rather the "how-to" of church.

This is not new, with aspects of both the church growth and seeker-sensitive movements having previously made their way across the Pacific. What is different is the accessibility of American Christianity.

Clearly, there are many aspects of how to approach ministry and the organisation of church life, which have been helpful. What is not as well understood is the significant cultural differences between American and Australian evangelical Christianity.

I had the wonderful privilege of ministering for six years as a founding pastor of an independent Anglican church in Spokane, Washington. Since my return to Australia in 2001, I have thought a lot about American Christianity and how it affects us.

There are many similarities between the USA and Australia, so no doubt we can learn from our American brothers and sisters. However, the cultural differences are also significant and are worth understanding. In particular, there is a very big difference between the two countries in the pace and significance of the collapse of "cultural Christianity".

Since the mid-1960s both America and Australia have had a large decline in attendance in mainline Protestant churches. However, this has played out in very different ways. The summary is that Australia has lost cultural Christianity much more rapidly than America. Understanding this difference helps to guide us as we assess the abundance of ministry approaches the US has on offer.

Attendance in American mainline Protestant churches has declined from 50 per cent of the population in 1965 to an estimated 6 per cent in 2018. This has profoundly affected America as these large institutional structures provided meaning and narrative to public life. However, by 2008 overall church attendance remained remarkably robust, as during the same period there was a dramatic increase in the number of conservative, non-denominational, mainly evangelical churches.

The mainline Protestant churches, succumbing to the pressure of secularisation, moved away from active orthodox belief. By contrast, the vigorous Christian message offered by the new non-denominational evangelical churches proved attractive.

Indicative of the scale of the change is that there were some 50,000 new non-denominational churches started between 1998 and 2012. Though there had always been large churches in the USA, this is the period when the mega-churches became a "thing". It is estimated that there are currently some 1300 mega-churches (i.e. with more than 2000 attendees) across the country.

Though these churches get a great deal of attention, they represent only 0.3 per cent of all the churches in the USA, and the average attendance at a church nationwide is just 75.

Though overall church attendance declined by 15 per cent over the past 50 years, the proliferation of new non-denominational churches meant the drop was nowhere near as bad as it could have been as they picked up the huge numbers transferring out of mainline Protestant churches. All this meant that cultural Christianity was sustained for a much longer period than was the case in Australia.

No longer.

South African theologian David Wells has said that many of the churches in the non-denominational evangelical world are losing their cultural adherence, summarising the Christian faith taught as "God is now weightless".

Rather than cherish God as God, he has been conceived as a projection of all our human longings into heaven. God is not known as he has objectively revealed himself in his word and given specific expression in the Lord Jesus Christ – rather the movement to God is from our experiences of life.

In the 1960s, mainline Protestant churches embraced liberalism as a way of dealing with secularism. By contrast, many in the new non-denominational world embraced Christianity "lite" as a way of dealing with secularism at the tail end of the sexual revolution.

What was not readily understood was that so much of the "how-to" approach of American Christianity was underpinned by the resilience of cultural Christianity. As this is now collapsing, much of the instinctive "how-to" of the American church is no longer as reliable. Instead, what is now being confronted is something we in Sydney have realised for some time: that a strong doctrinal orthodoxy, speaking, living and loving with revealed gospel integrity, is the most important arbiter of sustaining and growing churches.

We will still be the beneficiaries of much that we can learn from American evangelical Christianity. But it may also go the other way. We in Australia may also have much to offer our US brothers and sisters: how to make the most of the opportunities that abound as cultural Christianity collapses and the promises of secularism prove to be a mirage.

SC

The Rt Rev Peter Hawyard is Bishop of the Wollongong Region in the Sydney Diocese.



North Shore United

Prepare to share: youth and leaders from across the North Shore gather to be equipped for evangelism.

ON A BRISK SATURDAY NIGHT IN EARLY AUGUST, ST ANDREW'S, ROSEVILLE WAS ALIGHT AS MEMBERS from a dozen local churches gathered to share the evangelistic vision fuelling UNITED – a youth outreach event held at Chatswood Concourse just after *Southern Cross* went to press. Their mission was simple: to equip themselves to prayerfully invite non-Christian friends to hear the gospel.

Evangelism is intimidating for any Christian in an increasingly hostile world, let alone for high schoolers, but the Spirit of the Lord was at work as Lauren Van Der Merwe (St Andrew's youth minister and UNITED's main organiser) spoke of the urgent need for ambassadors to help win the North Shore for Christ.

"There are people who don't know him and we're called to be ambassadors of the gospel – now," she said. "Today is the day of salvation, and tomorrow might be too late."

The group of mainly Anglican churches from Artarmon to Wahroonga banded together to host the outreach night for 500 people at Chatswood Concourse, with the prayer that 100 or more unreached youth would hear the gospel (preached by Tom Pattison, the youth pastor from Grace City Church at Green Square).

And with 18,000 high schoolers on the North Shore, the mission field is huge. So, morning and evening in the week leading up to the event, UNITED youth leaders and volunteers prayed for the youth as they went out to invite their friends.

"We're not expecting 100 people to become Christian [that night], although that would be awesome!" Mrs Van Der Merwe said.

"We're hoping that we would see 100 people [come] who have not stepped in foot into a church... and eyes would be opened to the wonder of the cross. [We] pray that we'll be able to connect them back into churches, because we really believe that the local church is going to be the thing, long term, that will help them."

She said having 12 churches commit to such an ambitious event was made simpler because of the friendships between youth ministers and others across the region. "There was just these kind of natural relationships... it was just like, why wouldn't we do something together? Because we do really believe that we can reach more people [through a] bigger kind of event."

Having said that, organising UNITED was many challenging months in the making. It was expensive to run, tricky to juggle communication between so many churches, and there have been numerous setbacks. However, Mrs Van Der Merwe said they have seen God's faithfulness at every step.

"Seeing the way that God has provided for us in every way [is such a joy] – and just in the moments where I feel like maybe we shouldn't be doing this event, a major donor will come in the next day. It's also a joy because people have different ideas of doing things and they bring new ideas to the table that I wouldn't necessarily thought of."

"I really feel a lot of it hasn't come down to us, it's all God. And I'm so aware that, if it was just us trying to run an event, it would just be a fail."



True lies

JUDY ADAMSON

The Farewell

Rated PG

FAMILIES ARE WEIRD. IT'S ONE OF THE FEW CERTAINTIES OF LIFE. WE LOVE EACH other (sometimes hate each other), certainly embarrass each other and provide an ongoing well of stories to draw upon.

That's why films that delve into the experiences of families – however different they may be – have such a deep capacity to provoke a response.

For our brothers and sisters of Chinese ancestry, *The Farewell* may be very familiar. For the rest of us, personal knowledge of family is our way in, even if some of the cultural experiences are completely alien.

Based on "an actual lie", as the film tells us at the outset, it's the lie of director and writer Lucy Wang's own family. And I mean *all* the family, the lives of whom – in real life and the film – are turned upside down when they discover their beloved matriarch back home in China has Stage 4 lung cancer. She is given only a few months to live.

For US-raised Billi (Awkwafina), the news about her grandmother, or Nai Nai (Shuzhen Zhao), is devastating. She is also incredulous when her father tells her Nai Nai doesn't know the truth about her diagnosis – and no one plans to tell her.

Instead the entire family, and the medical team, creates a virtual cone of silence to ensure Nai Nai can be happy for the time she has left.

Given that Nai Nai must not suspect anything is amiss, a wedding is hastily arranged between Billi's cousin and his Japanese girlfriend so there can be a "reason" for everyone to get together in Changchun, their home town in northeastern China. Billi's parents aren't even keen for her to come with them, as she has become too Western and isn't good at hiding her emotions. But she comes anyway.

For those of us outside the cultural reasoning in play, the lie – and the further lies it perpetuates – seems crazy. Billi becomes our cultural eyes as she questions whether it is right to keep Nai Nai in the dark, and not give her the chance to prepare herself and say goodbye.

Our background and beliefs tell us not to lie, so what does it mean when the whole basis for a family's visit home is based upon a lie? Can there be such a thing as a "good" lie, as the doctor who sees Nai Nai suggests? And, thought-provokingly, if we wanted to care for our family best amid the news of a terminal illness, what would we do?

The lie is the way Billi's family chooses to promote life and happiness. The older ones want to carry the emotional weight of the truth, just as Nai Nai herself did when her husband became ill, and as the doctor did with cancer in his own family.

As with other films that show you a window into another culture, there is much in *The Farewell* to enjoy and to ponder. We're taken on a poignant and funny ride, as Nai Nai throws herself enthusiastically into wedding preparations and rejoices at having her family together for the first time in decades. Billi is also at a crossroads in her own life and you can see the visit is valuable for her in more ways than one.

There is tremendous love between the family members, even if it isn't necessarily shown by an outpouring of emotion. I was particularly challenged by the scene where the family goes en masse to the cemetery to pay their respects to Nai Nai's husband. As is common in China, they bring offerings – in this case, food and cigarettes – and burn things for grandpa to use in the afterlife while they snack at the graveside, then ask for his blessing.

The balance between sadness and humour is so delicate that you sometimes feel like weeping straight after you laugh. For grandpa doesn't need the burned-up paper phone or jacket, and he can't help them as they believe. For him, it is too late. The family love Nai Nai and wish to honour her by their decisions, but soon there will be no chance to make a different choice. It's a little hard to watch.

Lulu Wang's love for her real-life grandmother is clear to see in the film, not only in the delightfully feisty portrayal of Nai Nai by Shuzhen Zhao, but also because she has the best lines. You'll love her, and that's the general idea.

Awkwafina is just right as the fish-out-of-water Billi, who – like Wang – is so American she doesn't quite fit in at "home" in China. She slouches, she doubts, and her Mandarin is rusty, yet she also belongs because she's deeply woven into the fabric of her family. Weird and different, yes. But hers.

The cultural lens we get to look through in *The Farewell* should give us pause to think about how we love our own families, the impact of the choices we make and the chances we choose to take – or not. It's worth seeing.

SC



Less likeable women

JUDY ADAMSON

Little Women

Rated PG

ON THE FACE OF IT, A MODERN-DAY RETELLING OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S much-loved novel is a great idea. Goodness knows, the story has been told and retold onscreen so many times (with another period version due in January) that the innovation of bringing the tale up to the present day is a relief. So many possibilities!

Unfortunately, the final result isn't brilliant.

I really wanted to like it, given that it's trying to tell the story a different way and provides more than a passing reference to faith (although it isn't at the core of things, like Alcott's original). But while there are some excellent ideas, great scenes and many good performances, as a whole the film doesn't quite gel.

A key problem is the central character of Jo March, played by Sarah Davenport. I'm not sure whether director (and co-screenwriter) Clare Niederpruem has encouraged an over-the-top performance, or whether it's simply been allowed to get out of hand. Either way, it's a huge mistake on Niederpruem's part.

It's one thing for Jo to be strong-willed and passionate, but Davenport's Jo is self-absorbed and a bit of a harpy. Not to mention violent on occasion. She's not completely unlikeable, but you certainly aren't hoping she will learn to love and understand herself, as you normally do when reading or watching *Little Women*.

For those unfamiliar with the story it centres on the March family and their response to life's challenges, large and small, as they grow up. There are four girls: Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, who live with their mother Marmee in a big, old house while Dad is serving in Iraq (in the book he's a chaplain to the Union army in the American Civil War).

The close-knit family is struggling financially but still seeks to help others less fortunate, and the girls dream, learn and make their own fun at home with Marmee's encouragement.

The love discovered in Alcott's book is as much the love of God as of others, and that is present here to an extent. Beth (a well-drawn character for a change) always wears a cross around her neck and is unfailingly encouraging and servant-hearted. The family is also keen on *The Pilgrim's Progress*, although there's an odd play-acting scene where Marmee, as Apollyon, demands something the girls value so they can move "forward". A little different from the monster Apollyon with whom Christian battles in Bunyan's book!

It's a good move to update letters and some of the conversations via technology, have the parties Meg or Jo attend be challenging for more reasons than a lack of fashionable clothes, and turn the life-threatening illness of Beth from scarlet fever to cancer. Aunt March is no longer a grump, and the right balance is also struck, for once, in the friendship between Jo and the family's neighbour Laurie (Lucas Grabeel).

However, there are some real roadblocks to a viewer's enjoyment. Apart from the characterisation of Jo, the action jumps backwards and forwards in time – which would be fine if it was done well, but it's not. It's hard to be clear where you are, for example, when Jo looks exactly the same at 29 as she does almost a decade before. We're not even helped by a change of hairstyle or dress.

As in other remakes of the film the male characters (even Laurie) are underdone, which is a shame. The women should naturally be the focus, but the men become unnecessarily two-dimensional and uninteresting. Another problem – and it's a pretty annoying one – is regular echoes in the script from the 1994 Susan Sarandon version of the film.

This modern take on *Little Women* isn't bad, and is pretty family friendly, but I don't think most would feel any great keenness to watch it a second time.

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