

TOP CENTRE

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THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY



Arnhem Land ordinations





Prison chaplain moves on with mixed feelings

Anne Lim

Christos Kastaniotis gained a sense of just how big God is during his two years in a part-time role as chaplain at Darwin Correctional Centre with Anglicare.

As he leaves that role to take up a full-time position with Mission Australia, he reflects on how God showed him he could reach into every corner of society.

“Working in a prison, you work with people who have some very complicated backgrounds that often involve trauma and social marginalisation, drug and alcohol issues, and obviously, incarceration. So working with people from such diverse backgrounds, you get a sense of just how big God is and how God can speak to lots of different people in lots of different ways. You’re just really conscious of not trying to put God in a box,” he says.

He found the role rewarding in that chaplains only to talk to prisoners who want to see a chaplain so prisoners are very responsive.

“Prisoners are at a point in their lives where they realise their life is in a place where they don’t want it to be. They want to make changes – and they want God to be a part of that change. So that’s where we meet them. And it’s a real privilege and very rewarding to be able to meet people in that place.

Over the two years, I’ve built some very good relationships with the prisoners and definitely it’s been great to encourage them in their faith and spur them on.”

Asked why he is moving on Christos says he had been working at Mission Australia as a staff chaplain for three days a week, Monday to Wednesday, and they offered him two extra days as a community chaplain. “So I’ll be going full time with Mission Australia as a chaplain, three days as a staff chaplain and two days as a community chaplain.”

He says this will be a more coalface role than at the prison, where only about 30 percent of his time was spent working one-on-one with prisoners and running programs, with the rest office-based administration.

“Something that I’ve learned about myself is that I much prefer being at the coalface of ministry and not being in a coordinator or management role .. I just want to work with people, talk to people, tell them about Jesus. Teach the Bible.”

Christos has shared the prison chaplaincy role with Daniel Tete, with each working two days a week. With Daniel also planning to move on, the prison is now recruiting for a new four day week chaplain.

“So pray they find a really good person who’s suitable for the job, can maintain the ministry and grow it,” he said.

“As for me personally, just pray that as a full time chaplain at Mission Australia, I would support those who are meeting human need and spread the knowledge of the love of God.”



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TOP CENTRE

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Front cover: BISHOP GREG ANDERSON WITH JAMES WOODS, HIS WIFE MIRIAM NUMAMURDIRDI AND DAUGHTER PATASHA AT URAPUNGA.

Please feel free to submit your ideas for stories to the editor.



Bishop Greg writes...

One of the important things that happened at our diocesan synod in September was the endorsement of a new diocesan strategic plan for the next four years. Strategic plans can be helpful in mapping out what we are trying to do together in the diocese – especially when people know about the plan! So in the next few issues of Top Centre, I will unpack what is in it.

Of course, in one sense, our work as Christian people continues whether we have a strategic plan or not – strategic plans have arrived relatively recently in the history of the church! But our new strategic plan can focus our thoughts and actions as we work together in the years ahead. There are three main sections in the strategic plan: the vision statement, our values, and our strategic objectives. Our vision sets out what we want to see happening through our life together, and I will say some more about it in this article and in Top Centre 24.1 (if the Lord hasn't returned before then). Our values speak of the way we want to go about doing our work and what we expect to see embodied in our life together: love, integrity, unity in diversity, courage, hope, safety and faithfulness to our foundations. Our two strategic objectives, which go into the details of the steps we will follow in going about our diocesan mission, are summarised as *promote the gospel*, and *provide effective support structures around ministry*. Promoting the gospel – celebrating it, proclaiming it and demonstrating it (in the words of our previous strategic plan) – is our core business. And it is presented in our vision statement in these words: *growing communities in the love of Jesus Christ*.

Churches are communities, and our churches exist in the wider community of the Northern Territory. Our main expression of the church community in many parts of the Territory is our Sunday services – following the example of the New Testament, we meet together on Sundays, the day of Jesus' resurrection. The Old and New Testaments are full of stories and instructions about coming together as the people of God. We are all individuals, but God gathers individuals together and we benefit so much from that.

There are many other expressions of that kind of gathering as well – Bible study groups, prayer meetings, night-time fellowship in the remote Aboriginal parishes, conferences and seminars, Christians sharing meals together, visiting the sick and those in hospital, and so on. Some of these are regular weekly events, others are occasional. Because of what the Bible says, it is normal for us to think of Christians as people who form communities, and I hope that we will not neglect meeting together to encourage one another in our Christian calling (Hebrews 10:25).

The strategic plan wants us to see our communities growing. Growth happens in many ways, but we can especially think of numbers and maturity in our churches. We want our Sunday times together to be so good, so warm, so special, so profound, so authentic that people who are wanting to find out more about Jesus will want to join us in finding out more. It has been so encouraging for me to hear stories in the last few months of Territory people who have given themselves to Jesus this year and joined our churches, and people who have been coming to our churches and have become followers of Jesus. But as well as growing in number, we want to see our churches grow in maturity. That is harder to measure. It happens when people learn to know God's character more and more deeply, as they meditate on what God has revealed to us, especially in Jesus. It happens when people learn to love God more and more deeply, as they reflect on his goodness, holiness, power, mercy, love and compassion, as they spend time with him personally and corporately in adoration, praise, confession and intercession, remembering how his saving purposes find their climax in our King Jesus. It happens when people trust God more and more deeply, having peace in the hardest situations because they know Jesus is with us always and that his rule is unbeatable. It happens when people obey God more and more deeply, turning away from what God says is no good, and having our thoughts, words, actions and attitudes in line with what God says is good.

Outside our churches, we want to act in ways that grow the communities we live in also, and most particularly, that will enable these communities to grow into experiencing and understanding more and more the love of Jesus Christ. There are many ways that communities can grow, and that Christians can contribute to, but our strategic plan focuses on a particular kind of growth. I will have more to say about that in the next Top Centre.



The only hope for peace... was born in the Middle East

Bob Mendelsohn
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We are embarrassed. The world seems to be way ahead of us in terms of peace and tranquillity. The Dalai Lama said, "Do not let the behaviour of others destroy your inner peace." The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Nobody can bring you peace but yourself." We think about peace and for almost two years, we have prayed for peace in Ukraine. Since the beginning of October, we've thought a lot about Israel and Gaza and the world is crying for ceasefires and peace. Peace is a global concern and many are way ahead of us believers.

Lately we've been watching the ABC and reading the internet news and in this time of stridency in politics and in (non)relationships in workplaces and in neighbourhoods, one of the main messages we sing to one another is that we should be lovers of peace. It's the ache in the heart of all true believers.

But you are asking, "Bob, don't you know the world is at war just now?" And the obvious includes Ukraine and Russia, and the latest in the situation in Israel and Gaza, with Hamas and Hezbollah, Syria, Lebanon, and who knows how far this 'situation' will expand by the time I finish this article and by the time this article goes to print. War is real just now. How can I speak about peace at a time like this? Can real peace be found, honestly?

"It's the ache
in the heart
of all true
believers."

A simple biblical solution

The simple fix is to say that 'both' sides or 'all' sides need to put down their weaponry, stop shooting at each other, and to live together in harmony and kindness. Simple but unrealistic, they say.

Peace is not a new message. So many of the Levitical offerings were titled 'peace' offerings. Bringing shalom (Hebrew for 'peace') to humanity, or at least Jewish humanity in those wilderness wandering days. King David while playing the madman sought peace and said, "Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." (Psalm 34.14)

And this quote is even clearer: "Too long has my soul had its dwelling with those who hate peace. I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war." (Psalm 120.6-7). The literal Hebrew is clearer as there is no preposition before the second 'peace.' It reads "I am peace." That's a great clarifier. My position is so much for peace that I'm identified with the cause, the effect, the end-goal. "Ani Shalom!"

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, (Galatians 5.22) and so much more. And peace is central to be sure. If that be so, then shouldn't Christians be at the forefront of the peace now movements? Shouldn't we be seeking for peace, pursuing it, getting military agendas to be diminished and peace agendas to be elevated?

Realistic peace, with wars seriously ending, that would be worthy. Unfortunately, most people just want individual quiet and calm, but not necessarily real peace. Alanis Morissette is quoted as saying, "Peace of mind for five minutes, that's what I crave."

How is peace attainable?

The question then is how do we, how does anyone, make peace in a time of war? When I visited Ukraine and Poland last year after the war broke out, I found places with real peace. They were not governmental action centres. They were not political treaty venues. They were churches. Congregations where real peace between Russian sympathisers and Ukrainian refugees found depth. Their answer was the same: Jesus is the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9.6-7) Those who loved Jesus and sang songs of love to him found peace together. They were born again to a living hope.

The situations in Gaza and around Israel are turbulent, to be sure. Reports are varied and wide; pains are abundant as people are aching for all hostages to be returned and people finding their homes again. Is peace possible? I think so!

When I read reports of life in Israel just now, in congregations from Dan to Beersheba, even in S'derot, the village literally minutes from Gaza, I hear the same



"Arab and Jewish believers in Jesus find the same hope."

refrain. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Arab and Jewish believers in Jesus find the same hope. They sing the same songs. And war's swords are turned into ploughshares in the Spirit of God.

I remember preaching at a messianic congregation in S'derot a few years ago and shared my story of faith. At the end, I invited those attending to receive Yeshua as their Saviour and Lord and several did so. I saw real hope in those Jewish people. Hope for a personal relationship with the living God.

Paul the Apostle cited Isaiah and in the description of the result of the work of the cross of Jesus said, "He himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in himself he might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near." (Ephesians 2.14-17)

True peace is found in the Prince of Peace. Handshakes and treaties last a time, but real peace happens when Messiah himself breaks down the dividing wall and establishes in himself one new man.

As December fills our lives with opportunities for commercial silliness or for sacred reflection, as people in the Territory seek to find kindness and peace again after the referendum's failure, as the media continues in relentless pursuit of solutions in Ukraine and Israel, may we who know the Lord, find others who love him as well and announce together, "The only hope for peace was born in the Middle East... that's Jesus."

Meeting a real need in prison ministry



Natalie Watson

In February this year I started working with the Diocese in a part-time Women's Pastoral Ministry role funded by Bush Church Aid (BCA). Jim and I are not new to Northern Australia and BCA. BCA have supported our family in ministry alongside our Indigenous brothers and sisters for nearly 20 years but for me, this is a new role in a different context and so the journey of discovering what the Lord would see fit for me do in this season began again

One of the joys has been helping to lead a Bible study in the women's sector of the prison. On Tuesdays I visit the prison with one of two amazing ladies, Rosemary Snibson and Pam Daams, who have consistently run these Bible studies for two years. Rosemary and her husband Derek are CMS missionaries, and Pam and her husband Nico are with the Australian Society for Indigenous Languages. (Nico is its new director).

Once we've been cleared to enter the prison, an announcement is made that Bible Study is on, and we meet in a little library. Some days four ladies come and some days 16. The numbers vary due to things outside of the women's control. We usually start Bible Study around 10.30 am and finish at 12 noon. The ladies who come value our time learning from God's word and encouraging one another. Ladies also come for prayer – they really crave prayer. They trust in God's power and goodness.

Over the past few months, we have been studying much of John's Gospel using the Plain English Version (PEV). We have grappled with what it means for us that Jesus is the word, the light, living water, the bread, the good shepherd, the vine, the way, truth and life, and the special man that God promised to send to save us. We have been encouraged by Jesus' power to heal the man who could not walk and his compassion for the women who did really bad things. We learnt about being

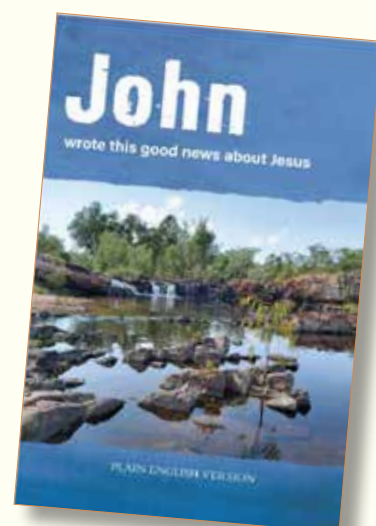
born again from God's spirit, being joined to Jesus and the Holy Spirit living inside people in God's family.

Some of the women committed to reading the whole Gospel in their own time. Then they shared their favourite stories and what they learned, and eagerly received a copy of the newly published PEV Mini-Bible with a certificate. This was a very joyful time. One woman who attends regularly shared her testimony of talking to God over the previous eight months. She opened her journal and shared in detail her heartfelt prayer to the Lord. You could have heard a pin drop. We were all listening intently – a powerful message.

We finished the series in mid-November with a responsive reading that Pam prepared based on John 17 – Jesus prayed for us! This was followed by exclamations of praise, thankfulness, and unity. In December, we are celebrating Christmas together with the stories of Jesus' birth, song and activities. Next year we hope to grow together in what it means to live for Jesus in all our circumstances.

It is wonderful to meet with these ladies in a time of their lives that is fraught with pain. Please pray that these women draw near to Jesus, as well as the support they need to survive and even thrive when they are released. Pray they will experience healing from God working powerfully in their lives through his Holy Spirit.

A version of this story first appeared in BCA's The Real Australian.





The ordinations of James Woods and Edwin Rami

Greg Anderson

In big dioceses like Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, ordinations are part of the routine of the year. But in the Territory, they are much less frequent and very special for that reason. On September 19 and 20, there were two ordinations of Aboriginal men that came after many years of training and preparation.

On Thursday, September 19, James Woods was ordained deacon at his home community of Urapunga, a community about 15km from Ngukurr, near the junction of the Roper and Wilton Rivers, with a population of about 150.

James has been a trainee teacher at Nungalingya College for the past few years, in a position funded by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). He has been a member of a cohort of Aboriginal men investigating ordination, along with Darryn Farrell from Minyerri, Craig Rogers from Ngukurr and Edwin Rami from Numbulwar. All have now been ordained.

James credits his Christian conversion to the input of his mother, who sadly passed away earlier this year. He has valued, enjoyed and benefited from his years at Nungalingya, and is able to express clearly his calling to ministry.

A thickly roofed traditional bough shade was used for the service, beautifully decorated with flowers. Visitors came from Darwin, Katherine, Gunbalanya, Minyerri, Ngukurr, Numbulwar and Kewulyi as well as interstate with Kate and Tavis Beer returning to the Territory to celebrate with the two ordinands whom they knew so well.

When all was ready at the bough shade, key leaders escorted James from his house to the service place. After some songs, the service proceeded from the Kriol Preya Buk.

I preached on the verses James had chosen (Mark 10:43-45), about the Son of Man coming not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. When it came to the questions asked of the candidate, James replied clearly and thoughtfully, indicating his intention to serve God by looking after all kinds of

“A bough shade was used for the service, beautifully decorated with flowers.”



people, building up the people of God and seeking the lost. James's intention is to stay at Nungalinya a bit longer and then to return home to Urapunga to minister there with his wife, Miriam Numamurdirdi.

Following the service, dinner was provided for the whole congregation by Urapunga's Community Development Program with financial support from the Member for Arnhem, Selena Uibo, in a gesture recognising that the Christians there make a great contribution to the community.

“The service proceeded in English, Wubuy and Kriol.”

The next day, at about 4.30 pm, all was ready for Edwin Rami's ordination as priest at Numbulwar, on the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, about 180km northeast of Urapunga. Edwin was ordained deacon in October 2021, and has served alongside priest-in-charge Yulki Nunggumajbarr at the Church of the Holy Spirit since then (as he did before his ordination), taking many funerals, leading services, preaching, visiting people and planning for the future of the church. Yulki has said that she would not retire until Edwin was ordained priest; and having reached the age of 88, she deserves that step.

Edwin has strong background in education, after studying at Batchelor College decades ago, and has been employed at Numbulwar School for many years. Many of the staff were keen to come to the ordination, demonstrating their support for Edwin. It was also special that Edwin's father, Langayina, could come. He is quite frail now, but spans the generations back to the early days of the Numbulwar mission, and the Bible translation program of Earl Hughes, the first linguist/chaplain. Langayina and his late wife Anne were key members of the translation team when it was headed up by Michael Hore from the 1970s to the early 90s.





As at Urapunga, key leaders and family members gathered at Edwin's house, and processed with him to the church. The church building was in excellent condition, after much work on it since Edwin's deaconing, with the front wall saved from collapsing, new windows and fresh paint. The service proceeded in English, Wubuy and Kriol, which provided inclusion for everybody who was there. Most of the English was a back translation from the Kriol prayerbook. I preached on the passage chosen by Edwin: Jesus the True Vine from John 15.

Following the laying on of hands, the service continued with 22 baptisms, many of them of primary aged children, by full immersion in a blow-up swimming pool in the church building. The newly priested Edwin shared out the baptisms with Yulki and some of the other Aboriginal priests who were present. I then confirmed six adults, as well as receiving Josh and Steph Mackenzie into the Anglican Church.

After a short meal break, with food cooked by the school and the shire council, again with funding from Selena Uibo (whose late mother came from Numbulwar), many of the congregations returned for an outdoor fellowship service, with more singing, dancing and healing prayer.

The two ordinations were great occasions of celebrating God's gifts for ministry, and commissioning these two men as they continue serving God. Please pray for them regularly. Both James and Edwin are deeply thoughtful people who know the Bible well, and have good ideas about what is involved in church leadership. There will be many challenges ahead for both of them, but God is their refuge and strength and they know and trust him and they have Jesus as their king.

Pray particularly that the ordination of these two men will encourage more men in their communities to consider the good news of Jesus, including Jesus' call to be his disciples and to give up our lives for him. Ask God that James and Edwin will be resilient, patient, full of love for the people they serve, and that God will give them joy as they serve him.



Bottom right: Individual communion cups ran out, so an adequate substitute was bottle caps.



BIBLE AND THEOLOGY

Meet a man who never gives up

Anne Lim

Nico Daams describes himself as stubborn, blunt and upfront, someone who likes to start things and doesn't give up easily.

His endurance and tenacity helped him to cycle around Australia and led him to board an unseaworthy boat in the Solomon Islands because it was the only way to reach an island to help revive a stalled Bible translation.

The Dutch-born Bible translator recently took the reins as director of AuSIL – the Australian Society for Indigenous Languages – despite initially finding the idea ridiculous of starting a new job at the fine age of 78.

He believes the Holy Spirit directed him to change his mind – just as when he felt directed to take the leadership position at Wycliffe Netherlands in 1990.

“I realised that I've done a lot of different projects in many different places over the past 45 years. Each time we had to try and figure out what might work in order to come up with a good plan. And I thought I can draw on that experience with AuSIL,” he said.

Being Darwin-based was a key consideration in accepting this role for two years before handing over to a younger man who has already been identified.

“My goal is to streamline some things as much as possible before I turn it over to him,” he explains.

Nico spent his first two months in his new job talking to people experienced in the Indigenous language sphere and learning from their insights. A key signpost was feedback from a translator of the Kriol Bible that while she has no trouble understanding Kriol, if she hears the gospel in her own language, it touches her heart.

The difficulty is that there are 150 small language groups and completing New Testaments in each of them would be a huge challenge. A Yolngu person from northeast Arnhem Land made another helpful comment. When given a choice between having a translation of the whole New Testament in his language or making sure several languages in his area each have some Bible stories, he preferred the latter.

“So, we want to see how we can help provide training and workshops for kinship languages and dialects on a regular basis,” said Nico. He was hoping that a November 20-24 translation workshop in Darwin would help to identify people with a keen interest in continuing with Bible translation.

“AuSIL and the Australian Bible Society have organised this workshop and have prepared the layout for a selected text so that participants can take home a booklet after the workshop,” he said.

“We want to provide training in kinship languages and dialects.”

“It’s only six or seven verses, but it is a start, and we hope to find out who might be motivated and say – ‘This is not enough; we want more.’ Then we can plan follow-up workshops translating the kinds of stories they would like.

“Perhaps people from other languages not attending this workshop will hear about it. They might see the booklets. So, the participants of this workshop can become recruiters for the next workshop.”

Nico met his wife Pam right after he completed three big cycle journeys, once around Europe, then all around Australia, in 1972, and finally in South America on the way to Alaska; but he got sick in Peru, so he went home to Holland. They met in England at a school where they both learned about Bible translation. After many years working in the Pacific they moved to Darwin three years ago to be near family. Nico continues to consult with several Bible translation projects in Polynesian languages in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

They started their work in 1978 in the Solomon Islands. “Rennell-Bellona was the first language project and the challenge in that project was that the two main church denominations found it difficult to work together. We asked our supporters to pray for wisdom in knowing how to deal with that issue, and God answered our prayers and helped us build a team of translators from both church communities.

“The next project was Tikopia, and I didn’t overcome the problems in that project. I tried everything under the sun to solve it, and finally found out, 20 years later, that someone had been boycotting it. But thankfully that project is going now, and it’s almost finished.

“Being persistent helped, but God also brought along people at just the right time when we were thinking of giving up. I made several trips to the home island on a very small ship. It’s a long way from Honiara, but I used to be a Merchant Navy Deck Officer, so I don’t mind going on ships. I knew one of the ships wasn’t safe, but it was the only way to get there. So, what do you do? You trust God. I kept trying, and it was great to finally see that project move forward. Now there’s a good Review team working in a Tikopian community on another island.”

Nico says the Kapingamarangi language group was another challenging project. It’s a Polynesian language in Micronesia.

“They had written a letter in 1982 – ‘Can somebody come and help us?’ We heard about that but were asked to go to the Netherlands for six years. We visited the Kapingamarangi people in 1994 to see if they were still interested. They had been saving money for Bible translation for more than ten years. They asked, “What do we need to do to get you to come? Do we need to pay your way?” We told them that we had people supporting us so that we could help them translate the Bible.

“The Kapingamarangi are an amazing group of people and we learned a lot from them. I found they had been translating daily Bible readings for their church services for many years – one man for 40 years. So, some of them had a lot of experience translating the Bible. I was able to help them work out a plan. Soon, we had 23 people working on translation and their motivation was super high. I gave them more training. They often misunderstood the English in some of the key terms, like Christian or Grace. So, we talked together and came up with solutions. It was an amazing project.

“In the first project on Rennell, I had five translators and a large group of reviewers, the Tikopia project originally had only one man, but now has a Review Committee working. The Kapingamarangi project had 23 translators and 60 reviewers. It seemed almost the entire population was busy with that project. We finished the New Testament in four years, and they kept going. We were only going to do part of the Old Testament, but they wouldn’t stop until they had the entire Old Testament as well. How could I not keep helping them? The entire Bible was finished after 18 years. We’re grateful that we could be part of work in such a motivated language group.”

“The participants of this workshop can become recruiters for the next workshop.”



Why do we go to church?

Jesse Morrison, Assistant Minister, St Peter's Nightcliff, writes a follow-up to Bishop Greg's reflections in the last issue of Top Centre about why we go to church.

It's Sunday and you're farewelling some friends from church who are moving on. They reminisce with you about all the things they've loved about church. What do they talk about? One month later, you welcome a new person to church. They've moved into the area and are looking for a new church. You ask warmly, "What brought you along today?" How might they respond? It's been a big week. Work was tough, we've got friends visiting and by Sunday, we're spent. What convinces us to still go to church?

When the world sees churches, it sees gatherings of people. Like every other gathering, they assume that people gather because of some kind of mutual benefit. So, do people go to church to increase their fitness, as in a Park Run? Unlikely. Do they gather to advance themselves, as at university or TAFE? Probably not. Or maybe they gather because it gives them a sense of personal fulfilment. The world says, "That must be it!" So you often hear people say, "That's great for you – whatever makes you happy." Is that why we go to church?

This question comes up more often than we think. You and I know there are lots of possible answers. But I'm

curious, what are the different implications of each of these answers? How do they influence how we walk into church, how we behave at church or how we respond to challenges at church.

Even as a minister, I'm not immune to this question. It's true, most of the time, I love being at church! But between you and me, I don't always hop out of bed like a child on Christmas morning. I don't always run into church like kids run into Leanyer Water Park. So, before reading on, let's pause for a moment and ask ourselves, "Why did we go to church last Sunday?"

The future church

In the last Top Centre issue, Bishop Greg helpfully began reflecting on some reasons. In particular, he mentioned the idea of church as an act of corporate worship. An activity where we hear God speak to us and together respond in confession, thanksgiving and praise. Notice how, already, our motivation for going to church becomes less about me and more about us praising Jesus for what he has done.

But we don't only go to church because of what Christ has done, but what he will do. We go to church because of the future. Soon, we'll be in the Kudjerk season (Wet season in Kunwinjku), but I start living for that future now. I clean the gutters and get excited for the first rains. In the same way, we start living for our Christian future now and our future is the church! A heavenly gathering of people from all nations in the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22-24). So why do we go to church? We go because church is a way to start expressing and practising our future today.

We go to church to fix our eyes on Jesus

For a start, on the final day, we'll be gathered with all eyes fixed on Jesus (Rev 7:9). So today, we also want to gather with all eyes fixed on Jesus. As we do, we're wonderfully brought into the eternal gathering since Jesus is the head of the church (Col 1:18), the one who washes us clean and presents us as holy and blameless (Eph 5:26-27).

We go to church to build up others

We also go to church to build up others (1 Cor 14:26). In our desire for our brothers and sisters to be with us in the eternal church, we'll seek for them to be established and mature in the local church today (Col 1:28). How? By being equipped for works of service so that the body is built up (Eph 4:12, 15). By doing so, we're living for things which are eternal rather than temporal.

We go to church to patiently wait

We also live for the future by remembering ... we're not there yet. While we strive to reflect the future, we can't accelerate it into existence. We're on God's timeline, not ours. I'm still plagued with sin, mixed motives and poor decisions. So churches need to be places where we bear with one another, forgiving one another, just as Christ has forgiven us. We do it, bearing in mind that these ordinary people we gather with each week will be with us for eternity.

So, how did you answer the question above – “Why did we go to church last Sunday?” I want to suggest that sometimes

we mix the benefits of church with why we go to church. We often enjoy the benefits like warm fellowship, community or, even, a sense of fulfilment ... now and again. These are not necessarily bad things, but if they're the reason we go to church, what will happen when church doesn't benefit us? No, the reason we go to church is because of Jesus. Both his past work in reconciling people to himself on the cross, and his future work gathering all nations around his throne.

This transforms how we walk into church, how we behave at church and how we deal with challenges at church. It motivates us to go to church when it feels great ... or not so great.

A better vision

So, brothers and sisters, we've actually got a far better vision for church than our world. We don't go to church because it benefits us (although I certainly think it does). We go to church

because it's a way to express our astounding future – a people with their eyes fixed on Jesus, mature and built up in Christ, children of God, gathered for eternity. Let's continue to go to church. Let's continue to live for the future...

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” Revelation 7:9–10.

“I don't always hop out of bed like a child on Christmas morning.”





Journey to Bethlehem

Boy meets girl: Their eyes lock over a spilled basket of fruit at a market. It's an immediate attraction quickly followed by teasing banter and the girl flounces off, having stuffed a fig in the boy's mouth.

It sounds like the start of any number of Disney-style romances, but this is the first meeting of Mary and Joseph – you know, THE Mary and Joseph, parents of the Son of God.

Here's the set-up: in Nazareth, Mary's father Jacob tells her she is to be betrothed to a boy recently arrived from Bethlehem whom she has never met. Mary is outraged because she wants to be a teacher and, besides, she would like to choose the man she will marry. She's volubly defiant – why did her father teach her the Scriptures if she was just going to be a wife?

But when her father insists, Mary obeys with as much grace as she can muster.

There follows a song and dance routine in which Mary and her sisters Deborah (played by Moriah Smallbone) and Rebekah (Stephanie Gil) tease Mary for being so contrary and speculate on how handsome her husband is going to be.

This is a Nativity story you have never seen before. It's been roundly panned by the Gospel Coalition for its demoralising Disney-style tropes and Technicolor hues which fail to illustrate the light of Jesus coming into the darkness.

But despite the predictable borrowings from 21st century sensibilities, I found this a highly enjoyable and joyful offering as a Christmas movie for all the family. Despite its excursions into comedy – especially with the buffoonish Three Wise Men – it sticks to Scripture when it matters.

For example, when the Angel Gabriel (played by rapper Lecrae) comes to visit Mary, he stumbles as he practises his lines then bumps his head on the lintel to her room. But when



Mary awakes and he transmits his message, the words are faithful to the biblical account.

So despite taking creative licence with what the Bible leaves out, the film stays on message in its essentials. We have no doubt that this is the story of the birth of Son of God and Mary fully understands the sacred responsibility she has been given.

“How can I be carrying your son when I need you to carry me?” she sings pitifully as she is sent away by her incredulous family to visit her cousin Elizabeth in Hebron.

Its writer, director and co-composer, Adam Anders, is a Swedish-born pastor’s son who has built a highly successful career in Hollywood in music-led film and television such as *Glee* and *High School Musical*. A keen Christian, he had dreamed of making this movie for 17 years. The quality of the nine pop songs in this film is undeniable which can be credited partly to the collaboration with talented songwriter Nikki Anders, his wife of 26 years.

The film would not be as charming as it is without the perfect casting of Mexican actress Fiona Palomo as Mary, Milo Manheim as Joseph and Oscar-nominee Antonio Banderas as King Herod, who plays the tortured but evil king with great relish. And he proves to be a fine vocalist in his annoyingly catchy big number, *Good to be King!*

His troubled son Antipater, played by Joel Smallbone, the Australian born member of Christian band *For King and Country*, wrestles with his feelings as he is sent to root out the newborn Jesus and kill him. Of course, we know how it ends but the suspense comes from seeing how they get there.

Then we have the comic relief in the Three Wise Men, a sort of three Stooges act that will give children a lot of laughs. I particularly enjoyed the fun they had with the idea and sound of myrrh in some very clever lyrics.

For me one of the most moving scenes in a highly choreographed sequences where two Josephs spar with each other in a song called *The Ultimate Deception*. After finding out Mary is pregnant and being urged to break off the betrothal, he feels torn in two between trust and suspicion, love and honour, before an angel voice tells him to go to Mary.

In an interview, Adam Anders told me he saw this love story as the original *Romeo and Juliet*. “This is a forbidden love. He should have left her. She should have been stoned. He took her stain upon him and his family name stayed with her. It’s an amazing story that nobody talks about.” Well, in this movie we see the agonies Mary and Joseph went through and feel with them their deep sense of joy at Jesus’ birth. “I think it’s beautiful and powerful, and I think it will leave people with a sense of all of what God has done for us,” says Anders.





Fiona Palomo as Mary in Journey to Bethlehem.

UPCOMING EVENTS AROUND THE DIOCESE

January 20, 2024

CMS SA/NT Summer Conference,
Edwardstown Baptist Church, Adelaide

February 14

Ash Wednesday, first day of Lent

March 23

CMS SA/NT Darwin world mission event,
Nungalinga College

March 27

Chrism service, cathedral

March 29 & 31

Good Friday and Easter Day

April 16-19

Clericon clergy and church workers
conference, Riyala

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