

InterSections

An Australian journal for Christian encounter and encouragement



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Welcome to the November 2021 issue of *InterSections*.

Jesus said that he came so that we 'may have life and have it to the full' (John 10:10). Yet amid our daily challenges – including pandemic lockdowns and restrictions – that promise of an abundant life can seem remote. In this issue we consider the idea of spiritual flourishing. How can we grasp the wonderful spiritual life that Jesus has given us?

In our *Feature*, Christian Bargholz invites us to embrace the adventure of following Jesus and to participate in a life-changing story. In our *Food for Thought*, Jenny Ancell considers what spirituality actually is and how we can develop a godly spirituality. On a related note, in *ChurchScene*, Graham Wall offers some ways we can maintain a healthy spiritual balance in our lives, especially given the challenges we're facing during the pandemic.

We also interview Pauline Tabalujan about what spiritual flourishing means to her. For our *Book Review*, Nathan Holyoak examines *For The Love of God: How the Church is Better and Worse than You Ever Imagined*. This book asks whether, historically, Christianity has been a blessing to the world or a source of division and suffering.

For our *International Letter*, Giovanni Rodriguez writes about the Bago Mission Farm in the Philippines. As for *News*, Camp Revive was once again held online over Zoom, but was still a great occasion for learning and fellowship. We also hear the encouraging story of Vince O'Shea's final gift to ACCET and how such a gift can help spread the Gospel.

May we all flourish and bear fruit as we remain connected to Jesus, the true vine (John 15:1–8).

The *InterSections* Team ♦

ChurchScene *Graham Wall* *Spiritual Flourishing – in a Pandemic?*

What does it mean to flourish spiritually?

Principally, it's a joyful relationship with God. Practically, it's growing in Christ-likeness both as an individual and as a church community.

This is God's purpose for humans: as his children, we're 'predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son' (Romans 8:29). Peter encourages his readers to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 3:18). In Ephesians 4:7–16, Paul uses an image of the growth and maturity of a person to illustrate how Christians can take concrete steps to grow in Christ-likeness and find joy in their relationship with God. How can we, as Christians, take concrete steps to mature in Christ-likeness and find joy in our relationship with God? Especially during a pandemic?

First, we need a healthy **heart**. Maturing in Christ requires a particular type of attitude and mindset. We'll never reach maturity if our heart is hardened by sin, fickle, full of worry, or fixated on riches and pleasures. We need a noble and good heart (Luke 8:1–15). Having this kind of heart comes from honestly assessing ourselves before God and choosing to surrender completely to him.





Second, we need a healthy **focus**. What we focus on in life matters. When our main focus in life is on material things, then that's what will define our life (Matthew 6:22-23). If we focus most of our attention on maintaining a religious system or tradition, we might, ironically, ignore what God values (Matthew 23). If we're fixated on certain practical features of church life, then what might concern us most is church attendance, adherence to church culture, people-pleasing, and perfecting the order of service rather than cultivating a genuine devotion to God.

The pandemic is a good time to review our focus. If we focus on Jesus and his work on the Cross, then our life begins to be defined and directed by his saving work, his qualities, his power, his heavenly perspective, and his way of living (1 Corinthians 2:2; Philippians 3:1-11; Hebrews 12:2; 2 Peter 3:18; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

Third, we need a healthy **identity**. Spiritual flourishing involves obeying God based on a new love and a new life. In Romans 6:1-7, Paul explains that God's grace isn't a licence to sin but the start of a new life. Rather than an identity tied to sin, it's now defined by the righteousness of Christ. That's what we pursue. We need to recognise our new identity and take the time and effort to grow into it. Its hallmarks are obedience and good deeds (Ephesians 2:6-10). So, to flourish spiritually, we should embrace who we are in Christ and then live up to what we have already become in Christ and are becoming (Ephesians 4:1).

Fourth, we need healthy Christian **relationships**. We'll struggle to thrive spiritually without healthy relationships with fellow Christians. That's why God adds us to the church and makes us dependent upon others within the church (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 18). That said, healthy Christian relationships go well beyond meeting together on Sundays or mid-week studies. The pandemic can hobble relationships through restrictions on movement. To continue nurturing relationships let's use phone calls, Zoom chats, and SMS messaging even more.

The type of relationships that accelerate spiritual development are relationships where people are devoted to *one another* (Romans 12:10), loving to *one another* (John 13:24), able to confess sins to *one another* (James 5:16), and able to admonish *one another* (Colossians 3:16). It's a relationship which allows us to weep and rejoice with *one another* (Romans 12:15). These qualities are especially powerful when they're present in close Christian friendships with two or three others.

Fifth, we need healthy **habits**. These habits orient us toward Jesus. Of course, there are baseline habits and disciplines that every Christian should be practising. They include: reading the Bible (Psalm 1), singing (Ephesians 5:19), praying (1 Thessalonians 5:17), taking the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:17-29), and meeting with the church (Hebrews 10:24-25).

The pandemic has provided an opportunity for a reset. Use this time to explore other habits and disciplines which can help us become closer to God. My sister finds it helpful to maintain a prayer journal. I enjoy bombarding a small section of Scripture with questions and then mulling over it. Some find value in memorising Scripture. Others are inspired by listening to Christian music. As we explore these habits, we may find ourselves gravitating toward some and not others. Don't feel guilty about that. Excel in what works.

In summary, spiritual flourishing involves maturing in Christ. Doing this requires a healthy heart, focus, and identity, as well as healthy relationships and habits. The pandemic has turned our world upside down. What better time than this to re-examine our lives and make a fresh commitment to Christ our Lord? ♦

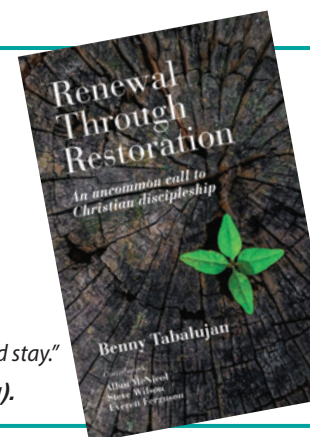
Graham Wall works as an itinerant evangelist in Victoria. He and his wife Kristina and family worship with the Border Church of Christ on the VIC and NSW border. gjwall@hotmail.com

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Towards the beginning of every great story is a 'call to adventure'. This is a literary technique which sees a character, called forth from their present circumstances into an uncertain future, faced with a choice of how to respond.

An iconic example is found in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. At the beginning of the story, Bilbo Baggins — a wealthy, comfortable hobbit — is called to step out of his home by Gandalf, a wizard who invites him on a perilous adventure. *'I have no time to blow smoke-rings this morning', says Gandalf to Bilbo, 'I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging...'*



Without this call to adventure, many stories wouldn't be worth telling. After all, adventure is what ultimately turns a set of facts about the world into a compelling and meaningful narrative. Every great story — from *The Hobbit* to *Harry Potter* — hinges on this small but incomparably significant moment because every story, ultimately, is the result of responding to adventure's call.

When we talk to people about what it means to become a Christian, we seldom conceive of it as responding to a call to adventure. We invite people to 'have their sins washed away', 'avoid eternal damnation', and 'receive the gift of God through faith'. While those are crucial elements in becoming a Christian, they describe a future outcome of a present decision. Becoming a Christian, therefore, becomes conflated with buying spiritual life insurance — at the end of the day, it's better to be safe than sorry.

The problem of conceiving the Christian life in such a way is that we miss the other half of the picture: what does being a Christian mean for the life that we lead now?

In the midst of Matthew's Gospel, we find Jesus' answer to this question. On one occasion, Jesus says to his disciples: *'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'* (Matthew 16:24)

This passage occurs at a key point in the story. It's sandwiched between two important moments that reveal Jesus' identity: Peter's great confession of faith that Jesus is the Son of God, and God's confirmation of that identity in Jesus' transfiguration. The placement of this passage is significant: Jesus' identity demands a response. Jesus challenges his would-be followers to respond to him by denying themselves, taking up their cross, and wholeheartedly following him. Hence, this invitation is Jesus' call to adventure.

The reason why we're drawn to adventure stories is, at least in part, because of their potential to transform the adventurer. The process of stepping out into uncertainty, and bearing the responsibility that comes with it, changes the adventurer into becoming more of the person they could be. Without the adventure, the person would remain stagnant, having missed the opportunity to flourish further.

That's why adventures make great stories. They involve struggle. They envision great difficulties. But they move characters forward in a meaningful and transformative direction if they will boldly take the first leap.

When Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him, he's inviting us to embark on a unique adventure with him. It's the kind of adventure we read about in great works of fiction. The difference is that this a real adventure. It's the adventure of our lives — one that will transform us into the people that God created us to be. We all have the potential to become God's chosen image-bearers who will one day rule a new world with him.

By responding to Jesus' call to adventure, we adopt the biblical narrative as our own. We take our place in its pages as a character in the footsteps of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David, and Jesus. We take God's story into the future.

However, this adventure is not without cost: it involves sacrifice, trial, and temptation. But the meaning of our lives is discovered the moment we voluntarily shoulder the responsibilities of following Jesus. We begin to flourish not when we indulge ourselves, but when we deny ourselves. True life is experienced along the narrow road, not the broad one. It's the difficult path, not the comfortable one, that will ultimately take us where we want to go. Following Jesus doesn't just involve an outcome at the end of all things; it means a radical, transformative change to a disciple's life here on earth.

To follow Jesus is to have the truest, greatest adventure of our lives. It's the adventure of becoming the people we are created to be. This journey involves self-denial, discipline, and radical trust in Jesus and his teachings. The road will be narrow, the obstacles many, the journey hard. But that's precisely what we should expect. If it wasn't difficult, it wouldn't be an adventure. ◇

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Food for Thought

Reflections on Spirituality Jenny Ancell

As early as the 4th century, Christianity witnessed an emerging group – monastics – who rejected worldliness and became secluded to devote themselves exclusively to God. The monastics practised fasting, praying, and self-denial to achieve a deeper sense of God's presence and spirituality. In part, the monastic movement was a radical response to worldly values sliding into the church after Emperor Constantine united church and state.¹

However, even in the 1st century the church battled with worldliness. On one occasion, Paul writes that he cannot speak to the Corinthians 'as spiritual but as to men of flesh' (1 Corinthians 3:1). While 'spirituality' as such isn't used in Scripture, Paul contends that one can cultivate a spiritual mindset and argues that the Christian's great ambition is to have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians, 2:16).

What then might spirituality look like today? What are the conditions for it to thrive?

Contrary to new-age definitions of spirituality, a spiritual mind has received 'not the spirit of the world; but the Spirit who is from God' (1 Corinthians 2:12). In his profound generosity, God provides Christians with his Spirit. This enables a Christian to have spiritual thoughts and motives as well as an ability to appraise all things (1 Corinthians 2: 11-16).

E.W. McMillan, a well-known 20th century preacher among Churches of Christ in America and founder of Ibaraki Christian College in Japan, fleshes out some defining characteristics of spirituality. He states that spirituality doesn't easily lend itself to a narrow definition. Rather, spirituality is an interpreting power that enables discernment; it places value on redemptive rather than temporal rewards; and it exercises a mature faith.²

McMillan argues that a mature faith is not developed by easy circumstances but is refined by adversity. Out of difficult circumstances one develops an implicit faith and trust in the overruling providence of God. He asserts: 'Real faith grows sweeter and stronger when trials are more severe, for it is unacquainted with fear. In courtship and marriage, in home and profession, in preaching and practice, in prosperity and adversity, in health and in sickness, whatever may come – this faith is "the victory that overcomes the world".'³

Spirituality also balances an inward, contemplative state with an outward demonstration of one's faith. Spirituality isn't purely meditative. It's the practising of one's beliefs and values in the arena called life. Like a deep reservoir, spirituality equips good works, produces light and salt in everyday circumstances, and sustains a focus on God's kingdom. When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, his reply demanded an all-encompassing allegiance: 'You shall love the Lord Your God with *all* your heart, with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind' (Matthew 22:37, my emphasis). This kind of focused commitment can help develop one's spirituality.

Meditating daily on God's Word provides a rich source of guidance and allows the Holy Spirit's promptings to inspire our faith and actions. Paul prayed that the Christians in Ephesus would grow in the knowledge of God. This would lead to a maturity, 'unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Ephesians 4:13). Such maturity comes from a disciplined life of meditating on God's Word. The famous hymn, *Take Time to be Holy*, encourages the Christian to 'take time to feed on his Word'. Including a regular pattern of meditation on God's Word can help us develop the fullness of Christ.

Building a strong prayer life has much to do with overcoming battles which war against spirituality. Communing with God gives spiritual direction and strengthens resolve. Growing up in China and often imprisoned because of his faith, Brother Yun held the motto: 'Much prayer, much power; little prayer, little power. Prayer equals power.' His life endured such persecutions that the antidote to giving up was found through prayer and perseverance. He said: 'We shouldn't pray for a lighter load to carry, but a stronger back to endure! Then the world will see that God is with us, empowering us to live in a way that reflects his love and power.'⁴

How can Christians develop a meaningful prayer life? Reading a portion of Scripture as a prayer can help the Word infuse our soul.⁵ For example, the prayer – 'Grant unto me a love that is patient, a love that is kind.... One that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things...' – can only inspire a sacrificial love.

Finally, practising love can boost our spirituality. Training our heart to give much for another person's salvation and blessing the lives of others will build in us the same heart and mind of Christ. 'As I have loved you, so you must love one another' (John 13:34). This is spirituality at its finest, when sincere love is the motivating factor for serving God and humanity. ◇

1 Tim Dowley, *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed (Fortress Press, 2013) 170.

2 E.W. McMillan, *The Minister's Spiritual Life* (Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1959) 5.

3 McMillan, *ibid*, 25.

4 Paul Hattaway, *Back To Jerusalem: Called to Complete the Great Commission* (Piquant, 2004) 69.

5 Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (InterVarsity Press, 2005) 247.

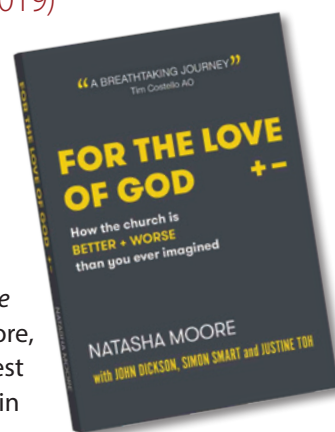


Book Review *Nathan Holyoak - For the Love of God: How the Church is Better and Worse Than You Ever Imagined* by Natasha Moore, et. al. (Sydney: Centre for Public Christianity, 2019)

What does it take for a society to flourish?

Today, many people who look back over history see mainly the damage wrought by religion – Christianity in particular. Therefore, so the thinking goes, for humanity to flourish we simply need to grow up and abandon the Christian faith. That's why increasingly Christianity isn't seen as something merely outdated or irrelevant, but a malign presence that harms the world.

Is this a fair summary of the situation? One way to help answer this question is to consider *For the Love of God* (also condensed into a documentary: publicchristianity.org/fortheloveofgod/) by Natasha Moore, a senior research fellow at the Centre for Public Christianity in Sydney. Moore takes an open and honest look at the history of Christianity, attempting to understand the best and worst that have been done in the name of God.



Of course, to do this comprehensively is a mammoth task. Moore's book isn't a full church history text. Instead, it focuses on episodes that loom large in the public imagination: negatives like the medieval Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and child sexual abuse; as well as positives like charitable works, the abolition of slavery, and others. Beyond these prominent examples, Moore considers the impact of Christian theology on ethics and political and social developments, such as civil and human rights. She also finds other examples where Christians have been a transformative presence in their world.

Beneath this discussion lies the question of what exactly do we mean by 'Christianity'? In reflecting on church history, Moore finds a distinction between faith used as an identity marker and faith used as a guide for living. When faith is merely an identity or a tribal marker it can be a driver of conflict. But when faith is a guide for living it can change us and shape our actions in positive ways. This realisation should temper our judgment when we go looking for someone to blame.

To help illustrate this, Moore uses a musical metaphor: a tune that's written by God but played to varying success by individuals. Do we judge the tune by the music or how it's being played?

As helpful as this illustration is, it still doesn't tell the full story. It's too easy to dismiss those who do evil in God's name as not being 'real' Christians. This is a serious topic that deserves our careful consideration. Even today, many have been hurt by people who claim to be Christians or representing the church; so we have to be wary not to be too glib in our assessment of these issues. As Moore points out, Jesus invited the world to judge his followers by their behaviour: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:35). An honest accounting will need to dig deeper; that's what this book helps us to do.

To the extent that Western civilisation over the past 1,700 years has been described as 'Christian', many consider the evils of Western civilisation as 'Christian' evils. Equally, the great achievements of Western civilisation are counted as 'Christian' achievements. This equation isn't entirely fair, but it's also not without some merit.

The truth is that the Christian faith has shaped Western civilisation and has also been shaped by it – for better and for worse. When seen in this light, it's impossible to give a simple and straightforward answer to the question as to whether Christianity has been a force for good. Also, does the good simply balance out the bad?

Instead, if we ask the question whether *Christ himself* has benefitted the world then the answer would have to be an unequivocal yes. Indeed, as the book shows, even the most strident critic of Christianity would likely agree – even if not for quite the same reasons.

The book's conclusion is referenced in its subtitle: Christendom in the broad sense of the term has done unspeakable things in God's name; this has to be acknowledged. But, equally, Jesus and the church he established has also had a much larger positive influence on the world we live in today than most people realise. This is a discussion that Christians should approach with great humility but also with confidence. We have nothing to fear with truth.

In sum, Moore's book is a worthwhile read on at least two levels. First, it helps us face up to the brutal reality of things that have been done in Jesus' name, and the pain and suffering that have been caused by churches of various stripes. Second, it's also inspiring to read about how followers of Jesus in many different circumstances have lived out Jesus' teachings with dedication and courage.

Seeing these two sides of the same coin is a powerful reminder of the responsibility we've been given as Christ's ambassadors in the world. The world is watching us, now more than ever. Meanwhile, the Gospel still has the power to transform our hearts and, through us, the world. ◇



International Letter

Mission Bago: How God Shows His Hand Giovanni Rodriguez

My story takes place in my home country, the Philippines. It's one of those stories where we see God working in a strange but wonderful way.

In 1999, I got to know Bettyboy and Bebing Saburiga. They live in Bago, a village in Negros Oriental province. They're part of a Church of Christ ministry which has roots in the 1960s when Bettyboy's father, Arsenio Saburiga, first worked with visiting American missionaries.

One day, a fellow Christian told me that Bettyboy had some land in Bago to sell – but only to another Christian. I was then living in Cebu City but I decided to see the land. Bago is in the middle of a mountain range and a day's journey away. It had no electricity, no communications, and no decent roads. Going to Bago was like taking a step back in time. I had a look at the land and purchased it straightaway, despite Bettyboy asking for a rather high price.

My wife, Naomi, wasn't happy with my decision. Back then I was a lukewarm Christian and more interested in doing business and making money. Naomi saw that my real intent wasn't to help a fellow Christian but was more selfish. On subsequent visits to Bago, I came to know other members of the Saburiga family. Some also sold their land to me. My mountain property was growing.

In 2001, my family migrated to New Zealand to start a new life. I left everything in the Philippines and considered the Bago land, which was still undeveloped, a write-off. I lost contact with Bettyboy. Amazingly, he kept our New Zealand address and in 2008 I received a letter from him. To my surprise he'd been faithfully caring for my land.

In 2009, my family relocated to Melbourne. We joined the Belmore Road congregation and became part of a Discovery Group which met on weeknights at the Tabalujan home. As a service project, our DG decided to help the Bago Christians plant coconut palms and fruit trees on my land. The goal was to develop a plantation to help improve the economic prospects of the local Christians. However, progress was slow. Rodents ate some of the saplings and maintenance was challenging.

In 2012, Bago experienced a 6.9 magnitude earthquake. This almost flattened the Bago church building. Naomi was keen to help so we brought the matter before the Belmore Road church. Christians opened their hearts and wallets and enough funds were raised to repair the Bago building.

In 2014, 2017, and 2019 I visited Bago with David Tabe (at that time one of Belmore Road's deacons). David wanted to see the Bago situation firsthand. For the 2017 trip, I wrote a mission update which was printed in the November 2017 *InterSections* news section. From those trips, David and I realised that the plantation project wasn't likely to take off because the land was just too difficult to farm sustainably. Instead, we focused on helping Bettyboy's family with their ministry to the Bago church as well as the 13 smaller churches in the surrounding region.

That's why, during our 2019 visit, I offered to return the Bago land to Bettyboy and his family. This was on the condition that the land would become common property of the Bago church. Bettyboy accepted the offer. Once again, I had failed to consult Naomi; but this time I knew she would agree – and she did.

Then came an unexpected turn of events. In 2020, the Bago church decided to host the annual Summer Camp. This is a week-long event which rotates among congregations within Negros Oriental province. Typical attendance is around 3,000 people, including Christians from neighbouring provinces.

The Bago church decided to use my former property for camp youth activities and requested assistance to make it suitable for that purpose. The Belmore Road church again chipped in. This time we funded the construction of toilet facilities and shelter huts, and the purchase of sporting equipment such as volleyballs and nets.

Then Covid-19 struck. The Summer Camp was cancelled. With no camp held but facilities built, Bettyboy and Bebing decided to stay temporarily on the property to escape the summer heat. In April 2020, some local church members visited them there. They were surprised at the raw natural beauty of the place. Photos were shared on social media. Soon, more people visited the property. This led to more social media sharing. By May, the number of visitors had increased significantly.

Because of this growing popularity, it was decided to make the property a tourist attraction. Bago church members rushed to construct a kitchen, expand a small hut to be used for serving food and refreshments, purchase solar lighting, and set up a water supply. An entrance fee was fixed. In June 2020 there were 350 visitors. In July they hosted 1,100. August saw 1,400 visitors.



Before 2020



After 2020



Continued page 7

God was finally showing his plan for the property – we just had to wait 20 years!

Fast forward to mid-2021. One year after its opening, the Lower Campanulong Eco Farm has become a registered tourist attraction in the town of Tayasan. It can be found on Google maps. There are photos and videos on Facebook and YouTube. Today the Eco Farm provides increased economic activity to a once marginal rural community.

Tourist money is flowing in. Local church members benefit from supplying chickens, fruits, and vegetables as the Eco Farm offers cooked food to guests. Some Christians rent tents to overnight visitors. Others earn money by helping maintain and improve the property.

To top it off, in May 2021 the Eco Farm hosted a local church youth group summer event – free of charge.

More recently, the ongoing pandemic in the province has put a dampener on visitor numbers. But this is a blessing. It's allowing

Bettyboy and Bebing to take stock of a phenomenon which has emerged out of nowhere. The hope is that the Eco Farm can continue to grow in future at a more measured pace.

Now let me quote the closing sentence of my Belmore Road – Bago mission update in the November 2017 *Intersections*:

This unlikely ministry [the Bago plantation] is still in its infancy. Yet it is exciting to dream of what God may be planning for future generations of Christians from these two churches.

Fast forward four years, and part of that dream is now revealed. The plantation has been replaced by the Eco Farm. Only God knows what is yet to come. ♦

Gio Rodriguez, his wife, Naomi, and their family are part of Belmore Road Church of Christ, Melbourne, Victoria. gbr98@yahoo.com



News Camp Revive 2021, VIC



On Saturday, 25 September, over 40 youth – and some not-so-young adults – jumped on Zoom to participate in Revive 2021 online!

We were honoured to have Peter Tickner (Macquarie Church of Christ, Sydney) share his thoughts and Tupperware-studded illustrations on the theme of 'The Treasure Within'. This is taken from Paul's words in Colossians 1-2.

In two break-out room sessions, we delved deeper into selected passages and discussed key questions about being 'in Christ' and 'getting dressed' as young people chosen and made holy by God. The event was interspersed with interactive games – including an icebreaker, Pictionary, a Kahoot quiz, and a rapid scavenger hunt – which provided a healthy dose of friendly competition and fun.

Finally, after the closing prayer and camp photo, we strengthened old bonds and forged new friendships during a round of break-out room 'speed-friending' – an especially uplifting opportunity for spiritual encouragement for those of us stuck in pandemic lockdowns across Australia.

On behalf of all the participants, I would like to say a huge thank you to the Revive Committee (Dale Christensen, Joy Tabalujan, Lois Ekong, Nancy Wu Won, David Chao, and Mitch Tabe) for all their hard work in organising such an engaging and encouraging event! ♦

Faith Tabalujan, VIC. faithxtabalujan@gmail.com



Donation from Vince O'Shea to ACCET, NSW

The Australian Churches of Christ Evangelistic Trust recently received a significant gift from the estate of Vince O'Shea, a Christian from the Ballina congregation in northern NSW. Vince died in April 2019. He wanted to be involved in the preaching of the Gospel despite no longer being physically present to do so. Vince knew that a bequest to ACCET would enable him to do just that.



Vince and his wife, May, moved from Toowoomba to Ballina in 1990 because of May's health and at the encouragement of Ian Coker. They were welcomed with open arms by the congregation, then made up of Nancy Bailey and her three daughters. As the only man in the Ballina church at the time, Vince took over the responsibility of leading the worship, despite having little experience. He quickly graduated from playing sermons on cassette tapes to delivering his own sermons.

'Vince was always ready to give his time and energy to helping in whatever capacity he could, always supported by May,' recalls Nancy. 'His devotion to studying God's Word was evident as he continued to grow in the knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures and get God's message across to the congregation in a manner easily understood. He was a true quiet achiever for the Lord.'

Vince's bequest to ACCET will continue to support the preaching of the Gospel in Australia as it generates income that will be distributed to enable workers to do just that – spread the Good News! Thank you, Vince, for your gift and your example.

Meanwhile, ACCET grant applications for 2022 will be accepted up until 19 November 2021 – please visit www.accet.org.au for details. ♦

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Interview *Pauline Tabalujan*

Much has been said about ‘human flourishing’ in recent years. What does human flourishing mean to you, and how does ‘spiritual flourishing’ play into that?

The word flourish (*florêre*) in Latin means ‘to flower’. When used with reference to humans, human flourishing entails abundance, productivity, health, and wealth. Today, there are varying definitions of human flourishing, but many don’t involve God.

As I see it, if God is absent from one’s desire to flourish, then superficiality, impermanence, and vanity are likely to sprout. I see spiritual flourishing as forming the core or foundation of human flourishing. Our central role is to imitate Christ, bear the fruit of the Spirit, and be God’s faithful ambassadors. When human flourishing is anchored in God, it becomes spiritual flourishing where God’s beauty is manifested in and through us. Importantly, spiritual flourishing takes root internally but bears external fruits, enabling us to be salt and light to others.

Spiritual flourishing is also about building character traits like faithfulness, resilience, and perseverance. A biblical example is the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27). Spiritual flourishing is descriptive of the man who built his house on a rock while mere human flourishing – without the spiritual element – is like the man who built his house on sand. Spiritual flourishing provides a firm foundation that anchors our souls in God.

Spiritual flourishing is also a dynamic process, with the end goal that we glorify God in becoming the person he created us to be (Philippians 1:6). Spiritual flourishing is both a process and a destination for Christians. We are all ‘works-in-progress’ as we look forward to dwelling in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives (Psalm 27:4).

What does spiritual flourishing look like in your own life?

Spiritual flourishing helps me see life as an adventure with God. Without him, all of life becomes meaningless, a chasing after wind (Ecclesiastes 1:14). It’s about seeing God’s purpose in all my encounters. Whether it’s appreciating the joys of life or weathering the storms of tribulation, God’s central in my life and all glory is given to him.

Spiritual flourishing is also about ‘paying-it-forward’. Even though I’m unable to fully repay Christians who have guided me, I can begin to pay it forward by nurturing and encouraging younger Christians in their spiritual journeys.

I think it’s beneficial to share my own spiritual journey – warts and all. This will help younger Christians realise that, even with the best of intentions and faithfulness, they’ll encounter bumps along the way. The key is to learn from these setbacks and continue seeking God’s wisdom and strength.

Other ways of nurturing younger Christians include: encouraging them to seek out and walk the good path (Jeremiah 6:16), helping them discover hidden gems in God’s Word (Psalm 119:105), and spurring them to be part of God’s community (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Giving back is another aspect of spiritual flourishing. It’s about extending the blessings received towards service within the



Benny & Pauline Tabalujan

wider community. This allows God’s light to become visible to others through us (Matthew 5:16).

Ultimately, spiritual flourishing is allowing the Potter to mould and shape me for his good work, purpose, and glory. When his work is completed in me and I return to my Father’s house, I hope to hear him utter these words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord’ (Matthew 25:23).

What would your advice be to a young Christian looking to flourish in their spiritual life?

Let me answer by saying that I love ‘tree watching’. I’m captivated by different species of trees and enthralled by the thought that trees are quiet custodians of time. They witness life as it unfolds. The Bible encourages Christians to strive to become ‘oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, for the display of his splendour’ (Isaiah 61:3). How can we achieve that?

When we look at trees, are we attracted only to the canopy, flowers, or fruits? Do we comprehend the importance of a strong root system in providing sustenance and support? In order to flourish spiritually, I would encourage young Christians to seek to develop a strong and deep spiritual root system that comprises the following practices:

Routine – Practice regularly the spiritual disciplines of reading, praying, solitude, and contemplation (Joshua 1:8).

Observation – Note the godly lives and examples of mature Christians among you and seek out spiritual mentors and peers as you walk this journey. Be purposeful and intentional in seeking communion with fellow Christians. The spiritual community is created by God for a reason (Psalm 145:4; Psalm 27:17).

Ownership – When you feel you’ve slipped in your faith, acknowledge it, seek God’s forgiveness, and ask for his wisdom that is given without reproach. God desires only a broken and contrite heart (James 1:5; Psalm 51:17).

Thankfulness – Giving thanks for all things and in all circumstances is a panacea for life’s troubles. Cultivate it daily (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Service – Seek opportunities to serve in the church and community. This gives purpose and meaning and, importantly, makes our faith real. Engaging in service also ensures that our faith is not lived in isolation but is challenged and tested with the promise that we will grow through the process. (1 Samuel 12:24; Isaiah 46:4).

May we all strive to cultivate strong **ROOTS!** ◇

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