

InterSections



Editorial

Welcome to the February 2014 issue of *InterSections*.

This issue takes a closer look at the book of Psalms and how it can enrich our lives today. In our *Feature* article, Ian Coker reflects on the real humanity expressed by writers of the Psalms as well as some faith-building aspects in the Psalms for the Christian. Norainie Bargholz in our *Food for Thought* section considers the invaluable benefits of the Psalms for nurturing the soul. Throughout the Christian journey, the soul needs constant renewal and care to safely navigate the path towards heaven – the Psalms helps to provide that.

In our other sections, Joanne Morgan writes a book review of *Sacred Influence* by Gary Thomas. This book examines the influence that godly women can have on their marriages. In our *ChurchScope* section, the Highfields and Drayton house churches in Toowoomba, Queensland, are featured. Rowan & Shannon Bestmann, as newcomers to Toowoomba, share their impressions of participating in the fellowship of these two house churches and the blessings they have received. And in our *Interview* we feature Andrew Johnson from Brisbane who shares his thoughts and views about Christian education and his work with Christian Schools Australia.

We also pay tribute to a quiet yet steely woman of faith, Leone Smith, who graduated to glory on 8 September 2013. Leone was a long-serving member of the Belmore Road congregation in Melbourne. Finally, the highlights of the 2013 Camp Challenge in NSW are also featured in our *News* section.

We hope you find this issue both informative and uplifting for your soul. As usual, we welcome your feedback and suggestions.

Happy reading!

The InterSections editorial Team

ChurchScope:

Toowoomba house churches, QLD

While there are undeniable merits in the 21st century for a church to own a building, the benefits of churches meeting in private homes are just as real and significant. We have found this to be the case in Toowoomba, Queensland.

Since moving to Toowoomba in early 2013, we have spent time with two home groups – one in Highfields in the north, the other in Drayton in the south. With sixteen and nineteen regular members respectively, the groups are small and intimate. Both groups consist of a range of ages, including members in their 70's and 80's, as well as young adults, couples and children. Consequently, there is a real family dynamic amongst the members.

The Drayton group meets on Sunday mornings in various members' homes, alternating from week to week. The Highfields group meets on Sunday afternoons. Approximately once a month, the two groups combine allowing an opportunity for a bigger gathering and usually the attendance of a guest speaker from The Point Church in Brisbane.

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We have felt strongly the calling we have as Christians to be counter-cultural, to stand out, to demonstrate the love of Christ...

There is also a mid-week evening Bible study for those who are able to attend and a weekday ladies' Bible study. It is here, in these smaller mid-week settings, that the most intimate and meaningful conversations and earnest times of prayer tend to occur.

Many of the Christians in these home groups have known each other for well over 30 years and have strong family connections. Those of us who are newcomers have been welcomed with open arms and have found both spiritual and practical support. The brethren here function like extended family. If someone needs help, others willingly step up and offer what is required. That's one of the great advantages of being part of a group of people who know each other deeply and are involved in each other's daily lives.

With our backgrounds rooted among various Churches of Christ in Australia, many of the Toowoomba home group members have had a good deal of growing (and, for some, healing). Now, with new faces present and some time having passed, the groups are beginning to look beyond family ties and reach out to the community in which we live.

Some members are closely involved with Toowoomba's large immigrant, refugee community. With their help,

one African brother was recently reunited with his wife whom he had not seen in over 12 years. Another family has begun hosting a youth group in their home, involving children in the family and their friends from school. Also, four women now have neighbours or friends regularly attending Sunday gatherings or Bible studies. It's a time of outreach, of lifting our eyes to see that 'the fields are white for harvest'.

Over the past year, as a couple we have been challenged to think about how we can really live out our faith and demonstrate Christ-like, unconditional love to the world. We have felt strongly the calling we have as Christians to be counter-cultural, to stand out, to demonstrate the love of Christ in ways which to unbelievers seem unnecessary, ungrudging, selfless, over-generous, even crazy. It seems to us (at least at this stage of our lives) that a good way to do this is in our own home, in our own time and with our own resources – which, after all, are not our own but God's. We hope our influence will increase by our choosing to meet with brethren in homes as the

earliest Christians did. If you are ever passing this way, please visit with us and share with us your own love for Christ. ■



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InterSections

InterSections is a quarterly journal designed to inform, inspire and unite Christians in Australia seeking to restore New Testament faith and practice. The editors are responsible for selecting material for publication, but each article reflects the views of its author(s). Advertisements in *InterSections* are broadly consistent with the ethos and goals of the journal; however, they do not necessarily constitute endorsement by the journal. *InterSections* is published by Klesis Institute, the ministry division of CommAsia Australia Pty Ltd (ACN 097136171 ABN 53702023602).

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Standing L-R: William, Jessica, Rhonda & David Tabe, Mitchell.
Sitting: Leone Smith holding a plaque from Belmore Road Church of Christ recognising her many years of service, especially as a Bible class teacher.

Tribute

To Leone Smith

18 March 1944 - 8 September 2013

How can I sum up, in a few words, a lifetime of service and devotion? Leone Smith: a servant; a sister in Christ; a mother; a grandmother; a teacher. My friend.

Leone was a fierce follower of Christ. When she wasn't reading the Word, she was living it. Leone was a fourth generation Christian who witnessed the fruit of over 30 years of labour including the conversion of her husband Ron. During that time we also saw her daughter Rhonda begin her walk with Jesus, marry David Tabe, and, more recently, their son, Mitchell, being baptised.

Leone had been a bible class teacher for longer than I can remember. Most of the current children at Belmore Road congregation had been taught by her over the years. Many of our members had also been taught by her in our earlier years. Her devotion to teaching was almost as great as her devotion to God. When she returned home after worship, she would begin preparing her class for the following week. She created all of the props she needed in class from whatever was at hand. Although her hands were gradually becoming unsteady in recent years, they were always busy.

Leone was never wealthy but with whatever she possessed, or with however much time she could spare, she would be willing to share with others. Leone would put others ahead of her own needs, even to the point of going without.

She was a quiet worker. Her deeds were always done behind the scenes. But for those of us who knew her well, her deeds were often noticed out of the corner of our eye, and we would smile. Leone would always be doing what she could, when she could, in spreading the Word.

Her dedication to God and his family, her devotion to her earthly family, her kindness, her example, and life, will not be forgotten by this friend. Leone will be missed. ■

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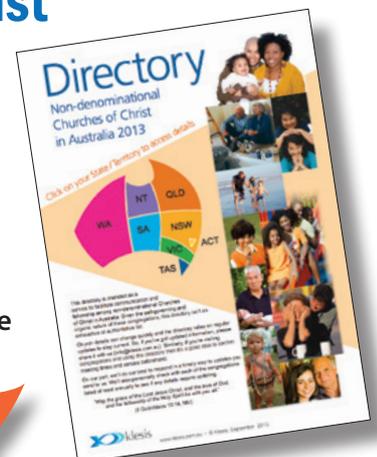
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Food for Thought

The Psalms

The Psalms is a collection of songs. Songs of praise, songs that teach or remind, songs that give vent to great emotion (despair, anguish, remorse as well as joy and celebration). Some of the songs in Psalms (the song of ascents, Psalms 120 – 134) were used to help worshippers maintain focus as they trekked towards Jerusalem – by calling to mind the good that God has done for his people.

The Psalms can give us words to praise in our moments of speechless wonder. How do you find the words when you are overcome by awe and a sense of your own insignificance when faced with the wonders of our world or the cosmos? Listen to and pray the opening of Psalm 19:

'The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows his handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech
And night unto night reveals knowledge.'

A beautiful sunset or the magnificence of the night sky – when not paled by city lights – speaks of a Creator who is intelligent, who appreciates order and beauty and who is beyond our imagining.

N T Wright, in *The Case for the Psalms*¹ (a book I highly recommend), suggests creation not only speaks of the Creator but praises or brings glory to him by its very being, by doing what it was purposed from the start. This brings to mind the 'good'ness of creation in Genesis 1.

Humans are the only part of creation that can be other than what they are meant to be (ie. God's image-bearers). If humans behave as we are meant to, we praise God, and cause others to praise God (Matthew 5:16). How do we know what praises God? The second half of Psalm 19 tells us:

'The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;
The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes'...

The Scriptures thus declare God's glory directly by revealing his wisdom, justice and grace, and indirectly through our obedience to them.

The Psalms can give voice to our darkest despair, allowing us to ask 'Why?' and 'How long?' In Psalm 22, David gives vent to his feelings of abandonment, telling God in deep emotive language what has befallen him. The Spirit's guidance in David's choice of words does not negate his response to the crisis he was undergoing. Psalm 22 can be a template for how we communicate to God in our own times of crisis, always remembering (as David did) that God will ultimately deliver us. Jesus, in his own moment of anguish on the cross, turned precisely to these words to communicate his sense of separation from God, thus simultaneously fulfilling the messianic prophecies contained in that psalm.

The Psalms can also fortify our faith. In Psalm 22 the author of the lament gives vent to his feelings. While the author wrote about a personal crisis, the language exactly mirrors the crucifixion and the suffering of Jesus. The number of such messianic prophecies which have been fulfilled and the precision in which they are fulfilled cannot be mere coincidence.

And when we've messed up (yet again!), the Psalms can help articulate our remorse and helplessness before God. We could do worse than use the words of Psalm 51:

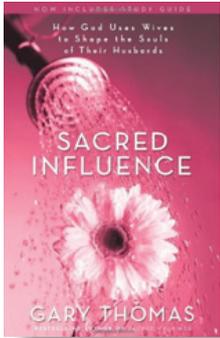
'Have mercy upon me, O God;
According to your loving-kindness'

These words remind us that we can do nothing of ourselves to atone for our sins. Instead, we are totally reliant upon the grace of God.

The concluding chapters to N T Wright's book include an encouragement to the reader to read and pray and sing the Psalms more often. (How I wish we had more psalms set to music.) Wright also writes how he '...once heard Billy Graham say that he read five psalms every day because they taught him how to get along with God, and a chapter of Proverbs every day because it taught him how to get along with other people. Psalms and Proverbs [read] right through each month: a great discipline.' That's food for thought. ■

1. N T Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (Harper Collins, 2013)

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Book Review

Gary Thomas, *Sacred Influence: How God uses wives to shape the souls of their husbands* (Zondervan, 2007)

When a good sister in Christ suggested a possible review of Gary Thomas' book, *Sacred Influence*, I thought: Great! After all, I've been married 30 years, I have a terrific husband and four beautiful sons. And I also loved Thomas' previous book, *Sacred Marriage*.¹

Why is it that when we write something down on paper on how to be a great influence on our men, we can have so much conviction and strength – and yet be so weak and wilful when those convictions are put to the test? Why, even with a good marriage, do we at times still go through times of struggle? Why? Because we are *beautifully flawed* – so says Thomas.

As a woman in an all-male family, I'm naturally protective of my men. Men have profoundly good qualities which are uniquely theirs. Their loyalty, their single mindedness and their great big hearts are wonderful to witness.

However, in the opening chapters of this book, Thomas hones in on the *flawed* aspects of a man's nature: his selfishness and his tendency to see women as weak and emotional, etc. These flaws or sins often cause much damage to the women in men's lives, leaving their women demoralised and turning them into nagging, ungrateful, bitter people.

At this point I wanted to bin the book. You may feel the same way, but read a little further. Because Thomas isn't about to spare women's feelings either. According to Thomas, women have a sinful tendency to define themselves 'according to their likeability or acceptance by

men' (p 20). Instead, he suggests: 'God, not your marital status, defines your life. Is this true of you? The more it is, the more success you will have in moving your man, because weak women usually forfeit their influence.' (p 21).

Keep reading and the wisdom of Thomas is revealed. After all, since women are more likely to read self-help books to 'fix' their husbands, isn't it logical that a man should write such a book?

Thomas then calls women to have a faith of their own. He addresses the common mistakes some women make in trying to make their marriages work. I particularly liked chapter 6, which is titled 'The Helper', because it embraces the high call of marriage. Some women view this aspect of Christian marriage – a wife being a helper to her husband – as subservient and demeaning.

But I think Thomas has a very scriptural view on our contribution to our husband's lives. He points out that being a helper is not meant to be demeaning; otherwise, the Bible would be demeaning God when it describes God as our helper (Exodus 18:4, Deuteronomy 33:29, Psalm 10:4, Psalm 27:9, Psalm 118:7).

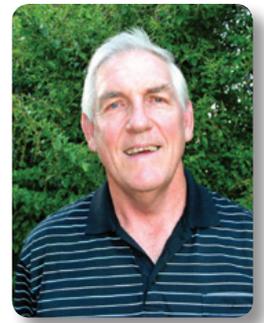
This review is in no way comprehensive. What I can say is that Thomas' book stirred up a lot of emotion in me. But he also

challenged me to be a more Christ-like woman. I love my Barrie and I feel very blessed to be his wife even after thirty years of marriage. We both know there are real dangers facing our society, with no-cause divorce laws and many marriages under pressure. This book may safeguard a good marriage and may well save a struggling one. ■



¹ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy* (Zondervan, 2000)

Feature *The Christian and the Psalms*



Many popular verses in the New Testament are found originally in the Psalms. Many of us have at least snippets of Psalms lodged in our mind. This raises the question: how should Christians today view the Psalms? What benefit can we gain from reading and meditating on this Old Testament book which was originally a hymn book for the children of Israel?

Though their name means 'songs', the Psalms do not need to be sung to be profitable. Neither do they present a system of didactic biblical theology. Instead, the Psalms reflect the emotions of people struggling for truth. Leupold wrote:

*'There does not seem to be any situation in life for which the Psalms do not provide light and guidance. They were born out of real-life situations. They were often wet with the tears and blood of the writer...Often times the Psalms become the superlative utterance of our deepest needs.'*¹

This means that we don't have to read many Psalms before we can say, 'I feel like that' or 'I've been there' or 'That scratches where I itch'. The Psalms thus highlight the humanness of the human condition. They show that, despite our technological advances, man really hasn't changed in his needs and aspirations. That is why the Psalms are as relevant to Christians today as they were to the Israelites. As Albert Barnes wrote:

*'A religious man is rarely, if ever, placed in circumstances where he will not find something in the Psalms appropriate to his circumstances...Hence, in sickness, in bereavement, in persecution, in old age, on the bed of death, the book of Psalms becomes so invariable and so valuable a companion...'*²

David is attributed to be the author of many of the Psalms. He is well known because of his significant kingship and remarkable life. Many songs of his great victories and ascendancy to the throne can be found. As with David, the Psalms reveal our many troubles and victories. Psalm 6:1 begins with: 'O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger'. Why such a request? The following verses reveal a much troubled man (verses 2-7). Psalm 13:1 starts with 'How long will you forget me, O Lord?' Why such a statement? Because David felt forsaken. Psalm 22:1 begins with the familiar, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' because he felt oppressed and out on a limb.

Perhaps Psalm 31 is the most revealing of David's low times; he wrote: 'I am in trouble' (v 9). He goes on to say in the following two verses that his body is wasted away and he is filled with sorrow and sadness. He expresses deep fatigue when he says his strength has failed and the awareness of his iniquity speaks of guilt. In verse 11 he writes: 'I am a reproach among all my enemies, but especially among my neighbours and a fear to my acquaintance: they that did see me without fled from me.'

No doubt David had his enemies, but had the whole world turned against him? Or was David expressing a perception of life that is not at all uncommon for one who struggles with depression? He concludes with: 'I am like a broken vessel' (v 12). What's a broken vessel worth? Nothing. Finally he expresses sheer hopelessness when he writes: 'terror is on every side' (v 13). He felt trapped with nowhere to go – except God (v 14).

Many of the Psalms are appeals for help and also expressions of dependency. Colossians 4:2 urges us 'to continue in prayer, and keeping alert in it with thanksgiving'. The Psalms are also perfect examples of this. Many begin with statements of disappointment with God's response to personal circumstances, but almost invariably they end confidently with expression of praise and thanksgiving.

Yet the emotional states expressed in the Psalms cover more than despondency and exultation. The darker emotions of indignation and vengefulness also surface. One doesn't have to read very far into the Psalms to come across what are known as imprecatory statements, either as complete psalms or minor segments. These are statements which invoke the vengeance of God and which seem to delight in the destruction of others. Many Christians have been disturbed by them, simply because they seem to be contrary to the spirit of the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Hence, some regard them as aberrations, perhaps uninspired and not worthy of retention in Scripture.

But our personal sensibilities should not be the measure by which the imprecatory psalms should be judged. Instead, we should understand that the Old Testament law included civil as well as religious law. For Israel, national security and victory were important themes. The preservation of the king as head of the nation was critical. So if we compare the imprecatory passages in the Psalms against passages such as Romans 13:1ff (where God gives the power of the sword to government) then the discord is not as apparent. Since vengeance belongs to God, his revenge must be right and holy, and though individuals are not entrusted to determine such matters, the imprecatory Psalms show man entering sympathetically into the righteous judgments of God.

In addition to appealing to our emotional states, the Psalms are also educational. For Christians today, one benefit of the Psalms is that they strengthen our confidence in the Scriptures as we see a multitude of statements either alluded to or fulfilled in the New Testament. There is no doubt as to the antiquity of the Psalms and to see them quoted so often in the New Testament (eg. Psalm 2, 22, 45, 89, 110, 132) – with many being Messianic – reinforces our appreciation of the unifying thread of the Bible.

Continued page 7

The Psalms also teach us something about history. Psalms 68, 105, 106, 136 are examples. They provide a different perspective than the historical narratives in the Pentateuch. For example, some have asserted that the Israelites committed sin in stealing from the Egyptians before leaving Egypt. This was based on an incorrect view of Exodus 12:35-36. But Psalm 105:37-37 reveals that Egypt was glad to see them go with the things they had given them, not dismayed at being plundered. Similarly, Psalm 106:28 reveals that the children of Israel ate sacrifices offered to the dead in Moab, a fact not revealed in the original account in Numbers 25.

From Psalms, we also learn something about the poetic exaggeration of Hebrew literature. This is helpful as many incorrect teachings are often supported by appeals to the Psalms. For example, Psalm 51:5 is often used as a key text to support the doctrine of original or inherited sin. But if we look at Psalm 22:9-10 we see the hyperbole of faithfulness as an appeal for help (after all, did David in infancy really consciously choose and hope in God?). Likewise, Psalm 58:3 exaggerates the wickedness of the wicked to heighten their need of judgment (do the wicked really go astray from the Lord

from birth, speaking lies?). In this way, we can see that Psalm 51:5 doesn't declare a system of inherited sin, but is rather a remorseful exaggeration of sin and guilt.

Likewise, care needs to be taken with respect to using the Psalms as a fount of scientific statements predating contemporary knowledge in order to prove the Bible's inspiration. Some have supposedly found scientific 'proofs' from the Psalms (and other Old Testament poetical books). But the danger in interpreting poetry scientifically is that, to be consistent, one must give equal scientific value to other poetic lines that appear to be scientifically inaccurate. This creates obvious problems. The better approach is to read poetical passages in Psalms not as scientific proofs. Poetical language is used to evoke a picture in one's imagination – not to give literal, abstract, scientific facts. Besides, if these verses have only become understandable in the light of modern science, then what was their value to the original recipients who did not have such knowledge?

In conclusion, in the Psalms, God has preserved a vast storehouse of devotional literature which offer rich spiritual blessings. Read properly, the Psalms will continue to bless Christians all the days of our lives. ■

1. Leupold, H.C., *Exposition of the Psalms* (Baker Book House, 1977) 28.
2. Barnes, A. *Psalms* (Blackie & Son, 1870) 43.

Ian Coker was a full-time minister for many years at the Gipps St Church of Christ in Toowoomba, Queensland. He and his wife Dianne now worship with the Townsville Church of Christ in North Queensland. dicoker@mail.com

News

Camp Challenge 2013

Camp Challenge is a highlight of the year for many people. For some it is their annual holiday, for some it is a refreshing retreat after all the buzz of the festive season. For many it is a time of spiritual uplifting and renewing of friendships and making new ones.

The theme this year was 'We're in this together' with the four days of lessons on: 'I'm here; You're here; We're here; They're here.' These lessons were led by John Cooper, Joshua Turner, Mark Jennings and Peter Tickner.

This year we changed venue to Kiah Ridge in Tahmoor, NSW. This turned out to be a fantastic change. The facilities were great and there was something for everyone – from the youngest to the oldest – to be involved in. As usual, the games evenings and talent nights were an especially delightful experience.

We hope you will plan to be at Camp Challenge in 2014 for another wonderful experience. Check out the Camp Challenge Facebook page for more photos. ■

Peter Tickner. tickey211@gmail.com





You have a background in business. How did you get involved in education?

After completing a Human Resource Management degree I worked in the family business for 10 years. My wife Danielle was a teacher and we were seeking an opportunity to work together in a profession which would allow us to travel. I completed a Grad. Dip. in Education and taught lower primary for three years. I then worked in school administration and leadership of a Christian school before moving into this current role. Danielle and I both enjoy the rewarding nature of teaching and I stay connected with teaching through my role as a sessional lecturer at Christian Heritage College.

How does Christian Schools Australia assist Christian schools?

Christian Schools Australia is a peak body for the Christian schooling movement in Australia. The organisation supports and equips an association of over 140 Christian faith-based schools throughout Australia, educating more than 50,000 students. This support includes the development of policies, curriculum documents, professional development, study tours, collegial networking, political advocacy, government accreditation, assistance with the establishment of new Christian schools and formal links with ACSI (Association of Christian Schools International).

What role can Christian schools play in an increasingly secular society?

Christian schools have a unique opportunity to powerfully influence the world for Christ. As the credibility of Christian schooling continues to grow, through effective educational outcomes, interactive service in local communities and supportive alumni networks, their acceptance has also grown. Many non-Christian families are attracted to Christian schools and students often catch their first glimpse of Christ through the actions of staff and other members of the school community. These schools often act as an introduction to Christ.

How does education at a Christian school differ from education at a secular school?

Christian schools form a partnership with parents to educate students within a framework of values, truths and moral parameters that provide clarity in a social context of permeable boundaries. The fundamental pillars of Christian education include a curriculum that is presented from a biblical perspective, extra-curricula opportunities that encourage students to develop their abilities and allow them to serve others and a school staff who are practising Christians.

You have studied Christian schools around the world.

How does the Christian education environment in Australia compare to other countries?

I have had the opportunity to visit Christian schools in Canada, USA, Hong Kong, China, PNG, Indonesia, Israel and every state of Australia. Broadly speaking, Australian governments, both State and Commonwealth, strongly support independent schooling, including Christian schools. Christian schools in Australia receive far more public funding, for both recurrent and capital expenses, than most other countries and have the freedom to employ Christian staff who embrace the faith basis of the school. About 30% of independent school students and 2% of all students in Australia attend a Christian school.

What role do parents play in their child's education? What are some ways they can be involved?

Parents are the primary educators of their children; schools are secondary educators. There is great value in parents knowing their children's teachers, sharing the uniqueness of their children with their teachers and volunteering in the classroom and at school events. Parents could also proactively develop relationships with the families of their children's close peer networks to stay involved with their children in secondary education.

How would you rate the involvement of Churches of Christ in Christian education – in Australia and overseas?

To my knowledge, Redlands College in Brisbane is the only Church of Christ affiliated school in Australia. In the US there are about 50 schools (K-12 or a variation of this) – as well as a number of universities – affiliated with Churches of Christ. In Australia, Churches of Christ would appear proportionally under-represented in Christian education when compared to other evangelical church communities. The establishment of a new Christian school in Queensland requires at least a two year lead-in period; however, there are significant opportunities available to our church community to become further involved in Christian education. The government funding available to Christian schools in Australia, for both recurrent and capital costs, is higher than most other countries and Christian education is an effective vehicle for both discipling and evangelising our faith. ■

Andrew Johnson is the Queensland Executive Officer of Christian Schools Australia. He and his wife Danielle have three children and they are part of the Holland Park Church of Christ in Brisbane. Andrew was interviewed by Nathan Holyoak. ajohnson@csa.edu.au