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InterSections

An Australian journal for Christian encounter and encouragement

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Editorial

The theme of this issue is restoring non-denominational Christianity. Upon seeing those words, many eyes may glaze over. But what we're really talking about is uniting Christians around a common faith based on the Bible and nothing else.

As the influence of Christianity in our society dwindles, it's even more important for believers to come together in unity. But how realistic is this goal, and what can we do to achieve it? In our *Feature*, Steve Wilson asks whether it is even possible to restore non-denominational Christianity. In *Food for Thought*, Allan McNicol considers the nature of denominations and their place in the Christian sphere, and Benny Tabalujan considers how – from a biblical perspective – we should deal with the reality of denominations. Also, Andrew Johnson reviews the book, *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, which analyses the relationship between non-denominational churches from the Stone-Campbell Movement and the broader evangelical church community.

Our *ChurchScope* focuses on the Greater Dandenong Church of Christ. This congregation began a few years ago but has grown quickly. We also interview John and Judy Wall about their lives serving in a country church in Bairnsdale, Victoria. And in *News*, we hear about the latest Easter camp at Lake Nillahcootie, and a recent program at Redlands College in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

May we continue to look to God's Word for wisdom in all things, especially as we seek to restore New Testament faith and practice.

The *InterSections* editorial team.

ChurchScope

Greater Dandenong Church of Christ, Melbourne



The church in Greater Dandenong started with a small group of six people on 10 April 2016. We wanted to bring back those who had stopped coming to worship and to spread the Word of God to all in this area. Greater Dandenong is a fast growing suburb with many different communities. It is an area in great need of the Good News - regardless of any community differences.

From the launch we have now grown to around thirty people from all backgrounds, including a generous quota from the Sri Lankan and Sudanese communities.

On Sundays, we start with a Bible class at 11 am followed by a coffee break and a worship assembly at 12 noon. Our teachers include Jimmy Forbes, Jeffah (John) Thabach, and Noel Forbes. We also have Chris Labrooy, Reggie Gangi, Greg Stevens, and Bobby helping lead the singing and the Lord's Supper.

It's definitely a wonderful environment and we thank God for giving us this opportunity. Although starting a new congregation has its moments of trial, we know undoubtedly that we can persevere and survive with God's unfailing help and strength.



At the moment we are also blessed to have a number of God's people coming by to teach from God's Word. We thank our visiting teachers wholeheartedly. An experienced songleader is what we would ideally like to have - but in the meantime we manage somehow, knowing that God listens to our hearts.

“... teach the scriptures,
live the scriptures...”

Our children's Bible classes involve around sixteen children – and more when there are visitors. It's a mixed age group, which makes it interesting and it's a pleasure to teach with the unfailing help of God.

The church also meets on Wednesday night at Sharon and Greg Stevens' home to study from God's Word. There is also a youth group meeting on Monday night with different topics discussed from Scripture.

The church recently celebrated its third anniversary with a very encouraging assembly glorifying God. Our goal and mission is to try our utmost to teach the Scriptures, live the Scriptures and, most importantly, to love God with all our heart and to love one another. We welcome any travellers to visit with us at any time and share what's best from God's Word, his love and his saving grace. ♦

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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 (© Klesis Institute, 2019). Copyright permission is given to anyone wishing to reproduce an individual article for non-commercial purposes, as long as due attribution is given to the author and *InterSections*. Klesis Institute is a division of CommAsia Australia Pty Ltd (ACN 097136171 ABN 53702023602).

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Feature: Restoring Non-Denominational Christianity: An Impossible Dream?

The dream of recapturing the non-denominational character of Christianity seems to be alive and well among believers today. We're encouraged when we find evidence of a decline in sectarian allegiances. There's also a corresponding increase in recognising the need to be biblical.

But turning the dream into reality is often difficult. We, in non-denominational Churches of Christ, know this all too well. Believers, past and present, seriously pursuing the dream of non-denominational Christianity are often called 'restorationists' or 'Christian primitivists'. The scope, consistency and success of attempts at restoration throughout church history have varied.¹ The common denominator among them is an attempt to discern and restore the original and enduring teachings and practices of the church we read about in the New Testament. With restoration as their goal, their motive has been to facilitate Christian unity and faithfulness.

Unity built upon a restoration platform presupposes that believers are willing, in the interests of unity, to forsake everything other than the apostles' teaching made incumbent upon Jesus' disciples in Scripture (Ephesians 2:19-22). History demonstrates that relatively few believers are prepared to do that.

“ Perhaps one way to reduce confusion is to adjust our terminology to pre-denominational Christianity. We want to restore the church to its original apostolic simplicity. . . ”

What exactly do we mean by non-denominational Christianity? In my experience, the claim to be non-denominational today risks confusion. Many assume non-denominational means inter-denominational (ie. inclusive of all denominations). Yet others assume it is code for saying 'my tribe is better than your tribe' or, more offensively, that 'my denomination is the only legitimate tribe and that all others are illegitimate'. Even many Christians who understand the theological fallacy of denominationalism seem to struggle when they seek to think and behave un-denominationally.

Perhaps one way to reduce confusion is to adjust our terminology to pre-denominational Christianity. We want to restore the church to its original apostolic simplicity, as it was before denominationalism evolved with its attendant post-apostolic and extra-biblical teaching, worship practices, institutional hierarchies, etc.

When the spirit of partisanship (the germ of denominationalism) did raise its head in the first century church, Paul was quick to cut it off (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Paul insists there is only one body (church), just as there is only one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:1-6; cf. 1:20-23). Paul consistently advocated unity in teaching, practice, and purpose among Christ's disciples (1 Corinthians 7:17; 11:1-2, 23; 14:33, 37; Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6-7, 14-15; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2:2). This echoes Jesus' earlier prayer for the oneness of his apostles and 'those who would believe in [Jesus] through their message' (John 17:20-21).

By unity I do not mean absolute uniformity in all respects. Some things are not negotiable (eg. the seven ones of Ephesians 4). But there are other things that are negotiable (eg. the disputable matters in Romans 14). Following Jesus' lead in Matthew 23:23, all things pertaining to serving God are important, but some things are much more important than others. Note that Jesus' prayer (John 17) invokes the oneness of the Godhead in three persons as the model and ideal of oneness among his disciples. This is a unity in diversity.

Jude anticipated the legitimacy of restoration when, just 35-55 years after its beginning, he felt compelled to warn the church at large: 'I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3).

There is a visible and tangible unity of the church advocated by Jesus when he commanded his followers to make disciples by 'baptising them ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:18-20). Peter and the early Christians reflected this obedience when Luke recorded their words and actions: 'repent and be baptised ... [and then] they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' (Acts 2:36-42).

Paul and Jude (see above), presuppose a 'once for all' standard of teaching and practice which the family of God holds in common and is to maintain from generation to generation. To the degree that any church in any time or place deviates from that original standard, it needs to be restored to the original.

Is the restoration of pre-denominational Christianity possible? Jesus the Messiah, who selected, equipped, and commissioned his apostles (Matthew 16:16-19; 28:18-20); the Holy Spirit whom the Father sent to guide the apostles into all truth (John 14:15-17, 25-26; 16:4-7, 12-13; Acts 1:1-8); and God the Father, who authored the whole redemptive plan, inspired the Old and New Testament writings and providentially preserved the apostolic message and traditions – all three persons of the Godhead – I think, would say yes. So it must be possible and practical and desirable! ◇

¹ A brief overview of notable restoration movements in church history is given by C. Leonard Allen, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University, 1988).



Food For Thought

Christian Denominations: An Oxymoron or Reality?

Jesus clearly planned to build one united assembly against which even the powers of the unseen world would not prevail (Matthew 16:18). Its members constitute one body worldwide (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12). And although there were tensions and differences between believers in the earliest days of the Christian faith (eg. Paul's dispute with the Galatians), through baptism all believers are united with the heavenly Christ who alone is designated head of the body: the church (Colossians 1:18-19; Ephesians 4:15-16).

In a general sense the idea of believers in Christ denominating themselves into separate groups based on different belief systems, membership rules, synods, and conferences was a development in later church history. It certainly was not authorised or advocated by the apostles. For this reason, non-denominational Churches of Christ, solely on the basis of the teaching of the apostles, strongly oppose this later understanding of the church. It would be fair to say that for us, the term 'Christian denomination' is an oxymoron.

Yet, for many people, shunning the use of this terminology isn't as easy as it may seem. We often hear people, 'What's your denominational preference or affiliation?' And sometimes even oxymorons make sense. My dictionary gives examples of phraseology such as 'absolutely unsure,' 'deafening silence,' and 'unbiased opinion.' So it's understandable that something which is an oxymoron biblically, in another context can actually make sense.

No matter how often we refer to ourselves as 'non-denominational', outside observers will see enough parallels between us and other communities of faith to draw their own conclusions. They may quietly nod when they hear our arguments and then go on thinking 'but they really are a denomination.' I live in Texas where Baptists are the most powerful religious group. But in many small towns there are often only two fellowships: the Baptist Church and a Church of Christ. Here everyone knows one another and denominational terminology inevitably filters into ways to describe this local reality.

Nevertheless, there are solid reasons why we should persist with our goal to be an undenominational fellowship which seeks to adopt and defend beliefs and practices only clearly authorised by the teachings of the apostles. For example, there are those who claim that in the 'household baptisms' (Acts 16:15; 1 Corinthians 1:16) infants surely were included. It seems to me rather unlikely. But people have argued over this for centuries.

How much better would it be if we adopted consistently the principle of only allowing, on this matter of baptism, a policy of baptising repentant believers who confess the lordship of Jesus? Here we would be following a principle which almost all believers would agree to be a practice affirmed by the apostles. Our desire is to promote unity. How could this be wrong?

By adopting such a policy we are clearly doing what we are saying we claim to be: a non-denominational fellowship. In my judgment this puts us in a firmer position to invite other believers to unite with us on the basis that we are simply attempting to follow the faith authorised by the apostles. I think that a lot of our problems could be averted if we did this on a regular basis.

So what do we conclude? I'm proposing that the idea of 'Christian denominations' is antithetical to New Testament teachings. Denominationalism divides. It doesn't unite. It's a product of a complicated ecclesiastical history. It is a festering stew in which we find everything from the Crusades to the amazing expressions of faith of the martyrs.

Nevertheless, even those of us in non-denominational Churches of Christ would experience matters differently without this reality of denominationalism. This reality has preserved the original text of the Bible. I daresay you read your Bible in a translation drawn from communities and groups financed by denominations. The same principle is applicable to the hymns we sing and the scores for the music that accompany them. Need I expand?

While I appreciate this reality of denominationalism, I know we can do better. I propose that our plea for non-denominational Christianity should stand as a lighthouse clearly setting forth a guiding light in the midst of this ecclesiastical storm. While it's a reality, denominational Christianity is also an oxymoron.

Meanwhile, before the coming of God's new world it may be good for those of us trying to be the New Testament church to underscore again the heart of the ethical teachings given to believers. Let's do all things in faith, hope, and love. And this applies to our relationships with denominational communities as well as those with whom we gather each Lord's Day. ◇

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More Food for Thought

Dealing with Denominationalism

How should Christians deal with denominations? How do Christians relate to other professed followers of Christ – individuals and groups – who have different beliefs and practices from us? In the midst of what some say is an explosion of denominations within Christendom, these are sensitive questions.

I believe the parable of wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30) suggests helpful answers. This parable is one of the few which Jesus interprets for his listeners (13:36-43). It tells of two types of plants present in a field, representing the world (13:38). The first plant is wheat sowed by Jesus. Wheat represents true Christians, genuine children of the kingdom. The second plant are tares planted by the Enemy. Tares are weeds which look like wheat in their early growth.

The parable teaches that, at final judgment, Jesus will send angels who will separate tares from wheat and gather them – the former to be burnt and the latter to be ushered into the fullness of God's kingdom (13:41-43). Before the final judgment, it's unwise for a person to pull out tares from among the wheat because they're indistinguishable. In fact, if we do so, we risk inadvertently uprooting the wheat (13:29).

A plain reading of the parable suggests at least two insights for dealing with the challenge of denominationalism. First, until judgment day comes, wheat (let's call them 'true Christians') and tares (let's call them 'fake Christians') grow together. Fake Christians masquerade as true Christians; they profess faith in God and outwardly behave like Christians, but inwardly are not. Hence, we shouldn't be surprised if true Christians and fake Christians are found side by side. Moreover, the fact that tares will one day be pulled out of the 'kingdom' (13:41) suggests that a local church and entire denominations can have both.

Second, the real nature of wheat and tares will be revealed at judgment. Until judgment, only God knows who in the kingdom are truly tares and wheat. Humans cannot presume to have this knowledge. If we attempt to root out fake Christians we may inadvertently harm true Christians.

I take this to mean that, prior to judgment, Christians should be careful about condemning those we think are fake Christians. Although sometimes it's tempting for Christians in a local fellowship to disparage believers in other churches or denominations who interpret Scripture differently to us, the parable calls us to exercise self-restraint.

Does this then mean that we should suspend all judgment of others? I don't think so. Satan remains active today. While some of his followers masquerade as Christians, others make no such pretence. The latter includes murderers, the immoral, and those who openly mock, deride, and profane God (eg. Psalm 14:1; Romans 1:18-32; 2 Peter 3:3-5; Revelation 21:8). It's easier to evaluate, identify, and avoid people such as these. Similarly, even within Christian communities there may be individuals who behave in an openly immoral, factious, or anti-Christ manner, or who propagate a false gospel (1 Corinthians

“...if other believers have different convictions, we can have respectful dialogue with them – without disparaging them or, conversely, feeling that we have to endorse or adopt their practices.”

5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 7-11; Galatians 1:6-10). Again, we're asked to evaluate these individuals and, if need be, avoid fellowship with them.

On the flip side, does this parable mean that, prior to Christ's return, we have to accept denominationalism or endorse denominational teachings – even if we disagree with them? By no means. Jesus prayed for unity, not denominationalism (John 17:20-21). Paul taught against divisions and factionalism in churches (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). While there may be historical, cultural, and political arguments in support of denominationalism, the thrust of the New Testament is in the opposite direction. Christians are called into one body and exhorted to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-6).

In other words, not condemning believers in other churches doesn't mean that we have to endorse their doctrines and practices. Christians are encouraged to study the Scriptures (eg. Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15). We can – with conviction and humility, coupled with love for truth – point out what we believe to be errors in the teachings of other believers. Paul also encourages Christians to adopt practices which align with their convictions, based on their understanding of Scripture (Romans 14). Indeed, to go against one's personal conscience is sin (Romans 14:22-23). At the same time, we should avoid stumbling others (Romans 14:21).

In summary, if other believers have different convictions, we can have respectful dialogue with them – without disparaging them or, conversely, feeling that we have to endorse or adopt their practices. We should live according to our convictions. We should respect the consciences of others. We should acknowledge the circles of fellowship which naturally flow from this – even as we continue calling for the restoration of non-denominational or pre-denominational Christian faith and practice. We should leave ultimate judgment to God.

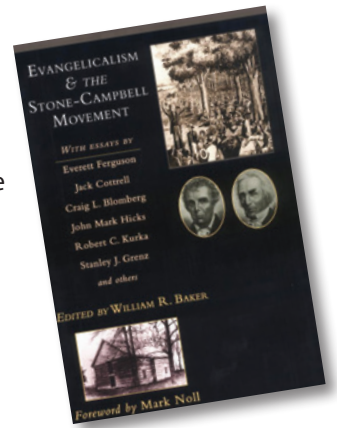
Meanwhile, let's remember that when Jesus returns there'll be a final accounting. (That exercise may yield surprises: Matthew 25:31-46.) Until that day comes, dealing with denominationalism is a sensitive task which requires humility, forbearance, conviction, and grace. These qualities will help us generate dialogue and minimise untimely condemnation – while we pursue the unity which Jesus prayed for and await the coming of God's kingdom in all its fullness. ♦

Book Review *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement* William R. Baker (ed) (InterVarsity Press, 2002)



Can non-denominational Churches of Christ, and the broader Stone-Campbell movement, be considered evangelical? Baker's collection of 14 essays, authored by scholars from within and outside the Stone-Campbell tradition, fulfils the commendable role of inviting the reader to grapple deeply with this question and to reflect on it.

With the heritage of the Stone-Campbell movement rooted in a rejection of traditional Protestant sectarianism in order to 'recover the primitive, non-sectarian, immersionist faith of the New Testament' (p 10), there has existed at times an uneasy relationship between churches birthed in the Stone-Campbell movement and the broader evangelical Protestant community.



Baker seeks to explore the nature of this tension by inviting fellow scholars to analyse the historical circumstances in which it arose and to consider whether Churches of Christ are now viewed as evangelical. Baker structures this conversation around a framework of inviting leading scholars, from inside and outside the Stone-Campbell movement, to present alternative perspectives on four key themes: the role of faith in conversion, the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion, the role of baptism in conversion, and the biblical model of the church.

Prior to exploring the core question of whether Churches of Christ are considered part of the evangelical movement, Baker seeks to define what it means to be evangelical. He distils a broad analysis down to three distinctive elements: 'a commitment to the Bible, zeal for evangelism and regeneration through personal faith in Jesus Christ' (p 38). Myers, whilst endorsing the broad thrust of Baker's elements, presents a more nuanced view of evangelicalism and advocates for the presence of four qualities: conversion – a belief that lives need to be changed; activism – the expression of the Gospel through effort; biblicism – a particular regard for the Bible; and crucicentrism – an emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (p 52).

These elements or qualities of evangelicalism highlight key similarities in definition. However, Baker contends that, as an effective descriptor, the term evangelical has lost clarity through diffusion in varying cultural contexts. He proceeds to

advocate that the core question can only be answered by referring to the distinctive elements of evangelicalism, not the breadth of its theological perspectives.

By limiting his definition of evangelical to its three distinctive elements, Baker concludes that Churches of Christ are clearly evangelical. Yet the differences in biblical interpretation between those from the Reformed tradition and those from a restorationist tradition are broad enough that the debate over theological perspectives will continue to stoke the coals of differing evangelical definitions. This will determine who really meets the criteria of 'evangelicalism'.

The book requires a deeply thoughtful and reflective approach given that scholars present arguments for, and critiques of, restorationist and Reformed perspectives of evangelicalism. The beauty of the book is its genuine desire to engage in productive dialogue on the topic. This reflects an inherent desire for greater appreciation of the evangelical movement.

The reader is left with the distinct impression that churches within the Stone-Campbell movement are accepted as evangelical, notwithstanding the differences in theological perspectives – which are most starkly expressed when considering the role of baptism in conversion. ◇

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News *Victorian Easter Camp, April 2019*

Victoria's annual Easter Camp, which has been running for 44 years all up, celebrated its 16th anniversary at the Lake Nillahcootie campsite this year. Camp was held over 19-22 April 2019. We welcomed around 70 people from 13 congregations from every eastern state and territory of Australia, as well as a visitor from Switzerland.

This year's teaching theme was 'Wisdom from Above', with wonderful lessons presented by Brett Christensen, Peter Thomson, Jules Cseszko, Rick Nyland, Paul Kuleshov, Graham Wall, Peter Tickner, and Geoff Thomas. Each lesson looked at different aspects of godly wisdom such as wise stewardship, wisdom from adversity, how to obtain wisdom, and the difference between godly wisdom and worldly wisdom. It was a fantastic time of spiritual enrichment, fellowship, fun, rekindling friendships, creating new ones, and, as always, a few brave people taking the plunge into the (very) chilly waters of the lake.

News *Victorian Easter Camp, April 2019 cont.*

This year was also a year of a few firsts: the first ever blackout and the first ever thunderstorm, which led to one less night of campfire hymn-singing. Even so, campers knew how to have a good time indoors by playing board games, Bananagrams, ninja, and signs. A special thanks to the Christensen family for all the time and effort they put in each year organising the camp. All campers had an enriching and fun time. ♦

Rachael Kirkpatrick rachaelmanga@gmail.com



Redlands College – Project Vila



Redlands College, a P-12 Christian school in Brisbane birthed in the faith heritage of non-denominational Churches of Christ in Australia, has introduced an exciting new program for its Year 9 students.

Commencing this year, Year 9 students will participate in a 2-week residential program in Vanuatu in the South Pacific. They will live in community with fellow students learning through a real-world curriculum, serving with domestic partners, and intentionally engaging with a practical expression of the Gospel message.

Redlands College operates on the premise that the dual concepts of education and formation are inseparable components of a holistic, Christ-centred learning journey. As part of this journey, the school seeks to provide intentional learning experiences and formational processes where students can participate in a practical expression of the Christian faith.

Service to others (Philippians 2:4) and the development of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) are foundational attributes of not only the Christian faith, but also a life grounded in Christ. Strength of character equips students to develop resilience and an appreciation of the beauty of the world around them. Both are essential for their ongoing participation in a flourishing life.

Research has highlighted the importance of two fundamental concepts which support young people to take significant steps forward in their maturing. These are the concepts of 'liminality' and 'communitas'. Liminality occurs when a person is taken so far out of their comfort zone that they can no longer rely on all the things normally taken for granted. This liminal space provides the context for a student to reflect on who they are, what they want to be, and enables them to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses.

Communitas is the term given to intense group experiences which often occur during a period of liminality. Communitas results in people being much more open to learning from each other and helping each other. The Year 9 program in Vanuatu is specifically designed to develop both phenomena.

Redlands College has partnered with the YWAM base in Vanuatu to ensure this program is embedded in the local community. In March 2019, Keith Morgan & Josh Faulks (Holland Park Church of Christ, Brisbane), Barrie Morgan (Eastern Shore Church of Christ, Hobart), and Robin Jung (Redlands Community Church, Brisbane) travelled to Vanuatu to construct the dormitory, amenities block, and meeting room for this program. We seek God's wisdom and leading as this exciting program unfolds. ♦

Andrew Johnson, Brisbane, QLD ajohnson@redlands.qld.edu.au



Interview

John & Judy Wall, Bairnsdale, VIC



Can you tell us about your background and how you came to Christ?

John: From childhood I was taken to denominational churches by my mother who was searching for God, to the point that I didn't want to know religion. The only thing I remember was that every church we visited told us you didn't have to know the Bible, just believe.

When employed as a truck driver and plant operator, I ended up working with my mate in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. While there I received a letter from Jim Sasser, a Church of Christ missionary to whom my Mum had given my address. I wasn't interested. Mum asked us to visit a couple living in Lae on our way home. Thinking they were her personal friends, we called on them. They were Church of Christ missionaries, Joe and Rosabelle Cannon. As Joe put us on the plane home, he said, 'I hope you men will be Christians one day'.

Arriving back in Albury, after 14 months away, I drove my Mum and sister to a Bible study at Simon and Suzanne Valk's home. We were taught by Simon, Max Burgin, Jim Sasser, and Jim Beech. They taught that the Bible could be understood and believed. Within a few weeks both Jack and I were baptised into Christ. I'm eternally thankful to my mother.

Judy: I'm the eldest of ten children who came from a staunch Catholic family. I considered myself blessed and followed faithfully the teachings of my parents and the nuns and priests in our church, never questioning if what they taught me was true. When I turned 27, I met my future husband John. Although he wasn't a Catholic, I assumed we could just cruise along together, he with his faith and I with mine.

One day we were having a discussion and I responded, 'Do you mean to tell me you would put God before me?' He responded: 'Yes'. I was shocked. John gave me a Bible and challenged me to see what God said. He took me to a couple of Bible studies but when a lady spoke about being only New Testament Christians, I was affronted – my heart was closed. John continued on, taking me to listen to a preacher from America, Roy Diestelkamp. He seemed to know me personally and I thought John had discussed my situation with the preacher. I was mad. Later I realised that God's Word is sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12).

After our marriage, I quietly studied by myself. Rolly McDowell came for a visit and I really appreciated him and how he spoke of God's Word. Seven months after we married, I was baptised.

How did you instill a faith in your children?

God blessed us with five children. We felt we developed a better understanding by starting from scratch and teaching our children about God. I felt more confident learning the truth from the Scriptures. When we moved to Bairnsdale, we were blessed to have strong teachers who supported us. The Wickhams and the Handleys also had children, and their examples filled our spiritual needs. We consistently attended weekly Bible studies and two meetings on a Sunday. I have taught children's Bible studies on a Sunday for many years until recently.

I do remember the kids asking us if we were the only Christians, as there were not many living here. So we started to go to Bible camps at Easter, which was the best thing. We met many new people who remain friends with us to this day. Emma, my eldest, met her future husband at the camp when she was twelve. All our children are baptised. Emma and Jarrod have four children; Graham and Kristina have three children; Rebecca, though single has two foster children; and Josh and Sarah are still single. We pray every day for them to remain faithful.

You have been members of the Bairnsdale congregation for many years now. What changes and growth have you noticed?

We have been truly blessed living in Bairnsdale for 39 years. It seems every time a family leaves, another takes their place. Although we're a small group, we're truly thankful for each member. God always sends us what we need. Many visitors from other congregations visit regularly. Monthly congregational meetings help us focus on spreading the Word and talking to people about Jesus. The younger members are also fired up and working towards getting to know and helping people that work and live around their area. We have a prayer meeting once a month to pray for those who are sick, in need, and opportunities to evangelise. We all work together as a family that cares for each other. It's inspiring. I love it.

What opportunities has God given you to serve in Bairnsdale over the years?

We believe God has given us ample opportunity to serve in Bairnsdale. Our main ministry, I strongly believe, is hospitality. Many people from Australia and other parts of the world have stayed in our home. My husband John is one of the kindest men I know, offering help to anyone who needs it, including strangers. He has visited an elderly lady in a nursing home every day until her death, took another lady shopping every fortnight (when I couldn't go), and is often called on to do minor jobs when needed. Although preaching is not his gift, over the years he has been the only male here. So he continued serving and preaching faithfully every week in a congregation consisting of mainly family and some older faithful women. ◇

John and Judy Wall are members of the Bairnsdale Church of Christ in Bairnsdale, a regional town of about 15,000 people in East Gippsland, Victoria. They were interviewed by Jenny Ancell. jwall@wideband.net.au