



**Churches  
of Christ**  
in Western Australia Inc



# ON MISSION JOURNAL

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## ON MISSION

For this September edition, our contributors reflect on "Art and Theology".

We hope that these articles serve to challenge and inspire our thinking about how art might shape and inform our faith. We hope you notice, as we did, that our contributors span the generations which we think highlights just how important art is as a unifying medium of engagement in community.

The final edition of On Mission Journal this year "My Story" is scheduled for November. We want to feature fresh, personal stories of God's work. If you believe you have a story to share, then we would love to hear from you at [admin@cocwa.com.au](mailto:admin@cocwa.com.au) and we'll send you a submissions template.

Tania Watson



## CHILDREN, THEOLOGY AND ART

When we pause and wonder, “Why did God create humans?” or “Why was God so pleased with what he created?” we engage in theology.

Theology is a term we often associate with skill, career, or choice. We name people like Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas or Stanley Hauerwas. While there are people who pursue becoming theologians as an academic discipline or profession, we all engage in thinking and wondering about God. We all ‘do’ theology.

Attempting to understand God and the divine is the process of wondering about our very existence. It should not be a dry theoretical exercise. People over the millennia have reached various conclusions about God in their wondering. We as a Christian community believe we have discovered that God is love. We have discovered that this love has been fully revealed in Jesus Christ, a human who is fully God. We believe that God is present in us through God’s Spirit that invites us into relationship with God.

Art has represented a central way we have responded to our study of God. Painting, sculptures, song, poems and even the churches we might build to meet in and worship God are all artistic responses to God. Art can also often be seen as an activity to be done by the professional, gifted or skilled. The term artist is bestowed on a few, and so we often believe that doing art is not accessible to us all.

Sadly, I believe we are trained away from our wondering and our response at an early age. Wondering begins at a young age and is naturally undertaken by children. As Picasso once wrote,

**“ALL CHILDREN ARE ARTISTS. THE PROBLEM IS HOW TO REMAIN AN ARTIST ONCE YOU GROW UP”.**

As a Christian community we believe that children also have access to Jesus Christ and the presence of God's Spirit. But we have developed the habit of closing down the wondering process with children, particularly when we gather together for church. At a time when we should be helping children to wonder and begin to develop their capacity to theologise, we have replaced this process with giving children information to learn and behavioural procedures to follow.

Fortunately this approach is being challenged. Jerome Berryman has developed "Godly Play" to create space for children to wonder about God. Put simply, Godly Play begins with a bible story being shared and then questions that allow children to wonder. Children are then encouraged to respond with art as a part of the wondering process or - as Berryman has named it - "doing the work of theology". Godly Play is an extensively developed program to counteract the prevalent didactic style of programmes in our churches that teach about faith, but do not allow children to form a faith in God. Of course, wondering about God can certainly be done beyond the structure of Godly Play, but it is a helpful tool.

The art shared in this edition of On Mission Journal is from children responding to a creation Bible story shared with them at church. The Kids Vision team has collected the art from across the Churches of Christ in WA. We may not at first recognise these pictures as art or theology, but our hope is that they kick off in you the reader the desire to wonder about God.



## About the Author

### **Peter Barney**

Peter is the COCWA Ministry and Mission Developer. You can find more writing by Peter at [www.cocwa.org.au](http://www.cocwa.org.au)





# A FRESH PERSPECTIVE THROUGH THE LENS OF ART.

Tania Watson

**“IT IS ART, I BELIEVE, THAT PROMISES TO  
TEACH THEOLOGY HOW TO SEE AGAIN.”**

Alejandro R. Garcia-Rivera. “A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art.” 2003.

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Art is an all-encompassing word into which we place a wide range of creative activities. However, whether we are thinking about composing a piece of music, designing a church, crafting a sermon or arranging flowers, one thing has been true through all of church history: the church has told artists what to create.

Why is this a problem? Whilst there is no doubt that magnificent art has adorned and educated and inspired the church, the “church” has tended to prescribe the frame for what is created.

There are some artists who manage to deliver commissioned work, yet find ways to inject their own critique of the church, theological view, or have just poked irreverence in some way. Last year I came across a painting in an old Cathedral in Léon, Spain, depicting the haunting scene of Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac. Right in the left-hand corner the artist included a dog ‘leaving a deposit’. Whilst some may find this offensive, I loved this very natural and basic intrusion into the drama of the story. The dog and his pile of poo enabled me to draw near to Abraham and Isaac as fellow human beings. I was led to reflect that on those days that seem full of great drama, life goes on in the world around me and ordinary things continue to take place under the sovereignty of God. That’s a sense of anxiety-correcting perspective that I often lose.

As my circle of artist acquaintances has grown, I have realised that I often meet with creatives through a pre-formed theological agenda. So in more recent times I have entered into conversation differently and asked, ‘as an artist, what would you want to say to the church through your art?’ Without exception, the artist has responded with a kind of shock. “Wow ... I don’t know. No-one has ever asked me that before.” Fascinating insights follow about God, life, the church and human experience that is rich and deep, sometimes surprising and confronting. The gift that I receive is a fresh lens through which to view my own theologies, and my soul is the richer for it.

Beholding a piece of artistic work has a way of cutting through our consciousness, communicating directly with our souls. Art, like God, speaks to us in the language of mystery and wonder. In this era of discontinuity and dislocation, we need to allow artists to help us to shape our theological responses to the challenges we face. As we do, I believe we will find both comfort and inspiration.

## ART, LIKE GOD, SPEAKS TO US IN THE LANGUAGE OF MYSTERY AND WONDER.



### About the Author

#### **Tania Watson**

Tania Watson is the Executive Minister for Churches of Christ in WA



*Miik Green Absent Presence (detail)  
mirror-finished stainless steel (pair)  
160cm x 90cm x 5m Riverview Church,  
Burswood 2015  
Image courtesy of the artist*

# ABSENT PRESENCE - PRESENT ABSENCE

Miik Green

I am an artist and a Christian. I produce large-scale paintings (resin and mixed media on aluminium panels) and sculptures, either designed for a gallery setting or for the public space.

My practice centres around the idea of exchange between the viewer and the work. I combine unlike materials (resins, oil and water-based paint, industrial chemicals and dyes) and pour them over the panels, injecting, dragging and manipulating the materials until a reaction begins. I then leave the studio for two days, returning when the work has set completely.

I went back to study in 2011 after a lengthy hiatus, leaving behind the notion of copying or imitating the natural world through artwork. Many forms in nature, I realised, are far more interesting, varied and engaging than the pieces I'd made, and it seemed pointless to copy and reproduce these forms as artwork. It was a pivotal discovery, and shifted my focus to why I made art, the processes I was employing, and what kind of significance these works might have for others.

**I ALSO STARTED CONSIDERING HOW I MIGHT CREATE SPACE IN THE WAY I MADE ARTWORK. WHILE I REMAINED INVESTED IN THE PROCESS, I LOOSENED MY AUTHORIAL AND ARTISTIC CONTROL AND INSTEAD FOCUSSED ON THE WAY THE WORK MIGHT ENCOURAGE CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUE. IN THIS WAY, MY PRACTICE WAS REPOSITIONED TO EMBRACE THE KEY NOTION OF EXCHANGE.**

One of the most challenging sculptures I have produced sits outside Riverview Church in Burswood, Western Australia. Absent Presence is a large metal sculpture that consists of two mirror-finished panels – a diamond-shaped pair of stainless-steel plinths. The work itself communicates the idea of resistance and opposition and is essentially invisible thanks to its highly-reflective surface – one which was polished by three bikies over a period of two weeks. (I was told not to mention that it was either an artwork, or that it was going to a church.)

I anticipated that this work might capture the way we are called through faith, and embody what is expected of us as followers of Christ. I felt the work echoed Paul's sentiment in 1 Corinthians, that unlike our (obscured) current perception, His vision allows us to glimpse a clear future in Christ.

It is easy to drive past the sculpture and not observe it due to its near-invisibility. On close inspection, however, its surfaces are revelatory. The work becomes about everything else – the movement of clouds and trees, cars and people. The hum of everyday life. Even looking between the pillars, one catches an augmented version of reality, as objects become reflected reflections.

This premise leads to the moment I open the studio doors and view the work, forty-eight hours later: shiny, complete: transformed. Through a process of reflection and dialogue, change occurs: a glimpse of Paul's perfection, seen in imperfection.

In a theological context, we might question similar notions of exchange:

Do we leave enough room for our creator to work in and through us? Is what we are doing and saying allowing for further exchange, interaction and action? Have we created space for change, possibility and growth? In our personal and professional lives, do we allow (and expect) others to interact in our decisions, making room for continued discussion?



## About the Author

### Miik Green

Miik Green is a visual artist and researcher living and working in Perth. He is an associate editor for two international art journals, published author and the current chair of Artsource. As a recipient of an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship, Green was recently awarded a doctorate in arts practice through Curtin University of Technology.

# THE MASTER ARTISTS' WORK OF ART

David van Leen

It was Poet Stanislaw Jerzy Lec who said 'Youth is a gift of nature, but age is a work of art'. I am in the privileged position of working with some true works of art. It has been my honour to watch people and see where God has intersected the fabric of a person's present reality and change that person, it may be for only a moment, but it could be for eternity. Through simple Music and Art groups I have seen a person who is regularly sobbing with arthritic pain, tapping their feet and stop sobbing all because of a simple beautiful melody. I have seen a person whose only memory is that of abuse, find healing through drawing. I have seen the depressed picked up from the miry pit, able to experience the full expression of life, because of a painting and uplifting music. I often feel surprised when such things happen but why should I? After all, we are the Master Artist's creation.

It's in Genesis that we read the account of the Master Artist creating his masterpiece, the sculptor sculpting and forming lands with plains and gullies, mountain peaks and cliffs that overlooked vast expanses more than the eye can see – and we are told that as He stopped and looked at what He created, He felt it was good. We are told that He formed man from the dust – now that is creative! - and with this work of art He stopped and saw that it was very good. Yet in Genesis 3 we read that His art was damaged and changed forever. Additionally as I look at the magnificent sunrise and the glorious sunset brushed by the Master Artist; as I reflect on the skilfully painted rainbow; as I listen to the conducting of the powerful mighty orchestra in nature or song that the Master Artist placed in the lungs of birds, I can't help think there is a spiritual connection with art and the artist.

Rev Professor Elizabeth Mackinlay suggests that the Arts is one area of spiritual connection that does not diminish as we age. She suggests that it is heightened along with three other areas: those of Environment, Relationships and Religion. Within three of Mackinlay's books she highlights that our spirituality – our ultimate sense of purpose and meaning – are found through our connections with the environment, such as gardens, nature and the sea; through Relationships with self, others and God and the depth of these relationships; and through Religion – faith, worship, prayer, praise and ritual. The Arts do have a true Spiritual connection.

Why is it that many of the greats in art, whether painting, music, drawing or sculpting, depict Biblical stories? Why is it that designs for modern buildings take into account views of the outside: the sky and gardens? Why do pieces of art sell for obscene amounts of money? Because I believe they point us all to the Master Artist and how great He is. Don't many of the Psalms and a number of passages from 1 Kings indicate that God, the Master Artist, is still involved in the world and His creation still has an impact? Doesn't John's Gospel highlight that when Jesus Ascended, the Holy Spirit remained to help and guide and direct – God being involved with his creation?

I believe that the Master Artist is still connecting with His creation through the Holy Spirit. As I find myself surprised with the reactions of seniors being ministered to by works of art no matter what form, I remind myself that God, who is the Master Artist, created this world for us to appreciate and enjoy. I have seen that, whilst the body and even the mind are impacted by age, the spirit is not. As a wise chaplain once said - 'the spirit doesn't get dementia' and I would add nor does it suffer from arthritis, poor eye sight and the effects of ageing. Therefore it can still be ministered to and impacted by the Master Artist's work.

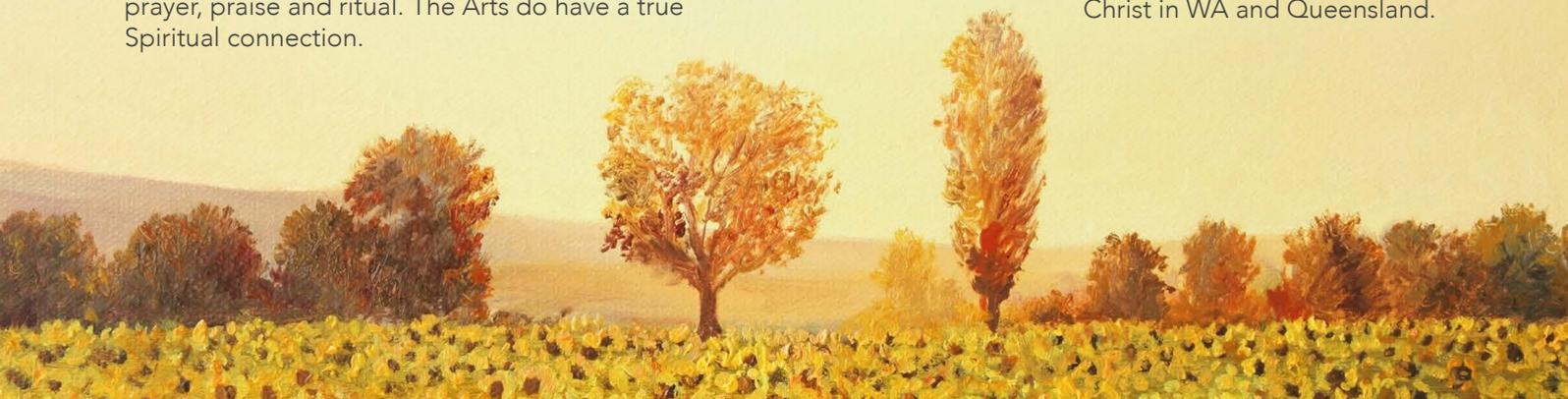
I like Artist Edgar Degas' quote 'Art is not what you see, but what you make others see' as people age and when they have heard 'seniors don't matter', 'that they are a cost to society', 'they have nothing to add' and 'they have little value because they are stuck in the past'. I want to help them see that they are still the Master Artists, yes, God's Work of Art.

## About the Author

### David van Leen



David is the Coordinator of Chaplains for the Bethanie Group. David is married to Roxanne and together they have 3 children. David has served in ministry positions in Churches of Christ in WA and Queensland.





# BIBLE ART

An Interview with Kylee Ingram

“I was looking online for a verse one day and accidentally searched under Google images. The verse I was looking for came up, beautifully illustrated” says Kylee Ingram.

This started a course of action which now has Kylee documenting her everyday faith through drawing and illustrating in Bibles. “Visually, the Bible is so black and white and for me the joy of the colour brings it to life”. The accessible medium can include drawing on a page and illustrating a verse, writing prayers in the margin, or taping in pages in manner of a journal.

“Looking back on the last couple of years of work, I have realised how much God speaks to me that I forget, so capturing these God moments becomes a kind of spiritual photo album” Kylee says.

“One of the more significant things I find is that it gives me time to be sitting in that passage. I treat Bible Art as a meditative process and use the time drawing and painting to really reflect on the scripture and have it wash over me.”

A lot of the techniques and products Kylee applies came through trial and error. Because the paper in bibles is so fine, she has a practice bible she uses first to ensure products don't cause the paper to tear or seep through. She has set up a studio where others from her church and the community come and work together.

“When we do our group Bible Art we are not totally silent, but we are quiet. It is a peaceful activity. We ask that people come having reflected on the verse that they wish to illustrate. The simple act of having to think about how to illustrate it causes you delve really deeply as you want to understand it more”.

“It keeps the scriptures in your mind throughout the week”.

**“I TREAT BIBLE ART AS A MEDITATIVE PROCESS AND USE THE TIME DRAWING AND PAINTING TO REALLY REFLECT ON THE SCRIPTURE AND HAVE IT WASH OVER ME.”**



**Kylee Ingram**

Kylee Ingram is the General Manager of Helium Digital Marketing and is currently involved in a church plant in Midland.



# BEFORE THE HEALING

Donna Lamont



It was a sad season. But it was just a season and it has long passed.

12 years after the healing I now sometimes pause and remember. And I am grateful to the artists, living or dead, that speak powerfully to the human condition. They drew me towards humanity and to God in those first shaky small steps of learning to walk again.

Grief and trauma had rendered me speechless. At 33 I was at the lowest point of my life, desperately needing comfort and connection from people and from God, yet I had never been more fragile and helpless.

The profound pain took me by surprise and went beyond the usual strategies we have all developed to navigate the seasons of life. After a series of stressful events that I had pushed through, it came to be that I suffered a complete emotional breakdown.

I couldn't boil an egg, feed the bird, or face taking calls from my best friends. I had been married and enjoyed hosting dinner parties for large groups. Now I was holed up at my parents' house having my mother chop up my fruit. So how could I reach for intimacy and empathy when I was in no state to receive it?

## THE ANSWER WAS ART.

Art spoke to my soul and connected me to people I had never met. We've been through this and come out the other side. We know how you feel. You will be ok, it will pass, their works whispered.

I couldn't open my mail or pay my bills. But I could sit at the library and feel understood by the poet who wrote the Haiku in my hands.

I couldn't go to church. But I could play music and be moved to mouth the name of Jesus.

I couldn't meet friends for coffee. But I could wander around the art gallery and see hope in paintings.

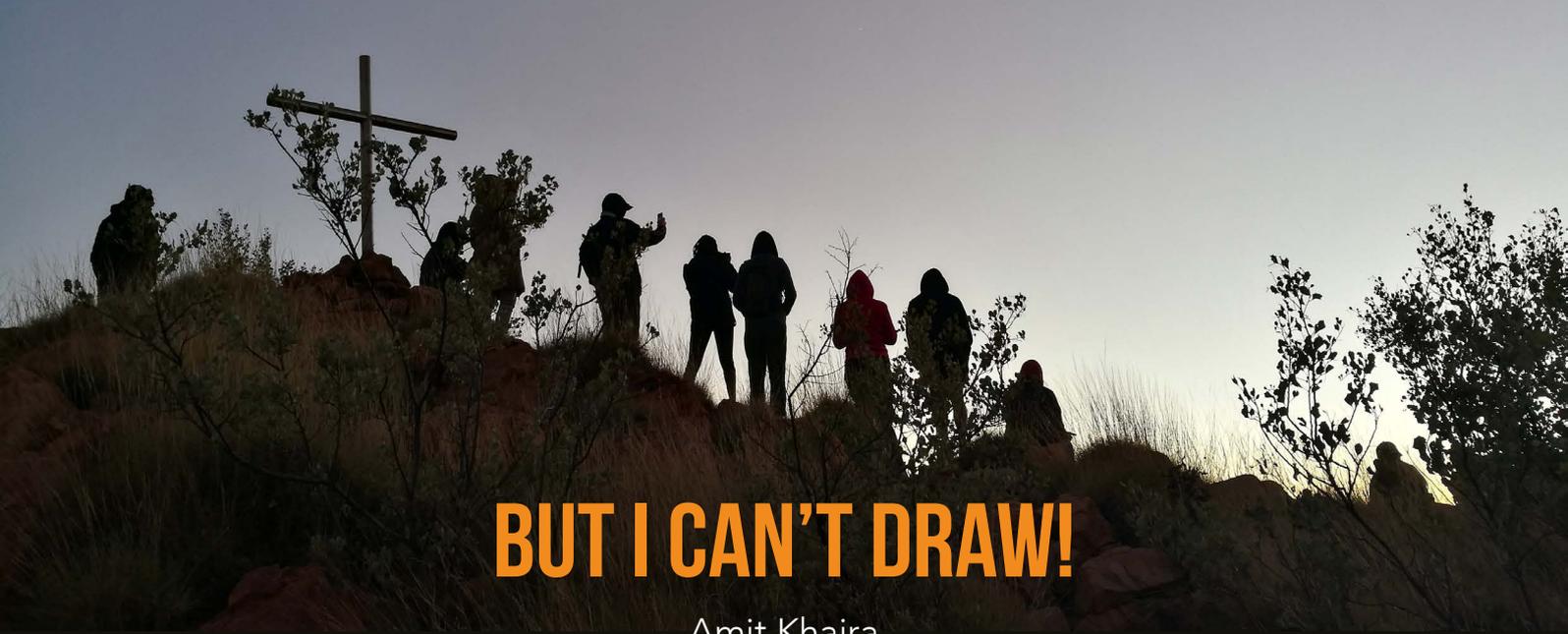
I didn't have the words or collected thoughts to pray. But I could walk around the river and delight in baby cygnets travelling in a line, and it felt like God had put them there for my pleasure.



### About the Author

#### Donna Lamont

Donna Lamont is a professional copywriter and content strategist. She serves in a variety of children's ministries.



# BUT I CAN'T DRAW!

Amit Khaira

A recent unit of study in Catalyst saw my students and I being welcomed into remote communities in the Northern Territory for an immersion experience. Key motivations underlying our philosophy toward such experiences include the concept of "elbow learning", embracing new opportunities and testing personal limits.

From a young age, I have been intrigued by indigenous art. As I looked out the window from our Qantas flight down toward our Red Centre, many of those images I spent my formative years admiring came flooding back to mind. The artwork I recalled had captured the beauty of our land from a birds-eye perspective. Those interpretations of our country and her people added significantly to my first taste of central Australia. Pictures, songs, paintings, sculptures and stories I recalled in those moments and at different stages throughout the immersion experience seemed to possess an ability to facilitate deeper connections between places and people.

Having the opportunity to sit with community elders, traditional owners and local workers was a privilege. After listening to first-hand recounts and tales of what effective development and partnership is in this unfamiliar context comprised, I noticed a common recurring theme. When time is taken to build meaningful relationships and where communication involved nature, art and storytelling, the results were inspiring. One of our friends shared how they had planned a seminar on oral health for the local women. They ended up cancelling the seminar on the day as no one attended. Taking a walk outside they noticed several women sitting in the shade of a large tree close by. They sat with them and listened. After several days of "yarning" together, the content from the planned

seminar was delivered. It was not with the planned power-point presentation, but rather in the form of conversations with multiple contributors, pictures in the sand, tangible examples and a song for the children.

As a means of communication, I realised I had underestimated the power of art. So, what is art? At a philosophical level, to determine what is defined as art implies two subtexts: the essential nature of art and its social importance. Plato first developed the idea of art as "mimesis", meaning copying or imitation. The closer a replication was of its subject, the stronger the piece of art was interpreted. Kant in the 18th century believed that art should not have a concept but should alone be judged on its formal qualities. Aesthetic interest was of little to no value. Fast forward to the 21st century and we look at balance, rhythm, harmony and unity to form an understanding of what art is and its value. Art is everywhere. We are art.

I was recently introduced to "Our Mob, God's Story", a Bible Society production with more than 115 artworks from 66 artists representing 41 language groups. CEO Greg Clarke recognises that

**"THERE'S BEEN A REAL ICONOCLASM IN CHRISTIANITY THAT SEES THE PICTURE AS LESS VALUABLE THAN THE WORD...THERE ARE JUST SO MANY RESOURCES GOD'S GIVEN US TO UNDERSTAND HIM AND THE WORLD, AND A LOT OF THOSE THINGS ARE VISUAL...WE'RE CRAZY IF WE LIMIT OURSELVES TO ONE FORM OF COMMUNICATION".**

I read about the God of pain in Job. I read about the God of praise in the Psalms and the God of prudence in Proverbs, the God of purpose in Ecclesiastes and the God of passion in Song of Solomon. The heart of the creator, the original artist, is brought to life in ways like never before. The details in colour, from the fluorescent tones of joy through to the darker shades of pain and the range of brushstrokes depicting isolation and poverty, wealth and abundance, perfectly encapsulate the entirety of the human experience.

As I study and participate in life, it seems as though I am walking on the very canvas that God is still painting on. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit through each of us, painting with love, pain, grace, mercy, brokenness, acts of service and kindness, trials and tribulations aides in human flourishing. Recognising this, I believe, facilitates our spiritual growth.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl in his work *Mans Search for Meaning* captures this interweaving of pain and brokenness with joy and passion. All of these are unique expressions of the human experience drawing us closer to the heart of God.

**“IN A POSITION OF UTTER DESOLATION, WHEN MAN CANNOT EXPRESS HIMSELF IN POSITIVE ACTION, WHEN HIS ONLY ACHIEVEMENT MAY CONSIST IN ENDURING HIS SUFFERINGS IN THE RIGHT WAY — AN HONOURABLE WAY — IN SUCH A POSITION MAN CAN, THROUGH LOVING CONTEMPLATION OF THE IMAGE HE CARRIES OF HIS BELOVED, ACHIEVE FULFILMENT”.**

Here is how I have been inspired. I have never considered myself an artist and by that, I have always meant I can't draw. I hear Solomon in Ecclesiastes 1:2 crying out "vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" I have been challenged to view my life as a canvas and the Holy Spirit in and through me as the artist. I've paraphrased Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 to read "God's hand is ever present in and on our lives. Even when injustice and uncertainty threaten to overwhelm, we can trust in Him and continue to follow Him". With this I ask myself every day, "What will my painting look like?"



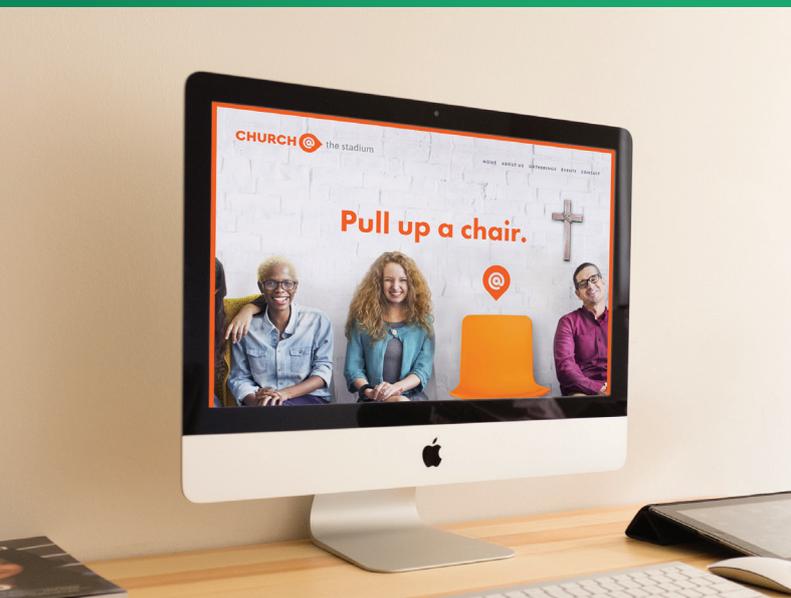
About the Author

**Amit Khaira**

Amit serves as the Director of the Catalyst Program with Stirling Theological College, Leadership Developer with Youth Vision WA and Scholarship Coordinator with Initiate Australia.



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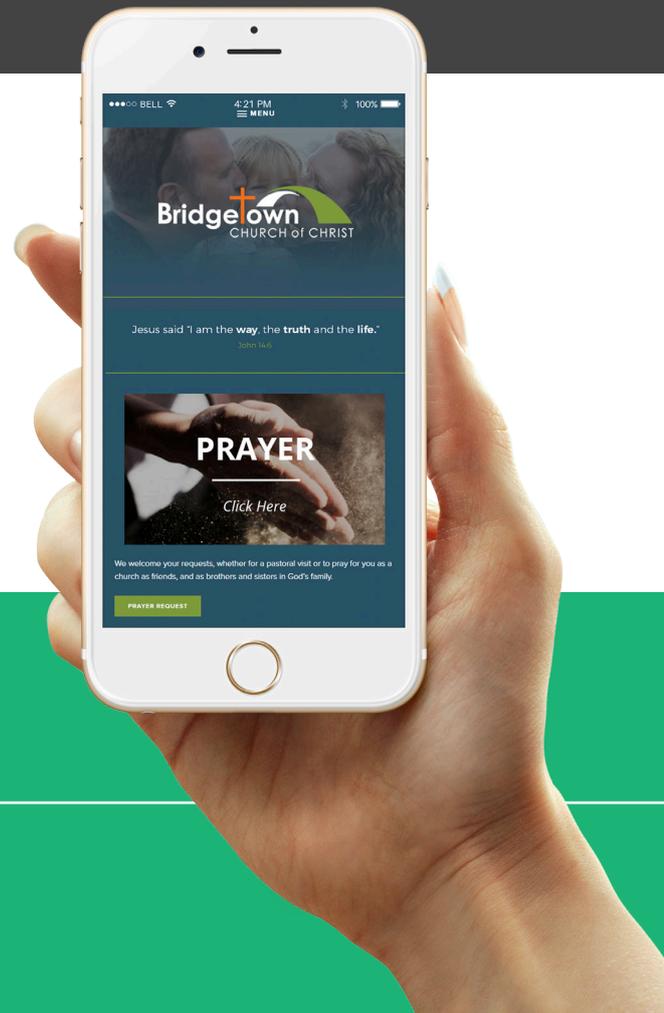
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