Churches of Christ in Western Australia Inc

ON MISSION JOURNAL

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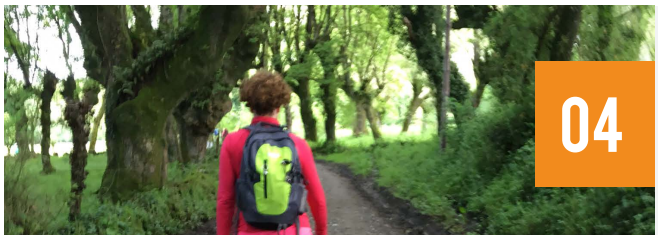
It's our first issue and we're exploring what it means to dwell together in unity & diversity.



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WELCOME TO THE FIRST ISSUE OF ON MISSION JOURNAL.

Within Churches of Christ there is a long tradition of people engaging with one another through thoughtful writing; reflections on culture, society and theology used to be expressed and debated through a publication called "The Australian Christian", stimulating years of rich conversation that played an important part in strengthening the movement of Churches of Christ throughout Australia.

That publication no longer exists and, in an era where there is so much information and opinion available online and on screens, you may wonder why we have decided to start adding to the 'noise' once more...

Back in 1995, Ian Allsop posed this question: "At what point does (this) diversity and autonomy become the basis for fragmentation?" That's a pretty bold question! At the time, there was at least one respondent who expressed fear for the future unless churches were willing to rally around the simple truths of Scripture. In other words, "Yes, we do want autonomy", but "Not too much diversity, please!"

Over the past 30 years, I think we would agree that we've seen the capacity for the Movement to accommodate broader diversity and autonomy without fragmentation. In fact, I would argue that we've been able to hold the distinctive value of "unity and diversity - in all things love" in relatively healthy tension.

Certainly, we continue to rally around the central Gospel truths. But, we have remained committed to being together in association whilst respecting differences in theology and the diversity of practise that comes with being a large collective of worshipping communities, each within our own local context.

Nevertheless, we cannot take relationships for granted. We risk fragmentation if we do not attend to the mutual responsibility to welcome and acknowledge and be present with one another as people and as churches. We have a joint responsibility to ensure that our Association does not devolve to a mere support organisation through which member churches access services and resources.

So whilst we can access the views and news of the world, we think that it's important that we create a place for us to share who we are and what it means to be together "On Mission".

What does it sound like to talk about the Gospel in the different suburban contexts of Perth? How are we thinking theologically through the challenges of being a faithful witness for Christ in regional areas? Who among us is wrestling with matters of business ethics with professionals or medical ethics with the sick in their church and community? "Where are the stories of transformation and inspiration that remind us that Jesus is being embraced as Saviour through people we know?"

Sure, we can organise gatherings and we can encourage people to connect and talk, but I would argue that we offer something significant when we take the time and the courage to write down our thoughts making them available for people to carefully and respectfully ponder.

"AS IRON SHARPENS IRON, SO ONE MAN SHARPENS ANOTHER." PROVERBS 27:17

This first edition is a mix of articles just to get the ball rolling. Our hope is that in successive issues, we can group together articles on particular themes that have relevance and applicability for us within Churches of Christ. We've begun to send out invitations for people to write but, really, we're hoping you will want to make a contribution and you will send us ideas and submissions.

Here's to a new season of shaping and strengthening the identity of Churches of Christ in Western Australia together!

Blessings,
Tania Watson

PILGRIMAGE

Tania Watson
Executive Minister, Churches of Christ WA

Everyone is on a journey.

Australians have whole-heartedly embraced the notion of the journey. We cozy up on couches positioned before our pulpits of round-the-clock lifestyle television programming. There's nothing more relaxing than a good journey testimony. We're inspired as we watch people learning to cook better or watch them find love through a process of elimination. We celebrate and worship journeys of sporting champions. We really love watching the mongrels, the under-dogs of the show, the ones who bring a little argy-bargy to the game.

We cringe when we hear it. We try to avoid saying "I'm on a journey", but we just can't stop ourselves, even in church. It's such a helpful image for framing life

PEOPLE SAY, "I'M ON A JOURNEY WITH JESUS." BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? IS JESUS MY TAG-ALONG COMPANION, THE ONE WHO VALIDATES MY SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND WHO CELEBRATES MY GIFTEDNESS AS I CHOOSE TO SERVE HIS CAUSE?

Journey. It's a word over-used. It's a word corrupted and leached of substantial meaning. The change is subtle but, I would argue, it's not insignificant.

When say we are on a journey, what we are expressing is that we are following our own path, pursuing our own dreams fuelled by our own passions. Life is an adventure to explore and, in the Western world, we naively believe that most of us get the life that we desire. We make good choices and celebrate our growth and value as humans. Life deals us a blow and we try to find answers 'why'. Sometimes we recognise that we made a bad choice, or we figure out that we suffer because of other people's bad choices. Either way, "it's all good" provided we take the opportunity to learn on the pathway to becoming a good person. What troubles me is that we in the Church have unconsciously bought into the "journey mentality", not realising that the journey mentality is an open door through which culture is corrupting Christian faith.

Why would I say this? The journey mentality is self-orienting, self-referencing and self-actualising. Journeys go everywhere and nowhere. They are driven by the quest for personal experience. This is not the life of faith in Christ Jesus. As we unconsciously wear the journey lens, we live out of a view of a diminished salvation, identity and purpose in Christ.

You might think that I am just talking semantics, but I'm pretty sure that something inside your soul is starting to feel unsettled as you think about what you really mean when you talk about being on a journey.

I've always learnt from history and culture. I'm keenly aware that each era of the church is always shaped and influenced by contemporary culture more than we care to recognise. I've lived long enough to observe that church life moves and flexes in response to culture and trends. Usually we don't spot these influences until much later.

On the other hand, God is always speaking to those who have ears to listen and eyes that have the discipline to stay focused on him. God tends to interrupt the souls of those who genuinely want to seek and see Him. We call these moments an 'epiphany'. Here's my story of my epiphany:

On my bucket list of things to do was to walk the Camino Santiago. The opportunity came early this year as a part of my doctoral studies. Perfect, I thought. I can tick off a life experience and get some easy credit as a bonus.

The reality was quite different.

It wasn't the actual pilgrimage that changed my life.

What changed my life was what God did as I began to embrace the practices of pilgrimage. As I walked and prayed alone, and in the company of others, I changed; I changed from being "Tania, who knows about pilgrimage" to "Tania, who is a Pilgrim".

GOD IS ALWAYS SPEAKING TO THOSE WHO HAVE EARS TO LISTEN AND EYES THAT HAVE THE DISCIPLINE TO STAY FOCUSED ON HIM. GOD TENDS TO INTERRUPT THE SOULS OF THOSE WHO GENUINELY WANT TO SEEK AND SEE HIM.

I am a pilgrim. Embracing this declaration opened a door to an entirely fresh perspective on my life journey. If I am a pilgrim, then that must mean that I am an alien and a stranger in this world. This world is not my home. I am a new creation person called to be in the world but not of the world.

On the day that I grasped this altered vision of life, two penetrating questions rebooted my soul.

I am a Pilgrim. The gospel, that culture-correcting force, has recreated me.

So then ...

"What does it mean to be an alien and a stranger in a land in which I am so very comfortable?"

"What does it mean to be aliens and strangers as the Church in a land in which we are so very comfortable?"

CREATIVE DISCIPLES OF A CREATIVE GOD

Craig Brown

Beginnings are important; they set the tone for what follows.

God's first act in the Bible was creation, where He formed and stamped this earth with a creative mark that is a literal part of us.

Too many times we have argued about how God created, and how long it took Him to complete it. But, what is missing in these debates is what the act of creating us reveals about God. We, and this world, are brushed with God's fingerprints.

GOD IS CREATIVE. OUT OF NOTHING, HE CAUSED SOMETHING TO COME INTO BEING THAT STILL CAUSES US TO GASP, AND STILL REVEALS SO MUCH ABOUT HIS CHARACTER.

He spoke into form such things as the Amazon River, the sweeping savannas of Africa, the glaciers of New Zealand and the snow-capped Andes. The sun that sets later tonight, casting its hue of many colours, is the work of the Creator - God.

I'm not sure what you think of when you hear the word creative or what you think your creative streak might be, but, it if we all bear the image of God (Genesis 1:27), then it follows that there is a streak of creativity within all of us.

The word creative can imply so much. We can use it as an adjective to describe innate talent, or we can use it to group people into stereotypes. Think of the creatives in your church, and what do you most often think of? Musicians and singers? Usually. Occasionally, we may find a young adult who has the capacity to act, or even write, but the opportunities we offer to them are too limited for their talents.

But, is that all there is to it? Or have we defined boundaries of the word creative so strongly that we have limited the word to mean only actor, musician, artist and writer.

It is important to remember, especially within our church settings, that creativity is not restricted to artistic endeavor. One of the most creative people I know couldn't write you a sonnet or compose an operetta. What he does do – extraordinarily well – is think creatively. There is no problem for which he cannot find a creative solution.

That is a creative streak that stems from the Creator God. And this creative streak carries the same DNA as the one that ran through Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Rembrandt.

In Quicksand, Henning Mankel explains that creativity is a necessity for survival, and a key weapon in our battle against the crises that face us: "We would hardly have been equipped with the enormous creative capacity that comes from fantasy and imagination had it not been for the need to survive, to protect our children and to find new ways of obtaining food when normal conditions become chaotic as a result of drought, floods, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions."

Too often, creativity is exclusively linked with the "arts", rather than life in general. But, if one's community is flooded, you have to get creative about living. All of a sudden you must come up with a creative response to a crisis in order to provide practical solutions for survival.

In our modern world, it's not often that we hear of creativity and practicality linked together – but it is this crucial link that helps us to understand God's gift of creativity. We need individuals within our churches to embrace their creative streaks because creativity can break us free from the confines of institutional practices.

As we look around us, the Australian church is faced with problems that threaten the way we express the gospel. We are facing an age of crises and if we're serious about survival, we need to find creative responses that can birth practical solutions.

This world that we live in, created so magnificently by God and redeemed so sacrificially by Jesus, is a world of opportunity if we listen and obey the Spirit who uses us creatively to spread the message and display the character of Jesus. Yes, crises may be on our doorstep, but with creative thinking we can begin to view the world as a place of opportunity for God's people.

This is an abridged article which first appeared in the Youth Vision Quarterly Annual 2016.

About the Author
Craig Brown

Craig has been involved in Churches of Christ since 1991, and serving in local church and national roles since 1996. He is a published non-fiction and fiction writer who also provides editing and coaching services to other writers. His website will be up soon: amplifyyourvoice.com.au

Q + A WITH STUART WESLEY

Stuart currently works as a pastor and church planter for Church @ The Stadium. He also runs his own business - Oasis Consulting - where he works as an Organisational Development Consultant, helping teams work better together. We sat down with Stuart recently and asked him a few questions about his new church and his church planting experiences thus far.

What made you want to become a pastor?

When I left high school, I started a bachelor of business degree. I did a year of that and realised that everyone was becoming an accountant and I just knew that wasn't me. At the same time, I had gotten involved with 'Youth for Christ' in what was known as their campus life program; I went back into Scarborough High School where I had been a student and just started doing outreach to students in the High School. I guess that just really gripped me and sort of affirmed that I was made for working with people. There was a sense of calling that the Kingdom of God was the focal point of all that.

You have a business as well - Oasis Consulting - where you work as an Organisational Development Consultant. Does this role draw on the same skills? and how does it inform your life as a pastor?

[The roles] absolutely complement [each other] ...In many ways pastoring work has a more overt and focussed spiritual component to it, but I have found that there have been a lot more opportunities to support people and to be evangelistic since I've been working in the corporate world as well than when I was only being a pastor.

You're now part of the core team that have started up Church @ The Stadium in Warwick - why was it important to you to be involved in a church that was local?

Our lives can get so segmented. We live in one community, go to work in another, go to church in another, play sport in another. We were very keen to see some alignment between all those different areas of our life and really put our roots down within a community and really belong to it.

Given that you have been part of a church plant before, were there some things that you had learned that you brought to this new experience?

We've tried a lot of things in the past, and some of those things work really well, and some of those things we don't want to try again because they didn't work very well, so we bring that experience to it. Hopefully we don't have to experience with some things we experimented with last time because we know they don't work.

But, we also remember [even though we have the] experience, to not become arrogant and say 'well, we tried that and it didn't work, therefore it never will'. It's a bit of a balancing act as well.

What has been the most surprising thing about being a part of starting up Church @ The Stadium?

I think the thing that surprised Carolyn and I the most is the fact that we're doing it. When we left pastoral ministry in 2013, we were pretty jaded with it all so I think the most surprising thing [for us] was that God stirred up our hearts to do it and to commit to it.

What do you personally hope that Church @ The Stadium will be for people?

We've been praying that it will be multigenerational, multiracial and multi-everything. We think that's the picture of the Kingdom of God. Our vision is that it will become a strong, Christ-centred community.

We meet around tables. We're trying to encourage people not just to sit and listen but actively engage.

What has been the biggest faith moment in your life this past year?

Starting a new business and starting a new church at the same time and being able to adequately fund ourselves through that. That would have been the biggest faith challenge.

To you, what's the most encouraging thing about being a part of the Churches of Christ community?

Carolyn and I both grew up in Churches of Christ and we started our ministry lives in Churches of Christ. We then spent 20 years in the Vineyard movement and that was a great experience but we've really, really appreciated the support and encouragement from Churches of Christ as we've stepped back into that movement. That's been really great and it's been really good to be a part of something bigger.

NAILING THREE POINTERS

Steve McAlpine

LATELY, I'VE BEEN TAKING MY EIGHT-YEAR-OLD SON DECLAN DOWN TO THE LOCAL COUNCIL OUTDOOR BASKETBALL COURT. IT'S THE TYPE OF COURT THAT HAS SEEN BETTER DAYS; SPLINTERING BACKBOARD, MADDENINGLY UNRESPONSIVE HOOP, ALL PLAYED OUT ON FADED GREEN CONCRETE.

If the court has seen better days, so has my game. But, lucky for me, my son thinks I am some sort of Bogut/Curry/James god, cunningly disguised as a 66kg, 5-foot-11-inch 49-year-old.

Declan's game, however, is improving out of sight, and with a full height rim and a full sized ball, that eight-year-old is going to live the sweet dreams of this old man (dreams that were shattered back in 1979).

All sorts come down to our local court. It's a less-than-salubrious suburb we live in, so it's a little rough, a little angry, and perhaps a little sad. There's no one showy. No one that good. No one with great shoes or great skills.

Our local council sports ground is mostly host to Aussie Rules footy, where the smack of tradies' hardened bodies can be heard from the sidelines, where the "f-bombs" get dropped when the ball does, and where the ballet girls run for their dainty little lives to their parents' car under the glare of the oval's evening spotlights.

I first noticed Kel about a month ago, when he drove up with some mates to shoot hoops. What was noticeable about him, was just how unnoticeable he was. Short, mid-to-late twenties, with cropped, thinning hair.

And a limp. Not just a limp either - He limped with one whole side of his body. His leg and arm curled up, his midriff tilted to one side. And then, as he began to shoot hoops at the other end of the court with his friends, I noticed his low raspy voice - a cracked whisper even when he was shouting.

None of this pointed to him being born that way. It was clear that something bad had happened to Kel. Something had broken him.

But whatever it was, it hadn't broken Kel's shot. He could drain it from anywhere. And it seemed he preferred to do it from outside the line. It was consistent and monotonous. He had a better three-pointer than anyone I'd ever seen on a community court. His friends would goof around, try – and fail – to dunk, speed down the court for a lay-up. He would fake them out, spin around on his good side, and nail it. Nine times out of ten.

We chatted a few times and I even saw him at the polling booth during the Federal Election. Then, one day we were down at the courts and Declan starting to hit a few more shots from just inside the free-throw line. Kel came down by himself that day. He started to go down to the other end of the court.

"Hey, dead-eye, shoot with us," I said, before realising that may be taken as an insult. Perhaps he did have a dead eye. It wasn't beyond the realms of possibility. We got talking. Well, I talked; he rasped. I picked up most of it. Hearing just isn't the same as you reach 50, let me tell you.

And all the while he drained them from about six metres out with what turned out to be more like a medicine ball in basketball drag. I stood under the rim and flicked them back to him. Declan would ping a shot from a few yards; Kel from 20 feet. And so it went on.

Finally, I asked. Kel had been intimating that his game was all fake and only shot hoops because he had nothing else now. I figured he was open to it, so I said "So, what happened? Car accident? It looks like you were seriously messed up."

"SURFBOARD," HE ANSWERED. "THROUGH THE SKULL. FOUR INCHES IN." HE POINTED TO THE NOW-OBVIOUS JIGSAW PUZZLE ON HIS HEAD. DECLAN AND I STOPPED.

"Yeah, back in 2001. Some idiot who couldn't surf hit me." He stopped to nail another shot. I retrieved the ball. "I nearly drowned in the surf before they dragged me out. Heaps of operations, heart failure. Just my left side though. I can still spin around someone on my right."

And then the conversation turned to God. Out of left field. But, not from me, from Kel.
"I believe in God. There's gotta be a God after what I went through. And it's not like he did it to me to teach me something is it?"

I told him I didn't think God would crush him like that for some sort of object lesson. That God doesn't want the world broken the way it is and will sort it out one day.

We talked some more about God, some of it less than orthodox, as you'd expect from him, and I didn't push it. I just listened, responded, and wondered about his wonder. After a few minutes, he abruptly turned back to shooting.

"Warming up for a one-on-one with a friend of mine up in Kalamunda later tonight," he said. Declan and I went back to practicing his rapidly improving jump shot – his little body all lithe and free, unsullied by Kel-like circumstances.

It got dark and cold. The lights weren't on. We'd all had enough. "What's your name, mate?" I asked as we went back to our cars. "Kel" he said, simply. "Steve," I said. And with that we went home.

About the Author

Steve McAlpine

Steve currently works as a pastor and church planter for Providence Church, and in his writing dabbles in a number of fields, notably theology and culture. You can find his blog at **www.stephenmcalpine.com**

STEADY AT THE CROSSROADS

Monica O'Neil

PSALM 77:19 "YOUR PATH LED THROUGH THE SEA, YOUR WAY THROUGH THE MIGHTY WATERS, THOUGH YOUR FOOTPRINTS WERE NOT SEEN.

Dark: the colour of my disorientation, the cloudy mood in our car, the sky outside, and my fear of losing our way. I was tired, with a car full of very little people who needed to be in warm beds. It was years ago and my husband and I were driving in unfamiliar Albany. The town had recently installed a vast number of roundabouts. What they had not installed yet was any directional signage (this was before the days of my much loved satnav!). Usually I'm good with road maps, but juggling a tiny torch and trying to scan for bearings was beyond me. I was crumbling.

Perhaps you know the feeling? When the path ahead loses definition, or multiple good options or multiple poor-to-terrible options are in front, with no satnav of life to tell you where to go.

For those of us who are stepping forward into uncertain or hidden paths, I've assembled a couple of thoughts from the wisdom of Scripture and some people wiser than me.

Centre in on your relationship with God.

Spiritual practices help hold us when we're in uncertain places. Doran McCarty, a formation supervisor, lent me the phrase 'structure binds anxiety.' He was right. The angst which sometimes accompanies ambiguity can be greatly settled by familiar patterns and practices. This is especially so of those practices which connect us with our loving Father. In Psalm 91:4 ('He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart') the psalmist evokes the image of being covered with God's feathers, finding safety under his wings.

Concentrate on personal mastery.

Get really good at what you do. I mean really good. If you are a beginner, aim for good. If you are good, aim for being a gun. Transition times are great for increasing knowledge and skills and for practicing mastery of your craft and your person. In his book The Fifth Discipline Peter Senge offers the following observation:

'Personal mastery goes beyond competence and skills, though it is grounded in competence and skills. It goes beyond spiritual unfolding or opening, although it requires spiritual growth. It means approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to a reactive viewpoint…'

So when you're at the crossroads, get proactive.

WE ALL HAVE SKILLS AND GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT WHICH FLOW THROUGH US. YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE YET, BUT THE TRACES WILL BE THERE

Focus on contribution.

Understand your contribution and those spiritual gifts which flow through you. I admit, this is easier said than done. Sitting alone in contemplation and praising ourselves for our brilliance is the stuff of narcissists and spin doctors and we should leave them to it. But, I think we can do better in our discernment. The truth is, we all have skills and gifts of the Spirit which flow through us. You might not know what they are yet, but the traces will be there. As we recall our best moments, and seek counsel from those in our faith community, we will begin to discover where our God-given gifts lie and how we can best serve others.

Match deep joy and the world's great hunger.

In the book Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, the author Frederick Beuchner proposes that "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Doing what you hate to do or care nothing for, with those who do not hunger for that, who are tepid or recalcitrant is a dusty road to travel. Why would you? Unless, of course, your deep hunger is to lead those who have no evident hunger. At the crossroads of your life you get to seek out the joy in you and the hunger around you, finding the place where they meet.

Understand your shadow.

Which sneaky parts of you will be lured by shiny gorgeous things? The answer is a little different for all of us. At the crossroads you will surely hear the voice of your shadows. Our best response is to reflect and pray both in community and in solitude. We can sit humbly with Scripture and let it challenge us while the Spirit transforms us. When thinking about this for myself, I find the words of Scot McKnight encouraging:

'In those stories [the gospels], the current world of Jesus—and ours too—is subverted. Our sense of power, our sense of passion, our sense of success, our sense of how to live—all these things are turned inside out and upside down. A disciple is someone who is lost in the Kingdom dream of Jesus.'

Think of reasonable service.

Romans 12:1 (Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship) reminds us that we are servants who live our lives as a living sacrifice - holy and pleasing to God. It is our reasonable service to do so. In an age where self-actualisation is the cultural aspiration, we might think we are leaders first, leading our own lives and leading others. But, Scripture reminds us that we are servants. We may be servants who lead, but servants we are.

In summary, when we find ourselves at the crossroads we do well to stay centred on our relationship with God and to focus on daily growth and discipleship. As we choose our path, if we keep our contribution, our joy, the hunger of the world, our shadow and our posture as a servant in sight, I think we can keep steady. Safe travels.

AT THE CROSSROADS YOU WILL SURELY HEAR THE VOICE OF YOUR SHADOWS. OUR BEST RESPONSE IS TO REFLECT AND PRAY BOTH IN COMMUNITY AND IN SOLITUDE.

About the Author

Monica O'Neil

Monica is the Director of Vose Leadership.
She holds a Masters in Ministry.

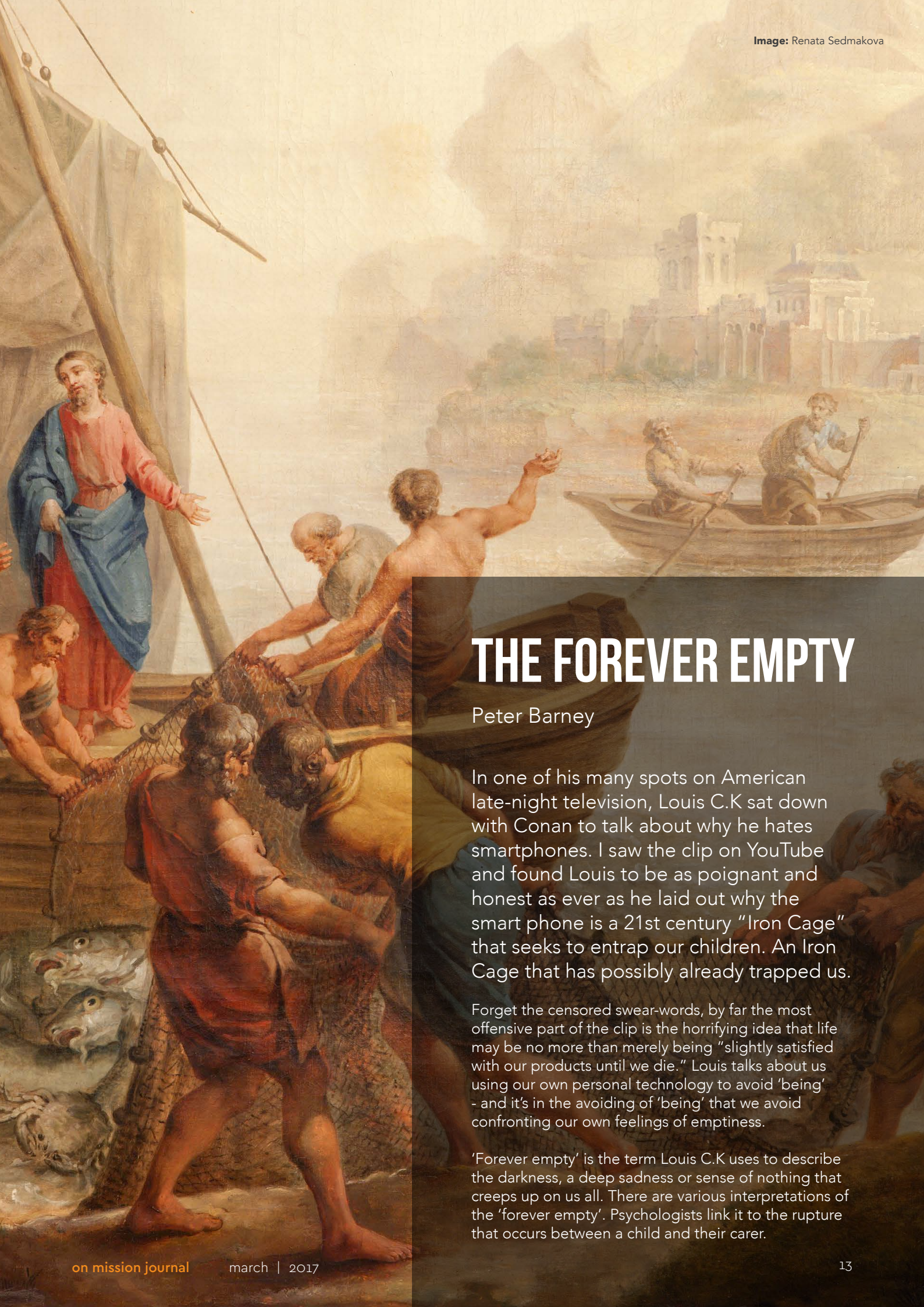

Image: Renata Sedmakova

THE FOREVER EMPTY

Peter Barney

In one of his many spots on American late-night television, Louis C.K sat down with Conan to talk about why he hates smartphones. I saw the clip on YouTube and found Louis to be as poignant and honest as ever as he laid out why the smart phone is a 21st century "Iron Cage" that seeks to entrap our children. An Iron Cage that has possibly already trapped us.

Forget the censored swear-words, by far the most offensive part of the clip is the horrifying idea that life may be no more than merely being "slightly satisfied with our products until we die." Louis talks about us using our own personal technology to avoid 'being' - and it's in the avoiding of 'being' that we avoid confronting our own feelings of emptiness.

'Forever empty' is the term Louis C.K uses to describe the darkness, a deep sadness or sense of nothing that creeps up on us all. There are various interpretations of the 'forever empty'. Psychologists link it to the rupture that occurs between a child and their carer.

First described in the 1950's as attachments, psychologists are now able to demonstrate reliably when these moments of rupture occur in the primary attachments in our lives creating within us our recognition of darkness and disconnect from the central need all humans crave - love.

FOREVER EMPTY IS AN EXTREMELY DIFFICULT SPACE TO BE IN. SO MUCH SO THAT MOST SEEK TO ESCAPE IT. BUT, OUR ESCAPE IS USUALLY BACK INTO THE IMMEDIATE - BACK INTO OUR IRON CAGE.

As he spoke, Louis reminded me of the story of the apostle Peter and his encounter with the risen Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

It is a scene where so much of Peter's relationship with Jesus has been defined. Being a fisherman, the sea was the place where all of his life has been shaped and framed. After the death of Jesus, Peter returns to the life of a fisherman - a life his body would remember as he once again immersed himself in the rhythm of preparing nets, letting the boat carry him across the water, hauling his catch and then returning to shore to prepare the fish.

I imagine the smells and the sounds of the beach would also fill Peter with a sense of bittersweet nostalgia as they reminded him of his life for the previous three years, where Jesus had been telling him that he would become a fisher of men.

Now Jesus had returned, and he was cooking fish on the beach. Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" which is when Peter starts to encounter the 'forever empty'. He is reminded of his betrayal of Jesus.

Peter replies; "yes Lord I love you". But Jesus holds Peter in this moment asking him twice more "Do you love me?" Peter is reminded of his denial of Jesus; a denial he makes three times. I have little doubt of the painful, dark nature of this moment. But during Peter's 'forever empty' he is being held by Jesus. He is in the dark, he does not quickly escape it, but he is not alone; he is being held by another - Jesus.

Holding is a concept that psychologists say is important in helping us to work through our 'forever empty'. It is through holding that we can begin the process of seeking out and finding deeper ground.

The mystery that exists beyond our life in an Iron Cage is, as Thomas Merton puts it, "hidden wholeness" - the unseen, unrecognized source from which all things unfold. As Christians we recognise this source as the triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a relationship bound by love. And this love is extended to Peter and extended to us.

So here we are, living our lives in Iron Cages that can be hard to transcend beyond because they are surrounded by a 'forever empty' that we can sense is too bleak to explore. Anxious to not be alone we find ways to distract ourselves back into our Iron Cages.

But, we need to find ways to be held while we attempt to traverse our 'forever empty' into deeper ground. Our Christian faith practices and communities are an ancient and true way to be held as we find deeper places. But they are also a delicate way that is easy to corrupt, creating stumbling blocks that merely put us back into our cages.

For example, Bible reading and prayer can be a mirror to our soul and a link to the love of God. It can serve as a process and pathway to help us move beyond the 'forever empty'. But they can also be the noise and distraction that we use to never move out of our Iron Cages.

Our faith gatherings can be communal opportunities to hold each other and seek deeper ground through connection and the sharing of sacraments. These processes can help us to regularly journey out in search of deeper ground as we leave our busy, linear, time-bound lives for a short time each week.

Sadly, our faith gatherings can also be carefully choreographed events of 'forever empty' avoidance. Singing as distraction, preaching as positive behavioural therapy, and guarded relationships that simply put more bars on our Iron Cages rather than helping us move beyond it.

Like Jesus with Peter, love is the unique gauge that Christians can use to ensure our faith practices are a journey to deeper places. So, let us choose to first let Jesus continually ask us the question "Do you love me?" And then, may we choose to practice our faith in ways that will hold us and allow us to move beyond our 'forever empty' and into deeper ground and the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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

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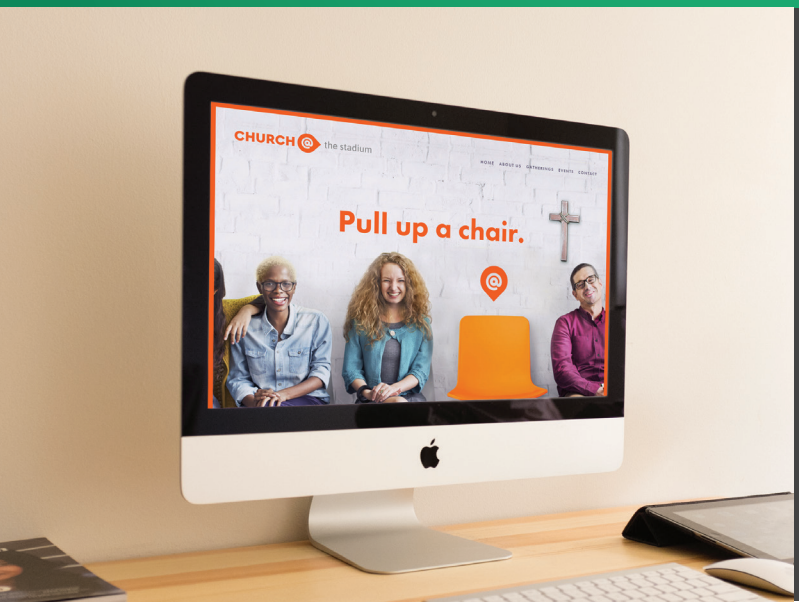

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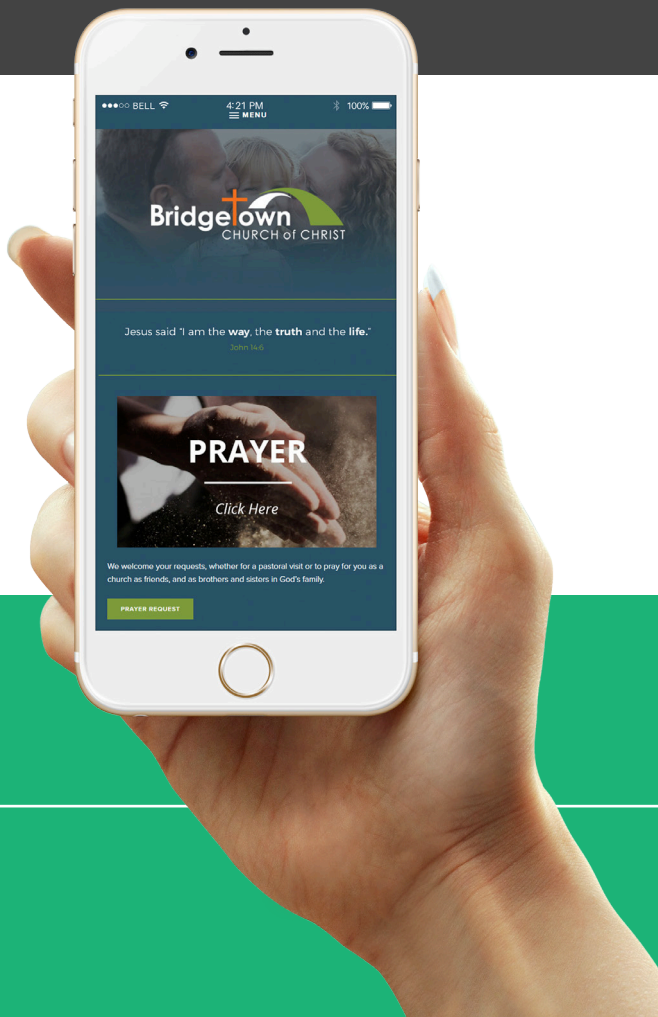

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