

RTC Monthly

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College News

- Our short first term has just finished and students now have a two week break. We're thankful for the way the year has begun – a great group of students in both day classes and evening classes. Around thirty students have been attending evening classes that are pitched at ordinary church members wanting to grow in their walk with the Lord.
- Our distance education program has grown considerably this year. With the addition of a new Church History course we now have 16 students currently enrolled in a distance subject at either Degree or Graduate Diploma level. Dr Bill Berends has been appointed Dean of Distance Education. He has led the way for us in this development and invests a large amount of time in it.
- At one of our Tuesday morning devotions a couple of weeks ago a Jew from "Celebrate Messiah" came and demonstrated a Passover celebration for us. It was great to see the rich imagery embedded in that celebration – imagery that so clearly proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Flame Burned Brightly

The *Fan the Flame* conference has been a major highlight of our first term. Forty-six people enrolled – 24 from New Zealand and the rest from Victoria, Tasmania and WA. The buzz of enthusiasm and responsiveness at the conference was contagious. Many who came said they had been hugely challenged and encouraged by the weekend. It seems this conference is destined to be a fixture on our calendar and indications are that it will continue to grow.

The weekend, however, was no picnic. In temperatures hitting the high 30s, we sweltered through seminars on the call to pastoral ministry, the missional church, motivations for overseas mission, preaching, leadership and studying an OT passage. Participants also had meals hosted in the homes of the lecturers and Geelong pastors, attended services in the Reformed Churches on Sunday, heard expository messages at the start of each day, had input on various ministry training

models and options, and had the opportunity for one-on-one interviews. The whole weekend was focused on the importance of seeing that we are all called to ministry – to serve the Lord with the gifts He has given us. But we have to think clearly about *where* and *how* the Lord would have us serve and what we need to do to be trained and equipped for service.

The conference has highlighted to us areas where we as a College can develop. It has also prompted us to set the date for next year already. Lord willing, *Fan the Flame* will be held 7 – 9 March 2009.

Faculty News

Fan the Flame kept faculty members and support staff well and truly busy over the last few weeks, so there hasn't been too much jet-setting of late. Henk de Waard was able to enjoy some holiday time in New Zealand. Alastair McEwen is juggling the demands of College work with part-time pastoral ministry in Melbourne. Bill Berends and Steve Voorwinde have particularly heavy teaching loads this semester. And Murray Capill has been finding his feet in his new role as Principal. We do value your prayers as we seek to teach and lead well.

Ministry Spot...

(by Dr. Murray Capill)

The last fifty years have seen massive changes in every part of life. Political changes have included the collapse of the Berlin wall, the fall of communism and the rise of world terrorism. Technological changes have included the communications revolution in which email, texting, mobile phones and the internet have become everyday realities. Lifestyle changes have included much higher standards of living, smaller families in larger homes, endless consumer choice, more years in school but arguably less education, and the rise of sexual freedom, divorce rates, blended families and alternative lifestyles.

At a more fundamental level, the last 50 years have seen the change from a modernist to a post-

modernist mindset on the part of the ordinary person in the street. People think differently from 50 years ago. Typically now a person under the age of 40 is not that committed to institutions, is suspicious of authority figures, likes to experiment but questions everything and doubts there is ever one right answer. People do not so much ask "Is it true?", but "Does it work?" They think and act as consumers. They value relationships but not commitment. They are into spirituality but not Christianity and certainly not the church. They like things visual, tangible, physical.

With a world that has changed this much in 50 years it is naïve to think that our approaches to pastoral care can remain largely unchanged. Of course the gospel hasn't changed. And people's most fundamental needs haven't changed. And the call of gospel ministers and elders to be undershepherds hasn't changed. But how do we shepherd the flock in these times? What does effective pastoral care look like today?

That is a huge question. Over the next few editions of *RTC Monthly* I will try to suggest some answers to it. But for now I would like to begin with a statement by Paul Goodliff in his book, *Care in a Confused Climate: Pastoral Care and Postmodern Culture* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998). He says,

"The postmodern condition of fragmentation and short-term commitments, of life imitating art, especially the pervasive art of the television, and the resulting personal and social disintegration call for some searching questions to be asked about the pastoral priorities that the Church should adopt. Pastoral priorities in our age of instability cannot be the same as in an age of stability, any more than the pastoral priorities of a time of war can be the same as in a time of peace. There will be common themes, but different nuances and emphases must be given to those themes. I want to argue for four pastoral priorities: building Christian community; creating relational health, especially in marriage; healing the wounded soul; and nurturing and sustaining faith. I believe that these both reflect the central concerns of the Christian faith and respond to the postmodern condition." (p140).

Any new models of pastoral care would do well to take note of the four themes Goodliff identifies. We would particularly do well to take note of his first two themes – building Christian community and creating relational health.

Pastoral care is not just about making pastoral visits; it is about creating a certain kind of community – one that is incredibly rare in our society. The church must be a place of truth, grace, love and forgiveness. It must be a place where trust is built through integrity and authenticity. It must be a place where friendships are built through genuineness, loyalty and purity. It must be a place where people see and experience relationships that do not revolve around sex, money and power, as they so often do in the rest of society.

This kind of community, moreover, must be a community not only for those already "in", but for those looking in. It must be a community that embraces people with damaged lives - people with baggage, people who have messed up and whose lives are messy. It must be a community that is prepared to care for people for years – investing deeply into lives that can feel, at times, like bottomless pits. It must be a community that loves to love and gladly serves.

The church must be radically counter-cultural not by looking dated and old-fashioned, but by radically embodying the gospel of grace. Given, however, that our church communities are also made up of sinful, selfish and often very post-modern people, none of this will happen unless the gospel is powerfully at work. The gospel must be transforming our lives if we are to create communities like this. It must be proclaimed boldly and uncompromisingly so that, by God's grace, it can be a powerful transforming and motivating force among us.

Re-thinking pastoral care shouldn't begin with tinkering at the edges of visitation systems or rostered care. It should begin at the heart of the matter – the church as a gospel community that offers to a broken and breaking world a different way. That's far more work. But it will be far more rewarding!