

InterSections



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Editorial

Welcome to a new year and a new issue of *InterSections*!

This issue has a loose theme around prayer. As **Craig Holyoak** notes in our *Feature* article, prayer can be a subversive activity in today's age – because through prayer we're affirming that God's in control, not us. But to pray well, one has to pray much (as some wise person once wrote). Yet many Christians who have tried to improve their prayer lives find their efforts sabotaged by stumbling blocks. If you feel that way, read **Faith Tabalujan's** *Food for Thought* – you may well benefit from practical tips on how to persevere in prayer. To round it off, **Nancy Wu Won** adds her voice by suggesting how we can pray using Psalms from the Old Testament.

For our *Interview*, we cross the ditch and learn about the experiences of **David & Mary Nelson** in Tauranga, New Zealand. The Nelsons are Americans who have long lived in the land of the Long White Cloud (Aoteroa) to serve God's kingdom there.

Our *Book Review* by **Alvin Tjipto** explores a book about preaching by the late Timothy Keller. But it's not a book only for preachers – you must read the review if you wish to know more. Finally, our regular *News* page carries updates about the **2023 APEDS** forum in Melbourne, **Camp Challenge** in NSW, and the 30th annual **Saving Light Series** of lectures held by Heidelberg West Church of Christ in Victoria.

Enjoy reading and be encouraged!

The InterSections team

Feature

The Subversive Power of Prayer

'Thoughts and prayers.' A phrase so often uttered in response to a tragedy. Perhaps sincerely. Perhaps cliché. Perhaps cynically. After all, aren't they often just hollow words offered in the place of action? Shove your 'prayers' in a sack, mister; we want you to *do something!*

But far more than empty words offered in place of meaningful action, prayer in itself is meaningful action. Powerful action. Indeed, prayer alone gives at least three meaningful and tangible outcomes – regardless how God chooses to answer.

Firstly, when we pray we are acknowledging our own powerlessness. Those who presume to have all the answers to society's ills, or who believe that all our problems can be solved by an act of human will, or human knowledge – the right science, the right policy settings – such people have no use for prayer.

In contrast, when we 'cast our cares on Him' (1 Peter 5:7) we are acknowledging that these things are, at least to some extent, beyond our power and wisdom. This is a profound act of humility. Even if we begin without this humility, prayer trains us to be humble, if we allow it to. The choice to pray reminds us to see our limitations and the need for action and power beyond ourselves.

This leads to prayer's second outcome: through prayer we acknowledge to ourselves and the world the power of God. I am powerless, but God is powerful. I don't have all the answers, but God does. This is especially challenging when it seems like God's willingness, if not ability, to act is so absent or random.

The Subversive Power of Prayer *continued*

Why was this person's illness healed, but not the other's? Why doesn't God punish my enemies who continue to prosper? If God *can* fix the world then why *doesn't* he?

It's easy to fixate on instances where God apparently does not act instead of those where he does, whether we identify them accurately or not. 'Remember that day when God didn't let a meteor fall on my head,' said nobody ever.

But do we, or do we not, believe that God is intimately involved in every aspect of his creation, causing the sun to rise and set, and bringing the rain, yes, on the unrighteous as well as the righteous? If God is not involved, of course prayer is pointless. But if God is involved, prayer makes perfect sense, whether or not we understand the response.

This is why prayer first calls us to be humble, to recognise that God's actions are often beyond our own understanding. Prayer is not transactional but relational. It forces us to reckon with the times that God (despite our persistent pleas) chooses not to remove the thorn in our flesh because, in his wisdom, his will may be done somehow through its remaining.

This is not to say that God necessarily *will*s for all kinds of atrocities to persist even though we might consistently pray for them to cease. But we must recognise two alternatives: that there is some mystery in God's purposes that tolerates them or, much more confronting, that their existence doesn't indict God, but indicts us – both individually and collectively as a people.

Which leads to prayer's third outcome, which seems paradoxical given the first: time spent in prayer calls us to act and to change. Yes, I am limited and weak. But God is powerful, and I am God's instrument. Prayer reminds us of our agency as beings created in God's image. Much evil persists in the world because of people like me, so I must first repent for my own culpability, great or small.

I may not have committed adultery, but I have lusted in my heart. I may not have committed murder, but I have hated in my heart. I may not have declared war, or sabotaged peace, but I have remained embittered with my neighbour and friend. These acts are small and seemingly insignificant in isolation, but taken together across all peoples and all times, who would begrudge God his righteous anger at mankind? And it starts with me.

But just as my own sin – our own sin – contributes to the world's ills, so too does my goodness – our goodness – bring light into the world. And when prayer helps me choose between the two, it changes the world.

David often prays in the Psalms, 'teach me your ways' (e.g. Psalm 25:4; 86:1). If we focus on the 'teach' then maybe prayer is nothing more than a subjective intellectual exercise and deserves to be viewed cynically by unbelievers. But if our focus is on the 'ways' we realise that prayer prompts us to act. And to do so in accordance with God's will as he has made it known to us.

In a world full of blame-shifting and power games, prayer is a subversive act. It operates from a different paradigm of power, agency, and responsibility than we are used to. Contrary to worldly powers, genuine prayer declares that we aren't perfect and don't have all the answers. It declares that God is powerful and in control. And it reminds us that we each have a part to play with our own actions, be they good or bad.

I am powerless, yet powerful. Perhaps, far from being a paradox, this is grace. I am limited but empowered. Though I am weak, I can act with boldness in the world through full dependence on God: his power is 'made perfect in [my] weakness' (1 Corinthians 12:9).

Such is the power of prayer. ◇

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InterSections is a quarterly journal designed to inform, encourage, 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, 2024). 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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Praying with Purpose, not Perfection

'I wish I prayed more.' Have you thought this to yourself or heard it said by a fellow Christian? The truth is that cultivating a consistent, focused, and heartfelt prayer life can be a struggle. And yet, we all know prayer is foundational to our walk with God.

When it comes to prayer, there's often a disconnect between our intentions and actions. So, what are some of the main hurdles we face as would-be prayer warriors? Let me mention three common hurdles and then offer some biblical and practical advice to help us overcome them.

'Not enough time'

For many of us, squeezing in another to-do seems hard. Whether you're a busy mother, respected church leader, or a single working professional like myself, we all fill our days with various tasks and hobbies.

In the Bible, however, we find many examples of people who actively prioritised prayer. One of them was Daniel. His practice of daily prayer helped him stand against an idolatrous culture (Daniel 6:10-18).

If you struggle to prioritise prayer, consider these two strategies. First, 'hook' prayer onto an existing habit – and the more instinctive the habit, the better. For example, if you can't leave the house without brushing your teeth, pray right before you uncup the toothpaste tube. Second, embrace in-between times as prayer opportunities. In line to get a blood test? Pray. Early for your train? Pray. Waiting for a parking spot? Pray. Short prayers are okay because God is pleased even by the shortest, simplest prayers we say behind closed doors (Matthew 6:6-7).

'I don't know how'

Another obstacle can be a feeling that we lack prayer skills. We all know at least one Christian brother or sister who seems to weave together eloquent, heartfelt prayers at the drop of a hat. In comparison, it's easy to become self-conscious about our own disjointed, half-baked prayers.

But, as with many aspects of our faith, growth comes through disciplined and determined practice – the Christian walk doesn't demand first-time perfection. It's no surprise that there are several passages which shows us that prayer can take many forms. One of them describes Hannah praying out of her brokenness and anguish to the extent people thought she was drunk (1 Samuel 1:10-18). Whatever our prayer 'technique' – or lack thereof – the Spirit can make sense of our jumbled thoughts and words (Romans 8:26).

Meanwhile, here are three tips to help tackle our feelings of inadequacy. First, pray from the Bible. Whether it's a two-word verse like 'pray continually' (1 Thessalonians 5:17) or a whole psalm, embrace Scripture as a launching pad into prayer. Second, couple creativity with discipline. I've heard people tying their prayers to days of the week – mission Monday, thankfulness Tuesday, etc. Or use the PRAY acronym to Praise, Repent, Ask, and Yield – like Jesus himself did (Luke 11:2-11). Third, if you dread praying in public, practise by praying aloud by yourself or sharing one-line prayers with a small group of trusted Christians. Who knows, God may well use your stumbling, yet sincere, prayers to encourage others.

'It doesn't seem effective'

A third barrier may be our own (mis)understandings about prayer. This includes the perennial question, why pray when our prayers seem to go unanswered?

However, if we learn anything in the Bible, it's that we worship a loving and faithful God who hears our prayers (1 John 5:14-15; 1 Peter 3:12). Importantly, God also knows what's best for us even – or especially – when we don't know ourselves (Proverbs 3:5-6).

So we should feel free to ask God for a desired outcome, such as a successful job application or healing for a loved one. But we must then have the humility and wisdom to leave it in God's hands. After all, we can trust God to discern which good gifts will help us walk more faithfully with him (Matthew 7:7-11).

On this point, here are two practices which may be valuable. First, start your prayer times by identifying requests God has already answered. Has God given you more patience with an elderly parent? Or perhaps an opportunity to encourage a colleague? Importantly, share this answered prayer with a prayer buddy or your mid-week Bible study group.

A second related suggestion is to keep a prayer record. Write down a summary of prayer requests on one side of the page, and then re-visit it during your daily prayer time to keep track of God's response. Is it a 'No', 'Not yet', or a resounding 'Yes'? Beside it, jot down the lessons – contentment, peace, or patience – which God may be teaching you through his answers.

Prayer is simple, but not always easy. Thankfully though, God meets each of us where we are. So let me encourage you to prioritise prayer today – no matter how busy, nervous, or doubtful you may be. Our heavenly Father is all ears! ◇



More Food for Thought

Praying the Psalms

Nancy Wu Won



I recently spoke to some sisters in Christ about the Psalms. Both replied that they don't usually read them. Years ago, a brother in Christ, after experiencing a relationship break-up, confided that he was reading the Psalms because they were comforting in his time of need.

Wherever we fall on the continuum of loving or ignoring the Psalms, we can't avoid this fact: the Psalms is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament.¹ The first-century Christians sang the Psalms. Luke notes the connection between Christ and the Psalms (Colossian 3:16; Luke 24:44). From praises to lament, the Psalms document highly emotional expressions in poetic form, covering a range of human experiences. Clinton McCann, an Old Testament scholar, makes a convincing argument that the Psalms were also Israel's instruction manual.² As such, Psalms was both hymn book and prayer book for the Jews.

Reading the Psalms is like reading someone's diary where they've recorded the highs and lows of life. Victories. Loneliness. Confession. Prayer. The Psalmist reveals what perhaps one might only dare to think. Within the Psalms, we're privy to discovering YHWH, the Lord. Although we may be uncomfortable in knowing that we cannot hide from an all-seeing, all-knowing God, it may also be comforting to know that nothing surprises him (Psalm 139).

Couched in these terms, the Psalmist teaches us to be honest with God: we bring to God our whole selves in order to have our blind spots revealed (Psalm 139:23-24). This confidence in God gives the psalmist reason to extol God's ways from the beginning of the psalter. That's why Psalm 1 teaches that if we want a blessed life, we will choose God's ways.

Who doesn't want a blessed life? Experience tells us that disease occurs, thieves break in and steal, and bad things happen to good people. Psalm 73 speaks of a time when the psalmist was envious of the wicked who were getting away with their wrongdoings. The psalmist petitions to God: 'It's not fair' (Psalm 73:13).

Yes, the wounds of life are difficult to avoid. The psalter reflects this truth. Approximately 40% of the psalter comprise psalms of lament.³ When trouble enters our lives, uncertainty, pain, and fear may wash over us, causing disorientation. Perhaps we may feel that God has abandoned us (Psalm 13:1).

In this context, a lament has a typical structure consisting of an address to God, the complaint, a petition, before ending on a note of trust in God.⁴ The common element in the laments is a call to trust. Away from the glitz and masks, the lament psalms restore the prayer of despair and anger within the container of faith.

Like the lament psalms, imprecatory (or cursing) psalms are also directed to God. You may have heard it said that Christians ought not to feel this way. (Have you ever prayed: 'O God, break the teeth in their mouths,' as in Psalm 58:6?) The psalmist seeks justice and vengeance with language that may expose unfettered anger.

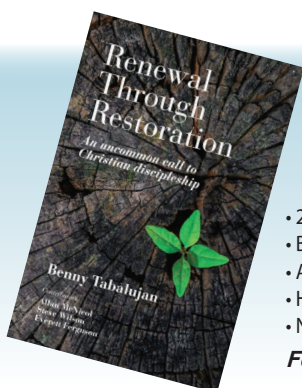
How can God's people pray these imprecatory psalms? A key point is to remember that the psalmist is directing these emotions to God, the One who hears and will handle the problem in his good time.⁵ Also, it is unwise to deny completely the emotions which may manifest themselves in other undesirable forms. Instead, raw honesty should not be buried under a stiff upper lip or clenched jaw. Rather, feelings and problems are to be handed over to God and entrusted to him to solve.

When we feel lost for words and don't know what to say to God, we can turn to the Psalms. We can use the Psalms like a template for our own prayers. We can be reminded that we can find a safe place near to the heart of God.

Out of the pit of life, we raise both lament and praise to God. At the end of it all, we find that he makes us lie down in green pastures and restores our souls (Psalm 23). ◇

- 1 Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Fortress Press, 1986) 27-28.
- 2 J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Abingdon Press, 1993) 18-19.
- 3 Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (ACU Press, 2012) 117.
- 4 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Ausborg Publishing House, 1984) 54-55.
- 5 Brueggemann, *ibid* 55-56.

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Book Review Timothy Keller, *Preaching – Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (Viking Penguin, 2015)

Alvin Jipto

The main purpose of the book is to be a resource for a larger audience than just preachers. It was authored by the late Timothy Keller, a Presbyterian minister in New York City, and well-known for his writings.

According to Keller the ministry of the Word can be broken down to three levels. Level 1 covers informal conversations between one another. Level 2 involves teaching, mentoring, etc. and involves conveying biblical content to a wider audience. Level 3 is the traditional sermon that's prepared and delivered to the congregation. This book aims to be a guide for Level 2 and 3.

There are three sections in the book. The first is 'Serving the Word' and the second is 'Reaching the People'. This is followed by a third, short section on preaching and the Holy Spirit. An Appendix contains practical steps on how one can craft an expository message encapsulating the main points that have been fleshed out throughout the book.

The first section describes Keller's view of expository preaching. He borrows from a definition from Hughes Old: expository preaching is the systematic explanation of Scripture. However, he is quick to point out the value of the latter and how both can be used effectively together.

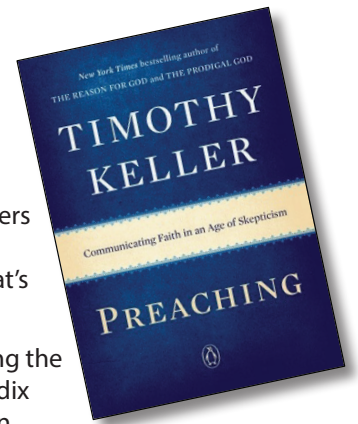
Next, the book pushes for the importance of including the Gospel in every lesson. In Keller's eyes, this refers to the narrative of God's grand plan and love to save mankind through Jesus. The two reasons that he gives for this are: only then can we show how the Bible fits together, and this reminds everyone that Christianity is not a moralistic religion where we can earn our way to heaven with our deeds. Expanding on this, he masterfully offers practical examples of how we can preach Christ from different genres, themes, major figures, and deliverance storylines.

The second section teaches the reader how to preach to different cultures, our minds (with a focus on the late modern mind), and our hearts. He offers six methods to bridge the divide between cultures: using accessible vocabulary; employing respected authorities; understanding doubts and objections; affirming in order to challenge cultural narratives; pushing a culture's pressure points; and highlighting Gospel motivation for life change.

Keller's observations about the modern mind are nothing short of fascinating. They give a reader more food for thought on how to craft words and illustrations to reach our intellect. As for touching the heart, he offers several ways – affectionately, imaginatively (through illustrations), wondrously, memorably, Christo-centrally, and practically.

In the last section Keller does not mince words. He argues that the most important message that one can preach is not through the pulpit but through lives. The spoken message must be believed and lived out for it to be effective and life-changing.

Alvin Jipto is a husband, father, an I.T. professional, and a member of Belmore Road Church of Christ in suburban Melbourne. alvintjipto@gmail.com



Keller is very clear on the intended audience of the book. It is to help frame conversations. In broadening his reach to Level 2 conversations, Keller challenges the mindset that preaching is limited to the pulpit or those who are gifted oratorically. Having said that, the title of the book leaves little to imagination; without spending time on the introductory pages, one may easily dismiss the book as one for preachers alone. Could a better title have been chosen?

The structure of the book makes it clear that the Gospel of Jesus must lie at the core of the Christian message. Rightly so. Keller dedicates a significant portion of the book to this theme in the first section, 'Serving the Word'. Though repetitive at times, this section drives home the importance of preaching Christ to all audiences, regardless whether doing so is considered offensive or not.

The language used in the book is simple and easy to follow. The sentences flow smoothly across points to paint a vivid picture of the message. A reader quickly gets the sense of urgency and passion behind Keller's words. These are not just mere facts he is passing on, but facts believed and practised. However, although many practical examples are given on how to preach certain points, or how to reach certain groups of people, I still find that the book lacks personal examples of what Keller has actually done throughout his ministry. Such examples could have added more strength to his points.

A reader may find the Appendix the most helpful part of the book. Here, Keller gives a practical step-by-step guide on how to prepare an expository message. He suggests a four-step process: discern the goal of the text, choose a main theme, develop an outline, and flesh out each point. On the other hand, putting this guide in the Appendix seems to be an injustice given the amount of good advice that Keller offers in this book. ◇



News *Camp Challenge, NSW*

Camp Challenge was held at a new location in the Blue Mountains from 28 Dec 2023 to 1 Jan 2024. Guest speaker Vani Igo, from the Cairns congregation, attended with his family and taught from the book of James.



The topic for camp was 'Faith Alive'. Vani taught three lessons which were followed by small group discussions. I felt that Vani's lessons really made me think about the teachings from James and the small group discussions pushed that thinking even further.



We had two baptisms at camp: Miles Jennings and Hayley Thompson, both from the Canberra Church of Christ. They decided to get baptised after Vani taught an additional lesson to encourage all the people at camp that haven't been baptised to get baptised.

Throughout camp, we had various activities including sports, swimming, and also chess and ping pong tournaments. Basketball, soccer, or volleyball were played in the afternoons whilst the primary school children had pool time. We also had a singing workshop and a drama workshop. After dinner, we had different games such as: getting to know you games, treasure bags, and a combined auction & talent night.

Overall, everyone enjoyed the teaching, fellowship, and fun. I'm already looking forward to next year's camp! ◇

Luke Schmierer (12 years old), Canberra Church of Christ, ACT. lisa.schmierer1@gmail.com

APEDS 2023, VIC

My husband, Mark, and I were so blessed to attend APEDS (Asia Pacific Elders, Deacons, and Spouses forum) at the Belmore Road church in Melbourne this year. It was my first time attending and I found it to be such an encouraging and spiritually refreshing experience.

It was wonderful to be surrounded by so many godly men and women from around Australia, New Zealand, and Asia. They are true pillars of the faith. I was also grateful for the chance to reunite with old friends and connect with new brother and sisters.

I was particularly touched by how well-organised everything was. There were so many efforts by the organising team to take care of all the attendees (including custom-made tote bags full of useful goodies)! The schedule was full of thoughtful, practical, and biblical teaching with many takeaways to apply back home. The whole experience was incredibly refreshing and nourishing and also gave me so much encouragement about the future of the Lord's church.

I came away grateful for the church which has so many humble, faithful leaders who are passionate about the Gospel and serving the body. Thank you to everyone involved for putting together this special event! ◇

Kate Jennings, Canberra Church of Christ, ACT. kates@hotmail.com



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OCT/NOV 2024 *Keith Gant*



This year sees the 50-n-Over Retreat mark its 40th anniversary and as such, promises to be a very special event! We owe a debt of gratitude to those who came up with the idea of a retreat for people over 50, and not just the idea, but the initiative and energy to make it happen.

Here we are 40 years down the track and still making wonderful memories as we enjoy fellowship and learning together!

For more information, contact David Mowday – 0411 284 685 or Alan Bottle – 0422 106 065

Saving Light Series, VIC



The 30th annual Saving Light Series was held by the Heidelberg West church in Melbourne from 5 – 8 October 2023. This year's theme was 'The Great Plans of God'. Ted Paull from the Macquarie church (Sydney) and Graham Wall from The Border Church (Albury-Wodonga) presented five excellent lessons based around this theme. The lessons focused on God's overall great plan, as well as his plan for salvation, for families, for the church and for the individual.

Once again, the support of brothers and sisters from other congregations in the Melbourne area was very encouraging. Sunday attendance was the highest we have seen in a long time and most stayed to enjoy a luncheon after the final session. It was a great opportunity for us to spend time with fellow Christians and visitors in an encouraging atmosphere. There were several visitors, mainly from members' personal contacts, and we received some positive feedback from them.

We now look forward to the 31st Saving Light Series in 2024, from 10 – 13 October, when Peter Tickner from the Macquarie church will be presenting the series. ◇

Geoff Thomas, Heidelberg West Church of Christ, VIC. geoffthomas150@gmail.com

Interview: David & Mary Nelson. cont.

The original curriculum was in hard copy, but over time, I moved everything into a digital format. In 2011, I learned to use WordPress and created the website.

I have to say I probably was not qualified to create what MBC is today. MBC and I have grown together. In the beginning, I had to make myself vulnerable (which I hated). It was excruciating to expose my writing and ideas for the whole world to see. Not long into this, I learnt that God uses my imperfections to convince others that they can also give things a try.

So I was genuinely shocked when many people worldwide began to use MBC resources. After over a year of trying to work all day and then staying up half the night writing, I made the big decision to quit a good job. I then developed MBC as a full-time ministry. You could say the official launch was in 2014.

The key for growing MBC has been to listen to what people are saying. I've met and listened to many wonderful people over the years. I bring them to mind as I'm writing or editing my website. I ask myself whether what I am doing is meeting



their needs. I'm not trying to impress the world; I'm simply trying to help those teachers talk about God to children.

Now I'm getting older, so working alongside younger people is extremely important for MBC's future. That's why I'm excited to have a young woman, Gina Nored, join me for two years. She's a recent graduate of Lipscomb University and is coming to work in New Zealand as part of the HIM (Helpers in Missions) program sponsored by the Memorial Road Church of Christ in Edmond, Oklahoma. I've never had a co-worker, so I'm excited about the new ways God will work with us together! ◇

David & Mary Nelson were interviewed by John Atchley, a deacon serving the Otumoetai Church of Christ in Tauranga, New Zealand. john.atchley@gmail.com

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David & Mary Nelson, Tauranga, NZ

You both became Christians as young people in the US but decided to use your many gifts to serve God in New Zealand. Why?



David: My mother believed that missionaries were true heroes. In the early 1970s, my home congregation, Cedar Hill, Texas, supported a missionary in Queensland that some readers may even remember: Thurman Self. He came home to a hero's welcome.

After that, I thought it would be great to be a missionary and teach people in faraway places. When I finished high school, I joined the Adventures in Missions (AIM) program connected with Sunset International Bible Institute in Lubbock, Texas. That's where I met Mary.

She and I wanted to go to Australia but this door closed. Instead, we were sent to New Zealand, which we quickly came to love and wanted to return to in the future.

Over the next few years we continued our education, worked with churches in New Zealand and the USA, and became parents to three boys. I also grew to love teaching more than preaching, so when South Pacific Bible College invited me to join the faculty, our family decided to make the big move to New Zealand. We arrived in January 1997 and have lived here since.

Mary: My faith was initially formed by loving Christian parents who practised their walk with God genuinely in all aspects of their life. The small country church that we attended did not have a preacher or Bible classes, but I learnt much there and wanted more. As a teenager, I began attending another church where I felt I could really grow in faith. It was there that I learnt about the AIM program and shocked my family by enrolling.

The next couple of years were formative for me. David and I met in this time, got to know each other while studying for Bible exams, and fell in love with missions. We could have stayed near home and served God in many ways but our hearts were drawn to places where workers were few and where we would be used by God to make a difference.

David, not everyone is called to be a shepherd, but you've risen to the occasion twice. Why do you think shepherds are important for a congregation? Why did you accept the role?

David: I believe it's self-evident that God's people need leaders. Leaders equip, support, encourage, admonish, pastor (feed), and guide God's people. Trying to fulfil the role of the shepherd can be painful but it does have its rewards.

The Otumoetai congregation had gone through a rough period in the early 2000s. We lost our first eldership during this time. After a time of healing the church appointed new shepherds. My name was put forward but I declined at that time. Those years of 'following' greatly helped me to understand the challenge of submitting to leaders whom you didn't always agree with.

Many years later, the church found itself with only three elders. I didn't think it would be in the church's best interest if it ended up with no elders so I spoke to the elders and said that if the church wanted to appoint additional men to serve, I would seriously consider it. And so the church blessed my appointment to the eldership.

Sadly though, that eldership ended in crisis. Two of the elders stepped down, leaving only two of us left (the two newest). Our differences and the way we communicated came to a head and the eldership dissolved.

Things were put into place to provide leadership in the absence of an eldership and a three-year plan was

implemented to help put the church back on track. Over time, the church chose 'official servants' (in effect, deacons) whose task was to take care of the day-to-day affairs of the church. A year after they were appointed, the church chose and appointed three men to serve as elders. I was one of these men.

Again, I had a desire to serve because the church needs guidance, pastoring, equipping, and teaching. I love God's people and God's mission. I believe God has gifted me in these areas, and I'm growing in my role as a shepherd.

One reward of being an elder is seeing members step up to the challenge of becoming more connected in the life of the church and her ministries. This can be in response to a sermon. Or by witnessing other Christians joyfully serving. Or when nudged by others. Whatever the reason, it's a thrilling change to see.

A more recent reward resulted from Mary and I making very intentional visits to members. We joined another elder, Chris Miller, and his wife, Melinda, to write cards that communicate how a specific member is valuable to God, the church, and each of us. We think of Bible verses which the person brings to mind. After that, we visit them and read our cards to them. Hearing these words from the elders has brought real change and encouragement to members. It's one of the best things I've ever done as an elder.

On the other hand, it's discouraging to witness people come to the Lord, begin their growth in discipleship, and then see their fire grow cold. That's a real challenge.

On occasion, I'm also faced with feelings of incompetence in my role as an elder, and how easily people can frustrate and disappoint you. But this teaches me to be more patient, forgiving, and loving. I remember that these brothers and sisters are trying to follow an often inadequate shepherd.

Mary, can you please tell us about the origin of Mission Bible Class, how MBC has grown, and its future plans?

Mary: When we moved to New Zealand in 1997, Chris and Melinda Miller had also only recently come to Tauranga. Melinda asked if I would like to collaborate and create a curriculum for the Otumoetai church.

Over many years of teaching children's Bible classes, I'd developed my own filing system to keep notes and collect new ideas, so that's where we started.

This original work, with Melinda preparing most of the visual aids and me doing the writing, was what eventually became missionbibleclass.org.

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