

Reflections • Tuesday 21 2019 • By Bishop Cam Venables

Closing churches, but continuing Commission...

If there's one thing we can be confident about in life, it is that things will change. Our physical bodies change through time such that when we are older we are not as physically strong and our memory is not as sharp as when we were younger! Communication technologies have changed in our lifetime to such a degree that we now have in our mobile phones the capacity to access huge volumes of information and entertainment, as well as the capacity to talk to another person. And, it's interesting to bring to mind the changes that have happened in transport, healthcare, education, and agriculture over the years.

Sometimes changes are easy to come to terms with – such as improved ways of treating injury and disease – and sometimes they are difficult. One of the difficult things for many communities in the Western Region of our Diocese is the progressive shift in population away from rural and remote areas. The Mayor of Quilpie, Councillor Stuart Mackenzie, observed recently that fifty percent of the Quilpie Shire population had moved away over the last twenty years.

With a shrinking critical mass of people living in the community there is a knock-on effect on local businesses, schools, community organisations...and churches. We do not close churches easily in our Diocese, but when a Parish Council decides for a variety of reasons that it is time to close a church, then the request will go to the Archbishop. The Regional Bishop will then meet with the local community to get feedback, and in the light of this make a recommendation to Diocesan Council.

There is much insight to draw from the Bible as we wrestle with this reality, and I am drawn particularly to the wisdom found in [Ecclesiastes 3:1-8](#) which pragmatically affirms: "For everything there is season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted..." It does not say explicitly, "A time to open a church, and a time to close..." but I think it is there implicitly!

It's not easy because we naturally get attached to church buildings, for they have been spaces where people have gathered through the years to be challenged and nurtured in faith. They have been places of 'holy ground' in which prayers have been offered and hymns have been sung. And, they have been places in which bread and wine have been blessed, and shared in memory of Jesus.

It's in the words of Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel that there is both comfort and challenge when it comes time to close a church. In what is often called 'The Great Commission' Jesus is remembered saying 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...' ([Matthew 28:19](#)). Jesus did not say "Go and build churches!" He said "Go and make disciples..."

So, when we close a church building, we generally do so with a great sense of thankfulness for what has been. But, we also recognise that the church building in that place no longer helps us gather community and make disciples in the way that it had previously.

Many people now travel significant distances to gather with others and grow in their faith. Many also gather online to grow as disciples through study and prayer. I think it is an exciting and challenging time to be part of the Church, and to be making disciples in a rapidly changing world...

What do you reckon?

Reality TV stars reunite for parish Anglicare fundraiser

Reality television came to the Brisbane Diocese – or at least the stars of it – with housemates from the recent SBS series *Christians Like Us* reuniting for a community charity event in Brisbane recently.

Rector of St Paul's Parish, Ithaca-Ashgrove, The Rev'd Tiffany Sparks, was one of the stars of the two-part series which aired last month. She invited the nine other housemates with whom she spent a week in a Sydney house last November for a 'reunion' of sorts – and five of them attended the recent Saturday night panel discussion for the parish wine and cheese night.

Brisbane-based Christians Hannah Campbell, Carol Portmann and Tiffany were joined by Sydney-based stars Chris Csabs and Jo Kenderes and Steve Smith from Newcastle before a crowd of around 100 parishioners and friends.

On their own admission, they're unassuming and unlikely TV stars (and yes, they can still all go grocery shopping in their local suburbs without getting stopped for endless selfies) and all jumped at the chance to reassemble five months after they wrapped up filming and a few weeks after the show aired.

What was a revelation for most people was the great bond and friendship that flourished between the six housemates during the show and which has endured in the aftermath. Perhaps the most remarkable is the strong friendship between Tiffany and Steve Smith, who was sexually abused over 250 times as a young altar boy in the Newcastle Anglican Diocese in the 1970s and 80s.

"Steve and I became buddies within the first few hours of meeting in the *Christians Like Us* house," Tiffany said.

"He was initially shocked and wary when he saw me enter the house wearing my collar, but we just formed a connection and it's a great testament to his resilience and his compassion that we became friends and have remained friends."

Despite his traumatic past with the Anglican Church and the fact he's no longer a practising Christian, Steve has nothing but admiration for Tiffany, who will leave St Paul's next month to serve in the role of Archdeacon of Grafton.

Of Tiffany, Steve said on the reality show: "Just watching and listening to Tiff about what she thinks and does and how she conducts herself – I think the Anglican Church, if they're bringing people like Tiffany into their church in leadership roles, they're going to find themselves in a pretty healthy place."

The wine and cheese Q&A delved into some of the behind-the-scenes tensions with some of the more conservative housemates, plus the very moving personal stories of housemates including Chris' campaign to have gay conversion therapy banned after years of traumatic immersion in it; and the stress that Carol (a Uniting Church parishioner and gynaecologist/obstetrician) experienced after she revealed on the show that she had performed numerous abortions.

"It was fantastic for the six of us to get together again. The reality show was emotionally intense and during the filming, but especially in the aftermath, the six of us have been an enormous source of support, comfort and friendship to each other and I hope that continues for a very long time," Tiffany said.

Donations from the event raised \$638 for the Anglicare Home Away From Homelessness Women's Shelter at Toowong.