

**Mittagong Region Anglican Church
Senior Ministers Report for 2015
given by Richard Mills, 7th March 2015**

Colossians 1:3-6

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints-- ⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

In this passage Paul gives thanks to God for the faith of the Colossians. This faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says that all over the world the gospel is bearing fruit and growing. These words were written by the apostle Paul to a particular situation, but they have been true of numerous churches around the world and throughout history. They are true today, of churches all over our world.

I believe they are true of our church in Mittagong and I give thanks for the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ of the people of this church and for what God is doing through us.

I regularly receive feedback from people who visit our church, and from people in the local community about our church. It is usually positive and often is about how alive and active our church is. Sometimes it takes comments from a person outside our church, to help us appreciate what is actually happening here. God is actively working in people's lives and we have a number of flourishing ministry areas. Let us praise him.

I commenced as the Senior Minister at Mittagong in October 2004 and have thus been here for over ten years. Reflecting back on those ten years we have been privileged to see a number of people come into faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is in accord with the first part of our mission statement, **Knowing Christ**. It has also been a great joy to see people grow in their faith, and this is part of **Growing in Christ**. Additionally it is encouraging to see people share their faith with others as this is **Sharing Christ with others**.

I rejoice in seeing God at work in so many ways in the lives of people in our church. I would like to give thanks to all who contribute to our church. Many people contribute in a number of different ministries. Some are seen, but many are not seen. Only this week it came to my knowledge that a couple have contributed many, many hours in practical help to a fellow member of our church whose life and circumstances are difficult. They told me they don't want thanks or acknowledgment because they are doing it because they delight to serve the Lord. So I will not tell you their names or what they are doing.

This is just one example that I know about and I am sure there are many other cases of which I am unaware. So I am not able to mention everyone in our church who serves God and others. Indeed I have been here for over 10 years, but I keep learning about different, ongoing ministry areas in our church. We may not know all that goes on in our church, but God knows. So thanks for your contributions and can I encourage us all to keep pressing on in serving our wonderful Lord.

In this report I would like to reflect on the idea of "why" in relation to church. Why do we have church? Why do we do the things we do? Why do we need to keep on being reminded of core values and directions?

It is good to ask these questions as we can so easily get distracted. Our task is a spiritual battle. Our church mission statement *Knowing Christ, Growing in Christ and Showing Christ to the World* is important to put into practise.

So I will work through the mission statement and talk about what we have been doing and what we can do in the future.

Knowing Christ - What has been happening

It is interesting to think about how we know when someone becomes a Christian. If you examine the history of our church you will see that in the past couple of generations there would be evangelistic meetings held at church. People would be invited to come forward and give their life to the Lord. These one-off evangelistic efforts were successful and reaped a good harvest. However they were held at a time when up to 50% of the population had been to Sunday school. Thus many people who made a commitment to follow Jesus had already had a good grounding in the message of the Bible.

Nowadays less than 5% of people attend Sunday school. This has been the norm for the last twenty to thirty years. Last year we held the *Jesus Brings* night at our church and the gospel was presented very clearly. However the audience was mostly made up of regular church goers and there did not seem to be a great response.

There is a general lack of Bible knowledge in our community. Recently in a sermon illustration I shared about my confirmation class at Frensham where none of the girls could name the disciple who betrayed Jesus.

Due to the lack of general knowledge of the Bible and of Jesus, evangelism is more of a process than a one off event. People need to be taught about the life and death of Jesus, before they can make a response to follow him. Often it is a case of gradually coming to know what it means to have Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

So, many of our evangelistic endeavours, Christmas services including Carols by the lake, Easter services, occasional services such as baptisms weddings and funerals are often just the first step in a person's journey to faith in Jesus. It is good to run courses such as the six week *Life of Jesus course*, on a regular basis

People in our church are involved in the process of sharing their faith through such ministries as Cubby Clubs, Kids @ MAC, teaching Scripture at Mittagong and Colo Vale school, Youth Groups and events for Men and Women.

But often it seems like hard work and little response. However we are called to proclaim the gospel and can I encourage us to continue in this fundamental task of telling others about their need to respond to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Knowing Christ - Things for the future

We have had some prayer groups meeting regularly during the past year as well some Parish prayer days. However it would be helpful to more focused as a church on praying for God the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of people in our community to convict them of truth of the gospel.

I feel that meeting for focused prayer might also help us gain more of a sense of the lostness of the lost: that we can become more awake to the truth that people without a personal relationship with God are destined for hell.

Prayer is something that is easy to neglect and I would welcome feedback and ideas about how we can mobilise more prayer in our church.

I also believe it would be good to do some personal evangelism training and we are planning to do some in the coming year.

In October of 2014 we recommenced church services at St Paul's Colo Vale. Matthew and Cathy Brooks- Lloyd and their small team of helpers worked hard for four months until January. I wrote in the MAC update at the end of January, that we suspended the church service at the end of January due to a number of factors that made good sense at the time. But we are looking at options for more ministry at the Colo Vale site and I notice there are two recommendations on the agenda paper of the AGM. Again I would welcome feedback about this area of ministry.

In thinking about what happened at St Paul's Colo Vale my wife Marge came across a quote in a commentary which I believe is relevant:
Much wisdom lies in deciding when a field of labour or a method of work should be abandoned as hopeless-for the present and for the individual worker, at all events. To do it too soon is cowardice; to delay it too long is not admirable perseverance, but blindness to plain providences.

Growing in Christ - Things that happened

In the past year our preaching program at church has had the following sermon series :

Morning : *Mark, Giving, Judges, Joel, Hebrews, Luke*

Evening : *2 Timothy, Apologetics, 1 Samuel, 1 John, John*

Thanks to all of our preachers. These have included the ministry staff members, myself, Don Taylor, John Livingstone, Matthew Brooks-Lloyd. We are blessed to have other preachers in our church who are Steve Clancy, Stuart Hawkins, Tim Hicks, David Lidden, Jono Mills, Marge Mills, Sam Mills, Ian Pennicook and Graham Rose. This is a total of 13 preachers.

Preaching a sermon involves hours of preparation in research and then writing the sermon. As I preacher I am encouraged to receive feedback that God has spoken to an individual through the sermon. Can I encourage us to affirm our preachers on a regular basis.

As well as church services people learn in small groups such as our home bible study groups and at other events both inside and outside our church.

A number of people have been involved in studying the Bible and church history more formally. This has involved groups meeting to study the Moore College distance courses. Also Mary Andrews College has just commenced a course now being held at Mittagong on church history. (This particular course has a very knowledgeable lecturer!).

A number of our groups have a focus on growing in Christ. These include MU, Time Out, men's group, women's groups, youth groups, Sunday kids. Thanks to all those who contribute to these vital ministries of the church.

Growing in Christ : Things for the future

At present we have 15 home bible study groups. We are encouraging more people to join one. As a general guideline I think it would be great if each person in our church put the 1:1:1 principle into practise.

attend ONE church service regularly

attend ONE small group regularly

be involved in at least ONE area of ministry on a regular basis

I have given Matthew Brooks-Lloyd the task to re invigorate our home groups. This will involve training and developing existing and new leaders. So we hope to grow the number of small groups in our church in the future and encourage more people into them.

Last year we talked about putting on a part time Youth Minister. I have been actively looking for the right person but have not yet found them. However, I am still looking. As well as trying to find the right person through contacts I have, we may soon advertise this position. Glyn Henman from Young Life who preached at our church last year has advised me that it is important to find the right person and this may involve waiting for quite a while before you find the person. I would value your prayers and feedback about this matter.

Showing Christ to the World - Things that happened

As I mentioned above in the Knowing Christ section, we have a number of groups and ministries that have an outreach focus. They are Cubby Clubs, Kids @ MAC, teaching Scripture at Mittagong and Colo Vale school, Youth Groups and events for Men and Women.

I am also encouraged when people share with me their experiences in actively looking for and then taking opportunities to share their faith in one to one situations with others.

There are also opportunities for the proclamation of the gospel at occasional church services.

Baptisms for children of people who are not regular members of the church are usually held on Saturday mornings. Cathy Jones has been very helpful in assisting me in this outreach ministry. Please pray for her as she seeks to follow up and keep in contact with these people.

We also have significant contact with people in the community through Weddings and Funerals. Please continue to pray that God will use these opportunities to draw people into his kingdom.

Showing Christ to the World - Things for the future

I believe that evangelical churches such as ours are facing a number of challenges in terms of making an impact on our society. Just this week I read an article about the church and our society which I reproduce below.

A new survey by research company McCrindle reveals an alarming gap between how the church and the community perceive each other, but there is hope the gap can be reduced.

The Church Communities Australia Report was commissioned by World Vision and designed to equip local churches to engage more effectively with their local communities. Of those surveyed, 1,024 people across Australia responded, along with 105 church leaders (made up of World Vision church partners).

Both groups were asked a number of questions relating to these hot button social issues: child protection, refugee rights, human rights, climate change, gay marriage, decriminalising drug use and abortion access.

What emerged was a discrepancy between what the church thought were the points of concern in the community and what the community considered major issues.

“The church underestimated the community’s view on four key areas: climate change, gay marriage, particularly decriminalising drug use and abortion access,” says social researcher Mark McCrindle.

The number one issue for both groups is child protection, while the general public ranks ‘decriminalising drug use’ as equal second greatest point of concern, something the church leaders ranks second last. The other equally important point of concern is refugee rights, which church leaders slightly overestimated. Interestingly, those surveyed from the general public didn’t realise how supportive church leaders are of refugee rights.

The survey also revealed that Australians want the church to stay out of policy debates, particularly regarding climate change, abortion and gay marriage. Around 40 per cent of those surveyed don’t want the church to have any role at all in policy debates on those topics.

Social Researcher Mark McCrindle says the survey is one of the most revealing he’s done on behalf of the church, due to the method of surveying both groups about the same issues.

“I haven’t come across this methodology before of surveying two groups about how they see each other. It’s a unique approach that gives some interesting insights.”

One of the sharpest results to emerge was how irrelevant Australians feel the church is to their lives. The survey shows they don’t think the church can assist in areas of mental health, social life, relationships, career, finances or physical health. Only around one in every 3-4 people think the church can assist with the spiritual aspect of life.

“The community is now able to meet spiritual needs through yoga, through listening to uplifting music, attending a motivational seminar, reading a book,” says Mark. “That’s the breadth of input in the spiritual life of Australians outside church ... That’s where Australians have moved to.”

He thinks the results are a reflection of how the church is perceived – as a religious organisation, an institution.

“The church does see itself as able to make a difference ... the sad part is that there was such a massive gap between the church leaders who said they can help in those areas and the individuals who just didn’t see how the church could help in those areas.”

So how to bridge the gap? Mark says it’s not about changing the gospel message. In fact, Jesus is still a popular figure, and the majority of Australians believe he was a figure in history. The issue, he says, is with how people perceive the church, and it all starts with language.

“Other commentators and communicators have been more talking the language of society when they speak about emotional wellbeing and purpose and significance and the sacred. They’ve been more articulate and engaging and accessible than has the church.”

Not all is lost though. Mark points out that 61% of Aussies still say they’re Christian on the census, we have chaplains in hospitals, prisons, tax exemptions for

the church, and many other freedoms which indicate a warmth towards Christianity. But he says, we shouldn't just let the downwards trend continue without stopping and thinking about how to make the most of the times.

“There's a stewardship requirement. Here we are in this country of peace with [freedom of religion]. But with this social license comes a great responsibility to make sure we are making a contribution and having an impact.”

(See more at: <http://www.biblesociety.org.au/news/church-seen-irrelevant-australians-lives-new-survey#sthash.gPQMaq89.dpuf>)

It is an ongoing challenge for us to keep on showing Christ to our community. I think our society is changing and there is more opposition to, and criticism of the church. To continue to make an increasing impact with the gospel in our community is becoming a more complex task.

Other comments about the past year in our church

Ministry being stressful

Recently I read an article about stressful jobs. The article said that the most stressful job in the world is being President of USA. It gave as evidence to back up this claim the changes in appearance in photos between when presidents commence, and when they finish. Most of them visibly age considerably much faster than the normal aging process.

The article also said towards the top of stressful jobs is being the minister of a reasonably sized growing church. Thank you to all those who regularly pray for me as I try and manage my stress levels and the combined varied expectations of people both inside and outside the church. My wife says I am not good at hiding my feelings and sometimes my stress outworks itself in ways that are not helpful. But thank you to those who are personally understanding and kind and considerate to me. I really appreciate your practical love and concern.

Thanks to my family

I am blessed by the wonderful support of my family. My wife Marge is very understanding, considerate, forgiving and supportive. We try and work as a team. She has a very important teaching ministry as a lecturer at Mary Andrews College but she still finds time to be very active in a number of areas of ministry in our church.

We are blessed to have three children who are actively involved in ministry in our church. Jono and Sam have chosen to stay living with us in the Southern Highlands and to commute to Wollongong Uni for their studies at Wollongong. One of the reasons for this decision is to be able to contribute to the ministry of our church. All three children are very involved in various ministries. It is not easy growing up as minister's kid and we appreciate the ongoing prayer support for our family.

Ministry Staff

Over the past year there have been some changes to our ministry staff. John Livingstone has retired and Don Taylor has returned to education but I am delighted that both of them are still attending our church and are honorary assistant ministers. I greatly valued both of their contributions to the ministries of our church over the years and it was good to have official functions where we could thank them for their years of service.

Dina Roki has been away since early January and it is when she is not here that I realise afresh, just how much she does as our Young Families minister. She left things well organised, but we are missing her many contributions as she organises and pastors the leaders of our cubby clubs and Sunday kids ministries.

Julie Marks is a tower of strength coordinating our office. She is very ministry minded. She is efficient but seems to always have time for the many different people who visit or contact the office through phone or emails. She works three days a week and is ably supported by Leonie Walters and Belinda Foster, who both come in as volunteers in our office one day a week. Our church is a complex organisation and the contributions of Julie, Leonie and Belinda allow the ministry staff to do less administration and more ministry.

Matthew Brooks-Lloyd joined our ministry staff as honorary assistant minister in October. He commenced as our full time Assistant Minister at the beginning of February. Matthew brings a wealth of ministry experience to this position and I appreciate having him as a colleague. He is already making a significant impact upon our church and I encourage you to pray for him and his family.

Churchwardens

I thank Sam Caltabiano for serving as a churchwarden over the past few years. Sam has a great deal of knowledge about building matters and was particularly helpful with the roof project for the heritage church building. I thank him for his contributions. Bill Crawshaw and Graham Rose have also contributed greatly to the life of our church. I am pleased that they will continue as church wardens. I have appreciated the support and encouragement of the three churchwardens over the past year.

Treasurer

Richard Stone voluntarily puts in many hours each month as our treasurer. I really appreciate his contributions to our church and thank him for all the work he does. He previously worked as the administrator at another parish in Sydney and thus is familiar with the complexities of dealing with our Diocese.

Parish Council

Thanks to all who served on Parish Council over the past year. The members of Parish Council were:

(The 3 Churchwardens) : *Sam Caltabiano, Bill Crawshaw and Graham Rose*
Jason Cooke, Alan Luff, Michelle Lindau, Lynda Parry, Andrew Sharwood, Richard Stone, Leonie Walters Nerridene Wilson
 (Ministry Staff): *Richard Mills and Don Taylor*

Leonie Walters, Andrew Sharwood and Nerridene Wilson are not standing again for re election. I thank them for their service. I would especially like to thank Leonie Walters for serving for quite a number of years including some years as Parish Council Secretary.

People helping with practical assistance in maintenance of property and programs

There are many people involved in helping to serve the people of our church. Our roster is difficult to organise as there are so many people involved in different tasks. Without people contributing our church could not function. So thank you to all those involved in the following areas :

Maintaining our grounds and buildings to a good standard, setting up buildings for church services and other events, ordering and organising supplies, preparing and serving food and drinks for church services and other occasions, cleaning and tidying up after events and helping with the office

Also thank you to all who are involved in activities which support the teaching of God's word:

Leaders and helpers of all our children's youth and adult groups, people who help on Sundays with our church service, service leaders, people who pray and read the bible, give all age talks, ushers and welcomers, people who run our sound systems, and people involved in our music ministry.

People serve each other and God through being involved in all these teaching, leading and practical help ministries.

One of the things I most enjoy doing is talking with people about areas in which they can serve the Lord. If you are not involved at the moment in our church can I encourage you to make a time to talk to me about possible areas where you might be able to serve.

Let me pray for us all using the words Paul uses to pray for the Colossians in Colossians 1

NIV **Colossians 1:9-10**

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰ And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,