



Christmas/Summer 2016

### **From the Editor**

Dear friends at Mark the Evangelist,

What a year it has been! Like you, I am tired and have a mountain of things to do in the next two weeks. Perhaps these commitments are the reason why we have very few contributions for this newsletter. Those on the Mark the Evangelist Futures Project Working Group are excused for a lifetime given the work they have put in this year in the lead up to a resolution we saw in the last vote on this matter.

Craig nevertheless has written something very apt about Grace which gave me the thought for a theme, as did my book review for Crosslight: *Making Property Serve Mission*. So this is not the upbeat version of a Christmas newsletter but rather one to make us reflect on mission. (But I promise some joyous music before we have finished!)

From the congregation we also have Rosalie's continuing careful and compassionate account of Akbar's situation which should never be far from our thoughts. I would like to thank Rosalie for always having him in her mind and keeping us abreast of what is happening.

Whatever contributions we have, Rod Mummery still has to produce the newsletter and I thank him for being such a stalwart colleague as we condense what we have into a readable form every three months.

We look forward to sharing a productive year with you in 2017.

Suzanne Yanko  
Editor

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### **A Christmas reflection**

by Rev Craig Thompson

For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and saviour, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all impurity and purify for himself a people of his own who are eager to do good deeds.

[Titus 2.11-14, NRSV *alt*]

This might seem an odd text for a reflection on Christmas, but it is appropriate because the Christmas stories themselves are not actually *Christmas* stories, but *Easter* stories. The gospel writers Mark and John, and also the apostle Paul, knew that it was possible to tell what it is necessary to know about the story of Jesus without the Christmas stories which appear in Luke and Matthew.

It is possible to do that because the telling of the story of Jesus begins not with Mary and Joseph and the angels and shepherds, but with the cross and resurrection, and it is through the lens of who the risen Lord is that we learn to see more clearly what is laid out before us in the Christmas stories. The light of the risen Lord is a light which shines both forwards and backwards in history, illuminating the meaning of all other things – including the very birth, ministry and teachings of Jesus himself.



*Birth of Christ (Giotto)*

“The *grace of God* has appeared,” Paul writes to Titus. It is easy to miss the “grace” bit because God’s grace is a subtle thing which always eludes our grasp and so we easily allow it to be replaced by some other thing which is a bit easier to comprehend.

Thus, when the writer of the passage ties this grace to the godliness and purity it makes possible, it is easy for us to over-emphasise this. “Living good lives” is certainly part of the Christian life, but the word of grace – the word of God’s stepping towards us in love – comes first, and is what makes Christmas *good* news instead of another demand to become better people through working harder.

Or, when we think about God’s coming to us in the event of that first Christmas, we can miss the grace bit by focussing on the innocence and prospects of a new-born child. Instead of hearing good news at Christmas we can be reduced to wishful thinking – *if only* we *stayed* like that – innocent, full of vitality and promise; if only the “idea” of peace on earth were a real possibility and not merely an *idea*...

But Christmas is not about an optimism that we might be able to make ourselves better people, or a pessimism about the impossibility of our dreams of peace. God’s grace is not an idea or a thought about peace and purity, but the very possibility of those things.

Grace is *gift* – something given which we couldn’t provide for ourselves; and what is given in Christ is just such an impossible thing.

“This day is born to you a saviour”, the angels declared to ancient shepherds; “this day”, that is, a change is made; this day something *new* occurs.

In effect, they say, “This one will live and die among you – live for you and because of you, die for you and because of you – living and dying that you might become a people of restored innocence, and a people of peace beyond what your wishful thoughts could imagine.”

This is the reason we mark Christmas – not to *dream* of the way we’d like things to be or to remember how they once were, but to give thanks to God for what indeed *is* possible on account of his coming to us in Christ as Lord and Saviour, and to commit ourselves to remember and re present that possibility to each other and the world in word and deed.

At Christmas, as at the other festivals of the church’s year, we are invited to find ourselves in the story of the crucified Lord who was born as one of us. When we can do that, we’re on the way out of dreams, and into the concrete reality of what God has begun in Christ, and will bring to completion by the power of his Spirit.

May this Christmas be one of such discovery for each of us.

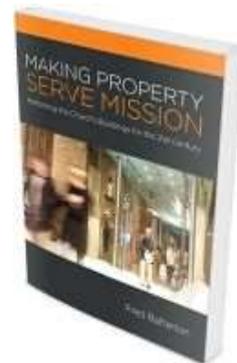
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## Review: *Making Property Serve Mission* by Fred Batterton

Architect and writer Batterton asserts that “mission is the reason that the Church’s property was provided by its predecessors and mission remains the core”. This is a handbook for any congregation open to the challenge of identifying its core mission and considering what buildings would best serve that mission, regardless of sentimental attachment to the current arrangement of bricks and stones.

Read the whole review at:

<http://crosslight.org.au/2016/11/20/building-for-the-future/>



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## Akbar update

by Rosalie Hudson



Members at Mark the Evangelist have been supporting Akbar Faridi, an Iranian/Kurdish asylum seeker since his release from several years in detention. For over three years, several members of this congregation continue to make regular generous cash donations. This seems to be one of the best means of supporting Akbar who has no work rights, no visa, and no income. He has free accommodation in a 40-bed hostel for single male asylum seekers run by the Baptist church; this does not include meals. Receiving fortnightly food vouchers allows Akbar some independence in purchasing his preferred food and other small personal items.

Life in the hostel is not free from challenges, with men from a variety of countries housed together. Akbar relies on three Iranian friends for company; he seldom ventures out or mixes with other residents. While in detention he became addicted to sedatives and other medications which were freely distributed to all asylum seekers, sometimes with coercion when they showed reluctance to take the drugs. In spite of many attempts to change this habit, he spends much of his time sleeping.

Akbar continues to be haunted by his past; including 24 hours solitary confinement on Christmas Island for daring to climb the fence to explore some ‘freedom’; sewing his lips together in an attempt at recognition of his plight, and inflicting over 100 wounds on his body in self-harm episodes. After a concerted effort, including practical support by his *pro bono* migration agent, letters of reference, private psychiatric review and political intervention, Akbar was released from detention in September 2013. He was the last person to be released, on the eve of the federal election. Since then very few asylum seekers have been released and even fewer granted visas.

Akbar’s one desire is to ‘work and pay taxes’. He would also use love to support his very poor, ageing parents in Iran whom he believes he will never see again. Although formally unskilled and uneducated, Akbar has taught himself some literacy skills with use of mobile phone applications. Due to the generosity of this congregation he now enjoys the benefits of his own laptop computer. His favourite occupation is watching (Iranian version) Charlie Chaplin and Laurel & Hardy films. He knows much of the dialogue by heart and laughs aloud when watching Chaplin’s antics. Another positive life change has occurred recently when offered regular weekly gardening in North Melbourne, courtesy of Julia Hamer who has befriended him. He now enjoys at least six hours per week in the fresh air, and where he enjoys using his considerable gardening skills. He shows immense joy and pride when praised for his accomplishments. Julia was delighted to hear Akbar *whistling while he worked*.

Twelve months ago Akbar was involved in an incident at the hostel, resulting in police charges and several court appearances throughout 2016. His migration agent and I, together with an interpreter, accompanied him once again to the magistrate’s court this week, where we were overjoyed at the outcome: all serious charges dropped. Throughout the very trying twelve months Akbar has maintained a quiet dignity and patience in maintaining his innocence. This unfortunate incident has also reinforced his preference to remain in his room almost constantly; wanting to avoid contact with those he regards as untrustworthy. He is very grateful for the services of a very compassionate

lawyer at the Darebin Legal Centre, and is most appreciative of the support he continues to receive from his *pro bono* migration agent, John Hood and me (representing this congregation).

Akbar is a very shy, gentle young man who loves children, but seldom has any such pleasurable contact. He was recently given a caged bird for his room. After 24 hours, although delighted to have the bird's 'company' he decided to release the bird. 'He deserves his freedom' he told me. Akbar is also very thoughtful and generous; several recent examples show his capacity for sharing the little he has, in order to give pleasure to others.

Sr Brigid, from the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Centre is of the firm view that what counts more than anything else for asylum seekers, particularly for those with no family or other close personal support, is to have continuity of relationships. This only needs to be one or two people in whom they can develop confidence over time, and whom they can trust. A common fault with the 'system' is that case workers tend to change every six months or so; leaving no capacity for building trust, let alone companionship.

One proven way of maintaining Akbar's dignity and psychological health is through some financial independence. The regular donations made through this congregation allow him some degree of pleasure. Albeit through small amounts, he knows he can rely on regular fortnightly visits accompanied by food vouchers; evidence of this church's tangible sign of support. Thanks again to those who maintain this generous giving; with the assurance that you are making a significant difference to the life of (at least) one asylum seeker. Donations can be given to me (or to Rod Mummery in my absence) on any Sunday.

We also continue to pray for Akbar regularly, naming him in the intercessory prayers on the first Sunday in every month.

### **From BASP (Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project Newsletter 82 December 2015.**

View full newsletter at: <http://basp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Number-82.pdf>

'A new assault on the rights of refugees unfortunate enough to have chosen Australia as a place to seek safety came when Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, announced that anyone seeking to reach this country by boat after July 2013 is now to be banned from even visiting Australia always and forever. This seems more than usually puzzling. The boats stopped two years ago. The move (still to be voted on in Parliament) seems sadistic, unworkable and totally unnecessary. It is also just another example of different groups of people being treated differently—depending on the mode of their arrival and the date.

Julian Burnside says that this is to punish people guilty of the crime of not being drowned at sea! Then came the news that America had agreed to resettle refugees who are currently indefinitely detained on Manus Island and Nauru. This appeared positive. However, in the cold hard light of day, the reality sank in. Indeed there are more questions than answers. At the outset we need to add that the uncertainty that this is engendering in people who have lived in limbo for three years is extraordinarily difficult.

At BASP we are talking to people who are being told by Immigration 'You will have to return to Nauru or Manus to be considered by America. If you are rejected by them you will have to return home—or accept a 20 year visa to stay in Nauru.' Many of the folk in this situation can't return home even if they felt they could. Iran is not accepting any 'failed' refugees, many others are stateless and so have no country they can return to. And what will happen to those who have received negative assessments at least sometimes because of serious inadequacies of the system? Nauru is a place with few opportunities for refugees and the local population are, on the whole, quite resentful of their presence.

Many people who have already been judged to be refugees on Manus and Nauru may well be rejected by America, a country that has very stringent health and security tests for refugees, and most of those potential candidates for acceptance have quite serious health issues as a result of their treatment and past traumas. So what will happen to those already judged to be refugees but not accepted by another country—America or another?

There are quite a number of families where one part of the family has already settled or is part of the process of being assessed for residence in Australia who have members of their families on Nauru or Manus Island. If the Bill denying those in the off shore detention places the right to ever return to Australia passes in Parliament, these families will be permanently separated. The fact that the Minister has discretion to override such a law in particular cases gives us no joy. We have pleaded with various Ministers about very heart wrenching cases involving separation of families—and almost universally with no success!

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### **Mission at work: a story of kindness and hope at Christmas**

Nasir Sobhani is a barber with an unusual clientele. When he's not working at a trendy salon in Melbourne's north, he's giving haircuts and hope to the homeless. He's known as the "Streets Barber". Nasir, who is driven by his faith in God, recently told SBS: "Sometimes, when you don't care for yourself anymore, you give up hope and so when you give up hope you lose sight of what's beautiful and that beautiful thing is yourself," he said. "So if you can be physically beautiful then that can spark a change on the inner beauty."

One of his recent "clients" was Graham. Here's his story of transformation as Nasir tells it ...



*"This is Graham. He's 33 years old and suffers from cerebral palsy and epilepsy. He is forced to live on the streets because he has no family.*

*Even when I was trying to comb his matted up hair because it was so unruly, it kept pulling and I was worried I was hurting him. However he assured me that it wasn't hurting because he wasn't able to feel anything due to the metal plates put into his head after it got shattered. The right side of his body cannot function properly. When I began the haircut he told me the reason why he looked the way he did*

*was because he simply couldn't reach his head properly to give himself a cut/shave.*

*After a haircut, face shave and a dry shampoo treatment we finished off by styling his hair and sprayed him with a sweet smelling deodorant. He was in tears after his cut and when he saw his new look in the mirror he couldn't stop smiling and kept telling me that he felt like a million bucks."*

We hope that your Christmas is full of joy, kindness, hope – and maybe a great haircut!  
Suzanne and Rod

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### **Noticeboard**

**18 December** a service of Advent carols and readings with Eucharist, 10AM

**25 December** Worship with Eucharist, **9.30AM**

(Normal services will continue, 10am, throughout January)



Uniting Church in Australia  
The Congregation of Mark the Evangelist - North Melbourne