

'Catching the Age Wave' - A Report on Seniors Ministry

by Eric Sears - sabbatical leave September/October 2010

1. Preamble

To most church leaders, from simple observation, it is clear that the church is greying!
But the reason for this is not just because the church is failing to reach younger people (though that may be true), but because the whole of our society is getting older – it's a demographic change.

A few simple statistics (from the USA but similar to most developed countries) –

* In 1900 those over 65 years of age were 4% of the population

In 2000 this had grown to more than 12.5%

By 2040 this is expected to grow to 25%

* Since 1950 the number of centenarians has grown by more than 10 times.

It is a change that is happening, so we need to ask what our response should be.

We acknowledge that many younger people struggle with the culture of the church, so that it is hard for them to even begin to be part of it. From this we have been looking at various new and fresh expressions of church that could help to meet the worshipping needs of these people.

But perhaps we do not acknowledge, to the same extent, that to many *older* people the culture of the present church is just as foreign. Probably the majority of people today in New Zealand society, in the 55 – 70 age group, have *never* been actively involved in a church, and often have distorted ideas about it.

So what do we mean by "senior"?

A book I have found very useful is Win and Charles Arn's "Catch the Age Wave". (Baker)

In a section on defining the "new" senior, it is pointed out firstly that we can't easily say whether this begins at 50 or 65, and secondly, mostly they don't like to be called "elderly" or "seniors" or "golden oldies". Attempts to find other words – "whoopies" (well healed older people), "opals" (older people with active lifestyles), or "grumpies" (grown up mature people), or even referring to them as "the chronologically gifted", are just not labels that stick.

Win and Charles Arn describe them not in terms of age, but in terms of their outlook on life, either as golfers or hospital volunteers or people studying and learning; and if they are Christians, seeking to find out in what ways God wants them to be serving. And they would never be seen dead at a seniors' meeting!

While I do not think we have neglected the ministries of older people in the church to the same extent as that which may have prevailed in the United States in the mid-1990's, nevertheless there is still sometimes an attitude that older people are a "difficulty to be coped with", rather than a "valuable resource God has given us in the church".

And at the same time, for the great majority of older people in our community who do not know Christ and are not part of his church, we need to find ways to reach them with the love of God and the timeless message of the Good News.

In order to do this, we need to take heed of the things that Bishop John Harrower told us when he was with us earlier in the year. We cannot assume that we can transfer programmes from elsewhere and expect them to work here immediately. Instead we have to do the hard work of analyzing our own situation by asking the relevant questions – where do we find older people? What are they involved in doing? What are their interests? Who are the people in the church who can make contact with them? What cultural barriers might we need to cross? How can we make our church services (or some other worship opportunity) relevant to that culture?

And these questions need to be asked not just by leaders within the church, but by whole congregations, so that they come to own the answers.

Win and Charles Arn wrote their book some 15 or more years ago, yet most of their findings are more relevant now than then, as the "age wave" breaks on us with the beginning retirement of the first of the baby boomers. The question they ask at the beginning of the book is "Will we, as a church, be ready for the wave"? – for as the subtitle says on the back page – "Many unchurched senior adults will not be reached by existing ministries in today's church"

While I had not read this book before my sabbatical, it was with this thought in mind that I set out to discover the kinds of ministries, not only *to* seniors, but also *by* seniors, that were happening in some of our closest neighbours, the Dioceses of Melbourne, Gippsland and Tasmania in Australia.

It is easiest if I simply describe some of these ministries by diocese, though it will be clear that there are recurring themes. In addition, there are a number of links between these dioceses, because some of the ministries in Tasmania were actually a spin-off from ministries in Melbourne. Mostly only a small number of churches were visited in each diocese, but there were also some meetings with key people, and some of these we might well consider bringing to the diocese at some stage to share their insights.

2. Diocese of Gippsland

We traveled first to this diocese, staying with Rev Rob Johnstone and his wife Lyn, now retired at Bairnsdale and one of my contemporaries at Ridley College in the 1970's.

We were able to set up a meeting with Bishop John MacIntyre (another contemporary at Ridley), and the following is a brief summary of what John had to say -

Gippsland has a total population of about 225,000, with the Registry Office and headquarters of the diocese at Sale, Central Gippsland. Sale is a town of only about 15,000, and is not as big as the larger town of Traralgon.

Sarah Gover (nee Pitman) (and David) – who was once a youth leader in the Nelson Diocese, does community development work, including Mainly Music, using older people as a resource.

Some comments of John at this point –

'We have what Rowan Williams calls "the mixed economy" – seeking to have both older and younger together. (Note – this comes about particularly because the diocese is very *rural*)

Don't try to get elderly to join in and be enthusiastic about things that are too far outside their thinking.

Hugh McKay – Australian Sociologist Builders/Boomers/GenX - get them to tell their stories!

(note – this is a recurring theme in other places also)

Young people commit to *causes* not *structures*'

He went on to mention a number of programmes that are either *for* seniors or *utilize* seniors, and some places where there are good examples of a "vibrant church involving all ages" –

(a) Parish of Paynesville –

"The Quiet Garden" . An international movement. Engages older people. They also have an annual jazz service.

To build relationships with the community they put in 12 stained glass windows telling the story of Peter, using a local glass artist to do the stained glass work, and inviting families in both church and community to sponsor them. It helped these families to really feel they belonged.

People in the community (not just the church) were asked to help with a kids programme and this led to positive engagement with older people outside the church.

Often older people don't feel they have permission to do things – they must be given that permission. Gentle exercise programme for seniors (this is used in a number of places).

(b) Parish of Leongatha –

Have redesigned their kitchen so that they can reach out to people. (also seen in Melbourne)

- older women are used to teach young or struggling Mums about cooking and other practical issues.

(c) Parish of Sale –

'Groovy Grannies' do a lunchtime activity with children in the school – kids knocking down the doors to get in!

John's comment - The diocese must send messages that are affirming of every age group.

He suggested that there are some good reports from CRA –"Christian Research Associates" www.cra.org.au

His charge to Synod

- change is necessary
- How do we go about it in a creative way?
- We need to give our leadership permission - give them space.

3. Diocese of Melbourne

My contacts were again through people I knew – in particular, Rev Gordon Hargreaves – another contemporary from Ridley College and the pastor of the early congregation (mostly seniors) at Glen Waverley Anglican Church (GWAC) until his retirement. Through him, and also coincidentally by recommendation from Bishop John Harrower in Tasmania, we were put in touch with John Christie, who picked up some pioneering ministries among seniors at GWAC some 15 years ago.

Since that time John C has helped to birth several new seniors' ministries in Tasmania, and has also been invited to speak at various conferences and venues. He is now, at age 69, still involved in a number of roles at GWAC but is no longer on the fulltime staff. We were privileged to spend some hours with John, hearing a summary of Seniors Ministry at GWAC and being given a number of resources, including the Win Arn book mentioned above.

Glen Waverley is a large parish in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne, with about 6 - 7 FTE staff and congregation attendances totaling about 500+.

Gordon Hargreaves is now living in the Rowville and Ferntree Gully Parish (RAFT – they didn't know what to do with the "G"!), a midsize almost adjacent parish formed by the amalgamation of two parishes, with a fairly new A\$2M church plant, and a staff of about 4 FTE. Congregation attendance would total about 200.

Peter Crawford has for 30 years been senior pastor in the Emerald Parish, a rural area to the east of Melbourne. Though a district of only about 6000, it has 3070 of the population on its database, at least as a contact, and has about 8 - 9 FTE staff, which includes some 2 dozen on the payroll. Some of these are funded in part by government grants because of the church's involvement with the community and a considerable number of older people are involved in these ministries. Congregation attendances total about 360.

Although these are large churches, I believe there are important principles that we can learn from them.

(a) Glen Waverley Anglican Church (GWAC) and John Christie

Although we did visit the church buildings at Glen Waverley, it was the ministry of John Christie that was particularly exciting in the context of what we were seeking to explore. The following is only a brief overview of what has been done in that parish, and is mostly my notes recorded at the time with him.

John Christie - At age 55 made redundant as an engineer.

Was offered training (with government grant) and chose to do a Graduate Diploma at Ridley College for one year full time, with focus on men's senior ministry. This also included evangelism.

He then pioneered or helped to advance ministries at GWAC which have included:

(i) An Alpha Course targeting seniors – up to three courses per year. Held in the morning with a sandwich lunch to follow.

(ii) Annual Discovery Tour

This started small and grew.

Chartered a bus for a 5 day tour – all around the state and interstate to Canberra, Adelaide and Broken Hill. One year a group of 35 toured around Tasmania for 9 days, and another year a group of 19 toured around NZ for 2 weeks.

Tended to be older people (note – many are comfortably retired in GWAC)

Broke down barriers and brought people to church

[John told us the story of Mary and Tim (not their real names). Mary was a churchgoer but Tim, her husband, was not. However he felt that a bus tour, even with some non-compulsory evening discussion groups, was not too threatening, so he joined Mary on the trip and made some good friendships with some of the men. The Sunday after the tour he asked his wife, "Would it be alright if I came to church with you this morning." Mary was delighted, and over the next 9 months Tim came regularly to church, growing in his faith in God. Sadly, about nine months later he died accidentally. However, the funeral was a time of rejoicing and celebration, knowing that Tim had come to faith].

Each evening of the tour, voluntary groups met for discussion and prayer. Very informal.

Used printed sheets with some quotes from sources such as:

"Stories of the Heart" - Alice Grey

"Quiet times for Couples" - H Norman Wright

"Stories for the Soul" - Philip Yancey

This year the tour went to an area between Echuca and Albury on the Murray River - with a group of 31.

(iii) Men's Shed

Woodworkers – at the church. It attracts a few outsiders though not many have yet been incorporated.

(iv) Indoor Bowls – again not much evangelism but building bridges of friendship.

(v) Art Group/Watercolours group – this is mainly seniors, though not exclusively.

(vi) SEEDS (Seniors Encouraging, Evangelising, Discipling, Serving)

This is a fairly new ministry and is coordinated by Barbara Simsen – returned from mission work overseas.
- has been a real stimulus to the seniors ministry.

Fun Day – this was already held on a Saturday - a bit like a fair but not to raise money. Mostly families.

- then they added something for seniors with a “gardening” theme.

- Speakers on orchids and landscaping. Donated plants.

There is a Seeds team that meets with Barbara – a good team player.

John C still has responsibility for music, at the 8am Sunday and 10am Wednesday services, which are particularly attended by seniors. He leads a small choir on Sunday that “drip feeds” new songs by singing them during communion a few times before being used by the congregation, often as the last song in a service.

(vii) MATES PLUS. (Mates – Pursuing Life Under the Sun)

This really began with John C starting to address the issues of those men who faced early retirement – maybe age 55+ (as had happened to himself). Often these people get categorized as “retired”, whether 60 or 100.

Men always ask the question “what do you do”? Women - “how many children do you have”?

So men's significance is related to their work. Often those retired early desperately miss their mates, as well as their work.

So John began a programme to attract this group:

Didn't meet in the church building

Outreach targeted to men aged 55 – 65.

Focus – activities that they enjoy coming to. No overt evangelism

Activities - Bus trip - wine tasting, art exhibitions, museums, Fishing trips, Power station visits, Visit to airport and short joyrides, BBQ and walk, Parliament House, river cruises (I have a long list that John gave me!)

Also the addressing of men's health issues – use a hotel for a meal and after-dinner talk– bring your wife – 100+ attended. Fringe men and women attend also.

Held on the last Thursday of the month generally. Attracts men outside the church.

(viii) Other health issues also addressed.

Initial contact with seniors who are often concerned about health.

Exercise/fitness class – every week with an outside professional trainer and light music. Aim is to keep costs down (some people can't afford a gym or prefer something with a smaller group). Each session is followed by tea/coffee and biscuits, and plenty of chat to grow relationships.

Walking groups

Advertise in wider community brochures etc (not just in parish publications)

(ix) Other comments by John

Always tried to drip feed invitations to Alpha - many came because of their relationship with church members. (John suggested that a morning Alpha should be run to attract seniors)

The 8.30am service is a version of the Prayer Book with modifications. Use of TNIV.

Comment – attention to detail is important when planning all events.

(John gave me copies of the detailed planning done for some of the events)

Bi-monthly brunch (between the 8am and 10am church services) – maybe 100 sitting down.

Mostly church people but they invited friends and neighbours.

Some people find it hard to pray in a group – especially older people who have not done so in the past, so Barbara “teaches” them to pray by handing out a list of prayer points. People can just read them, or sometimes people say what is on their mind and then just say AMEN. Formality reduced to a minimum.

(x) Books recommended by John Christie

“Catch the Age Wave” - Win Arn / Charles Arn.

“Just Walk cross the room” - Bill Hybels. (a good book on personal evangelism) (available from Koorong)

“Making the Most of the rest of your Life” - John Chapman (former Sydney Diocesan Missioner) (Koorong)

[I now have a copy – its really a short evangelistic book aimed at those who are getting older]

“Ministry To and By Seniors” - John Olsen. (An article from an Anglican Journal; does anyone have this, or know the source?)

(xi) A small selection of the leaflets available in the foyer of GWAC - ideas to get you thinking!

(I have a copy of each of these)

Welcome - a full colour small brochure welcoming newcomers

Welcome – Membership - a form explaining the steps to membership at GWAC

From “welcome” to belonging ... at GWAC - a four session course

Infant Baptism at Glen Waverley Anglican Church - a three-fold leaflet

Welcoming Children to the Lord’s Supper - a three-fold leaflet

Believers Baptism - a three-fold leaflet

The 2010 “Discovery Tour” Springtime around Cobram on the Murray October 11th -15th

GWAC Life Groups 2010 - information and a form about homegroups.

MU & friends 2010 program - a three-fold leaflet about Mother’s Union.

Our ministry partners - a full-colour card with pictures of the 11 mission families supported by GWAC

Praying for Mission - a three-fold sheet about how and why to pray for missions

Playgroups at Glen Waverley Anglican Church - a three-fold sheet containing info and parenting tips

Children and Family Ministry 2010 - info and contact person

Ignite – GWAC youth ministry - single one-third sheet with info and contacts

Money Matters (subtitle)- An information resource for the people of Glen Waverley Anglican Church

“seriously scoop” (subtitle)- seriously fun - a programme for Grade 4 – 5 children held on Friday evening.

A bookmark card (only GWAC on the front) - on the back info about using your gifts for service at GWAC.

Come and join the fun at ... Saturday Church - a small glossy info card (in colour) with phone number.

Friday night Craft Group - info on a one quarter size white sheet, colour print

Strangers & ALIENS iCAMP 2010 CYC Phillip Island - For all youth Yr 6 – 12

WOW and Waverley Cinemas Fundraiser Offer - A5 info sheet (b/w)

GWAC Financial Partnership in the cause of the Gospel - 3-fold sheet giving details of finances for the last year, and a giving form to detach if needed

GWAC Newsletter - the current monthly newsletter, b/w 4xA4 sheets folded to A5 size and stapled

Seeds - single b/w A4 sheet folded to A5, info about the seeds programme, and a survey form.

Website : www.gwac.org.au

(b) Rowville and Ferntree Gully Parish (RAFT)

Gordon and Ann Hargreaves, with whom we were staying, were familiar with ministries at RAFT as the parish where they worship, although not officially part of the ministry team. Nevertheless, he has oversight of the pastoral care for the early service, and is also called upon to preach and lead services at times. So the information in this section is both what we observed, and some information given by Gordon and Ann.

As mentioned earlier, it is a parish with an attendance of about 200, and about 4 FTE staff.

It was formed from two parishes some 7 or 8 years ago, and old buildings were sold to begin funding a new multiuse complex of buildings – which have been very carefully designed to provide good use for both the church and the community.

Some things we noted

- not only are there good lcd screens in the church and foyer for showing the service (sermons, songwords etc), but also a screen at the back of the church (facing the front) for the singers and worship leaders.

- there were two crosses, superimposed upon each other, at the front of the church, symbolizing the coming together of the two parishes.

- there was a good, clear sound system in the church which made hearing a pleasure.

- a lot of planning had gone into making sure that sound reflections were minimized. This was evident not only in the church but also the hall and other rooms.

- an important emphasis in the parish is building Christian Community – and related to this is the coffee area which is used continually throughout the week.

(i) Careline

This is a phone counseling service provided by a number of churches in the district. RAFT has three x three-hour slots on a Wednesday. A number of the counselors are seniors in the church.

(ii) Family History Group

This began during a time of locum when the church building was not being used much during the week. There were people who discussed having problems looking back to some of their family history. Some of these had convicts (exported from England!) in their family tree and tracing ancestors was not only difficult at times, but could also be hurtful.

By dealing with these things and helping correct wrong history, people felt more at peace.

The group takes great care of *feelings*, especially where there are other living family members.

(iii) Community Kitchen

We were amazed at the forethought that had gone into building a full commercial kitchen, so that the church could help teach both elderly (eg widowers on their own) and also younger people the skills needed for nutrition and cooking. Two sessions are held each Wednesday.

(iv) Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)

We will refer to this later in relation to the Emerald Parish, but it is designed for year 11 and 12 students for whom the usual school programmes do not meet their needs.

At RAFT, some of these students are used for various projects in the church grounds. These have included building a sandpit, landscaping and recently a concreting project.

A community garden is also planned for part of the church site.

An older person is responsible for maintaining the grounds, and involved with the VCAL programme.

(v) Strategic Plan

This was impressive, mainly for its simplicity with four Strategic Priorities.

Even better was the fact that a person from the community who used the building, felt that the word “outsider” used in the last of the priorities (which were displayed on 4 banners in the foyer) was not very helpful. So the church heard what was being said and changed its last priority from “Engage Outsiders” to “Engage Community”. Listening is important!

(vi) Mainly Music

As in other parishes, most of the people running this are seniors, 60 – 70 years or more!

(vii) Life Groups

These are the house groups or cell groups that meet, mostly weekly. At least some of them are run by seniors, for seniors.

(viii) A selection of some of the leaflets available in the foyer at RAFT

RAFT Strategic Plan - an A5 size booklet in light card cover. 10 pages. The Mission. The Vision. The Plan.

Weekly newsletter - single A4 folded sheet. b/w

Raft Kids - 3-fold on yellow. Children’s programs at RAFT

Raft Youth – 3-fold on blue. Youth programs at RAFT – also another sheet with specifics for each term.

SkillsPlus Community VCAL at RAFT - Coloured 3-fold. Info and contacts

Community Kitchen - 3-fold, detailed coloured brochure.

Raft’s Little Fishes - small paper “card”. After school group for little children

Puppets & Drama – for year 6 and up. Small coloured handout. Covers the whole year.

Communication Card – one quarter of an A4 – for any feedback to staff or parish.

Family History - info and contact

RAFT Anglican Church Memorial Garden - Information leaflet

Community advertising –

Wellington Care Centre - a counselling service

Ranges Chess Club - information including fees

What to do after a Drink/Drug Driving Offense - a Department of Health brochure.

Zumba Fitness - advertising brochure.

Summer Junior Soccer – info and training nights.

Diocesan

The Melbourne Anglican Foundation

Website: www.raftchurch.org.au

(c) The Parish of Emerald

To recap, Peter Crawford has been the rector and senior pastor here for 30 years, arriving 2 years before the disastrous fires of Ash Wednesday which happened in 1983. It has contact with about half of the population of the district through its database.

During that time the church has become a substantial influence in the community, particularly through its community facing ministries.

We were grateful to Peter and Karen for giving up some of their Sunday afternoon to meet with us and share the stories of the parish.

In some respects the parish does not have as many ministries with the elderly as some others simply because, like many rural areas, older people tend to move towards larger towns as they age.

Nevertheless, all those in the church are expected to exercise their spiritual gifts, including the older members. There are few over 70 year olds, though there is a local nursing home and some independent living units which are visited by church members.

One group which meets is "People Exercising Gently" – which is mostly for older people. There are also two small groups of mostly elderly meeting for "Doing Life Together".

A large part of the ministry of this church is to young people, many being "at risk" youth.

Those who train and qualify for Christian youth ministry, gain qualification for both church and government programmes.

Accredited courses are run for youth and kids at risk, and there are now two campuses for a college run by the church, of which one is on the other side of Melbourne.

These campuses run TAFE programmes as well as VCAL.

Frequently government departments have turned to the Emerald parish for emergency recovery assistance because the parish has trained and qualified people.

There is a strong underlying ethos of evangelism in all that the parish does.

Peter lists about 80 ministries that happen in the Emerald parish, and seniors are involved in many of these.

The community magazine, which is produced by the church, is a monthly publication which has helped to redefine community values and has high credibility in the local community. It is a glossy A4 magazine with a budget of about \$120,000, a staff of 3 paid workers, and many volunteers.

Other activities mentioned (but not an exhaustive list) included:

Concerts - Hi-brow, popular, Pantomime....

Playgroups

Dad's nights

Family nights

Clothing sales

Father/Son camps

Chaplains for schools (this is a feature of Australian schools!)

Mentoring (Seniors mentoring teens – 2 programmes)

The church has also been involved with planting new churches; one of these at Cockatoo.

They have an excellent 24 page manual, "St Mark's Manual ... for participating members".

- covering topics such as Core Values, Policies, Communication, and Guidelines for leaders.

(Definitely worth looking at - I have some copies)

Although many of the activities and ministries of the Emerald parish are not specifically "senior related", I feel it is encouraging to report what is happening in a rural area, in a district of a size similar to many of our rural parishes in the Nelson Diocese. Some clergy or laypeople from our Diocese might seriously consider spending a week in this parish!

4. Diocese of Tasmania

(a) Parish of Sandford (in Rokeby, Sandford and South Arm)

We stayed in a campervan at Rokeby, with Rev David Le Rossignol, Heather and their two “still at home” children. David was yet another ex-Ridley contemporary, and although of retiring age, he still has a 6 hour per week position caring for the Sandford congregation of this parish.

In fact the church is a fusion of Rokeby, Sandford and South Arm, of which the Rokeby church is in a growing suburban area, and is very much the larger of the three congregations. The Sandford and South Arm areas are now small rural churches, though for historical reasons the rector still lives at Sandford.

The Parish Centre is at Rokeby. All very confusing!

Generally there are three services in the district each Sunday

- 8am at Sandford – attended by mostly elderly, with a conservative prayer book service and hymns (though one young person attending the morning we visited seemed quite at home!)
- 10am at Rokeby – a more contemporary service, involving children and a Sunday School
- 5pm service at South Arm – again generally a prayer book service.

In general the parish resembled many of our rural parishes in the Nelson Diocese, with a good weekly newsletter containing info about mission partners, people to pray for, a prayer chain, and coming events such as a fun day, first aid certificate course, special appeals concert, and a 5-point statement of the church that they seek to be.

There was a special effort to reach the younger families in Rokeby, with a youth and children’s minister appointed (I’m not sure that this was full-time).

There were a variety of programmes involving older members (eg a Sandford Guild), with a number of Bible Study groups meeting.

(b) Parish of St Thomas’ Howrah

I had not planned to see this church, but found when I arrived in Hobart that I had been “booked in” to do a Natural Church Development seminar there the next day – a day-long event!

So I took a little time to look at the church organisation.

Howrah is a larger settlement than Rokeby, and adjacent to it on the northern side closer to Hobart city.

Though I met the rector briefly while there, I decided as I wrote this report to phone her and ask some questions. Helen (who is also the archdeacon), told me that the “age profile” of the church was high – which is a nice way of saying most have grey hair or none.

It was a church in decline which had lost contact with the community when she went there 2 years ago.

Numbers have not grown dramatically since her arrival, but she feels the decline has stopped.

It has a congregation of just 40 - 50 attending at one service on a Sunday morning, though a very free kids and family gathering once a month has been started on a Sunday afternoon in the last few months drawing another 15 – 20. The church plant has been updated and is quite user-friendly.

For a church of its size, it seemed to have a lot going – Craft Group, Playgroup, Prayer Group, Film nights, a women’s night away and a new venture of café church to be held one Sunday morning. I am told that some of the men of the parish joined with another parish for a “men’s away” night some months ago, which the rector of the other parish ran, so it was now her turn to run the joint “women’s away” night.

There was a clear attention to detail and well ordered functions. I noted a cupboard door with beautiful pictures attached for little children. They were at a child’s eyelevel (much too low for me) Good thinking!

Two years ago the parish could manage only a 0.75 stipend, so she had responsibility for another church.

However, they have now stepped up to 0.85, so she has applied for a grant for the next two years, hoping that the parish will then manage a full stipend. Helen believes that there is now a spirit of hope in the parish.

Since most of the people in the parish are “older”, they are the ones who fill the ministry needs.

Helen has sought to make the church more community facing, and has reestablished links with the local school. As a result, a couple of retired men from the church will shortly be helping boys at the school to learn how to fix bikes, repair punctures etc.

Even if there are no children at the morning service, she still has an “all age spot” suitable for them – with the adults entering into the spirit of what is being done.

At Christmas the church and hall will become “Bethlehem Street Live” – a recreation of what a complete street in Bethlehem may have been like, with various shops and the stable at the end – complete with live donkey. People from the community or groups from the local school will be invited to “walk the street of Bethlehem”. Once again, it will be many of the older people who will be involved.

What I liked about the story of this parish was the hope it gave in a small, semi-rural area, using mostly older people.

(c) Anglican Parish of Kingston (APOK)

This parish is on the south-western fringe of Hobart, and was at one time a very large parish, drawing people from a wide area to the charismatic worship which was its attraction.

Though perhaps not quite as large today in terms of congregation, it still draws congregations of 300+ (the auditorium seats about 450 – 500).

I met the rector only briefly, but had time to look around the buildings, which were constrained by a cemetery onsite – leading to some interesting and creative shapes!

The church managed to buy a large piece of land on the opposite side of a busy road, for a car park.

The only story I can tell is of an older man (about 70), who originally went from the Nelson Diocese to train at Ridley College, but subsequently decided to embark on a career in science in Australia and drifted right away from the church. When his wife died just a few years ago, he started thinking again of spiritual matters, and found a church in Hobart which he enjoyed, but which did not meet his need for fellowship and a home group. But through friends he knew, he was introduced to APOK; and his faith has grown immensely, so that he was keen to show us “his church”. The power of friendship and community – especially at those crucial times in life - is all important.

www.apok.org

(d) Rev Bruce Geeves – Missioner to Seniors in the Diocese of Tasmania

(1 Thess 2:8 “Share not only the gospel but your very own lives...”)

We met with Bruce the day before we were due to fly home – partly because Bruce does not use email, and all I could get for 3 – 4 weeks prior was an answerphone. It turned out that Bruce was away doing his seminars.

Bruce’s present ministry began some years ago when, in his mid-life, he realized that he could no longer do the “youth work” for which he had trained in the Church Army. He also realized that there were many older people, often not part of the church, who needed to be drawn to Christ.

After spending some time with John Christie in Melbourne, and reading books such as “Catch the Age Wave”, he approached the Bishop of Tasmania with a suggestion that he work among older people and the retired.

Bruce has developed a resource called “Nostalgia Now” – a series of interactive sessions that run over a complete weekend in a parish. His vision is to have a trained senior’s team in every parish who can communicate, through their life stories, the good news of Jesus. It also helps these seniors to see that they have a “resource of richness” in their faith.

It is a way of helping older people to discover a way of sharing their faith, by reflecting on the past and telling those stories.

As I haven’t seen one of these being done, I can’t describe it exactly, but Bruce begins with pictures or objects that evoke memories – these vary from place to place; and depend on the group present.

He doesn’t use a lot of printed material, but has a large collection of material in scrap books. These include his written plans. But his house is filled with nostalgic items – records and covers, books and pamphlets, and a good number of retro items from the 1940’s – 1980’s.

When Bruce goes to a parish he prepares by finding out about some of those who will come (including two or three church members that he “primes up”). He begins with these on the Friday night, with some fun as they look to their past and discover the impact that Christ has had on their life story.

There are further activities on the Saturday, often bringing in those from outside the church, before he speaks at the Sunday service(s).

His approach really respects where people “are at”. He is different and definitely worth listening to!

I have a couple of pamphlets explaining “Nostalgia Now”. One reflects how the program runs, and the other introduces Bruce in more detail.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

It has been an extremely rewarding time visiting these parishes and learning about the various ministries in which seniors are involved. Not all of the ministries are to or by seniors, so I hope that some of the other materials may be relevant to your situation. In addition, there is bound to be some transfer of ministries that involve seniors, to other age groups.

If there is anything else you wish to know about these ministries, I may have further information or may be able to elaborate, so please feel free to contact me. I can also put you in contact with relevant people if necessary.

If the possibility arises, it would be good for the diocese to bring John Christie here for some sessions – as he has done in other dioceses in Australia. If it were possible to bring Bruce Geeves at the same time, it would make a good conference on Ministry with Seniors. Both of these men have a concern that what is done is not just “entertainment”, but rather ways of bringing people to faith in Christ.

So have a look at what is done for and by seniors in your parish.

Do you feel your older people are a resource to the church?
Do they know how to share their faith?
Would they like to be encouraged in their ministries?

Perhaps it is something we can discuss.

I am very willing to phone you for an extended discussion – just give me a time that suits you.
Or email me your questions and I will try to give you answers.
I have a large collection of “information brochures” that could give you new ideas.

One of the most common questions I am asked is “How do we, as God’s people in the world, move from the point of just ‘being friends’ to that of ‘sharing the gospel’?”
I think there is a need for us to invite into the diocese some people who do this effectively with all ages of people, and who are able to teach us the principles – or to find some materials that can help us with this.

I am grateful to those who have filled in for me while I have been away on sabbatical leave

If I can help you to feel excited about ministry to or by seniors, or how you can reach out to them with the living Christ, please contact me – phone, email, or whatever.

Some seniors don’t have much time left to hear the good news!

Eric Sears - Chaplain for the Elderly
9 Sadler St, Stoke NELSON
Phone – (03) 5475257 Mobile – 027 2600767
Email erics@nelsonanglican.org.nz

(PS – It took us while to get used to this GWAC, RAFT and APOK stuff – until we realized that they are abbreviations used in the web addresses – in some manner or other.)