

Pastors Report to Community Meeting 7 November 2004

At this stage of the year we are in the middle of reviewing the past year and planning for the new one.

2004 has been a momentous year in the nation and the world. Recent election results do not engender a lot of confidence that we are any less fearful as Western people or any more creative in dealing with conflict and poverty, inequality and injustice without resorting to ideological blindness or violent solutions. There seems to be a worldwide lurch to the political and religious right happening in recent years along with a diminishing tolerance of difference in religion and increasing religious arrogance on both sides of the East/West divide.

It can all be a bit depressing to many of us and we may feel that our seemingly small efforts to live and work together as a small community of Jesus' followers in Yarraville don't count for much. But in another sense they count enormously. When we add together the love and support, teaching and spiritual nurture, deepened sense of God at work, practical help for the poor, inspired and enhanced efforts of many individuals through a wide range of occupations and callings throughout the week we start to get a picture of the ripples in a pond spreading out ever wider and eventually crossing the paths of other ripples from other ponds.

Let me reflect a little on the shape of some of the ripples from Westgate's pond over the last 10 months or so...

- As the sun streams through the windows there is a buzz in the kitchen as the last preparations are made to prepare the tables for the Community Breakfast on the first Sunday in February. People start to arrive and before long the grouped chairs and tables are full with people talking, munching on muffins and sipping good fair trade coffee. We celebrate together the various occupations and roles that each have during the week and acknowledge with gratitude that these can be an extension of our community's life.
- A couple of weeks later finds a group of about 40 adults and kids standing around in the cool shallows off Mt. Martha beach trying to beat the stifling heat on one of Melbourne's hottest days. We share together the next morning a communion service written by the young people and reflect on the shape of worship with Nathan Nettleton. Then Geoff proceeds to set fire to the BBQ until reminded that a burnt offering is not necessary to appease the weather gods.. We all drive home tired but happy that we have spent some valuable time together.
- On the first Monday of that month Anne Paltridge is supplying cups of tea to Ross, Geoff, Nancy, Arohn and Cherry as she sits down to call the Worship Group meeting to order and we reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of last month's services.
- On the last Monday, the Deacons are laughing together as they share a funny story around the dining room table at Jenny Murphy's home. Kaye Cameron is trying to push the agenda along and Jenny Murphy details the latest finance figures which are looking a little better. Newton, Hugh, Nancy and Arohn are there too and after some extended discussion about Duty of Care, Property and Pastoral issues we are feeling a bit tired but hopeful and grateful as we pray together a focussing prayer at the end of the meeting.
- On any given week throughout the year up to 9 teenagers will be meeting with their adult Mentors at a location and time agreed with the parents and pastors and read through Luke's

Gospel together or do some discipleship studies. On other occasions these young people will accompany their mentors as they visit someone in hospital, do some gardening at a pensioners home or visit another church to experience a very different style of worship. Faith is being formed and lots of questions asked. More notice is taken of the what and why questions about Westgate's life.. Comments are made about some of the boring songs we sing but young musicians enjoy playing in church especially for some of the more upbeat songs we have learnt..

- Almost every Thursday afternoon just before 5pm as a Karen High School student gets off the bus and makes her way to High Street where she happily greets Helen Hoffmann and Bryan Murphy and sits down in the SKC room to get some help with her Homework. Tim Wraight arrives and offers his help as a Maths expert while Helen struggles to get her mind around the Politics and Social Science questions and then interpret them cross culturally to Grace and the other girls.
- A group of Friends meet for a light lunch in a café in Newport after church as Wilma and Val try to recall what the pastor's talk was about at the last mid-week worship gathering at the Village Retirement Centre in Williamstown where he goes to speak a couple of times each year.
- Another group meets for a simple meal at a home in Yarraville each fortnight. Though some are feeling tired and a bit stressed – they are grateful for the level of trust and belonging that is shared by this group and feel supported and cared for in the middle of a busy week..
- That Friday, about 30-40 young people aged from 11 up are bopping to loud music and coloured lights in the hall at one of about 27 different Friday Youth Group events at Westgate this year. Some of them have invited school friends who chat with the pastor and the other WG parents when they come to pick up their children. At many of the events this year parents have been amazed at how well the older teenagers get on with the younger kids and mix with them. A strong group identity has emerged.
- On a Tuesday morning Geoff, Nancy, Arohn listen as Gail Crisp reflects on how the kids in SKC are going and shares some of her dreams about a possible Lenten After School Kids program for 2005. After LJ brings in the tea and biscuits, we do some dreaming and praying together about the struggles and joys of Westgate's life and feel excited about the possibilities that always seem to grow.
- We reflect also on the recent Open Westgate events. The brilliant Cabaret night and the breakfast service. The sense of hospitality and welcome that came through the brochure invitation and spirit of openness that we aimed to generate in all the events. We are thankful especially to the Gavin, Helen and Mark - the Community Linkages Group and their indefatigable commitment to raising the profile of our community and its buildings to be a more welcome place for newcomers and visitors and to build links with the local Yarraville residents.
- Sometimes someone unexpected offers help just when we need it. Matt Fenton (Nancy and Bill's son in law) is a Web page designer living in Yarraville who after some pre-marriage counselling with Geoff offered to help get Westgate's Website back on line. After thousands of dollars of free work and not a few hours of patient working with Geoff the site is back on line and looking great.

- We are grateful for the ongoing ministry of Arohn to many Asylum Seekers and Chin Refugee applicants and we talk about the possibility of gathering together a new mission group that will cooperate with the Karen Baptist Community too in providing practical assistance and advocacy for the growing refugee sector of Westgate.

What lies in store for our Community in the coming year? Some interesting things are emerging from the Re-Visioning process and I do not want to pre-empt that report. However, whatever are the priorities that we identify as important to us – in my mind there are some indispensable distinctives that beat in the heart of Westgate that will continue to be framework on which we build and grow.

Ross reminded us a couple of weeks ago of the foundational vision of multiculturalism and justice that lie at the hear to Westgate's life.

In the coming years it is these foundational gospel values that we will need to build on together. In two ways in particular.

1. We need to rediscover the sacramental nature of our communication and sharing in our gathered life. We need to give more time to telling our stories of what God is doing in and through us and in different parts of our church's life.
2. We need to bring together the wonderful vibrancy and energy of our young people with the vision of justice and mission and multicultural life that beats at the heart of our community's life and story. This is starting to happen – but I reckon we need to be more intentional about it next year.

I think we face a time in our history when following Jesus and living out the gospel in our lives is going to stand in starker and starker contrast to the values of the majority social forces we are immersed in. I think there is a growing deep yearning however among many people in the West to close the widening gap between what they really believe and how they actually live.

At Westgate my vision is that we will be a community where that gap is very narrow indeed.

Geoff Wraight
November 2004.