

HOUSE OF PEACE-
a place where God is at work

On the 23 November 2002 the *Beth Shalom Congregation* of the Presbytery of Peel in the Synod of WA celebrated the commissioning of their Worship Centre in the Southern Suburb of Perth. The name *Beth Shalom* means "*House of Peace*" and is the name chosen by the Tongan community as the name for their congregation. This name was chosen because the people in this congregation wanted to have a place of worship that would be a place of peace not only for the Tongan-Australian, but for all members of the community surrounding the worship centre. The Community Minister to this congregation, Utoikaman (Uto) Fotu, has spoken of the positive response that has been extended to the members of the congregation from the neighbours who have expressed the joy of having a Christian presence in their suburb.

The story of the journey of growing this new Uniting Church congregation that has a Tongan flavour goes back to the mid 80's when several families from Tonga settled in WA. They looked for a place of worship, with the hope of developing a service in the Tongan language. It was Rev Dr. John Amanaki Havea. Who said "*I feel God accepts my prayers when I speak to him in Tongan*". We all need to talk to God in our "heart" language.

11 May 1986 was the day that the first formal worship in the Tongan language in WA was celebrated at Coolbellup. With the help of a number of people especially Rev Taniela Fisihoi, then minister in the Wesley Congregation in Bunbury (whose congregation allowed him to take the service for this congregation on the first Sunday of each month) a new congregation was in the making. The story of this congregation is a story of hope and growth. The tremendous love and generosity that the congregation have shown to many other congregations in WA, as well as to the wider church in the sharing of their faith and spirituality, and their culture in food, dance and song, is well known. The congregation has offered fellowship and support to overseas students, particularly Pacific Island students that have come to Perth to Study. The unassuming generosity and patience that they have shown over the years towards achieving the goal of having a centre for the worship that they could call the House of Peace is to be commended. The impressive strategies and plans for the future that this congregation has outlined for this new Church in South Lakes is outstanding. The best news in this story is that of the congregation's Youth. They are planning and working at this building becoming a centre of hope, joy, love and Christian learning for years to come. Let us remember the *Beth Shalom Congregation* in our prayers as they seek to be a place that offers peace to the Tongan community in Perth, and beyond!

Story offered by Robert Underhill, chair of the Synod of WA Multicultural Ministry Working Group

ONE WOMAN'S DREAM

Meryl Gemo is someone with a passion in her belly for cross-cultural ministry and an obvious integrity and deep care and compassion for people. Perhaps her own experience of 12 years in Papua New Guinea gave her an understanding of what is involved when someone moves from one country to another. After she returned to Australia she asked God to help her find a way to use her gifts as an ESL teacher. Seven years ago the amalgamation of congregations that came together to form the Ascot Community Uniting Church began to think about its ministry and mission into the local community. As a rather small and aging congregation it was looking for ways to more significantly engage with its local, increasingly multicultural community. Meryl shared her vision of how God might use this congregation to significantly build bridges with the people around them, many of whom were migrants struggling to learn English. A weekly English Conversation Group was handed out in the local shopping center. The first English Conversation group began in April 1997 with the aim of building relationships between members of the congregation and people of non-English speaking backgrounds.

The Conversation group was a means by which English language learning support could be offered to those who used English as a second language. The Conversation group also explicitly named its hope of being a vehicle through which cross-cultural communication skills could grow, not only for the participants, but also for the congregation. Currently there are 12 people involved each week in teaching/tutoring and child care for about 30 English language learners. Since 1997 around 120 people representing 36 countries of origin have enrolled.

Meryl and the team with the backing of the congregation have developed other ministries as well; a weekly "Simple English Bible Study" for anyone interested and a very creative simple English Worship service, takes place at the end of most terms with the aim of introducing the gospel within an experience of Christian worship in the simplest English possible with visual support. Annual Multicultural Worship services take place and are a highlight in the church calendar.

"Relationship building is the key" says Meryl. "I feel so privileged to be part of this ministry and I have a vision of our church truly becoming a multicultural community where people from all different backgrounds feel welcome and can contribute."

*Some members of the English conversation group on a library visit:
Back LtoR Maria Tieu, Rozalia Levai, Dasni Rau, Daun Kling, Chizu Sakamoto, Tuk Chantratri,
Front: Te Roi, Muharram Kadirova, Karuna Millar*

SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND *A first for the Vietnamese Uniting Church community*

The new year was celebrated in a special way by Vietnamese members of the Uniting church.

Since 1987 the Uniting Church recognised the need for each migrant-ethnic community to have an opportunity to meet together to share and discuss issues in their own language. Some of the different communities and language groupings within the Uniting Church have found it very helpful to meet regularly for support and fellowship using their community languages looking at the joys and issues from their community. Since the first National Conference for the Tongan community, Indonesian, Samoan, Tongan, Korean, Fijian and Sri Lankan Tamil Uniting Church members have also regularly held national conferences. And now for the first time, for the Vietnamese community.

There are Vietnamese congregations in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne all established during the last decade. Delegates representing each congregation come together and have an opportunity to reflect on the challenges facing the Vietnamese community in Australia and ways to develop ministry and mission within their community. Working together in solving difficult issues that arise in the life of their migrant congregations is also on the agenda. Each national conference becomes a representative body that can foster mutual co-operation and communication, helping create national networks within the Uniting Church. The National Conferences also enable the sharing of experience and the offering of insights to the wider Uniting Church thereby assisting each community to make a distinctive contribution to its life. The Conference provided an opportunity to invite guests from the wider Christian Vietnamese community to be involved in the conversation and also some special guests from overseas including Rev Huan Ho Tong from the Vietnamese Evangelical Church in Auckland and Rev Nguyen Dinh Duong from the USA.

“I am excited by this opportunity to come together and the opportunity to build links between Vietnamese congregations in the Uniting Church and relationships between the Uniting Church and the wider Vietnamese community in Australia. Many Vietnamese Christians arrive in Australia and they have never heard about the Uniting Church. They don't know what kind of church this is. So we still need to do a lot of work in communicating to our community about the Uniting Church and translating materials” says Rev Bui Chi Ai, minister at Cabramatta in Sydney, and Co-ordinator of the first Vietnamese National Conference.”

LOOKING WITH NEW EYES

Learning to see things from a new perspective isn't always easy. Listening to the experiences of people who are different from ourselves opens up the possibility of seeing things differently.

Looking with New Eyes 2002 was the theme for a Cross-Cultural Consultation held in 2002 in Sydney - the midpoint of the Developing Networks of Diversity and Tolerance project within the NSW Synod Youth Unit. Young people came together with sessions entitled "Looking at Ourselves"; "Looking at our Community"; "Looking at our Church" and "Looking towards the future".



Above: Participants taking part in the crossing bridges exercise in the final session
- Crossing Bridges (Developing a Plan for Action)

Rev Lu Senituli, guest speaker from Brisbane, shared his first hand experience of struggles with identity and his work with young people in situations of uncertainty and pain in regards to belonging to our society. How does the church begin to deal with these issues? The Looking with New Eyes consultation promoted the values of being proud of who we are, and recognising that culture is not something which is separate from ourselves, but is very much a part of who we are.

Developing a cross-cultural youth network has been a major focus of the NSW Board of Education's 'Developing Networks' project that has also been responsible for running 'Confronting Racism' workshops, with a specially adapted youth focus. Workshops were held in Griffith and Sydney in 2002 with further workshops planned during 2003 and at NCYC. The 'Confronting Racism' workshops have been an intense learning experience. Participants in the weekend workshops have looked at the effect and causes of racism in our society, beyond looking beyond ill-informed opinions and inappropriate jokes, to an institutionalised system that oppresses people from various cultural backgrounds.

Andrew Elia, the 'Living in Harmony' project worker described the workshops as a very rewarding experience. "Participants have been sharing stories from school, church and family, identifying areas in which this sort of cross-cultural dialogue would be helpful in their local communities."

Participants agreed to continue the relationships built over their time together by combining events of their respective churches and allowing others from their congregations to experience the sharing they had experienced through the workshop.

A cross-cultural youth network is in the making!

FOR ALL NATIONS
Balkara- This is your life!

Balkara has an exciting history that has led us today to being a place where people of different cultures can be actively involved in the Uniting Church. 1992 was the year of a new beginnings for us when the Parishes of Oakleigh and East Oakleigh joined and sought a new identity. We selected the Aboriginal word *BALKARA* - meaning native dove, as our name.

In 1995 the members of the Parish felt it seemed a shame to have so many property resources and not have them fully utilised. We met some Cook Islanders in the area who were seeking a home for worship. Indeed a group of Cook Islanders had been worshipping at the Clayton Church whilst working to establish a formal association with the Uniting Church. They had their own minister, Rev Tangi Tangatutai from the Cook Islands Christian Church (CICC). A group of Tamils, many refugees from Sri Lanka were also looking for a home. Relationships grew. Negotiations started with the Presbytery of Nepean to seek formal recognition for these new congregations and in 1996 a formal Service of Reception for the newly recognised Tamil Uniting Church Congregation was held at the Oakleigh Worship Centre. Later that same year the Cook Islands Congregation was also formally welcomed as a Congregation of the Uniting Church within the Parish of Balkara. The Parish now had four congregations covering three different cultures and languages. This makes it one of the largest and most culturally diverse Parishes in the Presbytery.

We have been growing together as a cross-cultural community! The different congregations share together on the fifth Sunday of the month and we are always involved in each others' special events as we share and learn more about each other. We have had some wonderful ministers serve us and their wisdom and leadership has helped us grow. We also have had many challenges in developing new ministry. One challenge was in having a new Cook Islander Minister, Rev Temaie Vaeau, but having no suitable manse. The Parish decided to rationalise its properties and sell off some unused tennis courts. The official blessing, in all three languages and cultures, occurred in October 2000 Our Parish Secretary, Faye took up the invitation to go with Rev Temaie Vaeau to the Cook Islands, an opportunity to learn more about the Cook Islander culture. She had the privilege of staying with three local families and attending the CICC Bi-annual National Assembly. (where there would be as much eating as meeting!) Without notice, she was even asked by the President, Rev Tangi Tangatutai (the former minister of Balkara Parish), to address the Assembly and share the Balkara Experience. And we should mention our youth! A bus load went to NCYC in Brisbane and we hope to do the same again for Newcastle. That means hard work in raising funds. The Parish has underwritten to support delegates who are attending.

The Parish appreciates the generous support we have received from the wider church that has helped develop this vision. In recognition of our mission work, BOMAR (Board of Mission and Resourcing, Synod of Victoria) responded with financial resources for additional settlements for ministry to allow us to develop this significant work with the newer congregations. This represents the recognition by the wider church of the mission and vision for a multicultural church as we accept and embrace each other, all as members of God's kingdom.

Our vision is to be a 'parish for all nations' This was chosen as it reflected the direction we believed the Holy Spirit was leading us, moving out to witness to the wider community and to people of all nations. And there will no doubt be many new challenges in store for us. All this has followed from examining ways of getting to know each other better and reaching out to our local community. May our story inspire you too!

This story is adapted from material submitted from the Balkara Parish