

suggest that you form a small steering group for a one year term and those people be responsible for offering leadership to the rest. That's very doable and very worthwhile. That could be the starting point from which to build a dynamic and relational young adult ministry.

Just a further word about Sunday nights. One idea that emerged from discussion at the focus group last Thursday related to how we could offer both creativity and continuity in the context of an evening service. But let me paint the background to this.

At the beginning of this year TEA Party experienced an initial quite dramatic growth that at least doubled its size. However much of this growth has not been sustained, unlike the morning congregation which experienced similar growth at the same time. It has been my observation that since the beginning of the year at least 50 people have 'dropped in to visit us' and close to 20 of those people have stayed for a period of at least several months, though not necessarily all at the same time. Only seven or eight are still consistently worshipping with us. As I have enquired of those who have chosen not to stay (I've followed up eight people), the consist reason given was *a lack of consistency and continuity*, in terms of format, style, quality of theological reflection and the opportunity to engage in worship that involves music and singing.

How do we encourage consistency without losing the flavour of creativity. The suggestion that evolved at the focus group is simply to have a number of segments in the service with some of them being the same each week and some being different. Encourage more people to participate in aspects of the service trying to keep a 'both/and' attitude and also staying true to the relaxed, unplugged, informal (and genuine) feel some people associate with the service.

#### **A Final Thought**

In many ways, this is an unfinished message. It is unfinished because I want people to respond to it to further refine and hone the ideas contained within. There may well be a fourth or a fifth option out there that we haven't connected with yet. Please take this and prayerfully consider it. Be bothered to identify what you do or don't agree with and, more importantly, what you would be willing to commit to in order to make a difference.



# **TEA Party Looking Ahead**

**October '09  
Toowong Uniting Church**

## Looking Ahead, Part 1— The Miracle Question

If you came to church next week and God had performed a miracle so that church was now everything you hoped it might be . . .

What would be different?

- people, chairs, way of doing the service, (a video – more creativity),
- Jesus would run the church,
- it would challenge us,
- give us real insight, genuine connection,
- a genuine relationship that would encourage dialogue, questions, facilitate understanding,
- would Jesus have us sing songs to him? Join us in singing to God? I think we would be embarrassed about some of the songs we sing.
- no age segregation,
- more people involved in ‘delivering the service – singing, praying, welcoming;
- think about changing the pews to generate community; what about dialogue preaching – discussion on Sunday, inclusive language,
- mission house would be open on Sunday nights again, home groups once a fortnight to discuss bible,
- the building would not be bricks and mortar, but living plants and animals of God’s creation.
- we would be out in God’s creation;
- it might be outdoors, it might be a weeknight, it might be approachable,
- it might be inspiring and equipping us to do the good works and spreading of the gospel that would be the main focus of the people (prioritised over the weekly mandatory meeting),
- does church have to be something one comes to? People would come early, wanting to pray,
- they would hang around afterwards,
- come with a sense of expectation, would be asking questions during the week: what is God going to teach me? Who could I serve or connect with this week,
- people would have a clear sense of their giftedness and an excitement about using their gifts,
- people would be coming because they had needs they genuinely expected to be dealt with;
- there would be no church structure or building,
- i would be walking into someone’s home, or meeting with a group of people at a coffee shop or park,
- I would be with a small group of people doing some volunteer work or

the decks’ or ‘sweeping the house’, of ‘allowing the field to lie fallow for a time’. What would this look like in practical terms? Well, it might be that we say, “Let’s set a date next year when we start meeting again and between now and then, we’ll encourage everyone to visit other churches to see what God is doing there and we’ll set a time to weekly get together to pray that God will be showing us the shape of what he wants us to do for next year.”

### Option 3

A third option says, “Let’s try to keep TEA Party alive, but we make some significant changes. In light of the challenges I stated before, I believe we need to separate the identity of Tea Party from the identity of Sunday night services. What happens on Sunday night must be owned as a ‘service’ of Toowong Uniting Church with an appropriate application of theological discipline and accountability to the Church Council.

I would then like to see TEA party take a greater sense of ownership for its own life as a young adult network. Such a network needs to be owned by and run by young adults for young adults. Whilst I would see myself vitally interested in, offering support to and especially offering pastoral care to young adults, I want to see you pick up the baton and run with it.

Are you frustrated that TEA Party ideals and activities are currently not being done well, or not being done at all? Then let’s reduce our scope and clarify our definition. Let’s simplify the task and just do a few things really well. Identifying and re-invigorating one or two relational activities (such as Soul Food or something similar) mixed with a number of social events would be an achievable and very productive goal for the next twelve months. But that needs to be owned and planned and executed by all of you. There is more than enough energy and talent in this group to engage in a number of creative, lively, enjoyable, and engaging activities throughout the year. But, please don’t expect our missional interns to be doing that for you. There might be some interaction between what they undertake of a missional nature and these sorts of activities but we need to give them the freedom to develop their role for the future of the church beyond being social coordinators or supper providers.

For what it is worth, and you are of course welcome to ignore this, I would

laterally for a moment in sketching a number of possible responses.

### Option 1

A number of people have suggested to me that they believe a possible course of action would be to discontinue TEA Party as an entity. In this option we would agree to celebrate what TEA Party has been in the past and finish off its life as a chapter in the story of Toowong Uniting Church. All groups go through life cycles with different periods set aside for sowing, harvesting and recovery. To continue the agricultural metaphor, which Jesus often used as sources for his parables, there are times when fields are both highly productive and when they need to lie fallow. Sometimes entirely new crops need to be planted and sometimes the purpose of fields are changed altogether, for example, from crop production to livestock sustenance.

So, the suggestion has been made, we celebrate and remember how good Soul-food was, we recall the best of the creative worship that went on for years, we give thanks for conversations that took place in the mission house and the function it served and then we have a service of closure. Just thinking hypothetically for a moment, if that were to happen, what would you all do in that situation? Well, you could worship in the morning or we could create a list of churches nearby with evening services that you could choose from. Alternatively, TEA party could start up as an independent entity, paying its own way, renting space from Toowong UC or someone else or using people's homes for its meetings. What would then happen on Sunday nights here? Perhaps nothing at all. Or perhaps nothing for a time. Perhaps we might develop a time slot to serve the wider interests of the church. That might be for Christian education - teaching and discussion on various topics relating to the Christian life and faith. It might become a time to run alpha courses, or other small group based events, or become a time of corporate prayer for the church. Perhaps it would become something that no one has conceived yet.

### Option 2

A second option would be to say, "lets finish TEA Party but only for the purpose of re-conceiving something else – taking the best of what has been and shaping it into something else." This would have a sense of 'clearing

- anything we thought would enhance community;
- I'd see God working through all of us to spread peace through the whole world and the things we learn and talk about at church would be used to bring people together , end wars and poverty, bring peace and compassion,
- very strong feelings of God's presence,
- very strong sense of being loved/ supported/cared about by church family,
- all people accepted and loved,
- no judgement, no respecting of persons,
- people would feel safer to be whatever and not be judged,
- everyone would feel safer to feel that they think, people can approach each other on any matter . . . but it would still not be offensive,
- everybody would relate to each other very well,
- we would be able to contribute constructively to other's plans,
- there would be cupcakes,
- it would be like Acts 2:37-47,
- the Spirit would be flowing like a river,
- everything would be spontaneous and full of passion,
- people would be bursting to share what God had been doing in their week,
- everyone would delight in singing God's praises,
- people would be serving according to the gifts they had;
- supper offered before church with people milling around chatting and a worship team warming up and playing in the background,
- some people might be praying in a group,
- some lead a pre-service Bible study focussing on the passage being read that night,
- a service filled with music and the spirit of God,
- less small group interacting/colouring/playing with playdough and more worshipping,
- during the sermon people would feel open to ask questions if they needed clarification.

### What would you be doing?

- reading something,
- handing out notices,
- being at the zoo,
- listening/asking questions,
- being in awe,
- learning,



- singing/welcoming/praying/thinking,
- walking into Toowong to make community,
- support the isolated, sick and lonely,
- looking for the miserable,
- sharing the joy and pain of Jesus,
- speaking the truth of Christ's world,
- prayer,
- fully participating;
- worshipping God,
- reading scripture, sharing interpretations,
- open to the spirit moving in everyone,
- sharing things that had happened in my life and insights that had come from these,
- passing on insight/wisdom/inspiration I had received from other sources,
- being more able to live out Jesus in other parts of my life and other places,
- being able to nudge people toward Jesus,
- helping others to do more and me to do less,
- sharing my weeks thoughts and experiences with people and listening to theirs,
- living alongside them,
- asking questions and hearing different perspectives on how I can live more fully the life God has called me to,
- being encouraged and encouraging others to practically be living out their calling (not airy fairy hypothetical religious talk),
- actively doing something to positively benefit the sick, helpless, hopeless – those who have least,
- doing this as part of a community,
- trying to ease the suffering and create peace and hope for others,
- worshipping God freely,
- enjoying the love and friendship of other church members,
- feeling God's presence,
- hearing God's word and teaching,
- feeling part of the church family,
- being myself,
- enjoying other people,
- enjoying God,
- becoming humble,
- interacting and helping everybody achieve their goals to help the world,
- praising God,
- hopefully the same as everyone else because we would all have the same heart and mind,



*activity of people* (as agents of mission) rather than the *physical resource* of the house (a mission house).

As such, I have invited two people to participate in a twelve month **Misional Internship with accommodation provided** for 2010. It may seem pedantic but I will not be referring to them as a 'mission house residents' nor to their accommodation as the 'mission house'. Is this just a matter of semantics? No it is not. We have to move beyond the Christian church's centuries old dependence on buildings, even if they are contemporary or domestic ones and recalibrate our thinking so that we see mission as a function of our relationships and not places. Mission is the activity of people not of houses. And we have to get serious about training and equipping ourselves for activities of mission that go way beyond just hanging out with people in a nice place. My understanding is that the original ideal of the mission house was always to be much more than this, and I'm not willing to give up on that ideal just yet. Mission must become more than having supper on a Sunday night or just dropping in and catching up with friends. That can and is, of course, included in mission – but my observation is that as an expression of this church's mission, this is not resulting in lots of people meeting Christ and being transformed by him – so once again I think it's time for a change.

I have invited Laura Thompson and Sam Duncan to participate in a Misional Internship with Toowong Uniting Church in 2010, and I'm absolutely delighted to tell you they have agreed to be involved in that way. I have significantly revised the terms under which they will be serving here, as I have revised the criteria used to approach them in the first place. These criteria have been circulated to the Church Council and I'm happy to make them available to anyone who is interested.

Four challenges: our relationship with the wider church, taking greater financial responsibility, the means by which to connect with what God is doing and a new approach with what has been the mission house. These challenges create the parameters, the boundaries, within which we have to be looking for solutions and directions. They are not optional issues and we cannot afford to ignore them. So I would invite you to keep them in the back of your mind as we think about looking for the road ahead.

Enough of the challenges, how then do we respond to them? Let me think

nor spiritual interests of the group to not take responsibility for itself.

When we put these two challenges together we find that the issue of accountability looms large. To whom is TEA Party accountable? Who takes responsibility for its definition, its identity, its shape, its goals? When, where and how does it give account for its use of the churches resources both in terms of use of physical spaces and finances? How do decisions get made? What checks and balances are there? These are questions we have to come to terms with.

### Challenge Number 3

The third challenge relates to the means by which we expect to achieve our goals. If we look around in our church, around our city, around the world at groups and communities and places where the wind of the Spirit is both blowing and being effectively responded to, there are two common denominators in every single case: prayer and effective use of the Scriptures. Every healthy and growing church I know of and have read about either from our day and age or throughout church history has at its core and unswerving commitment to fervent, persistent, costly prayer and an earnest commitment to be shaped by and live out of the Biblical story. Let's be honest and say, an engagement with both those things will always carry us way out of our comfort zone. But until, as a community, we are willing to be committing ourselves to prayer and consistent study and application of the Scriptures, it is unlikely that very much will happen in our midst.

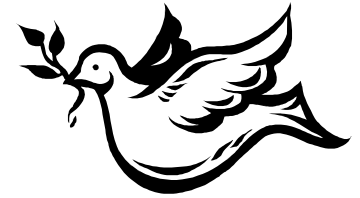
### Challenge Number 4

A fourth challenge relates to the use of the mission house. As you all know the 'mission house' has experienced mixed fortunes and results over the last six years and my sense is that the church would benefit from some intentional discontinuity with what has happened in the house previously. I want to emphasise that individuals in the house have made significant contributions to TEA Party's life as well as the life of the wider church, but the house has nowhere near lived up to its potential. Apart from its functioning, I must confess I have a philosophical problem with the idea of a 'mission house' as the primary tool for mission in a community. My strong preference is to rephrase the entire venture so that the emphasis is on *the*

- I would go early and interact with people or pray,
- I would be encouraged to stay after to have meaningful conversations on the service or to continue with conversations that had begun prior to the service

### What would you be feeling?

- happy,
- contented,
- out of this world,
- safe,
- challenged,
- captivated,
- overcome by participation in evangelical and dynamic community,
- empowered by holy spirit to share good news,
- wanting to invite friends,
- more in touch with God;
- righteous, at one with the spirit of God,
- peace,
- joy and love,
- the group would have a sense of one body rather than individuality,
- part of a community,
- benefitting from interaction with other Christians (and the yet-to-be Christians who feel comfortable to be part of the community),
- excited,
- nervous,
- repentant,
- challenged,
- burdened for those who don't know Jesus,
- joyful;
- joy and fulfilment,
- sometimes uncomfortable when challenged,
- a sense of belonging/community/family,
- a true love for God and people and my community,
- friendship,
- love,
- belonging,
- peace,
- loved,
- appreciated,
- accepted,
- part of the church family,



- God's presence,
- joy in God's presence,
- safe,
- happy,
- free to be a part of something,
- closer to God,
- motivated,
- absolute ecstasy,
- excited to see what God had planned for worship,
- expectant to see people connecting with God,
- at home,
- challenged and burdened,
- I would be feeling the spirit of God inside me and those around me,
- I would not be concerned with outside worries but be at peace and glorify the Lord,
- I would feel that I was in a place of sanctuary

#### What would others be doing?

- reading,
- preaching ,
- instructing,
- the same as above using their gifts to share, to unfold the Christian story here,
- wondering what God will do with them,
- gentle confrontation,
- freedom,
- respect,
- using their gifts as given by the spirit to worship God,
- asking questions,
- sharing stuff they had experienced found or thought about,
- praying,
- worshipping,
- inviting friends,
- enjoying being with each other (even if the group gets larger),
- sharing happiness,
- showing love,
- being positive,
- helping others;
- worshipping God,
- accepting/loving/encouraging others,
- wanting to bring others along to see and feel God's presence,

congregation (it is not currently by Uniting Church definitions)? Does it need to become one? Is it a young adult fellowship within this church? At the focus group, the most agreed to description of TEA Party is that it is a network: a network of relationships between the young adults of this church, but also ideally reaching beyond this church. Importantly we must note, it is not just what happens on a Sunday night and in the past, TEA Party's life has been expressed in lots of different lively events, things such as Soulfood (discussion in a Cafe on Monday nights) various short courses, artistic activities, bible studies and specific community connecting activities.

#### Challenge Number 2

As I've alluded to already, for many years now TEA Party's use of facilities and provision of paid leadership has been primarily funded by the generous giving of the morning congregation. No one in that congregation or from Church council has ever questioned this situation with me, or complained, or even shown the slightest hesitation in the contribution they have made. But, the reality is that the morning congregation now has its own missional imperatives and priorities as it continues to connect with this growing number of young families.

There is a clear school of thought in world missions now that recognises the best way to develop mission that is effective, sustainable and reproducible is to provide seed money for people and projects. This funding supports the commencement of activities, but the expectation is that within a certain period of time the ministry or the missionary will become self-sustaining and self-funding. The result of this philosophy is that new initiatives, in taking long term responsibility for themselves from the beginning, often develop and mature to the point where they can not only fund themselves but also provide support and funding for other new initiatives.

I believe that TEA party has to address the issue of financial sustainability. On an average Sunday, TEA party contributes 7% of the churches total offerings, yet approximately 40% of my time is being directed towards it. This is in addition to subsidies provided for the mission house and other miscellaneous costs. To be sure mission is not primarily about either money or physical resources but, I believe it is neither in the sociological

lenges that we face and that we will have to confront if we are going to move forward, and then explore a number of possibilities and opportunities that present themselves.

### Challenge Number 1

TEA Party has to figure out its relationship to Toowong Uniting Church. During the course of this year when I have asked people about this, I have received responses that range from an understanding that TEA Party is a congregation of Toowong Uniting Church to a description of TEA Party being a completely independent experimental community that meets in this location but has no relationship to the church. When I was employed here in December last year, the Joint Nominating Committee led me to believe that there was a strong desire between both groups to forge stronger relationships between one another.

This question has become all the more important because of the way in which the whole church dynamics have changed this year. When Tea Party started, the morning congregation of Toowong Uniting was steadily declining and there was a generous willingness on the part of that congregation to invest in a project that they hoped would secure the future presence of vital Christian worship in this suburb.

But that declining congregation has almost tripled in size this year. We are averaging 70-80 people at worship in the mornings. Last Sunday a rare event occurred – most of your young families turned up on the same Sunday – there were 25 were children. Just this afternoon we had a young families gathering at our home for lunch and there were 35 people. Seventeen young families are now consistently a part of this church, and the majority of those haven't come from other churches, a growing number are simply coming along and saying they want to become Christians. To be honest, we have our hands full coping with that growth. The significance of this is that when I step back and ask where is the breeze of God's spirit blowing within our church – a very clear answer presents itself and I have to confess that despite what the demographics say should be happening here, God seems to be doing something in our midst, quite exciting but also unexpected.

In the midst of that we have to ask the questions: What is TEA Party? Is it a

- singing with joy,
- talking,
- laughing,
- contributing or doing nothing (this would be ok too),
- somehow have all this with each other but still be focussed on God,
- sharing their ideas and listening to the ideas of others,
- praising God with all their hearts,
- using their gifts to worship God,
- engaging in worship styles of all kinds,
- repenting and turning to God,
- others would be filled with the spirit of God,
- they would detach to groups to pray, study the Bible, or meet any new people who walked into the church,
- some might be joining in singing with the worship team

**If someone who had never been to church before walked in, what would they notice?**

- comfy,
- satisfied,
- cross,
- buildings,
- what sort of people they are,
- customs,
- spirituality,
- no perfect church except in heaven,
- genuine connection,
- a willingness to answer questions,
- many individuals with different viewpoints being expressed,
- respect.,
- welcome,
- happiness,
- diversity,
- hope,
- joy,
- profound peace,
- empowerment,
- integrity,
- prayer,
- give people permission to fail and recover,
- exists for others,
- friendly and welcoming people,



- the very first thing they would notice would be God's presence shining from the people,
- they would see that it was a place of worship of God where everyone was made to feel welcome and encouraged to ask questions
- people would find coming to church confronting and not always comfortable,
- that this is not the stereotypical idea of church that they might have seen on Mr Bean or the TV news,
- that this is about people trying to live the best life they can by following Jesus,
- a place of warmth,
- inclusion,
- people taking a genuine interest in them,
- they would go away aware of God's presence – a sense of having been with him rather than just with people.,
- people who truly love each other and their community and life,
- underlying all is a passion to live like Christ,
- friendship,
- sense of belonging/welcoming,
- uplifted,
- inspired;
- amazing joy,
- joyful praise,
- sense of God's presence,
- acceptance,
- a welcoming spirit,
- they've never been before but feel like they're at home,
- God's people are less egocentric than others,
- there is an honesty and sincerity that is genuine,
- everyone actually cares about each other,
- God is at the centre,
- it would be peaceful/ serene,
- like they belonged and could contribute and gain from Church,
- the Spirit,
- God's holy presence,
- freedom,
- they'd feel welcome,
- sometimes confronted,
- maybe a little unsure of what was happening but strangely attracted to it anyway,
- they'd notice people who weren't ashamed of what they believed and how they expressed it,
- they'd notice that worship wasn't about entertaining, but worshipping the living God,



what they are doing in China or at City Life, for God will always do something unique depending on the combination of people, gifts and personalities in a given place, but I *have* to make the observation that those who are catching the Spirit's breeze in these places have their sails set very differently from ours here in TEA Party and we would be foolish to ignore the flavours and the emphases and the priorities and the directions and the goals of those who are seeing God at work in their midst in living ways.

One of the statements we agreed on in the focus group that was held last Thursday night was that it is fair to say, in TEA Party we are not generally connecting with many of the thousands of young people who live in Toowong. I make that statement with great hesitation because I genuinely do praise God for and want to constantly pay tribute to the faithfulness and vision of those who started TEA Party from scratch. I think it is remarkable how TEA Party began from nothing, borrowing young adults from other churches in order to begin to create a Christian presence and community that had a strong sense of mission and caring.

But here we are at the cusp of a new decade and after six or seven years of doing things in TEA Party a certain way, I believe it is well and truly time to try some new ways as well. We need to take the heart and spirit of the best of what has happened in TEA party previously and allow it to seed a new crop that will hopefully produce a new harvest. When I read through the Miracle question responses there were two words that I thought summarised that whole reflective exercise: the first word was 'both', the second word was 'and'. We need to be thinking in terms of both/and instead of either/or. We need to be developing both worship and small group life, we need to be making space for both teaching and discussion, we need to be developing both worship that involves singing and worship that doesn't, we need to be fostering both continuity and creativity, we need to be meeting both on Sundays and during the week, we need to be developing both community service and evangelism. We need to be reading both our bibles and the newspaper. We need to be paying attention both to each other and to God. Obviously, I could go on and on.

What new thing might God be calling us to do and be? Where is the God of Elijah?

As we face up to this question, I want to try to articulate a number of chal-

John Wesley? Where is the God of Billy Graham? These days we might tweak the question slightly. Instead of looking to Hillsong or Willow Creek or HTB, we need to ask where is the God of these churches and what does he want to do in our midst?

I believe we need to look around and learn from what God is doing in other places without slavishly copying it. Where is the wind of the Spirit blowing? Where is the God of Elijah? I share all this because I want you to know that my reflections here are based on more than just the experience of this community at Toowong. Where is the breeze of God's Spirit blowing in our world at the moment?

I've been reading extensively about what God is doing in China for example. As we speak at this very moment, God is dynamically at work just a few thousand kilometres north of here, where, sometimes in the midst of extreme persecution, thousands of people every single day are finding new life in Christ and living transformed lives. There are no church buildings, very few paid pastors, genuine shortages of bibles, but the church is growing faster in China than it ever has at any point in its history. Fifty years ago there were two million Christians in China. Today, conservative estimates put the number at 110 million. Last year the Chinese government conceded that there are now more Christians in China than there are members of the communist party. But it's not just China, that's happening in lots of places – Africa and Latin America. And it's not just overseas.

Where is the breeze of God's Spirit blowing in our city? Five years ago a small church plant commenced at QUT at Kelvin Grove called City Life Church. Kelvin Grove is a suburb with almost identical demographics to Toowong. 50% of the population are between the ages of 18 and 30, a large proportion of those are students. It lies a similar distance from the city and is of a similar size, though a bit smaller in total population. Made up almost entirely of young adults, City Life Church very quickly grew from nothing to a community of several hundred people and has now planted two regional churches around Brisbane. I only know four people who worship at CityLife Church, so I don't have a large sample, but all of them are learning and growing because of their engagement with the church: in faith, in service, in prayer, in their knowledge of the Scriptures.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that we should be trying to copy exactly

## Looking Ahead, Part 2— The Mandate Question

What five actions would most help us to move towards the ideals articulated in response to the miracle question?

The results of group discussion (in no particular order)

1. activities that involve the community, e.g., feed the homeless, sausage sizzle give away at the front of the church.
2. Pot luck dinner once per month, everybody brings a plate, dinner then service
3. Finding out what is already happening in the community
4. Small groups—during the week, more personal contact, get to know well a small group of people, bible study, sharing
5. Movie club—like a book club but talk about movies with meaning
6. Book library
7. Help people find their spiritual gifts
8. Run a community event, e.g., car boot sale for students
9. Provide for those in need e.g., shared meal
10. Seeing what is already being done in Toowong and joining in
11. Getting out of the church
12. Close community culture, eg., ladies group
13. Equipping people to be third place and third place missionaries
14. Growing from the inside—growth groups
15. Change the format of the nite service
16. Have a meal in sizzler,
17. Follow people up
18. Pray
19. We need to work out what God wants and trust that he will work through us. Work with what he's given us.
20. Prayer (as the basis for all else)
21. Be more involved in other people's lives (incl. people not from church!)
22. Volunteer (Rosies / Street Vans / Meals on Wheels)
23. Cater for diversity (and put up with the bits that aren't to one's liking) the words 'balance' and 'meeting various needs' were also said
24. Midweek activities (be they social or intentionally spiritual)
25. Comfortable/relaxed/informal place or atmosphere for after 7pm (idea of a couch between the kitchen and hall)
26. A 'Challenge of the Week' - to live out the message outside the church
27. Simultaneous Creative Worship Options - for people to engage with God in their own way (slightly different from 5 wasn't talking about simultaneous things)
28. 'Sermon' followed up with Q&A
29. Full-on meal after church
30. Alternate Venues (going to where people are)
31. A greater emphasis on training and equipping
32. Create action based small groups to facilitate movement into

and out of church

33. Have small groups that are variable in duration and purpose
34. Make deliberate efforts to connect with the university colleges/ students. Support the development of a short term student group at Uni for the commencement of the year.
35. Mission to a country parish.
36. Restructure Sunday nights – 5.30-6.30 Worship, 6.30-7.30 Small groups (discussion), 7.30 meal & stuff
37. Have a shared meal before church

fore long we're either exhausted or we've hyperventilated. What we need to do is have the courage to drop our sails when the spirit's wind is not blowing and to better tune ourselves into the prevailing breezes.

I have shared with you before that Nicky Gumbel, the Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, says, "in our church we don't so much do planning any more, as we try to figure out where God is going and then get into his slip stream." Let me say very clearly, I am ideologically opposed to the now common practice in many churches of the wholesale importing of schemes and programs from other places in the naive belief that we can reproduce here what God has done at uniquely in another situation. Programs will not save us.

But I am also equally opposed to foolishly ignoring what God has done in the past and more importantly what he is doing around us in the present. 1 Corinthians 10 invites people to learn from God's dealings with people in the past, to look for spiritual lessons and apply them to our own experience.

One of the great stories from the Old Testament describes the transition of prophetic leadership from Elijah to Elisha. The young, up and coming prophet Elisha accompanies Elijah to his final rendezvous with the living God. On the way Elijah removes an item of clothing called his mantle and strikes the Jordan river with it, causing the waters to part, allowing the two prophets to cross on dry land. On the other side, Elisha witnesses his master's departure from this world in unusual circumstances, caught up in a flaming chariot which carries him into the heavens. Elisha is left alone with nothing but his master's mantle lying on the ground beside him. Elisha picks up the mantle and retraces his steps. On reaching the river, he takes the mantle, looks up to the heavens, asks a prayerful question and strikes the water. The waters part once again, allowing him to cross and assume his prophetic work, eventually performing signs and wonders much greater than his master ever did.

My point in sharing this story is to highlight the question that Elisha asked as he looked to the heavens. His question was, "Where is the God of Elijah?" So often these days, I find people asking the question, "Where are the John Wesleys, where are the great missionaries, where are the Billy Grahams?" Wrong question. We should be asking where is the God of

prove the way it works. Like tending to a well oiled machine, we need lots of planning, lots of committees, lots of effort and lots of strategies to make the church achieve what it should.

So, what do you think? Should we see the church in organic terms, or as an organisation?

These two opinions seem to rarely meet in the middle, but I'd like to suggest that the church needs to be marked by both the spontaneity of organic life and the order of organisation.

When Jesus sat on a rooftop in Jerusalem late one night trying to explain to Nicodemus how God's spirit worked, he said, "It's like the wind, you don't know where it's coming from or where it's going to, but you can feel its effect on your face and in the swaying of the trees." God's Spirit is like the wind.

So, I believe the church needs to be a yacht. We need to be organic in the sense that we are powered by the wind of God's spirit, but we need to be organised enough to hoist our sails at the right time and set them in the appropriate way to make use of that wind.

If we're too organic, allowing any old thing to happen at any time, we'll be like a little dinghy, without oars or outboard motor, spontaneously bobbing on the waves, completely free, unfettered but generally going nowhere. Free to move but having no direction.

If we're too organised, too structured, too fixed in traditions and plans and committees, then we'll be more like an oil rig, highly ordered but fixed in the one spot. The wind can blow all it likes but an oil rig is not going anywhere.

But imagine if we could be a yacht: organised enough to hoist our sails, free enough to move with the wind of God's spirit.

The trouble is, though, sometimes we raise our sails but the wind is not blowing. So often in the church we hoist our sails with a good idea and then find there's no wind, so what do we do? We start blowing ourselves, and when the yacht doesn't go very far or very fast we blow harder. Be-

## Looking Ahead Part 3 — Simon's Reflections

This statement is the result of a process that was initiated by a request from the Church Council. Rather than engaging in common strategic planning processes, where the task of discerning a way forward begins from scratch, I was asked to present some thoughts regarding my reflections on a way forward for Toowong Uniting church as a starting point for further reflection and discussion. For the morning congregation that has involved presenting some material to the congregation and asking them to respond to it. This process has taken several weeks and I'm just now beginning to get some significant responses.

TEA Party the process has taken a different track, which is partway between what I am doing in the morning and normal strategic planning. As you know, for several weeks, we have been doing a variety of activities involving listening, thinking, discussing and reflecting. As I have participated in those activities, collated the results of them and prayerfully sought to discern a way forward that meets the requirements and integrates the needs both of this group and of the wider church, tonight's presentation is the outcome of that process. What I wish to do now is invite you to further reflect on this and feed back to me your thoughts and responses, with the hope of further honing things.

Let me first set some context for the statements I wish to make.

Tom Kerr tells the story of a time several years ago when Fuzz Kitto had been retained to conduct a review of Toowong Uniting Church. Fuzz and Tom were sitting in one of the coffee shops in Toowong discussing what the needs of local young people are, when Tom decided to engage in some spontaneous market research. He turned to a girl sitting at the next table and asked her if she could assist them. He described what they were doing and discussing and then enquired of her perception of the needs of young people in Toowong. She answered by saying that she really couldn't think of any needs she has that the church could help with. Her physical needs were catered for, she had a good network of friends and an interesting and stimulating life.

This scenario raises in my mind the question, "What exactly is it that we as a church are to offer people?" What does God call us to do and be in this

place. I like the way John Dickson answers that question when he refers to the mission of the church as not only a rescue mission but also a reality mission. He looks to the message of Psalm 96 to suggest our ultimate purpose in missional living, paraphrasing the psalm: “There is one God to whom all people belong and owe their allegiance; the worshippers of that Lord should therefore promote that reality throughout the world.” In other words we have to call people to realise that God exists, that they are his sole and beloved possession, that to live as though that weren’t true is to live in rebellion to our creator and destines us to an ultimately small and soul-less life that can only ever reach a tiny fraction of the potential that God had in mind when he created us.

In light of this, we in the church have to be oh so careful that we do not misunderstand the church’s primary task. I can’t help but wonder if the Uniting Church in general, in the midst of its national decline, and financial crises and theological debates has simply lost sight of its essential God-given task. First let me state what that task is not: *our job is not to socialise people into the church*. It is to save people into God’s kingdom. There’s a phrase that’s not very popular today. Saving people. But one of the first things the gospel writers tell us about our Lord is that Jesus was called Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. I don’t know how to read the NT and not come away assuming that our task is to cooperate with God in helping people understand the salvation offered to them by Jesus’ death and resurrection, so that they begin a process of transformation as the Holy Spirit fills and empowers them. Transformed lives awakened to the reality of the spiritual world should be our bottom line. We can settle for nothing less than this as the primary goal of the church.

So let me try to illustrate that further by taking a moment to distinguish between mission and social service, because I think, in our tendency towards socialisation, we often get the two confused. Here’s a hypothetical example to illustrate the difference. Social service thinking, for argument’s sake, says, “There is a need in Toowong with homeless people who don’t have enough food. Let’s go and start a soup kitchen. Let’s use our facilities to develop a day shelter for homeless people. They can come here, they can use our toilets, give them a meal, stretchers so they can get some sleep.” That would be a social services response to a particular need and that’s a good thing. There’s nothing wrong with that, but I firmly believe God asks us to do more than that.

A missional response to that situation says, “Yes, let’s start a soup kitchen but that cannot be an end in itself. That’s just the first step in a journey. Some people might come just for the free feed, and if that’s the case, that’s fine. Of course we’ll provide for their needs. But we also have a responsibility to use that point of connection to link up homeless people with the resources they need to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness – and the primary resource we have to offer them is a living relationship with Jesus Christ who has the capacity through his Holy Spirit to transform them from the inside out.” To be sure that will require a lot more of us. In that circumstance the soup kitchen would need to be supported by life skills and mentoring and prayer and love and care and acceptance within a church community, amongst other things.

I don’t think we have anything like the material or personal resources to undertake that sort of project yet – and I only use it to illustrate the difference between social service provision and mission. But mission is the thing God calls us to.

So I’m working off the assumption that as a church, God is calling us to something much bigger and much more significant than just developing social networks amongst young adults and as I read the responses to the ‘miracle question’ the sense I get is that there is a strong desire for that amongst us generally as well.

How, then, do we start moving towards that? Let me introduce a second set of ideas.

One of the questions people often seem to struggle with is whether the church is an organism or an organisation. Some people want to assert that the church is primarily organic. To be successful, we need to let its life spontaneously emerge. It’s like a plant which will grow by itself, but if we handle the plant too much with human effort we’ll probably damage it. The emphasis here is on God’s sovereignty. “If God is at work, we must step back and let him do his thing,” say those who see the church in organic terms.

At the other end of the spectrum there are those who think of the church as an organisation and it needs lots of human attention and energy to im-