

# *Breathing New Life*

## **3 Bible Studies for BUV churches** Created by the BUV Regional Ministers as a companion to the ***New Churches 2009 DVD***

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The DVD is available from the BUV office at a cost of \$5

**Date: July 2009**

**This material invites our churches on a journey of biblical interaction with issues being presented through the Delegates Dinners in May and October 2009**



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## Study 1 : Making Space for God

Acts 10 - Peter and Cornelius

### Opening:

- When was the last time you changed your mind about something really important?  
*It might have been about the way you thought about someone or even about a belief that you held.*
- What caused you to change?

Spend time thinking about this. As we look at the story of Peter and think about our own attempts to change, we begin to realize what was being asked of him.

### Read the Bible Story: Acts 10 : 9-35

Salvation for the whole world! That's what we believe. And in the back of our minds, we usually have the unspoken assumption that it means everyone becoming like us, so it's a very comfortable thought.

The reality is very different.

The world is made up of people radically unlike us, people who have differences of culture, race, political persuasion, sexual orientation, gender ... all things that often cause us to separate from them.

Salvation is uncomfortable because it does *not* mean that the things we find offensive, scary, foreign, alien and incomprehensible about other people and places will be done away with.

As the church began to grow this was one of the things the early Jewish believers struggled with and found hard to understand. Their assumption was that the non-Jew first had to become a good Jew – or at least, like a good Jew!

### **When people become followers of Jesus do we expect them to become like us?**

Sometimes we hear the same things said of the migrants and refugees that come to Australia and we are tempted to say in our congregations, "*Why do they continue to dress differently?*" or "*Why don't they learn to speak English?*"

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Peter was already on a journey towards a new understanding of his world and the ways of God. How do we know this? Well a true Jew would never grace the door of a Tanner's house because they were considered unclean, yet Peter was staying with Simon the Tanner.

Luke, the writer of the Acts, obviously considers the story of Peter's Vision to be really important as he gives us two accounts of it, Acts 10 and then Peter's recounting of the story to the Jerusalem church in Acts 11:1-18.

Peter is praying on the roof when he has a vision. It is really not important what caused the vision but what it is about.

*"Although the vision challenged the basic distinctions between clean and unclean foods, which Peter had been brought up to make, the Spirit related this to the distinction between clean and unclean people, and told him to stop making it. That Peter grasped this is clear from his later statement: **'God has shown me that I should not call any (person) impure or unclean'**" (John Stott)*

We instinctively know that God does not have favourites and that some ethnic groups are not superior to others. Yet somehow, deep inside, we have these feelings of fear of difference. It is into this place that we need God to come and show us the truth, as God revealed it to Peter in his vision.

John Stott, in talking about the story of Peter, says that the story is not really about the conversion of Cornelius but about the conversion of Peter. Peter needed to understand that the heart of God was for those who were outside, for those who were not acceptable to him if he stayed within the narrow confines of his background. This was not to say that God loved the Jew any less but his love for his whole creation was much wider and deeper than Peter had understood.

Peter is being asked to make space in his life for a much bigger God than he had previously comprehended.

We are reminded here of J B Phillips book **Your God is too Small** where he says:

*"...if it's true that He's interested in me and wants me to love and serve Him, then He's available for me and every other Tom, Dick, or Harry, who wants Him, without any interference from the professionals. If God is God, He's BIG, and generous and magnificent, and I can't see that anybody can say they've made a 'corner' in God, or shut Him up in their particular box." (p.24)*

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- **How does this story encourage us to make space for God in our lives?**

Peter has to deal with a significantly different view of God than the view which he grew up with. Although he was already on the journey (Peter was staying at Simon the Tanner's house which shows that he had come a long way) it was still a big change in his understanding of God. And yet Peter is a hero of the faith because of his willingness to embrace this new understanding.

- **Why do we sometimes think that God is asking others to change but not us?**

Peter is challenged in his vision to get a wider view of God, a new understanding of God based on new experiences. We are forced by this passage to ask ourselves the question, "What might we be able to achieve for God if we had a more realistic view of Him?"

The story ends with the Kingdom of God being extended.

- **What might God be calling us to give up in order that his Kingdom might grow?**
- **If God is often calling us to new things and new ways, what could be some of the new things that he might be calling us to embrace?**

### **Watch the segment of the Church Planting DVD outlining some of the New Growth Corridors (1st segment on DVD)**

- What are some of the opportunities and challenges which these new Growth Corridors offer to us?

### **Close:**

Proverbs 27:17 says, ***"As iron sharpens iron, so one (person) sharpens another"***

A key element in God's plan for us is to build accountability into our lives.

- How can you help keep each other accountable as you ask what God wants you to do in the building up of his kingdom?

Pray about this together as you draw your time to a close.

## Study 2 : Identity and the call of Jesus

### Opening:

One of the things that frightens us about change in the church is the fear that we will lose things that have been central in shaping our identity, individually or as a church. This study seeks to help people to understand the fear... and to explore what the Gospel says about it.

### Ice breaker

(Suggestion: keep this ice breaker brief. Help people to connect briefly with the feelings involved, but don't get bogged down in discussing them.)

Can you think of a time when you have changed an aspect of your identity? *e.g.*

- *You previously thought of yourself as a single person... but chose to become a married person... and perhaps to invest in a family;*
- *You previously invested a great deal of yourself in a career or sport or the creative arts... but relinquished it to start a new adventure;*
- *You have moved to Australia from overseas and have gone through a process of changing some of your cultural identity...*

After some quiet moments for reflection, ask for one or two brief stories from the group.

- What are the feelings involved in changing your identity?

### Prayer

Loving God,

We know from the Bible that you are a God who calls your people on an adventure of faith. We are always on pilgrimage... always moving toward the hope of the Kingdom... always between the reality of your presence and the promise of your future.

Change can both excite and terrify us;  
both liberate and paralyse us.

When we are anxious, be our comfort,  
but most of all, help us not to turn aside from the call of your Gospel,  
but to follow you wherever you lead us.

For Jesus' sake,  
Amen

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### Reflection:

In his book, "The Crucified God," Jurgen Moltmann talks about the tension between the church's relevance and its identity.

- The closer the church moves toward engagement with society around it so that its message is relevant, the more it puts at risk a clearly defined identity.
- The more the church separates itself from society so that its identity is clear, the more it risks a loss of connection and relevance in its message.

➤ **Should the Baptist Church in 2009 be giving a higher priority to relevance or identity?**

The Biblical pattern invites us to see our identity – both as individuals and as a church – as attaching to Christ, not to buildings or programs.

This pattern involves a continuing, daily rhythm of relinquishing our attachments so that our single-minded focus may be on Jesus and his mission.

Jesus himself models this way in his single-minded focus on God:

*"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
Who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on the cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father."*

Philippians 2:5-11

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- **What do you think it means that Jesus “emptied himself”?** Can you think of any experiences or images from your life that might help you to understand what this might have meant for Jesus?

Jesus himself is clear that his way – and the way for his followers – is in relinquishing life in order to produce new life.

*“Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.’”*

John 12:20-26

- *Jesus makes it clear that the path to life, both for him and his followers, is through death. **How does this find expression in the life of your church? Have there been times when your church has laid something precious down in order to express the mission of Jesus?***

Can our identity get stuck in the wrong place?

When change is proposed for our church, we often feel unsettled and anxious. Here are some frequent things heard within churches facing change...

- This church contains so many of my memories: my wedding, the Sunday School Anniversaries with platforms that reached to the ceiling, the weddings of my children, my partner’s funeral. To change the church would be to lose my memories...
- The songs we sang when I first became a Christian still move me deeply today. They are the deepest songs of my heart’s worship of God. I can’t let them go for new music that does nothing for my worship...
- It was this craft group that saved me when I was in utter despair. Nothing can replace the love and friendship of this group. I’d be devastated if it closed...

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- I can't imagine how God could possibly be honoured by a church without the communion table in the centre. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus that lie at the heart of our faith and pushing it to one side while a community group has a singalong would be a denial of who we are...
- I'd like to see some changes, but Mr and Mrs Foundation give so much to the church that we don't like to oppose them...
- I hear about the need for changes to the way we do church, but I just can't imagine any other way...
- To give up now and close the doors or merge with another church would be letting God down, wouldn't it?
  - **Are there any of these voices that seem to echo your own?**
  - **What picture of the identity of the church do these statements suggest?**
  - **In the light of the passages we have discussed, what might it mean for us to identify ourselves as followers of Jesus?**

### **Watch the segment of the Church Planting DVD on the church plant in Wallan (final segment on DVD)**

- What struck you most strongly in listening to Andrew Adams talk about this new plant of a Christian community?
- In what ways does Wallan's story as described by Andrew talk about laying down our life so that God's new life can emerge?

### **Close:**

Spend some quiet moments thinking again about your identity as followers of Jesus, and the things you have shared together in this Study.

- What do you sense God is inviting you to?
- What do you sense is the invitation of God to your church?

Go around the group again, and share what you have heard.

## Study 3 : Risks and Responsibilities

Matthew 25 : 14-30 - Fear and Risk

### Opening:

When addressing the question – “*Why is it so difficult for churches to stop what they are doing and let go of ministries in order to enable something new to happen*” one of the main answers was ‘fear of failure’; fear of letting God down.

There was also a common response that churches often had a misplaced sense of faithfulness – a sense that it was better to just keep doggedly going, than to run the risk that it might all fall apart.

The Matthew passage and related activities try to address this issue, and encourage us to take risks and explore new things.

### Ice breakers

Choose one of the following:

1. Ask people to split into 2-3's and share something they once did that was completely 'out of character'. Maybe they had never done it before and will probably never do it again. (eg: skinny dipping, buying a wig, pretending to do a different job, going to a StarTrek convention...!)
  - o What did it feel like?
  - o Were there any consequences?

OR

2. Clear a space in the middle of a room and lay 6 eggs in a random pattern on the floor – no more than about 30-40 cm apart. Ask for a volunteer to be blindfolded, and carefully note the reactions, (without drawing attention to this). People will ask what they have to do (don't tell them); they will be hesitant. See how long it takes to get a volunteer.  
When you have your volunteer, ask them to note the position of the eggs and tell them that they have to walk across the room avoiding the eggs.  
While you are blindfolding them and instructing them, your 'assistant' quietly removes all the eggs – indicating to the group that this is a secret.  
Encourage the volunteer to walk carefully and make lots of nervous '*ooh nearly*', *aaghh!* sorts of noises, and lots of directions – *left a bit* – *well done* – *amazing!* which hopefully the rest of the group will pick up on and join in.

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After the traverse of the room, remove the blindfold, thank the volunteer for being a great sport and then do some debriefing:

- Why are we reluctant to volunteer for such things?
- What emotions did we feel about seeing the eggs and the blindfold?
- What made us hesitant about being blindfolded?
- Do we not trust our leader?
- What made the volunteer eventually take the risk?
- What did he/she feel like when they looked round and saw no eggs?

### **Read the Bible Story: Matthew 25:14-30**

(You might like to photocopy this and divide it into parts beforehand, so that the different characters are played by different members of the group)

- **When you hear the story who do you identify with? Who do you feel most like?**
- **Who are we supposed to aspire to be?**

The central drama in this parable is the behaviour of the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant.

- **Who do you think the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant might have represented when Jesus first told the parable? What is it about the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant's behaviour that distresses the master so much?**

(Note: it would be good to discuss the possibility that the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant is to be identified with the religious leaders of Jesus' day, who had received God's revelation, but had played safe in order to secure and protect their own salvation.)

- **What then is the behaviour of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> servants that is so commended by the Master in the story?**

There is no one interpretation of a parable. They are stories whose power impacts upon us in ways that address us with new possibilities for life. However, here are a couple of quotes from well known commentators you might find helpful:

*"Two of the servants take a risk, which of course could entail the loss of everything entrusted to them, because they know that what their lord has given them must be actively at work, must live, must affect something new. The third can only think of absolute security."*

E Schweizer, The Good News According to Matthew, p.471

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*"[The religious leaders]... sought to ensure their personal salvation by a scrupulous observance of the law while by their selfish exclusiveness they made religion sterile."*

J. Jeremias, The parables of Jesus, p. 48

Parables invite us to make connections to our own situations.

- **What does this say about church life?** We have been entrusted with people and resources – how are we investing them in the work of the Master?
- **What is 'being faithful' in this context?**
- We often equate faithfulness, with keeping going; making sure that the traditions are kept alive; upholding our responsibilities. We fear change in case everything falls apart. However, **what does this parable tell us about 'playing safe'?**
- **Can you identify situations or examples in your own church, where there is a tension between 'being faithful' and 'taking a risk'?**
- **What might Jesus be inviting us to reconsider?**

Pause for some quiet and prayer

### **Watch the segment of the Church Planting DVD on the Heartland church plant (2nd segment on DVD)**

- What particularly stirs in you as you reflect on what Mike said?
- How did he take a risk?

Pause again for some quiet to listen to what God might be saying to us in our situation.

Go around the group and ask each person to share one idea or thought that has come out of the time together.