

Looking Out

by Roger Harrington

Three years ago St Andrew's, Invercargill was on its knees - literally.

We faced closure as the congregation was in decline and the average age of parishioners was over 70. So we prayed and recommitted ourselves to God asking Him to lead us into the future. St Andrew's had been an inward looking bible-based church and we sensed from God that it was time to look out. We had an idea of gifting our neighbours packets of Easter Buns with a message saying: "The time of Easter is a special time for us as we remember that Jesus died on the cross for you and me. This is a gift from St Andrew's church." We gave out 1200 buns to appreciative neighbours including folk in nearby flats. Our contact with residents led us to inviting some men to a men's breakfast. Four came. Some had marriage, gambling and alcohol problems. Two of these men gave their lives to God and have joined the church, prayer and study groups and are even contributing to leadership.

This initial success spurred us on to seek more opportunities for connecting with our community. I read an article in a Christian magazine about an artist, Graham Braddock, who was teaching young people to paint and draw. This inspired us to offer art classes with the help of a gifted artist. This attracted children from all over the city. We approached two local schools to ask them to advertise our course. One turned us down, but the other was keen to chat to us about how else we could work together to serve the community. The principal told us they had funding to build a school garden but no parents would help. We took it to our church and they agreed to help. This involvement with the children and teachers at New River School was a turning point for our church. Environment Southland heard about our work and awarded us the Community Award for Southland including \$1000. We decided to give this back to our school as a \$250 gift voucher each year for four years to be awarded to a senior pupil who shows outstanding leadership during the year. The media got hold of the story and next minute our church was on the local TV and in the newspaper.

After finishing the garden we asked if there was something else we could do for the school. The principal asked if we could help with remedial reading for struggling children. 10 adults go to school weekly to hear these children read. This is yet another marvellous opportunity to build a relationship with these young people. And now many of these kids come to our ICONZ group. Who would have thought that a 76 year old man would go back to school to read and talk with children? And what a blessing it is to us and the children. When we go to school the children greet us with big smiles and hugs.

The school now holds its end of year break-up, Anzac services and concerts at St Andrew's church. 90% of these children had never entered a church before this.

This year we gave out Easter buns to all the children with a simple message about Easter. We now have ten of our people teaching Bible in this school, the highest number in the city.

We now have employed Teina Marie, as a chaplain to the school and Valoa Jack as a youth worker to the secondary school. This was made possible by generous funding from the Synod of Otago and Southland.

As a result of the work of these leaders and many others in our church, 12 young people have given their lives to God and attend weekly study and leadership groups. A youth service is held monthly and last time 27 young people sang, read the Bible and prayed with guidance from the leaders. This has not been seen at St Andrew's for the last 25 years.

My wife Marie and I began distributing unsold baking donated by a local supermarket each week to struggling families in our community. As we deliver this food we connect with people and witness for Christ as we serve them in love. Many of these people have joined our church. Half a dozen church volunteers formed a Mon-Sat roster to assist us with the 'bun-run'.

We are now a multi cultural church that is once again growing.

What has happened at St Andrew's is beyond belief. But it's what can happen when you take a step of faith and let God lead you out of your comfort zone.

10 tips from St Andrew's:

- Commit your mission to God.
- Make friends with a local school and offer some practical help.
- Don't "bible bash" or preach but build a caring relationship with the teachers and pupils.
- Make the church facilities available to the school and community.
- Prioritise your ministry to children through groups such as ICONZ, their parents will follow.
- Listen out for opportunities.
- Be bold, don't be put off by doubters in your church, they will change when they see the results.
- Doing ministry is key if you want your church to grow.
- Identify your people's gifts and encourage them to use them.
- If you can't do it on your own, join with another church to release funds and grow a missional church.