



## GRIEF & LOSS

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Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

## welcome...

*I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink... (Psalm 102)*

Grief and loss are not comfortable topics or experiences. Although they are common to all of us, we find it hard to deal with them in ourselves or others. Our society wants to avoid and deny pain at all costs. It handles emotional pain even worse than physical pain. We're expected to "get over it" or "move on". Yet grief doesn't run to a timetable. Sadly, as Christians, we're often not any better at dealing with grief. We tell ourselves it's not hurting or that we should feel better by now. We avoid those who are suffering or offer trite comments about it being "the Lord's will".

Grief and loss are isolating. Others do not feel them at the same time or in the same way as us. Even those closest to us will react differently to a shared grief. This issue of *ishah* tries to break down the isolation by bringing grief and loss into the open. Our writers share their intensely personal experiences of grief – what it is like to lose a child at birth and how it feels to be single and childless. But they also share their heartfelt questions and cries to God. How can we trust God when in times of suffering and loss we can't see any hope or meaning? Where is God in our grief?

Our hope is that the honesty of the writers here will comfort you and encourage you to be honest about your own grief and loss; that you will gain insight and understanding of others who grieve; and that you will be helped to hold on to your faith in our suffering God.

*May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy... (Psalm 126)*

## The Editors

**ISSUES  
TO  
COME...**

**ISSUE 9:  
PRAYER**

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BIOETHICS**

## our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the *ishah* editorial committee.

# A GRIEF OBSERVED

BY CLAIRE LIVINGSTONE

> In an era where we hold happiness as the ultimate goal, grief is out of place. Uncomfortable and difficult emotions are regarded as "bad", things to be avoided and overcome. Easier and more pleasant emotions are what we search for. Yet we can be certain this roller-coaster of life will offer us a myriad of experiences - both difficult and pleasant.

Grief, commonly only linked with death, can be experienced with any change or perception of loss. Even changes that have been planned and are perceived as "good" can bring with them unexpected times of grief. What is our attitude to grief? Is there a "normal" way of grieving? Does our faith in God make any difference in the face of loss?

## RECOGNISED AND UNRECOGNISED GRIEF

From our infancy we learn we don't always get what we want. So many different events can introduce us to grief and loss - watching your parents argue; failing to achieve a goal; changing schools; being teased; the death of a pet or person we love.

Loss is a very personal experience. What I perceive as loss, someone else may not. My loss may not even be visible to anyone else. Some losses are obvious: leaving a job; moving house; illness; the death of a loved one. Others, though, are less recognised: an unrealised dream; miscarriage; loss of youthfulness; a wayward child; singleness; childlessness; menopause. Often grief is unrecognised because it's associated with events that are regarded as part of the normal cycle of life: giving up a career to raise children; an adult child leaving home; retirement.

One loss can be linked with others. Although the birth of a child is usually a welcome event it can lead to losses - such as a paid job and a drop in income; a sense of identity or autonomy; a sense of achievement or confidence. The end of a relationship, moving house, changing jobs, conclusion of a holiday or dealing with illness can all include loss on many levels.

We like to think grief ultimately has an end, but for many people grief is something they face each day. Mental or physical illness, abuse, addiction, disability and shattered dreams all have something in common - they can cause those affected, whether directly or indirectly, to face long-term grief.

## EXPRESSING GRIEF

Given that there are many different types of loss, is there a "normal" grieving process? Are there "right" ways to express grief?

The deepest loss I've ever known was the birth and death of our third child, Janna, ten years ago. One of

the best analogies I've heard about dealing with the death of someone close to you is that it's like losing an arm or a leg. You have to learn to live without it. There are days when you don't even notice it's gone, but there are other days when you're all too aware of the loss.

Giving birth to death is the most surreal experience I think I'll ever have. The people who were the most comfort for me were those who wordlessly cried with us. Their tears validated my tears. Tears said that this wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

For me, the next twelve months were a black hole of desperate pain, both emotionally and physically. In the beginning my arms literally ached from wanting to hold my baby. I felt as though a part of me had been ripped from within and physically felt a deep void within my body. I experienced stomach pain, jaw pain, headaches, appetite changes - and an incredibly deep despair and sadness. I felt a desperate loneliness that no one could bridge. I felt angry, powerless and hopeless.

The nights were unbearably long. Many times my husband found me on the lounge room floor punching myself, crying and moaning from someplace deep within. But the mornings brought no relief - there'd be a fraction of a second when I first woke when I'd feel okay, then I'd remember and the pain would envelop me.

One of the hardest things was still being a mum to two young boys: caring for them in their grief; being patient when they fought; taking care of their practical needs; loving them in the midst of my darkness. There were times when I was alone and I wanted to drive the car into a power pole - but I was stopped by the thought of my sons.

I tell my story to illustrate one person's experience of grief, and only part of that journey. We are all so very different that we can't even begin to compare our experiences of loss and grief. There may be some similarities, some shared emotions, but the expression of those emotions will be unique to each person.

My husband's experience of grief was quite different to mine. When he first heard the news he went into what he calls "intellectual mode". Andrew understood the news that his daughter wasn't going to live, but he had no idea how he'd feel. He says it was like trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together without knowing what the pieces or the picture looked like. Thirty hours later Janna was placed into his arms – still breathing and kicking. "The pieces suddenly snapped together," he said "and not only did I sob, but I howled from a depth within my very being. There was deep joy at her life, but deep grief at knowing it would end at any minute".

Andrew's tears stopped after a few days, to be replaced by lethargy, depression and a lack of patience. It took him a while to realise that was his way of expressing the deep grief he felt.

I found many active ways of expressing my emotions over the months - journaling; drawing; reading literature about grief; attending a support group; making a photo album; crying; yelling at God; talking with friends who could sit with me in the midst of my pain; cuddling a soft toy; washing and hanging out the baby clothes I'd unpacked, before packing them away again.

There are two sure things about grief: it lasts longer than you want it to; and it hurts deeper than you want it to. For many people there will come a time when a moment of happiness appears, when another day brings an hour of light. One evening they may go to bed realising they had enjoyed the whole day. For others, grief will be something they learn to adapt to, without it defining their whole being.

As carers we often find it difficult to be with those who grieve because their pain causes us discomfort. We feel powerless. It challenges us to look at uncomfortable aspects of ourselves. Learning to walk with someone who hurts isn't easy, but it can be done. We can't "fix them", but we can love them. Offering platitudes is unhelpful, but we can ask them what they need. We can ask them what they find difficult. We can listen patiently over and over again. In our caring we can reassure those in pain that they are more than their pain – we can treat them as whole people.

## FAITH & GRIEF

*Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, if you turn to Him then with praise, you will be welcomed with open arms...But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away...*

So wrote C.S.Lewis after his wife's death. Lewis gives us an insight into the reality of living through grief, and how he grapples with what he knows in his head, and what he experiences in his heart.

The psalmist had similar feelings. "My God, my God, why have you deserted me? Why are you so far away?"

Won't you listen to my groans and come to my rescue? I cry out day and night, but you don't answer, and I can never rest" (Psalm 22).

Struggling with God in the midst of pain is not new. In the bible, Job spends time trying to understand why God allows his suffering to continue. When God finally speaks to Job he doesn't offer any answers to his questions. He simply points out that He is God – and Job is not!

There are many parts of scripture where people rail against God, where they cry out in lament. In doing so, God's sovereignty is being acknowledged. He is in control of this world. Ultimately, the buck stops with Him. So yell at Him your questions, cry out to Him your pain, tell Him of your confusion. Then, sit with Him in silence.

The question I kept hearing was "will you serve me no matter what?". The first time I heard it I cried back - "even if it means you take my daughter?". The quiet answer was yes - "will you serve me simply because I'm God?"

God is God, and we are not. He hasn't promised constant happiness in this life – that's a lie of this world. He has promised He has a plan for this world and He is fulfilling that plan. God is faithful to his promises. Christ is proof of that. Until his return we live in the "now and not yet" of his Kingdom. God's Kingdom is here, but not fully. This world is still in pain – but as God's people we know there will come a time when God will reign completely – when there'll be no more tears, and no more mourning (Revelation 21).

God is the majestic Creator of the Universe. He rules over all things. He is to be feared and held in awe. Yet our Majestic Creator also knows how many hairs are on our head! He chose us before the creation of the world to be His children in Christ (Ephesians 1). He knows and loves each of us intimately. In restoring a sense of awe within us, God can increase our sense of intimacy with him.

Our purpose in life is to bring glory to God – even if that life only lasts four hours. We can learn to be satisfied in God, even though we may not be satisfied with our circumstances. We need to be careful that our desire for a comfortable life is not greater than our desire to know God. We can hold firm to the hope of Christ's return. We can experience the roller-coaster of life and know God is to be trusted.

Grief is not something to "get over", but a human experience through which we can grow together as God's people, and through which we can find a deeper relationship with God.

## Reference:

Lewis, C.S. (Reprint, 2001). *A Grief Observed*. Harper Collins, San Francisco.

■ Claire Livingstone is a former pastoral worker who has a particular interest in mentoring. She attends All Saints Greensborough with her husband and two boys.

## BOOK REVIEW

Steve Stockman. (2002). *Walk On – The Spiritual Journey of U2*. Creation House.

U2 are one of the world's biggest rock bands – they also happen to be one of the world's leading voices of faith and social activism. Despite their "rock lifestyle", this book argues that faith and a definite Biblical agenda drive the lives and work of U2. The book is not a biography but a spiritual companion to the band's career, exploring the questions and controversy surrounding both the faith of the band members and the religious themes in its music. From the group's beginnings at the Shalom Christian Fellowship in Dublin to their most recent album, this book chronicles the struggles and triumphs of the band members' Christian faith. It should be noted that the band's bass player, Adam, has never confessed to a Christian faith but the book suggests the remaining members believe that having a "sceptic" within the group has forced them to apply their faith to wider issues.

Authored by a Presbyterian minister who works as Chaplain at Queen's University in Belfast, the book contains background and quotations from a range of sources. Some understanding of the religious, political and social climate of Northern Ireland in the 1980s is provided to help the reader understand U2's work. Coming from a country marred by denominational violence, U2 have stated publicly that they have found a relationship with God beyond the denominational divide.

The book outlines the tremendous amount that U2, and particularly lead singer Bono, have done to alleviate Third World debt through supporting Live Aid, Amnesty International and Conspiracy of Hope. The book argues that the band members really believe that music can change the world. As Bono said in 1988 - "To me, faith in Jesus Christ that is not aligned to social justice – that is not aligned with the poor – is nothing".

U2 have received criticism from Christians for being too "worldly" and from the music press and fans for being too "holy". As Christians, *Walk On* challenges us to look beyond the drinking, smoking and swearing, to look beyond our middle class expectations and focus on Biblical principles. The book asks us: if Jesus calls Christians to rally against neglect of social justice, materialistic greed, and bigoted prejudice and we ignore this call, but don't swear and attend church once a week, how can we become spiritually strong? Some Christians have also been suspicious of the bands' political awareness. The book suggests that the band is trying to do what Jesus called his disciples to do (think of Matthew 25:31-46).

U2 claim to believe in a God who is bigger than the Church or religious boundaries. Bono is quoted as saying "Religion has torn this country [Ireland] apart. I am a Christian but at times feel very removed from Christianity". This has led some of the Christian community to shun U2, not realising that their music looks at faith from different angles. The book suggests that artists should give another view of something familiar to help us learn about it. Is Christianity static once we have "found" God, or is it a journey because we "Still Haven't Found" what we are looking for?

■ *Jane Nice is a full-time Mum who attends Wendouree Uniting Church (Ballarat) where she is very involved in the music program. She can be contacted at nice@giant.net.au.*

## write of reply

*ishah welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed (to ishahmag@hotmail.com) or posted (to ishah, c/- 23 Bundoran Parade, Mont Albert North VIC 3129).*

I am writing in response to Kathryn Fletcher's informative, challenging article on the Virgin of Guadalupe. I was challenged to pray more for all Christians living and working in this and similarly challenging situations. Could a secondary challenge to the fundamental one Kathryn mentions in her last paragraph be to identify and then involve committed and influential Christians on the other side of the wall in the rich suburb of south Mexico City? Could they be encouraged and guided to do something about the conditions of poverty which make people more inclined to fall easy prey to false teachings?

**Christine Bradbeer**  
Hawthorn, VIC

### NOTICE BOARD >

A short course examining women's ministries will be run at the Presbyterian Theological College in Melbourne over the next few months. Featuring a range of speakers including Jenny Letcher, Helen Bell and Ruth Owen, the course will cover a number of topics such as evangelising women, mentoring, working with children, chaplaincy and being a Christian mother. Lectures will be held on Wednesday nights from 7.15pm to 9.15pm. The course begins July 30 and ends September 3. For more information please call (03) 9898 9384 or 9886 7670.

*Are you organising a special event for women our readers may be interested in? Send us a short email with details to ishahmag@hotmail.com and we will publish it on our new noticeboard.*

This is a glimpse of how I kept my faith during a difficult few years.

My husband was at work. I was driving home from taking two of my children to school. Another was still in hospital. The medical profession seemed unable to agree on how best to care for her. I was trying to tell myself things like "Every family at one time or another faces pain, suffering, illness. You are not the only one in this situation. You have three other family members who need your care. Come on, get your act together! You've dealt with people and situations like this before!" So why then did I feel so angry, alone and helpless?

I was angry with God. I quoted the bible to God, trying to remind Him about the kind of God He said He was and asked why He had let me down. I felt I was doing my best so why wasn't He working for my daughter's good also? How unfair! I sat in silence waiting for a response and all I heard was the sound of my own sobs. God was silent. Later, another setback came for our daughter. In my despair I raised a particular bible passage with another person who gently said "You know what you are talking about is a general principle not a promise". Again I was shocked. In disbelief I reread the passage. I had heard what I'd wanted to hear, not what God's Word was actually saying. Suddenly the sense of control that I thought I had was gone. I felt vulnerable and exposed - this grief and loss was exposing my unhelpful beliefs.

Another belief that I questioned was whether God's grace was sufficient for me regardless of the outcome. My head said yes. But when I looked at my daughter, saw her pain and had to rely on people I didn't know, people whose world views I didn't agree with, my heart said no. I did not feel it and I could not see how God's grace was sufficient. This pushed the boundaries of my faith. More questions came. What is faith? What do I believe? I grew up with a belief that "seeing is believing" and in this crisis I had automatically started behaving this way. Then I remembered that faith is about trusting God even when I cannot see or understand what is happening.

The fact that I felt angry, resentful, alone, helpless, vulnerable, says I have feelings and I'm human. What I do with these feelings says something about the nature of my relationship with Jesus. Do I take my feelings of grief and pain to Jesus or do I turn away from him? Sometimes well-meaning people were very thoughtless and said hurtful things like, "don't worry, she will be all right". How was I supposed not to worry when the doctors didn't know the right course of action, my daughter was getting sicker and I knew death was one possible outcome? Or "pray about it". What was I to do when I tried to pray and the words just wouldn't come? I ended up feeling guilty and a failure as a mother and a Christian. Sometimes I held unhelpful beliefs and talked myself down. Sometimes things were beyond anybody's control. I blamed Jesus - even though I knew it wasn't his fault. I remembered Isaiah 42:29 - "A bruised reed he will not break, a smouldering wick he will not snuff out". I certainly felt bruised and sometimes my faith just smouldered.

With this passage in mind I prayed to God to show me how sufficient His grace really was. And over time God has faithfully shown His grace to me. He has done this through my brothers and sisters in Christ who committed themselves to listen and pray for me and my family - for however long it took. Kind people who did not know Jesus came with meals and offers to stay at home so I could go and stay at the hospital. Jesus also spoke to me through books, phone calls, a goodnight's sleep, even miracles.

I also learnt that grace and forgiveness aren't something that I get to keep for myself. I am supposed to forgive others and pass God's grace on. My daughter didn't get better for a few years. What I can tell you is when I risked laying my fears, my feelings, my unhelpful beliefs at the foot of the cross the grace and forgiveness that flowed back was how my faith survived.

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■ Clarissa Wilson has a background in nursing and midwifery. She is a loss and grief counsellor and parent youth mediator. At present she is a full time mother and does part time volunteer pastoral care work. She can be contacted at [icfwilson@netspace.net.au](mailto:icfwilson@netspace.net.au)

# The Grief of "Never Having Had"

BY LISA McLEAN

I recently visited a cousin who is researching our family tree. She has a page for each person in our family with the details genealogists rely on – birth date, marriage and divorce dates, names and birth dates of offspring, death and funeral dates. My page looks a bit blank and empty. These are fundamental details of our lives – where we come from, who we marry or attach ourselves to, who we give life to. One generation leads to the next – or so we suppose.

There is real grief in childlessness. Not the grief of having lost someone precious, but the grief of never having had someone, the jarring realisation that something we regard as a core human expectation is not going to be fulfilled. We expect to be healthy, to earn a decent living, to feel loved and secure, to get married and have kids.

I prayed for children for twenty years then gave up. I think God has finally answered my prayer by steering me towards middle age. The thought of small, demanding children is not so enticing now that I'm over 40. But for twenty years, I felt this yearning like an open wound. It deeply offends my sense of justice to see some very underserving people bringing children into the world. I tried not to be resentful and envious but it was only when I accepted that it was appropriate to grieve over the children I never had that I began to move on.

This grief doesn't stop me from being genuinely happy for my friends

and sisters when they give birth and watch the many milestones of their children's lives with pride and joy. And I feel for them as they deal with the frustrations and anxious times and disappointment that parenthood inevitably brings. But there won't be someone with my eyes or hair, someone to whom I can pass on a family name, someone to whom I am most important and this will always feel like a loss.

I lost my father to cancer more than two years ago. I miss him dreadfully. But I am so grateful for the depth of the relationship I had with him, for the way in which my life was so enriched and influenced, and for the many memories I have. The grief of losing someone like that is very different to the grief of "never having had". In my childlessness, there is an emptiness which cannot be comforted by memories, there is no "better to have loved and lost..."

Where is God in all of this? I'll be honest and say that I have often been angry with his apparent lack of concern. I prayed for something human and biblical but his answer has been no. He and I appear to disagree about what my needs are. I've had to deal, however reluctantly, with the idea that God has other plans for my life. I have never been homeless or unloved. I have reasonable self-esteem. I have some useful gifts. I've been chronically ill and broke and unemployed but even in those times I experienced his most generous love through the care and kindness of other people. This has taught me that the Christian life is not about worldly notions of success but faith which is tested in order to bring about maturity (James 1:2-4). It's also about an outlook which is based more on the hope of the eternal than the satisfaction of the here and now (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

So what do I do? I've decided to enjoy my solitude and independence – to accept them as gifts rather than burdens. I've decided overseas travel is some compensation for being alone. And I have deliberately cultivated relationships with the five most beautiful children in the world, my nieces and nephews. And, in all of this, I won't succumb to the lie that is fed to modern women – that we can have it all. Most of us don't, and those who do are just plain exhausted trying to juggle so many balls in the air.

As in many experiences of grief, there are times when I relapse. Just when I think I'm doing well, some trigger reduces me to a blubbery mess. I don't believe that a linear model of grieving is helpful, one in which we keep moving (or sitting) on a path that leads in one direction – from sorrow to recovery. Grief is messy and, in my experience, we roll all over the place for an indeterminate time. I do believe we need to allow ourselves to experience the hurt without completely succumbing to it and resist the temptation to seek a quick repair job. And while God and I disagree about some of my needs, I take comfort in the fact that he is still my guide, companion and redeemer.

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines...yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)*

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■ Lisa McLean teaches Music and Religious Education in a Catholic primary school. She attends St. Jude's Anglican church in Carlton. contact: [lisamclean@optusnet.com.au](mailto:lisamclean@optusnet.com.au)

# RESOURCE GUIDE >

## SOME HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS

- > Find two or three people who will listen to you in a non-judgemental way no matter what you say and who will commit to pray for you and your situation for as long as it takes. Choose people whose wisdom you respect so when they gently speak the truth you can hear it.
- > When your grieving interferes with you living your normal life seek professional help.

## SOME USEFUL BOOKS

- > Granger E. Westberg *Good Grief* (Fortress Press, 1979)
- > Philip Yancy *Disappointment with God* (HarperCollins, 1991)
- > Nicholas Wolterstorff *Lament for a Son* (WM and B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1987)
- > C.S. Lewis *A Grief Observed* (Reprint Harper Collins, 2001)
- > Philip Yancy *Where is God When it Hurts?* (Reprint Zondervan, 2001)
- > John S. Feinberg *Deceived By God?* (Crossway Books, 1997)
- > R. Davis. *My Journey into Alzheimer's Disease* (Tindale House, 1989)

- > Mal McKissock *Coping with Grief* (Australian Broadcasting Commission)

For those in Melbourne, the *Open Leaves Bookshop* is a specialist bookshop and stocks a great deal of material which can't be found elsewhere. It is located at 71 Cardigan St., Carlton.

## SOME USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS

- > Lifeline: 13 11 14
- > Bereavement Counselling Service in Melbourne: (free service) (03) 9817 7266

## SOME USEFUL WEBSITES

- > [www.grief.org.au/welcome.html](http://www.grief.org.au/welcome.html)  
A great site from the Centre for Grief Education in Melbourne. It has links to other internet sites, lists of support groups and other helpful material.
- > [www.grieflink.asn.au/welcomefp.html](http://www.grieflink.asn.au/welcomefp.html)  
An excellent site covering a huge range of topics including coping with grief, helping the bereaved, grief after miscarriage, unrecognised grief etc.

*Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.*

## Who is My Neighbour?

The press won't let us think that Muslims are our neighbours. Muslim women have now joined the throng of potential terrorists and promulgators of "barbarism". Who can forget the images of female Chechen terrorists in the Moscow theatre, wielding machine guns, strapped with explosives, swathed in their impenetrable headscarves? We were equally shocked when it was revealed that young Palestinian women – not to mention Iraqis – were now joining the ranks of suicide bombers. How can these women be part of our "sisterhood"?

The media have convinced us that Muslim women are alien to us in the West. If they aren't spitting hate, they are absurd - they wear headscarves that to us can only symbolise subjection (even when they fight for the right to wear them, as in Turkey), they refuse the Pill, they find themselves trapped in a private world of home, children and other women.

Muslims are our neighbours. Where I live in The Hague, young Turkish women shop with me in Esprit; they travel with me by train to work (headscarves matched to their suits); they slow my progress through our town centre, pushing laden prams, children tripping alongside. I am struck by their modesty, that old-fashioned Biblical virtue we Western women often forget in our desire to express ourselves freely. I am struck by their social values, where the role of mother is not devalued but praised. And I am struck by the quiet dignity that accompanies their obvious differences, not the least their distinctive dress. I have been guilty of thinking these characteristics only represent oppression.

These women are part of our sisterhood. Their private stories are often lost to us. They are women created in the image of God, fallen and struggling toward truth, but nonetheless bearing that divine mark. Some of them (perhaps justifiably) think we are their enemies. We who belong to Christ must love them as we love ourselves, as our neighbours. For Christ is our peace; he is the One who breaks down the dividing walls of hostility and misunderstanding.

*Anne Messer is a former member of St Jude's Anglican Church, Carlton. She now lives in the Netherlands, where Muslim immigrants from Turkey and Morocco make up approximately 4.5% of the population.*

