



Ministry update for Synod 2021

Theology and the Arts

Theology and the Arts resourced many congregations and presbyteries and collaborated with other eLM colleagues on several face to face projects before the pandemic struck. A Lenten Study on The Shape of Suffering drew people from across the Bellarine Peninsula. The move online saw creative Lent and Easter COVID19 resources posted on the Synod website. Artists quickly responded with poetry and photography, visio divina and labyrinth activities, and movement-based prayer resources. Artists embraced creative uses





of Zoom technology. Music and image supported Zoom gatherings for a Chaplains Retreat, hand labyrinth meditations. Christina led the Priority Focus and Advocacy team in a Reflection on Steadiness during these challenging times.

Many artist networks across the Synod quickly moved into the online space to meet and continue creating, finding a different energy and extending their reach. Artist talks, Interplay workshops, labyrinth facilitator training and a plethora of online workshops offered opportunities for artists to extend skillsets and nurture creativity. The work arising from these was profound, prolific and vibrant. Storytellers and slow stitchers continued meeting, The VicTas Arts and Spirituality Network found Zoom meetings made it more possible for regional artists to attend and share their current artwork.

At many Uniting Churches, the doors of the church building may have been closed, but the windows to the street were enlivened with visual art, poetry, and photography installations communicating the Gospel message with their local community. Isolated Art, an exhibition of the window installations at Fairfield Uniting Church, devised by Nicki Williams with artist Pearl Taylor, will be displayed in the CTM gallery in Feb – March 2021.

Unfortunately, some activities just had to be cancelled, among them Sacrededge Festival. Since 2014 this event has been hosted by Queenscliff-Point Lonsdale Uniting Church. A core value expressed by the congregation is to grow artistic and creative opportunities to explore meaning and nurture relationships with the wider community, young people and visitors. The congregation embodies this value through regular arts events and activities. Watch the Festival [webpage](#) for plans in 2021.

The Unmasked Festival is a new community festival planned for 6 -7 March 2021, drawing the entire town of Blackwood together to celebrate the restoration of the 125 year-old Blackwood Uniting Church. Anticipation is building, with plans for a procession through the town, an art exhibition, followed by a program of music, dance and childrens' activities.

Manningham Uniting Church has embarked on a significant commission of artwork. An Indigenous mural will be designed and installed by Robert Michael Young, flanked by further artworks to be developed in consultation with community groups.

The eLM Peace Labyrinth has offered a centring reflective space in this reporting period. This canvas 7-circuit Chartres style labyrinth is available for loan. I introduced the labyrinth to many congregations from Colac to Sale. The canvas labyrinth served reflective walks and workshops at presbytery retreats, worship at Wheelers Hill Uniting Church and in the CTM for prayer after the Christchurch terror attack. During lockdown, I offered hand labyrinth meditations on Zoom for workshops, a chaplains' retreat and the John Paver Centre, Clinical Pastoral Education course.

In 2005 I was commissioned to provoke and stimulate the church by engaging artists, resourcing and advocating for theological reflection through the arts, and to create networks to encourage artists. These many years later, as I conclude my placement, I see ample evidence in our Synod of congregations connecting with their communities; alive to the grace of God and expressing their faith, sharing welcome, hospitality, and working for justice through a myriad of artforms.

A significant artwork by Filipino artist Emmanuel Garibay has been donated to the Centre for Theology and Ministry and will signify the legacy of my ministry. This poignant and paradoxical painting, an *Ecco Homo (Behold the Man)* image, shows the wounds of Christ. Historically the trope shows the scourged Christ with the marks of crucifixion before death. Garibay's image can also be viewed as a resurrection image, as





Christ's broken heart is mended. He is portrayed with both an internal and external focus with eyes downcast, and eyes gazing outward.

As I gaze on this painting, it prompts a blessing and a call to action. May the arts and artists continue to thrive in the life of the Uniting Church and the communities in which we minister. May the arts nourish the life of faith deep within us, from which our actions in the world spring forth. May our eyes be opened to injustice and suffering. May we be known as those who carry hope and joy, peace and hospitality where we are called to serve, sharing in and through our bodies the liberating love of Christ that leads to abundant life.

The painting will be installed at the entrance to the CTM Chapel in early 2021.

Christina Rowntree

*Image from front page:
Emmanuel Garibay
Christ Liberator
2002
oil on canvas*

Gift of the artist, facilitated by Rev Dr Rod Pattenden, to celebrate the ministry of Christina Rowntree in stimulating and provoking the arts in the life of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, 2005 - 2020.

