



A Lifeboat for Drowning Souls...

Dear Friend and member of Hunter Bible Church,

Its great to be back! Emma, James, Sophia and I have spent the last six months in Melbourne. From April to June we were on Long Service Leave. We explored Victoria, from the fairy penguins of Philip Island to the snow on Mount Buller and the laneways of the inner city. What a holiday!

I then spent July to September reading, praying, thinking, meeting with church leaders, visiting churches and doing evangelism. And all the while I've been thinking about how to summarise what I've learned and been most convicted by.

And I reckon a story by William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army pretty much sums it up...

*“On one of my recent journeys, as I gazed from the coach window, I was led to think about the multitudes around me. They were living carelessly in open and shameless rebellion against God, without a thought for their eternal welfare. While my mind was thus engaged, I had a vision...
I saw a dark and stormy ocean. Over it the black clouds hung heavily; through them every now and then vivid lightning flashed and loud thunder rolled, the winds moaned and the waves rose and foamed, towered and broke, only to rise and foam, tower and break again.
In that ocean I saw myriads of poor human beings plunging and floating, shouting and shrieking, cursing and struggling and drowning; and as they cursed and screamed they rose and shrieked again, and then some sank to rise no more.*

As we've lived in Melbourne and grown to love our new friends we've been struck again that people without Jesus are poor, struggling wretches, plunging and floating, shouting and shrieking, cursing and struggling and drowning.

I spent each Friday with a man named Craig, who from the outside seems to have it all. He owns a beautiful nursery in Olinda (which is a bit like Leura in the Blue Mountains). He's wealthy, free to follow his dreams, owns a lovely home, has a stable relationship with his partner, Rick (they're gay). Most people would think he's got it all!

But as I got to know and love him I could see that without Jesus, his life is essentially meaningless. He doesn't know why he's here or why he's valuable. He doesn't know the God who created the beautiful plants and trees he works with every day. He knows so much more about his plants than I ever will but he can't appreciate them half as much because he doesn't know the God who gave them to him. He can never thank God for them!

And far worse than that, at the end of his life, Craig will face the God he has rejected to be judged. He looks like he has it all! But in reality, as much as I love him, he's a drowning man.

And isn't that true of so many our most beloved friends and family? Here in Newcastle, we have it all; beautiful beaches, a great climate, an easy drive to Port Stephens, the wineries and Sydney. Houses are cheap, the roads are clear. People in Newcastle have got it made! But in reality, Newcastle is under water.

Because these same people don't know their Father, who created them and loves them and gives them dignity, meaning and purpose. They have so many of God's good gifts but they can never fully enjoy them because they don't know the giver! In fact, by rejecting the good God, they replace so much

pleasure with sin, pain, confusion and lostness. And worst of all the people of Newcastle will soon face a God who's terribly angry at them because of their rebellion. They're lost at sea. It's a tragedy! And yet, Booth's story continues...

And I saw out of this dark angry ocean, a mighty rock that rose up with it's summit towering high above the black clouds that overhung the stormy sea. And all around the base of this great rock I saw a vast platform. Onto this platform, I saw with delight a number of the poor struggling, drowning wretches continually climbing out of the angry ocean. And I saw that a few of those who were already safe on the platform were helping the poor creatures still in the angry waters to reach the place of safety.

On looking more closely I found a number of those who had been rescued, industriously working and scheming by ladders, ropes, boats and other means more effective, to deliver the poor strugglers out of the sea. Here and there were some who actually jumped into the water, regardless of the consequences in their passion to "rescue the perishing." And I hardly know which gladdened me the most- the sight of the poor drowning people climbing onto the rocks reaching a place of safety, or the devotion and self-sacrifice of those whose whole being was wrapped up in the effort for their deliverance."

The second thing I've realised again and again over these past six months is that Jesus is the mighty rock. He towers above the sea and the clouds! He rescues drowning souls because Jesus plunged into the sea with us. He lived in our awful world and died for us. And by dying for us Jesus takes away God's dreadful anger. Jesus plucks us out of the sea! And some day soon he'll take us to the mainland.

Friends, this is momentous news! Alone in the world, Jesus' people are safe! We're not just another subgroup in Newcastle; Knights Fans, Jets Fans, Surf Club members... we're the only safe people in a drowning city! And so we're the people of joy and purpose and meaning. Don't you just love Booth's description of Christians in the story? We're the people who are *"industriously working and scheming by ladders, ropes, boats and other means more effective, to deliver the poor strugglers out of the sea."*

We're the people who... *"actually jump into the water, regardless of the consequences in their passion to "rescue the perishing."*

That's us, friends; the Christians of Newcastle and the people of Hunter Bible Church! That's our job; to deliver the poor stragglers out of the sea. To jump into the water of life with our friends, families, work mates, soccer team mates, school friends, University class mates, regardless of the consequences to rescue the perishing. Hunter Bible Church is a lifeboat!

Over the past six months my conviction has been doubled, tripled that Hunter Bible Church must commit itself to saving drowning souls in Newcastle. We must beg God to rescue thousands, because it is God who saves, isn't it? And yet he uses his people to do it. Ordinary people like us, who used to be drowning but have been dragged up onto the rock. Weak people, unconfident people who still have the water of sin in our lungs, but Jesus' people.

My strongest conviction is that we must beg God to save thousands of people in Newcastle. We're a city of 300, 000. Let's pray that God will give Jesus 30, 000 to praise his name and live for his glory. And let's pray that God will honour us by letting us join him in the effort. Let's pray that God will enable us to drag thousands into the lifeboat.

My firm opinion is that the best way to reach Newcastle is with three strong churches of 2000 people or more. One of these will (I pray) be the current Hunter Bible Church, one down on Lake Macquarie and after that one up in Port Stephens.

Those three churches can then fund the planting of dozens of smaller churches and ministries to youth, school students, city workers, blue collar workers, housing commissions, people with addictions, the unemployed, the homeless, single parents, sea- men in the port, the University, sporting groups, aid organisations. All of these ministries can be planted to reach our drowning city. Imagine the people who could hear about Jesus! Imagine the lives and eternities changed!

I used to think that we just needed to plant lots of smaller churches. But I've come to realise that most smaller churches get planted out of large ones. We need a few parent churches with deep pockets and generous hearts to gather the people and the resources and then send them off.

I think we ought to look to plant down on Lake Macquarie some time in 2011.

What will stop us from doing all this? Well, it might be that God simply chooses not to use us. In his infinite goodness, Hunter Bible Church will never be any more or less than God chooses. But, you know, there's more to Booth's story...

"As I looked on, I saw that few of the people on the platform seemed to make it their business to get the people out of the sea. Though all of them had been rescued from the ocean, nearly everyone seemed to have forgotten all about it. The memory of its darkness and danger no longer troubled them at all.

These people didn't seem to have any agonizing care about the poor perishing ones who were struggling and drowning right before their very eyes... many of whom were their own husbands and wives, brothers and sisters and even their own children!

Some of them were absorbed day and night in trading and business to make gain, storing up their savings in boxes.

Many spent their time amusing themselves with growing flowers on the side of the rock, others in painting pieces of cloth or playing music, or dressing themselves up and walking about to be admired. Some occupied themselves chiefly in eating and drinking, others were taken up with arguing about the poor drowning creatures that had already been rescued.

They were so taken up with their trades and professions, their money saving and pleasures, their families, their religions and arguments and their preparation for going to the mainland, that they didn't listen to the cry that came to them from this Wonderful Being who had Himself gone down into the sea. They didn't care. And so the multitude went on right before them struggling and shrieking and drowning in the darkness."

What will stop us from being a life boat in Newcastle is distraction and apathy. Having been saved our greatest danger is to forget the perils of the sea; to forget how truly lost we were and what a terrible thing it is to drown.

Wouldn't it be awful if we became absorbed in storing up our savings in boxes and amusing ourselves in painting and playing music and dressing to impress each other and eating and drink or (most tempting of all) our families? They're all good things! But how much less important are they than saving drowning people! This danger faces every single one of us on the rock.

But we also face a danger as a church; we'll forget that Hunter Bible Church is a life boat and we'll begin to think of Hunter Bible Church as a cruise ship.

Cruise ships are built for comfort. They have warm beds and comfortable lounges and diverting entertainment. Every need is catered for, every luxury on tap. And that's often how we're tempted to think of church, isn't it?

"Is church comfortable and convenient for us? Are my needs met? Are the things which irritate me fixed when I complain? Do the programmes suit me? Do I like the preaching and music? Do people welcome me?"

Basically...

"Is my cruise ship comfortable?"

But as we get bigger, Hunter Bible Church will become a less comfortable boat. We now have almost 450 adults in Bible Study Groups, about 150 youth and kids plus anything up to another 100 people who come along to Hunter Bible Church in some way. Its safe to say we have close to 600 people in the boat. Imagine if God begins to answer our prayer! Imagine if by God's grace we grow to 1000, 2000, 5000!

Church will be less comfortable. It will be harder to build relationships. From one Sunday to the next it will be hard to find people in church. It will be harder to spot the newcomers. It will be more difficult to see who's not around. It will be harder to find a parking spot on Sunday. People will have different tastes in music and meeting style, different opinions about how to run the youth group, different

demands about the crèche and Sunday School. We'll have to pay more rent, most likely even buy a building. Our budget will get more and more demanding. And our temptation will be to say, "My cruise ship isn't comfortable anymore. My needs aren't being met."

And part of the answer to all those complaints is for us to get better at serving people. That's why we've begun to organise Hunter Bible Church around the five "Ms" (Magnification, Mission, Membership, Maturity and Ministry). The five "Ms" are five clear areas of church life that we focus on.

Magnification is helping people love and live for God

Mission is helping people to know and preach Jesus.

Membership is helping people love and look after each other as a church family.

Maturity is helping Christians to grow as God's children.

Ministry is helping people to find their way in serving at church.

Having those five clear areas means that, God willing, we can look after people better and not miss people's needs and God's opportunities.

That's why our staff now specialise in one area of ministry that they're gifted in and passionate about. They can now train teams of people in each congregation to do Magnification, Mission, Membership, Maturity and Ministry.

But even with gifted, passionate staff and teams across the "Ms", Hunter Bible Church will never be a comfortable boat. With 600 or 2000 people in the boat, life will never be comfortable. But we don't ask for comfort a life boat. All we ask of a lifeboat is a seat... and a chance to pull people from the sea.

Are you willing to join us in a life boat? Are you willing to pluck people from the sea? Are you willing to preach, pray, give, send and suffer? Are you willing to go? Because its not just Newcastle that's drowning; the whole world is deluged. Are you willing to go as far as Lake Macquarie or Port Stephens?

I imagine some people, will read this and be itching to go. Others of us may be confused and upset. Does this mean we're never allowed to complain about church again? Will church always be agony? Do we only care about evangelism?

I'd love a chance to talk with you about those things. That's why each week I visit different Growth Groups to talk. And my purpose is point to the future under God and to get us talking and praying together.

Your brother in Christ,

Greg Lee
Hunter Bible Church Pastor