

**Title:** A place where religion, harmony and vitality can be found  
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Most of us don't go to church, but our society benefits enormously from the community activities of churches and their members. Today I want to describe the tremendous job three churches at Bonnyrigg are doing in helping immigrants settle in Sydney.

It's a contribution that deserves to be better known, not least because of the large numbers of immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds living in this city. According to the 2006 census, almost one-third of Sydneysiders now speak a language other than English at home. (The top five in order of popularity are: Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Greek and Vietnamese.)

Bonnyrigg is in the municipality of Fairfield. Father Michael McLean is parish priest at St John the Baptist Catholic church at Bonnyrigg Heights. (On a clear day you can see the Harbour Bridge from the Heights.) He moved here three years ago from Cronulla, where he had three churches to look after and a relatively Anglo-Celtic and ageing congregation.

He says he likes the vitality of Bonnyrigg, where less than 10 per cent of the large congregation is Anglo-Celtic and the two schools next to the church are bursting at the seams. St John's sent 13 busloads of young people and families to World Youth Day, the largest number from any parish.

"We could have sent more," says McLean, who was an MC at the event, "but we couldn't get any more buses."

The older Catholic families in the area came from Italy and Malta, but the majority are more recent arrivals from countries including Vietnam, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Iraq, India, Croatia and Poland. The area has six chaplains who look after different ethnic groups: the Vietnamese, for example, have their own church that attracts a thousand people every Sunday.

With 15,000 parishioners, McLean's job is daunting, and only possible because of the heavy involvement of volunteer lay people. For example, 70 parishioners are involved in providing religion classes for Catholic pupils in public schools in the area.

McLean says when he left Cronulla, people asked him why he was going out west. "The area gets a terrible rap in the media," he notes, "but it's really great. The streets are full of people of all nationalities, all getting along. There's a high quality of life, cycle paths and parks, the food is stunning."

Parkside Church is a very different kind of place. The Reverend Mathew Kuruvilla, who was born in India, was pastor at Maroubra 20 years ago when the small congregation at Bonnyrigg invited him to move west. As a Baptist church, Parkside is run by its pastors and members. Whereas St John's focuses on looking after those born into Catholic families, Parkside reaches out into the surrounding community for new members, emphasising its multicultural nature

Inside the church's main auditorium there is a flag for each of the 45 nationalities represented among the members, whose number continues to increase. Kuruvilla hopes to have a congregation of over 2000 before too long.

"The main thing is to make it welcoming," he says. "A lot of people from other places feel strange in a new country, and we create a welcoming atmosphere. For example, we have an international night and people bring their own national food."

This open approach creates some interesting pairings. During the Iraq War, two families asked Kuruvilla to pray for their soldier sons: one in the Australian army, the other in the Iraqi one. On Sunday there can be people from Jewish and Muslim backgrounds, Tamil and Sinhalese, sitting next to each other.

Most of those who come to the church don't have a Baptist background. They're attracted by its multi-ethnic nature and a range of activities such as play groups, Bible study, and programs for drug addicts and victims of sex abuse. This Christmas, Kuruvilla will be taking 25 young people to Cambodia to feed children who live in a rubbish dump.

Bronwyn Lihou is a home missionary with the Chinese Presbyterian Church. Most of the small congregation comes from a Chinese or Vietnamese background, and on Sunday there are services in Mandarin and English. In the past, language classes and tutoring have been provided for school children. The church is happy to help anyone who wants to come, and Lihou visits regularly with people who live on the big public housing estate nearby.

"One woman's toilet hadn't worked for three months," she says. "I was able to get it fixed with two phone calls."

Lihou and her husband Allan brought up their family in Campbelltown, and now have "an interest in helping Chinese people embrace Jesus and in helping people in western Sydney". They are training to go to Taiwan to work as missionaries.

Religion in the Bonnyrigg area has a vitality, and also a prominence, that you don't find so often in older areas of Sydney. In some parts, the main roads are literally lined with large places of worship, many on land provided by government.

Parkside Church is next to a Laotian Buddhist Temple (they sometimes use each other's car park). The Chinese Presbyterian Church is next to a mosque, which adjoins a temple.

Says Nick Lalich, the Mayor of Fairfield: "Mate, there's 12 places of worship within two square kilometres. All these communities live next to each other with absolutely no problems.

"If you could bottle what we've got here and export it, you'd save so much trouble in the world."