



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

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News from Long Gully

This is the 30th edition of *Manna Matters* in Manna Gum's tenth year of existence. Something of a milestone, considering the whole thing was a bit of an uncertain experiment. Thanks to all those who have supported us and made it possible.

This is a bit of a bumper edition as we are trialling putting more stories into *Manna Matters*. Please let us know whether you like it, or if it is too much!

The last three months have been very full but very rewarding. We received the exciting news that *Coming Home* was shortlisted for 'The Australian Christian Book of the Year Award', which has been great for publicity (it didn't win). In June I spoke at a combined Interserve/A Rocha event, 'Kingdom Gardeners', at Syndal Baptist Church. A link to the video for the talk can be found on the Manna Gum website and Facebook page. In July, Manna Gum and the Seeds Community in Bendigo hosted a visit from the Next2 group of young adults from Whitley College. The following Sunday I spoke at Collins Street Baptist Church on 'Ethics at the Supermarket'. In August, I gave a public lecture at Whitley College, 'The Gospel in a Consumer Age', along with the last of the launch events for *Coming Home*. A link to the video of that event can also be found on the website and Facebook page. The following Sunday, Jonathan spoke at Essendon Baptist on creation care. Phew!

Jonathan Cornford

'Join me': Manna Gum is now on Facebook! Have we gone over to the Dark Side? We're not sure yet, but if you want to find out, search '@mannaecconomy', and you can like us, follow us, or do any of those needy-sounding things that you do in social media.

Economic cooperation in the Seeds Community

by Jonathan Cornford

It is school holidays. Peter has called to see if the mulcher and whipper-snipper are available. I tell him the whipper-snipper (which we co-own together) is in our shed and he can grab it any time, but the mulcher (which four households co-own) is at Colin and Anthea's. They are away at the moment, but Greg and Elvira are staying in their house, so he will be able to get the key to their shed. I remember at this point that I need to go around to Colin and Anthea's to pick up the dog crate, as they took care of our dog while we were away ...

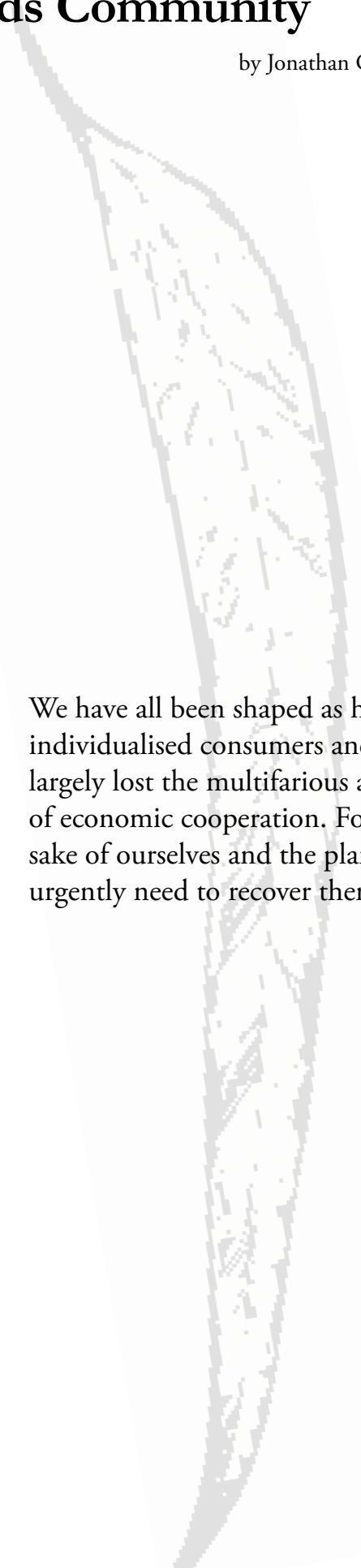
Kylie has banged and cut her head quite badly while vacuuming and Dave (on retreat with Jon and Glenn) is away with the car. Kylie calls Colin and Anthea, who come around and do some initial patching up on Kylie's head, then take care of her son, Shane, while Kylie borrows their car to drive to the hospital. Next day, Kylie needs a car again, so she calls Kim (Colin and Anthea have gone away). Kim says that is fine, but Edie is currently using the car to fetch a load of horse poo, so she will have to get it off her. That night, Kim, Kylie and Edie, and all the kids have dinner together while their husbands are away ...

Edie has sent around an email – it is time to put in our bulk orders for Fair Trade tea and coffee. I have to decide whether we order way more coffee this time, or I try to reduce my consumption ...

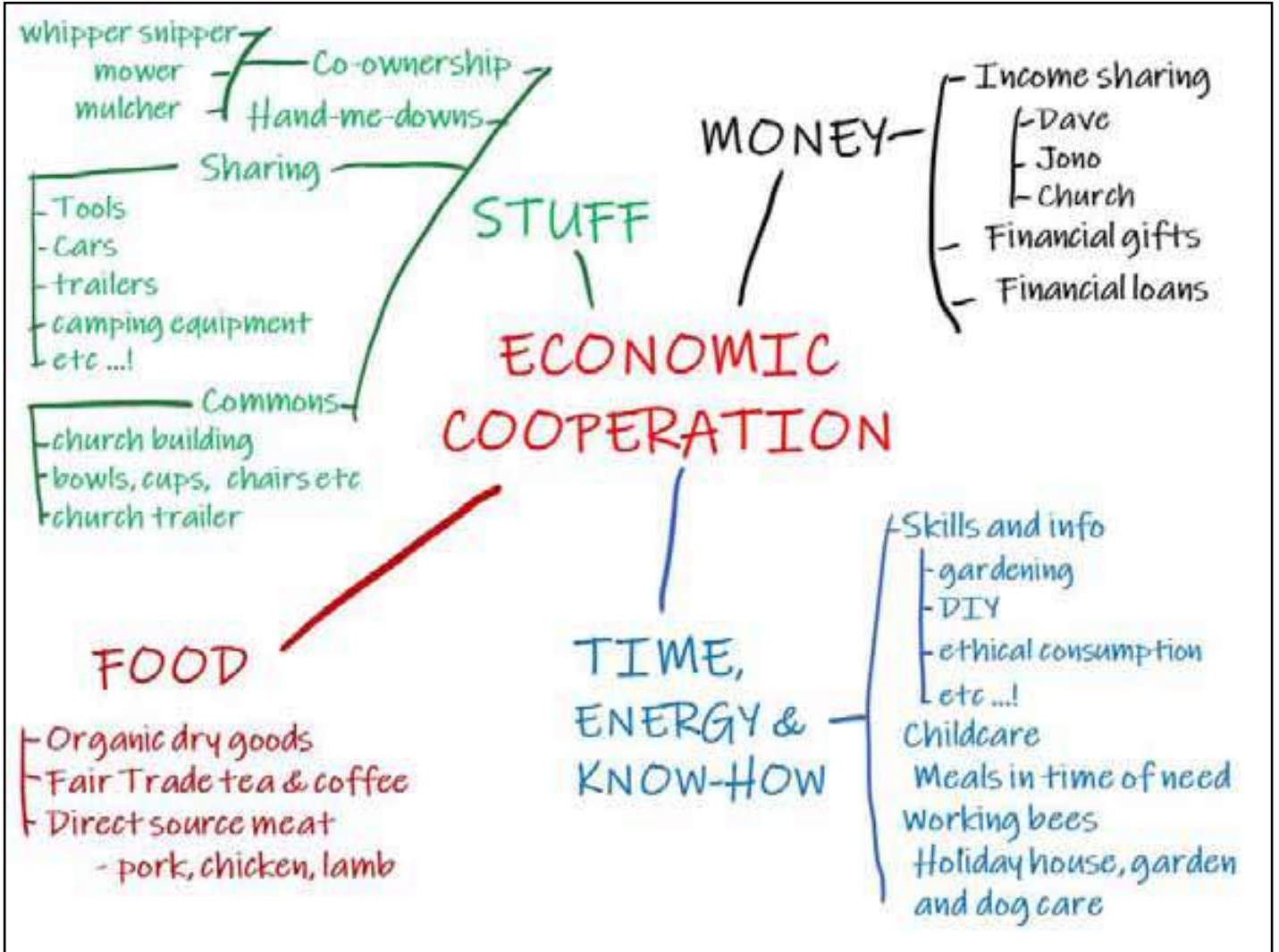
I am building a pergola along the north face of our house. It is a big job and I can't afford to pay anyone to do it, but I have never built one before. I pick Peter's and JD's brains first, then get to work, getting a decent half-day's labour (and bits of advice along the way) on each day I work, from Peter, Glenn, Colin and Dave. I use a number of Peter's and JD's tools to do the job.

This is the normal week-to-week life and interaction of the Seeds Community in Bendigo. It is not something that has happened by design, but something that has grown entirely organically. It was only recently in one of our evening discussions that we decided to think a bit more intentionally about how we practise economic cooperation, beginning with mapping what we already do. As the piece of butcher's paper began to fill up, we were gratified to discover that it was quite a lot. This is what our butcher's paper looked like [see opposite].

In this article, I want to share a bit about the experience of economic cooperation in the Seeds Community, what it looks like, how it has happened and what we have learnt. The danger with writing an article like this is that it can tend, however unintentionally, to make something seem more impressive than it really is, when in actual fact it has all been rather ordinary and low-key. I am willing to risk this danger because this is a subject that, if it is to go any further, really needs people to be sharing and discussing real-life examples. We have all been shaped as highly individualised consumers and have largely lost the multifarious



We have all been shaped as highly individualised consumers and have largely lost the multifarious arts of economic cooperation. For the sake of ourselves and the planet, we urgently need to recover them.



arts of economic cooperation. For the sake of ourselves and the planet, we urgently need to recover them. And I know from experience that, on subject matter like this, the great need is to get beyond ideas and down to practicalities. This is one modest step in that direction.

What have we done?

Income-sharing

Income sharing is simply where a group of people pool some portion of their income to fund activity they want to see happen. Two people in the Seeds Community (Dave Fagg and myself) are involved in ministry where our wages are paid by raising financial support (Dave for community mission work in Long Gully, me for Manna Gum). This goes far beyond the Seeds Community, but a significant portion of our income, for both of us, comes from within our own community. That is, our community has directed significant portions of income to support the ministries we undertake.

The other key area where we pool income is through our giving to St Matthew's, our local church in Long Gully. People don't generally think of their tithes or offerings as engaging in income-sharing, but that is what it is: pooling money to support a local community organisation.

In fact, the local Christian gathering has always been a community of economic cooperation in some way, even if it has largely lost this self-understanding.

Sharing stuff

The informal, ad hoc sharing of stuff has been a notable part of our community life. The range of things shared spans virtually the whole gamut of household goods, including cars, trailers, tools, garden equipment, kitchen equipment, camping and recreation equipment, books and the list goes on. Of particular note has been the readiness to make our cars available to each other – something of enormous practical value at various times. Also of note is the circulation of hand-me-downs in kid's clothes and assorted household items.

Co-ownership

For some items, some households have decided it makes more sense to split the cost and share the ownership. Once again, this has happened on an entirely ad hoc basis, stemming from particular need and circumstance, not any plan. Two households have owned a mower together, two own a whipper-snipper together and four households have pitched in to buy a decent mulcher, something extremely handy every now and then, but not enough to warrant buying one yourself. Interestingly, these co-owned goods

have been just as much a part of the sharing economy discussed above, available to other non-owners.

Cooperative purchasing

Members of the Seeds Community all share an ethic of responsible consumption, trying to prioritise organic, Fair Trade, minimal packaging, Australian-owned and made and, where possible, local. But it all takes time and energy and generally costs more, and most of us are on below-average incomes. Edie has taken it on herself to organise the cooperative purchasing of bulk organic dry goods (flour, rice, oats, dried fruit, etc) and bulk Fair Trade tea and coffee (see *Manna Matters*, Advent 2015). This involves pooling our money together for the purchase and delivery and getting together once a quarter to divvy up the goods according to orders. The trick is in coordinating the orders and the purchasing, which Edie, armed with an Excel spreadsheet, has down to a fine art.

We also join forces periodically to buy meat from local sources that have been kind to the earth and kind to the animals. Once again, this is expensive to do and hard to find, but when one of us finds something we have generally emailed around others to take orders for a bulk purchase and pick-up. Kim has gone for chickens from Hand to Ground in Kyneton, Kylie has sourced lamb from her Mum's property, also in Kyneton, and Ali and Di, members of the St Matthew's community, have sold pork raised from their property out of town. Making these bulk pick-ups work has also involved sharing cars and Eskies.

Shared labour, skills and care

Another of the key features of our economic cooperation has been the sharing of time and energy, know-how, muscle and acts of care. This has been so intrinsic and natural to our community life that no one really thinks of it as 'economic' sharing, but it nevertheless amounts to something of significant material and practical value. It can take the form of child care, caring for pets and gardens while on holiday, sharing home economy and handy-man skills and know-how, working bees in someone's garden, help with big projects and the provisions of meals in times of sickness or distress. Of all the forms of cooperation, these sort of activities most convey the sense of others being there for you.

Commons

'The commons' refers to goods owned and/or managed by a community. St Matthew's Church in Long Gully, which, in its current form, was started by the Seeds Community, has functioned as something of a commons. As well as being a place of worship and venue for a whole bunch of different community initiatives and organisations, it has also become an economic good both for its members, and for the local community more broadly. The St Matthew's community (which extends beyond Seeds members) is an

independent congregation, with no paid staff and a flat structure, that manages a building and property owned by the Anglican Diocese of Bendigo and very graciously made available to us. That is to say, the church only exists by the ongoing will and efforts of its members, so there is a very high level of ownership and participation. Consequently, it has just seemed natural and sensible that when one of us has a function or party on, we borrow cups, bowls, plates, chairs and tables from the church. Or sometimes we use the building itself. Moreover, with its pizza oven, garden, amphitheatre and adjoining hall, the church has been an attractive venue for other locals to hold the odd birthday party at little or no cost. The church also owns a trailer that has been made freely available to virtually anyone who asks (whether members of the community or not). Once again, there is no system, set of rules, or log book for any of this; it all just happens with a high level of trust.

How did it happen?

As I have pointed out a number of times, none of this happened by design, but has rather evolved organically out of the life of the community. But there are a number of preconditions that have inclined us in this direction and others that have allowed it to be possible.

1. As a covenanted intentional community [see box] we are already predisposed to think of ourselves as a 'community' – that is, people who are sharing a common life – and we have invested a certain level of trust and hope in that community.
2. We all in some way accept that following Christ has implications for our material lives and are all concerned about the impacts of the consumer economy upon people and the planet.
3. Part of the Seeds Covenant is to live in the suburb of Long Gully, so we all live within an area 1.5km across. Geographical proximity makes possible many acts of sharing and cooperation which, otherwise, would be much harder to accomplish.
4. Most of us work part-time and have therefore chosen a level of income-constraint on our lives that gives us a real practical incentive to think about how we can economise through shared action.

Evaluating our experience

When we reflected on our experience of this economic cooperation, the strong consensus was that it had been uniformly positive across a number of fronts.

1. It has enriched and deepened our experience of community. The material and practical value of this sharing takes the experience of community beyond simply something we *choose*, to be something we come to depend upon, and something through which we have come to experience a significant level of care and support.

The local Christian gathering is a ready-made technology and site for economic cooperation, if only we can tap its potential.



2. Economic cooperation has required trust, but doing it has also *built* trust.
3. Although we have not quantified the economic value of our economic cooperation, there is little doubt that its value to the bottom line of our household budgets is significant.
4. The seemingly low-key, but creeping, practice of sharing goods has helped us to gradually learn to loosen our grip on our possessions.
5. Although our economic sharing has largely arisen from within the Seeds Community, it has not been exclusive to it, but has overflowed into the broader Long Gully community, drawing other people into it and opening up resources to them that they otherwise did not have access to.

What have we learnt about economic cooperation?

1. The local Christian gathering is a ready-made technology and site for economic cooperation, if only we can tap its potential. I am a member of the New Economy Network (see *Manna Matters*, Nov 2018) which involves all sorts of creative and ingenious ways of fostering a 'sharing economy', but all of it is trying to make up for the absence of community. We have found the local Christian community to be a place where it can take place naturally without fancy platforms or legal structures and one which can easily leak into the broader community.
2. We all acknowledged that reciprocity has been critical to the positive and deepening nature of our economic cooperation – if it were one-sided, it would not last long. *But ...*
3. Not accounting reciprocity has also been critical to the positive experience of it. If we tried to count and keep track of who had given what, it would destroy the graced experience and the willing spirit that sustains it.

4. Responsibility for other people's stuff is critical: treat other people's stuff with greater care than you would your own, 'fess-up when something has gone wrong and fix it where you can.



St Matthew's Church: a local 'commons' in Long Gully that is supported by community income-sharing.

The Seeds Community

Seeds is a small community of Christians living in the Bendigo suburb of Long Gully. Seeds members seek to support the life and mission of the church within the local community and to support each other in living out our discipleship in Christ.

Seeds began in 2005 to pursue a calling of mission amongst the marginalised. Since this time, Seeds members have sought to build relationships, as well as initiate or support projects within Long Gully.

Seeds members share the conviction that 'in Christ, God was reconciling the whole world to himself' (2 Cor 5:19) and that we have been called to join with God in healing the broken things of the world. This is the Biblical vision of shalom, the restoring of all things to right relationship. The Seeds community recognises the centrality of Christ's command to 'bring good news to the poor', and that he came to 'seek and save the lost', 'not the righteous, but sinners'.

Seeds is always open to new members. We are also offering a 1 year internship for people who are wanting to come and do some hands-on, structured learning about local mission.

For more information about Seeds, please contact us: seedsbendigo@godfoodpeople.org





A bit of the Congo in your pocket

How we are all implicated in the suffering of the DRC

by Tom Allen

It's 4am, but you don't know it yet. You reach for a glass of water beside the bed. Then for whatever reason you also have to know what time it is. Your hand fumbles across the side table for your...

It's 10am. Bi-weekly team meeting. Someone hasn't turned off their...

2pm, walking back from lunch, you sense something's missing. You clutch an empty pocket. Stomach drops, conversation ends abruptly as you dash back to the café for your...

It's 4pm and the kids have been patient and easy-going all afternoon. Now they're starting to get a little ratty and disturbing your conversation. To gain a little peace and quiet you hand them your...

9pm and you're squirming as you watch your favourite thriller. You allay some of the piercing discomfort with a quick look at your...

11pm and it's another day done and dusted. Only one thing left to do: plug in your...

Alongside the most mundane of life's titbits can sit the most significant realities of the world we live in today. In the most routine moments of existence, there are threads that lead to the most profound.

Our phones constitute one of those mundanities which, when examined more closely, tell us many profound things about ourselves and our world. Each of us has a link, via our phone and many other of our electronic devices, to one of the most horrific and yet ignored situations of violence and destitution in the world today.

Unregulated, clandestine mining activities and exports have fuelled a conflict and humanitarian crisis on a scale never before seen.





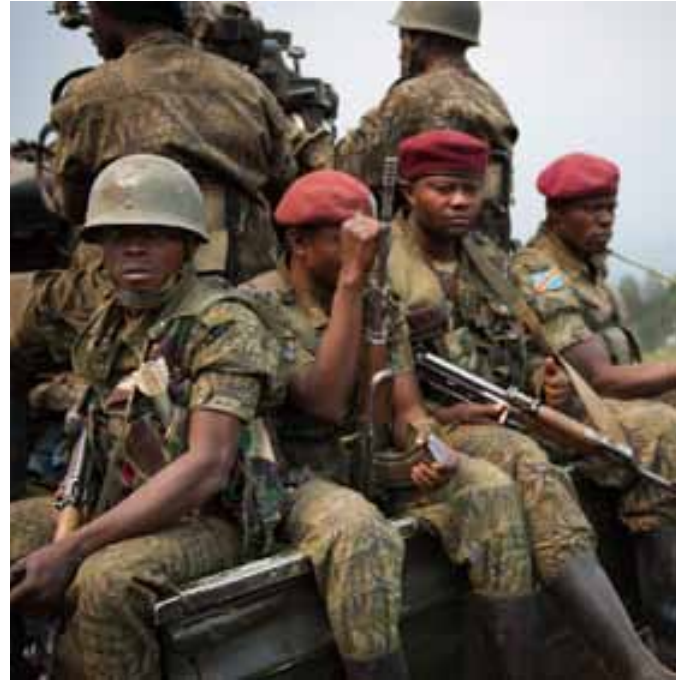
Inside your smartphone, your TV, your internet modem, your laptop, your tablet, your smart fridge, is an intricate set of chips which perform a vast array of functions, some of them bordering on quantum scale. The intricate functions performed by the motherboards within these devices require very finely controlled power levels and this is where tantalum capacitors come in.

A capacitor is a simple manager of electrical flow. Capacitors can be made from many different materials, but one of the most reliable and longest lasting is a metal called tantalum. Tantalum sits at number 73 on the periodic table. It is a chemically inert metal that can be used as a substitute for platinum and is regarded as a ‘Technology-Critical Element’ by the US Department of Energy for its use in a wide range of technologies..

Tantalum is commonly mined in the form of coltan, but it can also be produced from the by-products of tin mining and derived from recycled e-waste. The world’s biggest single producer of coltan in 2013, the last year for which there are reliable figures, was Rwanda. Second was Brazil and third was the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Both Rwanda and the DRC have a chequered past, and the fact they produced, between them, over 40% of a ‘Technology-Critical Element’ justifiably raises concerns. In recent years, Rwanda has taken great strides towards peace, democracy and wellbeing, partly funded by regulated mining activity.

The DRC has also made progress in some areas; however, in many situations, it is clear that unregulated, clandestine mining activities and exports have fuelled a conflict and



The conflict in the Congo has been one of the bloodiest in human history.

humanitarian crisis on a scale never before seen. While the DRC’s civil wars, triggered by a spillover from the Rwandan crisis of the late 1990s, are technically over, conflict persists, where rape is used as a weapon, child labour common and health outcomes dire.

The conflict in the DRC, raging since 1996, has been the deadliest single conflict since World War II. This superlative is so common when one hears—*if* one hears—about the DRC that perhaps it doesn’t carry so much weight any more. But if you take pause to consider that





There are an estimated 4.5 million displaced people in the DRC. Roughly one quarter of them have no shelter whatsoever.

so many people have died in a single conflict within a single country that it ranks second only to World War II it begins to sink in. And when you consider the relative importance of the DRC in the nightly news, compared to, say, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, the absurdity of it all begins to hit you.

There are approximately 4.5 million internally displaced people in the DRC. Imagine the population of Melbourne forcibly displaced, forming chaotic and disease-ridden encampments across the countryside, preyed upon by militias and people smugglers. These people have been displaced by an unceasing epidemic of violence. It is

estimated that there are over 140 armed groups active in the eastern provinces of the DRC, battling for territory and the proceeds of whatever profitable activities are still able to take place there. One of the most profitable of those is mining.

The links between mining and conflict have a long history in the DRC. Seventy-five percent of the copper used in the brass shell casings of allied troops in World War I was Congolese. As was the uranium used in the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When it comes to the league tables of national mineral deposits, the DRC is a heavyweight. It has significant reserves of cobalt, copper,



Global mining giant, Glencore, recently shut its cobalt mine in the DRC, objecting to a new 'mining super-profits tax' introduced by the new government earlier this year.



diamonds, tantalum, tin, gold, coltan, uranium and lithium. Overall estimates of the DRC's mineral wealth sit at around US\$24 trillion.

This potent mix of money, corruption, lawlessness, poverty and conflict is at the heart of the crisis in the DRC and mining is the catalyst. Under President Joseph Kabila, approximately US\$4 billion disappeared from the national accounts every year. In 2013, 8 to 12 tonnes of gold, worth about US\$400 million, disappeared. And in a 2016 plea bargain in the US, it was disclosed that a US hedge fund paid more than US\$100 million in bribes for mining concessions worth several billions of dollars. Clearly there is something very wrong here.

Attempts have been made to address this vicious cycle. In 2012, the Obama administration passed a bill that included laws relating to 'conflict minerals'. This concentrated minds at many large technology companies, including Apple and Samsung, which have taken steps towards greater knowledge of their supply chains and greater disclosure of that knowledge. Perhaps the most significant of these is a requirement by the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for yearly conflict minerals reports, which are publicly available. Apple directed suppliers to stop using five refineries and smelters which refused or were unable to comply with a conflict minerals audit. In 2017, Amnesty International praised Apple and Samsung for their efforts in tracking and eradicating conflict minerals from their supply chains.

This potent mix of money, corruption, lawlessness, poverty and conflict is at the heart of the crisis in the DRC and mining is the catalyst.

Clearly it is possible to improve practices, and the leadership exists to make such practice common. However, in that same year, the Enough Project published an extensive ranking of companies, primarily tech and jewellery, with most of them falling far short of a reasonable ethical standard. To its credit, Apple was lauded for continuing to source minerals from the Congo, but from mines that had been third-party audited and approved as benefiting the local community.

Present-day DRC reflects back on us an image of our society and global economy that is complex, convoluted, conflicted and consumption-obsessed. It is a country of 70 million sitting at the heart of Africa that goes largely ignored, but which is hugely exploited. The challenges faced by ordinary Congolese in the quest for a safe, fulfilling life are enormous.

In Australia, as citizens of one of the wealthiest countries on Earth, where 88% of the population owns a smartphone as well as a plethora of other electronic devices, we are inextricably linked into this global system

and to the exploitation of the DRC.

There are bright spots, however, as the issue of conflict minerals gains momentum and technology companies take their responsibilities seriously. Much remains to be done and if we must purchase electronics it pays to do our research [see box below]. Awareness can feel like a burden, but it need not be. We cannot individually solve anything, but if we each do our best and raise our collective awareness, we bear witness, and in so doing we learn to be part of the solution to the unjust systems in our world.

Tom Allen lives and works in Geelong, where he runs a social enterprise bike shop and lives in an intentional community of urban farmers and permaculturalists.

Responsible consumption of electronic devices

1. Buy fewer gadgets. Upgrade less often. Try doing without some things altogether (gasp!).
2. When a device is broken, look into repair before replacing. Find out if there is a 'repair cafe' in your local area.
3. Seek to source devices second-hand before buying new. There is a huge array of high-quality electronic stuff available on Gumtree, eBay and from social enterprises like Green Collect.
4. When buying new, check out the *Shop Ethical Guide* or website to see which brands are accredited for conflict minerals. www.ethical.org.au
5. When disposing of unusable devices, make sure they go to an e-waste recycler. Check with your local council to find one.





Waste, salvation & egg shells

by Jonathan Cornford

We have six bins in our kitchen. Seven, if you count the container for used egg shells. Three of those bins are to separate our food waste: most of our food waste goes to our blessed worm farm, that mystical system that simultaneously produces the most sublime compost and filters our kitchen water, turning it into worm wee for the garden. The choicest morsels of food waste go to the stupid chooks (I'm a bit dark on them at the moment, for reasons I will not explain here, but with which any chook-owner would sympathise), except that which goes to the dog (via the dog-food-quality-control-officer – my youngest daughter). The bits of food waste that neither worms nor chooks eat, and which dog-food-quality-control-officers reject, goes into its own compost pile for hard-core biodegradables (do not touch the glass, do not approach the glass ...). Then we have a recycling bin for the standard council recycling items and also a soft plastics bin which gets taken once every couple of months to the Red Bin at our local supermarket. Finally, we have a landfill bin, which, on average, sends one or two shopping bags worth of waste to the wheelie bin each week.

Let's face it, if we weren't motivated by love, this system of waste sorting would be a complete pain in the arse. If we felt that this is what we have to do because that is what is required of just and ethical Christians, then it would be oppressive. If we did it to mark ourselves as ethical and sustainable consumers (ie. the righteous elect) then we would be insufferable. If we did it to try to please God, then we would be spiritually dead.

But that is not how we experience our six bins (seven, if you count the egg shells). In actual fact, it's a joy. When we sort our waste we participate in our salvation.

Ok, now you are feeling a bit worried I have said something heretical.

Not at all. The Apostle Paul tells us that in Christ, God is reconciling the whole world (*kosmos* in the Greek – ie. 'all things on earth or in heaven', Col 1:20) back to himself. In Romans 8, Paul tells us that the suffering earth is waiting for our redemption – humanity and the earth are redeemed together. In effect, the saving work of Christ restores us to the communion of love between God, human and creation that we see in Genesis 2 and which is fulfilled in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation. We are saved *from* our alienation from God, each other and the earth and we are saved *to* the great communion of love. Salvation is, by definition, the restoration of sundered relationship.

When we sort our waste, we are acting out of *care* for a creation that we have come to love deeply. We do not do it to fulfil some abstract criteria of sustainability, but we act in relation to an earth that is suffering because of human *carelessness*. Our six bins (seven, if you count the egg shells) are an act of *relationship*. This is what we have been saved by Christ into and it is good news.

Let's face it, if we weren't motivated by love, this system of waste sorting would be a complete pain in the arse.



Left: a Red-Browed Finch. Right: puppy with a sore paw.

This is objectively true, but it is also *made true for us* because we have made a discipline of paying attention to the earth and its creatures. As I write, a flock of red-browed finches has flown into our back yard. Their presence here is an indicator of the health of the bush adjoining our property, which has regenerated magnificently since the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009. I walk in this bushland every day, often bird-watching as I go. I have only learnt about the 50-odd native bird species that inhabit our local Box-Ironbark ecosystems since we moved here four years ago and it has been a pure joy (and I mean that literally). But on every walk in the bush I also see, everywhere, the damage of plastics pollution. Written into the fabric of this bushland is both pain and joy and our lives are bound up with its pain and joy. We have placed ourselves in its presence and encounter the reality it faces.

It is only people alienated from the earth or from society, or both, who can dump their crap in the bush in such a fashion. Damaged people damage creation. Damaged creation damages people. There is a direct correlation between the family breakdown and family dysfunction that is endemic in our suburb and the ecological degradation of our bushland. (Let me hasten to add, this is not a judgement on these people *per se*, although none are exempted responsibility for their own actions, but a judgement on a society and economy that so alienates people.)

Once you have been drawn into God's love of all creation, once you have eyes to see its hurt, then sorting waste in the kitchen is not a pain in the arse, but seeing plastics in the creek *is* a pain in the heart.

Love means the entry into grief and pain. That is God's reality and it becomes our reality when we enter God's. That is why the second Beatitude, directly following the promise of 'the Kingdom of Heaven' which comes with the first, is 'Blessed are those who mourn ...'. To be drawn into God's love for the world is to be drawn into an ocean

of grief. This is one of the Golgothas to which we must go with Christ. But it is only via Golgotha that the stone will be rolled away.

And just as we cannot really love people in abstract, but only those real people who enter our lives, we cannot love creation in abstract. We must love real places, which means seeing both the beauty and feeling the brokenness of those places. It is only as we learn to love particular places, warts and all – which must include knowing and understanding those places – that the many practices of creation care can become acts of love rather than burdensome sacrifices.

Our family dog (still just a puppy) has recently cut its paw badly and needs to be confined in the laundry so it can't run about on it. The dog-food-quality-control-officer, who can have some nasty moments of Pharisaical legalism, has taken it on herself to sit long hours in the laundry with the puppy to keep it company. This is not an act of ethical obligation, it is an act of love – an act of entering into pain which, in turn, transforms pain into tail-wagging.

Christ has come into the laundry of our self-inflicted pain and got our tails wagging again, and it is the Spirit of Christ working in us that sends us into the laundry of the world with acts of care and care-fullness. And so our kitchen with its six bins (seven, if you count the egg shells) becomes the laundry of the world and it is all one great, beautiful mystery.

(Actually, most of it makes good sense; the real mystery is why we separate the egg shells. I have to ask about that one day ...)

[Postscript: a few months after our puppy's paw healed, we took her to the vet to be de-sexed. They botched the operation and we lost her. A simple act of carelessness and we are plunged into grief. This is a parable of what we are doing to the planet. Please, friends, take care.]

Damaged people damage creation.
Damaged creation damages people.



Seeking the Shalom of Lalor Park

by Steve Barnett

'Police investigating a suspicious house fire in Lucas Rd, Lalor Park'

'Police raid drug house near the scene of alleged double ice killing in Lalor Park'

'Lalor Park: Three-year-old girl shot dead inside house'

Poor old Lalor Park only seems to make headlines for the wrong reasons. Developed by the NSW Housing Commission in western Sydney in the late 1950's, 'LP' is now home to an eclectic mix of working class and welfare-dependant families, de-institutionalised mental health patients, people from indigenous, migrant and refugee backgrounds, and middle-class first home-buyers.

An old-fashioned strip of shops provides a village feel to LP, albeit punctuated by semi-regular arguments, domestic disputes and the occasional police call-out. A park, a primary school, a community hall with a small branch library, a newish skate park and a servo complete the town centre, which is surrounded by public housing flats.

When Churches of Christ pastor Nathan Marshall first floated the idea of moving to Lalor Park to set up a missional community, one friend joked 'Can anything good come from Lalor Park?'. As a passionate, energetic and determined (not to mention somewhat starry-eyed) follower of Christ, that was all the encouragement he needed to give it a crack. But how do you bring the message of Jesus to a community notorious for its social security dependency, dysfunctional families, drug abuse and mental health issues?

Common Groundz Community Café

After much prayer and even more beverage-fuelled discussion, and taking Vincent van Gogh's *The Cafe Terrace on the Place du Forum* as an icon, the dream of creating a space of welcome and hospitality, eating and drinking began to take shape. Soon enough, one of the shops became available for lease. Nathan managed to convince enough people that an idea as crazy as this might just work and, with the generous backing of an associated church, Common Groundz Community Café was born.

Although mission statements and strategic plans would gradually take shape, the basic concept for the café was to provide a safe and welcoming place for locals to hang out, as well as a focal point for Christian ministry in the neighbourhood. We were keen to explore what it might mean to 'seek the shalom of the city' where we lived, to explore what it means to be salt and light in a local community.

As the new café was taking shape, locals responded with a mixture of excited anticipation, disbelief, condescension and outright pity. Nearby shop owners were skeptical about our chances of survival. Local churches offered encouragement and prayer support, but not much else. Blacktown Council, willing to support any initiative that might help to 'fix' Lalor Park, was intrigued, but guardedly optimistic. At the other end of the scale was Sam, the manager of the local servo, who took every opportunity to remind us that we were 'effin mad'.

How do you bring the message of Jesus to a community notorious for its social security dependency, dysfunctional families, drug abuse and mental health issues?



The doors opened in October 2008 and Common Groundz quickly began to attract talented and passionate people from a variety of faith or no-faith backgrounds, but with a shared vision for what Lalor Park could be. One early addition to the 'Groundz Crew' was Danielle Rawnsley-Galistan, an artist who was already well known in the area for her 'fight graffiti with murals' philosophy. She brought her dream of a community art space to run sessions for people with mental health issues, programs for school kids and gatherings for the local indigenous community.

Over time, the café has served as a laboratory for community engagement experiments. At various times, it has hosted homework clubs, social groups, various types of support groups, music evenings and community Christmas meals. It has provided a venue for TAFE courses, work experience programs and 'Groundz Care', a gang of vigilante lawn mowers who tamed pensioners' back yards whilst providing mentoring and training for unemployed youth.

Lalor Park Community Garden

The community garden is an interesting case study in how followers of Jesus can be catalysts in fostering positive change. The original idea was first floated over coffee at Common Groundz, and a few potential sites scoped out. Almost on cue, Graeme Somerset, a permaculture Jedi who somehow managed to survive the hippie era with most of his brain cells intact, appeared on the scene. Graeme happened to be between jobs and looking for something to throw his time and energy into, so jumped at the opportunity to be involved in establishing a garden.

Having visited a few community gardens in New York, Graeme was keen that the Lalor Park garden should be an incorporated body and a grass-roots initiative driven

collaboratively by its members. A notice was displayed at the counter of the café and half-a-dozen interested people began to meet regularly to discuss the purpose, structure, governance and physical form of the garden. Nathan introduced Graeme to some of his contacts at

Blacktown Council and Graeme began to cultivate a few relationships of his own. Eventually, the council agreed to release a disused storage/play area at the rear of the community centre for the garden.

In the end, it was more than a year before the first sod was turned, but the original mission statement and constitution developed during that foundational period have stood the test of time and the garden continues to thrive as a genuine cooperative, owned and run by a small, but enthusiastic membership. And having appeared on *Gardening Australia* and *Sydney Weekender*, it's also now officially famous.

Over time the café has served as a laboratory for community engagement experiments.





Support

Throughout its 11-year history, Common Groundz has perhaps been a little too successfully not-for-profit and keeping the doors open is a constant struggle. Financial sustainability is a challenge for cafés everywhere, let alone one situated in possibly the least hip part of Sydney. Despite all the hard work of staff and volunteers, *Common Groundz* has been dependent on the generous support of Pathways Community Church (which underwrites the venture), local government, community organisations and individual donors to stay afloat.

Our relationship with Blacktown Council has been especially important in seeking to foster positive change in Lalor Park. Despite our unashamedly Christian identity, Council has been very supportive and also generous in providing material support, to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars, for various ministries and initiatives. This includes refurbishing a disused section of the community centre for use as a 'ministry space' and a downstairs area for 'Creative Groundz' (our community arts centre), as well as providing funding for an impressive outdoor kitchen in the community garden. As a measure of the value Council places on Common Groundz and its associated ventures, Nathan was recognised as Blacktown Citizen of the Year in 2013.

Other organisations that have provided generous support include the NSW Government (through its Community Building Partnership program), Blacktown RSL and Blacktown Workers Club.

The community garden is an interesting case study in how followers of Jesus can be catalysts in fostering positive change.

Local churches

An Anglican minister, a Presbyterian minister, a Pentecostal pastor and a Baptist pastor walked into a café. The punchline is a little disappointing from a comedic standpoint, but true to its name Common Groundz provides 'neutral territory' where local church leaders can meet regularly to share the joys and frustrations of parish ministry and to support each other in prayer. The ensuing corporate heart for local mission has led to combined prayer gatherings which rotate around the local churches, and cooperation on events such as the annual Carols in the Park.

Very early in its history, another small group of Christians began meeting at the café to share, read scripture, debate and pray. Common Groundz Café Church was formed and soon outgrew the confines of the café (which, let's face it, was never a great space to do church, especially with lots of young kids). It moved across the road to the community hall, where it still provides a spiritual home to doubters, misfits and refugees from more traditional expressions of Christian practice.

Lalor Park Focus is another initiative to grow out of the relationships established with churches and other local stakeholders. Focus provides a forum where representatives from local council, law enforcement, social services, schools, faith communities, business and other community groups can meet to discuss issues affecting Lalor Park, seek input on planning decisions and develop cooperative solutions to problems. Mark Tough, the



minister at St Clement's Anglican Church, has been chair of LP Focus for several years and considers it one of the most important contributions he makes to the local community.

Future challenges

Finally, a reality check, lest this brief account makes everything that's happening in Lalor Park sound too idyllic. At present, we face a number of challenges that threaten the long-term viability of Common Groundz.

The café has always struggled to balance the books and the church that underwrites it is no longer in a position to absorb financial losses. Most available grants are tied to capital expenditure and, whilst refurbished toilets and well-equipped community laundries are wonderful, our major expense is wages for our already over-worked and under-paid staff. Long-term sustainability is, unfortunately, still a pipe dream.

Although always a corporate effort, ventures like Common Groundz only seem to materialise through the passionate leadership of one or two highly motivated people. Nathan's vision and drive were central to getting the café up and running, but it exacted its own toll. After one-too-many burnouts, time off for reflection and discernment led him to pull out of café management and church leadership and move on to a new role within Churches of Christ. It remains to be seen whether Common Groundz can survive, and how it will evolve, in the 'post-Nathan era'.

Despite the many wonderful stories of redemption that have emerged over more than a decade of ministry – of

lives saved, relationships healed, community spaces renewed, people welcomed into a safe place and some even coming to faith – Lalor Park hasn't been radically transformed in the way we may have first hoped. All the old problems of drug abuse, domestic violence, dysfunction and destruction still exist. The cops still get called out on a regular basis. We've come to realise that there will always be weeds amongst the wheat this side of Kingdom Come. Despite all the excitement and bustle, ministry in this context

will always be a slog and there will be regular seasons of doubt and disappointment. But, above all else, the story of Common Groundz is testament to what Christ can do if a few people who aspire to follow him are willing to give him half a chance ...

Steve Barnett works for International Nepal Fellowship and is a member of the Common Groundz Café Church.

Christian communities should have a realistic appreciation of their own social location within cities and yet still feel they can have some sort of life-bringing leavening influence.



The Lalor Park Community Garden with new kitchen.



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