

Get the picture without a sermon:

*Enhancing a congregation's work and worship through
(re)visioning the church – art relationship.*

John Rigby

Master of Arts (Divinity)
Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling)

Master of Arts (Visual Arts)

Partial fulfilment of requirements

Faculty of Education and Arts
Federation University
Camp Street,
Ballarat Victoria, 3353
Australia

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Abstract

The church, throughout its history and motivated by the teachings of the Bible, has sought to assist people in finding meaning and direction in life. To this end it has used visual art to help people understand its message and increase people's openness to the Bible's redemptive story. After the Reformation, the emergent Protestant church had a more tenuous relationship with visual art, giving priority to oral forms of communication. Many small protestant congregations in current multi-faith Australia have little relationship with visual art and struggle to convey their message to the Australian society. A renewal of the church's relationship with visual art is needed. This thesis including the exhibition employs a theology of creativity, hermeneutical skills and artistic reflection to illustrate how a (re)visioning of the church-art relationship can help the church in its work and worship.

Rev. John Rigby

Statement of Authorship

Except where explicit reference is made in the text of this thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere, or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for, or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been relied upon or used without due acknowledgement in the main text and bibliography of the thesis.

Applicant –

Date

Supervisor –

Date

Supervisor –

Date

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Preface

This research starts with a small boy who grew up in an artless world. His formative years were shaped by a supportive loving family and nurturing family church. Despite these positive social attributes his environment was framed by a conservative white wall and little to no colour. The closest the boy came to anything artistic in the church were the drawings in the Sunday school workbooks, or pictures of roses overlaid with Bible verses mounted behind sheets of glass hanging on the church walls.

Framed by church tradition, the white washed walls and artless world seemed normal to the boy. That was until, in his early teenage years, his sense of ‘normal’ was shaken by someone who defiantly transgressed the unspoken rule of the homogenous church environment by purchasing a print of Albert Namatjira’s, *Near Glen Helen*, and hanging it on his lounge room wall. This act unsettled a number of the church members who saw it as self-indulgent act bordering on idol worship. Although this incident was insignificant when compared to what was happening on the global art scene, for the 13 year old boy it was a life-changing event: this defiant act against the cultural norms of the church became an awakening moment for the teenage boy.

As the local congregation debated the advocacy of art in the church, the painting hanging on his uncle’s lounge room transported the boy and opened a window through which he could explore beyond words the written within the sacred text. It created an internal tsunami that awakened a passion for the arts and provided a different way to explore his faith journey.

Now in the latter part of his life, he looks back with gratitude to his uncle’s act of rebellion. He emotionally, psychologically and spiritually profited from his uncle’s willingness to confront the church’s iconoclastic worldview. It initiated a desire to serve others in pastoral ministry and to explore ways to expresses his faith experience in and through the arts. Integrating these two passions has provided a means to see that the faith story is more than

church attendance; that visual art is an invitation to hear the call of shalom that resonates with all things if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.¹

Framed by this background and operating as an ‘insider researcher’ this investigation seeks to address the resistance² at work in some small protestant churches within Australia. It seeks to do this through the development of a conceptual tool for (re)visioning the church-art relationship supported by the construction and presentation of the artwork in the accompanying exhibition.

¹ Matthew 13:1-23 (NLT Bible 2007)

² The resistance may be due to an unidentified underlying iconoclastic disposition and/or ignorance about visual art’s potential to support the church.

Introduction

Defining the parameters of the research

This thesis follows an ‘insider researcher’³ approach to investigation. This approach allows personal observations and experience to be included in the research. Consequently, this research references my experience as pastor-artist⁴ working in a number of small protestant churches as well as anecdotal and unsolicited conversations with other church-based artists.

Since my ordination I have pastored a number of churches as well as visited many small evangelical protestant congregations in England, the United States and other states of Australia. The outcome of these experiences is to conclude that most small churches, even with practicing artists in the congregation, have a tenuous relationship with visual art. As a pastor-artist my response has been to passionately advocate for visual art in the church.

This passion stems from a perception that creativity is an essential element of our humanity, a pathway to our engagement with the numinous and profits a deepening faith and practice through the synergy of human effort and material. This thesis is an expression of that passion. Here the definition of visual art is taken to include the use of any natural or man-made material (including sound and light) that is arranged or brought together by human effort for the purpose of assisting the congregation in its work and worship. It is also important to define the term church as it relates to this thesis. The Macquarie Dictionary offers a number of different definitions which are interchangeable yet connected. The term, ‘church’ is used to describe a building, an entity, an identity and a function. For example, the church is ‘an edifice for public Christian worship’, an action of ‘public worship’ (a church service), an entity known as the ‘the whole body of Christian believers,’ an identity where a ‘division of this body professing the same creed and acknowledging the same ecclesiastical authority (a Christian denomination such as the

³ (Sullivan 2009)

⁴ I was ordained in the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia (WMC) in 1994.

Uniting Church).⁵ Of specific interest to this investigation is the definition of the church as ‘a body of Christians worshipping in a particular building or constituting one congregation.’⁵ This exegesis, whilst acknowledging the strong connection between the institutional (denominational) church and a local congregation, is concerned with (re)visioning the church-art relationship at this congregational level.

The operational paradigm

Since its inception, the Christian church has based its practice on the life of Jesus and the teachings of the Old and New Testaments.⁶ Throughout history the collective church has emphasised different parts of the biblical text in response to internal and/or external social and political changes. In most cases the church’s response has been informed by a conviction best expressed by C.S Lewis when he said, ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.’⁷ That said, it does not mean the church does not make mistakes in its response to internal and/or external social and political change. Since my ordination I have sought to advocate for the use of visual art in the churches I have pastored. This advocacy has been motivated by the awareness that visual art has the potential to amalgamate imagination and expression, skill and outcomes, congregation and viewer, place and a sense of the sacred.

Despite visual art’s potential to achieve these results, a number of encounters happened during this research to justify the need to advocate for the use of visual art within small protestant churches in Victoria. Some of these encounters have been positive and call for the ongoing support of the arts. For example, non-church attenders have regularly displayed a genuine openness to my art – art that often expresses overtly Christian themes. It has also been encouraging to observe members of the Melton Uniting Church congregation who are eager to discuss the drawings created during the sermon each Sunday morning.

⁵ (Macmillian Publishers Group 2014) This represents the entire Christian church, irrespective of place, culture and denominational affiliation.

⁶ John 20:19-31

⁷ (Lewis 1980)

This research has also stimulated a number of negative interactions justifying the need to advocate for a change in the church attitude to visual art. A number of other church-attending artists express frustration at the lack of visual art in the church and grief at their talent being underutilised, if not unrecognised.⁸ It is obvious that they have trouble expressing their artistic response to their faith inside the churches they attend. In addition, it appears that some church leaders have a mindset whereby art is seen as an expression of immaturity. During one conversation with a respected church leader I was reminded that ‘visual art is good but we need to get on with the real business of the church – preaching and teaching.’ He then quoted 1 Corinthians 13:11 where the Apostle Paul said, ‘When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things.’⁹ His inference was that visual art is a childish activity having little to contribute to the work and worship of today’s church.

In response to these experiences the artwork and this exegesis presents a conceptual model that supports and promotes the use of visual art within small protestant congregations in Victoria.

⁸ In March 2011 a conference was held, in conjunction with the *59th Blake Prize Touring Exhibition*, at the Toorak Uniting Church on art and spirituality. An outcome of this conference saw the creation of an artist network which includes monthly meetings. These meetings are supported by the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania and facilitated by Christina Rowntree, the Artfull Faith Co-Ordinator at the Centre for Theology and Ministry. (Artfull Faith 2014) This network offers artists of all styles and faith journeys a place to share their art and personal story in a nurturing, encouraging, supportive environment. A number of those attending these meetings feel disenfranchised from the church and often discuss the role visual art could/should play in the church.

⁹ This conversation took place after the church service on November 18, 2012.

Chapter One

The promotion of the conceptual model to support and encourage the use of visual art in small protestant churches is framed by the current cultural landscape in Australian. This landscape has seen some major shifts in the past 50 years;¹⁰ moving from a church-centric culture to one that is self-determined and multicultural. Concurrently, church attendance has been in decline.¹¹ This cultural change together with the decrease in the church's power and influence suggests that the Australian church is at an important point in its history. If the church wants to play a part in shaping the future direction of the Australian cultural landscape it needs to respond effectively to the changes happening now. Hauerwas and Willimon, in their book *Resident Aliens*, assert that the church is called upon to operate as a 'counter-cultural change agent.'¹² To this end, small churches, with their flexibility and diversity, are ideally placed to meet this challenge. In light of the Australian culture's visual maturity, small churches that embrace visual art have a tool to communicate their counter-cultural transformational message.

This is the challenge expressed by The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in a discussion paper calling the church to re-establish its relationship with the arts:

As the biblical narrative unfolds, it does so in stories and poetry. In fact, approximately 75 per cent of scripture consists of story, 15 per cent is expressed in poetic forms, and only 10 per cent is propositional and overtly instructional. In our retelling of the same story, we have reversed this biblical pattern. Today an estimated 10 per cent of our communication is designed to capture the imagination of the listener, while 90 per cent is purely instructive. Many Christians are beginning to realize that we cannot know God or walk the journey of faith as God has designed it without engaging the imagination. We are at a time when the church is being called to look afresh at the role of the artist. It may well be that the arts are one of the most untapped resources for the kingdom work of the church today.¹³

This connection between the people's imagination and faith experience is something the church of the past understood. 'Paintings and sculptures of the Bible narratives were

¹⁰ The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade identifies Australia as one of the world's most multicultural nations whose people identify with more than 270 ethnicities, speak more than 260 languages, and observe all the world's religions. (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade n.d.)

¹¹ (Occasional Paper 14: Church attenders' attitudes to innovation in church life - A comparison across countries and across time n.d., National Church Life Survey)

¹² (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989)

¹³ (Harbinson, et al. September 29 to October 5, 2004)

clearly important, they illustrated the stories that most people could not read.’¹⁴ From the third to the eighth century the church made use of every possible image to assist people’s devotional experience. By the eighth century a battle arose within the church over the use of visual art. A group known as iconoclasts (image breakers),¹⁵ believed it was a sin to represent God in any form other than in the mind of the worshipper. Three elements shaped their early position: they were suspicious of anything perceived as sensual and visual art was seen as sensual. They perceived visual art as having its roots in pagan worship which was evil and they were influenced by Greek dualism that differentiated between the secular and the sacred.¹⁶ As a result, the iconoclasts concluded that visual art was a secular activity and therefore had no place in the sacred church. After the church council at Nicaea in 787AD the power of the iconoclasts was reduced and art began to enjoy a period of support. The church recognised that stained glass, sculptures, mosaics and embroideries could support its work and worship by helping the illiterate understand and apply the church’s teaching.

The beauty and grandeur of many European church buildings stand as reminders, not only of the church’s power and wealth, but of the way the church embraced the arts. Many noted artists were commissioned to decorate many church buildings. A characteristic of pre-industrial Europe was a system of patronage networks.¹⁷ The Church was a major patron of artists for many years. ‘The Catholic Church has long been a patron of and great repository for the arts in the Western world. In its 2000-year history, the church has been responsible for commissioning countless masterworks in architecture, music, painting and

¹⁴ (Stemp 2006, 118) An example of translating the Biblical story into visual art is the *Biblia Pauperum* (*Bible of the Poor*). This book integrates images of the Old and New Testament set beside each other so the reader could see how the stories related to each other. The Christian practice of using art stood in contrast to Judaism and Islam that read Moses’ second commandment (Exodus 20:4) as an admonition against creating images.

¹⁵ The Oxford Dictionary defines an iconoclast as ‘A destroyer of images used in religious worship.’ (Oxford University Press 2014)

¹⁶ An excellent overview of the iconoclast controversy is presented in the Blog page, *The Orthodox Life* by Joseph Gleason (Gleason 2012). *Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity* reviews iconoclasm in the light of church history (Dowley, et al. 1987, 32,229-230, 244-249) and *Theological Aesthetics: A reader* discusses how the changes in theological insight led to shifts in iconoclastic practice. (Thiessen 2005, 44-110) Michelle P. Brown, in *Christian Art*, discusses how the use of icons within the Western and Eastern Church was influenced by the iconoclast controversy. (M. P. Brown 2008, 73-91)

¹⁷ (Kent, Simons and Eade 1987)

sculpture.¹⁸ For example, the Italian renaissance artist Michelangelo was funded by Pope Julius II to decorate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.¹⁹ The rich and supportive church–art relationship present during the Renaissance radically changed in the post-Reformation Protestant Church.²⁰ The shift in attitude was shaped by a new theological paradigm, a reaction to the perceived abuses within the Catholic Church as well as the congregational and community needs of the emerging Protestant Church.

Despite the fact that the Bible is rich in symbols, rituals and visual imagery, the post-reformation evangelical church defined its theology and practice in response to what it saw as excesses in the Catholic Church, adopting an anti-beauty stance as it thought beauty would distract people from God. Rev Douglas Purnell asserts ‘that the Renaissance valued beauty so highly that the Reformers believed the beauty of an artwork had become more important than its revelatory capacity to point beyond itself to God.’²¹ The Reformers’ concern over the pursuit of beauty saw the re-emergence of a modified iconoclastic attitude²² in which visual art took second place to the spoken word. This resulted in many Protestant churches being stripped of art.

In an attempt to gain a broader perspective on the church-art relationship today an internet search using the terms Christian + art produced a multitude of hits but a discouraging result. Instead of finding examples that challenge and stimulate the imagination many sites promote consumerism; sites selling cards, comforting verses and reproduced posters. The websites with images of artwork demonstrated limited themes and a broad range of quality. N.D. Wilson, speaking as a Protestant, indicates that people in the church share a common bond:

¹⁸ (Mabry 2013, 28)

¹⁹ (Stemp 2006, 82-85)

²⁰ Commonly dated to 1517, when Luther published his Ninety-Five Thesis.

²¹ Purnell cited in (Sangster 2004, 7)

²² The birth of the Protestant church saw the re-emergence of the iconoclastic position. Although this response was not uniform across the Protestant church, it was substantial. Initially art was used to promote an anti-Roman Catholic Church stance but was soon overshadowed by the iconoclasts’ attitudes promoted by people like Calvin. In contrast to Calvin, Martin Luther, despite some reservation, came to support the use of visual art as long as people did not worship an artwork in place of God. (Giorgi 2008, 258) (Carlettini 2008, 252-255)

For most people, Christianity and art no longer resonate as a glorious pairing. It's a sad and sorry truth that even as Christians, we've largely lost our respect and reverence for "Christian art." . . . Insecure about the branding Christian artists divorce their faith from their creations with a secular firewall.²³

In contrast modern Catholics have not encountered some of the same apprehension about art as their protestant evangelical counterparts. The Roman Catholic Church has been open to celebrating the work of artists. In 1965 the Vatican published a document entitled, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.²⁴ This document stated that 'in their own way literature and art are very important in the life of the church.' This position was reaffirmed by Pope John Paul II in his letter to artists.²⁵

While it is easy to be critical of the post-Reformation Protestant Church for distancing itself from the arts, it does reflect an underlying worldview currently at work in some congregations. Understanding the way a congregation's worldview determines its relationship with the arts is central to this thesis.

As defined by the Oxford reference dictionary, the term worldview is:

A largely unconscious but generally coherent set of presuppositions and beliefs that every person has which shape how we make sense of the world and everything in it. This in turn influences such things as how we see ourselves as individuals, how we interpret our role in society, how we deal with social issues, and what we regard as truth.²⁶

It defines the philosophical and normative operational assumptions (such as values and ethics) that determine how an individual or society behaves.²⁷ James W. Sire suggests a worldview is:

²³ (Wilson 2013, 34)

²⁴ Released by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965 (Pope Paul VI 1965)

²⁵ The Vatican published this letter on Easter Sunday, the 4th April 1999. (Pope John Paul II 1999)

²⁶ (Oxford University Press 2014)

²⁷ (Palmer 1996, 114)

a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true, or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic construction of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being... We should all think in terms of worldviews, that is, with a consciousness not only of our own way of thought but also that of other people, so that we can first understand and then genuinely communicate with others in our pluralistic society.²⁸

While there are a number of researchers (as those above) who are willing to define the term, it was more difficult to find a consensus as to how a worldview is established. In the article, *Cultural Differences and Communication of the Gospel*, Paul Hiebert suggests that:

at the heart of a culture are shared beliefs, feelings and values of a community of people. Through their experiences, people form mental pictures or maps of their world... for determining action. It provides them with a guide for the decisions and behaviours.²⁹

He notes that communities respond to a stimulus (internal or external) based on the decisions informed by their worldview. Figure 1 illustrates how the worldview dictates what decision informed response is needed to a stimulus.

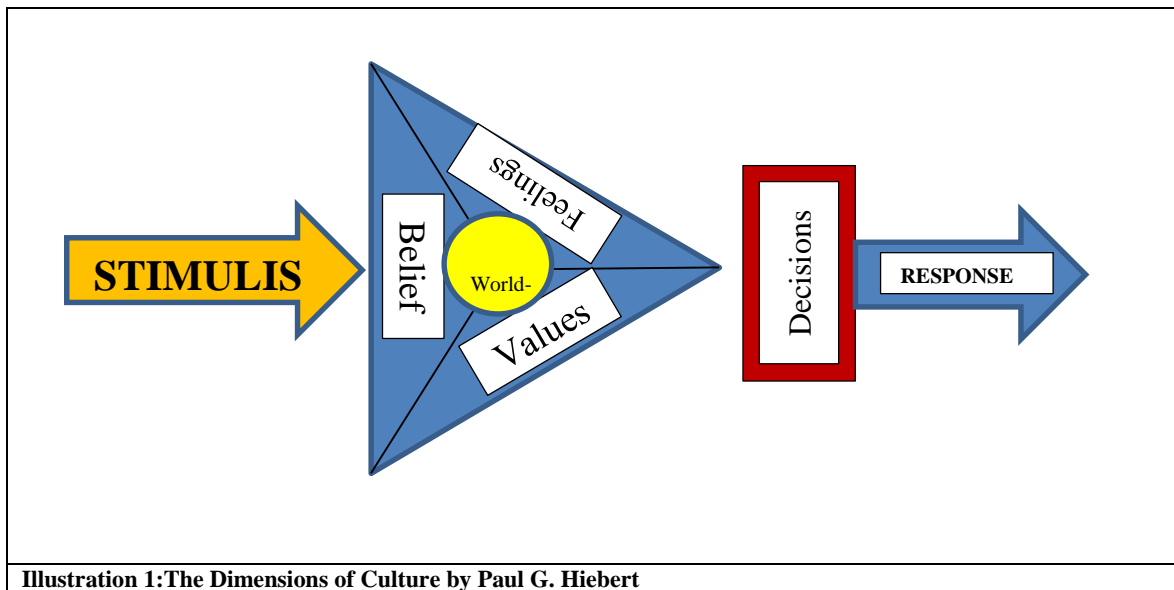


Illustration 1: The Dimensions of Culture by Paul G. Hiebert

The re-establishment of the iconoclastic worldview during the Reformation continues to influence Australian church practice in a number of subtle ways. Despite the beauty in the pre-federation Protestant Cathedrals, even those in regional centres, the use of visual art was often limited to stained glass windows. With the push for church growth in the post-

²⁸ (Sire 2009, 15-16)

²⁹ (Hiebert 1999, 375)

federation era, many local congregations opted for a simple multipurpose functional building with little adornment. For the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia³⁰ (WMC), established during the post Second World War church growth movement, visual art was non-existent. In reviewing the WMC's archives for material referencing the church's use of visual art, only one article was found. It was published in the *Aldersgate Papers*, the Methodist Theological Journal, by Peter Breen in 2004. At the time Peter was an ordained minister in the WMC and his article presented a prophetic call to the church to change its worldview to include the arts.³¹ Dr Jim Ridgway, the church historian and foundational member of the WMC in Australia, acknowledged that the prophetic call went unheard. As a leader in the church he looked back with regret that 'visual art had never been a point of discussion in all his years in the church.'³²

Similarly, the Uniting Church Commission in a paper entitled, *Art in the Body of Christ*, expresses concern at the dismissal of visual art in the church.³³ The Commission had a threefold purpose: to explore the relationship between the Uniting Church (in Victoria and Tasmania) and the arts, to discover what is currently happening within the urban and rural church in regard to its participation and creation of art, and to imagine future directions the church can take to use art as a tool to connect, inspire and awaken God's people, thus bringing about the greater glory of God. The paper seeks to reframe the church's worldview by stating that the act of being creative provides an inherent connection with God and calls for the church to be a creative space that supports the arts. The Rev Wes Campbell submitted a paper to the Commission in which he observed how the church's suspicion of visual art is played out:

³⁰ The Wesleyan Methodist Church officially began in Australia on the 29th of April 1946. The foundation for the church grew from the prayer and passion of Rev Kingsley M Ridgway for evangelism and holiness. The core element of the church's teaching and practice has been shaped by the teachings enunciated by John Wesley. Compared to the attendance of other churches the Wesleyan Methodist Church is small by Australian church standards. Despite its size and diversity, it represents a good cross-section of church practice. (Wesleyan Church n.d.)

³¹ (Breen September 2004). Since writing the article Peter has left the WMC and is now part of an arts ministry in Queensland called Jugglers Café.

³² The conversation took place at the Victorian church conference in September 2011.

³³ (Sangster 2004)

There is a great tension between those who regard artistic expression as ‘self-expression’ and those who are artists because of the necessity to give expression to a larger truth. That divide is an unavoidable area of contention and must be addressed theologically. Silence is no response.³⁴

The need for congregations to engage in theological reflection (the reframing of its worldview) was evident during the year spent visiting a number of small Protestant churches in Victoria.³⁵ These observational visits revealed that most churches have a tenuous relationship with the arts and that this was not due to an open iconoclastic attitude³⁶ but rather something that resides below the surface hidden in church tradition. Turner suggests that the development of biblically informed mainstream art is hindered by ‘the perception that Christians should make Christian art and “Christian art” is always explicitly religious.’³⁷ He also suggests that the strained relationship between Christianity and art is due to ‘the perceived division between secular and sacred. Christians have found it hard to appreciate art that deals with daily living...if it doesn't supply an obviously spiritual conclusion.’³⁸

In visiting the churches it was found that the majority of the congregations sought to honour the ‘mystery’ (the numinous/God) but were afraid of anything labelled mysterious. Because visual art evokes the senses and is perceived mysterious, it is treated with suspicion. This attitude shaped the church architecture, promoted an austere worship style, and valued the use of verbal and written forms of communication above others.

The call for change

While a tenuous relationship with visual art does exist within the church, the tide is changing. In the past fifteen to twenty years there has been a broad acceptance of contemporary music and audio-visual technology in church worship services. Where these contemporary devices are used, the congregation had responded positively as the material is presented in a culturally relevant way. In advocating for a comprehensive and permanent

³⁴ (Sangster 2004, 16)

³⁵ I visited 44 different churches across the year. These churches were randomly selected, varied in size and denominational affiliation. Most churches were in the north and west of Melbourne. I visited five churches twice to meet an artist or church leader that was not present on my first visit.

³⁶ Only two churches held a clearly defined iconoclastic attitude.

³⁷ (Turner 2001, 23)

³⁸ (Turner 2001, 47)

change, this research sits at the intersection between my passion and motivation as a Christian artist, my calling as an ordained minister, my understanding of the church's positive relationship with visual art prior to the Protestant Reformation and the openness within the Australian culture for messages to be communicated visually.

This exegesis posits that smaller church congregations in Victoria are ideally placed, due to their size and flexibility, to redefine the church as an effective counter-cultural change agent³⁹ through the (re)visioning of visual art within the church's work and worship. A potential outcome of (re)visioning the church-art relationship within a congregation is for individuals within the congregation to explore new ways to share and express their faith. To achieve this outcome congregations need a change in attitude and practice. The problem is that change in the church, as with any organisation, is often difficult. The conceptual model presented in the next chapter and the accompanying exhibition presents insights and examples to help congregations achieve this change.

³⁹ (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989)

Chapter Two

When the imagination is choked, so also is our theological knowledge.⁴⁰

Reflecting on historical shifts

Chapter One highlighted that many small protestant congregations in Victoria have a tenuous relationship with visual art. The chapter provides evidence and observational examples in a brief review of where the current church–art relationship sits within church history. The chapter concludes by acknowledging that there is growing interest in the arts as the emerging church looks for ways to communicate its message in culturally relevant ways. Chapter Two provides congregations seeking to (re)vision their church–art relationship with a conceptual model that supports and promotes the use of visual art in the church.

Central to the conceptual model is an understanding that a congregation’s worldview influences its practice. The changes in church practice over the last fifteen years, as noted above, illustrate the shift or change in the church’s worldview. In response to new knowledge and surrounding circumstances, the shift in worldview has generated an increasing openness to the arts. In the past two years there have been an increasing number of books published about visual art in the church.⁴¹ This parallels the enthusiasm displayed by the artists who gather monthly at the Artfull Faith meetings.⁴² Although the change in worldview is subtle, it is growing as small protestant congregations recognise the contribution visual arts can make to their work and worship.

While Hiebert confirms that a worldview guides a community’s response to a stimulus, Kathryn Hume, in her book, *Fantasy and Mimesis*,⁴³ contributes to this discussion by

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas (Opusc. 16, de Trinitate 6.2, ad. 5).

⁴¹ For example: *Arts Ministry: Nurturing the Creative Life of God’s People* by Michael J. Bauer (Bauer 2013); *Theological Aesthetics* edited by Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Thiessen 2005); *The art of the Sacred – An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief* by Graham Howes (Howes 2010).

⁴² The background to this group was discussed in footnote 8. Since its inception the membership continues to grow and diversify. From slow beginnings, the membership now includes artists of many different persuasions: dancers, poets, sculptors, storytellers, painters (of all media) and those using film, video and computers.

⁴³ (Hume 1984, 23)

identifying that the global worldview shapes both the experience and relationships of an individual. Referencing the author-text-reader relationship, she posits that both writer and reader are influenced by their external worldview and the text is the interface between the author and the reader. The external worldview informs the personal worldview of the author impacting on the writing process. Similarly, the reader's worldview informed by the external worldview, impacts upon his or her engagement with the text. Hume also indicated that this is not a one-way encounter; the writing and reading process transforms both participants. Figure 2 illustrates how society's worldview translates into the construction of, and engagement with the text via the author's and reader's personal worldviews.⁴⁴

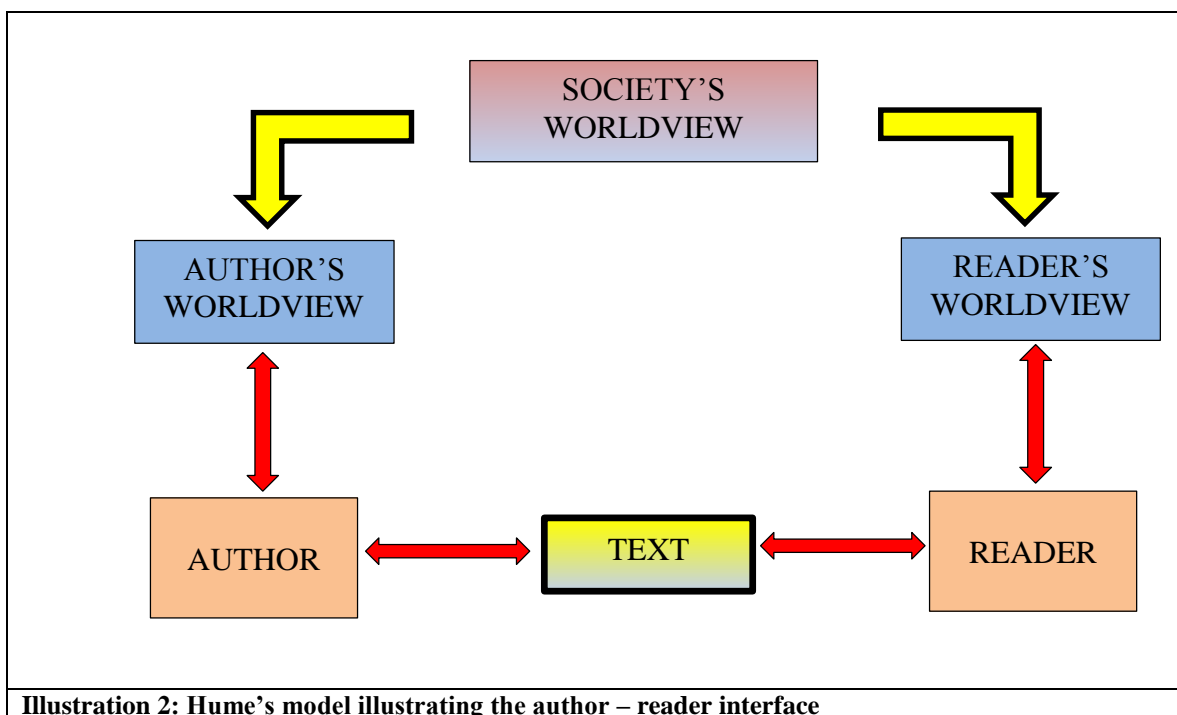


Illustration 2: Hume's model illustrating the author – reader interface

Hume's model, which discusses the impact of worldview on the author-text-reader relationship, can be used to discuss the impact of worldview on the artist-artwork-congregation relationship. The modified model below identifies how the overarching worldview of the church impacts on the experience of the artist in the congregation and the congregation's response to visual art. The external worldview informs the personal worldview of the artist, impacting upon the creative process. In the same way, the

⁴⁴ (Hume 1984, 23) The graphic has been modified for clarification.

congregation's worldview impacts on its engagement with the arts. As with author-text-reader relationship, this is not a one-way encounter; both artist and congregation are transformed in and through the engagement with the artwork. The modified model in Figure 3 illustrates how the artist-artwork-congregation relationship is influenced by the external worldview. It demonstrates how the artwork offers a relational interface between the artist and congregation and offers both artist and congregation the potential to be transformed through engaging the imagination.

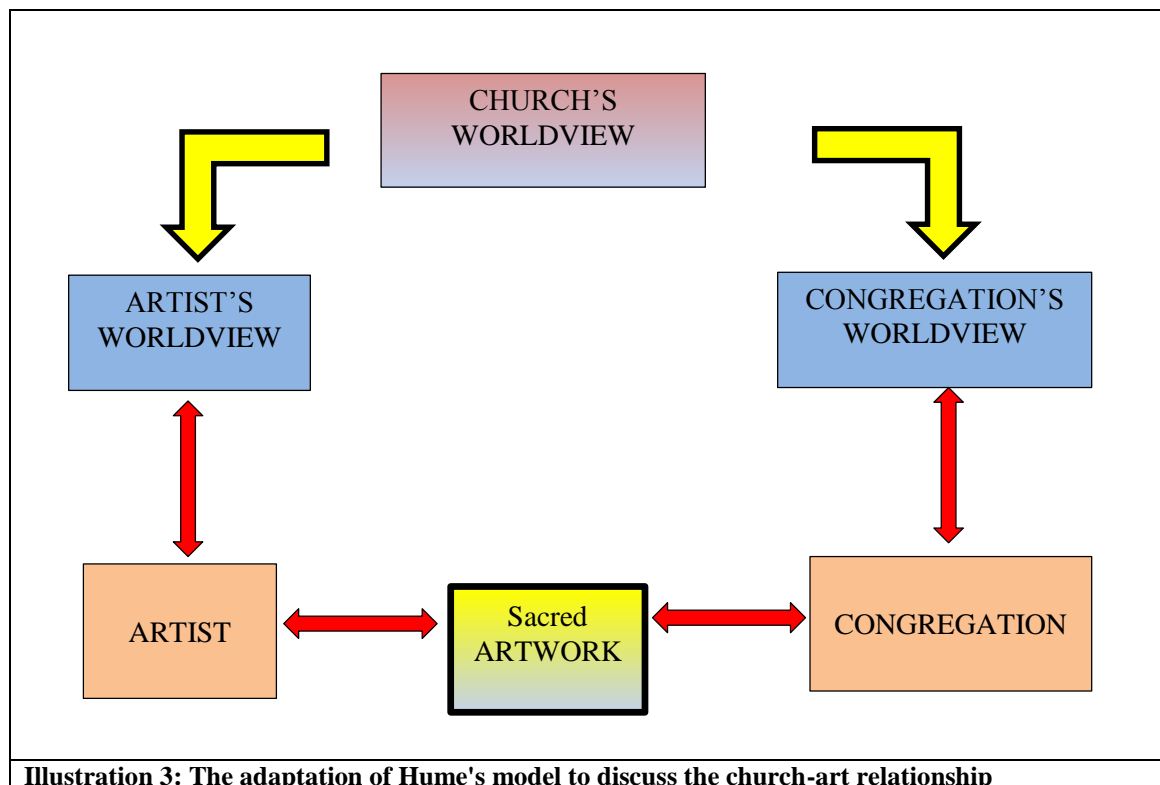


Illustration 3: The adaptation of Hume's model to discuss the church-art relationship

The adaptation of Hume's model for the church invites reflection as to what is the church's worldview. The revised model illustrates how the congregation's theology worldview impacts on the status of visual art in the church; a congregation that embraces a theology of creativity embraces visual art as an important part of its work and worship. The reverse is also true; a congregation that rejects or is ignorant of the theology of creativity is likely to dismiss the arts. Therefore, the theology of creativity is foundational to the (re)visioning of the church-art relationship.

Reframing the church's worldview – the theology of creativity

The formation of the theology of creativity begins by accepting the Bible as a source of wisdom and inspiration. By applying good hermeneutical skills⁴⁵ to the Biblical text it reframes the church's worldview to include the theology of creativity. The hermeneutical process starts by identifying the writer's intention, the audience and setting (context), and (as best can be achieved) determine the original reader understanding and/or response.

The hermeneutical investigation of the Biblical text starts with God as creator; the Bible highlights that God is the creative spirit that created all things, visible and invisible. God, as creator, declares his presence through his creative genius in creation⁴⁶ in which humanity is part of an integrated design. The Bible stresses that God's creativity is at the core of all human existence⁴⁷ and that humanity is made in God's image.⁴⁸ By implication, an expression of human creativity is evidence of god-likeness and a source of joy and inspiration. The pinnacle of individual creativity is best evidenced in a corporate setting where, in parallel to the genesis story, the creative act is directed as a gift to and for others. Therefore, the world is not simply a tool for experimentation and exploitation, but a resource for self-discovery, creative insight and expression. The world is an infinite experience of colours, sound, shapes, textures, tastes and smells – all of them a source of creativity. The theology of creativity encourages members of the church to accept, support and engage with visual art by maintaining a positive attitude irrespective of how and where the artwork is sighted (space and time) or its intended purpose.

While some may disagree that God is the source of creativity, the ability to appreciate the grandeur of creation fills the human heart with awe and wonder and in turn provides the congregation with a source of individual and corporate creativity. The theology of

⁴⁵ 'Hermeneutics is the theory of the comprehension and interpretation of literary texts. It differs from the exegetical method (the systematic way of proceeding in comprehension) and from exegesis (the exercise of comprehension and interpretation).' (Schokel 1998, 16) 'Traditionally it has meant 'that science which delineates principles or methods for interpreting an individual author's meaning.' (Osborne 2006, 5) Two books that have influenced my approach to biblical interpretation are *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Traina and Bauer 2011) and *Bible Study that Works* (Thompson 2011).

⁴⁶ Romans 1

⁴⁷ Psalm 19:1-2, Psalm 8, Psalm 148:1-6

⁴⁸ Genesis 1-3

creativity offers a creative pathway for the congregation to understand and imaginatively explore the biblical narrative. Luci Shaw, in discussing the role of creativity in the church says:

... for me it seems that the inclusion of the desire and appreciation for the beautiful is gratuitous—an infusion of pure Grace, a reflection of the generous heart of the Creator. When we create something appealing ... we show our integral relationship with the Creator ... [who] translated his own divine image in our human flesh so that we too are participants in creative intelligence and originality.⁴⁹

The exploration of the notion of creativity in the Biblical text provides a focal point for corporate reflection and dialogue. Creativity and faith work in tandem providing a synthesis between the seen and unseen world.⁵⁰ The artwork that grows from an understanding of the theology of creativity has a pastoral/prophetic nature, as such it has an inherent potentiality to invite personal and corporate transformation, although as Emily Dickinson said, ‘The truth must dazzle gradually.’⁵¹

From theory to practice

Where Hiebert identified ‘where’ the worldview operates, Hume detailed ‘what’ the worldview does. By integrating Hiebert’s ideas into the art focused modified model a new conceptual model emerges illustrating ‘why’ the theology of creativity is important. This new model acknowledges the way a small protestant congregation’s worldview, made up of the three related but independent components – beliefs, values and feelings – are influenced by the meta-worldview of the affiliated institutional Church or an overarching provincial theology. This new conceptual model illustrates how the theology of creativity supports the use of visual art in the church: it illustrates how visual art is an effective interface between the artist and the church congregation.

⁴⁹ (Shaw 1998, 5)

⁵⁰ Refer John 20:29 and Ephesians 6:12

⁵¹ (Dickinson 1935, 506)

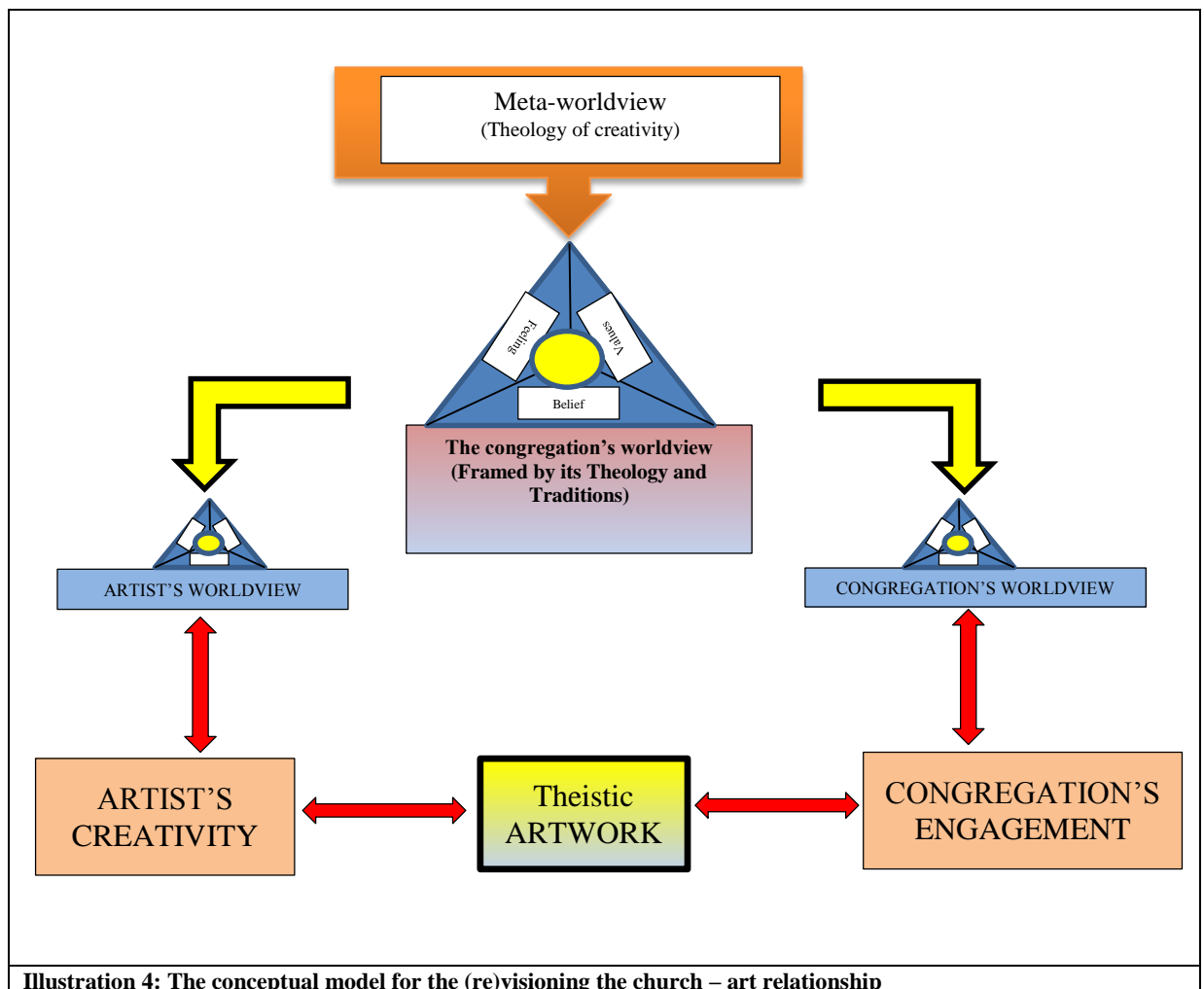


Illustration 4: The conceptual model for the (re)visioning the church – art relationship

Neither Hiebert nor Hume discuss ‘how’ the worldview influences the author or reader. The new conceptual model, in which the worldview is informed by theology and tradition, informs both artist and congregation ‘how’ to engage with the arts. For those wanting to express themselves creatively, they need a good understanding of the biblical narrative, sound hermeneutical skills to accurately unpack the text’s message and an open and reflective disposition. At a congregational level, as well as creating a nurturing environment within the church that encourages creativity for both artist and congregation alike, the theology of creativity encourages members of the church to accept, support and engage with visual art by maintaining a positive attitude irrespective of how and where the artwork is sighted (space and time) or its intended purpose. The next two diagrams highlight the centrality of the theology of creativity on the (re)visioning the church art relationship. Figure 5 illustrates how the worldview impacts upon the practice of both church-based artist and congregation.

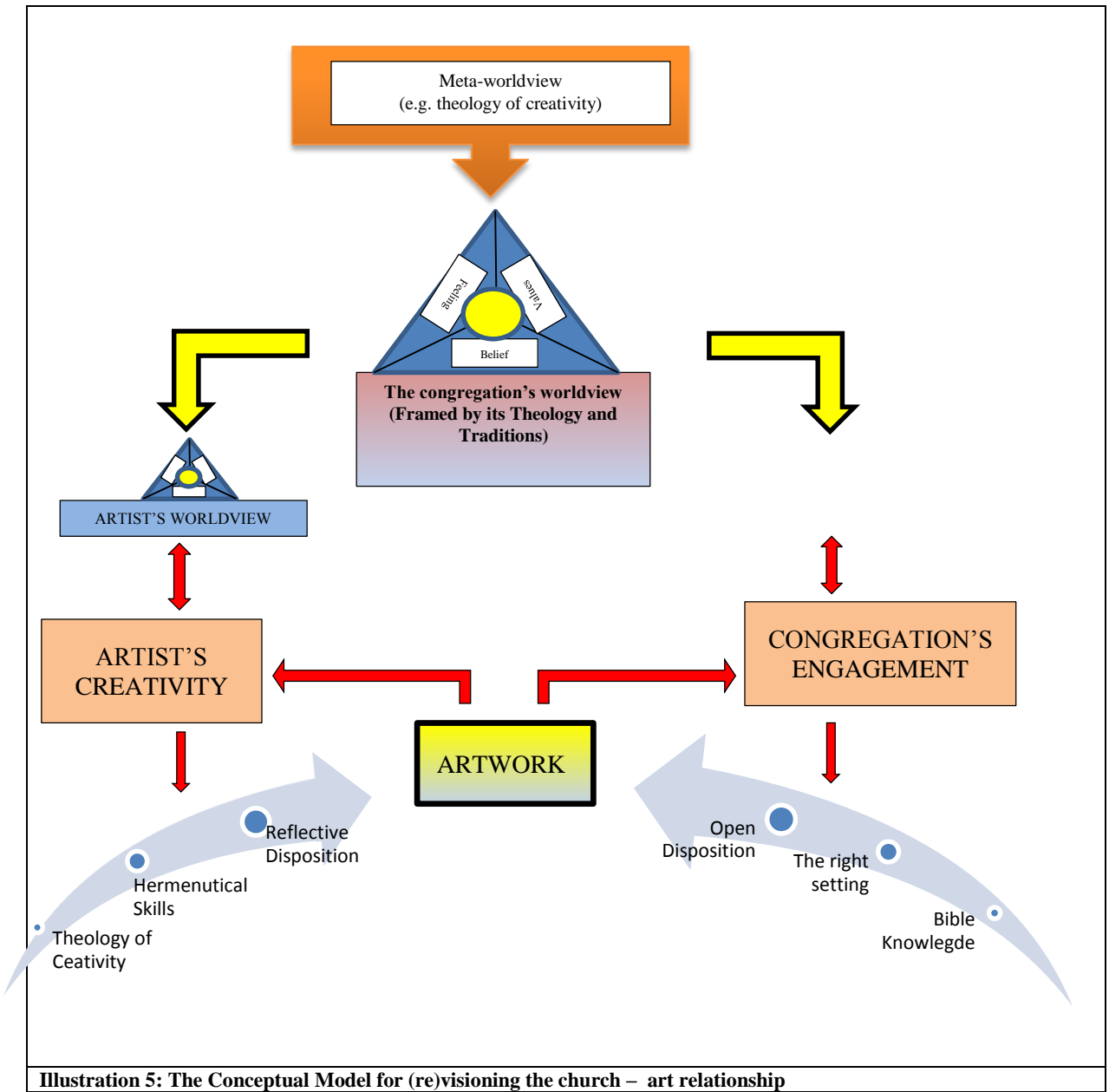


Illustration 5: The Conceptual Model for (re)visioning the church – art relationship

Important to this model is the role visual art plays in the cultural debate. Although, as Turner identifies,

it is not the primary concern of all artists to make statements about the human condition or to create a commentary on the times, it is inevitable that many will do so simply because the instinct of the artist is to ask questions about origins, identity, behaviour and destiny.⁵²

The church-based artist has the potential to express his instinct through the integration of the three inter-related components: a theological framework, sound hermeneutics skills and a listening and reflective disposition. The resultant sacred art is able, for example, to support the church's liturgy, encourage personal and corporate devotion, stimulate worship, and provide an iconic window to the sacred.

From conceptual model to the creation of sacred art

Common to the discussion of church-based art is the term, sacred or religious art.⁵³ Jenni Davis in her book *Sacred Art* says that:

The most outstanding works of art are born out of a passion for the subject portrayed, and for this reason sacred art arising from a deep spiritual connection with the universal source of divine love and inspiration that we know as God counts highly among the most beautiful and powerful of all the great works.⁵⁴

How then, can sacred art be defined and what is its purpose? For Davis, works of sacred art,

...are designed to connect those who look upon them with the Divine, and to unite or keep them in touch with their spiritual centre. They calm the senses and inspire the soul; telling the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection, they are both humbling and uplifting. Sacred art is challenging and intriguing, full of the extraordinary mystery of faith, and everything about it has a profound significance, from the materials used to create it to the complex symbolism portrayed within its depths.⁵⁵

Davis's explanation of sacred art encourages devotion and contemplation within the congregation. Sacred art offers an umbrella term that defines the researcher's artistic style and calling; it is church-based art that represents religious and spiritual themes, seeks to illuminate the redemptive message of the Bible and provides an iconographic window for viewers to explore their faith. Sacred art provides the specificity needed to encourage acceptance of visual art within the work and worship of the church. Congregation-focused

⁵² (Turner 2001, 21)

⁵³ Sacred is used here to define art that illustrates the breadth and depth of spirituality and religious art and references all religious traditions.

⁵⁴ (Davis 2010, 6)

⁵⁵ (Davis 2010, 6)

sacred art illustrates the truth, beauty, love, hope and redemptive invitation of a contemporary reading of the biblical text.

In contrast to other forms of visual art, sacred art has several important characteristics. It is not created for decoration or the pursuit of beauty, but to assist individuals and congregations in worship by providing a window through which people are able to investigate their faith story. The artist, in creating sacred art, understands church tradition and enjoys the freedom and empowerment offered by the theology of creativity. Sacred art encourages the artist to express personality, style, focus and emphasis of the biblical narrative. Sacred art encourages reflective prayer and contemplation as well as promotes congregational and community connection.

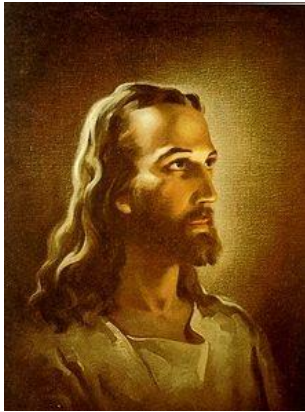


Illustration 6: Warner E. Sallman, *The Head of Christ*, 1941

Oil on canvas
51 x 41cm

© Anderson University and Warner Press

In 1994 the editor of *The New York Times* reflected on who could be considered as the best-known artist of the century, ‘Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol are running neck and neck, with Andrew Wyeth a respectable third.’⁵⁶ The article observes that if the selection was based on popularity then Warner E. Sallman⁵⁷ would win in a landslide. In 1924, Sallman produced a sketch for a magazine cover that portrayed a strong yet serene image of Jesus. This sketch became the foundation for Sallman’s most recognisable painting, *The Head of Christ* (Figure 1). It is thought that this image has been reproduced an estimated 500 million times. As a Christian painter, Sallman was influenced by the religious art of Gustave Dore.⁵⁸ The Dean of the Bible School he attended encouraged Sallman to visually represent his

conception of Christ. The Dean asked that the image be a manly one as he believed many

⁵⁶ (Grimes 1994)

⁵⁷ April 30, 1892 – May 25, 1968

⁵⁸ (Anderson University 2014)

of the pictures of Jesus were too effeminate. Reflecting on his work he once said ‘I give God the glory for whatever has been accomplished by my efforts to bring joy and happiness to people throughout the world.’⁵⁹

Despite the popularity and contribution this image has made to the western world’s image of Jesus, it illustrates the power of a descriptive image to distort/colour/transform/shape people’s understanding of the Bible. Sallman’s folk-hero image of Christ, produced in the middle of the Second World War, could be deemed a commercial success, but as an icon it does not capture the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel story. Akiane Kramarik, a popular contemporary Christian American painter has produced a different, somewhat more realistic image of Jesus but still approaches the visual translation of the biblical text in a didactic style. In contrast to Sallman and Kramarik, artists like Dinah Kendell,⁶⁰ Anneke Kaai,⁶¹ Stanley Spencer⁶² and Bill Viola ⁶³(artists specifically working in biblical/spiritual themes) invite viewers to reflect on their life stories through engagement with their art. Rejecting the teller approach, the 3D translation of Ecclesiastes in this exhibition replicates the invitational approach of Kendell, Kaai, Spencer and Viola. With that said, this exegesis acknowledges that an important cultural shift has taken place in Australia in the recent past – the need to be more spiritually inclusive. This shift is evident in the style of art being submitted to the Blake Prize, which is offered specifically for spiritual and religious art. Whilst applauding this shift, the artwork in this exegesis is shaped by my personal journey and my pastoral role within my religious community. As a consequence, the artwork has a specific audience and distinctive focus; to assist small protestant congregations (re)vision their relationship with visual art. With that in mind, the exhibition invites the viewer

⁵⁹ (Anderson University 2014)

⁶⁰ An example of her work is presented in the book, *Allegories of Heaven*. (Kendall 2002)

⁶¹ An example of her work is presented in the book, *Seeing a New Song*. (Kaai 2008)

⁶² ‘Stanley Spencer (1891–1959), devoted much of his career as a painter to creating a series of biblical scenes transported into the daily life of his home village of Cookham, Berkshire, executed in a tragic – comical exaggerated figural style’ (M. P. Brown 2008, 381). In 1935 he resigned from the Royal Academy when it refused to exhibit his painting, *St Francis and the birds*. The Academy may have rejected his work based on his style or ‘it might have been a reaction to the overly religious content which was no longer the stuff of which the Academy of Art is made’ (M. P. Brown 2008, 383). See also (Robinson 1990)

⁶³ The videos of the American artist, Bill Viola (1951-), reference the iconographic language of several faith traditions as a way to explore the human condition and people’s spiritual journey. (Ross, et al. 1997)

(especially those from small Protestant congregations) to adopt a meditative demeanour⁶⁴ within the exhibition space and to draw their own response to the message in Ecclesiastes.

The impact of sacred art on the congregation

As suggested above the theology of creativity is part of the church meta-worldview, it also has the potential to empower the congregation's relationship with the arts and support the practice of the church-based artist.⁶⁵ When visual art is part of the church it becomes a meeting place where the artwork interfaces between artist and the congregation offering an experience of shalom.⁶⁶ Anne Mallaby suggests that 'art invites people to wonder.' As the curator of the Chapel on Station Gallery, she 'Believes that people will be changed in the viewing [of art], extended in their horizons, and expanded in their seeing.'⁶⁷ Church based visual art provides a door to creative fulfilment and connection to the divine nature within. The resultant sacred art provides the potential for the inquisitive heart of humanity to meet the self-revelatory heart of God. This form of sacred art sits at the intersection of the human and divine story and invites people to respond. Rowena Loverance, in her book *Christian Art*, believes that Christian art should deepen our encounter with God. She states:

From the tiny to the monumental, from a piece of personal jewellery used for personal meditation to the massive stain glass window in a great cathedral, the function is the same: to catch the imagination, to open the heart and the mind, so that we may better hear the divine promptings. Visual art offers a non-demanding platform for connecting people's spirituality with the biblical story; it provides an environment for reflection, dialogue and growth.⁶⁸

Although this form of sacred visual art has many styles and roles it can visually guide a congregation through each phase of a liturgical worship service. It can operate as a devotional resource, helping the congregation reflectively engage with the biblical text. It

⁶⁴ The call for a mediative demeanour parallels the approach used by the artist to explore the book of Ecclesiastes and the construction process. It is also befitting the siting of the exhibition in the church.

⁶⁵ The reverse is also true. As one church based artists (who wished to be unnamed) expressed, 'He feels like a refugee who has come to Australia in the hope of being accepted only to find he is unwanted.'

⁶⁶ On April 5 2014, April, Dr Anne Mallaby presented a soon to be published paper to the Artfull-Faith artist's group at the Centre for Theology, University of Melbourne. The topic of the paper was 'Art As Shalom.' The paper highlighted art's ability to offer a viewer an experience of shalom. For Dr. Anne Mallaby, Shalom is more than peace. Shalom 'offers harmony and wellbeing, a drawing together of all that is.'

⁶⁷ (Mallaby 2014, 2)

⁶⁸ (Loverance 2007, 6)

can be a channel for meditation.⁶⁹ It can provide a window through which the transcendent God becomes present, prayers are expressed and healing experienced.

The construction of this type of sacred art, whilst referencing art history and church tradition, has its own voice as it seeks internal and external transformation in the maker and viewer. Motivated to promote personal and corporate change, the makers of sacred art derive their vision, passion and direction from their calling as artists. The resultant sacred artwork that grows from integrating theology, hermeneutics and personal reflection is able to support the church's liturgy, encourage personal and corporate devotion, stimulate worship, and provide an iconic window to the sacred.

⁶⁹ Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Nouwen 1991) illustrates the link between art and faith. He spent days sitting and reflecting on Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal son*, (1661–1669). Oil on canvas, 262 × 205 cm Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. He suggests that to gaze deeply into scripture, art and creation is to find the face of God. In order to meditate, we need to let ourselves go into an artwork and allow the redemptive message of the bible that is behind the artwork to speak.

Chapter Three

Constrained by the reality of not working with a small protestant congregation on reframing its worldview, the exhibition validates and explicates the part of the model that involves the artist's theology, hermeneutic skills and reflective disposition.

The conceptual model at work

The exhibition has been influenced by four distinct personal experiences: the observations of a year-long informal ethnographic investigation of churches in Victoria; conversations with the custodian(s) of the Methodist Art Collection in Britain in 2013; membership of an artists' network sponsored by the Uniting Church of Victoria and a change in personal circumstances – moving church and denomination. The exhibition stands at the intersection of my high regard for the Bible, the creative freedom offered by the theology of creativity and an understanding that visual arts is an effective tool to support the church's work and worship.⁷⁰

Motivated by the theology of creativity, I selected the book of Ecclesiastes as the template for the hermeneutical analysis. The rationale for this decision was threefold; its contemporary theme, having twelve chapters it was deemed a manageable size for the research and it is a book that is rarely discussed from the pulpit. Ecclesiastes is one of the five poetic books in the Old Testament. The writer of Ecclesiastes identifies himself as a teacher.⁷¹ The text suggests that the teacher is Solomon, purported to be a wise man.⁷² This book, written some 3000 years ago⁷³, seeks to answer the question many people ask today, 'What is the true source of meaning in life?' Seeking to answer this question, the author undertook an autobiographical investigation. His insight framed by a phenomenological epistemology, resulted in his personal observation on what shapes society's sense of

⁷⁰ (Huyser-Honig 2004) (Pierson 2012)

⁷¹ Ecclesiastes 1:1. While there are some internal discrepancies leading some commentators to conclude that the Solomon is not the author (Rudman 2001) (Smith 1996, 692), it is generally agreed the author is Solomon. (W. P. Brown 2011) (White 2010) Interestingly, rabbinic tradition holds that Solomon wrote the book at the end of his life. (Bickerman 1985, 157)

⁷² 1 Kings 2:1-28, 1 Kings 5:7

⁷³ Accepting Solomon as the author and written at the end of his life.

meaning. After presenting his eclectic and core conclusions he asks the reader to respond by reflecting on how he/she defines life's meaning.

While the first reading of Ecclesiastes may seem depressing, entwined within the poetry and prose is a thread of hope; the author acknowledges that life, although confusing and ambiguous, finds meaning in a God who has 'set eternity in everyone's heart.'⁷⁴ Other artists such as Salinger (*Catcher in the Rye*⁷⁵), John Lennon (*Nowhere Man*⁷⁶) and Francis Bacon (various emotive paintings⁷⁷) have echoed the same message as Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes challenges the reader to envision humanity with no potential for redemption; such an existence would be meaningless.

The foundation of the author's worldview is the 'fear of God'⁷⁸ which he suggests provides a viable and constant antidote to the transitory and uncertain nature of humanity.

Solomon's investigation explores how wisdom relates to meaning across a range of behaviours between birth and death. He wonders if meaning is found in self-indulgent pleasure, the accumulation of achievements (such as titles and financial success), personal status or power or religious practice.

Solomon's research methodology is to use two contrasting points of view to analyse his observations – from below the sun (the humanist worldview) and from above the sun (a worldview of faith). At the end of his investigation he concludes that there is nothing new in life; materialism and uncontrolled pursuit of pleasure never satisfies, people die and are forgotten. Once dead, others inherit a person's wealth and there is no way of controlling what they will do with it. Solomon reached a confronting conclusion that life is meaningless and that to seek meaning is like trying to catch the wind. He then spent the

⁷⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:11

⁷⁵ J. D. Salinger wrote *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951 and discusses the issues of teenage angst and alienation.

⁷⁶ John Lennon came up with this after struggling to write a song. He said 'I thought of myself sitting there, doing nothing and getting nowhere.' (Lennon and Ono 1981, 1-3)

⁷⁷ Bacon often used a screaming mouth as a metaphor for personal and corporate anxiety. In referencing Bacon's art, Robert Niemi notes that 'Bacon's nihilistic figurative paintings are revered by art critics for their technical mastery and as haunting evocations of modern alienation and anxiety.' (Niemi 2006, 307)

⁷⁸ The New International Version of the Bible translates the word fear as reverence. In an April 2006 John Mallon in *Inside the Vatican* suggests that the 'fear of the Lord' is best understood as "filial fear" (not wanting to offend a loved one). (Mallon 2006) (New International Version 2011)

majority of his investigation using the humanist paradigm and concluded that life is repetitive and meaningless.

Solomon's autobiographical approach to research is often contradictory. He observes injustice in the judicial system, the poor being treated unfairly, the rights of good (righteous) people being denied and fools being elevated to positions of power. He concludes that life is meaningless. The teacher concludes his analysis by inviting the reader to reflect on what is important and what really matters in life; does knowing/not knowing God make a difference in life? Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes to encourage introspection and change in the reader.⁷⁹ In keeping with his agenda, the artworks in this exhibition are selected and arranged, not only to illustrate the message of Ecclesiastes,⁸⁰ but to echo the teacher's goal to encourage reflection. This exhibition visually replicates the invitation the teacher offers his readers, to look at life with the eyes of faith. In the same way the teacher of Ecclesiastes does not tell the reader how this should happen; the exhibition leaves room for viewers to respond as they will.

The exhibition maintains the same focus and voice as Solomon in Ecclesiastes, counterbalancing the proclamation that life has no meaning with an invitation to hope. It visually replicates Solomon's pastoral and prophetic message, and seeks to encourage a life-changing understanding of the biblical text through reflection and dialogue, basing it on the awakening of the viewer's imagination. The artwork demonstrates the synergy between the hermeneutical investigation of Ecclesiastes, my biblical knowledge and a two-year process of reflective visual journaling. The outcome is an autobiographical exhibition where some artworks are the direct result of the contemplative journaling and others are the revelatory voice at work during the construction process. The size of the exhibition is designed to complement the room by offering the viewer space to engage with the installation without feeling cramped. Each piece in the exhibition has its own voice but combines to promote Solomon's observation that life only makes sense when viewed with the lens of faith. The exhibition demonstrates the timelessness, relevance and power of the book of Ecclesiastes for today's congregations. It highlights how the message of the

⁷⁹ Refer: Ecclesiastes 12:11, Hebrew 4:12

⁸⁰ The identification of the message of Ecclesiastes is determined through hermeneutic investigation.

ancient sacred text is able to provide insight, hope and direction even though surrounded by negative circumstances.

The style, size and siting of the exhibition

The exhibition contains eleven works of art. The style and size of each artwork is motivated by a conscious choice to avoid the sentimentality often seen in illustrated Bibles and church art of the 1950s. In addition, the significance of the artwork in this exhibition is not found in its dollar value or the display of artistic skills; the value is in the contribution the exhibition makes to the viewer's understanding of Ecclesiastes. The interactive sculptures in the exhibition illustrate Ecclesiastes' narrative message and invite viewer participation. In support of the call to (re)vision the church-art relationship the exhibition is sited, not in a gallery, but at the Melton Uniting Church.⁸¹ The layout of the exhibition follows the pattern of a contemporary worship service.⁸² A typical worship service invites members of the congregation to move from gathering to dismissal via the experience of engagement, exaltation and adoration.⁸³ In keeping with this pattern the exhibition transitions the viewer from an invitation to be present to personal reflection on leaving via artworks that engage, instruct and encourage.

⁸¹ The reason for presenting the exhibition at the Melton Uniting Church is two-fold. First, the transition space in the old blue stone church building, complete with stained glass windows and a sacred atmosphere, are conducive to the exhibition's agenda. Second, the church pastor is open to (re)vision the church-art relationship without imposing preconceived or unrealistic expectations.

⁸² (Liesch 1993)

⁸³ Thielen states that the 'basic pattern of Word and Table was firmly established by the second century. For example, in his *First Apology*, written around 150 A.D., Justin Martyr describes services of Word and Table as normative experiences of Christian worship. Later, the church added to this basic order of worship a gathering and a dismissal, thus providing a four-fold order of worship: the gathering, the service of Word, the service of the Table, the dismissal. However, the service of the Word clearly had two parts – the Word itself (Scripture readings and sermon) and a response (affirmation of faith, prayer, and offering). Therefore, in practicality, the basic worship pattern involved five movements: gathering, service of the Word, response, service of the Table, dismissal. This fivefold order of worship has been a mainstay of Christian worship for most of its history.' (Thielen 2000, 20-21)

Walking the exhibition

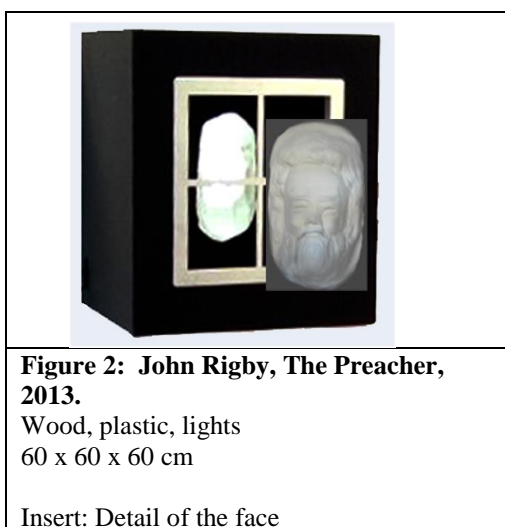
Movement One – the teacher’s call



This gathering phase contains three artworks which parallel the invitation offered by the teacher in Ecclesiastes. He introduces himself and then challenges the reader(s) to reflect on what he has written. Each artwork in this gathering phase represents three of four different attitudes viewers can have on entering an exhibition – disengaged, present and inquisitive. In Figure 1, the person looking below the curtain represents the viewer who not only looks at the artwork but reflects on what they are seeing. The fourth attitude representing the fully immersed person is displayed in the last phase of the exhibition.

These artworks symbolise the minister’s call to worshipers in a church service – to leave behind what the past week has held and to be present to what is now happening. The combination of the three artworks invites viewers to decide what attitude they will have as they walk around the exhibition.

Movement Two –The teacher’s personal approach



The teacher in Ecclesiastes finds life anything but uplifting. In chapters 4 to 10 he reviews the five personal ethnographic approaches he undertook to investigate what gives meaning to life – study, hedonism, philosophy, materialism and religion. As those attending the exhibition move into the main part of the installation, they join the teacher reflecting on the meaning of life. The two sculptures in this section of the exhibition represent the teacher reflecting on the

meaning and purpose of life as he looks out a window across the horizon of life. He is represented by a back-lit 3D vacuum-formed plastic face mounted in reverse inside a cube (figure 2). The cube has a window mounted on the side facing the viewer. This artwork is constructed to create an optical illusion for the viewer. As the viewer passes the artwork the face gives the impression that the teacher is following them. The design of the artwork represents the inquisitive nature of the teacher; no matter where you stand emotionally, socially, politically, philosophically, spiritually, he has something to say to you about the meaning of life.



Figure 3: John Rigby, *The Five Investigators*, 2013.
Wood, plastic, lighting, recycled support material.
5 works, 30 x 220 x 30cm

(inserts of the five 3d faces)

The second artwork in this section contains five tall, stand-alone boxes that represent a simple form of a minimalist life-sized human figure searching for the meaning of life (figure 3). Each box represents one of the five pathways the teacher took in order to find meaning in life: the pursuit of knowledge, the exploration of a self-indulgent, unrestrained hedonist lifestyle, the pursuit of wisdom and applied knowledge, the

accumulation of material wealth and the exploration of the religious life. Each box contains a different back-lit vacuum-formed 3D plastic face mounted in reverse and surrounded by artefacts to enhance their message. The additional artefacts provide supplementary information about the teacher's ethnographic contemplation.

Movement Three –The teacher’s observation

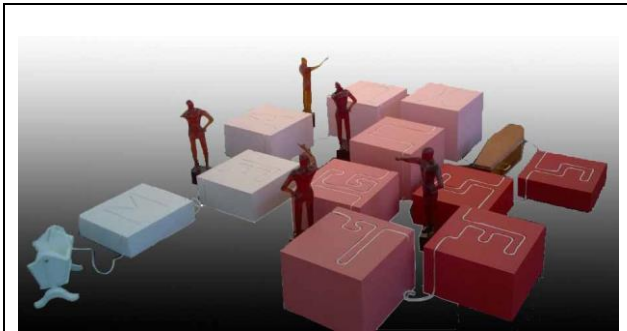


Figure 4: John Rigby, Life's Great Mystery, 2013.
Wood, resin, rope
200 x 300 x 300

This is an important section in the exhibition. In the same way a pastor may call a congregation to respond to the sermon, the teacher in Ecclesiastes invites his reader to respond to his observation that any attempt to find meaning in pleasure and achievements is meaningless. He repeats this observation several times throughout

the book. The resultant artwork (figure 4) illustrates the teacher’s conclusion that life, from birth (illustrated by the cradle) to death (illustrated by the coffin), is meaningless. The artwork sits in the centre of the room offering space and time for reflection and response. The artwork parallels an advertising print by Jim LePage in that he also identifies Solomon’s observation that life, from birth to death, is meaningless.⁸⁴ The rope connecting the cradle and coffin passes over boxes, each with a letter routed into the surface, spelling the word *meaningless*. The multilevel boxes represent life’s ups and downs. This installation invites the viewer to question the teacher’s conclusion and reflect on what gives meaning to life.

Movement Four –The teacher’s recommendations

In the same way that communion offers the members of the congregation an anchoring point to face the future, Solomon weaves strategic anchor points throughout his book.

⁸⁴ Jim LePage is an American artist who is the Senior Designer at Logos Bible Software. He says he is ‘passionate about using art to explore Biblical passages and themes.’ In a project he called *Word* he set aside each Friday between January 2010 and November 2011 to design a poster for each book of the Bible. The artwork was adapted was one of these posters. (LePage n.d.)

For example, the pessimism of Solomon's overall message is balanced against his perception that God has anchored in all people a sense of eternity.⁸⁵ He posits that this offers hope in the midst of life's mess (figure 5). The artworks in this section illustrate four of the Solomon's important beliefs; there is an eternal core in all people that offers hope,

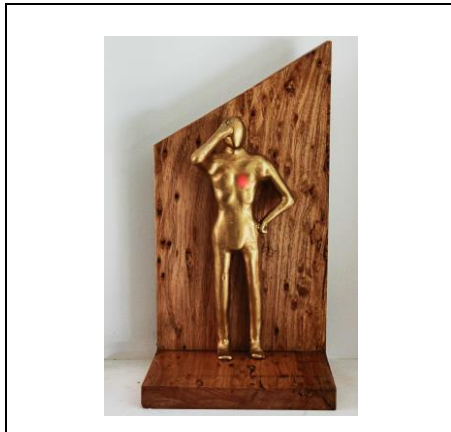


Figure 5: John Rigby, Eternity is where?, 2013.
Wood, resin, light.
28 x 38, 18 cm.

there is always time to do the things that are important but not the non-essential (figure 6), people can experience an almost unbreakable strength by allowing the numinous to be present in their relationships (figure 7) and people can experience a moment by moment enjoyment in life (despite the surrounding circumstances) by maintaining a silent and listening attitude (figure 8). Viewers in the exhibition are invited to reflect on how each element influences their faith and practice, before moving to the final part of the exhibition.

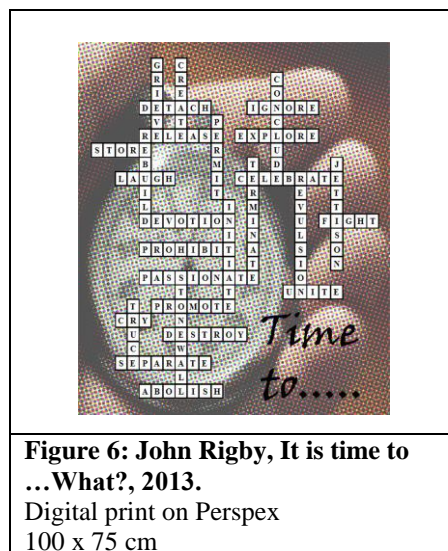


Figure 6: John Rigby, It is time to ...What?, 2013.
Digital print on Perspex
100 x 75 cm

⁸⁵ Ecclesiastes 3:11

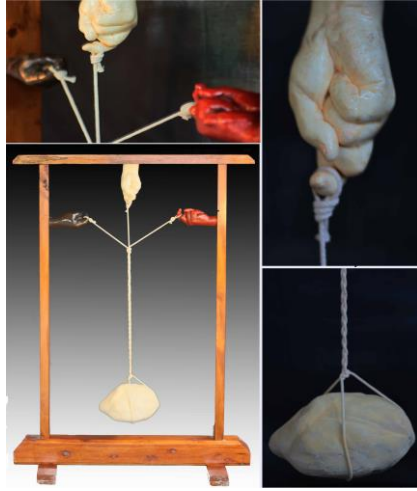


Figure 7: John Rigby, The strand not easily broken, 2013.

Wood, resin, rope, concrete.
120 x 180 x 30 cm.

Image includes various detailed close-ups

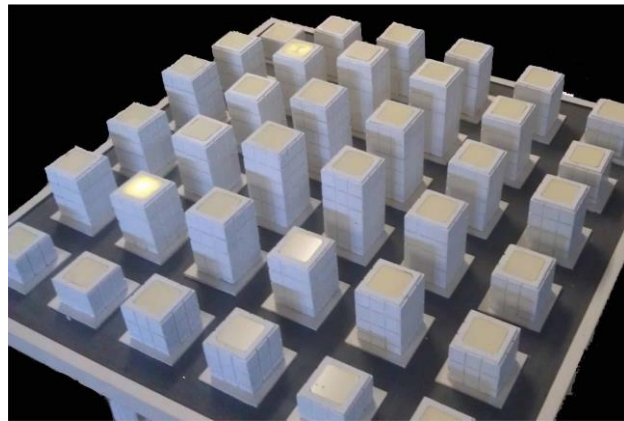


Figure 8: John Rigby, Six letters, two words, 2013.

Wood, Perspex, paper, lights.
110 x 110 x 65 cm.

Movement Five – The teacher’s conclusion and invitation

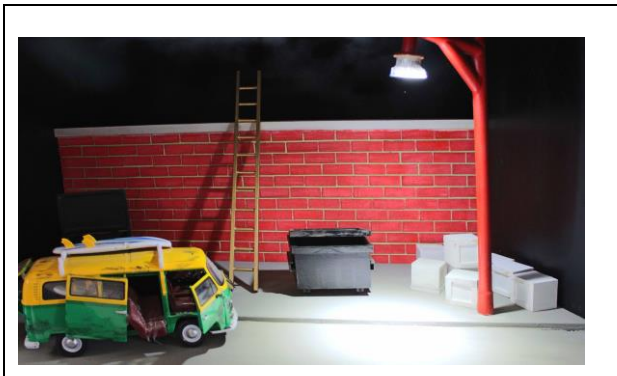


Figure 9: John Rigby, The view from above, 2013.
Wood, plastic, light, mannequins.
90 x 60 x 45 cm.

In the same way a worship leader invites the congregation to live this next week in hope based on what they have seen, felt, heard and done during the service, the teacher closes his book with the same intention. In Ecclesiastes 12:4 he encourages his readers to approach life, despite their meaningless existence, by looking at life from ‘above the sun.’

The artwork in this section of the exhibition is an interactive diorama focused on engaging the children. The children are free to play with the figures in the diorama with the intention of discovering the message of Ecclesiastes through play (figure 9). The central figure in the diorama is on a ladder and represents the teacher’s invitation to look at life with an ‘above the sun’ perspective.



Figure 10: John Rigby, The approach 4 (above the sun), 2013.
Wood, resin, cloth
60 x 90 x 25 cm

The penultimate artwork bookends the opening artworks in the exhibition and illustrates the attitude of a person having responded to the invitation to see life from ‘above-the-sun’ (figure 10). The figure behind the curtain represents the person who is fully immersed in the experience. In the same way the leader in a church service commissions the congregation to live faithfully in response to what they have seen and done, this artwork, as does Ecclesiastes for the reader, recognises that the viewer is free to leave, to take or not

take the teacher’s advice.



The final artwork in the exhibition contains three interconnected panels (figure 11). The central panel contains a question mark supported by a pair of open hands. The outside panels have a drawing on them; one with an eye and the other with an ear. The eyes and ear represents the need for those on a faith journey to have eyes and ears to see and hear God at work. The question mark represents the viewer's unanswered life questions which they can record on pieces of paper provided, seal them in an envelope and

place them in the open hands at the bottom of the artwork. At the end of the exhibition, these mailings will be collected and members of the MUC congregation will pray with each unopened envelope asking God to respond specifically to the recorded question. At the end of the prayer time the envelopes will be taken and burnt as part of the prayer ritual.

The added attractions

In support of (re)visioning the church-art relationship there will be a number of guided reflections on both the Saturday and Sunday of the central weekend of the exhibition. In addition, the main Sunday service will use a number of the artworks to assist the congregation's worship experience.

Conclusion

The exhibition illustrates my hermeneutical investigation of the book of Ecclesiastes, demonstrates an understanding of church tradition and its use of symbols, and reflects a working knowledge of the theology of creativity and the value of artist reflection. The exhibition demonstrates how the sacred text can be presented visually, support the work and worship of the church and encourage personal faith and practice. The exhibition justifies the call to (re)vision the church-art relationship.

Chapter Four

Introduction

In review, this thesis provided a brief historical overview of the relationship between the church and visual art. The church, prior to the Protestant Reformation, used the arts to support its work and worship. Functioning as an insider-researcher, investigation based on informal personal observation indicates that the current use of visual art in the church is minimal. These personal observations, together with conversations with other practicing Christian artists, suggest that many small protestant congregations have overlooked the contribution visual art can make to the church's work and worship. For a number of congregations this reflects a continuing subtle but powerful negative attitude promoted by some Post-Reformation denominations, demonstrating how an unchallenged worldview (seen in church tradition) results in ignorance-driven church practice.

In opposition to those that 'opine that art galleries are the new cathedrals – and art and film the new mode of communication,'⁸⁶ this thesis presents a model for (re)visioning the church-art relationship with practical examples of artwork that promotes the work and worship of small congregations. Central to the model and underpinning the exhibition is the theology of creativity. The theology of creativity encourages the use of the Bible with its diverse approach to storytelling, its use of prose, its unique style of poetry and its use of metaphor and allegory, as an endless source of inspiration. Similarly, the words of the creeds, as Dorothy Sayers has said, 'come before our eyes and ears as pictures.'⁸⁷ Just as the artists of the past used these pictures as inspiration, these same creeds and biblical stories can still inspire the artist and congregation today. The theology of creativity justifies the use of visual art to assist the congregation to imaginatively and reflectively engage with the biblical text that promotes personal and lifestyle change.

The artwork in the exhibition is influenced by a personal interest in sculpture, a passion to visually communicate the message of Ecclesiastes and a desire to promote/demonstrate the contribution visual art makes to individual and corporate faith and practice. In keeping

⁸⁶ (M. P. Brown 2008, 429)

⁸⁷ (Sayers 1969, 20)

with my understanding of the intention of the author of Ecclesiastes, the exhibition provides a window through which viewers are invited to reflect on their own sense of meaning in light of their personal and corporate faith story.⁸⁸ The development of the artwork in the exhibition passed through three phases. The investigative phase included the hermeneutical examination and the reflective visual journaling of the ways in which Australians search for meaning.⁸⁹ The creative phase translated these observations into narrative sculptures. The creative phase also included an exploration of different media – oil painting, pencil drawings as well as leather and ceramic sculptures. Different means were also investigated – holograms, 3D digital images and photographs. While these experimental investigations had some validity, capturing the essence of the book of Ecclesiastes, they felt forced and counter-intuitive to the creative process. Their value, however, lay in the provision of the stimulus and trajectory of the artwork in the exhibition. The initial experimentation with holograms led to the use of vacuum-formed images. The experimentation with leather-form sculptures built on resin armatures led to the construction of resin figures used in the installation. The development of drawings and oil paintings led to the use of wooden boxes as a metaphor for the human figure. This process highlights the importance of the artist's reflective disposition promoted in the model for (re)visioning the church-art relationship.

A complementary element to the theology of creativity is the need to be ecologically sensitive. As a result, the artwork in this exhibition is not just a testament to the model for (re)visioning the church-art relationship but a demonstration of how visual art can also, have a minimal ecological footprint. As such, the majority of the materials in the exhibition are from recycled material. The exception to this commitment has been the purchase of some electrical components,⁹⁰ materials for doing the resin casting and tools needed during the construction process; everything else is made from recycled products and materials. The majority of the wood came from scrap discarded by a cabinet maker in Melton, fence

⁸⁸ The researcher acknowledges that an analyses of the viewer's response is possible and important in supporting the call for (re)visioning the church – art relationship, it falls outside the scope of this current research project.

⁸⁹ The visual diary was used to record personal observations on the interface between current trends in Australian spirituality and the personal and corporate search for meaning. Some of the journal entries included reflected on a personal engagement with the text and were narrative (story-telling) in form.

⁹⁰ The driving force to this decision was a concern for safety.

posts and railings left on the roadside in Werribee, sawn timber from trees burnt in a bushfire, plastics from a Port Melbourne company's recycle bin and toys from a Salvation Army shop. The use of the recycled wood and plastic has influenced the style and shape of many of the artworks. Several artworks in the exhibition are transformed from previously rejected, broken or leftover scrap.

The commitment to use recycled material, although a challenge, offered an invitation to explore different approaches to art making that were outside my usual arts practice. Apart from finding and gathering the resource, several of the pieces required special tooling and skills to complete. This has led to better equipped studio and an expanded skill-set. In addition, many of the recycled materials demanded sensitivity which directed the construction process. This meant, rather than impose an idea on the material the recycled material often had its own voice leading to a better finished product.

Outcomes

As a result of this investigation several important outcomes have been identified, some personal others structural.

Personal outcomes

I began this thesis as an ordained minister in the Wesleyan Methodist Church with a passion for visual art; I finished as a minister in transition to the Uniting Church with a calling to promote the arts in the church. This investigation has affirmed my belief that creativity provides congregations with a culturally relevant way(s) to explore and express the faith story. This experience has highlighted that art is firmly welded to my spirituality; it provides a pathway for finding me, finding my voice and affirming that my sense of meaning is best understood when life is 'viewed from above the sun.'⁹¹

In August 2013, while travelling in England, I was privileged to talk to two members of the committee overseeing the Methodist Modern Art Collection. This experience, together with an opportunity to view the collection, has been a great inspiration. I am inspired to see

⁹¹ Ecclesiastes 12

what the Methodist Church in Britain has done to promote the arts and hope this thesis is a rallying call for congregations in Victoria to do something similar that is:

to spend time, money and resources in gathering and commissioning works of art by Christians and non-Christians, presumably in the hope that the world will be more enriched by the Beauty, Truth and Goodness of the Christian story than it would otherwise be.⁹²

Affirming these ideals I seek to create visual art that is ‘an aid to worship, a tool for mission and important for personal and corporate wholeness.’⁹³

Structural outcomes

The style of art in the exhibition, whilst acknowledging and valuing church tradition and history, challenges congregational complacency and preconceived ideas of what church art should be. The exhibition demonstrates that sacred art can be more than storytelling and religious portraits. It highlights that sacred art can be confrontational as well as redemptive, prophetic as well as nurturing, contemplative as well as educational and motivational as well as invitational. The exhibition also demonstrates that visual art has the ability to tell a story efficiently, subtly present a message and break through the barriers that block people’s ability to worship.⁹⁴ This demonstrates that visual art, like worship, has a reconciling power that reaches beyond the spoken words and sung rhythms by offering an invitation to all which (or is received equally). This process highlights the idea that Church artwork is more than a utilitarian product. The power of all visual art, irrespective of its purpose – functional or non-functional, is that it has a presence. It says something to its surroundings. It says something about the maker and owner and each encounter with the artwork invites the viewer to see something new. It can offer an ever-changing and new invitation to explore the faith/spiritual journey through revealing new insights on the biblical text, a prophetic message and/or pastoral support. This is because a viewer’s reading of an artwork is not static; an artwork has a unique story-telling ability to move past the head and speak to the heart. The voice of an artwork may also change with time, space and place. Each time a viewer experiences an artwork it can bypass church tradition

⁹² (Wollen 2010, 4)

⁹³ (Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes. 2012)

⁹⁴ John 4:16–26

and cultural norms and invite the viewer to plum new depths and unexplored messages of the biblical text.

Areas for future study

Whilst producing this thesis a number of subsidiary questions arose. These questions, while outside the scope of this thesis, demand further investigation. For example, the exhibition demonstrates the importance of context; siting the exhibition in the Melton Uniting Church provides a realistic setting to examine the congregation's response. This response requires future investigation. This thesis has validated the artist's role in the (re)visioning model but it is equally important to investigate the congregation's acceptance and participation in the reframing church- art relationship. In addition this exegesis highlighted that this is a time when the Church needs Christian artists, and equally, Christian artists need the Church.⁹⁵ How is this cooperative relationship, between artist and church, best nurtured? For example, what level of control should church leaders have over the production and presentation of sacred artwork?

Epilogue

The development of the conceptual model for (re)visioning the church-art relationship sits within the premise that every human experience has the potential ability to speak of faith. The style of sacred art the model promotes is not defined by past traditions, symbols and narrative but seeks a transcendent quest where the relationship of the spiritual and physical are explored. The writer of Ecclesiastes encourages his readers to this same end – to reflect on their existence in the light of eternity. He closes his book by highlighting his struggle to find the right words to communicate his message. (Ecclesiastes 12:10). Behind the struggle is an awareness that the right words presented in the right way have the potential to lodge in the reader's psyche like a 'firmly embedded nail' and become the source for change (Ecclesiastes 12:11). When supported by the right setting and placed in the right environment, visual art has a similar potential to be an 'embedded nail' catalyst for change. Supported by the theology of creativity, this invitation to change is enough reason for

⁹⁵ Reference: 1 Corinthians 9-13

small protestant congregations to use visual art within its work and worship. Reinforcing this call is a sociological reality in which the church congregations are a microcosm of the image-saturated Australian culture. As such they are skilled at interpreting message-laden images. Consequently, visual art is a potential bridge between the congregation and the biblical text. The congregation's positive response to the exhibition supports the underlying premise that visual art has the power to effectively communicate the biblical narrative and the ability to support the congregation's work and worship. The exhibition not only raised the profile of visual art within the Melton Uniting Church, but successfully provided an environment for personal and corporate reflection.

In contrast to the church of my childhood, I am committed to helping local congregations develop an appreciation of the creative arts, to help individuals use their creative gift(s), to resource church leaders seeking to integrate visual art into the church's work and worship and to demonstrate how visual art contributes to the cultural life of the congregation and surrounding community. I call for congregations to respond to the call to (re)vision the church-art relationship and to express the creative freedom provided by the theology of creativity resulting in a depth and richness in the church's work, worship and community life. I envision the arts side by side with the spoken word and the artist side by side with the church pastor/leader in a creative environment that communicates the biblical story in a timeless, cross-generational and inclusive manner.

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