



UCJCI 43rd SYNOD THEME – **Rooted, Resilient: Re-ignited by the Spirit** (Return, Reconnect, Realign, Re-ignite)

SEPTEMBER - REALIGN THE FAITH AND WIDER COMMUNITY

To realign the faith and wider community requires an encounter with God. The community depends on the Church to show the example of commitment and peace.

Using Faith to Transform Lives

Ms. Amber Bothwell

Please read Romans 12:9-21

As schools start back again after the summer, it can be hard not to become overwhelmed by the scope of evils with which our children and young people are faced every day. Layered on top of age-old fears are the new complications from modern technology: eating disorders are now fueled by Instagram and selfies; dangerous fads spread more quickly than ever on TikTok; influencers from faraway countries spew hate-filled viewpoints in videos and podcasts. And these are dangers encountered with technologies that persons of older generations (like me!) struggle to understand, much less to guard our children against.

I thought it was fitting, therefore, that our epistle text includes a verse designed to make those of us in Cayman think particularly about our students: a version of the John Gray High School motto: 'Hold fast that which is good' (1Thess. 5:21b). Please read it in the context in Romans 12:9-21.

Can this advice from 2,000 years ago really help adults and young people overcome the temptations and adversaries that they face in both the real and virtual worlds they inhabit? I would argue it can, and I would like to share just three ways with you this morning.

Firstly, we can overcome online hatred by holding fast to the true Source of strength.

So much pain and suffering in this world comes from a misunderstanding of what it means to be strong. On the internet, too many people try to demonstrate power through mockery, deception and threats of violence, sometimes from genuine hatred, sometimes only to achieve the prestige that comes with having numerous followers.

Paul is no stranger to this understanding of strength. He is first introduced as a supporting player in the execution of Stephen in Acts 7, where his peers feel that the only way to stop the spread of what they see as heresy is with a tough-on-crime approach. The stoning of Stephen features disinformation and fake news (Acts 6:11), manufactured outrage (6:12), public calling out (6:12, 7:58) and so many other tactics that our young people will recognize from social media. Once Stephen has been 'cancelled', the persecution of Christians 'goes viral' and Paul transitions from a supporting player to a vicious crusader.

Then, of course, he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and converts to Christianity himself, bringing the same commitment, passion and drive to promoting his new beliefs. But crucially, he does not just transform the target of his crusade, his new faith also transforms his methods. After his conversion, he does not continue dragging people out of their houses and imprisoning them, even those who reject Jesus. Under the influence and inspiration of Christ, he stops trying to overcome what he sees as evil with more evil. Instead, he starts trying to overcome evil with good, with love. Paul finds in Christ the true source of his strength and no longer needs to control, dominate and diminish others.

But Paul has not gone soft. His new, Christ-like fight against evil is neither feeble nor passive. Witness today's passage, which is full of verbs - things we have to do: 'Keep, be, practice, share, feed, give, overcome...' It is full of 'the work of love' (Galatians 6:9a, as paraphrased by Charles H Gabriel in the hymn 'Send the Light'), an impossibly high standard we can only hope to reach through Christ, who gives us strength - a strength that is stronger than online trolling, call-out culture, hate speech and any other evil to which new technologies might expose us, or tempt us.

Imagine how the online landscape would be transformed if everyone with a Twitter account chose the hard work of sincere love, instead of putting others down or trying to shout the loudest. Imagine how our children's lives would be transformed if they truly understood that strength comes from God - not from triumphing over enemies or from the approval of others.

Secondly, and similarly, we can overcome cyberbullying by holding fast to radical empathy.

Romans 12 calls us to be a caring community and support system for fellow Christians in particular, but for non-believers also - even our enemies.

Think of who might be your enemy. Perhaps it is someone who hurt you personally, a public figure whose actions you find reprehensible, or a type of person whose lifestyle you worry about will lead your child astray. Now think about giving him or her hospitality, food and drink, perhaps at your own table, in your home. Think about blessing them and praying for them. This is the type of superhuman generosity that we are challenged to practice.

Remember, Paul is not advocating that we let morals slide or let people get away with hurting others. If a child (or adult) is a victim of bullying or other abuse, online or in person, the correct course of action is not to passively ignore what is happening. Sincere love and empathy for the victim demands that families, schools and communities ensure that he or she receives caring support and protection, including, if needed, from a trained counsellor or even the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Justice for the victim may mean that the perpetrator has to deal with quite serious consequences, including punishment.

However, earlier in Romans, Paul has already established that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Rom. 3:23). Therefore, difficult as it might be – and I personally often find this very difficult indeed – we must accept that the people we see as evil or as our enemies are no worse sinners than we are. We Christians have to mete out justice from a place of deep humility, seeking restoration and healing, not revenge. We do not seek to repay online bullies with a taste of their own medicine.

Perhaps more importantly, this passage is all about our personal integrity, not the shortcomings of our so-called enemies. Paul wastes little to no time ranting about the idol-worshippers of ancient Rome, but instead invites Roman Christians to focus on their own behaviours and attitudes.

Like the sincere love of Romans 12, bullying is an action, a behaviour. If we want to stop cyberbullying (etc.), then we need to stop people from acting as bullies. Children and adults must learn to empathize with, and love, rivals and adversaries when we post online. Going even further, we should be using social media to befriend and support people of ‘low position’, however we might interpret that phrase. Our faith calls us to ‘honour one another above [our]selves’ and that should transform our emails, text messages and online comments.

Finally, we can transform mental health by holding fast to each other in love.

Though in no way limited to online life, there are real concerns amongst experts as well as laypeople that social media use can exacerbate anxiety, depression, body image issues and so on, particularly in teens and young adults who ‘live’ online.

Firstly, let’s be clear that mental illness is real and serious. We should also emphasize that committed Christians can and do have mental health concerns, and we should never suggest that this is a sign of a weak faith or a lack of trust in Jesus. These types of reactions do not meet the standards of sincere love and empathy that Romans points us towards. Indeed, if we truly ‘mourn with those who mourn...’ then we will endeavour to

sensitively journey alongside our brothers and sisters through all types of mental health challenges, humbly recognizing that they may need to do the same for us one day. To ‘Share with the Lord’s people who are in need...’, as a church and community, we must be sharing access to trained counsellors (for example, through the United Church’s own Bethesda Counselling Centre), to psychiatrists and neurologists; prescription medication; and residential facilities, as needed.

Romans 12 also points us towards good habits of mental self-care, to support our kids and ourselves with our emotional wellbeing – though, again, we stress that mental illness cannot be ‘cured’ by a positive attitude alone. We know that Christ and the early believers were intimately acquainted with trials and difficulties of all kinds, so the call to ‘be joyful in hope, patient in affliction’ is no flippant dismissal of real pain and anxiety. We can acknowledge the struggles our children will face while helping them to build coping strategies that include optimism, perseverance, gratitude and the peace that comes from God. For example, verse 11, as worded in The Message translation, cautions: ‘Don’t burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame.’ To do so, old and young alike will need to ‘be faithful in prayer’ and the other spiritual disciplines. We must also keep ‘serving the Lord’, focusing on God and on service to others, instead of on our own worries or on our Facebook feeds. Our faith can transform our attitudes to ourselves and to life.

Ultimately, in these days of IMs, DMs, tweets and selfies, we are strengthened by the same Christ and empowered by the same Spirit as the early church. By realigning their online lives to the teachings of the Bible, our children’s faith – and our own – can help to transform social media. Even when evil seems overwhelming, we can overcome it with good by holding fast to the love, strength and empathy that come from God alone.



We are delighted to introduce the new Primary School Principal Mrs. Sacha Strand. She has shared the following message:



“I feel privileged to have been asked to join the fabulous team at CPHS and to lead the primary team in a school which has an outstanding reputation globally, for its excellence in educating and developing young people from 4 to 18. My experience across both the primary and secondary education sectors, over the past 25 years, and the leadership posts I have held, will support me in ensuring the children of CPHS have the best possible education journey.

In my 25 years of working in education, I am blessed to have been appointed to a wide range of roles in many different settings and most recently, two headships in a well-respected Christian Multi-Academy Trust in the UK. I am energized by

working with the incredible teams at CPHS and I am very excited to meet and begin to get to know the children and families this week as we embark on what promises to be a fantastic new academic year. It is an enormous pleasure to be living and working on Grand Cayman with my own family, and as part of the CPHS family.”

Camp Leadership Team Members Reach Out to Fire Victim

In last week’s edition of our Weekly Update, we reported on the case of the East End family whose house burned down due to a lightning strike. A family member, Jazaiah Zenel Martinez Christian, attended the Teen’s Camp this summer and was selected as the 2023 Teen’s Camp Girl. On Sunday, August 27, 2023, members of the Camp Leadership Team with Rev. Euthman Wray, Minister of the Savannah United Church, visited her and her family to offer their support and to deliver some much-needed assistance.



(Note: The Council Office will no longer collect donations, for there was a generous response to last week’s appeal. However, contributions can be given to their GoFundMe appeal.)

JGMC Member Appointed Chief Officer



Heartiest congratulations to Ms. Tamara Ebanks, a John Gray Memorial Church member, on her appointment as the Chief Officer in the Ministry of Innovation, Investment, and Social Development.

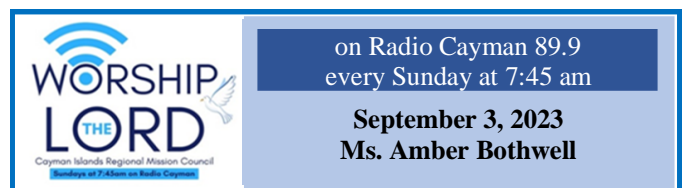
Deputy Governor, Franz Manderson says of Tamara, “She has demonstrated exceptional leadership and a deep commitment to public service throughout her career. Her promotion as Chief Officer is well-deserved, and I am confident she will continue to perform at a very high level in her new post”.

Tamara, a qualified Social Worker and Human Resource Manager has been a committed and dedicated public servant for over two decades.

We wish her every blessing as she continues to contribute to the further development of the Cayman Islands.



IS/IVCF Invites you to our 10th Anniversary Church Tour. We will visit a few churches to spread awareness about IS/IVCF and celebrate God’s faithfulness in our schools through this Ministry. Our first stop will be at the Agape Family Worship Centre on Sunday, September 3, 2023, at 10:00 am (50 Fairbanks Rd, George Town)



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