

# Cheers

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Interview with Geoff and Sally Westlake  
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“If I don’t connect with people outside the church, I go stir crazy”. This is part of what has motivated Geoff Westlake and his wife, Sally, to move to Banksia Grove on the northern outskirts of Perth, Western Australia in 2002.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Geoff and Sally at their home, with their four children playing in the background in the large tree-lined backyard. This move was part of a commitment to a vision to be part of a “community development movement from a Christian base” – now known as *Cheers*.

The journey to Banksia Grove happened after 8 years in Baptist ministry and a formative trip overseas in 1998 where Geoff saw lots of examples of alternative styles of ministry. He also experimented with some alternative models, and finally concluded that most still had a ‘consumerist mentality’ and were also not focused on the community.

As Sally put it, “There’s got to be something better. How do we do something for my friends who won’t step near a church?” Geoff and Sally both acknowledge the influence of people like Dave Andrews, who helped them with ideas about community development. “We saw ways to live out our faith with integrity across the whole of life” said Geoff.

Upon arrival in Banksia Grove, they deliberately reoriented themselves to the local community. Sally remembers “Initially I felt like we were on our own – but now I am glad. We had to make new friends.” They immediately started to meet with people, and as they did, they would ask them what sort of community they wanted. “We then started asking what we could do to make that a reality, ” said Geoff.

## **What can we cheer?**

*Cheers* began over a BBQ – a gathering where what was good about the community was named and cheered on. This has grown into a fortnightly meeting on Mondays. What is going on in the local community is recorded in an exercise book. What is good, or seen as in the image of God is identified. What is not good is also listed. These items are prayed for and the question ‘what can we do’ is asked. Those meetings decide who will do ‘the cheering’, which may simply be to let someone know that their action had been

noticed. They also follow up answers to prayer from previous gatherings. “This meeting keeps our focus on the community,” said Geoff.

With an email list of around 50 people (now 100+), *Cheers* participants include lots of people who would not profess to be Christian, and come from local residents groups, playgroups, and school connections. “If a person feels part of *Cheers*, then they are a participant. Commitment needs to be internal”.

## **SUPPER**

Sally confesses a pet hate: when children are shuffled off to a separate area as soon as you walk into a church. As Sally and Geoff sought to work out how to pass on kingdom values to their own children, a second incarnation of *Cheers* developed. On the second and fourth Sundays of each month, from around 4.30pm there is a gathering of some 12 adults and 20 children at the Westlake home.

The acronym SUPPER describes the format:

S – Socializing

U - Understanding: this is a time of Biblical input & dialogue

P - Play: The children join with the adults to ‘play’ with the topic in some active-learning ways

P – Pray: this is done using one of 8 modes of expression (eg. music, nature, art, conversation, contemplation etc)

E – Events: this covers participation in Banksia Grove life

R – Restaurant: time for everyone to eat.

“The more that worship, mission and discipleship overlap, the more they are each enhanced,” said Geoff.

There are also C.S.I groups or Community Special Interest groups that are short term. “We don’t want to clog up people’s lives with more ongoing meetings than needed!” said Sally. “Learning happens best when there is a ‘need to know’,” added Geoff.

As someone who has a lot of people through her own home, I was impressed that everyone is encouraged to clean up. This is seen as important modeling to the children and challenges a consumerist view of the experience.

## **Not church but ecclesia**

*Cheers* has two orientations: it is “Christ-centred, and Community-sent.” Christian based, and focused on serving and sharing with the people of Banksia Grove. They find that they do not have a problem talking to people about God. The community focus gives a credibility and an integrity to the conversations. “It’s easy. People ask because they see a difference.” Geoff emphasized, “We focus on relationships over program. A health indicator is relationship, measured by the content of the conversation.”

An important insight for Geoff is that he does not describe *Cheers* as a church, however, he is clear that “we are an ‘ecclesia’”. Discovering some of the layers of meaning behind this Greek word has been important for his thinking. An ecclesia includes the idea of being an assembly that is called together to attend to public affairs. While the word has often been made synonymous with ‘church’ separate from the community, Cheers maintains the small-p political orientation.

While Geoff works full time for OAC Ministries (a world-wide interdenominational organisation working in partnership with local churches), *Cheers* receives no financial support – they simply “pass the hat around” as needed. “But we don’t need much”. They have connections with two local Perth churches, but they are officially a mission of SUNO – Scripture Union Neighbourhood Outreach – which is their main administrative support base.

While SUNO is not in the business of planting churches, they are into missions, which Cheers is. And this institutional link helps with things like insurance for public events. They turned down the offer of a building, acknowledging that without this external structure, the group remains fragile. “But we would do this regardless of how many people are involved.”

Would they do anything different? Not so far, they agree. “As long as we stay adaptable, and let things stop when they have done their dash.”

With reference to the Ephesians list of gifts (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher) Geoff and Sally recognize their gift set as apostles and evangelists. These gifts have an entrepreneurial edge, and note that this has probably shaped the direction that *Cheers* has taken.

What of the future? The dream is for exponential growth - eventually. The challenge for the next period will be to properly develop new relational leaders. “But we are not in a hurry. It is likely to be an exponential effect, with a long slow start. We are carriers of the dream to come, but are also attentive to opportunities now.”