

# Helensburgh's heart for the arts

The chapel at Helensburgh Uniting Church is thriving as a space where community and congregational creativity can flourish.



PHOTO: LYNDALE IRONS

**F**ive years ago, when Dr Geoffrey Sykes returned to the church he'd attended in the 1980s, he was met by a congregation that was modest in size but open to change.

That was all the encouragement he needed to start the chapel on a new venture as a community arts space.

"The blank slate here attracted me back," he says.

"While some people see that as a challenge, I see it as an opportunity."

*FROM A PERFORMER'S PERSPECTIVE, THE CHAPEL FILLS A GAP THAT NO-ONE ELSE IS FILLING IN THE COMMUNITY*

As church council chairperson and lecturer in media at Wollongong University, Geoffrey was keen to utilise his skills in theatre, playwriting and video production to serve Helensburgh Uniting Church and the local community.

With help from Steve Wright, the Bushland Chapel put on its first arts event in 2009. The nine that followed ranged from puppetry to plays and, in late 2010, contemporary dance was added to list.

Around half the events have been written or staged by Geoffrey and the chapel. The rest have been curated and performed by professional artists sourcing a venue for finished works.

The way Geoffrey sees it, providing a low-rent space to artists is an important service to an unappreciated sector.

"The arts are really a struggling and under-funded part of our society so I think it's a suitable area for charity!" he jokes.

But the art events staged in the chapel are serious, professional and very well received.



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