

A bold new Preamble to a church's constitution

An era begins for the Uniting Church

- The national Assembly moved too quickly, too far, say our correspondents
Presbyteries and synods urged: 'Vote the Preamble out'

- 'The Church is dead; long live the Church'
The ACC moves forward at a vibrant conference

- 'New Faith' seriously under-states the Church's belief in God
Jesus Christ is more than 'just a Jewish peasant'

Inside this Issue: Editorial changes for ACCatalyst

- *An eagle flies over a blackened land* • *While Christianity sleeps in the West, disaster stalks unseen* • *Two Christian world-views bid for support* •

ACCATALYST



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Theology politicised and history falsified

Not surprisingly, this issue contains several reports on the new Preamble passed by the recent Assembly, but yet to be endorsed by synods and presbyteries. Only a miracle will see the Preamble thrown out by these 'inter-related councils'. Their track record of rubber-stamping Assembly decisions will almost certainly prevail when they vote the Preamble in or out next year. Synods and presbyteries face a double hazard. They must adjudicate on a matter at the heart of aboriginal sensitivities, and must take issue with the myth that Assembly actually represents the distilled thinking of the church. The myth is remarkably intact despite a history of flawed decisions and serial manipulation of the church's political processes.

This year the manipulative juices ran perhaps more freely than usual. The occasion was the Preamble's revision of history and the political steps taken before and during the assembly to ensure it was ratified. These matters are touched on by our writers.

The re-writing and falsification of history is a question that should linger long into the future if the Preamble is to offer real advantage for aboriginal members of the Uniting Church. Clearly that question was not adequately raised at the Assembly because of time constraints. Deeper reflection and careful study were impossible before delegates entered the pressure cooker of 'debate', so it was inevitable that they voted on the basis of inadequate knowledge and under pressure to reach a happy conclusion. As with all constitutional changes, the initiators had the advantage, because they had spent months devising arguments and planning the moves to ensure their goals.

The result was a preamble insufficiently considered in an assembly ruled by the rubric of tolerance for marginalised groups, who in turn were not above speaking with truculence as well as grace, and perhaps with unwarranted confidence in the truth of their claims. These are not firm foundations on which to build a genuine rapprochement between what are now designated as First and Second peoples.

The tensions exposed by the Preamble process will have lasting effects. It is too early to predict their outcome. It is not too soon to remind ourselves that no good purpose is served by a misreading of history, or by commandeering theology for what, in the end, are political ambitions. ■

This issue of Catalyst is edited by Warren Clarnette

Changes at *Catalyst*

ACCatalyst enters a new era with production shifting from Melbourne to Sydney, and a new editorial team. The National Council endorsed the Melbourne-based editorial committee's plan to appoint Max Champion as executive-editor, Peter Bentley managing editor, and John Sandeman editor. Mr. Sandeman will begin his duties in December.

The wide acceptance of *ACCatalyst* owes much to the personal qualities of founding editor Paul Gray, whose work commitments at the University of Melbourne made it necessary for him to step aside. An experienced journalist and churchman, Mr. Gray brought strong professional and theological insights to the ACC's national magazine. ■

Uniting Church stumbles into uncharted land

“It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that ‘romanticizing’ one culture and ‘demonizing’ another did happen at the Twelfth Assembly and that more work should have been done before such a drastic revision to the preamble was approved at Assembly.”

Dr. Max Champion, chair of ACC

The Uniting Church has ventured into new territory. Not with one voice, to be sure, because the passage of a new Preamble to the church’s constitution by this year’s Assembly was achieved by not a little pulling of strings and a *tour de force* of legerdemain by the business committee.

By changing the spirit and substance of the 1977 Preamble to its Constitution, the church’s leaders claim to have moved towards a truly ‘Australian’ church. The aim is for black and white members to share decision-making authority, and for church doctrine to reflect the wisdom of aboriginal ‘spirituality’. In the process Assembly leaders have rewritten the history of post-1788 aboriginal experience and depicted their pre-1788 theology as a seamless precursor of Christianity.

By severing the church’s links with the 1977 *Basis of Union*, new questions are raised about the church’s legitimacy within the wider Christian community.

ACC national chair Max Champion was an observer at Assembly. He deplores the methods employed in reaching the new Preamble which, unlike the 1977 Preamble process, was presented to synods and presbyteries with undue haste. A draft was not circulated until the latter part of 2008. It was

substantially revised one week before Assembly after talks with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Assembly members therefore had no time to consider its implications.

Champion said the new Preamble was not foreshadowed at the previous Assembly, which ensured that its theological and legal ramifications were never properly assessed.

The Preamble debate was a study in political lobbying and unsubtle persuasion. UAICC national administrator the Rev. Shayne Blackman told Assembly members that a functioning system of good governance and ‘spirituality’ existed before 1788, which sustained a viable economy, health, education, law and order. The claim was not contested.

Blackman attributed present indigenous disadvantage in education, health, unemployment and crime to the erosion of spirituality connected to the earth, for which the church and invading governments (as in the NT intervention) are responsible. He proposed ‘negotiated equal partnerships’ with Aboriginals as ‘drivers’ of reform. Opinions of indigenous thinkers outside the UAICC, or the achievements of the

Congress in redressing aboriginal disadvantage, were not mentioned.

Blackman said the guilt of invasion would lie heavily on Australians until they recognised Aboriginals as Australia’s ‘first people’. Questioned in open session, he said the ‘creator God’ was a universal belief of all indigenous people, whether Christians or not. Indigenous people, he said, have a strong sense of ownership of Australia.

NSW synod general secretary Paul Swadling’s question about the link between the ‘creator God’ and the Word made flesh was answered by Rronang Ggarrawurra that aboriginal law is sacred like Old Testament law. Jesus is part of God’s story which “adds to our story but didn’t change it.”

Dr. Chris Budden’s claim that non-indigenous people are “sitting on aboriginal land and should not judge Congress’s description of the first people’s belief in God” was a curious statement in support of a Preamble that declares the *whole* Church is being radically transformed. In fact the Preamble process pitted one numerically small part of the church against the larger part.

Queensland synod general secretary Douglas Jones commented that indigenous spirituality now seemed to be a new source of revelation, and more theological work was needed

Uniting Church stumbles into uncharted land continued

before the new Preamble could be adopted. His point was not taken.

Debate unsettled members of the Congress. Declaring that questioning of their spirituality 'by members of the dominant culture' made the meeting an 'unsafe place' for them, they walked out to consider their position. This seemed to be no surprise to the assembly business committee, which refused to display a revised motion on the overhead screen (the usual practice during debate) — a move suggesting that a deal had been brokered beforehand between the business committee and Congress, permitting only minimal

changes to revisions agreed to before the assembly meeting.

Emotions ran high. When Congress members returned, their leader said "Our people have understood God for thousands of years ... we struggle to see God in you ... you have destroyed our places ... and as missionaries once shared the good news with us, now it is time to share our good news".

In the end, the Assembly suspended further debate. Next day a vote was taken which overwhelmingly endorsed the new Preamble. By no stretch of the imagination could this decision be attributed to the Uniting Church. It was done by a

council remote from the church's congregation and parish heartland, and without enough time to give it the consideration it deserves.

Somewhat bizarrely, a 'cleansing ceremony' presided over by the Congress followed the vote. Was this an act of absolution by the Congress, or an admission that in the Uniting Church the high moral ground belongs to its indigenous members?

The newly minted Preamble will now go to Councils of the church for approval, but not amendment. A synod or presbytery that does not respond within a very short period of six months will be deemed to have approved it. ■

The new Preamble The church has not thought it through

Jonathan Button

More time and thought must be given to the new Preamble endorsed by the Assembly but not yet ratified by presbyteries and synods. True, the glory of indigenous peoples is to be brought into the kingdom of God, which means the rich expression of their culture is to be brought into the eternal city for the worship of God, according to Revelation 21.

Thanks to the universal reconciling work of Christ (2Cor 5:16-21), reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is already established in him. This reconciliation recognises past and present wrongs and enables

repentance, forgiveness, and appropriate reparations.

The new Preamble raises legitimate questions for all councils of the church. It acknowledges the original custodianship of Australia by its indigenous peoples. It speaks of the invasion of this land and the churches' culpability. But its exposition of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ contains significant negative consequences for the Uniting Church.

Problems appear especially in paragraph 3.3. of the new Preamble, which reads as follows:

"The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the

arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways."

Most Uniting members would affirm the presence of God the Father, the Creator with the indigenous peoples from the beginning. Also that their culture with its wisdom and understanding of creation and the depth, intricacy and power of their kinship relations, are gifts of God the Father. They express his divine life and glory.

We would also affirm that God the Father's gracious, shepherding lordship, in and over all creation and history, was with the indigenous peoples through their history. God was leading them, with all the families of the earth, to completion in his saving, redeeming, enriching, fulfilling grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

Yet for the sake of the good news and the salvation and fullness of life

it brings, the unique character of that revelation must be acknowledged and witnessed to. God the Father reveals himself in a particular way only through his Son, to give us true and complete humanity and the only true, complete relationship with God our Father, as so many texts affirm.

The language of the Preamble's paragraph 3.3 is ambiguous, unclear and open to misinterpretation. It may mean that the truth we can have *apart from* the truth revealed in Jesus Christ is the same as that which we have *through* Him. If so, Jesus Christ and the truth and salvation we have in him may be considered as unnecessary, or capable of being blended with alternative understandings of truth and life. In its present form the Preamble risks diminishing or losing the uniqueness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, and consequently of the fullness of life we may know and experience only in him.

The Christian faith also understands that true relationship with God the Father through the reconciling grace

of Jesus Christ is the only basis for full, rich relationships between the races. (Ephesians 2). This guards us against political attempts to achieve reconciliation based on guilt and pay-back. Upholding the uniqueness of Christ's work also ensures that relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians will be based on a firm foundation, producing the best possible outcome.

The importance of this issue cannot be over estimated. It concerns the essential nature and content of the Catholic Gospel as the foundation of our church's life as given in the *Basis of Union* (para.3), declared in the ecumenical creeds and authoritatively witnessed to by the *Old and New Testaments* (para.5). The new Preamble, especially paragraph 3.3, needs to be written in language that more clearly preserves and expresses the uniqueness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

At the recent Assembly there was no discussion of the theological issues raised by paragraph 3.3. The business

committee may claim that discussion was allowed in the small groups. But none of the theological issues raised in my group came back to the floor of the Assembly. They were lost in the facilitation process.

When the new Preamble came before our synod and presbytery last year, we did not clearly understand the issues. We had no help in the process of analysis and response. Moreover, last year the proposed Preamble was in a very different form and wording from what was presented and passed by the 12th Assembly. Significant redrafting had occurred in the meantime.

The councils of the church which next year will reject or adopt the new Preamble must understand that they are dealing with the heart and substance of the Gospel. There must be full and open discussion. Because of the Preamble's inadequacies, I hope they will not adopt it. ■

The Rev Jonathan Button was a member of the 12th Assembly. He is a minister in the Flinders Congregations.

Sleight of hand, string-pulling, at Assembly

Not least among the official manipulations that occurred at the recent Assembly was the excision of a key paragraph from the Covenanting Statement of the 1994 Assembly. Fifteen years ago the statement was sealed (and solemnly ratified) in a moving service of Holy Communion. This year that solemn resolve was overturned by an act of authoritarian excess.

During a re-enactment of the 1994 event, the Covenanting Statement was read by former president Dr. Jill Tabart. To the surprise of many, the 1994 statement's opening paragraph was omitted, not by the reader but

by the Assembly business committee. An attempt at brevity perhaps? No. The omission avoided awkward questions about the integrity of the new Preamble, which has opened the way for privileging one group of people over others in a church that professes to believe that, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gal 3:28), neither Barbarian nor Scythian (Col 3:11).

Most Assembly members would not have noticed the omission because — as all conference organisers know — it is impossible to study every word of the papers provided. But some did notice the omission.

In the seventh Assembly (1994) they had fought to include it in the Covenanting Statement, to express the unity of the Church before going on to identify breaches of Christian fellowship and the need for repentance. We re-state that paragraph for our readers' benefit.

'We meet in the presence of God who through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God and to one another in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our unity "transcends cultural, economic, national and racial boundaries", (Basis of Union, para 2). In this sharing of bread and wine we recall God's gracious covenant with us

Sleight of hand, string-pulling, at Assembly continued

and the whole creation, and anticipate the joyful celebration of the fulfillment of God's rule of love and justice among us. In the meantime, as people who share in this covenant, we are called to carry out faithfully Christ's command to love one another and to order our life in the church in truth and justice. We who are not aboriginal members of the Seventh Assembly, representing all members of the Church, make this covenanting statement.'

The omission of these important words appears to be a deliberate attempt to mislead the Twelfth Assembly about the theological integrity of what the Assembly had decided 15 years ago. ■

ACC a 'prophet in the church'

Speaking at the ACC Southern Tasmanian Cluster meeting in August the Rev. Devadosan Sugirtharaj (Deva) described prayer as the key to evangelism, and said evangelism had been set aside in the church's current concern with survival. "When we are on shaky ground, that is when prayer is minimal," he told the gathering in Wesley Hall, Hobart.

It was OK to die for the kingdom, because resurrection leads to newness, Deva said, but there was no point in committing suicide. Fears about the church's survival would be realised "unless we go back to basics, to humble ourselves before God." The ACC's role in the Uniting Church was to stand among the congregations as a prophet without fear. "Stand up and grow, proclaim the gospel, live out the Bible with prophetic leadership". ■

Dead, yet alive amid the ruins

As reported elsewhere, the ACC theme "the church is dead — long live the church" was amply expounded by Ian Breward on 'Reforming the 21st Century Church', David Millikan on 'The Failure of the Liberal Experiment', Elizabeth Kendal on 'Strengthening that which remains' and Brian Edgar on 'Human Rights and Human Wrongs'. Panel members Brian Edgar, Nola Stewart and Ross Carter ably led a plenary discussion.

Worship and prayer were enhanced by studies on Nehemiah and Malachi, led by Max Champion and Ivan Kirk. State Networks met for mutual support and planning.

Opening the conference Dr. Champion referred to *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity* in which the author, R. R. Reno, 'tries to provide spiritual guidance to Christians seeking faithfulness within increasingly dysfunctional churches.' He argues that dissatisfied Christians, both liberal and evangelical, should

not detach themselves from the collapsing church but learn from reformers like Nehemiah.

'If we are to follow the scriptural rather than the modern pattern, we must turn as did Nehemiah and travel back, as he did, to the city of graves, to the monuments kept living by the passion of memory even as they lay wrecked. For this city (Jerusalem) is hallowed by the presence of the Lord, and to return to its sanctuaries, however ruined, is to return to the instruments of redemption that God graciously provides. We must suffer its ruins if we are to rebuild its walls.'

Dr. Champion said this was sage advice for a reforming movement in a church that is desperate to be thought of as culturally relevant, and a society equally desperate to be rid of its Judeo-Christian heritage. Sage advice indeed, provided we reject the narrowness of Nehemiah's heirs and, instead, put our hope in the power of the suffering, crucified and risen Christ who shall 'make all things new' (Rev 21:5). ■

The New Faith of St. Michael's

Hedley Fihaki

I was disappointed and saddened to read the 'Report to the Standing Committee of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania' regarding the 'New Faith' proposed by St. Michael's congregation, Melbourne. It was written by moderator the Rev. Jason Kioa and the Rev. Dr. Sandy Yule, and ends by suggesting no further action on the matter.

I am particularly disappointed since I had spoken personally to Jason Kioa

about the issue, and we had agreed that an appropriate action would be to take it to the 12th Assembly through a formal proposal.

The report concludes that no further action should be taken solely on what Francis Macnab has said in their private conversations. It does not consider what has already been said in the public domain by Dr. Macnab himself, which clearly shows that he is working outside the faith of the one, holy, catholic and

apostolic faith. The report also does not take into consideration what has already been said by the Rev Professor Chris Mostert, professor of systematic theology in the Uniting Church Theological College, Melbourne, that:

“The Uniting Church is committed to an understanding of God as the Holy Trinity and to Jesus Christ as Son of God, Saviour and Lord. To describe him as ‘just a Jewish peasant’ falls very far short of the church’s classic statements of belief in him. Similarly, to reduce God to ‘a presence beyond ourselves’ is a serious under-statement of the church’s belief in the God who is creator, redeemer and perfecter of all things”.

In other words, Professor Mostert, on behalf of the synod of Victoria and Tasmania, clearly understands what Dr. Macnab is on about and that what Dr. Macnab teaches clearly “falls very far short of the church’s classic statements of belief in him” and is a “serious under-statement of the church’s belief in God...” This report therefore by Rev. Jason Kioa and Rev. Dr. Sandy Yule is not accurate, in fact it is a deliberate manipulation of the truth. ■

The Rev. Hedley Fihaki is vice-chair of the ACC.

Chamberlain’s spirit lives on

Neville Chamberlain could not have done better than these two stalwarts of the faith, Jason Kioa and Sandy Yule, with help from our redoubtable standing (or should it be ‘falling-over’) committee. The document should be titled “A new Munich agreement”. How wonderful

to have peace in our time, thanks to our ability to embrace diversity with all the promiscuity of a prostitute, by replacing any notion of an overriding theological and biblical authority with the authority of individual voices, to each of whom, of course, we are all answerable. Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison. ■

Clive Skewes is a regular contributor to Catalyst.

ACC defines its abortion stance

The following statement on abortion was adopted by the ACC conference this month. It will be reviewed by members in coming months.

“The ACC believes that human life in the image of God begins at the moment of conception, and affirms the intrinsic moral value of that life from that point in the biblical witness of humankind’s creation as male and female in the image of God.

“We commend and thank the Social Responsibility Commission for their work in producing the draft statement ‘Abortion in Australia today’. We ask the SRC to further refine the statement by considering comments and submissions from members; the amended statement to be of similar length to the draft statement.”

A concise position statement of less than one page will be developed for use with the larger statement or independently. Submissions are invited to the SRC. These will be discussed with interested members, edited in light of their comments, and further considered by the National Council. ■

Ordered to speak against his own

Ivan Kirk

Attacking one’s own religious practices is nothing new. Malachi was one of Israel’s own, an insider under commission to speak of what he knew. He was a prophet who knew that Israel had displeased the Lord by her worship, who reminded her of a Name they would rather forget, and proclaimed how the Lord would rather see the temple doors shut than the altar profaned with lame and imperfect sacrifices.

The lot of confessors in today’s church is not unlike that of Israel’s prophets who were compelled to say things that few wanted to hear. The signs of death surround us when the church lacks the will to test the spirits and prefers to reflect on the culture that shapes it. The church is dead when it profanes the Lord’s Table with a celebration of its own story rather than the story of Christ’s redeeming love. Malachi is a prophet for our times. His astonishing switch from censure to promise should strengthen the hand of every confessor who knows the church has lost its saltiness. Malachi announces the coming of the messenger of the covenant who is like a refiner’s fire and a fullers’ soap. ‘But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?’ This hope of divine judgment and grace moves every confessor to exclaim ‘long live the church’ because the day of salvation is now because the Lord is revealed in Jesus Christ. ■

The Rev. Ivan Kirk is minister of St David’s, Coopers Plains, Qld.

Probing questions from an outsider

Christopher Pearson is a journalist of note, an outsider to the ACC, and an observer highly competent to probe the quirks of denominational polity and Christian theology. Writing about the UCA's new Preamble to its constitution in *The Australian* recently, he said it "posed a series of highly contentious questions, but the congress (Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress) used its special procedural privileges as an indigenous body to stifle the sort of free-flowing debate in which mainstream Christians ... might have articulated some orthodox answers."

Pearson's article ('Christianity has always taught that its revelation was entire and whole and perfect') said his first question was "What was God's purpose in preparing

and speaking to the 'first people' of our nation over such a long period of time?" Traditional theology would agree, he wrote, "that God is omnipresent, but warn that his ways are unsearchable and his purposes in the great sweep of history are usually mysterious. Grave misgivings would also be registered over the presupposition that indigenous people had been 'prepared' or 'spoken to' over the millennia as part of a distinctive revelation that adds anything to Christianity."

Pearson's next question assumed what the first foreshadowed. "What cultural and spiritual insights can indigenous Christians potentially bring to today's Australian churches from their long history and a theology contained in their

Dreaming?" His answer: A mixed bag derived from a world-view dominated by nature and earth spirits, with practices "utterly abhorrent to Christianity, including sorcery and necromancy. The only contribution Dreaming theology has to offer is a negative example: what to avoid."

These and other questions should be heard by church policy makers, especially in synods and presbyteries, because they must decide the fate of the Preamble. Being uncluttered by in-built prejudices and the constraints of denominational debate, Pearson's questions open the kind of broad insights that are so often overlooked in the church, whether by intention or incompetence. ■

ACC CONFERENCE THEME:

The church is dead, long live the church

A fresh consciousness marked the 2009 ACC Conference. Ian Breward's address on 'reforming the 21st Century Church' was not out of step with a conference whose theme was 'the church is dead'. Nor was David Millikan's address 'the end of the liberal experiment' out of step with a conference that exclaimed 'long live the church'. The speakers counselled us not to be resigned to religious traditions that have lost their vitality. They encouraged the recovery of a vibrant theology and practice.

Addresses by Brian Edgar and Elizabeth Kendal on human rights and religious liberty reminded the church of the responsibility it has

for the world, and particularly those at home and abroad who suffer for their faith in Christ.

The launch of a *Commentary on our Theological Declaration* and the Australasian Theological Forum's release and launch of Gordon Watson's *revised commentary on Barth's treatment of Trinity and Creation* were highlights. The overall thrust of the conference assisted delegates to handle the ambiguity of our times by urging us not to give in to the insipidness of today's church but to offer our confessional commitments to the Lord of the church for the advance of his purposes. ■

Ivan Kirk

Chaplains beware of tetchy patients

The UK based Christians Concerned for our Nation warns of dire consequences that will follow if the European Union's Equal Treatment Directive, now being proposed, takes effect. It aims to compel Christians or people of other faiths to guard against commending their beliefs in public. If passed, the directive would cover every facet of public life, including sale of books, hotel rooms and supply of services. Discrimination on grounds of religion or belief and sexual orientation will be prohibited. 'Offensive' acts or words may produce claims of 'harassment' requiring payment of compensation.

Christians Concerned cites the case of a homelessness officer who was dismissed from his public service job after suggesting to a terminally ill patient that she might consider putting her faith in God. The EU definition of 'harassment' entitles a person to accuse someone of offending by raising issues of religious belief. The person accused, not the accuser, would be required to prove the offence did not take place. This means that legal action could be brought against a hospital chaplain, or the hospital itself, if an offer of prayer, or words of comfort, is deemed by a patient to be offensive. ■

Cops recruited to new church in censored Fiji

An arm of Fiji's police force, known as the "Jesus crusade", has been likened to the rule of the Taliban. *Fiji Times'* editor in chief, Mr. Netani Rika, last month told journalism students in Queensland what life is like under the rule of Frank Bainimarama. Reporting Mr. Rika's talk, the *Brisbane Times* said police converts to the fundamentalist New Methodist church had replaced military officers and censor all stories in Fiji's newsrooms.

The new church was backed by Bainimarama and the police, and aims to draw popular support away from the dominant Methodist Church. Police are enforcing Fiji's laws from a radical fundamentalist Christian perspective. "It's just like having the Taliban," said Mr. Rika.

Fiji's media are heavily censored. Government policy aims to create

a peaceful society through religious conversion. But not to the traditional churches. Said Rika, "Even the police phone answering message says 'Praise the Lord. Can we help?'"

Head of the new Methodist Church is the brother of the Police Commissioner, a close friend of Mr Bainimarama. The Police chief holds the second most powerful position in Fiji. Meanwhile, journalists continue to cover all stories they regard as important for the people, even though these stories may not pass the censor. ■

Do not dilute our heritage!

To speak of reform in the 21st century Uniting Church may seem optimistic, given the way our polity currently works. We would not, however, be the first to dare to hope for reform in unpromising times. This was the Rev. Dr. Ian Breward's message to the ACC Conference which drew on the example of reformers in earlier times.

Today, he said, hostility to the Christian faith appeared to be growing. Many in the media saw religion as a private matter, which should not enter the public square. Some in the churches wanted to trim Christianity, to remove the difficult parts. The ACC needed to demonstrate that there was another way, which draws on the Scriptures and our Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical heritage, in order to proclaim the fullness of the faith.

"Our task is to bear witness to a living Christ-revealing God, remembering that all are called to repentance and faith. Part of that task involves

countering the different kinds of unbelief in our nation, drawing on Scripture, our heritage and offering intelligent analysis of our world in the light of God's purposes." ■

REVIEW

Behind the Preamble, a fierce denunciation

Behind the startling new Preamble to the Uniting Church's constitution lies a new book by the Rev. Dr. Chris Budden. The title describes its contents, but does not convey the author's fierce judgment on Australia's culture, the churches generally and his own church in particular. *Following Jesus in invaded space* is sub-titled *Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land*. We are, says Budden, living on stolen land and we are racists to boot, cherishing the mental outlook of generations before us who destroyed a civilised people. Two contentions in the book describe the genesis of the Uniting Church's newly-minted history which the new Preamble incorporates starkly and without compromise. One is the record of aboriginal dispossession — a field bitterly contested in recent years by historians. The other is a re-fashioning of ideas about the church to accommodate a disavowal of two hundred years of familiar theology, so that the newly raised voice of aboriginal Christians can be heard. ■

Warren Clarnette

Following Jesus in invaded space will be reviewed in a future Catalyst.

On eagles' wings : reflections after Black Saturday

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Malcolm Macmillan

A week after Black Saturday, at Arthur's Creek where I live, my wife Margaret and I hosted a UCA fire recovery team from Adelaide, and we were reflecting on why this catastrophe had struck Victoria. We were a few kilometres south of fire-ravaged Kinglake ranges, 40 km. north of Melbourne.

An animal had died in a paddock on our farm and when I looked the next day I was surprised to see three large wedge-tailed eagles perched nearby on towering dead trees, no doubt waiting for another turn to have a feed. These beautiful birds of prey were once regarded as a pest and a threat to young lambs. Nowadays they have a much better press and indeed are seen as good citizens of the environment. Our Adelaide guests were entranced.

My reflection on the ruthless fires which ravaged life, property and

livelihood in our area led me to think about what God might be saying to us in all this. Why did this happen and can we still count on God's love and care for all his creation? The advent of the eagles led me to think about a passage in Deuteronomy where the writer likens God's care of his people Israel, to an eagle's of its young:

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads out its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. (Deut. 32, 11)

But why would an eagle stir up its nest perhaps 60 or 70 feet above the ground?

It's a problem, unless of course it's trying to teach its young to fly. Yes, no doubt, that's it. How else would they learn? But then we read it still *hovers over them* — still cares for them; still loves them. Having tossed them out of the nest it assesses their flying prowess. If they are doing well, no problem, but if they are in

danger of crash-landing we read that it *spreads out its wings to catch them*. And not only that, carries them on its pinions. Bush men and naturalists attest to the fact that this actually happens.

Many of us are conscious of God "stirring up" our lives at different times. And it's often a not very comfortable experience. In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis suggests that God allows us to suffer in order to get our attention. On the face of it, this seems to be a cruel, even an immoral, view of pain and suffering. But it is possibly the one that Lewis finds most satisfactory.

Above all else, the picture is one of a caring and loving God who is anxious for us to trust Him in new and unexpected situations. And he will be there to carry us through, if we falter. ■

Malcolm Macmillan is a member of Whittlesea UC congregation.

Confessions of a Gen-X evangelical

What is it like to be a follower of Jesus from within that much maligned group known as Generation X, a young evangelical, a parish minister? What challenges face the Uniting Church as it tries to raise a new generation of orthodox believers?

The questions were asked by the Rev. Peter Chapman, keynote speaker at the ACC NSW annual meeting at Sutherland Uniting Church in April this year. He is the minister at Gerringong, NSW.

Now 35 years old, I grew up in the Hills District of Sydney and attended Galston Uniting Church throughout my formative years in the 80s & 90s. At Galston Uniting I met Carlie, whom I married eleven years ago. We lived at Wellington near Dubbo, where I worked in the bank and Carlie taught at the local Christian school. We lived in London for a year before returning home and getting a mortgage, having kids, and candidating for the ministry. Our children are Bethany 6, Sebastian 5, Elijah 2 and Ethan 4 months. I was at UTC from 2003-05 and from 2006 until now I have been in congregational ministry at Gerringong.

And I am a self-confessed, card carrying evangelical member of the Uniting Church.

As Gen-Xers growing-up in the church, we (unlike in previous generations) have been being very much in the minority in the wider community. I have always been one of only a few church-going

Christians among my peers. We are used to being a bit strange, a bit odd, a bit of a novelty because we went to church.

We have always been counter-cultural. Right from the earliest days at high school, we have been used to defending our faith against everything from a bemused ignorance through to outright hostility. We have known what it means to be strangers in a strange land. We know what it is to be sheep among wolves as we live out our faith in Jesus. Right from the word go, we have known we are missionaries to our own nation — it's not a new concept for us.

Sometimes I think we who have been in the church for a number of years (of whatever age) allow ourselves to get a little naïve about just how irrelevant the church is to broader Australian society. We tend to think we're more important/relevant/significant in the community than we really are. We need to accept that among people my age and younger, the church is a quaint irrelevancy.

Unless they went to a private school and were forced to endure chapel each week, most people my age are ignorant of even the most basic tenets of the Christian faith.

Here's an example. Recently at Gerringong we started a small group for some young mums who were new to the faith. The leaders started talking about the significance of grace — only to met with a room full of blank looks. They realised then that they had go right back to square one because even the fundamental truths of Christianity are a mystery to my generation.

Another example from Gerringong is the Palm Sunday march the churches used to get together for every Palm Sunday march down the main street with a bloke on a donkey and the whole works to show church solidarity etc to the town. When I floated the idea that we might get it going again with my Anglican counterpart, he pointed out that the feedback he had got from many people was that when they saw it they had no idea what was being re-enacted. Many people my age and younger do not have the first clue about matters of faith. And that's if we're lucky!

Once you get to university you are singled out for outright hostility from both students and faculty alike. I went to UTS in the mid 90s and the Christian groups there were harassed by the Student Association at every opportunity. In the name of tolerance and diversity, we were threatened for even daring to raise the issue of homosexuality and question it as a valid lifestyle. It is funny how intolerant you can be in the name of tolerance. While the student union were fanatic about tolerance, they took great joy in pillorying the Christian faith. One edition of the student newspaper Vertigo carried a picture of Jesus surrounded by children with a caption stating "Have you seen this man?" The obvious insinuation was that Jesus was a paedophile.

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Exiles at the king's table

Grahame Abrahams

A visitor at the 12th Assembly, Pastor Abrahams was asked by a friend if he was some sort of masochist. His reply was that it is important to understand how decisions are made in the church.

After the first part of Professor Daniel Smith-Christopher's Cato Lecture I was about to leave, but there was a shift in the message when he spoke on the contrast between Jonah and Ezra. He set my mind racing. Later, at our church, Steve Estherby recalled the writing on the wall, from Daniel, which made me go back and re-read those books, with some Nehemiah thrown in for good measure.

Smith-Christopher talked about the church as a people in exile, and the indigenous people as exiles in their own land. Something similar is happening to the ACC, which is experiencing exile in our own church. We stand apart as a thorn

in the side of those in power. Like Daniel, Jonah and Ezra we are called to hold people to account. We believe in the potential of the UCA but see it going off the path set by Scripture, while we remain loyal to the Church.

Relating the role of Daniel during the exile, the Cato lecturer recalled Daniel's refusal to defile himself by eating from the king's table. To take food from the king's table was to be indebted to the king and obliged to do his bidding; to surrender to the ruling authority. The same holds true today. By accepting government funding for charity and aged care projects, the church has bowed to the government, accepting its

regulations not only in administering funds but in political correctness.

We are coerced into liberal views of theology which accommodate immorality, homosexuality, drunkenness and debauchery. Societies have fallen when they reach this state of decline in church and culture. Are we risking another sort of exile?

The ACC is in exile against the excesses of theological interpretation, of so-called inclusiveness. The claim of tolerance and a safe place is only possible for people who are not in exile. Jesus was an exile in His own land, which was not a safe place for Him either. We are too concerned about being in a safe place; we need to be in an unsafe place if we are to follow Jesus.

The exiles who returned from Babylon were a minority in their own land, among people who had intermarried and compromised their identity as God's people. Ezra called all who claimed to be God's people to purity of faith, to live as exiles in their own land.

These thoughts raise many questions for me.

Is this happening to the UCA? In trying to be inclusive, has the church become like the Israelites who avoided being taken into exile? Has faith been compromised by accommodating our beliefs to the ideas of the world? Are we also compromised by indulging as we eat continually from the king's table? Has the church lost its way through compromise?

Is the ACC's role to be an Ezra, a Daniel, and a Jonah calling the UCA back to its roots, to purity of faith? Or, as Steve Estherby said, is the writing on the wall? ■

Grahame Abrahams is pastor of Shellharbour Village Uniting Church.

Confessions of a Gen-X evangelical continued

This sort of marginalisation has had an interesting effect. It creates a Christian sub-culture among today's youth. There is a Christian sub-culture out there with its own music, its own events, its own wrist bands, its own clothing, even its own celebrities. This is particularly the case with the rise of the mega-church where the pastors wouldn't personally know their flock from a bar of soap. I remember waiting in line to see a movie at Castle Towers in my teenage years and some of the big names from what was then 'Hills CLC' turned up — it was like Elvis had entered the

building or something.

The more marginalised Christianity becomes, the stronger the identity of the Christian sub-culture has become. The challenge for those of us immersed in this sub-culture is to stay focussed on Christ rather than on Christianity. The challenge is to see through all the jargon and merchandising and make sure we are committed to following Jesus rather than joining a sub-culture like evangelicalism or some other 'ism'.

Part One of Peter Chapman's address is edited for publication. Parts two and three will appear in future issues. ■

Religious liberty at home and abroad Persecution there, legislation here

Elizabeth Kendal

A startling account of Christians under persecution in other countries was followed by a warning that if the “dying, liberal Western Church in general does not stay awake, and become stronger in faith, we could die from within.”

This was the message given by Dr. Elizabeth Kendal at the ACC conference in Sydney. Whether at home or overseas, Christians could respond to relentless hostility and opposition only through engaging in the struggle of Christians across the world, and by keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus.

Following are excerpts from her address, edited for publication.

Persecution is real today. Of two billion Christians in the world today, 200 million live with the daily threat of imprisonment and/or murder. Another 400 million live with discrimination that ensures generational poverty and marginalisation.

Some Christians are prohibited from university or high office. They are denied government benefits and services, because they are Christians. They live as religious and ethnic minorities in Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist-dominated states and lawless, corrupt totalitarian states whose names are synonymous with human rights abuses.

The Taliban-al-Qaeda alliance is ascendant in Afghanistan and Pakistan, leaving a trail of fundamentalist, jihadist destruction, repression and terror — destroyed churches, bombed schools and traumatised remnant Christian communities largely driven underground.

The al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabaab in Somalia is actively hunting Christians — virtually all of whom are converts from Islam — to kill them. In September 2008, al Shabaab ambushed a humanitarian aid convoy, killing all the aid workers except Mansur Mohammed (25). Mohammed was a Christian convert from Islam, so the militants took him to his village, gathered the people around, charged with being a “murtid” (traitor to Islam) and publicly beheaded him. Mobile phone footage was then spread across the region as a warning. Eye witnesses said Mansur Mohammed was peaceful and calm to the end.

Many Christians have since been killed. After receiving threats, house church leader Musa Mohammed Yusef went underground.

In February this year al Shabaab kidnapped and beheaded Yusef’s 11- and 13-year old sons, returning their headless bodies for their mother to bury. Yusef, his wife and 7-year-old son have since been reunited in a Kenyan refugee camp.

In July al Shabaab publicly beheaded seven Christians, as “murtids”, in the city of Baidoa. Four Somali Christians were beheaded in the coastal town of Merca. They cared for Somali orphans. In August al Shabaab shot and killed Ahmed Matan (41, father of 3), a Christian convert from Islam, near the Kenyan border.

Christians may not be being led into the Coliseum to be torn apart by lions, but they are being hunted and publicly beheaded in Somalia.

But who needs terrorists? Radicalised Muslims are rising up against their Christian neighbours as they find they can persecute them with impunity. In August in Pakistan’s Punjab, a thousand Muslims were incited by the mosques and militants to attack Christians. Police did not intervene. One church and 40 homes were set alight and eight Christians were killed; six were burned alive. Police later issued reports against 29 named and 100 unknown Christians — including the Church of Pakistan’s Bishop of Faisalabad, John Samuel, and his two sons. This action forced the Christian community to drop their charges against the Muslims: “You drop your charges and we’ll drop ours!” The Christians were forced to accept a terrible injustice.

We can be appalled and saddened, but we should not be surprised, for Jesus warned us that it would be this way (Matthew 10: 16-25, 38; John 15: 18-16:4).

Persecution there, legislation here continued

Trends in religious liberty in our own country are grounds for concern. We live in a post-Christian age. Generations growing up now are not raised on the teachings of Jesus. We suffer a 'crisis of courage' (Solzhenitsyn) that besets the leaders of Western democracies. More and more they opt for appeasement and short term gain, leaving us with the long-term problem of a descent into lawlessness.

Into this mix the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) is lobbying for anti-defamations laws which will affect our free speech and religious liberty. Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender (GLBT) groups are lobbying for "broader" and "stronger" (i.e. no exemptions) anti-discrimination and equal opportunity laws that will remove the Church's right to conscientious objection.

My comments, earlier, about Islamic persecution of Christians are enough to have me charged with vilification of Islam under Victoria's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001. But that is unlikely thanks to Daniel Scot, whose gracious and reasoned defense over several years led to the law being largely discredited.

What the OIC wants, however, is to have "defamation" of Islam (i.e. saying bad things about Islam) criminalised internationally. The "Cartoon Intifada" was organised to this end, using the following strategy.

In December 2005, the OIC met in Dakar, Senegal, and formulated a 10-year Plan aimed at Islamic renaissance. One issue was "Islamophobia" — the supposed result of "defamation of (saying bad things about) Islam". So the OIC set itself the goal of having the UN pass a resolution against defamation of

Islam, and then moved to have that resolution passed into international law.

To that end, the OIC decided to use the Danish cartoons that had been published in Denmark in September 2005 in response to the scandal that a local publisher could not find anyone brave enough to illustrate a children's book about the life of Mohammed. The cartoons caused no riots when published in Denmark in September 2005. There were no riots when they appeared on the front page of an Egyptian daily in the middle of Ramadan in November 2005.

What awaits us is ... the state will decide what beliefs are acceptable in the 21st century

But, with a view to the OIC submitting an anti-defamation resolution to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2006, the OIC and Arab League went to work and in February the Cartoon Intifada erupted with deadly riots. Embassies were burned and Danish products boycotted. In March 2006, the UNHRC passed the OIC's anti-defamation resolution; and in December 2007 the UN General Assembly (after a few more strategic riots) passed the OIC's anti-defamation resolution by 108 in favour, 51 against, with 25 abstentions.

The logic is: "defamation" of Islam leads to deadly destructive riots

therefore we must ban "defamation" of Islam! Plans are under way to have this now widely accepted resolution passed into international law along with deterrent punishments.

The most immediate threat to our religious liberty in Australia, however, comes from the Gay, Lesbian, BiSexual, Transgender (GLBT) lobby groups.

We have had equal opportunity, anti-discrimination laws protecting people's rights on the basis of race, sex, age and disability for some time — and with few or no problems. The Gay Rights lobby groups intends to have the laws "broadened" to include religion and sexual orientation, and "strengthened" to remove all exemptions.

The State Labor government in Victoria is considering amending Victoria's Equal Opportunity legislation. This is not a flash in the pan, it is based on legislation operating in Europe since 2000. To obtain EU membership, states must align their equal opportunity laws with European standards. This is causing immense distress in the Central European states like Orthodox Serbia and Catholic Croatia and Romania.

The politicians want EU membership so they can get access to the Euros -- but the churches are appalled that the cost will be laws based on EU directives that ban discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. The churches are protesting and being labeled "backward" and "obstructionist" for their efforts. This is what awaits us — the church is basically going to lose its right to conscientious objection and the state will determine what beliefs are acceptable in the 21st Century. ■

Stitching up the Assembly?

Clive Skewes

The ABC 7.30 Report on July 28 made some perceptive comments on Labor's soon to be held National Conference.

Having previously opposed the union movement's 'Buy Australia' campaign — geared to give preferential treatment to Australian companies and businesses — the Federal Government had done a backflip and was ready to announce funding to give unions what they wanted. Preference for local industries.

Aside from the merits or otherwise of the plan, what was interesting were the comments on the process leading up to the National Conference (Italicized comments are mine). Journalist Heather Ewart contrasted this year's conference with that of 2007 when Labor was on the cusp of victory: 'Two years later with Kevin Rudd firmly ensconced in the top job, nothing is being left to chance in detailed preparations to ensure a carefully choreographed conference where the image (*but not the reality*) of unity comes first'.

Industry Minister Kim Carr and AWU national secretary Paul Howes offered warm, positive comments on the outcome, both obviously relieved that a push which was shaping up to be a brawl on the floor of conference had been averted.

Not so happy was former Labor pollster Rod Cameron: 'We've of course got the world champion control freak who is prime minister. And with that sort of makeup, we see conferences which are really being worked out pretty well in advance'.

Comment from Ewart: 'Though there might be the odd squeak or two.... By and large, though, the aim is to come across as one big happy family'.

Cameron: 'Gone are the days when Labor Party conferences were the scene of great impassioned ideological debates about economic direction and major policy issues. They're gone. We now see calm and stitched up outcomes'... we've got all power centralised around the Prime Minister's cabal, and perhaps that's a good thing for the stability and direction of the government. But it's a bad thing if you want to get impassioned and argument-fed policy'.

Ewart: 'That's not about to happen under this government. Kevin Rudd will be the star performer on centre stage when the conference opens... and woe betide any delegate who doesn't stick to the script.'

Hmm. Change the issue, and a few names, and you'd swear this was a report on this year's recent UCA National Assembly, especially those lines about 'a stitched up deal' and the loss of 'impassioned and argument-fed policy' and 'coming across as one big happy family'. The UCA has long been accused of being an echo chamber of the ALP, but had we realised we were also copycatting the similarity of the processes?

The Rev. Clive Skewes is a retired Victorian minister still active in part-time parish work. ■

Ian Clarkson on Marriage

There's a very important debate looming on our social and political landscape. It's to do with the place, purpose and importance to our nation of marriage.

Volumes of research demonstrate beyond doubt the positive contribution that intact stable marriages make to the wellbeing of children and society.

Australia needs to invest in this solidly if it is to deliver the best opportunities for its children in the future. The best protection and opportunity we can give our young is sound marriages.

But, the debate goes deeper. Senator Sarah Hanson-Young said the Greens believe discrimination espoused by the current Marriage Act must be overturned to ensure that freedom of sexuality and gender identity are recognised as fundamental human rights.

They wish to rewrite the basic structure of marriage, which has been fundamental for millennia. Their view overlooks that marriage isn't only a right for adults, it's a structure to provide a foundation and wall of protection for the next generation.

Others have inaugurated a national marriage day celebration to highlight the unique benefits and seek to renew a culture of marriage within the nation.

If marriage is so essential to the stability, morale, security and prosperity of the Australian nation, then laws that protect it are as important as issues of health care, economy, or climate and environment.

Think about it. ■

Small church evangelism — is it possible?

Second of three articles by Don Purdey

Don Purdey had a successful career in the Commonwealth Public Service as secretary to Australia's counter-terrorism response committee before entering the ordained ministry. In over 11 years of ministry, he has served in rural and city churches, and now works on the Assembly of Confessing Congregations South Australia Movement executive.

In the previous article I told about Glenunga Church — a small suburban congregation in Adelaide seeking to grow its mission and ministry. It's been a struggle but we're convinced our doors would have closed some time ago without our efforts at small church evangelism.

So I want to share the key lessons we've learnt as we seek to build the Kingdom. The first three (listed in last issue of *ACCatalyst*) were to Pray, to Make Evangelism a Priority, and to Take an Attitude Check. Now let's go deeper into the process.

4. Research it.

An easy trap is to assume you know your own community. Our people believed there weren't many young people among us but a quick visit to the supermarket showed otherwise. We get used to moving in our own circles and become blind to other groups. And it's easy to think your church is offering nice things — worship on Sunday and a weekly Bible study — but are they the things non-churchgoers are looking for? Probably not.

So find out what your community wants and needs. How? The Bureau of Census and Statistics figures on

your community will give you a start. In addition, conduct your own survey. We asked our community some questions through a door knock of 200 homes and a survey at the shopping centre. We discovered that our community wanted security and a sense of — community! This encouraged us to try to bring people together — Friday nights of fun, food and friendship; community Christmas Carols and so forth. But we didn't know what people wanted until we asked.

Also find out what your church's strengths are and use them. You can do that through the NCLS reports, and add to it your own brainstormed notions of what you're good at. Once you know where your abilities are, and what your community wants, you can design programs that will meet real needs, and have a better chance of being run well.

5. Make a plan.

It's fine to start with a single event — hopefully that will start to get your church members thinking about evangelism as a key part of your ministry. But one event will not change everything. One letterbox drop will not suddenly create

instant, total community awareness of your church. You need a planned series of outreach events — first to teach your own church people that you're serious about evangelism, and second to start getting the message to your community that things are different down at the local church.

Your plan should put effort into several categories, such as initial contact, drawing in, enabling attendance, confirming attendance, and Christian input. For example, letterboxing, free giveaways and the like are initial contacts — designed mainly to raise the profile of your church. An event like Christmas Carols takes it a step further — bringing people together with church members, and sometimes on the church property. A service to bless children aims to bring people into a worship experience (and make it one that is welcoming, understandable and relevant!). An Alpha course will appeal to people who have started thinking about faith issues and want to ask questions. In other words, people respond in different ways to different opportunities, depending upon where they are at personally and what their needs are. Or, as Rick

Warren puts it, to catch more fish, use more hooks!

Glenunga developed what we call “The Pathways Plan.” It shows diagrammatically the ways in which we seek to link together our various activities to draw people from initial contact deep into the life of the church. We elected to shape our plan into three defined “streams” — Community Interest, Pastoral Care and Youth & Children. At this point we have not yet fully implemented the plan. The pastoral stream we still feel is beyond our current levels of expertise. We hope God will open this door by providing additional

skills and resources. Meanwhile we’re working with the other two. Because every situation is different, develop a plan that works for you.

6. Brainstorm for ideas.

Brainstorming is gathering all sorts of wacky ideas on a whiteboard or butcher’s paper. It achieves several things. It gets a lot of people involved. It draws on collective wisdom and perspectives. It builds ownership of what is happening. It builds enthusiasm. And, hopefully, it produces ideas for things to try that will further your mission and outreach.

Don’t rule anything out until you’re sure it’s not God’s idea. It’s too

easy to consider something to be ridiculous just because you’ve never thought of it before. Let everything stand until you’re sure that it doesn’t fit with where God seems to be leading you in a more general sense. Once you’ve collected the ideas, recognise where they fit in your overall plan. Are they profile-raisers, or things that get people through the door? Do they work for outsiders, or are they more for growing people once they’re connected? Keep an eye out for ideas that will be in harmony with what you are doing so that people can move easily from one program to another.

Watch for the final instalment in this series in next *ACC Catalyst*. ■

My traumatised cat

Robyn McKay



It was time for my cat Rubey to make the big shift from my Wongyarra house to the Peterborough manse. The day came when I unceremoniously shoved her into a borrowed cat cage and off we went in the car. Rubey is not used to car travel and has not been anywhere for nearly four and a half years, and she meowed pitifully for the whole trip, looking terrified. Arriving at the manse she quickly found my bedroom and hid under the bed. There she remained for a night and a day while I went about my work.

I waited for her to come out, but she didn’t. After some time it dawned on me that I was using the wrong approach. Instead of waiting at a distance for

her to come out, I went into the room and got on the floor next to her. Then she came out. Alongside of me, Rubey was happy to venture into the big, wide house. As long as I was with her, she could cope with her fear of the unknown. As soon as I stopped paying her attention, she scuttled off under the bed again.

There are times in my life and maybe all of our lives when we feel like hiding from the world, because it can be a scary place with lots of unknowns. We withdraw from everything, including God, and look for a safe place to hide.

But God doesn’t wait at a distance for us to regain our confidence and crawl out of our hiding place to meet him. God comes to us, gets down on his knees and looks under the bed. God meets us where we are, just as we are, with all our fears, weaknesses and failings. He is ready to take our hand and walk with us into the big wide world where he has so many blessings in store for us.

Are we willing to trust him? Will you take his hand and let him lead you?

By the way, Rubey has recovered from her trauma, and now she thinks she owns the place. Typical! ■

Contest of options in church today

Steve Everist

The future of our church is being shaped by a conversation between two competing options — competing because they are antithetical and cannot form a workable plurality. For the sake of brevity I define one as *Biblical Christianity*, a belief system based on the authority of scripture (which phrase needs more elaboration than is possible here) and *Progressive Christianity*, a hopeful relabelling of liberal Christianity with the spiritual self at its centre.

While the progressive world view is attractive, it is demonstrably the wrong choice. Progressive Christianity is comfortably congruent with the dominant secular individualistic culture. Biblical Christianity is essentially at odds with the dominant culture.

Progressive Christianity wants to be therapeutically self-affirming, promising safety and comfort in community. By any standard that is desirable. On the other hand, biblical Christianity uncomfortably challenges the self. Moreover, a greater problem is that the authority claimed by scripture has too often been co-opted by systems and individuals to justify unhealthy pathological behaviour. This appears from time to time in the abuse of power and control within church communities using biblical authority as their excuse.

So we understand why people want something safer and warmer than biblical authority. But progressive Christianity is not the solution. Biblical Christianity does not become abusive because the authoritative centre (the Bible) can be shown to cause abusive behaviour. It becomes abusive when the centre is co-opted by unhealthy psycho-social pathologies.

A church struggling with these issues should not replace biblical authority with something else. It should apply more radically the authority of the Bible which contains within it the necessary requirements for healthy exercise of authority and development of loving relationships, where grace has justice at its heart. This approach deals with unhealthy pathologies and maintains the integrity of scripture, an essential historically verifiable element in the life of churches that are vibrant and growing.

Progressive Christianity on the other hand, worried about textual difficulties, robs individuals of the Bible's authority. Our culture of secular rationalism inevitably



nudges people towards exchanging the self for the Bible as the centre of belief.

Philosophers worth their salt understand that anything can be doubted given the right conditions. So our question is, should biblical authority be doubted in the light of a systematic understanding of the relationship between text, faith and community? The answer is No. Negatively this is because a belief system like progressive Christianity, which has the multiple possibilities of multiple selves at its heart, will inevitably lose coherence. Positively we embrace biblical authority because the cause of Christ, our personal and corporate relationship with God and the integrity of Christian faith are demonstrably reliant on the centrality of scripture as the authoritative light by which we steer.

Progressive Christianity is attractive. I love to bits many Christians who lay claim to that epitaph. But it can have no other outcome than to render the church impotent, which is what it is doing throughout the western world. This is seen in the contrast between beliefs and outcomes as they operate within these two competing faith-views in western protestant Christianity. ■

The Rev. Steve Everist ministers at Pittwater, NSW. His article was originally published as a letter to the editor of Insights (NSW Synod) in May 2009.

An inconvenient truth: Balibo 1975

Peter Bentley

This new Australian film touches on the nature of oral testimony, of eye-witness reports delivered years after the event, and of later interpretations by scholars and writers. *Balibo* joins other excellent portrayals of real events like *Breaker Morant*, *The Year of Living Dangerously* and *Gallipoli*.

The story of *Balibo* is well-known to Australians. Journalists Brian Peters and Malcolm Rennie, British citizens working for Channel 9, Australians Greg Shackleton, Tony Stewart and New Zealander Gary Cunningham, were killed when Indonesian troops invaded East Timor on October 16, 1975.

The story is told through the eyes of Roger East (Anthony LaPaglia) — the last foreign journalist in East Timor during the Indonesian offensive. His death is well documented. It occurred on December 8, 1975, along with scores of East Timorese, also murdered at the Dili waterfront. East's final words (in the film) were "I'm Australian".

While the story belongs to the journalists, the film recounts East Timor's trauma over 25 years. The viewer gains a glimpse of the impending death toll, estimated at between 50,000 and 200,000. Many died through disease and malnutrition.

At another level the film offers historical reflection through the work of the Commission on Reception, Truth, Reconciliation of Timor-Leste, which produced 'The Profile of Human Rights Violations in Timor-Leste 1974-1999'. One East Timorese, a girl in 1975 and now a mother, vividly describes her personal

story and that of her country in the context of East's death.

Despite the central role of religious faith in the new nation, the church's role could have been more significant. But this is a film about Australians and we learn little about the journalists' beliefs or philosophical leanings, apart from occasional comments by Shackleton and East.

As with the earlier *The Killing Fields*, which focuses on the friendship of journalist Sydney Schanberg and Dith Pran, *Balibo* portrays the relationship between Roger East and the man who later became the country's leader in exile for East Timor, José Manuel Ramos-Horta. He became the first foreign minister in 2002 upon independence, and later Prime Minister and then its second President in 2007.

The film's producers claim historical credibility in the opening credits. A more appropriate wording ("based on true events") appears at the end, which allows for some fictional events, such as East visiting Balibo, and a scene based on coronial interviews concerning the murders of the Balibo Five.

The film has sparked debates in Australian media, with politicians of the time defending their role in Australia's foreign policy and diplomacy. There is an excellent film web site and material in one section 'Balibo in Depth', curated by consulting historian Dr Clinton Fernandes, senior lecturer in Strategic Studies, UNSW-Australian Defence Force Academy, reinforcing the overall long-term historical study of East Timor.

Balibo is a timely reminder of the inherent dangers of investigative journalism 'from the frontline'.

The Committee to Protect Journalists' statistics on the deaths of journalists confirms that 742 died since 1992 (as at 8 July 2009), with 72 per cent murdered and 18 per cent combat related. Of these 93 per cent are males, and 88 per cent were killed with complete impunity.

Soon after the pro-independence vote in 1999, two more journalists were murdered in East Timor, including an Indonesian travelling with nine Catholic religious and aid workers. Examination of the bodies found that all were killed at close range.

I have no doubt that the Balibo Five were murdered by Indonesian troops, not killed in the crossfire as Indonesian officials claimed. The CPJ statistics show that the likelihood of all five being accidentally killed is nil, and this was supported by the coronial inquest of 2007.

Balibo illustrates the nature and depth of sin, and how this explodes during the chaos of war and terror. We see how much communication technology has advanced since the 70s. We hear recordings of Roger East's interviews with the ABC in late 1975. In one he says "Well, everything's settling down here, or so it seems. I'm quite happy. I think I'm on a very peaceful island." Sobering material.

On the nature of history, I would suggest that this film's historical methodology might encourage secular novelists and atheistic apologists to consider that at least the death and even the resurrection of Christ are very well historically grounded. ■

Official comment

Without any doubt, the most significant decisions of the Assembly related to the Preamble of the Constitution and some changes to the Constitution itself. The changes relate to the inclusion of a number of sentences that set out the difficult truth that during the years of colonisation, members of the uniting churches “shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples.” The new preamble also makes it clear that God was present in this land before the arrival of the Christian church and that the First Peoples had “particular insights into God’s ways.”

In accordance with Clause 72 of the Constitution these amendments to the Constitution will not take effect until they are approved “by a majority of the synods and two-thirds of the presbyteries.” However, even before such concurrence is gained, it is clear that the relationship between the Congress and the rest of the Uniting Church has attained a new level of recognition of the place of indigenous members of the church and the contribution they bring to our life together.’

The Rev. Rob Brown, general secretary, synod of Victoria-Tasmania

What it’s all about — the proposed new Preamble to the UCA Constitution

[Excerpts from unconfirmed Minutes of Assembly]

As the Church believes God guided it into union so it believes that God is calling it to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples from many lands, and as part of that to

RECOGNISE THAT

1. When the churches that formed the Uniting Church arrived in Australia as part of the process of colonisation they entered a land that had been created and sustained by the Triune God they knew in Jesus Christ.

2. Through this land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples of this country, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning ‘sovereign’ in the languages of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial.

3. The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.

4. Some members of the uniting churches approached the First Peoples with good intentions, standing with them in the name of justice; considering their well being, culture and language as the churches proclaimed the reconciling purpose of the Triune God found in the good news about Jesus Christ.

5. Many in the uniting churches, however, shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples. They were complicit in the injustice that resulted in many of the First

Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land.

6. The uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied, utilised, cultivated and harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.

7. From the beginning of colonisation the First Peoples challenged their dispossession and the denial of their proper place in this land. In time this was taken up in the community, in the courts, in the parliaments, in the way history was recorded and told, and in the Uniting Church in Australia.

8. In 1985 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Uniting Church in Australia formed the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

9. In 1988 the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress invited the other members of the Church to join in a solemn act of covenanting before God.

10. After much struggle and debate, in 1994 the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia discovered God’s call, accepted this invitation and entered into an ever deepening covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. This was so that all may see a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

ANDTHUS the Church celebrates this Covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. ■