

# ACCatalyst

ASSEMBLY OF CONFESSING CONGREGATIONS WITHIN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

PETER KURTI

## The roots of Religious Liberty



The Future of the  
UCA

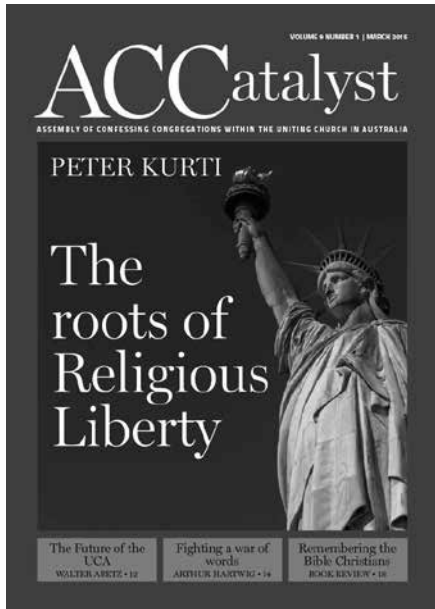
WALTER ABETZ • 12

Fighting a war of  
words

ARTHUR HARTWIG • 14

Remembering the  
Bible Christians

BOOK REVIEW • 18



Franck Schneider/flickr.com

## EDITORIAL

# UCA dreaming

In this edition of *ACCatalyst*, Walter Abetz responds to Keith Suter's intriguing scenarios for the UCA. Abetz summarises the Suter scenarios that range from a church of larger but fewer regional congregations, to a welfare-agency-based church, or wrapping things up. Abetz concentrates on the effects of church overwhelmed by its managers. His article is on page 12.

The fourth Suter scenario - return to the early church intrigues me. In Suter's thesis from which the AC-

*Catalyst* summary was drawn the scenario includes the idea that "This Uniting Church does not worry about "church growth" and celebrating numerical growth. The focus is on quality and not quantity."

The quality of the early church surely was evidenced in vigorous missionary work. It may not have worried about church growth but certainly sought it. Suter describes a smaller humbler church, but that should not dampen its fire.

*John Sandeman*

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# Looking back

This week I had several days of irritations. I haven't had major issues to deal with, but a number of smaller things that have taken time and been frustrating and if you let them, those things can leave you feeling discouraged.

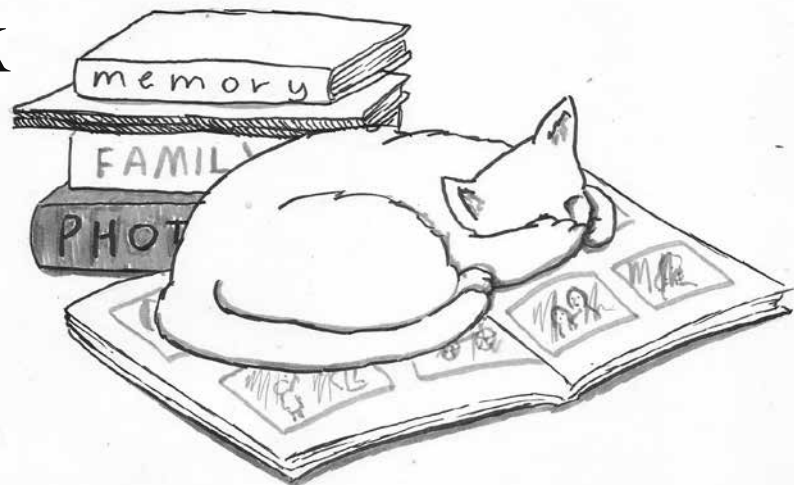
But also this week, in my spare time I have been sorting through photos of my life, from babyhood to adulthood. I know it's not a good idea to live in the past, but I have found it quite therapeutic.

There's a photo of me learning to crawl, then I learnt to walk and to write and ride a bike. I've overcome a lot of obstacles in my life and learnt how to handle many challenges. If I could deal with all of that, then I can deal with a few small issues now.

More significantly than remembering what I have done, is looking back and remembering what God has done for me. He made me unique. He was with me as I learnt and grew. He kept me safe as a youngster when I fell into a flooded creek.

He drew me back to himself when I unwisely tried to go off on my own path without him. He let me feel

Hilary Sandeman



him near me when I was frightened. When I asked him to come into my life, he did and forgave my sin and called me his child. God has been faithful right through my life so there's no reason why he should abandon me this week when I need him.

The Israelites were exhorted to remember what God did for them when he delivered them from Egypt. They were supposed to celebrate their deliverance each year, so that they would remember God's great power and love for them as a nation. If they had done this, they may not have been so tempted to run after powerless idols.

And as Christians, we also look back. At this time of the year especially we remember Easter and that should be an encouragement to us. If Jesus had the power to defeat death and sin then he ought to be able to handle my weakness and sins and problems. If Jesus has all authority in Heaven and on earth, he ought to be able to answer my prayers.

What Jesus did at Easter is not just a memory or a story for us; it's a reality that transforms our lives today, and gives us courage and passion as we seek to serve God in whatever situations we may find ourselves.

*Robyn*

## Confronting persecution

In recent years and especially this past one, the world has been convulsed by ever-increasing religious persecution. Generally the secular media is disinterested in religious persecution, but so severe has it been even the media have sat up to take notice.

One case that comes to mind is the sentencing to death of a pregnant Sudanese woman because she would not renounce her Christian faith. Another is the abduction of Christian schoolgirls in Nigeria. The atrocities of Islamic State against all religious minorities in the Middle East, including beheadings and crucifixions, are legend.

How should Christians in the West respond to this persecution, bearing in mind that 80% of all religious persecution is against Christians? Should not the West as a whole, and in particular Australia as a nation, be doing its utmost to ensure that our distant brothers and sisters, who share our Judeo-Christian beliefs, also share the cup of justice?



Senator Cory Bernardi presents CUP's petition to Julie Bishop.

In response, a small group of concerned Christians decided to capitalise on the fact that in 2014 Australia hosted the G20 economic forum and held the chair of the UN Security Council in November.

In May 2014 CUP – Christians Under Persecution was formed officially

with the title of CUP Advocacy Inc.

CUP's first task was to arrange a nationwide petition for Christians of all denominations. By October CUP had received over 12,000 written signatures and about 900 on-line signatures. On 4th December, the petition was presented to the Foreign Minister, the Hon Julie Bishop by Senator Bernardi on CUP's behalf.

The response to the petition shows that there is concern over this issue in the minds of Christians across the nation. CUP plans to pursue the lobbying of the Australian government, the United Nations and possibly other Western nations through local organisations, to bring about justice in third world and developing countries where religious persecution is present.

Lobbying in the field of religious persecution in this day and age of political correctness, within an atmosphere of fear of reprisal will not be easy. But we have an almighty God on our side, and 'if God is for us who can be against us' – Rom 8.31  
[www.facebook.com/christiansunderpersecution](http://www.facebook.com/christiansunderpersecution)

Frank Reale  
President CUP Advocacy Inc.

Note: Many ACC members attending the 2014 ACC conference signed the petition that was brought to the conference by members of Whittlesea Uniting Church.

## Adventures with Anglicans



**Anne Weeks, Ian Weeks and Peter Bentley Seated: Jan Allan, Gordon Allan, Jane Buesnel, Dick Buesnel**

For the last four years, ACC members at the annual NSW CMS Summer School held at Katoomba in January have met for lunch, news and a time for questions and discussion. Up to 12 members have been present.

The lunch is organised by NSW ACC Convenor, Rev Ian Weeks and Mrs Anne Weeks and is a wonderful opportunity to fellowship together.

ACC members also attend and

send greetings to a like-minded group EFAC (Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion) who hold their annual NSW Lecture during the CMS Summer School

This is a helpful time to learn about what is happening in Evangelical Anglican circles in the world and also hear from an invited overseas speaker. ACC members are warmly received at this event, and copies of ACC materials are also well received.





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## PUBLIC SQUARE

BY PSEUDO-MAXIMUS

### The road less travelled

*The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:14 NRSV)  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less travelled by; and that has made all the difference. (Robert Frost, 'The Road not Taken.')*

Roads are often used in books, films and music to symbolise adventure and pilgrimage, where people turn their backs on home and security for exciting, unknown destinations and also the way they return, after their dreams are shattered.

In *The Road Trip that Changed the World* (2012) Mark Sayers outlines the crisis facing Christianity in Western civilisation. In a modern take on Jesus' saying about the 'wide' and 'narrow' roads, he contrasts two conflicting world-views in our society about the path on which we are travelling.

He notes that since the 1960s a big change has taken place in how we understand our life journey. The road has become a symbol of escape from commitment. It signifies open-ended 'choices' that we can use to experience spiritual health, sexual intimacy and material well-being.

To maximise happiness, many people now live for the moment. They are not interested in overarching stories about where we have come from and where we are going. The past and future are blocked out as they focus on 'the journey' rather than 'the destination', thus distracting themselves from 'asking the big questions'.

They fling themselves into fleeting relationships and amusements that make them feel good. This creates an

amiable but self-satisfied shallowness that is detached from other people. Those who question this pleasure-seeking narcissism are regarded as repressed fundamentalists whose sin is to deny their desires and seek 'truth' that is not in tune with our natural inclinations.

Sadly but inevitably the dream that many hoped to realise on the 'wide and easy road' has become a nightmare. Though entertainers, sports people and media gurus talk up the 'wow factor' to heighten emotions and energy levels, many have become easily bored, apathetic, anxious, and resentful, with some turning to drugs to deaden the sense of futility.

The road symbolises a very different journey on the map travelled by Jesus in the footsteps of Abraham. Like the post-1960's road, this road leaves the security of what is familiar. Unlike it, this road is taken by people of faith who know where they came from and where they are going. This road is not 'the way to self-discovery' based on limitless 'choices'. Nor does it detach us from other people or the quest for truth.

This road is travelled in the knowledge that God has called the Church to pack her bags and make the journey of faith.

The 'narrow way' of Jesus is not, as is often thought, fanatical, bigoted or fearful. In his company, life's journey is immensely challenging and richly blessed - in good and bad times alike. Those who travel down this road discover true freedom because life is seen in the light of the cross and resurrection. They know that, incredibly, they are 'chosen' to participate in the grand purposes of God.

Therefore, they are freed from the shallowness, restlessness, anxiety and self-centeredness that accompany travellers on the other road. They

know their sins have been forgiven and evil overcome by the One who walked the path of suffering love to the Cross, and who revealed himself as the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13ff). They rejoice in the company of all who are called to give themselves fully for the life of the world. Along this road, commitment and sacrificial love are to be found. In Cormac McCarthy's grim novel and film, *The Road* (2006), these qualities are found in the father who, in the aftermath of a cataclysmic event that has killed most living things, destroyed civilisation and led to his wife's suicide. He does all in his power to protect his son and lead him to safety.

Despite the father dying in his son's arms at the end of the road, this dark, haunting vision of a future without life, humanity and purpose is tinged with hope! After sitting with his dead father for a highly symbolic three days, the son is given a way ahead when he is embraced and adopted by a loving family who embody the love of God.

Instead of embracing the modern escape from commitment, responsibility and purpose that is typical of those who travel the 'wide road' to self-discovery and unfettered pleasure, *The Road* can be seen as a parable of the 'narrow road' on which Jesus' disciples are called to travel. It illuminates the redemptive place of sacrificial love in the midst of unrelenting suffering and evil.

Today, this road as M Scott Peck memorably described it (1979) is *The Road Less Travelled*. Unlike the other road, it requires discipline to restrain emotions and delay pleasure. It commits us to be honest with ourselves, to face problems, conflicts and disappointments and to devote ourselves to the pursuit of truth so that actions

- not feelings - will be the basis for genuine love for other people.

Above all, as Peck realised later, it commits us to the costly path of discipleship in the service of Jesus Christ who embodied God's sacrificial love for small, fragile and flawed mortals. It is a miracle of grace that insignificant people like you and me should be chosen by the Creator of this unimaginably vast cosmos to take part in his redemptive purposes for the world.

That such a miracle should come to light, not on the 'broad road,' where satisfaction of desires, feelings and choices are thought to be limitless, but on the 'narrow road' of self-giving love, is an occasion for deep gratitude. For, unlike exclamations about the 'awesomeness' of banal happenings in our tiny self-enclosed worlds, the event of Jesus Christ is the one event that truly has the 'wow factor'.

To experience this wow factor we cannot be spectators. We must set out on 'the road less travelled', not the all-too-frequently chosen path to instant gratification. As disciples of Jesus we share with them the desire to break free of traditions that stifle adventures in faith and action. However, we do so, not to satisfy selfish personal desires or bend the world to our wills, but to participate in the triumphant, suffering love of God for the strife-torn world.

Such costly living for others springs from gratitude for the blessings that God has undeservedly showered on us as we walk - faltering and imperfectly - the road of faith.

The blessings and hardships of this journey are beautifully portrayed in Ezra's vision:

*There is a city ... set on a plain, and it is full of all good things; but the entrance to it is narrow and set in a precipitous place, so that there is fire on the right hand and deep water on the left. There is only one road lying between them ... so that only one person can walk on the path. If now the city is given to some as an inheritance, how will the heir receive (it) unless by passing through the appointed danger (2 Esdras 7:5-9).*

There is something unsettling about preaching on these texts today. As Christians we do not usually think of ourselves as pilgrims on a perilous journey in a hostile world!

Our faith makes us grateful for blessings. It gives us comfort in tough times. It encourages us to be tolerant of everybody and everything. Unlike our fellows elsewhere in the world we do not risk torture, imprisonment or

death for our faith.

We need to open our eyes, ears and hearts to the fact that the road along which the vast majority of people in our day are walking is destructive of the good purposes for humanity that are revealed on journeys travelled by men and women of faith and exemplified in Christ.

That truly is 'The Road Trip that Changed the World'. Whilst this 'road less travelled' is not always easy to walk - and opposition from those who have gone down a different track is to

be expected - we can rejoice because God has accepted each one of us by grace and surrounded us with fellow recipients of grace.

Undeservedly blessed by God, we are free (as the Basis of Union puts it) to accept our calling as 'a pilgrim people who are engaged to confess Christ's death and resurrection on the way towards the promised goal'.

Thanks be to God for this high and responsible privilege!  
*(Sermon preached by Max Champion on Sunday 28 September 2014)*

## IAN CLARKSON

### What made last Advent unique?

Last Advent involved, in my memory, an unprecedented acknowledgment and even outpouring of the fruit of Christian grace on the public stage.

First was the so-called agnostic Gough Whitlam's funeral service which featured Blake's Jerusalem and excerpts from St Matthews Passion, with his son detailing the liturgical influences on Gough's psyche. They can't do without Christian grace when it counts!

A little later came Phil Hughes' death at the crease: then a fully televised Catholic funeral service with the haunting melody of a modern version of the Shepherd's Psalm described by one sports editor as magnificent and beautiful. It didn't stop there. As the first test rolled on and Clarke, Warner and Smith made their tons they all looked upward to the supposed heavenly dwellings in salute. Then Warner publicly thanked Hughes for helping them make the win! As secular as we like to say we are in other circumstances, we can't get away from at least a folksy Christianity. We must have it.

Then came the Lindt cafe siege. As the second day drew to a close and the tragic hostage deaths were lamented, news cameras focused on one directly worded prayer to the Lord amongst the mass of floral tributes. The news cycle ended with Malcolm Turnbull outside the special service conducted by the archbishop at St Mary's Cathedral. Emotionally he concludes "its all about love, and that is why that service was so beautiful, it was all love"

There has been much talk about our values and Turnbull probably said it best. But values have to come from somewhere. Last year's Advent events are all pointing in that direction. Behaviours, social and individual, come from values. But values come from beliefs. And those value-producing beliefs which have blessed our Aussie society come from one source only - the Bible, the revelation of Christ.

Carols in the Domain topped it off with a service televised to the whole of Australia celebrating its annual highpoint with the Hallelujah chorus: Jesus, Lord of Lords.

We enjoy the fruit of Christianity: peace, order, freedom and tolerance. After the siege, police commissioners, politicians and media hosts reiterated these factors continually. But such fruit only grows from trees with roots in the Word of God. Some like Nikki Gemmill in her *Weekend Australian* piece eschew church but like the carols and acknowledge that atheism has nothing with which to compete.

Well, the root has to be nourished to produce the fruit. Deep in the soul of Australians the Word of Christ must find a home for these values to flourish. Without direct relationship with God through Christ we are spiritual vacuums open to any ideology that is the fancy of lobbyists and hardcore ideologues. Honour Christ as Lord in life and declare his name every Sunday in resurrection joy. Preachers, preach it; your work is the premier task of the nation. Christians live it with trust and courage: you are the salt of the nation.

## The Future of the UCA

During the 31st Queensland Synod it came to mind how easily a radical group, using available avenues, could alter the future of the Uniting Church. Indeed, we have an Evangelical group, to counter liberal action, the ACC. Let us become radical!

The question is, "How can we, the ACC, mobilize and enthuse members to become proactive?" My concern: Should the Uniting Church favour same-gender unions it will be the end of the UCA.

People will leave, and they will be those who uphold the Truth and contribute more generously. Recall the exodus following Resolution 84. The UCA will go bankrupt spiritually and financially. To save the UCA, we must act now!

In this life there are people who "make things happen", who "let things happen", and those who "wonder, how did that happen"?

We cannot remain passive any longer; we have to make things happen! Make ourselves available to take up positions of leadership in the congregation where we worship. To put it bluntly, we have to load all sections: Elders, Presbyteries, Synods, etc. with numbers of Evangelicals.

Turn on The Power, in the strength of The Holy Spirit, each to do our part, to save our Christian Heritage.

Not to do so, will make us accountable. CAN WE BRING THIS ABOUT? Rejoice, in the birth of Jesus, the Saviour of mankind.  
*Jack Waddell, ACC member at Paradise Point Uniting Church*

### Saying farewell

I refer to the article "Death defying" on the *Public Square* page and would like to say that it upset me.

My husband of 47 years died and when it came to arranging his funeral, it was decided to have a private cremation followed by a Thanksgiving Service at the church.

The comment that mourners are desperate to avoid the finality of their loss is insulting. We are very aware of the fact that my husband has died and so are the people at the Church. We wanted to have a service in which we gave thanks for the many years John had served his Lord, in fact ever since he was a child.

To say the Church should do better is insensitive. My husband was the last of 4 boys to die in 14 months and I think that people who express these opinions should have regard for those who are still grieving.

It is up to each individual family as to what they believe is the best way to deal with the funeral arrangements and I do not think the Church or some in the Church have the right to say how these should be done.

Our minister was very supportive throughout and continues to be so.  
*Johanna Jesson,  
ACC member  
(Sutherland Uniting Church)*

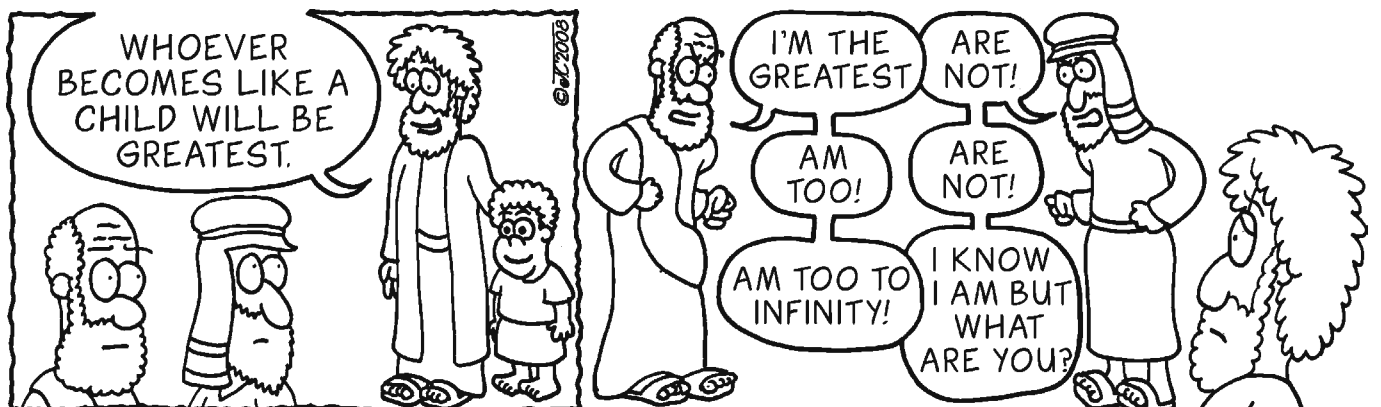
### Staying in

Having just emailed off yet another letter to Insights supporting the sovereignty of Scripture on the issue of homosexuality (as on all other matters), I can sympathise with Harold Ayton [December 2014] wanting out. However I would urge him to reconsider and continue to support the truths of Scripture within the Uniting Church.

### At the local level there is a multitude of faithful believers,

Whilst I am unhappy with the dominance of liberal theology within the councils of the Church, I recognise that at the local level there is a multitude of faithful believers, witnessing to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

I also recognise that the Uniting Church is much sounder than many other Churches, particularly some of the newer ones, on the social implications of the Gospel, so the UCA reaches out to and fights on behalf of the poor, the disabled and the dispossessed in a way that is honouring our Lord. It would be tragic if, as a consequence of an exodus of those supporting traditional Christian doctrine, such a Church were to cease to be an agent of the Gospel and become just another social welfare lobby  
*Yours sincerely  
Gary Ireland (Camden)*





# Defending the Good

## Christianity and the roots of Religious Liberty

*An address by Peter Kurti  
to the ACC National  
Conference 2014*

### Introduction

I am grateful to Peter Bentley and the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church of Australia for their kind invitation to address you this morning. Of course, the person you should have been listening to now is Ms Chelsea Pietsch, the Executive Officer for Freedom 4 Faith. But she was not able to fly up to Sydney for this morning's session and so she invited me to speak in her place; and it is a great privilege for me to do so.

I've called my address "Defending the Good: Christianity and the Roots of Religious Liberty". But before I get to that,



let me just say a word or two by way of introduction about the Centre for Independent Studies where I work.

Founded in 1976 by its Executive Director, Greg Lindsay, the CIS is a think tank committed to promoting a classical, liberal conception of society and to advancing the cause of liberty in all aspects of Australian political, economic, and social life. Our philosophical orientation has been hugely inspired by thinkers such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek. Indeed it was Hayek himself who, in his 1949 work, *The Intellectuals and Socialism*, observed:

“Unless we can make the philosophic foundations of a free society once more a living intellectual issue, and its implementation a task which challenges the ingenuity and imagination of our liveliest minds, the prospects of freedom are indeed dark. But if we can regain that belief in the power of ideas which was the mark of liberalism at its best, the battle is not lost.”

One of the aims of the CIS is to ensure that those philosophical foundations remain a living intellectual issue in Australia. Although we are a non-religious organisation, the CIS recognises the significant contribution that religion makes to a liberal society, not just in terms of the cohesiveness that religious communities promote but also through the spirit of volunteerism and community engagement that religion and religious communities help to promote.

And so it is that the CIS developed the Religion and the Free Society program to examine just those dimensions of liberal society. I came to this project very much from the point of view of a practitioner rather than as an academic specialist. I have been an Anglican Minister of Religion in full-time ministry since 1986, and before joining the CIS in early 2011 I had been rector of a large church in the Sydney CBD.

The theme of this conference, Truth, Faith and Freedom in a Hostile World, is a reflection of the challenges faced by religious believers in an age when secularism is widely, if incorrectly, understood to stand for the exclusion of all religion from the common arena of life – the arena sometimes known as ‘the public square’. This push to exclude religion helps to explain some of the hostility with which believers increasingly need to contend.

In my address this morning, I want to do a number of things. First, I want to affirm what I see as the importance of religion for the flourishing of the whole human person. Second, I want to look more closely at the word ‘secular’ and to test the cogency of its commonly understood meaning. And third, I want to argue that when religion is threatened by the pursuit of what passes for ‘tolerance’, freedom is threatened, too.

Indeed, the key point I wish to make is that far from being hostile to religion, secularism, properly understood, actually has its roots in religion; and more specifically, in Christianity. As the intellectual historian, Larry Siedentop, to whom I will be referring later, has remarked, “Secularism identifies the conditions in which authentic beliefs should be formed and defended.”

Far from feeling intimidated by an aggressive hostility directed at religion, believers can draw confidence from knowing that freedoms such as freedom of religion actually have their roots in religious faith.

Indeed, that’s the reason that I have called this paper *Defending the Good: Christianity and the Roots of Religious Liberty*.



**Religious liberty is so central to human flourishing because unlike politics or culture, religion alone is ultimately concerned with the search for the truth**

## Religion and Human Flourishing

Many had hoped – and even predicted – that religious belief would whither in the heat of twenty-first century scientific criticism, but this hope has proved to be unfounded. Of course, it is true that the development of science in the modern era demonstrated that much of what the churches had earlier claimed as ‘knowledge’ turned out not to be knowledge at all. Some of those claims either turned out not to be true or to have been based on unreliable sources. But the rise of scientific method did give rise to a more pervasive mood of rejection.

As the philosopher Dallas Willard has remarked, “That mood became an intellectual and academic lifestyle and spread across the social landscape as an authority in its own right. It branded all...religious ‘knowledge’ as mere illusion or superstition and all of the sources of such knowledge as unreliable or even delusory.”

And so it came to be that mathematics and the natural sciences were accorded the right to proclaim what was meaningful, reliable and true. The very idea of religious knowledge was almost a contradiction in terms.

Yet religion, with its concern for the primary questions of life and existence, has refused to go away. There are three factors, all quite closely linked, that help to account for the raised profile religion continues to enjoy in the early years of the 21st century.

First, we have seen the rapid spread of traditional, conservative expressions of religions, such as Christianity and Islam, in recent years that have claimed to be bastions of certainty in an uncertain world. Second, we are still seeing, and with a heightened awareness, the terrible consequences of religious zealotry in the early years of the twenty-first century. And finally, we see that these developments have been accompanied by a third factor: a greater readiness on the part of religious believers to assert, often aggressively, their right to the free expression of their beliefs.

Well, if we are to defend religion as a key component of human flourishing and well-being – in other words, as a public good – it will be helpful, at this point, to come



to some understanding of what we mean by 'religion'. It's a vague and elusive term, but the Australian Human Rights Commission has offered the following very workable definition:

"Religion can be taken to refer to an organised form of maintaining, promoting, celebrating and applying the consequences of engagement with what is taken to be ultimately defining, environing, totally beyond, totally other, and yet profoundly encountered within life. These activities are usually done by or in association with a group, an organisation and/or community."

However, the component I would add to this definition is that religion can also be said to have its roots in the awareness of a supreme being. Let us say, then, that religion can be characterised by a belief in supernatural, transcendent agents and powers that makes demands of its adherents by imposing a standard of moral behaviour which sets criteria for conduct.

It is precisely because religion, as understood in this way, helps to give shape to the way we live our lives and pursue values and meaning, that we can describe religion as a basic human good. As natural law theorist Robert George has remarked:

"The existential raising of religious questions... are all parts of the human good of religion – a good whose pursuit is an indispensable feature of the comprehensive flourishing of a human being." In other words, religion is one of the many ingredients necessary for a good, fulfilling and meaningful life. Robert George goes on to argue that if we accept this understanding of religion, then respect for a person's well-being:

"...demands respect for his or her flourishing as a seeker of religious truth and as a man or woman who lives in line with his or her best judgement of what is true in spiritual matters. And that, in turn, requires respect for his or her liberty in the religious quest - the quest to understand religious truth and order one's life in line with it."

Religious liberty is so central to human flourishing because unlike politics or culture, religion alone is ultimately concerned with the search for the truth concerning the divine (including whether or not their God exists) and the meaning of that truth for human action and choice.

I think it is fair to say that the assertive religiosity I referred to earlier, often dogmatic and uncompromising in its nature though it can be, does contribute, in part, to the hostile environment in which religious believers today try to live out their faith. At the same time, in the West, advocates of secularism are hostile to the public manifestation of religion because they believe that religion and secularism are irreconcilable opponents.

The term 'secular' can bear many meanings but essentially describes a political outlook that is neutral as to the existence or even relevance of a religious dimension in public affairs, but recognises the importance of religion to citizens. However, a more aggressive form of secularism, to which I am referring, is actively hostile to any manifestation or expression of religious belief in the public sphere.

As Rowan Williams put it in a lecture delivered at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in Rome in 2006, this form of hostile secularism "assumes that the public expression of specific convictions is automatically offensive to people of other (or no) conviction." It's not hard

to find examples of this popular misconception of secularism here in Australia. The Secular Party of Australia, for instance, on the home page of its web sites says this:

"As 21st century citizens, we want to challenge the power and privilege of religious institutions in Australia. As secular humanists, we want an end to religious interference in education, health, civil liberties and taxation. As champions of human rights, we want women, minorities and the LGBTI community to be free of discrimination and the dictates of archaic superstition."

Interference, superstition, discrimination – these are just a few of the charges commonly levelled at religious believers today, as you will know well enough. And they are charges coloured by an aggressive hostility to religion that actively seeks to establish unbelief as the norm for our society. And they show that the issue of freedom of religion is becoming increasingly pressing in our society.

But this is not just an issue for members of religious communities. I think that these threats to religious freedom raise concerns for all Australians, regardless of whether or not they profess any religious belief themselves, because they go to the heart of the relationship between truth, faith and freedom.

### Christianity and the Genius of Individual Moral Agency

In his recent Annual Lecture on Religious Liberty delivered at Notre Dame University in Sydney, the Federal Attorney-General, Senator George Brandis, remarked that it is a mistake to hold that human rights and the liberal premises that underlie them are a product of the modern world alone.

"The governing ethical principle which underlies our modern understanding of human rights," he said, "that is, the moral equality of every human person and his or her right to liberty which flows from that, has its origins in the gospels".

In making this claim, the Attorney-General was citing an important new book by the political and intellectual historian, Larry Siedentop called *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* in which Siedentop argues that liberal thought is the offspring, not of the Enlightenment but of Christianity.

The kernel of Siedentop's argument is that the ancient,

**The kernel of Siedentop's argument is that the ancient, pre-Christian world had at its heart the assumption of natural inequality**



pre-Christian world had at its heart the assumption of natural inequality. The golden thread linking the Western liberal principles of truth, faith and freedom is the principle of individual moral agency and the assumption of the inherent equality of all human beings.

Siedentop argues that this thread can be traced right back to the Gospels, to the writings of St Paul and his exposition of the 'The Christ' to describe the presence of God in the world, and ultimately to the teachings of Jesus himself that proclaim the supreme moral fact about humans: we are all created in the image of God.

As Siedentop puts it: "Delving below all social divisions of labour, Paul finds, beneath the conventional terms that confer status and describe roles, a shared reality. That reality is the human capacity to think and choose, to will. That reality is our potential for understanding ourselves as autonomous agents, as truly the children of God."

The genius of Christianity is that by investing every individual with the God-given capacity for individual moral agency, human beings are no longer to be defined by social location or status. Rather, life 'in Christ' creates what Siedentop calls "a rightful domain for individual conscience and choice". In the course of the Middle Ages canon lawyers and philosophers began to work out the elements of rights which needed to protect the notion of individual identity and agency.

In this way Siedentop builds his compelling argument that the foundation of modern Europe lay "in the long, difficult process of converting a moral claim [about the individual] into a social status [concerning individual agency and with rights to protect the free exercise of that identity]".

"It was pursuit of belief in the equality of souls that made the conversion possible. A commitment to individual liberty sprang from that. Combining the two values gave rise to the principle which more than any other has defined modern liberal thinking, the principle of 'equal liberty'."

While never side-stepping the church's shortcomings in upholding the ideal of individual liberty and freedom of conscience, Siedentop makes the bold and, I think, truthful claim that because of its central egalitarian moral insight about individual liberty, Christianity played such a decisive part in the development of the individual and the concept of individual liberty that it can be said to have changed the ground of human identity.

This central insight is, in turn, the crux of 'secularism', in the more neutral sense to which I referred at the outset: that is, the recognition of, and commitment to a sphere of conscience or belief in which each individual is free to make his or her own decisions.

In Siedentop's words, "It rests on the firm belief that to be human means being a rational and moral agent, a free chooser with responsibility for one's actions... It joins rights with duties to others". In this sense, secularism identifies the appropriate ways in which authentic beliefs should be formed and defended.

The aggressive, hostile secularism of our own age has scrambled the proper relationship between liberty and faith, and in doing so has also distorted what should be a healthy relation between secularism and religion. These are themes I have addressed in a report I published recently at the CIS called *The Forgotten Freedom: Threats to Religious Liberty in Australia* and which, if you are interested, is available online at [www.cis.org.au](http://www.cis.org.au)

## The Tyranny of Tolerance?

At one time, the mark of the good citizen in the liberal state used to be the free and unselfconscious display of personal conviction about ideas and beliefs and morals. That kind of open manifestation of conviction has, however, given way to what can best be described as an ostentatious display of 'open-mindedness' that attempts to appeal to the culturally fashionable values of tolerance and diversity.

This enthusiasm for managing diversity has its historical roots in the sincere desire to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of race or ethnicity which gave rise to the Racial Discrimination Act brought on to the statute book by the Whitlam Government in 1975. The Act was intended as a means of eradicating racism; however, its values have since set the tone for subsequent debates about equality, social inclusion, and tolerance.

Too often, tolerance is actually intolerant of traditional religious beliefs that are often ruled to be incompatible with the values of the secular state. The Australian scholar Samuel Gregg who is based at the Acton Institute in the USA has remarked that:

"Tolerance is no longer about creating the space for us to express our views about the nature of good and evil and its implications for law and public morality, or to live our lives in accordance with our religious beliefs. Instead, tolerance serves to banish the truth as the reference point against which all of us must test our ideas and beliefs."

Although I think it is a pressing matter, the issue of religious freedom doesn't seem to generate much excitement these days. Controversy surrounding institutional responses to the sexual abuse of children, as well as a marked lack of sympathy for some points of view propounded by religious leaders on issues such as human sexuality and voluntary euthanasia, has helped push religion to the margins of public life.

Indeed, it is no longer widely considered appropriate at all for religion to be practised in the full glare of the social and cultural realm. For there, expressions of religious conviction and belief might jar with one another and conflict. Far better, many people now say, for religion to be confined to the private realm of the mind where it can be considered almost a hobby or taste preference with as little capacity to cause offence as an enthusiasm for astrology.

And indeed, just as formal participation in religious institutions in Australia is declining, so believers are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that religious faith is a positive rather than a negative feature of a liberal society.

The ethicist Oliver O'Donovan has observed: "Civil societies are necessarily tolerant to a degree, and intolerant to a degree; they punish what they cannot afford to tolerate [and] tolerate what they cannot afford to punish." Efforts to redefine the boundary between the necessary power of the state to coerce and the right of religious freedom are frequently in the news.

For example, when the High Court recently struck down the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare program as unconstitutional, it did so because the

program was not authorised by a specific head of power under the Constitution. However, the challenge was motivated not by a concern to protect states' rights but by secular objections to the open involvement of religious groups in public schools. No surprises then that when the High Court handed down its decision it was widely celebrated as a victory for secularism.

Yet all citizens of a free society, whether or not they are Christians and whether or not they are religious believers, should have a strong commitment to upholding and defending religious liberty. "Religious freedom doesn't just concern our role as citizens in the public square," says Samuel Gregg. "Religious liberty also concerns our freedom to choose in numerous non-political aspects of our lives, ranging from whether we attend church on a given day of the week, to what we choose to purchase."

What this also makes clear is that in any discussion of religious liberty, belief and practice must be understood as being inseparable: freedom to believe must surely be accompanied by the freedom to speak, to associate, and to order one's life in accordance with one's beliefs.

The right to religious liberty, therefore, is a fundamental right that confers upon the citizen of the liberal state the freedom to pursue their conception of the good life. If one accepts that religion is about the human pursuit of ultimate meaning and value, it is not hard to see that the erosion of religious liberty hinders the pursuit of a higher purpose that can contribute significantly to deep human fulfilment and satisfaction.

## Conclusion

**O**f course, this pursuit will not necessarily be consensual. Those whose ways of life are guided by the search for ultimate meaning and a solemn obligation to live dutifully are highly likely to clash with the values of the secular state – whichever of the meanings we assign to the word 'secular'. And in any diverse, modern Western society, wrangling about questions of ultimate meaning among adherents of different religions is certainly bound to cause offense to someone.

So when we talk about religious freedom, what we are essentially talking about is the extent to which the state should permit both the free expression of religious belief and the attendant wrangling about ultimate meaning and purpose. In the pithy words of Australian philosopher Russell Blackford, "Religious freedom is essentially a freedom from state persecution, not a guarantee of a religion's ongoing credibility or its success in the contest of rival ideas."

I think Blackford has got it about right in this formulation, but the language he uses, which draws upon the idea of the state and of the overcoming of inequalities of social status, does make it sound as though religious liberty is essentially a modern notion, the creation, perhaps of the era of intellectual development we call the Enlightenment. Yet as I have argued, drawing upon the work of Larry Siedentop, secularism and equality have their roots not, as many suppose, in the Enlightenment, but rather in Christianity itself.

Critics of Christianity, or rather of the churches, remain unconvinced by this. Writing in *The Guardian* the

## If there is a threat to homosexual people in Australia it is now far more likely to come from Islam



other day, David Marr distilled his scepticism about what he described as the "argument being pushed energetically by the conservative think tanks of the nation":

"That the churches are owed a great debt for the liberty of the modern world. And the quid pro quo being demanded is fresh respect for what churches call religious liberty... But when the churches talk about religious liberty in peril these days they have only a couple of things on their minds: the freedom of the faiths to define marriage for everyone, and their freedom not to have homosexuals on the payroll."

I admire David Marr but I don't think he is correct about this. Whilst the churches certainly have views about marriage, these views can be very different and do not coincide precisely. For instance, opinions in the Anglican Church, to which I belong, are divided with people both opposed to and supportive of changes to the Marriage Act. Nor are these views which the churches seek to impose on, as Marr puts it, "everyone".

Rather, the principle of religious liberty is being promoted to protect the churches from having a new, secular meaning of marriage imposed upon them by the state. As for the punishment of homosexuals, if there is a threat to homosexual people in Australia it is now far more likely to come from Islam than from Christianity, although I think this is a point David Marr has yet to develop.

Religious liberty is important because when religion operates in a world of free choice, it will either flourish or fail. As such, freedom of religion needs to be protected not just for the benefit of religious believers, but for the benefit of every member of society.

This is a point made by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge in their best-selling book *God is Back*. They argue that secularisation theorists were wrong to claim that modernity and religion are incompatible but right to warn of religion as a dangerous political force.

However, if religion is to flourish in a world of free choice, thereby allowing people to pursue lives reflecting their authentic judgements about the truth of spiritual matters, then an important challenge confronts the secular liberal state. The challenge is "to construct a constitutional regime that makes room for religion without sacrificing the fundamental principles of liberal pluralism".

Questions of religious value and fulfilment are important. We must strive to ensure that religious voices are neither silenced nor confined to the realm of the mind. And we must be vigilant in holding the state accountable for its responsibility to enshrine and uphold the right to religious liberty as a fundamental human right.

*The Reverend Peter Kurti is a Research Fellow coordinating the Religion and Civil Society program at the Centre for Independent Studies.*



# The Future of the UCA: an untried option

*Walter Abetz responds to four scenarios for the UCA put forward by Keith Suter and finds a fifth possibility*

Scenario planning is a useful exercise for many organizations, and I include the church in the many. On that account I am grateful to Dr Suter. We are to worship God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – so let us use our minds by all means. Planning always implies a history, a purpose and a future. The four scenarios of the future painted by him raise some interesting issues. For the sake of those readers unacquainted with his article in the December 2014 *ACCatalyst*, he takes as a given the historical decline in UCA membership and then suggests four scenarios:

1 “Word and Deed” – the church consisting of large parish missions, such as Wesley Mission in Sydney, Forest St UCA in Bendigo, or Pilgrim Church in Launceston.. Both spirituality and social welfare are promoted. Get big, or get out.

2 “Secular Welfare” – Uniting Church agencies become the core business of the UCA, and congregations will disappear. The public’s ‘contact with the UCA’ is already largely through agencies rather than congregations.

3 “Return to the Early Church” – Instead of working for the government in aged care and child care, the church returns to a missionary model, recognizing that it is competing in a market place of many faiths.

4 “Recessional” – winding up the UCA in a coherent and systematic way, and giving the proceeds to the churches in the Global South.

Scenario Planning has a good purpose – one does not want to be surprised. One wishes to remain in control. Eugene Peterson in his book, *The Contemplative Pastor*, writes about the futility and destructiveness of needing to be in control in the kingdom of God.

A business ought to seek to control its destiny, but should God’s people determine for God what God’s people should be doing?

Christians acknowledge Christ as monarch (literally, one ruler) and are called to participate in his kingdom, both now and in the new heaven and earth.

Peterson relates a personal anecdote of an enlightening moment in a Greek grammar class. Greek has three voices, the active and passive voice, as does English. It also has a middle voice, something between active and passive. From there he realized that Christians are not to be in control of their lives, nor are they to abdicate from their lives, but they are to participate in the Kingdom of God, under God’s authority. Worship with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength speaks of participation, but not of control or abdication. Participation in God’s business is different from setting up our own business.

The UCA, in terms of its welfare arm funded by government, needs to be a business and responsible to government. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. Now that governments and private enterprises provide education, hospitals, orphanages, aged care, etc., it might be appropriate to exit those industries (and adopt the recessional scenario for them). They are no longer the core business of the church, and certainly not so in a secular framework that muzzles any overt expression of faith. Therefore I would say that the secular welfare scenario Suter names as a possibility would be a perversion of the mission of the church.

The Word and Deed scenario is appropriate for city churches. The connection between Christian faith and love for fellow human beings go hand in hand. Big problems require large solutions.

Scenario three, a return to the early church, is couched in business terms, “competing in a market place of many faiths”. I wonder if the 3rd century Christians thought of their faith as another alternative in the multi-faith market place.

The Christian Faith is not our product for our business. The age of martyrs was not generated by a mere “alternative” in the multi-faith market. The age of the martyrs came about by a very serious, exclusive and confronting understanding of the Christian faith. Christ is Lord, not Caesar. And all other gods are idols. In contrast to the “emerging church”, the early church believed exclusively in the Lordship of Christ. “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” If we no longer believe this faith entrusted to us, we should embrace the recessional scenario as our future.

Both the Word and Deed model of formal parish missions, and a modified Early Church model of informal faith communities are alive and well in the Kingdom of God. (Suter’s Early Church model appears to be anachronistically framed in a business paradigm.) The UCA is participating in these two futures to the glory of God and

the succour of human beings.

Reflecting on these scenarios, it becomes clear that a business model for the church will not do. The call to the church, to participate in the Kingdom of God, countermands the “we need to be in control of our business” paradigm.

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## Unfortunately, the UCA leadership wants control of the church instead of encouraging and serving congregations in their mission.

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It may be worth noting that the Basis of Union has come under indirect and subtle attacks from those who would like the UCA to be run like a business with a CEO and Board. In particular, the Assembly General Secretary in an official letter on 10th Sept 2014 wrote to Katherine Abetz, “The Basis of Union is not the law of the church and so it is not a source document that is considered when the [Assembly Legal Reference] Committee is interpreting the Constitution and Regulations of the church.” If the Basis of Union is not a source document, how then does the Committee interpret Clause 2 of the Constitution<sup>1</sup>, if the Committee does not refer to the Basis of Union? Herein resides a fundamental dysfunction!

Suter recognizes the symptom of dysfunction, but misdiagnoses the cause. The UCA has great difficulties because it has a Basis of Union that requires the Church to be a series of inter-related councils. Unfortunately, the UCA leadership wants

control of the church instead of encouraging and serving congregations in their mission. Thankfully, their control is still stymied at times by the conciliar nature of the Church.

If the UCA is to participate in the Kingdom of God, it cannot dictate the terms. Instead the councils are to be the servants of the Kingdom of God. As servants they are to help congregations to fulfill their local missions – whether it is parish mission work, or whether it focuses on faith communities that may grow into congregations. The “CEOs” of the church do not set the pace, but congregations do, within the framework of the constitution and beliefs of the Church. The “CEOs” are meant to be facilitators and servants, not commanders. That is why the business model for the church is so devastating to the kingdom of God.

Again I thank Dr Suter for his article. He has provoked me to put into words what I have believed for a long time to be a major problem in the UCA. Yes, good governance is important, but good governance does not determine the content of the church’s work. Good governance ensures that things are done decently and in order, whatever the church’s tasks might be. The councils and their officers are to serve that purpose for the greater glory of God.

Is the UCA the kingdom of God, or is it a participant in the kingdom of God? That is the question. Our Basis of Union gives a clear answer. It is worth reading the Basis of Union again in order to “line up the ducks” – see the strategic plan – in the light of Dr Suter’s article.

<sup>1</sup> Clause 2: “The Church, affirming that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end, lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, guided by its Basis of Union....”



# On being a non-conformist

*Arthur Hartwig on a war of words*

**T**he World has consistently issued a strident and unmelodious call: “Conform. Conform. Conform” Perhaps from the time of Abram, certainly from the time of Socrates, and acknowledged from the early Christians whose ‘difference’ lay, not in their professed religious beliefs but in their refusal to acknowledge Caesar as the ultimate Ruler, and currently in full flight, the call to ‘conform’ pervades everything.

In a cruel and simple society, persecution takes a cruel and simple form. Christians are thrown to the lions, or into the Gulag. In a comfortable and complex society like ours, persecution is more insidious because it is masked. It is an attack on the mind, not on the body. It takes place in the Media, not in the Coliseum. We have a war of words, not of gladiators. We (believers) should not resent persecution because we should be neither surprised nor amazed by it. After all, we are promised it; and we are called ‘to be different’.

How is this ‘war of words’ conducted? Simply by nuances, by so-called ‘weasel words’, by euphemisms and by a refusal to accept responsibility; by the assumption (perhaps implicit) that my ‘right’ to make my ‘choice’ makes whatever the consequence inviolable.

How many of us graciously accept responsibility (similar to ‘duty’- another 4-letter word) for the results of our ‘choices’? If the best, the most effective way to teach is by example, what responsibilities have we for the plight of an unknown who followed a ‘bad’ example?

Choices carry consequences - inevitably; but we make them often with unrealistic expectations and the assumption that nothing untoward can result. After all: It was my choice; so if/when it goes wrong, someone else is to blame, or is responsible.

Pablo Fernández/ Flickr



Does ‘right’ contrast with ‘left’, with ‘wrong’, or with ‘incorrect’? Or with all?

The basic right surely is a right to Life; everything else depends on our being alive. To this the American Founding Fathers added “to Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”, and the idea that such were unalienable, and thus both universal and non-transferable. ‘Rights’ can be bestowed by others but he who gives also has power to taketh away. But irrespective ‘Rights’ without responsibility quickly become licence; and apply equally and to all or are not worth a drink of cold and dirty water on a freezing day. My! How prolific have become ‘rights detectors’.

Often ‘rights’ are conditional; either on ability, training or provision. A ‘right’ to drive a motor vehicle depends on our ability to control that vehicle ‘consistent with the safety of all other road users’. Some rights are incompatible; the right to consume alcohol clashes with the right to drive.

Redefining words goes on apace. ‘Gentleman’ is out of fashion; ‘gay’ has changed meaning completely.

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**‘Rights’ without responsibility quickly become licence; and apply equally and to all or are not worth a drink of cold and dirty water on a freezing day.**

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‘Marriage’ is currently being redefined. Does it matter? Yes, it does. How can we communicate without an agreement on which words mean what? Euphemisms and the Western tendency to see ‘either/or’ rather than both/and add to the confusion. How can Christ simultaneously be both ‘The Lion of Judah’ and ‘The Lamb of God’? If I were to ask my son how he came to have such gorgeous blue eyes, he might respond “God gave them to me”; or he might say “The fortuitous combination of your genetic material with mother’s resulted thus”. Which answer is correct? Which is more fundamental? ‘Initiative’ was defined in earlier Communist Russia as “An independent search for the most effective way to fulfil a command”. Agree?

Which cynic said “The secret to happiness is to be dependent on as few others as possible?” Others cannot, and do not make me happy/mad/sad. I allow myself to become thus. We wish to be happy but are unwilling to accept, or fail to recognise/participate in the conditions of happiness. We wish, simultaneously, to be free and to conform. Our ‘intolerance’ of the foibles of others caused some wise person to pray: “Lord, teach me to forgive all who sin other than as I do”. We continue the delusion ‘Forgiveness is weakness’; and allow the past to rule

*Continued page 15*



## The year of visiting

*The wandering National Director of the ACC reports from the road to the National Assembly*

It was wonderful to be able to visit so many ACC member congregations and groups last year (23 congregations and ACC Clusters). I travelled extensively around NSW, some parts of Queensland, a significant part of Tasmania and also Adelaide.

In that city it was a pleasure and privilege to be present at the Robert Iles Trust Memorial Lecture, and hear The Hon. Kevin Andrews speak about Marriage, giving an overview of his excellent book: *Maybe I do: Modern marriage and the pursuit of happiness* (reviewed by our own Pat Noller in *ACCatalyst* in February 2013).

### I find it refreshing to hear frank and direct questions

Part of the focus for my visits was the UCA *Discussion Paper on Marriage*, though it was also an opportunity to preach, and speak about the role of the confessing movement. A highlight for me was the (often) question time at morning tea, lunch or other special events. I find it refreshing to hear frank and direct questions and I hope I was able to give reasonable and open answers.

During the year I enjoyed hearing from members via email, telephone and letter as well, and very much ap-

preciate all the feedback, including the constructive criticism.

I am especially grateful for the practical support I received during my visitations, and my personal thank you to all the generous people who hosted me during the last 12-18 months. Christian hospitality abounded in providing for a place to stay, and I was fed, watered and chauffeured very well.

Visitations in 2015 will be less on the Eastern Coast, with a focus West, especially as the 14th Assembly of the Uniting Church to be held in Perth approaches (12-18 July). If you would like to arrange a visit please contact me at the ACC office.

### Poll Speak

From the near past – Peter Bentley continues his series originally published in the Reforming Alliance newsletter *Reforming* March 2006, No. 12 (and slightly edited). There is nothing new under the sun.

*Political (Church) Speak 5 & 6. "The migrant-ethnic churches need more time." And "There are other voices in migrant-ethnic communities?"*

Please, let us not patronise our migrant-ethnic churches. This issue is about strongly held positions.

Why can't the Uniting Church recognise that migrant-ethnic churches have well-grounded and maintained positions on sexuality and sexual practice?

Our migrant-ethnic churches know the value of family life for the

vitality of, and development of their communities.

This is a very interesting attempt to bring doubt mainly into the minds of Anglo members who dominate the councils of the church. It is a subtle way of raising issues without reference to the real situation and real beliefs of the members of our migrant-ethnic congregations.

Yes, of course, in any debate there are other voices, but in most debates it is important to base your argument in reality. The Uniting Church needs to recognise that 95% plus of our migrant-ethnic members are supportive of traditional [biblical and orthodox] understandings on sexuality.

From my discussions with leaders and members in these communities, there is also overwhelming support for traditional [biblical and orthodox] positions from all generations, and it is not a matter of 'give them more time or let us hear other voices' so they can change their minds. We should affirm our brothers and sisters, as they affirm and encourage traditional marriage and family life in their communities.

### 2015 Conference

It will be a pleasure to be back at the UCA Nunyara Conference Centre for our annual conference. Note the different meeting pattern for 2015: Lunchtime Monday 14th September – Lunchtime Wednesday 16th September.

*Peter Bentley*

*From page 14*

us. The more 'independent' we claim to be, the more dependent on the works of others we become. Do the truly independent make their own clothes, distil their own petrol, bake their own bread, grind their own flour?

Euphemisms add to the confusion. What do we make of 'adultery' being 'defined' as 'a coping mechanism to a mid-life crisis'; and 'pedophilia' defined as 'intergenerational intimacy'. There are sociological degrees of sin but no theological degrees. What is "SIN"? Simply put it is failure to do the 'good' I recognise, AND 'failure to abstain from the 'wrong' I recognise'.

To conclude; and make a point:

*Said an angry young man of Miletus  
These doctors use jargon to cheat us.  
They are quite reconciled to killing a child.  
For they are only aborting a foetus  
Which really is devilishly smart*

*The devil who plays a deep part  
Has won his way into our hearts  
By his insistence  
On his own non-existence  
Which really is devilishly smart*

*Dr Arthur Hartwig is an ACC member in Queensland.*

# ‘Insiders’ and ‘Outsiders’ learn to work together

*John Sandeman*

In Britain, co-operation across the divide between independent local churches and churches that are part of a theologically-mixed denomination is at an all time high. Regional “Gospel Partnerships” that link independent churches with evangelical Church of England parishes have been formed across the country.

At least fifteen Gospel Partnerships have been formed across the United Kingdom in the last decade.

They “bring evangelicals who share

been involved in promoting the Gospel Partnerships include Australians such as Phillip Jensen (former Dean of Sydney) and Kanishka Raffel (a key evangelical leader in Perth) who have shared platforms with John Stevens including this January in London.

The local partnerships provide training events to help churches, youth events, ministry apprenticeships and church planting “where gospel ministry is weak”.

While it might seem unremarkable

ismatic churches which also form a key group in Britain.

There is a FIEC group of churches in Australia: the two organisations are similar, but the Australian group consists of younger church plants.

## United Methodist evangelicals call for penalties

*Heather Hahn United Methodist News*

The end of the complaint against retired Bishop Melvin Talbert for officiating at a same-sex union has brought comfort to some United Methodists and consternation to others. What it’s likely to bring to General Conference in 2016 is legislation aimed at making sure clergy who officiate at same-gender unions face penalties.

On Jan. 5, United Methodists learned that Talbert would not face a trial or risk his clergy credentials after he blessed the union of two men in 2013 in defiance of church law.

The “just resolution” follows similar conclusions last year to complaints against clergy who officiated at same-gender unions or weddings in Michigan, eastern Pennsylvania and New York.

The Talbert complaint was resolved just months after the denomination’s top court — the Judicial Council — upheld the reinstatement of the Rev. Frank Schaefer as a United Methodist pastor.

“For the evangelical community in The United Methodist Church, it’s very discouraging that something so in-your-face and obviously confrontational is treated in such, what appears to us to be, a cavalier manner,” said the Rev. John P. Miles II, senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Jonesboro, Arkansas.



**A** Passion for Life graphic

a common philosophy of Bible-centred ministry together to co-operate in training and church planting,” according to John Stevens, National Director of Britain’s Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) which links 500 churches. He blogs at John-Stevens.com, the source of this quote. “They have engendered greater unity between Anglican and Non-Conformist evangelicals, and have organised two major national mission initiatives in 2010 and 2014 under the name *A Passion for Life*.”

The FIEC side brings a network that include long-established independent churches, fellowships that have left a denomination and newly-planted churches. From the Anglican side come large evangelical parishes which increasingly regard themselves as part of a confessing movement.

Some of the Anglicans that have

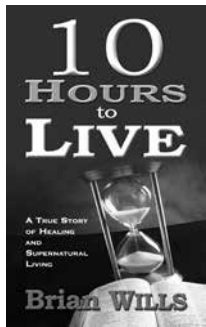
that Christians from denominations with mixed theologies (in the UK mostly evangelical Anglicans) should work with Independent churches the British have had to overcome their history.

In 1966 Evangelical Leader Martyn Lloyd-Jones called for evangelicals to leave their denominations for a united evangelical body, a move opposed by the Anglican evangelical John Stott. Lloyd-Jones’ call is still disputed, but the effect was to call the two groups to draw away from each other. The growth of the Gospel partnerships is evidence that this wound in Evangelicalism has been closed.

These Gospel partnerships pull together conservative evangelical churches. There are other networks linking churches in Britain locally such as the large scale Hope network. Stevens is in dialogue with the leaders of the “restorationist” char-

## A miracle and a dilemma of healing

*10 HOURS TO LIVE* by Brian Wills  
Published in 2010 by Whittaker Press  
Reviewed by Pat Noller



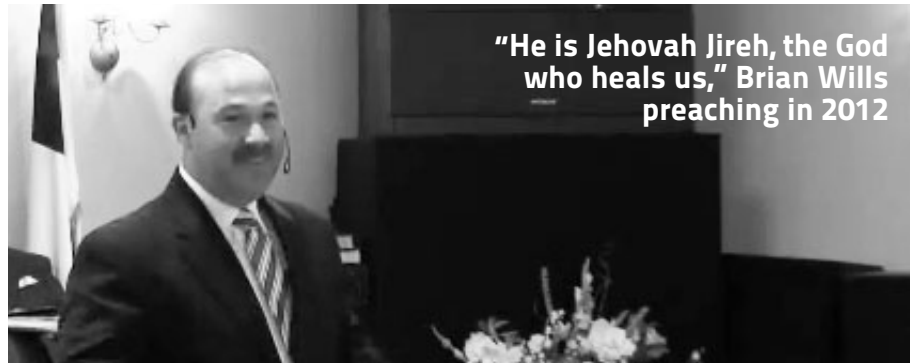
In “10 Hours to Live” Brian Wills tell the story of how, as a 22-year-old physically-fit professional tennis player he was diagnosed with Burkitt’s lymphoma, a rare but very fast-growing

tumour that was affecting his basic organs such as his kidneys. The top specialist on this disease in the USA claimed that he would not live more than three days. Another doctor gave him only 10 hours to live, hence the title of the book.

Brian, a committed Christian from a Christian family focused on Proverbs 4: 20-22, a passage that emphasizes the importance of attending to God’s Word and making it the centre of one’s life. Brian understood from those verses that his healing depended on “keeping the Word of God before my eyes every waking moment of the day” (p.26). For this reason, members of his Christian family covered the walls of his hospital room with healing texts from Scripture. They also agreed to immerse themselves in God’s Word, and not to allow negative words or thoughts of doubt or fear into their minds.

After a pre-dose of chemotherapy, doctors reading a CT scan declared that there was “no evidence of disease”. Nevertheless in response to heavy persuasion from his medical team, he agreed to undergo a full course of chemotherapy. He prayed over every dose of the chemotherapy that was administered to him and immersed himself in the Scriptures, avoiding the medical library and all television, and allowing few visitors. His goal for each treatment day was “more Scripture than chemo”.

Despite all this discipline, he suffered from a serious bout of an



infection called Candida, made more serious because his immune system had been practically wiped out by the chemotherapy. He was very ill through this period and in a lot of pain.

### Why was God ... the God of grace, requiring so much of this poor sick man?

Nevertheless, he continued with the prayer and immersion in Scripture that he and his family believed was needed to “overcome the constant barrage of doubt and unbelief that permeates such an environment” (p.54) as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) where he was being treated.

The doctors, on the other hand were concerned about what they saw as an unrealistic approach to the illness by the family.

I found my head full of questions at this stage. Why was God, the Father of Jesus Christ and the God of grace, requiring so much of this poor sick man? Why didn’t Brian just believe the diagnosis that there was no evidence of disease and go home? Was he being punished for not accepting that he was already healed? Or was this some kind of works theology that was being imposed on him? How much immersion in Scripture and how much praying would be required before he would be healed? What happened to “faith as small as a mustard seed”?

I also saw a real problem that other seriously-ill Christians, of whatever age, would assume that this book provided a formula for their healing. I feared that rather than submitting themselves to God and whatever form of wholeness he had in store for them, they would assume that by going through such a regime of Bible reading and prayer they could expect God to heal them because of all the effort they had put in. Alternatively, if they weren’t healed of their illness, might they interpret their on-going ill health as a result of insufficient time spent on prayer and reading the Scriptures?

This book also provides a 12-step procedure called “Steps to Healing”, as well as a chapter titled “Godly Instructions for Healing” that are “necessary to produce victory” (p.187). This section only increased my concerns that many would believe that here was a formula that would always lead to healing. Nevertheless the book also includes a useful set of Scripture verses on healing that could be used to encourage discussion about this topic, and help others to explore the topic more deeply.

Brian did experience a miracle (in fact, two miracles) but I won’t spoil the story by giving you any more information. There is still the question, however, about the implications for the rest of us. I suggest that you read the book and discuss it with friends.

*Emeritus Professor Patricia Noller is former Director of the University of Queensland Family Centre. She is Convenor of the ACC Board of Communication*



# Love and togetherness

Two days after the tragedy occurred, I visited the site of the Lindt Cafe siege with a small bouquet of flowers to offer as a memorial. Walking up from the station onto the street, the images I'd seen on the news were a reality in front of me. This had happened, lives had been lost and our city had been affected by an act of terror. At the site of the cafe was a row of flowers placed in tribute but there seemed to be no space to add my own offering. My boyfriend and I were ushered by police officers across the road, where we were told there was a designated space to lay our flowers. As we walked through the crowd, I gained a clearer understanding of the extent to which our city, indeed our country, has been moved by these events. Before me was a sea of flowers, thousands of individual bouquets laid out - each one only a small token of respect but together forming a monument to the two people who had lost their lives and those who were left to remember the suffering.

I walked around this sea of flowers, taking my time to read the messages written by others. Although there was an unspoken sense of sadness among the people gathered, while



Peter Hindmarsh/ Flickr

reading these messages I also sensed a collective spirit of love, courage and togetherness. For the most part, the response to this tragic event has not been anger, bitterness or fear. The messages, from people from all walks of life, spoke words of condolence and sympathy and encouraged our community to respond to acts of terror by standing together in love. I only hope that these sentiments continue when the immediate shock of the events has passed.

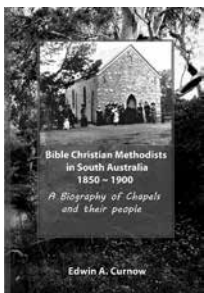
I also found many messages expressing deep gratitude and respect for those two that lost their lives

saving others. Bible verses were used on more than one occasion. There's something planted deep within the soul of humankind that moves us so profoundly when we see acts of self-sacrifice, someone laying down their life for their friends. As I placed our little bouquet into the still-growing sea, I thanked God for the good he was bringing out of this evil. Since then, I've prayed many times that through these events people would search for Jesus, the perfect self-sacrificial Lamb, and that he would find them.

*Bella Hibbard*

## Bible Christian history

*Bible Christian Methodists in South Australia 1850 - 1900*  
*A Biography of Chapels and their chapels. Uniting Church Historical Society SABY Edwin A. Curnow.*



As one of the smaller Methodist causes in colonial South Australia, the story of the Bible Christians has been overlooked and almost forgotten as an important part of our revivalist Christian heritage.

They were a passionate mission-

preaching-focused church, intent on seeking the intervention and presence of the Holy Spirit. They left their homeland, family and friends to venture into an arid frontier on the other side of the world to reach colonial settlers and bring the Word of Life, especially to the poorer farm labourer and miner.

Drawing largely on unpublished, first-hand reports to the Mission Society in England, this book documents the hardships, and the driven spirituality that motivated early missionary-ministers and lay people to build chapels across the remote country in order to establish a new world based on Christian values.

Reaching into the lives of our early forefathers this book reveals the stories and drama of a unique non-conformist Christian heritage.

This is a detailed document with extensive quotations describing early towns, places, chapels and people of the period across the State.

In A4 format with pictures, it is of particular value to local libraries, genealogical-history groups and churches.

For further details please contact:  
*Uniting Church Historical Society*  
*44a East Ave, Black Forest 5035 S.A.*  
*or email: ucsahist@chariot.net.au*  
*Website: historicalsociety.uniting-church.org.au/*

# THIS IS THE ACC

## Who we are

Within the Uniting Church context of a very broad range of theology and practice, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations is a nationwide body of congregations and individuals whose vision is confessing the Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming the truth, renewing the church.

*Our goals include*

- Encouraging the confession of Christ according to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as that faith is described in the UCA's Basis of Union.
- Providing resources, seminars and conferences to build up believers, develop their gifts, and equip them for life, mission and works of service.
- Encouraging Christian believers in earnest prayer through our Prayer Network.
- Encouraging younger members of the Uniting Church in their faith and participation.
- Communicating about current events and issues through our website, our national magazine *ACCatalyst* and local newsletters.

## What does ACC do to help you?

The ACC conducts meetings, events and seminars to assist believers to

- grow in their faith and be active in prayer, worship and fellowship
- share their faith and respond to current issues in the church and the world
- develop their congregations as vibrant expressions of the Good News.
- experience God's Word in action through healing broken lives and reconciling relationships.

## What we want to do

The objects of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations are:

- a) To confess Christ according to the catholic, reformed and evangelical heritage in the Basis of Union, by:
  - i) upholding the Scriptures' prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ as the final authority for the Uniting Church's faith and life;
  - ii) calling the Uniting Church to

determine matters of doctrine and ethics according to the teaching of the Scriptures and the faith as understood by the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church;

- iii) calling the councils and congregations of the Uniting Church to uphold the Basis of Union and Constitution:

- iv) providing biblically-grounded leadership in partnership with other confessing movements;

- v) developing ecumenical partnerships for the more effective proclamation of the Gospel in our pluralist nation; and

- vi) establishing national, state and territory bodies to implement the Charter as approved by the inaugural meeting of the Association, and seeking the renewal of the Uniting Church.

b) To undertake such religious, educational or other charitable activities which are incidental to the above objectives.

## How to join us

Please consider joining the ACC.

Supporting Membership forms are available at: <http://www.confessing-congregations.com/assembly/members/individual-members/>

Membership rates for supporting members: Concession (single or couple): \$40.00 pa. (financial year basis) Full (single or couples): \$70.00 p.a

Contact (02) 9550 5358. email: [accoffice@confessingcongregations.com](mailto:accoffice@confessingcongregations.com) mail:

PO Box 968 Newtown NSW 2042

## What happens next

- March 3-4, 2015: ACC National Council Sydney meeting
- July 12 - 18, 2015: Uniting Church 14th Assembly - Perth.
- September 14 - 16, 2015: ACC Annual Conference and Meeting - Adelaide

## ACC Resources List

All ACC resources (except the DVD resources) are available on the ACC Website: [www.confessingcongregations.com](http://www.confessingcongregations.com)

A selection of ACC DVD and video resources including the 2012 Conference presentations are available on vimeo; eg., Max Champion introducing the ACC: <http://vimeo.com/53983980> A limited range of earlier material is still published in Disc form, and all ACC Congregations have received ACC DVD resource material for their use.

### Founding Documents

The Charter (2006)

Statement on Sexuality (2006)

Confessing Statement from the Executives of the Reforming Alliance and Evangelical Members within the Uniting Church (EMU) (2006)

### ACC Brochures and Statements

ACC Vision and Goals 2007-2017 (2008)

Cross Cultural Commission Statement (2008)

The Church's Social Responsibility (2008)

Theological Declaration (2008)

Theological Declaration: Commentary and Study Guide (2009)

Abortion in the Australian Community (2010)

A Christian Response to Euthanasia and Medically Assisted Suicide (2011)

Marriage: An ACC Statement (2011)

### Bible Studies

Bible Study: Mark ISBN 978-0-9804493-0-3

Bible Study: Galatians ISBN 978-0-9804493-1-0

Faith That Works: Studies in the Letter of James ACC Bible Study No. 3. Brian Edgar (2008) ISBN 978-0-9804493-2-7

3. Brian Edgar (2008) ISBN 978-0-9804493-2-7

### DVD Resources

Conversations Series

No. 1 Conversations in Discipleship and Evangelism: A Study Guide with DVD (2010) ISBN 978-0-9804493-3-4

No. 2 The Hope of a New Heaven and New Earth: A Study Guide with DVD (2011) ISBN 978-0-9804493-6-5

No. 3 This is Love: A Study Guide with DVD (2012) ISBN 978-0-9804493-8-9

### Devotional Booklets

Seeds For Harvesting Vol. 1 (2011) - Rev Robert Imms ISBN 978-0-9804493-5-8

Seeds For Harvesting Vol. 2 (2012) - Rev Robert Imms ISBN 978-0-9804493-7-2



Christian Bale as Moses in Exodus: Gods and Kings

# A Hollywood *Exodus*

## Exodus: Gods and Kings (2014, M)

While cinema screenings of this film finished a while ago, I thought it would be helpful to offer a reflection as the movie received considerable coverage and also promotion in a number of church arenas. Firstly I want to note that this is not a traditional 'old-style' biblical epic and thus those people seeking a message of traditional biblical encouragement and endorsement will be disappointed. It is a traditional Hollywood movie, and of course the themes that resonate with Hollywood dramas are front and centre:

*Hero starts well and has significant influence; has problems and falls from great height; has time away in the wilderness; comes back renewed and finds true purpose and meaning in achieving tasks set out at the beginning; settles down at end.*

Leading actors Christian Bale (Moses) and Joel Edgerton (Rameses) have some excellent scenes and Bale grows into the Moses character, though at times he does give the impression he is like a bearded Old Testament version of John McClane from the *Die Hard* series. Some other acting parts are a bit hammy and some lines are a little too 21st century for the context. Of course, hammy acting in epic biblical based films has an honourable cinematic tradition, but there is a very odd portrayal by Aaron Paul as Joshua. Paul is well-known for his role in *Breaking Bad*, and in this role he looks as though he is tapping into the role of a wide-eyed blue crystal druggie.

From church arenas, I imagine there will be a good deal of criticism

and focus on the areas where it departs from the biblical message. One could list many, though the use of the giant crocodiles to turn the river into blood is an intriguing secular approach and reminded me more of the black comedy of *Lake Placid* (1999).

The choice of a child to 'play out' the voice of God – when God is speaking directly to Moses, will also ensure endless controversy and question about what the director was attempting to do? Scott told the *Hollywood Reporter* (THR) magazine that "Sacred texts give no specific depiction of God, so for centuries artists and filmmakers have had to choose their own visual depiction," Scott tells THR. "Malak exudes innocence and purity, and those two qualities are extremely powerful." (November 21, 2014)

Overall the film needs some editing. You do not want people screaming out "Let my people go (out of this cinema)". While the overall editing is good, one could easily remove 25-30 minutes, which at least would make it more manageable and more seamless in the story. It also oddly drags a little once the Red Sea scene is concluded, with these parts almost like an appendix.

A star in the movie is the computer-generated imagery which goes well with the 3D base, though perhaps ironically, or deliberately, "The parting of the red sea" was a little underwhelming, but then it is probably difficult to do something without appearing to be a homage to *The Ten Commandments* (1956), though I suspect the main reason for this film's "parting of the Red Sea" is the implicit nature-based interpretation

for most of the miracles.

I believe overall we need to be realistic. The director Ridley Scott did not set out to make a film that would encourage or even capture a Christian audience. This is clear from the start as he uses the term B.C.E. for the period setting, firmly establishing it in a secular context. God is however very present in the film, but God in this case is perhaps primarily the God of certain people's imagination, rather than the Great I Am.

Still, this film provided opportunity for discussion, dialogue and reflection and an opportunity to witness to the Living God.

Events like these could be used to develop a one-off discussion night or a series that could well bear fruit: e.g. *Exodus: One God and Many Pretenders* or *Exodus – The Story Behind the Film*.

## Hollywood and Marriage

I have long been intrigued by Hollywood movies about marriage. There are many amazing, encouraging and intriguing films. You may have a favourite yourself. I would be interested to explore some themes here and if you are interested in suggesting a film please let me know at the ACC office. It is perhaps an irony that while there are many marriage failures on screen and in real life, Hollywood loves films about marriage. It is also worth noting that there has been little focus on homosexual marriage, probably because Hollywood knows that the films would not be financially rewarding. Hollywood films in the main still focus on key themes about marriage, including:

Marriage being for life (e.g., *Up* (2009) and *Shadowlands* (1993))

Marriage is monogamous and the negative impact of adultery and deceit, e.g., *Shoot the Moon* (1982) and *The Wedding Singer* (1998).

Marriage being between a man and a woman and marriages bearing children, e.g., *Parenthood* (1989).

There is of course the Christian 'Hollywood' film *Fireproof* (2008), (reviewed in *ACCatalyst* June 2010). This film received wide commercial distribution in the USA, and was used extensively in discussion-based church film screenings. It led the way to more 'successful' Christian films, such as *Courageous* (2011), where marriage also features front and centre.

*Peter Bentley is the National Director of the ACC*