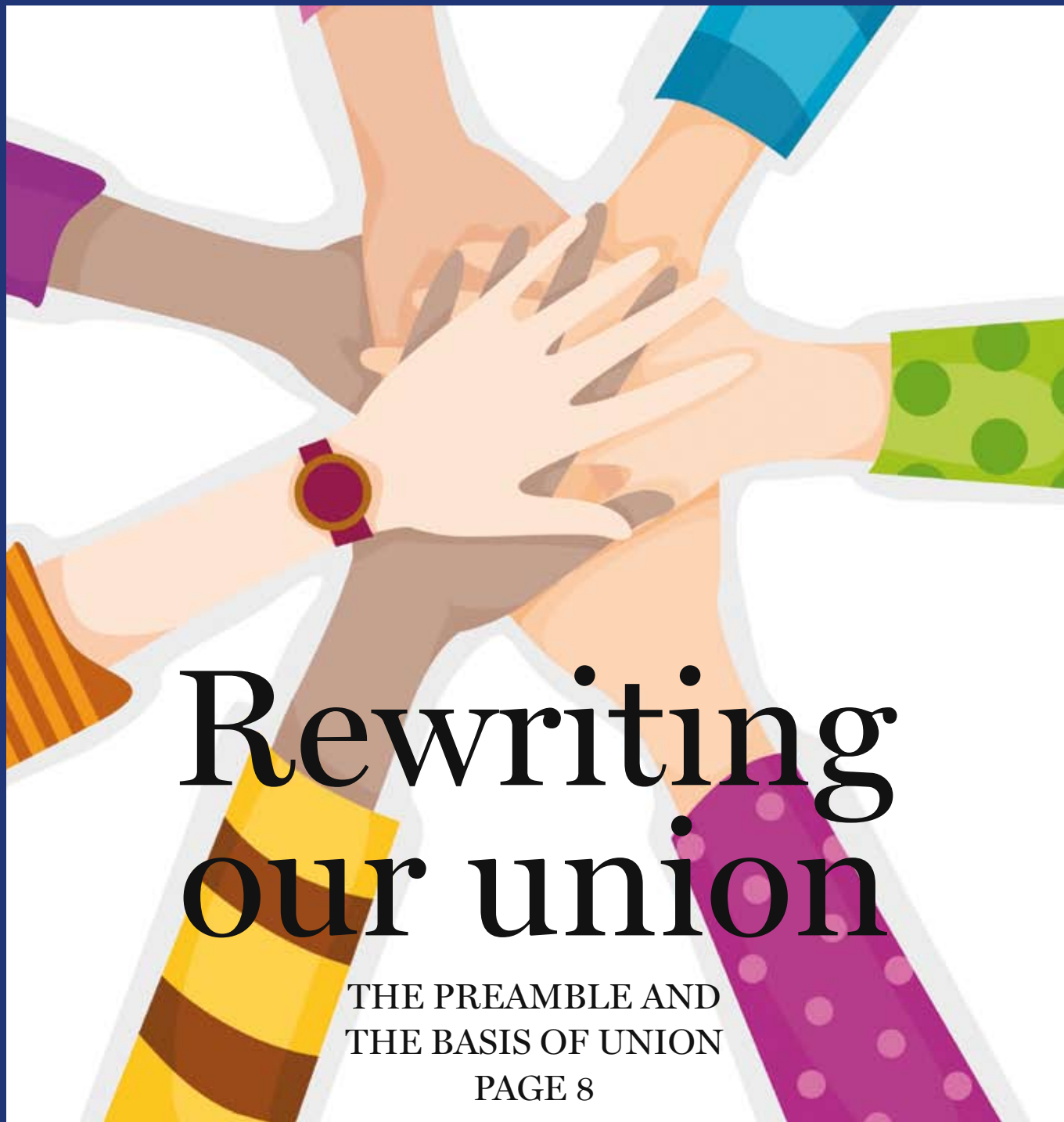


ACC Catalyst

ASSEMBLY OF CONFESSING CONGREGATIONS WITHIN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA



Rewriting our union

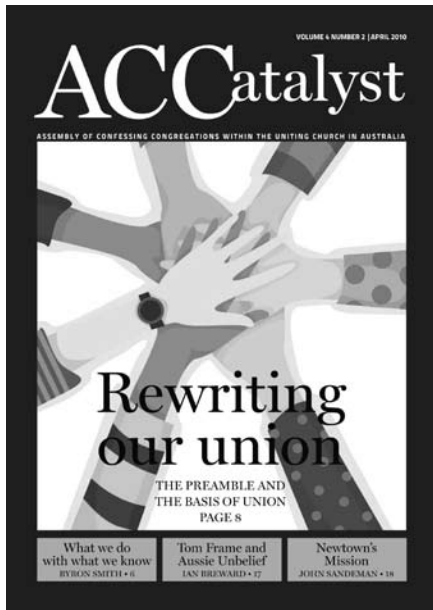
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EDITORIAL



Cover illustration lenm/istockphoto.com

Careful readings

Sometimes events overtake plans. This *ACCatalyst*, full of articles about the new Preamble and the UCA basis of Union is an example. Events in the form of new discussion of the basis of union in the wider UCA, and the need for Synods and Presbyteries to vote on the Preamble and other constitution changes have changed our plans.

We hoped to bring you some broader content, but it can all wait, because the votes and discussions are happening as we speak.

So readers can look forward to some critiques of progressive religion

(and the rise of 'evangelicals' who support the progressive cause) and a fascinating look at what ACC members' hopes and dreams for this organisation are, in future editions. Any reader who wants to add their two cents worth is very welcome. The finishing touches on the ACC statement on abortion were discussed at the recent national council. It was fascinating to watch the council take so much care to make sure the report got things exactly right. When every jot and tittle is in place, *ACCatalyst* will bring it to you.

John Sandeman

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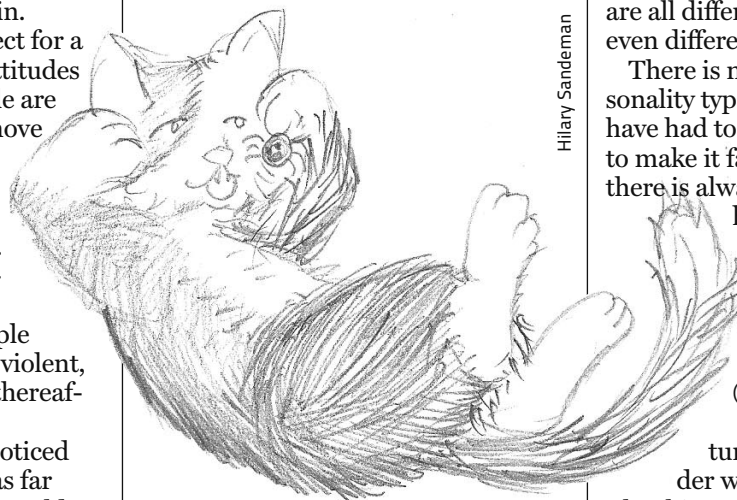
I was not happy with the big huntsman sitting on my wall. I am not particularly scared of spiders, but I don't like having them inside, and this spider had annoyed me because I had already taken it outside once and it had come back inside again.

But it did cause me to reflect for a while on different people's attitudes towards spiders. Some people are fascinated by the way they move around and the way they get their prey. Others respect them for their important role in the balance of nature. Some people are uncomfortable with them and keep a safe distance. Still other people become uncharacteristically violent, and the spider's life is short thereafter.

Rubey the cat eventually noticed the spider too. She reached as far up the wall towards it as she could and meowed at me. I was curious to see what her attitude would be. Would she be frightened? Would she delicately pat it with her paw out of curiosity?

I was interested to see what she

Rubey and the spider



Hilary Sandeman

would do so I flicked the spider off the wall. It landed near her on the floor. Rubey pounced. Within seconds all that was left was one spider leg on the floor and Rubey was contentedly licking her lips. The spider was gone.

It's amazing how different people can look at the same situation and see totally different things. Some people always see problems and reasons to be afraid. Some people see challenges and opportunities. People are all different, and cats, I guess are even different (if that's a word).

There is no right or wrong personality type, otherwise God would have had to make us all the same, to make it fair. But for Christians, there is always hope. Regardless of how much we tend to see the worst in things, we still have God's promises that he will "Work all things together for good for those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

Figuratively, God can turn the most hideous spider we face into a tasty snack.

The things that scare us can turn out to be a blessing, because there is nothing we will ever meet that is outside of God's control. That's one of the good things about being on God's side!

Robyn



Waverley cluster meets

The Waverley regional cluster held a highly appreciated seminar in Melbourne on 27 February at Mt Waverley UC. This was the first of the four seminars planned for the Melbourne area during 2010, and with an attendance of 85 persons it showed a significant level of support, and also the excellent promotional work of the local cluster members.

Thank you to the members of the Waverley Cluster who promoted this initiative, and the co-ordinators, espe-

cially Elizabeth Adam and Bill Phillips. Three ACC officers spoke, with ACC Council member Rev Prof. Ian Breward starting the day by providing a further explanation of the development of problems in the contemporary church, and a call to the path of renewal in 'Reforming 21st Century Church'.

Chair of the ACC Doctrine and Theology Commission, Dr. Rosalie Hudson explained and affirmed the ACC Theological Declaration and

Commentary in 'A Declaration of Hope' (now available on the website: <http://www.confessingcongregations.com/national/resources/doctrine-theology/>)

ACC chair, Rev. Dr. Max Champion presented an examination of the UCA's understanding of the status of the Basis of Union, highlighting the problems that have arisen from various decisions in 'Firm Ground or Crumbling Foundation, the Future of the Basis of Union.' *Peter Bentley*

Preamble: timetable for the changes

A number of changes to the Constitution, including changing the Preamble adopted at the time of Union, were adopted by the 12th Assembly. As required by the Constitution, they have now been sent for the approval (or rejection) by other councils of the Church. To come into force they need the approval of a majority of the Synods and 2/3 of the Presbyteries.

Only two councils of the church can vote on the proposed changes to the Constitution: Presbyteries and Synods.

It is not possible to suggest any changes. A council can only Agree or Disagree (this means voting YES or NO). Each proposal for constitutional change adopted by the Assembly needs to be determined separately.

The closing dates for response to the various proposed constitutional changes:

The Preamble, Definitions and Clauses 49 and 71 (matters concern-

ing the UAICC (Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress) which postulate significant knowledge of the Trinitarian God before the proclamation of Jesus Christ) - 31 October 2010.

Proposed change to Clause 39 (this proposes a change to how councils of the church can 'stay' a decision of the Assembly, and attempts to have a mechanism for determining what matters are vital to the life of the Church based on responses from Presbyteries and Synods) - 31 October, 2010,

Clauses 36 and 37 (provision for allowing co-options to Synod and Assembly Standing Committee)- 31 December 2010.

Please contact your local presbytery to find when the presbytery will meet to vote on these matters, and what material and information will be provided to members and how long before the meeting. If you are a

member, ask that sufficient time be allowed for discussion and questions on the floor of the presbytery.

Synod meeting dates:

NSW: 10 - 13 April

Queensland: 21 -25 May

Victoria and Tasmania: 21 - 26 May

WA: 17-19 September

Owen Davis ACC SA member

Study tour

After the 2010 ACC conference in early September, which is being held at Camden UC, Revd Colin Seymour, minister at Camden will lead a tour to Turkey. ACC members may like to consider this opportunity.

Following the Spread of Grace: Exploring highlights of the work of St. Paul and St. John in Turkey - 24 Sept - 10 Oct 2010.

Cost \$5490 twin share including return airfare 15 nights accommodation and all meals. For information contact Rev Colin Seymour; email - cseymour@camdenuniting.org.au; Phone - 0246559303; Mobile 0408201973.

A link providing full details about the programme is on the ACC website under congregational news
Peter Bentley



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PUBLIC SQUARE

BY PSEUDO-MAXIMUS

Atheist Delusions

The *Global Atheist Convention* was held in Melbourne 12-14 March. Attended by 2500 people it caused quite a stir. Prof Richard Dawkins, doyen of militant atheists, ridiculed Christians and refused to distinguish 'fundamentalist nutbags' from 'real theologians.' He called Benedict XVI 'Pope Nazi.'

Media reports made much of the dichotomy between religion and science, faith and reason, superstition and enlightenment. Religion, unlike atheism, was discredited with being the cause of nearly all things evil. Prof AC Grayling accused Christianity of 'this awful moral psychology that says we are all failed creatures in need of grace and salvation. It's these aspects of religion, ethically speaking, that are very disagreeable. Humanist ethics wants to start with the good' (*The Age Insights* March 13).

The Church needs to develop better responses to these age old criticisms. Feeling aggrieved is a luxury we can ill afford. If Christ is the truth then Christians must be committed to truth in every sphere of life – even when the truth exposes flaws in the beliefs and practices of the Church. At the same time, we should challenge atheists, like columnist Phillip Adams, who takes the high moral ground and feigns tolerance of religionists who share his views:

'My messages to the conference? Beware both hubris and the atheistic counterpart to religious bigotry. Do not treat them the way they treated us. Accept that on social justice issues the progressives within the ranks of the religious are our allies. By all means man (and woman) the barri-

ades on abortion issues, on religious homophobia, on the bullying and racketeering of cults such as Scientology – or on attempts to infiltrate the education system with creationism. But elsewhere, let's try to calm things down. Let's not let a little thing like God come between us.' (*The Weekend Australian Magazine* March 27-28)

In a world where conflict and hatred hold sway it is not very re-assuring, and more than a tad deluded, to be told that justice can be achieved by enlisting the help of 'religious progressives' and ignoring 'a little thing like God'!

of Victoria and Tasmania Standing Committee on 12/8/09 to 'take no further action with respect to the 'New Faith' campaign at St Michael's which caused uproar at the 2008 Synod (see *ACCatalyst* October 09) he now puts himself in exalted company.

Florence Nightingale and ML King could not be accused of such blatant self-promotion – one saving the lives of the sick; the other dying so that Black Americans could live fuller, more dignified lives. Unlike Dr MacNab, they did not draw attention to themselves but to the plight of those in need.

Sadly he has missed the point of Christian faith – that 'our chief end is to worship God and enjoy him forever,' not to idolise ourselves. Unwittingly, he has shown up his 'New Faith' – faith in oneself – for what it is. Dressed to appear radical, it is exposed as the oldest form of self-centred religion. Look within

Nightingale, King, Macnab



Three people with a vision of new possibilities...

New possibilities for humanity, of healing the body, mind and spirit; of moving towards a vision of a life that calls for our

[St Michaels Collins St Website](#)

Delusions of Grandeur

'Dissident Uniting Church minister Francis MacNab has posted a giant billboard over the Monash Freeway with pictures of Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King and himself as model leaders.' (Barney Zwartz, *The Age* February 10) No doubt emboldened by the decision of the Synod

yourself to find your essential goodness!

Two letters to the editor hit the mark. 'The new faith – narcissism' and 'No Francis, you're not the Messiah – you're just a very naughty boy.'

Groupthink is bad for all of us

The chairman of the ABC, Maurice Lionel Newman, recently addressed ABC managers, programmers and

journalists on the need for media balance. He said: "There should be no public perception there's such a thing as an ABC view."

In an interview on PM he said "I've been around long enough to know that consensus and conventional wisdom doesn't always serve you well and that unless you leave some room for an alternative point of view you are likely to go down the wrong track." (March 10)

Reflecting on these words in the context of how views contrary to majority sentiment are often met with derision, Errol Simper (*The Australian* March 15) wrote "It's catching, but groupthink's bad for all of us."

One of the marks of Groupthink is that 'members of the group avoid promoting viewpoints outside the comfort zone of consensus thinking. A variety of motives for this may exist such as a desire to avoid being seen as foolish, or a desire to avoid embarrassing or angering other members of the group.

Groupthink may cause groups to make hasty, irrational decisions, where individual doubts are set aside, for fear of upsetting the group's balance. The term is frequently used pejoratively, with hindsight.'

Groupthink is a handy weapon to hurl at opponents, especially when consensus is used to stifle debate and intimidate dissent. In the church the thought police (Orwell *1984*), may be enlisted to serve liberal or evangelical causes.

What is necessary is that Christian thinking be shaped by an event which no group could think of, if it had not taken place—the Crucifixion of Christ.

A Legend Reflects

Freakish AFL player, Gary Ablett Snr is a controversial, troubled and reclusive figure. In the *Herald Sun* (March 26) he paints a bleak picture for the future unless the community is willing "to take a serious look at the direction in which we are heading".

A convert to Christianity in 1986 Ablett admits that he is not perfect but insists that "Modern society has lost its moral compass and must return to its Christian origins".

"Darwinism cannot explain the origin of life because it cannot explain the origin of information" which assures us that "the origin of all things is a person".

"Man can live without many things but he cannot live without hope. The Bible reveals a very different reality.

God's word tells us that we are a very special and unique and precious creation, made in God's image for an eternal relationship with God and a purpose and destiny that is mind-blowing. And God loves and values us so much that He was willing to leave His glory, take on human nature and enter into His own creation to undo the damage done by a dark intruder, and provide a mechanism by which you and I can qualify and be eligible for that relationship, purpose and destiny which is there for the asking".

The response to his article makes it doubtful that the message of this flawed prodigal son, once dubbed 'God' for his ability on the field, will be heard anytime soon.

A Legend Crumbles

And the legend goes on. On checking the reference *ACCatalyst's* editor discovered that Gary Ablett's article in the *Herald Sun* is remarkably similar to an article on the website of Grace Haven Ministries, a US evangelical organisation. A website with the charming url of buggery.org runs the text from Ablett side by side with the original. Which only goes to show how good Ablett Snr is at letting people down.

Godless Politics

'A dismissive attitude towards Christianity flows into a phony dichotomy between Caesar and God.' So writes

Angela Shanahan in *The Weekend Australian* March 6-7. She notes widespread opposition to public figures with 'strong religious beliefs' being allowed to participate in politics. The implication is that Christians are entitled to their private views but, unlike Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, atheists etc, they must not promote their views in public life. As Shanahan observes, this myopic view is blind to Christianity's contribution to the complex development of Western culture.

The refusal to admit the positive value of Christianity in public life, says Shanahan, is seen in the way current debates on human life, human rights and freedom of conscience are conducted. Particularly disturbing is the attempt of rights activists, many claiming to be civil libertarians, 'to suppress religious belief and initiatives in the name of freedom.'

If the public square is to be denied to publicly spirited people 'with strong Christian beliefs,' then debate on crucial issues will be greatly diminished and any resultant legislation will be seriously flawed.

That this is not alarmist can be seen by the refusal of the European Union to recognize the history of Christianity as a formative influence in the rise of modern Europe, and by a raft of inquiries and legislation currently before Federal and State Parliaments which seek to restrict religious freedom of conscience in the name of individual rights.

IAN CLARKSON

Dawkins, media and lent

Last month the first ever National Atheist Convention met in Melbourne and had the media feted Richard Dawkins as its front line speaker.

In his several media interviews during his Aussie tour Dawkins put on show his trademark ridiculing of core Christian beliefs including the sacrifice of God in Christ. He did this during the Christian season of Lent.

Of course such publicly touted opinions and attacks on core tenets of Islam would not be tolerated by the media nor would it be game to air them. Should Dawkins put one toe inside the jurisdictions of Iran, Saudia Arabia and in fact most Is-

lamist regimes and utter a fraction of such acrimony against Islam he would end up in jail for a very long time with flogging to boot. He can however rant against Christianity in countries where that same faith has given the freedom to dissent.

But Christianity pre-eminently makes the claim of Truth (and doesn't this atheist and the mainstream media know it!) and thus its claims, unlike all other religious claims, are out in the public square for any and all to see and scrutinise.

Interestingly Dawkins' failure to understand and accurately express the great Lenten Passion demonstrates this is possible only as a result of childlike humble access.

Someone said that the truth of Christ is like the blazing sun. We can't see it directly but by it we see all else clearly.

Most of the time the relationship between science and Christianity is just an academic debate. But for BYRON SMITH, a Sydneysider currently studying at the University of Edinburgh as a PhD candidate in theological ethics, the topic suddenly became very personal. Byron's essay is a must read on the subject of

What we do with what we know

A few years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. It was not an easy cancer to explain to people, because, basically, the doctors hadn't seen any cases quite like it before and could not identify precisely where it had started or what caused it. Since it was such a rare growth, they could also not give me a meaningful prognosis.

The scans indicated that it was of a significant size, in a critical location, and there was good reason to think it was probably growing quite rapidly. Their recommendations were that surgery would be almost impossible (one of them told me, "I'm not into killing my patients"), but that chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy might have some effect (one oncologist spoke of "curative doses" and another simply of reducing its size).

Now at this point, I had a variety of possible responses open to me.

I could go and get further oncological opinions (I had already gone to three different hospitals and had multiple scans and a variety of tests).

I could have weighed up the probable side effects of treatment (quite a long list!) and decided that it was not worth it and tried to make the most of my remaining time, however long or short that turned out to be.

I could have heeded the many voices telling me that traditional medicine doesn't know how to deal with cancer and that I needed various alternative treatments: homeopathy, acupuncture, meditation, herbal remedies, hypnosis, miracle diets and many more that were urged upon me by well-meaning contacts, often with powerful testimonials.

I could have listened to the Christian sisters and broth-

ers who told me that I would be healed if I had faith, that God loves miracles and would preserve my life without treatment, that they had seen or been given amazing recoveries after prayer.

I could have embraced the cynical critiques of the medical system by noting that it is in doctors' interests to keep me thinking that I am sick, that I need them, that I need their expensive and complicated treatments.

I could have gone onto Google and attempted my own re-diagnosis on the basis of extensive reading of the most popular sites, or by consulting the most helpful discussion boards.

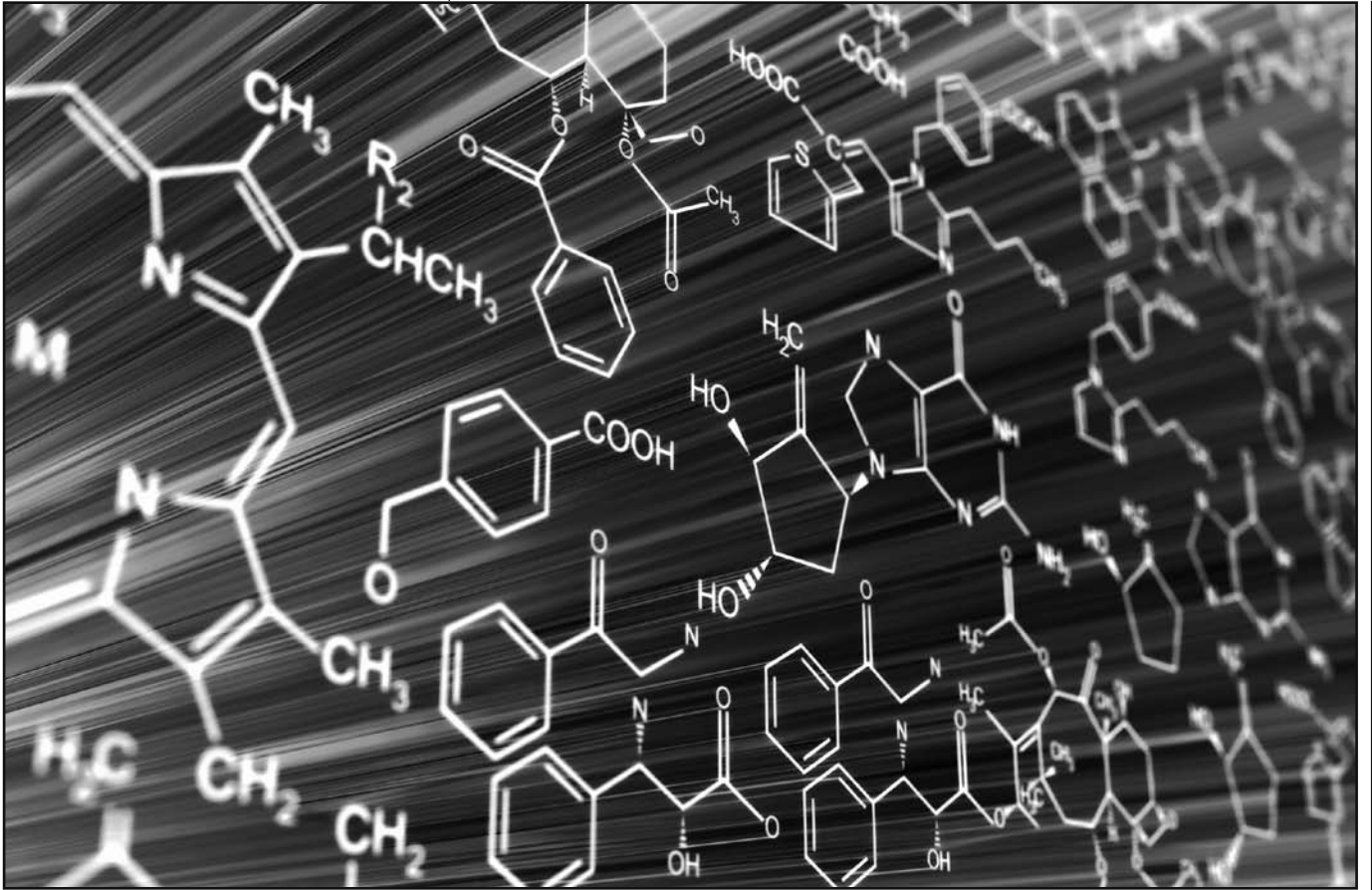
Each of these options was being put forward by people who apparently desired good for me. Yet deciding to go ahead with the recommended treatment was a relatively easy conclusion for me.

Despite its costs, I do not at all regret the decision and suspect there is a very good chance I would not be here today without the excellent treatment I received at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Indeed, it has been three years today since I had my last radiotherapy dose, a few more days since my final round of chemo.

I'm sharing this story not for the sympathy vote, nor to celebrate an anniversary, and nor yet to ridicule the faith or intentions of those who urged me to avoid treatment. I share this story to raise the issue of the relation of knowledge to ethics.

How does our knowledge of the world affect our obligations and opportunities to pursue good?

Many factors contributed to my decision to accept treatment, but significant amongst them was the considered advice of recognised experts in the field based on years of empirical research. I was not morally bound to follow this advice. The research has not been exhaustive. Not all the



enot-poloskun/istockphoto.com

experts I saw recommended exactly the same treatment. My case involved some degree of novelty. Not all cancer treatment is as effective as mine has been so far. But I do believe I would have been both foolish and seriously at fault if I had simply ignored their advice, or acted as though the diagnosis must be wrong because I've heard of some misdiagnoses in the past, or if I had presumed that I would be alright because some tumours undergo spontaneous remission.

It would be no good to say that since the scriptures don't tell me whether or not to trust doctors, then I have no reason to trust them. It would equally be no good to say that since the scriptures don't tell me to have cancer treatment, then I was under no moral obligation to take the advice of the oncologists seriously.

There is a large and diverse body of scientific experts with years in the field who point to widespread and growing empirical evidence of a critical diagnosis, which we cannot in good conscience ignore.

Of course, receiving treatment in order to try to stay alive was neither my only nor my highest moral obligation. There are worse things than death. There are ways of staying alive that diminish the point of being alive. But all things considered, I believe there was a compelling moral case for me to accept the recommended treatment. I believe that not only was it possible to pursue this treatment without being distracted from more important things (like loving those around me and praising the wonders of the one who gives all life), but that the treatment was in

fact a means to that end, keeping me alive for more service and song, and opening many opportunities to love and praise that I might otherwise not have had.

It may be obvious where I am going with this, but in case it is not let me spell it out. There is a large and diverse body of scientific experts with years in the field who point to widespread and growing empirical evidence of a critical diagnosis, which we cannot in good conscience ignore. They may offer a variety of different (even sometimes conflicting) advice on specific treatment, but it would be irresponsible to dismiss their warnings or to treat the situation as though it were nothing but a distraction from what is truly important.

Our knowledge of the world, though fallible and incomplete, is nonetheless sufficient to contribute to the moral deliberation of Christians. The evidence for alarming anthropogenic climate change is strong enough such that wilfully ignoring or burying the issue at this stage has become irresponsible. This is not to deny *sola scriptura* nor to fall into legalism.

Nor is it to say that climate change is the only or primary moral challenge of our day, or that all Christians ought to become climate change activists. And neither yet do I claim that Christians owe their allegiance to any particular mitigation strategy.

But as one significant pastoral and social issue amongst others, and one linked to fears and guilt, to anger and confusion, to questions of greed and of faith, hope and love, addressing climate change in a Christian way is neither a luxury nor a distraction from the gospel.

Uniting

In July the UCA will hold a conference on “Engaging the Basis” in Melbourne. The UCA basis of Union is such an important topic that *ACCatalyst* wants to start the discussion early, with three short essays on the UCA’s founding document. The Conference details are at www.engagingthebasis.ucaweb.com.au

1. Why the Basis of Union is important.

The place of the Basis of Union became an openly contested item 1994-1997, and the 8th Assembly decided to do what was assumed to be unnecessary ten years earlier: to state in the Constitution of the Uniting Church that the church “lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, guided by its Basis of Union.” (Clause 2 of the Constitution)

If any one wishes to claim that ‘guide’ is a weak word, allow me to remind them that ministers are required to be ‘guided’ by the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice. The Assembly website reflects the strong sense of ‘guided’:

“[The Basis of Union] states the central affirmations of the Christian faith and is a guide to what is central in the life of the Uniting Church.” Assembly website www.assembly.uca.org.au/resources/20-historicdocs accessed 19/3/10

This is a clear statement of the ongoing importance of the Basis of Union. The statement reflects the intentions of the writers of the Basis of Union.

“The Basis of Union was intended as a call to the church to renew her commitment to the faith by which she lives and to go out boldly on her mission.”

One of the chief writers of the Basis of Union and First President of the Assembly, J.D. McCaughey, says in his *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, 1980, p5 “Apart from a full and deliberate process for the amendment or replacement of the Basis, including amending legislation in the parliaments, the Uniting Church and its councils must themselves abide by the Basis of Union, in accordance with which the Church was formed. To fail to do so, would be to break faith with all who have entered the Church on the understanding that it was founded on this basis, and also to create a completely contradictory situation for office-bearers who are themselves required to adhere to the Basis of Union.”

Note the date and the defensive style by one of the other writers of the Basis of Union, Michael Owen, *Back to Basics* (1996), p188: “The writers of the Basis of Union had no doubt that the document was more than an instrument to facilitate church union. Nevertheless, attempts to undermine the status of the Basis of Union continue.”

President-elect of the 12th Assembly, Andrew Dutney describes the Basis of Union in these words: “And the permanent symbol of that process [i.e., church union] - the charter, the manifesto, the vision statement of that generation - is the document called the Basis of Union.” Andrew Dutney, *Where did the joy come from?*, 2001, p8.

By calling the Basis of Union a ‘permanent symbol of that process’, and then adding the limiting phrase ‘vision statement of that generation,’ he appears to want to consign the Basis to the pages of history.

The proposed Preamble follows that same path of wanting to consign the Basis of Union to history. Yet the Assembly website declares that the Basis of Union contains matters central to the Christian faith and is central in the life of the Uniting Church.

The Basis of Union, on careful reading, will show that the Uniting Church was meant to be a beginning of wider church unity: hence the name Uniting rather than United (cf United Church of Canada vs Uniting Church in Australia).

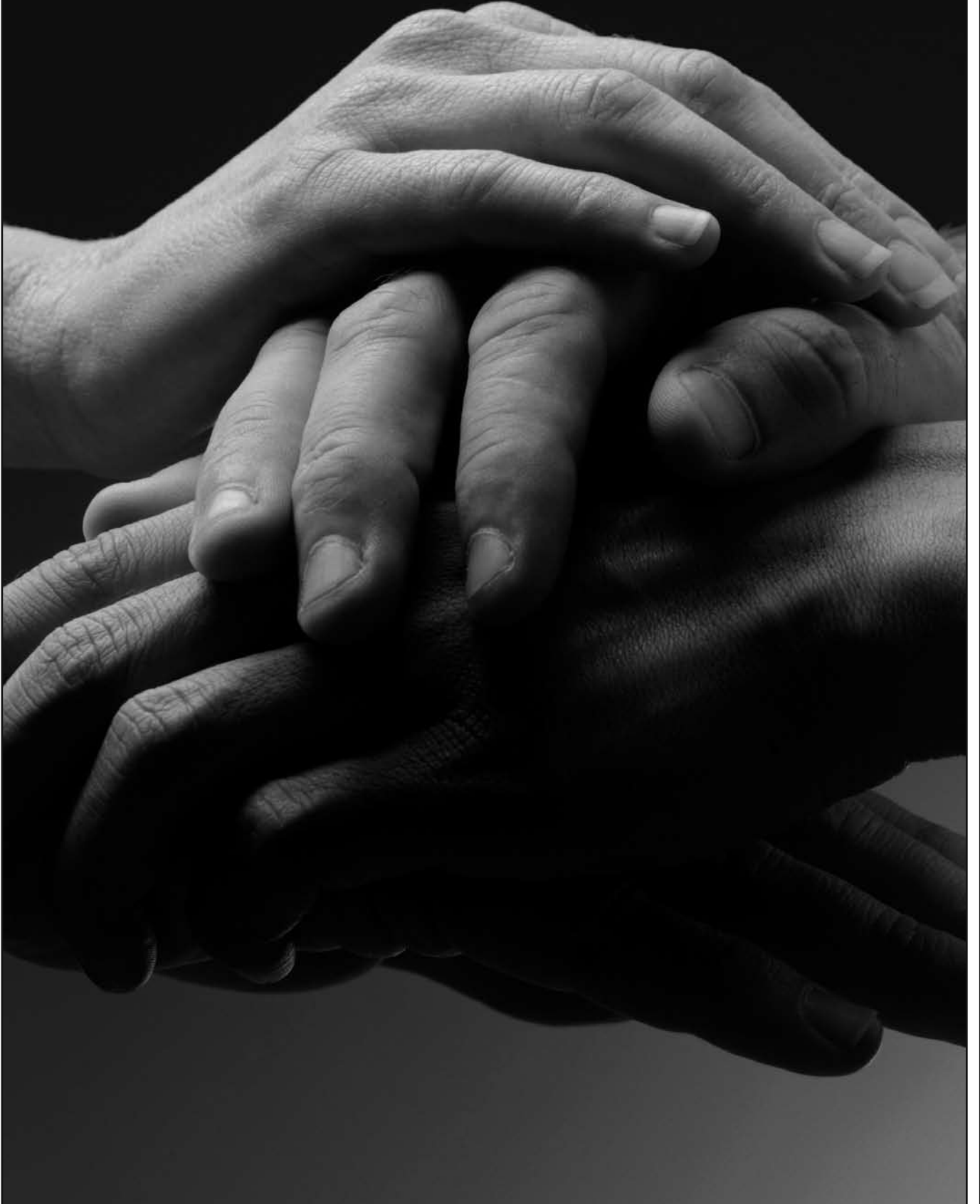
We set out not to be a denomination, but to be an authentic part of the one holy catholic (i.e. universal) and apostolic church (as in the tradition of the apostles). The desire of the authors of the proposed Preamble, to make the Uniting Church uniquely Australian, is not part of the vision of the Basis of Union.

The Basis of Union deals with the ‘substance of the faith’, those matters which the church has always believed, which are described in Paragraphs 1-14. The Basis insists that Christ as the head of the Church ‘can speak through any of its councils’, not just the Assembly (Paragraph 15, and 15e), and so affirms interrelated councils.

The Basis describes the process into union in Paragraph 1. It then sets out the fundamentals of the faith that come to us through the incarnation. The church’s relationship with Jesus Christ comes before the Bible and the sacraments. But the Bible is the witness which nourishes and regulates our faith and obedience, and it controls what we say about Jesus Christ (Paragraph 5). This Paragraph sets boundaries to diversity: the possible rejection or misrepresentation of New Testament teaching and practice.

The Uniting Church is not stuck in the past by adhering to its Basis of Union. Paragraph 11 places the Uniting Church into the worldwide fellowship of Christ’s Church.

basis



As part of that fellowship we take note of scientific developments, and contemporary issues, but always in the context of listening to faithful and scholarly interpreters. Again, we do not want to be a denomination riding our own hobby horses, but be participants in the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. And as such we recognise the need to proclaim our Lord Jesus Christ in fresh words and deeds.

Paragraph 5 anchors that process. We are not permitted to 're-imagine' Jesus Christ. Paragraph 18 concludes with the prayer that 'God will constantly correct what is erroneous in the life of the church.'

Much more could be said about the Basis of Union. The ACC's constitution requires adherence to the Basis of Union from its members. Therefore I commend the Basis of Union to your careful and prayerful reading. It can be found on the Assembly and Synod websites. And it can be googled!

NB: The Wikipedia article on the Basis of Union contains some inaccuracies, the chief of which is that the Basis of Union 'functions as a Constitution' for the UCA.

Walter Abetz

2. Faithful & Scholarly

Paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union commonly appears with the heading 'Scholarly Interpreters'. This heading was added for ease of reference and did not form part of the Basis approved by the churches at union. We should note that scholarly scriptural interpretation is linked with faithful scriptural interpretation and that such interpretation occurs within a worldwide fellowship of churches.

But the heading that was added later may mislead some people into attributing a narrower kind of scriptural interpretation to the writers of the Basis than is meant.

In *Crosslight* (December 2009) Rev. Bob Faser claims that the founders of the UCA did not interpret the Scriptures in a 'literal' manner. He bases this statement on paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union. But the paragraph does not mention the word 'literal'. So what is the 'literal' interpretation that the UCA founders supposedly ruled out and what alternative interpretation did they supposedly adopt?

'Literal' could be contrasted with metaphorical interpretation of scripture. But such interpretation would not be specific to 'literary, scientific and historical enquiry which has characterised recent centuries'. Metaphor is not an invention of recent centuries.

'Literal' could be contrasted with 'sceptical'. Some scientific or, more strictly, philosophical theory of recent centuries might cast doubt on miracles for instance. But paragraph 5 of the Basis of Union states: 'when the church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses'. Strong language.

Perhaps Bob and others are reading too much into paragraph 11. It concludes with a prayer that the church may be ready to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds. This is by no means a prayer to express the faith in fresh words and deeds in the sense that the substance of the faith is open to change. The need for church leaders to adhere to the substance of the faith is made clear in paragraph 14.

Katherine Abetz

3. The un-Australian conditioner

There was once a church that was governed by inter-related councils. Some councils had smaller areas of responsibility and some had greater but even the one with the greatest responsibility of all was obliged to seek the concurrence of the other councils in matters of vital importance to the life of the church. In this way even the smallest councils had a responsibility for the whole church.

The winds of change blew over the church bringing new beliefs and many of the smaller councils felt so battered that they erected strong walls of self-protection and forgot about their responsibility for the whole church.

The Greatest Council of All saw that the church was divided by many beliefs and concluded that no one belief could claim validity over another but that all must be offered hospitality within the church and be treated in a democratic way. This idea came from one of the new beliefs. The idea was that there was no access to an external source of validation which would say which belief was right. Nevertheless, hospitality and democracy were regarded as values. These values were set free from any external source of validation.

But the church had a document called the Basis which described the external source of validation. It was the Basis that had given the church its structure of inter-related councils. The Basis prevented the church from offering the kind of hospitality and democracy that some in the church thought it should.

One special group had a strong cultural objection to one of the new beliefs. The Greatest Council of All refused to recognise this belief as a matter of vital importance to the life of the church but did not wish to alienate the group. The Greatest Council of All proposed changes to the Constitution of the church, recognising the culture of the special group but weakening the system of referring matters of vital importance to other councils for concurrence. The changes paved the way for increasing the power of the Greatest Council of All and the Committee that acted on its behalf, at the expense of the other councils and of the Basis that held them all together. The recognition of the special group's culture was a sham because it disguised the intention not to refer this matter of vital cultural importance to other councils in accordance with the Basis. The smaller councils could have objected to the changes but most were deceived and did not do so.

So the new belief that seemed to offer democracy destroyed the democracy of inter-related councils. The new belief that seemed to offer hospitality to many beliefs allowed the Committee to impose its own belief on the many. And the smaller councils that had erected walls of self-protection found that their walls came crashing down.

Katherine Abetz

Katherine Abetz is married to Walter Abetz. She has 4 adult children and one and three quarters grandchildren. She affirmed Walter's call to ministry at age 44 in 1991 and joined Walter in studying for a BD. She has edited a collection of essays on the Basis of Union with Walter.

Walter Abetz is married to Katherine. Venturing into his first Uniting Church parish in 1995 in Bendigo aged 47, he served there for 11 years. He was a foundation member of EMU Victoria.

A new Israel

Extracts from an open letter sent
To the Chairpeople
Uniting Aboriginal and Islander
Christian Congress (WA)
The Revd Sealin Garlett

The Covenanting Commission (WA)
The Revd Dr Alison Longworth

Dear Alison and Sealin,

Thank you for your circular letter of 9 February. I am writing in reply to let you know of my concerns about the proposed new preamble. A paper of mine criticizing it is likely to be published later this year. Now that you have communicated your position to me, I had rather not withhold mine from you.

You write that

While preambles aren't legally binding, they speak of identity, how a group reached the point of forming a constitution and, importantly, their core values.

I have to challenge both sides of that statement. To be sure, the Assembly did note that a constitution may do such things as you state, and also the limiting qualification that

(c) a preamble is not legally binding in terms of interpretation of the constitution, or for any understanding of regulations which flow from that constitution (Min. 09.08.02 c).

But the Assembly then also resolved that this preamble would be taken into account in any binding interpretation of Constitution and Regulations, amending

[...] Clause 71 to read: All rulings as to the interpretation of this Constitution or any of the Regulations made by the Assembly shall be made by the President after taking appropriate advice, and noting the preamble [...] (Min. 09.08.11).

These two things the Assembly decided contradict each other. It may have been a stratagem for getting what was wanted by offering false assurances, but it could just have been incompetent drafting. Either way, there is something wrong here.

At least the current "Preamble to Interim Constitution" acknowledges that the churches agreed to unite on the Basis of Union. The proposed new preamble merely says that they approved it. It wants to suggest that the churches united by adopting the interim constitution, so that giving the constitution a new character would give the Church itself a new character. The change that the new preamble would make to the Uniting Church would, if effective, really be far more radical than your letter recognizes, although what you write is breathtaking enough.

For what the churches sought through consultations from 1957 to 1971 was by no means just a "joining of the



Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches". The first report of their Joint Commission on Church Union pointed in quite a different direction:

[...] we need not be too diffident about our request to the churches to which we belong that they would take with renewed seriousness the Faith of the Church of the ages. We have no narrowly Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian or pan-Protestant or

liberal-Protestant view of that Faith. It is the Faith in its wholeness, the Faith of the Catholic Church to which we would recall [people] [...].

The approach thus identified, initially with regard to the Church's faith, was maintained to the end, as the opening of the Basis of Union shows:

The Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia, in fellowship with the whole Church Catholic, and seeking to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and his will for the Church, hereby enter into union under the name of the Uniting Church in Australia (Basis, § 1).

We do not call ourselves the Uniting Church "of" Australia, because it is not this land or nation that gives us our identity as a church. We accept and acknowledge our place "in" Australia, because that is where God in Jesus

Christ brings us together as the particular people we are, makes us responsible for one another and also for proclaiming him to those around us and not just within Australia (Basis, § 2).

While we live in Australia as citizens of this country, God's call and promises continue to unsettle us, so that we understand ourselves supremely as people whose citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and therefore as exiles, aliens, pilgrims on this earth (Hebrews 11:8-10,13-16; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1). We can no longer have an unbroken and unproblematic relation to the things of this life, but continue to deal with them only "as though not" (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). That means that all of our inherited earthly patterns must now serve as forms through which, however inadequate they may seem, we strive to live the new life in Jesus Christ.

In contrast to all of this, your letter identifies the purpose of the proposed new preamble as being to make the Uniting Church into “a whole church”, “a distinctly Australian church”, with the “Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people at the centre of our denomination’s life and witness”!



That would certainly be a distinctly Australian body. I just wonder whether it would still be a church. For there is only one church, one body, of which Jesus Christ is the Head (Ephesians 4:1-16; Colossians 1:18; 2:16-19). To put it another way, there is only one body, into which we have all been baptized and of which we live and function as individual limbs and organs, “members” and that Body is Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; rather differently, Romans 12:4-8). No one can be at the centre of the Church’s life and witness, apart from Jesus Christ. Baptized into him, we have to learn (and to keep on learning) that all the old worldly differences between us no longer apply:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28; cf 1 Corinthians 12:13).

In the earthly body of our heavenly Head, the categories male or female, citizen or asylum seeker, indigenous descent or immigrant stock, no longer apply. We are all one in Jesus Christ.

Therefore the Basis of Union has sought to centre the Church as simply and directly as it can on Jesus Christ. In his person, life, death and resurrection, and through his Gospel, God has acted and acts to “reassert[...] his claim over the whole of his creation, [...] pardon[...] sinners, and [make] in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love” (Basis, § 3).

All dimensions of our relation to God, and of God’s to us, are given in the Jesus Christ of biblical witness and Gospel proclamation:

Christ who is present when he is preached among [people] is the Word of the God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist (Basis, § 4).

Reconciliation and unity in righteousness and truth are ours in Jesus Christ, ours to enjoy and to proclaim. In him, we find our relations restored to God our Creator and Redeemer, to his old creation, to ourselves, to each other and to fellow human beings in the world.

In Jesus’ person and story, God has dealt representatively with all of us and with this old world. He has carried out his final judgment and reconciliation exclusively in Jesus, in a way that is able to draw us in and include us all, and finally to restore all things to their creaturely relation to God. The Church as his body on earth already participates in and serves the achieved reconciliation and is the “whole” church, “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:23), in its oneness, holiness and catholicity.

Your letter claims that the proposed new preamble

“affirms the importance of the revelation of God through Jesus Christ”. But it does not at all allow him the same crucial importance in revelation and reconciliation as the Scriptures see in him. For the new preamble locates Jesus Christ within a story about how the “First Peoples” had already encountered the Creator God, how the Spirit had already revealed God through their laws, customs and ceremonies, and how love and grace had already been sustaining them and giving them insights into God’s ways all before Jesus Christ was preached to them. The same love and grace were then, according to the proposed new preamble, “finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ”. Jesus Christ finally appears well on in a story in which the “First Peoples” are the centre of interest and connecting theme. To whatever extent Jesus Christ can be made to seem important in that story, he can have only a relative and partial importance there.

There is a general human tendency to confine Jesus Christ, and thus God, to some place within an overall story of the world and our race. That limits the extent to which God can threaten the stability of our existence, reign over every dimension of our lives and claim all our gratitude and trust.

That tendency developed into a dominant feature of the Modernism that now pervades our Western culture. To a large extent, it is a secularized version of the biblical story of God’s dealings with humankind by election and calling, promises and fulfilments. In the Bible’s story, Israel was God’s specially chosen people, to whom God made himself known and gave his promises and commandments. Jesus belonged within that context; and the New Testament writers understand him within it. But Jesus’ coming meant the final crisis for the chosen people. He confronted them directly with the God of their traditions of law, faith, hope and wisdom, was rejected by them, but vindicated by God as the only one to have kept faith with God. Raised from the dead, Jesus Christ represents God’s sovereign judgment and mercy in relation to all people and peoples.

Thus God has revealed himself in his unique identity and universal sovereignty through that one individual Jesus, in the setting of that one particular people. Jesus Christ is heard and known as the unique expression of the one and only God through the unique witness of the Old and New Testament scriptures. Whenever we try to turn what we hear in Jesus Christ into abstract, general truths that also hold good apart from him, we are running away from the One God’s grace and truth. We are refusing to be reconciled and insisting upon our own agenda for our own or the world’s salvation.

The proposed new preamble wants to make the “First Peoples” into a new Israel, through whom God deals in a unique way to constitute an especially Australian church. It would make the Uniting Church similar to the British Israelites, the Mormons and the “German-Christians” of the 1930’s, all of whom wanted to find for their respective nations special connections to God through secret historic links or extra-biblical revelations or creation-based expressions of God’s will in and for the national ethos and destiny. That would actually be a much greater change to the nature of our church than the progress of the uniting churches into union. The insights on which they finally agreed were already foreshadowed in their traditions.

You write that “The new preamble is offered as a gift to the Church”, but has it not rather been experienced by

many as an ultimatum? Certainly, it comes as a finished proposal, without any extended period of shared preparation allowing for discussion and the weighing of different points of view at the grass-roots and in the various councils. For a church to go through this sort of change really requires, say, ten or more years.

It is quite inappropriate to attempt a change of this sort through the preamble to the Constitution. The attempt to do so will probably prove quite ineffective. Real changes need to be spiritually and mentally digested and absorbed. Most people in the Church never bother about the Constitution.

The issue that the Congress really seems to be trying to address is that of its relation to the rest of the Church. I do not think that the new preamble will help at all. It is healthy for a community to have defined structures, but it is self-defeating, when some people try to side-step relational problems by changing structures to secure their own position. Within the Church, we actually need to keep coming back to the Gospel and trying to deal with each other afresh in the power of God's reconciling grace. That can sometimes demand a lot of us, but it is the only way to healing and wholeness in our fellowship.

The proposed new preamble is supposed to reinforce the position of the covenant between the Uniting Church and its Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. But the perceived need to do so may actually be a signal that the covenant itself can only do so much. For one group within a church to deal with the church as a whole through a covenant seems a lop-sided arrangement. But

perhaps we can get some benefit from it, if we do not try to press too much out of it.

The issues touched on in the proposed new preamble between original inhabitants and their descendants, on the one side, and colonists, later immigrants and their descendants, on the other, are continuing issues within Australian society and the Australian churches. Proclaiming God's reconciling action in Jesus Christ and living in the power of it must lead us back to those issues again and again. The Gospel itself will enable us and oblige us to face them. We do not need to construct a separate, Australian sacred story of God's relation to this land and its peoples from time immemorial. But does not the new preamble attempt just that and actually mix up things that it is much wiser to keep distinct in our minds and our speech?

God's Word in Jesus Christ does address us in all dimensions of our life together, not just in religious and spiritual matters, but also in personal, familial, social and political regards. But no human cause, not even the most justified, comes to be identical with God's work of judgment, forgiveness and reconciliation in Jesus Christ or with the coming of God's promised Kingdom. God's Word clarifies and confirms the creatureliness of the creature and the sinfulness of sin. It promises and proclaims the work that God alone can do and thus puts all of our concerns and activities into their proper places and perspectives.

If we allow Jesus Christ his true place and seek peace and reconciliation in him alone, we shall surely begin to find new ways of dealing with each other in love, truth and righteousness.

Michael Owen is a former Principal of the Uniting Theological Hall (Perth). Edited by John Sandeman

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Preamble debate: We are not free

Dear Editor,

I write with regard to the current discussion about the Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church.

Behind the Aussie attitudes of a "Fair go for all", and a confident, "Can do" attitude, there needs to be an acknowledgement from the outset that we don't come to the Preamble Discussion free from deep prejudices. Both White Europeans and Indigenous people bring baggage from the past. While we may want to theologially approach the issues and concepts based on reason, Indigenous people speak from a noumenal or pneumatological background largely based on the Dreamtime. If we all proceed to dissect the issues overlaid with an arrogant attitude of superiority the Holy Spirit and the moment of new progress and understanding will bypass us.

Recently a visitor, Kanishka Raffel, a converted Buddhist expounded Acts 10, a passage that embraces both means of revelation. I found the cross-cultural revelation of the inclusion of Gentile believers into God's Family to be helpful and relevant to the current preamble discussion.

In a vision God lowered a sheet of unclean animals and requested Peter to take and eat. Peter had been taught the food laws and with the air that he breathed he believed that Gentile people were "dogs". In a remarkable clash with his own long ingrained prejudices Peter's mind was transformed and he found himself saying, (v34) "I see very clearly that God shows no favouritism." God accepts those who fear Him and do what is right.

At the same time God sees the devotion of a Gentile Roman Officer. Cornelius, described as a God fearing, generous and prayerful man is used to send messengers to Peter. In turn Peter is summoned to the home of Cornelius. The equality of all people had been made clear, the worth of religious piety was also recognised but did this mean that all the ancient religions and practices of the nations were sufficient?

Raffel pointed out that while the food laws had served their purpose

there is a clear distinction here between religious devotion, the practice of religious laws and sacred ceremonies and the need for all people to hear the gospel. Peter needed to visit Cornelius. He was specifically sent to share the good news but not because he was superior. In fact Peter insists that Cornelius stand up because they are equals. Sadly while attitudes of European superiority have often tried to hijack the gospel in the past, it is clear that the Gentiles still needed to hear that peace with God was possible but only through Jesus Christ. It is as Peter spells out this Gospel to Cornelius that the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit, the gift of life. God may well be lowering the sheet again in our time to deal with old ingrained prejudices to show us the urgent need to announce the Good News, but with a humility that rejects arrogant judgmental attitudes of superiority.

Rev Ted (E.A.) Curnow
Langwarrin Vic

Dear Editor,

Congratulations on what I consider to be the best issue of Catalyst yet! (December 2009) I was particularly encouraged by David Lewinsohn's letter, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions", regarding the proposed changes to the UCA Constitution and its Preamble, and would like to add my comments to his.

[The new preamble] give[s] the impression that the UCA believes the god/s of the Aboriginal Dreamtime to be one and the same as the God of Christianity.

A simple study of Aboriginal Dreamtime stories etc shows clearly that there was great variation in the beliefs of the various tribes, and those beliefs are vastly different from those of mainstream Christianity. If our God was revealing himself to the so called "First Peoples", then why is there such variation?

My concern is that many of our UCA members may have little or no knowledge of Aboriginal Dreamtime stories, or their beliefs and customs. Indeed, many I have spoken to, who see no problem with the proposed changes to the Preamble, admit this

to be so. I would therefore like to pass on a little of what I have learnt over the years.

- Was, or is, the "Creator God" of the Aboriginals the same Creator God as the one the Christian Church has believed in for the past 2000 years and more?
- Which spirit was in the land, being revealed to the people?
- Which god was being revealed?
- Which laws, customs or ceremonies reveal anything of the God in whom Christians believe?
- In what ways did "the same love and grace that was finally revealed in Jesus Christ" sustain "the first peoples"?
- What particular insight did this love and grace give to them regarding God's ways?

I believe the answers to these questions, are

- The creator described in Aboriginal Dreamtime stories and the God of creation described in the Bible are definitely not the same god.
- The spirit being revealed to the Aboriginal people was definitely not the Holy Spirit.
- The god being revealed was definitely not the same god as the God of the bible.
- Also, I am unable to find any of the Aboriginal laws, customs or ceremonies which reveal anything of the God of the Bible, and
- I see no insight into God's ways revealed in the beliefs, stories, laws or customs of these "First Peoples".

What do we know of the creator as the Aboriginal tribes have depicted him? Much of the information below is contained in a small, easy-to-read book named "Aboriginal Myths: Tales of the Dreamtime" by A.W.Reed, 1978, Reed Books Pty Ltd., Balgowlah, NSW.

So what do Aboriginals believe? Here are just a few of the insights I have gained into the beliefs of Aboriginal people of various tribes.

Firstly, their beliefs are extremely varied. As Reed writes, "there is an essential disunity amongst all Central Australian tribes." (Pg 63) Below are just some of those differences.

Different Creation Stories

- Tribal versions of the many separate

from baggage

acts of creation varied enormously (Reed A.W. Pg 40)

- Many Aboriginal Dreamtime stories tell of the Rainbow serpent at work in creation. On the contrary, in the Biblical creation account, the serpent is not God but the devil!

- In “the Centre”, creation is attributed to “the goddess of the sun” or “the spirit of the sun, the Great Spirit, the Mother” (pg 40).

- Many Aboriginal tribes believed in some sort of a god or Father Spirit, known by such names as Biame, Nooralie, Mungan Ngour, Bunjil etc. (pg.13), who was involved in creation, but most show this Father Spirit as having only been one of many involved in creating the earth, land-forms, people, animals and birds etc. The Bible speaks of only one creator, God, and he had no assistants.

- Stories of Biame speak of his many unsuccessful attempts at various aspects of creation, and of the many mistakes he made in the process (eg Pgs 17, 41).

- Some tribes believe Biame is part of his creation, part of every single animal (Pg 20).

Many and varied gods:

In Aboriginal spirituality, there is a belief in many gods, e.g. Yhi, the “goddess of the sun” (pg 19), Bahloo, the Moon god (pg 24), and “the gods of the Milky Way” (pg 42).

- Some believed the Father Spirit only got involved in creation at the bidding of the Sun God.

Different Father Spirit/s, and different son/s, but no Jesus

- At least some of the Father Spirits had either one or two wives. (Pg 32).

- Most Aboriginal Father Spirits had one or more sons, none of whom was called Jesus nor did any, as far as I can see, resemble Jesus in any way *No Saviour, or Recognised Need for one*

- The idea of repentance from sin appears inconsistent with Aboriginal thinking. Blame, is consistently directed at others not at the self. Hence the system of payback, whereby if a man from one tribe is killed, that death must be avenged by killing a man from the perpetrator’s tribe. There is, it appears, no word in the Aboriginal languages for “sorry”, in the sense of taking the blame for one’s own wrong actions.

Therefore there appears to be no concept of repentance from sin, which is such a vital part of Christian belief. If one cannot admit to having sinned, one cannot repent and thus receive salvation through belief in Jesus Christ!

In view of all these points, and many more, it seems the god of creation revealed to the Aboriginals bears little or no resemblance to the God of the Bible.

The statement in the new Preamble that “The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers;” therefore appears to be seriously flawed. If a god was being revealed to the Aboriginal people, then I would ask, is this the Creator God of Christianity, or another god entirely?

We would do well to remember the warnings given to the Children of Israel when entering the Promised Land. They were warned to have

nothing to do with the gods of the land to which they had come. God’s anger was kindled when they took up the beliefs of other religions, eg. when they made the golden calf. God will not tolerate his people accepting other gods as well as him. He says “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.” (Ex 20:5) “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3).

The preamble continues, saying, “the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony.”

This statement poses difficulties also. For example, Biame (one of the names for the “Father Spirit”) is said to have commanded, and to preside over Aboriginal initiation ceremonies (Pg 27).

And what about such beliefs and practices as the acceptance of witchcraft practiced by witch doctors, curses (pointing the bone etc) and payback (avenging even accidental death by the intentional killing of a member of the offending tribe)?

For the UCA to indicate a belief that the Aboriginal belief system, laws, customs or ceremonies reveal any revelation of our God, or of the love of Jesus Christ, appears to be contrary to long established orthodox, or biblical Christian belief!

And so I ask, would a belief that Aboriginal Dreamtime stories, customs and rituals add to our understanding of God bring the UCA into compromise and cause it to cease to be a truly Christian church?

Yours in Jesus Christ’s love
Judy Harrison,
Scone UCA



Scripture sidelined

Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered from the truth.

This is how 'theology' gets done in the UCA. In the late 90's the Assembly Standing committee faced such a backlash from the problematic use of the Bible in Alistair Macrae's *Sexuality Report*¹ of 1997, that it set up a special task group of 11 members with one evangelical, Dr. Robert Iles, to represent 80% of UCA members and two later appointments including Professor Howard Wallace, that further skewed the committee to a liberal bias. The specified task was "... to identify the wide range of approaches to the Bible and emphasise the importance of respecting differences..."

The subsequent report *The Understanding and Use of the Bible* made its way to the 9th Assembly in 2000 which apparently, in a minute (00.29.02-03), commended the report to Presbyteries and Congregations. It isn't clear who officially received it, or what binding authority it has. Nevertheless, it has assumed authority by being included in Robert Bos and Geoff Thompson's 2008 collection of influential UCA documents, *Theology for Pilgrims*.

The task group held fast to the assumptions of Standing Committee's guidelines; there is no faithless reading of the Bible: only various readers with various intentions and methods from various cultures and who already "know who they are". That is the first great departure from the Basis of Union that acknowledges the Bible as, "unique prophetic and apostolic testimony". The authority of Scripture, which the committee repeatedly insists it intends to uphold, is undermined by this focus on readers rather than Scripture itself. It looks ironic.

However, the devaluation of Scripture is furthered by the inclusion of an indefinite article, "the Bible is a point of entry into the mystery of God's purposes for humanity..." The committee's devaluation of Scripture must be intentional.

As for the task, the group, then, only had to find a form of words for reading the Bible that might include all conceivable comers. Using the vaguest of novel terms that have no precedent in the long history of the Church's use of the Bible, the report described the reading of the Bible as "lively" and as a book to be "wrestled with". In doing so it's "story" can be allowed "to become our story" so that "we open our lives to wisdom and guidance beyond what is in

our minds and experience". This ensures "the same divine presence as is witnessed to in Scripture." In this way the Bible becomes a "conversation partner." This is the method the task group recommended for the Uniting Church to "reclaim the Bible" as an authority.

There is absolutely no reference here to Scripture itself, nor to the great confessions of faith named in the Basis of Union – the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration, the Heidelberg Catechism - that guide us to Scripture well read and to what single and consistent message of Salvation the Bible bears witness to.

The task group's method – with its repeated emphasis on learning "how to 'argue honestly' with the Biblical text" and to do so "with the assistance of friends in faith" leading to the hoped-for result that somehow differences will dissolve – looks much like 60's hippies, who gathered stoned, hoping to dissolve the aggravations and separations of sin. The task group's method throws back to the 19th century theologian Schleiermacher's analysis of Christianity as experience—but without a feeling of absolute dependence—just a search. Actual obedience isn't necessary.

The method didn't work among the experts of the task group; "impatience and frustration surfaced". Convener Dr. Hopgood, was it honesty or friends in faith that were lacking? Why on earth did you recommend it to faithful church members then?

The outcome is clear. These methods of Biblical reading cannot help faithful church members answer matters of morality—right and wrong—that this committee was supposed to settle.

And the substantive issues of Biblical interpretation that are needed here—such as the Bible's inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy—this report dismisses as "scholarly work on theological hermeneutics" and not its task.

It is Biblical interpretation that has determined the Christian Church's long confession and its stance on historical matters, and will determine modern matters of the roles of women in the church, divorce and homosexual practice.

This paper switches, neatly and without explanation, doctrine's authoritative role in interpreting the Bible for the authority of multi-various experience so that, "the community will decide which enactments of Scripture best demonstrate how Christ is taking form among us." In this way the central message of Scripture is sidelined. That is disastrous because it shoots the heart of the church's teaching about Scripture. It is gangrenous.

¹ *Uniting Sexuality and Faith : Final Report of the Assembly Task Group on Sexuality*
Paul Langkamp is an ACC member based in Seoul.

Australian unbelief

T. Frame, Losing my religion, University of NSW Press, 2009 Reviewed by Ian Breward

The book is remarkable for the breadth of its learning. It is a must read for anyone who cares about the future of the Australian churches. It is demanding in its detail, as well as in its broad critique, and a challenge to the complacent. Dr. Frame has written masterfully about the cultural changes, which have led some Australians to argue that religious views have no place in public life.

Frame wants his readers to understand why these changes have taken place and why some Australians rejoice in rejecting all religious convictions. He estimates what such changes might mean for Australia and wants Christians to recognise that belief is not without problems, and that religious communities need to realise they have had a part in making belief unattractive.

Religion has inescapable social and political implications. Its disappearance would have profound consequences for Australians.

The book is divided into three parts. Frame therefore asks firstly, has there been a shift to unbelief; then goes on to assess the strength of the factors causing that shift; and finally asks what are the consequences of that shift.

In part one of the book, leading up to 1900, he talks about the rise of religious belief and then its decline from 1901 to 2008. He suggests that Australia was reasonably religious until 1939, but notes the post-war percentage decline of Christians in the population and then the striking decline between 1966 and 1980, because of changes in social solidarity. He attempts to develop a theory of unbelief, suggesting that few Australians have actively embraced a godless philosophy.

In part two, he gives careful discussion of the causes that attract people to alternative worldviews. The range of the evidence that he adduces is admirable, not only in expected sources, but even covering blogs. According to Frame, Australian unbelief is more practical than philosophical, more personal than ideological.

In part three, he discusses Hitchens, Harris, Grayling, Onfray, Dennett, as well as Dawkins, suggesting useful questions about their assumptions. There is little evidence that books on atheism have increased the number of atheists. They have, however, made it easier for people to dismiss religious ideas.

He then turns to Australian critics of God—Phillip Adams, Terry Lane and Tamas Pataki. He argues that, by looking at their reaction to Jesus' resurrection, the validity of their method can be tested.

In this discussion, Frame shows how much is taken for granted, how religious history is sometimes misunderstood and how often critics can resort to ridicule instead of rational argument.

Frame recognises that Adams and Lane are serious

about dialogue, whereas he believes that Pataki is not. Christians must, in the light of such criticisms, rise to the challenge of better explaining the faith. "Much anti-theism begins with the premise that there is no God or that God must be disproved. This is not a neutral starting point or a position from which the claims at least of Christianity can be given a fair hearing."

Tolerance is a very important factor in serious religious discussion. He argues that the historic intolerance and state-sponsored coercion in the name of Christianity are at odds with the central tenets of Christian belief. The disestablishment of the churches in many countries and the separation of church and state in Australia have changed that, but there are still atheists who believe they

are disadvantaged, compared with Christians in Australia. While the latter no longer have such a privileged position as they once had, they must compete in the public contest of ideas, without expecting special treatment.

Frame, therefore, pleads for careful recognition of religious variety, for recognition of the limits of rationality and insists that we must not seek to protect religious beliefs from criticism. Privatising religious beliefs has serious dangers but Frame

suggests that if some anti-theisms became dominant, they could have some of the intolerant characteristics of Christian fundamentalism about opponents.

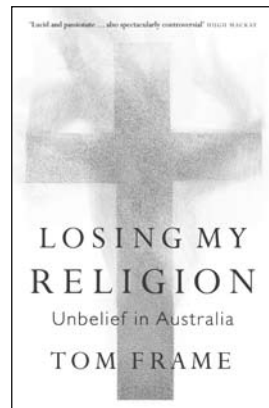
Valuable comments are offered on the varied meanings of the secular. He believes that a secular society is one that does not privilege any philosophical or religious viewpoint. All must be part of the voices respectfully heard in the public square.

Frame's concluding chapter is essential reading. Unless there is a dramatic change in the Australian situation, the Christian churches will be marginal players by 2025. In Frame's viewpoint, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Orthodox and Reformed will remain, but many local churches will have disappeared.

Denominations that are left-leaning will, he believes, be the first to disappear, because they do not present an attractive and credible alternative to popular culture.

The social consequences of this slippage will mean that governments must increasingly have recourse to the law and regulation, because the social cohesion inspired by the churches will have substantially weakened. Frame frankly confesses his own problems of believing and living the Christian life. Until otherwise convinced it is his deep conviction that Jesus' word and work and His dying and rising have transformed human history. If so persuaded differently, he too would lose his religion.

Ian Breward, is a ACC Council Member and Archivist for the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania



LOCAL CHURCH

A good place to drop into

It's called Newtown Mission; but this parish has an air of good old Methodism reports
JOHN SANDEMAN

Newtown Mission is a sheet anchor church for the ACC. This is not just because it provides space for Peter Bentley and the national office of the movement.

Rather Newtown is a living model of evangelical witness and social concern, bound together in a practical way. It's an old fashioned Methodist Mission, mixing evangelism and social concern, but seeking 21st century people.

Despite the influx of uni students and wealthy members of the gay community, Newtown in inner city Sydney is still home to many vulnerable people.

The mission used to have large wrought iron gates between the main chapel entrance and busy King Street. They mysteriously disappeared during the time of former pastor Rob Brookman. Now it is just a step from busy King Street into the chapel. Anyone can come in, and they do.

At the Thursday night drop-in service anyone does. A cross section of the old Newtown, the awkward and anxious, the lonely and the struggling join the volunteers led by compassion pastor Brian Unterrheiner.

It's a low key and welcoming time with a simple Bible talk, led on the night I dropped in by a Moore College student, who has forgotten all his big words as he walked up the street.

It's a simple, subtle talk and very interactive with questions that the audience answers enthusiastically. But it is good, plain vanilla Christianity.

There's a small interruption when someone gets a little anxious. There's a small flurry of volunteers. They're used to it and handle it well.

After the service, the hall next door welcomes us to a meal. There is plenty of conversation to go around as well as food. There's a nice buzz about



Newton Mission's revelation Ceiling draws visitors to the main chapel

the place. Friendly without the hype.

"This is our operating theatre" says senior pastor Doug Clements as he welcomes me to his office. "This is where they do his heart work".

And he has just finished praying/operating on someone with a life story of jail, jail rape, drug usage, 20 year of methadone who is living out a commitment to Jesus while wrestling with pain.

I gather that the operation was a success.

We discuss whether "evangelical" describes the Mission. It's not a word Doug shies away from, but he doesn't want the place to sound too "safe", to be a place for people who want a comfortable church. It's a church for people who want to take risks.

Risks, in engaging "our very diverse community, with many opposed to Christian values -gays, students, homeless and those challenged with drugs", says Doug.

"Our calling is to be a church that is sent into the surrounding culture."

Currently the mission has two strategies to connect. In addition to the drop-in meals the mission has commissioned Amanda Hallihan as "Art Evangelist".

Her job exists because of the "revelation" ceiling floating above the main chapel. It's a massive artwork that chronicles the book of Revelation. Amanda arranges tours and events that feature the ceiling, using it "to explain who Jesus is, or explain how the world will end, which is very relevant today to what people are talking about with the global financial crisis and global warming", says Doug.

But these are "come in" activities, that are centred on the Mission building. Doug wants to add ministries that plunge into the swirl of the the crowds that throng King Street and engage with the community at large.

Doug estimates the Sunday gatherings at 120 per week, 80 at the drop in and 150 Revelation ceiling visitors.

The third pastor, Andy Collins, is a

discipleship pastor looking after small groups, and households on mission property that live in community.

The Mission is looking after the Anandale Church property in a nearby suburb, which is seeking to develop as a creative arts hub for Christians and eventually a niche church.

The property helps support three pastors. "This is appropriate for a mission, but not for a normal suburban church" says Doug.

He is clear that an evangelistic mission like Newtown needs to draw in Christians and support from the more settled suburban churches. There a place for risk-takers at Newtown.

Doug is clear that Newtown Mission is back to the future.

He asks his elders "Are we a Church or a Mission? What's the difference?"

Here are some highlights of his charge to them:

"Are we wanting to be a Comfortable Church or a Mobilised Mission? "A "Mission" means acting with intent in all that we do. A Mission crosses

cultures, from one's own native, comfortable, natural culture where we have been brought up since we were children. It means moving into a culture that we are not familiar with; where we cross over from comfort to challenge, where we do not "do" the word naturally or by previously learnt intuition.

"Newtown Mission, has always been cross-cultural in its various life-cycles. ... Failure to evangelise and disciple people into Jesus' lifestyle will lead to inevitable decline and loss of the Kingdom of God.

"A 'Mission' captures the Great Commission of the resurrected Jesus. History shows a slowness to capture, embrace and enact the Great Commission. For many of us it is a long and tortuous journey to get out of synagogue thinking, a comfortable and predictable fellowship, with its exclusive operations, to see a risky, challenging and needy world outside the comfort and traditions of the church."

Five imperatives of Newtown

Doug Clement sets out his goals for 2010 this way:

I am recommending the FIVE IMPERATIVES FOR 2010 to run under the existing Mission Plan theme of "Growing up, and Going Out in Christ" in conjunction with the two Bible passages, from 2009: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 and 1 John 2:12-14, both relating to growing into maturity and leadership, and knowing the gospel and taking it to the wider world. Imperative has the definition "Not to be avoided or evaded, commanding, something that must be done, a verb of mood" (Macquarie Dictionary). There are five because they are a digital handful, are able to be captured in the mind, are portable, and able to be envisioned and evaluated against.

- Authority of God's Word:

To build an atmosphere of honouring the authority of God's Word and to develop an insatiable appetite for it.

- Deeper Discipleship:

To build pathways to deeper discipleship in Christ in the identified key groupings of people in the Mission

- New Leaders for Unmet Needs: To identify unmet needs in and around the Body of Christ, and to identify, equip and release people with potential leadership skills to service these needs

- Engaging the Street:

To encourage and facilitate engagement of the Main Street culture, by identifying, equipping and releasing those with the evangelist gift

- Distinctive Worship Styles:

To build a distinctive focus of expression for each of the five congregations in worship at Newtown

What happens next:

- April 17 - ACC NSW AGM. 10.45 am: Sutherland Uniting Church
- April 18-19 Visit by ACC Chair Rev. Dr Max Champion to Maitland West-side, and Hunter Regional Cluster.
- May 4 - SA ACC Committee 1 pm: Glenunga UC
- May 6 - 7 SA ACC Prayer Retreat: Halbury Emmaus Campus
- May 8 - SA ACC 'Dig Here' Regional Seminar: Halbury Emmaus Campus
- May 22 - Wesley Institute Sydney Conference: Drummoyne
- May 22 - Wesley Institute regional seminar: New Lambton UC (with ACC Hunter support). Speaker: Dr Holly Schut from Midlife Momentum, a ministry arising out of her DMin research. See <http://www.midlifemomentum.com>
- May 15 - 16 Kyabram Rally and Gathering with Revd Col Shenfield.
- May 31 - ACC National Council Teleconference
- May 29 - ACC Victoria Regional Seminar: Ashburton UC (Ashburton ACC Group)
- June 1 - SA ACC Committee 1 pm: Glenunga UC
- June 7 - 9 - Wesley Institute Ministry Workers Conference: Merroo Conference Centre
- June 18 - NSW ACC Committee 10 am: Haberfield
- June 26 - SA ACC AGM - 3 pm: Tea Tree Gully Uniting Church ('Dig Here' seminar before)
- July 6 - SA ACC Committee 1 pm: Glenunga UC
- July 24 - ACC Victoria Regional Seminar: Living Faith Church (Greenborough)
- July 26 - ACC National Council Teleconference
- August 3 - SA ACC Committee 1 pm - Glenunga UC
- August 20 - NSW ACC Committee 10 am: Haberfield
- September 2 -4 ACC Annual Conference and AGM: Camden Uniting Church
- October 5 - SA ACC Committee 1 pm: Glenunga UC
- October 16 - NSW ACC State Meeting: Liverpool UC

FILM



Viggo Mortensen and Kodi Smit-McPhee in *The Road*

Do all roads lead to God?

The film adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Cormac McCarthy novel *The Road* is a worthy addition to the growing list. Interest in McCarthy grew significantly after his novel *No Country for Old Men* was adapted for the screen and won the Best Motion Picture Oscar in 2007.

The film has Australian connections, with director John Hillcoat, a well-known artist in music directing circles. Hillcoat's previous film was the 2005 Australian outback western, *The Proposition* starring Guy Pearce. Guy Pearce has a small, but pivotal role in *The Road*, and the writer of *The Proposition*, singer and composer Nick Cave co-wrote the music for *The Road*.

The two main characters, 'The father' - played by Viggo Mortensen, and 'the boy' - played by Australian Kodi Smit-McPhee are literally on the road, hopefully heading for a better world on the coast. The context is post-apocalypse, though we never learn what caused the destruction. The ground has been scorched, dust and ashes appear over everything, and human beings have mostly become barbaric savages, with little pretence to conventional morals and manners. People scrounge for clothing to keep warm, and sleep where they crash from exhaustion. Death comes cheap, and money cannot buy your life. Gold, silver, jewels - who can eat these? There is no lasting treasure here. For a generation raised on TV images of 9/11, the Asian Tsunami, Bushfire disasters, Hurricane Katrina, and most recently Haiti and Chile earthquakes, there will be ready identification, but the apocalyptic landscape Hillcoat has created

will also remain in your mind simply because it has such a striking absence of colour.

While at one time the boy gives thanks to the people for food they have found, there is no waiting for grace until all are served—the motif for most people is eat or be eaten. One bible reference appears graffiti-like near the start of the film (Jeremiah 19: 6), highlighting the slaughter that has taken place. The idea for this came from Hillcoat's experience in looking around New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, where biblical graffiti had been painted on homes and buildings.

Where is God in this world?

Certainly Cormac McCarthy had a view on this and is reported to have said that the film adaptation needed some more of the God references. I found the film to highlight more of a questioning of God, or perhaps even paying a bit of 'lip service' at times, and I wondered whether this catered more to the secular outlook, for a society which believes God was never really involved?

There are touches of common humanity though, and I often thought the role of the Good Samaritan was never far away from consideration. The boy is the one who wants to help others on the road, and even offer more than seems reasonable given the circumstances. He is mostly untainted by the evils that humans have succumbed to, and wants him and his father to be seen as 'the good guys'. His father is caught between offering help, and maintaining the righteousness of his mission, which is to keep his son safe and alive. If others must die so his son can eat, then that is

simply how it is. The father says at one point "All I know is the child is my warrant and if he is not the word of God, then God never spoke." Later when reflecting he says "If I were God, I would have made the world just so and no different. And so I have you... I have you." Interestingly, one person they meet is named Eli, and the discussion they have around the campfire certainly promotes the idea of 'the boy' being special or called, perhaps like Samuel.

The treasure promoted in this film is essentially an affirmation of humanity, and the occasional display of goodness. I found the film version firmly focused on the father and his love for his son. The film emphasised this more than the subtleness of the novel, highlighting the common theme of the sacrificial parent - going the extra mile for your child to ensure their survival.

There is clearly a personal element as well for McCarthy who was born in 1933. *The Road* is dedicated to his son, John Francis McCarthy from his third marriage, who is a similar age to the character 'the boy'. I wondered if the film also reflected McCarthy becoming an older man, re-considering his role in life, especially thinking about the values he should pass onto his young son.

One dominant theme for the father is need to have a fire burning within and to pass on the fire, again an aspect which people have linked to parts of Jeremiah.

The Road production company hired a Christian PR firm to liaise with churches and Christian groups and promote the film in the USA. After the success of *The Passion of the Christ*, Hollywood knows targeted church promotion is a key road to making even more money.

Clearly many critics see strong connections and ideas, and while I agree there are some striking links, connections can also be made with humanist philosophy, perhaps illustrating more the concept that in Hollywood it is better to appear to be all things to all people. In any case, this film will certainly challenge you, some images will remain with you long after the film, and it could also provide an opportunity to discuss questions about love and life, parenthood, and yes faith.

Peter Bentley

Rated MA (violence, and strong themes, occasional coarse language)

Peter Bentley is the executive consultant for ACC.