

# ACC Catalyst

ASSEMBLY OF CONFESSING CONGREGATIONS WITHIN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

## Hope in the West

DR ROBERT BRENNAN

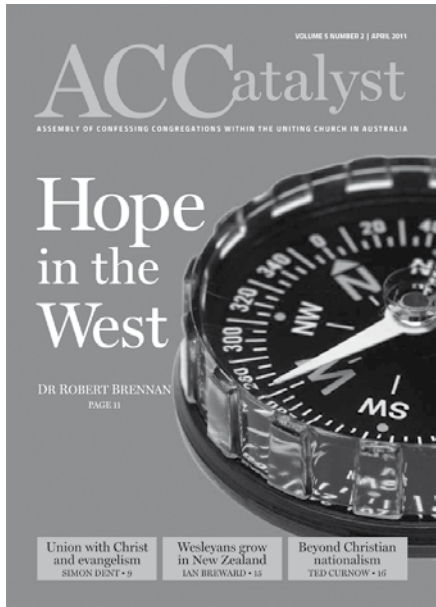
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Cover illustration Mik122/istockphoto.com

## EDITORIAL

# Thoughtful hope

Staying sane when everyone else thinks you are mad is a challenge. In this issue of *ACCatalyst* Dr Robert Brennan gives us hope that in a post-modern West the Christian message will still make sense. That is, we can still subscribe to a thoughtful Christianity with the help of our God. More than this, that our message can make sense to others and that they can be won to Christ.

Simon Dent provides an example of how we can be confident that God will help us evangelise. His essay was written to accompany a set of

evangelism DVDs produced for the ACC Evangelism Commission. Being united with Christ, he writes, it is through His will we are motivated to speak.

Ted Curnow rounds out the edition with a punchy warning that we should not allow Christianity to fade into a type of “emotional nostalgia”. In taking stands in the public square he recommends avoiding the other extreme of an overblown militancy that imagines that our zeal can force God to change the nation.

*John Sandeman*

*ACCatalyst* is published by the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc.  
 ABN 73 794 518 715 ARBN 128 001 785.  
 Incorporated in NSW. INC 9887628.  
 Liability of members is limited. Opinions expressed in *ACCatalyst* do not necessarily reflect the official views of the assembly.

Executive Editor: Max Champion  
 Managing Editor: Peter Bentley  
 Editor: John Sandeman  
 Office: 2 Erskineville Rd, Newtown NSW  
 02 9550 5358  
 Website: [confessingcongregations.com](http://confessingcongregations.com)  
[accoffice@confessingcongregations.com](mailto:accoffice@confessingcongregations.com)

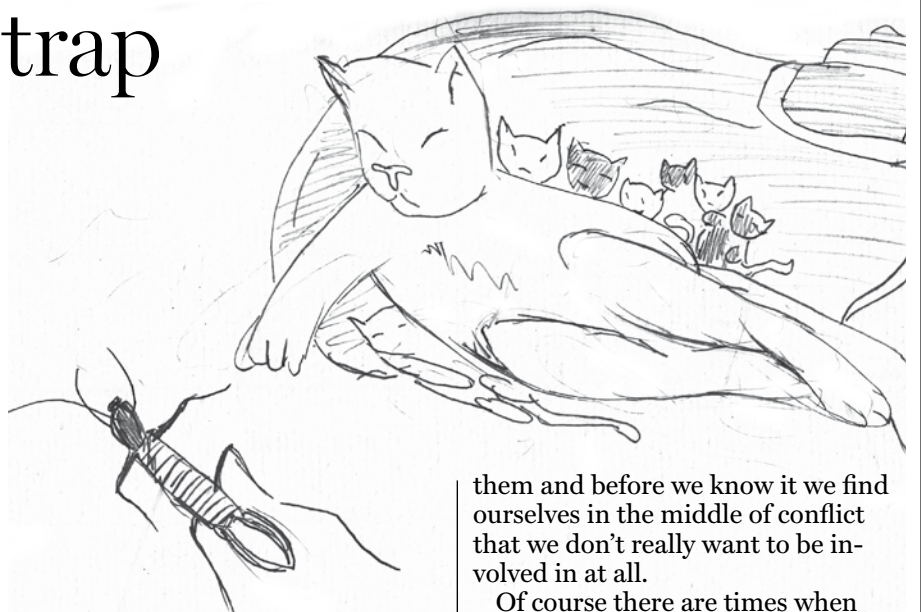
Email for *ACCatalyst*:  
[catalysteditor@confessingcongregations.com](mailto:catalysteditor@confessingcongregations.com)  
*ACCatalyst* is available as a subscription only (\$35pa) or by becoming an ACC Supporting Member (\$35pa concession or \$60pa full)  
 Printed by Brougham Press, Scoresby Rd, Bayswater Vic. ISSN 1835 2073

# The earwig trap

No one warned me about the earwigs in Peterborough! I have discovered that there are lots and they seem to like hanging around the kitchen sink in the manse and goodness only knows what they are chewing up in the garden. I felt as though I needed to take action so I made an earwig trap (of sorts) and put it in the garden. I wasn't sure exactly what you're supposed to do to catch earwigs but nevertheless it was worth a try.

The next day I peered in to discover that I had caught five moths. This was unfortunate because I didn't really want to kill any moths. They next day I discovered that I had caught one earwig—and two more moths! So I had to weigh up whether it was worth continuing with my trap when I was killing a lot more than I intended. It's often the case that, in our attempts to deal with something the destruction we cause is a lot more widespread than the original target, like when my uncle had a snake in the garden and destroyed numerous plants in his determination to get the snake.

We can be destructive creatures, can't we? Farmers with chainsaws set out to trim a branch and end up cutting down a tree.



Hilary Sandeman

Farmers with Roundup who wipe out the rose bushes in order to kill half a dozen weeds that could have been just as easily pulled out by hand!

This same tendency is often there in the way we treat each other. We have earwig moments when someone does something that makes us angry or upset and we feel the need to set the situation to rights. However by our actions we can end up causing destruction that extends far beyond the original issue. Other people get dragged in, frequently without our intending to involve

them and before we know it we find ourselves in the middle of conflict that we don't really want to be involved in at all.

Of course there are times when things have to be set right with other people. Sometimes we need to take action against the earwigs of life. Paul tells us to “Be angry, but do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26). We need to deal with things the right way - with prayer and love and self-control. It's a tricky business. Building the perfect earwig trap takes time and thought, and dealing with people takes even more time and thought. But it's worth it to get things right!

We have a God who deals with the earwigs in our own lives and makes us the people he wants us to be!  
*Robyn*





Meet the future

## Young church leaders emerge at ACC camp

What do you get when you cross eighteen young church leaders with a group of servant-hearted mentors and teachers?

The answer in February was the Emerging Leaders Award camp at Longwood in the Adelaide hills. For four days our young leaders were treated to the best teaching and coaching the ACC could provide, as ACC SA sought to bless them—and through them, their churches—with a novel approach to leadership training.

The camp was designed to teach in key areas like spiritual formation, leadership development, teamwork, volunteers, organisation, motivation, public speaking and social skills. A highlight was the sharing of testimonies, as each camper spoke of their personal love for Jesus and was prayed for by a colleague.

Key speaker for the camp was Rev Tim Hein, himself a young church planter and lecturer at SA's Uniting College for Leadership & Theology, where he was recently appointed as Director of Christian Education and Discipleship. Craig Bailey, also from the College as their Director of Leadership, spoke on educational opportunities and conducted an elective on team building.

Rev Dr Max Champion, National Chair of ACC, travelled from Melbourne for the camp and offered

some important insights into the role the ACC has in sustaining its member churches in our post-modern culture. Max also led a popular elective on theology for living.

Speaker for the dinner was Neil Andrew, former Speaker of the Federal House of Representatives in Canberra, who gave the awardees many insights into the delicate mix of faith and politics.

A team of dedicated ministers and lay leaders served our awardees, leading small groups, managing the camp, providing food and, yes, doing the dishes.

But the real joy of this camp was in the young people themselves. This was an amazing gathering of our future leaders. From students studying medicine, law, chemistry and microbiology to shearers, creative writers and child protection officers, this was a cohort with serious levels of knowledge and talent. And added to that was a zeal for the Lord and a passion for his church that saw each one immersing themselves in the opportunities given them.

A great sense of camaraderie developed among the awardees through their interaction in small groups, worship and prayer times and fun activities. They gained healthy respect for one another and quickly learned to share and grow together.

## The Thelma Pendlebury prize

My name is Hiroshi Tse: I'm studying a Bachelor of Music at Wesley Institute alongside with a Bachelor of Theology and I'm in my third year. Music and Theology have always been my passions and I've come to Wesley because no other college is able to integrate both of these.

I'm in the Core Leadership Team of RICE Youth Sydney, an evangelistic event we organise annually in the Sydney Entertainment Centre in partnership with around 50 youth groups around Sydney.

I yearn to see the youth of the world really passionate and delighting in the word of God and truly anticipating the Lord's return. I aspire to teach Old Testament Theology and Apologetics as well as Music, to equip the next generation.

*God bless!*

*YBIC Hiroshi*

Hiroshi's prize is named in memory of Thelma Pendlebury, whose steadfast faith, generosity of spirit, good humour, and encouragement greatly enriched the members and national councils of ACC and its predecessor bodies as an executive member and treasurer.

## Fihaki suspended

*The Cairns Post* has reported that Rev. Dr Hedley Fihaki was suspended on full pay by the Uniting Church for three months on Sunday 27th March from his congregational duties at Cairns Emmanuel.

This decision follows the determination of the various UCA committees concerning the continued operation of the congregationally-based Good Samaritan facility for the homeless at its previous Gattton Street location. The Synod Newspaper *Journey On-Line* has reported on this matter and *ACCatalyst* referred to this previously in the February 2010 issue. The current *Cairns Post* story can be found in the news link: [http://www.cairns.com.au/article/2011/03/29/156421\\_local-news.html](http://www.cairns.com.au/article/2011/03/29/156421_local-news.html)

ACC encourages members to pray for Hedley, his family, the congregation, the interim minister (Rev. Graham Whybird), the Moderator (Rev Bruce Johnson) and the Presbytery.



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## PUBLIC SQUARE

BY PSEUDO-MAXIMUS

### Silence on Marriage

The following exchange between Rev Dr Max Champion, National Chair of the ACC, and Rev Alistair Macrae, President of the UCA is printed here as a matter of public importance.

The issue of civil union or 'marriage' between same-sex couples has been, and is being, hotly debated in the public square. Due to the present composition of Federal Parliament it will not fade quietly away.

The question is whether, at this time, it is wise for an uncharacteristically reticent UCA to be silent on this vital public matter?

*15 March 2011*

Dear Alistair,

I am writing on behalf of the National Council of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia.

The Council is disappointed that, amongst the many public statements that you rightly made on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia before, during and after the 2010 Federal election, nothing has been said about the sanctity of marriage.

In view of the strong statements made in the media by the Australian Greens and others in favour of enshrining same-sex 'marriage' in Federal legislation, this omission is surprising.

Members of the UCA would have welcomed your re-affirmation of the declaration of the Eighth Assembly (1997) that marriage for Christians "is the freely given consent and commitment in public before God of a man and a woman to live together for life". This splendid statement, which is the foundation of the Report of the National Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the UCA

(1999), is central to maintaining good relationships with all of our ecumenical partners.

Your silence on this fundamental doctrinal matter is most regrettable, particularly as the UCA did not think it was necessary to make a submission to the Federal Parliamentary Committee on the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2009 after Senator Hanson-Young sought to move an amendment to the Marriage Act.

The church's silence leaves the unfortunate impression that neither you nor the agencies of the National Assembly think that marriage between a man and a woman is important enough to reaffirm and defend or that you are anxious not to offend those who are promoting same-sex 'marriage'.

In view of these concerns the National Council resolved:

"To request that, in view of strong representations being made in the Australian community for 'Marriage Equality', you make a public statement to re-affirm the UCA's fine statements upholding the sanctity of marriage as the union of a man and a woman".

The Council further resolved:

"To request that, as a matter of highest urgency, you circulate the statement to the secular media, the Uniting Church media and the UCA's ecumenical partners".

It is our sincere hope that you will issue this statement immediately so that members of the UCA, the Australian public and our ecumenical partners will be in no doubt about the UCA's position on this crucial matter.

I look forward to your reply at the earliest opportunity.

Yours faithfully,  
Rev Dr Max Champion

*28 March 2011*

Dear Max,

Thank you for your letter dated 15 March 2011.

I acknowledge that during the election campaign I did in fact issue a number of statements. These comments generally expressed dismay at the disappointing level of political discourse by our political leaders rather than speaking on particular issues.

As you indicate, the Uniting Church's view on marriage has not changed and you rightly quote its most recent articulation from 1997. I consider our position to be widely known within our church, to our partner churches and more generally; and I therefore consider it unnecessary to issue further statements.

I will, of course, make the UCA view on marriage known as and when appropriate.

In considering whether or not to make additional statements into the general discussion about civil unions for same sex couples there are two principles that guide me.

First, whether the Assembly has expressed its mind on this subject and clearly it has not.

Second, whether the contribution that I might make to a particular debate might be misused or misunderstood within a complex debate. I consider that this is a serious risk in the context of the current public debate on civil recognition of same sex couples, whether as "marriage" or otherwise.

Australian society has come a long way towards embedding respectful recognition of the civil rights for people from a diverse range of backgrounds. I do not believe that the Uniting Church has an objection to that exploration continuing.  
Yours sincerely, in Christ,  
Rev Alistair Macrae

## Dangerous Harmony

Australia celebrated Harmony Day on 21 March—surely a welcome and necessary sign of respect for all in our multicultural, multi-faith society! But all is not as it seems. Dan Ryan, an Australian lawyer with 10 years work experience in China, says “living in harmony is a mixed blessing” (*Week-end Australian*, 12-13/3, *Inquirer*, p3).

“Harmonious Society” is perhaps the most well-known slogan of today’s Chinese Communist Party. Although suggesting, peace, love and understanding, it has become synonymous with suppressing dissent.

Silencing dissent is not confined to China. ‘The truth is, while superficially sweet-sounding, the idea (of harmony) is illusory and utopian.’ ... ‘Attempts by the government to try to build its idea of harmony will almost always trend towards restricting freedom of speech or narrowing the parameters of debate. Increasingly governments in the West seem to believe the need to preserve some ill-defined sense of harmony trumps an individual right to forthrightly discuss controversial subject matter’.

Ominously, the same mind-set permeates the corridors of ecclesiastical power. In the UCA harmony is built on merely accepting the diversity of beliefs and life-styles among members. Dissent is not only not tolerated but it is silenced. The total absence of reports in UCA media on what is being said in the community and within the UCA on public issues like euthanasia, abortion, and same-sex unions is proof that the harmonious church cannot tolerate dissent.

Who would have thought a church that is proud of dissent on policies on refugees, indigenous reconciliation, the environment and business wealth would silence debate and vilify dissenters within its own ranks?

## Courage the Japanese Way

In the *Herald Sun* (17/3, p34), Miranda Devine reports the effect of the terrible earthquake and tsunami on the Japanese people.

“No looting, no whining, very little panic, if any, and no demands for some mythical ‘them’ to fix it”.

Despite dismay at the death and destruction, queuing for food and water, and anxiety about radiation from the stricken Fukushima nuclear plant

there is “no swearing or exclamations to be heard on YouTube videos. The common response among fatalistic people used to misfortune is ‘Shikata ga nai’ (it can’t be helped).”

No doubt resilience in the face of tragedy is a common trait, as reactions to the Christchurch earthquake and Queensland cyclones show.

But perhaps we have much to learn from a culture formed by a mixture of Shinto Buddhism and Confucianism—traditions very different from the mixture of Christian faith and enlightened reason found in the West.

Where Western traditions are

naively optimistic about our ability to overcome suffering and forge a utopian future for humanity, Japanese culture expects suffering and knows that it must be borne.

We could save ourselves the fruitless, and faithless, task of trying to discern the finger of God in calamities if we paid more attention to the suffering love of God and Paul’s injunction to ‘bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ’ (Galatians 6:2).

The Christian’s calling to bear the burden of other people is more than stoic dignity, but it certainly isn’t less.

## IAN CLARKSON

### Heaven and Hell

*Who goes there?* At the average funeral the assumption is that the deceased is off into the great golf course, yachting marina, quilting glory or whatever their chief desire here on earth. A young person asked me, if, after a while in hell a person wanted to upgrade, would that be possible? The rich man who went to hell in Jesus’ parable didn’t ask to get up to heaven, he just wanted more comforts in hell. The thief on the cross wanted to go where Jesus was going. Heaven is the monopoly of Jesus. Heaven is His presence, hell His absence. It is as simple as this: Do you want to go to heaven? On the day of Judgement Christ might say to us *thy will be done!* Heaven is the consummation of a believers earthly prayer, *Thy will be done*. Hell is the consummation of earthly indifference to Christ.

Our hereafter depends on what we are after here! As the lovers desire for his beloved is consummated in marriage so the desires of the lovers of Christ are consummated in heaven

*What is hell?* When Geoffrey Bull, missionary to Tibet was asked by a Buddhist monk how big is hell he replied; *about the size of a pin-head*—that’s all it would need to be to house all the shrivelled souls that have rejected the love of God.

But it takes the new heaven and a new earth and perhaps an expanding cosmos to house the gifts and blessings which God has in store for his saints, who through childlike trust in his Son, go on to a world of unimaginable good-

ness and wonder; of responsibility in great works, travel, music, and ecstasies of moral beauty!

*Powers of heaven.* Christ wants us to do and enjoy greater works. Look at what He did, like walking on water! For a human being to have those powers in the new heaven and earth without exploiting them for selfish advantage or to gain advantage over others requires true transformation of a life. Look at the destructive effect of our power gifts now, like sexuality—man perverts that into adultery, sodomy and thus foretastes hell.

The gift of repentance—surely the greatest opportunity on earth—bids us receive the resurrection power today and the resurrection body tomorrow. That resurrection change is inward now, in preparation and will be outward then, in completion!

*Its Politics?* No external forces to control behaviour, just the force of unforced grace. All will be inner-directed according to the law of the Spirit of God. Here the longing to know and do more of His will and law. This necessitates free choice. The New Covenant—*I will write my laws on their hearts*, functioning fully. Hell or the Second Death is God’s good way of dealing with the problem of the rejection of His great universal last resort work of mercy. Lewis puts this insight:

*God in his mercy made the fixed pains of hell. That misery might be stayed, God in his mercy made eternal bounds and bade its waves no further swell. God in his mercy made the fixed pains of hell.*



# Discussing the gospel

I enter the discussion aware of how important it is.

February's contributions were largely inept. The only one which I hold with great respect is that of Gordon Dicker, but then he for a long time was a theological educator and administrator so we immediately recognise his rhetoric. Neill Reid and John Sandeman could do with a decent theological education.\*

Which leaves us with Ian Weeks: "Paul describes the Gospel as being about Jesus' physical death, physical burial, physical resurrection" (page 9 of *ACCatalyst*) which with a physicality foreign to Paul he seems to base on 1 Corinthians 15:1-3. I will return to this. Meanwhile we should note Paul's real liveliness and vitality at every turn. For an example of this see 2 Corinthians 7 (REB).

It is a truism that Paul's statements (his kerygma) about the Gospel are usually found in the first halves of his letters. I will take notice of this with 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and his first letter, 1 Thessalonians, in the hope of clearing up the matter substantially.

In 1 Corinthians 1:17 (NRSV) Paul shows that rather than anything else God sent him "to proclaim the gospel" and in a way that was really down to earth rather than in heightened rhetoric for he knew God would work among ordinary people. He puts it graphically: "So that the cross of Christ would not be emptied of its power" (1 Corinthians 1:17 NRSV). For the pre-eminent religious matter is the cross: "for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God." (18) This point is repeated in verse 23.

The crucial text is the following:

"When I came to you, brothers and sisters, ... I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (2:1,2 NRSV)

## No answers

In reading the various views on the subject (*ACCatalyst*, February 2011), two thoughts came to mind: "Judge not that ye be not judged", Matt 7:1, KJV) and a statement I read some time ago in *The Devil's Advocate* which said in effect "leave theology for the theologians to debate because ordinary believers only seek to be assured that their sins are forgiven".

Then, I returned to page 7 to read a heading which effectively sums up my feelings: "It's official: 'No right or wrong answers'".

Ken McPhan  
*Spence, ACT*

This would appear to be Paul's Gospel. His core.

The message of Christ crucified is put in the middle of cosmic reality: "None of the rulers of the age understand this; for if they had, they would

not have crucified the Lord of Glory." (2:8 NRSV)

We will survey the opening chapters of Galatians, Philippians and 1 Thessalonians (Paul's first letter) to corroborate the above.

In Galatians Paul is annoyed that the recipients of his ministry have so quickly turned away from the Gospel they were taught for there is no other Gospel. He castigates those who

'distort' the Gospel and calls for a ban on that (1:6-9 REB). He claims the Gospel is of divine origin alone (11,12).

Then, the crux of the matter, that concurs with 1 Corinthians is: "You stupid Galatians! You must have been bewitched—you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly displayed on the cross." (Galatians 3:1 REB)

In Philippians there are mentions of the Gospel in 1:5, 1:12 and 1:16. Then Paul says the Gospel is to be

the norm for Christian conduct (1:27) and obviously this is the foundation for Philippians 2:6-11.

As we know Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is brief and to the point. Again he brings the Gospel into play with lowly words (1:5). Then he is pleased that the Thessalonians are equipped to work with the Gospel (2:4). And Paul indicates how he has come to bring the Gospel "frankly and fearlessly in great opposition" (1:2 REB).

All this shows that Paul does little to define the Gospel—probably because he is so engaged in proclamation – and that when he does it is a message of Christ crucified. Resurrection is obviously in here somewhere and I will indicate three places where it is found:

1. Philippians 3:10 "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (NRSV)

2. Acts 17:31,32

3. 1 Corinthians 15:1-3 as we originally mentioned it. Here is verve and vigour. The physicality that Ian Weeks used is not Paul's. Paul does not speak of the flesh but of the "body" and the "incarnate".

So when Paul speaks of the Gospel he speaks at the same time of Christ crucified. In all of his thought there is a mention of resurrection too. So the Gospel in Paul is an ellipse of cross and resurrection.

Rowan Gill

NOTE

NRSV = New Revised Standard Version, the leading American Biblical text, 1989.

REB = Revised English Bible, the premier British text, 1989.

The NRSV is a revision of the long-standing Revised Standard Version.

The REB is a complete revision of the New English Bible: both the REB and the NEB were published by the Oxford University Press and the Cambridge University Press.

*\*As this targets me I have left it in, but ACCatalyst will not normally publish ad hominem comments.*

Editor



# Finding Abundance in the Bush

*Abundance In The Bush*

By Linda Watt.

Dark House Print Design

Available from [dusterduck@hotmail.com](mailto:dusterduck@hotmail.com)

Reviewed by Bob Imms and Anne Weeks

If you are looking for some deep philosophical thought then this little book may pass you by. Linda has woven real life experiences into her farm life and they “warm the cockles of our hearts”.

Farm animals such as her horse, dog, things with wings and things with motors and even the pathway all come alive as she shares with us her living experiences. It’s not a mystery story, but there is a lot of history in it. The cover has a picture of a well-worn pathway leading into an open forest. This picture helps to make us feel at home even before we start.

Jesus used down to earth things to lead His listeners into the deeper things of God. A saying that I remember from my very early years of training in the Ministry was “A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning”.

So often His followers understood the earthly story but missed the heavenly meaning.

He was very disappointed with His disciples when they shared with Him in feeding the five and four thousand but then were deeply concerned that there was only one loaf in the boat as they travelled back to Capernaum.

Even in our day we still cannot see the wood for the trees. Down through the years our theologians and biblical scholars have turned what I like to call the simple words of Jesus into complicated theological statements.

It is good to read down-to-earth meditations about farm-life and simple everyday experiences that draw us close to Jesus and the Heavenly Father.

If you want to have your minds stirred and your lives and hearts warmed, then read this meditation written from the heart.

Some may feel that Linda’s messages are over simplistic but they

## Example devotion: Dinky-di tracks

Unpressured, cattle will follow along in single file, often walking along the same path, forming well-worn tracks or ruts. ‘Tracks’ form through our minds in a similar way. If we go down the same line of thinking often enough, a pathway forms and becomes a rut that gets deeper each time we use it. That is great stuff if the track is a dinky di pathway (with true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy thoughts (Philippians 4:8). It isn’t so good if that rut is a load of bull dust.

If we have bad thinking ruts, we need to chuck a Uie.

To reroute cattle, you put up a fence. To reroute wrong thinking, find out what the Bible says about your dodgy thinking and replace the lies with God’s thinking. If you always think how you’ve always thought, you’ll always get what you’ve always got. You have to start thinking differently if you want to see different results in your life.

Will you start refusing to go down the old ruts in your mind?

Think biblically often enough and you will get some new mind ruts! It’s called “renewing your mind” (Romans 12:2). Renewing your mind is the key to changing your life. Can you see the dodgy ruts in your mind? What Scripture will you use to set those paths straight? God will help you with that.

May all your mind ruts (and cattle tracks) be good ones!

*...lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6*

“Father, in my wrong thinking, I have been living by my feelings instead of by Your Word. Forgive me. Please help me find verses of scripture I can use to rebuild tracks of truth in my mind.

Thank You Lord, Amen.”

*From Abundance in the Bush by Linda Watt, reviewed on this page*

touch us where life is real.

*Bob Imms*

*Rev. Robert Imms is a member of the ACC Southern Cluster and is well-known for his devotional resource Seeds for Harvesting on the ACC Website.*

*The ACC website now has three ministers providing devotional and pastoral resources: <http://www.confessingcongregations.com/resources/devotional/>*

I used a devotion from *Abundance in the Bush* at Leisure Group at Grenfell Uniting Church, when Ian and I were ministering there last Spring.

Leisure Group is a weekly hall full of people doing crafts, gentle exercise and playing cards. Many are not followers of Jesus yet. During morning tea, one of the Christian leaders gives a talk.

It can be hard to find resources for audiences like this—but *Abundance in the Bush* is a series of one-page

stories that are interesting for non-church people yet share a Christian message. I found it very easy to choose one of Linda’s stories, and read it out.

Each page finishes with a Bible verse and a prayer, so I printed these out and gave each person a bookmark with them on to take home. Praise God that many found the message touched them.

As we were in the country, the themes were very familiar, but Linda describes things so clearly, that I think anyone would get the message. Many of her stories are about her beloved horses, so if you are a horse-lover, this is a “must read”!

Thank you, Linda for allowing God to speak to us through your daily life.

*Anne Weeks*

*Anne is married to Ian, the Minister at Belrose Uniting Church, Sydney NSW and is a member of the ACC Board of Communication.*

# Worth reading in full

John Dickson, director of the Centre for Public Christianity tackled the subject of gay marriage in the most public of forums—The ABC—recently.

In a piece for *Unleashed* on the ABC website he made a plea for a calm approach.

“This week’s Mardi Gras parade reminds us how far Australia has come since the dark days when gays and lesbians were legislated against and openly vilified and when all conversation about the rights of individuals to form their own views about sex were shut down. We no doubt have further to go before homosexuals fully experience the acceptance in society they deserve, but some of us are wondering whether the noble march toward the end of discrimination has inadvertently damaged our moral imagination and limited the public conversation.

“Contemporary minds are fixed to think of only two possible camps on the gay issue. Either you are pro-homosexual and therefore open-minded, kind and respectful, or else you are a mean-spirited, homophobic bigot. You are either for me or against me. No space is given to a third group, much larger than the current discourse allows, made up of people who sincerely want an end to discrimination and who show nothing but care and respect toward gay friends but whose deeply held convictions prevent them from endorsing same-sex practice. This last clause may get the blood boiling for some, but perhaps that underlines my point. Some of us are unable to imagine how you can care for some-

one and disagree with their lifestyle at the same time.”

When published at the ABC website Dickson drew a predictably vituperative response. Despite this his piece is a model of tackling the subject of gay marriage at a time of national debate when passions are aroused.

Read it all [http://publicchristianity.org/homosexuality\\_new\\_conversation.html](http://publicchristianity.org/homosexuality_new_conversation.html)

## Geoff Thompson on Progressive Christianity

In an article titled “Progressive Christianity: Testing its Arguments” published in *Uniting Theology and Church* February 2011, from Trinity College in Queensland, and written by the College principal, Geoff Thompson, the article does just what its title suggests.

It’s a long piece but here are some of *ACCatalyst’s* highlights:

On Spong Thompson writes: “Every single move in this argument would be contested within the world of contemporary historical-Jesus scholarship. Yet, even if his historical reconstruction of Jesus is plausible (and, in principle, there is no reason to deny this possibility), what are Spong’s actual intellectual gains?”

“The whole structure of the argument can’t help but set off alarm bells. If the church’s pre-modern theology and doctrine—including even the gospels—can’t survive the scrutiny of modern thought, how

does the decidedly pre-modern, first-century Jewish rabbi with decidedly pre-modern, first-century Palestinian Jewish preoccupations survive any better?”

And on some contemporary Australians Thompson has dug out a great quote: “I note, in concluding, that it is not necessary to be theologically orthodox to be unpersuaded by the arguments of PC. In the recently published *The Australian Book of Atheism*, Alex McCullie briefly surveys the writings of Borg, Crossan, and Spong, as well as those of the Australians Val Webb and Francis MacNab. He explores PC’s key ideas about God, Jesus, the Bible and ethics.

“Whilst sympathetic to some of the movement’s ethical aims he observes that it has ‘effectively denuded Christianity’, and he suggests that in denying the Christ of faith (his term), it has ‘jettisoned the raison d’être of Christianity’. So, this atheist critic asks: Why bother with any form of Christianity? ...

“It would be inappropriate to generalise from this one atheist response to PC, but nor can such a response be ignored... It is also a reminder to progressive Christians that there are limits to the persuasiveness of high-pitched rhetoric and constant appeals to ‘contemporary scholarship’.

“The question, ‘Why bother?’ is put to all of us, and deserves the most careful arguments that can be offered.”

Thompson promises to follow up with an article examining the claims of orthodox Christianity.

Read the whole essay [http://www.trinity.qld.edu.au/data/UTC\\_Essay05.pdf](http://www.trinity.qld.edu.au/data/UTC_Essay05.pdf)

The screenshot shows the ABC website interface. At the top, there's a banner for "THE DRUM UNLEASHED" with the text "Robust Community Debate". Below the banner is a navigation menu with links: "News Home", "The Drum Home", "Archive", "Unleashed", "You Said It", "Contributors", "Photos", "Video", "Blogs", "Polls", and "Contribute". A search bar is visible on the right with the text "Search ABC Ne". Below the navigation, the date "4 MARCH 2011" is displayed. The main article preview features the headline "Time for some nuance between the gay and the god-fearing" and a photograph of a crowd of people. A "Find More Stories" button is located above the photo. On the right side, there are links for "Open for Com", "Read our terms and", and "Join us on Fac".



# Union with Christ

## The Foundation to Discipleship

*Simon Dent* on how Christians share in building a new creation. This essay is from ACC's new evangelism DVDs.

**A**fter the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) Jesus told his followers, "Go and do likewise". It is a story about a traveller who has been beaten up by robbers and is avoided by all the so-called respectable people, only to be shown practical grace and love by one who did not fit the existing religious model of a "righteous person". It is a story about discipleship: how to live as one of God's servants.

Ultimately however it is not just a story about a good man from Samaria. Jesus himself says "no one is good but God alone" (Luke 18:19). It is not just a story about a good man but the good man. It is not just a story told by Jesus, it is also a story about Jesus. It is a story about Jesus, as the Good Samaritan, coming to bind the wounds of a humanity beaten up by sin and death when all the religious systems in the world could only contribute to the problem.

Jesus actually does something about the lostness of humanity in his death, resurrection and ascension on our behalf. He does something for humanity that no religious system can do. That is to bring real healing, reconciliation and life. So when Jesus says, "Go and do likewise", it has a far deeper significance than mere good actions. Jesus is saying to his followers, "Be like me. In me, be grace

in action, bring reconciliation to the world, and serve the Father for the sake of the world. In all you do bear the hallmark of love."

It's a pretty big ask isn't it? Well, yes if Jesus has gone off to heaven leaving us to get on with it. Fortunately He hasn't. He remains the ultimate Saviour and worker of the Father through the Holy Spirit. Being his disciple or living like Jesus lived means we dare not rely on our own religious programs to bring God's salvation plan into action but on Him whose work is effective and redemptive. Our actions can never be good enough. Jesus has to show up!

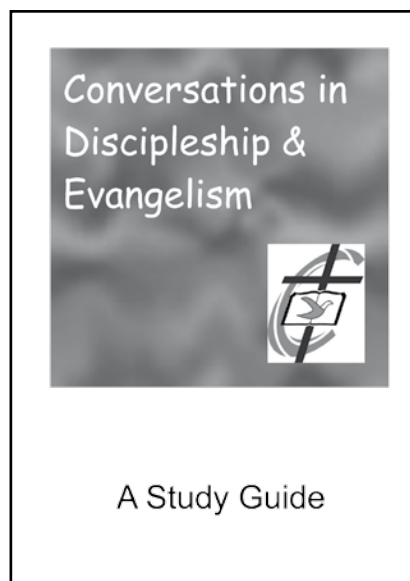
Our efforts must rely on Jesus and his covenant will: whether they are renewed personal devotions; a mission program done through the church; a leader's attempt to bring congregational alignment to a strategic plan or

works of justice; or the renewal of the creation (which includes persons being made new).

These activities may have a place in Christian discipleship; however, in themselves they cannot do anything. Unless the Lord builds the house the labourers build in vain.

Our necessary discipleship is reliant upon the real ongoing activity of Christ, our ascended Lord, represent-

ing us to the Father and pouring his favour upon us. He is the worker in salvation and reconciliation. Our hope and the hope of all creation is that God Himself is on a mission—to us and through us. As the Good Samaritan



did what he could do, so we do what we can, but our doing is a sharing in the ultimate doing that Jesus does on our behalf.

This statement might sound a little complicated. Perhaps the best way of understanding this is by picturing Jesus as the chief worker in a workshop and we stand with Him as apprentices. He has the blueprint of the Father. As the “Master Builder”, who has the joy and ability of the Father to fulfil his plans, the ultimate success of the project remains with Him.

**W**hat is the project? The Father’s plan of new creation; a new heaven and new earth; of remaking something holy, good and useful out of that which was broken and wrecked by sin. The main work has been done already. Jesus did that work while we dozed off in the lunch hour!

Now He calls and equips us to share in building the new creation by pouring his own Spirit into us. He allows us even to put our own slant on the work. It gives Him great joy to see us creatively contributing, all the while making sure that our contributions align to the Father’s plan. We need not worry about that though. That is in his hands. He simply calls us to get on with the fun of the building. Such is the gift of discipleship.

We don’t even really know what the final project will look like. But we know we share in the Father’s delight in making all things new through his Son. The work is not in our own name but in Jesus Christ’s, however it does have our distinctive mark in it. In fact, Jesus even offers it up to the Father in our name so that the joy of pleasing the Father may be ours.

Discipleship means we share in Jesus’ own ministry to his Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ ministry is a work based on the Father’s love for the creation. Jesus can fulfil it because He knows the Father’s plan, loves the Father and loves what the Father loves. Only He knows these things and He makes them known to us because He is in us revealing them to us.

We are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to know the Father and also share in this ministry of love with the Son, Jesus. In fact, knowing the Father through Jesus as children makes us his followers. In Christ we have the freedom to do, like Christ, whatever it takes—to join in Christ’s reconciling work and to build for the kingdom of God.

**S**o what does all this mean in terms of our Christian discipleship? What does all this “theology” have to do with the real work of getting on with evangelism, spiritual practices, attending church, confession and proclamation, the sacraments, doing acts of service and love in the world?

In Ephesians 3:8-12 the Apostle Paul writes, “Though I am the very least of all the saints, grace was given me, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access

with confidence through our faith in him.”

Paul was struck that, though he was the least of all the saints, grace and power from God were given to the church to reveal this plan to everyone. This revelation was so that all the powerful forces that operate in this

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## **He takes what we offer Him in loving obedience and He transforms it according to the great project of reconciliation.**

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world might know that the Christ has come and is bringing this plan to fulfilment. How does Christ do that? Through the Church! The wisdom of God is being made known through the church. What is that wisdom? The wisdom is Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:22-24).

We may be as equally dumfounded as Paul!

It means that we are called to be single-minded in our hope. We are united to Christ. In fact Paul tells us we have died and we no longer live but Christ lives in us (Gal 2:20).

While we may still physically live, our accountability before God and our ability to bring about fruit for his Kingdom rests in the faithfulness of God who sent Jesus not only to die in my place but also to live and work in my place.

This is what he is doing now. There is a working of the Spirit of Jesus in Christians now that will assure us that our work will not be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

This assurance does not call for passivity. On the contrary, Paul says, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” (1 Cor 15:10). For He takes what we offer Him in loving obedience and He transforms it according to the great project of reconciliation.

This understanding will affect everything:

Prayer:

Our prayer is freed up and empowered because we know that Christ Himself intercedes for us and with us through the Holy Spirit. He takes our prayers, imperfect as they are, and transforms them to perfection.

*Simon’s article is a resource in the study guide that accompanies the DVD “Conversations in Discipleship and Evangelism”.*

*The DVD discusses 5 areas of discipleship and evangelism:*

- 1) Disciples are called;*
- 2) Disciples are sent;*
- 3) Disciples participate in Christ’s ministry;*
- 4) Disciples and discipline;*
- 5) Disciples of the Gospel.*

*These studies are ideal for use in a Bible Study, or to be handed around to congregation members for individual reflection. All financial congregational and group members have received a set. Both the studies and DVD’s may be copied, provided it is not for profit. The Study Guide is available on the ACC website. The DVD and Study Guide are also available to purchase from the ACC office for \$10.00 a set (post included).*

*Simon Dent is the Minister at Clare Uniting Church (SA)*

Dr Robert Brennan  
on winning back  
a society hostile to  
claims of truth  
and accustomed  
to being negative  
about God.



Mik122

# Wasteland & Hope

IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN SOCIETY

*O my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me.  
... Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?  
Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?  
Jer 8:18-22*

*I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the*

*man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men--the testimony given in its proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle--I am telling the truth, I am not lying--and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles. 1Tim 2:1-7*

One of the hardest parts of being a Christian in our contemporary society is to have anyone take us seriously. Jeremiah laments his home being reduced to a wasteland. For many Christians, particularly the older Christians it looks as though our society and culture have become a spiritual wasteland.



**T**here is a movement in the church and in society to see faith as somehow about people struggling to get to know some great god out there through various spiritual journeys. This idea is expressed often enough in various Synod magazines. To claim that there is a specific way to come to know God as Paul does to Timothy is not very popular. Paul's story or conventions for speaking about faith are called into question. Consider for moment, that rather than struggling to find God, it is a personal God who says, "Here! Look at me in this particular way." Is knowledge of God determined through our debate, discourse or conventions or is it determined by its object—that is, by the God who makes himself known?

The real question is who or what are we in relationship with?

**Can we win them back? The answer is yes, but it is not through using the right programs, not using the correct the old hymns or the new ones or the latest ministry fad. Rather we need to clearly understand God and what the Christian faith is as well as listening carefully to our society.**

How do we come back from this? Can there be change, is it even possible? Or will the Christian church go whimpering off into the night? We need to win our society back one heart and mind at a time and eventually our community. It can happen because the God we follow is compellingly attractive, awesomely powerful, frankly confronting and lovingly transformational. The answer involves prayer, love, action and addressing the

questions of others. All are needed and all in that order. These are the things of which Paul speaks in his letter to Timothy and even today our society has little trouble with the first part—prayer and love in all things for all people. Our society is becoming increasingly hostile to the unique claims of truth expressed in the second part of Paul's encouragement to Timothy.

Can we win them back? The answer is yes, but it is not through using the right programs, not using the correct the old hymns or the new ones or the latest ministry fad. Rather we need to clearly understand God and what the Christian faith is as well as listening carefully to our society. I was prompted to write by someone asking how to deal with the overwhelming negativity of our society to serious consideration of the Christian faith. I was initially going to use Nicky Gumbel's *Searching Issues* and some input answering the new militant atheism, but realised that if many of us are going to be able to address the concerns and questions raised by some of our well-educated offspring and grandchildren that I need to move out

of the 1980s and 90s and into the present. While it is important to be able to give clear and logical answers to these common questions such as "What about other religions?" "Why do bad things happen?" and "Is religion evil?" there is a trend gaining support among the educated of our society and of our churches that we need to address. If we do not do this then we will find that after we have completely and logically answered a serious concern, that they simply dismiss what they describe as a value-laden discourse.

If we claim truth we are faced with the crushing pain of secular, and anti-religious and anti-Christian society. It is eminently worth having a discussion about this approach. Post modernism or post-structuralism pervades our society and some parts of academia in the humanities, influences policy makers, some of our leading intellectuals (inside and outside the church) and even directly affects school curricula and journalism. By this description any logical argument about the shape of the specific way that leads to a relationship with God becomes itself something to be rejected as suspect, as it promotes "exclusivity." This could be a valid argument against such an orthodox case if such post-structuralist analysis deserved credibility and was not highly contested.

**P**ost modernism and post-structural analyses criticise any claim of absolute truth as the holdover of outmoded social conventions. This position holds that how people use their discourse or the conventions they use to talk about ideas somehow shapes their reality. The claiming of absolutes is seen as naïvely clinging to old conventions that need to be challenged.

One recent example was the manner in which the recent visit of Rt Rev Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, who was dismissively described in the secular media as radical and controversial and thereby to be dismissed as a legitimate voice in the current multicultural debate. While he is an evangelical Christian, he grew up in Pakistan and knows and respects the followers of Islam. I heard him speak last year in dialogue (not debate) with a local leading Imam. They were both frank and honest about differences while also agreeing that contemporary secular society is not the friend of either faith or any other for that matter. They both claimed that there are objective truths which are either held in common or with which both disagree.

However, in our secular media he was pigeon-holed. "I know your story. I know what kinds of things you will say and what shape your logic and reasoning will take." It says, arrogantly, I know what you think and will stop listening to or even evaluating carefully what you have to say.

My philosophical approach is probably most similar to Critical Realism in that I share the harsh opinion of Critical Realists for Post-Structuralism including some who even go as far as seriously questioning its legitimacy as an academic discipline. I have constantly found that post-structural analysis lacks precision because the analyst's ideology obscures the details they attempt to study, often in ways that cannot be overcome. The end result is often emotive, confused and misses important

detail, offering simplistic and incorrect descriptions of complex and important events and issues. Post-structuralism has led to the propagation of false myths, and erroneous conclusions. This has happened plenty of times in the study of history and in the study of the philosophy of science where concerns of the present are read as motives into the past or blatant anachronisms are used. I would have to agree with the physicist Anton Sokal who said “the problems ... of the human sciences quite generally, are too important to be treated with such sloppiness. On the contrary, they require a great intellectual rigor. The “hard” and “soft” sciences are indeed in the same boat. Flirting with relativism and irrationalism won’t lead us anywhere.”

**S**ure post-structural analysis can be applied seemingly plausibly to any given human study, whether in the social sciences, theology or physical sciences to highlight the shape and problems with their discourse and conventions.. But again I would agree with the sentiment of Sokal in criticising the application of this type of thought. “Anyone who believes that the laws of physics are mere social conventions is invited to try transgressing those conventions from the windows of my apartment. (I live on the twenty-first floor.)”

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## **Critical realism is closer to truth but I want to hold back on that a bit in the light of what Christ might reflect on this way of looking at reality.**

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The protagonist in Ian McEwan’s recent bestselling novel *Solar*, who is the most morally bankrupt, corrupt and lazy scientist easily dismisses post-structuralism (or would if he could be bothered to make the effort.) That is a common criticism that post-structuralism is sloppy and intellectually lazy.

Critical realism is closer to truth but I want to hold back on that a bit in the light of what Christ might reflect on this way of looking at reality. N.T. Wright, New Testament scholar and Anglican Bishop of Durham also writes on this topic:

“... I propose a form of critical realism. This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence ‘realism’), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation

between the knower and the thing known (hence ‘critical’).” *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 35

That is to say, that what is real is objectively real and should shape what we say about it rather than the other way round. There are a number of scholars who hold to this approach and are worth consulting including Michael Polanyi, T. F. Torrance John Polkinghorne, Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke and Alister McGrath.

Why is making a distinction important? The answer is in outcomes and the ability to clearly understand the world and society around us.

If we look at an answer to the question “Is religion evil?” Post-structural analysis would typically say “yes”. That is when what is evil in religion can be identified by



challenging its “normal” conventions. A more critical realist approach would say “yes when people attempt to hold it as true in its own right (self-righteousness) and act independently of God (which is as good a definition of sin as you can get)”.

The difference may not seem significant until you look at how to address and correct the problem. For post-structuralism: this evil can be overcome by challenging conventional thinking and speech, challenging absolutes and by being open and inclusive. Critical

# HOPE

realism: by humbly submitting to the God who confronts us and transforms us.

In post-structural discourse analysis, absolutes, judging and confronting people with the choice as to whether they are in or out are treated as evils to be avoided. Everything you thought was a certainty even that which is moral and good gets challenged, sidelined or even called evil if that overcomes the injustice or evil highlighted by the analysis. In critical realism it is the same challenges and absolutes that are the means of bringing people to change, to salvation and to the transformation of the person and the society in which they live.

One offers a faith, which while open and inclusive, is not compellingly attractive—you can take it or leave it. Rather than challenge and transformation—there is ongoing play with words to redefine what is seen as evil and to avoid offence. Various forms of good speak are offered in place of bad speak. This process leads to spin and continually placing issues before the community that they do not want to hear and disagree with, until the change is affected. (push polling)

**W**hy is what is evil and morally questionable often defended as good or as an alternate choice? That is why. The path of intellectual relativism must be rejected because it ends up calling evil good. It is like Karl Barth's shock and conversion away from Protestant liberal theology during WW1. Barth loved liberal theology.

He was soaked in it but abandoned it because it the cream of those Christians who believed it ended up calling evil good. All of his teachers affirmed WW1 and his teacher von Harnack wrote the Kaiser's declaration of war. Barth saw a serious failing in what they believed because those he considered good Christians came to call evil good. Post-structuralism leads good Christians to call lies and self-deception and political Machiavellianism good. Often what is left in the policymaking process is a Nietzschean exercise of the will to power—that I exert my power and my influence over others by what ever means. It even goes as far as the people doing this not being able to recognise that that is what is happening.

Even though contemporary militant atheism operates with a poorer understanding of what it is criticising than at any time in history it is this kind of poor theological thinking which fuels support of some of their claims.



This essay has begun to deal with what to do with other people's questions. There are plenty which are often still the same as those of decades past: "Do you really expect me to believe *That!*?" "Is religion foolish?" "Are all Christians hypocrites?"

When our answers to these questions are dismissed as merely being our story, our discourse, a result of our conventions, way we need confront, the arrogance, ignorance and rudeness naming it for what it is, demanding they listen to us as we listen to them.

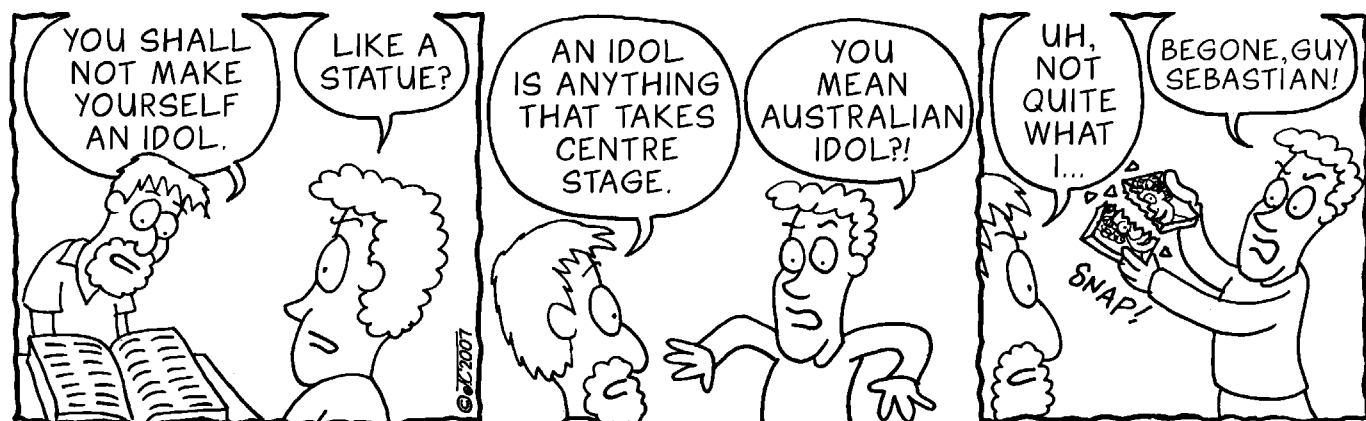
Continuing to argue logically and rationally as we would normally do is a waste of time. We need to confront them with the fact that there are better ways of understanding the world than they use.

**No one is won over by the intellectual slam-dunk**

We were told to know them by their fruit (Matt 7:20) and Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No' (Matt 5:37); anything beyond this comes from the evil one. However, no one is won over by the intellectual slam-dunk. We need to commit all people and every situation as Paul says to Timothy—to prayer.

Continue to love, and to act on that love so that people will meet the real God in Christ who is compellingly attractive, awesomely powerful, frankly confronting and lovingly transformational.

*Rob Brennan was the Qld state coordinator for ACC up until last year and Secretary for EMU Qld before that. The topic of Dr Brennan's doctoral thesis is Augustine, Inspiration, Perfection: A stumbling block to the dialogue between Theology and Science. His PhD is from Griffith University.*





# A new Church

R. Waugh, *A new church for a new century. East City Wesleyan's early story, Auckland.* ECW, 2010.  
Reviewed by Ian Breward

This is a book of considerable importance for ACC members. It is a vivid account of the building of a new congregation, after a minister was expelled from his congregation by disgraceful liberal machinations in the New Zealand Methodist Conference.

They reneged on their agreement to permit the formation of an Evangelical Synod. Over 20 ministers and some 1500 members left the Conference in 1999 and the following year; these Evangelical Methodists formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church.

Waugh tells the story of the new congregation that he and his supporters established. He is an outstanding minister, passionate about the life-changing Gospel. Theologically well-informed, active in bearing Christian witness in the community, ecumenically engaged and a respected historian on NZ aviation, Waugh is also deeply committed to the Wesleyan heritage and its contemporary importance. With one third of the congregation born outside NZ, they reflect Auckland's diverse ethnicity. They face the same problems of ministry as other denominations and congregations, for a high percentage of Kiwis are no longer interested in historic Christianity. His narrative is a reminder of the challenges Evangelicals face in building a congregation which lives the Gospel and is evangelistically effective....

In their first decade, ECW has developed varied worship, youth work, members' education and community involvement, as well as providing offices and administration for the new denomination, of which Waugh is now Superintendent.

His development of strategic links with the Wesleyan Methodist Church in the USA has been very important in the growth of the denomination.

Initially they met in homes, schools, halls, until they reached a point where they needed their own building. Their financial resources were limited, for the Conference had denied them any financial compensation.

Eventually they found a building that cost just under two million dollars and then had the task of renovat-



East City Wesleyan

William Chong

ing it, so that it was suitable to their needs. That cost \$420,000, to which was added voluntary labour worth \$300,000.

The strength of the congregation was shown by the completion of the building while Waugh was absent in the USA for doctoral study. The development of their building has enhanced their strong mission emphasis and their commitment to give at least a tenth of the congregation's income to missionary work, as well as contributing to community projects in imaginative ways.

This is more than a conventional church history. It is attractively written, splendidly illustrated and tells the story of the faith journey of many in the congregation. There are many issues that are relevant to Australians, not least the placing of evangelism at the heart of the congregation's life, without sacrificing Christian involvement in the community, or exaggerating their success. They have had failures and are very aware of how much yet remains to do in their ministry of service. Dr Waugh has placed us in his debt by his spirited account of the congregation's first decade. I hope many in the ACC make time to read it.

*Ian Breward*

## How to buy this book:

*The ECW church has kindly made copies of East City Wesleyan's early story available at a very reduced rate. Please contact the ACC Office. Cost: \$10.00 (including postage in Australia).*

*Please make cheques payable to ACC, or use credit card details (Visa and Mastercard only)*

# Culture War Rage

Ted Curnow on why we should avoid “emotional nostalgia”

**I**f your response was anything like mine when I learnt that social networking played a significant role in the demise of President Mubarak of Egypt, a full scale realisation that we are living in a world of rapid change and amid complex issues hit me like a ‘ton of bricks’. This is also true of changes raging across Australia and in the Church.

Over more recent years there has been a growing evolution of para-church groups representing different Christian perspectives in what we might call the market place of public values and secular social engineers.

Naming a few of the plethora of groups we could list Saltshakers Inc., Culture Watch, Family First Party, Australian Christian Lobby, Family Voice Aust., Australian Centre of Christianity and Culture, and Endeavour Forum.

I willingly signed the “Canberra Declaration” recently because it provided an opportunity for me to express my support for religious freedom, human life, marriage and family. Generally speaking I have always had strong sympathies for a conservative position that prophetically calls Society to account, rather than conforming to a trendiness that simply upholds political correctness. This is why I respect those Apologists of our time who, after investing in sound research, are not afraid to speak up.

In recent days however the socio-political stakes have been raised with the Labor Party seeking to placate the Independents and Greens. On the basis of returning democratic rights and self-redetermination to the ACT, the Labor party has approved and made not only euthanasia a certainty but it has also opened a back door to same-sex marriage and the further homosexualisation of society.

The “Marriage equality Bill” also introduced by the Greens that attempts to amend the Marriage Act and to redefine marriage by saying that gender in marriage no longer matters has also now intensified debate. Federal MP’s have been asked to consult electorates about their views on same sex marriage and there is growing pressure from the homosexual lobby and the mainstream media to pass the Bill. This in turn has prompted Christian groups to step up opposition with open letters, social networking, petitions and numerous appeals claiming that Christian values are under attack.

On the “Canberra Declaration” website the “Good Marriage” campaign invites people to watch a You Tube video clip explaining Christian opposition to the “Safe” Schools Coalition Victorian programme that promotes sexual diversity and homosexual life style via primary and high schools. At the same time to coincide with the period of Lent an international “40 Days for Life” campaign has been launched as a period of intensified awareness-raising. Among other

things it states that permissive abortion laws will murder over 4,600,000 babies over the 40 day period of Lent!

While all of this is alarming, what is equally alarming is the aggressive intent and political scheming of minority groups to change the fabric of our Society. In fact the manner of this opposition lends weight to the opinion that beyond party politics there is a darker, more sinister conflict of a spiritual nature taking place.

In broad terms our nation does have a Christian heritage from which our important democratic right to speak up and contribute has come, and as Christian people who care we are obligated to constructively participate in that process.

Having made that clear however, the complexity of our age now raises the question of how Christians should publicly participate. Some things are obvious. An emotional nostalgia that simply seeks to preserve past values in themselves does nothing to represent a Christian position. Neither is an angry defensive reaction helpful nor a sensationalism that seeks to recruit by inflaming people’s passions.

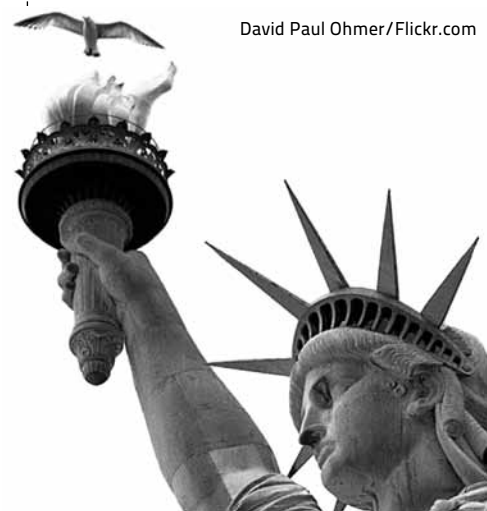
**H**ow do Christians respond faithfully and with integrity?

Firstly, Christians need cultural sensitivity. Media ratings in themselves should alert Christians to the fact that their values, rather than being the norm are increasingly radical counter-cultural values, alongside of those of the average Aussie.

This fact means a sort of Christian nationalism that assumes that Australia is or has been a “Christian country” is uninformed. To display an Australian flag on a letterhead with the words, “Protecting Australian Values” and to promote the “protection of Australian marriage” while well-intentioned is simplistic and misleading.

While it is true that many of our institutions and values have been derived from a Christian heritage there is no such thing as a pure Christian culture and neither is Christianity culture bound. It finds expression in many different social contexts and rather than primarily setting boundaries Christianity enlightens and enhances the best “life qualities” of a culture.

Secondly, to imply that there are connections between Christianity and militancy is not helpful. While we may legitimately pray for our nation it is not helpful when a Christian group assumes that their task is to “Change our culture for Christ” while another invites people to contribute to a “fighting fund” or to engage in a “battle to preserve marriage.”



Thirdly, Christian integrity needs to avoid reverting to the weapons of the opposition. One group tends to make God

## A sort of Christian nationalism that assumes that Australia is or has been a “Christian country” is uninformed.

dependent upon our zeal and resources by claiming that our effort will help to bring in the Kingdom. Another says, “God is helping us help Him to help this nation.” While this is a catchy slogan it overlooks the fact that our Sovereign God is already the God of the Nations. The gospel calls us to evangelise our opponents not to crusade in order to change their values or to “protect Australia’s future.”

We do not need to embrace an anxiety that adopts a rear-guard defensive position. We certainly need to learn to network in order to be informed, creative and articulate, but let us not forget that ultimately the gospel has an authentic power that can speak for itself as it changes people’s lives. The key values of the ‘Australian Prayer Network’ and those adopted by ‘Transform Melbourne’ appear to be closer to the marks of the Kingdom as we encounter the complexities of cross-cultural ministry today. These are the keys of servant-hood, humility, prayer and unity.

Kabl1992



## From Manhattan to Canberra

Some good ideas DO come from New York. The Manhattan Declaration published in 2009 was the brainchild of evangelical leader Charles Colson, Princeton University law professor Robert P. George and Beeson Divinity School dean Timothy George.

It’s in the form of a petition that affirms the right to life, objects to gay marriage, and supports freedom of religion. [www.manhattandclaration.org](http://www.manhattandclaration.org)

It was followed by a similar Westminster Declaration [westminster2010.org.uk](http://westminster2010.org.uk) and then a Canberra Declaration. [canberradeclaration.org.au](http://canberradeclaration.org.au) Unlike the Manhattan original which roped in well-known church leaders before its release, the Canberra Declaration was issued by a relatively small group.

The Manhattan Declaration has passed 480,000 signatures. The Canberra Declaration has attracted support from 30,000 people.

The Manhattan Declaration may be historical because its app is one of two evangelical apps removed by Apple from the iTunes store. (The other is Exodus Ministries, an ex-gay group.) This means that the app is not available for the iPhone unless the phone has been given the “jailbreak” treatment to unlock it.

This may be a straw in the wind concerning access by Christians to some forms of new media. It may be that Christians should set up their own systems as the Internet scene changes.

The Australian Christian Lobby is providing the opportunity for another on-line petition on marriage. You may care to highlight this in your circles.

<http://www.makeastand.org.au> “With the battle over marriage set to dominate the political landscape in 2011, an online petition in support of marriage by ACL now makes it easier than ever to add your voice to this crucial debate” the ACL announced.

“The petition, to the Senate, calls on politicians to respect and defend the current definition of marriage in the Marriage Act as “the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life”.

As Ted Curnow points out in the main article on this page, exactly how Christians navigate between “historical nostalgia” and quietism in their response to social changes they oppose, will be crucial in the next few years. *John Sandeman*



# A Season of Natural Disasters and God's grace abounding

### *Peter Bentley's round-up*

As all readers would be keenly aware, many parts of Australia were affected by fire, severe rainstorms, flooding and cyclones. Queensland had several weeks of continuing problems, first with the floods and then Cyclone Yasi in early February.

The Queensland Government declared 19 Local Government Areas across Far North Queensland natural disaster zones, caused by cyclone Yasi. The councils identified as being hit by the cyclone include: Burdekin, Burke, Cairns, Carpentaria, Cassowary Coast, Charters Towers, Croydon, Doomadgee, Etheridge, Flinders, Hinchinbrook, Mackay, Mount Isa, Palm Island, Tablelands, Townsville, Whitsunday Wujal Wujal and Yarrabah.

All these areas include Uniting Church congregations and groups, and for ACC it is the area with the base of the Queensland membership.

Several Uniting Churches had damage to buildings (mainly roofs, gutters, windows and grounds), including Tully and Mission Beach, Ingham, Townsville (ACC Member and Minister Anne Harley at Mt Louisa House of Praise Church reported water damage and extensive tree damage on their property—see the photo); Aitkenvale, Wulguru (ACC Member), and Cairns (ACC has Emmanuel Church as part of its fellowship). Church members were among many in Tully who suffered damage to, or lost their homes.

The Queensland Synod *Journey* Newspaper website has provided helpful updates and a prayer focus: <http://www.journeyonline.com.au/>

ACC has an "ACC group" (a gathering of members) at Mission Beach, Tully and Cardwell within the UCA Parish (Tully and District). This was the local area that suffered the most damage from Cyclone Yasi. It was encouraging to read the following message on the Tully and District Uniting Church Facebook page:

"Thank you to all of those who are



**Cyclone damage at the Mt Louisa House of Praise youth centre**

praying for us and our community. Our church has suffered some damage, but still has a roof! We have broken windows, water damage and some guttering damage. Please continue to pray for those in Tully and surrounding communities as there are so many people who need help."

### **Pitching in**

Our Church Council were keen to launch a flood appeal, and it was agreed that we should endeavour to give to a fellow ACC member congregation. This would also mean that our money would be distributed on a "person to person" basis rather than as a part of one of the major charity appeals.

The Tingalpa Uniting Church, located just 3 Km south of the river, on the south-eastern side of Brisbane, was contacted, and their Church Council Chairman Ray Thomas was keen to use our donations to assist what they hoped to do with their own resources. Our appeal was launched on Sunday 16 January, to run for two weeks. We were able to raise \$2 933.35, and to forward this to Tingalpa for their use as desired. We thank the Lord for the generosity of our members. *Bruce Fairhall Treasurer St Andrew's Uniting Church, Richmond NSW*

**Cardwell** suffered significant cyclone damage and then some storm surge damage. There was no UC building here, and the Anglican Church is now an outdoor church with the pews (bolted into the floor) the only visible part remaining.

**Ingham's** Shane Kammermann (Minister and ACC Council member) reported "that the town has many damaged buildings, but not as severe as further north. Many trees are down. It is amazing how many missed buildings, or caused minor damage. Some have flattened sheds etc. too. Flood levels in the Beamerside and Halifax districts have apparently been the highest for many decades according to some of the old locals. We are tired and feeling under it a bit. But we have a house (manse) without damage. The Ingham Uniting building has roof damage and water issues inside."

**Innisfail** Members will remember that ACC Member church Innisfail bore the brunt of Cyclone Larry in 2006, so this time they were very relieved, but there is still extensive damage and clean-up and ongoing issues with power and damage caused by debris removal, mainly trees and damage to older and less well-built structures.

Pray for those who have suffered the loss of their homes, pets and animals, and personal effects.

## 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
- to share their faith and respond to current issues in the church and the world
- to develop their congregations as vibrant expressions of the Good News.
- to 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 other 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/>

or by calling the office on (02)

9550 5358. Interested congregational contacts please contact the office or see the website. [www.confessing-congregations.com](http://www.confessing-congregations.com)

Membership rates for supporting members: Concession (single or couple): \$35.00 pa. (financial year basis) Full (single or couples): \$60.00 p.a

For further information contact by email: [accoffice@confessingcongregations.com](mailto:accoffice@confessingcongregations.com)

## What happens next:

- April 16 – Wesley Institute Annual Seminar – Speaker: Dr Craig Keener, Duke University. 'Encountering the Historical Jesus of the Gospels' (This is also part of a course Dr Keener is teaching 14-16 April 2011). Venue: Drummoyne, Sydney.
- April 29: ACC SA Movement Executive Meeting
- May 12 – 14: ACC SA Prayer Retreat 'Connection' – Halbury Emmaus Campus
- May 16: ACC National Council Meeting (Teleconference)
- May 27: SA ACC Movement Executive Meeting
- June 24 - 26: Combined ACC and Hope Network Marriage and Family Gathering and Seminar: Port Augusta
- August 29–31: Oxygen 11, the First National Conference for Pastors and Leaders, in Redfern, Sydney. Speaker: John Piper (ACC NSW is helping to sponsor members to attend – please contact the office. For more information see: [www.kcc.org.au/Piper](http://www.kcc.org.au/Piper))
- 1 September 8–10, 2011: ACC National Conference, at Brimbank (Anglican Church, East Keilor, Melbourne). The conference commences at 1.30 pm on Thursday 8 September 2011 and concludes with lunch on Saturday 10 September.

## Consider making a Bequest to the ACC

It has been wonderful to see the support and hope evidenced for the ACC appeal, and in particularly the enthusiasm for a National Director. Some members have indicated that they would like to make a larger contribution to the future work of the ACC, but are not presently able to do this, and thought one way was to provide for the ACC in their wills.

This is a very helpful suggestion, as people can contribute to the on-going and long-term work of the confessing movement. All you need to do is specify in your will the name of the organisation, and the amount to be provided:

For example, "I give .... to the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc. For the general purposes thereof."



Bryce Dallas Howard and Matt Damon in *Hereafter*

## Eastwood's chick flick

**Hereafter** – Heaven is more than human love. (Rated M)

Clint Eastwood's latest offering is not one of his best, though given the theme, it is certainly one of the most interesting. Many of his films in the last two decades have vividly explored the themes of death, including his masterpiece *Unforgiven*, but this one takes us to the question of what happens after death.

The opening scene sets the tone and is as dramatic an opening as one could find in recent films, resonating with a contemporary audience who often ask the question – why was that not me? Interestingly the film was removed from many cinemas in the wake of the recent disasters in Japan.

We live in a time where spiritual mediums have become superstars who command large amounts of money and have their own television shows. I am not inclined to mention their names for fear of giving them even more recognition. Due to the experiences of one survivor, the film explores the world of the hereafter and the often documented 'near-death' experiences of people and the searching that people undertake because they want to communicate with their lost loved ones.

The main character, George (played by Matt Damon) has the 'gift', but also the 'curse'. He can relay messages to the living from their loved ones simply by touching their hands. It had become so burdensome that he gave up his 'business' and took a labouring job. Circumstances though draw him and the other leading characters together and offer a picture about how Eastwood and the writer

Peter Morgan view life, death and the afterlife. One would have to say they have a cynical view about the afterlife. Eastwood himself is a non-believer. One scene shows one of the other characters at a spiritual meeting where the woman is clearly exposed as a charlatan to the film audience. Many forms of spiritual searching are shown and each is found wanting. It is worth commenting that a young boy's first foray into exploring a spiritual connection is via the World Wide Web. Web-searching he comes across a Christian preacher who gives a simple message of who to trust at these times of loss – Jesus Christ. The look on the boy's face makes it plain that he sees this person as someone who is no help at all.

While the film's theme is the *Hereafter*, the actual meaning is revealed at the end. It is basically a love story and is about finding a 'soul-mate'. For Eastwood and Morgan, spiritual connections are primarily human affairs, meaning you need to make the most of the present world. I could not help but be reminded of the ruin and ultimate death that searching after false spiritual connections can bring. What you involve yourself with does not have a neutral quality. "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:3 NIV)

From the Past a Movie to explore:  
**Crimes and Misdemeanours**  
(1989 – Rated M)

Woody Allen, a somewhat controversial, but long-standing film director has often struggled with questions

about faith (or lack of faith), with dialogue that revolves around Jewish beliefs and practices. He even penned a one-act play entitled *God*. In this moral fable, the two main characters in the large extended Jewish family we are introduced to, have very different outlooks on life. Martin Landau plays Judah Rosenthal, a well-know ophthalmologist, who is a seemingly loving and moral man and yet what we see outwardly is not the truth. Woody Allen plays Cliff Stern; a documentary film-maker who is quite hopeless in terms of the success the world highlights and struggles with living a good life. There are many telling conversations about God and faith, and interactions with rabbis, befitting those brought up in this religious life. One line that has always stayed with me is Judah remembering that his father had told him "The eyes of God are on us always", but Judah finds this hard to believe as he has simply got away with murder. This movie has been well-used in Christian film circles to stimulate discussion about marriage, faithfulness and the existence of evil in the world of God. Watching this movie is like reading parts of the Old Testament.

**Ushpizin** (2004 – Rated PG) – Jewish Connections

Some films are helpful in providing understanding of Jewish customs and practices. One which provides a very good contemporary depiction of the Jewish festival of Sukkoth (see Nehemiah 8, Leviticus 23:24), is *Ushpizin* (Aramaic for 'guests'). The film provides an excellent way of delving into the festival in the very orthodox areas of Jerusalem where communities ritually set up for the festival. The film's story revolves around a couple (Moshe and Mail) praying to God for a child, and facing some marital difficulties and tensions during the festival, especially associated with the arrival of two men from the husband's wayward past. The film also explores themes of hospitality and forgiveness, reminding me of the hospitality of Jesus who welcomed and ate with the sinners in society. It is worth noting that its connection with the contemporary orthodox Jewish community meant that the director had to agree to a real-life husband and wife playing the central characters.

*Peter Bentley is the ACC Executive Consultant.*