



THE NATIVITY STORY TAKE TWO

The meaning of Christmas
in non-Christian times



**'Let's talk
about social
responsibility'
- a chat with
Brian Edgar**

**ABC's
Compass
program
gets it right**

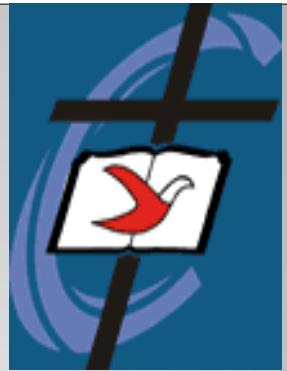
**Interfaith
meeting:
what's it all
about?**

**Singing a
sad song: a
Progressive
Christian hymn
book reviewed**

*Confessing the
Lord Jesus
Christ ...*

*Proclaiming
the truth ...*

*Renewing the
church*



CATALYST

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Editorial

ABC's 'Compass' got it right

Let me apologise in advance for the back pages of this edition of *Catalyst* magazine. Publishing several pages of the transcript of an ABC program on religion could be seen as excessive.

It must be admitted that the ABC, as a network, has time and again demonstrated an unequalled hostility towards Christianity – and particularly towards Christianity in its traditional forms. Only last month did another depressing example of this anti-Christian bias rear its ugly head.

In a recent episode of the famously unfunny ABC comedy show *The Chaser's War on Everything*, the face of Jesus was represented as appearing "miraculously" in a pile of human excrement. This was meant to be a joke. Only at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation could such a low piece of second-rate humour make its way to the airwaves in the hope of being passed off as witty irreverence.

Curiously, the attention of this publication was drawn to the Chaser incident not by the clamour of outraged voices raised in protest by the Christian community, but by a Muslim. The Australian National Imams Council, a Muslim group, emailed a protest note to the media on November 2, highlighting the horror with which the Australian Islamic community regarded this televisual insult towards the person of Jesus.

The imams called it "despicable and extraordinarily repulsive." I thank the imams for their public expression of concern.

Nevertheless, let this lament over regrettable anti-Christian ABC bias serve as an introduction to some words of well-deserved praise for the ABC.

In particular, the in-depth program on the Uniting Church in Australia which ABC's *Compass* program put to air on November 11 was a fine example of what balanced journalism can achieve.

Everyone will have their own individual perspective on what was right and what was wrong with this program. A communiqué from the Uniting Church's head office, voicing concern that the program "did not do justice to the breadth and vitality of the Uniting Church", indicated a small but certain level of dissatisfaction with the ABC's coverage.

But in the most important areas, this program got it completely right. The program was dedicated to the thesis that the Uniting Church in Australia today is a deeply divided community.

In the words of Geraldine Doogue, the *Compass* compere, the UCA today is "a modern, dis-united church."

Over the past decade, the church's membership has "divided, fractured and fallen off." There are, Doogue said, "many different expressions of Christianity" living under the church's emblem. How, she asked, can it survive?

Of course, this is not welcome news, for many people including the church's leadership. For those



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Melbourne conference waters seeds of hope for church



Tongan and Chinese choirs inspire the public rally which was part of the 2007 ACC annual general meeting and conference

Considerable discussion was also provoked over the draft statement on doctrine and theology, prepared by the Doctrine and Theology Commission convened by Dr Rosalie Hudson.

On the ecumenical front, contact was reported between the ACC and seven heads of Christian churches outside the Uniting Church.

Prayer was a significant feature of the gathering, with Rev Anne Hibbard and other

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The six commissions of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church of Australia took centre stage at the 2007 national conference held in Melbourne in mid-November.

The commissions have been established to advance the work of the church in all of the major areas of Christian ministry today: discipleship and evangelism, doctrine and theology, ecumenical, social responsibility and cross cultural ministry. A networks commission has also been established.

Progress in all of these areas was recorded and discussed by the 140 registered participants, many of whom travelled from around Australia to Melbourne's Rydges on Bell Hotel.

Significant progress was registered by the discipleship and evangelism commission which is overseeing the development of bible studies and other resources.



Left: Rev Mike Fawcett, an ACC Council member from WA. **Above left:** Rev Walter Abetz, Tasmanian convenor. **Above:** outgoing SA convenor Rev John Cranmer



South Australian Convenor of the ACC Rev Dr Phil Marshall (podium) with fellow members of the Discipleship and Evangelism Commission; Above: Prayer team members Barrie Robinson, Jill Heilmann and Karen Chapman

members of the ACC's prayer network leading continual prayer for the church throughout the three days of the meeting.

A public rally was also held at the Macedonian Evangelical Uniting Church during the conference, with ACC chair Rev Dr Max Champion speaking on the theme "Gimme Some Truth."

Dr Champion said: "In 1971 John Lennon released a song called 'Gimme some truth.' In it he railed against short-sighted, narrow minded, hypocrites in public life.

"The urgency with which Lennon craved the truth is symptomatic of deep dissatisfaction with the 'old values' which emerged in the 1960s. It was a time when basic Christian beliefs and morality were being questioned.

"How different this was from the present cultural mood," Dr Champion said. Today, "no one gives a damn about the truth.

"We are preoccupied with our subjective opinions and



Conference-goers carry the discussion outside during deliberation over the ACC commissions' reports

needs, and those of our various groups. What matters now is not whether convictions and values are true, but whether they are true for me or you – and for our groups of choice."

Dr Champion said that believers should be wary of voices of "fanatical relativism" in our society today, because these voices can destroy lives. The church must not be afraid of speaking its belief that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, he said.

"If the ACC can contribute to this task in some small, fragile way it will perform a most valuable service to the Uniting Church in Australia and, more importantly, to our nation."

The conference also heard from a number of keynote speakers from outside the ACC: Rev Dr Gordon Preece of Urban Seed, Bill Muehlenberg of Culture Watch and Philip Johnson, author of several works on Christianity and 'New Age' religion.

Next year's annual conference will be held in South Australia.

Photos Robyn McKay



The Doctrine and Theology Commission of the ACC with chair Dr Rosalie Hudson (centre)



Clockwise from above:
ACC NSW convenor Rev Dr Alan Russell.
Rev Anne Hibbard.
Vic ACC convenor Rev Graeme Harrison



The Networks Commission behind Rev Rod James (podium) presents its report to the conference

Let's talk social responsibility

An interview with Brian Edgar

Why talk about “social responsibility?” Why not talk about “social justice?” After all, isn’t *justice* what the church is all about, these days?

Brian Edgar, convenor of the ACC’s Social Responsibility Commission, is well equipped to answer all these questions.

An Australian theologian and ordained Uniting Church minister, Brian has been actively involved with the Australian Evangelical Alliance.

He also has strong international links, recently taking up an appointment as Professor of Theological Studies with Asbury Theological Seminary in the United States.

More directly, with colleagues Margaret Macmillan, Ian Higginbotham, Nell Muirden and Ron Clough, Brian has just completed work on the ACC’s “Social Responsibility Statement.”

The team consciously chose the term “social responsibility” rather than “social justice” when putting together the statement, Brian told *Catalyst*.

“We certainly have no problem with ‘social justice’,” Brian said in an interview with *Catalyst*. “Justice in society is an excellent thing. Justice is one aspect of what ought to happen in society.

“But there are many other Christian virtues and values which should be incorporated in our society – compassion, love, care, gentleness, kindness. They all have social dimensions.

“We want to say something that’s broader than ‘social justice’.”

The statement begins with words from the inaugural Assembly of the Uniting Church in 1977: “A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the church.”

The statement argues that the church’s principles of social responsibility are not based on “abstract reasoning” or on “cultural presuppositions,” but upon “Jesus Christ and ‘on the way Christ feeds the Church with word and sacraments’.”

“The church has a distinctive gospel ministry and it is important that the church’s activity does not just become another form of social work, indistinguishable from that of other organisations or government departments,” it reads.

“The church’s social responsibility includes, but extends beyond, physical needs, and relates to people’s full humanity as spiritual beings made in the image of God and

called to be reconciled to Christ. The very appropriate desire to avoid what is referred to negatively as ‘proselytism’ (the imposition of the gospel) has implications for the way the church ministers to people, but it cannot mean that evangelism must be left aside.

“It is always the responsibility of the church to witness to Jesus Christ.”

The Commission’s statement was warmly received when presented to the national conference of the ACC in Melbourne last month.

From his time in America, where he teaches one or two short intensive courses at Asbury each year, Brian imports several insights which he believes can be useful in Australia.

One is the “holiness” movement in the American church. Holiness is not a term Australian Christians use very much.

“Over there the word ‘holiness’ is a good word, a positive word,” he says. “It’s not just personal holiness, it involves social holiness as well. In other words, it’s a very contemporary, up-to-date understanding, particularly from a Wesleyan point of view.

“One of the phrases that Wesleyans use is the saying ‘there is no holiness but social holiness’. I was blown away by the way ‘holiness’ is a part of the church’s teaching when I was there in 2005, and it made me think that perhaps, in terms of our own situation here, the greatest loss that happened from the time of the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church was the loss of the Methodist and Wesleyan tradition.

“It’s not the be-all and end-all, but we simply don’t have much of the Methodist and Wesleyan tradition anymore in Australia. That’s part of what is driving me at the moment.”

Brian is not about building a Wesleyan ghetto, however. He is an enthusiastic participant in interchurch dialogues with Catholics, Pentecostals and members of other churches.

And on a personal note, he makes a practice of paying regular Sunday “visits” to neighboring churches of other denominations within his local suburban area in Melbourne. This has been known to provoke nervousness among pastors of some churches who still seem unfamiliar,

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What in heaven are you afraid of, Professor Dawkins?

by Dinesh D'Souza

Richard Dawkins has a bright idea: Atheists are the new gays. Is he joking? Not at all. The bestselling author of *The God Delusion* has been suggesting for two years now that atheists can follow the example of gays. This would put the atheists last in the line of liberation groups: first the civil rights movement, then the feminist movement, then the gay liberation movement, and now the cause of atheist liberation.

What makes Dawkins want atheists to be like gays? Dawkins explains that gays used to be called homosexual, but then they decided to pick a positive-sounding name like "gay." Suddenly the meaning of the term "gay" was entirely appropriated by homosexuals. Gays went from being defined by their enemies to defining themselves in a favorable way.

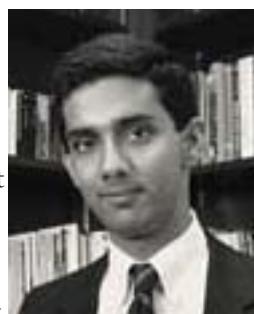
Dawkins cited this example in advocating that atheists call themselves "brights." After all, atheist is a somewhat negative term because it defines itself by what it is opposed to. "Bright" sounds so much happier and, more important, smarter. "Bright" kind of reflects the high opinion that atheists have of their own intellectual abilities. Even the stupidest village atheist gets to pat himself on the back and place himself in the tradition of science and philosophy by calling himself a "bright."

Dawkins and the philosopher Daniel Dennett have both written articles promoting the use of the term "bright." Not all atheists have warmed to the term, but Dawkins and Dennett clearly envision themselves as far-looking strategists of the atheist cause. But how bright, really, are they?

Dawkins has also suggested that atheists, like gays, should come out of the closet. Well, what if they don't want to? I doubt that Dawkins would support "outing" atheists. But can an atheist "rights" group be far behind? Hate crimes laws to protect atheists? Affirmative action for unbelievers? An Atheist Annual Parade, complete with dancers and floats? Atheist History Month?

Honestly, I think the whole atheist-gay analogy is quite absurd. It seems strange for Dawkins to urge atheists to come out of the closet in the style of the all-American boy standing up on the dining table of his public high school and confessing that he is a homosexual. Dawkins, being British, doesn't seem to recognize that this would not win many popularity contests in America.

If Dawkins' public relations skills seem lacking in this area, they are positively abysmal when they come to building support for science. Remember that Dawkins is



Dinesh D'Souza

professor of the public understanding of science. He has a chair funded by the Microsoft multimillionaire Charles Simonyi. If I were that guy, I'd withdraw the support, not because I disagree with Dawkins, but because I think he is setting back the cause of science.

Basically Dawkins is saying if you are religious, then science is your enemy. Either you choose God or you choose science. No wonder that so many Americans say

they are opposed to evolution. They believe that evolution is atheism masquerading as science, and Dawkins confirms their suspicions. Indeed Dawkins takes the same position as the most ignorant fundamentalist: you can have Darwin or you can have the Bible but you can't have both.

Dawkins is in some ways a terrible representative for atheism, which I'm glad about because a bad cause deserves a bad leader. He is also a terrible advocate for science, which I'm sad about because science deserves all the support it can get.

Having debated Christopher Hitchens, I'd like the opportunity to debate Dawkins. I think I can vindicate a rational and scientific argument for religion against his irrational and unscientific prejudice. When I wrote Dawkins to propose such a debate, however, Dawkins said that "upon reflection" he decided against it. He didn't give a reason, and there is no reason.

In his writings on religion, Dawkins presents atheism as the side of reason and evidence, and religion as the side of "blind faith." So what's he afraid of? How can reason possibly lose in a contest with ignorance and superstition? I have written Dawkins back offering him the most favorable terms: a debate on a secular campus like Berkeley rather than a church, with atheist Michael Shermer as the moderator, and a donor ready and willing to pay both our fees.

So I hope Dawkins takes me up on my challenge to an intellectual joust. If you want to encourage him, write Dawkins and send the email to dineshdsouza@aol.com. I'll forward your thoughts to our wavering atheist knight. He may want to pattern atheism on the gay rights movement, but surely he doesn't want the world to think that he's a sissy.

US author Dinesh D'Souza's new book What's So Great About Christianity has just been released: see www.dineshdsouza.com. D'Souza is the Rishwain Fellow at the Hoover Institution, a think-tank based at Stanford University, California.

Think globally, act locally

by Bill Muehlenberg

There were three keynote presentations by guest speakers at the 2007 annual conference of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations in Melbourne. The first of these was by the well-known media commentator and host of the Culture Watch website, Bill Muehlenberg. In his paper, Bill looked at some bewildering cultural and moral trends in our world, and asked what should be the response from a person of faith?

A lot of thought has gone into human mortality, and how we can prolong life. Less thought has gone into the question of why nations die. But nations, like people, do have a beginning, and do have an end. Thus it is worth looking at the questions of how and why nations collapse.

One common theme that emerges from those who have thought carefully about the decline of nations is that often it is the case that they collapse from within, instead of perishing from without. Thus Arnold Toynbee could rightly say, "Civilizations die from suicide, not murder."

Toynbee, a British historian (1889-1975), is most famous for his magisterial *A Study of History*, 1934-1961. In this 12-volume work he examined the rise and fall of nations. One of his more significant remarks is worth recalling: "Of the twenty-two civilizations that have appeared in history, nineteen of them collapsed when they reached the moral state the United States is in now." Given that this is now a dated comment, how much more true is it today?

Other historians have of course remarked on the suicidal tendencies of nations. Will Durant (1885-1981), an American historian, made this observation: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself within. The essential causes of Rome's decline lay in her people, her morals, her class struggle, her failing trade, her bureaucratic despotism, her stifling taxes, her consuming wars."

Along with his wife Ariel, he penned the monumental 11-volume *Story of Civilization* (1935-1975). They also penned, among other works, the 1968 study *The Lessons of History*. In both these works they noted the tendency of nations to wither from within.

Lord Macaulay (1800-1859), the English writer and historian, made a similar observation about the fate of democracies. He said that the average age of the world's greatest democratic nations has been 200 years. Each has been through the following sequence:

From bondage to spiritual faith.
From faith to great courage.

From courage to liberty.
From liberty to abundance.

From abundance to complacency.

From complacency to selfishness.

From selfishness to apathy.

From apathy to dependency.

And from dependency back again into bondage.

(*Letter from Lord Macaulay to an American friend, May 23, 1857*)

The questions that arise are these: Where are we in this progression? How far along are we on the road to decay? Can we escape this fate?



It is not hard to pinpoint where we are on Macaulay's timeline. The examples of corruption, selfishness, apathy and decadence are all around. The easiest way to make this case is simply to open the daily newspaper.

Recent newspaper headlines readily make the case. Consider just a few from the past several years:

— *Pedophiles launch own political party (May 30, 2006)*

Pedophiles in the Netherlands are registering a political party to press for lowering the legal age of sexual relations from 16 to 12 and allow child porn and bestiality. The party, which plans to register tomorrow, says it eventually wants to get rid of the age limit on sexual relations.

— *Bibles banned (May 12, 2006)*

Bibles are being banned in hospitals and schools in order not to offend non-Christians.

— *Gay school guide: Teachers' manual rejects 'mum' and 'dad' (June 4, 2006)*

Victorian schools are being advised to dump the words "mother" and "father" by a new teachers' manual that promotes the cause of same-sex parents.



**The famous slogan of the Greens but
believers could bear it in mind**

— PC penguins (April 16, 2006)

Seaworld in Queensland has decided to change the names of 'fairy penguins' to 'little penguins' for fear of offending homosexuals.

— Schools 'avoid Holocaust lessons' (April 2, 2007)

Some British schools avoid teaching the Holocaust and other controversial history subjects as they do not want to cause offence, research has claimed.

— "I'm not gay, but my four mums are" (June 16, 2007)

The story of a boy with his four lesbian mothers, evidently told with a straight face.

— "Lesbian pair sue for cost of twin" (18 September 2007)

A lesbian couple are suing their IVF doctor because they got two babies for the price of one.

— Sex with robots 'not far away' (October 13, 2007)

A Dutch academic predicts that within decades people will be having sex with robots, and will be marrying them as well.

— "Foster child to be taken away because Christian couple refuse to teach him about homosexuality" (24 October 2007)

Devoted foster parents with an unblemished record of caring for almost 30 vulnerable children will have their latest foster son taken away because they have refused to sign new sexual equality regulations.

Many more examples could be provided. These are all examples of a culture in deep decline. Or as one American sociologist and Democratic Senator put it, these are illustrations of "Defining Deviancy Down".

Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927-2003) wrote an important essay by that same title in 1993. In it he decried the moral collapse in the West, and the way we try to cope with it. He wrote: "The amount of deviant behavior in American society has increased beyond the levels the

community can 'afford to recognize' accordingly, we have been redefining deviancy so as to accept much conduct previously stigmatized, and also quietly raising the 'normal' level in categories where behavior is now abnormal by any earlier standard."

He rightly noted that the saturation of evil is becoming so complete that the only way we can cope is to redefine it. Of course such attempts are not new. Twenty-five hundred years ago the prophet Isaiah could warn of similar calumny: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." (Isaiah 5:20)

There is a long answer which we cannot go into here. We could look at the Enlightenment and its impact, or more recently, the counter-culture of the Sixties. But we can provide a short answer: the past century has been one grand social experiment to see what life is like when we reject God.

The results are in. We have tried to live as if there is no God, and we are now reaping the whirlwind.

One modern prophet who shares this view is the former Russian gulag prisoner, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He has written much on this theme. His assessment is simple yet profound: "It is because we have forgotten God. That is why all this is happening to us."

Our moral decline is directly connected to our rejection of God. Will Durant offered this insight: "There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion."

Another important voice in this regard is TS Eliot (1888–1965). The American-British poet and critic wrote an important volume in 1948 entitled, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. His thoughts are well worth recalling:

"If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes. Then you must start painfully again, and you cannot put on a new culture ready made. You must wait for the grass to grow to feed the sheep to give the wool out of which your new coat will be made. You must pass through many centuries of barbarism. We should not live to see the new culture, nor would our great-great-great-grandchildren: and if we did, not one of us would be happy in it."

Exactly. Throw out God, and the work of civilization becomes very difficult indeed. Again, Will Durant concurs: "From barbarism to civilization requires a century; from civilization to barbarism needs but a day". Or as he and his wife Ariel wrote elsewhere, "Civilization is not inherited; it has to be learned and earned by each generation anew; if the transmission should be interrupted for one century, civilization would die, and we should be savages again."

The late Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer put the question this way in a 1976 book title: "How Should We Then Live?" What steps can be taken to reverse the tide?

What is needed more than ever is a rebuilding of the foundations. As the Psalmist said so long ago, "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The job will not be easy, but it must be done. We need to preserve what is good, and resist those anarchic voices who would take it away from us.

A big part of this is to learn from history, and to avoid the problems we encounter there. As the Spanish philosopher Santayana reminds us, "Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat its mistakes." Or as Winston Churchill put it, "The greatest advances in human civilization have come when we recovered what we had lost: when we learned the lessons of History."

But it is not enough to just recall the lessons of the past. We must be willing to act, to take a stand, to make a difference. We cannot sit on the sidelines in a time of danger and threat. It was Dante in his *Inferno* who remarked that "The hottest level in hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in a moral crisis".

We must get involved. It is not enough just to talk about the problem, or to theorise about our current malaise. Karl Marx knew the importance of action: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the thing is to change it".

Of course to take on a world going downhill at an alarming rate will not be easy, and those seeking to make a difference will be regarded as treasonous and trouble-makers. As George Orwell once explained, "During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act." Or as C.S. Lewis wisely observed: "When the whole world is running towards a cliff, he who is running in the opposite direction appears to have lost his mind."

But I am just one person, you might protest, What difference can I make? The problems are just too big. But the anthropologist Margaret Mead would have us believe otherwise: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world ... indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

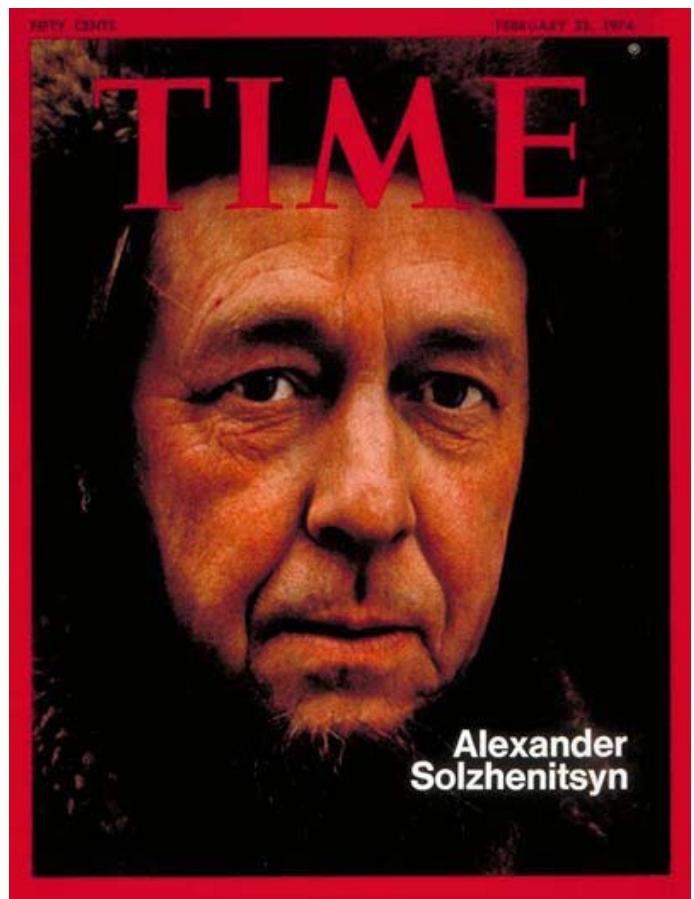
Charles Haddon Spurgeon also reminds us of this truth: "The greatest works are done by the ones. The hundreds do not often do much – the companies never; it is the units – the single individuals, that are the power and the might. Individual effort is, after all, the grand thing."

Martin Luther King Jr. said it this way: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Or as Edmund Burke has written: "Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little."

Mother Teresa had some helpful things to say about all this. She once remarked, "We cannot do great things on this earth. We can only do small things with great love." Or as she said elsewhere, "We are not called to succeed; we are only called to try."

The greens have a motto: "think globally and act locally". We cannot save the whole universe, but we can make a difference in our own community. Again, Mother Teresa: "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one." And as Margaret Thatcher reminds us, "You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it."

The Christian is called to extend Christ's kingdom in every arena of life. A century ago an influential Dutch Christian took his biblical responsibility seriously. Abraham Kuyper was a newspaper editor, a theologian, a founder of a university and a Prime Minister of the Netherlands. He once said, "There is not one square inch of the entire



Nobel Laureate Solzhenitsyn ... "It is because we have forgotten God. That is why all this is happening to us."

creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine! This belongs to me!'

C. S. Lewis argues in a similar vein: "There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan." And a radical Black Panther activist of the Sixties, Eldridge Cleaver, correctly said: "If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." A prophet of 2000 years ago put it this way: "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world."

So what do we do, as believers? Often people debate as to whether we should seek personal revival or social reformation. The argument is often presented as if it is either/or. But can I suggest that it is both/and. The need of the hour is to both get our own act together, and to seek to be a light in a dark world, to be a preserving salt in a corrupt nation.

Indeed, the bottom line is this: society is in a mess because the church is in a mess. And the church is in a mess because you and I are in a mess. We need to get back to our first love. We need to stop our trivial pursuits. We need to realise that we are here for a purpose, and the purpose of our existence does not revolve around ourselves, but around someone who gave his very life for all of us. We can do no less for him.

In the end, we must agree with Toynbee: "Sooner or later, man has always had to decide whether he worships his own power or the power of God."

Christ as the anchor of all human hopes

by Ross Carter

The November edition of *Crosslight*, the Uniting Church paper in Victoria, gave an account of an event that occurred in the Synod building to mark the end of the Muslim fast of Ramadan.

The Uniting Church Moderator, *Crosslight* reported, had invited some Muslim people to break their fast with some Uniting Church members.

The Muslim guests prayed to Allah in a specially prepared room in the Synod building before joining with "fellow believers in the 'One God' to eat, drink, hear each others scriptures ... and grow in faith and understanding."

This event was part of a developing inter-faith dialogue in Australia. This dialogue between Christians and Muslims is to be encouraged, as it seeks to foster mutual understanding of faiths, as well as friendship and reconciliation between the adherents of those faiths. Given the conflicts that have occurred between faiths in other parts of the world, this dialogue is important in the multi-faith society that is modern Australia. It would be a magnificent achievement if the dialogue fostered a peaceful multi-faith society in Australia which could be a model for other nations to emulate.

It is clear, then, that the way the inter-faith dialogue proceeds will shape the kind of society that develops in Australia. In particular it will be the assumptions that underpin the dialogue that will shape that society into the future.

One way the dialogue can proceed is on the assumption that behind particular faiths there is, in the words of the *Crosslight* story, 'One God'. This is an increasingly popular view in some Christian circles. In this view Jesus tends to be thought as one exemplar of the Golden Rule in a class of many exemplars: He was the author of a particular path pointing to the 'One God' who ordained the Golden Rule whereas Gotama the Buddha did the same job in Asia. It follows that the particular paths that lead to the 'One God' and its Golden Rule are equally valid or perhaps equally invalid. Furthermore it is fundamentally only a matter of aesthetic taste which exemplar one might think best points to the 'One God'. To put the matter bluntly this increasingly widespread view in the Church holds that Jesus, Mohammed and Gotama were all exceedingly great men who showed particular groups of people how to be the decent human beings they had always known how to be, but had forgotten about.

This is what may be termed the pluralist road to a peaceful multi-faith society. The various faiths are reconciled by relativizing and, I would argue, trivializing the important differences between them. The pluralist road solves potential conflicts by postulating a vague God who has nothing to do with human events or particular traditions. At the end of the day Jesus, Gotama and Mohammed become ciphers whose wisdom unlocks the good that is in all human beings but that humanity

Teach your children well ... about their own faith: Jewish leader



It isn't only Christians who believe you should hold firm to your own faith tradition.

A distinguished Jewish leader from Israel, Rabbi Michael Melchior, has brought exactly the same message to these shores.

Speaking at an interfaith gathering in Melbourne attended by Muslims, Christians and Jews, Rabbi Melchior warned of the danger of losing your own religious identity out of an exaggerated desire to respect other faiths.

"If you don't know precisely where your own borders lie, that is when you get border battles," he said.

Before engaging in interfaith dialogue with people from other faiths, every individual should be confident, well-informed and firm in what they themselves believe.

As well as teaching our children to respect people of other faiths, we must be careful to teach them the reasons why we believe in our own, Rabbi Melchior said.

The Rabbi should know a thing or two about border battles. As a religious leader and member of Israel's parliament, the Knesset, he has been involved for many years in building relationships across the Jewish-Muslim divide.

Paul Gray

unfortunately forgets from time to time.

The trouble with this view, at least for Christians who know their tradition, is that *Christ* is not Jesus' surname, nor is his legacy a reminder of the Golden Rule people have forgotten. That is to say that for Christianity Jesus is the Christ, God's Messiah. This means that Jesus Christ is God the Father's blueprint for the way humanity shall live. The Christian claim that Christ Jesus is the "way, the truth, and the life," means that *Christ* is a word that maps out the future of humanity while remaining at the same time the designation of a particular person. The event of Jesus being raised from the dead as the representative of humanity establishes him as the Father's crucified Christ and the future of humanity.

This event creates a different sort of human community, a community that connects people to Jesus the Christ but also to one another in a new way. This community is a body whose members, in connection with Christ and one another, are growing into a Christ-shaped future that will be the future of all humanity.

This universal and catholic community which is called 'Church', enacts God's future for the world in that the unfinished human stories of many cultures are drawn together and given wholesome shape in relation to Christ. The body of Christ, in which the people participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, is a peaceful community that incorporates a diverse humanity with many gifts, temperaments, and cultures.

Christianity cannot fall from the belief that the future of humanity is a Christ-shaped future in which all peoples, whilst retaining their varying distinctive features, will be reconciled to one another as Christ has reconciled them to himself through self-emptying cruciform love. This belief is only arrogant and destructive when a sinful Church forgets or deliberately ignores the reality that its head is the crucified-risen Christ Jesus. It is a tragedy for the world, and a judgment that the Church must fear, that too often it has done this.

In view of this understanding of the person of Christ Jesus and the Church the Christian goal in multi-faith dialogue is to invite the world of faiths to find in Christ and in the practice of his community that which anchors and connects all human hopes without taking over their histories.

Christianity does not seek to impose a particular cultural or institutional form on other faiths, but it must declare that the concrete future of all people can only be conceived of as a Christ-like and, therefore, cruciform humanity.

To return to where I began is to affirm again that the Church should be in dialogue with other faiths. But it should not think that this requires resiling from the Trinitarian God and that divine communion's historical eventfulness in the life of humanity. To think that the reconciliation of humanity depends upon a silent and remote 'God behind the God' is a recipe for despair for such a view really leaves a sinful humanity to its own devices. And, clearly, that is of no help to anybody.

Ross Carter

Review

The Nativity Story: supporting this film is a ministry in itself

Billed as the ultimate timeless story, the commercial film *The Nativity Story* had a short life at the cinema, but is now available on DVD, and has more going for it than you may think.

The film has received significant support from mainstream Christian denominations and inter-denominational groups, and was actually the first film to premiere at the Vatican.

It is directed by Catherine Hardwicke, a former production designer who has had extensive experience working with youth in 'coming of age' drama – *Thirteen* and also in *Lords of Dogtown*. Her commitment to period settings and naturalistic drama is very strong. In *The Nativity Story*, the actors were taught to make cheese in traditional ways, press olives and grapes and milk goats.

The cinematography in this film is also startlingly clear, and the use of natural light excellent.

Written by Mike Rich (best known for *The Rookie*), the film is a sensitive and faithful story. The writer was also the executive producer and had a strong personal interest in bringing the film to the attention of the church community, as well as the wider cinema audience.

Rich brings a script founded in the Bible, with a whimsical approach to non-biblical and speculative parts, for example, Mary's parents. It is worth reading one of Rich's comments about his reason for following through on what he termed his call to write this script and to bring this message to the screen.

"In the past few years, in a sense, the dialogue over Christmas has diminished slightly. And by that, I mean individuals talking with their families and friends about the focus of the holiday. I think that's been lost a little bit in the hectic nature of the holiday where we impose these deadlines upon ourselves that we have to get this done, and we have to get the shopping done, and we've got the office party to go to and this and that. We get to December 25, and we exhale and we go, 'Whew, we made it through that.' When I started seeing the early cuts of the film, I thought to myself, this is one of these stories that [when] presented in this fashion will give families that opportunity to spend a couple of hours together during the holiday season. But more importantly, what I would love to see happen is that it [would] refresh that dialogue where parents talk to their children about the amazing courage and the amazing faith that was displayed by Mary and Joseph."

The lead actors are also excellent, with Keisha Castle-Hughes making a lovely, caring, vulnerable

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These statistics don't lie - church members have left in droves

by Peter Bentley

In the September edition of *Catalyst*, ACC executive secretary Peter Bentley kick-started a landmark statistical analysis of membership in the Uniting Church. Peter's paper is based on all the most relevant research yet undertaken on this topic. In this, the second of the paper's three parts, Peter reveals the central importance of the sexuality and leadership question to why one-time church members are leaving.

In this slightly shorter piece I will briefly comment on other major surveys or studies with a particular focus on sexuality issues, including a comment on National Church Life Survey (NCLS) sexuality questions in 1996 and 2001. The third part of this series will focus on the National Church Life Survey including 2006. Results of the 2006 survey are now coming out, and each Synod or Presbytery may have provided material to church members or had a special session to consider these.

It would help if readers could take note of any reporting of the National Church Life Survey material in Uniting Church of Australia publications and media releases. This will help you consider the broader issues I will raise in the *ACC Catalyst* in March 2008.

Some of these studies noted below have received wide comment across the church, and have attracted considerable controversy.

The National Social Science Survey (NSSS). 1990s

The National Social Science Survey was a national survey conducted by the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. The Christian Research Association arranged for questions on a variety of topics during the early 1990s when the survey was conducted. "Unlike church attender surveys it tells us the attitude of a random sample of the whole population" (See *Pointers* from the Christian Research Association, December 1993, Vol. 3, No. 5, p.2). It also allows for comparison with attendance because questions about attendance are included. In general this demonstrated the overall conservative attitude of Uniting Church attenders to sexual practices outside of marriage, in particular homosexual sex. If people want a more detailed examination of this material in the context of sexuality see Peter Bentley 'The Practice of Homosexuality' (*Uniting Church Studies*, August 1997). A copy of this article can also be found on the Reforming Alliance Website.

The Christian Research Association publication:



Australian Life and the Christian Faith: Facts and Figures (1998) is also helpful for later material, and *Pointers* articles contain many references which are now available on a CD-ROM from www.cra.org.au

Analysis of the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality (1997)

(Peter Bentley, 'An Analysis of the Responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality for the Assembly Standing Committee', February 1997).

I must of course highlight that I wrote this report after examining the 8000 responses to the Uniting Church Interim Report on Sexuality which had been provided to the church for comment and response. At the time, I was the part-time secretary for the Uniting Church Assembly Commission on Doctrine.

It should be clear from the material collated in what has become colloquially known as ‘The Bentley Report’ that this report was not based on a survey. But one only had to look at the numbers who responded, particularly the local church councils to know these were substantial responses that should have been more carefully considered. The Uniting Church had never had anything like the number of responses to any report before. I am very familiar with all reports and responses during the 1980s and 1990s and one can only marvel at the comprehensive and extensive responses of church councils and individuals.

It is simply the most important theological collection of responses the UCA has ever received, and certainly the most extensive collection it has ignored.

In terms of the status of the responses, as I have previously stated: “When asked to comment as to whether the responses were representative of the church, I commented, basing my opinion on my knowledge of National Church Life Survey material and National Social Science material. I believe that in the broad sense they were representative of the church, though I believe that both the affirming and negative response rates were slightly above what a random survey would have revealed at the time. Also, the responses revealed a much smaller group of people who fitted into the ‘don’t know’ category. Respondents usually expressed a strong opinion, no doubt prompted by the orientation and seemingly non-partisan nature of the Interim report.” (‘Liberalism, Sexuality and the Future of the UCA’ Part II, An address by Peter Bentley to the open meeting organised by the Reforming Alliance and EMU held during the September 2004 NSW Synod.

Reforming Alliance Survey on sexuality (2003)

In January 2004, the Report on the National Survey on Sexuality of the Reforming Alliance within the Uniting Church was released. Approximately 27,000 Uniting Church attenders completed the survey in late 2003. While comprehensive in its attempt to reach all Uniting Church attenders, it needs to be clearly stated that this was not a random survey, simply because it is evident that the wider church did not co-operate with its distribution, and also because some unknown number of congregations and ministers refused to participate, or even allow individual members of their local church access to the survey.

The results of the Reforming Alliance Survey on sexuality: 2003.

Should a commitment to celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage be a requirement for those exercising leadership in the UC?

Yes 88.6%, no 6.3%, undecided 3.8%, no answer 1.3%.

Should people living in a same gender sexual relationship be ordained in the UC?

Yes 6.5%, no 88.8%, undecided 4.0%, no answer 0.7%.

Is the ordination of people living in a same gender sexual relationship an issue on which members of the Uniting Church should be directly consulted?

Yes 87.6%, no 7.7%, and undecided 3.5%, no answer 1.2%.

Comment: The results were in keeping with the usual orientation to a traditional conservative position on these matters, though the traditional conservative position is slightly higher, and a much smaller percentage of respondents were undecided or unsure than in statistically based surveys. The survey authors estimated this represented nearly a quarter of current attenders based on more contemporary projections of attendance (allowing for a decrease in the National Church Life Survey 2001 figures, primarily due to ageing)

‘The Splitting of the Uniting Church in Australia’ (2005)

Dr Howard Bradbury (now a former Uniting Church member), conducted a major survey of Uniting Church congregations through an extensive range of contacts in presbyteries, and prepared a report for the Reforming Alliance, ‘The Splitting of the Uniting Church in Australia Due to the Issue of Homosexuality in Leadership’ (May 2005, Canberra).

Howard Bradbury had excellent contacts and sources throughout the whole of Australia, and this report clearly shows the impact of the sexuality debate on the Uniting Church.

Unfortunately, it has been one of the most neglected sources of information. Bradbury’s report estimated that at least 6500 attenders have left since 1997, with three-quarters of these leaving since the 10th Assembly in July 2003. Over one hundred churches have been seriously affected.

There has not been a comprehensive survey since the 11th Assembly (2006), though anecdotally it is evident that a number of congregations were affected. I am personally aware from my contacts through the Reforming Alliance of at least 20 congregations, representing at least 1500 more individuals. Probably most of these members were people who had decided to stay in the Uniting Church until the decision of the 11th Assembly, and when their hope of a traditional decision was not realised, they formalised their position.

‘Mapping Homophobia in Australia’ (2005)

A more recent report of interest was produced by The Australia Institute.

‘*Mapping Homophobia in Australia*’, a report by Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, was published in July 2005.

It outlines some information about Australians who believe homosexuality to be immoral. The study used a large database compiled by Roy Morgan Research using self-completion interviews with 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over.

Religious affiliation was asked for in the survey. About one-third of the Uniting Church affiliates thought homosexuality was immoral.

One should be cautious about the applicability of this general research to the current situation in the Uniting Church in terms of beliefs of the members and regular attenders, and in terms of specific questions related to leadership in ministry. As I have mentioned before, because of the very diffuse sense of identification

for members of the Uniting Church, unless there is some other correlating factor it is difficult to interpret. One possible correlating factor is interesting. The survey reported that 62 per cent of those identified as 'evangelicals' agreed that homosexuality was immoral.

Specific NCLS Material on Sexuality (1996 and 2001)

The National Church Life Survey has asked questions about sexuality in both its 1996 and 2001 surveys. Only a random sample of people answered these questions (that is, only a sample received survey forms with these specific questions.)

Given the importance of the matter, NCLS produced two relevant reports for the Uniting Church. While slightly different questions were asked, the reports allow a comparison, and indeed the second report clearly and succinctly outlines this basis. The first report on the 1996 survey – *'Thinking about sexuality: Results from the 1996 NCLS'* – is summarised in the Occasional Paper from the 2001 Survey.

This clearly shows that the majority of the Uniting

Table 1: Uniting Church Attenders and attitude to leadership by homosexual people (percentages)

NCLS	1996	2001
Affirm practising homosexual leaders	15	18
No to practising homosexual leaders or allow if non-practising	53 19	45 20
Don't know	12	17

Source: 'Homosexuality and Church Leadership – the views of Uniting Church Attenders' Occasional Paper No. 2 by J Bellamy, K Castle R Powell. (2004).

“the majority of the Uniting Church attenders were opposed to having practising homosexuals in leadership in 2001.”

Church attenders were opposed to having practising homosexuals in leadership in 2001 (65 per cent), though this is less than 1996 (72 per cent).

It also illustrates the increasing uncertainty among a section of the church, as well as a slight growth in those who support practising homosexual leaders. The group supporting practising homosexual leaders is still substantially smaller than those who do not support practising homosexual leaders.

There is a difference between the sample sizes in 1996 (333 attenders) and 2001 (461 attenders), but the main question I had was the 9% over-representation of women in the sample group for the 2001 survey, which may have been more significant than noted.

What would have

been more interesting, and certainly would be for a future paper, is a detailed study outlining rural and city regions and Synod differences. The continuing small sample size may not allow more detailed studies, but will provide a picture of the trend which is occurring.

What will the 2006 NCLS Survey illustrate?

Growing uncertainty should be expected as there are more theologically liberal leaders and ministers now, especially in rural areas. The relentless 'normalisation' approach that the Uniting Church has adopted has also weakened the resolve of many ordinary members to present an opinion, especially if they have a strongly minded liberal minister.

A major change between 2001 and 2006 which will have a major affect is the exit of a large number of evangelical members who held strong opinions on these matters. Overall the traditional conservative position should still have the greatest numerical percentage, because it is unlikely the liberal statistical percentage will have grown to the same extent that the other has fallen.

Stay tuned – there is more to come!

Sexuality, leadership and the Church – an Eastern perspective

by Philip Kariatlis

Dialogue and collaboration between the churches remains crucial today. In a recent dialogue between leaders of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia and the ACC, the topic of leadership and sexuality was discussed. This paper, published here as an edited extract, was contributed by Philip Kariatlis, Lecturer in Theology and Academic Secretary at St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College in Sydney.

Philip, a graduate in arts and theology, is completing research under the Sydney College of Divinity doctoral program, examining the notion of *koinonia* as both gift and goal in Orthodox ecclesiology.



The question of leadership in the Church is one of the most divisive issues facing Christians today. Even though the fruits of biblical, patristic, historical and liturgical studies have shed much light on the true nature of Church leadership, the unfortunate fact remains that discussions continue to be conditioned by the approach which emerged at the time of the Enlightenment.

And so, leadership within the Church has continued to focus, for example, on the 'power' of those in authority whereas, in the early Church, it is clear that leadership roles gradually evolved to hold together and in harmony the great diversity of 'charisms' ('graces' or 'gifts') exercised by the faithful for the building up of the 'body of Christ,' especially when they would assemble to celebrate the Eucharist.

Indeed, the place of leadership in the early Christian communities very quickly came to be seen as an expression of God's continued provision for the Church so that the salvific ministry of Christ could continue through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament it is evident that the question of leadership arose so that order could continue to be maintained within the various local communities until Christ would come again.

Moreover, all forms of Christian leadership developed not only for the sake of order – or for the 'bene esse' (or well being) of the Church – but also to facilitate the communal integration and participation of all the faithful.

And this communal mode of the Church's existence, far from being only a sociological experience, was based on the divine life of the Trinitarian Godhead.

Consequently, the early Church attributed the primordial root and ultimate source of all its permanent leadership structures to the divine initiative of God.

variety of charisms of all baptized faithful, where different members of the community had been allotted specific gifts giving rise to an ordered communion: "There are a variety of gifts ... but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a more excellent way."

For Paul, even though all baptized members were bestowed with a distinct ministry by the Spirit, apostles nevertheless occupied first place in his list of charisms, followed by the prophets and teachers. That these were considered to be the leading orders of the local worshipping communities is also seen in the book of Acts. Elsewhere, Paul mentioned leaders in terms of 'presiders,' (cf 1 Thess 5:12, Rom 12:8) overseers and ministers (cf Phil 1:1.)

With the death of the apostles, the bishops, who themselves had been appointed by the apostles, would continue the apostolic ministry, in this way preserving the identity and integrity of the apostolic faith for future generations. Indeed, this was especially important in the face of the growing danger of division and schism, which one would expect within the growing communities.

In reflecting upon the basis of leadership within the early Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church would claim

that safeguarding the unity of the Church in the one apostolic tradition and presiding over its essential unity and Eucharist were inextricably linked.

This is the reason why different aspects of leadership came to be merged in the one person of the bishop.

Already the sub-apostolic Church (in the period immediately after that of the apostles) called for the ordination of responsible leaders who not only exhibited the appropriate moral qualities befitting a leader, but who were also gifted and authoritative teachers, “faithful people able to teach others as well (2Tim 2:2), as well as “rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

From this it is clear that episcopacy and teaching office came to be identified since witness and fidelity to the apostolic faith was of paramount importance for maintaining the *koinonia* of the Church – that is, Christ’s organic and integral presence among the faithful.

Whereas for St Ignatius of Antioch (who died around 110 AD), the bishop was the one who brought the faithful into *koinonia* through the celebration of the Eucharist, by the time of St Irenaeus of Lyons (d, 202 AD), authoritatively teaching the truth of the Gospel within the community had become an indispensable characteristic of the bishop’s ministry for upholding unity.

In writing against the different Gnostic sects, Irenaeus regarded the bishop as the authoritative organ of the genuine apostolic tradition who could therefore ensure the Church’s inward continuity with the apostolic faith.

The connection between apostolic identity and the bishop’s ministry of leadership is explicitly expressed in the following: “Anyone who wishes to discern the truth may see in every Church in the whole world the apostolic tradition clear and manifest. We can enumerate those who were appointed bishops in the Churches by the apostles and their successors to our own day.”

Consequently, for Irenaeus the relationship between apostolic continuity and the bishop came to be clearly connected, resulting in the bishop assuming the role not

only of authoritative teacher of the apostolic faith in his local Church, but also the guarantor and witness to the faith held by all within the community.

Having highlighted the apostolic character of the bishop’s ministry, Irenaeus also stressed that such a ministry was undoubtedly a gift of the Holy Spirit: “Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church – those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles: those who, together with succession in the episcopate, have received the assured *charisma* of the truth.”

Having traced the historical trajectory of the emergence of Christian leadership, the task at hand is to reflect upon the extent to which this experience and vision of the early Church’s leadership is compatible with those who today aspire to become leaders within the Church, but who are engaged in same-sex sexual activity.

To be sure, what must guide the Church on this issue is not each society’s subjective attitudes or modern scientific claims – especially the behavioural sciences which examine what theology would call the ‘fallen’ human condition – but the Scriptural vision of the person and the experience of the Church as a whole.

Even though scientific study is taken most seriously, Orthodoxy understands that its area of expertise is restricted to physical nature; and so, the fact that it

may ‘prove’ that a percentage of human persons are of ‘homosexual orientation’ – or even born this way – is not a determinative factor for its vision of the human person as God intended it from the beginning.

Indeed, according to Orthodox interpretation, with the passing of time, the world will become more confused – Christ asked, “when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” – and traditional values will, at best, be questioned, or openly rejected.

Already in the fourth century, St Anthony the Great had said: “A time is coming when people will go mad, and when they will see someone who is not mad, they will attack them, saying,

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Screwtape would just love these progressive hymns

Singing a New Song: New Century Lyrics for Traditional Tunes
by George Stuart

Published by The Centre for Progressive Religious Thought, Sydney

Review by Clive Skewes

On that dead-end street of theological foolishness called Progressive Christianity, the fans can now belt out the lyrics of *Singing a New Song*, a book of new words to old hymn tunes. This new religious movement is a reaction to 'rigid, unaccommodating theology' in the mainline, and to anything that makes Progressives feel uncomfortable, which seems to be most of the Christian faith. Progressive Christianity however is not a youth movement. Nor are Progressives on a journey out of atheism or agnosticism. They are generally card-carrying church members of several decades' standing. Singing a New Song's lyrics are '*particularly for many of the older members of congregations who have grown up in the church and love the many old tunes... but now find the traditional words are no longer meaningful, helpful or tolerable*'. Author George Stuart is a former Uniting Church of Australia minister. His work has been enthusiastically endorsed by Bishop John Shelby Spong, Dr. Francis McNab, Rev. Dorothy McCrae-McMahon, Rev. Rex Hunt and *Crosslight*.

Progressive Christianity's goal of finding an alternative to a sterile biblicism is admirable. But it has led to a misrepresentation of genuine orthodoxy and replaced it with a dumbed-down, popularised version of the New Age's 'god-within'. Jesus also gets treated as merely one ideal figure among many.

The movement's appeal to these older folk seems to be: (1) that it scapegoats the traditional church - always a high profile, easy target; (2) it is undemanding intellectually, theologically, morally and spiritually; (3) it caters to a nostalgia for the liberal-flavoured, church social scene of their youth.

Stuart claims his lyrics '*re-present God*', '*re-present Jesus*' and '*re-present humanity*'. Since the place where the Holy Spirit actually re-presents God, Jesus and humanity is in the Holy Communion, this assertion seems tantamount to claiming one has re-invented the wheel. Like any good heresy there is a mixture of truth and error, and what is omitted can be as significant as his errors.

Truth seems to appear in Communion Hymn, no 95,

'*We are welcome*'. Its themes of unconditional welcome, and rejection of exclusivism, racialism and legalism, the seeming affirmation of the Presence of Christ and the mention of 'Amazing Grace', would make this song right-sounding to many Uniting Church people. Jesus is 'host and servant' (echoing Revelation 3:20) whose blood was spilt. But is Stuart serious about his words? The God of Stuart and the Progressives is not the God who speaks, acts and redeems. Inevitably the earth shattering news in these lyrics is not about God but about Progressives - they have

discovered God within! More modest souls in the movement refuse to name God, preferring to allude to just something in life that is there but vulnerable and non-threatening. Stuart would replace the dynamite of the Gospel with something fairly innocuous - blanks instead of real bullets. Screwtape would be proud of him.

See what happens to the powerful doctrine of the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion. Jesus said 'Do this for the remembrance (*anamnesis*) of me.' 'Anamnesis' is not just a mental act. It is a recollection in which Jesus is continually present. It belongs to the work of the Spirit. Our Lord instituted the Holy Communion for this remembrance of him. Stuart changes the Christ-centered focus of the sacrament and trivialises what takes place through his opening words '*Our communion with each other is enhanced with bread and wine*'. The horizontal relationship precedes and displaces the vertical. Our salvation and our fellowship have no foundation outside the self.

The new song of Scripture is actually a response to God's act of redemption (Psalm 40:1). Progressive Religion knows only a rescue which comes from within the self, which ultimately leaves the despairing in their despair. Stuart's verses do not take us out of ourselves. Instead a cloying narcissism pervades his lines. The worst example would be '*Companionship with our Self*' (No. 65), an introspective hymn which tells us the goal of our discovery is '*our self-our person deep inside; / we can respect and love that one, And in that love abide*'. C. S. Lewis thundered against this sort of notion; for example, in 'A Preface to



**Charles Wesley
his hymns got the
balance right**

Paradise Lost' he wrote '*In the midst of a world of light and love, of song and feast and dance, Lucifer could find nothing to think of more interesting than his own prestige*'. What Lewis castigates, Stuart now celebrates. His lyrics make clear that Progressive Religion is in fact Progressive Narcissism.

The received wisdom on new versions of poetry is that if you can do no better than the original, you should leave well enough alone.

In Stuart's '*Wondrous and Yet Common Birth*' (SANS 27), he replaces '*Hark the herald angels sing*', one of the finest hymns on the Incarnation. He also dissolves the tension between God's transcendence and immanence, which Charles Wesley brilliantly preserved; giving us the alternative, '*Wondrous and yet common birth; /born like us from seeds of earth; cattle trough, holy bed, /God is worshipped in a shed. /rising from within our kind; /human body, human mind*', which is lame poetry and insipid theology. His lines '*God is born a baby boy; those believing sing for joy*' are just weasel words. Since this is not the One 'who came down from heaven' but a product of the divinity within us all, it follows that in worshipping him we are worshipping ourselves.

Readers may judge for themselves the quality of Stuart's verses by putting the 'new songs' side by side with the originals in the Australian Hymn Book, or beside Waltzing Matilda for which he has written the banal '*Jesus Christ is born in our country*' (No. 25) to some very clumsy and loose

rhymes.

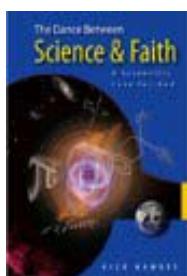
There is no lack of doggerel. E.g. '*We your human family celebrate your holy birth; /families and singles, the short and the tall*'. Readers will also find the threadworn Uniting Church psychobabble which litters the public statements of our church ad nauseam: '*God is inclusive of all*', '*God embraces our difference and diversity*'. In an attempt to patch up the rhythm 'do' and 'did' also get overworked in several of the lyrics. And in a desperate search for rhyme the polysyllabic *diversity, legality, adversity, inequity, divinity*, get used to such an extent that one is reminded of W. S. Gilbert's ditty satirising such straining for flamboyant rhymes:

*Here's a first rate opportunity /to get married with impunity / to indulge in the felicity / of unbounded domesticity. You shall quickly be parsonified/conjugally matrimonified/by a doctor of divinity / who is located in this vicinity'. (*Pirates of Penzance*)*

Perhaps *Singing a New Song* could learn from Gilbert and Sullivan. The order of writing for G & S was lyrics (Gilbert) first, music (Sullivan) second. On one occasion Gilbert allowed Sullivan free reign with the music. The crusty old librettist dismissed the result as 'mere doggerel, but words written to an existing tune are nearly sure to be that.'

This book purports to be new but it rolls out the old self-centred religion against which Jesus and the prophets thundered.

Science not the only source of truth



The Dance between Science and Faith
A scientific case for God
by Nick Hawkes

Published by Storm Harvest

Review by Anneke van de Loo

Recently a new contribution to the 'God debate' was launched in Adelaide. The author, Nick Hawkes, who holds both science and theology degrees, has written a timely and very helpful book. Timely, as recent best-sellers like *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins are reverberating in the minds of many thousands of Australians. With honesty and humility, Nick Hawkes presents arguments and claims of both sides, and offers opportunities for people with entrenched positions to come to the realisation that science and theology complement each other.

He quotes extensively from the writings of scientists and Christian thinkers worldwide, with some 50 pages of bibliography and footnotes.

The Dance between Science and Faith is also a helpful book. Many Christians shy away from sharing their faith in God, or even entering into conversation, with people who believe that science is the sole source of truth about nature and the real world. I believe confidence will be restored to every Christian who reads this book.

Moreover, not only for the Christian, but for the general reader too, the book will prove enlightening. The case for the compatibility of science and Christian theology is clearly made.

"For its part, Christian theology can help constrain scientists from passing off speculation as unassailable science and can help rescue science from errors that result from atheistic presuppositions. Theology can also help break science out of its empiricist prison so it can be informed by other ways of knowing that more fully reflect our total experience of reality" (page 178.)

This book is attractive and accessible to general readers, who like me do not have degrees in theology or science. I found it a great encouragement to my faith in the Creator and an enhancement of my grasp of the amazing universe of which we are a part.

The Dance between Science and Faith is available from Koorong bookshops or via www.stormharvest.com

Sexuality, leadership and the Church – an Eastern perspective

Continued from page 16

‘you are mad, you are not like us’.”

For this reason, the stable and unwavering reality of God’s truth, as it has been witnessed to in the Scriptures, experienced and preserved in the Church, has to be the normative measure by which each Christian generation must be guided.

As we have seen, what is referred to as Christian leadership in the New Testament is the ministry of those with the particular calling of *headship* within the Church, whose role it was to witness to the presence and action of Jesus Christ.

In the attempt to provide guiding principles for this fixed and defined form of leadership, the New Testament Scriptures provided some guidelines for the Church’s good order, effective service and witness to the world.

The Pastoral Letters (1 Tim 3:1-7 and Tit 1:5-9) for example list various personal qualities those in leadership were expected to possess.

They are all qualities of Christ Himself, which confirms that Christ was seen as the source of all leadership.

Christ’s ministry was complete and could not be added to, but the Church, as we have shown, claimed to share in this mission and to be an extension of it in its witness of Him, in this way giving permanence to Jesus’ ministry.

First Timothy spells out what is entailed in such a leadership role by listing 14 qualities for effective leadership. The author begins by stressing the nobility of such a ministry and the requirement that leaders be ‘above reproach’ (1 Tim 3:1-2), ‘blameless’ (1 Tim 1:6), ‘the husband of one wife’ (1 Tim 3:2), clear-minded, meek, slow to anger, not addicted to alcohol, not violent or greedy. He has to be hospitable, gentle, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout and self-controlled. Timothy also states the importance of the bishop managing his household well and being a respected member of the community.

Clearly, the requirement that a bishop/presbyter be ‘the husband of one wife’ would suggest not only the male character of the ordained leader but also the natural context in which such a ministry could be accomplished – namely, in a committed marriage to one other person, not of the same gender.

In carrying out their ministry, the bishop/presbyters were considered ‘fathers’ of the community where God alone was Father. And as ‘fathers’ and leaders of the community, they had to have their household in order – the implication being that this was to be achieved in a committed marriage between a man and a woman.

Indeed, first Timothy makes this connection clearly: “He

must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way – for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church?” (1 Tim 3:4-5).

According to 1 Timothy, same-sex relations could not fulfill such roles within the community, particularly fathering a child. Accordingly, it would be the Orthodox conviction that the responsibilities and qualifications implied in such leadership serve to indicate the limitations on ministry by those committed to same-sex relationships in this regard.

In the traditional Orthodox viewpoint, Christian leadership therefore is seen to be incompatible with homosexual activity precisely because attraction between persons of the same sex cannot reflect the love of God – such love being complementary, unitive, life-creating and life-enhancing. Such leaders could not be expected to model such human relationships as intended by God ‘from the beginning’ for the community, since Orthodox theology would affirm that same-sex sexual activity ‘misses the mark’ and is therefore misdirected. Unlike countless people today and some Christian Churches who would argue the contrary by claiming that sexual activity between people of the same sex is capable of being ‘natural’ – that is, divinely loving, godly and holy – the Eastern Orthodox tradition would hold that praiseworthy sexual love can only have the opportunity to blossom between a married man and woman as this is exemplified in Christ’s love for the Church (cf Eph 5:21-33).

Such a position regarding homosexuality is further based on the first chapter of St Paul’s letter to the Romans (Rom 1:18-32), which Orthodox Christianity interprets in light of its tradition and the Church’s councils and canons, which were the practical applications of the Bible.

According to this vision, sexual actions between people of the same gender have come about as a result of humanity’s rebellion against God and nature since they have refused to ‘glorify Him as God’ and ‘give thanks to Him’ (cf Rom 1:21).

The interpretation that argues that Paul was correct on the one hand in forbidding acts which are ‘contrary to nature’ but was unaware of the ‘fact’ that many people are ‘by nature’ homosexual and therefore ought to act accordingly, is not an accepted interpretation of this passage since, throughout history, this text has never been understood in this way.

On the contrary, it affirms precisely that the reality of homosexuality is one of the countless indications of the world’s fallen state.

The Nativity story

Continued from page 11

and yet strong young Mary. Keen Star Wars fans will know Keisha Castle-Hughes better as Apailana, the Princess of Theed, or more likely as the new Queen of Naboo in *Star Wars III – Revenge of the Sith*. Castle-Hughes has not been in many films, but became widely known in film circles for her Oscar Nominated Best Actress performance as Paikea in the New Zealand film, *The Whale Rider* (2002). She was only 13 at the time of the nomination, the youngest person ever to be nominated. Now only 17, she has recently given birth to her first child.

Oscar Isaac is certainly not that well-known an actor, but is an excellent choice for Joseph. His delivery of lines and looks at certain times convey a depth that encourages the viewer to focus on the character rather than on a celebrity actor.

DOVE, a US based Christian and family movie group, recommends the film as suitable for ages 12 and above due to some violence, and interestingly the comment that “very young children might find the movie a bit slow moving”. Still they give it 5 Doves - their highest rating. Yes, it is actually quite slow moving in parts, but some scenes are ‘rich’ with poignant moments and surely at Christmas, as the script writer has mentioned, we can make time for quiet reflection and a slower pace. (I know I need to).

Most commentators note the film’s adherence to the biblical text, and also its liberty with those areas where we of course do not know what was spoken. It is not silly or gratuitous in any dialogue scenes or in the script overall, though perhaps it is a little too sanitised in terms of the

actual birth of Jesus.

There are some issues, however, which pop up in nearly all nativity dramas; for example, the Magi. In this film they appear at the stables along with the shepherds. Overall, one could even use this point to discuss the context and what may have really happened, and Mike Rich has his own explanation, referring to the concept of the blended narrative.

I want to conclude by raising a more controversial point as to why Christians should support these ventures and others in the pipeline. Secular companies will not put vast amounts of money into films unless there is some guarantee of reasonable return, or at least not too great a loss, which can be made up partly via DVD sales. The company behind *The Nativity Story*, New Line Cinema, is reported to have lost nearly \$20 million dollars to date.

Of course, other films such as *The Passion of the Christ* and the first Chronicles of Narnia film, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, have been commercial successes, particularly bolstered by Christian audiences.

But my point remains: without this support, a wider and mainly non-Christian audience will not have the opportunity to view these films. More people can be reached in this way than by any other possible church based outreach event.

While these films are essentially ‘pre-evangelistic,’ seeds can be sown, and Church groups can make use of these opportunities.

I believe that a Christian film ministry, firmly founded in serious biblical discussion will help to enable people to consider the claims of the Christian story in our visually dominated world.

May this be so at Christmas time.

Peter Bentley



The Uniting Church – as seen by ABC TV's 'Compass'

One of the most significant pieces of media coverage of the state of the Uniting Church in Australia was a program broadcast on ABC Television's 'Compass' last month. With the permission of the ABC, we reproduce the program's transcript here.

Introduction: Geraldine Doogue

Thanks for joining me. This year a uniquely Australian church celebrated its 30th year. The Uniting Church of Australia was formed in the 1970s in a spirit of ecumenical unity and strong social justice ideals. But over the past decade its constituency has divided, fractured and fallen off. Many different expressions of Christianity are today lived under its emblem. How can it survive though? Tonight we examine the unfolding story of a modern, dis-united church.

Narrator:

In June this year the Uniting Church celebrated its first 30 years with a service at St Stephens Church in Sydney. Its pride was evident.

David Gill-Former General Secretary of Uniting Church Assembly:
Whether you've been in the Uniting Church for 30 years or 3 months the story of its formation is your story.

Narrator:

But it was a modest turnout for Australia's third largest religious denomination and its leaders were on the defensive.

David Gill-Former General Secretary of Uniting Church Assembly:
I cannot remember a time, where the church in this country was under more fierce attack. There are people who seem eager to celebrate our problems, to highlight our frailties, to ridicule our mistakes. It is not an easy time in which to be thankful for the church, for any denomination of the Christian family.

Narrator:

And of all the denominations the Uniting Church is faring the worst.

In three decades church attendance has halved, it's fractured from within and its very future is on the line. It's a far cry from the Uniting Church's triumphant beginnings 30 years ago.

[Uniting Church Inauguration Service 1977]

L F Gunn- Joint Constitution Council:

My brothers in Christ, I report that the Uniting Church in Australia has today been established and constituted.

Narrator:

The Uniting Church was a bold new experiment in Christian unity. It married three separate churches: the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches with their roots in the European reformation and the Methodists from 18th Century Britain. Unity was enshrined in a document called the 'Basis of Union' endorsed at the Uniting Church's first ever assembly that same day - an event that captured world attention, national headlines and even protests.

[News Report 1977]

Protester:

You can't bring people into the kingdom of God by church union. You have to bring them by the preaching of the Gospel.

Narrator:

But on June 22nd, 1977 a new and uniquely Australian church was born. And overnight it became Australia's third largest with about two million members.

[News Report 1977]

News Reader:

The historic gathering was conducted under the new emblem of the church – a cross standing in a darkened world with a dove representing the Holy Spirit and an U standing for unity. The first moves towards union were taken at the turn of the century. Today's inaugural assembly marks the final step in that long and difficult path to union.

Philip Hughes-Christian Research Association:

I don't believe the 'Basis of Union' was ever really meant to be a credal statement. And I do believe that in fact the 'Basis of Union' in itself, in the way that it's being written is a fairly open statement. It's inviting people to engage on that journey of faith.

John Morrison, member of ACC:

It was a tough time and a lot of soul searching for a lot of people and ah, but for us when it happened, and we were part of it, it was really something that had been achieved and we saw a future.

Marion Morrison, member of ACC:

I felt it was a beginning of something I didn't know quite what, but I just really felt positive about the whole thing.



ACC Chairman Rev Dr Max Champion

Narrator:

John and Marion Morrison are representative of the Uniting Church's founding generation. Before union they'd been members of the Presbyterian Church where they'd met as kids in Sunday school.

They spent their formative years here in an era when the church was at the centre of community and social life.

John Morrison:

We both taught in the Sunday school as we got older and Marion was a teacher and for 11 years I think I was the superintendent of the Sunday school and we did a lot of building up in that particular period. And the same time we were involved in the Fellowship, which was the Presbyterian Fellowship, and it was a pretty 'go-ey' affair in those days because each church in the Eastern Suburbs would have a dance each Saturday night and one of us would have one and they became our social factor. Which was great, so we spent our social life virtually in that atmosphere.

Narrator:

But by the 1970s all that had changed. Local churches were in decline. Religion was becoming less important in people's lives. The Uniting Church burst onto the scene with a reworked Christian message shaped by and for the times: It stood for things - social justice, human rights and equality for women. It quickly became the most progressive church of its day.

Philip Hughes-Christian Research Association:

It was, it was the opportunity to renew its life, renew its vitality, to be something different to what it had been in the past.

Narrator:

The new church was not afraid to mix religion and politics. It opposed racism, supported Aboriginal Land Rights,

and lobbied for the decriminalisation of homosexuality. It was committed to the Environment long before the term global warming had been coined. But its radical agenda provoked the ire of conservative politicians.

Joh Bjelke-Petersen- Premier of Queensland- 1977:

Just why they are involved in the things that they are involved in, that's just beyond my comprehension and they're not speaking on behalf of the churches because I could give you illustration after illustration where other churches in other areas disagree completely with what their leaders are saying.

Narrator:

In 30 years the Uniting Church has also grown to become one of the large non-government providers of community services in Australia. It cares for the aged, homeless people and many others in need. But as this work has become more professionalised, congregations have become less directly involved.

Philip Hughes-Christian Research Association:

I think one of its unique attributes is that the Uniting Church has sought to listen to the culture, to respond to the cultural context in which it's in. And to adapt to that. Which has meant that at least in some places there has been some flexibility, there's been some real sparks of creativity in terms of church life.

Narrator:

The Uniting Church had high ideals. It was democratic. It had no Bishops. Churches chose their own ministers. It revelled in its diversity. But this would become both its strength and weakness.

[Rev Rex Hunt in service]

Rex Hunt- St James, Curtin, ACT:

This flame is warm as the companionship of friends is warm. Let us celebrate the richness and diversity of life in the presence of God.

Narrator:

Today the Uniting Church has around 2,500 congregations Australia wide. They embrace a wide range of theological views, spiritual practices and styles of worship.

Narrator:

St James's Uniting Church in Canberra is one of the most progressive in the Uniting Church family.

Rex Hunt- St James, Curtin, ACT:

The structure of the service itself is quite traditional. But we are very careful with the use of language with the use of image. That it is inclusive, that it is open, that it is progressive, that it is Australian.

[Rex Hunt in service]

Rex Hunt- St James, Curtin, ACT:

Now some folks still want to call it a new Kingdom protocol but that language is stuck in the era of the King James Bible.

Narrator:

Rex Hunt was deeply influenced by the progressive theology movement of the 1960s and 70s. He's rejected many core Christian beliefs: the Virgin Birth, the physical resurrection of Jesus and the Biblical account of miracles.

Rex Hunt- St James, Curtin, ACT:

Have I rejected the basic tenets of Christian faith? No, what I have done personally is to reject some of the interpretations, but I don't believe I have rejected the experiences.

Now is everyone at St James a self classified progressive? I'm sure that is not the case. Progressive is not a signed and sealed box which says this puts you in and this puts you out. But our people at St James are they open to other people? Are they wanting to hear integrity in the preaching of the sermons? Do they want to relate to 21st century images and language in liturgies? Yes, they certainly want all of that. So in a broad way yes we are a progressive congregation. But that doesn't mean to say that everyone's got their left foot nailed to the floor and sign on the dotted line.

Merrelin Robbins:

I think progressive means moving with the times. Recognising that we are of the 21st century, that we are people who think. That we're not people who have been told what to think as some churches are.

Rodney Evan:

Well it's challenging theology. It's certainly not conventional Christianity that even I've grown up in the Uniting Church tradition. It looks to redefine the person of Jesus, redefine the meaning of God and to explore things that I guess in some churches are regarded as very controversial.

Rev Max Champion:

The progressive Christian network in our view is less than helpful in with the church facing the issues it must face these days.

Narrator:

Max Champion sits on the other side of the theological fence. Proudly conservative, he's leading a push to return the church to its core beliefs.

Max Champion:

We use the terms 'reformed', 'orthodox' and 'evangelical' quite frequently. And we want to draw attention to the fact that the church that uses those sort of titles is one

that wants to focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ, and the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and so on. And we believe that at its best, the ecumenical tradition from Biblical times through the creeds, and the creeds of the church, expresses that reality extremely well. Now that means it needs to be reappropriated in every generation. But we don't believe it should be set aside as it is done by some people within our church.

[Uniting Church General Assembly 2003]

Speaker:

Those in favour of proposal 84 please indicate. Those against please indicate. It is clearly carried.

Narrator:

But what's triggered the growing divide in the Uniting Church is not orthodoxy, but sexuality. At its 2003 Assembly 90 per cent of delegates voted to approve gay and lesbian ministers – the only mainstream church to do so.

Dorothy McRae-McMahon - Retired Uniting Church Minister:

I'm feeling proud of being apart of a very brave church.

Max Champion:

I think the church has made a serious mistake at its last two Assemblies. It has without actually discussing whether or not same sex relationships in ordination are appropriate, without actually debating that issue at the doctrinal level and ethical level, it has never the less permitted that to be acceptable.

Narrator:

Three years on Max Champion raised the issue yet again at the 2006 Assembly in Brisbane.

[News Story 2006]

Reporter:

Rev Champion says more than six and a half thousand church members have left in the past three years and more will follow if the church maintains the status quo.

Narrator:

But the church refused to debate the matter any further.

[News Story 2006]

Terrence Corkin- Uniting Church Assembly General Secretary:

We have a culture now where people move churches for all sorts of reasons people: switch in, people switch out. If this is the reason for some people I'm about that but we would rather it not be so.

Max Champion:

If diversity is now to be the mark of what the Uniting

Church is about, then it won't only be on sexuality, it'll be diversity on what you believe about God. So if you don't like the Holy Trinity for example, or if you don't like the incarnation, or you feel the scripture really is a book that should be set aside – a whole range of things like that – then we will become simply a church that encourages people to follow their own natural desires towards spirituality or sexuality or liturgy. And that fundamentally is a dangerous situation for a church that was founded on such a strong doctrinal and ethical and pastoral document as the 'Basis of Union.'

Narrator:

Rather than move churches, Max Champion and other conservatives established an organisation called the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, a dissenting group within the church.

Max Champion:

We want to have a place where congregations and individuals who still want to reaffirm the 'Basis of Union' and adhere to it, have a place to be able to discuss those sort of issues. The ACC is not an anti-gay organisation. The motion that eventually went forward to the Assembly was a very fine positive statement of the splendour of creation. And it includes within it concern for people who are, find themselves in confused sexual relations. And the pastoral care and the concern for people there is very clearly stated.

Narrator:

John and Marion Morrison are among around one thousand Uniting Church members who have joined the Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

Marion Morrison:

People are very passionate about this. I mean if everyone's going to up and leave because they just don't like one thing, it's not good for the church as a whole, so I think this has presented another avenue for people to remain within the Uniting Church but have the opportunity to be able to express their views and their beliefs.

Narrator:

John and Marion are firmly against homosexual ministers.

Marion Morrison:

I just feel that it's not Biblical, I feel a leader has to set an example. And it's not an example that I would want to have for my children, it is just the problem of a homosexual being a spiritual leader. It seems to be a contradiction in terms to my way of thinking. And so, I just don't feel that I could accept that decision.

John Morrison:

That's all it's about, as Marion says, we've got plenty of friends who probably call themselves gay and, fine. But whilst I don't agree, that doesn't stop a friendship and

it doesn't stop that person being brought in within the church itself. We're talking about leadership.

Narrator:

When it comes to leadership John Morrison has plenty of experience. For 38 years he was a police officer rising to the rank of commander. Today he's the captain of the Uniting Church's Boy's Brigade at Bondi Junction in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

John Morrison:

I want to see them grow up to be good strong Christian blokes, you know and that's all I've ever done it for, I think, to bring young fellas to Christ and to learn to be strong, upright men.

Narrator:

On Thursday nights Marion leads the girls Brigade at the same venue.

Marion Morrison:

The aim of the Girl's Brigade is, basically the same, but just probably worded a little differently and, it's to help girls become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ and through self-control and reverence and a sense of responsibility to find true enrichment of life. I believe faith is not much good without works, you have to have faith to be able to do the works, and, you can only do them through God's power, it's not you, it is him that is in control and I just feel that, it's more than just going to church on a Sunday, it has to be your whole life.

Narrator:

John and Marion have been active members of their local Uniting Church at Bondi Junction for 30 years. The congregation is a mix of old and new and while some of its members like John and Marion have joined the breakaway group pushing for a return to orthodox beliefs, their church did not.

Pastor Peter Watson- Uniting Church, Bondi, Sydney:

The only reason we didn't join as a whole congregation was that there were a few people, really probably less than a handful, who we have a lot of respect for but who hold a different theological viewpoint. And we felt that at the time it wasn't worth the hurting of that relationship. So I would say 90 to 95 per cent of our congregation would very happily vote to join. But just out of a sense of acceptance and love we chose not to, and allowed people to do it on an individual basis.

Julie Anderson:

I believe that the Bible says that it's not the way that God created us to live as homosexuals. The Bible says accept everybody. But the Bible also says you know don't let the people lead.

Marv Neubig:

I believe in the same way that is written on our front door,

that all are welcome full stop, regardless of your beliefs or your preferences. I feel very comfortable with that.

Narrator:

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations claims to have 140 church congregations onboard – around five per cent of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Philip Hughes-Christian Research Association:

It's not going to really help the Uniting Church to be dogmatic in terms of its faith in an orthodox way, just as I also believe that it's not helpful for the Uniting Church to be dogmatic about its faith in a really liberal way. That true inclusiveness does involve a breadth of ways in which faith is seen and acknowledged and experienced and expressed.

Narrator:

In 2002 Rex Hunt from St James Uniting Church in Canberra set up a national forum, open to all-comers, to explore progressive religion and spirituality.

Rex Hunt- St James, Curtin, ACT:

The aim of the Centre for Progressive Religious Thought is to offer a safe place where people can push theological boundaries without feeling that they're going to get knee capped because their views are perhaps different to the so called established or orthodox tradition.

Narrator:

In July the centre sponsored 'The Common Dreams Conference' in Sydney. It brought together progressive theologians from around Australia and the world, including Anglican Bishop John Shelby Spong from America.

John Shelby Spong- Retired Anglican Bishop:

I think the experience is real. God is real but I think the way anyone explains God is always time-bound and time-warped.

Rex Hunt- St James, Curtin, ACT:

I believe that progressive theological thinking if you like is repositioning the matter of religion within society. We are claiming our space in the public debate. And the response from ordinary people in churches and ordinary people who have left churches 20 and 30 years ago was tremendous. The energy at that conference was something really to be seen and experienced and felt.

Max Champion:

It surprises me that Bishop Spong really has the gall to continue to call himself a minister in the Christian Church. His view is so far removed than from anything that you might consider traditional to the extent that it's not exactly clear what he does believe.

Philip Hughes-Christian Research Association:

I believe some of the liberalism of theology still comes out of a rebellion against the traditions of the 1960s and 1970s, that its still people working through that period of

rebellion, And I don't think the almost fundamentalism in some of the liberalism, that is occurring today is particular helpful to younger people.

Narrator:

To survive and move forward the Uniting church must attract a younger congregation. The liberal progressive theology at St James in Canberra is what enticed Alison Proctor.

Alison Proctor:

Before I arrived at St James I'd been church hunting with my flat mate, my house mate, Joanna. And we'd been to Baptist churches and to Anglican churches, we'd been to our local church, and when we arrived at St James we sort of sat through the service, and then we wrote our names in the visitors book at the end, two women living at the same address. And so automatically people assumed that we were, I think, they probably assumed we were a gay couple. And yet we were still welcome with open arms, and I really I loved the fact that they were still just embracing of us. No matter who we were or where we came from.

Narrator:

Alison was raised in the Uniting Church, but dropped out as a young adult. She returned 18 months ago.

Alison Proctor:

Another thing that really grabbed me and hooked me onto St James when I first arrived there, first went there, was that they read from the gospel of St Mary, a non-canonical gospel. And the fact that there was a group of people who were interested in seeking further afield to understand what it means to be a Christian.

Narrator:

Alison represents the new face of hope for the Uniting Church. Its congregations are ageing so fast there are dire predictions about its future membership.

Now there are moves afoot to discriminate in favour of leaders aged 50 and younger, to attract youth into its greying flock. But how the Uniting Church intends to deal with core issues dividing it, remains an open question.

David Gill-Former General Secretary of Uniting Church Assembly:
The Uniting Church in Australia has that very important '-ing' in its name. It didn't all happen when the heads of churches signed a document. It's been a work in progress for the last 30 years and it will be for the years to come.

Philip Hughes-Christian Research Association:

I think in 30 years time, the Uniting Church may still be very diverse, that there will be quite a wide range of expressions of the life of the church. Whether it can embrace that or whether it gets so divided and demoralised by the divisions, I think remains to be seen. But I believe that the Uniting Church still has potential.

Wesley Institute School of Theology gets accreditation in record time

Wesley Institute's School of Theology has received accreditation with the Department of Education and Training (DET) for five years until 31 August 2012. The outcome is extraordinary given that they had to come out of one system and into another under very tight time constraints. Dr Jim Pendlebury, Chairman of the Wesley Institute Board, said, "The fact that it went through in record time without any conditions is an indication that God's hand is upon it."

Wesley Institute has received accreditation for nine theology degrees: Associate Degree of Theology, Associate Degree of Theology (Korean Medium), Bachelor of Theology, Bachelor of Theology (Korean Medium), Bachelor of Theology (Honours), Graduate Diploma of Theological Studies, Master of Theological Studies, Master of Theology, Master of Theology (Korean Medium).

Wesley Institute provides the opportunity to study in a context where there is rich interplay between a variety of disciplines including theology, the creative arts, counselling and education. It is an evangelical College of Theology and the Arts with lecturers and students from all major Australian denominations. This makes the college a stimulating place to study as students are presented a mix of evangelical theological positions. Many students take the opportunity to study for an extra year to complete concurrent degrees in Theology and the Creative Arts (Music, Graphic Design, Dance or Drama) or to add a Graduate Diploma of Education that qualifies them to teach secondary studies of religion.

Hilda Caine, Academic Dean, said "We are now able to have more of our own unique expression in course design. It puts the college in a better position to reflect the flavour of the church by adding curriculum that reflects our own vision for ministry."

Given the shortage of ministers across Australia, in particular the shortage of evangelical ministers, it gives congregations other options for meeting their staffing needs. Students can study for three years (or four years for concurrent degrees) in an environment which is pleasing and satisfying to them. Students with a call to ordained ministry can then make the transition to ministry by doing extra studies at an approved college. Graduates typically engage in ministry as youth workers, school chaplains, pastoral workers, worship pastors, creative arts directors and missionaries.

Dr Jim Harrison is the head of English Theology. His published thesis, 'Paul's Language of Grace in Its Graeco-Roman Context' won Best Book Relating to the New Testament at the 2005 Biblical Archaeology Society Publication Awards.

Wesley Institute is also the only provider of Korean language post-graduate studies in Australia. It forged the way in Korean language studies by being the first provider

of undergraduate theology courses. This department is headed by Dr Kye Won Lee, author of 'Living in Union with Christ: The Practical Theology of Thomas F. Torrance.'

Readers are encouraged to visit the website at www.wesleyinstitute.edu.au. A Gordon Moyes Scholarship is awarded to a student in the School of Theology who demonstrates academic merit and commitment to the pastoral ministry

Let's talk about social responsibility

Continued from page 5

and perhaps uncomfortable with the idea of the growing friendship among Christians of different denominations today.

Traditionally in Australia, groups like evangelicals, Pentecostals and Catholics didn't work together. But increasingly, they do.

"I think because of the decline of the role of the Church in our society, people have to ask serious questions about what is really essential and important in the life of the church, whereas previously, denominations could exist quite happily by themselves.

"Today we can no longer afford that luxury, that stupid luxury, and we are rediscovering what is essential in relationship to other groups."

Back in 1977, Brian was a church member though not yet an ordained minister. Nevertheless he backed the formation of the Uniting Church.

"I voted for the union, and thought that was a good way to go, and in principle, what I'm aiming at today with my work for the ACC is to support the Uniting Church through the ACC.

"They're the best way to help the church, because I think that ecumenical vision's a really good one. I don't think anymore that that top-down, institutional kind of view is the way to go."

The church in the 21st century has "a different ecumenical nature," Brian says. It's a more "bottom-up" kind of church today.

"These days people are far less concerned about institutions. They don't come up on the radar really. But I've always worked in situations that involve people from a wide range of denominations.

"I think what's important is the gospel."

Though it's a document produced by the ACC, the intention behind the Social Responsibility statement is to help the whole church clarify its thinking.

"We're writing from the ACC for the Uniting Church, and the statement was intended as an initial clarifying statement, setting out the basic parameters of where we are at."

The commission will follow up the statement with other material on social responsibility. Members are now working on a study on the Epistle of James.

The full text of the Social Responsibility Commission's statement can be read at www.confessingcongregations.com

Editorial

...from page 2

who have followed the debate over sexuality and leadership over the past few years, it is not even news at all.

It is, however, true that the church is deeply divided, and faces critical questions over how it can reassemble itself to form a body with the possibility of living beyond the first decade of the 21st century. The church was born in 1977, 30 years ago. Will it live to see its own 40th birthday?

The Christian faith itself is, in large part, a question of authority. Why should anyone believe that Jesus is God? The answer lies, ultimately, in the authority of the source from which the proposition arises. From a Christian point of view, the source for the proposition that Jesus is God is revelation from God himself. This makes the message that Jesus is God trustworthy, or at least it does from a Christian point of view.

To the non-Christian, secular mind, the authority behind a proposition also counts for almost everything, and not only on questions of ultimate spiritual belief. The media holds great influence in modern secular society, and this is not only because of the power of mass production and mass broadcasting. It is also because what is reported by the media is generally seen as authoritative. This lends special importance to the ABC's treatment of the Uniting Church in this *Compass* program. To the uninformed, secular mind, the ABC's "take" on the UCA today will certainly carry enormous weight.

What the program revealed was that, in the words of the ABC's narrator, many "core Christian beliefs" have been abandoned by the advocates of so-called Progressive Christianity, who loom large today, if not in absolute numbers then at least in relative influence, in several Western denominations, including Australia's Uniting Church.

These core beliefs include the Virgin Birth and the physical resurrection of Jesus, and the Biblical account of miracles. In the words of one churchgoer shown on the *Compass* program, today's Progressive Christianity "looks to redefine the person of Jesus," and to "redefine the meaning of God."

This is a significant admission. Since the time of the Creeds, Christianity has sought to preserve the authority of its teaching by confining its claims within the limits of a teaching structure. This is what the Creeds themselves represent: formulaic, public, confessional statements of what the church does and, by implication, does not believe about God and how he has revealed himself.

Today, however, credal statements about the Christian faith are themselves defined, by Progressive Christianity, as somehow inimical to Christianity itself. To any intelligent person, this has at least one implication. It means that anything goes. If you do not accept the credal statement that God is three persons in one, you may as well believe he is any number of persons at all: one, two or 10. Pick

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a number, any number. Your personal preference is your personal God.

Of course, this "anything goes" phenomenon, if admitted, does not apply only to the doctrine of the Trinity, but to every Christian teaching on every conceivable topic. It applies especially to the crucial question of what are the authoritative written sources of authoritative Christian teaching. These used to be held, by many people, to be the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Not by Progressive Christians, though. According to one, interviewed on this *Compass* program, they include a host of non-canonical "Gnostic" gospels which were rejected by the Christian church precisely because of their lack of authority as many as 17 centuries ago. In the words of this interviewee, she was attracted to a progressive Christian community within the Uniting Church because, on her first visit, "they read from the gospel of St Mary." This takes us immediately out of the realm of rational theology, and into the realm of *The DaVinci Code*.

Many other illustrative features of life in the churches today can be gleaned from reading the transcript of the *Compass* program. One is the occasional violence of the language and imagery used by progressive Christians: for example, in the comment that progressive communities are needed to allow people to push the boundaries of belief "without feeling that they're going to get knee-capped" for their views. Really. Has anyone in Australia ever been knee-capped in church?

Researcher Philip Hughes warns in the program not only against fundamentalism of a conservative variety, but also against the fundamentalism of doctrinaire liberals. Which of these two forms of fundamentalism represents a graver threat to the future of the Uniting Church can be judged by individual readers.

One thing, though, is plain. Large numbers of church members have left the Uniting Church in recent years. Now this may be an incorrect prescription, but it seems that ever-larger doses of the "Gospel of Mary" are not going to bring them back.

Paul Gray

A land where Christianity thrives

by Paul Langkamp

My first sight of Korea, in the first rays of dawn one morning in January 2001, was from the jet-plane window descending to Seoul's old international Airport, Kimpo. It wasn't the city's massive, unrelenting congestion of skyscrapers that shook me, but the sight of thousands of Christian crosses – in bright red neon illumination atop so many buildings.

Faith in Jesus' saving crucifixion isn't stark like this back home in Australia. There, it seemed to me, if one accepts the Christian confessions of faith at all, one holds them shy from the media's mirthful eyes.

During the following years in Korea, while teaching English, I would welcome Korean Christians' bold and brave faith and see that God's renewing Word is neither culture- nor history-bound.

I soon learned that Christianity had first landed on Korea's ancient shores by way of a Catholic chaplain who accompanied the Japanese invasion of 1592. The saving Word of Jesus survived the conflicts of Korea's national defence, and made its way, via layperson word-of-mouth, among Korea's people. So much so, that by the mid-nineteenth century, the numbers of Catholic Christian believers seemed to present itself as a threat to the fabric of Korean society – a society worried by internal dissension, governed

according to the Confucian principles of the 550 year old Choseon dynasty, and isolated from the world. In the mid 1860s, the infant King's father, Tae Won Gun, who ruled Korea as regent, tried to stamp out this movement once and for all. The result was that up to ten thousand Korean believers were martyred by their own countrymen, many by having their heads cut off at a small hill near the Han River in Seoul, their blood making the river red, and "cleansing Korea's land of foreign influence". A large memorial to these martyrs now stands on that site, called "Choldusan", or "Chop Head Mountain". In 1984, during his visit to Korea, Pope John Paul II prayed for a long time in Choldusan's chapel.

Less than 20 years after the Choldusan martyrdom, on April 5, 1885, missionaries Henry Appenzeller, a Methodist from Pennsylvania, and Horace Grant Underwood, an American Presbyterian, arrived in Seoul and established the first Protestant churches. Appenzeller's church, Chungdong First Methodist Church in Seoul, developed dramatically. In 2001, the denomination comprised 5,262 churches, 1.39 million members, 7298 ministers, six universities, its own theological seminary and numerous schools.

These days, Christianity is practised by up to 40 per cent of Koreans. The Presbyterian church in Korea, founded by Underwood, is today ten times bigger than the Methodist.

The influence of these churches, through numerous parishes, hospitals, schools, newspapers and TV stations is enormous. However this modern development did not come without life-threatening testing to Korean Christians through the 20th century.

The Japanese, after decades of subterfuge, finally annexed Korea in 1908. The colonizers set about repressing all things Korean, and placing stringent conditions on the Christian churches. When the last Choseon Korean King finally died in 1919, a protest movement for independence, known as "March the First", arose. Thirty-three Koreans, including Sin Sok Gu, a graduate of the Methodist Theological Seminary, risked their lives by signing the "Declaration of Independence". Protest marches flared across Korea. Thirty-thousand Koreans were killed in the aftermath. Among them were the parents of Yu Gwan Sun, a young girl of 17, at that time a member of Chungdong First Methodist Church. She participated in the leadership of this movement. Her deep faith and her education at Ewha Methodist school for girls gave her the courage needed for such a bold act at a young age. Yu Gwan Sun, after prison torture, finally died in 1920. The Christian churches were to be more circumspect in their reaction to the Japanese.

After these events, the colonizers placed the Christian churches under the closest scrutiny. The Japanese demanded that Christian churches acknowledge Japan as the rightful rulers of Korea. Presbyterian and Methodist churches alike officially acceded: pointing guns at Christians' heads, Japanese police attended church meetings. Then, the Japanese demanded that Christians bow at Shinto Shrines in acts of worship to the Japanese emperor. Some Christians preferred to close their churches and pray together privately, while other protestant churches, using ingeniously camouflaged language, argued that they could meet their colonizer's demands and simultaneously remain faithful Christians by suggesting that bowing to the Japanese Emperor is neither betrayal to their country nor compromise to the Christian faith.

There are times in history when public admission of faith is unavoidable. In the words on a young American woman missionary's gravestone in the foreigner's cemetery in Seoul, "My Lord died for me so it is right that I die for him."

There is more to my Korea story. One young man in my English class confessed to me as I left, "God has blessed Korea". He had no doubt about the source of all life, including his nation's life.

Paul Langkamp is a contributing writer.