

PASSING ON THE TORCH

**A new
flame rises
in the
Australian
church**



**After 30 years, a
new magazine for
a new era**

-page 4

**Richard Dawkins
v the Holocaust**

-page 20

**Does Bishop
Spong have a
religion?**

-page 22

CATALYST

The ACC's *Catalyst* magazine is published quarterly by the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church of Australia.

Editor: Paul Gray

Editorial Committee: Warren Clarnette, Max Champion, Ross Carter

Board of Communication: Ivan Kirk, Steve Estherby, Vic Malham, Anne Weeks

Contact for editorial and advertising:

paulgray@sprint.net.au

Tel (within Australia): 0418 519 450
Assembly of Confessing Congregations
administration office:
P.O. Box 068, Newtown, NSW 2042

Subscription to this magazine is free to each individual member of the ACC.
Individual membership \$50.00 per year.

Congregations or parishes which subscribe to the Assembly of Confessing Congregations will also receive *Catalyst*.

WE WILL ACCEPT ADVERTISING

Catalyst magazine offers a national readership among churchgoers.

Small to medium businesses with a national focus are invited to advertise. Two more editions are to be published in 2007.

Catalyst offer a safe space for you to place your business message.

Latest legal advice on UCA doctrine

'Assembly rejects RA bid on vital question' was the lead story in an earlier issue of *Reforming*, a publication of the Reforming Alliance.

The Uniting Church's Assembly standing committee (ASC) rejected the Reforming Alliance's legal advice, from barrister Stephen Howells, that Resolution 84 on sexuality and leadership is invalid and unconstitutional.

The advice indicated the Resolution was invalid because it contradicts existing Church doctrine, and unconstitutional because it fails to comply with clause 39 of the Constitution and clause 15(e) of the Uniting Church's Basis of Union by not seeking concurrence of other Councils of the Church.

The ASC also rejected any attempt to resolve the issue in a cooperative way.

Letters were then sent to presbytery secretaries in August-September – these were directed to 'ministers, persons serving in the specified ministries and church council secretaries' -- rejecting all of the Reforming Alliance's suggestions about resolving the issue in a cooperative way.

A request from the chairs of RA and EMU to circulate a response was denied.

The Reforming Alliance has now received further legal advice from Mr Howells which confirms his earlier opinion concerning Resolution 84, and extends it to Resolution 108 (2006).

The invalidity of R84 and R108 on doctrinal and constitutional grounds will render invalid or irregular the use of church property, the making of clergy appointments and the use of trust funds and other monies.

The advice was forwarded to the Rev Terence Corkin, Assembly General Secretary.

The March meeting of ASC resolved to receive the letter and the legal opinion from RA.

It also resolved to report to a later meeting on 'a proposed course of action in the light of the advice received from the Assembly's legal advisors, such report to include a copy of the RA legal advice.'

The General Secretary expects to be in a position to respond after the ASC meeting scheduled for July 20-22.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE of ACC

ANNUAL ASSEMBLY

Elect Chair and National Council. Receive Commission Reports and set policy.

NATIONAL COUNCIL

12 people—Chair, Deputy Chair and Secretary plus nine others
Administrator and Treasurer to attend meetings
Meet at least 4 times each year

NATIONAL COMMISSIONS

DOCTRINE AND THEOLOGY

Develop doctrinal and theological resources as required by the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, including responses to doctrinal decisions of the Uniting Church.

Based in Victoria, Convenor: Dr Rosalie Hudson

DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM

Encourage and equip the Assembly of Confessing Congregations to bear witness, in word and deed, to the redeeming work of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, by developing bible studies and pastoral resources, etc.

Based in SA, Convenor: Rev Dr Phil Marshall

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Assist the Assembly of Confessing Congregations to critically reflect upon our culture's presuppositions in the light of the orthodox, reformed and evangelical faith. Identify social/public issues of importance and produce statements, study resources and discussion papers for ACC congregations and ACC Groups.

Based in Victoria, Convenor: Rev Dr Brian Edgar

ECUMENICAL

Assist the Assembly of Confessing Congregations to witness to the catholicity of the faith we hold. Encourage ecumenical relationships, and liaise with Australian churches and with other Australian and international confessing movements.

Based in NSW, Convenor: Ms Marion Byrne

NETWORKS DEVELOPMENT

Assist with the development of regional networks of ACC congregations and groups, and encourage them to develop ways of furthering the confessional cause within the Uniting Church. Assist and encourage the work of the National Prayer Network and the Association of Confessing Ministry Workers

Not based in any state, Convenor: Rev Rod James

CROSS CULTURAL

Liaise with migrant/ethnic and indigenous congregations in the Uniting Church. Develop and maintain an environment where indigenous and migrant/ethnic congregations can confidently participate in the life of the ACC. Develop, gather and promote cross-cultural resources that foster the unity of the church and its mission in Jesus Christ. Organize the translation of ACC documents and resources into different languages.

Based in Queensland, Convenor: Rev Lulu Senituli

STATE NETWORKS

Provide the resources of national ACC to confessing congregations, ministry workers and Christians. Develop new ACC congregations. Provide pastoral support and encouragement to congregations and ministering leaders.

ASSOCIATION OF CONFESSING MINISTRY WORKERS

Provide a strong sense of identity, a renewed sense of belonging, and a position of integrity, in which members can publicly confess their faith within the Uniting Church whilst rejecting the liberalism, relativism and secularism which has infiltrated the Uniting Church.

NATIONAL PRAYER NETWORK

Call and encourage the ACC to be a people of prayer and fasting. Provide prayer support for individuals, congregations, networks, commissions, the national council and the mission of the church as a whole.

SECRETARIAT

National Office: **ADMINISTRATOR** (full time/part time) etc

BOARD of COMMUNICATION: Take responsibility for facilitating and communicating the work of the national assembly, national council and commissions within ACC congregations, and in relation to the UCA, other Churches and the public media. Establish and maintain the ACC website. Publish and distribute the ACC newsletter and magazine.

BOARD of ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCE: Take responsibility for administrative, financial and legal matters. Report to the national council and assembly through the Administrator.

After 30 years, a new magazine and a new era

Warren Clarnette

Catalyst appears at a crucial moment for the UCA. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the denomination's founding and the emergence of the *Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia*. The new body joins the global movement to arrest the decline in doctrine and practice of churches across the developed world.

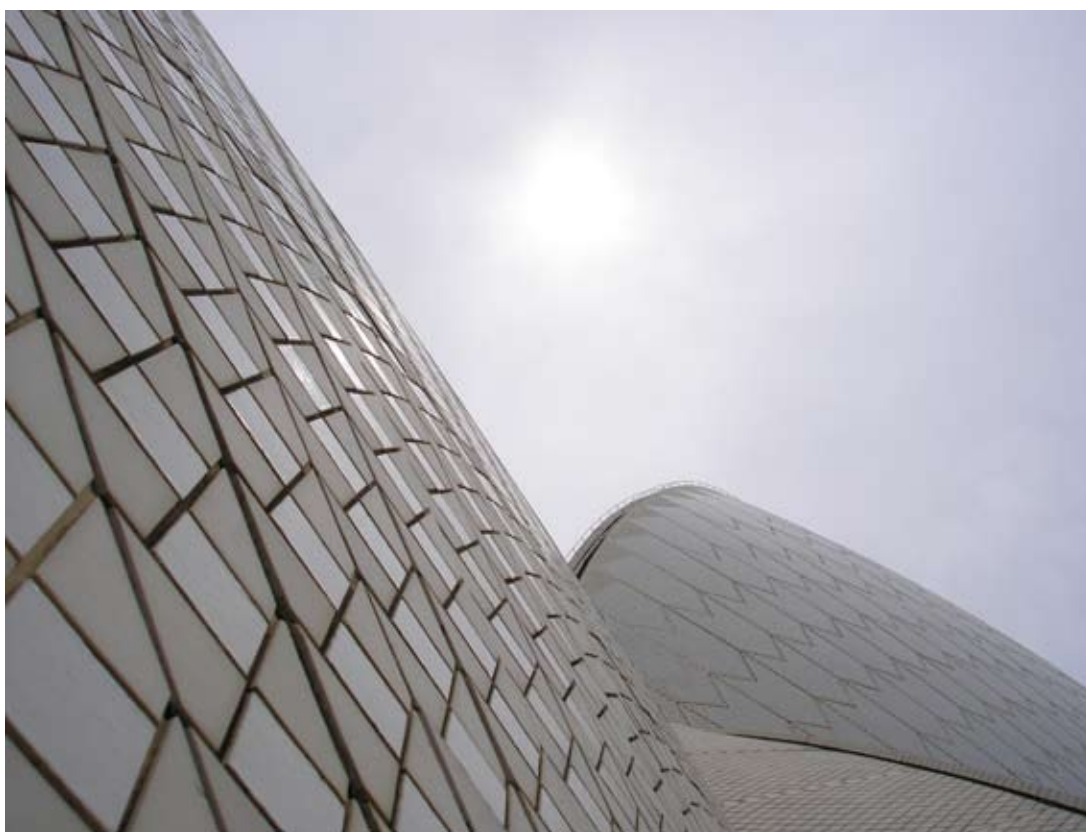
The ACC may represent the only chance for reform of the Uniting Church from within. It will succeed only if it is a movement of the Spirit which inspires committed action from loyal lay people and ministers. This year offers a once-

only opportunity to reverse the debilitation of the Uniting Church due to its surrender to the spirit of the age.

That the ACC should emerge so early in the denomination's brief existence would have been inconceivable on the night of June 1977, when the inaugural assembly was televised nationally from Sydney's Opera House. The numerical decline is bad enough; the church's sleep-walking connivance in the moral and ethical confusion of our time is a disaster.

As if absently-mindedly, UCA officials have preferred public popularity over scriptural

principle. By gradual steps they have attracted the not unreasonable charge of apostasy. The official church has opted for media exposure over integrity. Self-proclaimed as a reforming church, it has found the biblical witness less attractive than speculation and has searched in vain for the chimera of relevance. Now, as it enters a fourth decade, the new church can take



no comfort from its disrupted unity, the quiet disdain of ecumenical partners and the bewildered embarrassment of the wider community.

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations, as its name implies, is a grassroots movement formed out of the passion and enterprise that produced the evangelical members of the Uniting Church (EMU) and the Reforming Alliance. Both groups offered a losing resistance to the church's capture by the so-called gay and lesbian social revolution.

Time will show that by embracing the global homosexual venture, the national assembly and state synods were midwives of the ACC. Ironically, if homosexuality had not been thrust upon congregations with demands for ordination of homosexual men and women and approval of same-gender 'marriage' rights, the ACC would not now exist.

But sexuality is not the substance of the ACC's purpose. The movement is global in scope. It opposes the bias of church officials for dialogue over dogma, personal opinion over scriptural truth, tolerance over discrimination and political means over the *communio sanctorum* of classical Christianity.

Sceptics and honest seekers will find Thomas C. Oden's 2006 book *Turning around the Mainline – how renewal movements are changing the church* an excellent introduction to the issues facing the Uniting Church, though its locus is the north American scene. Oden answers two frequently asked questions: why are confessing movements necessary?, and what do they really believe?

A short answer to the first question is the decline of mainline denominations, accompanied by the fact that many intelligently critical observers in the public domain hold Christianity in contempt.

For example, Uniting Church leaders have from the beginning sought public esteem, only to find their efforts unrewarded, except for the approval of activist fringe groups pleased to have any sort

“

The most powerful social witness of Christianity is simply the gospel of Jesus Christ and not a partisan political agenda.

of church imprimatur. This new denomination, formed to offer a made-in-Australia church for succeeding generations, with the hope of further organic church unions, is ignored, pigeon-holed and often lampooned in the public arena. Our church's public statements carry none of the gravity our official pretensions would suggest. We are, at the moment, a church earnestly engaging a dwindling band of public supporters happy to share the dessicated remnants of a once-vibrant spiritual force.

The second question raises many complex problems of doctrine, interpretation and ethics. *Catalyst* will explore these in succeeding issues.

Our primary purpose is to inform the member congregations of the ACC about the policies and demands laid on them as a loyal movement within the Uniting Church. On public issues the magazine will adopt the principle, enunciated by one of the several confessing bodies of the US Presbyterian Church, that 'the most powerful social witness of Christianity is simply the gospel of Jesus Christ and not a partisan political agenda.'

Catalyst offers support to ministers and lay people who may not be ready to align themselves

with the ACC but understand the urgent need for reform and renewal.

We will publish perspectives on church life not found in official propaganda and synod journals, where the fact of decline is concealed under cover of glowing accounts of progress and achievement.

Members could be forgiven for thinking the Uniting Church this year celebrates three decades of conspicuous achievement, rather than a catalogue of lost opportunities. The ACC prays that the church will experience reform and renewal, and *Catalyst* will serve that end.

A committee of the ACC board of Communication directs the magazine's policy, and we are delighted that the editor, Paul Gray, brings considerable skills and energy to the task. Mr. Gray has been a columnist with News Limited's *Herald Sun* since 1992, is national affairs editor of the Catholic weekly *The Record* and author of *Nightmare of the Prophet* (Freedom Publishing 2004), a philosophical study of totalitarianism and terrorism. From 1985 to 1994 he was associate editor of B.A. Santamaria's *News Weekly*, and a presenter and script writer for the radio program *Gray Matter*, broadcast on Christian radio around Australia from 2003-06.

Mr. Gray was twice chosen as a finalist in the annual UN Media Peace Awards for a radio program on asylum seekers (2003) and a *Herald Sun* column on relations with our Muslim neighbors (2004). He won the Best Column prize of the Australasian Catholic Press Association (2000) for an article on cricketer Hansie Cronje.

He served five years as chairman of the Council for Marriage and the Family, an advisory body to Melbourne Archbishop George Pell from 1997 to 2002. He attends St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic parish in Blackburn, Victoria. Mr Gray graduated in Arts (Hons.) from Monash University in the 1980s in English Literature and Philosophy, after attending Catholic schools.

We commend him and his editorship to our readers and thank him for making himself available to this project of the confessing movement.

Warren Clarnette is the convener of the ACC Board of Communication.

FROM THE EDITOR

How many members of the Uniting Church does it take to change a light globe? It sounds like the beginning of a great joke, but unfortunately I can't share the punchline with you just yet.

*There was another great joke about Californians and light-bulbs a few years ago. **How many Californians does it take to change a light-globe?***

Answer: 10. One to change the globe, and nine to 'share the experience.'

As a modern-day churchgoer, it often seems to me that we've all long since reached the point where we've become more Californian than the Californians.

We like to "share the experience" of coming together "as church." But many of us have long since lost all clear understanding of just what this thing, the church, was meant to be all along.

For example, amongst my own tribe, the Catholics, a story was told some years ago about a "communion service"

for children in Brisbane, where instead of handing out consecrated bread, or even some sort of consecrated bread substitute, the organisers opted to give the kiddies each a piece of chocolate Freddo Frog.

"Body of Frog," the leaders reportedly said as the kids came up in turn. How the churches parody themselves.

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations has a clear idea of what the church is. Today we need that idea more than we need Freddo Frogs, or even those delicious Lindt blocks with 85 per cent cocoa. That's why I'm keen to be part of this publication. Long may it prosper.

As the editions churn their way out, I will look forward to being in touch with you, personally and through these pages. Please send in your feedback, and your proposals for articles and interviews.

*And please, if you do know the answer to that electrifying question, send it in: how many members of the Uniting Church **does** it take to change a light-globe?*



We should now begin to look forward to a lot of ACC activities and initiatives in the months and years ahead. The national council has worked carefully over the last six months setting up the administrative arrangements. We have worked hard to design an organizational structure that will assist us to further the confessional cause.

Most of the states have held public meetings and put in place steering committees that will design ways of fulfilling the commitments we have made in our charter. The way this will be done in each locality can be worked out by the local steering committees. However, the national council, along with the commissions and boards we have established, will support this local work.

Now that most of the set-up tasks have been completed we can look forward to seeing the various groups in action. The administrative structure will be vital to sustaining the confessional movement. If unsupported or under-funded our work will peter out, but we are hoping the work we have done over the last six months will begin to pay dividends. We are most grateful to Revd Dr Ian Breward for his painstaking work in developing our constitution for incorporation. The decision at our inaugural meeting to incorporate was an important one. It enables us to cover our activities with public liability insurance and commits the ACC to a number of accountabilities.

Please do consider how you can financially assist the work of the ACC. We have people available who are able to visit local churches or groups and we always like to cover their travel expenses. If you are part of a group or a local church that would welcome a visit from one of our ACC representatives then do not hesitate to contact Mr Peter Bentley at our national office and we can arrange a visit.

There is some growth in the number of congregations joining the ACC and also the formation of local ACC groups. Individual members are most welcome as well. We realise that the commitments the ACC asks of its

How can you help the confessing movement?

From the Secretary

members takes some careful consideration. We encourage all that consider joining to take the necessary time to assess if they can make the commitments. However, be assured ACC membership is always open to any congregation or individual committed to the confessional cause.

All of the work which the ACC has completed on the matter of sexuality and leadership will hold us in good stead in the years ahead. The Uniting Church national assembly has instructed its working group on doctrine to prepare a report and we are hoping it will seriously engage our confessional stance.

Thank you to all of you who have made early commitments to the objects of the ACC. Let us not be daunted by the hard work ahead of us recovering the truth, but rather be carried along by this noble task which the Lord of the Church has laid upon us.

The Rev Ivan J Kirk is Secretary of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations

Called, but where to?

Rob Tann

There is an urgent matter that the Uniting Church needs to address - the matter of leadership, training and ordination. Over recent years I have been saddened by the number of fine UCA men and women who hesitate to pursue full time Ordained ministry within the UCA because of the state of play within the assembly and synods. In my exit year from Theological Hall (Victoria, 1989) there were 14 of us entering our first parishes. I wonder how many Synods now have a total of 14 candidates even in training. Training for ministry, and where that ministry will be exercised, is a desperate need in the UCA and I believe the ACC needs to be foremost in addressing this matter. God is still calling but our church is clearly missing out. Who will stem the flow of these fine evangelicals out of the UCA? They are called by God, but to where?

Over the past 15 years about six men from within parishes where I was minister have 'heard the call' and investigated and/or entered theological studies - all but one aged 35 or under. Only two of them chose to study with the Uniting Church. The others all went to independent colleges such as Tabor. One is now 'accredited' in a major pentecostal denomination and one completed youth ministry studies and is now in counselling work in that area and attends a substantial Baptist church. Of the two who chose to stay with the UCA, both are now enrolled at Parkin-Wesley College in Adelaide, and one of those has really anguished over the UCA's future. He will 'exit' later this year. The others who felt the call of God while in my congregations did varying amounts of study but I think it fair to say the instability of the UCA and future ministry greatly affected them.

The common factor for those side-stepping the UCA was clearly the drawn out and destabilising sexuality and leadership debate; that and the strong liberalism that dominates the formal UCA training centres in our Synods. (I have also had one man refuse to study the lay preachers course because of its strong liberalism and unwavering 'inclusive/feminist' language requirements).

These men all heard God call to them and yet they could not see how they would fit in the UCA or how the training would be appropriate to their own theological understanding and evangelical/charismatic spirituality. It's a church which has taken over 20 years to debate (and still not finally deal with) a topic which they saw as clearly defined by Scripture and Church tradition and so was not the place for them to seek training.

It seems to me that ministry is still being called forth by God, but the UCA misses out on the gifts and graces of many of those He called because of the divisive nature and the often most unhelpful training emphasis offered by our Synod training colleges.

It is my understanding that while the NSW Synod also struggles to get ministry candidates to enter UTC the Wesley Institute -- a major Uniting Church with its own State-accredited degree level Bible College -- has in excess of 40 Uniting Church students enrolled. I understand that the NSW Synod will not recognise Wesley as an appropriate training place for UCA ministry and so dozens of people hearing the call of God within the UCA are being trained and educated, but cannot be taken into UCA ministry without being 'pushed' into the Synod mould to make sure they are 'right'. It smacks of spiritual and academic arrogance. These students won't go to UTC in the first place because they see it as totally inappropriate to their spirituality, their theological calling, and their well-grounded orthodox Biblical understanding.

My own call to ministry was from within the UCA but in a 'charismatic' setting. Little was done at my Theological Hall in Melbourne to help that - in fact the 'squeeze' was applied to adopt the dominant liberal-feminist thought. Nothing of my calling from God, my spirituality, my desire for church growth, or my 'healing & renewal' heart was considered, fed, or taught over my years of study. While my years at UFT in Melbourne were highly significant and I loved my time there, the majority of my training and beneficial education in those areas of ministry I was clearly called to was

“

Many fine young people ... are unable to anticipate a future within such a divergent and sexually-confused denomination.

gained from outside the UCA.

I was most fortunate to share my training years with 6-8 fellow students of similar spirituality and I also had wisdom and insight fed into my life from a few UCA ministers of the same ilk and 'renewal' commitment. The great Tabor conferences of the late '80s in Adelaide and the Wimber-Vineyard gatherings in the '90s fed my soul and greatly equipped my ministry. I could not have ministered from my heart, faithful to my call, with just the UCA training I received. Without those other men and women of God and the added training I sought outside the UCA, I doubt I would have become a Uniting Church minister, and without their ongoing support I may well have left with so many others over the past decade.

The liturgical spin doctors with their often repeated rhetoric about 'unity in diversity' have got it wrong. It is obvious that many fine young people raised in the UCA are now ministering in other places, called by God from within our congregations but unable to sit in, or anticipate a future within, such a divergent and sexually-confused denomination.

Rev Rob Tann is a minister at Unity Hill Christian Ministry Centre, Port Lincoln Uniting Church, South Australia.

Spirit and 'spirituality'

During winter and spring, the lectionary offers rich opportunities for reviewing and reinterpreting the high festivals of the Christian calendar. From Advent to Pentecost they present the person and work of Christ through the promise of his coming, the birth and ministry of Jesus, his passion and death, the unexpected reversal of resurrection and his ascension to glory.

The Sundays after Pentecost give time to explore the meaning of the great reverberation which marks, for Christians, the start of the apostolic mission to all the world.

This exploration takes place in a world sceptical of churchly missions and Christian pretensions. And yet, Oxford professor Alister McGrath declares, in *The Twilight of Atheism*, that the atheistic dream of expunging religion from mankind has ended. He says atheism is in retreat. In its place is a resurgence of emotions, feelings, hopes and aspirations, lumped together under the umbrella of 'spirituality'. Lacking definition and disavowing semantic precision, the word covers a range of personal and private meanings which ignore the practices and long traditions of established churches.

Those who claim to found their lives on a quest for spirituality almost universally claim to be 'not religious'. They seem concerned chiefly with personal preferences and the right of self-determination in matters of belief, feeling and behavior.

The Uniting Church has seized on 'spirituality' as a new frontier of ministry. The Victoria-Tasmania synod journal *Crosslight* declared in its cover story for April: "Spirituality may emerge as a new focus, and

a significant source of funds, for the Uniting Church's ministry in future years." The journal describes 'spiritual direction' as an emerging profession, with trained helpers responding to increasing evidence of a community-wide search for "meaning in the contingencies of life, dissatisfaction with bare materialism and cold reason, and the human responses of compassion and cries for justice."

Spiritual directors in the United States charge fees for their time. It is claimed that several thousand Australians are graduates of programs for spiritual direction, many of whom may be practising already. Fee-paying is not likely to be long delayed in Australia as an accepted part of the service provided.

The effects of such a new emphasis in pastoral ministry are difficult to predict, but there is no doubt that it will change the way pastors relate to parishioners as well as non-churchgoers. Caution is therefore necessary. Spirituality may be another name for the spiritual emptiness, private hubris and self-justification which characterise contemporary agnosticism. Undoubtedly, 'spirituality' gains credibility and popularity so long as it refers to undefined longings and unexamined presuppositions. The challenge this poses for Christian ministry is not the fact that many people embrace spiritual realities; it is the notion of holiness without which no Christian spirituality is possible. Since holiness denotes more than 'wholeness' or self-fulfilment, spirituality for Christians can only be grounded in the human experience of Christ whose gift to mankind is the Holy Spirit.

Warren Clarnette

Spirituality is everywhere evident in Australian society. Millions of people practice some form of spirituality, and if you look up the word on the worldwide web you will discover millions of sites promoting an enormous variety of spiritualities. Clearly, interest in spirituality is a world-wide phenomenon. But just what do people mean by the word? What are you interested in if you are interested in spirituality?

Although spirituality takes many forms in the modern world, we may make a generalisation and say that people regard it as connecting themselves to a force that is both deep inside themselves, and present in the world around them, with the aim of achieving holistic health and a real sense of well-being.

Spirituality involves the belief that if the different aspects of a person's life are brought into balance with the life-force, the rewards will be financial security, harmonious relationships and robust health.

There are, as a search of the web shows, many paths by which we may connect ourselves to this deep current of meaning. But they all lead to what is believed to be the 'god behind all gods'. Therefore in the search for balanced well-being one chooses the spiritual path that best matches one's own temperament or interest.

“

Jesus explicitly says he is not another wise man or spiritual guide who can give the young man the pattern of the good life.

Jesus is no Guru

Recalling the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, **Ross Carter** goes beyond the search for private satisfactions to the unexpected gift to the world in Jesus Christ.

As the Gospel according to Mark tells the story, the young man who runs up and kneels before Jesus would be very much at home in the modern world. He is interested in spirituality. His question is about salvation, which means that he wants to be connected to the source of life. As with the modern person who follows one spiritual path or another, the young man is looking for an answer to the only serious question in the world and, we should note, he is very sincere in his seeking.

What the young man seeks from Jesus is advice about how he can best make the connection with the source of life. He believes his question is so important that Jesus must have something really profound to say about it. He expects from Jesus a weighty pronouncement, for he regards Jesus as a wise teacher, a guru. This is why he calls Jesus the "Good Master", and pays him the respect worthy of a guru by kneeling before him.

But the young man quickly discovers that Jesus has no intention of counselling him about possible spiritual paths that he might follow. For Jesus explicitly says he is not another wise man or spiritual guide who can give the young man the pattern of the good life. He is not someone who can offer anybody a spiritual ideal to strive for. All these possibilities are rejected by Jesus. This

is what Mark means when he records that Jesus refuses to accept the title of “Good Master”.

But Jesus responds to the young man’s question, even though he does not engage in a discussion about spiritual paths. He responds by giving a direction from God. This is to say that Jesus does not respond as a wise man or spiritual guide but as one who exercises the authority of God. He calls the young man to be obedient to the commandments of God.

How do we understand these commandments? They were graciously given to humanity by the God who led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, who became man in Jesus Christ, so that human life may be lived as cooperation with God, and in peace and friendship with others. Nothing more than this is required of a life that is connected to God. Because God has given the commandments, there is no need for a constant taking of our spiritual pulse to see how we are going on the path of life.

The young man knows the commandments and has kept them all. There is no dispute about this claim. At this point the Gospel tells us that Jesus looked upon the young man and loved him. Jesus loves this man who is sincere in his seeking but who, as we shall see, is also lost; he loves this man in his seeking and in his lostness. In this sense the young man is a representative figure of all people: Jesus loves lost humanity whom he has come to seek.

The young man is so wrong because he wants to do more than obey the commandments. He cannot accept that doing the commandments is all that God wants of him. There must, he feels, be something more that he can do to achieve what he wants, some particular spiritual technique or practice that will give him the feeling, the satisfaction, that he is achieving his goal.

But in wanting this ‘something else’ all he does is show that he will not rely on what God has given. He will not recognise that in Jesus he has to do with the presence of God and should do as he is told. The young man has to be the centre of

action and will not be obedient to God’s action, and because of this he actually mocks God.

Jesus responds by telling the young man to give up his possessions and follow him. Why does the young man’s wealth suddenly become part of the story? It becomes part of the story because the world of the young man, like our world, is a world where wealth is power and influence, where wealth gets things done. Wealth fosters a mindset that seduces the young man into thinking that he can organise his salvation, that he can arrange his ultimate well-being.

The issue for the young man is whether he wants to have to do with God, who is the source and fulfilment of life, or not. And if he does want to be involved with God, is he prepared to allow God to determine the form of involvement? The young man’s answer is in the negative. He will not allow God to set the agenda.

Whether the possession of wealth always leads to this habit of thinking is debatable. But the point of the gospel is that whatever may lead to this habit of thought has to be given up. For we are called simply to bank on Jesus Christ as our, and humanity’s, future and not on anything we can make of ourselves; we simply are called to be obedient to his commands. And if something does get in the way of banking on Jesus in this way, it is to be given up.

No wonder the disciples are astounded and ask, ‘then how can anyone’s life be fulfilled?’ If fulfilment of life means being involved with God, then only he can arrange that involvement. He has done that in Jesus Christ, who is God with us. He is the way and he is the life. Mark tells the congregation to whom he wrote to bank on Christ and his commands. We can hear the same word. We need to hear that we have no quest to pursue because God has set before us our true life in Christ. This, I think, is freedom; freedom from self and freedom for others. And this is God’s will for us writ large in Jesus Christ.

The Rev. Ross Carter is minister of the congregation of Paul the Apostle in South Melbourne.

Netlines

internet snippets highlighting issues in the church around the world

The United Methodist-affiliated Boston University School of Theology hosted and sponsored an April 18-19 conference on “Queering the Church: Changing Ecclesial Structures.” Speakers at the event on the Boston University campus delved into discussions of “hardcore queer theology,” “triadic unions,” “erotic relation with the divine,” and the “queerness of God.”

The term “queer,” often used as an insult against homosexuals, has more recently been taken up by some radical gay and lesbian theorists as a badge of honor flaunting their non-conformity with social and sexual norms. This kind of delight in transgressing traditional boundaries was the prevailing spirit at “Queering the Church.” Speakers almost seemed to compete against one another to see who could utter the most outrageous sentiments furthest from Christian orthodoxy.

- Ray Nothstine in *'Methodist News'* for the Institute on Religion and Democracy, USA

As we have stated before, not all persons with same-sex attractions want these attractions affirmed. We are concerned for those whom we describe as “silent sufferers” in the pews. These are the many individuals who adhere to the traditional Christian teaching on sexuality and wish for the church neither to condemn them as persons nor to encourage them to act on those same-sex attractions. Who shall support them? Such individuals need pastoral care -- towards which goal your statement offers empty wind.

- *An open letter from the Zacchaeus Fellowship, responding to a statement from the House of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada*

In the past few years Richard Dawkins has become a vocal and increasingly shrill critic of religion, apparently believing that attacking religion assists the public in their understanding of science. Unfortunately, Dawkins has blundered into a field he knows very little about. He misunderstands the logic of the arguments and how they function in a religious context. His own naive and plodding counter-arguments would make a philosophy undergraduate cringe, and a number of reviewers have mercifully dispatched them (the arguments, not the undergraduates.)

Philosopher and self-professed ‘hard line Darwinian’ Michael Ruse has remarked that Dawkins’ efforts make him ‘embarrassed to be an atheist.’

- Peter Harrison, an Australian who is the Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford, in *'Journey,'* the synod journal of NSW.



The 'Passing on the Torch' Service at South Australia's Tusmore Uniting Church in February marked an historic moment in Australian church life.

The torch was passed from two previous movements -- the Evangelical Members within the Uniting Church and the Reforming Alliance -- to the new Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

A torch made from an Australian Native Pine log, grown in the Roxby Downs area and rejected by timber contractors, was fashioned for the occasion by Rev Ben Usher.

The torch's unique tripartite wick symbolises the three movements -- EMU, the RA and the ACC.

Words from the torch:

"The Torch of Truth"

2 TIM 4: 1-5

1. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus
2. Preach the word, be urgent in season & out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience & teaching.
3. For the time will come when men will not endure sound teaching
5. As for you ... be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.



Passing on the torch

Max Champion

'Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; those who follow me shall not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12)

In ordinary speech, and in religion and philosophy, 'light' is a symbol of truth, goodness and life in contrast to the 'darkness' of error, evil and death. Ignorance is banished when 'light is shed' on a subject. A friend/lover can 'light up your life.' In Plato, the sun symbolises the 'Idea of Goodness' shining in the midst of evil. The Buddha offers spiritual enlightenment. New Agers find in themselves the inner light that illuminates true spiritual knowledge. Post-modernists are bedazzled by the mass 'cult of celebrity.'

Since the mid 1600s the Western world is said to be experiencing 'enlightenment' due to the triumph of reason over irrationality and superstition in every sphere. In a different way, Hebrews understood themselves to be a 'light to the nations' (Is 60:1-3) and Christians speak of Jesus (the 'Word made flesh') as 'the true light which has come into the world,' who illuminates God's incomparable costly love for a world darkened by sin, evil and death through his life, death and resurrection.

Our interest today is not in 'light' as a metaphor.

This is the text of the sermon preached at the 'Passing on the Torch' service at Tusmore Uniting Church, Adelaide on Friday February 23, 2007.

We come together to re-affirm the Christian conviction that 'the Light of the world' has come in Christ, and to be 'torch bearers' of that light in places where it has been dimmed or extinguished. So we come to ask what it means for Reformed, Evangelical and Orthodox Christians to be lantern holders in the world that we inhabit and how best to pass on that heritage?

We can't answer these questions before understanding something of the beliefs which have lit up our society, especially the Enlightenment and Christianity.

Nietzsche's *Parable of the Madman* is particularly illuminating.

The madman 'lit a lantern at noonday, ran to the market place, and cried unceasingly, 'I am looking for God! I am looking for God! ... he aroused great laughter. Is he lost? ... Or has he hidden himself? Is he afraid? Has he gone on a voyage or emigrated? So they shouted and laughed. The madman leapt into their midst, and pierced them with his glance. 'Where has God gone?' he cried. 'I will tell you. We have killed him you and I. We are all his murderers. ... What did we do, when we unchained this earth from its sun? ... Are we not wandering as through infinite nothingness? ... Is not night coming, and ever more night? Must we not light lanterns at noon? God is dead.... And we have killed him. How shall we console ourselves, the chief of all murderers? ... Must we not ourselves become Gods?'

"The madman fell silent and looked at his hearers again. They too were silent and looked at him with shocked eyes. At last he threw his lantern

on the ground, so that it broke in pieces, and went out. 'I come too early,' he said, 'it is not yet my time. This monstrous event is still on the way.'

The image of a man bringing a lantern into the market-place at noon, when the light is at its brightest, to announce that darkness is nigh, is ludicrous. But it jolts us to the reality that Western culture, shaped by two brilliant traditions – Christianity and the Enlightenment – has lost credibility. Nietzsche had as little time for arrogant rationalists as he had for the churches. In place of (Christian) faith and (Enlightened) reason he announced the (eventual) triumph of 'desire,' 'will to power' and libertarianism.

The effects can be seen in the impatience of many people today with such faith and reason. Less and less do people believe in universal principles of (Enlightened) religion and morality or the universal relevance of (Christian) faith, hope and love. In the post-colonial era, there is much scepticism about 'universal claims' to knowing reality. No-one has the right to 'impose' their biased beliefs on any person or group. The ultimate authority to determine truth is the inner light of conscience.



The ACC has come into being so that the Gospel may be heard in opposition to the false gospels within the church and in the public square.

Despite the 'light' that the Enlightenment and Christianity have brought to our understanding of science, ethics, human dignity and politics, both have dimmed, leaving us in the gloom and subject to dark forces. Many luminaries agree:

- Agnostic sociologist John Carroll (1993) says that 'we live amidst the ruins of the great, five-hundred year epoch of humanism.' (*Humanism: The Wreck of Western Culture* p.1)

- Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1951) says that we are experiencing the 'Eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God.' (*Eclipse of God*, 23)

- Willem Visser 't Hooft (1937 & 1963) former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, speaks of the neo-pagan 'celebration of life' marked by 'the protest against the subordination of life to reason and rational civilisation; the search for intensity of experience; and the desire for communion with natural forces.' (*No Other God*, p.151)

- Catholic layman and father of multiculturalism in Australia, Prof Jerzy Zubrzycki, predicts the coming of a new 'Dark Ages' (1980s).

Nietzsche's grim forecast is coming true. Shafts of light still shine in the darkness, but the post-modern mind-set (which puzzles older Christians) is increasingly dismissive of the Christian-Jewish and Enlightened-Humanist traditions which, until now, have illuminated Western culture. Thus,

- Where once Nature replaced God in science, politics, morality and religion, now revelation and the 'natural order' are widely rejected.

- Where once the basis for the unity of humanity was found, not in the (Christian) vision, but in the (rational) vision of a single global civilisation, now the individual is simply part of the mass.

- Where once Happiness on earth, not

‘eternal bliss,’ became the goal of human existence, and ‘progress’ displaced the ‘new heaven and new earth,’ now hope has dissipated.

- Where once Rights were determined by universal principles of responsibility (Christian or Enlightened), now they are largely based on individual desires or preferences.

If we don’t realise that the traditions which shed light on our society are increasingly being re-shaped to suit the natural desires/wills of the individual, then even our most ‘evangelical’ endeavors will be acts of accommodation to post-modern culture.

What has this to do with our purpose here?

EMU and RA are not handing on the torch to ACC in order that ‘an evangelical/reformed voice’ can still be heard in the UCA! The ACC has come into being so that *the* evangel (Gospel) may be heard in opposition to the false gospels which exist within the church and in the public square. We are called at this particular time to confess the faith of Christ crucified-and-risen *so that the ‘world’ may believe*. Our mandate is not to preserve a religious niche for ourselves in the UCA but to call the UCA (including our own member congregations and individuals) to a missionary encounter with our post-modern society.

The reason that ACC has been forced to name the ‘*apostasy*’ of the Uniting Church Assembly in relation to decisions on sexuality and leadership (Resolution 84, Resolution 108) is that the church has accommodated herself to an individual-centered, rather than a Christ-centered concept of what is ‘natural.’ As a consequence, the UCA is depriving the ‘world’ of the ‘light’ which redeems – the mercy and goodness of God in the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

The ACC owes the world the truth. The ‘light of the world’ is not to be found ‘in ourselves’ with our fascination with making God in the image of our own reason, desire or spirituality. Jesus Christ is ‘the light of the world’ who confronts each person and every culture with the reality



The Uniting Church has accommodated herself to an individual centred, rather than a Christ-centred concept of what is ‘natural.’

of God – the incarnate God whom it could not have invented nor accommodated to our natural reasons or desires. So the ACC is committed to shedding light on the ‘strange new word of the Bible’ for the sake of the Church and (therefore) the world.

This twofold missionary encounter is splendidly set out in *A Letter to Confessing Christians in USA* from the Commission of Confessing Theologians.

- In answer to the question ‘Why do our Churches need faithful confessors?’ they say ‘a church which is unable to confess its faith is a lame and withered church. The church needs faithful witnesses in order to be the church of JC.’ (p56)

- And in answer to the question ‘Why does our society need faithful Christian confessors?’ they say ‘In the absence of faithful Christian witness, society establishes false idols. The 20th century is littered with the victims of

secular ideology. Nazi and Marxist ideologies produced Auschwitz and the Gulag. The North American threat comes from a more benign form of atheism that banishes Christian witness from the public square. Consumerism, materialism, individualism and hedonism rush in to fill the void. Dogmatic atheism brutalizes and destroys the church. The more benign and civil atheism seduces and marginalizes the church. Disoriented by the ideology of moral relativism, some church leaders haphazardly champion fashionable causes. In each case, the savior of the church and the light of Christ is lost.' (p57)

The ACC, through its national commissions, boards and state networks, is committed to a missionary encounter with our post-modern Australian culture. This is taking place, not on the presupposition that 'the Light' is to be plugged in beside 'other lights,' but from the conviction that the 'light to the nations' has come decisively and supremely in the Person of Jesus Christ.

There are far more important matters than worrying about whether the evangelical, reformed and orthodox position is respected within the UCA. What is at stake is the future of the human person! One of the tasks of ACC (in all its endeavors) will be to show the *person* in a 'new light' – not as an autonomous individual free to follow his/her own natural inner light (conscience), but as one who is called to covenant faithfulness which mirrors God's own faithfulness to the nations (as revealed to Israel and embodied Christ.)

It remains for us to be reminded that our task is to allow the light of Christ to shine on us. We are not the light. 'It is God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' And 'John the Baptist came (the point is emphasized) to bear witness to the light, that all might believe.'

The ACC's task is simply to bear witness to the light in a darkened world! As Israel is to point away from herself to God who 'brought light out

“

Why does our society need faithful Christian confessors? The 20th century is littered with the victims of secular ideology.

of darkness,' so John the Baptist points away from himself. We are to be 'torch bearers' / 'lantern holders' who, in the darkness of post-modern culture, point the way to the incarnate, crucified and risen love of God 'in Christ, instead of shining on our own flawed and fragile 'evangelical' faith.

When the 'darkness' seems blackest and 'light' seems far off, we must pray for courage to 'hold the torch' and 'keep the light flickering.' With the Psalmist we shall then be enabled to say, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear?' and, with John, to 'walk in the light as he is in the light.' For the world that so often lives 'in darkness' needs to 'see the true light' in the Person of Christ ... He is the sign of hope for a suffering world, a 'light to the nations' and God's pledge that the 'darkness' shall be overcome in him.

Let us pray that we may not be tempted to 'throw our lantern on the ground in disgust' at the reaction we may get to unwelcome words, but, by the power of the Holy Spirit, be steadfast as 'torch-bearers' of the One who is 'the light of the world' – Jesus Christ, Lord of the Church and Head of a new humanity.

Rev Dr Max Champion is Chairman of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

In focus

An ACC parish in North Queensland

Emmanuel Uniting Church, Cairns is a multicultural congregation of over 120 people from the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, America, PNG, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Torres Strait and Korea. It shares its property with other Christian groups including the Cairns Korean Uniting Church.

Says Pastor Hedley Fihaki: "It is our aim to develop and grow in our relationships with one another, through combined worship and cultural activities, so that we might better understand to share and participate together as the one community of faith in the mission of Christ into the world through the power of the Holy Spirit."



Scenes from Emmanuel church life: top, church members; left, eating together; right, cyclone clean-up

Richard Dawkins versus the Holocaust

Paul Gray

The murder of Europe's Jews, including about a million children under the age of 13, remains the emblematic action of evil in modern history.

I keep asking myself: who killed the Jews, during the Holocaust? Was it the religious -- or was it the atheists?

Some recent books have pushed this question back into the forefront of my attention: Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* is one. Dawkins' best-seller has been in the top 10 books nationally for months, with public interest in his God-baiting claims showing no sign of waning.

And the newly published *Diary of Petr Ginz* is another. Ginz was a 14-year-old Czech Jewish boy gassed by the Nazis at Auschwitz in 1944.

His wartime diary, uncovered just four years ago has this month been published in English.

Of course, everyone knows that in fact it was the Nazis who willed and perpetrated the destruction of Europe's Jews.

But behind that obvious statement, a lingering, soul-searching debate over the responsibility for the great evils in the world, including terrorism, remains.

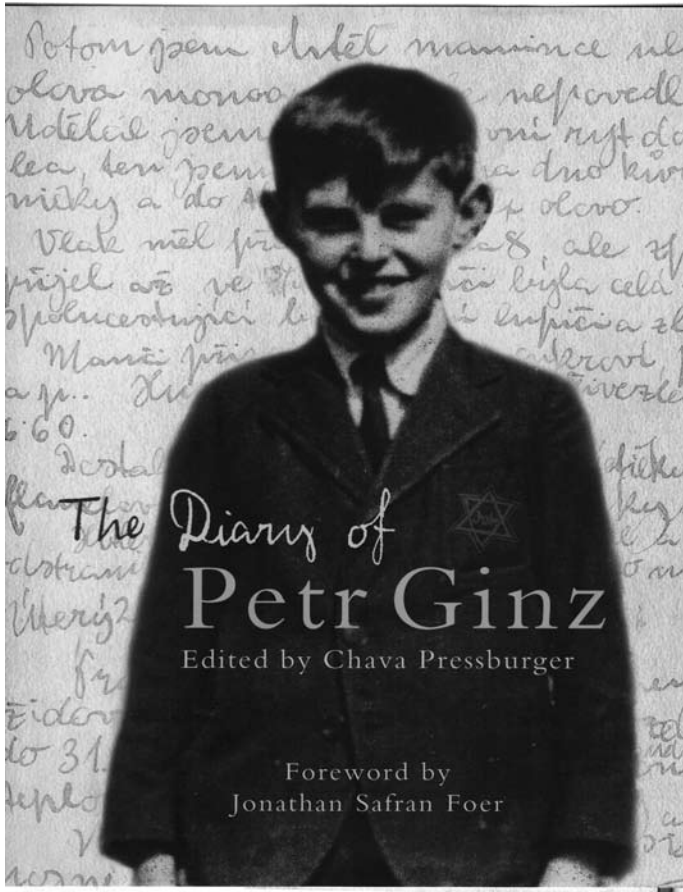
Summing up the miseries perpetrated by man on man throughout history, Richard Dawkins has little doubt who to blame. Religion. And particularly, belief in God.

The market for such thoughts is virtually limitless -- witness other recent additions to the Dawkins stable of God-hating books, Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* (which dwells on "sexual repression" caused by religion) and Michael Onfray's *The Atheist Manifesto*.

But even non-believers can see that the Dawkins agenda, when it comes to religion, is obsessive. Take British Professor Terry Eagleton, for example.

Writing in the *London Review of Books* recently, Eagleton said Dawkins is silent on the horrors created by science -- the atom bomb and chemical weapons, to name just two -- and yet he sees religion present in every evil deed on earth.

Satirising *The God Delusion*, Eagleton quipped: "Like the puritan and sex, Dawkins sees God



everywhere, even where he is self-evidently absent.”

Which brings me back to *The Diary of Petr Ginz*. Written by an innocent teenage boy about to face a horrible death, the book confronts the reader, like no other book in recent memory, with questions about the way humans justify their violence towards each other.

Someone – Adolf Hitler, his party, his nation – hated Petr Ginz enough to want him murdered, just for being a Jew. Was this hatred prompted by belief in God, or by more base and human interests?

Reading this book is harrowing – a new “Diary of Anne Frank” for our times.

Ginz was a brilliant child -- the diaries start when he was 13 – who wrote novels, painted, drew and made linocuts.

His “Moon Landscape” sketch, an imaginative drawing depicting the earth viewed from the moon, was taken aboard Space Shuttle Columbia by an Israeli astronaut in 2003.

Petr Ginz’s diary doesn’t actually answer the big question of who was responsible for the Holocaust. Rather, his writings are eyewitness reflections on evil times, written by a boy who possessed sensitivity, a sense of mischief and ironic wit.

For example, the young Ginz described the “celebrations” throughout Prague, his hometown, to mark Hitler’s 53rd birthday, saying “there are flags and parades everywhere and his (Hitler’s) bust is in every shop window.

“Every building has to hang out a swastika flag,” he added, “except for Jews, of course, who are not allowed this pleasure.”

Historically we know, today, that Nazi policy was prompted by hatred towards Jews, which is an irrational thing. But it was *justified* in the most rational ways, by pseudo-scientific arguments about superior and inferior blood types and racial differences.

In the same way, Stalin’s Communist Party murdered millions of Russians, Ukrainians, Chechnyans and others for being enemies of their “revolution” – a revolution of which many of the victims had never even heard.

This irrational mass violence was justified by elaborate pseudo-intellectual arguments about the “progress of humanity,” and other nonsense.

Similarly, it is the pseudo-intellectuals of the radical Islamic movements who justify the killing of “infidels” – meaning anyone they disagree with, non-Muslims or Muslims alike – and thus provide the fuel for today’s world terrorism.

Some have leveled criticism, fairly, at the German churches for moral weakness in the face of the Nazi rise during the 1930s and ‘40s.

Others, like the philosopher Hannah Arendt, point out that many Nazis met their own deaths confident in their dogmatic belief in the non-existence of God.

Is God then to blame for all this violence?

God, I would suggest, has remarkably little to do with it.

The Diary of Petr Ginz is published by Picador. Paul Gray is Editor of *Catalyst*.

Bishop John Shelby Spong is coming to Australia, again ...

**... and Tasmanian writer
Will Briggs questions
what the bishop really has
to offer the church today**

Should I, as they say, 'thank God for Spong' or is he 'Satan's best lieutenant?'

Having read him I can now understand why Spong has gained such a following. He touches upon issues that are relevant yet not frequently talked about.

Who can't sympathise when he talks about the 'spiritually thirsty' who can 'no longer drink from the traditional wells of the past' or a Christianity which 'increasingly displays signs of rigor mortis'?

But Spong approaches such issues by attempting to do away with the very idea of God that we associate with traditional Christianity - the belief in God as a divine personal being; one who forms creation, sustains creation, and miraculously and graciously restores creation through Jesus Christ. For Spong such 'God-talk' is 'dying, or ... perhaps already dead,' and produces beliefs that are 'non-sensible at best and non-believable at worst.' For Spong, the Christian God is simply a 'human creation.'

And so it is easy to see why Spong is such a controversial figure and why many demand that he stop calling himself a Christian. His message does undermine essential Christian beliefs such as creation, the incarnation, the resurrection, and also traditional Christian views on abortion, homosexuality, and the right to have children.

But Spong is not just trying to knock things down.

He also wants to construct a new 'Christianity' - a 'new quest for God' which carries his refrain: 'I neither need nor desire that parental protective God any longer.' After denying the plain message of the Bible (which he calls a 'God-explanation') he then proceeds to give his own explanation of what he calls an underlying 'God-experience.'

In this new explanation, God is an intangible abstraction, the ungraspable source of life, love, and being. Jesus is a 'God-presence' who personalises this impersonal Source in a way we all can if we open ourselves to our 'divine potential.' Evil is the twin of goodness and we are called to embrace wholeness instead of goodness, our darkness along with our light. By 'meditation and



Spong's protests that he is a Christian just sound like a man who believes that the sky is pink and proclaims, 'The sky is blue!' while attempting to 'reform' the dictionary so that 'blue' actually means 'pink.'

contemplation' we can discover 'what it means to be fully human' and find in ourselves the 'second coming of Christ.'

For me Spong's explanation is hollow.

And it is obvious to me that he is not a Christian believer. His protests that he is a Christian just sound like a man who believes that the sky is pink and proclaims, 'The sky is blue!' while attempting to 'reform' the dictionary so that 'blue' actually means 'pink.'

Spong's explanation is also flawed. And I have to agree with the many intelligent people who have pointed out the problems. He portrays biblical Christianity as something it isn't; he distorts it so that it is easier to attack. He unashamedly imposes his own beliefs into the Bible. And there are gaps in his explanation (for example, he asks us to embrace our evil but doesn't satisfactorily show how this changes our view on the crucial issue of justice). I know Spong 'sounds convincing' to many, but having now read him his unsoundness is clear to me.

Furthermore Spong's explanation fails, as far as I can see, to answer his own concerns, mainly because he is unbelievable in a post-modern world. Despite his attempts, his world-view is just another human power-play, an imposition of beliefs. His demand for enforced ethics and

imposed religious tolerance, and his idolising of Western science demonstrates this. In my mind, his is a 'gospel' accessible to only the strong, proud and intelligent in a world that knows its own weakness and need for freedom.

Ultimately, it is Spong's question of relevance that the church needs to face. I agree with Spong to the extent that I will borrow his words to say that the church must change or die. It must - our Victorian-era style of ceremony, our nondescript practice of morality, our shallow spirituality, and our misuse of God's Word, among other things - must be dealt with. We must get closer in practice to our gospel heart of freedom in Jesus Christ from sin and all that keeps us estranged from God our maker. In rejecting this heart Spong has nothing to offer the problems of the world but a repackaging of those self-same problems. His is no new Christianity for a new world; it is a non-Christianity for a non-existent world.

Will Briggs is an Anglican priest from Somerset, Tasmania. This article first appeared on the Anglican Tasmanian website www.anglicantas.org.au

Bishop John Shelby Spong will be a high-profile guest speaker at the Common Dreams Conference in Sydney from August 16-19. The conference's sponsors include the Centre for Progressive Religious Thought, the Pitt St Uniting Church and the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria.

A plea for theological leadership

The church can be renewed

Ian Breward

Though the issue of homosexuality was beginning to emerge in public forums by the 1970s, none of the parent churches of the Uniting Church had produced an authoritative theological statement on the issue, changing the historic catholic and reformed position on the subject. It is not unreasonable to infer that the historic position was taken for granted, for male homosexual practice was still a criminal offence and remained so in Tasmania until 1996. Some individuals were beginning to urge the decriminalisation of male homosexual behaviour between consenting adults.

Most Uniting Church ministers and members still believed that homosexual intercourse was sinful and that ordination of sexually active homosexuals was ruled out. The first sign of change was a report presented for the approval of the Yarra Valley presbytery in Victoria during July 1983. It was entitled “Issues in the debate on homosexuality and ordination,” and upheld the traditional position. The Assembly standing committee had also taken up the matter, which was intensively studied and discussed until the

1997 Assembly, which was asked to approve a wide-ranging report on sexuality. This included a proposal to permit ordination where a couple was deemed to be in a committed and faithful relationship. That section of the report was not accepted and it was clear by the 2000 Assembly that no agreement was then attainable, for a substantial body within the church saw no reason to depart from the historic position.

The Evangelical Movement within the Uniting Church, Reforming Alliance and Assembly of Confessing Congregations members of the UCA reject the claim, made in the name of justice, diversity and inclusivity, that the decisions of the 10th and 11th Assemblies known as Resolution 84 and Resolution 108 are compatible with the historic position of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

Succinctly put, the church’s historic position insists our humanity rests on the divine ordinance of the marriage of a man and a woman to reveal the image of God, and that engaging in homosexual intercourse is sinful. The decision of the 10th Assembly in 2003 to permit presbyteries to ordain homosexuals in committed relationships on a case by case basis is a serious departure from the historic faith and morality of the church catholic, founded on the Scriptures and centuries of reflection on their message. We have not been persuaded that these long held convictions are misguided, or that due process for doctrinal change was followed. The Basis of Union commits

This is an edited version of a paper presented to a recent conversation between the UCA and the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia.

the Uniting Church to uphold the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

By this decision to recognize committed homosexual relationships as a legitimate part of Christian discipleship, the UCA has incorporated into its life what has hitherto been deemed a sin, incompatible with the holiness without which none shall see the Lord. This can only be described as false teaching, or even apostasy, on this cluster of issues. The ACC believes that these decisions have not originated in the living word of God by which the church's faith and obedience is nourished and regulated, but in the changed attitudes to sexual behavior which have their origins in the individualistic liberal Western culture of the late 20th century. According to the Scriptures we have been purchased with a price – the death of Christ. Our bodies are meant for incorporation into the body of Christ and are therefore temples of the Holy Spirit and cannot be given to promiscuity. The union of husband and wife in Christ is mysteriously linked with Christ's love and his sacrifice for the church, as well as being based on the order of creation. We do not believe that the Uniting Church can rest content with recognition of mutually exclusive views on these issues, without seeking a resolution of the conflict by appropriate redefinition of doctrine. The revisionist position cannot be allowed the same constitutional legitimacy as the historic position without seriously compromising the identity of the Uniting Church.

There was widespread anger and dismay at this decision of the 10th Assembly and some 20,000 members petitioned the Assembly standing committee to reject the decision embodied in R84. The Assembly's leaders refused to consult with presbyteries and congregations as required by clause 39 of the Constitution, on matters vital to the life of the church. Despite international turmoil on the issue in many Protestant churches and serious disagreements in the UCA, the Assembly's leaders strangely did not consider this

issue a matter vital to the life of the church. Nor did the Assembly's standing committee bring any biblical or theological rationale for its decision to the 11th Assembly in 2006, or deal adequately with the theological comments made by a variety of individuals, congregations, presbyteries and the synod of Queensland. R108 simply reiterated the decision of the previous Assembly. Nor have they dealt adequately with the claim that, in the absence of any theological statement, the Assembly had, in practice, delegated its doctrinal responsibilities to presbyteries on this matter without due process. Some 5000 members and ministers left the UCA between 2003-6 as a result of the decision and failure to address such concerns about its implications.

While there can be no dispute that, from time to time, cultural contexts have reshaped the way in which Christians read the Scriptures on sexuality, the church has a duty to ensure that divinely given truths on redemption are given due authority rather than relativised to fit with cultural experience and priorities. This has not adequately happened in the Uniting Church, despite the discussions of the last 20 years. For the sake of the UCA's ecumenical credibility and unity, the principles by which exegesis shapes our vision of God's gracious redemption and our ethical and pastoral practice need carefully to be spelt out. Opponents of the Assembly's decision do not claim to have said the last word on biblical interpretation. We are willing to be corrected if our views are contrary to God's Word. We eagerly await an Assembly decision to seek an authoritative determination of these contested issues, which does justice to the rich heritage of revelation, by which an authentic church must live.

The UCA decisions call into question the nature of Christian unity. This does not mean the polite coexistence of diametrically opposed views. On a number of occasions in church history, the Church has been called to re-examine its theological foundations and to declare its mind

on the boundaries of the truth of the gospel. The debate about homosexuality and ordination in the Uniting Church raises issues about what is meant by the holiness and identity of the Church Catholic and Reformed. If the Uniting Church wishes officially to change its position, it needs to give the most serious consideration to the objections of significant dialogue partners such as the Greek, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

Disordered sexual behavior has always been one sign of sin and part of the death that comes from living according to the flesh, rather than living by the Spirit in the new order of righteousness and love established through our baptism. The reasons advanced by some progressive Christians for removing homosexual behaviour from the category of sin seriously affect the Church's classical understanding of the boundaries of sin and holiness and the manner in which the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the Church is understood. We utterly reject any affirmation of homosexual or bisexual practice in the name of God's justice and love, for we are persuaded there is no biblical basis for this. We insist that naming sins which prevent us being made whole in Christ is an essential part of preaching, teaching and pastoral care.

We recognize that in the past pastoral care of homosexuals has often been lamentably inadequate. Their dignity before God has sometimes been denied. They have been unjustly stereotyped, and been victims of violence and injustice in which sometimes the churches have been complicit.

It is one thing to plead for changes on how active homosexuals are dealt with pastorally, quite another to assume that abolition of historic boundaries of sin are without consequence for the integrity of the Church. If the work of the Holy Spirit is to be redefined, that has important effects on how the historic credal and confessional bases of the UCA are read and applied through preaching and pastoral care. Christians may sin in

their sexual behaviour, but that does not mean that ethical boundaries have to be altered in ways that deny the goodness of God's creation as revealed in the Scriptures.

It is not a historical accident that Christians were so insistent that chastity in singleness and lifelong faithfulness in marriage was the goal to which humanity was invited by our Trinitarian God. That was counter-cultural in the Roman empire and is so again in our time. It is this view which the Uniting Churches took for granted prior to their union in 1977. Male homosexual behaviour was still a criminal offence in most states. It was decriminalized in 1990 in Victoria. The founders of the UCA could not have envisaged the demand for the legal recognition of homosexual partnerships.

The UCA has many members who do not appreciate the difference between individual opinion on contested matters, on which there may be legitimate differences, and the authoritative teaching of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Any church which undermines the importance of this authoritative teaching by refusing to define the boundaries of faith and ethics runs the risk of heresy and apostasy. A church which refuses to define its theological and moral boundaries is unfaithful to the truth, since all opinions are legitimate. That is not helpful to internal unity, to ecumenism or to pastoral care. It is the conviction of the ACC and related bodies in the Uniting Church that such failure is compromising the integrity of the UCA and undermining its ability to challenge contemporary godlessness, and to invite men and women to repent and enter new life in Christ. Without adequate boundaries to identity, the distinction between church and world is collapsed. The proclamation of the gospel as an invitation to new life within the church becomes pointless, for God is present in the world as much as in the church. Conversion is needless.

Wholehearted compliance with the teaching

of the whole church is an essential for ordination within the reformed and evangelical tradition. This is clearly indicated by the questions asked in the UCA ordination service. Departure from such acceptance is a sign of rejection of the substance of the faith. It is vital that those who are ordained uphold the official theological position of the church. By ordaining homosexuals, a church weakens its commitment to doctrinal unity with other historic churches such as the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics. It gives recognition to a view without support in Scripture and privileges individual interpretations and experience over against the credal and confessional standards of the whole church.

Not taking an authoritative decision on these internationally contested issues is deeply divisive, because it undermines trust in conciliar governance, and privileges a contested viewpoint. While numbers are not definitive in defining doctrine, National Church Life surveys appear to indicate that a majority of UCA members still hold the traditional position on chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. They are not persuaded by alternative views. Survey answers to the proposals on sexuality prior to the 1997 Assembly indicated the same reality. Some leaders in the UCA appear to see no need to supply a biblical and theological rationale for change in the historic views of the UCA's parent churches and the broad consensus held at its inauguration. Their approval of "progressive" views appears to devalue the historic Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical heritage, by giving priority to fashionable cultural ideas which reject the unique authority of Jesus' revelation. A church based on Jesus Christ surely cannot uphold mutually irreconcilable views by saying that the Scriptures are the final authority and then permitting individual or group experience to have more authority in determining policy.

Diversity and tolerance of competing views can be permitted on non-essentials, but not where

the substance of the faith is concerned. Those who support R84 and R108 need to demonstrate that these issues are not of the substance of the faith. Celebrating diversity can only occur when truth claims are adequately dealt with and different meanings given to key theological terms are honestly and painfully explored. Our human words are always open to correction when we seek to describe the realities of the Trinitarian God, but that does not mean that some definitions are not inferior. Other denominations and confessional families may reach different conclusions from those of the UCA, but our mission must be founded on rightly discerning God's truth and, where necessary, excluding error.

We cannot afford to modify the unchanging Gospel to fit the climate of our time. We must reject cultural claims which call us to depart from the holiness of God and to live by other priorities. We must reject any claim to theological knowledge which leads to faith and life contradicting God's clearly revealed will in the Scriptures. The UCA is in grave danger of accepting inadequate substitutes for confessional orthodoxy and the authority that gives to proclamation of the Gospel. It is vital that the UCA faces the magnitude of the problem and listens to Christians in other traditions, which stand in a different place on what is authentically catholic, instead of assuming that the revisionist position is the only authentic hearing of the Scriptures.

At the moment, opponents of the Assembly's decision are seen by some in the UCA as potentially schismatic. We are seeking, however, to build up, unify and strengthen our beloved church by recalling it to its biblical and confessional foundations. We are deeply grieved at its numerical decline, but believe that it can be reformed and renewed, so it more adequately fulfills the great ends of the Church.

Ian Breward is a member of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

Neither Jew nor Greek ... nor Turk

Ivan Kirk

Last Anzac Day my wife and I were in the city and looking for somewhere to have lunch. We chose a place at random and it did not disappoint. But it was not until we had been seated at our table and ordered our meal that the irony of our choice dawned upon us.

We were in a Turkish restaurant, and 90 years ago the idea of dining with the enemy would have been inconceivable to the Anzacs. It just happened. By a strange coincidence of time and place, we discovered ourselves being served at the table by Turks -- the same people who were Australia's sworn enemies during the Gallipoli campaign.

That little scenario draws us close to the music Peter had to face when word got back to Jerusalem that he had been dining with the Gentiles. By accepting the hospitality of the Gentile Cornelius, Peter breached a time honoured custom of not dining in mixed company.

This is why Peter's behaviour up in Caesarea was so problematic for the believers down in Jerusalem. They feared that Peter had disgraced himself by dining with Gentiles and he faced the criticism of the table fellowship monitors when he got back home to Jerusalem.

Two thousand years later much the same issue, but on a much larger scale is before today's church. The issue does not take an explicit first century form of table fellowship, but in more insidious ways the church in the West questions whether or not our brothers and sisters from



Turkish Australians march in the Anzac Day parade

the East and the South are the genuine article.

Nowhere does this surface more in the Western church than in its debate on the nature of our humanity and its sexual expression. The debate runs like a fault line through the church in the West, and when the East and the South calls us to account on this matter, our brothers and sisters are too often dismissed

as unsophisticated in biblical hermeneutics, homophobic, and shackled by cultural taboos. But I think God will have the last laugh. He is shaking the arrogance of the church in the West.

We have been reduced to a mere third of the world's Christian population, whereas the church in the South and the East constitute a growing two thirds of the global Christian population. They have neither silver nor gold, but they have Christ and the Spirit, who are doing a mighty work among them.

Let us hope the West can quit patronizing and proselytizing our brothers and sisters from the South and the East. We must acknowledge that they are the 'real thing,' and as we hear and see the blessings of the Messiah spread among them, may the church in the West be provoked to jealousy. God has given to Asians, Africans and Islanders from the South Pacific 'the repentance that leads to life.' May the expansion of the church in those places reach the West, so that we may see it too.

Ivan Kirk is the minister of St David's, Coopers Plains, Qld.