

ACC catalyst

Volume 1 March 2008

SEX AND THE CITY OF GOD

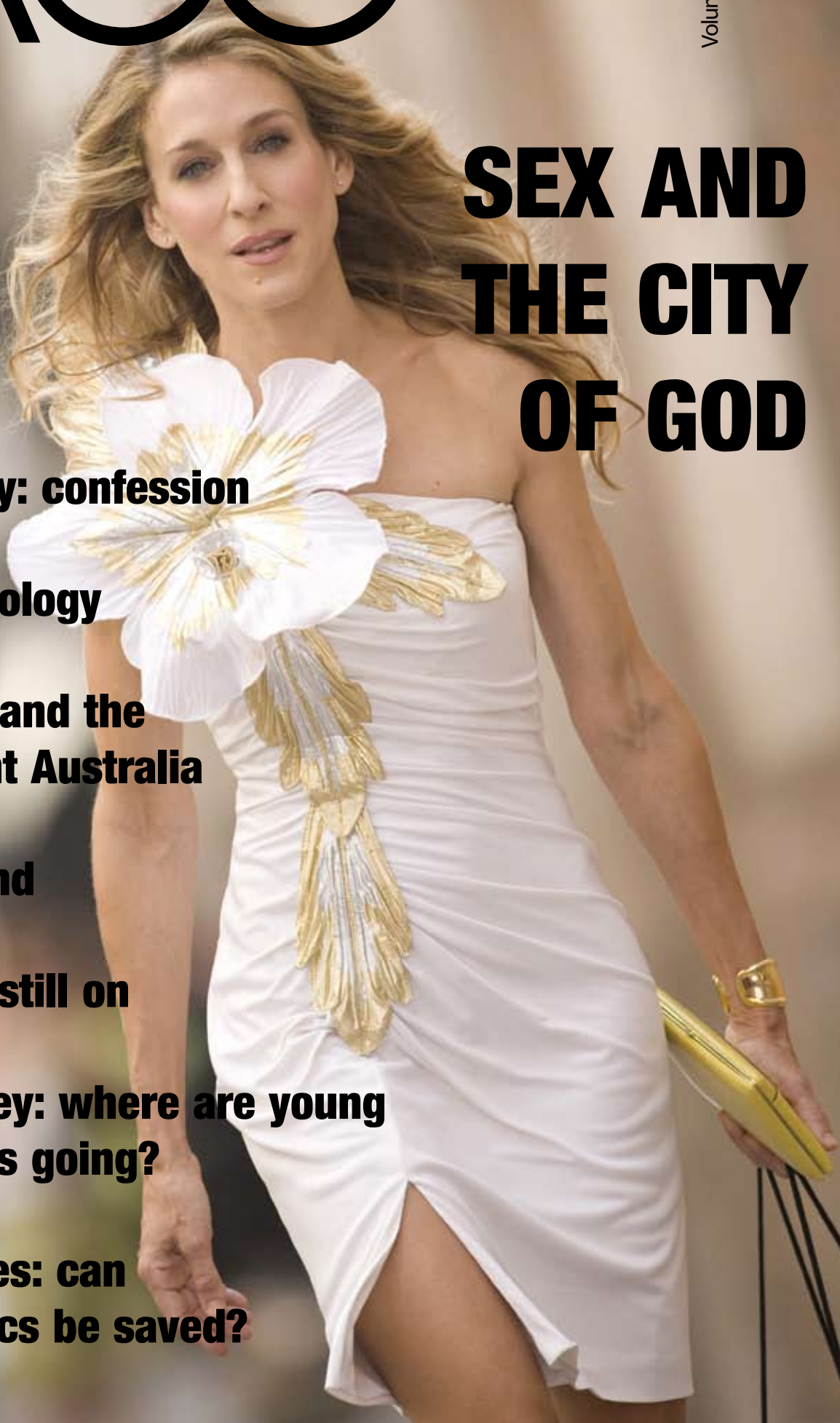
**Saying sorry: confession
and the
National Apology**

**The Gospel and the
Environment Australia**

**Sexuality and
leadership:
the fight is still on**

**Peter Bentley: where are young
churchgoers going?**

**Clive Skewes: can
hermeneutics be saved?**



*Confessing the Lord
Jesus Christ ...*

*Proclaiming the truth
...*

Renewing the church.



ACCATALYST

ISSN 1835-2073

ACCatalyst magazine is published quarterly by the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia Incorporated.

ABN 73 794 518 715. ARBN 128 001 785. Incorporated in NSW INC9887628. Liability of Members is limited.

The magazine welcomes written contributions relating to the world and the church.

Submissions will be published at the editor's discretion.

Editor: Paul Gray

Editorial Committee:

Warren Clarnette (Convenor)

Max Champion

Ross Carter

Board of Communication, corresponding members:

Ivan Kirk

Steve Estherby

Vic Malham

Anne Weeks

Assembly of Confessing Congregations
Registered Office 2 Erskineville Road
Newtown NSW. Postal address: P.O. Box 968,
Newtown, NSW 2042. Tel (within Australia):
02 9550 5358.

Email:

accoffice@confessingcongregations.com

Direct contact for editorial matters:

catalysteditor@confessingcongregations.com

ACCatalyst is available on a subscription-only

or on an ACC Supporting Membership basis.

Subscription only: \$25 a year for four issues.

ACC Supporting Membership: \$50 a year.

For all subscriptions, contact the administration office.

Front cover: Image from 'Sex and the City: the Movie,' Craig Blankenhorn/New Line Cinema

More than 'sorry', Australia needs the steel of confession

The leadership of the Uniting Church was quick to congratulate the Australian Government on its decision to apologise to Aboriginal people. The President of the Uniting Church, the Rev Gregor Henderson, said the Christian view of confession was a recognition of wrongdoing. "We take confession to mean that what has been done is not in accordance with the hopes and possibilities that God has for us," he said. He continued: "Confession is both an acknowledgement of this and an expression of resolve to live, by the grace of God, differently in the future."



The President's words are beyond criticism. We welcome an Australian church leader reminding the Australian nation of the importance of confession of sin as part of religious and public life. However it does raise the question: how many people these days do make regular confession of their sins at all? Many thousands of Australians have signed the "sorry books" which have been a feature of community activism for more than a decade. Only God can answer this question, but let us ask it anyway: have those white Australians who have apologised for their nation's oppression of the Aborigines also apologised for much else during the intervening years?

Confession, according to Christian tradition, has a much broader application than simply acknowledging that one's ancestors, collectively or individually, violated the human rights of the ancestors of their fellow countrymen. Do we not commit sins in our own homes and our own communities every week? Do we not speak in anger or judge others, especially our nearest and dearest, with unkind and unchristian words? Do we recognise and confess these sins fearlessly and openly, or do we confine our tally of personal wrongdoing to those fashionable crimes provided for us by writers of newspaper opinion pages?

Distant worlds

Cardinal George Pell recently posed a similar question in relation to global warming. He wondered whether the large number of middle class teenagers and adults who are greatly concerned by the potential problem of global warming were not, in fact, simply looking for something to worry about in this post-religious age. The Cardinal urged each of us individually to address the challenges in our own hearts, families and communities before beginning to moralise about "distant worlds." By distant worlds, he meant the worlds of eco-science and climate change. We might make a similar point about distant worlds of history. The past is another country, it is often said. With the national apology to the Aboriginal people and the massed media attention associated with it, the past is another country that is becoming more familiar, to some of us, than the actual country or town we live in every day.

Continued on page 7

Consultation on sexuality and leadership a success' was the headline on the Uniting Church's NSW Synod *Insights* website on February 20. It reported the comments of the Rev Dr Wes Campbell, convenor of the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine (AWGD) following its consultation on February 4-5.

He was quoted as saying that it 'was seen as a positive development by all involved. ... In the church there is broad agreement about a number of things, but there are some particular points of difference around same-sex relationships and leadership.'

Unfortunately, this gives the false impression that differences were relatively minor. Civil discourse on controversial issues should not be misconstrued as 'a positive step forward.' No mention is made of strong disagreements over the interpretation of texts.

Nothing at the consultation gives hope that AWGD will act urgently to heal the rift in the Body of Christ caused by the schismatic decisions of the past two Assemblies.

Dr Campbell's reported comments are, frankly, banal and inaccurate. He does not say that any work is planned to address the many contentious issues identified at the consultation.

And the later decision of the AWGD to prepare materials on marriage, while commendable, is a case of leaders trying to dodge controversy and delay a decision on specific issues.

The ACC was well represented at the consultation attended by 22 participants. Three of the six speakers were ACC leaders Dr Rosalie Hudson, Rev Dr Ian Breward and me.

The others were Rev Prof Christiaan Mostert, Rev Dr William Loader and Rev Dr Anita Munro.

In accepting the invitation, we were well aware that our mere presence could be co-opted in the cause of false consensus. Therefore, in letters to

Spin muddies church leadership report

Max Champion

the convenor before the consultation (20/12/07 and 1/2/08), I said: "We do not think anything is to be gained by engaging in yet another talk-fest which delays a decision unnecessarily. ... We do not agree (as stated in the initial letter of invitation to the dialogue) that the consultation should 'identify further theological work that must be done, suggesting ways of dealing with identified points of disagreement over the next three or four years'. As a matter of urgency, we believe that the issue must be resolved as soon as possible. The consultation should be committed to serious theological argument with the express intention of framing theologically informed motions for decision at the Twelfth Assembly (2009). Procrastination at this point in the life of the UCA will inevitably cause further fracturing of the Body of Christ.'

I also stressed the importance of the consultation debating the motion forwarded to the 2006 Assembly by the Queensland Synod and several Presbyteries. The suggestion was not taken up.

Moreover, focussing on marriage will not end the dispute over homosexuality. It will reinvigorate the cause of those who are relentlessly pushing for equal recognition of same-sex marriages (See article on Relationships Registers, p5.)

The UCA made a fine statement on marriage at the 1997 Assembly and put out a splendid *Report of the National Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the UCA on Interchurch Marriages* in 1999. In fact, the ACC presenters suggested reissuing the 1997 statement, giving theological reasons for any proposed changes.

The consultation was left in no doubt about ACC's affirmation of the

unique splendour of our creation as male and female and the sanctity of marriage. Naturally, there was resistance to the charge that the Assembly was apostate in failing to uphold the clear teaching of Scripture. It was argued, in relation to 'Gospel values,' that sexuality is a secondary

matter; that, because we are in possession of 'new data,' the Genesis account of creation is obsolete; that the appropriateness of sexual conduct depends on where people are along the continuum of hetero- or homosexual attraction; and that friendship, not



Rev Dr Max Champion

male-female relationships per se, was a better model for commitment and marriage.

The bodily difference between man and woman, their complementary unity in marriage and their unique patterning of the relation between God and humanity was largely treated with indifference.

References to their anatomical complementarity was labelled as 'reducing the person to body parts,' thus displaying a Gnostic dualism in which the body is less significant than reason or experience.

Much was made of the findings of modern science. But there was little interest in current debates in the scientific community about the

Continued on page 6

Swelling ranks of the departed raise critical questions for UCA

by Grahame Abrahams

I was blessed to represent the ACC at the conference of Crosslink Christian Network late last year and to catch up with many old friends who have left the Uniting Church.

Crosslinks is a growing organization, originating out of a former Uniting Church congregation in Canberra. In the last three years it has doubled in size and strength.

There is a growing trend away from mainline denominations. Members recognise that this has its drawbacks, as they do not have the voice in society that larger denominations have, but they can get on with the work of the "Kingdom" without the baggage and administrative restraints we carry.

In many ways, this is the attraction to these independent support organisations. Although 80-85 per cent of these congregations are groups that have pulled out of the Uniting Church, they are now attracting other groups that are tired of the structures of the mainline denominations.

One of the statistics quoted was that there are something like 33,820 separate denominations in the world today. It seems the



Grahame Abrahams

requirement to be a 'denomination' is to have 100 member congregations: this Crosslinks is rapidly moving towards.

In 2006, Crosslinks had 35 congregations: there are now 71.

These statistics also made me stop and think about what we are doing within the Assembly of Confessing Congregations. I came away realising we are doing the right thing in trying to remain within the Uniting Church. With so many denominations, the last thing the world needs is one more.

There were about 100 in attendance at the conference, once again mostly ex-Uniting Church people. The fact

that some are leaving may, in one sense, strengthen our cause within the UCA. The church has to realise that it cannot ignore reform forever.

There is, however, a great deal of pain within the hearts of many of the Crosslinks people in the way they were hurt by the Uniting Church when they voiced their concerns over The National Assembly's Resolution 84 on sexuality and leadership.

Many felt they had no choice. They felt forced out of the UCA, and they felt that they no longer had a voice within the Church's ranks.

On a positive note, there is a much greater sense of vision within the CrossLinks ranks. It is much more 'mission-focused,' having shaken free from the organisational restraints of mainline religion. Within the UCA, there is an undertone message that the church is in mission to survive as a denomination, and we are looking for programmes that will turn around the downward spiral. When I sat in the opening night of the CrossLinks

conference, by contrast, mission was more about advancing the Kingdom of God and fulfilling the Great Commission. Much the same ideas as the UCA, but an entirely different focus, which made it exciting.

Secondly, although their worship has a more Pentecostal focus, Crosslinks' speakers had a refreshing honesty which was heart-touching for everyone present. It had a humility that was unmistakeable.

There wasn't that Pentecostal arrogance that many of us have experienced at some conferences. They spoke of their failures as well as their visions and successes, which was different from the usual round of speakers at conferences who give the listener the feeling they are not measuring up, and are failures in their own ministry. It showed that we all struggle together, and we all have failure and successes.

Yet through the conference there was a vision of climbing a great mountain, achieving and fulfilling the Great Commission from God. The theme for the week was one of putting together a team to climb Mt Everest

Former UCA President James Haire joins ACC ecumenical commission

A former President of the Uniting Church, the Rev Professor James Haire, has joined the ACC's Ecumenical Commission.

Rev Dr Alan Crawford, a former Moderator of the Synod of Victoria, has been appointed Convenor of the Commission.

The Ecumenical Commission is one of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations' six commissions. It is charged with assisting the ACC to witness to the catholicity of the faith it holds by encouraging ecumenical relationships and the co-sponsoring of activities with other reform and confessional movements.

The Commission's brief is also to correspond with the Australian Council of Churches, and to encourage Uniting Church members to commit themselves to the confessional cause.

Other members of the Ecumenical Commission are Rev Dr Ian Breward, Peter Bentley, Marion Byrne, Revd Peter Davis, Rob Williams and Rev Dr Max Champion (ex-officio.)

Rev Prof Haire was Uniting Church President in 2002-3. He then served a term as President of the National Council of Churches.

Rev Dr Crawford has been a member of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations' doctrine commission, and co-chair for 12 years of National Conversations between Anglicans and the Uniting Church. He has been active in similar discussions with the Catholic Church.

– of the need for preparation and training, of working closely together, of needing people with different skills and abilities. It was honest enough to include the struggles of climbing and stretching ourselves beyond anything we have achieved before.

In this honesty, it was also recognised that when a team sets out, only a few are able to make it to the summit. Some never get past base camp, others form a support camp below the summit, and the fortunate few make it to the top. This, however, doesn't negate the need to have a full support network.

Even if some failed along the way and had to turn back, they also provided lessons for those who made it to the top.

It will be interesting to follow the development of CrossLinks over the next few years. CrossLinks has a DVD available to spread its message.

Bridger visit sheds light on Anglican self-destruction

by Ted Curnow

The big picture for the global church was the bottom line for those who attended an evening with Rev Dr Francis Bridger before Christmas at Marryatville, South Australia.

Dr Bridger is Executive Director of the Centre for Anglican Communion Studies and has a brief from the Archbishop of Canterbury to work through the sensitive issues facing the 78 million Anglican/Episcopalian church members and the 38 Provinces of the Anglican communion worldwide. Although he faced a few baited questions, Dr Bridger made it clear from the outset that rather than entering into the issues of the debate itself, he was there to describe the processes of the Anglican crisis.

He described the ordination of non-celibate gay Bishop Gene Robinson in New Hampshire as a Western issue exported to the world, an eruption of a simmering volcano.

March 2008

No justification for suggesting 'marriage' where no marriage exists: interfaith committee

No Australian State should endorse de facto or same-sex relationships in a way that gives them a meaning or significance in the law equivalent to marriage, according to an ad hoc interfaith committee.

The committee has voiced its concern to the Victorian Premier, Mr John Brumby, in response to two pieces of legislation currently proposed by the Victorian Government, dealing with relationships and judicial pensions.

The committee has written to the Premier to express its strong opposition to any legislation which would undermine the status of marriage.

The letter's signatories are Dr Nicholas Tonti-Filippini from Melbourne's John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family, Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen from the Institute for Judaism and Civilisation, Rev Ross Carter, chair of the committee for bioethics of the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Rev Dr Max Champion, Rev David Palmer from the Presbyterian Church of Victoria, Rev Fr Geoff Harvey from the Antiochian Orthodox Mission Parish at Monash University, Dr Denise Cooper-Clarke from Ridley Melbourne Mission and Ministry College, City Church Pastors Mark Connor and Peter McHugh and Rev Megan Curlis-Gibson of the Anglican Church.

The committee acknowledges there are many and varied forms of interdependent relationships into which people enter, and that de facto and same-sex relationships happen within Australian society.

People within those relationships need the flexibility to make arrangements, including financial ones, that reflect their interdependence, it says. However, the committee adds, "it is quite another matter for the state to endorse de facto or same-sex relationships in a way that gives them a meaning or significance in the law equivalent to marriage."

The committee says that Victoria's Relationships Bill 2007 is problematic because in providing for a relationship agreement, it "depends in practice on the existence of sexual intimacy as a criterion for recognising a domestic partner."

By doing so it implies the existence of a marriage-like relationship. "This would seem to give a meaning and status to sexual intimacy between persons of the same sex or persons in a de facto relationship that is unwarranted," the committee says.

The committee urges that the two bills be withdrawn from the state's parliament.



Dr Nicholas Tonti-Filippini

He suggested that the churches' view of homosexuality over the years had changed. In earlier times the practise was clearly understood as sin, then it was a disease, a disorder and now for some it was a matter of choice. These differences and the friction they generate were like a range of shifting tectonic plates because much of the Church cannot identify with the last stage of choice.

For many African and Asian

Churches it is an issue because for their Muslim neighbours it would just confirm the irredeemable, decadent nature of the Christian church.

The Anglican communion is a strange cultural animal, a little like the Conciliar Councils of the Uniting Church. The various Instruments of the Church involve the Archbishop of Canterbury, the gathering of Primates and the gathering of 800 Bishops at the Lambeth Conference. The world

Adelaide set for National Conference

The ACC's 2008 annual national conference and general meeting will be held in South Australia.

The dates are September 11-13, at Coromandel Valley Uniting Church in Adelaide.

Details of speakers, discussion and voting sessions and accommodation arrangements will be notified to Assembly of Confessing Congregations members in coming months.

church and these Instruments have no universal legal power over each other.

The communion is a fellowship purely held together by bonds of affection. This explains why the communion is cracking under the weight of complex issues it is not structured to cope with.

We were informed that Anglicans in the USA only number two million members – a very small percentage alongside the rest of the world church. Some Parishes have withdrawn from the Episcopal Church in America to place themselves under the oversight of Ugandan, Nigerian or Asian bishops.

This means there are now two institutional forms of the Episcopal Church in America.

The gathering of Primates urged the US Bishops to stop authorising same sex unions and ordaining anyone living in a same-sex union. The US Bishops' response on 25 September 2007 said they would exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the Episcopate whose manner of life presented a challenge to the wider Church and would lead to further strains on the Communion.

Bishop Gene Robinson has not been invited to the Lambeth Conference in 2008, and neither have the Bishops consecrated by African Bishops for the USA. They may attend as guests.

The Windsor movement is a similar group to the ACC within the Anglican Church that seeks reform or reconfiguration based on theological and moral grounds.

Compass and the 'Basis of Union'

Terence Corkin's article in the latest edition of 'New Times,' 'Looking beyond 'Compass', seems to be an exercise in damage control using some fairly predictable spin.

We know that there is much that is vibrant, hopeful, encouraging and inspiring about the Uniting Church... In the year of our 30th Anniversary the 'Compass' program has served as a timely reminder that we are a wonderfully diverse church; uniquely placed in the Australian community.'

No doubt the 'Compass' producers had their own agenda, and part of that included portraying only very small congregations of the UCA.

However the program did raise some important questions about what, if anything in particular, the Uniting Church believes.

Terence advocated that as a result of the program 'we spend time talking about who we are as a Uniting Church, our core values; our Basis of Union.'

Terence is apparently not aware that the South Australian Synod, at its meeting in November, declined to confess its faith in words from the Basis of Union which so beautifully express our core values.

Rod James
South Australia

Spin muddies report

Continued from page 3

complex causes of sexual attraction. It was widely assumed that, because there 'are' gay people, the Church should simply affirm their sexuality.

Ignorance about large numbers of 'ex-gays' who have suffered confused sexual identity and are grateful for being helped to resist or modify same-sex attraction, also prevents otherwise intelligent people from questioning the prevailing wisdom. It is a pity that the revisionists do not question Kinsey's 'junk science.'

Such considerations are not only theoretical, but pastoral. Instead of helping people to 'come out' of gay relationships, the Uniting Church tacitly treats 'ex-gays' as traitors. It is instructive that no ex-gays were invited to the consultation.

Dr Campbell's reported comments give no confidence that the theological issues identified at the consultation will be addressed in a coherent form.

There is no commitment to contact ecumenical partners who have done fine work on these issues already; or to deal with the incompatibility of the Church's working theology, based on acceptance, 'strenuous tolerance' and inclusion, with the classical ecumenical theology based on the

redemptive love of God; or to debate the aptness of apostasy; or to identify the presuppositions and methods of different approaches to Scripture and tradition.

The consultation did nothing to narrow the chasm between the ACC and the predominant voices of the AWGD. The illusion of harmony has been shattered already by decisions of past Assemblies.

Confidence is further shaken when spin is strongly applied to the outcome of proceedings. There can be no optimism that the AWGD will recommend that, in the interests of Christian unity, 'R84' and 'R108' be rescinded.

It remains to be seen whether the AWGD will recommend to Assembly that the matter be dealt with doctrinally, as strongly recommended by the three ACC presenters at the consultation. What is certain is that there is no reason to continue the debate in a setting where goodwill and frankness have been corralled in the service of false unity.

The ACC will not participate in a process in which the participants are more concerned to 'honour differences' than confront the schismatic decisions of the past two Assemblies and deal with them theologically.

More than 'sorry', Australia needs the steel of confession

Continued from page 2

Many commentators, including the executive secretary of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission, Mr Graeme Mundine, have rightly insisted that a national apology to Aborigines should be accompanied by practical measures to alleviate and rectify the human disadvantage suffered by this sector of the population. This is a statement worth repeating, even though many well-meaning attempts at correcting this disadvantage have already been made, at a cost of several billion dollars and over a long period of time, since at least the 1970s. That mistakes have been made during previous attempts to correct a problem does not mean that the problem should not be fixed now. It is also fairly obvious that simply paying more money to the representatives of Aboriginal communities is not a sufficient solution. Given the sickening reports of drug abuse and sexual violence in some remote Aboriginal communities in recent times – not “white on black,” but “black on black” violence, we might say – it is clear that one of the practical measures required in combating Aboriginal disadvantage is to generate better habits of living. Probably another necessary practical measure is the breaking up of certain communities of disadvantage in remote Australia.

A valuable insight has been gained from recent attempts by Christian-influenced research groups to chart the problems of poverty and social dysfunction in Australia. This insight is that some communities have a higher concentration of disadvantage than others. The ground-breaking *Dropping Off the Edge* study undertaken by Prof Tony Vinson in collaboration with Jesuit Social Services is an example. This study is built around the concept of an Australian map which shows the

Good news for Easter weekend on TV

John Dickson's *The Christ Files* will screen on the Seven network around Australia as a one-off Easter weekend TV special.

Dickson, Director of the Centre for Public Christianity in Sydney, is the author of several books, including *The Christ Files* which argues from the historical record that the earliest Christians believed in the divinity of Jesus – despite conspiratorial claims to the contrary made in books like *The Da Vinci Code*.

The Christ Files can be seen on Good Friday, March 21 at 12 noon on the Seven network in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, and at 12 midnight on March 22 in Melbourne.

The later time in Melbourne is because of Seven's broadcast of the annual Good Friday Royal Children's Hospital telethon.



John Dickson

nation's disadvantage “hot spots,” so to speak. The study uses the available government data to find those postcode locations which have the highest concentrations of disadvantage. We can deduce a general rule from studies like this: that disadvantage does pool in particular locations.

It is fairly clear to a casual observer that disadvantage in today's Australia has pooled most disastrously among Aborigines. However, it does not help to view this problem as somehow racial. The entire dismal history of racially-based “science” throughout the 20th century ranges from the cruel Darwinian theories of eugenics, which helped give rise to the ‘stolen generations’ problem, to the more extreme racial “science” of the Nazis, which produced Auschwitz. This history is more than enough to deter anyone from pursuing a racially-based argument in attempting to deal with the problem of Aboriginal disadvantage. In fact, this has been one of the unfortunate side-effects of the entire “sorry” debate. Inadvertently, the proponents of a national apology have helped render what is essentially a human tragedy requiring cool and dispassionate thinking into a prolonged racist drama played out on a cheap media stage. It is inviting, though perhaps optimistic, to think that this drama has now finished because the

Prime Minister has made his apology.

Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson expressed reality well when he highlighted the complexity and variety of the issues. “People were stolen, people were rescued; people were brought in chains, people were brought by their parents; mixed blood children were in danger from their tribal stepfathers, while others were loved and treated as their own; people were in danger from whites, and people were protected by whites. The motivations and actions of those whites involved in this history – governments and missions – ranged from cruel to caring, malign to loving, well-intentioned to evil.”

Recognising the immoralities of the past, as well as recognising the moral requirements of the present and future, are two tasks to which plain-speaking Christians can and should devote themselves. As regular confessors of our own sins we should be well equipped for this task. First and foremost, we not only need but are given grace to recognise every fellow Australian suffering from poverty, abuse or disadvantage of some other kind as our brother or sister, whose parentage is no more important to us than their hair-colour. What matters is their need and suffering, and what can be done to correct it.

Paul Gray

The Gospel and the environment in Australia today

Deane Meatheringham

How does the gospel of Jesus Christ connect with the environment? I have always maintained that the grace of God displayed and enacted in people's lives has a transforming impact on the way they live. These include the new ways a farmer relates to her or his animals and land and the new regard of all who love God for his creation. However, there was a lack somewhere, because I was separating the gospel from the creation. Then I heard a loved and respected mentor state that creation is the most important subject of the Bible. I began to adjust my theology.

One day in my early ministry the



Deane Meatheringham

local funeral director asked me to conduct a funeral service at a graveside. "Bit of a strange one this", he said, "the bloke's been murdered".

I did not recognise the name. As I travelled to the cemetery I realised that I had helped the murdered man a year or so earlier. He and his wife were having financial and marital problems. I had provided practical help and pastoral counselling. When the couple left the district I took them with their meagre belongings to catch the bus. I heard no more of them until the funeral. The man had lived in a remote farmhouse for several months and was murdered there.

That day we had the sort of wind you get in a dry year, squally, with

clouds looking as if they should produce rain but sending only a few spots to torment us. At the graveside, there were six men – farmers from nearby – the undertaker and me. I honoured the dead man as a unique person and presented the promises of hope in Christ for life beyond this present existence. As I called on Christ's name and we began to lower the coffin into the grave the wind ceased, the sprinkling rain stopped, the scrub around the cemetery stood still, the leaves of the mallee trees glistened as if they were new. There was silence. None of us said a word. Unforgettable eye contact occurred. I knew that my companions had all felt the stillness as I had.

Years later, when I needed to prepare a study on the work of the Holy Spirit in creation, I realised that humanity is one with creation, and the Spirit of God is working simultaneously in the creation. The creation is the theatre of the gospel, and he who sustains and renews human life does so for the creation.

Christians live in the creation, gain from its wealth, and contribute to or drain its resources. We believe in a God who not only creates and sustains the creation but who comes to us as a creature in his incarnate Son by whom he will redeem us with the whole creation.

So far I have spoken of 'creation' rather than 'nature'. Should we quibble about a word? Society generally says

The Rev. Deane Meatheringham is rural mission planner for the Uniting Church in South Australia. His paper considering how Christians should respond to today's environmental concerns, written in May 2007, is published as an edited excerpt.

'nature'. In a public forum I would not want to be side-tracked by a word when there are larger issues to be considered. But 'nature' is slippery. It can have a meaning that is not consistent with the Christian confessions which say, "We believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth".

The ancient Greek philosophers gave considerable attention to nature. Ultimately, Plato and Aristotle came to differing conclusions but both were dualistic. They drew a distinction between what we would call the physical world and the mind or the soul. Nature was a life or power that descended through bodies, shaping and governing them. Such a philosophy could lead to an inferior view of the physical and a superior view of the mind or soul. We have strong remnants of this in the way some people mistreat their bodies. Also in the way inordinate attention is given to developing the inner life of a person as the superior object of devotion

Enlightenment thinkers believed in a creator God, but in dualistic terms. They separated the creation from the creator and developed the idea that the world of nature could have its properties explained with reference to itself through mathematics. Thus, Newton's arguments in favour of universal gravitation encouraged the view that the universe was a single uniform mechanism, governed at all

times by the laws of motion. Nature had gained autonomy, yet was a mechanistic system of cause and effect.

In our post-modern culture where all boundaries are discarded and all history and ideas are deconstructed we have an ecological movement that

“has tended to see nature as a self sufficient domain of intrinsic value, truth and authenticity . . . In the absence of any consensus concerning the ontology of nature, such notions as the environment become socially constructed entities. Nature is under siege, both physically (through bulldozers) and intellectually (through deconstruction), in that the very existence of the category has been challenged. The defences offered by well-meaning environmentalists are generally pragmatic (‘this will lead to further exploitation of the environment’) and have failed to appreciate that the real issues lie very much deeper – the need for an ontology of nature”, Alister E. McGrath, Nature, T & T Clark, 2001, pp. 155f.

What we need to know is not just what nature does but what it is. The prophetic and apostolic canon sees nature as creation. The world about us is not a thing to be used or dominated by human beings who have placed themselves in the place of the creator. *“The doctrine of creation ex nihilo allowed the scientist to approach nature with the expectation that the divine rationality would be reflected in its structures and workings”, ibid, pp. 140.*

The references to creation in the Old Testament suggest that creation has to do with more than beginnings. Other factors such as bringing order out of emptiness and nothingness and the imposition of a form have to be reckoned with. The correct place to begin is not Genesis chapters 1-3, it is the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. John’s Gospel begins by revealing that he who was the very communication or expression of God, because he was face to face with God, was the one through whom all things were created. He is the Word who called creation into being.

Paul follows this principle when he writes : *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in*



him all things in heaven and earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through and for him”, Colossians 1: 15-16.

Creation did not spring from some deficient or malignant demiurge. Nor is it the result of a fatalistic chance-plus-matter process. Rather God created all things out of the sheer goodness of his unconditional love as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. This latter point is important pastorally because it shows us that the creator is not some dark unknowable or forbidding divinity somewhere behind Christ. Many people have made a dichotomy between the creator God and Jesus Christ with calamitous consequences for our understanding of creation.

Creation is not an emanation of God or an extension of his divinity, which is pantheism. God is above the creation he has made and Lord of it. Yet in the incarnation of the Son of God, God has joined himself not only to humanity, but has also become a creature and is present in his creation. Repeatedly the Scriptures tell us that the creation was functionally good in that it is whole and every part of it relates to the other. The New Testament says the whole creation coheres by the power of Christ’s continuing Word. *“In him (Christ) all things all hold together”, Colossians 1: 17. “He sustains all things by his (Christ’s) powerful word”, Hebrews 1:3. “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected”, 1 Timothy 3:4.*

This is valid for the whole of God's creation and includes those things we may consider threatening and harmful. When I was teaching at a Bible college I once said the marijuana plant is good, along with opium poppies and tobacco. This brought a strong response. A former Methodist principal of mine remarked to his students that he could understand people not wanting to believe John's Gospel because Jesus turned water into vast quantities of *wine*.

Is atomic energy a good thing? I believe so, but much depends on our responsible use of these creation gifts. The creation is good because it contains and reflects God's free mercy and those powers that work to draw us to him and save us in Christ Jesus.

Joy and thanksgiving to God express themselves exuberantly in many contexts in the Bible. Christian hymns and songs adore the God of creation. In the eucharistic liturgy the company gathered by Christ joins with all the heavenly beings, the church in heaven and on earth and all

the creatures of the creation, singing "Heaven and earth are full of your glory, Hosanna in the highest".

Yet we do not see creation as it is. We are often more inclined to see various bogies lurking behind the good. Every day we should delight in creation but instead can be terrified of it. If our fear comes from the awe of the dramatic events and marvelous movement of creation, then we can understand people becoming deeply moved by the impact upon them. Nevertheless, we develop phobias about the weather or are fearful of the dimensions of the universe, while some live in dread of invasion by alien creatures.

I suggest that the fear of creation links with our fear of God. We do not trust a faithful creator. So much in the creation seems to speak against God. When it comes to climate change and global warming our fears are reinforced. This is especially so when ecology becomes a religion with its own almanac dating the end of the world.

When we hear predictions of Bondi beach being covered by the rise of the sea, the old guilt manipulation game comes into play to force people to

change their habits. I do not believe this is an effective psychology for the proper treatment of the earth. Fear is more likely to produce hate for the planet and even more destructive behaviour.

In an essay called "Progress and Abyss" Jürgen Moltmann describes the coming of the enlightenment and traces the pursuit of a utopia of blessedness through human discovery and conquest. By the seventeenth century Europe had learned from Virgil to expect a golden age. With the beginnings of modernity the time of fulfillment had arrived. Revolutions sought the future ideal by force of arms. New scientific and technological discoveries trusted in a beginning without an end. Nature did not fare well under the industrial revolution with its emissions and rape of the lands for resources and the beginning of the greenhouse effect. The ecosystem of our planet was losing its equilibrium.

"This was not just a crisis of the natural environment. It was also a crisis of the industrial world itself. The destruction of nature that we can see every day with our own eyes is based on the disturbed relationship of modern men and women to nature. It is impossible to make oneself 'the master and possessor of nature' if one is still part of nature and dependent on it."

Modernity has ended in catastrophe. In the fight for progress we have produced wars of annihilation and destruction of the planet. Here is the good creation also working against human ambition and desecration and in God's governance resisting final destruction.

Peter tells us that we have a faithful creator to whom we should entrust ourselves, (1 Peter 4:19). From the beginning, God's



covenant has been not only with Abraham, Israel, or the Church, but also with the whole of creation.

In his sheer goodness and grace the Triune God joined himself to our humanity by becoming bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. The incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ is the joining of God with our corrupt and death-sealing humanity. Jesus Christ is not only the one through whom all things were created but in his flesh “*God was pleased to reconcile all things whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross*”, *Colossians 1:20*.

In the light of the cosmic event of the crucified God the creation that was subjected to decay and futility in hope, waits with eager longing for the final liberation of the whole creation, (Romans 8:18-24). Creation will be set free when humanity is finally glorified as God’s sons and daughters. The Christian faith is not utopian, pessimistic or optimistic. It is realistic. It hopes for what God has promised though the salvation of Christ. It begins to live consistently in the light of what it hopes for in the future.

Suggesting that a Christian response to the current climate change crisis is to hope may seem somewhat weak. Am I merely saying just hope everything will turn out OK so that we can continue with our present life style? Hope is not wishful thinking or like a ticket in the lottery. It is not passive waiting. Hope is faith with a future look. Hope needs to be distinguished from what we see, for as Paul says, who hopes for what he or she already sees?

As we anticipate what “we hope for” we start to shape up for it by ordering our lives accordingly. Without hope, we are hopeless and bereft of any future to live for.

Hope believes this world belongs to God and not to us. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof”. We will be skeptical, not cynical, of all utopian dreams and ambitions to bring in the final era of peace and tranquility. In 1964 Jacques Ellul wrote the famous treatise *The Technological Society* in which he seriously questioned the promises of technology to bring in an ideal society. It was heralded in some circles at the time, but it fell into oblivion. In 1990

Ellul wrote *The Technological Bluff* in which he says techniques are bluffers that do not deliver what they promise. We have been deceived into thinking that computers are the real creators. Christians are not Luddites who reject technology or its benefits but they are people who put their trust in him to bring in a final future from a realm beyond this present existence.

People of hope worship the living God and do not absolutise the creation or any part of it. Conservationism linked with the dynamics of creation itself plus spirituality, can become an object of worship. Christians do not worship the creation in the place of God; they worship God and obey his commands for justice in the creation.

Looking to a future renewed creation, we do not spoil or destroy God’s creation now. As a farmer who has inherited land that has been abused in various ways can work successfully to renew the soil through replanting trees, using less chemicals and not overworking the land, we too can work for the renewal of the world’s ecosystem. Faith can lead to a decision to not consume as much power through inefficient air-conditioning or by driving vehicles with larger motors than we need. We will not fight governments over developing clean coal policies and the use of developing technologies for sun and wind power. Christians can effect a powerful witness to Christ and his saving grace by their attitude and care of the creation.

Christians who hope will also pray in the strong name of Christ for his deliverance of the creation from tyranny and catastrophe. Providing we acknowledge our sins in repentance and trust the forgiveness of all our transgressions, we should be bold enough to pray for rain and for our daily basic needs along with all humankind. We will be praying for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven and for his ultimate kingdom to come.

Churches have a natural desire to offer help in times of crisis. The big drought has intensified this.

The Uniting Church in South Australia has provided grants for food and drinks for congregations to arrange social occasions like BBQs in accessible, non-threatening public

venues. At some of these, space has been made to help farmers take care of their health, direct people to counseling services, and unravel the complications of seeking government help. In the Mid North, Eyre Peninsula and the South East there has been opportunity for listening to people. That may have assisted in breaking the boredom of grief.

Early in 2007 thunderstorms brought heavy rain which washed away rural fencing to areas such as Orroroo and Hawker. For farmers already struggling for funds the rain filled their dams but it washed away valuable fencing. The South Australian Synod provided financial grants for the local minister to distribute to enable people to replace their fencing.

The church received valuable help from a government mental health researcher and practitioner who had wide experience of rural communities. Ecumenical seminars were held where he addressed ordained pastors and practising pastoral workers to assist them in recognizing signs of depression and other mental health difficulties. These were invaluable.

It is late April 2007. I rise early to travel to upper Eyre Peninsula. The Weather Bureau has been predicting substantial rain for the agricultural areas for today and the next two or three days. The temperature is warm and the wind blows dust onto the road as I leave home. As I pass the autumn grape vines, the rain starts to fall slowly and lightly. It steadily increases as I progress on towards Kimba. As I get out of the car, I need to negotiate a stream of water pouring down the street. I cannot see the paddocks around the town for the heavy rain clouds and mist.

As the rain continues to fall over the next three days every conversation starts with comments on the rain. People are jubilant. The dry ground and trees look refreshed. Rainwater tanks are filling. Dams again have water in them. Many paddocks are waterlogged and farmers are eager to get out onto their tractors to start seeding. The impact of the rain has clobbered us.

Can hermeneutics be saved?

GOSPEL-CENTERED HERMENEUTICS:
FOUNDATIONS AND PRINCIPLES OF
EVANGELICAL AND BIBLICAL
INTERPRETATION
BY GRAEME GOLDSWORTHY

PUBLISHED BY INTER-VARSITY PRESS
PRICE: \$29.95

REVIEWED BY REV CLIVE SKEWES

When the ancient Greeks named the winged messenger and interpreter of the gods, Hermes, they could scarcely have imagined his name would be given to a recent growth industry, that of hermeneutics (from *hermeneuo*, 'interpret').

Interpretative theory and practice or hermeneutics, is as old as the Stoics. Embarrassed at the absurdities and crudities of the gods in Homer (whom they respected), these ancient thinkers re-interpreted the gods as human qualities or elements in nature.

In the Bible, hermeneutics begins whenever earlier traditions or writings are reviewed from the standpoint of later ones (e.g. the application of parts of the law in the prophets, or Paul and Matthew's use of Isaiah).

Today hermeneutics also concerns the interpretation and understanding of any act of communication - written, oral or symbolic. Accordingly it is common to find in current writings in the social sciences a move to hermeneutics as an essential aid in solving problems.

However when this move to hermeneutics has been made by writers on biblical and theological issues, such as sexuality in the Uniting Church in Australia, it has sown the idea in people's minds that everyone can interpret Scripture from their own historical and cultural perspective. This in turn has led to the conclusion

that there is no lasting or abiding or absolute truth about anything.

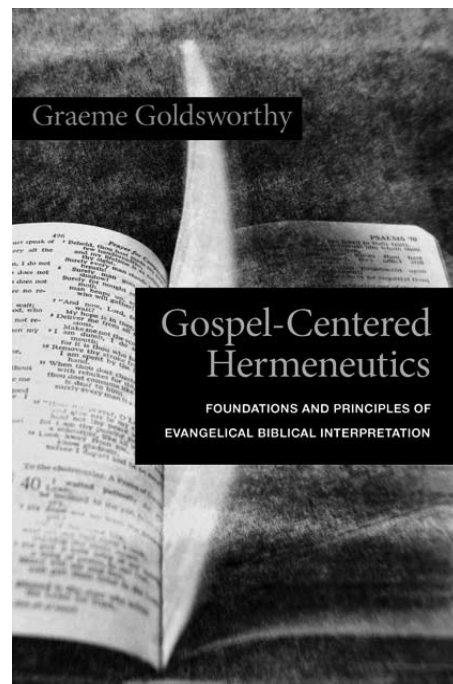
It is at this point that Graeme Goldsworthy mounts the platform and, as unapologetically as an evangelist on the sawdust trail, warns the interpretative theorists that hermeneutics needs to be saved. Indeed that the interpreters of Scripture need salvation (justification) and sanctification in order to understand and explicate Scripture faithfully.

Surveying the history of interpretation in the early church, medieval Christianity, Roman Catholicism, liberalism, philosophic theories, historical criticism, literary criticism, quietism, literalism, legalism, decisionism, subjectivism, the 'Jesus in my heart-ism' of evangelical catholicism, evangelical pluralism and evangelical pragmatism, Goldsworthy claims too much ground has been given up to non-biblical and secular theories of communication and interpretation. He demonstrates how the gospel has been eclipsed in each of these traditions.

Yet this eclipse is never total and he recognizes valuable contributions by non-Christian postulations in these areas.

He argues there is and should be a distinctively evangelical (i.e. gospel-centered) hermeneutic in regard to Scripture, which arises out of Scripture itself. Christ is the ultimate aim and interpretive centre of all Scripture. Hermeneutics is about reading God's word with understanding so that we might be conformed more and more to the image of Christ.

Whatever the role of intellect in hermeneutics it is still a spiritual discipline, so Goldsworthy insists an evangelical hermeneutic necessarily entails a regenerate mind interacting with Scripture.



Those who are 'tired of the perplexing neutrality of most books on hermeneutics will be pleasantly surprised by the clear, confessional, Christ-exalting treatment of this subject by the author'.

The book is divided into three sections which give fresh perspectives on some well-worn paths:

PART I examines the foundations and presuppositions of evangelical belief, particularly with regard to biblical interpretation.

PART II offers a selective overview of important interpretative developments from the sub-apostolic age to the present as a means of identifying some significant influences that have been alien to the gospel.

PART III evaluates ways and means of constructing truly gospel-centered hermeneutics.

Goldsworthy's constant aim is to commend the much-neglected role of biblical theology in interpretative practice, with pastoral concern for the people of God as they read, interpret and seek to live by his written Word. The focus of this book 'is not word studies but Word study'.

One reviewer who has read and reread this book recommends reading it often - at least once a year for the next ten years.

An extended review by Miles Van Pelt, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi can be

Book reviews continued page 18



Sex and the City of God

Sex and the City is based on a book by columnist Candace Bushnell. It follows Carrie, a sex columnist or sexual anthropologist and her observations of New York's sexual mores. It is based on her own and her successful, smart, thirty something friends' largely fruitless search for meaningful sexual relationships. Each is sadly unsuccessful, each fills the empty hole in their heart in their own way. 'Sexy Samantha, who is in PR, sleeps with pretty much anyone [and does just about anything]; Miranda the lawyer dallies with a man with whom the sex is great but whom she will definitely not marry; Charlotte, the art gallery buyer, is Ivy League, somewhat preppie and, relatively speaking, inhibited'.

Carrie's provocative prone advertising pose bears the caption: 'Carrie Bradshaw knows good sex' without a hint there might be a theological or ethical, not merely aesthetic or technical sense of 'good sex'. Carrie's friends' conversation rarely rises above the navel, but masks a poignancy and longing for love in the midst of a succession of one or several night stands. It represents the nihilistic nadir of the modern romantic myth as shown in this excerpt from the programmatic first episode.

An attractive young Englishwoman of Carrie's acquaintance arrives in New York and is wooed off her feet into a whirlwind romance with a Manhattan male.

Gordon Preece reviews post-modern eroticism and God's vision for authentic sexuality.

His article is an edited extract from 'Whose Homosexuality? Which Authority?' a book-length edition of the journal *Interface*, available from atfpress.com

They have candlelight dinners, make love, even look at houses together before Carrie's all-knowing voice-over says:

"Then I realized, no-one had told her about the end of love in Manhattan. Welcome to the end of innocence. No-one has breakfast at Tiffany's and affairs we like to remember.

Instead, we have breakfast at 7 am and affairs we try to forget as quickly as possible.

Self-protection and closing the deal are paramount. Cupid has flown the coop. How the hell did we get into this mess.

There are thousands and thousands of women like this in the City. They spend \$400 on a pair of strappy sandals, and they're alone."

The saddest comment of all in *Sex and the City* was 'how can you believe in love at first sight in a city where a guy jerks off next to you on the subway'. Such is the postmodern, post-AIDS, post-most divorced generation in history's sense of betrayal by the modern master narrative of romantic love. Yet they keep coming back for more. All the cynicism barely covers great wistfulness.

Two themes often arise in contemporary disillusioned media romances. Firstly, many movies – *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *American Beauty* – shift the traditional romantic tragic plot of star-crossed heterosexual lovers to portray women who find the best guys and relationships are gay.

As Carrie's gay friend Stanford Jones says: 'You know I'm beginning to think that the only place where you can still find love and romance in New York is the gay community. Straight love has become closeted'. TV shows like *Ellen*, *Six Feet Under*, *Queer eye for the Straight Guy* and *Queer as Folk* display fascination with, and partial idealisation of gay relationships and stereotypically dysfunctional heterosexual marriages and families.

Secondly, in *Sex and the City* the postmodern mobility of bourgeois bohemians, or 'bobos' as they have been labeled, has been mistakenly translated into a consumerist and relativistic morality. This is a category mistake. Nonetheless it shows why the bedroom must not be divorced from the boardroom because the global cosmopolitan urban economy generates hyper-capitalist development of narrower market niches with attached life, spirituality and sexual styles. Think of the powerful pink dollar and the new class, sexually expressive individualism that dominates much media, arts and parts of the city and church. Author RR Reno, before turning Catholic, captured well the class captivity of the American Episcopalian push to marry and ordain practicing homosexuals: "The gay lobby, while unappealing in some of its excesses, is fundamentally congenial to the sensibilities of Bourgeois Bohemians. The typical Episcopalian is not very likely to be committed to the homosexual agenda in any focused sense. . . . The general relaxation of traditional sexual morality is the decisive element. The experience of many upper-class Americans [and Australians] is that it is OK to sleep around a bit - it did not destroy their lives. . . . 'Hey', says the Bourgeois Bohemian, 'if we can neglect the Scriptures on matters of fornication, adultery, and divorce, then why not on homosexuality?' This helps to explain why homosexuality is so important in the Episcopal Church. It symbolizes the Bourgeois Bohemian confidence that liberated sexual practices can be prudently and wisely absorbed into a socially respectable way of life . . . Homosexuality is also important because it reassures. . . . If homosexuality is OK, then our transgressions are OK . . . otherwise we would have to confront the uglier sides of the sexual revolution and would begin to feel the necessity of judgments and condemnations that might threaten our happy marriage of sexual freedom and upper-class respectability."

Augustine's *City of God* was written in the early fifth century AD at a time of barbarism within and without Rome. It was written to a Roman imperial age not dissimilar to our own American imperial age of sexual decadence and frenetic restlessness, symptomatic of the decay of western civilization. *Sex and the City* is truest when Carrie confesses herself 'restless'. Compare EL Doctorow's recent New York novel about a spiritually and sexually restless Episcopalian priest, entitled *City of God*. Both are reminders of Augustine's sexually and spiritually restless pre-Christian state, described famously in his *Confessions* in the words 'lord make me chaste, but not yet' and 'Lord we are restless until we find our rest in Thee'. Augustine restlessly tried and discarded many ancient philosophies and lifestyles.

Augustine's Christian legacy is partly ambiguous. Witness his pessimism, his occasional confusion of sin (concupiscence - or disordered desire) and sex, his over-

valuation of virginity and of procreation compared with companionship in marriage. Yet he has been scapegoated for all the ills of the western theological tradition. None of the above denies his profound understanding of sexuality in its created, fallen and redeemed reality. Augustine's attempt at discerning the goodness of the created order, the body and its gendered destiny in resurrection in *The City of God* shows how far he has put his neo-Platonic and Manichean dualism behind him with its devilish denial of the goodness of the body, sex and marriage for the grandeur of being 'created to embrace the material world'.

Despite some of the Augustinian tradition's ambiguities on sexuality, today's 'naked public square' needs re-clothing, not in the romantic myths of modernity, discredited by *Sex and the City*, but in the biblical and Augustinian narrative of the City of God. This story, with its realistic and prophetic vision of the future city or polity of God, out-narrates all other stories of utopian cities and sexual freedom without consequence. The story of the City of God can transform the earthly city as it did when it inspired the best of Christendom, the best of early liberal modernity, and some of the world's most urbane cities or public places.

Michel Foucault claims that notions of natural and unnatural are historically, socio-culturally and politically constructed and that almost any cultural and institutional configuration of pleasure can be constructed and depicted as natural. Theological 'postmodernists' like Stanley Hauerwas rightly note that 'appeals to creation too often amount to legitimating strategies for the principalities and powers that determine our lives', leading us to project



Today's 'naked public square' needs re-clothing, not in the romantic myths of modernity, discredited by *Sex and the City*, but in the biblical and Augustinian narrative of the City of God.

ic square' needs re-
 ntic myths of modernity,
 nd the City,' but in the
 n narrative of the City of
 od.

our present
 'twilight of
 good and
 evil' onto the
 canvas/screen
 of creation.
 They cite the
 misuse of the
 doctrine of
 the orders
 of creation
 to justify
 Nazi racism
 and by some
 contemporary

in any given society is a free
 human cultural creation."This is
 a Gnostic rejection of creation
 or biology altogether.

Postmodern social
 constructionism is fallacious
 like the projection theory of
 religious needs; just because
 we are hungry does not mean
 that food doesn't really exist.
 Further, just because people
 ideologically abuse the notion of
 the natural for their own power
 doesn't deny the existence of
 the natural. Abuse of the notion



Rev Gordon Preece

of creation order does not deny
 its use, it just disciplines our
 critical discernment of it, or we would do away with sex
 too, the most abused of all precious human goods.

In Romans 1:24 ff. Paul depicts homosexual practice as
 a symptom of Gentile idolatry and God's giving them
 up to disordered and unnatural desires. In Romans
 7:13-25 Paul graphically describes the Adamic self (still
 existing within the Christian) divided by all-demanding
 desire, including sexual desire. Following Paul, Augustine
 partially deconstructed the Greeks' Olympian harmonious
 soul-body dualism. Autobiographically in his *Confessions*,
 he explored humanity's broken sexuality in a much more
 fundamental way than any postmodern de-centering or
 fragmentation of the self. Augustine found its source in
 the Pauline 'dissociation of body, reason and will'. This
 leads to a disordering of our now competing loves and
 desires. Desires become demands, captive to the law of sin
 competing with the mind/conscience's recognition of the
 goodness of God's law.

According to Romans 1:20 ff. - anarchic or
 disordered, anonymous or depersonalized desire flows
 from idolatry. Idolatry means worshipping the creature,
 including sex, not the Creator. It makes good things into
 gods. As Augustine notes, the basic problem of the earthly
 city is that it does not do justice to God's worth, by
 refusing to worship him, and by sacrificing to other gods.
 One of the most powerful of these gods in Augustine's and
 our age, is clearly Eros, the god of sex.

Idolatry infects the whole person, mind and body.
 It means not thinking thankfully with our minds (1:21),
 not worshipping, honoring God with our bodies. Contrast
 Rom 12:1, 2 where we are called to present our bodies as
 'living sacrifices' and 'be transformed by the renewing of
 our minds'.

One of the insights of postmodernity is that our thinking
 is never neutral or universal, it is always determined by
 a particular vantage point. The Bible takes this insight
 deeper; post Fall, we are not so much rational creatures
 as rationalizing creatures, trying to justify ourselves and
 our idolatry (Rom 1:20:ff). Augustine saw the way the
 will drags our reason behind it more profoundly than any
 postmodern questioning of modern rationality.

Wilful idolatry or divinised desire therefore leads
 to ideology, rationalizing or justifying our wrong worship

Christians to justify sexism or homophobia.

This misuse of arguments from nature has led
 to the near rejection of creation as part of the Christian
 master-narrative or the idea of a master narrative at
 all, as justifying the mastery of some over others. Yet
 James Gustafson correctly sees Hauerwas abandoning
 the distinction between right use and abuse of nature.
 Thus 'Nature is ... of no ethical significance as a source
 of direction in Hauerwas's ethics. Hauerwas becomes a
 twentieth-century version of Marcion'. Similarly, much
 postmodern theology is now 'an Omega that has no Alpha',
 an end without a beginning. The contemporary social
 location of such views can be found among the sexually
 expressive urban elites or cosmopolitan new middle class
 who can choose who, when, and where to relate to, and
 how. Sociologist David Reisman anticipated their looking
 down on 'the provinciality of being born to a particular
 family in a particular place [and looking forward to the
 desired time] when ties based on conscious relatedness
 would replace those of blood and soil'.

Yesterday's sociology, often justifying a particular
 academic and social location, regularly becomes today's
 theology. Liberal Catholic theologian JJ McNeill is
 typical in going to the social constructionist extreme. He
 argues that "the call of the Gospel to man is not one of
 conforming passively to biological givens; rather that call
 is to transform and humanize the natural order through
 the power of love ... what it means to be a man or woman



and lust, our objectifying exercise of power against God and others. E. Michael Jones' deconstructive and idolatry detection skills uncover many examples of such modern sexual rationalization. Prominent sexual theorists such as Jung project their own parochial western, class based mores onto a universal canvas to justify their own practices, because 'everybody's doing it'. For instance, Jones cites anthropologist Derek Freeman's demolition job on Margaret Mead's trend-setting sexual anthropology. Her *Coming of Age in Samoa* justified the swinging sixties and her own lesbianism and adultery by claiming that Samoan adolescents were engaged in a wholesale process of sexual experimentation and free love. They were just pulling her leg.

The danger of ideological misreading of sexual history is shown by Bruce Thornton's *Eros: The Myth of Greek Sexuality*. This myth or ideology had its modern social location in mid 19th century English single-sex boarding schools and Oxford University around the time of Oscar Wilde. It projected its own view of homosexuality's higher love onto the ancient Greek city to provide a classical precedent for its own urbane view of homosexuality. Similarly, Foucault's claim that the Greeks were bisexuals, indiscriminately appreciating beauty wherever it may be found, is a myth.

Thornton shows that the Greeks see Eros is one of the anthropomorphic gods at creation, foundational to the cosmos and an 'inhuman force of sexual attraction'. 'Eros needs to be tamed so his potentially destructive powers, which will always exist, can be redirected to human purposes. This was accomplished in the institution of marriage and by the sexual fidelity of husband and wife' and children.

Sexuality is not the transcendent liberation many seek. People mistake the sign for the reality it signifies or points to. Instead, sexuality is a sign or sacrament of relationship with a trinitarian relational God. Sexuality and its stabilization in marriage is a sign or metaphor of God's propositioning us, God's marrying his people, in an exclusive, intimate, purifying relationship (Hosea, Eph 5:21ff, Rev 21:1, 2). Unlike modern romantic myths, this is a realistic and robust divine romance that can re-enchant cynical postmodern sexuality.

It is vital not only that romance and love be re-framed or re-stor(i)ed but that our bodily sexuality be re-narrated. We live in a society that promotes bodily hatred in order to sell products to perfect 'bad' bodies. We need to hear the New Testament story of the body condensed in 1 Corinthians 6 and connected with the corporate story of the body of Christ.

To set the scene. Corinth was an infamous seaport where sailors found a good time. In fact just as the Red Hot Chile Peppers can sing of 'Californication' so 'Corinthifornication' was a byword of the ancient world. The individualistic and over-spiritual Corinthians (some of whom had 'spiritual' marriages (1 Cor 7:1-7) thought that whatever they did with their bodily appetites is irrelevant to their soul, and so they visited prostitutes. But Paul has an earthier view of our bodily sexuality. He describes the body holistically, not as something irrelevant to the soul or

self. Paul locates the body within the story of salvation and sanctification: through Jesus' death on the cross on Good Friday 'you were bought with a price' (v. 19); through the resurrection of Jesus' body on Easter Sunday our bodies are bound to Christ's in the body of the church (v. 14-17). Through the Spirit of Pentecost 'your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit'. 'You are not your own ... So glorify God in your body' (v. 19).

There are many sexually soiled and damaged people in our society and church. In this context Paul first has bad news: 'Neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts ... will inherit the kingdom of God'. But he then boldly proclaims the good news of redemption: 'And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God' (9-11). So many of us have been stained or polluted sexually, that we need to recapture the old biblical language of cleansing to be restored.

We also need to recapture Paul's corporate view of the Christian's body as primarily a member of the body of Christ. Social anthropologists note the way the physical body is perceived through the social body, in a never-ending exchange of meanings and bodily experiences. The corporeal body is part of the corporate body of Christ, the Church, which functions as a body politic. There is no such thing as sex being a purely private thing. The personal is political. When we bed people we are representatives of the body of Christ.

This corporate view of the body and of bodily church discipline on sexual issues appears harsh to individualistic modern Christians. But the early church had no concrete signs such as the sabbath, circumcision or food laws to maintain its distinctiveness like its Jewish parent/brother. One of its primary signs or practices was its bodily discipline or heightened sexual ethic, which set it apart as a holy people, a third race. Richard M Price writes: "Modern Christians who feel that traditional Christianity attached undue importance to sexual morality and made it too restrictive need to be aware that their own lack of sympathy with the traditional discipline arises not only from sexual liberation but also from a different ecclesiology, from a lowering of boundaries between the Church and the world. The broad questions of the ... precise sense in which the Christian should be in the world but not of it, need to be ... resolved before the sexual ethic of traditional Christianity can be rightly understood and fairly judged" (from 'The Distinctiveness of Early Christian Sexual Ethics,' in *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, Thatcher and Stuart eds, 1996.)

Lesbian theologian Elizabeth Stuart only slightly exaggerates that 'No one has yet attempted to do sexual theology from an eschatological perspective'. We have responded to her challenge in locating sex in relation to the eschatological city of God. For Stuart we have become like Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection. Fundamentalist family values advocates often collapse heaven 'into the eternal nuclear family' even 'while the nuclear family itself is breaking up'.

By contrast the 19th century novelist 'Charles Kingsley thought heaven would be one perpetual

copulation in a literal, physical sense, with his wife, Fanny, and illustrated his belief'. He believed that Jesus only ruled out getting married in heaven, while earthly marriage continued. But Jesus said there would be no *marriage* in heaven, not just no marriage ceremonies.

Gay theologians like Stuart see this as part of Jesus' common questioning of the patriarchal, heterosexual family. Similarly, Michael Vasey says that modern evangelical Christianity is unaware that its "recurring anxiety over 'family issues' is a measure of how deeply it has sold its soul to the destructive idols of Western culture' - heterosexism and commodities not communities. Evangelical hostility to gays is less due to its biblical loyalty than to its idolatry. For Hauerwas also, family values is 'how Americans talk about 'blood and soil'. In fact, for many, the heterosexual family is heaven.

It is important to hear this challenge without hearing it uncritically. We do make good things like family and heterosexuality into gods, but contrary to gay theologians, that doesn't mean that they are not good, just that they are not God. Sadly, Stuart perversely pretends that the anonymous, no-name sex of many singles and gay bars and bathhouses expressive is an anticipation of our universal, unmarried relations in the city of God, rather than an expression of the anonymity of the city of Babel leading to our remaining strangers to one another even in the most intimate of acts.

A reminder for the church of the priority of God and the city of God over sex and family is the place of celibacy. Martin Luther rightly rejected a corrupted Gnostic and medieval Catholic form of celibacy and reaffirmed the created goodness of marriage and family, but he did not affirm celibacy as a sign, for some, of the kingdom's priority, even above family. Although celibacy has been scapegoated for the Catholic sexual abuse scandal, and it should be non-compulsory, its important role as an anticipation of God's kingdom should not be lost.

Paul's realistic narrative and eschatological theology is foreign to many contemporary family values advocates' quest for heaven in family and also to many sexual liberals quest for an Eden of free sexual expression. The Woodstock generation sang their anthem along with Joni Mitchell and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young: 'we are stardust, we are billion year old carbon, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden' as they romped and played naked in rain and mud, like Israel before the Golden Calf (1 Cor 10:6-8). Sex was salvation, paradise, the garden of Eden.

Theologians too can mimic a seventies romanticism about sexual liberation. James Nelson, whose books were eagerly cited by many mainline liberal sexual reports in the nineties, wrote a book entitled *Between Two Gardens*. Nelson is utterly utopian in thinking that sex now is unambiguously good, with no flaming sword blocking our way back to the garden of pure sexual delight. He highlights the idyllic romanticism of the garden in Song of Songs over the fallen garden of Eden with its tension between the innocence and ambiguity of sex. Nelson has no sense of the eschatological end of sex, no sense of the garden's goal within the city of God, and therefore no reason for sexual restraint.

So much of the liberal utopian sexual agenda sees our sexuality as our property, merely limited by the rights of others, rather than part of our person. It shows a Pelagian naivety about human nature and unfettered, neutral freedom, limitless liberty, as if each sinful act is atomistic with no long chain of after-effects. It assumes that a utopian view of the sexual body as ongoing incarnational sexual revelation, divorced from the finality of Christ's Incarnation, Cross and resurrection, plus a bit of sexual therapy and technique, will solve all our sexual problems.

Sadly, we have replaced the biblical and Augustinian city of God with the modern Enlightenment quest for the Heavenly City on earth, originally through reason, increasingly through sexual passion. As Foucault says: "*A great sexual sermon - which has had its subtle theologians and its popular voices - has swept through our societies over the last decades; it has chastised the old order [of Christian and Victorian repression] and denounced hypocrisy [which is the only thing that stands between us and shameless, cynical decadence, the compliment we pay to having some standards] and praised the rights of the immediate and real; it has made people dream of a New City.*"

People seeking this New City foolishly think of it as a god-like *creatio ex nihilo*, out of nothing, as if God did not create in the first place. Like an erratic jazz musician, they seek to culturally and sexually improvise without any created rhythm to improvise upon. Yet 'the word 'culture' comes originally from agriculture [cf. Gen 2:15]; culture is nature humanized, not abrogated'. Oliver O'Donovan in *Desire of the Nations* captures this fine biblical balance between nature and culture (social construction) in the city of God: "*It is the last word of the Gospel as it is of the NT. Itself a natural environment rather than possessing a natural environment; a city that has overcome the antinomies of nature and culture, worship and politics... a city with a Valley of Hinnom, which does not therefore have to carry within the cheapness and tawdriness that have made all other cities mean.*"

All impurity or lack of created wholeness will be cast out of the city of God. Allow me to use an imperfect analogy to illustrate. The first time I went to Times Square New York with my wife in the early 1980s, it was known aptly as Hell's Bedroom. It was full of prostitutes and intimidating pimps. We were scared and got out of there ASAP, not even going to Broadway. The second time we went, with teenage kids, was 1997. The transformation was astonishing. The city center had been cleaned up, we felt safe walking the streets at night with the children and had a wonderful time. This is a vision of what could happen if we sought seriously to transform our cities into analogues of the city of God. But to do so Christians will need to challenge the public boardrooms as well as the private bedrooms of our culture – to challenge the whole commodification of sex and persons in the light of a comprehensive vision of the city of God.

Images with this article are from 'Sex and the City : the Movie.' Images by Craig Blankenhorn / New Line Cinema.

'Sex and the City: the Movie' will be released in Australian cinemas on June 5.

Who stole the healing ministry of the church?

SENT TO HEAL: A HANDBOOK ON
CHRISTIAN HEALING
BY HAROLD TAYLOR
SPEEDWELL PRESS

AVAILABLE FROM ORDER OF ST
LUKE, UNIT 112, 100 HAROLD ST,
WANTIRNA, VIC 3152
PRICE: \$28.00

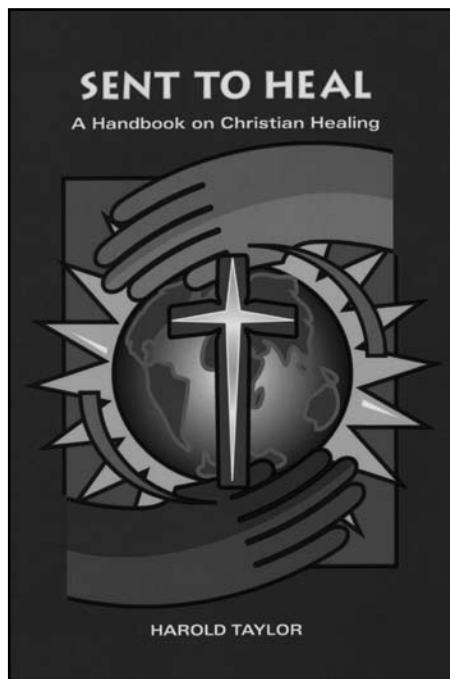
REVIEWED BY BRIAN EDGAR

There was a time, not so long ago, when many churches held healing services in addition to, or as part of, regular Sunday services. Now it seems that over the past decade or so this ministry of the church has virtually disappeared. Or at the very least it has become the preserve of some Pentecostal churches with their particular understanding of what it involves.

The loss of the healing ministry from other traditions – including the Uniting Church – means not only the loss of an important corporate activity of God's people in offering prayer for physical, emotional and spiritual healing, but also the loss of a constant public reminder to Christians and the wider community of the fact that there are dimensions of life which lie outside human control.

One wonders about the reasons behind the loss of this ministry. Does it indicate anything about the confidence of those engaged in public ministry? Is it a more general indicator of a loss of spiritual vitality? Or is it perhaps a concession to the common notion that only that which can be achieved scientifically or technologically and with measurable outcomes is of any real value?

With this in mind it is good to be able to commend the book *Sent to Heal: a*



handbook on Christian healing written by Uniting Church minister Harold Taylor. In the interests of openness I declare that he is a friend and former colleague in theological education, but that in no way alters the fact that this is one of the most comprehensive and theologically and pastorally helpful books that one could wish for. The fact that the author has been active in the healing ministry for a long time and was formerly Warden of the healing ministry known as the Order of St Luke enhances the value of the book. There are 14 chapters covering health and healing; healing in the Bible; healing in church history; different approaches to healing; sickness and suffering in the will of God; healing by many means; the prayer of faith; healing of memories; healing and medical science; healing and lifestyle; healing and alternative movements; the ministry of deliverance; what about those who are not healed?; and the wider social dimensions of healing. This is a book which deals with health and healing in the broadest possible context. It deals with both good health

News

Charitable donation helps 'ACCatalyst' magazine

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations has received a generous donation of \$30,000 from a charitable trust to support the establishment of *ACCatalyst* magazine.

The National Council of the ACC continues to explore other avenues of financial assistance to support and expand our programs and influence.

and with suffering; it covers issues related to both prayer and science; and it looks at personal and social dimensions of healing. It is a balanced book which is both biblical and pastoral in approach.

It is also a substantial book in both size (436 pages) and content. It is suitable for use as a text book as well as for individual use and group study and contains many case-studies and discussion questions. It was first published in Australia but its value has been recognised overseas and it has been revised and re-published (2007) by Speedwell Press in the USA where it has already undergone its third printing. It would be great to see comparable interest in this important ministry here. It is available locally from the Order of St Luke (Unit 112, 100 Harold St Wantirna, 3152, Ph. 98375097).

Gospel-centred hermeneutics

Continued from page 12

found online at Reformation 21.

Some book sale websites enable you to read a sample chapter from the book.

Now retired, Graeme Goldsworthy was formerly lecturer in Old Testament, biblical theology and hermeneutics at Moore Theological College, Sydney, where he still teaches part-time.

It is increasingly difficult to escape the fact that mainline Protestantism is in a state of disintegration. As attendance declines, internal divisions increase. Take, for instance, the situation of the Episcopal Church in the United States. The Episcopal Church's problem is far more theological than it is moral – a theological poverty that is truly monumental and that stands behind the moral missteps recently taken by its governing bodies.

Every denomination has its theological articles and books of theology, its liturgies and confessional statements. Nonetheless, the contents of these documents do not necessarily control what we might call the “working theology” of a church. To find the working theology of a church one must review the resolutions passed at official gatherings and listen to what clergy say Sunday by Sunday from the pulpit. One must listen to the conversations that occur at clergy gatherings – and hear the advice clergy give troubled parishioners. The working theology of a church is, in short, best determined by becoming what social anthropologists call a “participant observer.”

For 35 years, I have been such a participant observer in the Episcopal Church.

After ten years as a missionary in Uganda, I returned to this country and began graduate work in Christian Ethics with Paul Ramsey at Princeton University. Three years later I took up a post at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. Full of excitement, I listened to my first student sermon – only to be taken aback by its vacuity. The student began with the wonderful question, “What is the Christian Gospel?” But his answer, through the course of an entire sermon, was merely: “God is love. God loves us. We, therefore, ought to love one another.” I waited in vain for some word about the saving power of Christ's cross or the declaration of God's victory in Christ's resurrection. I waited in vain for a promise of the Holy Spirit. I waited in vain also for an admonition to wait patiently and faithfully for the Lord's return. I waited in vain for a

call to repentance and amendment of life in accord with the pattern of Christ's life.

The contents of the preaching I had heard for a decade from the pulpits of the Anglican Church of Uganda (and from other Christians throughout the continent of Africa) was simply not to be found. One could, of course, dismiss this instance of vacuous preaching as simply another example of the painful inadequacy of the preaching of most seminarians; but, over the years, I have heard the same sermon preached from pulpit after pulpit by experienced priests. The Episcopal sermon, at its most fulsome, begins with a statement to the effect that the Incarnation is to be understood as merely a manifestation of divine love. From this starting point, several conclusions are drawn. The first is that God is love pure and simple. Thus, one is to see in Christ's death no judgment upon the human

condition. Rather, one is to see an affirmation of creation and the persons we are. The life and death of Jesus reveal the fact that God accepts and affirms us.

From this revelation, we can draw a further conclusion: God wants us to love one another, and such love requires of us both acceptance and affirmation of the other. From this point we can derive yet another: accepting love requires a form of justice that is inclusive of all people, particularly those who in some way have been marginalized by oppressive social practice. The mission of the Church is, therefore, to see that those who have been rejected are included – for justice as inclusion defines public policy. The result is a practical equivalence between the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and a

Acceptance or redemption? Behind the battle for a ‘working theology’

The Very Rev Dr Philip Turner wrote this article in the American journal *First Things* in 2005 as a summary of the outstanding differences between the liberal theology of the wealthy West and the salvific theology of the poor and the Third World. It is reprinted here by permission of *First Things*.

The article addresses issues in America's Episcopal (Anglican) Church, but has obvious global importance in view of the divisions within the global Anglican communion, as well as within the Uniting Church in Australia.

The challenge now being put to the Episcopal Church in the United States and, by implication, to all liberal Protestantism, is not about official documents.

It is about the church's working theology.

particular form of social justice.

For those who view the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops and its General Convention from the outside, many of their recent actions may seem to represent a denial of something fundamental to the Christian way of life. But for many inside the Episcopal Church, the equation of the Gospel and social justice constitutes a primary expression of Christian truth. This isn't an ethical divide about the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. It's a theological chasm – one that separates those who hold a theology of divine *acceptance* from those who hold a theology of divine *redemption*.

Look, for example, at the increasingly common practice of inviting non-baptized persons to share in the Holy Eucharist. The invitation is given in the name of "radical hospitality." It is like having a guest at the family meal, so its advocates claim: it is a way to invite people in and evangelize.

Within the Episcopal Church, a sure test of whether an idea is gaining favour is the appearance of a question about it on the general-ordination exam. Questions on divorce and remarriage, the ordination

of women, sexual behaviour, and abortion all preceded changes in the Episcopal Church's teaching and practice. On a recent version of the exam, there appeared a question about "open communion for the non-baptized," which suggests that this is far more than a cloud on the horizon. It is, rather, a change in doctrine and practice that is fast becoming well established and perhaps should be of greater concern to the Anglican Communion's ecumenical partners than the recent changes in moral teaching and practice.

Indeed, it is important to note when examining the working theology of the Episcopal Church that changes in belief and practice within the church are not made after prolonged investigation and theological debate. Rather, they are made by "prophetic actions" that give expression to the doctrine of radical inclusion. Such actions have become common partly because they carry no cost. Since the struggle over the ordination of women, the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops has given up any attempt to act as a unified body or to discipline its membership. Within a given diocese, almost any change in belief and practice can occur without penalty.

Certain justifications are commonly named for such failure of discipline. The first is the claim of the prophet's mantle by the innovators – often

quickly followed by an assertion that the Holy Spirit Itself is doing this new thing, which need have no perceivable link to the past practice of the church. Backed by claims of prophetic and Spirit-filled insight, each diocese can then justify its action as a "local option," which is the claimed right of each diocese or parish to go its own way if there seem to be strong enough internal reasons to do so.

All of these justifications are currently being offered for the practice of open communion – which is the clearest possible signal that it is an idea whose time has come in the Episcopal Church. But the deep roots of the idea are in the doctrine of radical inclusion. Once we have reduced the significance of Christ's resurrection and downplayed holiness of life as a fundamental marker of Christian identity, the notion of radical inclusion produces the view that one need not come to the Father through the Son. Christ is *a* way, but not *the* way. The Holy Eucharist is a sign of acceptance on the part of God and God's people, and so should be open to all – the invitation unaccompanied by a call to repentance and amendment of life.

This unofficial doctrine of radical inclusion, which is now the working theology of the Episcopal Church, plays out in two directions. In respect to God, it produces a quasi-deist theology that posits a benevolent God who favours love and justice as inclusion but acts neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life after the pattern of Christ. In respect to human beings, it produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness.

The Episcopal Church's working theology is also congruent with a form of pastoral care designed to help people affirm themselves, face their difficulties, and adjust successfully to their particular circumstances. The primary (though not the sole) pastoral formation offered to the Episcopal Church's prospective clergy has for a number of years been "Clinical Pastoral Education," which takes the

form of an internship at a hospital or some other care-giving institution. The focus tends to be the expressed needs of a “client,” the attitudes and contributions of a “counsellor,” and the transference and counter-transference that define their relationship. In its early days, the supervisors of Clinical Pastoral Education were heavily influenced by the client-centred therapy of Carl Rogers, but the theoretical framework employed today varies widely. A dominant assumption in all forms, however, is that the clients have, within themselves, the answer to their perplexities and conflicts. Access to personal resources and successful adjustment are what the pastor is to seek when offering pastoral care.

There may be some merit in putting new clergy in hospital settings, but this particular form does not lend itself easily to the sort of meeting with Christ that leads to faith, forgiveness, judgment, repentance, and amendment of life. The sort of confrontation often necessary to spark such a process is decidedly frowned upon. The theological stance associated with Clinical Pastoral Education is not one of challenge but one in which God is depicted as an accepting presence – not unlike that of the therapist or pastor.

But this should not be an unexpected development. In a theology dominated by radical inclusion, terms such as “faith,” “justification,” “repentance,” and “holiness of life” seem to belong to an antique vocabulary that must be outgrown or reinterpreted. So also does the notion that the Church is a community elected by God for the particular purpose of bearing witness to the saving event of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

It is this witness that defines the great tradition of the Church, but a theology of radical inclusion must trim such robust belief. To be true to itself it can find room for only one sort of witness: inclusion of the previously excluded. God has already included everybody, and now we ought to do the same. Salvation cannot be the issue. The theology of radical inclusion,

as preached and practised within the Episcopal Church, must define the central issue as moral rather than religious, since exclusion is in the end a moral issue even for God.

We must say this clearly: The Episcopal Church’s current working theology depends upon the obliteration of God’s difficult, redemptive love in the name of a new revelation. The message, even when it comes from the mouths of its more sophisticated exponents, amounts to inclusion *without qualification*.

Thinking back over my thirty-five years in the Episcopal Church, I was distressed to realize that this new revelation is little different from the basic message communicated to me during the course of my own theological education. Fortunately, in

description of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, its richly developed Christology, and its compelling account of Christ’s call to holiness of life.

The future of Anglicanism as a communion of churches may depend upon the American Episcopal Church’s ability to find a way out of the terrible constraints forced upon it by its working theology. Much of the Anglican communion in Africa sees the problem. Can the Americans? It is not enough simply to refer to the Episcopal Church’s Book of Common Prayer and reply, “We are orthodox just like you: we affirm the two testaments as the word of God, we recite the classical creeds in our worship, we celebrate the dominical sacraments, and we hold to episcopal

For many inside the Episcopal Church, the equation of the Gospel and social justice constitutes a primary expression of Christian truth.

my case God provided an intervening event. I lived for about ten years among the Baganda, a people who dwell on the north shore of Lake Victoria. The Baganda have a proverb which, roughly translated, says, “A person who never travels always praises his own mother’s cooking.” Travel allowed me to taste something different. It was not until I had spent a long time abroad that I realized how far apart the American Episcopal Church stood from the basic content of “Nicene Christianity,” with its thick

order.” The challenge now being put to the Episcopal Church in the United States (and, by implication, to all liberal Protestantism) is not about official documents. It is about the church’s working theology – one which most Anglicans in the rest of the world no longer recognize as Christian.

Philip Turner is the former Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. He currently serves as Vice President of the Anglican Communion Institute.

The Dead Sea Scrolls: travelling proof the Bible is no fabrication

Paul Langkamp

The story of the Dead Sea Scrolls – their production, preservation, discovery, eventual publication and interpretation – from beginning to end is like the discovery of God’s revelation of himself to his creation. It’s full of stops and starts, subject to human error and fanciful scholarly interpretation, swayed by political motivation, exposed to environmental decay, and finally, for those who believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ as a fulfillment of God’s promises already revealed in the Old Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls are a source of reassurance.

At the reassuring end of this process is the travelling exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls now on show in Seoul, South Korea. Christian leaders in Korea, including Cardinal Jin Suk Jeong, recommend it.

The exhibition uses a huge exhibition room of 2600 square metres inside the vast Korea National War Memorial Museum. The exhibition is beautifully presented. Inside the entrance, visitors are confronted by photos of two Bedouin shepherds who discovered the first scrolls near the Dead Sea in 1947. They had thrown rocks into a cave to frighten out their wandering goat and heard a clay jar shatter. The jar contained scrolls that soon got into the hands of market traders and others who put a price on them. It’s a wonder the scrolls survived at all.

Exhibition visitors enter through a life-like reconstruction of a cave entrance. Inside this room, dark and illuminated by non-damaging ultraviolet light are 15 original pieces

of holy writ, mostly on animal skin parchments and papyrus and one of copper. The main feature is an 8.2 metre long scroll of the Book of Isaiah inside a heavy glass cabinet.

Of course it takes a scholar to read the old Hebrew and also to argue – as some have done – about whether there are any variations from the next most recent manuscript of the same book of Scripture. The ordinary visitor, however, might recall the words of Isaiah 2.4, in the original right there in front of them, “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks,” and consider the irony that this exhibition room was recently filled with powerful and deadly warplanes.

In the same caves, archeologists found many Old Testament-related documents including unknown stories about biblical figures such as Enoch, Abraham and Noah. One story includes an explanation of why God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. There are also prophecies by Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Daniel not found in the Bible. It is a feast of material for scholarly interpreters.

The ordinary viewer can reflect again on the long, consensual and multi-cultural process, lasting several centuries and involving terrible persecutions and, frequently, martyrdom, by which the texts of the Holy Bible were selected and other texts were rejected. For those who confess Christ, the selection of scripture was a process led by the Holy



Paul Langkamp

Spirit.

One reassuring fact about the Dead Sea Scrolls is that fragments of every book in the Old Testament were found except the book of Esther. The Bible is no fabrication by latter-day fraudsters.

Many other Jewish-related documents were found in the caves – none refer to Jesus or the early Christians. One is a community rule, supposedly for the regulation of the Essene community at Qumran which probably wrote most of the scrolls and then hid them in caves near their village before the Roman army, in 69

AD, wiped them out.

Also found in these caves were nonbiblical writings that expand on the Law, conduct in war, thanksgiving psalms and liturgical texts. There is much material about the era in which New Testament books were written. The exhibition also has a volume of exhibits on the relics of the early Christian communities as they sought to adhere to faith in Jesus in the midst of persecution.

Now, what can we - Christians who confess the truth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour - make about this? One point that requires careful diligence is about judging the text of God’s Word by using faddish and fanciful theories. This is arrogant and stupid. The Bible is God’s word. It belongs to his faithful. The church father, Tertullian warned that the scriptures belong to the church and should not be yielded to secular authorities (or faddish theories) for common abuse. It is not for scholars and interpreters whom the church pays to subject Holy Scripture to any other purpose except encouragement in the faith of God’s people.

Scholarly interpreters, like all church members according to the Uniting Church’s Basis of Union, are required to “...reflect deeply upon, and act trustingly in obedience to, his living Word.”

Surely God’s Word is continuously preserved for the daily joy of those who believe in him. That’s good news.

Paul Langkamp is a contributing writer.

Not a family movie: The History Boys

One of the intriguing developments in the movie world last year was the generally uncritical and amazingly positive reception of the film, *The History Boys*. Why? I will only make a brief mention of this M-rated film, which was made for screen following the success of the Alan Bennett play. I believe it is helpful to highlight this film, as I am aware families may be hiring the DVD to explore this purported savvy and witty story of a school and a group of bright boys coming of age.

It appears most reviewers either ignored the plainly obvious moral questions which were raised, or in some cases, belittled them by finding it all a bit of a laugh. A regular Sydney columnist, Miranda Devine, was one of the few people I could find who raised issues with the easy portrayal of pedophilia (the main male teacher has a fondness for touching the genitals of the boys when he gives them a ride home on his motor bike.)

Even the issue of the use of power by a person in authority, while raised, is poorly handled. There is also gratuitous foul language in the context of supposedly witty exploration among the boys themselves.

If this was a film with a male teacher who liked touching girls, no doubt it would have earned at least an MA if not an R rating, as well as howls of protests.

While the film has an intellectual guise, it is really a glorified teenage sex comedy dressed up with longer sentences and literary references. Do your children a favour and help them avoid this one.

License to Wed

Another film out on DVD, which I also do not want to really recommend, but comment on, is the intriguing and March 2008

somewhat disturbing comedy with Robin Williams making another crazy and caricatured role his own.

Williams plays a minister (presumably Episcopalian,) Father Frank, a somewhat blunt and somewhat rude man, but with the necessary heart of gold. While this is certainly not a great film, I wish to acknowledge the helpful focus on pre-marital counseling.

There is a solid consideration of the need to examine relationship issues and some of the sessions and role plays the characters have to undertake certainly raise critical relationship issues. He even has a contract which stipulates that the couple must refrain from having sexual intercourse until their wedding. Given that the majority of couples marrying today cohabit beforehand, I wonder how this suggestion would be received by an intended pair?

I am aware that Russell Crowe is on record as saying that he and his future wife agreed to not sleep with each other for the three months before their wedding, trying to capture the special basis and newness that their being husband and wife would bring. Having indicated the positive aspect of the film, I need to point out one aspect which gave me the chills: I hope no minister or counsellor I

know actually bugs the homes of the intended couple in order to find out how they are actually doing in terms of the pre-marriage counselling contract.

I am presently undertaking research looking at contemporary marriage in Australia, mainly the question of why people marry, and still do so in large numbers. This film is more unusual when one considers the Australian context as now fewer than half of those



Robyn Williams as Father Frank

marrying use a religious wedding celebrant. The main reason the main couple (Sadie, played by well-known singer Mandy Moore, and Ben, played by John Krasinski) in this film provide is that it is the church where she attended as a child, and Father Frank is the family minister, so who else would provide the ceremony?

Overall, the helpful question posed by this perhaps exploitative film is this: do you want a wedding or a marriage?

Peter Bentley

Wesley Institute, Sydney

A one day Conference to resource and encourage leaders of the Uniting Church in their ministry in their local congregations will be held Saturday July 19, 2008.

Cost: \$35

Venue: Wesley Institute, 5 Mary St, Drummoyne.

Electives:

Keith Garner *The social challenge of the gospel in an affluent society*, Peter Davis *Traps for leaders in ministry: How to avoid the pitfalls*, Mike Wilson *How Churches can reach different nationalities in multicultural Australia*, Louise Gospel *Ministering to people with disabilities*, Dr Cliff Powell *The pain of divorce: Helping people in relationship breakdown*, Dr Jim Harrison *The Skilful Shepherd: A biblical profile of the elder*, Grenville Kent *The Gospel and film: How Christians can engage the media in creative ways*, Jennifer Davis *Maintaining a healthy marriage*, Kit Barker *False substitutes for the gospel in contemporary preaching: Rediscovering biblical truth*.

Keynote Speaker: Dr Joe Fantin, Dallas Theological Seminary, on *The Life that Christ Brings* and *The Life that Christ Empowers*.

Further information: Rev Peter Davis peter.davis@wi.edu.au or mob. 0422 638 298

What a Bonanza!

I happened to watch a late night episode of the TV classic *Bonanza* during January, and became more intrigued than usual. The story revolved around two feuding families, who each happen to have had a member of their families fall in love, leave the town, marry and have two children.

Sadly the parents are killed in an accident and the two children are sent to the town so there can be a formal hearing by the local judge to decide their custody.

The judge initially 'orders' Ben Cartwright to look after the children while a final decision is made. He is also charged with making the long-term decision for their welfare. This is because (and the townspeople seemingly do not disagree) is that Ben is a good and Godly man who will make a wise decision. It also reflects an era where the Church was more at the centre of the community than it is today.

Ben is usually in the business of peace-making within the community and church, and he decides to hold a lunch after the church service to welcome a new minister to town. Even this is a little sticky as the feuding parties want to make sure they keep their food separate (would this ever happen in our churches?)

The sermon is preached powerfully and aptly from the sermon on the mount, and the lunch goes off well, especially because the new minister had demanded that there be no guns in church (this was still the wild west) because it was Palm Sunday, and we should "keep things peaceful".

Ben is overawed by his responsibility for the children and he seeks the counsel of the new minister (who is very much a Christ figure.) He is prompted toward the word of God, namely the familiar story in 1 Kings 3 (where Solomon discerned who was the real mother of the baby by ordering it to be cut in half,) and he also remembers the story of God speaking to Samuel.

The final part of the legal hearing has Ben asking only one question of the families (mainly to the grandparents). What will you offer the children?

One family immediately mentions

their wealth and ability to provide all the wants the children would have. The other nearly falls into the trap as well, by wanting to compete in the material sense.

Ben wants them to sincerely say they will love their enemies, and provide a home where the love of God is real and practically shown. He clearly does not want anything in return, and certainly is above corruption by bribe or reward.

Ben then proposes to divide the children, and gives the boy to the grandparents of one family and the girl to the other grandparents. On seeing the distress of the children at this division, one of the grandparents decides it is too much, and she takes 'her' child and asks them to be placed together.

The wealthier family then realises that it is the other family who are best placed to bring up the children. This action is the start of the reconciliation, as both families could now see how the 'homes' the children could have entered would have been based on hate, rather than love. They would have provided a stumbling block for the children, rather than a starting block for the eternal race.

As the minister had predicted, the children would do Ben's work for them.

Where are the Christians today in your community who are called upon by other community members to offer advice and counsel, who lead the community away from sin?

Would you be amazed if someone rang up and asked, "I know you are a member of the local church and 'a good Christian', and I would like your Godly wisdom on this matter of vital importance?" After getting over the initial shock, I would probably trip over the cat in my haste to rush out and meet this 'stranger'.

Where is the place for the man or woman of God who can make a distinct contribution in their local community today? I tend to think that one may have more opportunity in a smaller town than in the somewhat disparate suburban environments of the larger cities, but nevertheless, what could you do to help those you know have that wisdom from God that our communities are crying out for?

Peter Bentley

News

Wesley conference refreshes NSW ministry workers

Wesley Institute held a ministry workers conference at Merroo Conference Centre from 19-21 February, with some 30 ministry workers from across NSW.

Rev Alan Robinson spoke on 'The Future of the Mainline: Movement or Mausoleum?'

While survey results show a large percentage of members are over 70 years of age, the mainline UCA has a future. He encouraged us to ask ourselves 'why do people need Christ?' and 'why do they need the church?'

The conference enjoyed good biblical teaching by Dr Jim Harrison on 'The Role of Suffering in the Life of the Leader, and 'Our Ministry Calling – To Proclaim God's Word,' addressed by Rev Ian Weeks through a study of Ezekiel 1:28-3:15.

Conference organizer Rev Peter Davis, who is Lecturer in Practice of Ministry at Wesley Institute, spoke on 'Growing Emerging Preachers in the Local Congregation,' with practical suggestions for developing preachers in the local setting.

Jennifer Davis led an elective on 'The Human Fuse Box in Pastoral Care - Can we know what people are really feeling?'

Rev Dr Stephen Robinson spoke on his research into Trauma Ministry which has been published in his award winning book, "Ministry in Disaster Settings: Lessons from the Edge". He outlined how ministry workers need training to recognize trauma.

Rev Dr John Dickson – author, musician, historian and minister – led us in three sessions on 'The Historical Jesus and the Mission of the Church'.

Uniting Church leadership must reveal the figures showing where growth lies

Where do more young people go – liberal or evangelical?

The ACC's executive consultant, Peter Bentley, here concludes a three-part statistical analysis of the state of the Uniting Church. Based on the most authoritative expert sources available, it concludes that the best growth for the church, at a time of overall decline, lies in the evangelical congregations.

Parts one and two of this study were published in the September 2007 and December 2007 editions of *Catalyst*.

For statistical purposes, the National Church Life Survey is now the most important resource for the Uniting Church. Since 1991, the survey has been held every five years, among a variety of Anglican and Protestant congregations, and since 1996, the Catholic Church has been a partner.

NCLS Research is sponsored by many smaller groups and agencies, but the largest groups providing support have been the Uniting Church NSW Board of Mission, ANGLICARE (Anglican Diocese of Sydney) and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

The most recent survey was held in the second half of 2006. You may remember filling in the survey form.

When comments are made about the NCLS, you should check what statistics are being quoted, the year and for what purpose. For example, a person could quote 2001 NCLS attendance statistics in the context of commenting on Reforming Alliance and EMU statistics about people who have left the church over the sexuality issue, without fairly admitting that the RA figures in particular mainly address the situation after 2003. Therefore the use of 2001 figures is not a fair comparison. It is worrying that many leaders in the Uniting Church have ignored the obvious changes that have occurred in the last four years, and the substantiated impact on at least two hundred congregations since the start

of the present sexuality debate. Why have some leaders ignored the pain of so many UCA members?

The NCLS Occasional Paper No. 8 (referred to below) is a very important resource paper and contains interesting comparative material with other denominations. It should be widely considered, particularly



Peter Bentley

the differences in decline and change due to the age of church members, and the general remarks about the future in terms of the declining pool

of 'switchers' – people arriving from or leaving for other congregations. The NCLS material provides a very affirming and encouraging way of helping mainstream denominations consider their situation. While it notes present difficulties, it presents the view that change is still possible. This NCLS paper provides an image of the UCA position in 2001, which could be taken by some people to mean that there will be a more positive future, simply because there was a slight decrease in the decline between 1996 and 2001. In fact, the NCLS Paper No. 8 does not detail the present (2006) or beyond, though a further report will provide more detail on this information.

1. NCLS material on the Uniting Church

Will there be a more positive future?

Yes, there have been newcomers (those who arrived in last five years – no previous church), and an increase according to the NCLS for the period 1996 – 2001. What is very important is the local context. NCLS has conducted a raft of research and has identified twelve core values applicable generally (many congregations would have seen the NCLS Connections for Life reports in connection with their own congregation). I am particularly interested in specific details, like

which local churches have grown and what is their theological orientation? If one considers other data in the 1990s, such as the National Social Science Survey, it is clearly evident that the Uniting Church has failed to keep those who have grown up in it, or attract significant numbers of people under the age of 40 into a variety of congregations to make up for the numbers who have exited the church

(see the NCLS estimate of decrease: Table 4), or will exit in the next fifteen years. I believe this exit has increased in the period 1996 - 2006.

Over the last few years I have been constantly amazed at the number of evangelical members I have met, who have told me that their children have left the Uniting Church for another denomination. Many members have told me that their particular local

Uniting Church did not provide a strong message of personal faith and commitment, helping to reinforce their own convictions. Their children were attracted to other churches which presented clear faith and biblical positions, and often ended up marrying into that particular denomination, thus making the next generation more likely to also be members of that denomination.

Certainly there are still young people in the Uniting Church, but there has been little reasonable discussion about the membership basis for most young members. What the Uniting Church needs to do is make available all statistics and detail so that people can truly understand the context. Which Synods and congregations have more young people, and which have fewer? What is the theological orientation of the larger congregations with younger age profiles? I understand it is clearly evangelical, and this is the picture throughout Protestant and Anglican circles as well. While some liberal churches have some younger members, they are few in number compared to evangelical churches.

2. Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) Members and large Congregations

I believe a separate comment needs to be made about NESB congregations. It would also be helpful to have more detailed statistics on our NESB congregations, as from my experience these congregations are usually larger than the average English-speaking background congregation, and have different issues in terms of young adult retention (many are still attending as family groups, but second generation issues are appearing more significant).

Over the years when I was more formally involved in the councils of the Church (1989 – 2004), I came to understand that for some leaders in the Uniting Church, the theological and spiritual orientation of many

Table 1

NCLS	1991-1996 (%)	1996-2001 (%)
Newcomers	5	7

Table 2

NCLS	1991-1996 (%)	1996-2001 (%)
New 15-19 year old young adult retention	3 (4)*	3

Table 3

Selected NCLS data	1991-1996 (%)	1996-2001 (%)
Switchers In	8	8
Estimate Switchers Out	10	10
Estimate of Deaths	11 (10)*	12
Estimate of Drifted out	10 (11)*	7

NCLS Occasional Paper No. 8 explains the inflow and outflow model (I have summarised the terms here):

There are three Inflow measures:

* Switchers In: people arriving from other congregations in last five years

* Young Adult Retention: people aged 15 – 19 years who were attending the denomination five years ago (see Table 3).

* Newcomers: people who joined within the last five years and did not belong to a church previously (see Table 2)

There are also three Outflow measures:

* Switchers Out: People leaving for other congregations

* Deaths An estimate based on Australian Bureau of Statistics figures applied to the current age profile of the denomination

* Drift Out: An estimate of the number of people who drifted out.

* Net Attendance Change: This is the Inflow group minus the Outflow group.

For a fuller discussion and explanation of the terms used see Occasional Paper 8, 'Inflow and Outflow Between Denominations: 1991 to 2001'.

* Note: the slightly different figures recorded in brackets in Tables 2 & 3 are from the NCLS Research 1996 Survey on the NCLS website: www.ncls.org.au and referred to in chapter 7 of NCLS Publication *Build My Church*.

For the statistics in Tables 1, 2 & 3 see Occasional Paper 8, 'Inflow and Outflow between denominations: 1991 to 2001,' Sam Sterland, Ruth Powell and Keith Castle, NCLS Research, March 2006

of the larger congregations in general did not fit into what they believed the Uniting Church should promote, and while these leaders may have been pleased to keep the public impression which the overall numbers provided, they were uneasy about where the numbers reside, and they were certainly not pleased if these congregations had an active role in calling attention to the Uniting Church's deficiencies in theological direction.

3. NCLS data on Uniting Church Attendance

What does the NCLS survey mainly outline for attendance in the Uniting Church?

Significant attendance declines are now being experienced, with the NCLS recording a decrease for the Uniting Church of 22%, between the period 1991 – 2001, and a further decline between 2001 and 2006 is expected. While the full national figures are not yet available, some states may already have their statistics, and it is evident that the decline will be at least the same, if not greater than the previous periods.

Ageing and exodus

Most of the decline to date, and future decline is related to the ageing of the Uniting Church, though as I have mentioned, the exodus of members, especially younger families and long-term members in the last five years will exacerbate the situation.

In 1996 48.7% of Uniting Church members were aged 60 years or over.

In 2001 56% of Uniting Church members were aged 60 years or over.

The 2001 NCLS survey found that 36% of the membership was over 70 years, compared to 5% of Pentecostal members being over 70 years of age.

What will 2006 reveal?

NCLS has focused on the results from the 2001 Survey and the statistical base that this provides for comparison with previous surveys. The full results from the 2006 NCLS survey will be very helpful, as it will provide a fifteen year comparison.

4. Conclusion

Commentators like myself can give an opinion now, based on observation of the church in general and the different statistics available. I believe five points will become clearer in 2008

congregations with a strong sense of corporate and community life, and which did not suffer a significant split after the 2003 Assembly, will have grown, or at least remained stable. The majority of young people in the

Table 4

NCLS	Estimated attendance	Change in numbers and percent	Percentage of Census Affiliation
1991	162 830		11.7
1996	142 900	19 930 (-12.2%)	10.7
2001	126 600	16 300 (-11.4%)	10.1

Sources for references: (From NCLS published material: see - www.ncls.org.au) '2001 Church Estimates,' *NCLS Occasional Paper No 3*, John Bellamy and Keith Castle, February 2004, NCLS Research, Sydney and 'An Accurate Look at Attendance Trends in Australian Churches,' *Pointers*, June 1999, Vol 9 No 2 (from NCLS published material) and *Religion: Facts and Figures*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne 1997

and beyond:

- The future is very dim for overall congregational life in Synods which have a significant liberal orientation, like Victoria and Western Australia.
- Drifting out: this group will increase, especially among older evangelical members of the church who are currently attending a church led by a theologically liberal minister.
- The remaining group of UCA members who have been occasionally attending their local UCA church, while mainly attending another denomination, will make a formal decision that they are no longer UCA members and cease to have contact.
- The general attendance decline due to the ageing church will continue to be accentuated by the exodus of members due to ongoing issues with the sexuality debate and with any more overt liberalisation of the UCA, especially in certain Synods, like Queensland, and some Presbyteries.
- Large evangelical Uniting Church

Uniting Church will attend these congregations and thus worship within a local tradition that promotes chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.

Over this year as more figures come out I will provide an occasional update via email to ACC subscribers and, in the event of dramatic news, in *Catalyst*.

In summary, I can do no better than reiterate my earlier comments that I believe present trends indicate that the most likely churches to develop within the Uniting Church are churches with a more overt evangelical foundation.

If, however, these churches and members are increasingly alienated by more theologically liberal decision-making, then, over time, more evangelical members will leave, confounding the viability of individual congregations and the UCA as a congregationally based denomination.

I know that some people believe that the UCA will be flooded with new members when it embraces a fully liberal theology, but there is no evidence to suggest anything like this will happen – other than in someone's vivid imagination.

□

Religion Daily!

FIRST THINGS

THE JOURNAL OF RELIGION, CULTURE, AND PUBLIC LIFE

Home | First Things | Search | Subscribe | About Us | Contact Us | Store

The world of ideas just got more interesting... at least for those who visit **Firstthings.com!** Our daily essay and blog postings bring you the fresh information and commentary you're looking for. **New features** give you immediate access to *First Things'* latest issue and full past-issue archives. There's no reason to wait. Visit **Firstthings.com** and **join the lively online conversation** about religion, politics, and contemporary moral controversies.

A new look!

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar with 'FIRST THINGS THE JOURNAL OF RELIGION, CULTURE, AND PUBLIC LIFE' and a search bar. Below the navigation, there are several sections: 'From the Current Issue' featuring 'Evangelicals and the Mother of God' by Timothy George; 'From the Previous Issue' featuring 'What We Know About Embryonic Stem Cells' by Maureen L. Condic; 'On the Square Observations & Contentions' dated February 22, 2008, with the article 'The Engines That Run the World' by Richard John Neuhaus; and a 'REGISTER' form for a user name and password. There are also buttons for 'Subscribe to FIRST THINGS today!', 'Make a donation to FIRST THINGS', and 'Advertise in FIRST THINGS'.

New online subscription access!

The more cynical may say it is a small price to pay for achieving the stature of intellectual celebrity, but Francis Fukuyama took some very hard knocks after the publication of his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Some critics took the "end of history" part of the title altogether too literally and had a field day lampooning Fukuyama's chronological hubris.

The book was an expansion of a 1989 article by Fukuyama, "The End of History?" The question mark should not be overlooked. And the thesis of the book is not without nuance: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." Then came, among other things, September 11, and many could not resist the temptation to ridicule what they depicted as Fukuyama's confidence in the world's inevitable conversion to liberal democracy.

Partly in response to Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington published in 1996 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. That justly influential book argued that cultural and religious identities, rather than liberal ideology or economic-technological

Daily content!

Visit www.firstthings.com today!