

# ACC Catalyst

DAVID MILLIKAN



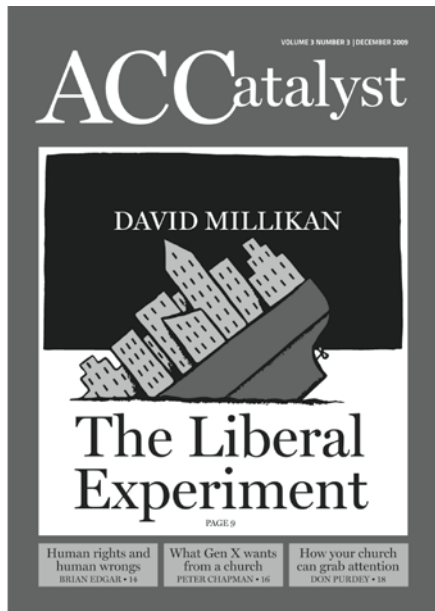
## The Liberal Experiment

PAGE 9

Human rights and  
human wrongs  
BRIAN EDGAR • 14

What Gen X wants  
from a church  
PETER CHAPMAN • 16

How your church  
can grab attention  
DON PURDEY • 18



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## EDITORIAL

# A game of Hockey

The avuncular Liberal MP from North Sydney, Joe Hockey, has told Australia that he believes in God; an avuncular sort of God.

Now Mr Hockey is more than his image, he is a serious politician and possibly a Liberal party leader one day. It is a pity that his writing about God fails to dig beneath a caricature of a tamed domesticated God.

Taking the Bible too seriously, too literally, is the reason church attendance is falling says Joe. Jed Bartlett of TV's *West Wing* is Joe's model for Biblical interpretation, arguing that regarding homosexuality as sinful requires us to stone rebellious children to be true to Leviticus. Bartlett is no Bonhoeffer, the theologian that Kevin Rudd famously wrote a major piece about.

Rudd turned up at a *Christians in the Media* conference a couple of years ago and came across to this observer as a christian.

Two responses to Hockey got him right: the SMH headline writer who summarised the Hockey speech as "God is good, but just be sure not to take Him too literally" Ouch.

And then the SMH right of reply

by Sydney's Anglican Dean Phillip Jensen that pointed to the inconvenient central truth of Christianity that Joe had left out: the Cross. Double Ouch.

Our US cousins would be amazed that here our leading left-of-centre politician, has made the running in reaching out to christians.

All of which goes to show that being a Christian in public these days is rather interesting. So it is a good time for *Catalyst* to introduce a "Public Square" column that will unleash the opinions of ACC writers looking outside the UCA. Enjoy.

It's an unashamed steal from the US magazine "*First Things*" led by Richard Neuhaus.

Now before somebody remembers the only memorable quote from a US vice-presidential debate, Democrat Lloyd Bentson's great put-down of Republican Dan Quayle "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy", our Public Square compiler Rev Dr Max Champion admits he is no Richard Neuhaus.

But this editor thinks he will give it a good run.

*John Sandeman*

Thud! There went another Christmas decoration, off the tree and across the floor with the cat chasing after it. Without a doubt, this was Rubey's favourite part of Christmas. You keep hitting the decorations with your paw until they come off. Baubles were particularly fun because they roll away, and you keep hitting them until you get bored, or they get stuck under something, then the human has to try and get them out.

However, I found that I could not be cross with Rubey, after all, I enjoy all the trimmings of Christmas, so why shouldn't my cat? In fact I found myself encouraging her, kicking a bauble to her so she could attack it and try and kill it.

Rubey knows how to enjoy Christmas. She doesn't get all stressed out about being busy or buying the right gifts or rushing about here and there.

## Rubey's Christmas

Hilary Sandeman



She just has fun.

Maybe she's got something there. After all, Christmas is about receiv-

ing a gift - a wonderful gift from God. He sent his son into the world to be our Saviour. We didn't have to earn him, there were no strings attached. God simply gave us a gift so that we could be free from sin and be God's friends forever.

Yes, it's true that the busy-ness and the stress and the expenses and difficult relatives are sometimes unavoidable. But all of us need to take time to stop worrying about all of that stuff for a moment and be grateful for the gift we have been given - and to celebrate!

Whatever our circumstances, we can still enjoy that gift, and live with its benefits.

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests!*

May we all have a truly joyful Christmas!

*Robyn*



The village of Weberek in East Timor

## Peak experience

*Earlier this year, Peak Hill village featured in a major Sunday newspaper, illustrating some of the difficulties faced by rural communities.*

*Lay Leader of ACC member congregation Koinonia Fellowship Peak Hill Geoff Steventon reports that Peak Hill's future is far brighter now.*

The problems we faced, of mine closure, unemployment and questions about our supermarket have been largely resolved.

The wind down of mining led to the demise of an engineering and fabrication business in Peak Hill which also owned the only hardware outlet in the town.

The supermarket finally changed hands after many years in the Redenbach family. Some people may remember Rev. Maurine Redenbach, who is now a retired minister in Peak Hill.

On the farming front we are expecting a moderate harvest in the district after a very promising start to the season.

Peak Hill Central School employed a chaplain in third term. Caleb has already made his mark in the school community.

Our ministry to children and youth took a further step forward in August when we started youth church once a month. Held in Koinonia Hall, it is called "Free 2 Worship". The services have drawn good numbers.

Early this year we were blessed to receive a young missionary fam-

ily from Youth With A Mission (YWAM) Tasmania. They are settled in the manse and are working with the youth group at the Westlink (AOG) church, as well as conducting prayer ministry in the district.

Jaims is a native of India, and Carolyn his wife is a local girl. They have a son Elijah (1 ½) who livens up our services.

The annual trip to East Timor in August was very eventful and challenging. But I say that every year! This year the focus was on a community health initiative in the village.

The missionary nurses encouraged every family to install a toilet. They asked us to raise the funds to provide the cement and roofing iron kit for each family.

So operation Loo Loo commenced. At the cost of \$25 each, a total of 120 toilet kits were donated.

The Australian Army group in Dili provided the transport for the tons of cement and iron.

The first task was to dig a demonstration toilet at the local pre-school. Following that each family received a kit on completion of their earthworks. Over 75 of the toilets have been constructed.

This will do a great deal towards breaking the disease cycle in the village.

If you think that you are past short term missionary work, I want to tell you that our oldest member of the team celebrated his 78th birthday on the way. He is going again next year!

## Locals take on the world

Ron Tiller reports that following his retirement from teaching, he and his wife Colleen have been volunteers at an orphanage near Phetchabun in Thailand. They are supported by our ACC affiliated congregation at Glenunga.

This orphanage is one of three run by Mercy International and has 90 children, many having lost parents through the AIDS epidemic. Our involvement with Mercy International began 10 years ago when our church in rural South Australia wanted to sponsor a child and we hosted the director of MI who introduced us to the organisation.

Lucindale UCA, a small congregation of 30, not only sponsored a child but later sent a desperately needed building team to Thailand. My annual involvement with that building team led to a clear call from God for Colleen and me to commit to two years working at the orphanage.

At the Ban Meata (House of Mercy) orphanage I have worked in a range of areas from financial administration to building supervision while Colleen has been sponsorship coordinator and teaches English to the staff and to children.

## Taking God's word to the local church

*Senior Pastor of Newtown (NSW) Mission, and ACC Member, Revd Doug Clements reports on what has become an annual mission and support ministry*

After leaving Sydney on October 28 and visiting Thailand, I arrived in Bangladesh and have now run 15 days of teaching *Leadership Bible Teaching* to 15 ex-Muslim young fresh church planters ready to go.

Our strategy is working well, with another two centres for training 15 church planters each online, and building nearly finished for two Satellite Training Centres.

New plans include correspondence training for others not able to attend, and a correspondence course based on the *Jesus* Film for inquirers, which I will design. The next course starts Dec 3-18. My health has been excellent there courtesy of Mum Water and the Lord's Guidance.



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# PUBLIC SQUARE

B Y P S E U D O - M A X I M U S

## Out of order?

I recently received a letter from the Rev. Dr. D'Arcy Wood, former President of the UCA and a member of the Assembly's Christian Unity Working Group. He was concerned about ACC setting up "shadow" committees which seemed 'like the setting up of a "denomination within a denomination."' His concern was 'heightened' by news that ACC had contacted Heads of Churches which 'have mutual acceptance of baptism' to alert them to the fact that the UCA continues to convey the impression that ecumenical relations are not seriously impaired by the failure of the Assembly to uphold orthodox teaching on sexuality.

"It seems to me," he wrote, "out of order for you or any other group within the church to cut across agreements reached with other Churches. Concerns which you may have about agreements, or indeed other policies of the Assembly or its agencies, should properly be addressed to the Assembly or the agency involved, rather than to another Church, its office-bearers or agencies."

UC leaders still don't get it! The institution is assumed to be the bearer of Christian Unity when, in fact, it is obsessed with protecting institutional conformity.

Thousands of baptised members have left the Church due to false claims by national leaders that 'nothing has changed on sexuality' and because of the failure of successive Assemblies to determine the matter doctrinally. Many of our ecumenical partners are similarly disturbed.

Despite this grave situation, and the dearth of evangelical, reformed and

orthodox teaching in the UC, the ACC still is committed to uphold classical theology in sole loyalty to Christ as affirmed in the *Basis of Union*.

It is a pity that leaders of stature, like D'Arcy Wood, seem blind to the crisis within the Church, oblivious to ecumenical concern about the fidelity of the UCA, and unwilling to consider other ways in which the fullness of the Gospel may be promoted within and beyond our Church.

## Hoax or denial?

*'Seeing through the hoax of the century'* was the heading to an article by Janet Albrechsten in *The Australian* on 4/11 p.16 in which she is critical of 'climate change hysterics' and media indifference to the complex issues surrounding global warming. She quotes Nils-Axel Morner, a leading world authority on sea levels who says that there is 'no rational basis' for dire predictions of imminent disaster for low-lying communities. Is the public, she wonders, becoming sceptical of the preachers of this 'modern day millenarianism'?

On the same day the editorial was concerned about 'stifling debate' It reported the censoring of an article by CSIRO scientist Dr. Clive Splash by the CSIRO who argued that the Federal Government's proposed emissions trading scheme (ETS) 'appears ineffective in terms of actually reducing' greenhouse gases.

Proper concern for the environment mustn't blind Christians to the dangers of moral superiority, inflated rhetoric and fanaticism, on both sides of the debate, which may distort scientific data and manipulate the political agenda.

## Abortion v love

As new legislation continues to be raised in various Australian states concerning abortion or euthanasia, Christians need to prayerfully consider what guides our personal views. If we believe unconditionally in a God of infinite love and mercy, if we believe that every person at every stage of life is made in God's image, then certain responses to abortion and euthanasia will ensue—unconditionally.

Christian bioethics is drawn from the narrative of God's action in the world, through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Abortion is not merely about weighing the merits of a mother's rights against the rights of her unborn child. It is about claiming unborn children as belonging to the Body of Christ.

Euthanasia is not merely about preserving or prolonging the life of the biological organism. The paradox is that death must ordinarily be resisted, but death at some point must also be accepted.

The Bioethics Committee of the Victorian and Tasmanian Synod, is working on publishing a comprehensive book *Abortion and Euthanasia: A Study Guide for the Church* in 2010.

Rev Ross Carter is chairperson and Dr Rosalie Hudson is secretary. Both are members of the ACC's Doctrine and Theology Commission.

## Our new culture

Trams were diverted from the Melbourne CBD on the 7th and 21st of November. The reason on the 7th was "Santa's Grand Arrival in the City", an event sponsored by the City of Melbourne. The event on the 21st was the "Myer Christmas Parade." Isn't it

strange that we are living in a time when Christianity is under attack for being irrational, but everything stops for “Santa’s Grand Arrival”? These events tell us that a culture that no longer has a moral and religious compass is a credulous culture. This is particularly true of Western culture that was shaped by a gospel that stripped the world of homely divinities in order to restore its true reality as a wonderful creature of God. But once the gospel is rejected the old worldly divinities rush back in.

## Pop tarts

In the ‘pop-media’, religious belief of almost any variety is being subjected to sustained criticism and humiliation. I say, ‘religious belief of almost any variety’, because these critics choose their targets carefully. No criticism of Islam for fear of possible violence; nor of Buddhist believers (and those of other Eastern religions) which seem to espouse a more politically correct belief system.

Some so-called ‘more informed’ critical authors, such as Christopher Hitchens’ *The God Delusion* and Richard Dawkins’ *God is Not Great*, are remarkably ill-informed when it comes to understanding the Christian faith.

In his recent book, *Atheist Delusions*, David Bentley Hart, (an Orthodox scholar) takes to task both popular and academic critics with painstaking scholarship and wit.

For example Hart says, ‘One hardly need mention the extraordinary sales achieved by Dan Brown’s “*Da Vinci Code*”, already a major film and surely the most lucrative novel ever written by a borderline illiterate’. Fiction can afford to be ridiculous but valuable criticism should arise from the truth.

Hart’s book reminds the faithful to ‘give an account for the hope that is within you’ (1 Peter 3:15).

## You say you want a revolution

Frank Furedi, Prof of Sociology at Kent University in UK, is concerned about the plight of education in Western societies (*The Weekend Australian*, Nov 7-8 *Inquirer*, p4).

He complains that “there is a casual disrespect for the content of what children are taught.” This disrespect occurs because the outlook of educationalists “is shaped by an imagination that is so overwhelmed by the

displacement of the old by the new that it often overlooks historical experience that may continue to be relevant.’

The result, he says, is that education ‘has become about the new rather than renewal.’ The churches face similar problems. Illiteracy about Scripture, theology and Church history is widespread, as is enthusiasm for new spiritualities which mock ancient beliefs and offer instant benefits. ‘Imagination’ is urgently needed. Christians should be so curious about their rich traditions that fascination with the ‘new’ will give way to lively, ongoing commitment to ‘renewal.’

Now, that’s an ‘education revolution’ to look forward to!

## Super talkfest

If history repeats itself, the the Melbourne meeting of the Parliament of the World’s Religions (PWR) will be marked by a near-silent contingent of Christians and a PR coup for Eastern religion. Commentator Bill Muehlenberg gives a good rundown of the PWR’s sad history at [billmuehlenberg.com](http://billmuehlenberg.com)

Of course we wish history does not repeat itself at the PWR. Or perhaps

we should wish that what Karl Marx wrote comes true: “History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.”

## French toast

“*Rise of French evangelicals puts secularism in a spin*” is an article by Lizzy Davis in *The Guardian* (reprinted in *The Sunday Age Nov 8...*). “According to the Evangelical Federation of France, the number of churches has risen from 800 in 1970 to more than 2200 today.

The boom made headlines when thousands of evangelicals descended on Strasbourg to turn the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth into a huge media-covered event.”

Predictably, this event has spooked a proudly unreligious nation. Hell-bent on banning religious symbols from the public square, French lawmakers insist on the superiority of secular values.

What remains to be seen is whether this new evangelical movement or its detractors are capable of forging a truly secular society – one in which the world is neither idolised nor abandoned.

*Contributors include Rosalie Hudson, Ross Carter and John Hudson*

## IAN CLARKSON

### Today’s values

Here’s a contradiction in contemporary values. A friend of mine went to the auto-teller recently and punched in his PIN for fifty dollars out. To his surprise the machine spat out five hundred dollars. But what came next was even better—the receipt against his name only registered fifty dollars. What a windfall!

But . . . then came the conflict of conscience—what a lucky break but what is right?

Well, after a second or two of emotional seismic adjustment our friend listening to conscience stirred the biggest surprise of the day—he went in and to the tellers’ astonishment reported the malfunction.

This deed with hundreds of like deeds of simple honesty of ordinary people doing right because it is right when no one is looking—is the Araldite that binds a society together with goodness, care and great strength.

As someone put it, a strong so-

ciety functions when its people are their own policemen. If not, they will need an increasing number of laws and law enforcers. If we don’t govern ourselves gently, others will do it harshly.

### Terrible contrast

As the television images of the Asian earthquakes began to break, we also saw a stark contrast of belief. It started on the Q&A panel with the international celebrity atheist Christopher Hitchens declaring the idiocy of faith in the face of such disasters. Then as tsunami-savaged Samoa prepared for its mass burial of victims, there was faith made plain. With tears of pain and Job-like perplexity in his face, a Samoan village elder gently sobbed the words, “We believe in God”. And around him were images of devout Samoans streaming to their churches. What a contrast. Comfortable, theoretical atheism against soul-searching practical belief.

# LETTERS

## The road to hell is ...

This letter puts my position in relation to the proposed amendments to the UCA constitution, including its Preamble. I apologise if this letter appears to ramble, it is simply that the proposed amendments have so many points that I wish to address. My views are that of a lay representative to Sydney Presbytery.

I believe that the issues can be condensed into the following observations: (Preamble quotes in *italic*)

*“As the Church believes God guided it into union, so it believes that God is calling it to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples from many lands, and as part of that to....”*

*“2. Through this land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning ‘sovereign’ in the languages of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial.”*

I am in agreement with the first phrase: “As the church believes God guided it into union”. This is in full agreement with 1Corinthians 1:10 (NIV) “ I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” It is clear from this passage, that God wants us all to be part of one body united in Jesus Christ. That is, all the races of the earth, united in Jesus Christ. The Aboriginal people are included in this call.

I believe that the use of the terms First and Second people tend to create an unnecessary division that Jesus is seeking to extinguish. That is, it goes against the teachings of Jesus. It is my understanding that before God, there are no first, second or third people, we are all created and treated equally.

I do agree that God created the Earth and provided the food in both plants and animals for man to sustain himself. God gave this to all mankind, not just the Aboriginals.

### Book offer

ACC has copies of *The Nation’s Guilt; An Australian Psychosis* produced by the Forum on Faith and Society in the wake of the 1994 Assembly which affirmed the covenant. It is written by the late Dr Edgar French. Dr Max Champion says “It is a splendid analysis of the situation that still confronts the church on reconciliation.” A limited number of copies are available from the ACC office for \$10.

*“3 The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers. The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.”*

“The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony.” It states clearly “the Spirit” (Is this the Holy Spirit?) revealed God through their law, custom and ceremony. My understanding of Aboriginal religion is that it is steeped in spirits residing in various places such as the Earth, the Sky, the rocks, the different animals, etc. Is the Assembly asking us to believe that the Aboriginal “Dreamtime” is an example of the Holy Spirit communicating God’s wishes? What is the Assembly’s understanding of the practice of “Pointing the Bone” or “Singing” a person to death? My personal beliefs about “Pointing the Bone” and other spiritual rituals are that they are closer to being under demonic influence rather than the Holy Spirit’s influence.

“The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.” This sentence implies that the Aboriginal religion is on the same level of spiritual and theological validity as Jesus in our Bible. Can I ask where the substantive evidence

that fully justifies this statement is? In reality, these statements relating to the revelation of God to the Aboriginal people prior to them learning about Jesus are unsubstantiated and should not be accepted as fact without full justification. I cannot believe the Assembly is saying that an Aboriginal does not have to believe in Jesus to be saved and that they are already saved, but that is the inference.

Do the people that are promoting this wording believe in the adage that “All religions are pointing to the same God”? That Muslims can believe in Allah, Hindus can believe in whatever they want, etc. That it does not really matter which religion you belong to, in the end, all roads lead to God and God will be gracious. In Exodus 20:3 & Deuteronomy 5:7 it clearly states that “You shall have no other gods before me.” But isn’t our salvation the whole reason we believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord. Is it not written in Isaiah 53:7 that Jesus will first come as a sacrificial lamb and later in Revelation 5, 6 talking about the “wrath of the Lamb” to judge all mankind. Is it not in the Lord’s Prayer, “Save us from the time of Trial”? Isn’t that why we want people to come to know Jesus as their personal Savior, to save them from the time of Trial?

*“5. Many in the uniting churches, however, shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples. They were complicit in the injustice that resulted in many of the First Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land.”*

*6. The uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied, utilised, cultivated and harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.”*

# ... paved with good intentions

*7. From the beginning of colonisation the First Peoples challenged their dispossession and the denial of their proper place in this land. In time this was taken up in the community, in the courts, in the parliaments, in the way history was recorded and told, and in the Church."*

The history of the human race is full of conquest and battles. Typically, wars are used to redefine ownership of countries. Once a country has been "defeated", the previous inhabitants lose the right of ownership to it. Do the "first" inhabitants of Britain now have a "right of claim" on England? I agree that the Aboriginal people were here before the "white man". The fact the white man came and took possession is not in dispute. Because of the way it was done, it has left the door open for an ongoing legal battle by Aboriginal people. I believe that this is currently being dealt with by our civil legal system. I believe it is not in the long term interests of the UCA to enshrine "an admission of guilt" in the Preamble to our Constitution. I believe this admission of guilt will open the door for legal claims by aboriginals for UCA property.

As I go through the detailed document, other questions arise:

- Who does it advantage to make the distinction between the First & Second Peoples in the Definitions section within Clause 3? I do not see a long term benefit in making this clear distinction. In fact, I foresee it as a wedge that will forever separate the main body of the UCA and the Aboriginal and Islander peoples of Australia. Christ calls us to be one in

unity. 1Corinthians 1:10. Anything else does not edify Christ.

*Section 49A. (d) and if the Regional Committee remains unsatisfied the Assembly may direct the Synod to make the transfer of some or all of the specific rights, powers, duties and responsibilities of a Synod or Presbytery as requested by the Regional Committee.*

- This new sub clause appears to give the Assembly the power to require the Synod or Presbytery to hand over property, rights and claims, etc. to whomever the Regional Committee wants to have them. If my understanding is correct, then the following is a valid example. If a congregation within the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) request that they have unrestricted access to a property currently used by an existing "Second People" congregation, the Regional Committee can force the current users out and give it to the UAICC congregation.

- The Assembly is proposing amendments to Clause 39 to implement a 6 month timeframe to accept a dissenting vote regarding an Assembly decision. The fine print is that there would have to be at least 50% of either Synods or Presbyteries in favour of a dissenting vote, all noted and files back to Assembly within 6 months. This is totally impractical.

- Another point I wish to make is that this new Preamble has come from "above". That is; it has come from an Assembly subcommittee. It is not a document that has originated in the normal process. In this case it has not been through the normal process

of refining with full, wise debate from the floor of the Presbytery.

- I believe the advocates of this new Preamble are well-intentioned, but unfortunately demonstrate a lack of understanding of the potentially very significant long term "ripples" that will, I believe, adversely affect the UCA for many years to come. The UCA wants to show an image of unity and inclusiveness to the world. I believe the world perception of UCA will be different.

Because of the lack of debate, and the speed of "pushing" it through the Assembly, this Preamble leaves the door open to the perception that the UCA is advocating pantheism and potentially leaving itself open to significant claims on UCA property.

That is why I prefaced this letter "The Road to hell is paved with Good Intentions".

If these amendments are passed, the UCA will never be the same again. The long term effect of these well-intentioned changes could bring about an irreparable split within the UCA.

As the option to edit the Preamble is not available, I wish to register my strong vote against this new Preamble and would respectfully ask every clear thinking member of a UCA Presbytery to vote in the same way.

1. Vote No for the acceptance of the new Preamble.

2. Vote No for acceptance of the new Clause 49A.

3. Vote No for the acceptance of the new Clause 39 (b) (i) through (iv)

Thank you for reading this letter,  
Blessings,  
David Lewinsohn



# CONFESSING MOVEMENT

## United Methodists hold the line

The United Methodist Church's highest court recently reversed a resolution, passed by a regional group, that declares the denomination is divided on the issue of homosexuality. The UMC's Judicial Council said the legislation negates the body's "clearly stated position" that homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian teaching.

One of the UMC's regional bodies, the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference had adopted a resolution, early in 2009 that the church was divided on the question of homosexuality.



**The April 2008 UMC General Conference voted to describe homosexual practice as "incompatible with Christian teaching."**  
UMNS/Mike DuBose

While the local bishop had ruled the motion did not contradict the UMC standard the Book of Discipline, the church's Judicial Council rejected his decision. This latest ruling was released at the end of October, and joins a string of decisions that has prevented the UMC from endorsing homosexuality.

In May 2009, for example, Judicial Council ruled that a clergyperson cannot perform same-sex marriages or civil unions, even if their regional church district or regional annual conference supports such rituals.

2008's General conference, a meeting similar to the UCA Assembly, rejected still another motion to delete the denomination's policy that homosexual behavior conflicts with Christian teaching. The change

appears to have been prevented this time by the votes of international delegates, particularly those from Africa, whose numbers and influence have grown because of the growth of the denomination outside of the U.S.

AT the time of the General Conference vote some progressives concluded that the international nature of the UMC made it hard to change the church's traditional stance on homosexuality, and that the best chance for change would be to change the structure so that the USA had its own Methodist church.

In 2007 worldwide membership was about 12 million: 8.0 million in the United States and Canada, and 3.5 million in Africa, Asia and Europe.

The UMC parallels the UCA experience of having Liberal and Evangelical lobby groups. But instead of becoming more progressive the UMC has held to a conservative stance on sexuality first

adopted in 1972.

Greg Dell, a UMC minister convicted in the church courts for performing a same sex ceremony told UMC.org, the denomination's news service that change is unlikely

"If we're not the last holdouts, we're going to be very close to that," Dell said, "the General Conference has moved steadily to more and more explicitly conservative positions."

"The Confessing Movement in the UMC" is the US equivalent of ACC. Its website exclaims "Great news from the Judicial Council!" They are engaged in many battles, especially against regional assemblies and officials that fail to uphold the church discipline.

But it must be said the Confessing Movement in UMC fights on better terrain than ACC in the UCA.

One key difference is that The UMC Book of Discipline still rejects homosexual ministers.

## UCA: a Lutheran perspective

*The Lutheran*, one of Australia's best religious magazines, reports that not every UCA minister will be eligible to join in joint ministry between local Lutheran and UCA congregations.

"There are four provisos .... a) the Uniting Church Minister must be male. (b) He must not be in a same-gender relationship. (c) He must publically teach baptismal regeneration, and (d) he must publically teach the bodily presence of the risen Christ in the Eucharistic bread and wine.

"[LCA Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations] chairperson Rev Jeff Silcock assured delegates [to the LCA Synod] that no Uniting Church Minister would be authorized to serve a Lutheran Congregation if he did not meet these four criteria. 'Yes there is diversity of practice and doctrine in the Uniting Church' he admitted. 'But there are also Uniting Church Ministers who do agree with us, and it is from that small pool that we will be able to draw on Pastors to serve our Lutheran people.'"

## Pope's rescue

Australia has played a key part in Pope Benedict's recent announcement of an "Ordinariate" to take in displaced Anglicans. John Hepworth of Adelaide is the Archbishop of the Traditional Anglican Communion; a group of Anglicans in exile that claims a membership of 400,000.

Hepworth led a delegation to the Vatican, two years ago that pleaded with the Pope to grant them entry as a group into the Catholic Church.

Conservative evangelical Anglicans, a much larger group will not be tempted by the Vatican offer.

The Anglican Church in Australia could be the first church to lose a diocese to the Ordinariates. In 1997 Torres Strait Islanders, angered at the amalgamation of the diocese of Carpentaria into North Queensland, which resulted in a Liberal Bishop being imposed on them, formed the Church of the Torres Strait.



# The Liberal Experiment and the Culture of Uncertainty

**P**aul knew that the struggle for the message of Christianity would not cease with his death. He said: "I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." (Acts 20:29-30) And he was right, the great creeds of the Church were the product of bitter arguments arising from arguments about the most basic issues concerning the nature of God, and salvation.

In my own Church at Balmain there is a small group of members who have asked me several times not to introduce the creeds into worship. They said to me: "Those creeds were the product of a way of theological thinking that is no longer relevant to the Church today. We are not comfortable with what they ask us to agree to." I know this is a situation that many ministers who have orthodox theological outlooks face in the Uniting Church.

The first time I preached at Balmain, three people took me to task and suggested that I should modify my words about the divinity of Jesus. One of them said: "There are some of us here who do not believe that Jesus was God you know." I said: "I think we are going to have a very interesting time together." And let me say, three years later, that is right. I don't believe I have changed their minds, but we have found a friendship and respect.

## Starting at Bondi

My first call as a minister was to Bondi Junction in Sydney. I was 45 years old, I had been Head of Religious Broadcasting at the ABC, and I was editor of *National Outlook*, a feisty independent journal of Christian commentary, with its roots in the liberal camp of Australian Catholicism. I had become something of an expert on New Religious Movements and cults and was preparing a Four Corners program on Robert Kyosaki and his group Money and You.

The announcement to the ABC staff that I was going into the church created something of a stir. To most it made no sense. Robin Williams from the Science Unit said: "What the hell are you doing Millikan? You know

there is no God... so what are you going to talk about?"

At a raucous farewell at an underground Indian karaoke bar, one of the speakers sadly announced: "David Millikan is about to disappear into a black hole." But privately a number said they had been "thinking" of going to Church for some time and said they were coming to hear me preach. As you would expect, most didn't, but some did. Over the first year of ministry, it was not uncommon to see an uncomfortable figure from the ABC sitting in Church wondering what was going on. In all cases, the experience proved too much and they never returned. It was as if they had stepped into another world.

Within the first month of taking up the job at Bondi Junction, I was approached by a fellow Uniting Church minister in a nearby parish. He said to me: "There are a few clergy in this area who have formed a group which meets every week, I was wondering if you might

be interested to come along." I asked: "What sort of group is it?" He said: "We are all fairly liberal in our theology. A few are in theologically conservative churches and appreciate the support. I think you're going to need it. Bondi Junction is very straight." We fell to talking about theology when he asked me: "What do you think about the Trinity thing?" I said: "That is one of the questions I find the most difficult. I have no idea how to reduce the philosophical impossibilities of the Trinity to language. But I'm interested why you asked me. What do you think about the divinity of Jesus?" He said: "The ascription

of divinity to Jesus was the biggest mistake the church ever made." I said: "What do you do during worship? Do you pray to Jesus?" He said: "I am very careful not to." "Do you call him Lord?" I asked: "No" he said, "I don't. How can I?" I said: "I'd love to come. This is my first Church appointment and it'd be good to discover where I'm getting it wrong." He paused for a mo



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**I consider  
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Christianity.**

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ment and said: "I had the idea that you would be pretty progressive in your theology. I get the feeling that you're not. What do you think of the divinity of Jesus?" I said: "I buy the whole thing, I'm afraid. I believe he was God, man and that he died for my sins and rose on the third day." He took a big breath and said: "Oh shit. I don't think you'll fit into our group." I'm not sure he was right about that. I would have enjoyed going to his group. But I was never invited.

## Uncertain in Canberra

Some years ago I was invited to address a parish meeting at a Uniting Church in Canberra. I was given the topic: "Communicating the Gospel to Contemporary Australia". There were about 40 people sitting in a large circle in the multipurpose church. Like most Canberra audiences, the people were engaged, attentive and generally well informed.

In the weeks before, they had run a weekend camp where the Church Council and elders along with the minister had done some serious soul-searching about the direction in which the church was moving. I understood that they wanted to consider all possibilities in terms of the way they worshipped, the message they represented to the world outside and the intellectual life of the congregation. It was for this reason they had invited me to talk about the issues associated with the communication of the Christian message in the Australia media.

After I had finished speaking, we began an interesting and wide-ranging discussion. One woman said: "I have been working beside an Indian lady for the last 3 months and I am certain she knows I'm a Christian. I can just feel that she is going to ask me about what I believe..."

She paused. I understood that she was wondering how she would be able to find the best way of doing justice to the things she believed. I said: "I've been doing that for the whole of my life and I have got to say that I still find it difficult. I'm not a believer in formula in situations like that. We have got to find our own words..."

She interrupted me: "No.... that is not what I'm asking." She looked around the room for support and I could see three or four others were with her. She continued: "Some of us here have been doing a study group for the last 6 weeks. We have had a wonderful time. But since then, I don't know what to say."

She paused. I asked: "Do you mean you can't find the words to explain the Gospel to someone else?" "No" she said: "I don't know what the Gospel is any more." Several others in the circle were nodding in agreement. I asked: "How long have you been a Christian?" She said: "Nearly 20 years." "Is this the first time this has happened to you?" "Oh, yes. I never thought I wouldn't know what I believe." I said: "Would I be right in thinking that you were studying a book by Bishop Spong?" She said: "Yes".

I found this a remarkable thing that had happened. I said: "What a wonderful opportunity for you all. There look like there are about 6 people in this room who are asking the most basic question, I think a person in the church can ask. What do I believe? I would love to be part of that discussion. Only good things can come from that sort of searching." I looked at the minister. He had a frightened pained look on his face. He was sitting with his head down, anxious to keep out of the discussion. I talked with him later and realised that the last thing he wanted was a conversation like I was suggesting. He also was unsure of what he believed. His experience in the Church had taught him that theological conversations of

this sort of searching character often led to trouble. He saw his role as a dispenser of the peace, not the umpire of a theological bun fight. There was something too painful about that prospect.

**W**e have lived through a generation of Church membership that has seen a remarkable challenge to the beliefs the church has held to be true for 2000 years. From where I watch this happening, I see an amazing loss of faith, so profound that many people are wondering what is left of the faith they held to for so long. It has made its way into the teaching of many Western Theological Colleges, it has deeply affected the preaching and pastoral life of our clergy and I believe it has created an existential crisis in the life of the Church. It has sucked out the energy of theological discussion and I also believe it has opened the door to the excesses of the Charismatic movement. People will not live long in a religious system that is devoid of enthusiasm. The Theology of Doubt which infects the life of so many Uniting Churches is not the place where that enthusiasm is likely to flourish. Indeed I believe the decline in our membership numbers is in part the consequence.

What is this theological animal that walks around our theological halls and worship places? I have chosen to answer this question in part by looking at the version of it presented in the work and teachings of the erstwhile Bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong. He is one of the most well-known and prolific sellers of books advocating this swingeing revision of Christianity. I have met him several times. I have interviewed him on TV and radio. I have debated him at Flinders University and had dinner with him and his wife. John Spong was a bishop in The Episcopal Church in the US but is now retired. In the last 20 years Spong has written many books which all tend to the same message: that unless Christianity radically rewrites what it has to say to the world it is doomed. In recent years Spong has become increasingly hostile to the mainline denominations that he regards as obscurantist, intransigent and incurably captured by conservative evangelicalism.

Spong has had a widespread influence on the theological debate within the Uniting Church in Australia. In my present church there are a small number of people who love Spong. They have had study groups focusing on his books *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* and *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. They see him as a powerful thinker. One of the first questions I was asked by the selection committee when I was "in conversation" with them about coming to Balmain as the minister about three years ago was: "What do you think of the writings of Bishop Spong?" I answered then as I do now. "I can think of no greater loss of faith than a Bishop of the Church advocating that the resurrection of Jesus did not occur or that Jesus did not die on the cross for our salvation. I consider John Spong to be the death of Christianity." That question was put to me by a formidable and highly paid criminal barrister. As you can imagine it led to a spirited series of exchanges. But despite this I was asked to be the minister and I must say that my time there has been good. God in her wondrous wisdom put us together and I am glad.

Several years ago, Spong published a set of theses in the same style as Luther. According to his good friend

Philipp Melanchthon, Luther “wrote 95 theses on indulgences and posted them on the church door of All Saints on 31 October 1517”. Spong wrote 12 theses and posted them on the Internet.

What Luther did, changed the world; I’m afraid the effect of Spong’s posting is very much more modest. Spong is destined to be assigned to one of the insignificant sidetracks of religious history. But in the meantime we live with his influence in the Uniting Church. And he gives us a door into a way of thinking which we can call the great Liberal Theological experiment.

Let’s look at Spong’s first thesis. It is this: “Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. So most theological God-talk is today meaningless. A new way to speak of God must be found.”

It is often not easy to know what Spong is saying for he has a tendency to invest common theological terms with his own, eccentric meanings. I understand what he means by theism is any way of thinking which puts God in and above the cosmos as creator and sustainer.

This is a way of talking about God that would be familiar to orthodox Christianity. That is, theism speaks about God as transcendent, personal, sovereign and interventionist. Deism espouses contrasting ideas. Deism rose in response to the seventeenth century scientific revolution, and argues that God is not personal and does not intervene in the affairs of the world. Deism is closer to the belief of New Agers who talk about God as “energy” or a “force” or “intelligence” or “the principle of love in the universe”.

Here lies one of the essential building blocks of Spong’s theology. He has a visceral philosophical squeamishness concerning divine intervention. He and his fellow Liberals believe that the scientific revolution has shifted human understanding to the point that any talk of the miraculous is offensive and meaningless to the modern ear. That may seem strange to us today, for contemporary culture is awash with talk of the miraculous. It is what gives a somewhat anachronistic sound to much of the Spong’s arguments.

While he believes he has his finger on the pulse of contemporary modern thought, he does not. He needs to watch the Oprah show, wander through a bookshop or spend an hour at the *Body Mind Spirit Festival* at Darling Harbour. The world out there seethes with miracles. This sort of talk is not meaningless; on the contrary the idea of an interventionist God is being debauched by the Charismatic movement and the New Age.

So Spong’s first thesis could be rewritten like this: “No one today can possibly believe that God does anything to affect the progress of our lives. So we have got to find a new way of talking about Her”.

No doubt he would applaud the rise of fundamentalist atheism from the likes of Hitchens, Patarki, Dawkins and Onofray. The only difference is, they don’t like any talk about religion, Spong still longs for the Church to take him seriously so he strains to find religious language in which to put his arguments.

Spong’s second thesis is a corollary of the first. “Since God can no longer be conceived in theistic terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity.” What an extraordinary statement. Is this the way Spong wishes to dismiss the entire history of Christianity? By simply declaring the last two thousand years of Christology to be bankrupt? Good grief. And yet what is left of the incarnation if Spong cannot bring himself to believe that God enters human history? What I find astonishing is the cavalier

way in which Spong dismisses the experience of millions of Christians who claim to be in a relationship with the risen Christ.

The same is true of the clergy who follow Spong in the Uniting Church.



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## Ultimately evangelical truth will prevail and the liberal experiment will wither away.

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With breathtaking ease they sweep away the entire history of deliberation that lead to the creeds and foundational documents of the Churches. What Spong is saying is this: “I John Shelby Spong, best selling author and popular radical don’t believe that Jesus was God. In fact most people today find it ridiculous so the problem is yours.” Well I’m sorry. We are here along with many millions of Christians around the world to say the problem is yours John.

Spong’s third thesis is this: “The biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.”

This may be a peculiar issue that plays on Spong’s mind.

I am not sure how widely his thoughts on this are shared by other advocates of the Liberal Experiment. The problem he states is this: If you remove an interventionist God from the cosmos, then everything in Christianity changes including the definition of evil.

Every religion needs to account for the persistence of violence and evil in human history. That is what religion is about. Religions must provide a philosophical framework which allows us to answer the big questions such as: “Why is there suffering in the world?” “Why do the innocent suffer?” “Why do I find it impossible to avoid compromise with what I understand to be good?” Christianity provides a means to answer these questions contained in what we call the doctrine of sin. It is one of the most important contributions we have to make to the current world debate.

What we Christians say about human moral responsibility is different from the explanation you find in Hinduism or Buddhism. Take the subtle but vital differences between the Koran and the Bible’s treatment of the Adam and Eve story. The Bible holds Adam and Eve morally responsible. The Koran lays the responsibility on the serpent. These are not insignificant differences. The Bible tends to encourage a culture of guilt and the Koran encourages a culture of blame. Spong flounders when he gets down to the nitty gritty of the issue of evil.

And what assurance is there that the essential nature of the cosmos is good? Spong has taken us back into the ambiguities of neo-Platonism that pits the spirit against the flesh. There is no space in his theology for the idea that Jesus came to save not just the spirit but also the flesh. After all we believe in the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul.

Theses four and five I will deal with together. Thesis four states: “The virgin birth, understood as literal biol

ogy, makes Christ's divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible." Thesis five takes us to one of the distinctive foundations of the Liberal cosmology: the *a priori* rejection of miracles. Spong: "The miracle stories of the New Testament can no longer be interpreted in a post-Newtonian world as supernatural events performed by an incarnate deity."

It is statements like this that make it so hard to understand the continuing popularity of Spong. He claims to speak for contemporary culture but neither understands it nor gets it right. To say that post-Newtonian physics is relentlessly deterministic or mechanistic either means that Spong is unaccountably ignorant of the work of Polkinghorne, Paul Davies etc... or he is simply denying what he knows to be true.

**T**o believe what Spong is saying is to rob prayer of its vitality. The prayers that matter most in our lives are always enlivened by the hope that God hears us, loves us, and has an interest in the progress of our lives. This is particularly important in the life of clergy. We come closest to people when they are either in times of extraordinary joy, sorrow or anxiety. What do we have to give when people are in pain or facing sickness or death?

We have our friendship, the assurances and understandings of the Gospel, and we have prayer. It is in prayer often that people find the sense of rest or assurance that eludes them in all the talk. At these moments people instinctively go to God as the one who is their final refuge. How terrible to have to say to them: "I need to tell you that God does not participate in the world. There is no point in asking him to care for your wife, or your baby."

This I fear is what Spong is asking us to do. The trouble is, most of the Liberal clergy I know, cannot bring themselves to do it. So they lead a double life. They use the traditional and transcendental language of their parishioners but they don't believe it. People are not fools. They know when their pastor is playing that sort of game.

Spong has made a tragic mistake; history is not the enemy of faith and reason. Faith and reason are given confirmation and direction through history. Faith is lost when confidence in the life of Jesus is compromised. Faith is shaped and allowed freedom through its relationship with Christ.

The ultimate tragedy of Spong's position is that he has made Jesus a creation of his own spiritual yearnings. The Jesus Spong talks about looks like him. Questing, hungry for intimacy with the divine, mystically bewitched but still elusive. This is true of Marcus Borg, and Robert Funk and Dominic Crossen who share many of Spong's liberal presuppositions: they have each created a Jesus that looks like themselves. One painted Jesus as a peripatetic mystic, another casts him as revolutionary rabbi and other has Jesus as the eccentric outsider like Passarelli's Jesus.

Spong has so little of the flesh and blood Jesus left, that he is almost transparent.

In the end it means that Spong and the rest have created another tyranny of scholarship in the life of the Church.

Most Churchgoers trust the judgment of their denomination and come to the Scriptures with the confidence that it is true. That is one of the benefits of membership

in our church. It is why we educate our clergy. It is why we have a Commission on Doctrine. We care about the content of what we believe. We strive to provide a secure framework in which those who are members can rest in the confidence that the best of our thinkers and preachers and theologians believe that they are co-operating with the Holy Spirit in providing us with an understanding of the Scriptures. It puts us under Scripture rather than putting us in judgment over Scripture deciding what we can accept and what we do not.

How does a believer remain within that posture when we are told that most of the stories about Jesus are not to be believed? How do you make sense of the Church's teaching about salvation if the resurrection of Jesus is at best a metaphor and at worst the misguided invention of the early Christians? How do we read Paul when his theological framework is described as barbaric or primitive or simply wrong? It is not as if the things we cannot trust are at the edges of the Biblical Message: they go to the heart of what it is saying.



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## For most believers this raises the question: "What can I trust?"

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For most believers this raises the question: "What can I trust?" It is not a question that the average believer is able to answer, and Spong does not give them much guidance. In the end they are thrown back onto the judgment of Spong himself.

When Augustine looked back at his early years with the Manichees he said: "They were more adept at deriding and ridiculing the beliefs of Catho-

lics than they were in offering convincing arguments for their own teachings".

I say the same of Spong. He has become what he calls himself, an angry exile. Away from the influence of his curmudgeonly mutterings, far from the university debates and dinner party discussions of the West, the gospel is flourishing.

We in the Uniting Church must liberate ourselves from this debilitating theological burden. I am not suggesting that we engage in a heresy witch hunt. There is a terrible tendency in the Church to turn the battle for theology into vilification and the destruction of personalities. I will not be a party to it. This is about ideas and the place to do that is out in the open, within the clear light of public scrutiny.

Ultimately the evangelical truth will prevail and the great liberal experiment will wither away. In fact it is already happening. Spong's star is on the wane. But the ideas he holds dear still infect theological conversation in our churches.

We need to respond with some humility for we must admit that in part we bear responsibility for the way this theological aberration has flourished. We were intellectually lazy, and too often retreated into a defensive fundamentalism.

For the sake of the unity of the Church we cannot afford this, after all we seek to persuade not destroy. These are our brothers and sisters who love the Church as we do. But it is time to put an end to this terrible uncertainty and have a hard and deep discussion on where we stand on these matters. After all, the Gospel is at stake.

# How guilt and injustice stain our history

Chris Budden, *Following Jesus in invaded space: Doing theology on Aboriginal Land.*  
Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 2009  
Reviewed by Warren Clarnette

**A**s titles go, this one is honest and informative. Readers who believe Australia's convivial disposition is founded on a huge injustice will warm to the word 'invasion'. Others will be put off and are unlikely to read on, which would be a pity. Uniting Church members need this book if only because it explains the radical new Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church.

Presbytery and Synod members are required to endorse or reject the Preamble next year. They will not vote intelligently if they have not read Budden's thesis. They need to know what 'invaded space' signifies not only for 'following Jesus', but for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Congress and the Assembly standing committee. This monograph does it better than any official explanation could manage.

To call the new Preamble a Trojan horse inside the Uniting Church would be a mite fanciful. But Budden exposes the agenda behind the kind of denomination it presages: a church of irreducible guilt, lingering resentments and bad faith based on a false reading of history. That is the message of the book and the Preamble.

The bottom line of both is that church members may say sorry until the cows come home, but they cannot expunge the stain of an invasion they did not commit. Nor can Aboriginal Christians forget the loss of the country they did not own, in any meaningful contemporary sense. This contradicts the radical vision of Paul when he states that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek .. slave nor free .. male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28).

According to Budden, today's Christians are beneficiaries of our continent's abundance and complicit in the theft of a sovereign nation. He makes the familiar blunder of using contemporary ethical and anthropological norms to castigate 18th and 19th century settlers, whom he paints as a genocidal occupying force. Modern Australia is therefore the product of crime, for which Christians should be deeply and permanently penitent.

These gloomy themes, founded on a jaundiced view of contemporary Australia, raise important questions about reconciliation (a word with many different meanings), and the nature of covenant relationships. The latter question hardly worries mainstream society, but it seems to trouble

Aboriginal Australians inside and outside the churches.

For these reasons Budden deserves a careful hearing as he speaks for a truly victimised people. The word has two connotations that he does not mention. The 'first peoples' had their way of life abruptly dislocated after 1788, never to be the same again. They were victims who did nothing to provoke the first fleet to land on our shores and take possession of what lay before them. In another sense the 'first peoples' have been victimised by decades of well-meaning but misguided policies, resulting in the victimhood that stultifies the lives of many aboriginal people. White policy-making and black compliance are at fault in the process.

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**In challenging the church to put things right, he asks for the impossible.**

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The prospects of the Uniting Church taking up Budden's challenge are not promising. Budden accepts that 'second peoples' find it hard to enter into dialogue with 'first peoples' because, among other things, they do not appreciate Aboriginal sensitivities. A greater problem is that the vast

majority of church members have no contact with aboriginal Christians. So it is a pipe dream to suggest (as the Preamble does) that the primary responsibility of the church is to bridge the gap between 'first' and 'second' peoples.

What does the author mean by 'the church'? If he means the institution represented by Assemblies, Synods and Presbyteries, these bodies can make whatever priorities they like. If he means the body of congregational members, they have other more immediate concerns. And what does the author mean by the 'first peoples'? They cover a multitude of groups and cultures, not to mention mixed-race backgrounds and widely divergent attitudes to mainstream Australia. They never speak with one voice.

The diatribe implied in the Preamble, and this book, does justice neither to the situation of all aboriginal Australians nor to the historic truths of European settlement. Since other responsibilities than the aboriginal agenda take precedence for most Uniting congregations, the onus is on 'first' people to disregard both the stigma and the status of their present victimhood. That is their challenge, and only they can meet it.

Obviously Budden thinks otherwise. In challenging the church to put things right, he asks for the impossible.

# Human rights and *The church's dilemma*

**I**n recent times the concept of human rights has become very important. It is now very common for people to seek to resolve everything from the most serious to the most trivial issues via the concept of human rights. The central point of human rights – and the reason people are keen to define concepts as ‘rights’ – is that they are attributed a status as high priority convictions which trump other laws.

The issues seen as rights are as diverse as religious liberty; torture; the use of landmines; the right to self-determination; corporal punishment; dowries; the Northern Territory intervention; gay marriage; vilification laws; single sex private clubs; construction industry unionists; bikie gangs; access to justice; children and young people's rights; disability discrimination; asylum rights; the rights of family and friends of alleged terrorists. Consequently, the first problem is deciding exactly what is meant by ‘human rights’!

The concept of universal human rights is not static. ‘Human rights’ as they are generally understood and discussed today are the rights of lawyers and lawmakers and not so much the rights of theologians and philosophers. The concept has shifted from the 18th century biblically grounded and philosophically expressed rights expressed in general principles (as found in the US and French Declarations of Rights) towards ever more detailed and legislated rights.

Historically speaking, Christian theology has contributed hugely to the notion of human rights, and still has more to offer. I suggest that the church should be involved in the following six activities concerning human rights.

**1 Preserving the foundation of human rights:** Human rights need to have a theological (philosophical) foundation. It is doubtful that any purely secular theory of rights can satisfactorily demonstrate why particular human rights ought to exist. This is not to say that there cannot be a purely pragmatic reason given or that a set of rights cannot be developed simply by consensus. The loss of a substantial foundation exposes human rights to a process of deterioration. Trinitarian theology is intimately connected with social human rights. God is the source of all good and the concept of rights arises from the reality of the creation of humanity in the divine image.

**2 Developing the theology of human rights:** although we can say that rights derive from Trinitarian theology the Christian focus is really upon human

responsibilities directed towards God. But in modern statements these states of responsibility are expressed as basic rights of individuals. To say that a person has certain rights is only possible because we understand that God holds others responsible for them. Talk of rights apart from both responsibilities and relationships is not really adequate. We need to consider the possibility of Christians and the gospel helping society go beyond the concept of human rights into a new way of thinking.

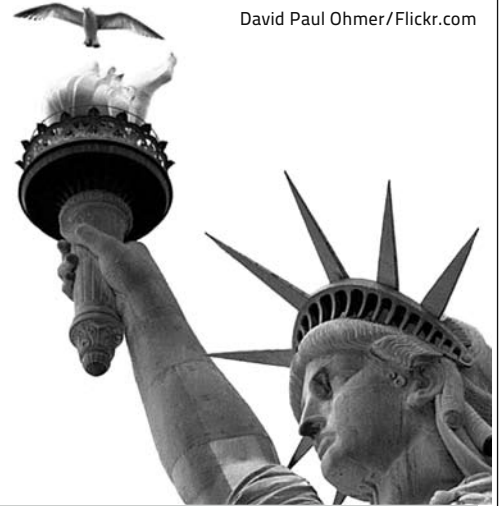
**3 Strengthening the practice of supporting human rights:** It is precisely because of this strong theological foundation that Christians work for human rights. These fundamental gospel rights work their way out into other rights. This extended liberty is such that not only do Christians have freedom of conscience but so do Muslims, bikies, trade unionists and even terrorists. Human rights from a Christian perspective is not just about ourselves, or defending the church. It is about defending freedom of conscience for all people – and this is a gospel issue because God is not a God of compulsion. Liberty derives from gospel of grace.

One dilemma here is helping people understand that defending freedom of conscience/religion is not mere self-interest but something which is at the heart of human rights for everyone.

**4 Defining fundamental concepts:** the issue of human rights actually raises important issues relating to the way that we understand what it means to be a ‘secular’ society. There are some ‘strong secularists’ who want to enforce secularism – as distinct from maintaining the neutrality of a genuinely secular society.

For example, it is argued that every group will have an essential core and a non-essential periphery so that a school, say, has no right to define the spiritual characteristics or the communal role of a gardener or receptionist and there will be no places – even private clubs or associations – where men and women can meet exclusively. This is social engineering and not the protection of human rights.

**5 Extending the moral language:** Rights is the language of law and just as to a man with a hammer everything is a nail, so to a person with a law degree or a political position everything seems to be in need of a law. But an emphasis on a rights-based morality to the exclusion of other vocabularies will undermine understanding of public good, partly because of the perception of individual self-determination as the universal good. The language of rights is unsuited to express the goods



# wrongs

of many parts of community life (including marriage, sexual fidelity, the bonds and duties of family life and parental care). The dilemma here relates to the way we can help society develop a larger repertoire of moral social vocabulary including: virtue, responsibility, love, altruism and duty. The problem here is that some of these don't sound very good to those who have adopted the underlying Enlightenment view of the person as an autonomous independent being.

**6 Testing and protecting rights:** there is a dilemma in helping society identify genuine specific rights for all people (including, at times the 'right' to be wrong and rebellious—even, at times, sinful!) while seeking the good of society with behaviour which is God-directed.

In seeking this end Christians can be seen as taking one of two approaches. One approach is to argue for specific rights (eg concerning human dignity, freedom,, gender equality, family, association, welfare etc) on the basis that they are specifically Christian. The second approach focuses on defending the foundation of rights – including the freedom to be wrong – which may mean defending rights that are not 'Christian' (the right to be Muslim, atheist, sexually immoral from a Christian point of view) but the principles which allow for this foundation are Christian (involving grace and non-compulsion).

These two approaches are not fundamentally contradictory although, at times, they create conflicts on particular issues. The problems of particular conflicts are simply inevitable expressions of the fundamental difficulty of determining how to live in a world where the kingdom of God is both 'present' and 'not-yet'.

When one argues for specific Christian values it strengthens the moral state of society, but there is a danger of over-identifying church and state and trying to implement too much Christian legislation to 'make' people good, and also a danger in not offering to others the liberty which we expect for ourselves.

Those who argue, from a Christian perspective, for the libertarian foundation of society are defending the genuinely secular (not irreligious) nature of society and the grace of the gospel. The danger here is of allowing a re-definition of justice to mean 'letting people do whatever they want' and a danger of supporting the same moral vacuum which underlies secularism.

Christians are called by Christ to protect human rights as an expression of our responsibility to God, which arises from our covenant relationship with Jesus Christ.

*Rev'd Dr Brian Edgar is the Convenor of the ACC Social Responsibility Commission*

## Ross Carter: The case for a human rights act

The Rudd Government has established a process to decide whether Australia should legislate to protect human rights. The vehicle for such protection, some groups propose, could be a Human Rights Act.

Those advocating for such a bill claim it is necessary to legislate to protect human rights as defined by United Nations covenants because, in recent years, basic rights set out in these covenants have been breached by the Australian Government. Cases cited are the mandatory detention of children of asylum seekers and the treatment of indigenous peoples.

It is also claimed that individual human rights are infringed when a Church School, for example, may not want to employ an atheist teacher, or, to give another example, a person living in a de facto relationship. This too brief account of the reasons advanced for a Human Rights Act invites a couple of observations. The first is that the case for a Human Rights Act seems predicated on a view of society in which the individual is ultimately under threat from every other individual as that person seeks to maximise their well-being, and certainly the rights of the individual are thought to be menaced by the totalitarian tendencies of governments and other public institutions.

And there is truth in this perception because we live in a society whose citizens, on the whole, do not think of themselves as being claimed by notions of the good, of right and wrong, that are independent of their individual desires or choices. What used to be felt as a sense of having a duty for the wellbeing of others seems to be absent in our society.

My second observation is that in such a social environment what rights are to be enumerated in a Human Rights Act is a matter for debate. Clearly the rights claimed by every individual or group cannot be included. My own view is that an Act should limit itself to the basic rights set out in the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

I am, therefore, inclined to the view that in a culture which no longer understands the good as a kind of moral furniture present in things, and towards which people are no longer believed to be naturally orientated, then we do need a Human Rights Act that sets forth some explicit boundaries in order to lay a foundation upon which those most in need of society's respect and assistance may stake their claim.

# ‘My job is to protect young families from the dysfunctional Uniting Church structures’

**M**y generation, and the one following mine into adulthood – Gen Y, are post-denominational. We have never known Methodism or Congregationalism – we have grown up in the Uniting Church. In general terms, we don’t know or care for the particular traditions of one denomination or another. And if you’re like me (which most of us are) and grew up in mainly a contemporary worship format, you don’t know the hymns. The CD player in the car is our hymnal.

When it comes time to choose hymns for our 9 am traditional service at Gerringong I look up what others have suggested on the web, and ring my organist to confirm if they’re well known or not. It is like learning another language.

I sometimes tell people that ministering to both a traditional service and a contemporary one is like ministering to two different churches. There is a feeling of having to straddle a great divide when it comes to knowing both the traditions of the church.

When push comes to shove, most of us really don’t care about the logo on the front door. It’s just a brand name, a label, disposable packaging. And it is irrelevant.

We just call ourselves ‘Christian’, pure and simple. Although, even that word has lots of unhelpful baggage these days, and I therefore avoid it when I am describing my faith to someone.

I tend to simply say I am a follower of Jesus. The reason is that Jesus himself still has street-cred, but the church has all sorts of negative connotations for people.

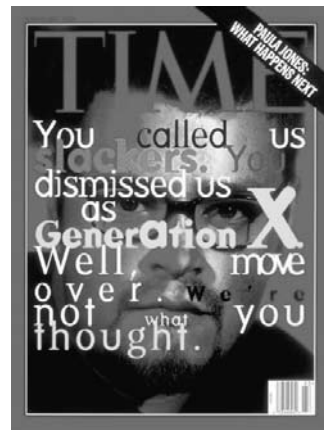
Getting back to the post-denominational nature of my generation, we have to realise it’s a church supermarket out there. There are hundreds of brands to choose from, and not a huge amount of brand loyalty.

If you move to another suburb or town and you find a home at the same flavour church as before, that’s well and good, but rarely will young people let it be a deal-breaker if the community of faith they find they’re at home at does not have the same badge on the front as their last church.

In some ways that’s just as well for the Uniting Church that denominationalism is all but dead among the youth of today – if they were concerned about it they wouldn’t often darken our doors.

Sometimes I think it’s people’s willingness to overlook the denominational stuff that’s keeping us in the game.

This random post-denominationalism provides one of the greatest challenges we face in reaching young adults



today. Among young adults today there is a tendency to reduce church to the same level as our mobile phone contract or our internet contract.

Even among committed evangelical Christians, church is often seen as another service provider offering a product to be consumed at the discretion of the consumer. Churches have to compete not only among themselves for pre-

precious market share, but with other organisations offering other services that people might want to consume to make them feel whole/well/happy/content.

Church is there to meet my needs, on my terms, when and how I want it. We have imported the consumer mindset to church. Church is all about me; getting what I want out of it. There is a lack of commitment to come to church with a mindset of what can I give, rather than what can I get.

Another consequence of Generation-X's post-denominational nature is that because we don't particularly care for denominations, we are not going to spend our precious time and energy in propping them up. We are not going to prop-up dying institutions. We don't go in for committee meetings. We don't care for quorums or constitutions.

This of course is an issue for any membership-based organisation – they are all struggling – just as the scouts, the unions, the clubs etc. Membership-based bodies struggle to appeal to my generation. Getting young adults or young mums and dads even to take out formal membership is a challenge, let alone getting them to serve on Church Council.

And I can't imagine even my most committed young mums and dads going to Presbytery or Synod. To be honest with you, I'm not going to ask them to.

They would be totally demoralised by our church meetings. In some respects, my job is to protect my young families from the inefficient, irrelevant, dysfunctional, labyrinthine Uniting Church structures.

This is part, I believe, of the increasing Pentecostal influence on the church – people don't expect and don't particularly want to have a say in running the church – that's what the pastor does, and we come along if we like it. If not, sadly they'll just go elsewhere.

*Part 2 of a series of three. . Part three will appear in next*



## Telling the truth with integrity

### HEDLEY FIHAKI on when sin is sin

On the 28th September 2009, Dan Taumoepeau, a member of the ACC-Tonga sent out a powerpoint presentation regarding the ACC to many of the Tongan ministers within the UCA as well as to a wider group of people within the Tongan National Conference (TNC).

There were immediate responses to this email asking why a powerpoint about the ACC was being sent out to a wider audience outside the ACC. Some ministers questioned the appropriateness of doing this and tried to discredit the work of the ACC by saying that it is not a recognised council of the UCA.

Others pointed out that the TNC had already clearly stated its position regarding sexuality and leadership.

Some suggested that the ACC was a divisive and schismatic group; one person said that he cannot possibly see anything good or new coming out of the ACC for the Tongan people.

When we discussed the issue of sexuality and leadership, it was clear that homosexuality (*fakasotoma*) for Tongan people was clearly a sin.

What some were questioning was whether or not the UCA had actually made a decision regarding this matter.

One minister clearly stated early on in our discussions that if the UCA had already made a decision regarding the ordination of ministers living in same gender relationships, then, there was no doubt in his mind that we should move out of the UCA and move to a place/space where same gender relationships were still considered a sin.

As a result of this comment I spent some time trying to explain that R84 and R108 were the actual decisions that endorsed not only a diversity of views regarding sexuality, but in reality endorsed a diversity of theologies, even if they are mutually exclusive. That is, even if these theologies are in conflict or opposed to one another, what is important is not the truth of the matter, but that we “live together in peace as people of faith

notwithstanding differing views in the matter of same gender relationships” as R84 itself puts it. This I believe is hypocrisy to give ‘mutual’ and equal standing and authority to two ‘exclusive’ or different & conflicting positions.

The issue of the New Faith by Dr. Francis Macnab was used to highlight this new reality or this new ruling theology of “diversity” within the UCA. I was pleased that the ex-moderator of the Synod of Victoria, Rev. Jason Kioa, was a part of these e-discussions.

After sharing with the e-group my response that appeared in ACCcatalyst (October 09) regarding Rev. Jason Kioa and Dr. Sandy Yule’s report to the Standing Committee of the Synod of Vic/Tas regarding this matter, Jason responded to me by saying, that my response to their report suggested that he and Sandy were ‘lying’. The following is an edited part of my response to Jason regarding the issue of ‘lying’ and integrity as a whole.

26th October 2009

Dear Jason

*Tapu mo koe tangata'eiki faifekau (with all due respects to you)...*

*I believe my personal comments are secondary to the “facts” that are already before us.*

*That is:*

*1. If Dr. Macnab’s public lectures and sermons reveal that he does NOT believe (and thus does not preach and teach) that Jesus is the Son of God, and*

*2. If Prof. Mostert (Synod of Vic/Tas) himself has already made a public statement confirming this fact, that his teachings ‘fall well short’ and is a ‘serious under-statement of the church’s belief in God’;*

*3. and if the report that Dr. Yule and yourself wrote does not in any way point to these facts, then,*

*4. the only logical conclusion is, that there is something wrong somewhere. That is, if Prof. Mostert has clearly articulated that there is definitely something wrong with Dr. Macnab’s teachings and your report fails to recognise this truth, then it means that your report, as I have said, is ‘NOT accurate’.*

*a. The fact also that I have also spoken to you personally regarding this matter and that you also made it clear to me that Macnab is clearly working outside the faith of the church and that he is clearly dancing around the issues,*

*b. this, together with the fact that you agreed to support a formal proposal to go to the 12th Assembly regarding this matter and the discipline of ministers,*

*c. these things, together (as a whole) highlight for me, that [in] your report ... you have avoided everything that you have already personally confessed regarding the truth of the matter, i.e. that Dr. Macnab is in fact working outside the faith/doctrine of the UCA....*

Out of these e-discussions a number of people have sent in emails thanking me for making the situation clearer for them regarding what is happening within the UCA.

It is very evident from my perspective that many of our people have not been properly informed of what is going on in the church.

Sadly the reason for this is that it is our own Tongan ministers within the UCA who are preventing information from flowing to the grass roots, as well as painting a very negative picture of the ACC based on hearsay or gossip, rather than on any factual information.

I was very happy that I was given an opportunity to be in Sydney a couple of weeks ago (17th November 2009) to meet with the ACC-Tonga movement and to discuss possible ways to move forward from here.

There is a renewed sense of passion for the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and we look forward to what God has in store in the new year and for the years to come. May God continue to give us strength, wisdom and JOY as we continue to Confess the Truth of who God is for us in Jesus the Christ.

*Rev. Dr. Hedley Fihaki is Deputy Chair of the ACC and Minister: Cairns Emmanuel UCA*

# LOCAL CHURCH

## Small Church evangelism

DON PURDEY distills what he has learnt on the joy and struggle of mission.

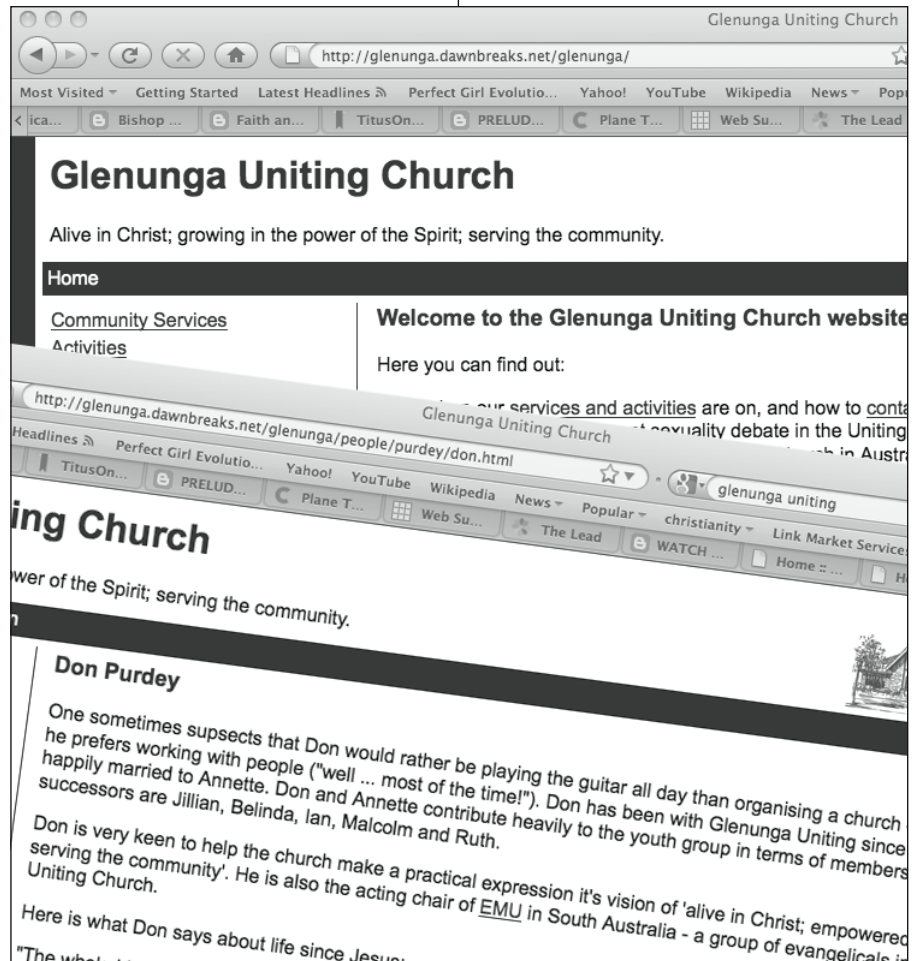
In the two earlier articles in this series, I introduced you to Glenunga Church – a small suburban congregation in Adelaide SA seeking to grow its mission and ministry. It's been a struggle. But we're convinced our doors would have closed some time ago without the efforts we have made at small church evangelism.

So these articles are written to share with you the nine key lessons that we've learnt as we seek to build the Kingdom. The first three were to Pray, to Make Evangelism a Priority, and to Take an Attitude Check. In the second article we went deeper into the process, and our lessons were to Research, to Make a Plan, and to Brainstorm for Ideas. In this last article, we look at some key lessons as you continue to work through your outreach plan.

### 7. Communicate.

Communication is crucial to success in outreach, and you need to communicate constantly in two directions. First, you need to constantly remind your own people of what you're doing and why, encouraging them to participate wherever possible. Involve the whole church. Help everyone to "own" the mission. Preach it. Live it.

And of course you need to communicate with your community. When I did part of our door knock research, I spoke to a man who lived in the same street as our church, and when I introduced myself as being "from the church up the street" his response was, "What church?" He drove past it every day for three years and didn't even notice it was there. We can't ever assume that people in the community take note of us or what we do, unless we go out of our way to bring ourselves to their atten-



tion – to speak their language.

But how, you ask? It sure is a challenge, but there are ways. We have used quite a number over the years. We have a street sign which alternates its messages between pithy, noticeable quotes and one-liners, and promotions for events at the church. We also put banners outside for special events. Banners change the look of your property and attract attention. We letterbox our area three or four times a year – at Christmas, Easter (times when visitors are more inclined to come) and at other times when we have specific activities to invite people to. We also use the local newspaper, and maybe you have access to community radio or even TV. Posters in shop windows, the local library and other helpful (legal!) locations are also good – but don't forget to take them down afterward.

Do they work, you ask? My an-

swer is this: yes, we have had direct response to letterboxing and signs. But don't expect that one flyer will change your world. You need to understand that this kind of promotion of the church is primarily to raise your profile, so that, when, say, a moment of crisis comes for someone and they realise they need or want to find a church, they know where you are.

A word about websites. We're still wrestling with ours. We started with an elaborate one that we didn't have the skill to maintain. So we simplified it, and now it is a bit inflexible. But you need to know this: for everyone under about 60 years of age, the chances are strong that the first impression they gain of your church will be your website. Before they ever think of coming along, they'll "Google" you to check you out. The website is now a primary means of

information gathering, and for better or worse, it has become your church's front window. If you don't have one - it's almost like you're not trying to talk to the next generation.

And there's one other vital form of advertising that is far more effective than all the others combined - word of mouth. The personal invitation of your church members is far more effective than any form of static advertising. I recently read a statistic that amazed me. The number one reason people give for why they don't go to church is not that they're too busy or too tired or not interested - it is (drum roll!): no-one asked them!

## 8. Give it your best.

We live in a world of professionalism in the areas of marketing and promotion. Your black and white photocopied flyer will look poor compared to the chain-store's catalogue. Obviously it's not easy to compete, but make what do you as pleasing and professional as you can.

And that goes for everything you run. Your Sunday Service is a showcase of your congregation. So is your family barbeque and your outdoor Christmas Carols and your Alpha course. Make what you do as positive, professional and profound as you can. Notice I didn't say perfect. The aim is for excellence, not perfection. Encourage everybody to give it their best, but beware of unnecessarily harsh critique that deflates your team. Keep them brainstorming for

the best ways to do things, so that they are energising each other as they work.

## 9. Persevere.

This last one - to persevere - might seem obvious, but so often people will give up too soon. It's hard to keep doing letterboxing when no-one has responded to the last two. But perseverance is crucial. The Alpha people in England advise that it can take up to your ninth course before you really get people coming along who are the true seekers the course is designed for. Many, if not most, churches give up on Alpha far too soon. Whatever it is you're trying, give it a thorough trial before you give it away.

And persevere in prayer. Never give up praying for what you are doing. Thank God all the way. Remember, it's His church and His kingdom that you're building. He supplies the power; he does the convicting and converting. We simply get to share in the work—and the joy—along the way.

So that's what we've learned. Our church still walks its tightrope, and whether it survives its current numerical and financial crisis is still to be determined. But we are determined not to slip idly into oblivion. While we are here, for as long as God wants a church at Glenunga, we will do all we can to build the Kingdom, to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and to bring glory to the Father.

## What happens next:

- February 27 - ACC Victorian Regional Seminar. The Waverley Cluster will conduct a seminar at St Johns Uniting Church, Virginia Street. Mt. Waverley. on Saturday February 27th 2010. from 9.30 am. to 3.00 pm  
Speakers: Rev Prof. Ian Breward, *Reforming the 21st Century Church*, Dr. Rosalie Hudson, *A Declaration of Hope*, Rev. Dr. Max Champion, *Firm Ground or Crumbling Foundation, the Future of the Basis of Union*.  
BYO lunch. Tea and Coffee provided. Further details 9800 4078 or 9887 6098
- April 17 - ACC NSW Movement AGM. 11 am - Sutherland Uniting Church
- May 22 - Wesley Institute regional seminar. New Lambton UC.  
Dr Holly Schut from Midlife Momentum, a ministry arising out of her DMin research. See <http://www.midlifemomentum.com>
- September 2 -4 Annual Conference and AGM: Camden Uniting Church
- National Council Meetings:  
15-16 March - at the Healing Centre  
10.30 am start - 4 pm 16 March.  
24 May - teleconference: 1 pm AEST  
26 July - teleconference: 1 pm AEST  
15 November - teleconference: 1 pm AEST

## James is here

The third ACC Bible Study has been released.

*Faith that Works [Six] Studies in the Letter of James ACC Bible Study No. 3*  
Written by Rev Dr Brian Edgar in conjunction with Ron Clough, Ian Hickingbotham, Margaret Macmillan and Nell Muir

Order forms will be included in the ACC Newsletter and one copy will be sent to each ACC Congregation or group. Cost \$10 (including post and GST).

## Next ACCatalyst

Catalyst is planning six editions for 2010. The first, in February, will include a feature on "Marriage: the final frontier".

## IDEAS YOU COULD TRY

Don't just pick something from this list - pray, research and brainstorm. But these might help if you add them to your mix.

- Free newspapers, car washes, Easter eggs, sausage sizzles, etc.
- Courses - marriage, parenting, tax and budget management, photography, *Drug Proof Your Kids* etc.
- Garage sales, car boot sales, fetes, community picnics, sports days for kids, etc.
- Alpha, 40 Days of Purpose, etc.
- Café, library, DVD borrowing (family titles).
- Migrant English tuition, craft groups, photography clubs, music clubs etc.
- School holiday programs, church camps
- Kids' clubs, youth events, engaging Sunday School material.

# FILM



George MacKay, Clive Owen and Nicholas McAululty in *The Boys Are Back*

## Just saying 'Yes'

I'll be back boys.

Arnold Schwarzenegger's iconic line has been given a twist in *The Boys Are Back* (rated M), the new feature from Scott Hicks. Hicks is the celebrated director of *Shine*, which in 1996 won Geoffrey Rush an Academy Award. While many readers may not see this new film, it is worth considering for the context and issues. There are some quite realistic portrayals, and yet also amateurish, and perhaps even mediocre and unnecessary elements and scenes. It is good production, especially with the complementary music of the wistful Icelandic band Sigur Rós and Hal Lindes, formerly of Dire Straits.

Based on a true story "*The Boys are Back in Town*" by political journalist Simon Carr, a father coming to grips with parenthood following the death of his wife, Clive Owen plays the lead Joe Warr, who in the film is an English sports writer now living in Australia, because as we find out he got too close to one of his interviewees and "got her pregnant", and then left his first wife and young son (Harry) to what he had hoped would be a long life with his new love Katy. We meet him devastated, and unprepared as he has always been on the road covering sporting events. Not only does he have a soon to be seven year old Artie, (there is a quintessential Australian boy birthday party scene), but he soon has his teenage son arrive, who has a break from his mother and new partner in England.

South Australian readers will be familiar with the areas in the Fleurieu Peninsula, and the locations, including the airport, Flinders Hospital,

Kangarilla, Hendon, Willunga and Glenelg. Hicks lived in Adelaide from his early teenage years, and now his family now have their own Vineyard. The setting is very noticeably South Australian with Katy's family vineyard actually a real-life working vineyard (Dog Ridge) at McLaren Vale.

There are many familiar actors, with Julia Blake and Chris Haywood playing the parents of Joe's deceased wife Katy. The wife (played by Laura Fraser) re-appears throughout the film, not as a ghost, but a type of affirming conscience to let him know he is doing okay.

The film has many aspects and this is one drawback as it could be seen as partly educational drama and social commentary, and even part farce.

Issues abound:

- The teenage son feeling abandoned by his father but giving it a second go.

- The supportive grandparents grieving for their daughter, but still with their own busy lives, unable to drop everything to care for the grandson, and yet the grandmother clearly believes she would do a better job raising Artie than Joe.

- The social dating scene of single parents and the pronounced desire to know what type of relationship one has – is it child helper and cleaner for hopeless messy males?

- The use of technology which allows Joe to write stories as if he was courtside at the Australian Open even though he is still at home with the boys.

- The depth of and problems created by a drinking culture in Australia.

The main area explored is that of practical parenting today. It is more unusual to have single fathers in film roles, and the idea follows the traditional one of the father coming to grips with parenting by simply fitting it into his lifestyle.

Warr has a philosophy of Just Say Yes (to your kids). This is outlined in those cute colour alphabet magnets that abound on fridges in houses with children.

Joe has one overall rule which is basically if he tells you something then you have to do it. One rule he announces is 'no swearing, but this is soon and obviously broken. The occasional coarse language and adult references are however mostly not gratuitous, as they are used to illustrate elements of Australian society.

At the least, one can easily work out why a certain level of confusion could arise in this family. There are some extraordinary examples of a parent letting a child do something, including a driving car (albeit sitting on his father's lap). Overall I felt ambiguous about Joe Warr. In Australia we are supposed to love a larrikin, but there is a limit to the amount of selfishness even a larrikin can get away with.

I found this film tailored for a secular, and fairly Godless country which in terms of the statistics in rural South Australia is far from the truth. Where does Joe seek comfort?

Not in any form of faith, and certainly not a church. There is the help of friends and family, but they also provide complications, and often a point of rigid contrast with his freeing attitude. Joe is essentially by himself, or with a drink, or his boys, but they are too young to help a grown man accept his responsibilities. I think it would have created a more positive message if they had all gone to family counselling, and this may have also helped with all Joe and Artie's grief.

This film reminds me of the tendency in some parts of the church to consider pastoral care to be letting people get what they want and even helping them to do things which are not helpful.

Joe comes back and forth, and back again – and the boys do too. I will not say too much but I doubt if there will be surprises. This could have been a much more lyrical film, but its larrikin whimsicalness has an edge that for me provided unease.

Peter Bentley