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## CATALYST

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# Landmark national conference in November

*Truth to Tell*, the second national conference of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, will be held from November 15-17 in Melbourne.

Guest speakers Bill Muehlenberg, Philip Johnson and Gordon Preece will deliver major presentations, while ACC Chairman Max Champion will speak on the theme "Gimme Some Truth," at a public rally at Macedonian Evangelical Uniting Church in Preston on the Friday evening.

Bill Muehlenberg, well-known for his work with the Australian Family Association and the Culture Watch website, will speak on "Christianity, Secularism and Culture: when nations perish."

Philip Johnson, a commentator on contemporary Christian apologetics and author of *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age*, will deliver an address on "New Spirituality in the church and marketplace: churchless faith, alternate pathways and reinventing the past."

Well-known ethics expert Gordon Preece, who is a former director of the Centre for Applied Christian Ethics and is now director of UrbanSeeds at Collins St, Melbourne Baptist Church, will address the conference on the topic "Whose justice? Which sexuality? Sex, social justice and the City of God."

The conference will also embody the annual meeting of the ACC, with assembly sessions to take place across the three days, from Thursday to Saturday.

Individual supporting members of the ACC are encouraged to attend all sessions of the assembly meetings and can speak during these meetings, though voting will be reserved for nominated congregational representatives and appointed officers.

For more details and registration forms, see insert in this magazine or call the ACC administration office on 02 9550 5358.

## *Legal update*

In the first issue of *Catalyst*, we reported that the Reforming Alliance had "now received further legal advice from Mr Howells which confirms his earlier opinion concerning Resolution 84, and extends it to Resolution 108 (2006.)"

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

"The March meeting of Assembly Standing Committee resolved to receive the letter and the legal opinion from RA" and "to report to a later meeting on 'a proposed course of action in the light of the advice received from the Assembly's legal advisers, such report to include a copy of the RA legal advice'."

A reply was received by the RA executive after the July meeting of ASC. It is now under consideration. The Executive continues to regard the matter as of vital importance in the life of the UCA and will provide an update to RA members at the earliest opportunity.

## Editorial

# Should we take Spong seriously?

One of my many unfulfilled fantasies is to put together a rock band with an unforgettable title. The fact that I have not achieved this after 46 years of life on earth may be a sign that I am not up to the task.

Dreams die hard, though, and my latest invention is a nostalgia band playing retrospective hits of the 1970s and '80s. I would call this band "Jack Spong and the Re-Inventors."

Bishop John Spong, the veteran American would-be re-inventor of Christianity, would of course be the lead vocalist. Other band-members would include comedians Rowan Atkinson and Mel Smith and actor Nigel Hawthorne.

Bishop Spong's views, in which he does not so much re-think as replace the central doctrines of classical Christianity with those of his own invention, are too well-known to bear much repeating here. Before his recent reappearance on stage at a number of Australian venues supported, weirdly enough, by Christian churches, one of his thoughts was recalled in an excellent article in the Sydney Anglican magazine, *Southern Cross*.

In "Jesus for the Non-Religious," Mark Thompson points out that in his latest book, Bishop Spong is dismissive of the classic Christian teaching on the atonement. This is the teaching that, in the words of the Nicene creed, God the Son "was crucified for us, died and was buried." Spong rejects this with a caricatured view of the classic teaching.

"Who needs a God who would require the death of the divine Son before being willing to forgive a fallen humanity?" Spong asks. "That is a portrait of God as a divine child abuser. We should rejoice in the death of such a deity."

It is possible for some to become angry on reading a passage like that. Consider for a moment, though, that it is possible to view such Spong-ish statements not through the prism of anger, but through the prism of satire. Humour, in other words.

Since the 1970s, there have been plenty of attempts to do just this. All of them have come from outside the Christian churches. One of the best efforts in this domain was a sketch from the 1970s TV comedy *Not the Nine O'Clock News*. Here the comedian Mel Smith, dressed as a modern Christian clergyman with collar, was interviewed for a "serious" documentary about his controversial liberal views on Satan. "Is the devil all bad?" the introductory voice-over asked. Smith, representing a "new" version of Christian teaching shorn of all judgment not only against sinners but also against the very notion of sin, then gives an outstanding defence of why we shouldn't be too hard on Satan.

But doesn't the devil represent pure evil, the journalist (Rowan Atkinson) asks the clergyman. Smith replies: "Well, that's a theological grey area."

There are many other such memorable pieces of satire on the modern art of Christian re-invention. Who could forget the episode of TV's *Yes Prime Minister* in which Prime Minister Jim Hacker, the shallow, pragmatic politician par excellence, is given the task of adjudicating on who will be the next Archbishop of Canterbury?

Confused by the fact that the leading candidate for the Archbishop's post has been described as a "modernist," Hacker asks his public service adviser Sir Humphrey Appleby (played by Nigel Hawthorne) what exactly a modernist is?

In the Church, Humphrey explains, "the word Modernist is code for non-believer." "An atheist?" Jim asks in surprise.

"Oh no, Prime Minister," Sir Humphrey replies. "An atheist clergyman couldn't continue to draw his stipend. So when they stop believing in God they call them modernists."

Such satirical gems, which for decades now have popped up continuously in the arts of what is an overwhelmingly anti-Christian, or at least ex-Christian culture and society, demonstrate an important reality about the modern church.

That is that while church members continue to take "progressive" notions seriously – either getting angry at their proponents or, what is much the same thing, mistaking their shallowness for depth – the outside world often has a clearer view.

The outside, non-Christian world can see that a Christian clergyman who does not believe in the Christian creeds is not so much a powerful intellectual figure, as a rightful figure of fun. Rather than taking Spong's "God-as-a-divine-child-abuser" line too seriously, we should observe the smirk it provokes on the faces of non-believers, as they receive further confirmation of the already firm conviction that Christians lost their marbles ages ago.

Obviously, not all Christians did lose their marbles. There are many who still believe in the God of the creeds, and globally, their number grows. Meanwhile, we should not be too disturbed by the fact that an entertainment-driven culture gives prominence to the theme of madness within Christian ranks. After all, such a prospect can be diverting.



Paul Gray

## Thank you, Professor Dawkins

# Reflections on the atheist challenge

Warren Clarnette

There are several reasons why we should be grateful for Richard Dawkins and his atheist colleagues. They have exposed, not for the first time, the seriousness of what has been called the death of God, or God's absence, eclipse or silence. If things turn out well, the atheist challenge to religion may prompt a reinvigorated expression, somewhere in the churches, of authentic Christianity.

Such a response would not be what Professor Dawkins and his friends set out to achieve. They are not interested in whether or not God has disappeared from the world stage, because that would imply God's existence, whether past, present or as a future possibility. The atheists want to extirpate God root and branch. In the tradition of Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, Dawkins attacks religion by explaining the origins of religious belief not only in terms of human psychology or sociology, but on the basis of ethology, his own scientific discipline. Just as physics solved the riddle of planetary movement and biology discovered our genetic inheritance, Dawkins explains

human behavior by an analysis so rigorously dismissive of non-material factors that his logic compels him to brand 'religion' as dangerously irrational.

This is a curious position for one who tiptoed to the edge of metaphysics by declaring, in the Preface to the second edition of *The Selfish Gene* (1989) that to break new ground in science

"requires insightful new twists of language and revealing metaphors. If you push novelty of language and metaphor far enough, you can end up with a new way of seeing." These words suggest that the author of *The God Delusion* is fully aware of the power of metaphor, which is the daily bread of Christians. And Christians, despite breathing the atmosphere of the most advanced era of materialistic secularism known to mankind, still experience the numinous, which is no less real for being off-limits to scientific research and beyond verbal expression.

If this suggests a certain irrationality in Dawkins' claim for the irrationality of religious belief, we should thank him nevertheless for exposing the broad ignorance of Christians about the fundamental doctrines of their faith, as well as his ignorance of what Christianity actually teaches. Professor Dawkins is no authority on the biblical record. Jesus would find Dawkins' view of God incomprehensible. Sin has no place in the Dawkins lexicon, though he makes much of the flaws and failures of Christians and fails to mention their attitudes, belief-systems and motivations which enhance countless lives and bring many gracious influences to bear on society.

While we're at it we might mention Dawkins' unjustifiable dismissal of the theological traditions that nourished western civilisation through many centuries and which continue in unexpected ways to play a salutary role in tempering the excesses of religious anarchism on one hand, and atheistic hubris on the other.

Nevertheless we should thank the atheist challengers for compelling us to think again, even to think anew, about what and who we believe when we repeat the Lord's Prayer, say the Creeds and join in the church's liturgy. For that service our critics deserve gratitude, so long as we take the logical next step of re-examining the roots of faith, which entails risk because such an inspection may destroy it in the process. In short, the atheist challenge may be fatal for Christians and Christianity.

These are elementary observations. What is a possible next step? The first is to admit that we will be misrepresented in the same way that we misrepresent

### FACT

The first episode of *The Root of all Evil?*, an ABC TV documentary featuring the ideas of Richard Dawkins, attracted 760,000 viewers in Australian capital cities.

*The God Delusion*, *God is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens and *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris are recent bestsellers in this country.

our critics. On both sides there is nothing so adamant as a mind made up, regardless of evidence or argument. Since there can be no proof of God's non-existence or existence, what can sustain an atheist's dismissal of religion? Apparently, the past evidence of religious hypocrisy and folly, seen through the prism of invincible trust in the truth of science and the absurdity of non-material explanations of cosmic origins and human behavior.

Temperaments unsuited to the nuances of religious feeling and unmoved by testimonials of religious conversion can hardly judge the reality or otherwise of religious experience. This is the Achilles heel of atheism. Christians have an Achilles heel too. Repetition whether of biblical texts or stock phrases is no way to defend the faith of "apostles, prophets, martyrs and the holy church throughout all the world".

To be sure, we must speak in defence of the gospel but only, as French Reformed theologian Gabriel Vahanian has said, so long as we recognise that "there is nothing better than words at getting in the way of what we mean to say." Herein lies the problem of discourse for and against religion, and Christianity.

The problem is that in the clash of words we assume that everything depends on the clarity of our speaking and the force of our arguments. We hone our definitions of 'God' in the hope that in upholding the truth of faith we conceal the weaknesses in our arguments. This would be the wrong way to proceed. Faith is never commended by argument. It would be better to admit that the God we can, and do, do without is the God who cannot do without us. This approach sets Christianity apart from religion-in-general, defined as an inherent consciousness of mystery embedded in the natural order that invites and informs a multitude of mystical and metaphysical responses.

This is not what Christianity is about, and Dawkins' dismissal of religion helps us to understand this. Gabriel Vahanian has an important paragraph on this theme in his recently-translated *Anonymous God*, where he states (p. 87) : "One can define God as the origin of all that is and its fulfilment; as its beginning and its end; as the first and the last. One can define God from above and from below; as the most high and as ground of being. God can further be defined in terms of 'before' and 'after', as the God who chastises but who also shows mercy; or in terms of 'already' and 'not yet', as the one who was and is to come. And again God can be defined in terms of the life within,

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**Christians do not need to demolish unbelief or refute atheist vitriol. We need to put forward a modest account of the mystery by which God and mankind are inextricably linked, puzzling as that is.**

as the one whom I encounter in my innermost self; or, on the contrary, in terms of an entity out there, and then God's being is totally extrinsic to what is real to me.

"In yet another perspective, God can also be defined so that Christianity blends into the history of religions. Contrariwise, God can be defined so that Christianity entails the negation of religion and its overcoming. All these categories undoubtedly echo the biblical tradition. They reflect now this, now that aspect of it. Somehow, they are not entirely foreign to it.

"Still, the biblical approach hangs on a different set of concerns. Wary of religions of nature, this approach is kept from straying away from its original insight into the nature of religion. It evinces an understanding of God and the human which is cast in a different, and more essential, dimension."

Vahanian goes on to say that in the New Testament God is defined only in terms of Christ. God breaks his silence only in him. But not for a select few or an elect race, for Christ belongs to the universal story of humanity, and is "less a believer's Christ than .. a Christ for the unbeliever." He encapsulates in himself all that is rumoured of the divine, and all that is potentially human. This means that to speak of Christ is to point to the perfect human stature which is the measure not only of God but of man.

On this reading, Christians do not need to demolish unbelief or refute atheist vitriol. We need to put forward a modest account of the mystery by which God and mankind are inextricably linked, puzzling as that is. We need to affirm that this connection takes place only through the reality of Christ, the man-God and the God-man. That is an enigma which no argument can resolve.

*Warren Clarnette is convenor of the 'Catalyst' editorial board.*

# *What is the Assembly of Confessing Congregations?*

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations was voted into existence on July 12, 2006 at a meeting held at Kings College at the University of Queensland. The meeting took place immediately after the conclusion of the 11th National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia. This formation meeting of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations (ACC) was attended by more than 150 Uniting Church members, from around the nation, who opposed recent decisions by the Church's National Assembly on sexuality and ordination.

On October 13, 2006, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church (ACC) was officially inaugurated at a meeting at Wesley Mission in Sydney. More than 150 individuals representing 71 member congregations from within the Uniting Church attended the Sydney meeting. This meeting confirmed the Assembly's name, adopted founding documents and articles of association and elected a 12-member national executive.

The ACC's membership today consists of 135 congregations and groups from six states, and from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Its administration office is located in Sydney (see page 2 for details.) The overriding purpose of the ACC is to uphold the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as described in the Uniting Church's Basis of Union.

## Anglican Archbishop Jensen meets SA confessing group

The Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, addressed a meeting of ACC members and friends at Glenunga Uniting Church in Adelaide on August 6.

A rather warm and friendly Archbishop began his address with a strong affirmation for those in the Uniting Church who were making a stand on important issues.

He said no one liked tension or division, but it was extremely important for the whole church in Australia to know that there is continuing opposition to the Uniting Church Assembly's decision on sexuality and on matters contrary to the faith.

While sharing something of his own spiritual journey, the Archbishop spoke about the acute secularisation of our culture.

Christians today must swim in what he described as a toxic sea of raging individualism.

Yet he made it clear that to refuse to relate to the world is as bad as being enmeshed in the world.

The Archbishop noted that when Christians turn away from the essentials of Christian teaching, like the deity of Christ and the structure of biblical truth, we get rid of Christianity. This results in the collapse of sound ethics.

The huge assault on Christianity in recent years, he

said, had affected the Church in the West deeply. It had led ultimately to mistranslations and distortions like those of Bishop Spong's.

Confessing the faith is very important, Archbishop Jensen said. We need to be decisive, saying a clear 'yes' or 'no' to issues on the basis of God's Word.

We also need to anticipate the pain and cost involved of long term friends sometimes choosing to distance themselves from us.

Confessing also unites, and the Archbishop illustrated this by acknowledging his delight in accepting the invitation to address us in a Uniting Church.

While some want to align Christian evangelicals with extreme fundamentalism, Archbishop Jensen pointed out that historically, fundamentalism is a recent development whereby people turn in upon themselves and self destruct.

This is very different from what it means to be evangelical.

Evangelicals have a much longer history based on sound biblical scholarship and a compassionate outward focus.

Christians must ensure that our main aim is always to reach out to others and to introduce them to Christ.

*Ted Curnow*

## Stem cells

# The case against therapeutic cloning

Ross Carter

All humanity has benefited from the results of medical science over the last hundred years or so. Governments and public institutions have rightly showered awards upon the medical scientists who have discovered the cures of diseases that have caused humanity so much suffering in previous centuries. The good news continues in that the latest generation of medical scientists are also holding out the promise of curing diseases and conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, spinal chord injury, cancer and Parkinson's disease through the utilisation of stem cells.

The potential benefits of understanding and using stem cells to alleviate and eliminate diseases and conditions has, naturally, so captured the yearning of the Australian public that the federal government, and a number of State governments, have legislated to allow medical scientists to experiment with stem cells. But why, we might ask, was legislation necessary?

The legislation was necessary because before it was passed it was illegal to create embryos with the intention to 'harvest' stem cells from them for the purposes of research. The legislation, we might note, has not been supported by some groups who oppose experimentation on stem cells obtained from embryos. These are people who desire the benefits of medical research as much as anyone else but think that using stem cells is too high a cost to pay for possibly finding cures of disease. To appreciate why some people think this way, it is important to understand something of the biology of stem cells.

Stem cells are unspecialized cells – they are not already muscle cells or brain cells – that have the potential to develop into specialized cells. Stem cells occur at all stages during the development of human beings, from embryo to adult. Given the right conditions in the laboratory, stem cells can, unlike nerve cells and other cells, replicate themselves many times over. When a stem cell replicates, the resulting cells can either remain as stem cells or, if scientists have a thorough knowledge of the way cells work, be directed to become specialized cells. The hope would be to direct stem cells to become, for instance,

brain cells that would then be injected into the brain of a person with dementia. These cells would replace those that have been lost, and re-establish normal neural pathways.

There are two kinds of stem cells – embryonic stem cells and adult stem cells. As the name suggests, embryonic stem cells come from human beings who are in the embryonic stage of development. They have the potential to develop into all types of specialized cells. Adult stem cells are found in many tissues and organs of the body, but they are present in low numbers and are difficult to obtain. Adult stem cells may trans-differentiate into specialized cells in certain circumstances.

Embryonic stem cells can be grown in the laboratory for long periods and, it is believed, be made to change into most tissues in the human body. Adult stem cells are, at this point in time, difficult to grow in the laboratory.

Embryonic stem cells can only be obtained from human beings who are at the embryonic stage of development. The purpose of the legislation passed by Australian governments has been to allow scientists to create human embryos from which embryonic stem cells can be obtained. The harvesting of stem cells from embryos kills the human being.

The legislation passed by the Commonwealth and various States permits the creation and use of human embryo clones for 'therapeutic' purposes. The way in which human beings in an embryonic stage of development can be created is by somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT). This involves obtaining a woman's egg, removing the genetic material (DNA) from it and replacing it with DNA from a cell of another person's body. When scientists understand the right triggers and apply them, this new cell can develop into an embryo. The embryonic stem cells harvested from this (now killed) embryo could be encouraged to develop into human tissue or, perhaps in the future, into a complete organ. The resultant tissue or organ could then be transplanted in the person who donated the original body cell. Because the tissues or organs from the cloned embryo have identical nuclear DNA to the cell donor, the rejection hurdle that exists with current organ and tissue transplants

will, it is hoped, be overcome.

To sum up, the legislation passed by various governments permits the creation of human beings at an embryonic stage of development, and explicitly approves their destruction through the harvesting of embryonic stem cells. This is not a controversial or inflammatory statement because the Lockhart Review Committee, which was appointed by the Federal Government in 2005 to advise it about stem cell research and cloning, is quite clear that embryos created for experimentation and destruction because of the harvesting of stem cells would, if implanted in the reproductive tract of a woman, develop, in the normal course of events, to birth, middle age, and then death.

As mentioned above, some groups in Australian public life, and often they are Christian, oppose the creation of embryos that are slated for destruction. The same people also oppose abortion, and the legalization of abortion, as is being proposed by elements of the Labour government in Victoria. What is at the heart of their opposition to the legislation enacted by the federal and state governments?

What is not in contention, and it really is time to put this furore to bed, is not when human life begins. This is a biological question about which there can be no reasonable dispute: a fertilized egg will, all things being equal, go through the steps that make up the history of a human life. This includes implantation in a woman's reproductive tract, development into a fetus, birth, ageing, death.

The question raised by those opposed to the legislation is this; which human beings, in whatever stage of development or phase of decline, have rights that our society is bound to respect, and why? The same question may be expressed in another way by asking who belongs to the community for which we accept public responsibility?

Christianity has traditionally given an answer to these

questions, and it was an answer that was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations after the Second World War. It is the claim that all human beings have an inherent dignity from which derives a right to bodily life, as well as many other rights that have been enunciated over the years by the various agencies of the United Nations and other national and international groups. Whether this claim has traction in twenty first century society is perhaps a matter of conjecture but, whether it has or not, Christians must continue to claim a common dignity for all human beings.

Human dignity is grounded in God's creation of the human being in God's image. This inalienable dignity of the human being is affirmed when in Jesus Christ the reality of God enters bodily into the reality of the world. This dignity is the gracious gift of God to all human beings and takes precedence over all other rights and duties that belong to being human. It is obvious from this understanding that human dignity is not something that can be self-constructed or earned.

It is essential to understand that the human being only exists as bodily life, and that this also must be understood as the will of God the Creator: bodiliness and being human belong indivisibly together. Human bodies are therefore ends in themselves and are not to be treated as a means to an end.

To be created in the image of God is to be commissioned to represent God's will to other human beings and to the whole of creation. In Jesus Christ this will is manifest: in his actions and words he shows that God's will is that humans should have life in abundance. Abundant life involves loving God and neighbour and the most basic commandment of neighbour love is "You shall not kill". This is the case because love for the neighbour begins by respecting the neighbour's right to be. The commandment

## A tale of two cities: Sydney, Australia

St Augustine wrote that there were two cities, the City of God and the City of Man. Two recent developments in the area of stem cell research suggest that both cities are living cheek by jowl inside Australia's largest present day metropolis, Sydney.

The Premier of New South Wales, Morris Iemma, has announced a generous taxpayer subsidy to reward the first scientific team to develop stem cell lines using embryonic stem cell tissue.

Shortly before Mr Iemma's announcement, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, announced a church-backed subsidy to fund medical scientists to develop therapies using adult stem cell tissue.

The entirely different approaches to the stem cell issue demonstrated by one of the city's top political leaders and by one of its main Christian leaders are poles apart.

Both leaders are taking practical steps towards the reduction of human suffering, using stem cells as the tool.

Mr Iemma's approach is based on encouraging the use of biological material taken from embryonic human bodies destroyed specifically for the purpose. Cardinal Pell's is based on encouraging the use of tissue from living humans, harvested in such a way that no life is destroyed in the process.

Whatever the medical success of the two different approaches may finally prove to be, the moral difference between the two could not be clearer.

*Paul Gray*



## Update

# Queensland's MPs face a moral test

As *Catalyst* went to press, a bill to authorise the “use” of specially created human embryos in medical research remained under consideration by Queensland’s parliament.

The bill was introduced by the Queensland health minister, Mr Robertson, on August 7. On the final parliamentary sitting day for September, the bill was still listed for consideration, as item number 8 for the day’s business.

NSW and Victoria have already passed similar bills allowing the destruction of embryonic humans for stem cell research.

Should the Queensland bill not pass in September, it is likely to be considered when the state’s parliament meets again in the second week of October.

“you shall not kill” is the minimum of what we owe our fellow human beings. The taking of innocent life in abortion, euthanasia or embryonic research is killing, some would say murder, and a contravention of this command.

While this way of understanding human dignity would perhaps not attract plaudits in the Australian public square at this time, our public discourse does preserve traces of its Christian heritage in concerns for justice for the vulnerable and those without power in potentially exploitative relationships. In Victoria the government, on behalf of the public, attempts to protect children from sexual or physical harm by legislating that those who work with children undergo police checks. Towards the other end of the human continuum, governments are zealous in prosecuting nursing home proprietors whose staff mistreat vulnerable elderly people. Those who oppose the legislation legalizing destruction of embryos think that human beings in the embryonic stage of life are rather powerless and vulnerable and wonder why this does not seem to be obvious to others who support the legislation.

Those who oppose the legislation enabling experimentation on embryonic stem cells do so, then, because they do not believe it to be a matter of indifference that human beings in the embryonic stage of development will be killed. If this is the cost of finding cures for diseases and debilitating conditions, then it is too high. We do irreparable damage to the moral fabric of society if human beings are routinely treated as raw material or instruments for, albeit, good outcomes, at least for some. What a society allows to develop by this practice is a culture of death. A culture of death shows a callousness towards human life which, perhaps almost imperceptibly, leads to a toleration of more and more ways of violating the dignity of the human person. A Christian writing, the *Didache*, probably written in the second half of the first century of the Christian era, which shows how Christians responded to the pagan culture of that historical period, makes the point well:

*There are two ways, a way of life and a way of death; there is*

*a great difference between them. . . . . In accordance with the precept of the teaching “You shall not kill”, you shall not put a child to death by abortion or kill it once it is born. . . . . The way of death is this: They show no compassion for the poor, they do not suffer with the suffering, they do not acknowledge their Creator, they kill their children and by abortion cause God’s creatures to perish; they drive away the needy, oppress the suffering, they are advocates of the rich and unjust judges of the poor; they are filled with every sin. May you ever be guiltless of these sins.*

Those who oppose the legalized destruction of embryos want to recruit members of Australian society to a culture of life; a culture that affirms and celebrates life. They believe that this only can be done if all human beings at whatever stage of development or decline are included.

Finally, it is important to note that if the governments of Australia repealed legislation permitting the destruction of embryos, this would not mean that research on stem cells would cease and that possible cures and treatments were lost to us. Research could continue with adult stem cells. A report of the National Health and Medical Research Council, Australia states that adult stem cells are present in the body in low numbers and are difficult to obtain. It also states that adult stem cells are hard to grow in the laboratory and may not develop into every kind of cell. However, the report states, recent developments are promising.

These difficulties with adult stem cells have been seen as a reason to fast track experimentation on embryonic stem cells. A nation which embraced a culture of life might, however, decide to focus on research on adult stem cells. Governments would, with the support of all sectors, fast track research through the provision of generous funding. Our society might lose some time in bringing rightly hoped for benefits to its members, but it would not do so by the exploitation of the most vulnerable of its members. Such an outcome would be a noble and humane win-win.

*Ross Carter is a member of the Catalyst editorial board.*

# The Green obsession at the heart of

Recent frenzies over “global warming” in the worlds of the media and politics have led many people to fear for the future of our earth. But how much of this fear is generated by a loss of faith in humanity itself, and not just by consideration of the scientific evidence?

In this extract from his recent book *A Loose Canon* (Connor Court Publishing), retired CSIRO scientist **Brian Coman** explains how the loss of a Christian perspective on man’s role in the universe is helping spread a new kind of sickness in our thoughts about the world.

Just as it is proper to talk of a history of philosophy, it is also proper to talk of a history of history.

The very process by which we turn a vast assemblage of dates and events into some sort of meaningful story has itself changed over the millennia of recorded human affairs. History does not assemble itself but rather, requires some principle of interpretation on our part. For many of the ancients, such a principle was to be found in the idea of the Four Ages. In many tribal civilizations, history is also seen as cyclical. There is often, in such civilizations, a concept of time very different from ours. Indeed, one might say that there are two ‘times’ – sacred or primordial time and the ‘ordinary’ sense of time which we experience in earthly affairs. The boundary between these two times is quite permeable and, once this is understood, it is possible to get some inkling of what the Australian Aborigines, for instance, mean by the term ‘Dream Time’. Here human history and cosmic mythology merge into a seamless whole.

In Europe though, for more than one and a half millennia, history was interpreted in terms of Christian eschatology. History unfolded as part of God’s plan for humanity and it was not cyclical. There was an end to history. Here, it was proper to speak of ‘progress’ in the sense that history was a one way process. But over this entire period, ‘progress’ had very little to do with earthly affairs and material circumstances. It was during the seventeenth century that the Christian idea of progress was somehow secularized so that it simply came to mean ‘material progress’.

There were, of course, variants of this secular

idea, the most obvious and extreme being Marxism. For the Marxists, progress came to be identified with the dialectic of the class struggle. Here, the endpoint of history was construed as the withering away of the state and a permanent ‘golden age’ under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Alas, such dreams finally turned to the nightmares of enforced collectivization and the Gulag camps. The liberal, democratic version of progress fared somewhat better. Indeed, if people like Francis Fukuyama are to be believed, it has triumphed and achieved what Marxism could not – the end of history. Fukuyama published his famous thesis in 1992, but even in the short space of time that has elapsed since then, it is rather evident that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of the West have not really brought about the end of history. One enemy disappears, but a new one arises.

When we consider all these differing interpretive principles used to produce human history we may, at first, decide that they have little in common with each other. But, in fact, there is one common denominator. What they share is some sense of the centrality of human beings in the historical process. It could be argued that the Australian Aborigines, for instance, do not see humans at the centre of history since their spirit-ancestors are often animals – kangaroo spirits, emu spirits, and so on. This is true up to a point. The spirit-ancestor can indeed be a kangaroo-man or an emu-man. In every case, however, the possibilities of manifestation include the human form. It is the common denominator.

I want to suggest that this common conception

# is a sign of sickness our civilisation

of humans as being central to history no longer pertains in the West. It began to lose its force some 40 or 50 years ago and its demise is exactly contemporaneous with the rise of what I will call 'ecological consciousness'. It is true that ecological consciousness had its roots much earlier in history – at least from the time of Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in Germany - but the modern form required at least three further developments. The first was the general public acceptance of Darwin's evolutionary theory, something that lagged well behind the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859. The second was a similar and gradual acceptance of 'ecology' as a scientific discipline, rather than simply a philosophy or a way of seeing things (as it was for Haeckel). This gave it respectability. The third, rather obviously, was the decline in religious belief in the West.

These three developments finally came together in the middle of last century. Indeed, I can remember a colleague of mine, back in the 1960s, who rather boldly decided to call himself an 'ecologist' at that time. The rest of us were just 'botanists', 'zoologists', or simply 'biologists'. We felt that our colleague was bumbling on side. Within a decade or so, though, all that had changed. As a more pertinent example, one only needs to chart the name changes in that section of CSIRO devoted to wildlife research. It started life in 1949 as the 'Wildlife Survey Section' and then changed to the 'Division of Wildlife Research' in the 1960s. In 1987 it became the 'Division of Wildlife Ecology' and, today, is called 'Sustainable Ecosystems'. These name changes are quite revealing for they show a progression from merely surveying nature, to one of active investigation of nature along Baconian lines, and finally to a sort of scientific holism.

It is, of course, true that the scientists themselves tend to be specialists, sticking to their own particular disciplines and rarely giving what might be termed a 'holistic' account of nature. Because of the huge range of variables involved in such studies, it is simply impossible to give a full account of any but the very simplest of so-called 'ecosystems'. The people that do give holistic accounts are usually the science popularisers, not the scientists themselves. The result is quite misleading for the average layperson who quite naturally supposes that, when he or she reads a Paul Ehrlich, or listens to the whispered commentary of a David Attenborough, they are receiving an account of the natural order which has a level of validity equal to that of any of the laws of physics or of mathematics. It is not so.

On my bookshelf I have a small volume entitled *Do Lemmings Commit Suicide: Beautiful Hypotheses and Ugly Facts* (Oxford University Press, 1996). It is written by Dennis Chitty, perhaps the best known and most respected small mammal biologist of the recent past. As regards small mammals at any rate, Chitty points out that the gulf between ecological models and actual observations is enormous. It is precisely because Chitty was a good scientist that he refused to do violence to his research data simply to make it fit with the models.

And so, in the popular accounts of 'ecology', it is taken for granted that humans, post Darwin, are simply another species of mammal on the planet, albeit a very intelligent one - a trousered or skirted ape. To suggest humans could be something more is 'unscientific'. They are part of something called 'the

web of life', a vast series of interactions between species and their environments. Each species is connected to others in such a way as to form a huge matrix of mutually dependent associations. Changes to one small part have an effect throughout the entire system. Furthermore, these associations have developed over a huge time span, via the principles of evolutionary biology, such that a certain steady state or balance comes into being. Such a steady state does not preclude change (clearly necessary for the edifice of evolutionary biology) but rather manages it in such a way as to ensure that the whole system remains 'in balance'.

It is against this particular background that the modern notion of human history must be viewed. The history of humanity simply becomes one of ecological declension. Once the human ape develops beyond some sort of primitive tool-user, an aberrant species comes into being - one which is out of balance with the rest of the natural order. The web of life becomes dysfunctional because one species 'jumps the tracks,' as it were. Amongst the science popularisers, opinions vary as to when all this started to happen. Some state that the development of sedentary agriculture spelled the end of eco-harmony. Others might come forward to the invention of the first primitive plough ('the rape of Mother Earth') or even the Industrial Revolution. Another variant approaches the whole issue from the 'animal liberation' perspective. The philosopher Peter Singer belongs here. Time scales differ but they all agree that historical *Homo sapiens* is a blight on nature. Prehistoric hunter-gatherers, though, are generally benign because they are in balance with their environment. For the science popularisers, all this is believed with a sort of religious fervour and dissent is simply not tolerated. By way of example, when the young Danish scientist Bjorn Lomborg recently published his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, a horde of angry commentators dismissed him as a crank. Yet, on my reading of his book, the data he uses is the very same as that quoted by his opponents. What differs is predisposing attitudes towards humanity and the possibilities of human achievement.

As a result of the enormous media interest in science in the last decade or so, a sort of 'golly-gosh' account of science, in the *Readers Digest* style, has arisen. I believe its influence to be negative and widespread, especially amongst the young. In the last decade or so, I have been involved in teaching

some aspects of animal biology to young students at tertiary level. Whilst this involvement has been very limited and involved only small numbers of students in total, my overwhelming impression is that many if not most young students in the biological sciences see *Homo sapiens* just as I have suggested above. To put it bluntly, humans are a pest species, and the earth would be a far better place without these dominating super-apes. Nonetheless, given the circumstances, the best we can hope to do is to limit the damage. In such a climate, should we be at all surprised if birth rates continue to decline in the West? This, after all, is simply part of the great ecological death wish.

I do not suppose that these young people believe this stark ecological perspective with any great passion. Rather, the whole question of the meaning of human life leaves them profoundly confused. They prefer not to think about it at all. On the one hand, they do have some feeling for the achievements of their ancestors - great art and architecture, music, literature, and so on. And yet, in these very achievements they sense some tragic consequence. It is the desire of the moth in which the journey towards the light of human understanding is also the journey towards the all-consuming flame of eco-doom.

What underlies the whole issue is the meaning of the word 'nature'. If we want to suppose that the human species, like any other species, is totally the product of a natural, evolutionary process, in what sense can the actions of modern humanity be seen as 'destructive' or 'unnatural'? One might argue that, in multiplying their numbers, building their cities and devouring an ever-increasing amount of the earth's natural resources, humans are simply acting out some genetically or environmentally determined role under a process of natural selection. Ecological harmony, after all, is the harmony of balanced warfare, since the blind process of natural selection knows nothing of charity and moral virtue. But popular ecology believes that, precisely because we are so much more intelligent than other species, we should show more respect for the non-human world and ensure its long-term survival. Now these are very laudable sentiments and few people would disagree with them. But

*Continued on page 26*

## **An amazing, grace-filled film**

# Apted's movie shows faith and art can work together

Review by Peter Bentley

Many readers would have already seen *Amazing Grace*, a film biography about the work of the evangelical antislavery pioneer William Wilberforce. The Australian cinema release was in late July, but if you missed it on the big screen, there will be the opportunity to see it later this year on DVD.

The film is directed by Michael Apted, who has no recognised Christian background, and is most well known for his ground breaking reality documentary series, *7 Up*, which in 2005 marked the seventh part with participants now aged 49 years. Apted also directed the James Bond film *The World is Not Enough* and will direct the third film in the Narnia Series. Apted brings a professionalism and standard



**Actor Rufus Sewell as anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson in *Amazing Grace***



that is expected and is in the tradition of *Chariots of Fire*, another Hollywood-style film which treated people of faith with dignity and respect.

Ioan Gruffudd plays Wilberforce. You may recognise him as Hornblower in the TV series of the same name. William Wilberforce was elected to the House of Commons at the age of 21, and after his own spiritual awakening used his political career to help end the trade of slavery in England and, mainly with the help of others, eventually in the whole British empire. He also took up many other social causes, all inspired by his faithfulness to God and God's grace shown to him.

A focus of the film is the relationship between friends and mentors. Long standing actor Albert Finney plays John Newton, the former slave runner turned Christian pastor. Newton has a supporting role in this film, as the confidante of Wilberforce who helps him to dedicate his life to serving humankind. According to historical record, Newton told Wilberforce that it was "for such a time as this" that he had been placed

in Parliament and needed to work toward the abolition of the slave trade. The movie emphasises that it was only as a politician that Wilberforce could best serve God.

In a way the other main supporting star of the film is not a person, it is the hymn itself. John Newton wrote the original words to one of the most sung hymns of all time while he was an evangelical Anglican priest in the Parish of Olney, and it was first sung at a New Years Day service in 1773 with his sermon entitled *Faith's Review and Expectation*, from a text of 1 Chronicles 17: 16-17. Newton continued to write many hymns and preached until the last year of his life, although he was blind by that time. There is a wonderful scene, captured in the film, where Newton says he now realises what it is like to be blind but also see.

Benedict Cumberbatch plays William Pitt the Younger, England's youngest ever Prime Minister at the age of 24, who encourages his friend Wilberforce to take up the fight to outlaw slavery, and supports him in his struggles in Parliament, except for a period during war with France, which is briefly related in the film. There is a lovely portrayal of Barbara Spooner by Romola Garai and Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour plays the former slave Olaudah Equiano, who bought his freedom and made his home in London, where he wrote a best-selling account of his life and became a leading figure in the fight to end the slavery of his fellow countrymen.



John Newton died in London on December 21, 1807, and there are many celebrations planned for the 200th anniversary of his death this year, here and in other places, including Sierra Leone, which was the first country he visited on a slave ship, and where today a town is named after him.

William Wilberforce died in 1833 shortly before the final passing of the Slavery Abolition Act, 26 years after the initial Slave Trade Act. It is the anniversary of the 1807 Act that this film also commemorates.

Where does this leave us today? William Wilberforce's work is far from finished. There are an estimated 27 million slaves in the world today. Modern day slavery has many forms, but at the centre is the abuse of a person's creation in the image of God. In the movie we hear amazing words spoken by a former slave, who says that the slaves were marked (branded) so that they would know they "no longer



belong to God but to a man.” In conjunction with the release of the film *Amazing Grace*, the company behind the production, Bristol Bay Productions has launched a campaign to abolish modern day slavery. This is found on their website, [www.theamazingchange.com](http://www.theamazingchange.com)

It may seem unusual for a company to promote education resources and campaigns, but this company and Walden Media are part of Anschutz Film Group which is owned by well-known billionaire conservative evangelical businessman Philip Anschutz. Educational liaison and educational campaigns have been a key feature of Walden Media, which produced the first Narnia film in conjunction with Disney. The next film for Bristol Bay Productions is another C.S. Lewis classic, *The Screwtape Letters*.



**Pictures: top left, Romola Garai plays Barbara Spooner, who encouraged Wilberforce, and later married him. Left, Benedict Cumberbatch plays Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. Top, William Wilberforce, played by Ioan Gruffudd muses about his future course of action in conversation with Richard, his butler (Jeremy Swift, right.) Above, Michael Gambon, of *Harry Potter* fame, plays Lord Fox, a wily British peer who is reluctant to fight the slave trade, but eventually signs on to join the struggle.**

## What's ahead for the Uniting Church?

# The future is evangelical

**Peter Bentley**

The statistics on church membership -- and on who is leaving the church -- are hotly contested today. This month, the ACC's Secretary, and author of the famous 'Bentley Report,' **Peter Bentley**, begins a detailed three-part analysis revealing what the latest statistics really say.

**T**here is a great myth operating in the Uniting Church at present. This is the myth that congregations and members will remain in the Uniting Church, no matter what happens. It appears that sometimes migrant-ethnic communities are button-holed in this way. It appears that members are told 'you will be okay in your local church or group - just hang in there and it will be alright.'

Interestingly, this type of argument promotes congregationalism, and may actually foster further problems in the Uniting Church in the future. I believe it is clear from present trends that the most likely churches to develop within the Uniting Church are churches with a more overt evangelical foundation. If, however, these churches and members are increasingly alienated by more radical decision-making, then over time members will leave and some congregations will effectively end up disbanding. This will have an impact on the whole viability of the Uniting Church as a congregational enterprise.

What will happen in the future? Will evangelical congregations stay in the Uniting Church no matter what decision is made concerning sexual practice and leadership?

### 1. The Use of Statistics

I have long been intrigued by the use of statistics by some members (usually leaders) within the Uniting Church. It appears that if they do not like the statistics mentioned about a particular subject, then the usual tactic is to say, 'we are not a church that is about

numbers'. However, when statistics are found that seemingly support their case, then they are often used quite widely.

Like the rather bizarre, pseudo post-modern decision known as Resolution 84, when it comes to using statistics it appears that in the Uniting Church you can have your cake when you like it, and throw away the whole cake when you don't like it.

For example, in the feedback to leaders of the Uniting Church, it appears some leaders are quite happy to quote numbers if the letters or responses are more supportive of their case, but when the majority of responses come from a different point of view, then it is sometimes implied that the respondents or writers are crazed, right-wing, fundamentalist conservatives.

As I once heard it said: "don't pay any attention to them – that's Queensland for you".

I am personally not surprised that for some matters today, opinions proclaimed via letters, including letter pages in the church papers, are more supportive of liberal theology, because most members now realise





there is little point in writing letters or participating in the various listening consultations that have been promoted.

One of the most prominent areas of concern at present is the future of the Uniting Church in terms of its membership. Over the last few years I have detected two main responses:

- ‘Don’t mention the war’. This means we do not discuss difficulties associated with the declining and ageing church, and certainly do not seriously consider the impact of the sexuality debate.
- ‘The Uniting Church has a wonderful future’. This puts the positive slant on the previous response, and is simply a form of propaganda designed to convince people that things will work out. It also seems to imply that if you ask a question or raise concerns, then you are actually to blame for what happens.

Certainly, I believe that the Church should not concentrate on the negative, but I also strongly believe that the Church needs to be aware of the challenges it

faces. If a leader is asked questions about membership and congregational numbers, he or she needs to be able to answer honestly and not present a picture that bears no relationship to the real situation.

I find especially curious the idea that we should not critique the current state of the Uniting Church, or always say that there are no problems in the Uniting Church, especially when one considers that many liberal people believe that the Church should do away with, for example, belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is because they believe this belief is not grounded in reality, and yet when it comes to our present day reality, they are willing to be part of a myth about the future of the Uniting Church.

Members of the church need to understand that many leaders of the Uniting Church are not able to address the present situation in the church, or perhaps are too afraid to present a realistic picture, because they know they simply do not have any answers.

The situation has gone on for so long that a culture

## The raw facts

### Uniting Church affiliation in the National Census

Year	Percentage	Affiliate Numbers
1981	4.9	712 609
1986	7.6	1 182 311
1991	8.2	1 387 646
1996	7.52	1 334 917
2001	6.65	1 248 674
2006	5.7	1 135 400

**Source:** *Pointers*, The Bulletin of the Christian Research Association ‘Trends in Religious Identification’ Details from 2001 Census’, Vol. 12, No. 3, **and** **ABS: National Census 2006**, and *Religion in Australia: Facts and Figures*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne, 1997.

of survival now dominates, rather than a culture of vibrancy and growth. I remember when I first became secretary of a large city presbytery (in 1998), I conducted an audit of all the congregations, and presented this to the executive, but at the time it was regarded as potentially too depressing. I then embarked (with presbytery approval) on a process to find a mission officer, with the idea that the officer would work closely with ministers and congregations, and help people to realise their situation and their accountability to God for the resources that had been placed in their hands, or perhaps allow the presbytery to help them 'bequeath' their resources to other congregations and groups, and thus support these wider activities and development. It was also envisaged that such groups would be helped to maintain their sense of worship and community, in effect as a form of chaplaincy.

## 2. Statistics and the Ageing of the membership of the Uniting Church

I had a letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (and other Fairfax editions) magazine *GoodWeekend* (March 11, 2006) in response to an article by comic writer and satirist, Jonathan Biggins 'Mr Biggins Goes to Church' (*GoodWeekend*, 18 February 2006). While Biggins was fairly caustic with each group he visited, I personally thought that to choose a small suburban Uniting Church (Merewether Central), when he chose for other denominations two cathedrals (St Andrew's and St Mary's, both in Sydney) and Hillsong was a little unfair in terms of comparison. Perhaps he could have gone to Wesley International Congregation for a reasonable numerical comparison. Seeing the Wesley Theatre nearly full of a variety of age groups, including several hundred people less than forty years of age, may have caused him to re-write his stereotype.

The point I made in the letter was that any church with an ageing membership has certain issues to confront, but that congregations of older people can have a major role to play in contemporary communities, in which personal relationships are devalued and neighbourly awareness is limited. Issues of an ageing church need to be considered sensitively, but they should not be ignored. Uniting Church members are realistic people. They know what the situation is like on the ground because they have been active local members for many years, and have

seen the changes firsthand. Uniting Church members should not be patronised, and the issues should not be ignored.

For the future the following factors are important:

- Older members presently provide much of the ongoing services and finances for the majority of Uniting Church congregations, but as they become older and as their numbers decrease, more pressure will be placed on the remaining active members (who are usually slightly *younger* older longstanding faithful members). There is a limit to how long this cycle can be maintained, and many congregations only have to lose a few key members to be rendered effectively non-viable.
- Older members usually have a more traditional belief, and support traditional understandings of sexual practice.
- Older members usually have a strong allegiance to the local congregation, but this should not be equated with allegiance to the denomination, simply because for older members, their primary experience and foundation was with one of the antecedent denominations.
- Older members are now increasingly likely to change congregations or leave the Uniting Church altogether, especially if they feel isolated, ignored or abused.
- An increasing number of ministers appear to have significantly different theological positions from members and the sexuality issue in particular has become a prime area for conflict.
- There is a growing divide between rural and city congregations, and between property rich congregations and property poor congregations. Many of these congregations have even less opportunity to connect with younger members, and they are becoming increasingly devoid of people resources, especially stipended leadership. The rural church will suffer a much sharper decline over the next ten years.

## 3. Sources for Statistics

What is the real situation? Where do we find information? There are several main areas of statistics that are commonly used in these discussions, and in

this part I will note two areas: Internal Records and The National Census. When the full figures for the 2006 National Church Life Survey are released I will provide a longer report on this key area.

I believe it is now difficult to make significant comparative analysis of membership statistics from the triennial statistical returns to the Assembly. Please read the reports presented to the 2000 and 2003 Assembly meetings to see detail of the issues. It is evident to me from my contacts in presbyteries that the difficulty of providing reliable information is related to the overall difficulty that many churches (mainly church office bearers) have in managing and responding to the request for information, and maintaining information and a reliable membership record. Therefore many churches fail to fill out their form and, as a result, estimates are increasingly used.

The National Census has basic questions on “religion” or “no religion” in terms of identification. It provides an overview of religious affiliation in Australia. The latest census was August 2006, and the basic results were made available in June 2007. Apart from a small glitch in 1991, the percentage of UCA affiliates has steadily decreased. I remember one leader in the Uniting Church proudly promoting the census statistics in that year (1991) as proof that the public were coming into the Uniting Church in droves. Apart from the fact that attendance records did not agree, this person had completely missed the point that the numerical increase had nothing to do with a love for the Uniting Church.

Firstly, all those who were still recording themselves as Methodist were now coded to the Uniting Church (from 1986), and secondly, some non-members had finally caught up with the fact that there was a Uniting Church and had sufficient enough knowledge to tick a box they thought may be closest to their antecedent church, though it could be argued that many of these could have been included in the statistics for continuing Presbyterian affiliation or continuing Congregational affiliation.

What is clear is that between 1996 and 2001 the UCA affiliation rate fell by 6.46%, and between 1996 and 2006, by 14.9%. (Tasmania recorded the largest decline -- 23%). This affiliation decrease occurred during a time when the population in Australia increased by 11.8%. For comparison the Baptists recorded a growth of 7.3%, and Pentecostals 25.7% (nearly double the population increase).

What factors are important in the UCA affiliation

decrease?

I believe there are three main factors:

- (i) Numbers who have left since 2003. While small in terms of affiliation, the debate over sexuality and leadership may also have affected non-members.
- (ii) Continuing members of the Uniting Church who decide to not tick the Uniting Church box in the Census form, and instead choose a general term such as “Christian” or write in another description. There are probably thousands of increasingly alienated UCA members who do not wish to be identified anymore with the Uniting Church.
- (iii) Ageing of affiliates.

## **Uniting Church congregations and the Future**

What are the types of Uniting Church congregations which are more likely to survive the next ten - twenty years given the current context?

Some church commentators believe that the denomination is dead or dying. I believe that while the older institutional denominations will certainly become smaller, some denominational-style churches will remain. Clearly unless there is a significant reversal, overall numbers will be fewer and the main churches will be:

*Larger evangelical and reformed churches, especially regional churches*

The regional church will also have a life of its own and may have an identity quite distinct from the denomination. Like the Mega Church, it will attract people to worship from within the denomination and outside of the denomination, but it will also be of sufficient size to promote a sense of community within an area. Regional churches will be particularly helpful in large rural or coastal areas as the population shift continues and small towns are simply unable to sustain paid ministry and worshipping congregations. These churches will be mainly evangelical in their outlook.

*The Mega Church*

An additional category in the evangelical and regional group is the mega church, which is increasingly becoming a semi-independent or network linked church. Essentially the church makes its own decisions and has little personal connection with the denomination, apart from fulfilling legal and statutory requirements. They will develop their own internal

networks and support system, independent of, though not exclusive to the denomination. The autonomous nature of these (usually) individual churches also makes the denominational identity more diffuse.

Mega churches attract people from different regions, usually a whole city. These churches are openly evangelistic and attempt to attract people to worship and make a commitment to Jesus Christ. Clearly, these churches will be evangelical in their outlook.

#### *Smaller lay ministry based evangelical churches, like house churches*

These are presently small churches, mostly with lay leadership. They are able to maintain basic services and worship, and are not reliant on large offerings or property income. They are also remote and removed from the experience of the public workings of the denomination.

An increasing number will be in the cities as people move to explore closer connections with their community and develop a non-denominational setting. Many will be in rural areas, and if they have become a non-Uniting fellowship, may even meet in church buildings which have been abandoned by the denomination or rented at a peppercorn rent. These churches will be mainly evangelical in their outlook.

#### *'Niche market' city or suburban churches*

These churches will cater for disaffected church members in general, often from different denominations, and will have a liturgical and liberal orientation. They will run high profile programmes in an attempt to connect with the wider liberal social justice networks, but will remain very small in attendance given the number of potential affiliates.

#### *Wealthy middle class suburban churches*

Some average suburban churches with older members will be able to continue, due to paid staff who undertake many tasks that may have been previously undertaken by lay members. In some ways these churches will develop into a form of chaplaincy.

#### *Alternate communities, linked to welfare centres or groups.*

Various experimental groups and communities will continue or develop, especially worshipping communities founded by missions (previously Methodist Parish Missions), and groups funded by the denomination as it seeks to "do church differently". Some of these experiments may be short-lived.

#### *Migrant-ethnic or NESB churches*

While there will be increasing strain on these churches due to sexuality issues and also generational and language issues, the network of family and historical connections will continue to provide a strong base for continuity in the local scene. These churches will continue to be mainly evangelical in their outlook, and though they will mostly not support the Uniting Church position on sexuality, they will remain reliant on the Uniting Church for property access. Unless more radical decisions are made, most (but not all) will at least remain technically 'under the umbrella'. The influence of ministers and members of other churches, and their perceived position in their particular migrant-ethnic community will have a significant impact on their decision making, especially if there are reasonable alternatives for their own members. Some churches may adopt names that do not publicly identify their 'brand' as a Uniting Church, and this may be the first step to moving out of the Uniting Church.

There are some members of the church who believe that the Uniting Church will have a flood of new members when the church fully adopts a dominant liberal theological basis. Sometimes people will highlight the beliefs of non-attending Uniting Church affiliates and note the similarity with liberal social beliefs, and raise the expectation that a truly liberal church will attract these people to worship. I acknowledge that some may be attracted, but it will be a small number in reality, and they will mainly attend niche market churches which can afford to maintain stipended ministry, perhaps due to their location or property income.

For many liberal churches, the social message is the primary concern, but today there are many quasi-religious social activist groups who are far more active and, one could say, even more evangelistic in their recruiting zeal. Most denominations will not gain many members from a strong liberal-based theology. People do not readily join churches which have vague and amorphous ideas. If you are looking for certain ethics and values, then you are more likely to find the type of ethics and values you want outside the church. Most humanists are actually quite honest about their lack of interest in the 'trappings' of the Christian church.

*Peter Bentley's analysis continues in December's 'Catalyst'*

# Wesley Institute Choir takes out first prize in international competition

Wesley Institute's Choir of 47 students has won first place at the Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival in Vienna. The choir competition was held on Monday, 9 July and winners were announced the following day. They then performed as part of an evening Gala Concert on Tuesday, 10 July at Vienna's world-renowned Golden Hall of the Musikverein.

The competition was part of a three day music festival in Vienna that featured performances by choirs, symphonic bands and orchestras and workshops with a variety of international musicians. The Wesley Institute Choir were up against stiff competition from talented youth choirs from Shanghai, Ukraine, Phoenix and New Zealand but to their amazement - and the resounding cheer of the Golden Hall - were announced as winners in the category of 'Mixed Choir with Outstanding Success'.

"It was an incredible night," said choir member, Jonny Robinson. "It was amazing to be amongst choirs and orchestras all performing at the Golden Hall because they love to play and sing. Once the prizes were announced, we enjoyed the night for what it was - young people from around the world brought together playing world-class music in a world-class hall.

"We congratulated each other, made friends from around the globe and proved to ourselves that anything is possible. David Johnston took a bunch of

inexperienced choral musicians who were ready to work and brought them to Vienna to win the grand prize."

The choir performed five pieces for the competition; Dir by Wolfram Wagner, Locus iste by Anton Bruckner, Tides of Ocean by Matthew Orlovich, Bogoroditsye Dyevo (Ave Maria) by Rachmaninov and Song of Exaltation by John Ness Beck.

The festival was part of a three week, tailor-made tour designed by Principal of Wesley Institute, Dr David Johnston.

"I created this tour as an academic subject the students could enrol in," said Dr Johnston. "The subject is called Historical and Cultural Performance Tour. The students study classical composers and musicology on site and combine this with choral performances at some of the places they have studied in music history.

"One of these places is St Mark's Basilica in Venice where Vivaldi worked and which dates back to the 15th century. We had the privilege of singing there which was an amazing experience."

The choir sang and toured their way through Rome, Florence, Venice, Munich, Salzburg, Vienna and then visited Prague, Budapest and Zurich before heading back to Sydney.

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## Derrida: remembering September 11

*Why the 'father of deconstructionism' believed radical Islam to be worse than the coalitions of the West:*

What appears to me to be unacceptable in the "strategy" of the "bin Laden effect" is not only the cruelty, the disregard for human life, the disrespect for law, for women, the use of what is worst in technocapitalist modernity for the purposes of religious fanaticism. No, it is, above all, the fact that such actions and such discourse *open on to no future and, in my view, have no future*. . . . What is being proposed, at least implicitly, is that all capitalist and modern technoscientific forces be put in the service of an interpretation, itself dogmatic, of the Islamic revelation of the One. . . . That is why, in this unleashing of violence without name, if I had to take one of the two sides and choose in a binary situation, well, I would. Despite my very strong reservations about the American, indeed European, political posture, about the "international antiterrorist" coalition, despite all the de facto betrayals, all the failures to live up to democracy, international law, and the very international institutions that the states of this "coalition" themselves founded and supported up to a certain point, I would take the side of the camp that, in principle, by right of law, leaves a perspective open to perfectibility in the name of the "political," democracy, international law, international institutions, and so on. . . . Even in its most cynical mode, such an assertion still lets resonate within it an invincible promise. I don't hear any such promise coming from "bin Laden," at least not one for *this world*."

From A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, University of Chicago Press, 2003

## *ACC discusses business with church heads*

ACC Chairman, Rev Dr Max Champion, wrote to the heads of churches around Australia during August, and in reply received several favourable comments and expressions of support for the ACC project.

In his letter to the heads of churches, Dr Champion reiterated the ACC's view that the decision of the 11th Assembly of the Uniting Church on sexuality and leadership was very disappointing, and voiced the ACC's deep concern that the UCA's sexuality and leadership debate might be resolved "without recourse to the fine theological, ethical and pastoral traditions of the ecumenical church."

There are several emerging signs of mutual interest between the ACC and the country's significant Christian denominations. For example, the Deputy Chair of the ACC, Rev Stephen Estherby, attended the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church on September 10, at the invitation of the Church's Moderator General, Rgt Rev Bob Thomas.

### **Review**

## **Some problems at prayer**

*Prayers for a Multicultural Church: Mission Prayer Handbook (1991-2003)* is published by the Uniting Church National Assembly and can be viewed on the UCA website. It is published for use by cross-cultural congregations.

Some of the book's prayers sound Christian and holy, but on closer inspection, are problematic.

The first prayer in this collection is called, *God of Many Names*. The prayer begins invoking the "God of a thousand names" and then lists 14 "forms" in which this god comes to "us". Each form is as a supplier of a need to the needful. For example, god is "rainbow" to the depressed, and "water" to the parched. Each form is a 'name' for God. The other 986 "forms" or "names" are not mentioned. The prayer seems to imply that whatever one thinks god does, that is indeed his name.

There are problems here. The prayer's logic is deceitful. The sequence of stating: god has a thousand names; think of what god does; that is god's name; all these names are one: is done at the precise moment when the worshipper trusts the ordained to lead their innermost worshipful thoughts.

The prayer allows the pantheistic idea that praying to rainbows and water is a good thing. The prayer also allows any "form" to have legitimacy as a "name": remember, ancient Israel confused the golden calf as legitimately god. Christians have to be careful.

Fortunately, we already know who God is when we pray, "Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be thy name." The one name we confess is the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in whose name we are baptized, as is stated in the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia, and by the major church

confessions. There is no need for vagueness about whom we worship.

The third prayer in this collection goes further – it seems to despise God's name. Taken from the *Mission Prayer Handbook 1993*, the prayer is called, "In the Many Faces."

This prayer puts a new twist on God's name. Unlike the first prayer, which suggests that any name will do, this prayer prays to a no-name God. The prayer begins: "We thought we knew Your face, O God. It was the face of the strong father watching over us and holding us like a rock." By using the past tense of the verb "to know", the prayer implies a previous misunderstanding of God's name.

It also ignores some of the most comforting, ancient psalms that use the image of rock. Then the prayer does an about-face by having the congregation apparently affirm this image with the words, "Praise to You, God who is like a father." This makes a simile of what, in the Lord's prayer, is God's name.

The prayer then continues its play with images: "Then we saw you as a mother, bending over to feed us and rocking us gently against Your warm breasts." The prayer seems to be appealing to the sort of earth-mother-goddess imagery that the writers of the New Testament took care to avoid.

Finally, the prayer asks the congregation to pray to "Great God, unnamable and glorious."

It seems this prayer doesn't know whom to worship, and yet it asks others to follow.

These prayers are not worthy of Christian use and should be discarded by the Uniting Church.

*Paul Langkamp*

## Tongan assembly joins ranks of the ACC

# Why we must keep working for unity

In July, the Tongan Assembly of Confessing Congregations was launched in Sydney. One of the addresses to mark the occasion was delivered by the Hon Rev Dr **Gordon Moyes AC**. In it, he recalled the original reasons behind the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia 30 years ago, and argued the theological basis for continuing to seek 'unity' today. An edited extract follows.

I grew up in an era that took church union seriously. Throughout the twentieth century many denominations planned to unite. By 1980, 137 denominations had united into 39 denominations found in six continents, with a further 123 denominations negotiating in 29 countries on six continents.

However optimistic the 1960s and 1970s were, the times since the 1980s on have seen a worldwide slowdown in church union. If the union of the three denominations to form our church had not occurred by the end of 1977, I doubt if it would now occur. Furthermore, the experience of union was so traumatic that any further union in this country between our denomination and the three others close to us has been shelved.

Sociologists like Dr Robert Guthrie explain that the union was painful because it was initiated by theologians and administrators who were not the people to implement the policy in the parishes. Union came and did not allow local structures to emerge gradually from a process of socialisation.

Only now, thirty years after the union, are members in many areas completing the socialisation process.

I did not drift into the Uniting Church because of my parents' choice or any accident of growing up. I chose the Uniting Church in Australia.

Thirty years ago I thought the choice of this name was nothing short of inspired because the word "Uniting" was in the present continuous tense. We were not a *united* church like "The United Church of Canada", or "The United Church of North India" -- the

past tense that spoke presumptuously of something already accomplished.

We are "Uniting", not already "united". We came from different traditions: Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational. Two other denominations were officially observers to the formation of union, but they voted not to join: the Anglicans and the Churches of Christ. Had they done so, it would have been a stronger union, with greater numbers of evangelical members and greater choice of leadership, and that could have saved the Uniting Church from the pain of the past two decades.

But I recognise that the process of union was so painful that no other such union is likely to occur. More socialisation must take place before we can move from "uniting" to "united," even in this one denomination. The unpleasant fact is that more are leaving us than are deciding to join us, and among those who remain there is great unhappiness which has led to the formation of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, an attempt to stay within the Uniting Church while declaring our commitment to the Scriptures and our opposition to the direction in which the UCA leaders have been taking us. The main motivation towards us uniting in the first place is of prime importance. It is this reason that keeps us within the Uniting Church in Australia, although our beliefs and protests have been trampled or ignored.

In the beginning, many saw sense in uniting people of similar beliefs. Others saw economic sense in rationalising properties. That has become a painful issue as denominational bean-counters look with envy

upon local churches and try to make small congregations close down to give them the assets.

Others saw a powerful witness to the community in Christians demonstrating that they really were one by their worshipping together. That hope blew up in our face when parts of the church took other parts of the church to court to settle property disputes and schools and hospitals decided they wanted their autonomy and property rather than be part of the union. Significant numbers voted to remain separate from the union.

Large numbers left to join other denominations. The Pentecostal churches now include in their numbers tens of thousands of former Uniting Church members. The move away from the Uniting Church still continues. These churches, now called the Australian Christian Churches, have passed the Uniting Church and have moved to be the third largest denomination in Australia after the Catholic and Anglican Churches. Our moves to union made us a laughing stock with many.

The 2007 Census reveals that over the past ten years, the Uniting Church has decreased by 15 per cent, from 1.3 million to 1.1 million, a loss of over a quarter of a million adherents in just ten years. In Tasmania, the Uniting Church has lost in ten years 23 per cent of its total adherents. Over the past 30 years this loss is staggering, with the Uniting Church losing three quarters of a million adherents! This includes losing almost a whole generation of young adults. If this loss rate continues, considering the average age of UCA membership (over 66 years now) the UCA will go out of existence altogether within the next 20 years. Yet some Uniting Church leaders deny our membership is in a disastrous decline. They persist with policies that every week lose us members and adherents. The Assembly of Confessing Congregations is an attempt to stem that haemorrhage.

But our original motivation for uniting was neither pragmatic nor economic. It was theological. If we



**Our original motivation for uniting was neither pragmatic nor economic. It was theological. If we could only recover that original commitment, there may be some hope even yet for the Uniting Church in Australia.**

could only recover that original commitment, there may be some hope even yet for the Uniting Church in Australia. We were convinced 30 years ago that in uniting we were obeying the expressed will of Christ, recorded in scripture and basically ignored over 2000 years of division among Christians. We became a Uniting Church because it is His will.

Our world is divided by race, religion, colour, class, creed, status, sex, economic circumstance, disability, age, employment, social standing, family ties, town of origin, and place of education and so on. Australians like to think we are all mates, with no barriers against anyone. But scratch us and old antagonisms, prejudices, snobberies and divisions come out. Jesus prays that in a segregated society the church may be one. The church must be one place where rich and poor, black and white, brown and yellow, educated and ignorant, male and female, ethnic and caucasian, migrant and aboriginal, young and old, may be found both in congregations and in leadership.

Jesus in his last hours prayed: "I do not pray only for them, but also for those who believe in Me because of their message. I pray that they may all be one." We usually take this to mean that Christians should be united instead of denominationally divided.

But Jesus was not advocating some form of ecclesiastical carpentry, tacking one denomination onto another. Nor was he talking of a union based



## Letters to the editor

How many members of the Uniting Church does it take to change a light globe? That was the electrifying question posed in *Catalyst* June 2007.

The answer is that it depends on the light.

Take a light that has been burning steadily for the last two thousand years or more. Obviously time to change the globe.

How many Uniting Church members did it take to do it? Not so many judging by various surveys. But after the job was done Uniting Church folk were assured that *nothing had changed*. After all, what's a light globe between friends?

How many Uniting Church members does it take to change a light globe? They do that sort of thing in the dark in the Uniting Church so you can't count.

*Katherine Abetz  
Tasmania*

It was with great interest that I read the article "Called, but where to?" by Rev Rob Tann.

However he failed to mention the women from within parishes where he was minister who "heard the call."

I was one of them. I completed my studies at Trinity Theological College (where there are presently over 20 candidates) in 2004 and have been Minister of the Word in Gympie for the past two years.

*Linda Hanson  
Queensland*

I feel that the members of the editorial committee and the magazine's contributors have done an absolutely marvellous job regarding the inaugural issue of *ACC Catalyst*. Both the layout and the subject material are in my humble opinion "spot on." In any endeavour it is a rare thing to get something right first time. All concerned are to be congratulated.

*Rob Porteous  
Northern Territory*

upon compromise, where beliefs do not matter. Nor was he talking about a marriage of convenience between churches with falling memberships. "Being one" is a spiritual conviction that binds us together over all worldly segregations that divide. Jesus prayed that in a world of segregation we might be one.

So often, the leaders of the Uniting Church do not listen to the membership of the church. A petition demanding the rescinding of an unacceptable Assembly motion was presented to the Assembly Standing Committee. 24,000 Uniting Church members from over 500 congregations signed the petition, which was delivered in 16 volumes.

Thousands of letters and notes expressed the deep spiritual and emotional dismay and concern of Uniting Church members and adherents following the Assembly's decision.

UCA leaders believed the concept of "homosexuality being OK if you happen to live in right relationships." But that is not acceptable Christian practice in the light of clear biblical teaching.

The members of the ACC believe that the Assembly of the Uniting Church have placed themselves outside the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, in

contravention of paragraph 2 of their Basis of Union. They also are appalled that the proposal was not referred back to other Councils of the Church as the Assembly is obliged to do where a matter is "of vital importance to the life of the Church." The President was clearly in error in making a ruling that the matter was not of vital importance to the Church.

We call upon the Uniting Church to unite together in a fresh and exciting thrust into national witness to Jesus Christ. Our denomination is silent and invisible to most Australians. Only a fresh witness to Jesus Christ can make the difference.

The prayer of Jesus is the greatest in all history. It was prayed for his disciples, and as well for you whom he calls "those who believe in me because of their message." Have you heard his prayer for you? Have you believed? His prayer is the reason we call ourselves "uniting", for in a segregated world Jesus prays for our unity. His prayer is the reason that we emphasise a Christian life-style, for in a sinful world Jesus prays for our holiness. His prayer is the reason that we preach the gospel, for in a sceptical world, Jesus prays for our witness.

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there is just one problem. A fully biological account of the human has to be deterministic, by definition. Phrases like 'respect for nature' have no meaning. For humans to be fully in the age of ecology, there is no room for genuine freedom, because this hints at some sort of transcendentalism. Real freedom would imply that, at least in some respects, humans were not 'part of nature'. The argument can be put in fairly simple terms: if humans are wholly 'within nature', then everything that they do is 'natural'. Now, of course, for the greater part of its history, humanity in the West believed that there is in the human something which goes beyond the merely 'natural', and this provided a rationale for the human alteration and exploitation of nature. Perhaps more importantly, it has also provided the rationale for appreciation, respect, and even love of the natural world around us.

But, for many young people today, all that has changed. Without a firmly entrenched religious tradition they have nowhere to go. Ecological awareness cannot give them the answers they need and the only secular alternative - a sort of ignorant hedonism - is repugnant to the more sensitive among them. Philosophy once offered some sort of solution too, but the descent into relativism has put an end to all that. And so they stagger on like weary dinosaurs plodding towards extinction in some dismal swamp. They are creatures doomed by the sheer weight of their own presence. In such a situation, one might have hoped that the great religious traditions of humanity could come to the rescue. Alas, in the West at least, it seems that there have been two equally problematical responses to what is really a question of finding some meaning and purpose in human life. The first response is to totally dismiss the traditional Christian view of the human - the affirmation of the centrality of humans in the created order. This is simply a form of 'speciesism', as Professor Singer likes to put it. The second is to re-interpret basic Christian doctrines in such a way as to make them more ecologically palatable.

I have read some of the better known proponents of a 'Christian Ecology' - people like Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox in America and Australia's own Paul Collins (former ABC Religious Affairs commentator). The message in each case is fairly clear. Christianity must change its views and become 'creation-centred' rather than 'redemption-centred'. No doubt that could be done, but it is a moot point as to what would be left of the Christian religion. What we would have, in essence,



**Without a firmly entrenched religious tradition, many young people today have nowhere to go. Ecological awareness cannot give them the answers they need .... And so they stagger on like weary dinosaurs plodding towards extinction in some dismal swamp.**

is a reworking of Scripture and Tradition such that offensive bits are either removed, ignored, or reinterpreted along the lines of that famous Peter Simple character, Bishop Spacely-Trellis with his ultra-contemporary Bevidon New Testament. As an example, Paul Collins supposes that the so-called 'dominion passage' in Genesis (humans are given dominion over the rest of the created order) is 'an unfortunate text, which so vividly represents early Judaism's own antagonistic relationship to a difficult and arid desert environment...'. In the light of such a statement, it is unclear to me as to how the concept of divine revelation can then have any real meaning at all. Like Humpty-Dumpty, we make things mean just what we want them to mean. Perhaps we should reword the opening passage of St. John's Gospel - 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was wrong'. Collins also believes that 'we have become the world's most acute and intractable problem'. Not surprisingly, he is very big on population control. Recent figures on birth rates in the industrialised West should give him great comfort. We are well on the way to auto-extinction - good riddance! In another statement, absolutely typical of popular ecology, Collins is at pains to remind us that, on the geological time scale the existence of humans is so transitory as to be almost irrelevant and that 'the world does not revolve around us as human beings and never has'. Pascal would have reminded him that while man may indeed be the very weakest reed in nature, he is a

thinking reed and this makes all the difference: “*But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows nothing of this.*” (*Pensées xv: 200*).

The ‘ecological’ response from religion is no solution. It is merely the capitulation of religion before the idol of scientism (itself a form of religious belief). Moreover, it comes at a time when science itself is being battered by the winds of change. Its dominance of the contemporary scene is no longer complete. Just the other day, I heard some education guru warn of a drop in student interest in the sciences and suggest that we need ‘to make science more sexy’. Science has lost its edge for many reasons, not the least being that many young students in the biological sciences see it as part of the problem, not part of the solution. And so, that self-same enterprise which has enabled us to gain an ever greater understanding of the natural world around us has also made us in its own image. The human enquirer disappears and we become mere specimens in some vast physico-chemical system. Like the Fisher King, science has been laid low by its own weapon and the Amfortas-wound refuses to heal. In Canto 26 of *The Inferno*, Dante gives us a speech from the doomed Ulysses in hell. This includes an exhortation to his men as they sail towards danger in a disastrous second voyage (an image later taken up by Tennyson in his Ulysses):

*Brothers’, I said, ‘O you, who having crossed a hundred thousand dangers, reach the West, to this brief waking-time that still is left / unto your senses, you must not deny experience of that which lies beyond the sun, and of the world that is unpeopled. / Consider well the seed that gave you birth: you were not made to live your lives as brutes but to be followers of worth and knowledge.*

There is something of relevance here for the modern enthusiasts of ‘ecological consciousness’. If, indeed, we come to view ourselves as no more than highly organised bags of protoplasm then we are doomed. As Sir Kenneth Clark remarked at the beginning of his famous *Civilization* television series, it is lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilization. At the very end of the series, he also remarked that ‘heroic materialism’ is not enough to save us on its own. The new ecology may help us if we keep it strictly in the realm of cautious scientific investigation. As a philosophy or a religion though, it is the sickness unto death.

Lemmings, by the way, do not commit suicide. That seems to be a specifically human trait! They live in a lemming-centred world and do not practice birth control. A helpful footnote in Dennis Chitty’s book on lemmings explains that one of the early science popularisers, Walt Disney, filmed a ‘mass lemming suicide’ in *White Wilderness* (1958). The producers of the film purchased one thousand of the little rodents from Eskimo children and had them flown to Alberta. When the hapless creatures refused to commit the only unforgivable sin, the Disney crew threw them off the edge of a cliff into a river below. Thus was a law of popular ecology satisfied.

The last half of the twentieth century saw the rise of political correctness. I predict that the first half of this new century will see the rise of ecological correctness.

*This edited chapter from Brian Coman’s ‘A Loose Canon: essays on history, modernity and tradition’ is used with the permission of the book’s author and its publisher, Connor Court Publishing. ‘A Loose Canon’ is available now from Connor Court Publishing, ph 03 5368 2570, or via the web at [www.connorcourt.com](http://www.connorcourt.com)*

*‘Catalyst’ will review the book in a forthcoming issue.*

## ACC activities build around Australia’s states

The growth of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations continued in July and August.

On August 25, the ACC’s Chairman, Rev Dr Max Champion, visited Launceston for the official inauguration of ACC Tasmania. Rev Walter Abetz was confirmed as the ACC’s convenor for the state.

Before that, on July 14, Dr Champion was one of three speakers at a celebration by Tongan community members of the Uniting Church, at Auburn in NSW.

Revs. Sione Alo Fakahua and Dr Gordon Moyes also spoke at the meeting (see Dr Moyes’ address p24.) Several choirs sang at the meeting, which was to establish an umbrella organisation for all Tongan members of the Uniting Church in Australia. Representatives from Queensland, NSW and Victoria attended.

# Relax ... in the end, we're not in charge

Ted Curnow

Although it's painful to talk about -- and some feel it is better to avoid the subject altogether -- the truth is that the Christian Church in the West has been in decline now for many years. In addition to this, to belong to any major church and to share an evangelical view today often leads to a person being marginalized or feeling a sense of rejection.

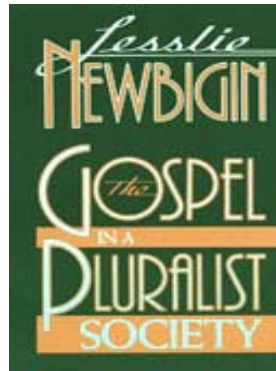
There are a number of reasons why this occurs. Sometimes renewal groups in the church attract people who have been hurt or wronged in some way, to the point that they become a bit paranoid about the odds stacked against them.

On the other hand, perhaps we have taken what we might call the "perks of Christendom" for granted, and we have forgotten that the church was born amid persecution, and that it has always lived with the tensions of apostasy, syncretism and schism, contending for the faith once entrusted to the saints.

When Paul wrote to Timothy from prison, facing execution, Timothy was young in years, physically frail and retiring in disposition. The great Anglican Bishop Moule, in describing this period, goes as far as to write "Christianity trembled, humanly speaking on the verge of annihilation." We should not be surprised then or caught off guard today by the decline of the church, the subtle pressures or the hostile public response to the truth we stand for in the gospel.

The temptation, of course, is to avoid the tension by modifying the truth, to rationalise our response and to conform to the spirit of the age. How then should we respond?

In his book *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Lesslie Newbigin identifies two common Christian responses to the pressure of a pluralistic environment in which every idea is as good as the next, and there is no such



thing as "the truth". The first is timidity. Our gospel becomes muffled because we are conscious that its exclusiveness is not regarded as politically correct.

The second is anxiety, which can spark off a desperate activism that really reflects a lack of confidence in God.

A proper attitude, says Newbigin, is confidence!

Australia's Geoffrey Bingham, in recent years, wrote to some of those who have enjoyed and benefited from his ministry. "I watch my brethren, as I watch myself and see how easy it is to be deflected from the primary ministry committed to us. The gospel of justification by grace, through faith is the only message we have, and none other. I am convinced that the reason we have to fish around for 'something more' is because we have never really fully, initially understood the basic reality of justification by grace through faith, but we think we have! That we are sinners and saints at the same time is a doctrine few of us live by."

The good news is that we can be released from timidity and anxiety to be ourselves when the grace of God transforms our self image.

Accordingly, we have no need to offer knee jerk reactions or to revert to an angry protest that damages our credibility. Paul makes it clear that we don't need to react with an aggressive "crusade attitude" in a desperate bid to save the Church.

Influential British evangelical John Stott has said, "Don't be afraid. In entrusting the deposit to our hands, he [God] has not taken his own hands off it. He is himself its final guardian, and he will preserve the truth which he has committed to the church."

*Rev Ted Curnow is minister at Kuitpo Linked Congregations, South Australia.*