



Building a new model of how to live

Alan Finkel, who was recently Australia's chief scientist, in his new optimistic and powerful book *Getting to Zero, Australia's Energy Transition* (see the review in this newsletter) started with a quote from Buckminster Fuller; "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

The words have stuck in my mind. They can be applied to so many aspects of society that concern us; how to keep in our lives some of the good things we discovered when we couldn't live as we usually did before the pandemic, how to reduce violence against women.

They also echo one of the wise sayings that guide many progressive Christians: *How we live is more important than what we believe*. They could be a guide to church groups whose dwindling numbers are signs of a model that used to work well but is helpful to fewer people each year.

It is about how our values change over time. For example, it provides a way to think about moving on from earlier expressions of Christianity that supported evils like slavery, a myth of exclusive male leadership, the submission of women by men, cruelty to LGBTIQ people, repression of healthy sexual expression, myths of white racial superiority, support for colonial invasion and oppression of indigenous peoples - a list that could be extended.

Progressive Christianity is about a developing model for how to live that is guided by the Way of Jesus – perhaps more accurately about many models of how to live that take account of how diverse we humans are after around 200,000 years since the first modern humans appeared in the great story of the evolution of life on this planet. How to live better lives is an attractive and energising and significant task that we share. - DM

Coming at the PCNV meeting
on 23 May:

**“Politics, Concepts of Evil, &
Apocalyptic Insights”**

with

Rev Dr Robyn Whittaker
Senior Lecturer in New Testament
at Pilgrim Theological College,
Melbourne

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Alan Finkel, “Getting to Zero. Australia’s Energy Transition”

Quarterly Essay 61, March 2021.

Review by David Merritt

As I write this review, Australians are confronting weather in NSW and Queensland that is disrupting homes, shops, families and farms with extraordinary floods. Recently WA and eastern states in Australia were devastated by bushfires that destroyed large areas of forests, numerous homes and farms, and horrifying numbers of Australia’s distinctive wildlife. Everywhere changes in weather are topics of anguished conversations. Discussions of actions to limit predicted impacts of climate change on living in Australia have fresh urgency. “Houston, we have a problem”.

A new brief publication by a highly qualified author is designed to help us understand the extent of the issues we face, and, more importantly, what practical steps can be taken to do something significant to minimize the looming threats.

Alan Finkel is a household name in Australia. He was Australia’s chief scientist from 2016 to 2020. He led the 2017 National Electricity Market Review and the 2019 development of the National Hydrogen Strategy, and chaired the 2020 panel developing the Low Emissions Technology Roadmap. He is now special advisor to the Australian government on low-emissions technologies.

That list of highly specialised qualifications could be daunting for those of us who are not scientifically trained if it were not for three additional factors. **First** this is not a book about the problems we face (though there is a bit about them) but a practical book about what can be done to solve the problems. Forget uninformed rants and political excuses for inaction. This small book is, as its subtitle states, about “getting to zero. Australia’s energy transition”. Every page involves practical actions that affect our future and the future of our children and grandchildren. **Second**, the man can write! He uses straightforward language to describe formidable tasks. He describes in clear language how to arrive at an Australia we will be able to live well in. **Third**, and almost amazingly, he is optimistic about the paths ahead to reach close to zero emissions. And all of this in 103 pages of mostly easy to read type. There were some places where my lack of technical knowledge meant I was reading words but not grasping all that they meant. But those pages did not interrupt the author’s case for action.

The author starts with a quote from Buckmaster Fuller: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing one obsolete.” It sets the tone for the book. “If Australia handles the challenge well, we can build an economy that takes advantage of the transition” (page 3).

Pages 4 to 13 lay out some facts on global warming. The following pages address the mountain to be climbed. In clear descriptions and charts he describes 2020 emissions in eight categories: electricity, stationary energy (to generate steam, heat or pressure), transport, fugitives (during the extraction, processing and delivery of fossil fuels), agriculture, industry, waste, and land use.

He states that in Australia nuclear fission power stations and hydrogen fusion are not currently starters for the task ahead and large hydro electric dams, burning biomass waste to electricity, natural geothermal heat, and wave and tidal power are not major contributors to solutions we need (pages 33-34). He discusses electricity generation by solar and wind (‘the backbone’), storage problems and the role of natural gas (pages 35 to 59). The hero of his story (from page

60) is hydrogen – made from water by using clean electricity, and reduced to very low temperatures to be transported internationally as a much desired fuel and income earner.

His conclusion: “My personal vision for a future, net-zero-emissions Australian society is one in which technology is rapidly advancing to the point of our being able to have our cake and eat it too. Energy will be clean, plentiful and cheap, supporting jobs in manufacturing, agriculture and indeed in all sectors of the economy. By investing in low-emission technologies, Australia will simultaneously confront the environmental challenges threatening our nation and the world, while laying the groundwork for our long-term economic security and prosperity. The challenge of climate change will be turned into a moment of opportunity for technical innovation, scientific imagination and job creation.” (pages 95-96)

-David Merritt. 25 March 2021

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Open Discussion on Progressive Christianity

Open Dialogue and Inclusive Action in the Uniting Church in Australia and with friends of the UCA

For 21 years the Queensland **UC Forum website** has offered free subscriptions to people from many denominations or no church connection interested in resources and scholarship in the field of Progressive Christianity.

Subscribers receive an email notice when a new resource is posted on their website – often several times a week. There are articles of current interest and many book reviews including an impressive backlist of books that have been reviewed.

The Group Moderator of the website, Dr Paul Inglis, has built links with PCNV, receiving our newsletters, and welcomes any members of PCNV who would like to have access to the resources on UC Forum,

I can warmly recommend this excellent source of diverse and stimulating resources related to Progressive Christianity – David Merritt.

“Join the UC Progressives Network and receive our posts”



“We would like to share our interest in **Progressive Christianity** with you.”

Email: <https://ucforum.unitingchurch.org.au/>



If Not God, Then What?

Essay by Rev. Gretta Vosper

March 18, 2021

My previous article, [“Except for God”](#), challenges our habitual use of the word “god” in church because of its polymorphous tendencies, taking on a different shape and purpose for each unique individual. Using the word “god” to conjure an all-powerful deity with biblically-proportioned prejudices and condemnations is dramatically different from using the word “god” to call us to a “no matter what” sort of love. I talk about this a lot. About ditching archaic language. About reading more than just the Bible or not reading the Bible at all. About questioning the prevalence of organ and choral music. About pews, though in the time of COVID, we’re not so worried about pews. About how the non-churchy parts of church are the perhaps most important - the things that get you to fall in love with being together. But talking isn’t enough. We all know what air is and how essential it is to our survival. But how many of us would know how to put what elements together in a way that would really let us breathe, even let us thrive? Not many. Our time is short and the task at hand is crucial.

The Essence of Church

In my second book, *Amen*^[1], I pull the essence of the four basic types of prayer out of their ecclesiastical functions and into the realm of real life. What does prayer strive to do? What deeply human challenges did it evolve to address? Do those challenges still exist or are we, through the course of our history and the advancement of social institutions and our knowledge of the natural world, no longer in need of it? Are its purposes still relevant or have we kept it around simply for its comfortable familiarity? After all, even Pope Francis has argued that the god called God isn’t a magician with a magic wand.^[2]

Turns out, each of the different functions of prayer meets a specific human need: awe and inspiration; acknowledgement of our own personal failings; realizing and expressing gratitude; finding hope whether from within our own selves or the community beyond us. But addressing those needs doesn’t need to be undertaken on one’s knees or in church, at all.

We can do that same examination I exerted upon prayer to the whole of a Sunday service. And, in truth, we can do it with the whole business of church, not just the part that unfolds on Sunday mornings. The questions are the same: What is the essence of church? What does it strive to do? What deeply human challenges did it evolve to address? I think we’ll agree that church meets very human needs and that many of those needs are going unmet in contemporary society.

We are herd animals. We gain strength from one another’s presence, even if that presence is only intermittently welcome. We thrive in positive, affirming, intergenerational relationships and

we excel within a network of them. Our brains evolved because of them. Human connection is crucial to our development. Only a small fraction of the mirror neurons we need to develop empathy are present at our birth and we have about eight months to develop the rest of them, something that only happens if we're being nurtured in an empathic environment. If we aren't, and those neurons don't develop, things are permanently compromised. We can't catch up.

Whatever our mirror neuron load, we can keep it in tip-top shape. That, however, requires regular, positive, emotionally engaged relationships that reflect our worth as human beings (not as "human whateverwedo"s). And where do we find those relationships? Well, for many of us, we've found them in church. That is where we have been nurtured in intergeneration settings as healthy, valued members of society. And because we are, society benefits through our voluntarism, philanthropy, service, political action, and community leadership. We engage in socially pro-active ways when we are valued ourselves.

Which is, of course, why this whole endeavour we call church is so important. This is the essence we seek: **Church supports and develops people who support and sustain community.** And true community makes democracy possible. So church, when it is working well, is a crucible for democracy. I kid you not. Take note.

[1] Gretta Vosper, *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World beyond Belief*, HarperCollins, 2012.

This is an extract from a longer essay by Rev Gretta Vosper, a United Church of Canada minister.

From *Progressing Spirit. Explorations in Theology Spirituality, and the News*. Email articles that continue on from the writings and thought of Bishop John Shelby Spong.

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REFLECTIONS ON THINKING AND SPEAKING ABOUT GOD

The following words were written by Robin Myers, an American minister and author, about what he sees happening in America. The data in Australia, for example from the 2016 Census, suggests they are relevant to Australia.

I have wondered if the decline of organized religion has less to do with secular humanism and more to do with the suffocating way in which people of faith speak about that which they do not know. When church attendance first started to wane, pundits claimed that liberal churches were shrinking because they were not sufficiently conservative, unambiguous, or doctrinal. But in the last decade, the Southern Baptists have lost more than a million members. The fact is that organized religion of almost every stripe is declining and graying across the board. It's an equal-opportunity disappearing act, and it's complicated, except for one universal thread. The young are leaving religion in droves. Four out of ten younger millennials (eighteen to twenty-nine) are "nones" (no religious affiliation). That is four times higher than it was in 1980. "In fact, the fastest-growing religion in America is . . . no religion at all."

Today there are clergy who confess to hearing a very strange question from people considering membership: "Can I join your church even though I'm an atheist?"

.....

What we can no longer deny, however, is that organized religion has a God crisis on its hands. Traditional theism, the idea that God is a kind of superperson who dwells outside the world as we know it and occasionally intervenes to answer prayers or impose the divine will, has run its course and been rejected by millions. To an entire generation of disillusioned young people, and millions who came before them, the God spoken about in church has become little more than a projection of human hopes and fears. We need new ways to conceive of being human. New ways to be in relationship to the sacred and to one another.

.....

To put it plainly, we need to stop looking up—at a God who lives on the ceiling, directing and pronouncing judgement upon everything below—and start looking around.

- Robin Myers, *Saving God from Religion. A minister's search for faith in a sceptical age.* 2020

The rejection of a fake story

“The earliest Jesus and Christ movements were born out of resistance to Roman imperial power. Claiming the Bible and Christianity in the name of imperial power is a false and misleading representation of the Jesus story that belongs to Christianity’s history but need not define its future. Scholarship allows a glimpse at the real story of origins, and it allows the rejection of a fake story that rests strictly on the greed of power.”

By Perry V. Kea, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at University of Indianapolis, Indiana
<https://www.westarinstitute.org/blog/i-am-right-and-god-is-with-me/>

Promoting understanding of other faith groups in Australia is an important PCNV objective. We have benefitted from shared programs with progressive Muslims.

The following descriptions of a progressive Muslim faith group are from the website:

<https://www.muslimcollective.com>

Muslim Collective

Reason – compassion - progress

An Australian community for progressive thought and action.

Muslim Collective is a dynamic Australian faith-based community for progressive thought and social action. We are a diverse and inclusive group that supports and encourages dialogue about the real issues of our time.

We envisage a society where all people - regardless of gender, religion, race, culture or sexuality - can contribute to this conversation respectfully. Come and meet others who you can have real conversations with- we have community groups in **Melbourne** and **Sydney**

We come together as fellow humans, as Australians and as Muslims because we believe that it is the duty of each of us to contribute to making this world a better place. We strive for critical reflection and growth in our personal spiritual journeys, and within our communities.

- This organisation is welcoming to members of the LGBTQIA+ community
- This organisation focuses on Multicultural/Multilingual Communities

**THE PCNV IS RESUMING FACE TO FACE
MONTHLY MEETINGS!**

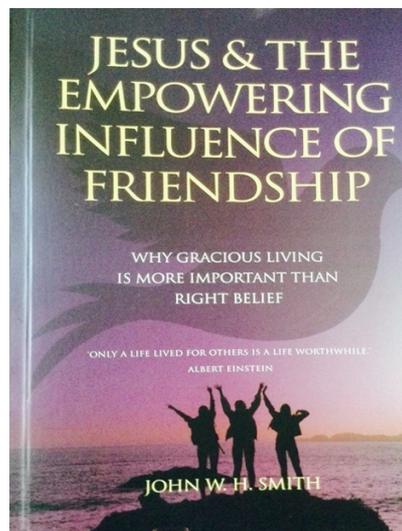
You are invited to

JESUS & THE EMPOWERING INFLUENCE OF FRIENDSHIP

**“Why Gracious Living is More Important
than Right Belief”**

with

Rev John Smith



Sunday April 25, 2021

3:00pm - 5:00 pm

Ewing Memorial Centre of Stonnington Uniting Church

Corner of Burke Road & Coppin Street, Malvern East

Online access to PCNV meetings will continue

Download a flyer for April 25 event with Rev John Smith [here](#).

John Smith is a trained social worker and ordained minister of the Uniting Church of Australia. With a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Melbourne and a Master of Social Administration from Flinders University, his ministries have included welfare management, chaplaincy and parish ministry. He is a founding member of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria Inc. and Common Dreams conferences where he continues to serve as a committee member.

For further information email.: info@pcnvictoria.org.au

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