



Living with change

Within a few weeks of writing this newsletter Australians will complete the Census held every five years. On August 22 we will provide details of many aspects of life in Australia – and some months later the Australian Bureau of Statistics will begin publishing reports that provide up to date pictures of living in Australia. Many of those reports will require action to fit a changed Australia.

Living with change will increasingly challenge us about what is important for us. First Nations People have offered us an invitation to walk with them to a better future. Climate change will increasingly confront us with the futility of wanting to keep everything we now have at the risk of losing much of it in catastrophic events in coming years – and looking on as the human family and animal life suffer. Living through the COVID pandemic has made us freshly aware of what the common good involves in accepting limitations for us individually,

Some of the issues raised are deeply ‘religious’ – that is about what matters most for our planet and the diverse life on it. The factors that led to the formation of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria in 2006 seem even more relevant. – though we have not yet worked out how best to respond to those factors. “Progressive in the title just refers to changes from traditional understandings of being Christian. It is a way of welcoming wise changes rather than staying with older ways of thinking and living that are neither fit for purpose nor express the founding vision of the Christian Way. If recent Census data is any guide, the 2021 Census will show that increasing proportions of the Australian population, especially younger generations, do not find traditional religion, nor progressive Christianity, a guide to a good life.

So “Living with change” seems, ironically, a superfluous title as we do not have a choice, but also relevant as it is possible to cooperate with others for a better life. DM

**Coming at the PCNV meeting
on 22 August:**

**“Mining John’s Gospel:
Wisdom for our times?”**

with

**Professor Mary Coloe
Yarra Theological Union**

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**Stan Grant, *Talking to My Country*. HarperCollins Australia 2016. Paperback
229 pages. Review by David Merritt**

At a time when “The Uluru Statement from the Heart” requires informed and compassionate response from all Australians and negotiations have begun in Victoria for Truth Telling to precede a Treaty, there are powerful new reasons for doing what previous generations have not done and become better informed about both our history and the realities of our present. This book can take us a significant way on those journeys by taking us inside the formative experiences of a prominent Australian. If we hear this voice we will understand the urgent force of painful memories and we will be better equipped to engage in discussions that will change Australia.

When I purchased the book I thought it would expand my understanding of ‘country’ as an indigenous term expressing a deep belonging to land, people and all living things and the stories connected to them. That would have invited me to new ways of thinking. Instead Stan Grant is speaking to ‘My country: Australia’. And he has taken me further in awareness of the deeply painful aspects of some of today’s social and political issues than I expected. Because they are powerful I often use the author’s words in what follows.

“My country, I have hesitated to tell you these things before. I have never been convinced you wanted to hear. There are those now who will shrug. Others may pause and move on. But something else is moving in our country. We are looking again at reckoning with ourselves. I can feel it and many of you have told me you are ready.” (Page 5)

From one perspective the story is told simply. But what it is about so intertwines with how Australians tell the many stories of our lives that we are invited to see and hear and feel in ways that are different and challenging.

Part one begins with two simple sentences: *“I want to tell you about the road that leads to my parents’ house. It was here that my people were murdered.”* The next paragraph begins: *“Today it is marked with a sign that reads: Poison Waterholes Creek.”* (Page 7) The simple nature of those sentences is confronting. They are not experiences of people like me. But people like me need to feel their tragic force. The early part of the book tells the story of his poor itinerant family moving from town to town as his father searched for work and ‘felt the pain of being a black man in Australia’. (Page 21)

“I am formed more fully from those early years than all the decades that have followed. This is where I came into the world and it has never left me. The small boy I was is nestled deep in the man I have become. My own path – my people would call it my songline – has taken me far from the dark back roads of poverty and fear.” (Page 21) *“We were black and Australia was white”.* (Page 23) Again we are hearing a statement about a basic division in Australia that we who are white can too easily hear without the pain that is felt by those who are black.

The story of his early life is challenging reading for those of us who will read it in the comfort, prosperity and easy national assumptions about inclusion and the ‘country of a fair go’. *“... the fear of being laughed at, the fear of being caught out wearing another boy’s cast-off clothes, the fear of the welfare men, all of this marked the territory between the world of Australia and me. This was the space the history had made and the place it had reserved for people like us.”* (Page 37)

Every page brings vividly to life experiences in school, family, seeing Fred Schepisi’s film “The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith”, reading James Baldwin, a job delivering internal mail at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, meeting Marcia Langton who encouraged him to think of university and gave him enrolment forms, absorbing radically new ideas in the university. It is both absorbing and confronting reading.

Part three (pages 71 to 87) tells the remarkable story of how an Irish ancestor John Grant in 1810 became a victim of English oppression in Ireland and was sent as a convict to New South Wales and by 1828 ran 5000 sheep on 4000 acres near Bathurst. He was wealthy and raised a large family – including ancestors of Stan Grant.

There are passages that leap out to offer insight into what has shaped Stan Grant and the memories and perspectives he offers.

If you have wondered about how memories from long ago are powerful today, the author tells his story: *“When I was a boy my world was alive with stories. We told ourselves who we were by keeping alive the memories of those passed. In my family’s telling, time was not important – what happened yesterday was as real today and would be again tomorrow. What happened to my forebears felt as real as if it had happened to me. The pain of dispossession and suffering became printed on my DNA. ... My people inherit the loss of our country. It has proven as incurable and potentially lethal as any cancer.”* (Page 177)

“I wonder now about the lives that could have been. I wonder about Eddie Murray and the ninety-nine others. I wonder about those who continue to die in custody. I wonder how we can lock up entire generations of people.. Since the royal commission’s recommendations the incarceration rate of indigenous people has increased by 100 per cent. It is worse today than ever.” (Pages 108 – 109)

“Journalism has been my salvation. It has taken me around the globe. I have seen the worst of the world and met people who inspired me. In a career now spanning more than three decades I have reported from more than seventy countries. I have lived on three continents and have seen the world turn on its axis.” (Page 124)

“Racism isn’t killing the Australian dream. The Australian dream was founded on racism. From the first time a British flag was planted in this soil, the rules have been different for us. A convict could come here in chains and die free, a rich man. But British law condemned us to a longer sentence.” (Page 213)

I have discovered this book late - five years after it was published. In a way there is little here that is wholly new for well-read Australians. But the voice resonates with urgency today where we have to deal in new cooperative ways with the place of Aboriginal people in Australia. So for me it was freshly challenging. I am currently reading Stan Grant’s latest book *“With the Falling of the Dusk”* (to be reviewed soon).

My copy was from www.booktopia.com.au for \$21.25 plus delivery.

ABOUT THE ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART

In May 2017, The First Nations National Constitutional Convention gathered for three days at Uluru. It followed extensive consultation with Indigenous Peoples across Australia. It was part of a process facilitated by the Referendum Council to advise the federal parliament on a pathway toward a successful referendum to recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution.

The Convention was a gathering of 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to articulate the nature of reforms desired by First Nations. The gathering expressed their agreement in a document that is now known as The Uluru Statement from the Heart .

It was and is an invitation from First Nations Peoples to the people of Australia: “We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.”

To refresh our memory and stimulate our action it is printed on the following page.

THE ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. *This is the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle*. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

“Making sense of the progressive movement”

Val Webb

Presentation at the Orientation session for Common Dreams Conference, “Progressive Spirituality: future Directions”, Brisbane, Australia, September 2016

I have been asked to make sense of the progressive movement, a big task by anyone’s standards! Rev. Dr. John Bodycomb’s description suits us well. “To call it a movement is misleading. Instead, it is a momentum, a stream of thinking that is slowly but inexorably spreading over the religious landscape like a river spreading on a flood plain”. This momentum is not confined to one place or one denomination or even one set of beliefs but has been emerging in *many* places around the world in response to people asking questions about church traditions in light of our contemporary world and being open to what other religions say about what they call GOD. By the way, I use these letters GOD as a symbol for the different ways people imagine the Something More, the Divine, the Sacred, Nature, or what people refuse to imagine at all.

Although this momentum has been labelled “progressive” in recent years, it has been happening since the beginning of Christianity. There has never been only one way to talk about God, or to understand who Jesus was and what he was about, which is why I wrote my latest book *Testing Tradition and Liberating Theology: finding your own voice*. In a lay-friendly sweep through church history, I wanted to show how theology – talking about GOD - has changed over the centuries and keeps changing. So many people are trapped in believing there is only one version of Christianity, the one *their* church preaches, and have no idea that theology has evolved over the centuries and keeps adapting with new contexts despite efforts to keep the status quo. Many doctrines have been kept in place by fear, power and authority, silencing other ideas; and many people have left churches because what they hear has become unbelievable, restrictive or even harmful, yet they still want a spiritual connection, something to give meaning to their place in the universe. We all need to find something transforming for *us*, rather than having to accept someone else’s rules.

People have been challenging the theological status quo ever since people began following “the way of Jesus”. For the first centuries after Jesus’ death, different apostles and teachers produced different explanations, each interpreting the story of Jesus and his message within their context. With little contact between Christian communities around the Mediterranean, stories could be different. For the sake of unity however, Bishop Irenaeus, at the end of the second century, declared what he saw as “orthodox” teaching, based on John’s gospel, and wrote a thesis *Against Heresies*. This did not mean that the supposed “heresies” lay down and died. By the fourth century, bishops across the Mediterranean were still debating the questions, until Roman Emperor Constantine demanded a single statement of belief, hence our fourth century creeds. Again, this did not stop the debate, but now people could be punished for heresy – and they were and still are, in different ways. Christianity has never been without debate, silencing, rebel groups in the margins and brave theologians challenging the powerful centre.

Christian theology has two aims that must always be held together – firstly, critical reflection on the story of GOD; and secondly, how or whether that story has meaning in our present world. Today we call the latter task contextual theology. Rather than simply accepting an unchanging, inspired bundle of beliefs relevant for all time and place, we need to consider what is happening in our world – new knowledge, changing cultural and social understandings – in order to allow these new contexts to impact how we interpret scripture and tradition to make it relevant today.

At the end of the 1800’s, the label “progressive” was applied to those challenging traditional interpretations of GOD, the Trinity, Jesus, virgin birth, bodily resurrection and an inspired, inerrant Bible. Such challenges were influenced by German biblical criticism – the use

of literary historical critical methods to study and analyze the scriptures in their historical contexts, rather than texts that cannot be questioned. This included the search for the historical Jesus – what can we *really* know about Jesus of Nazareth? Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had also been published which further challenged an uncritical reading of scripture. In America, some Protestant clergy, including Harry Emerson Fosdick, were called “progressives” and in Australia, Charles Strong, Peter Cameron, Samuel Angus and others were so labeled for challenging traditional doctrines. Our current “progressive” movement began as a counter voice raised against the influential American Religious Right in the mid 1900's. Australians like Rex Hunt and others accessed for Australia the American progressive literature, including the scholarly biblical studies from the Jesus Seminar.

So what does “progressive” mean? The term suggests the idea of moving forward, continually adapting to changing contexts and knowledge bases, without feeling we have arrived – the idea behind the hymn “GOD has still more light and truth to shed forth from GOD's word”. Doctrinal truths from outdated philosophical frameworks, the culture and cosmology of fourth century Rome, medieval monasteries or the Reformation, have to be constantly re-examined to see if they make sense today. When we think of how much more we know about human beings and the universe, compared with Aristotle, Galen, Galileo or Darwin, it would be strange to say we should accept *only* the science they understood. And what we say about GOD *today* may be obsolete in a hundred years as knowledge expands in unexpected turns. Context and culture do not stay still. Neither must our ideas about whatever we see as sacred.

Today, “progressive” is a wide-ranging term for any groups that see themselves moving beyond their traditions, whatever those might be. Search “progressive Christianity” on the internet and you will be amazed at what comes up. There is no uniformity in terms of what is believed. In fact, progressives are often more about what they are moving *from* than where they actually *arrive!* I have done a few speaking tours of Progressive Christian groups in the UK. Like many groups here, UK progressives are an ageing population, just like our churches, since young people see less need for church – or at least what is offering as church. Because of this age bracket, I have been inclined in places to call it *remedial* Christianity as the people gathered, for the most part, are recovering from the not-to-be-questioned Christianity of their childhood. Most of their children and grandchildren have been raised in a less sin-filled- more love-based theology that does not need the same remedial help.

When I look, however, at American blogs from the blossoming new progressive momentum calling itself Emerging Christianity, there is a surge of younger people now moving from fundamentalist/conservative mega-churches and the religious conservatism of the South. We don't see as much of this in Australia because we have always been a more secular society and many of our young people were never in church in the first place. You can find blogs from Emerging Christianity that offer tests to check if you are a progressive Christian - mostly revolving around ecological concerns, LGBTIQ rights, interfaith dialogue and challenges to a literal reading of an inerrant Bible.

Because of the diversity of ideas and places from which people are progressing – with the emphasis on moving forward rather than beliefs - there has rightly been hesitation to define progressive beliefs, but some commonalities have emerged:

1. An insistence on personal integrity, paying attention to reason and experience in conversation with traditional teachings and contemporary scholarship
2. A resistance to claims that Christianity is the only or best religion; and a desire for interfaith dialogue as an avenue to global understanding
3. An advocacy for issues around social justice and inclusion for all
4. Advocacy for the care and protection of our planet
5. A desire for spiritual vitality and inclusivity in our communities

The big challenge for all those who call themselves progressives today is to take a serious look at the commonalities we share, rather than focusing on what divides us.

What sort of issues do progressives question? Again, there is no homogeneity here – we agree more on the need for questioning than on the answers! “Living the Questions” has become a progressive slogan, thanks to the marvellous video series and book by that name by David Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy. Progressives think about how the Bible came to be and what genres of literature we find in its pages – narrative, poetry, myth, parable – as opposed to divine words dropped from heaven. They ask what can be known of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and how the understanding of him evolved in the early church into part of the Trinity. They ask whether fourth century creeds, based on outdated philosophical ideas, are suitable statements of beliefs for today’s context. They examine traditional doctrines of the atonement, resurrection, virgin birth and life after death. They raise questions about interpretations of Adam and Eve and the fall; about Jesus as the only way of salvation; about the need for dialogue with other religions who also seek the Sacred. They talk about imagining GOD in a contemporary scientific world; about the anthropomorphic gendering of GOD as male; about outdated images in hymns and liturgies; about whether we can believe in something called GOD at all. There is a joke you may have heard: why are progressives such bad hymn singers? Because they have to read ahead all the time to see if they agree with the theology. Progressives raise issues about care of the planet, justice for all, including women and LGBTIQ people. They care about social issues, poverty, refugees, terrorism and the demonization of the “other”. I could go on and on, always stressing that there are no *single* progressive answers – we have freedom to think for ourselves. Above all, progressives celebrate doubt as a necessary part of being human and see uncertainty as a more authentic stance than certainty. Interestingly, when I wrote my book *In Defence of Doubt: an invitation to adventure* in 1995, Christian books only talked about how to *overcome* doubt. Today, doubt is an acceptable topic in most quarters.

This questioning challenges many Christians who hold traditional interpretations or fundamentalist positions. The label “progressive” has become, in some church circles, a negative label, as a momentum that threatens ancient creeds and confessional statements, suggesting an elitism that implies other positions are regressive. Progressive has also been seen as belief in nothing at all, especially when some progressive atheists are quoted as representative of *all* progressives, which is simply not the case. Because of this, even some progressives do not like the label.

Progressive groups are in many countries. American progressives have several websites and blog sites across the broad meaning of the term. www.progressivechristianity.org reaches out nationally and internationally, offering articles, resources and encouragement to progressives across the world, the beauty of social media. In Great Britain, the Progressive Christian Network has over 65 groups scattered across the country with a fine online newsletter to keep them in communication and for sharing excellent articles. There is a Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, a Jamaican Centre for Progressive Christianity and many Asian progressives across a spectrum of what it means to be progressive. We are all part of this world momentum and we should be eager to be in contact with these different groups.

I have said “Progressives think this and that ...” to introduce general themes. However, progressives sit at all points on the spectrum on every issue and that is fine. Don’t be afraid if you cannot agree with all the progressive ideas you encounter. I probably don’t either. Progressive groups grew out of the need for safe communities where questions can be asked, not to provide correct answers or homogenous new doctrines.

To those at this conference, I say – ask your questions; enjoy the moment; create opportunities for good discussions; make new friends; visit the bookshop; tap the wisdom of the presenters; feel free to speak up if you disagree; have fun and take home lots to encourage you in your journey.

The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage **By Sr. Joan Chittister, Convergent books, New York, 2019.**

Review by Lorna Henry

The cover blurb of this book describes Sister Joan Chittister as ‘a rabble-rousing force of nature for social justice and fervent proponent of personal faith and spiritual fulfilment.’

She is a nun, American, a leader in the Benedictine Order, 85 years old, an author, theologian and frequent public speaker.

She writes here about the role of the prophet. The biblical prophets were those who warned and notified of what would happen ‘if we continue in the direction we are going. Those biblical prophets faced similar problems to ours, but now they are gone!’

Sr Joan looks at the massive challenges of the global world we live in, the refugees, climate change, abuse and suppression of women, promotion of the rich and disregard for the poor, and sees at the same time the growth of alt-right and far left political positions which divide people everywhere. This world is not the world of God’s vision for humanity.

Some of the more recent prophets whose protest actions are mentioned in this book are Daniel Berrigan, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Dom Helder Camara, Oscar Romero and Nelson Mandela.

Her call is for people (us!) to be the prophets of today. ‘Prophetic spirituality is about living out our faith on the streets of the world, rather than just talking about it’. There is a delightful piece of advice for any would-be prophets: ‘Be gadflies, judge no-one, open the conversation, do not despair and do not disappear’. It takes a long time to change the world, but never give up.

The book was written during the Trump presidency and from within the Catholic Church, so there are predictable emphases, but the relevance for us, as Christians, is real.

She recently gave an address to a Jesuit group entitled ‘The Time is Now for Jesuits’, a half-hour talk about this book. It is available on YouTube on the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7TBlkdV5aw>

You can see there this ‘force of nature for social justice

The Time is Now. A Call to Uncommon Courage is available from booktopia.com.au for \$26.25

“How can you still be a Christian?”

Diana Butler Bass, the award-winning author of *Grateful* goes beyond the culture wars to offer a refreshing take on the comprehensive, multi-faceted nature of Jesus, **keeping his teachings relevant and alive in our daily lives.**

Diana Butler Bass, **Freeing Jesus. Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence.** HarperCollins. Hardcover, 30 March 2021.

“How can you still be a Christian?”

This is the most common question Diana Butler Bass is asked today. It is a question that many believers ponder as they wrestle with disappointment and disillusionment in their church and its

leadership But while many Christians have left their churches, they cannot leave their faith behind.

In *Freeing Jesus*, Bass challenges the idea that Jesus can only be understood in static, one-dimensional ways and asks us to instead consider a life where Jesus grows with us and helps us through life's challenges in several capacities: as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence.

Freeing Jesus is an invitation to leave the religious wars behind and rediscover Jesus in all his many manifestations, to experience Jesus beyond the narrow confines we have built around him. It renews our hope in faith and worship at a time when we need it most.

Available from Amazon, Barnes and Noble, HarperCollins, and other booksellers.

Review posted by Paul Inglis on April 1, 2021, in **Book Reviews** on the website **Open Discussion of Christianity**: <https://ucforum.unitingchurch.org.au>

“Talking back to our past”

“Like the writers within the text (of the Bible), we are always taught by our sacred past, and like them we are often chastened and corrected by it. ... and sometimes, like the biblical writers themselves, we dare to take views that differ from the voices in the Bible. We do disagree with biblical teachings. We permit divorce, although the Bible rejects it. We pay and charge interest, although the Bible condemns it. We reject slavery even when the master is kind and monarchy even when the ruler is benevolent, although the Bible endorses both...We live in relation to our sacred Scripture – listening, learning, and sometimes ‘talking back’.”

-Delwin Brown, [What Does a Progressive Christian Believe?: A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious](#)

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We are now in a place to recognize that fundamental questions about God are not about a physical deity but about our language for reality and the limits imposed by that language.
Westar Institute blog

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PCNV PROGRAMS

SUNDAY 27 June. 120 people joined the PCNV zoom program to hear **Rev Dr Margaret Mayman** speak about her experiences of Progressive Christianity in NZ and Australia.

SUNDAY 25 July. Due to the illness of the planned speaker there is no PCNV program.

SUNDAY 22 August. **Professor Mary Coloe** from Yarra Theological Union will speak on “Mining John’s Gospel: Wisdom for our times?”

SUNDAY 26 September: To be arranged

SUNDAY 24 October: **Dr Diedre Palmer**, National President of the Uniting Church in Australia will speak. Topic to be confirmed.

SUNDAY 28 November: **Annual general Meeting.** Program to be announced.