



Achieving a modest purpose

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria started in 2006 with eight to ten people sitting around a table exchanging stories of their disenchantment with churches and hearing three people recently returned from a Westar Institute conference in USA share the inspiration of that gathering which explored more contemporary perspectives on the Christian tradition.

Now PCNV has been going for more than eleven years.

As well as over 100 meetings on chosen topics in a variety of formats, there have been seminars by national and international scholars, guest speakers from other religions and Aboriginal Australians, cooperative interfaith ventures with Muslims for Progressive Values (now the Muslim Collective), a DVD of resources about Open Christianity, literally thousands of books from Progressive Christian authors around the world sold through John and Robyn Smith's bookstalls, around 12 groups in Victoria loosely related to Progressive Christianity, assistance in the founding of the young adult venture "Beyonding", 8 to 10 newsletters each year, and opportunities to meet like-minded people.

The recent 'Gathering of Members' was an opportunity to look back and ask what it has meant – and to look ahead and ask how we could be more effective. Behind each brief report described in the following pages is a story of encouragement and hope: *"I thought I was an outcast but found out there was a group I could identify with". "Finding like-minded people." "Appreciate the scholarship". "A platform for people to discuss their faith".*

A network is not a simple organisation to nurture. It requires both appreciation of the diverse interests of its members and enough people to volunteer to carry through the necessary tasks to respond to those interests. Our President when presenting the Annual Report for this year stated that it might have been our best year. If so that is a tribute to the nearly 300 people who are the Network, providing financial support, participation, encouragement and vision for coming years.

PCNV – The first eleven years - and creative possibilities for the future

There was a special "Gathering of Members" before the AGM on 19 November – to recognise the contribution of members to the Network and to hear the ideas of members about what has meant most to them up to this point and their ideas for creative and realistic possibilities for the future.

Encouraged by refreshments including an African style afternoon tea, time to mingle and purposeful conversation in groups, the ideas flowed for the Committee to work on.

See the special report on pages 2 and 3

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In a special “Gathering of Members”, groups of 4 to 6 people discussed two questions. The first was about their experiences up to this time. The second was about possibilities they saw for the future. They were asked to focus on creative possibilities but also to take into account what could be practical. The ideas recorded were from individual members and did not necessarily have support from others in their group.

The Committee has already begun to think about the creative possibilities for the future as it is working on the program for the middle of next year. (Planning for the program for the first part of next year needed to begin before the Gathering of Members).

“WHAT HAS MEANT MOST TO ME” ABOUT PCNV

From the “Gathering of Members”, November 19, 2017

In a large number of ideas some themes emerged:

An effort has been made to retain original wording rather than to interpret notes

THE SUPPORT OF FINDING LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE

- “I thought I was an outcast but found out there was a group I could identify with”
- Finding like-minded people
- Meeting progressive people beyond my own congregation
- “To meet others who thought in other ways than the “Magic God”. A liberating experience for me”
- A delight to find so many interested in progressive Christianity
- Discussions that focussed attention on the problems facing progressives in their own churches

SPEAKERS AND SCHOLARS

- Appreciate the scholarship
- Meetings for critical exploration
- Critical analysis and symbolic possibilities
- PCNV provides a more rational methodology
- Divinity lectures have been helpful eg. Hal Taussig
- Richard Rohr, Julian Burnside, Morwood, Val Webb, Spong, etc
- A speaker who has attracted me and my friends
- Speakers from other faiths and other denominations
- Panel input

EVENTS

- Common Dreams
- John Smith’s visit to Geelong

OTHER

- A platform for people to discuss their faith
- Affirming your own beliefs
- Newsletters
- The speaker’s notes – a great help
- Beyonding (especially for young people)

“CREATIVE AND PRACTICAL POSSIBILITIES” FOR THE FUTURE OF PCNV

From the “Gathering of Members”, November 19, 2017

In a large number of ideas some themes emerged strongly:

An effort has been made to retain original wording rather than to interpret notes

1. NEW STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION

- A new website. *“Kept up to date”. “Find someone to do it or take it down”*
- A Facebook page – to gain more interest in the wider and church communities
- Articles in “Crosslight” and other journals.
- Present PCNV views to churches
- How can “we” promote these ideas beyond “us”
- Public comments on social justice issues
- An alternative Christian public voice
- More focus on communities

2. MORE FOCUS ON ACTION

- We cannot just rely on good teachers. Need action. What actions?
- Support groups of PCNV to do things
- Groups for action – support or do
- Ideas for making the world a better place
- Issues – not in abstract
- We need more creative and realistic possibilities for the future of the church

3. DIFFERENT GATHERINGS

- “Supper clubs” – The role of food in informal creative get-togethers
- Series of discussions – *“We do the work”*
- Do home groups have a place, especially in the country?
- Expand from books to an educational opportunity
- Common Dreams conferences VIP

4. HOW TO MAKE CREATIVE WORSHIP FROM PROGRESSIVE PERSPECTIVES

- Variety of experiences – spiritual, theological, creative – art/music
- How to tap into groups that do have creative worship, liturgy
- Meditation. Ways of meditating and meditative supports in progressive worship
- Sourcing resources for progressive worship eg. music, hymns
- Leadership
- How do ministers unpack ‘myths’ and keep people in congregations

OTHER

- Listening! How to do this in communities. Networking – we need to move out into the community
- Multi-faith. Leading the dialogue
- Understanding other values and spiritual paths
- Dealing with distance
- What’s Christian about it? Revitalise church
- What is “church”. Ambience? Activities? Statement “representing” Christian faith
- How do we better get in touch with the spirit within/God within?
- How much does PCNV know about Beyonding? Does Beyonding need to be better promoted?
- Bible stories told in modern language
- The wealth of written material is too big for each of us to read! Could PCNV offer summaries eg. On website or in discussions.

FACING ANOTHER CHRISTMAS

Well here we go again, friends, facing another Christmas. The big stores are posting huge advertisements, notifying us of major sales, playing Christmas music and of course wherever you go there is a Santa Claus. ...

First, why are we celebrating Jesus' birth on December 25th? We know he was probably born between 6 and 4BCE and we also know he was not born in December. ...

... the early Christians did not celebrate Jesus' birthday until the fourth century. Up until that point, the most important holiday on the Christian Calendar was Easter. Then as Christianity began to grow in the Roman world, church leaders had to contend with a popular pagan holiday, commemorating the "birthday of the unconquered sun" (*natalis solis invicti*)—the Roman name for the winter solstice. At the same time, Mithraism—worship of the ancient Persian god of light—was popular in the Roman army, and the cult held some of its most important rituals on the winter solstice.

It was around this time the Roman Emperor Constantine I converted to Christianity, in 312. He soon sanctioned Christianity, and more than likely instructed church leaders to appropriate the winter-solstice holidays and thereby achieve a more seamless conversion to Christianity for his subjects. So December 25 became the birthday of Jesus Christ. So the fact is, we are celebrating *natalis solis invicti*, not Jesus's birth or even Santa Claus' birth. ...

And then there are the carols. When I go to a candle light service, which I truly hold dear in my heart, we are sometimes lucky enough to hear a decent sermon. Then we start to sing about the "virgin birth," or the King of All, Joy to the World, or Silent Night Holy Night, or O Holy Night. Well you get the idea. Yes, I do go now and then, and I have learned to view the words symbolically not literally. I tell myself that this is just a song and some of them still stir something in my soul, even if my head is spinning. ...

If we want to look seriously at the story of Jesus of history, we must first let go of the idea he was God or part of the Godhead. Only when we move toward the more real Jesus, can we begin to understand why we celebrate his name every year. Remember Jesus was a prophetic teacher and preacher, and was a man of extraordinary faith. For us to truly understand this, we have to let go of the idea that as God he would have no need for faith. But we have a pretty good idea that Jesus struggled, he doubted and he wept just like the rest of us. And when we begin to understand this, only then can we understand what an incredible thing it was for him, as a moral person, to maintain his deep faith, in spite of his difficult life. Like other Jews of his time, Jesus had to reconcile his faith in a God who promised freedom, while he was experiencing living in a hostile, occupied country. I can celebrate that.

Thirdly, I need to be reminded that Jesus was poor, worked with the poor, preached and taught the poor. He set an example that can be followed today. His incredible faith carried him through some extraordinary times and events. ...

And finally, when we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate a very important birth. And no matter what we have done with his story, my guess is young Jesus would have had no idea about his life, what he would achieve, or its ending. But as he evolved and moved through the stages of his life, his faith grew, his wisdom developed, and his absolute trust in whomever he perceived as God, was strengthened. Although he never intended to start a new religion, it happened. As a result we inherited a safer, more loving, and more just society. Now I can celebrate that.

~ Fred C. Plumer, President ProgressiveChristianity.org (Extracts from a longer article)

ProgressiveChristianity.org is a superb site for resources for progressive Christianity

A NEW TEMPLATE FOR RELIGION USING THE WORD “WORSHIP”?

Recently, Rev David Felton, known to many people involved in progressive Christianity for his role in the DVD program ‘Living the Questions’ interviewed Michael Morwood about ‘A New Template for Religion’. Michael Morwood has been a speaker at PCNV events and at Common Dreams 2016 in Brisbane.

Here is a part of that interview about worship and prayer

David Felten: *We’ve moved away from using the word “worship” in our local faith community, opting for words like “celebration” or “gathering” instead. The concept of “worship” has so much baggage: all those ancient formalities and royal protocols that don’t fit post-Enlightenment ways of thinking – yet people are somehow loathe to give it up.*

Michael Morwood: Personally, I would stop using the word “worship,” too. The notion of “worship” belongs to an old paradigm, an outdated template for religion.

I was in Canada not long ago conducting a weekend for a progressive United Church community. The audience was very on-side with what I presented. At the end of the weekend, I asked some of the community leaders, “Why, with such a progressive community, do you have the large ‘WORSHIP HERE 10:00 am SUNDAY’ sign outside the church?” I was met with puzzled looks, as if to say, “Why wouldn’t we have this sign?”

So I asked some questions:

- Worship whom?
- For what reason?
- What do you imagine is at the other end of your worship? A deity taking notice? A deity taking some delight in homage being paid?
- Is your Sunday gathering for God’s sake?
- Where did this imagination come from?

I’d ask the same questions regarding “the Mass” and what Catholics imagine “Mass” is all about (but I don’t get invitations to Roman Catholic parishes these days!).

Overall, I prefer to use words like “liturgy” or “service” for a new template. The roots of the word “liturgy” (*leit*, people; *ergon*, work), means the “work of the people.” For me, this understanding of liturgy expands beyond ritual to mean participation in a sacred or divine action.

David Felten: *So what’s the “work of the people” and the “divine action” you have in mind?*

Michael Morwood: I think our primary task is to gather around the story of Jesus and seek to understand its full implications for all human interactions. Our challenge is to let it reveal to us the truth of who we are, to challenge us to commit ourselves to being the best possible human expressions of the Great Mystery, and to do this as faithfully and as courageously as Jesus did.

And none of this has anything to do with reception of a sacred object, with a priesthood with special powers, or being “fed” at an altar – it certainly has nothing to do with Jesus shedding his blood for the sins of the world. It has nothing to do with singing songs to or addressing prayers to a listening deity.

What it *does* include is:

- Remembrance of Jesus and of others who shared his vision
- Awareness of the presence/power within us
- Commitment to working for a better world.

David Felten: *So, what about the songs we sing and our liturgical prayers? What about the efficacy of the prayers we offer in our faith-sharing groups?*

Michael Morwood: What are we being asked to imagine when we ask God to listen? When we thank God? When we address God with personal pronouns? We know where this imagination comes from. The question is, how does this image resonate once the notion of a “God in the heavens” has been abandoned?

By all means, let us sing hymns and address prayers to “God” that suggest this divine “being” is listening in and taking note. But, let us do so mindful that whatever words we use are metaphor and poetry. They’re not to be taken literally, but as a means of giving expression to longing, pain, gratitude, joy – all those movements our minds and hearts struggle to convey otherwise.

Then let us embrace one of the key challenges that faces us today: to shape prayers (the hymns may take a lot longer!) that affirm a “presence” within and among us. We need a growing collection of metaphors and images that help develop our awareness that this “presence” is not only here with us in the ordinariness of our everyday lives but challenges us to live out the best possible human expression of this “Great Mystery.”

David Felten: *For as long as I can remember, one of my mentors, Bill Nelson, has advocated that we simply stop using the word “God” altogether. We need images that are free from so many centuries of the theistic and human-centric God that is “out there” somewhere.*

Michael Morwood: Exactly! In practice, stop addressing prayers to “God.” Just stop doing it. If you still practice a traditional style of spoken prayer, all it takes is the determination to not begin as if you’re speaking to a theistic God. Try it and see what happens! I resolved to do this 15 years ago. It resulted in my book, [Praying a New Story](#) which Spirituality & Practice included in its list of “[Best Spiritual Books](#)” of 2004.

With regard to their own private prayer, many people ask me, “If I let go of the idea of praying to “God,” how do I pray now?”

One way I think about it is remembering a Syrian monk known as “the golden speaker.” St John Damascene was born and raised in Damascus in the early 8th century, but he’s given the church words that have been carried down through the centuries: “Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God.”

Today, if we substitute “great mystery” or “power” or other similar concepts for the word “God,” the definition still holds – understanding it to mean raising our minds and hearts to a presence here, all around us; in the depths of our being. So a key concept for any prayer becomes “awareness.” The goal of my personal prayer is to deepen my awareness, to be conscious of the reality that I embody this “great mystery” in human form.

It’s also important to acknowledge that my personal prayer is not for God’s sake. It is for *my* sake, it is meant to change *me*. Someone recently asked me, “Can prayer change the world?” and I said, “Of course! If prayer is intended to change us, then we can change the world.” Otherwise we become trapped in the religious cop-out version of prayer: “Let’s leave the fate of the world in God’s hands.”

I think Jesus had the same conviction about personal prayer. It’s what motivated his ministry to “the crowd.” He wanted people to become aware of the power and the presence within them and use it to change the world. That was his dream.

What a pity that this fundamental stance of Jesus has been buried beneath a layer of prayer asking God to “deliver us from evil.” That’s not God’s task; it’s *our* task.

David Felten: *Well that should give the proponents of conventional Christianity heartburn. The Church has thrived for centuries convincing people that they are but loathsome sinners and depraved worms, incapable of any good without Jesus vouching for them. It sounds like your new paradigm puts some pretty high expectations on us lowly humans.*

Michael Morwood: The major shift in my theological thinking and prayer life in the past 25 years has stemmed from a growing – and a completely new – appreciation of what it means to be human. Much of my appreciation is grounded in the scientific story of our origins in stardust and the four billion years of atoms undergoing transformation after transformation until the 60 trillion atoms that are Michael Morwood enable me tell the story of who and what we really are.

Now that's a truly remarkable story. But what I find just as remarkable is to have discovered that throughout human history the other side of this story – without the great scientific story we have today to back it up – has made itself known. Call it “enlightenment”; call it whatever you will, but there has been this constant awareness, insight, revelation – in both religious and non-religious people – of an awareness of a power, an awesome reality beyond our imagination, within and among us, a presence that binds together everyone and everything.

Rumi, the great Muslim scholar, teacher, and poet said it well 800 years ago,

“You are the fearless guardian of Divine Light,

so come, return to the root of the root of your own soul...”

“Why are you so enchanted by this world

when a mine of gold lies within you?

Open your eyes and come,

return to the root of the root of your own soul.”

Here is the proper focus for religion, today and in the future. Here is where religion can get beyond dogmatism, thought control, the disregard for common decency, and claims of exclusive access to the divine. Jesus is not alone in urging men and women to “return to the root of the root of your own soul” and use what is discovered there to create a profoundly better human community.

And here is why the “Christ” religion needs to change its thinking about Jesus so dramatically: Jesus is not and was not a god-figure essentially different from the rest of us because only he could gain access to God’s dwelling place. Rather, he presents a movement, a presence, a reality – a great mystery – that is within every woman, man, and child. *That* is the good news that needs to be proclaimed and acted upon.

A New Template for Religion: A Conversation with Michael Morwood, Part 3 Worship, Prayer, & the Other Side of the Story Rev. David Felten

LECTURES AND BOOKS BY PROFESSOR HAL TAUSSIG

1. PCNV now has the USB of all the presentations by Professor Hal Taussig in Melbourne

There has been a very positive response from those who attended these sessions both for content and presentation. PCNV is pleased with the quality of this production, It was produced by St Michael’s Uniting Church at a cost of \$15.00 each plus \$5 packing and postage in Australia. These presentations will provide refreshing new material for small group discussion. Orders can be placed by phoning John Smith on 0427520500 or by email: jwhsmith@inet.net.au .

2. We also have copies of the following Taussig books.

“A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grassroots.” (12 copies available @ \$23.00 each plus postage). Orders can be placed by contacting John Smith by phone or email.

In this book Prof Taussig identifies thousands of progressive churches and faith communities who are embracing a Christian faith for the 21st century. He affirms the need to challenge the

doctrines and theology of orthodoxy and encourages these explorers to stay with their faith communities to share the sacred wisdom of life together.

“Many Tables” co- written with Denis Smith (20 copies available @\$20.00 each plus postage) Orders can be placed by contacting John Smith by phone or email.

This book addresses the need to develop liturgies that are contemporary in practice. There is a particular emphasis on a contemporary approach to the “Lord’s Supper” rather than the current traditional but outdated forms.

“In the Beginning was the Meal” (4 copies available @ \$ 50.00 each plus postage). Orders can be placed by contacting John Smith by phone or email.

In this beautifully detailed analysis of the early faith communities sharing of open meals (Supper Clubs) Prof Taussig draws out the important implications in both recognising the celebratory nature of the Eucharist and the egalitarian attitude of shared meals for today’s society. (Even though the cost of 'In The Beginning was the Meal' is \$50.00 I strongly recommend it.)

“A New New Testament”. See the reviews that follow. A limited number of paperback copies are available @ \$25 plus postage. Contact John Smith by phone or email as above.

“A New New Testament”

Review by John W H Smith

For more than two decades I have been searching for a single volume of sacred writings that brings together the existing biblical New Testament along with the wisdom writings not originally included with those that have been recently discovered, such as the find at Nag Hammadi.

At last we have the book we have been waiting for in Hal Taussig’s “A New New Testament”. Hal has brought together a Council of Scholars to examine these sacred texts and they have added a further 10 volumes to the books already included in the Bible. Such writings as the “The Gospel of Thomas”, “The Gospel of Truth”, “The Acts of Paul and Thecla”, The Gospel of Mary” along with “The Gospel of Thomas” to mention some.

Some of these texts had been lost or mislaid such as “The Gospel of Mary” and others were never lost such as “The Acts of Paul and Thecla”, which was written in the late 1st or early 2nd century. By the second century this text was extremely popular as was Thecla herself. She had the following of a modern day movie star. Unfortunately, her popularity was criticised by the early church fathers such as Tertullian as was her self-

baptism after Paul refused to baptise her. This could have been a major reason for the text not to be included in the canon because it was seen as being critical of the apostle Paul.

The great value of Taussig’s book is that by adding these additional sacred texts to the range and depth of the early sacred writers in one volume, it allows for an informed comparative analysis. Importantly this innovative work is written in 21st century easy to read language, which will encourage in its readers a deepening spiritual awareness.

This is now my new Bible and I now use it for readings from our tradition when preaching.

Review by Paul Inglis

For UC Forum, a discussion group for open discussion on Progressive Christianity in the Uniting Church in Australia:

Marcus Borg has described this book as “Important both historically and theologically. Readers will not be able to see the New Testament in the same way again”.

In autographing my copy, Hal said of his own work: *Here’s to the powerful way the old and the new combine to help us grow.*

So this combination of the traditional and newly discovered and analysed texts arriving a millennium and a half after the canon was settled for the New Testament will inevitably be threatening and intimidating to some but to many the beginning of a new and exciting journey of discovery about Jesus and his teachings.

A New New Testament contains amazing new material from the first century Christ movements and places this alongside the traditional texts. An eclectic mix of bishops, rabbis, well-known authors, leaders of national churches, and women and men from African American, Native American, and European American backgrounds have studied many of the recent discoveries from the first two centuries rigorously together, and chosen these new books.

The story of the discovery of the new books and bringing them into the light is a remarkable thing in itself and the story of the evolution of the traditional New Testament over 500 years helps the reader to understand why these new texts have not appeared sooner.

The new texts, like the traditional texts were all written between 50 and 175 CE, somewhere around the Mediterranean Sea, with similar themes and within certain realities of life. Like the traditional books, the new ones had a life of their own before they were added to the New New Testament.

The reader is helped through new texts (including The Gospels of Thomas, Mary, Truth, The Prayer of the Apostle Paul, the Odes of Solomon, and the Acts of Paul and Theda) by a guide to reading the material and making sense of its chronological and thematic order. The reader is encouraged to read thoughtfully taking into account historical contexts. It is important to give thought also to who wrote each text and why. So it is a good book for personal refection.

Expect to be surprised about the common material found in the old and the new, but most of all be excited about the the totally unique concepts and messages that we did

not see in the traditional text. This is a book that provokes feelings and forces the reader to think about the nature of God, of Jesus' mission and develops positive attitudes about the gift of learning we have in front of us. *Paul Inglis, 2nd November 2017.*

<http://ucforum.unitingchurch.org.au>

PCNV PROGRAM FOR 2018

Unless unusual circumstances affect planning, PCNV public meetings in 2018 will be on the fourth Sunday of each month, February to November, at Ewing Memorial Centre of Stonnington Uniting Church, Burke Road, Malvern East.

Sunday 25 FEBRUARY: Glenn Loughrey, the vicar of St Oswald's Anglican Church, Glen Iris. He will bring us insights into a spirituality informed by his indigenous background and expressed through his art.

Sunday 25 MARCH: Palm Sunday. "A Progressive Liturgy for Easter". Followed by time to discuss what is involved in a Progressive Christian understanding of Easter and relevant resources.

Sunday 22 APRIL: Coralie Ling, Planetary solidarity - the contribution of eco feminists from across the globe to new interpretations of Christianity in the light of climate change.

Michael Morwood will be the speaker on 24 June

From the Editor

I regret that poor health reduced the preparation of Newsletters in the period September to November. This larger edition completes 2017 with more 'food for thought'.

A special thanks to those who have renewed membership of PCNV in spite of late reminders. You can email me at any time to obtain information about the details of your membership: djmerritt@ozemail.com.au