



Working for a better future

One of the only semi-facetious definitions of insanity is doing the same things and expecting different outcomes. So at the start of a new year for the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria, a top issue is what we should be doing differently to contribute to the possibility of a better future.

The Gathering of Members associated with thje 2017 Annual General Meeting last November gave the Committee some suggestions to consider. The following pages report on starting action on some of those. The announcements of the PCNV public meetings for February to May lists topics that confront change from different perspectives – Aboriginal spirituality that challenges the status quo in Australia, an alternative to traditional Easter liturgies, a new progressive understanding of prayer, and the contribution of eco feminists to new interpretations of Christianity in light of climate change.

The biggest challenge confronting a network such as ours was vividly expressed in a recent letter to members of progressive networks in Queensland. Dr Paul Inglis wrote: *“I have a sense of the frustration of many in our networks who feel that we are making slow progress in assisting the Church to move towards a more progressive viewpoint. Many have commented to me on how our focus on literature and conferencing around theological perspectives, whilst having an important educative part to play in bringing on change, has not brought about any obvious commitment by the Church to make itself more relevant.”* Dr Paul Inglis, UCForum and Progressive Christian Network Queensland.

Your Committee often confronts the stark clash between what appears desirable and what seems reasonably realistic for our voluntary Network with no staff. As we start this year we invite you to communicate with the Committee about activities you consider could contribute to a better future, especially strategies in which you could be prepared to become involved working co-operatively with others.

John Shelby Spong’s final book

The last in an amazing writing career that has helped thousands of people discover fresh understandings of the Christian tradition will be published on 13 February.

Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor The Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today. Published by HarperOne. February 2018. Hardback.

From www.booktopia.com.au A\$37.75
fishpond.com.au for A\$52.99 with free delivery.

There will be a review in the next PCNV Newsletter.

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UPDATE ON POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE OF PCNV

There has not been a lot of time since the “Gathering of Members” on November 19 last year suggested a number of possibilities for the future of PCNV. See the report in the Newsletter of December 2017. However the Committee met on December 1 and set in motion consideration of some possible developments. At the recent Committee meeting on February 9 there were reports of actions so far.

- **IMPROVED COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION**

Anne Page has been appointed to fill one of the vacancies on the PCNV Committee. She will give particular attention to publicity about PCNV programs reaching more widely into churches and the community including publicity in denominational journals.

- **A NEW WEBSITE** The Committee received first reports of discussions with website developers about the processes involved in a new website for PCNV. The next step is to prepare specifications and receive quotes. Responsibility for these steps were assigned. A webmaster to operate a new website has been identified.

- **A FACEBOOK PAGE** Similar work was reported for development of a Facebook page with wider reach than the Facebook page already linked with the PCNV website.

- **CREATIVE WORSHIP FROM PROGRESSIVE PERSPECTIVES** While planned before the Gathering of Members, it is worth noting that three of the first PCNV programs this year involve new perspectives on worship. On February 25 Glenn Loughrey will devote part of his presentation to “Doing Authentic Australian Worship” which will be a Eucharist drawing on Aboriginal spirituality. On March 25, Palm Sunday, the Emerging Church Team will lead us in a Progressive Easter liturgy, “The God of Easter: Who was that for Jesus?” and after the service they will lead a discussion on what is involved in designing a progressive Easter liturgy. On April 27, Michael Morwood will speak on “A New Template for Progressive Christian Prayer” which he describes as one of the most common and significant issues raised by groups he addresses.

So a start has been made and there is more to come. Members are encouraged to keep thinking about creative and realistic possibilities for the future of PCNV and to contact the Secretary with suggestions.

The most significant events in your lifetime

In an article in *The Conversation* on January 27, 2018, Frank Bongiorno and Darren Pennay reported the results of a survey by the Social Research Centre between November 15 and December 3, 2017, of 3000 members of its Life in Australia panel.

The top 10 events make interesting reading and could encourage you to make your own list.

The authors commented on the significance of the responses: “When events are placed in categories, 45% found a place for events concerned with human rights and civil liberties. And whereas terrorism, war and politics figure prominently, just under one-quarter of respondents named one of the landmarks in the modern history of Indigenous people.”

See the full article: “Australians rate the most significant events in their lifetimes ... “ by Frank Bongiorno and Darren Pennay. *The Conversation*. January 27, 2018

<https://theconversation.com/australians-rate-the-most-significant-events-in-their-lifetimes-and-show-the-fair-go-is-still-most-valued-90453>

What to call a movement that encourages alternatives to traditional Christianity is a contentious issue for some progressives. Alternatives include "Open Christianity", "Emerging Church", "Progressive Spirituality", "Progressive Religion", to name a few. In a recent article one of the staff of the largest and most widely used progressive Christian websites in the world argues for the continuing significance of retaining the word "Christianity".

"Just let go of the word Christianity for god's sake!"

by Deshna Ubeda, ProgressiveChristianity.org

There have been many people over the years who encourage us to drop "Christianity" from our name. Here are my two cents on why I am not ok with that.

Progressive Christianity is a unique and beautiful movement. It is a vital landing space for hundreds of thousands of humans around the world. Though small, it is growing. And there continues to be a very large percentage of people in this world that consider themselves Christian. At some point many of those will question what they are being told in church. Many will find that the theology presented in their church does not match their understanding of science and/or their values. And they will, perhaps, consider leaving their church. But many will not if their isn't a *better alternative*. People who have Christianity in their heritage, their culture, and their traditions are often not ready to straight up leave Christianity all together.

While many will be comfortable jumping into the large umbrella of "Spirituality," many will not. Because "Spirituality" doesn't have a church, it doesn't have a community, it doesn't have specific creeds, vows, rituals, or theology. It is all over the board- it can be anything. For the people that aren't comfortable with that, progressive Christianity can be a life line.

And the truth is, progressive Christianity is thriving. It is still breathing, speaking, and evolving. I for one, am not ready to pull the plug on this highly ethical, challenging, expansive, spiritual Christian path. Religion can still serve the people to provide direction, comfort, and a connection to the Infinite Mystery.

For that reason, I am pushing for ProgressiveChristianity.org to stay strong and proud. I would not like to see us change our name at this time or become some larger vague spiritual or interfaith umbrella organization. I think we should continue to focus on the evolving theology of Christianity that is informed by history, research, science, and new discoveries because that is what Christianity needs most in order to continue to thrive. I would like to see us continue to offer resources for progressive Christian communities and ways for people to connect with other like minded people. Offering a safe space where people can find and create community is a vital contribution to this world.

We are the leading progressive Christian organization in the world. And I am proud of the work we have done. Today I am asking you to contribute what you can to keep this movement alive. If everyone reading this contributed just \$25-\$50, we would be done with our end of year campaign and we could look forward to another year of progressing and supporting a compassionate, inclusive and just Christianity. ...

- Deshna Ubeda

Tillich's Challenge: The Search for New Vocabulary

by [Carl Krieg](#) on January 14, 2018

progressiveChristianity.org

Confusion about words can divide rather than unite, and so I wonder: is there a language that both secular humanists and Christians can agree on? When I say humanist, I mean people who are doing good in the world. I do not mean selfish, greedy, or hateful people. And when I say Christian, I mean people who get their guidance from Jesus about how to be whole within themselves and to be loving to others. I do not mean a church that hates gays, that tries to impose its belief system on society, that proclaims that hurricanes are god's punishment for ...well, you get the picture. I am limiting myself to humanists and Christians because they are two groups that I think I understand, and I do not want to presume to speak for other religious thinking.

Paul Tillich was a brilliant man who tried to bridge the gap between theology and philosophy, between secular thinking and religious thinking. God, for example, was conceived as our ultimate concern. And faith was having the courage to be in the face of the threat of non-being. Although the language will be different, Tillich's program needs to be re-kindled, because we need to speak with each other now more than ever, and the more we learn the more aware we become that Christians and humanists, at the core, are speaking the same language.

Quite possibly, no word creates more division between people than the word "god". Modern technological advances have devised ear bud gadgets that can help in cross cultural situations by instantly translating one language to another while engaged in conversation. Sounds like a definite gadget to get for the world traveler, but I wonder how such devices would serve certain people when they need to translate the word "god".

The difficulty arises not only in transcultural situations, but intra-cultural as well. Your definition and understanding of "god" could be quite different from mine, and probably is. The greatest division between people with respect to god, however, is between those who have a belief in a god and those who don't.

So here's the situation: the word means different things to different cultures and religions, has different connotations for various persons, and is denied as specious and vacuous by a good percentage of the human population.

I have a suggestion: let's strike the word "god" from our vocabulary and substitute the word "love" instead. Granted, we need to work on defining this word, but at least it's something we can all accept as a basis for discussion.

Christian biblicists will protest, but there is a great deal of material in the Bible itself that points in this direction. A person or group that we refer to as "John", writing in the second century CE, says quite simply: "God is love. Whoever abides in love abides in God, and God in him. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

In the 13th chapter of his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul extols the virtue of love, and ends with the famous quote: "Faith, hope and love abide. These three. But the greatest of these is love."

The gospel of Luke relates the story of a teacher who challenged Jesus with a question: what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus responds: You know the law, love God with all your heart,

soul, strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. The young man asks: and who is my neighbor? Then follows the story of the good Samaritan, probably the most famous of the parables of Jesus. The Samaritan, enemy of the Jews, was the one who proved neighbor to the one who had been robbed and beaten, going so far as to pay for his rehabilitation, all without thought of reward. Question: what must I do to be made whole, to inherit eternal life? Answer: love your neighbor.

Both as a description of god and as a fulfilling way of life, the word is love. That sounds good, but it's not so simple. The Greeks identified at least seven types of love, and three, in particular, are in common English usage: agape, philia, and eros. Starting with the last, I suppose we all know what erotic love is. And philia- brotherly/sisterly love, is also well known. The third, perhaps less familiar, is the word used in John: God is agape, and a life of agape is how life becomes fulfilling. It is given without thought for reward, "pure", if you will.

The origin of the word "agape" is subject to debate. It was used by Plato, but not much. The early church made it much more common, some believe, because it sounded like the Hebrew word for love. In any case, agape means unconditional love and is applied both to God and to a life inspired by God. Take out the word god, and you have unconditional love. So let's work with that. My guess is that everyone can at least understand the meaning of unconditional love.

Or can we? John Bennett was president of Union Seminary while I was there and he championed an ethic based on what was referred to as middle axioms. Love was considered a bit abstract and so needed some concepts to bring it down to reality, concepts like justice, freedom, and equality. Following this line of analysis, saying that god is love could be interpreted as meaning that god is justice, for example. On this basis, it's understandable why many progressive churches today have programs that focus on social justice. Be that as it may, the next question is: what is justice? and I suppose that the first phrase in answering that question is: well, it depends...

The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book on ethics in which he sought to define the highest goal for which one should strive. One was the good: a person should seek the highest good. Another was the right: one should seek to do that which is right. In attempting the good or the right, one must inevitably decide, whatever the issue is, in terms of another criterion: the fitting. Abstract definitions of what is good or what is right remain divorced from reality unless we can understand what is fitting in a given situation. And how do we determine what is fitting? Do I decide on my own? Is it a communal decision? Does it depend on my culture? Is it as simple as: do unto others...?

I think it is. And there are lots of examples of persons who give of themselves without thought of payback. Think of Gandhi, Mandela, King. Think of family members who devote their life to one another, of community members who do the same. Think of Jesus, whose heart went out to his impoverished countrymen, only to be executed by the very empire he sought to change. Think of the unheralded daily acts of people caring for one another. The recent hurricanes and CA wildfires have been the occasions for strangers to step forward and lend a helping hand to people they don't even know. Yes, it all counts, all selfless love, and it depends on what is fitting in the circumstance.

Does this mean, then, that we are left without any universal standard, lost in a vacuum of absolute relativism, where whatever I think is acceptable, just because I think it? And you think your way, and so on, down the line? and we are all trying to be loving.

Finding that place between total relativism and universalism is not easy, and perhaps not possible. I have always been a contextualist when it comes to ethics: you don't know what fits

until you're in the situation. At the same time, I am absolutely certain that what Hitler did was wrong. How can I hold these two together? I don't know.

Facing this dialectic, I come back to the story Jesus told of the Good Samaritan, who stopped to help a stranger of another culture who had been beaten and robbed. He had no thought of compensation of any type. He bound up the man's wounds and brought him to an inn, telling the keeper to care for the man and he would pay the bill, regardless of cost. Agape love at its finest. There can be no doubt that the Samaritan did the right thing, the good thing, the fitting thing, the loving thing.

We started by asking if we could replace the word god with the word love. We have seen that both words are not easily defined or understood. And yet, given the importance of finding common ground, I think that at least for the time being, we should give it a try and replace the word god with the word love in the context of humanist/Christian dialogue. Christians can talk about god all they want when talking among themselves, just as humanists can deny god all they want when talking among themselves. But when talking to each other, using the word love, as exemplified by the Samaritan, would be a helpful way to begin the dialogue. If we can agree on love, then will follow the awareness that indeed we have much more in common.

PCNV PROGRAMS FOR 2018

All meetings are at Ewing Memorial Centre, Stonnington Community Uniting Church, Cnr Coppin Street and Burke Rd, Malvern East, unless indicated otherwise.

- **SUNDAY FEBRUARY 25. 3.00PM TO 5.00PM.**
Glen Loughrey, "Sovereignty and Treaty – It's in Our Bodies" and "Doing Authentic Australian Worship".
- **SUNDAY MARCH 25. 3.00PM TO 5.00PM.**
Palm Sunday: Progressive Easter liturgy: "The God of Easter: Who was that for Jesus?" Followed by discussion of a progressive understanding of Easter. Leaders: The Emerging Church Team.
- **FRIDAY EVENING APRIL 27. 6.30PM TO 8.00PM.**
Michael Morwood, "A New Template for Progressive Christian Prayer".
- **SUNDAY MAY 27. 3.00PM TO 5.00PM.**
Coralie Ling: "Widening our Horizons". Planetary solidarity: The contribution of eco feminists from across the globe to new interpretations of Christianity in the light of climate change.
- **SUNDAY JUNE 24:** To Be Announced
- **July: Professor Joe Bessler lecture series.**
Common Dreams on the Road scholar

Talking Templer – workshops on the faith and philosophy underpinning the Temple Society

Temple Society Australia (TSA) – a progressive Christian community since 1950 (and PCNV organisation member)

The Temple Society is a spiritually diverse, independent Christian community, with no creeds, dogmas, sacraments or liturgy, and which focuses on Christian values to serve as a life guide for how we conduct ourselves and interact with others.

Five sessions, each of 1½ hours (followed by supper), starting at 7.30pm in the Templer Chapel, 51 Elizabeth Street, Bayswater (Melway map 64 F7) at no cost to participants. Attend all or any of the programs.

- ❖ Friday 13 April Temple Society – an overview of a progressive religious community
- ❖ Friday 4 May God, prayer and spirituality – a Templer perspective
- ❖ Friday 18 May Jesus and the Bible – a Templer perspective
- ❖ Friday 1 June Temple Society – a brief history
- ❖ Friday 15 June Temple Society Australia – a faith community for the 21st century

The sessions will culminate with our Founding Day service on Sunday 24 June at 10.00 am. Please register with the TSA Office (email tsa@templesociety.org.au or call 03 9557 6713)

Renate Beilharz, TSA Elder

VOLUNTEER TUTORS TO HELP ADULT REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS LEARN ENGLISH

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is an Australian government initiative. AMEP Melbourne is seeking volunteer tutors to help adult refugees and migrants learn English and about life in Australia.

Tutors need to be able to speak and write English well and relate to people from different cultural backgrounds. They volunteer for one to two hours per week.

AMEP provides a free training course that includes practical ideas to help with tutoring. Ongoing advice and support is provided by professional staff.

Term 1 training has started but training for Term 2 will commence towards the end of April.

For more information go to melbourneamep.com.au and click on 'Volunteer' to express your interest or call 1300 062 314.

EMERGING CHURCH IN 2018

Emerging Church meets on the third Sunday of each month

from 5.00pm to 6.30pm. Please bring a plate of finger food to share.

Opportunities for music and reflection that encourage progressive spirituality.

The venue this year is Manningham Uniting Church, Westfield Drive, Doncaster

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

“Sovereignty and Treaty - It's In Our Bodies” and “Doing Authentic Australian Worship”



with

Rev Glenn Loughrey

WHEN: Sunday 25 February 2018
3.00pm to 5.00pm

WHERE: Ewing Memorial Centre
Corner of Burke Rd and Coppin St, Malvern East.

THE SPEAKER

Glenn Loughrey is a Wiradjuri man and Anglican priest at St Oswald's Anglican Church in Glen Iris. He is an artist (he will display some of his work) who explores his identity and story, and was a finalist in the Doug Moran Portrait Prize 2017. He is engaged in the dialogue for treaty, sovereignty and self-determination for Aboriginal people.

He has worked with young people and their families for over 30 years in various fields including outreach ministry for the Salvos in Brisbane, junior sailors in Sydney for the Royal Australian Navy, and chaplain in a school in NSW.

THE PROGRAM will be in three parts:

1. “Sovereignty and Treaty – It's in Our Bodies”
2. “Doing Authentic Australian Worship” – an Australian Eucharist
3. Let's talk – Q & A

PCNV meeting cost is \$7 (\$5 for members)