



“The best of times, the worst of times”

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. 1859

These words, among the best known opening sentences for a novel in the English language, began *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens in 1859. They sprang to mind as I prepared this newsletter in April 2018. We are confronted with the astonishing greed and deceptions of some of our top business leaders to gain increases in already offensively large incomes. Our political leaders seem to excel at exchanges of abuse with other politicians but not at addressing some of the big issues that concern us and which will affect the lives of our children and grandchildren. A carefully developed invitation from indigenous people to enter discussions for a better future for all of us together has been summarily dismissed. Offers of cuts in taxes are assumed to be vote winners but not improved services for education, hospitals, people with disabilities, returning soldiers, child care, or millions of desperate asylum seekers and refugees.

Yet the love and care and achievements of most people continue to enrich lives. In the same-sex marriage vote, the vast majority of Australians voted to welcome people of diverse sexualities. In March NASA tested a new generation space telescope, the James Webb Space Telescope that will expand further the extraordinary knowledge of the universe made possible by the earlier (1990) remarkable Hubble space telescope. (A stimulus to me to pay tribute in this Newsletter to Lloyd Geering, one of the theologians whose worldview is thoroughly shaped by science).

In such a time, the mantra ‘business as usual’, whether for societies or religions, is a guide to failure or irrelevance. In a small way, the task of The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria is to encourage us to face the future, already vastly different from the past but with change accelerating.

Towards the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*, in Chapter XV, Charles Dickens wrote:

I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out.

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RECENT SIGNIFICANT MEETINGS

The PCNV meeting on 25 February was addressed by Rev Glenn Loughrey, Wiradjuri man and Anglican Priest.

His address was informative and challenging as he spoke about Treaty and Sovereignty, their significance for Aboriginal people and some of the issues that need to be addressed.

“One of the issues has been how the idea of treaty has been watered down to one of an agreement with various authorities and corporations when in fact it is the dialogue of equals for the betterment of all. It is not an economic agreement or an agreement with economic outcomes as the primary reason. A treaty is about standing face to face and eye to eye and acknowledging the rights and responsibilities of both parties in order to benefit both, now and into the future.”

His talk was illustrated with stories of his own family, with humour his audience appreciated.

“For my family the best defence was to assimilate and live as white people. My grandfather swore his eldest son to ensure that no one knew of my grandmothers story. It was our secret but not a secret to anyone else and my father and I and others suffered directly as a result despite doing our best to be white. Perhaps becoming an Anglican priest is evidence that this was still in my psyche when I did so. Being a priest in a church where the head of it is the Queen of England is the whitest thing a blackfella could do.”

In the second part of the program Glenn shared parts of an Australian Eucharist that incorporated some distinctive Australian images. It began:

“Blessed be God, the Great Creator Being.

Blessed be God, the Breath of All, the Wisdom behind the Dreaming

and the Way of Reconciliation and Healing.”

It was a meeting that provided a lot to think about.

The PCNV meeting on Palm Sunday 25 March was a Progressive Easter Liturgy led by the Emerging Church Team who provide a progressive service on the third Sunday of each month. The theme was “The God of Easter: Who was that for Jesus?”

Vivid projected slides, challenging quotations, evocative songs and reflective prayers involved around 75 people in a meaningful service.

Early in the service there was a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

The final blessing ended, “And somewhere in the world, Easter dawn breaks over the earth, not only at Easter, but every day, and the familiar pulse in our veins throbs of ‘peace, peace, peace.’”

The questions listed for discussion after an afternoon tea break included:

1. What does Easter mean for you these days? Does it differ from your experiences of Easter in the past, and if so, how?
2. What ideas about God were behind the traditional Easter events?
3. Jesus apparently was courageous and determined in the face of threatening authorities, and as he faced death. What kind of God would have inspired him in those circumstances?
4. Where was God when Jesus’ followers gathered in fear following the crucifixion?
5. Would God rejoice with the church’s celebrations on Easter Day? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. How could we explain the meaning of Easter for us to a Jew or a Muslim?

Not surprisingly, people lingered after the formal conclusion to continue talking with each other.

“Unbelievable. Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today”, John Shelby Spong. HarperOne, 2018. Hardback 335 pages.

This is the final book from a prolific author who has addressed the need for changes in Christianity. His lifelong focus has been on the need for a new approach to understanding the ancient Christian tradition so that it becomes credible in the contemporary world.

An introductory part, ‘Why Modern Men and Women Can No longer Be Believers’ sets the stage for 12 ‘Theses’, starting with ‘God’, in which he presents the challenges of modern knowledge, and concluding with Thesis 12 where he discusses the marks of tomorrow’s Christianity. Throughout he makes his case for a new Christianity, an essential, radical, theological reformation essential to a Christian future.

A final chapter is a personal statement of what lies at the heart of his new understanding of God and being Christian. ‘The mission into which this understanding of God drives me is not to build a religious institution or to help people become religious people. Indeed, if the truth were known, I am more repelled by those attracted to what people might call religion than I am drawn to them. No, the mission to which my mantra calls me is the task of building or transforming the world so that every person living will have a better opportunity to live fully, love wastefully and be all that each of them was created to be in the infinite variety of our humanity.’ (Page 286)

Fred Plumer of ProgressiveChristianity.org, the leading world website for Progressive Christianity, has welcomed this final book from Bishop Spong and related its purpose to the goals of ProgressiveChristianity.org.

“... in his newest book, *Unbelievable*, Spong calls for a whole new way of approaching the Christian faith. It is not totally a new thought for him, but in this book he is being very specific about *how* he sees a future of

Christianity. In this book he spells out twelve theses, starting with the need to recreate our understanding of the word *God*. He then walks us through the balance of the eleven other theses and an epilogue. At the end of the book he simply asks, “*Can Christian theology once again be enabled to interact with contemporary knowledge? Can Christian liturgies be made to reflect reality rather than nostalgia? Can Christianity affirm human oneness while still embracing its radical diversity? Can this faith create a new institutional form that fosters a truth-seeking, universal community?*”

“Bishop Spong calls for change. He challenges us to begin to rebuild a new Christianity and frankly, that is what we are trying to do here. These are the issues we have asked our authors to deal with. We do not need to do any more deconstruction. It has been done, and done well. There are still organizations that are devoted to this endeavor but we no longer see the need for that. We are trying to build something that we can proudly call a New Christianity. This is what we are trying to birth even though we do not yet know what form it will eventually take, what it will look like, or how it will feel. We do know that most of us will not be around to see the end results. That is the challenge we have been given, however, and we accepted it.”

The book has a lengthy Bibliography, a Scripture index and a Topic index which will make it an easy-to-use resource for people searching for particular subjects.

-Review by David Merritt

Available from the PCNV bookstall for \$38. Postage \$8.

Some Encouragement to Keep on Making a Difference

Star Fish Story

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wuSaNCIde4>

Landfillharmonic

<http://www.landfillharmonicmovie.com/>

The Lord’s Prayer

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWqpVtmSB_c&feature=share

Prayers for Progressive Christians. A New Template, by Michael Morwood.
Kelmor Publications, 2018. Paperback, 247 pages. Review by David Merritt

In the Introduction, reflecting on thirty years experience engaged with Christians searching for a more relevant faith, the author writes, ‘ “How do we pray now?” is one of the most common questions I am asked by people who are seriously exploring what they now find believable or not.’ (Page 6)

Two previous books by the author on this subject have been widely used to stimulate discussion about prayer and to guide the practice of prayer. (Michael Morwood, **Praying a New Story.** Spectrum Publications, 2003 and Michael Morwood, **Children Praying a New Story. A Resource for Parents, Grandparents and Teachers.** South Bend. Kelmor Publishing, 2009)

This new book builds on those earlier works and provides a wider discussion of the issues involved in light of contemporary knowledge and beliefs and a richer resource of actual prayers that provide a template or pattern for personal or communal prayer.

The book is in two parts. Part One: “Praying what we now believe” has 11 brief chapters in 41 pages starting with “Why prayer should change” through topics such as “God”, “The purpose of life”, “Jesus”, “Liturgy”, and “Religion” to a concluding chapter on “General principles for composing prayers”. Each chapter may be brief but it is direct and engages the topic in contemporary terms. For example, in the chapter on the purpose of life, after describing a traditional view, the author writes, “Today, we have at our disposal a radically different basis upon which to talk about the purpose of life – the scientific story of our human origins. ... We are a life form composed of stardust that gives the universe a way to reflect on itself”.

Part Two is nearly 200 pages of prayers, though that title does not convey the diversity of ways of praying that are described here. There are not only the words of prayers but also the words of songs (many by John

Denver) to be listened to as part of prayer, readings for multiple voices, readings from the Bible, and reflective prayers with group responses. I typed most of the songs listed into Youtube and found, for example, that I could listen to John Denver sing “Amazon” (“There is a river that runs from the mountains, That one river is all rivers, All rivers are that one”) as the beginning of prayer about everything and everyone being connected. While these are songs from a long past folk song period in the 1970s they can serve as a template for using more contemporary songs. (On the day I typed this I listened to Missy Higgins sing “49 Candles at Orlando” which broke open my heart. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqxaPoN-Nil>) There are prayers for a wedding (“The wonder of human love”), for baptism, and for death.

I found it a moving experience to enter Michael Morwood’s prayer world where contemporary personal experience is intertwined with the heart of the Christian tradition in ways that find evocative expression in music, words and silence. To read this book will make you wistful for what prayer could be in your life and in your Christian gatherings.

- David Merritt, 17 April 2018.

Available from the bookstall at PCNV meetings for \$25. Posted within Victoria add \$5 postage, total posted \$30.

Today’s questions demand different answers

“When today’s questions demand different answers from those of Biblical times, such answers are not rebellion or heresy but an acknowledgement of *contemporary* encounters with What inspired our ancestors in their day. The question is ... can we live with such openness to the new? I can, because I can do no other. It is the way I live with everything else, an ongoing juggling of a few certain facts, constant new experiences, diverse opinions, and faith in many things, some scientifically verifiable and others not -- it is the adventure of being alive.”

Val Webb, “The (Im)possibilities of God Talk”.
Address to UCA, NSW, Sept 2007

“How Progressive Christian Understandings Affect Your Life”

A PCNV study guide

In mid 2017 the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria offered four monthly programs about practical implications for our lives of progressive Christian understandings. The topics were God, Jesus, The Bible, and Hope. Some members who were unable to be at some or all of the series asked for access to the resource notes used in the programs.

PCNV has now made the notes available as an 18 page pdf file; “How Progressive Christian Understandings Affect Your Life”.

The notes use the Nicene Creed as a reference for traditional positions and provide quotes from four authors for a range of different progressive Christian perspectives – Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong, Lloyd Geering and Gretta Vosper. The books by these four authors are readily available for follow up reading. There are worksheets to encourage people to work on and clarify implications for them.

Perhaps the best way to describe what is in this resource is to list the table of contents.

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- Page 3. The purpose of these resources
- Page 4. Using these resources in groups
Including individual “Implications for me”
worksheets
- Page 6. Implications of Progressive Christian
understandings of God
- Page 9. Implications of Progressive Christian
Understandings of Jesus
Including a summary of developments
in scholarship about Jesus
- Page 13. Implications of Progressive Christian
understandings of The Bible
- Page 16. Implications of Progressive Christian
understandings of Hope

This resource is a free download (1 MB) from the PCNV website at:

www.pcnvictoria.org.au

EMERGING CHURCH

Meets on the third Sunday of each month

5.00pm to 6.30pm

at Manningham Uniting Church,
Westfield Drive, Doncaster.

Please bring a plate of finger food to
share.

Opportunities for music and reflection
that encourage progressive spirituality

Lloyd Geering 100th birthday

On 26 February 2018, one of the leading scholars of Progressive Christianity, New Zealander Sir Lloyd Geering, celebrated his 100th birthday. He has been an inspiring writer and speaker for many people who have sought a way to live with intellectual integrity informed by the contemporary scientific and secular world. His career moved from being a parish minister to the theological colleges of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand in Dunedin and the Uniting Church in Queensland to become the first ever Professor of Religious Studies in a New Zealand University, at Victoria University of Wellington.

At the 1967 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand he was famously charged with doctrinal error and disturbing the peace and unity of the (Presbyterian) church. The charges were quickly dismissed.

He is the author of numerous books. Those that have influenced my life are:

Tomorrow's God: How We Create our Worlds (1996)

Such is Life! A Close Encounter with Ecclesiastes (2010)

From the Big Bang to God: Our Awe-Inspiring Journey of Evolution (2013)

Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic (2014)

Progressive Christians around the world will think of him with deep gratitude and wish him a happy 101st year.

-David Merritt

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

“A New Template for Progressive Christian Prayer”

with

Michael Morwood

WHEN: Friday evening 27 April 2018
7.00pm to 8.30pm

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

THE TOPIC

“One of the biggest challenges facing progressive religious thinkers is how to shape community, group and personal vocal prayer that reflect the enormity and the reality of the theological shifts we are experiencing. Are we up to accepting the challenge? This presentation will reflect on the shifts in theological thinking prompting us to change our prayer style, and offer examples for how we might reshape our prayers.” *Michael Morwood*

Michael’s new book with the same title as this address, is divided into two Parts, “Praying what we now believe” and “Prayers”. The first Part includes topics such as “Why prayer should change”, “God”, “The purpose of life”, “Jesus”, “Liturgy” and “religion”. The book will be available at the meeting.

THE SPEAKER

Michael Morwood is well known to PCNV members. Previous times he has been speaker have been among our best attended gatherings.

Michael resigned from priestly ministry in the Catholic Church in 1998 after his book *“Tomorrow’s Catholic. Understanding God and Jesus in a New Millenium”*, was banned by the then Archbishop of Melbourne, George Pell. Since then he has worked with progressive Christians throughout USA, Canada and Australia as well as in Ireland and England. He lives in Perth with his wife, Maria. He is the author of ten books including “Praying A New Story”, a much valued guide to changing from prayer “to an elsewhere God” to prayer that recognises “a sustaining Presence everywhere”.

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