



## *Finding a Way*

We are at a strange and challenging time in Australia where there are big issues about the future of Australia that require nation-wide action at the same time when there has been an erosion of trust in the political, social and economic institutions that we would normally expect to provide leadership.

To list just four of those issues is to establish the size of those challenges: human induced climate change, a new relationship between the First Peoples of this continent and later arrivals, widespread sexual abuse of children and sexual assault of women, and that well over half a million Australians who are unemployed must struggle to survive on a fraction of what is identified as a living wage.

Adherents of religions with a this-worldly ethical component in their worldviews feel a special challenge, made all the more complex by religion sometimes helping to cause or being complicit in those problems that now must be faced.

This newsletter leads with one of those topics that is beginning to be recognised across our country: a new relationship between Indigenous and other Australians. This urgent topic was the focus of Indigenous people in the Uluru Statement, "A Voice from the Heart" and at the recent Gama Festival of Traditional Cultures earlier this August at Gulkula near Nhulunbuy, Northern Territory. It emerged as a strong focus for Progressive Christians at the recent Common Dreams conference in Sydney in July. Treaties are being negotiated in some states, including Victoria. Political voices in Canberra often appear ill-informed and conflicted.

Whatever the way ahead turns out to be, an urgent need at this time is evidence based knowledge to replace gaps in our knowledge and especially to replace some distortions of our history that suited our ancestors.

The next three pages of this newsletter describe four books that have taken me on an historical journey that was not included in my history major as part of a BA in the 1950s nor in my schooling before that but now is solidly supported. That journey is a prerequisite for the discussions and actions that lie ahead. I welcome for future newsletters the sources of knowledge and vision that other members of PCNV have found informative and helpful.

*-David Merritt, Editor*

### **Pages 2-4:** Book reviews:

- Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu. Aboriginal Australia and the birth of Agriculture*
- "Remembering Pioneer Australian Pacifist Charles Strong", edited by Norman Habel

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PCNV meeting August 25

## UNDERSTANDING OUR PAST AND CREATING OUR FUTURE

There are few, if any, issues more important for the future of Australia than how we respond to the Uluru Statement “A Voice from the Heart” and to the negotiations for a Treaty between Indigenous Australians and today’s non indigenous Australians – negotiations under way in some states including Victoria but politically bogged federally. Some recent reading has had a big impact on me. There are implications for Christians.

**Bruce Pascoe, Dark Emu. Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture.** Magabala Books. Broome. 2018. Paperback. 277 pages. My copy \$14.95 from [www.booktopia.com.au](http://www.booktopia.com.au)  
Review by David Merritt

Every now and then I read a book that both confronts and informs me. This is one of those books. I finished reading it thinking that I had come across information that requires substantial rethinking of what I thought I knew and, more importantly, is relevant to what Australia is and what we become.

Bruce Pascoe is an indigenous author who was influenced by responses to an earlier book (*Convincing Ground* 2007) to explore an alternative view of pre-colonial society to the widely held description as hunter-gatherers. He knew that he would have to begin from the sources upon which Australia’s idea of history is based: the journals and diaries of explorers and colonists.

Having driven with a 4WD group over some of Charles Sturt’s expedition into Australia’s inland and camped a number of times on Cooper Creek, I was especially interested to read an extract from the journal of Sturt’s 1844 expedition to Cooper’s Creek and the Stony Desert on climbing a final dune to look down on the plain:

*“On gaining the summit [we] were hailed with a deafening shout by 3 or 400 natives, who had assembled on the flat below ... I had never before come so suddenly upon so large a party. The scene was of the most animated description, and was rendered still more striking from the circumference of the native huts, at which there were a number of women and children, occupying the whole crest of a long piece of rising ground at the opposite side of the flat.”* (Page 99)

Sturt saw well-constructed huts in other areas as well. He wrote, *‘The paths of the natives became wider and wider as we advanced. They were now as broad as a footpath in England, by a roadside, and were well trodden; numerous huts of boughs also lined the creek, so that it was evident we were advancing into well peopled country.’* (Page 101)

*“Thomas Mitchell admired another large village on the Gwydir River in the Murray Darling Basin: ‘In crossing one hollow we passed among the huts of a native tribe. They were tastefully distributed amongst drooping acacias and casuarinas. ... The interior of each hut looked clean, and to us passing in the rain, gave some idea, not only of shelter, but even of comfort and happiness.’”* (Pages 108 – 109)

Another area of inland Australia that I have crossed many times with 4WD groups is Poeppel Corner. So a paragraph in Pascoe’s book stood out starkly to confront my memories of this now desolate landmark. *“Government surveyor David Lindsay reported many large villages at Poeppel Corner (a corner of state boundaries in Australia, where the state of Queensland meets South Australia and the Northern Territory), including one house large enough to accommodate thirty to forty people.”* (Page 115)

*“Elizabeth Williams quotes a graphic account from William Thomas, an Aboriginal Protector, which provides a neat summary of the scale and sophistication of Aboriginal housing, but also why so few people saw it after the first visits of Europeans;*

*‘[The] first settlers found a regular aboriginal settlement. This settlement was about 50 miles NE of Port Fairy. There was on the banks of the creek between 20 and 30 huts of the form of a beehive, some of them capable of holding a dozen people.. ... In 1840 a sheep station was formed on the opposite banks of the creek ... and one day while the blacks were away from their village up the creek, seeking their daily fare, the white people set fire to and demolished the aboriginal settlement. ... What became of the blacks (my informant) would not tell but at the close of 1841 ... he could not trace a single hut along the whole creek.’* (Pages 117 – 118)

Again and again in the book Pascoe points out the interest of settlers wanting to take land for their animals and their houses in painting a picture of the original inhabitants as nomadic hunter-gathers who could easily be moved on to other hunting lands. The truth was very different.

Of almost equal challenge to what has been assumed about Aboriginal occupancy of the land and diet are the author's descriptions and discussions of aboriginal planting, harvesting and storage of foods such as the grains from Kangaroo Grass and a barley and the tubers of the yam daisy.

Pascoe describes how official reports omitted references to Aboriginal houses and agriculture when forwarding local reports. *"Editing references to violence committed against Aboriginal people and evidence of their established villages and economy was not uncommon."* (Page 113 and following)

Bruce Pascoe is not only lamenting the past - killings and the loss of knowledge about this country's agriculture and fishing that had been developed over many centuries - he is seeking a conversation with Aboriginal people about the future of the country. (Page 128). Such a conversation *"will have intellectual and moral benefits, freeing us from the mental gymnastics we currently perform to rationalise colonialism and dispossession."* *"It seems improbable that a country can continue to hide from the actuality of its history in order to validate the fact that saying sorry, we refuse to say thanks."* (Page 228)

The book describes current attempts in Victoria to plant crops of wheat-like seeds of selected Australian grasses that yield flour of rich dietary value and attractive flavour when cooked. Such plants thrived in a variety of environments when cultivated by Aboriginal people. Pascoe sees this as likely to lead to new agricultural developments at a time when Australia faces the impact of changing climatic conditions on some traditional European crops.

The page before the Contents page carries just three words: **To the Australians**. We need to hear the pain and promise in the pages that follow. How can we respond to strong evidence that we have inherited stories of settlement that conceal the true story of settlement? The last page of the book proposes a starting point for the way ahead:

*"The start of that journey is to allow the knowledge that Aboriginal people did build houses, did cultivate and irrigate crops, did sew clothes, and were not hapless wanderers across the soil, mere hunter-gatherers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were intervening in the productivity of this country, and what has been learnt during that process over many thousands of years will be useful to us today. To deny Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agricultural and spiritual achievement is the single greatest impediment to intercultural understanding and, perhaps, to Australian moral wellbeing and economic prosperity."* (Page 229)

### **The Author**

**Bruce Pascoe** appears often on our television channels speaking about the land, agriculture and his people. He is a Bunurong man born in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond. He is a member of the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative of southern Victoria and has been the director of the Australian Studies Project for the Commonwealth Schools Commission. He has had a varied career as a teacher, farmer, fisherman, barman, fencing contractor, lecturer, Aboriginal language researcher, archaeological site worker and editor.

**Since writing that review in January I have found how easy and stimulating it is to find out more. A few reading recommendations:**

**Bruce Pascoe, *Young Dark Emu. A Truer History*. Magdala Books, Broome. 2019.** 79 pages hardcover large format. Attractive, colourful, well-illustrated extracts from *Dark Emu* designed for children, young people and school curricula. My copy \$18.75 from [www.booktopia.com.au](http://www.booktopia.com.au) (An excellent present!)

**Bruce Pascoe, *Salt. Selected Stories and Essays*. Black Inc. Carlton. 2019.** 308 pages paperback. An enthralling collection of writings about the land and people often with sensitivity and a subtle humour and passion that I found evocative and moving. My copy \$34.99 from [www.blackincbooks.com.au](http://www.blackincbooks.com.au) (eBook \$16.99)

**Billy Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming. Uncovering Ancient Australia*. Black Inc. Carlton 2018.** 376 pages paperback. Takes us on a journey into Australian history that describes the discoveries,

scholarship and places that give profound substance to names and places that echo in history – Lake Mungo and Mungo Man, the first Tasmanians, the Franklin River – as well as revealing the ancient land and peoples that are part of Australia. Tim Flannery wrote of this book, “The freshest, most important book about our past in years”. I found every chapter absorbing reading. My copy \$34.99 from [www.blackincbooks.com.au](http://www.blackincbooks.com.au) (eBook \$16.99)

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**Remembering Pioneer Australian Pacifist Charles Strong, edited by Norman Habel.  
2018. Published by Morning Star Publishing, PO Box 462, Reservoir VIC 3073**

Review by Peter Fensham 15/02/2019

In the late 1930s a school classmate’s family attended the Australian Church in Flinders St Melbourne, but I was unable to learn anything from him about its character. So it was a surprise 80+ years on to be given a new book about this church’s founder and minister.

This slim book is edited by Norman Habel, an international Biblical scholar at Flinders University in Adelaide, and current chair of the Charles Strong Memorial Trust. The spur for this publication was the centenary in 2010 of a highly controversial speech, *Thoughts on Armistice Day*, that Charles Strong gave in 1920.

The book includes a series of short essays by Habel and several other authors, who focus on different aspects of the issue of *Christianity and Pacifism*. Older PCNVers will find Robert Crotty’s essay of interest as it compares Strong and Archbishop Mannix in relation to the great conscription referenda in WW1

Strong came from Scotland in 1875 to be minister of Scots Church in Collins St and it immediately began to attract intellectuals in the city and the University. Soon after, however, an article by Strong on *Atonement* sparked an enquiry of heresy and, although not leading to a conviction, made his position precarious. In 1883 his charring and endorsement of a lecture by Judge George Higinbotham, on *Science and Religion*, who argued that ‘the churches were failing to address the spiritual and intellectual needs of nineteenth-century people’ signalled an end to his association with Scots Church, and the emergence of the Australian Church in 1885. Strong and his wife Janet (Jessie) were joined in the new church by many of the influential citizens of Melbourne he had attracted to Scots Church, but in its emerging activities of social welfare Strong had strong backing from many others, like Isabella Goldstein and her daughter Vida (woman suffrage), Alfred Deakin (campaign for federation), Henry Bourne Higgins (established principle of a minimum wage), and Higinbotham (Chief Justice).

A long list of new social initiatives soon originated from this church which had over 1000 persons regularly attending its services in the 1890s. Marion Maddox, in describing the *Social Improvement Society*, the *Collinwood Creche*, the *Co-operative Village Settlement*, the *Collingwood Workingmen’s Club*, the *Anti-Swearing League*, the *Melbourne Peace and Humanity Society*, and the *Sisterhood of International Peace*, identifies the Australian Church as ‘a church for the poor’ but not ‘a church of the poor’.

The primary focus of the book is the radical position Charles Strong had on *Christianity and War*, an issue that PCNV could well add to its forthcoming agenda, but there is enough in Norman Habel’s essay to suggest that the Australian Church was, in theology and practice, a progressive church. Strong’s re-interpretation of Christianity “involved:

- a new spirituality in which the Spirit is the governing force within,
- that the Spirit is one and the same as the Spirit of Christ within us,
- being guided by the Spirit means experiencing the power of Love,
- living by that Spirit means being social agents of the Kingdom of Love”.

He argued against ‘traditions, dogmas, infallible books, infallible churches’ and drew on the deeper studies in the 19<sup>th</sup> C of the New Testament and of the life and teaching of Jesus. In his November 1920 speech Strong used Jesus’ injunction to ‘love your enemies; do good to them that hate you; pray for them that persecute you’ to critique the celebrations of Armistice Day that failed to include ‘prayers for Germans, Austrians, Serbs, Turks and Russians. ‘Do they not need our prayers? Are they not our brothers? ‘Armistice Day makes us think about our share in the guilt and the shame of the great Christian War in which Christian Governments, supported by Christian Churches, offered up millions of the best and bravest men as sacrifices to Mars.’

Charles Strong, aged 98, died in 1942 and the Australian Church folded in 1955.

## Resources for gatherings of people open to new understandings of a Christian Way.

*Rev Gretta Vosper wrote of changes at her Uniting Church of Canada congregation in Ontario:*

### Christmas and Easter

For our congregation, struggling with the dissonance of traditional liturgies and music at Christmas and Easter was very important. It made no sense for us to provide a service for those who came but once or twice a year and not present something meaningful for our own community, something worthy of their hearts.

That same year, we introduced a "Longest Night" service which was well attended and beautifully reminiscent of the magic of the season. It has become the new "ritual" and it is filled with truth, beauty, and wonder. We've shared that service with the wider community for nine years now and it has become a signature service for us, drawing participants from as wide a distance as the weather will allow. We have also changed our Easter services, and now call the two-Sunday experience "Dream Away". It says nothing about the cross or the resurrection and everything about literally spending our lives, day by day, in our efforts to make this world a better place. We put the toothpaste where the members of *our* community expect to find it; we don't expect them to sift through traditional language, symbol, and myth for a meaningful message.

*-Progressing Spirit 9 March 2019*

### The Sound that Calls Us : A responsive reading

*by Dawn Grace Peters*

One What is the sound that calls us? Listen carefully.

**Many The beating of our own hearts calls us to ourselves. It calls us to be our true selves, our best selves. Calls us to be what we might become.**

One The breath of our neighbor calls us outside ourselves. It calls us to be companions, allies, partners.

**Many Let us heed the call of our own hearts, where love and truth, compassion and justice are born.**

One Let us heed the call of others, to gather together for some great purpose, where passion and fidelity, truth and equality are nourished.

**Many The silence calls us together that we may do the work we cannot do alone.**

**All Let us heed the calls that come in the silence, that we may be well, and do good in this world together. Amen.**

<http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/the-sound-that-calls-us/>

#### Christianity today

In my latest little book "Is Christianity Going Anywhere?", I contend that we have come to the end of traditional Christianity, and I point to the new phase which it has already entered. Indeed, if we look around us in the modern, secular world, we find already there many of the elements that Jesus talked about when he spoke of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God has been coming, and we haven't even noticed it. It's been coming when we asserted human rights for everybody. It's been coming when we emancipated women from male domination. It's been coming when we freed the slaves. And it is coming as we still painfully try to give fairness to homosexuals. And this book further suggests that we have discovered sufficient of the footprints and the voiceprints of the original Jesus, to help us and inspire us in the path ahead.

**Lloyd Geering, "God and Me". Address at a conference**

## **Emerging Church 2019** **Jesus' great passion:** **The Kingdom of God on Earth.**

**This year in Emerging Church we are going to explore What is the Kingdom of God?  
What did Jesus have to say about it?  
What does it look like?**

**Can we experience it through our senses? As well as utilizing sound and sight through music and images, can we experience it through our other senses - of touch, fragrance and flavour?**

**Join us at 20 Westfield Drive Doncaster on usually the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of the month at 5pm and explore a slightly different way of experiencing the Sacred.**

**Each service is followed by a simple shared meal**

**Aug 18 Sept 15 Oct 20 Nov 18**

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### **PCNV Meetings in August and September 2019**

Venue: The Ewing Memorial Centre of Stonnington Uniting Church, corner of Burke Road and Coppin Street, Malvern East, starting at 3.00pm and finishing by 5.00pm.

**Sunday August 25: Christopher Page, "The Role of Contemplation in Progressive Christianity. Enchantment. Disenchantment. Re-enchantment".**

See details on the final page of this newsletter

**September 29: Sally Douglas, "Early Church Understanding of Jesus as the Female Divine".**

Rev Dr Sally Douglas is the minister at Richmond Uniting Church and an Honary Postdoctoral Research Associate and Associate Lecturer at Trinity Theological College and the University of Divinity. Her doctoral research focused on christology and the potential implications of ancient, often suppressed, understandings of Jesus in contemporary context.

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### **Dick Carter receives religious advocacy award** **at Westar Institute's Spring Meeting, May 2019**

**Dick Carter** of Melbourne, Australia, President of The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria, received the Advocate for Public Religious Literacy (APRL) award in 2019.

Carter first encountered Westar in 2005, when he and John Smith travelled to Westar's fall meeting. On their return, they brought together people interested in the work of Jesus Seminar scholars. With John and others, Dick played a pivotal role, in 2006, in establishing the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria and, in 2007, organizing Common Dreams, a conference of Australian and New Zealand organizations that promotes the study, discussion and implementation of progressive religious streams of thought and action.

"Dick invests of himself into you, as a person and in your research," says his friend and minister Greg Crowe. "He is a deep thinker and reads widely. His commitment to biblical, theological and religious literacy is a passion. While he has breath, he will give as much as he can to make it happen."

## GROUPS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN NETWORK OF VICTORIA

*Discussion groups and more formal organisations associated with PCNV vary in aims, style and places of meeting. Some are book discussion groups, some exploring specifically Biblical questions, some generally spiritual in content. Some meet in homes, others at a church or public place.*

The following groups have indicated that they are happy to welcome newcomers, albeit with some restriction on numbers when they meet in a home! The contact person named for each group will be able to give more detail about the group if you are interested.

### **BRIGHTON: 'Seekers'**

Meets third Tuesdays at 7.30pm in members' homes.

Contact: Daphne Alcorn 9592 2306.

### **BLACKBURN: 'Quest – Exploring contemporary Understandings of Christianity'**

Meets weekly on Sundays, 9am – 10am, February to June, September to December, at The Avenue Centre, Blackburn.

Contact: David Merritt 0438 966 559

### **DONCASTER: 'Explorers'**

Meets on second and fourth Mondays, 7.30pm - 9.30pm, at Manningham Uniting Church.

Contact: Gwyn Roberts [glob@bigpond.net.au](mailto:glob@bigpond.net.au)  
Zoe McLachlan [tozomcl@bigpond.net.au](mailto:tozomcl@bigpond.net.au)

### **FLEMINGTON: 'PCN North'**

Meets monthly, usually the fourth Friday, 7.30pm -9.00pm.

Contact: Margaret Rolfe [mrolfe@netspeed.com.au](mailto:mrolfe@netspeed.com.au)

### **GEE LONG: 'Open Christianity'**

Meets on the fourth Thursday, 1.30pm - 3.00pm, followed by refreshments.

Contact: Geoff Naylor [drgeoffnaylor@gmail.com](mailto:drgeoffnaylor@gmail.com)

### **MALVERN EAST: 'Something for the Spirit'**

Meets monthly on the third Sunday, 5.00pm - 7.00pm.

Contact: Lorna Henry 0425 755 807 or [lorna.henry@optusnet.com.au](mailto:lorna.henry@optusnet.com.au)

Two more formal organisations associated with PCNV welcome newcomers at their meetings:

### **BENTLEIGH: Temple Society Australia**

See the website for times of services and activities: <https://templesociety.org.au>

Contact: Renate Beilharz [beilharzrenate@gmail.com](mailto:beilharzrenate@gmail.com)

### **CARLTON: Sea of Faith Network in Australia (SOFIA)**

Promoting open exploration of religion, spirituality and meaning.

Monthly public lectures on the third Thursday at 7.30pm followed by discussion

Contact: [sofme1b@yahoo.com.au](mailto:sofme1b@yahoo.com.au)  
[www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org)

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## NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

**Development of a new website.** The Committee of PCNV allocated budget and commenced work on a new website for the organisation early in the year. It will provide improved access to information, a wide range of resources and information for members, as well as significantly upgrading design to facilitate navigation of the site and refresh appearance. Due to circumstances beyond our control the development process has been delayed. Work is proceeding!

**The newsletter.** I regret that it has not been possible this year to provide newsletters frequently as in recent years. Poor health has been a factor adding to the phenomenon, well known to members of similar vintage, that all paths once flat have mysteriously increased their upwards slope making walking harder.

# The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

## *“Contemporary Contemplation in a Progressive Voice”*

with

**Rev Dr Christopher Page**

**WHEN:** Sunday 25 August 2019  
3.00pm to 5.00pm

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

### **THE LEADER**

Rev Dr Christopher Page is the minister at Toorak Uniting Church. Prior to becoming a Uniting Church minister he was a Baptist minister for 30 years and has been at Toorak Uniting Church for 8 years. His interest is in the field of philosophy/theology called “Epistemology” particularly in religious knowing. Hence his emphasis on contemplation, “being in the presence of and being present to all of life.” A form of knowing that leads beyond reason, rationalism and information to wisdom, perception and experience.

### **THE PROGRAM**

“Enchantment. Disenchantment. Re-enchantment. In recent years Progressive Christianity has drifted toward rationalism and atheism. While these are worthwhile intellectual and philosophical pursuits, they will not sustain the heart of faith and new adventures in religion or spirituality. Neither will a solely biblical approach to faith provide us with the emerging knowledge we need. Biblical knowledge must be supplemented with the wisdom of the earth and universe to give us the ultimate meanings that lead to a re-enchantment of full life we desire.

“For this we need, poetry, narrative, ancient wisdom from various traditions, landscape and inner commitment. This is best provided by the process of contemplation. In our time together we will consider a few contemporary contemplatives and consider the richness of the wholistic life. A short video of the Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue will be shown as well as some input from Christopher Page and table discussion.”

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

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