



EXPLORING WAYS TO CROSS OLD BOUNDARIES

The first two meetings of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria for 2011 were both an indication of how far progressive Christianity has come and an invitation to explore next steps that have potential to take us further into uncharted territory.

On 16 February author and scholar Dr Val Webb asked whether Christianity was a gated community or just one house on the block. Her most recent book draws on the experience of many religious traditions to show how humans have engaged the Divine.

On 27 February, after reflections on the experience of progressive Christianity in two local groups and through PCNV since its formation in 2006, participants were invited to consider what is next for them as individuals and for progressive groups in which they may be involved. A poem by Robert Frost was quoted to encourage reflection; its final line expresses the challenge of the way ahead: *"There are ideas yet we haven't tried"*.

What is next? Some possibilities for groups or congregations suggested at the PCNV meeting on 27 February

1. How can we better develop our sense of the sacred?
2. How can we find ways to give meaning and nurture in times of darkness?
3. How will we nurture our spirits in community? How will we celebrate, give hope and encounter beauty?
4. Do we have a prophetic (social action) role, to promote Peace with Justice?
5. Continue to encourage open minds through a focus on inquiry and intellectual integrity.
6. Help to find appropriate words to express what we affirm, what is important about Christianity.
7. Break through old barriers between religious groups and between religions.
8. Encourage, and if necessary establish, groups and congregations that nurture the human spirit.

9. Invest in resources that communicate with us as Australians who want to explore open Christianity and express it in lifestyle, groups and/or congregations.

HUMAN ATTEMPTS TO ENGAGE THE DIVINE

On 16 February, at the first PCNV meeting for 2011, author and scholar Dr Val Webb introduced some of the main themes of her most recent book, *"Stepping Out With the Sacred. Human Attempts to Engage the Divine"*. Her challenge was whether we view Christianity is a gated community or just one house on the block.

The February Newsletter carried a review of the book which is available from PCNV. See the Resources Order Form accompanying this Newsletter.

Dr Webb was also interviewed by Rachel Kohn on the ABC National Radio program, "The Spirit of Things". Some extracts of that interview are provided on the following pages.

Interview with Dr Val Webb

Dr Val Webb was the speaker at the first PCNV meeting for 2011 on 16 February. A few weeks earlier, on 30 January 2011, Dr Rachel Kohn interviewed Dr Webb on "The Spirit of Things", ABC National Radio. Following are some extracts of the transcript of that interview.

Rachael Kohn: Val, I think you'd agree, we live in interesting times. On the one hand, universal claims to truth are discouraged, while at the same time we are struggling to find unity amongst the diversity of religions. Is this the big issue for us in the 21st century?

Val Webb: I think it is a big issue because we have moved from a time when the universal truth claims about religion were considered to be very important and have actually divided people and nations and been quite crucial in our human life, and now we are talking about whether it is possible to make these universal claims. In the past when we really only knew one religion wherever we were in the world, we could say these sorts of things, but now when our doctor is Muslim and our school teacher is Hindu and our best friend is agnostic, we have to somehow rethink all this and these ultimate sorts of claims. And so I guess most contemporary theologians are turning now to the human experience, what we can understand as being human and then what is our unity as human beings. We all understand that.

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Rachael Kohn: ... I suppose it all comes down to how God is incarnate in the world, and of course for the Christians this means Jesus, and also to those who imitate him or who can imitate him, whether they are priests or saints. Do you think what is meant by 'incarnation' is an open book, or is too specific? Could we do with a renovation on this term, how we understand it?

Val Webb: I think we could, I think initially certainly the understanding in the Jewish tradition was that the divine shared space, it was the same space, the human realm and the divine realm. And the divine realm in the same space on earth broke into the human realm, it was very much a here and now, this is where we are. And most people know that the Jewish tradition didn't have an afterlife idea in terms of a conscious place afterwards until a few centuries before Jesus, and that became one of the topics of discussion at a time of Jesus.

This idea of God with us stays on in the Christian tradition too. John's gospel is certainly about the God within or the God with us, the bigger story of God but in the same space. But as Christianity met its Greek thinking in the first few centuries, we get heaven not being the place where God is, which is here and now, but taken off into a high heaven, another place, another realm. And so by the fourth century you've got this idea then of Jesus not as a human being in whom God was seen or could be understood, but Jesus is God, and that's very different. Paul says that God was Jesus reconciling in the world, so that is the human experience of God speaking through...like the prophets. But then by the 4th century you've got this idea that Jesus is God, is divine.

When people think that's heresy, they need to go back and look at what the discussion was at the time of the 4th century creeds, the ones we still see as our creeds. The discussion, the big argument was is Jesus God, of the same stuff as God, or is Jesus like God? And even though they came across to say Jesus was fully human and fully divine, it was never quite understood and it was challenged again and again through the centuries.

So I think a lot of contemporary theology is getting back to some of these earlier ideas, which are found in most religions, the idea of the sacred within the world, the formlessness of the sacred, energy, divine realm, if you want to talk about it that way, but in nature in the world in

contact with us, which is an incarnation, a total incarnation, and almost an infinity in that God is incarnate in each of us, the divine is in each of us. And that's very different from the idea that there was only one single moment when God came in contact with us and therefore we have to wait for heaven to be in contact with God. So this gives you that engaging idea that the divine is incarnate in the world and in us, therefore we are encountering the incarnate God.

Progressive Christianity

A definition of Progressive Christianity which may be helpful sees 'progressive' in the sense of embracing new knowledge of the world and of what is called 'God'. Progressive Christianity is founded on faith in the God revealed by Jesus of Nazareth, but it has the capacity to evolve with the third millennium world in which it lives. It is not a separate group or 'denomination'; Progressive Christians are members (or ex-members) of mainstream churches who are looking for a new way of being Christian. The profound need for an adaptation of Christianity which embraces human knowledge and experience in the twenty-first century illustrates the fundamental reason why religions exist in any age and culture. Religion has always been the means by which a society validates and affirms its ultimate values and so orders its life. Where the basic tenets of a religion no longer serve that purpose, its influence will correspondingly diminish.

Over the past hundred years a fundamental change in standards and methods of education has had a huge impact on the way religious doctrine is received and understood in Western Christianity. This is the case wherever the overall educational standard has increased and encouraged independent thinking. For several decades Christians have compared their view of God with independent reading about the cosmos, and have read the Bible alongside historical, archaeological and literary developments. Through this process traditional Christian doctrine has been considered and pronounced either obsolete or in need of reinterpretation, by a growing number of well-educated current and former churchgoers. They have discovered an unbridgeable chasm between belief in an interventionist God and a christological Jesus/Christ, and ways they have experienced the sacred in their own lives. In particular they have rejected the interventionist God whose forgiveness is reserved for those who embrace the 'saving death of Christ' for their sins. Progressive Christians see this as an understanding of a God who has no conception of the unconditional forgiving love which is often called 'grace'.

Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson

We create our words; our words create us

The language we use about faith is critical. The words we select are crucial. It matters very much that our claims about historical Jesus are grounded not only in a sacred text, but also that they are grounded in the stones and on the epitaphs of the first century. To authentically participate in Christian tradition means to take seriously what was going on in the world when historical Jesus resisted the domination system of his own day and encouraged and insisted on non-violent alternatives to the way empire civilizations do business on any given day. Our words, our claims matter greatly. We create our words; our words create us. We make our claims about what is historical and authentic about historical Jesus. And these claims we make about historical Jesus surely claim us.

*From The D. L. Dykes, Jr. Foundation,
FAITHANDREASON® E-News, March 2011*

Website: www.faithandreason.org

Membership in the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria may be by individuals or organisations. The following material is from three organisation Members, each from a different denomination, responding to a request to express in a few words what being progressive means in their congregation and in particular how being progressive is expressed in prayers, reading the Bible and other parts of worship services.

EAST DONCASTER BAPTIST CHURCH **and The Centre for Faith Life and Learning**

In 2005, East Doncaster Baptist and Templestowe Uniting Churches established the *Centre for Faith Life and Learning* with the objective of exploring progressive ideas in theology, Biblical studies and the Christian life. From the beginning both churches recognized the diversity of theological opinion and practice within their respective congregations. Therefore an openness was encouraged that showed respect for traditional, conservative, liberal and progressive views and perspectives among the members of each church.

East Doncaster Baptist wrote this open approach into their "*Statement of Attitudes and Affirmations.*" For example: *We celebrate freedom of thought, courage of opinion and diversity of belief as a sign of God's spirit among us. As an open congregation we commit ourselves to listen to the views of all our members.*

In practice this meant that on Sunday morning, hymns are both contemporary and traditional. Readings include the Bible and other wisdom traditions. While prayers continue to be addressed to God, the divine is named through a plethora of metaphors. The preaching reflects contemporary Biblical scholarship but also emphasizes the spiritual nature of the text and the audience.

The *Centre for Faith Life and Learning* was established to encourage those interested in progressive ideas to do so without having to bring the whole church along with them. The CFLL has run seminars on homosexuality, discussion on the work of Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan and Richard Rohr, as well as introductions to world religions and religious practices outside the Christian tradition. While some in the congregation have taken offence at EDBC being associated with progressive theology, the majority recognize the benefits of an inclusive and open approach to Church life. To aid this diversity at EDBC, small groups within the church are encouraged to develop a programme of reflections and studies that best suit those attending. Hence some groups explored issues such as inter-faith dialogue, ecology and progressive theology, while others look at more traditional aspects of Christian theology. While this may not suit everyone, it does provide recognition of the theological diversity within the congregation and among its members. However, it remains a work in progress!

Website: www.edbc.org.au

Submitted by Christopher Page

• TEMPLE SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

Being progressive is about openness, thinking, questioning, moving, always evolving, without compromising one's identity and purpose.

As an independent, religious community we are free of dogma and spiritually diverse. Christian values serve as a life guide in how we conduct ourselves and interact with others. Our focus is our sense of community, and we take pride in what we are able to achieve as an effective community model. Our members endeavour to practise, individually and collectively, an active life philosophy centred on trust, fairness and respect.

The Temple Society is a living example of a community where considerable change from mainstream Christian practices occurred at establishment 150 years ago, and since then has been constantly challenged to continue growing and developing to meet the religious and spiritual needs of its members and society as a whole.

Prayers: We support individuals to develop a personal relationship with their understanding of the God-spirit through activities such as prayer, meditation, contemplation. Our communal services include prayer-like affirmations, as well as the traditional Lord's Prayer.

Reading the Bible: We recognise and respect biblical writings and regard them as a rich source that records human experiences with God. We believe, however, that the books of the Bible were not “literally dictated” by God, and should therefore not be followed blindly. It is necessary to read these writings thoughtfully and without prejudice, and to apply to them the same critical standard as is usual for other historical works.

Other aspects of worship: The founding generation of the Temple Society deliberately dispensed with all ritualistic and doctrinal elements, focussing instead on what they saw as the central focus and essence of Jesus’ teachings: trust in God and compassion for our neighbour. Our religious gatherings seek to provide nourishment for the mind and the soul. The religious leadership and guidance of our community is in the hands of lay Elders from within the community.

Opportunities to learn about contemporary understandings of Christianity: Our Elders conduct services, discussions and seminars assisting members to develop their own understanding of Christianity. Our members have freedom of belief and religious thought consistent with the Temple Society’s focus on the essence of Jesus’ teachings.

Addresses: Regional Office and facilities at 152 Tucker Road, Bentleigh, Vic
Facilities at 51 Elizabeth Street, Bayswater, Vic and 7 MacPherson Street, West Ryde, NSW
Website: www.templestheology.org.au *Provided by Mark Herrmann*

EWING MEMORIAL UNITING CHURCH

Ewing Memorial Uniting Church, East Malvern, is a Christian Community committed to following the way of Jesus rather than following religious dogma.

We believe in being a safe place for all people, regardless of race, creed, gender, cultural background or sexual orientation. As a community of faith we are more interested in:

- exploring life rather than having the answers to life,
- being fully human and celebrating the beauty, wonder and mystery of life,
- valuing life and every creature as a unique expression of the Divine Energy of life,
- being companions on the way, listening, learning and helping each other in the journey of life.

Ewing is:

- *A listening Church* – we are non-judgemental, sympathetic & compassionate.
- *A helping Church* – we help & support each other & the community, work for the disadvantaged & social justice, and care for the environment.
- *A learning Church* – we are on a spiritual journey; we don’t have all the answers but we are learning from our experiences & from each other as we progress through life

Our community meets regularly each Sunday morning at 10.00 am. Our gathering is traditional in style but contemporary in content with space allowed for silent contemplation. Our public services are a celebration of our experiences of God’s love and goodness to us.

We all come from different backgrounds and experiences of God. Each of us will interpret the foundations of our faith through different lenses. To this end we commit ourselves to an evolving liturgy and worship celebration that reflects our contemporary insights and discoveries.

“Something for the Spirit” is an informal forum for talking about things of the spirit and life. Association with a church is not assumed, but we explore a wide range of ideas to help us make sense of the original Christian message for a life in the 21st century. We have found particular help in the writings of Bishop John Spong, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Karen Armstrong, Val Webb and others. We also try to gain an understanding of other major faiths. This group normally meets on two occasions each month. A range of books with progressive leanings is available on loan from the Ewing library.

Website: www.ewing.org.au *Submitted by Greg Crowe & Dick Carter*

PCNV PROGRAM FOR 2011

Each issue of the Newsletter will update PCNV programs in light of changes to speakers, topics or venues. For example, since the February Newsletter the date of the November meeting has changed .

The Committee's assumption is that a very varied program with diverse topics and formats will allow members and other interested people to select the events that suit them.

The program includes a weekday evening, two full day Saturday learning festivals, frequent Sunday afternoon meetings, and some venues equipped for multi-media presentations.

More details about programs, presenters, the processes and the venue for each event will be sent to members and people who have requested to be on the PCNV information list. Usually this information is sent 2 to 3 weeks before each event.

SUNDAY APRIL 3: 3.00 to 5.00pm: "A New Beginning with Jesus". A different kind of liturgy for Easter. At "The Arrow on Swanston", 488 Swanston Street, Carlton. See the full page poster on page 7.

SUNDAY MAY 15: 3.00pm to 5.00pm: "The Brewing Storm: Eco-justice, Climate Change & What Progressive Theology Has To Do With It". Rev Dr Morag Logan. Venue: Glen Iris Uniting Church

SUNDAY JUNE 19: 3.00pm to 5.00pm: "The Practice of the Mystical Path"
Greg Crowe and one other. Venue TBA

SATURDAY JULY 23: 10.00am to 4.00pm: "A Learning Festival: What progressive faith communities can look like in practice"
Eric Elnes. Venue TBA

SUNDAY AUGUST 28: 3.00pm to 5.00pm: "What can Progressive Christians learn from Progressive Judaism"?

Rabbis Jonathon Keren-Black and Fred Morgan. At Glen Iris Uniting Church

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 25: 3.00pm to 5.00pm "Struggling for Women's Equality in the Church". Anglican and Catholic women share the struggle. Muriel Porter and Mary Williams. Venue TBA

SATURDAY OCTOBER 15: 10.00am to 4.00pm: A learning festival exploring the emerging faith:
Greg Jenks, "The future of the Bible".
Margaret Mayman, "The future of an inclusive community". Venue TBA

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 27: 3.00pm to 5.00pm "A Re-interpretation of the Gospel Healing Narratives"
John Smith and Andy Calder. Venue TBA

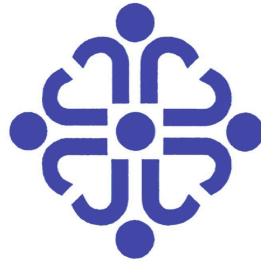
Can You Help?

The Rev Rex Hunt and I are editing a book of articles and cameo's on 'progressive Christianity', which will be titled "Why weren't we told – A Handbook on Progressive Christianity" to be published later this year. We have arranged for a number of internationally known scholars and practitioners from Australasia, United Kingdom and North America to contribute.

However, to add to this I am seeking information regarding the development of the 'progressive Christian' movement from a uniquely Australasian context. If you belong to a group/congregation that is journeying along this path I would be interested in hearing your story. It is my intention to make these stories available in the publication of the proposed book in summary if not in entirety.

If you would like to be a part of this venture you can contact me on my mobile 0427 520 500 or via email jwhsmith@iinet.net.au and I will forward to you more details regarding this project.
Rev John W H Smith

**The Progressive Christian Network of
Victoria**



presents

**A New Beginning
with Jesus**

A Different Kind of Liturgy for Easter



Participants will be involved in an observance of Good Friday and Easter Day designed to inspire new meaning and personal commitment.

**At 'The Arrow on Swanston',
488 Swanston St, Carlton
Public Transport Available**

Sunday 3 April 2011, from 3 – 5pm.

A donation to help with venue cost would be appreciated