



## **The contemporary journey of faith**

This final PCNV Newsletter for 2011 features reviews of addresses and writing by three local leaders in progressive Christianity – Dick Carter, Lorraine Parkinson and Francis Macnab. They have very different backgrounds and different perspectives – a characteristic of anything called ‘progressive’, which does not prescribe one correct and approved way of understanding faith and life. They each provide encouragement to the contemporary journey of faith. This has been a good year for the recognition of the strength of Australian leadership in the world-wide growth of progressive Christianity.

As part of planning for next year, the Committee of PCNV has reviewed how things have gone in 2011. The general verdict is that we did fairly well. There will be some fine tuning of programs for 2012 – shorter presentations from more than one speaker so that differing viewpoints are offered and the listening time is broken up, a series of meetings that can stand alone but contribute to a bigger picture on a theme, and an expansion of our provision of resources - books, DVDs and CDs – with an improved payment and dispatch system.

### **LEARNING FESTIVAL**

The Learning Festival with Dr Gregory Jenks and Dr Margaret Mayman on Saturday 15 October was a successful experiment with an all day Saturday event at an excellent venue, Kingswood College in Box Hill South. The 50 participants were involved in lectures and workshops in a variety of formats with two leaders from Queensland and New Zealand. In light of their feedback, PCNV Committee will consider a similar event for the future.

### **FINAL MEETING FOR 2011**

The final PCNV public meeting for 2011 is described in detail on the last page of this Newsletter. Changes in how we understand the historical Jesus has implications for the inclusion of people with disabilities in communities.

**“A Reinterpretation of the Gospel Healing Narratives”**

**Sunday 27 November, 3.00 pm**

**At Glen Iris Uniting Church, Glen Iris**

**(Melway map 60 A9)**

**Speakers: Rev John Smith and Rev Andy Calder**

### **PROGRAM FOR 2012**

The first meeting for 2012 will explore a top issue for contemporary Christianity with a panel of speakers each developing an aspect of the topic - with time for us to discuss implications for us as individuals and for Christian communities:

**SUNDAY 26 FEBRUARY, 3.00 PM  
GLEN IRIS UNITING CHURCH, GLEN IRIS**

**“JESUS IN THE 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AND JESUS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY”**

- **What recent scholarship tells us about Jesus – *Rev John Smith***
- **What Jesus taught – *Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson***
- **What Jesus means for us today – *Rev Dr Chris Page***

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**MARCH 22: EASTER LITURGY**

**APRIL 22: “RELIGION UNDER ATTACK IN AUSTRALIA”**

**MAY 27: speaker being negotiated**

**JUNE 24: speaker being negotiated**

**JULY 22: speaker being negotiated**

*Dick Carter, President of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria, recently gave a talk about his progressive Christian journey to a group of ministers who meet to explore progressive Christian understandings and practices. Personal stories can resonate with our own experiences. Following are some extracts from that talk.*

## **MY PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY**

*Extracts from a talk by Dick Carter*

I came to Progressive Christianity relatively late. Although I didn't become conscious of the term "Progressive Christianity" until quite a while later, my interest in it was sparked in 1994 when I picked up a copy of Bishop John Shelby Spong's "Resurrection: Myth or Reality?" while idly browsing in a Perth bookshop. My personal Christian theology at that time was pretty traditional, largely unexamined and, I now realise, not very well informed. While I often had difficulty in reconciling biblical accounts of miracles, a physical resurrection of the crucified Jesus and so on with the scientific and physical realities I dealt with in my experiences of life and particularly in my work as a mining industrialist I was nevertheless able to put this uneasiness aside as just something that I didn't understand and which was probably inexplicable anyway.

Spong's book therefore came as a bit of a shock to me. First of all, I was made aware that my understanding of what the gospel accounts and other New Testament writings represented was woefully off course and, second, I was confronted with the concept that the importance of the resurrection for Christians did not require Jesus' body to have been physically resuscitated. The thought that Jesus might not have died as a predestined sacrifice to save us from our sins I found surprising but not shocking although Spong did not really explain in this particular book actually why it was Jesus came to be crucified. Notwithstanding these revelations I did little more immediately with my new insights other than to exhibit increased scepticism to theological claims that called for the suspension of normal judgement and belief and I continued to participate as usual in the life of the traditional suburban Perth Uniting Church congregation where my wife and I were members. My failure to rise to the occasion and examine these insights in greater depth can be explained, at least to my satisfaction, by the fact that my professional life and the heavy travel load associated with it consumed the whole of my time and I had no opportunity for further exploration of what I knew were important questions.

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About the turn of this century the number of new books being published on Progressive Christian subjects started to increase noticeably. Most of these were by established and new international authors but Australian titles were pretty sparse on the ground. An exception to this rule was Michael Morwood's "Is Jesus God?" which appeared in 2001. You may know that Morwood is a former Roman Catholic priest who resigned from the priesthood after being proscribed by the then Archbishop of Melbourne who found Morwood's 1997 book "Tomorrow's Catholics" to be substantially "in error". We invited Michael to Ewing (Memorial Uniting Church in East Malvern, Victoria) to speak to us on a couple of occasions in 2002. Each time he drew a significant audience who found his teaching very persuasive particularly his proposals that Christianity needs to move from an understanding of Jesus as "... an incarnate god-figure on whom our access to eternal life with God depends" to one where "... the 'good news' would be universally 'better news' if it were linked to Jesus' preaching about the 'reign of God' in our midst and the experience of the sacred in decent, everyday human actions" and that God had to be understood as being constantly with and in us and not an "elsewhere God" abiding in some remote place called "Heaven". I think this marked the time when Ewing started systematically to take up the progressive path and also when I personally began to devote myself to examining these progressive concepts in greater depth and began to read the new literature more avidly....

Another significant step for me occurred later in 2005 when John Smith (minister at Ewing) and I together with our wives attended the Fall Meeting of the Westar Institute in Santa Rosa, California. We were impressed by the vigour and depth of the progressive Christian movement we observed in the United States and lamented that our part of Australia lacked any organisation dedicated to encouraging individuals or groups of progressive Christians to join or work together to study, discuss and research progressive Christian thought and practice. We wondered whether there would be enough interest among like-minded people to justify founding an organisation to facilitate these activities. Other friends were recruited to help test the degree of enthusiasm for the concept and a public meeting was held in December 2005 which was attended by a handful of people representing discussion and study groups with progressive interests and this gathering strongly endorsed an initiative to set up an association to facilitate and promote interaction between Progressive Christians. An interim committee was appointed to establish the new body and after a series of constructive planning meetings The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria Inc (PCNV) was launched in June, 2006 before an audience of 145 interested people and I became its first President.

Five years on, the PCNV is one of the more successful Australian regional organisations promoting and facilitating the development of Progressive Christianity. ....

I have found my journey along the progressive path to be intensely liberating. Putting aside the notion that being Christian was principally about my personal salvation which was made possible by the substitutionary sacrifice of God's only son for the forgiveness of my sins was a relief - particularly as I had, perhaps deludedly, never felt particularly sinful and had never been persuaded that humans were inherently sinful because of the misdeeds of Adam and Eve. Being able to see that the real purpose to Jesus' life was the proclamation of God's reign on Earth – that it is possible for humans to create a just world where everyone has sufficient, love prevails and there is freedom from violence, war and oppression – suddenly made brilliant sense. The fact that Jesus was martyred by the authorities of the day for his audacity in promulgating this radically different way of ordering society, that his followers' came to realise that Jesus still "lived" amongst them and that his "appearances" to some of them, whatever form these might have taken, showed he was vindicated by God all made perfectly good sense to me. From this it seems self-evident to me that those of us who call ourselves Christian are also called to work individually and collectively to bring about Jesus' vision for a just world even though the situation we face today is hugely different from that in Palestine 2,000 years ago.

Probably the most difficult thing for me to come to terms with as my understanding has developed is the change I have been required to make in the image I have of God. I suspect that many others have had a similar experience. Twenty years ago I still clung to a concept of God as a remote power which could sometimes wilfully intervene physically in the world – an "elsewhere God" to use Michael Morwood's term – even if I'd given up on the notion of God being a supernatural anthropomorphic being beyond the sky. The change to a position where I sense God to be intimately with and in us and all things throughout our universe and all the other universes, if they exist, has been a real challenge and I'm not sure that I've quite got there yet. I am also still struggling to grasp why we can say with any conviction other than pious hope that "God is love". Perhaps I will just have to settle with the fact that God is beyond understanding and forever ineffable.

I am quite convinced that Progressive Christianity offers Christians a way for the church of the future. A way that is true to the original message of Jesus, is critically relevant to the way the world is organised and the way we live and which does not require us suspend our knowledge of physical and scientific reality.

*Dick Carter, October 2011.*

## Francis Macnab, *Discover a New Faith*

Spectrum Publications. Richmond, Victoria. 2011. 259 pages. Review by David Merritt

The cover of this book offers a lot: “Discover a New Faith. Energy for a better life”. The first page offers something even more definitive: “The New Faith. A proactive proposal for a practical faith for our time”.

There is much in this book that will encourage and stimulate some people for whom traditional religion has lost its appeal, if it ever had any, or for whom traditional statements about religion appear irrelevant or plainly erroneous. The author draws on a distinguished career as a psychotherapist and 40 years as minister of a large city church at the cutting edge of experimental communication about Christianity to present a vigorous case for a changed way of understanding what religion is about and how it can contribute to healing and hope in the contemporary world.

There is also much in this book that will provoke and antagonise some people for whom aspects of traditional religion retain a valued place in their lives. They are not all, as the book alleges, dominated by fear, guilt, anger, and a desire to preserve patriarchal power. Nor are they all ignorant of the scholarship that is the basis of ‘the New Faith’.

The strategy of the book is to contrast the author’s ‘New Faith’ with other religious views lumped together as ‘the Old Faith’. Early in the book, the author makes clear the origins of this strategy in an advertising campaign for a city church that wants to say something significant in its secular environment. From that point of view it is an informative case study in how to communicate a faith perspective to a modern urban secular society. That it was tried by St Michael’s should be commended even if there are questions about the particular strategy. At least their way of doing something seems preferable to the common ways of churches doing nothing, or very little, about addressing a secular city audience..

Early in the book Dr Macnab summarises the choices he sees including:

*We do not need faith in a supernatural being*

*We do have faith in our being in the world*

*We do not need faith in eternal life*

*We do have faith in life in the here and now.*

*We do not need faith in a holy spirit to change the world*

*We do have faith in a good spirit that makes a difference to everyone*

*Faith in the process of healing, hope and humility. (Page 3)*

The key descriptive chapter (St Michael’s Lecture 1) expresses the New Faith in five ‘Platforms’ to describe ‘the comprehensive richness that the New Faith offers’ (Page 22) – ‘Basic beliefs’, ‘A thematic faith’ ‘The energy and dynamics of the New Faith’, ‘Seven essential conversations’, and ‘Gifts and givens’. Each ‘platform’ has seven ‘components’ or sub topics. The 35 ‘components’ cover a wide range of topics related to faith and life. As far as I could see, the rationale for this structure or these concepts was not discussed in the book. They appear somewhat arbitrary. They do, however, offer much to invite readers to explore an approach to religion that is open to contemporary understandings of human behaviour and the realities of life in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.

The rest of the book brings together more than 20 lectures or papers that explore and elaborate aspects of the author’s New Faith. People in different life situations and at different stages on their spiritual journey will find different insights and challenges.

What is said about “the New Faith” claims too much exclusively for this particular expression of contemporary understandings of faith. There are now many books offering interpretations of faith and life drawing on Christian traditions and scholarly insights. What is said about “the Old Faith” is sometimes over simplistic and at times patronisingly derogatory of alternative views.

However, the book does what the author sets out to do: it introduces a faith described by the author as enhancing life. Anyone who grapples with the enthusiasms and denunciations of this book enters the world of a skilled psychotherapist and experienced spiritual leader and is likely to expand their horizons, be informed by deeply human perspectives on contemporary life, and be invited to discover new or renewed faith whether it is this particular New Faith or another faith. In Australia we need more strong voices like Dr Macnab stating that there are contemporary alternatives to the stereotypes of traditional conservative Christianity which have been discarded by many Australians.

*David Merritt*  
*24 October 2011*

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## **‘The World According to Jesus’**

Extracts from an address for the Council of Christians and Jews,  
by Lorraine Parkinson

An essential aspect of laying a renewed foundation for the beliefs of Christianity is finding the answer to this question: what kind of God can be seen in and through the teachings of Jesus? It is essential to remember that Jesus was first and last a Jew. It would not have occurred to him to try to formulate a definition of God (that has been a Christian preoccupation). No, Jesus did not write or speak a theological treatise. He simply did as I said before. In answer to his students’ questions about the Kingdom of heaven on earth, he gave them ethical principles couched in sayings and stories, or parables. In those parables, God is often the central character – as a man who had two sons, or as the owner of a vineyard – and so on.

Through those teachings we can first of all see the kind of human beings needed to make the best possible world. They are to be forgiving, not condemning. They are to be compassionate, not unfeeling. They are to be just, not unjust. They are to be peaceful, not violent. In other words, they are to reflect a forgiving, compassionate, just and peace-loving Creator. What more do we need to know about God?

Jesus risked death at the hands of the authorities in order to make known his teachings. He obviously believed in the basic goodness of his fellow human beings, and their ability to make a better world. Traditional Christian doctrine from the third and fourth centuries CE says something totally different. Reflecting the Greek mythology of its day, it says Jesus was the divine Christ sent by God to be mediator between heaven and earth, and to die to bring about sinful humanity’s reconciliation with God.

Progressive or Evolving Christianity does not believe in original sin, or in an interventionist judgmental God who interferes in the freedom of humanity. Instead, it says that the man Jesus was killed by the Romans because he was proclaiming teachings that can threaten unjust powers and transform humanity and the world.

*The full address by Dr Lorraine Parkinson for the Council for Christians and Jews, Melbourne, October 23, 2011, is on the PCNV website: [www.pcnvictoria.org.au](http://www.pcnvictoria.org.au)*  
*It also accompanies this newsletter to all PCNV members as a pdf file. It provides an easy to read, scholarly, progressive perspective on Jesus and his teachings.*

# The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

## *“A Re-interpretation of the Gospel Healing Narratives”*

with

**Rev John Smith & Rev Andy Calder**

**WHEN:** Sunday 27 November 2011.  
3.00pm to 5.00pm

**WHERE:** Glen Iris Uniting Church, Glen Iris.  
Glen Iris Rd. near the corner with High St (Melway Map 60 A9)  
Parking in church grounds and nearby streets

### **THE TOPIC**

The New Testament Gospels contain at least twenty narratives of healings by Jesus. How we interpret them will not only define the person of Jesus, it will have implications for people with disabilities who are perceived as needing healing.

Two speakers with theological training and extensive experience with people with disabilities argue strongly that we need to bring together the movement for people with disabilities seeking inclusion in communities of faith with the recent work of scholars about the historical Jesus. They propose an approach that will have intellectual integrity and provide an inclusive dimension to faith communities.

### **THE SPEAKERS**

**John Smith** is a recently retired Uniting Church minister who has had a varied ministry including welfare management for 27 years, chaplaincy and parish ministry. As a trained social worker John is best known for his pioneering work with children, especially those in need of care and protection including young offenders. He has also worked with adults who have intellectual disabilities. He is a founding member of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria and continues as a member of the Committee.

**Andy Calder** is a Uniting Church minister who has worked for the past 15 years in the area of disability inclusion. He has been chaplain at Prahran Mission and most recently was Senior Chaplain at Epworth Healthcare for six years. Prior to ministry he worked in a range of community settings, as well as both local and state government. His involvement with community groups includes being a Director on the Board of Wesley Mission Victoria and service on the Boards of Collingwood Community Health Centre and Road Trauma Support Services Victoria.

**Cost** is \$7 (\$5 for members)

*“Open minds, open hearts, open hands”*

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