



"Inviting people to think in new ways"

In the middle of a long federal election campaign it is only too obvious how easily holding different ideas can degenerate into false labelling of opponents and distortions of what others hold to or propose to do. Unfortunately it is also a situation confronting Christians as the ways of understanding and practicing Christianity increase. It is a particular challenge to progressive Christians who define their position(s) as in some ways different from "traditional" Christians.

The address by Dr Val Webb that accompanies this Newsletter as a supplement is a perceptive and challenging discussion of what is at stake in how we relate to those from whom we differ. *"Practising theological hospitality: building bridges not borders"* is about how we can live together in hospitable communities, or even speak about issues of faith if we come to very different conclusions. There are sections of the address that deal with one of the questions most frequently raised by PCNV members: how to be positively involved in a local church community where some beliefs and practices are experienced as alienating?

We are grateful to Dr Webb for permission to make this address available through PCNV. We hope it will be widely read and also discussed in some of the groups associated with PCNV. Several paragraphs extracted from the attached address are printed on page 4 of the Newsletter as samples to entice you to read the full address.

The recent lectures by Dr Robin Meyers presented a complementary challenge: to become more significantly different from the prevailing culture - to see the church as a spiritual insurgency and to be more interested in being loving than right. Two reports from PCNV members are on following pages.

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"PROGRESSIVE SPIRITUALITY : NEW DIRECTIONS"

**Fourth Common Dreams Conference,
Brisbane**

**FRIDAY 16 SEPTEMBER TO MONDAY 19
SEPTEMBER 2016**

Go to the website for full details of programs, speakers, venue and to register:

<http://www.commondreams.org.au>

Less than four months to go!
Early bird registrations now available.

**A Weekend with Robin Meyers,
Presented by Common Dreams on the Road
May 13-14, 2016**

Two reports and reflections by PCNV members

120 people on Friday night and 80+ on Saturday, were enthralled by the wit and wisdom and humour and passion of US theologian and Pastor the Rev Professor Robin Meyers, in his lectures at the Uniting East Malvern Centre. His opening gambit was: “When was the last time a sermon turned up on Wiki-leaks?” That set the tone for his call to the church to stop imitating empires and become the ‘leaven’ that will corrupt or upset, empires/governments – as Jesus intended! Like the woman concealing leaven in the dough, Jesus’ followers are called to ‘hide’ the corrupting agent of love in the structures of empire. But no one these days sees the church as a threat to power. Once it was revolutionary, now it is resolutionary. This tends to keep the church invisible, and for the empire, business as usual equals ‘good news’.

Dr Meyers urged his listeners to see the church as a spiritual insurgency:

- Do what’s right even before it’s legal.
- You must be more interested in being loving than being right.
- Essential Christian practice is more important than theological uniformity.

He listed ways the church must change if it is to be an effective insurgency. For example:

- Make changes to the Eucharist as befits a church grown beyond traditions about the sacrifice of Christ. Open the table to everyone.
- Make the church the centre of non-violent resistance to the unloving ways of the empire.
- Create an alternative economy – lend to the deserving without charging interest.
- Put children at the centre of community.
- Adopt a local school and become its benefactor.
- Go green in practice, not just in theory.

Dr Meyers noted that:

- “Everyone says they love Jesus, but if he were to return saying the same things he said before, they would have him arrested.”
- “The church is weary. Originally it met in joyful non-compliance to the principalities and powers. So if the status quo isn’t working now, for the love of God, resist!”

In his final lecture, Dr Meyers led the audience through his thoughts about Quantum Physics and the Future of God. Among much more, he declared that:

- Science and religion are natural partners.
- Science leads us to a room called ‘wonder’.
- All in creation is connected – the whole is far more than just the sum of the parts.
- Every action is consequential.
- The physical reality of the universe refuses to be compartmentalized.
- We are part of the whole web of life – we are not alone.

The audience was left with a distinct and urgent call – make the church a serious trouble-maker for the good. Don’t just go to church expecting to be bored. Go to church looking over your shoulder in case the ‘authorities’ see where you are going!

- Lorraine Parkinson

Robin Meyers was a different type of speaker for PCNV – a pastor in ministry, leading a congregation, although also an academic. He spoke with the elocution of a preacher, as much as an academic dissertation, although still erudite and presenting the results of scholarship. In what he has stood for with his Mayflower congregation he modelled for us what progressive Christianity could look like in action.

His overall theme was in the sub-title of his first lecture – “reclaiming the subversive way of Jesus”. He reminded us of the setting of the early followers of The Way as an underground movement dedicated to the Imperial Rule of God rather than the empire of Rome. He sees that the role of the Church today should be subverting the Empire represented by the prevailing culture and the corporations that control it. He contrasted that with what it has become – a “compliant acolyte of the Empire” (to quote Harvey Cox). He was passionate in his convictions that the church needs to reclaim its subversive role– and backed that up with the stories of what the Mayflower church has done over the past 30 years – “unapologetically Christian and unapologetically liberal” in a conservative (politically and religiously) state. He said he was more interested in being loving than in being right.

He spoke from the US context but most applied directly to us here in Australia. He asked how social inequality could be at a historical level in the US when 86% claim to be Christians. He noted that regional indicators of social well-being appeared to be inversely correlated with religiosity.

He asked this question as he spoke about “From Galilean sage to Supernatural Saviour – the heresy of orthodoxy”. He noted that in the early church showed there was never a single understanding of the gospel, and that it was not the apostles who established “apostolic authority” to control heresy, rather it was later power-brokers. Significantly, the Roman empire was not just the low level background of the early church – rather the church was an underground movement that was essentially anti-imperial - if Jesus Christ is Lord then Caesar is not. As Christianity adapted to and was incorporated into the empire, the transition of Jesus to a supernatural being was a natural progression. Now we need to reclaim the humanity of Jesus.

The third lecture was about faith as resistance and how we need to build “beloved communities of resistance”, focusing on doing not believing. He quoted some lovely poems by a Polish poet, Anna Kamienska. As one example, in case we feel there is little we can do:

“It’s not from the grand, but from every living thing
That it grows enormous, building eternity as a swallow its nest
Out of clumps of moments.”

He also quoted from Martin Luther King Jr’s Letter from Birmingham Jail (e.g. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html) which now seems very prophetic.

He summarised with the call : “For the love of God, resist!”

The last lecture was on a different tack and was concerned with using science, in particular Quantum Physics, to help us re-define our understanding of the “Almighty”. He noted that this is now the focus of the Westar Institute in its “God Seminar”. Robin noted that many progressive know what they do not believe about God but are at a loss for concepts to use instead of the clock-maker reductionist God. Robin does not want to give up on transcendence and mystery. In the Mayflower church they use the term proposed by Barbara Brown Taylor as “the luminous web” for God. Another source of inspiration was Paul Tillich.

He noted that science cultivates curiosity and a sense of wonder and that there is much in science that can help us regain our sense of the transcendent. He spoke at length about “quantum entanglement” or “spooky action at a distance” as Einstein referred to it. Robin showed that this hints at an “unbroken wholeness of the universe”.

Questioners raised the issue of how we relate to a non-theistic God, and in particular what prayer means. Robin thought of it as “entry into the mystery”, and not a transaction. Peter Fensham, a scientist in his own right, proposed that a view of God based on “ecosystems” would also be helpful. But clearly this is just the start of a journey.

I think that Robin spoke as a prophet – pointing out the true nature of the present, what we need to do to make things better and what will happen if we keep on our present course of action. His message was powerful as he was so engaging but also as he spoke as the representative of a community trying to live out the message.

- Terry Hart

Practising theological hospitality: building bridges not borders, by Dr Val Webb. A few sample paragraphs to encourage reading of the full address accompanying this newsletter

“In discussing theological hospitality, I first want to say something about labels and names. A deadly military weapon does its work even before troops are dispatched or shots fired – the naming of the other as the enemy and oneself as the norm. Such naming justifies aggression toward, or domination over, the other, whether in military battles or religious communities, where some think they have the correct beliefs and others are simply wrong. We have lots of names for different theological positions – liberal, conservative, fundamentalist, charismatic – but, although they make handy shorthand tools, they often become a negative naming of the enemy rather than useful descriptions; and this does not make for theological hospitality. The problem is, each of these labels encompass a variety of meanings, depending on the one doing the naming. ...”

“I want to talk about theological hospitality in two settings – firstly within the progressive movement and then within church communities. ...”

“I have found that most progressive groups are operating within churches or at least using their buildings; and most members are working to bring the progressive message into their churches, so theological hospitality will be the key to their success – a gentle inviting of people to think in new ways. And part of this hospitality will be to continually evaluate just how progressives are different and not different from their mainline friends. Does it simply come down to different theological ideas about God, Jesus and the Bible, or is it more than that? When progressive groups first started, there were clear delineations as to different thinking, but I am finding that some progressive ideas are becoming more mainline in some churches – perhaps we are making a difference! ...”

“Theological hospitality begins with people being able to talk about what is in their hearts without being told they are wrong or unacceptable. It confronts when real issues are not allowed expression. It calls a halt in discussions when third-person language never becomes first-person, or when anecdotes never give way to deeper experiences. It challenges when hard questions are dismissed with pious words, scolding, demeaning, inadequate scriptural quotes or by the authority of creeds and confessions.”

****CONFESSIONS OF THE COMFORTABLE:**

How can I who lives within
A suburban cocoon
In a selective cloud cuckoo-land
With awareness of the world around me
Governed by 20-second pic-grabs
Have a consistent sense of compassion?

Here is a lucky old-sod ALWAYS in credit
Stuff available at the push of a button
The only issue is remembering the pin!

My worries pale in the light of so many
Fighting the daily fight
For resource and dignity
Raising their family
With fragile safety-nets
And uncertain incomes

How then can I walk in the shoes
Of those who live CONSTANTLY
In hidden desperation
On an edge of imploding hope
Lives lived juggling "Small Change"
Making "ends meet" --- For another day

Even with the best of intentions
Can empathy occur?
Has solidarity gone forever?
Is there possibility of deep feeling
That is practical and long-term effective?

Empathy? --- probably not

Non-judgemental standing alongside?
A slender possibility

Perhaps a time-to-time activist
For structural compassion
Is where I might best fit
In this jumble of a world

Even in this most-lucky of nations

john Cranmer
20th May 2016

EMERGING CHURCH 19 JUNE 2016

Emerging Church is a progressive worship service, non-traditional in its format and theology. Attendees are invited to consider new ways of thinking about their faith in a relaxed, meditative style, with different music styles, images and film, a short reflection and silence.

During 2016 each service considers an aspect of the way God is understood by progressive Christians in the 21st century. We also freely acknowledge how much we do not know about the ultimate mystery of the holy. Those who no longer find spiritual nourishment in traditional worship and understandings of the faith will discover a welcome, and a safe place to talk with like-minded others.

At Manningham Uniting Church, 152 Andersons Creek Road, East Doncaster (Melway 34 E6), on the third Sunday of each month, 5pm to 6:15pm including an informal shared light meal - a small plate of food is requested from participants.

AN UNENDING CONVERSATION

"Imagine that you enter a parlour. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defence; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress."

So also being Christian involves us in an unending conversation – with the Bible, the Christian tradition, and each other. ... The task is the ongoing construction of what it means to be Christian.

Marcus Borg, **The Heart of Christianity.** HarperSanFrancisco. 2003. Pages 19 – 20.

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

“Beyond Belief: How we find meaning, with or without religion”

with

Hugh Mackay

WHEN: Sunday 26 June 2016
3.00pm to 5.00pm

WHERE: Ewing Memorial Centre of Stonnington Uniting Church
Corner of Burke Rd and Coppin St., Malvern East. Melway 59 G12
Parking in Coppin Street.

HUGH MACKAY

Hugh Mackay is a social researcher and the author of seventeen books, including the 2013 bestseller, *The Good Life*. His latest book just published, *“Beyond Belief, How we find meaning with or without religion”*, explores the changing role of religion in Australia - a society where 61 percent of the population identify as Christian, 67 percent claim to believe in a God or ‘higher being’, yet only 8 percent attend church weekly. He interviewed Australians representing many different points on the spectrum of faith, including some who are part of the emerging 'spiritual but not religious' movement. He examines the rise of non-religious spirituality in the context of our persistent desire for a sense of meaning.

Hugh has had a 60-year career in social research. Of his seventeen published books, eleven are in the fields of social analysis and ethics and six are novels. He is an honorary professor at Charles Sturt University and the University of Wollongong and a patron of the Asylum Seekers Centre.

In recognition of his pioneering work in social research, Hugh has been elected a Fellow of the Australian Psychological Society and awarded honorary doctorates by Charles Sturt, Macquarie, NSW and Western Sydney universities. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2015.

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