



## **2010 - A YEAR OF DEVELOPMENT AND VARIETY**

The report at the Annual General Meeting of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria Inc. on 14 November featured both the expansion and diversity of PCNV activities in the past year. When planning for 2010, the Committee set two main objectives: first, to provide for both contemporary scholarship about Christianity and exploration of practical implications of new understandings; and secondly, to run meetings with more varied processes that gave participants opportunities to discuss and respond to presentations by speakers, sometimes individual speakers and sometimes panels with diverse views. The report on the year's activities in this newsletter will assist you to judge how well these objectives were achieved. The Committee will seek your feedback in a survey of members in the next few weeks.

The final two meetings for 2010 tackled significant contemporary issues. In October, Peter Norden brought a challenging ethical and justice perspective to consideration of compassion. He challenged us to consider how far the responses of Christian churches to community needs are in fact shaped by compassion. In November, Lorraine Parkinson reflected theologically and philosophically on how to hold together the idea of a good God with the reality of evil. [Now we look ahead to 2011.](#)

### **“Good God! What a Mess!”**

[At the PCNV meeting on 14 November, 100 people grappled with issues raised by Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson in an address on “The problem of evil in a world created by a good God”.](#)

The text and audio of the full address, including the questions that were discussed by table groups, are available on the PCNV website: [www.pcnvictoria.org.au](http://www.pcnvictoria.org.au)

A few quotes:

“We will refer to biblical, philosophical and scientific theories that can help us to explain the existence of evil. Finally, we will discuss the idea that the potential for evil may well be essential for the appearance and survival of human life on Planet Earth. This topic is fundamental to all of us in the way we live, and it throws up all kinds of questions. It often generates questions for which there seem to be no acceptable answers. Questions about the existence of evil apply whether or not the questioner belongs to any religious faith, or believes in the existence of the mystery we call G-O-D. “

”For those who believe God to be both real and good (which I assume includes most of you), the problem of evil opens a ‘pandora’s box’ of questions about a good God as Creator of the world. Why should the world include the existence of both good and evil? Why could not the world have been created without evil? Surely a good God could have created a world of creatures and events entirely good. The questions about this go on and on. “.....

“ ... Jesus accepted the presence of natural and moral evil in the world, and ... he did not accuse God of deliberately inflicting it on anyone. It is self-evident that Jesus’ entire teaching about the Kingdom of heaven is designed for people who live on Planet Earth, with its earthquakes, volcanoes, storms, floods and fire, plus human freedom to make good and bad choices. His teachings are intended to help prevent the occurrence of evil acts between human beings and to bring justice to the disadvantaged. Where natural evil is concerned, to bring justice means to use resources to avoid or minimise suffering caused by natural processes such as droughts, bushfires and floods.”

## PCNV ANNUAL REPORT

55 members were present at the AGM on 14 November. The President, Dick Carter, presented the annual report of the Committee for the year to 30 June 2010. Following are extracts:

It is pleasing to report that the past year has seen The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria ("PCNV") make further advances towards fulfilling its objectives. A varied program of events was offered that was well supported by members and visitors, the very successful second Common Dreams conference was held in Melbourne under the PCNV's local arrangements, the website was significantly developed, a more extensive range of resources (books, DVDs, etc) was made available for sale, work began on production of the "Open Christianity" DVD series, and finances were maintained in a healthy condition.

The committee met on nine occasions during the year and its work was conducted in a constructive and collegiate way.

**As at 30 June 2009 the PCNV had 331 financial members** (previous year 285). The committee is keen to promote further growth in membership and to encourage membership from a more diverse range of backgrounds.

**The program for the year** consisted of nine meetings (not including the Common Dreams conference). These were:

### 2009

July 4: Prof Amy-Jill Levine;

"[Misunderstanding Judaism/Misunderstanding Jesus](#)" at Phoenix Park Community Centre, Chadstone.

August 9: Rev Dr Greg Jenks; "[Your Kingdom Come: Dangerous Words at the Heart of the Lord's Prayer](#)" at Toorak Uniting Church, Toorak.

September 6: Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson; "[How Did Jesus of Nazareth Become Jesus the Christ?](#)" at St David's Uniting Church, Canterbury.

October 11: Dr Rufus Black; "[Why Darwin Requires Us to Rethink Christianity](#)" at Glen Iris Uniting Church, Glen Iris.

November 15: Dr Val Webb; "[Like Catching Water in a Net](#)" in conjunction with the Congregation of St Michael's Uniting Church, Collins Street.

### 2010

February 14: Panel of Rev Dr Rob Buckingham, Rev Brent Lyons Lee, Rev Dr Chris Page; "[The Future of Faith – Beyond Belief](#)" at Glen Iris Uniting Church, Glen Iris.

March 21: Panel of Margaret Ray, Dick Carter, Rev Ian Higgins, Rev Coralie Ling & Lois Godwin; "[Personal impressions of 'The Case For God' by Karen Armstrong](#)" at Glen Iris Uniting Church, Glen Iris.

May 23: Harriet Zeigler & Rev Dr John Bodycomb: "[God Consciousness: Why, How & What We Pray](#)" at Glen Iris Uniting Church, Glen Iris.

June 27: Peter Kennedy; "[Emerging Possibilities for Faith Communities](#)" at Glen Iris Uniting Church, Glen Iris.

**A highlight of the year was the second Common Dreams conference** which was staged at the St Kilda Town Hall over the period 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> April 2010. The PCNV was responsible for all aspects of the local arrangements and logistics for this significant event as well as participating, with kindred bodies in Australia and New Zealand, in the planning of the speakers' program. Over 400 people attended the conference and the uniform view was that it was very successful with the PCNV's efforts drawing significant praise.

Your Committee is of the view that the effort that was put into organising the event was well worthwhile and that it advanced the cause of Progressive Christianity in Australia and New Zealand as well as enhancing the profile of the PCNV. It is likely that a further Common Dreams conference will be held in 2013 – at present it seems that Brisbane will most probably host this event with the support of the PCNV and

other members of the Common Dreams Alliance.

**Newsletters** continued to be sent to members on regular intervals and feedback indicates these are appreciated by recipients which the Committee finds gratifying.

**The PCNV website** was substantially redeveloped during the year to give it a new and more attractive appearance, improved navigability and many new features including connections to social networks (FaceBook and Twitter), ecommerce capability and on-line registrations for major events. The number of visits to the site has increased manifold as a result and the website, which was always an important link to members and the wider world, has now become a critical tool in promoting the PCNV's objectives. Adrian Pyle has been solely responsible for this wonderful innovation.

The Committee has noted that members have a **significant interest in books and other resources** relating Progressive Christianity and that it is often difficult to obtain this type of material through normal bookshops. As a result, the PCNV has made available selected titles at many events and by mail-order; members' response has been very encouraging.

**A start was made during the year to produce a series of DVDs** featuring respected experts who have presented at PCNV events with the intention that these can be used by discussion groups as resources to facilitate their meetings. This project was, to some extent, stimulated by the popular "Living the Questions" series and a perceived need for somewhat similar material featuring talent from Australia and New Zealand. Intended to comprise five or six individual DVDs set up as interviews between the featured expert and Rev Dr Chris Page the first three disks of the series have now been filmed and star Dr Val Webb, Sir Lloyd Geering, Peter Kennedy

and John Dominic Crossan. A further DVD featuring Rev Dr Greg Jenks will be filmed later in 2010. This series may be purchased through PCNV and the Committee is hoping for considerable support from members to make this project a success.

The Net Surplus for the year was \$5,710 (previous year \$2,607). A feature of this year's income and expenditure was the sponsorship received and pre-paid expenses made in anticipation of the visit by Prof John Dominic Crossan in the coming year. Cash on hand at the year-end amounted to \$25,817 (previous year \$20,489). While the PCNV does not plan to achieve significant surpluses, since the aim is to deliver its services to members at affordable prices, it is prudent to ensure that losses are avoided and that modest reserves are accumulated over time so that the resources are available to undertake more challenging activities. (The Financial Statements were presented to the meeting)

**Mrs Maree Burnett**, the Office Administrator at Ewing Memorial Uniting Church, again provided extensive support for the PCNV's activities at no charge other than reimbursement of the direct costs of postage, copying and stationery. Her energy, enthusiasm and skill assisted the PCNV immeasurably over the year. Our grateful thanks are extended to the Ewing Congregation for the generous provision of this invaluable service.

I must give full acknowledgement to the work of individual **Committee Members** who personally carry out most of the work of the Network often in company with their spouses and other family members. Without their dedicated application the PCNV could not operate.

This report is presented on behalf of the Committee.

Richard J Carter  
President  
14 November 2010

## **ELECTION OF PCNV COMMITTEE**

At the AGM, members elected the Committee to manage the affairs of PCNV for the year to the next AGM in 2011.

President: Mr Richard J Carter  
Vice President: Rev Dr Christopher Page  
Secretary: Rev Dr David R Merritt  
Treasurer: Rev John WH Smith  
Committee members:  
Mr Adrian Pyle  
Ms Margaret Ray  
Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson  
Rev Coralie Ling

## **PCNV PROGRAM FOR 2011**

As this Newsletter is being distributed the Committee of PCNV is working on the details of the program of meetings for 2011. Two meetings have been decided. More information will be sent as soon as it is available.

### **SUNDAY 27 February, 3.00 pm to 5.00 pm** **“What next for Progressive Christians?”**

by David Merritt and Lorna Henry  
at Glen Iris Uniting Church.

As more people accept the changes in our understanding of Christianity that have come from the scholarship of the progressive movement, what should be the focus of the next stage in the progressive movement?

### **SUNDAY 3 APRIL, 3.00 pm to 4.30 pm** **A Progressive Liturgy about Easter.**

At the Arrow Centre in Carlton.

## **SURVEY OF MEMBERS**

It is three years since our last survey of PCNV members. The findings from that survey guided the development of the program since that time.

2010 has seen some big developments – support for the public meetings with attendances usually around 100, Common Dreams 2, and the Exploring Open Christianity Series of DVDs. The Committee has decided to invite members to assess the 2010 program and make suggestions for future programs by mail or email.

Early in December is not the ideal time to ask you to make recommendations but it is the time when you can help to shape the next steps by PCNV.

## **PCNV WEBSITE STORE**

Recent PCNV lectures are now available for secure download at our PCNV file download store.

To download Lorraine Parkinson's November address to the network copy this URL into your browser:  
<http://sites.fastspring.com/pcnvictoria/product/lorraineparkinson1>

To download Peter Norden's October address on compassion and restorative justice, copy this URL into your browser:  
<http://sites.fastspring.com/pcnvictoria/product/peternorden>

Of course all recent addresses including John Dominic Crossan's ten magnificent lectures (available at reduced cost) are available from the full store. Copy this URL into your browser::  
[http://sites.fastspring.com/pcnvictoria/product/download\\_store](http://sites.fastspring.com/pcnvictoria/product/download_store)

You can access the Exploring Open Christianity Series (see below) online store by copying this URL into your browser:  
<http://sites.fastspring.com/pcnvictoria/product/exploringopenchristianity>  
DVDs will be sent to you and the discussion guides will be available for immediate download.

## **EXPLORING OPEN CHRISTIANITY**

A series of DVDs by PCNV for study groups and individual reflection exploring Christianity open to contemporary scholarship and new ways of understanding Christianity.

1. [Exploring doubt and faith](#) with Dr Val Webb
  2. [Exploring the future of religion](#) with Sir Lloyd Geering
  3. [Exploring the future of a faith community](#) with Peter Kennedy
  4. [Exploring Jesus and Paul](#) with John Dominic Crossan
  5. [Exploring the future of the Bible](#) with Dr Greg Jenks
- Cost each DVD: \$40. Set of 5 DVDs: \$150. Plus P & H.

## *Is Christmas a good time for Christians?*

*It's that time of year again. Stores and our TV screens are full of crass marketing 'for Christmas'. Many of our children and grandchildren will participate in an orgy of indulgence as they receive piles of toys to add to their overflowing cupboards. (Yes, I know. You are lucky if they put them in cupboards rather than using floors for creative lateral filing). Other children will have little. Christmas carols will be everywhere – especially in large stores wanting to put us in the right mood to celebrate with an excess of buying. The sentiments will be warm; the words will often be literally incredible. Credit card debt will soar. We will sometimes enjoy and sometimes cope with family gatherings and a too large meal on Christmas day.*

*And somewhere in all of this the churches will try to get across a message about the Christian meaning of Christmas. But what will all those people who are once a year attenders at churches on Christmas Day hear? Ancient stories of dreams? A star that moves across the sky and stays over a house? Angels with messages? A choir of angels? Shepherds, sheep, cows and camels? The baby in a manger? What will they make of these stories from a pre-scientific era?*

*For a very different perspective on Christmas, consider this review:*

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas. What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Birth*. Published by HarperOne. 2009. 259 pages. \$23.99

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan are leading biblical scholars and internationally known authors, each with a string of best selling books on understanding Christianity in the contemporary world.

Their approach to the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew and the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke about the birth of Jesus is refreshingly different from traditional approaches that leave us faced with making a choice between seeing them as factual or as fables. They offer a third option based on understanding the contexts of the narratives. Just as Jesus told parables to communicate his teaching, his followers told parables about Jesus to communicate his significance. Borg and Crossan state that if a person reads the New Testament text without knowing the context to which the authors addressed their writing, the text can mean whatever the reader likes. However to understand what the authors intended, there are three contexts to take into account:

- Judaism and the Hebrew scriptures (our Old Testament)
- Jewish thought and expectations about the Messiah in the first century, and
- The Roman Empire – its religion, political structure and military power.

“The context or matrix of the Christmas stories has developed at least three layers – with each successive one always including its predecessor – across the two millennia of Christian interpretation. First of all, those Christmas stories were understood only *within Christianity*, within the New Testament as well as Christian legend and tradition, art and liturgy. Next ... that traditional matrix was expanded to interpret the Christmas stories *within Christianity within Judaism*, especially for that traumatic first century CE. Finally, and especially at the end of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first century, the full context for those Christmas stories is to see them *within Christianity within Judaism within the Roman Empire*.” (Page 57)

In careful detail, the authors help us to understand the Old Testament background to such stories as the slaughter of children by Herod (the slaughter of children by Pharaoh in the Exodus narrative) the journey to Egypt and the return from Egypt to Nazareth (the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the promised land), the announcement of good news to the poorest of the poor – the shepherds in the fields, and the parallels between John the Baptist and Elijah and between Jesus and Moses to declare Jesus as the teacher of a new way.

The authors enter territory less familiar to many Christian readers when they show the essential Roman background for some of the most central New Testament messages about the birth of Jesus.

“The titles of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus were: Divine, Son of God, God from God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and Savior of the World. To use any of them of the newborn Jesus would be either low lampoon or high treason. And, since empires know their opponents, Rome was not laughing. But for now, what did those titles mean as applied to Caesar Augustus? Without knowing that we will never understand what they meant when transferred by some Jews to Jesus.” (Page 63)

The authors bring to life the outcomes for the Roman Republic, weary of many years of internal warfare between conflicting groups, when Octavian (later Caesar Augustus) won a decisive victory over Marc Anthony and Cleopatra at the sea battle off Cape Actium in 31 BCE. Augustus brought peace to the world and was seen as saviour of the world. He brought peace through victory that destroyed all opposition.

“It is vital to understand Augustus’s program of peace through victory, because it is presumed in the counterprogram of those Christmas stories and by the gospels to which they are the parabolic overtures”. (Page 65) The announcement that the birth of Jesus means “Peace on earth to those whom God favours” is a powerful statement of a political alternative.

The very different genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke are shown to have significant meanings for the first century.

“... if you wanted to oppose and replace one Son of God born with a millennium-plus decent from the divinely born Aneas, you would have to introduce an alternative Son of God with a better than millennium-plus descent from, say, the divinely born Isaac, as in Matthew, or, better, the divinely created Adam, as in Luke. But what is always clear is that ancient genealogy was not about history and poetry, but about prophecy and destiny. Not about accuracy, but about advertising.” (Page 98)

The conclusion of their study of Jesus’s birth stories is to help us see them as powerful gospel statements with much larger claims on us than comes from quaint stories for children.

“Finally, then, it is unwise to imagine that those pre-Enlightenment ancients told incredible histories, which we post-Enlightenment moderns have learned to deride. It is wiser to realise that they used powerful metaphors and told profound parables, which we have taken literally and misunderstood badly. ... Whether taken literally or metaphorically, a divine conception was their way of asserting an individual’s transcendental character and extraordinary gifts to the human world. ... And, therefore, the proper question is not about the biology of the mother, but about the destiny of the child. What is that destiny, and once you know it, are you willing to commit your life to it? To Caesar the Augustus, for example, *or* to Jesus the Christ?” (Page 127)

This is a rare book that is easy to read that opens up ways of understanding familiar stories so that they make fresh claims on both our intelligence and our faith.

*Review by David Merritt, November 2010.*