



An expanding network

Forty three people representing 18 progressive Christian groups met on 9 July at the invitation of the PCNV Committee to explore shared interests and needs. Hosted by the East Doncaster Baptist Church, the participants shared the stories of their groups, what was working well, and what the needs of the groups were that could be helped by networking among themselves and by new actions from the Committee of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria.

The variety among the groups was impressive in times and frequency of meeting, program content, resources used, and the ways the groups were described. The dominant note was enthusiasm for the freedom participants in such groups found to consider ideas, say what they wanted to say, and to share important aspects of their lives. As one person said, "I was surprised by the number and vibrancy of the groups".

An updated profile of each group was prepared, contact details were updated, and suggestions for the Committee noted. The network is expanding in encouraging ways.

PRACTICE OF THE MYSTICAL PATH

100 people participated in the PCNV meeting on 19 June to explore the practice of the mystical path.

Greg Crowe, a Uniting Church minister, and Bev Polzin, a Quaker, provided an introduction to the subject and some experiences of meditation and reflection.

At the conclusion of the meeting there was widespread appreciation of what was offered but also a strong wish that there had been more actual experiences of mystical practice than the time or meeting format allowed.

In response to requests from participants, the two quotations, each offered by Bev Polzin as the focus for five minutes of silent focus, are printed later in this newsletter.

When considering how to respond to the cancellation of the meeting originally scheduled for July, the PCNV Committee has taken the opportunity to accept an offer from Greg Crowe to lead a follow-up

event focussed more on actual experiences of mystical practice.

"MORE PRACTICE OF THE MYSTICAL PATH"

On Sunday 31 July, 3.00 pm to 5.00 pm at Serrell Street Uniting Church, Malvern East. This program will provide a wider range of experiences of mystical practices that were only described or referred to in the June meeting.

See the details on the final page of this Newsletter.

SCRIPTS AND AUDIOS OF MEETINGS

PCNV negotiates with speakers to make available whenever possible the transcript of their presentations. and to agree to audio recording. Sometimes this is not possible because of the nature of the meeting or the personal or professional preferences of the speaker.

The audio of Dr Morag Fraser's address on Climate Change can now be downloaded from the PCNV website. No transcript is available.

The World According to Jesus

At the PCNV meeting on 19 June, Dr Jill Tabart launched Lorraine Parkinson's book, ***The World According to Jesus ... his blueprint for the best possible world.*** Spectrum publications, Richmond. Victoria. 2011. Paperback 251 pages. \$29.95
Jill is a medical doctor and an ex national President of the Uniting Church in Australia.

I was brought up in a devout Christian home. Bible stories, prayers, grace before meals, high moral standards, were the daily norm. And worship, Sunday School, Christian Endeavour, youth groups and other local-congregation-based social and sporting activities were the weekly norm - the church was really the centre of our life in my childhood family.

But when I was a teenager, I remember envying those who discovered the gospel stories about Jesus for the first time in their adult years. I was aware that familiarity since babyhood with the teachings and parables of Jesus had the potential to 'immunise' a person against their dramatic impact; innocuous, superficial acquaintance doses provide a fairly effective fortification against fuller understanding! I wondered what it could have been like if it had been otherwise for me.

It took me decades to discover that the teachings of Jesus were counter-culture and iconoclastic – certainly so in his country and his times, and radically needing to be so in mine in the mid twentieth century. Somehow over the millennia, state-based Christianity has managed to water down the revolutionary nature of Jesus' wisdom, perhaps as the easy way out when faced with awkward choices, perhaps to justify an increasingly comfortable lifestyle in western civilisation – water it down, or at least ensure that institutionalised religion remained undisturbed by anything Jesus may have said.

In this new book, ***The World According to Jesus ... his blueprint for the best possible world***, Lorraine Parkinson offers a passionate case for a back-to-basics, confronting understanding of what Jesus was on about, using the beatitudes and the teachings of Jesus in Matthew's gospel as the framework for a challenging, fresh exploration.

But the purpose of this book is much more than a revitalising of the reader's engagement with the teachings of Jesus (much as I found it did just that for me). It's an argument that the Sermon on the Mount (and the Beatitudes in particular) contain a systematic, deliberate crystallisation of all the teachings of Jesus, providing all the wisdom necessary to create the best possible world – IF Jesus' followers would only commit to practising it.

And more than that – the book suggests that Jesus' vision of the coming of God's Kingdom (that is, people living out his principles to ensure this is the best possible world) – the coming of God's Kingdom is an achievable blueprint not just for followers of Jesus, but for people of all faiths - and none. With its frequent absorbing anecdotes and relevant references to an eclectic list of other writings, the reader can't help but be caught up in the vision coming alive with unifying potential.

Almost as an aside, the book indicates:

- that orthodox Christology has led people astray;
- that an interventionist God and the atonement concept of salvation through the crucifixion of the divine Son of God, is not congruent with what we know of the teaching and life of Jesus from the Biblical record; and ...
- that a genuine return to the original basis of Christianity involves a profoundly new Reformation of the church's teachings and traditions about God and Jesus.

Are you ready for the church to be swept off its feet in a new Reformation in this third millennium?!

I like the way Lorraine includes discussion questions at the end of each section.

I appreciate her meticulous attempts to get to the original language meaning of some words and phrases that could be stumbling blocks to a cohesive understanding.

I enjoyed the stories scattered throughout, which aptly illumine particular points.

You may not agree with all of the conclusions; you may find irritating (as I certainly did!) the repeated use of words like 'clearly', 'plainly', 'self-evident', 'without doubt', and such-like; but the book is easy to read, difficult to put down, and stimulating enough to want to go back and work with it again.

I doubt there's anything radically new to be found within its covers – if you've read all 49 of the reference books included in the Bibliography. I haven't read more than a smattering of them, so I'm grateful that Lorraine has brought this accumulated wisdom together and focussed it in such an accessible form.

This book will be helpful for many people. It will achieve much if it's used as a starting point for engaging in conversations about faith, about church, about the way we read the Bible – and about how we can participate in bringing about the best possible world. It's set out with discussion starters to enable just that.

Launching a ship requires a bottle of champagne to be smashed over it, I understand. Launching a book conjures up images of literally hurling it to the quickest pair of hands. But I'm resisting that temptation, as I know I'll value this book for my own further considerations, and I'm not going to part with it.

So I'll just say: I hereby launch this book: *The World According to Jesus*. May it disturb all who read it.
Jill Tabart

If the Church were Christian

Phillip Gulley, *If the Church were Christian – Rediscovering the values of Jesus*.
HarperOne. 2010. \$30.00. Book Review by John W H Smith.

This is a challenging and extremely well written book by Phillip Gulley, a Quaker pastor from Indiana USA.

The book is divided into ten chapters, each dealing with a character trait or value of the historical Jesus. Gulley then compares this characteristic to how the church behaves. He relies for much of his material on the anecdotal information gleaned from many years experience in pastoral ministry and comes to the conclusion that the church sadly has lost its way. The church has institutionalized its response to the point where there is virtually no resemblance between its behaviour and the values espoused by the historical Jesus.

Each chapter poses the question, "If the Church were Christian?"

- Jesus would be seen as a Model for Living rather than an Object for Worship"
- Affirming our Potential would be more Important than condemning our Brokenness.
- Reconciliation would be Valued over judgment.
- Gracious behaviour would be more important than right belief.
- Inviting Questions would be more valued than Supplying Answers.
- Encouraging Personal Exploration would be more Important than Communal Uniformity.
- Meeting Needs Would Be more Important than Maintaining Institutions.
- Peace would be more Important than Power.
- It would Care More About Love and less About Sex.
- This Life would be More Important than the Afterlife.

At the end of the book there is a series of question for each chapter, which makes the book ideal for a group study.

I used this book as bedside reading because I found it is easy to read and each chapter is quite discrete. The structure of the book is easy to follow and I found it an interesting exercise to compare the propositions Gulley raises with communities of faith with whom I had been associated.

I highly recommend it.

John W H Smith

A glimpse of progressive Christianity in Britain reminds us of the world-wide progressive Christian movement. An article in the June 2011 Newsletter of Progressive Christianity Network – Britain addresses issues that are relevant to Australian progressive Christians. The full text of the Newsletter can be downloaded as a pdf file from the Progressive Christianity in Britain website: <http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk>

Can we be radical in practice?

Jesus for Today and Tomorrow, by Tony Rutherford

What is the future for the organised church - established or otherwise? And how will it relate to the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus? Can, and if so how will, the church be relevant in the 21st century?

I see the church as the Christian people of God organised in many different ways, formal and informal. There is no one body called The Church. We may be united but we are all different, we are not uniform. In our difference, we all relate to our local communities in different ways. Yet each group will declare it has a purpose. But does that purpose include a potential for growing, developing and therefore changing? Or are we just kneeling in the sand and waiting for the world to become like us?

To be a relevant faith community and radical in practice, I believe, means:-

- being a living, caring, compassionate and active body of people
- being alive to the fact of our being and to the reality of the world around us
- praying for and with this world AND putting our prayers and actions together into action
- doing so both in our liturgies and in our daily lives, both as individuals and as groups.

Underpinning our faith and action is the question, "How do we RE-discover God, Jesus and the Bible?" We might begin this process in reverse by starting with a new look at the Bible.

Over the last 10 or 20 years, there has been a revival of biblical scholarship with a particular reference to the Gospels. The key element of these studies is that they are written in the language of the lay person. The main writers in this field are Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, Jim Cotter, John Dominic Crossan, Richard Holloway, Adrian Smith, Jack Spong, Richard Rohr, Keith Ward and Walter Wink. Each can be heard regularly in the UK.

More challenging writers include James Alison, Don Cupitt, James Funk and John Hick. All of these have been inspired and liberated by the late Bishop John Robinson. Their words are being read and heard by a growing number of members of open-minded national and international bodies such as the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN), Modern Church, Spirited Exchanges, Affirming Liberalism, Green Spirit, Christians Awakening to a New Awareness, Free to Believe and CRC in Sheffield. Their common approach is to be open to one another, to listen to each other and to share insights. All views are heard with respect and much thoughtful and prayerful and active faith is generated.

This approach has a dynamic quality without being overwhelming. It has the potential for growth and the power to demonstrate a living and a loving, relevant faith. It is a broad alternative to the more limited fundamentalism, the narrow conservative evangelical churches and groups, and the traditional "middle of the road" churches. This dynamic, broad and relevant approach to Christianity has a sustaining power which, being rooted in an open minded approach to the Bible, leads to an open approach to God

Much is being written now about the meaning of Jesus in terms of his life as well as his death and resurrection. Jesus' ministry lasted probably only a few months, yet so much traditional teaching about him has focused only on his last few days. The Creeds, for instance, don't mention Love, the Great Commandments, Jesus' life style, his teaching, his healing ministry, his prayers, his political action or his compassionate concern for others. It's as if our traditional faith is being defined by narrow creeds and limited doctrines, and that the birth, death and resurrection stories are the only events that relate to today.

Borg has coined the phrase, "Jesus shows us what a life full of God looks like." When we re-open our

eyes to see Jesus, we will see God in a new way: as his book title says, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Richard Rohr has presented a graphic way of understanding “repentance” as a “re-turning” to God.

So many writers are leading us into a new way of being Christian, that is open-minded, aware, living in the real world and committed to faith, based on life styles of prayer and action – for instance, a concern for Christians to respond to the effects of Climate Change.

Potentially, the future of the “church’ is bright, the future is a range of new doors opening, new ways of being a church body, new styles of being a worshipping and serving presence in our local communities. Listening, learning and leading. If not the Church will die. But there is now a need to move forward, to move on from *talking* about being radical to *being* radical: a need in our groups, to promote and work together for a different way of being God’s people – focused and serving, alert and prepared to be different, to move away from unexamined assumptions and to take a leap of faith into tomorrow. If we as groups, or as collections of groups and conferences etc, are unable to move on and make a radical difference to how we express “Church”, then even the radical groups will fade away as we age, and many of these groups have a high age profile already.

The key issue now is to capitalise on all the writing, speaking and conferring, to do something creative. Mainline churches, can all show our sisters and brothers a way of growing, spiritually **and** practically. Those of us in the church alumni association can continue to develop new ways of being Christian outside the church.

So let us now walk the talk and make a difference. How can we work towards being radical in practice?

Questions:

1. What does it mean for your group to be radical in practice?
2. Do we need a new way of being church? What would it look like?
3. What is the future for your church?

MYSTICAL PRACTICE

At the PCNV meeting on The Practice of the Mystical Path, Bev Polzin offered the following quotations from the Quaker tradition, each for five minutes of silent focus, not for critical analysis but to allow an image or word or phrase to engage the heart.

From Isaac Penington, 1661

"Give over thine own willing, give over thy own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything and sink down to the seed which God sows in thy heart, and let that grow in thee and be in thee and breathe in thee and act in thee; and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of Life, which is its portion".

From John Woolman (1720-1772)

"There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is however pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren."

Sherene Hassan explains Islam

Sherene Hassan,
Secretary Islamic Council of
Victoria,
will present a talk on
**'Reclaiming Islam - The Vision of
Today's Progressive Muslims and
the Challenge that Lies Ahead.'**

Venue: Waratah Room, Level 1 - St
Michael's Place
St Michael's, 120 Collins Street, Melbourne
Date: Sunday 17th July 2011
Time: 11:45am

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to

“More Practice of the Mystical Path”

with

Greg Crowe

WHEN: Sunday 31 July 2011
3.00pm to 5.00pm

WHERE: Serrell Street Uniting Church, Malvern East
(Melway 68 K2) Parking in church grounds and nearby streets

The venue has been selected as a comfortable setting with individual chairs allowing flexibility in the program.

THE PROGRAM is a follow-up to the June meeting “The Practice of the Mystical Path”. This afternoon will provide more actual experiences to engage and integrate the Mind and the Spirit - meditation and reflection rather than description of practices.

Mysticism today is for any who search for and desire an authentic transformed life not only for the self, but for all. The mystical path is a profoundly human journey. It is the movement from an unconscious seeking to a conscious desire.

THE PRESENTER

Greg Crowe was Ordained as a Uniting Church Minister in 1992 and has worked in both congregational ministry and chaplaincy within the Juvenile Justice custody centres of Victoria. Greg says of himself that he is no expert on Christian Spirituality or Mysticism. He is simply a seeker, open to the transforming of the sacred presence in and for the world. Greg is currently Minister at Ewing Memorial Uniting Church, Malvern East. He uses some mystical practices in leading worship services.

Cost is \$7 (\$5 for members of PCNV)