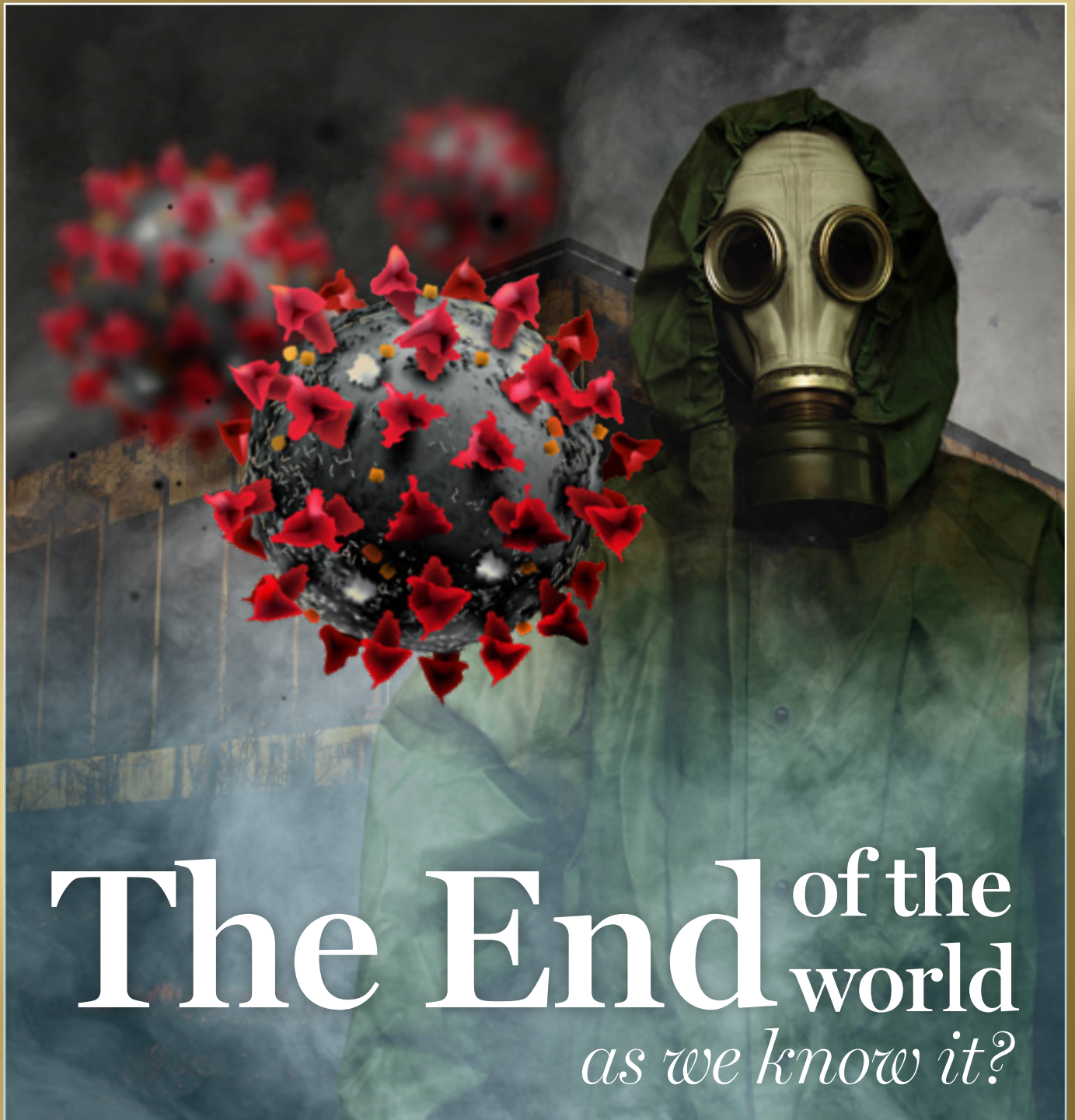


NUMBER 1-2 | MARCH - JUNE 2020

ACCatalyst

ASSEMBLY OF CONFESSING CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA



The End of the world *as we know it?*

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EDITORIAL

This will be last type of standard *ACC Catalyst* magazine in its present format as the council looks to communicate in new ways. It is hoped that there will be an annual publication (linking in with publishing the conference papers, though for 2020 this will be different due to the cancellation of the 2020 conference). There will be other print arrangements as well, and a wide variety of social media and resources. The Confessing School of Faith website is particularly commended to you as it provides an inspiring range of resources to serve in your local congregation as well as information and encouragement in the Lord.

As we have mentioned, it is a new era for the ACC in the midst of all that is happening, and we value your prayers and consideration for the confessing movement.

Peace and grace,
Peter Bentley



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ACC NEWS

Over the last few months ACC has been providing electronic communication with a monthly E-Letter; devotional articles and videos via the School of Faith website and email list, and regular postings on the ACC Facebook and website. A variety of news has been communicated and this is now summarised in the following excerpts. You can subscribe to the ACC E-Letter yourself, or many members receive via their congregation. See the website or contact the office.

Be encouraged and strengthened by the Lord Jesus Christ's continuing presence with us all. Contact the ACC office if you do not get this monthly update and would like to.

Adapted Excerpt from Pastoral Letter ACC March E-Letter

From Rev. Anne Hibbard



It's time to wake up and let Christ shine on us. "Wake up sleeper, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you." Ephesians 5:14

The worship centre may continue to be closed down for a season, but the body of Christ continues. It is not

a time for slumber in the church and the ACC but rather to keep alert and awake. Though many have continued to worship online, our congregations have stopped meeting physically. It is wise to follow the Synod's advice as to how long this should occur. However as Confessing Congregations and members we are not in a time of increased slumber and rest but rather of waking up and living as children of the Light. There are other ways to be light in this time without necessarily meeting physically. The underground church has discovered this throughout church history, and now it has been our turn.

We are also to be very careful how we continue to live in this season (Ephesians 5:15). There is great temptation to give in to the panic of the world that is being heightened through the media. We are to be wise and careful, but not afraid. We are to fear the Lord, not the virus.

We are to make the most of this new opportunity that presents itself to us in the ACC. And we are to be wise in knowing when and how to come out of isolation as individuals and as congregations.

Are we ready as the Confessing Movement in the UCA, to let the Lord Jesus Christ reach out, command our attention and wake us up from slumber, that we may shine for

His glory in the aftermath of this virus and panic filled world?

Much love and prayers to all ACC congregations, clusters, groups and members in this difficult yet promising time with our Lord Jesus Christ we find ourselves in.

Adapted Excerpts from Pastoral Letter ACC April E-Letter.

From Rev. Dr Hedley Fihaki



"I hope and pray that you are all in good heart despite the unprecedented situation that we find ourselves in as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic. Though we are certainly in challenging times, the situation is not all bad. There are many hidden blessings that have come out of this. For example, one thing we have a lot of now is time; time to be with our families, time to be with God, time to reflect deeper on the essential things of life.

Having said that, I understand that this pandemic is having a significant financial impact on our congregations. Some congregations will struggle to recover, and some may even be forced to close permanently. Our prayers are particularly with those congregations.

Pendlebury Award



The Thelma Pendlebury Award is provided by Dr Jim Pendlebury OAM to Excelsia College (formerly Wesley Institute) and is given in the current year (this being 2020) to an outstanding student in the previous year of study.

The student chosen for 2019 is Steven Pulbrook. Steven is a committed Christian who has been involved in several leadership roles at Excelsia College. He was the vice president of the student council during his second year of study and focussed on establishing cohesion between different schools by planning and facilitating social events. Steven has stage-managed several concert practices and showcases.

Steven has attended Hawkesbury

Valley Baptist Church since 2013 and has been a member since 2015. He has served in a volunteer capacity there helping with youth ministry for the last 6 years. Part of his leadership role within the youth ministry of the church has involved co-leading the youth worship band and helping with the worship team on Sundays. He has participated in a leadership capacity, organising and administering the worship team and as a pastoral care leader in the mission to Port Macquarie holiday-goers that is run for 10 days over Christmas-New Year.

With appreciation for this information and advice from Dr Lotte Latukefu, the Head of Performing Arts, Excelsia College.

Vale

*Dr Jim Pendlebury OAM
21 May 2020.*

Jim was a faithful supporter of reform movements in the UCA, a regular attendee of ACC conferences and a keen advocate for his (late) wife Thelma's tireless voluntary work for RA and ACC. The ACC Council extends its sympathy and offers prayers for the Pendlebury family and recognises Jim's wider self-less ministry and service to the whole church, especially within Bexley Uniting Church and Wesley Mission over many decades. Well-done good and faithful servant.

We are always walking in between the 'magnetic field', as Lesslie Newbigin put it, setup up between the appalling sin of the world and the amazing grace of God. As a church in our postmodern society, we often try to slacken this tension. One is always in the (humanly speaking) impossible position of knowing that one is – along with all others – at the same time the enemy of God and the beloved child of God. To live in this charged field of force is always at the same time supremely demanding and supremely affirming" (Newbigin, L. Gospel in a Pluralist Society).

On behalf of the National Council, may I convey our love and prayers to each one of you during this time."

Cancellation of the 2020 ACC Conference

Unfortunately, because of the Coronavirus and its ongoing impact the ACC Conference scheduled for early September 2020 has been cancelled. The National Council has decided to reschedule the face to face AGM before the end of the year and will inform you of the date and venue as soon as possible. We are also exploring the possibility of members who are unable to attend physically, being able to join online in some capacity.

Assembly of Confessing Congregation's

School of Faith

Devotional Messages from the ACC School of Faith

If you would like to subscribe to the ACC School of Faith weekly devotional sent out by email, please contact the ACC office.

Online Worship Services

If you don't have an online service to go to yet, please check out the list of ACC Congregations on the ACC website that are providing online services.

Or you may consider attending our ACC Sunday afternoon Zoom Worship Service including communion. **Sundays 3pm (AEST)** NSW, Vic, Tas; Qld; 2:30pm SA, N.T; 1pm WA.

Please contact the ACC office for all the details.



Change in Staffing Arrangements

We want to let our members know of the changes to Mr Peter Bentley's position.

Late last year Peter resigned from the paid position as our National



Director and is now acting in a volunteer position as the ACC Executive Consultant at least for 2020. At our Face to Face National Council meeting (March 10-12) we had a dinner that honoured Peter for his amazing diligence, wisdom, excellence and faithfulness in the variety of paid roles he has held within the ACC. We give thanks to God for the blessing of Peter especially during the last few years. There is much work still to be done as we as the ACC continue in our vital role in being the Confessing Movement of the Uniting Church in Australia. Please pray that as we move forward in the ACC in this changing season, people will rise up to fill the new challenges that are needed.



Barnabas Fund coordinating international Christian networks to help Christians in dire life/death need as a result of Coronavirus lockdowns in poor and discriminating countries.

(Note: The ACC joined the Barnabas Coronavirus Emergency Network in April and has provided a donation from our general funds)

A partially-sighted widow mother of three daughters and a son cleans the homes of the wealthy is now out of work, with no savings from her pitiful wages. It is now illegal for her son to even beg in the streets. Pastors are left destitute because they cannot be with their people who in any case are unable to support them due to CV lockdown. Christians are taunted in some countries because it is believed because the big losses in so-called Christian countries CV is seen as God's curse on them.

In the face of such need, Barnabas has sent \$1,477,174 AUD, to support Christians across 24 countries. This has provided emergency food aid to over 260,000 COVID-affected Christians, hygiene materials for 14,000 and special support for 6,400 pastors. Praise God that we have been able to help in this way through the gifts of other Christians throughout God's world.

One of the chief ways we draw near to our Lord is to draw near to his suffering body (Matthew 26 - the sheep blessed by my Father on that day).

Barnabas functions on a lean administration to income ratio, currently 10.9%. This is one of the lowest and donations to specific projects like this one see every cent going to it. Here are details for helping Christians ignored or isolated from food and help, especially in those countries which discriminate against them.



barnabasfund.org/donate-au



PUBLIC SQUARE

BY PSEUDO-MAXIMUS

Temptations Disguised as Virtues

A Lenten Reflection

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (Matthew 4:1)

We may think that talk of being tempted by the devil belongs to the dark ages and is harmful to a positive self-image. Still, temptation fascinates us. Novels, films, TV programs etc stimulate our interest in 'the dark side' of life. We are attracted to people, products and causes that promise us the world but, in reality, exploit our desire for sexual intimacy, economic security, political power and spiritual wellbeing.

Christians are not immune. Temptation isn't foreign to the faithful. That is why we pray 'Do not lead us into temptation (do not bring us to a severe trial of our faith) but deliver us from evil.' We are no match for temptation which thrives, not only by exposing our flaws, but by appealing to our strengths. Evil often masquerades as goodness.

Notice that Jesus was tempted to do things that were very good. He is attacked, not at points of weakness, but at points of greatest strength - his compassion, faith, humanity. The devil, who personifies all that is hostile to God's will, presents Jesus with three options:

He can perform an economic miracle, prove his faith in his 'Father,' or become a benevolent dictator. All this could be achieved, to the glory of God and the benefit of humanity, if he relinquished his 'Sonship.' A 'nod and a wink' in the direction of the 'dark side' and all would be well.

He would prove himself to be the long-awaited Messiah come to Jerusalem (the Holy City) to establish God's reign throughout the world and lead long-suffering Jews out of the wilderness into a land of plenty. ... Very attractive indeed.

1 Economics:

Jesus is urged to let what is 'good' take the place of what is 'best.' *'If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread.'* (v3) It is good to eat and necessary to feed the hungry. In Mt 25:31ff Jesus is scathing of religious people who ignore the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the naked and the imprisoned. He isn't indifferent to our material needs. He feeds the starving crowds with real bread (Mt 15:32). Disciples are taught to pray for 'daily bread.'

In refusing to turn stones into bread, Jesus is not being callous. He is resisting the temptation to meet our deepest need by economic means. Forgiveness, healing and hope are not to be found by accumulating wealth. Material well-being, financial security and care for the poor are very important, but not ultimate. We must debate the best ways to create, distribute and use wealth, knowing that evil cannot be defeated by capitalism, socialism, Marxism or any other ideology.

If Jesus had given-in to this temptation, he would have proved his compassion, but at the cost of his mission. As the incarnate Son of God who shed light on those who live in darkness, his power is to be displayed in a life of incomparable love. In the economy of God, Christ crucified, risen and ascended gives life ultimate purpose. ...

2 Religion:

Jesus is tempted to force God's hand by an unambiguous display of power to convince folk of his unity with God. He is urged to ensure the success of the mission. The devil, like the serpent in the garden (Gen 3:1ff) becomes 'very religious'. *'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the top of the temple and people will believe in your incredible faith and God's astonishing power.'* (v6)

Who could resist such a Super-hero? It would bolster his public image and convince everybody of his Messianic power. Why, then, does he refuse to display his faith in this way? If he had performed this extraordinary feat, it wouldn't have demonstrated the real miracle of God's presence in him. The real miracle is to be seen in Christ's costly, self-giving love for sinners, displayed supremely in the whole of his life, death and resurrection. ...

3 Politics:

'Let the end justify the means.' What an opportunity to exercise power for good in a dark world where untold millions are tortured, killed, abused and demeaned by political leaders. Surely, the Messiah has come to establish the long-awaited Kingdom when things are put right and peace and justice reign?

The cost of attaining such power is too high. *'If you will worship me, the whole inhabited world will be yours.'* (v7) Political compromise is important in the public arena. But capitulation to evil – even in the service of socially just causes – is unconscionable. Since the French Revolution, atrocities have been committed by countless tyrants – religious and irreligious, capitalists and socialists, Left and Right wingers – who have appealed to 'freedom, equality and brotherhood' but not thought twice about 'telling lies or murdering for justice.'

Jesus doesn't 'sell his soul' so that he can exert global influence for good. Nothing is more vital than worshipping God! We must abandon what Ellul called the 'political illusion' that achieving political power and influence is the ultimate goal of Christian social action. A commitment to 'social justice,' as important as it is to uphold human dignity, isn't a substitute for the Kingdom of God. God's power is exercised from the Cross. ...

“Do not lead us into temptation

Economics Religion Politics – Areas of responsibility where danger lurks.

In each, Jesus' strengths are attacked – compassion for the needy, faith in God, commitment to the world. He refuses to 'make a bargain with the devil.' Resisting these pressures, he shows that the ultimate purpose of life isn't the pursuit of economic security, political power or religious miracles. God's eternal goodness and grace is displayed in the power of costly, self-giving love which doesn't shrink from evil, refuses to play by its rules, and submits to and defeats its dark power.

The sacrificial love of the Risen-crucified Jesus for our flawed and strife-torn world is the 'best thing' to have happened in history. It mustn't be confused with the many 'good things' that we must do to strengthen political and economic institutions and meet the needs of the hungry, the oppressed and faith-seekers.

Besides, Christ's victory over temptation is also a source of hope for us. His temptations are far more severe than any that we experience. We are not tested as the Son of God come to reconcile humanity to God. But we, too, experience the 'dark side' when sin and evil appear good, just and attractive. The good news for us is that, by God's incomparable grace, we share Christ's triumph over temptation.

He acts on our behalf for us in two ways:

- He is the model for our struggles. We mustn't deify our important political, economic and religious causes. They distract us from being, first and foremost, servants of the crucified and risen Christ.

- None of our temptations are so great that they have not already been experienced and defeated by Christ. We are not alone. He sympathizes with us in our temptations. He identifies fully with us in our humanity – being like us in all things *except sin* (Heb 2:14f, 4:14f; Chalcedonian Creed, AD 451). ...

It is hard to resist temptation today. We long for 'ultimate solutions' to life's economic, political and religious problems. We expect politicians to fix the climate and prevent pandemics. We are rightly horrified by widespread hunger, deprivation, injustice and tyranny. We want to make a difference. We are saddened by the declining public influence of the church and desperately want others to be attracted to the Gospel. We yearn for the time when 'Thy kingdom shall come.' ...

Why not now, rather than later? It's hard to wait while evil prospers. But we must wait, and not allow ourselves to be duped by false hopes. Evil cannot be wiped-out by conniving with evil. It must be dealt with, as God has done in Christ, who suffered and defeated its dread power. The best news is that the long-awaited Messiah, the Risen-crucified Son, bears our weaknesses, shares our temptations, forgives our sins, enables us to live in hope.

This ultimate word needs to be heard today because pride and despair are ever-present dangers. The church is tempted to embrace current economic, political and spiritual ideals that are driving Christianity from the public square. The world is tempted to compromise with evil and reject the best news. Let us not forget that God's costly grace has triumphed in his Risen-crucified Son. In him, hope for the future is glimpsed and assured, and our task as disciples now is emboldened.



Easter Exhaustion

Fiona McDonald

It's Good Friday morning.

Husbands are exhausted by trying to make the technology work so that church can go ahead.

Wives are exhausted from trying to support husbands, whilst also trying to make technology and life work for them, their ladies, their kids, their neighbours ...

Mums are exhausted from trying to suddenly homeschool in the midst of already busy lives, and now there's all the holidays to fill

Those with jobs are exhausted by the craziness in the workplace: dealing with anxious people, dealing with angry, frustrated people, dealing with the extra stresses, demands and worries of workplaces.

Kids are exhausted from cranky mums, stressed dads, siblings who want what they have, who destroy what they've just built, who ...

Mums and dads are exhausted from trying to hold it all together when they're not sure why it's happening, when it will end and the overwhelming fear of sickness and even death.

The people concerned with finances are exhausted as they stretch and readjust budgets.

Lonely people are even more lonely and isolated, (though some are finding there are generous kind people out there).

The elderly are exhausted from their fear: this virus seems to be targeting them, they're a burden on society.

The news from overseas is overwhelming, the numbers beyond comprehension, the imagination of how awful it must be is burdening.

Governments are beginning to play the blame game there seems to be

sharing of resources: at a price!

The news from home is full of complaint and blame and accusation. What about me.

It's full of pleas for people to be sensible, (just not me, I can go out). The police are exhausted, and angry at people who spit on them.

The health care workers are exhausted from the anxiety of what might be coming, of resources already used up, of people who cough on them.

It's Good Friday morning

The disciples are exhausted. They couldn't stay awake to pray, but sleep in the garden was fitful.

Jesus looks exhausted: he's been praying, sweating agonising all night. But now there's calmness and purposefulness in his face as he rouses the disciples once more.

Judas has figured how to stretch his budget: the coins jingle inches pocket as he leads the soldiers and kisses Jesus cheek.

The hastily convened court is chaotic, noisy, disordered, accusations fly, blame is pointed, frustration and anger boil over, clever plotting by the manipulative ones seems to sway the crowd. Someone has to pay to save their way of life, their rule.

Peter is devastated and deeply shamed by his betrayal, but what else could he do: he didn't want to stand where Jesus did. He could smell the anger and blood lust, he was sickened by the smell of his own fear

Pilate is exhausted by this rabble of Jewish religious rulers: why can't they just sort things out themselves and leave him alone.

The rabble are frenzied, whipped to fury: someone has to pay.

The soldiers are exhausted; it's another day in this forsaken roman

outpost. They'd rather be at home with their families

But it's another day's work; they may as well get some fun out of it, whipping, spitting, cursing, mocking. at least there's some nice purple material to divide.

Jesus is exhausted

Simon of Cyrene is co opted to bear the burden: "What did I do to deserve this? Innocently in wrong place at wrong time. Poor wretch, he does look all done in. God, I hope they don't crucify me as well!"

There is spitting and jeering, laughing, mocking, scorning, pushing, crowding shoving.

The women are exhausted from their mourning.

Jesus is exhausted.

God has abandoned him

Isolated

Alone

Struggling to breathe

Yet still thought for others. John, take care of Mary.

Father forgive them

Today, son, you'll be with me in paradise.

Exhausted, alone, abandoned, dead.

We do not have a saviour who is unable to sympathise with our weakness.

We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin.

He himself, bore our sins in his body, on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.

Enter the throne room with confidence to receive mercy

and to find grace to help us in our time of need.

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he knows and cares for you.

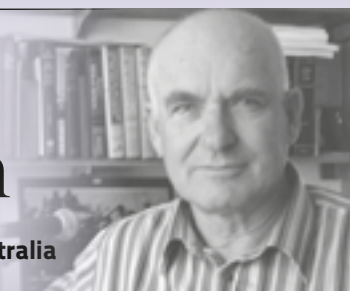
continued page 30

2020 Easter Reflections
during the COVID-19
lockdown provided by
Dr Fiona McDonald,
from her husband's
Pastor David McDonald's
blog at Macarisms.com

Father of Rock & Roll

Ian
Clarkson

UCA Minister - South Australia



Little Richard (Penniman) died this week at 87. He was considered to be the father of 'rock and roll' and an inspiration to Elvis, Rolling Stones, and the Beatles. The lingering sense I have of Little Richard from the obituaries this week of his death and from reading his autobiography many years ago, is the question, what was his real calling? Rock and roll brought the jungle to suburbia and the beat got you, but his lyrics were gibberish. So, I sat down and watched some of the hits from my teenage years, his originals plus remakes like 'Baby Face'. But of more interest than his songs is his 'in and out' ministry of preaching and evangelism. I wondered what his real calling was, as he seemed to love to preach the Gospel, and to be known as a preacher. The most recent YouTube videos show an old man preaching ramblingly to a congregation of senior contemporaries.

So, what is going on here? The power and priority of the ministry gifts, including the 'evangelist' recorded in Ephesians is how Christ will impact and fill the whole universe. And these gifts are not flighty and once given are scarcely withdrawn. In other words, they are strongly given and to be seriously exercised.

Today the world hijacks the best gifts that God gives and applies them to worldly energies. It has produced nothing better - seeking more cannot go past the Bible and what it gives. Bob Hawke the agnostic

had to have the Hallelujah chorus at his funeral. 'Evangelical' has become a sociological term.

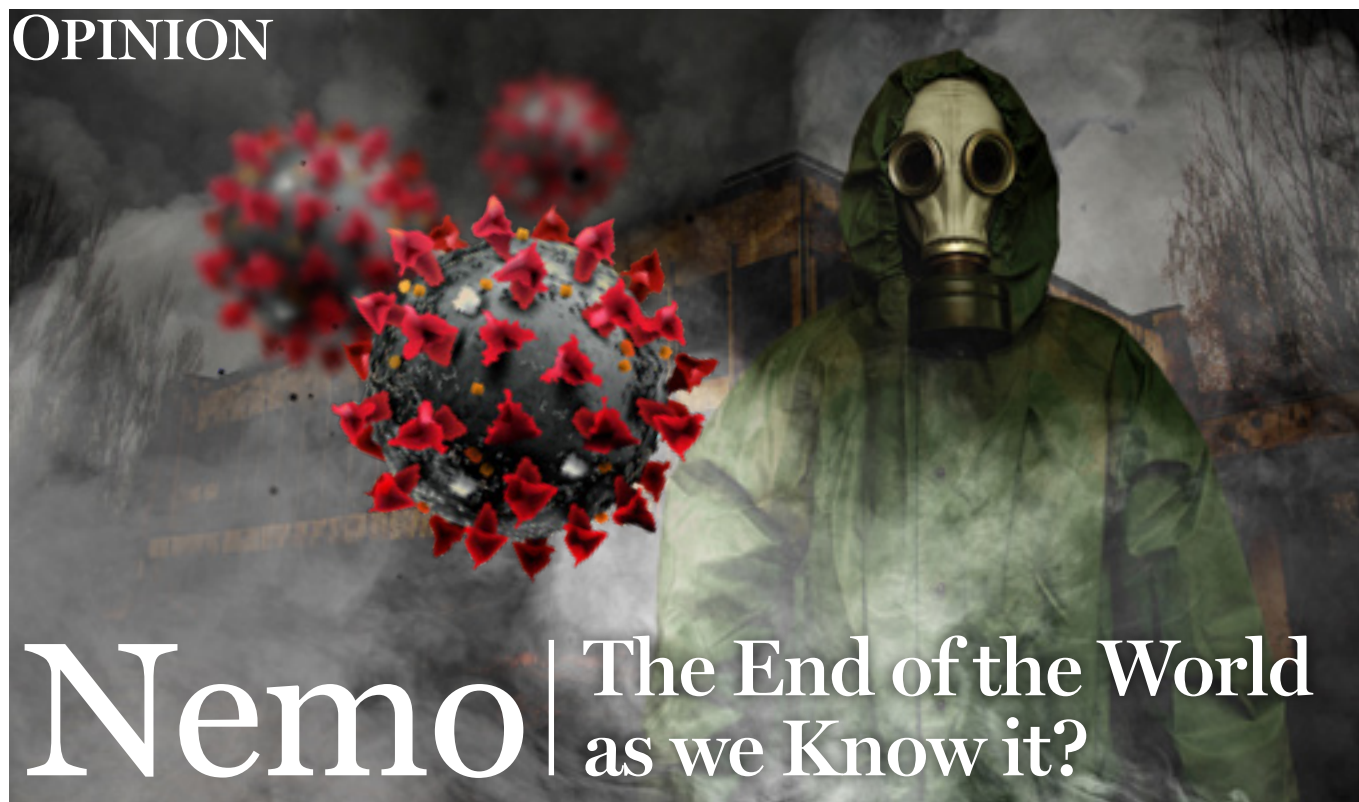
The evangelist, whatever the measure of the gift and its result whether small or large, is the number one necessity for the formation of good societies as well as recruiting for the Kingdom and preparation for eternity. Small towns and regional centres across Australia need the gift of evangelist/pastor ahead of all other professions. That is the primary instrument for creating rich and flourishing society.

The gifts of pastor, evangelist, teacher, prophet and apostle of the Word are the most needed, the brightest and best for nation building and social goodness. They are not to be locked away into a religious enclave. And with them are the variety of gifts and callings for all kingdom members and Christ's church.

Wesley kept teaching the millions who became Methodists to be serious about their calling and they radicalised communities with holy love and transformed nations. There is nothing more important for the exercise of social health, the nourishment of democratic societies and saving souls.

All work, whether a rock star or rabbit-trapper can be avenues of Christian stewardship and even daily worship. Take seriously and pursue energetically your personal God endowed inclination, gift-fitting and calling to testify and honour his Name.

Rev. Ian Clarkson has a special ministry focus on supporting and encouraging ministers and congregations in South Australia with HopeNet SA.



Nemo | The End of the World as we Know it?

I have heard it said that we are (I write in April) in a great unprecedented crisis. Untrue. Swine flu, MERS, SARS, HIV were pandemics within living memory, all much more lethal than COVID-19. Then there were two world wars and the great depression. There has been mention of the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 which killed perhaps 50 million, including 15,000 in Australia. Before that, the third bubonic plague pandemic of 1855-1922 killed millions, including over 100 Australians. The London Plague of 1665-66 killed 100,000. The Black Death (bubonic plague) killed 75 million in Asia in the 13th century and 25 million in Europe around 1348-50. The Roman Empire experienced catastrophic plagues in 160-180 AD (the Antonine Plague, possibly smallpox) and 249-270 (the Cyprian Plague, possibly bubonic). Even earlier, as a couple of Australian medical researchers pointed out to a conference just before the bubonic plague hit Sydney, 1 Samuel 5:6-12 refers to “emerods” (or, bubes), which were evidence of plague amongst the Philistines around 1141 BC.

I have heard it said that COVID-19 is a challenge to all Australians. So far the evidence is mixed, with lots of compliance and a host of local helping schemes popping up, but there have been egregious examples of hoarding, non-compliance and even abuse of nurses and police.

I have heard it said that COVID-19 is a great challenge to Christians, but I have also heard it said that COVID-19 provides great opportunities for us. The churches’ early reactions were mostly inwardly directed, e.g., how to keep worship, children’s and youth work and other groups going, maintain member numbers, conduct pastoral care, maintain income. Churches are finding innovative ways in which to meet, worship, study and so on. What is outwardly directed is, so far, e.g., to follow the governments’ directions, to share your neighbours’ burdens, to make sacrifices and to pray. No doubt Christian agencies will be in the thick of things as they unfold. We could join some of the new local helping schemes or support them as much as possible, or start our own.

In 1991, Rodney Stark, a nonbelieving but contrarian sociologist, published *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. In it, he upends traditional assumptions of supporters and opponents of the church and presents some surprising explanations, backed by strong data and compelling analysis. One of his chapters is very pertinent here, “Epidemics, Networks and Conversion”. Though the two plagues in the 2nd and 3rd centuries mentioned earlier killed thousands of Christians along with the pagans, Stark argues that

the fabric of Roman society was substantially disrupted and demoralized by these catastrophes, and that this opened the door for Christian ascendancy, both theologically and numerically. ... First, the Christians offered a more satisfactory explanation of the catastrophic events. Second, Christian values of love and charity were translated into practices of social service in the times of crisis, thereby creating a network of medical care. Third, with even minimal medical attention, the survival rate among the Christians (and any of their pagan neighbors whom they treated) was substantially higher than that in the general population. Over time, the proportion of Christians in the total population was thereby dramatically increased. When coupled with the network effect of those pagans now disengaged from traditional ties and attracted by Christian benevolence to new attachments, the result was to alter irreversibly the balance of the Roman empire.

Even though, today, the state and organised charities do much of the work described in the second and third point (actually, largely because Christians took over the state and changed its role, but that’s another story), these early plagues can help point us toward ways in which, simply by unselfconsciously living out our faith at this time, we can both help and influence our nonbelieving neighbours.

Nemo

Let's take an example both more recent and closer to home, the plague in Australia around 1900 and 1905. Nemo's last column featured two dedicated nurses in Maryborough, Queensland, who gave their lives to care for people with pneumonic plague in 1905. We know that at least one of them was a devout Christian lady. In Sydney in 1900, the family of J.H. Mills, Sydney City Missionary in Glebe, was taken off to North Head Quarantine Station with plague; he ministered to fellow sufferers there even after his son died. Three chaplains, two Protestant and one Roman Catholic, ministered there for four months. Mills' colleague in the Rocks, James Mathers, popped up on the doorstep of the first victim on the day he was taken away to offer consolation and assistance. He continued to work his district fearlessly throughout, even when it was under quarantine for four months. As well as the Sydney City Mission, the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Salvation Army were active in relieving distress. Two Church of England parishes near the quarantine zone put on gospel services for quarantine workers in April and May. The churches fearlessly criticised government inaction on health and sanitation and gave them the hurry-up from time to time. Unsanitary conditions were finally attacked by quarantine and a mammoth cleansing operation under the charge of a consulting engineer, the Presbyterian George McCredie. Among other things, the operation from March to July disposed of more than 50,000 tons of garbage and killed over 40,000 rats. There was much prayer as well as carbolic. Christians were engaged on all fronts.

Finally, we need now to be effective witnesses to the gospel in the midst of confusion and fear, when the modern gods of self and of science do not provide lasting hope and courage in the face of an invisible and insidious foe. We should support anyone who needs reassurance or wants to ask questions like, "How could a good God allow this to happen?" We need to offer a "more satisfactory explanation of [the meaning of] catastrophic events". We need to hear it said that Christians are offering a better way, which points to the God who overrules all fates and comforts all people.

Nemo continues to point people to history and the Lord of history.

SEEDS

A Quiet Place

Mark 6:31

"Let us go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile."

God expects us to become conscious
of those load-bearing times
when we need to turn aside and find a "quiet place"
so that we can be renewed in spirit and body.

The disciples were exhausted through exaltation.
Their missionary tour had been unbelievably successful:
teaching, healing and having power to cast out evil spirits.
But still the folk made demands upon their time.
Jesus' invitation was,
"let us go off by ourselves"
He understood their needs even before they did.

How often have we yearned for a "quiet place"
where we can seek forgiveness and be forgiven,
To renew again the heavenly vision within us?
To quieten again the rebellious spirit within us?

We cannot create an artificial place
where we can "rest awhile".
It is Jesus and the Spirit who invites us.

For me so often it is as I meditate on his Living Word,
that inner peace comes.
This happens through the presence
and guidance of the Holy Spirit
and not because of what I do.

*"Father I affirm the joy of health and peace
in my mind and heart
because your love is real in me."*

*Reverend Bob Imms is a member of the
ACC Southern Cluster in Tasmania.*

Behold: *a new thing*

Rev Ted
Curnow

Minister of the Word (Ret),
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“Behold I am doing a new thing—now it springs forth.”

- Isaiah 42:9

Through its history God’s servant nation, Israel, had been depleted through corruption and idolatry and a number of times it had paid the price of being chastened and corrected by God. In 721BC the Assyrians had destroyed the Northern Kingdom. In 701BC the state of Judah had fallen, and Isaiah would spend a lifetime being God’s mouthpiece to his people. Isaiah predicted the fall of Jerusalem (Isaiah 39: 6-7). Here Isaiah assumes that the captivity to Babylon is already an accomplished fact and he speaks God’s word into the chaos of his time. *“Behold I am doing a new thing.”*

In a sceptical article written by Dr Desmond Ford (1977) he says, “We are told this is a Post-Christian age. We doubt however, whether the news will create a flurry among the angels or even act as a depressant upon the Lords’ little flock’ below, in as much as there have been Post-Christian ages before.” Ford in his sceptical, flippant tone, scoffs at the idea of the cultural pain and trauma that occurs when a community or nation transitions away from God and underestimates the consequences of God’s chastening. However, Ford is right to unintentionally reminded us that the God of history and time has never been passive in those periods. Indeed, there have been other post-Christian periods, but history reminds us that God has never lost control, God has always been actional and dynamic. God has always revealed himself: **He has always been at work in some way doing a new thing.**

God’s renewing hand through the ages

The Genesis Story begins with the words *“In the beginning God created heaven and earth.”* But in a counter re-action Adam refuses the very one who he is dependant upon and who gives him the breath of life.

The creation is spoilt, the intimate relationship with

Creator is severed, our human wholeness is frustrated in rebellion against the purposes of God. Genesis 3:23 says, *“Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken.”*

As expressed in Francis Thompson’s poem, “The Hound of Heaven”, from the time God began to pursue human-kind down the corridors of time and history—to reclaim humanity and to redeem it from a hotch-potch condition. Like a hound that never gives up, from the very beginning God sets out to redeem and restore a beautiful, but spoilt creation.

This is the amazing thing. GOD BEGAN TO DO A NEW THING.

Genesis 12:1 says, *“Now the Lord said to Abram, go forth from your country”*--- and eventually God developed a nation out of a bunch of scruffy slaves, bound and suppressed in Egypt. Later, through a series of extraordinary events they settled in Canaan.

But in those days of the prophet Isaiah it is recorded that the ‘common ass knew his master’—but Israel did not know God, the one who gave birth to their nation. Amid idolatry, syncretism, and corruption, sadly the people failed the purposes of God. But God did not give up on them. God spoke through the prophets, *“Give ear to the teaching of our God—you people of Gomorrah. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?”* “Therefore the Lord says, the Lord of Hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies, and I will avenge myself and my foes.” (Isaiah 1:1-10, 24)

The enemy swept down, Jerusalem fell, there was captivity and exile in Babylon. For year upon year the people sat by the rivers of Babylon remembering Zion.

But this is the amazing thing. GOD BEGAN TO DO A NEW THING

Israel was set free. God led the whole nation through the Persian desert. Jerusalem, the holy city was restored.

But in those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism and Jesus came as the light in the darkness. *“He came to his own”—“and his own refused to receive him”* (John 1:11)

There were the Scribes and Pharisees who were shaped by a strong pride in their distorted religious traditions. They failed the purposes of God. *“Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites—for you are like white-washed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful but within they are full of deadmen’s bones and all uncleanness.”* (Matt. 23:27.)

And there was darkness across the earth, and as it was foretold the Lord *“laid on Him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:6). God turned our terrible human moral darkness, its consequences and judgment in upon himself and as John the Baptist predicted Jesus became *“The Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.”*

And the God of history began to do a NEW THING.

The words of the prophets were fulfilled. Death was swallowed up in victory when on the third day *“Jesus rose in accordance with the scriptures. He appeared to*



Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time. Then he appeared to James then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (Paul). (1 Corinthians 15:5-8)

The early church was born of people transformed by contact with a Risen-Living-Saviour who was loose, in the world. The followers were empowered with the extra energy of the Holy Spirit. *“And the Lord added to their number day after day those who were being saved.”* (Acts 2:47).

But in the 16th century, Rome had become the Holy City and the spiritual skies were black with gloom. In the words of Martin Luther, Rome was, *“A filthy stinking puddle, full of the wickedest wretches in the world.”* The eternal city was a money machine where the church sold indulgences and relics. The blasphemy and laxity of the priests and clergy were chief examples of loose living. They failed the purposes of God and the chastening hand of God came.

But in an amazing way God began to do a NEW THING.

A shaft of light pierced the darkness! *“The just shall live by faith”*. A spiritual springtime came to Europe. The scriptures were opened through Martin Luther the son of a miner and a mighty flame lit the world.

But in the English 18th century church, the ecclesiastical establishment forgot the common people. Materialism ate deeply into national life smothering spiritual values. Instead of being in the pulpit, parsons went hunting on Sunday. The country was gripped by a moral paralysis. Historians claim that open revolt against religion and churches existed among both the rich and poor.

They failed the purposes of God and the judgement came. BUT God began a NEW THING.

The “church-man,” John Wesley, instead of trusting the institution, personally trusted in Christ and he *“felt his heart strangely warmed.”* He was converted. He left a room in Aldersgate Street and flung himself onto the back of a horse and rode out to save England. Thousands upon thousands claimed Jesus as Lord and England was saved from social disaster.

Now reflect with me.

What do we have in this seeming cycle through the corridors of history and time? Is it merely a matter of ongoing history or of a repeated self-regeneration?

No, I suggest that it is much more profound than that.

The biblical historiography of Israel is different from other nations. Other nations never seek to remember, catalogue or record details of their failures. In the biblical record then we have a pattern; a dynamic, re-occurring principle and cycle of God’s judgment that always leads to renewal. The birth of a new thing. It is a principle that occurred time and time again. Every time we fail to respect creational purposes of God. Every time God’s witness is frustrated, abused or smothered. Every time the church is shackled by tradition, apostasy, apathy, material idolatry or coldness of heart, God has done a NEW THING and today is no different.

While Christians believe God reveals himself through history, we must not be a slave to the past because God often moves in unexpected, mysterious ways. As one Hymn-writer wrote *‘God moves in his mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.’* In Isaiah 43 before he calls us to recognise the ‘NEW THING’. He says, *“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.”* v18. Do not be stuck on the ‘good old days’ or pin your assurance on the way God has worked in the past. Don’t count on things always being the same when God is about to do a NEW THING.

The writer of Hebrews understood this. He knew the human spirit quickly forgets, distorts or entraps the Good News entrusted to the church and to us. It is because we have actually become partners, joined to the living Christ that the writer alerts us by saying, *“Take care brothers/sisters.”* We are all prone to the deceitfulness of sin, to being seduced by the spirit of the world, so the calls on us to *“stir each other up.”* We are to hold our first confidence; to live in the full benefit and flow of the Good News because God has always had a long-term plan.

Instead of finding our security by tightly hanging onto the past, of being disillusioned by distorted, unreal expectations of the present. Instead of being overcome by the noise and pessimism of the world stage, be assured there never has been a time when God has been diverted from unpacking his final plan. Be assured that God the Creator, the Sustainer, the Alpha and Omega still speaks to his people. ***“Behold I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”***



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Contending *for the* Faith



The little one-chapter book of Jude is often overlooked in the study of the Bible. It was written by Jude who describes himself as the 'bondservant' (one who is bound to) of Jesus Christ and also as the brother of James. This letter is not written to any particular church but to 'the church'. It speaks to us today just

as it did to the early church 2000 years ago.

Jude painted a very negative situation in the early church. The church was in grave danger. The people were not aware that the enemy of the church – Satan, in the form of these ungodly men – had come in to do his destructive work.

Jude first writes concerning what the believers had in common – their salvation, but then has a reason to bring them a warning and an exhortation.

Jude 1: 3 reads: 'Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.'

What is this faith which was 'once for all delivered to the saints'? The phrase 'once for all' is also found in Hebrews 10:10. It reads: 'by that which we will have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.' This is the faith we are to contend for: it is the centrality of the Christian Gospel – the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross.

The dictionary meaning of the word 'contend' is 'to strive in opposition; to exert oneself in defence or support of something'.

So, what is it that has caused Jude to urge the church to 'contend earnestly for the faith'? The answer is in verse 4: 'For certain men have crept in (to the church) unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Here we have a dire situation. Something had happened to cause Jude to make this call to the church; the very foundations of the faith were at stake. These men had 'crept in unnoticed'. Until Jude brought this to their attention, what was happening had been hidden. The believers were not alert and watching and the enemy had crept in.

These ungodly men were denying the Lord Jesus, turning God's grace into lewdness and yet there they were in

the church. Jude goes on to shine more light on the situation in verses 5, 6, and 7. He has to remind them of things they had forgotten.

He brings out into the open just what the 'lewdness' mentioned in verse 4 was. He calls it for what it is: the sin that caused the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In verse 7 he describes it as the people 'having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh'.

Romans 1, Corinthians 5 and 6, and other passages also speak clearly to the church about this.

Jude continues to warn the church in verses 18 and 19 that these things would also be evident in the 'last time'. 'There would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. These are sensual persons who cause divisions not having the Spirit.'

In the light of these last verses which point to this present time, what is the situation today in the church? Do we see the same thing happening? There is one big difference today compared to the church in Jude's time, and that is that this sin is no longer hidden.

However, most people in the church are not realising the danger and are not 'contending for the faith' which cost Jesus so dearly. Many do not know the Word of God. Because of this the whole message of the Gospel is distorted and weakened. Repentance and forgiveness of sin and being born again is not preached boldly and clearly.

However, Paul, in warning of the same sin (and many others), gives the option of a different outcome for those caught up in this lifestyle. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 he writes: 'Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the Kingdom of God.'

In the next verse, Paul writes of the powerful results of the message of the Gospel of God's grace. This verse is the key verse in all these reflections. 1 Corinthians 6:11: 'And such were some of you'. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.'

The key phrase is 'and such were some of you'. What powerful words this statement portrays: You used to be like this, but now you are washed clean, sanctified (made holy), and justified (made righteous in God's sight).

So now we have these two scenarios, both describing a sinful lifestyle but each having totally different outcomes.



On the one hand, the ungodly men spoken of by Jude had an agenda, and that was to deliberately creep into the church. Verse 4 says they were marked out for this long ago. Why? Was it to undermine the message that was preached that challenged their sinful lifestyle? They came not to be changed but to attempt to change a message they did not like.

On the other hand, those Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 6:11 came to hear the message. They knew they were sinners and were looking for release from the bondage of a sinful lifestyle. They came in humility to the cross of Jesus Christ and found in Him the freedom they were looking for. Their hardened hearts were softened by God's agape love that flowed from the cross at Calvary and the truth of the message that they heard set them free.

Two different scenarios were present in the church 2000 years ago. But what of the church today?

The question each church, church leader, and church member must ask is this: Will those who come humbly, seeking freedom, deliverance, and wholeness hear the truth that will set them free? Sadly, the reality often is that they will hear what is described in the Scriptures as 'another gospel' or 'another Jesus'.

May each of us have ears to hear and hearts to obey as we seek to discern what God is saying through this message, both as the church and as individuals. Jesus said, 'I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.' We have a Gospel to proclaim and a faith to contend!

Claire Lawson is an ACC member in Cornerstone Christian Church in Queensland.

Assembly of Confessing Congregations

School of Faith



The School of Faith is looking for expressions of interest for the ministry of 'ACC Lay Preacher' from among our members. ACC congregations are asked to pray for a new generation of leaders and to discern who these candidates might be.

Candidates for the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Lay Preachers Course will

- be an active member of a local worshipping community
- receive ongoing supervision from an ACC mentor
- become familiar with the Basis of Union and prepare to lead studies on the Basis in terms of biblical sources and practical application at the local level

ACC Lay Preachers in active ministry will be asked to:

- accept the spiritual oversight and discipline of a presbytery (or network) approved by the ACC
- attend sessions on the Uniting Church Code of Ethics for Lay Preachers and Safe Church Practices (or equivalent as may be negotiated with the ACC)
- engage in continuing education

More information and a registration leaflet are available on the School of Faith website.



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Holding Fast, *Standing Firm*

Rev. Robert Griffith reflects on the 15th Assembly decision in this article that was written after the Assembly meeting and revised following his move to ministry in another denomination.

Robert Griffith

Minister of the Word. Former Chair
of Far North Coast Presbytery NSW



Have you ever had one of those weeks where one disappointment after another brings you to a point where you just wonder why you bother? Such was my experience many times over the past couple of years. It's a very painful place to be when your call to the mission of Christ is still strong. Contending for the faith in an increasingly indifferent, anti-Christian world is a real challenge. However, contending for the faith within a seriously flawed institution we call 'the Church' can be absolutely soul-destroying. When the Apostle Paul warned Timothy all those years ago that in the last days we would battle false teaching and even doctrines taught by demons, he was not joking.

The extent to which many in the Church have now departed from our foundations and rejected the authority of the Bible is breathtaking. So in my desire to seek solace in the Scriptures and to hear from God for my next season of ministry, the Spirit led me to a number of Paul's letters and to the book of Hebrews. Two phrases kept leaping off the page as my spirit was fortified and harnessed for the road ahead. They formed a constant refrain through those letters: 'hold fast' and 'stand firm.' Neither of these things can be done in private or in silence. Both of these exhortations require us to take up our position and make it clear to all where we stand and why we must hold fast and stand firm until the Lord tells us otherwise.

In July 2018 the Uniting Church National Assembly changed UCA's long-established doctrine on marriage and opened the door for same-sex marriages to take place within the Uniting Church in Australia. In parts of the Uniting Church this decision was warmly welcomed and celebrated. However, for a large number of UCA members, including many Ministers and Pastors, this decision, and the way in which it was made (only seven months after the law was changed and with no consultation with

Congregations and Presbyteries) caused enormous grief, sadness and even anger. Many members and Ministers resigned within weeks of the decision and many more followed once the appeal against that decision failed.

Following this unprecedented departure from the orthodox Christian position on marriage, I engaged with thousands of people across the country within the Uniting Church. Two questions continued to emerge. From those who could not accept this change in doctrine, I heard: "*How did we even get to this point?*" From those who didn't see what the problem was, I heard: "*Why all the fuss about same-sex marriage?*"

This document is only one person's attempt to answer those questions but I know my words will resonate strongly with tens of thousands of UCA brothers and sisters, many of whom have spoken to me or emailed me and all of whom have felt dismissed or demonised by the UCA Assembly leaders and some Synod leaders for having the audacity to question this decision. That is beyond disappointing. For others, this will be a hard word which they may judge harshly or reject outright. That's because they come to this issue from a different perspective and the views expressed here will directly challenge that perspective. I acknowledge this tension. I respect those who disagree with me and I affirm their right to argue their position in an equally respectful way. Diversity is celebrated in the Uniting Church, but that diversity must always make room for rigorous, honest, respectful debate and discussion. I also must acknowledge that expressing what I believe to be God's truth has and will put enormous pressure on relationships which I value. That saddens me, but I cannot control the way others respond, I can only ensure that my words are offered with love and respect, but always with an uncompromising commitment to the Biblical foundations which have served the Church and advanced the Kingdom of God for over 2000 years.

So how did we get to this place of tension and division? What some people see as a brave, pioneering move by the Uniting Church as they 'lead the way' into this new age of 'inclusion' - many others regard as a divisive, ill-timed, ill-informed decision, predicated on false teaching and supported by a minority of the whole membership and a much smaller minority of the whole Church in this nation. If the Uniting Church is truly 'leading the way' they will have followers. When nobody is following, they are actually 'breaking away.' Thousands of Uniting Church members do not want the Uniting Church to break away from other denominations. So this decision has brought

incredible division into the Church in Australia.

To understand how we can have two clearly opposed positions on marriage, we need to examine the different starting points of those positions. Like any journey, where you end up is first and foremost determined by where you start out. For those who strongly support the long-established Christian doctrine that marriage is between a man and a woman, their starting point is the Bible and over 2000 years of established Christian doctrine. I know its popular today to not let the truth get in the way of a good story (or a militant campaign), but here are the irrefutable facts:

There is not one sentence in the Bible which normalises homosexuality and it is certainly never affirmed as God's creative purpose or intent for anyone. There is not one sentence in the Bible which supports the concept of same-sex marriage. All references in the Bible to marriage refer to a relationship between a man and a woman.

This has therefore been the established position of the Christian Church throughout its entire history and this is the starting point for those who oppose same-sex marriage within the Church.

By contrast, those passionate advocates for same-sex marriage in the Uniting Church must start at a different place. They begin, not with the Bible and all of Church history, but in the 21st century social context of western society where the sexual revolution which started in the 1960's has evolved to the point where everything about sexuality, gender and marriage is now regarded as negotiable. Against that very different backdrop, orthodox Christian doctrine is seen as antiquated, culturally irrelevant and in need of revision, based on 'what we now know'. The result is that those who still embrace the truths of Scripture and the words of Jesus himself are increasingly being labelled as 'fundamentalists' or 'conservatives' and seen as those who are out of touch with the modern, 'enlightened' understanding of God, the Church and humanity. Revisionist theology has now become the norm in many places.

This alternate view of marriage gained momentum some years ago when the narrative around homosexuality changed significantly and, I believe, deliberately. What used to be a discussion about behaviour, personal choice and lifestyle – became a discussion about personal identity. This new way of talking about homosexuality suggested that people are 'born homosexual' and have no control over their sexual orientation or its accompanying lifestyle. Therefore we are told that if you do not accept homosexuality as being normal, you do not accept those people who identify as homosexual. The term 'homophobia' then began to be thrown around whenever anyone even so much as raised a question about this issue. This view very quickly led to the conclusion that 'God made me this way.' The moment people shifted the responsibility for their homosexuality to God, the whole debate changed overnight. It is really important we know why this happened.

Firstly, if someone's homosexuality is part of their innate identity – then the discussion becomes very personal and it's difficult for anyone to offer a contrary view without that person feeling judged or condemned personally. This effectively silenced the majority of our population and skewed every poll and survey done from that point on. None of us want to be seen as condemning someone or being personally judgemental. So in spite of



our personal convictions about homosexuality or same-sex marriage, too many of us have just remained silent as this tsunami of new-age thinking has crashed across our society and now into the Church.

Secondly, as this 'God made me this way' concept emerged, its supporters worked backwards in their deceived logic and reasoned that if God made people this way then God must be ok with same-sex marriage. They found all the references in the Bible which speak about God's unconditional love, inclusion, grace, not judging each other etc. and offered that up as 'Scriptural support'. In many parts of the Uniting Church now, this new position is accepted as truth, taught in many congregations and even taught in some Bible Colleges - in spite of what is clearly articulated in the Bible and by many experts in science, sociology and psychology.

This whole shift in the sexuality narrative over recent decades has occurred in spite of the fact that there is no credible scientific support, no Biblical support and no sociological data which would lead us to change the long-established view of marriage being between a man and a woman. There have been many scientific studies done on sexuality and gender and one of the most widely respected institutions in this field is Johns Hopkins University in America.

A few years ago they published a report entitled, *Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences*. It was co-authored by Dr. Lawrence Mayer and Dr. Paul McHugh. Here is one really important statement from that lengthy report:

"The belief that sexual orientation is an innate, biologically fixed human property - that people are 'born that way' - is not supported by scientific evidence. Likewise, the belief that gender identity is an innate, fixed human property independent of biological sex - so that a person might be a 'man trapped in a woman's body' or a woman trapped in a man's body' - is not supported by scientific evidence."

Holding Fast, Sta

There are many leading psychologists, sociologists and theologians who agree with those findings. Even some prominent homosexuals, who are experts in their field, agree that homosexuality is not an immutable human trait from birth. Here are just two quotes which leave little room for doubt:

Dr Lisa Diamond, Lesbian Professor of Developmental Psychology, University of Utah :

"The various sexual categories currently in use (LGBTIQ, etc.) are useful mental shortcuts, educated guesses or stereotypes, but though they have meaning in our culture, ... we have to be careful in presuming that they represent any kind of natural phenomena. It is tricky to use these categories for advocating rights based on the concept of immutability, now that we know it is not true. As a community, homosexuals have to stop saying: 'Please help us, we were born this way and we can't change' as an argument for legal standing."

Lesbian Activist, Camille Pagalia, Professor at the University of the Arts in Pennsylvania:

"Homosexuality is not normal. On the contrary, it is a challenge to the norm. Nature exists whether academics like it or not and in nature, procreation is the single relentless rule. That is the norm. Our sexual bodies were designed for reproduction. No one is born gay. The idea is ridiculous. Homosexuality is an adaptation, not an inborn trait."

At the same time the Uniting Church National Assembly was re-defining marriage because of an erroneous view of sexuality and gender, there was a conference taking place in the United States. The annual Revoice Conference states its purpose as, *"Supporting, encouraging, and empowering gay, lesbian, same-sex-attracted, and other LGBT Christians so they can flourish while observing the historic, Christian doctrine of marriage and sexuality."* The keynote speaker at that year's conference was Wesley Hill, associate professor of New Testament at the Trinity School for Ministry.

In his speech to the conference Hill declared very strongly that Jesus did not support *"trimming God's standard down to fit whatever chaos is true in our lives. Jesus was not out to undermine God's holy will for our lives. If anything, Jesus ratcheted up the standard of sexual purity and sexual holiness."* He was addressing a conference full of people who identified somewhere on the LGBTIQ spectrum and he flatly rejected the idea that Jesus wants the Church to accept same-sex marriage.

During his speech Hill focused on John 8:1-11, the story of where Jesus saved a woman from being stoned to death for adultery but then warned her to *"go and sin no more."* Hill said the following: *"Jesus does not combat the shame of this woman by rewriting the rule book. He does not discard what Moses said about adultery, nor erase any of the commandments. He's going to redeem her but*

not at the expense of His law, or changing the standard of morality to fit her life."

So when you study the biological, psychological, sociological and theological understanding of marriage and gender, you cannot arrive at a place of support for same-sex marriage – especially not within the Church, which is our primary area of concern here. In 1 Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul reminds us that it's not the job of Christians to judge the world, God will do that. However, we *are* to judge the Church and keep the Church true to the Word of God and the call of Christ. I know of many respected Christian leaders who have remained largely silent on the decision of our Government to change the Marriage Act and legalise same-sex marriage. They have an opinion on that decision as a citizen, but as a Church leader, they know their responsibility is to the Church and it's within the bounds of the Church they need to speak up. I only wish many more would.

We are warned so often in the Bible to not let the priorities and views of the world infiltrate and dictate what we believe and do in the Church. We are called by God to be salt and light in the midst of a broken and dysfunctional world - not to let that brokenness and dysfunction re-shape the Church's doctrine. When the government changed the law and redefined marriage across our great nation, the pressure on the Church to conform increased. There was an assumption by some that the decision of our Government to change the law would simply be acknowledged by the Church in changing their doctrine to suit. However, every example in the Bible where God's people took their cues from the world, ended very badly. The Church is called to show the way to the world – not the other way around. From God's perspective, the Church is not peripheral to the world - the world is peripheral to the Church!

I want to now address the toughest part of this whole issue and the place where so many of us stumble because it's just so hard. Many of us have family members, friends or colleagues who identify as homosexual. Some of them are keen to embrace this new day which has dawned and get married within the Church. When our love and support for them as people is confronted by our desire to be true to God's Word and God's plan for creation, it can result in a gut-wrenching struggle.

The man who led me to Christ when I was 14 years old quickly became my role-model as a wonderful man of God, a Church leader, a husband and a father. He was MC at our wedding. A decade later he walked out on his wife and three children and moved in with a man and that's where he has been ever since. That whole scenario set me on a journey of learning how to love a person unconditionally and still remain true to my convictions and what I believe is God's best purpose for us all. Since that day many years ago, God has led a number of men and women into my life who identify as homosexual and most of them have been actively involved in the Church. I have had many difficult, but loving and mutually respect-

standing Firm



ful conversations over the years. This is not an easy space to be in, but the most important thing we all have to learn, regardless of where we sit with this whole issue, is this: saying to someone, “*I don’t agree with you*” does not equate with “*I don’t love you, respect you and accept you as a person*”. When we are confused about this, we see relationships destroyed or we see people silenced and prevented from speaking the truth in love, for fear they will offend or upset someone they love. When people don’t understand that it’s possible to disagree with someone and still love them as a person, the consequences can be devastating. Sadly, this is where many in the Church find themselves at present and it’s really hard for them to step back from their personal situation and look at the bigger picture of what is right for the whole Church.

If ever there was a time when we needed the wisdom and love of God to grip our hearts, it’s now. We need grace and truth to rise above our personal stories and pain.

Grace without truth is not God’s grace and it leads to apostasy. Truth without grace is not God’s truth and it leads to hard-hearted legalism. We need the grace of God and the truth of God in equal measure and that can only be found in Jesus Christ, who is the full embodiment of both.

Diversity is a word which has been used a lot during this debate. Without question, the Uniting Church would be the most diverse Christian denomination in Australia. Staunch conservatives and radical liberals sit side by side in some Congregations and seek to make decisions together in the Councils of that Church. This diversity allows people like me to write what I’m writing here, knowing there are others who are writing something very different. That’s very messy and fraught with danger – but that’s the diversity which reportedly exists, thanks to the successive decisions of UCA Assemblies over decades which has widened UCA’s doctrinal position to the point where diametrically opposed views are held within the one body.

The Uniting Church is therefore a really tough place to be a Minister of the Word, if the Word is still important to you! However, diversity in and of itself is not a bad thing, provided that our diversity has some limits. For the last 42 years in the Uniting Church those guiding and confining parameters have been the Bible and *The Basis of Union*. In that foundational document members have committed to always be “*regulated by the Scriptures*” and “*guided by The Basis of Union*.” The decision of the 15th Assembly on marriage has, in the opinion of many Ministers and members in the Uniting Church, taken UCA beyond the Scriptures and made a mockery of *The Basis of Union*. This part of the Christian Church has now entered very dangerous, uncharted territory and that’s why tens of thousands of UCA members across our nation have been crying out, “*Enough is enough – we can’t keep doing this and still call ourselves the Christian Church.*”

Of course, this is not the first time the Church has had to wrestle with doctrinal differences to determine if a

certain teaching is true or false. In the early days of the Church there were many councils convened for that very purpose. From those councils came statements which made it clear what the whole Church believed and some creeds were written which are still in place today. Sadly, that kind of council doesn’t exist today. The Church has become so fragmented and divided that we have multiple councils across multiple denominations – all determining on their own what is true and what is false. One of those councils is our National Assembly. In July 2018, that Council made a decision, without any consultation with any other leaders in the wider Church, to break ranks on the issue of marriage and change 2000 years of established Christian doctrine. That has forced other denominations to publicly re-affirm their support for the orthodox, Biblical view of marriage and distance themselves from the Uniting Church.

Having served God in four different denominations during my long ministry, I cannot describe the grief I have felt recently for the whole Church in this nation. This should never have been a decision made in isolation by one part of the Christian Church – it should have been a decision of the whole Church, or at least a large part of the whole Church. The UCA Assembly not only ignored *The Basis of Union* and the Scriptures, they effectively defined the Uniting Church as being separate from the wider Body of Christ, making a mockery of the word ‘Uniting’ and the foundational commitment it once embodied.

My ordination vows and the Uniting Church Ministerial Code of Ethics to which all Uniting Church Ministers are called to submit, demand that my preaching, my teaching, my writing and my whole ministry within the Church are always regulated by the Scriptures, empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit and whilst in the Uniting Church, guided also by *The Basis of Union*. I believe all three of those commitments placed me (and hundreds of Ministers like me) in an untenable situation where our commitment to *The Basis of Union* and to the Scriptures brought us into direct conflict with the decisions of the national Council of the Church of which we were a part. I respect the right of the UCA Assembly to govern in accordance with the regulations of the Uniting Church. However, that respect does not equate to agreement with every decision they have made.

At the very heart of this whole debate lies one question which is absolutely vital to the life of the Church: can UCA members accept the Assembly decision on marriage and still be guided by *The Basis of Union* and regulated by the Scriptures? Hundreds of UCA Ministers and thousands of UCA members are answering with an unequivocal “No!” whilst Assembly and Synod leaders continue to plan for growth as the Church they lead bleeds to death around them. The most serious failures within the Uniting Church at present are a poor handling of the Scriptures; a refusal to engage with the wider body of Christ on theology and a blatant disregard for *The Basis of Union* and its foundational guiding principles.

Holding Fast, *Standing Firm*

Unless all three are addressed urgently, this organisation will rapidly become an apostate, impotent, shrinking shadow of the miracle that once was the Uniting Church in Australia.

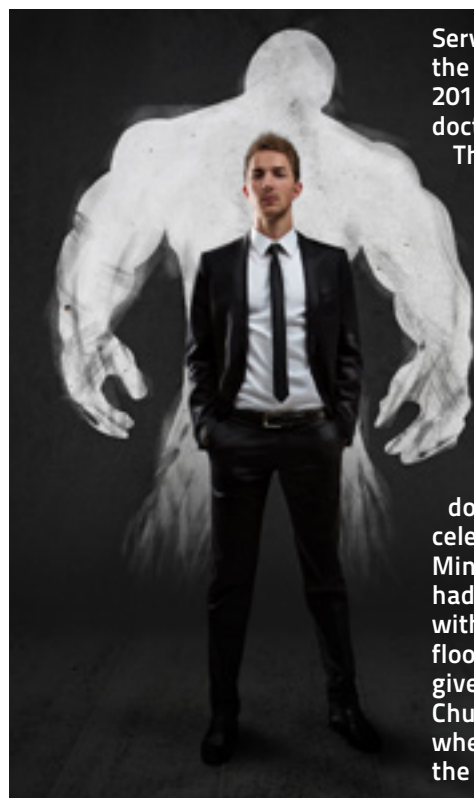
My commitment to the authority of Scripture and the foundational principles governing the Uniting Church brought me to the point where I declared firmly with the great reformer Martin Luther: *"Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me."* I received tremendous support from so many UCA members across the nation for taking a stand. I received nothing but disinterest or disdain from Synod and Assembly leaders who just want all the critics to shut up or leave. Sadly, I fear that will be the inevitable outcome of this whole debacle as the silent majority quickly becomes an irrelevant minority.

I was incredibly grateful to be part of a Church which still allowed me the freedom to hold this position and fulfil my calling to preach and teach what I discern to be the truth and respectfully expose what I believe to be false teaching. However, towards the end of 2019, I was forced to concede that true 'diversity' was wafer thin and the undercurrent of disrespect and aggression towards anyone who dared suggest the Assembly may have made a bad decision, became very clear. Sadly, just in our Presbytery, we lost more than six of our most experienced evangelical Ministers and Pastors in less than two years. I believe that trend will continue until the Uniting Church bears little or no resemblance to the miracle God birthed in this nation in 1977. I too reached the point

where I could no longer remain in the Uniting Church with integrity and my relationship with UCA came to a respectful but tragic end in February 2020. I am now preaching Christ crucified in another part of God's Kingdom and the Lord has gone before me in this very painful but necessary transition and I am really looking forward to what is in store in the days ahead.

I have many dear friends and valued colleagues still within the Uniting Church for whom I pray continually. No organisation is beyond redemption and I believe God will respond to the cries of His people within this part of his Kingdom. My greatest fear is that those cries are now too weak and too few in number and the current trajectory of the Uniting Church will eventually take it to a place of no return. I pray that will not be the case and that God will have mercy on us all for the sake of the Gospel and the Glory of Christ.

Rev. Robert Griffith is now ministering in a rural congregation in NSW. Robert's current sermons and teaching can be found at: gunnedahbaptist.org.au.



Serving as a Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church in recent days was the toughest challenge I have faced in my entire ministry. On Friday 13th July 2018 the National Assembly voted to change the Uniting Church in Australia's doctrine so as to allow for same-sex marriages to take place within the Church.

This decision and the way in which it was made brought incredible pain and division to that part of God's Kingdom and triggered shockwaves across the whole Christian Church in our nation. Under the UCA Constitution an appeal was possible. If enough Presbyteries (Regional Councils) in enough Synods (State Councils) agreed, then the Assembly (National Council) would be forced to set aside the decision and consult more widely on the issue. That appeal failed by only a handful of votes nationally. So when the deadline passed on 13th January 2019, this doctrinal change was set in stone and the Uniting Church in Australia broke away from the wider Church in this nation on a very important issue.

It was on that day, with tears flowing, that I wrote the first draft of the document above. On that day some UCA members were dancing in the aisles celebrating this new age of diversity - whilst many of their fellow members, Ministers, Pastors and Church leaders were preparing to leave the Church they had served faithfully for so many years, feeling they could no longer remain with integrity. I was overwhelmed by the response when the feedback starting flooding in via email. People needed a reason to stay and I tried so hard to give them one, whilst acknowledging the seriousness of the issues facing the Church in these difficult times. However, even I had to admit there is a point where our allegiance to a human organisation must give way to the priority of the Kingdom of God and the truth of the gospel.

The Voice

by Robyn Painter

One Sunday I was in Adelaide, so I went to a Church around the corner from my sister's place.

My two nieces, Ebony (6) and Tahlia (4), were very pleased to come with me, as they don't very often get to church.

During the service, a man sitting at the back of the church started reading out a reflective reading, designed to remind people of God's love and presence. Everyone sat quietly, listening with eyes to the front. Everyone that is, except for Tahlia who knelt on the seat, facing the back, eyes looking here and there to see where the Voice was coming from.

To add to her puzzlement, half-way through this reflection the man's microphone started working, and all of a sudden the Voice was coming from the front of the church from up near the ceiling somewhere.

Finally Tahlia gave up her search and sat down next to me. When the reflection was finished she leaned over to me, eyes wide and whispered to me, "I couldn't see anybody saying all of that, so I think it must have been Jesus talking"

I wasn't sure how to respond to that; my first reaction was to laugh. I knew the Voice was coming from an average looking bloke sitting in the back row.

But then as I thought about it afterwards, I thought that perhaps Tahlia had come to church in a better mindset than I had; she came expecting that Jesus would be there and would speak to us. I had come expecting to sit in church for an hour, and go home more or less

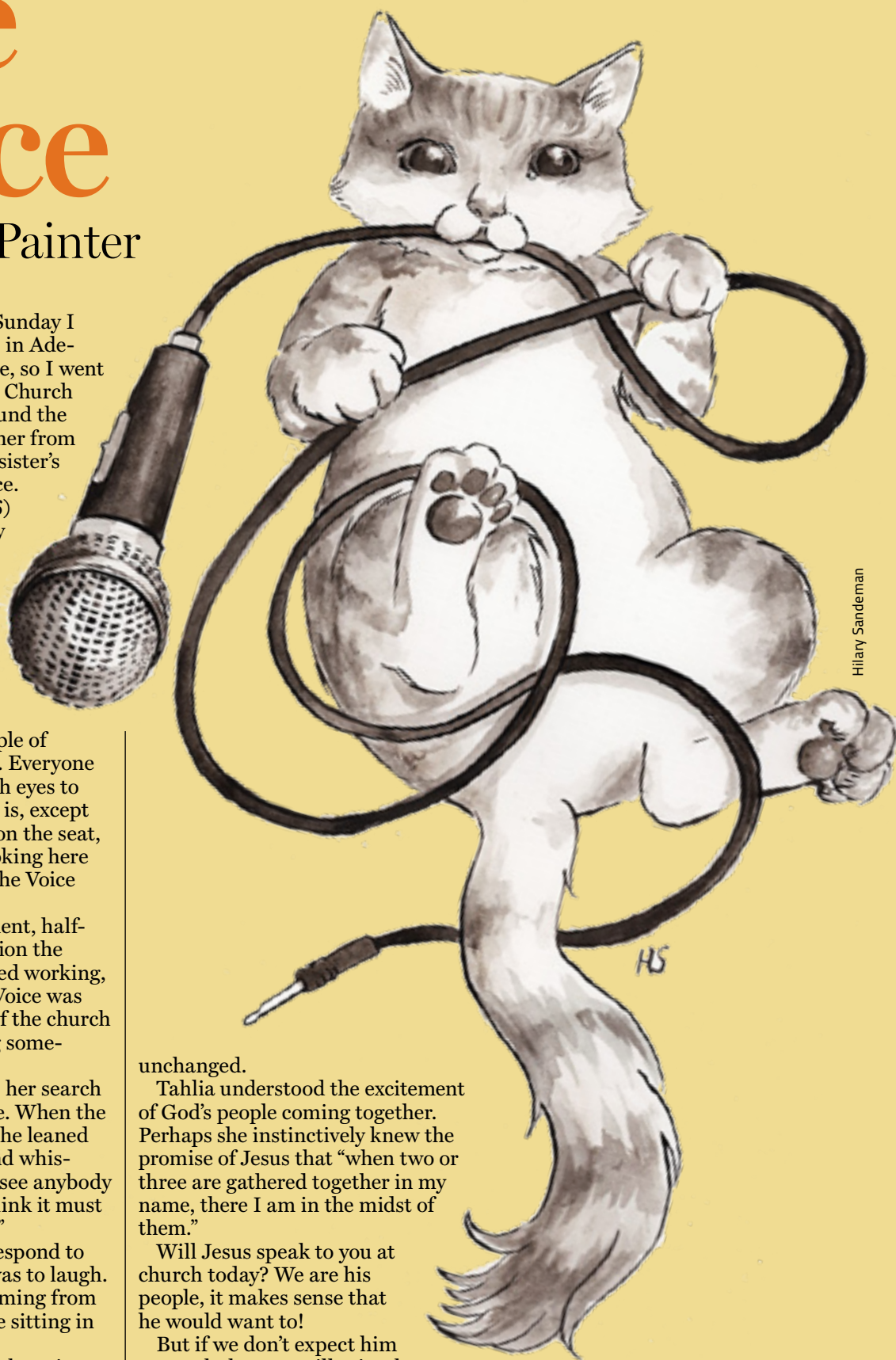
unchanged.

Tahlia understood the excitement of God's people coming together. Perhaps she instinctively knew the promise of Jesus that "when two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

Will Jesus speak to you at church today? We are his people, it makes sense that he would want to!

But if we don't expect him to speak then we will miss the sound of his still small voice when it comes to us. Perhaps we too need that childlike faith that doesn't come to church merely out of habit, but comes with ears open and hearts softened to hear and respond to our loving Lord Jesus.

Robyn Painter ministers in the Peterborough community.



Hilary Sandeman

A Happy Death & A Hopeful Future



Prof William Abraham

Professor of Wesley Studies
at Southern Methodist University



The unravelling of The United Methodist Church has reached one more turning in the road. The Feinberg Protocols are the bridge into the future that is now taken with radical seriousness on all sides. There is little to add to the responses already available on social and other media. The level and high quality of engagement makes clear that the debate about the future is now joined in earnest. We can expect all sorts of surprises as we move into the next phase of reception. There is a time and place for unravelling the amazing political dimensions involved, dimensions that are concealed in the pious and positive language that shows up in the Protocols and the commentary on them. I leave that for another day; my moral assessment of what has happened is not pretty. My interest here is to come clean on my sense of where we are and where we should go.

Looked at over the short span of recent history, what we have is the end of the experiment that was worked out after the uniting of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren. The church was saddled from the beginning with three forms of internal incoherence. First, the effort to have a pluralist church, a church which housed a wide variety of doctrinal and moral options, was incoherent because it excluded

from the very beginning any robustly conservative or orthodox version of Methodism. While claiming to be inclusive it was built on an exclusive ecclesiology that as a matter of simple logic excluded a more substantial vision of what a church should be. Pluralism as applied to a church is in fact a highly partisan way to think of what a church should be. Churches, like any organization, cannot exist without boundaries; pluralism excluded traditional boundaries even as it depended on its own meta-boundary that rejected the rejection of pluralism. This is not a matter of semantics or logic-chopping; it is a matter of social and political reality. In the end, the whole thing was bound to unravel; it was destined to collapse from within.

Second, there was a very particular incoherence at the very heart of United Methodism. On the one hand, it endorsed pluralism in the arena of doctrine (including the option of the death of God theology); on the other hand, it developed a very specific orthodox commitment in the arena of sexual morality, marriage, and ordination standards. Few, if any, saw that this is utterly incoherent. Doctrine is just a fancy word for church teaching. The general vision of church teaching (allow as many options as can be grounded in the quadrilateral) was clearly at odds with the very specific teaching carried forward by that same General Conference with respect to sexuality. Albert Outler fought with all the skill he could muster for both these commitments; late in life he stepped back from the first (doctrinal pluralism) but held resolutely to the second (conservative views on sexuality). Again, no organization can live for long with this kind of incoherence lodged in its bosom.

Third, the implementation of pluralism and the effort to impose the quadrilateral on the whole church was also incoherent. On one hand, we said that we can allow diversity on theory of knowledge in theology; on the



other hand, we committed United Methodism to a very particular theory of knowledge. Putting the issue uncharitably, the quadrilateral is akin to flat earth theory when it comes to debates about how we know what we know. Unfortunately, it is useless in actually resolving issues in that those who use it can manipulate the outcome to get whatever results they desire. It simply adds to confusion in debates about sexuality. Perhaps, we are already overdosed on incoherence, so this last observation does not matter; however, informed observers naturally feel the dissonance at issue. In so far as they do, we have yet another cause which has brought us to the brink of dissolution.

I see no way forward other than to opt for a happy death and a hopeful future.

In speaking of a happy death, I do not mean us to take the happiness involved as psychological. I mean it in a more ontological and providential sense. Early Methodists had a strong tradition of a happy death. By this they did not mean that one could avoid the usual phenomena of grief, denial, anger, anxiety, and the like. Nor did it mean that there was no work to be done on the property and assets of those who died. They meant that one should handle death with assurance and even gratitude. We have all seen situations where we have thought (if not said) that death was a blessing in disguise. This is how I see things at present. Or, to turn to another more singular observation from early Methodism: when Wesley's marriage failed and his wife left him, he noted that the water had been spilt and could not be gathered up again. We have all heard the hackneyed references to divorce and the conventional aftermath; these embody some truth, or we would not repeat them. It is time to face reality and look upon the death of United Methodism as a happy death.

Technically, of course, this is inaccurate. Technically,

it looks as if The United Methodist Church will continue as a legal entity complete with name and restricted assets. However, the post-separation United Methodist Church will not be the church that we have known across the years. Preachers who tell this to their local congregations in order to calm troubled waters (I could name names) are being fooled if they believe this. Put simply, you cannot lose a significant network of conservative pastors and members and not be radically altered. When Methodism left or was pushed out of The Church of England, the losses theologically and evangelistically were serious. However, Methodism would never have developed the rich heritage that it did if it had remained inside the Anglican womb. When Pentecostalism left or was pushed out of Methodism at the turn of the twentieth century, the loss to Methodism was incalculable. One historian once remarked to me that the only good thing Methodism ever did was to give birth to Pentecostalism. Perhaps the most important gift of United Methodism to the world may be the birth of a fresh and invigorated version of Methodism. This is exactly what we should now pray and work for with gusto.

It will take time for most ordinary United Methodists to come to terms with the notion of a happy death. This is where my analogy begins to break down. For one thing, the effort to mask this reality by pious phrases will encourage many to provide a less painful description of the situation. Furthermore, the full impact of what is happening will take time to emerge. That is one reason why centrist pastors in particular will talk a good game, even though they fear that as the change begins to sink in, many who initially stick with the status quo will realize that they can no longer belong to the post-separation United Methodist Church in North America. For example, many pastors are saying something like: "Others will do same sex weddings, but we



A Happy Death &

A Hopeful Future

won't do that here; or, as senior pastor I will not do it, but I will allow our associates to do it off campus." At every Charge Conference, though, there will be those within the congregation pushing for the change, and so every year the leaders will have to vote again on their policy, and once again answer the question why any limits at all should be put on marriage, since the UMC in North America will have defined it solely in terms of the person-relative commitments (or feelings) of the participants. Conservatives who move earlier will need to be sensitive and magnanimous to those who are less sure what to do than they are. However, we have waited long enough in the wilderness. So, let's saddle up the camels and head over into the promised land. A future full of hope is ahead of us.

I have my own general aspirations that I will carry with me over into the new, renewed Methodist denomination. I envisage the creation of a Methodism that will be orthodox in doctrine, effective in bringing folk to a living faith in Jesus Christ, biblically literate, inspired and equipped by the good and life-giving Holy Spirit, caring for the poor, vigorous in teaching an industrial-strength version of Christianity, politically and socially engaged in the public arena, driven by lay ministry set free to experiment, open to the length and breadth of orthodoxy, intellectually rigorous and vibrant, and truly global in scale. No single description will work; we need a thick description of what we want to see God bring about in our midst. We also need to seize the freedom that will be ours once we get away from the politically correct straight-jacket that is tacitly in play. We will be done with Annual Conferences that have featured a church within the church decked out in its own sartorial costume! We will be at liberty to praise God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with gusto as one people once again!

Permit at this point a more person-relative wish list. I would love to see us build a strong connection with world-wide Methodism. There are tens of millions of children of the Wesleyan movement across the earth who are not part of the UMC, and are put off by its present politics and policies. They stand with us in our understanding of the historic importance of the core ordinances of the church. The new, renewed Methodist church will have the opportunity to move beyond lip service to a true unity of mission with the rest of the world. In fact, in time I would love to see a host of non-UMC Methodist/Wesleyan churches who share an authentic version of our tradition either affiliate with or become part of the new Methodist denomination that is on the horizon. There is no need to identify names at this point. Moreover, this development will require special patience, wisdom, and cross-cultural intelligence. However, just think of the diverse gifts that will be available across the mind and life of the church up ahead.

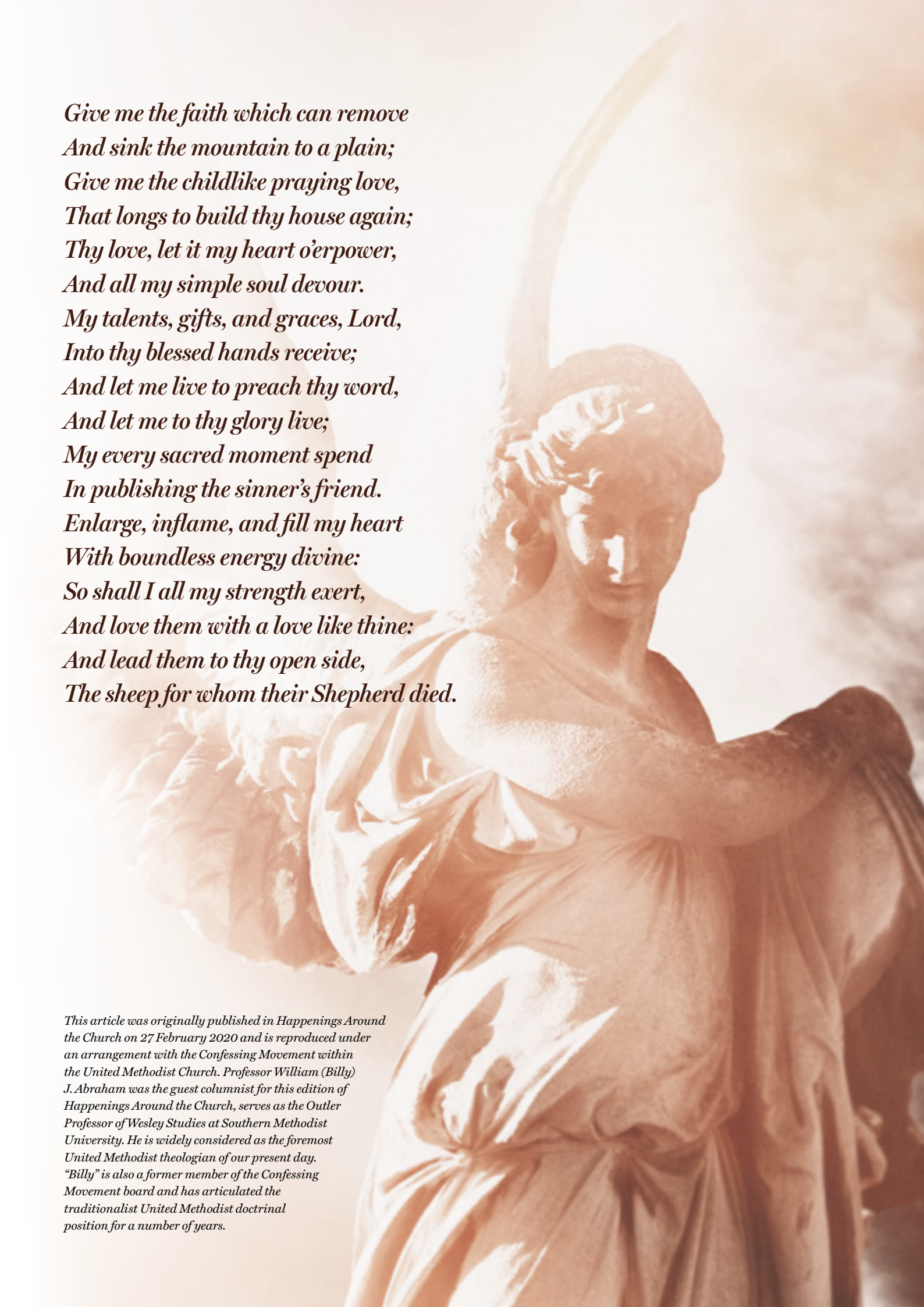
I would love to see an upgrade in our practices

related to the Lord's Supper. Why not have a full meal in our homes where we include the celebration of the Eucharist? Think of what this might do if we began in the homes of our shut-ins or those in nursing homes. Combined at the congregational level with real biblical exegesis and preaching, this could work wonders in our worship. Talk about a converting ordinance! Think of a sense of the glory of God descending in our midst! I got glimpses of this after my conversion in Ireland, and I would dearly love to have fresh glimpses today.

I would love to see all the leaders of the new, renewed church immerse themselves in the great canonical sermons of Wesley read as a brilliant if incomplete handbook of spiritual direction. We have a batch of sermons on how to become a Christian; a batch on what it is to be a Christian; and a batch on how to survive the trials and tribulations of the Christian life. This would give us a common discourse from which to begin our extended conversation together. No more silly reductionistic slogans! No more handwaving in the direction of this or that abstraction in our heritage! No more Wesleyan fizzy lemonade! Real food for the soul that will drive us towards holiness! And what about a fresh start on the relation between faith and politics that begins with Wesley's devotion to the legacy of Edmund Burke!

I would love to see us recover some of the rich hymnody of Methodism. How about the whole congregation singing the great hymns of Charles Wesley in four-part harmony? How about organizing on a quarterly basis hymn-fests where we revel in the joy of the music and the grandeur of the theology? There is no need to abandon either the great tradition of Gospel songs or the developing heritage of contemporary music. I am at home in both these traditions. However, we need at times to nourish ourselves with the spiritual meat of our own glorious tradition. The Irish who first brought Methodism to North America can join in from the gallery.

Above all I want to see souls saved in our churches, really saved, so that they can become salt and light in the world surrounded and cheered on by the great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on from the balcony above. We are done with toy religion, with thin forms of piety, with absurd moral slogans, and with a theology so sick and feeble that it is not worth disbelieving! We have been in the wilderness long enough, constantly looking over our shoulders and half-expecting to be hit over the head by self-appointed gatekeepers. It is time to get ready for a new journey together under leadership who have secured the very best that they can in the circumstances. We can harvest the fruit of renewal and bake it into the Methodist meat and drink of the future. There is a time to expose the political shenanigans that are in play; as I mentioned earlier, this will not be a pretty sight. However, now is the time to stand up straight, salvage what we can for the kingdom, and march into the much better future that the good Lord has in store for us. Charles Wesley got it exactly right.



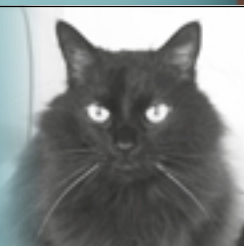
*Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the childlike praying love,
That longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,
And all my simple soul devour.
My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinner's friend.
Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless energy divine:
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a love like thine:
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.*

This article was originally published in Happenings Around the Church on 27 February 2020 and is reproduced under an arrangement with the Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church. Professor William (Billy) J. Abraham was the guest columnist for this edition of Happenings Around the Church, serves as the Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at Southern Methodist University. He is widely considered as the foremost United Methodist theologian of our present day. "Billy" is also a former member of the Confessing Movement board and has articulated the traditionalist United Methodist doctrinal position for a number of years.

Only Waving

Peter
Bentley

ACC National Director



It has been a very concentrated few months for UCA ministers and members and the focus for many has been on simply ‘managing’ the local congregation, and in a real way, literally ‘just surviving’. There has also been innovation and new ways of serving and communicating in the overall context of the restrictions imposed by the response to COVID-19. The amount of Christian material now on YouTube, Facebook and other social media is amazing, and in hopefully most cases providing a blessing and wider witness as people searching for meaning come across sermons, talks, videos and material.

I have been reflecting on the institutional church, and soberly realised that if Australia had not introduced strict self-isolation arrangements, it is quite likely that the impact on worshipping congregations and preaching places would have been severe, with numerical impact high from death or illness due to the already vulnerable base of many congregations (small numbers and age). Due to the difficulty of holding funerals, this would have also had a significant pastoral impact and quite likely increased negative response from many moderate and evangelical members with the lack of pastoral connection especially from liberal progressive ministers who hold out little hope at funerals at the best of times. It is also likely that those members who were more loosely connected and/or have felt increasingly alienated from ill-equipped liberal progressive ministers will simply not bother to return, and instead seek fellowship in other ways. As thousands have left the UCA over the last two years, many more will drift away, and the compounding impact of this will hasten the demise of many congregations.

Financial factors have of course been a major concern, and this is not surprising given the economically rationalist approach of many institutions. In the UCA, Synods are financial managers and planners and thus worry about overall liquidity and financial viability for themselves and

other ‘institutions’ they serve like the base unit of operation, namely the congregation. Some congregations were well set up with online offerings, and the impact may have been minimal unless many of their members also had reduced income. Congregations are still reliant on physical offerings for overall budgets, but more importantly property income has been a key source of overall income. This sudden and dramatic change has been a reality check to those congregations who have been coasting along, able to pay for stipended ministry simply from property income.

All of these changes and challenges are happening in this new post 15th Assembly era for the Uniting Church as it faces consolidation of being a divided denomination (except for the hierarchy – that is displaying more uniformity than before, a natural response to a declining denomination). As I have mentioned before, there are now several Uniting Church denominations, depending on which Synod you are connected with and even which regional area, though the name Uniting is held high, anyone in the know understands the lip service that is paid to the once Uniting Church movement that has now become a brand to be interpreted as one desires under the banner of diversity.

In terms of personal belief, one increasing trend in liberal progressive circles is seemingly to not know what they don’t believe. This is a sign of the diversity mantra taking hold and making it difficult to comment on any beliefs to the exclusion of others (except when taking pot shots at evangelicals). This is different from the beliefs of ‘old school liberals’, as they knew what they didn’t believe.

As I have mentioned, it is a new era for the ACC in the midst of all this, and there will be new ways of continuing to witness as a confessing movement. The use of social media, gatherings and teaching online (the School of Faith), a new website, and hopefully many individual members coming together in their own congregations and regions to support each other and confess the faith once given to all the saints.

A Great Problem and a Great Opportunity

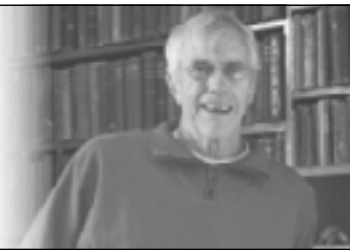


Dr Riley B. Case provides an account of how the United Methodist Church (USA) arrived at its present situation and is now considering dividing the denomination.

Note: The UMC General Conference that was scheduled for May 2020 to consider the PROTOCOL OF RECONCILIATION & GRACE THROUGH SEPARATION has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. See the ACC website or Confessing Movement in the USA website for further information.

Dr Riley Case

United Methodist (Retired)



I was sorting through some older files and found a clipping from *Zion's Herald* (later *Progressive Christian Magazine*) Vol.178, No. 1, back in 2005 with my picture in it (which was probably why I cut it out). The article, by Andrew Weaver and Nicole Seibert, was an expose and critique of the Institute of Religion and Democracy (IRD). It seems because I have had connections with IRD, I was brought into the critique. I had written an article in *Good News* magazine invoking a "deceptive formula" to justify an assault on the UMC. The "deceptive formula" linked the decline in membership in the UMC and other mainline churches as the consequence of liberals who got the church involved in "social action." Mr. Case, according to the article, had observed that United Methodism was in the midst of a 100-year decline and that "the years of the decline correspond exactly to the years that liberalism and institutionalism have dominated Methodism."

Guilty as charged, though I admit and confess my charge was overly simplistic. Many of us still claim that the erosion of theological integrity and Biblical authority is a major reason for Methodist decline for the last 100 years or so, but we must admit other factors were also operating and these need to be discussed. One argument from progressives for membership decline is that the church is hateful and unloving because it does not agree with what has become a major progressive article of faith, that the Bible is wrong or at least needs to be "contextualized" (re-interpreted in the light of modern knowledge and changing culture) and homosexual practice and transgender transition need to be blessed because otherwise the coming generations will

simply reject Christianity for being on the wrong side of history. For those who call themselves moderates or mainstream the issue is not big enough to divide the church and we should all seek to live under a big tent (after we have removed all negative references to homosexual practice).

But there are other reasons given for why the UMC in America is facing membership loss. In the article first mentioned in this column, Andrew Weaver and Nicole Siebert have their own explanation for mainline decline. The Case logic is wrong (membership decline is the result of compromised theology), they said:

"Correlation does not denote causation. Demographic research shows that the primary reason for the decline in membership in mainline churches and the growth of conservative churches has little to do with ideology and much to do with biology. Conservative church members have more children. According to findings published in the American Journal of Sociology...." (then is reported a study reporting higher birth rates and earlier childbearing among conservative women from 1900 to 1970).

When I first read this years ago I shook my head in disbelief. This didn't make any sense to me. I still question the analysis but a look at some cultural trends in the past few years makes me wonder: are progressive families having fewer children and if so, why?

The January 27 issue of *National Review* includes an article, "Our Global Birth Dearth," which records the falling birth rate in the world, at least among some communities. In America the rate of "expected children born per woman" has decreased from about 6 in 1850 to 1.72 today. Since 2006 the rate has fallen from 2.12 to 1.72. One reason, according to some researchers, is the "changing ideas about transcendence," which, being interpreted, means it's a religious thing. Religion declines, the birth-rate goes down.

I would like to see some studies, but the arguments

continued over...



A Great Problem and a Great Opportunity

can be made on the basis of observation. Birth rates among Mormons, Pentecostals, Amish, and Muslims remain high. Of course, they believe in something. In my home county of LaGrange in Indiana, there were 5,000 Amish sixty years ago and those who thought they knew predicted that that would be the last generation. The pressures of a materialistic world were too great; Amish youth would desert en masse. Today, there are 14,000 Amish in LaGrange County. Not every group is being mesmerized by secular culture. But many are so mesmerized: birth rates among agnostics, progressives, feminists, the academic elite and, of course, among gays, lesbians and transgender persons are in sharp decline. The sexual revolution from the 1960s led to cohabitating without marriage, many more children born out of wedlock, single mothers, a push to approve all sorts of sexual experimentation, an aggressive gay lobby, and self-understandings of personhood described in such ways as non-binary and gender fluid.

All of this has been related to a general rebellion against generally accepted religious and cultural moral standards. Authority is shifting to the autonomous self. Whether something is right or wrong depends not so much on what the Bible teaches as on my own feelings. Today progressives say the only truth we need to know is “love,” but “love” is a subjective standard.

So we observe that progressive ideology, whether religious or non-religious, is not good for families, and because societal health is to a large extent based on family health, it is not good for society. And in the Christian world, it is not good for church health. At one time general conferences and bishops passed resolutions on the family altar and the sanctity of marriage and the family. There was an emphasis that the family was the major means by which faith is communicated from one generation to the next. No more. In 1976 Good News advocated for Family as the church’s missional priority for the quadrennium. The effort failed spectacularly. The present web page of the General Board of Church and Society lists 30 areas of concern and focus for the board. Not one is related to family, or to marriage. Family is sometimes seen as the problem, not the solution to our social confusion. Several years ago (2015), Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, General Secretary at the General Board of Church and Society, wrote: “The General Board of Church & Society affirms and upholds in prayer the work of the United Methodist Church as it continues to discern its understanding of marriage.” (quoted in *Lifewatch*). The implication is that the Bible and 2,000 years of church history have not established

God’s will for marriage and our teaching needs to be updated.

Meanwhile evangelical Christians, in America and world-wide, are thriving (or at least holding their own) and part of this is because of the emphasis on the family. A new book, *The Twentysomething Soul* (Clydesdale and Garces-Foley, Oxford, 2019) reports on evangelicals: 80% of active young evangelicals want children and plan to join churches when they have children. The authors predict that whatever happens to the secularizing trends in America, evangelicals should be able to maintain their 30% of the young adult population. Another book, *The Myth of the Dying Church* (Stanton, Worthy, 2019) reports that despite fewer persons in America identifying with the institutional church, between 2007 and 2014, the percentage of Americans who say their faith “is very important to them” who pray daily, who say they read the Bible at least once a week, is increasing.

Teachers and pastors and social workers see the consequences of dysfunctional homes. I have served for nearly thirty years with our local Rescue Mission. The mission has sought to be a safe place and a healing place for hundreds of hurting men and women, many of whom are referred directly from jail. Their problems are the usual: drugs, promiscuous sex, abuse, poverty, alienation, anger, rebellion. Very few of these, as they tell their stories, were raised in two-parent stable homes.

And so, a great problem: A de-emphasis on the traditional Christian home is related to serious problems in society, and even in the church. It is difficult to sense any oneness in Christ when within the church there are such different approaches to such important matters. The understandings of marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman, and the established sexual standard as celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage is now being challenged, even by church leaders.

But perhaps there is a new opportunity. Rather than continuing the confusion and the acrimony let us take seriously the proposal of amicable separation. And whether the numbers are great or small let there be groups willing to lift up the sanctity of the home, safe places of faith and stability, where persons grow in faith and the body of Christ is made strong.

Dr Riley B. Case is the Associate Director of the Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church. This article was originally published in Happenings Around the Church on 2 February 2020 and is reproduced under an arrangement with the Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church.





The Power of Singing

We were singing ‘O for a thousand tongues to sing’ one Sunday at church when I was intrigued by Charles Wesley’s usage of the words ‘cancelled sin’. The result was this reflection.

Only His Outrageous Grace Will Do

Charles Wesley was not only a prolific hymn writer; he was also an extraordinarily insightful Christian. Take the verse that goes ‘He breaks the power of cancelled sin’ in his famous hymn ‘O for a thousand tongues to sing’ for example. Why ‘cancelled’ sin? When sin is cancelled by Jesus’ finished work at the Cross, isn’t it supposed to be powerless? No, it still wields power when Christians fail to realise just how forgiven they are. Charles grasped that connection between that failure and Hydra-like nature of sin.

If Christians do not fully realise just how much God loves them and how completely forgiven they are (and it is not only until their next sin), sub-conscious condemnation still lives to rear its ugly head to tether believers to depression, aberrant patterns of thought, self-harm and substance addictions.

Legalism teaches God will love you only if you are ‘good enough’. Post-modern theology fights shy of the gospel and the message of the cross.

Both cannot remove condemnation. Both rob us of the truth of the real extent and healing revelation of God’s love. Destructive bondage finds fertile soil in wrong beliefs.

And how much does God love us? Let 1 John 4:10 tell you: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” And what of condemnation? The Bible confirms “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.” (John 3:17) Still not convinced? Then God’s declaration to believers in Hebrews 10:17 “**Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more**” (emphasis mine) should unequivocally clinch it.

Above and beyond that, God gave us a new identity. He calls us ‘His righteousness in Christ’ – all because of what Jesus, upon His Father’s request, has freely done for us at the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21). God knows that only an outrageous affirmation of His love will break the stranglehold of phantom sin. Charles fully understood the power of the grace of Christ as he completed the stanza with:

*He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.*

Kimmy Fam attends a Uniting Church in Victoria.

O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

by Charles Wesley

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer’s praise
The glories of my God and King
The triumphs of his grace!

My gracious Master and my God
Assist me to proclaim
To spread thro’ all the earth
abroad
The honours of your name

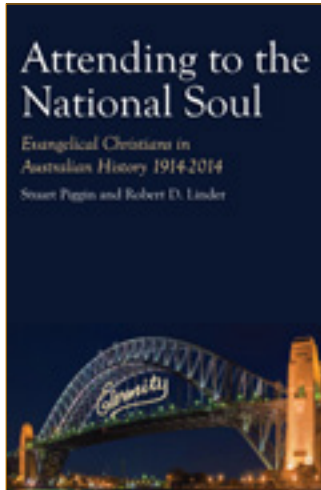
Jesus! the name that charms
our fears
That bids our sorrows cease
‘tis music in the sinner’s ears
‘tis life and health and peace

He breaks the power of
cancelled sin
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the
foulest clean;
His blood availed for me

To God all glory, praise,
and love
Be now and ever given
By saints below and
saints above
The Church in earth
and heaven



Evangelical History



Attending to the National Soul: Evangelical Christians in Australian History 1914-2014

Monash University Publishing, 2019

Written by
Stuart Piggin
and Robert D. Linder

This volume continues the story begun with *The Fountain of Public Prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian History 1740-1914* in 2018. This two-volume blockbuster is the consummation of 35 years of research and writing by the authors as well as incorporating work by many other scholars who are acknowledged within.

As Stuart Piggin quipped at the launch on 12 Dec 2019 at St Stephen's Uniting Church Macquarie Street, this volume is *vasta mole superbus* ("proud in its prodigious bulk," as Dr Johnson said of his *Dictionary*) at 656 pages. Again, thankfully, the footnotes are at the foot of the page, there is a bibliography of forty pages and a two-column index of 47 pages. It is also a very attractive volume and a credit to authors and publisher. The jacket illustration is even more evocative than the Parramatta Memorial Drinking Fountain on the volume 1 cover. There are many arresting phrases (e.g., Anglican proponents of the ordination of women had something in common with Lindy Chamberlain, they were both "condemned hysterically, unreasonably and with allusion to witches"). This reviewer said of volume 1 that this is "an epic achievement which deserves to reorient Australian history-writing in several important respects". Volume 2 confirms his opinion.

Volume 1 was set up by a stunning Prologue, a tour de force concerning first fleet naval officer and astrono-

mer, William Dawes and his relations with the Aborigines. The Prologue to this volume did not disappoint, featuring Mary Bennett (1881-1961), missionary and a determined advocate of Aboriginal rights. Both prologues set the scene for a work which throughout takes seriously relations between Aborigines and later settlers and gives a continuing and balanced account of the importance of Christianity to the Indigenous peoples.

Volume 1 ends with evangelicals helping in "creating one of the most 'Christianised' nations on earth in terms of values" (p. 39). The introduction to volume 2 reiterates this but goes further in asserting that Australia is "still one of the most 'Christianised' of nations". (p. 15). The themes of the book are, first, how evangelicals worked out how to be dual citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and of the Commonwealth of Australia, secondly, how evangelicals manifested their aptitude for desecularisation in a rapidly secularising world, and thirdly, how evangelicals have sensitised the Australian conscience and informed the Australian consciousness (i.e., "the National Soul" of the title).

The structure of the book works well. Part A, "Faith under Fire" has two chapters on WW1, three on the 1920s and depression, and two on WW2. Part A is underpinned by Bob Linder's splendid research. Part B, "Faith and the Secular Challenge" has three chapters on 1946-65 and two of

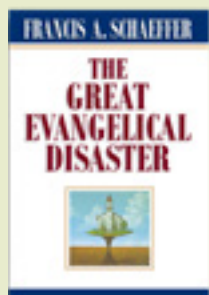
each of 1965-79, the 1980s, the 1990s and the 21st century. This means that some chapters deal with issues internal to evangelicals and their denominations (such as theological and political conflict) and some with their attempts to influence the broader society (such as evangelism, social work and political influence).

The authors obviously accept the truism that you can't say everything, so generalise quite a lot but took Paul Hasluck's advice and sank "shafts" to achieve depth. Their two shafts were the evangelical experience of war (Linder's *métier*) and Sydney evangelical Anglicans (for whom Piggin is something of a *bête noir*). The account of the charismatic and Pentecostal movement within evangelicalism from the 1960s comes to form almost a third shaft.

Other sorts of evangelicals are treated much more selectively and episodically, especially in Part B, where Sydney Anglicans shape the whole narrative, for good or ill. With the Baptists, we get perspectives from WA, Victoria and NSW in different time periods, with little lateral connection. Well, maybe it's their polity that's the problem. The Congregationalists appear from time to time, but their swing from solidly evangelical to predominantly liberal from the 1880s to 1920s is left unexamined (despite a helpful article on the subject by Geoff Barnes in *Church Heritage* in March 1997). The Methodists get better treatment, especially those in NSW and SA. The Lutherans feature little at all. There is nothing on the Brethren in northern Tasmania. The Presbyterians also appear in a fragmented way, but feature strongly in sections about doctrinal dispute (e.g. Samuel Angus) and the ordination of women. A personal beef is the continued ignoring of Scottish evangelical entrepreneur Andrew Stewart who recruited about 90 evangelical home missionaries and ministers for the Presbyterian Church of Queensland from 1900 to 1938. His recruit George Tulloch features, but not Hugh Paton. Actually, Queensland is somewhat neglected

continued on p. 30

Battle for Truth & Morality



The Great Evangelical Disaster

Crossway
1984

Written by Francis A. Schaeffer

"Where is the clear voice speaking to the crucial issues of the day with distinctively biblical Christian answers? With tears we must say that largely it is not there and that a large segment of the evangelical world has become seduced by the world spirit of this present age."

This is the prophetic voice of Francis Schaeffer quoted from his 1984 book, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*.

Can we, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations of the Uniting Church (ACC) relate to these words? Are we ourselves in danger of being "*seduced by the world spirit of this present age*"?

Francis Schaeffer was at the peak of his ministry in America, as a pastor, apologist, bestselling author and Christian activist, in the 1970s, and 1980s.

His 23rd book, "*The Great Evangelical Disaster*" was written in 1984 in the context of his previous books, but stands alone in speaking to the critical issues of the day.

Schaeffer notes that "*throughout my work there is a common unifying theme, which I would define as the Lordship of Christ in the totality of life.*"

He believes there is no area of life that does not come under the lordship of Christ, and it is this belief that sets the scene for the "*battle for truth and morality in our culture*".

This book demonstrates in no uncertain terms why this battle must be seriously engaged by all who call themselves "evangelical".

"Here is the great evangelical disaster - the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this - namely accommodation: the evangelical world has accommodated to the world spirit of the age."

Schaeffer says that scripture has been generally accommodated to suit the world, leading many who call themselves evangelicals to hold a weakened view of the Bible.

In addition there has been an accommodation to the social issues of the day, such as abortion and euthanasia.

He points out that this accommodation has been costly in hastening the breakdown of the culture, with a consequent loss of morality and respect for human life. This is not just a cultural matter but more importantly a spiritual matter.

Although Schaeffer is writing about the American culture in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s he could be writing about

Australian culture and the evangelical scene in 2020.

He suggests the battle for truth and morality must be fought with the only weapons that will be effective: "*It will take a life committed to Christ, founded on truth, lived in righteousness and grounded in the Gospel.*"

Australian author and pastor Mark Sayers, in his 2016 book, *The Disappearing Church* supports this view and suggests the solution to cultural breakdown:

"What if the answer is what it has always been? The path of walking in Jesus' footsteps, of following the traditions and teachings of the apostles. What if the answer to our culture's challenges is still the Gospel?"

While Schaeffer argues for a strong stand against accommodation, he also warns against a harsh and legalistic condemnation. Our confrontation with the world must be a "*loving confrontation.*"

This warning emerges from his strong belief that the evangelical church needs to take the words of John's Gospel (Chapter 13: verses 34-35) to heart:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Schaeffer believes the "*mark of the Christian*" is to love not only our fellow believers, but all people who are made in the image of God.

He then explores in some depth the distinction between those "*who have cast themselves upon him (Jesus) in faith and those who still stand in rebellion.*"

If the world does not see this oneness in love he says, it will not believe that Christ was sent by the Father. Having spent some time in emphasising the necessity for such a oneness in love Schaeffer returns to the holiness of God.

Schaeffer says the Christian has a double task: "*... to practice both God's holiness and God's love.*" "*Not his holiness without his love; that is only harshness. Not his love without his holiness: that is only compromise.*"

This is the challenge given to every Christian by this book, and to the ACC facing difficult choices at this present time. Each "*crucial issue of the day*" no matter how demanding must be met with holiness and love simultaneously.

As Francis Schaeffer points out:

"As we confront the issues, there must be a proper balance under the leadership of the Holy Spirit while carefully living within the circle of that which is taught in Scripture."

This book is a useful and sharp reminder that while maintaining the discipline necessary to maintain Gospel purity, a Christ like love for those who take a position contrary to ours must be visible and real.

Gary Kelly is a co-ordinator of the ACC Southern Cluster in Hobart.

BOOK REVIEW

Evangelical History continued...

in general. (Even WA does better.) However, Stewart's son-in-law Alfred Coombe is featured, but then he was active in Victoria.

A number of individuals come in for special treatment, or are used to illuminate the themes, not all of them evangelicals. R.M. Williams is a surprise: he is used as a lens through which to observe the outback. (Some might consider Bert Facey for a similar but urban purpose.) Robert Menzies, John Curtin and Joh Bjelke-Petersen are more understandable. The main evangelical "stars" are Alan Walker, Billy Graham, Donald Mackay, the Chamberlains, General Eva Burrows, Tim and Peter Costello, Peter and Phillip Jensen and Margaret Court. Not to mention Arthur Stace, the "Eternity" man.

The authors explain what they call the trifurcation of Australian evangelicals (p. 503), gradually from the 1970s and clearly so from the 1990s. The three branches are (1) exclusives conservatives (e.g., the Jensen brothers), (2) inclusive progressives (e.g.,

Tim Costello) and (3) charismatics/Pentecostals (e.g. Brian Houston). They have unfortunately spent quite a bit of energy on fighting each other but the authors think they are learning to cooperate better.

The authors identify dangers of intolerance, defensiveness, narrowness and shallowness in contemporary evangelicalism, especially in "Fortress Sydney Anglican". Another point which hit home concerns the decline in theological literacy partly because hymns (previously often written by ministers and covering all aspects of belief and practice) have been replaced by short-lived, repetitive praise written by musicians. The new "generic evangelical church plan" (associated with both Pentecostalism and Phillip Jensen) is based on being Jesus-centred, Bible-based and imaginatively led. In practice, they can turn out to be narrow in focus, shallow in worship and both congregationalist and authoritarian in polity.

There are about eight pages on

the UCA, starting with the union as a response to secularisation, then dealing with the growth of "ethnic" congregations (predominantly evangelical) and featuring two sections on the homosexuality issue. The authors clearly recognise that very many, if not most of, the rank and file have been evangelical and argue that intolerant and politically-savvy liberals took political control and foisted their agenda on a reluctant laity. They conclude that the UCA's "liberal leaders ... dumped the Bible in order to be relevant to the culture." They were not rewarded by the culture but, instead, caused "cataclysmic losses", as theirs was "not a gospel which could sustain a Christian denomination" (pp 553-4). There is much to cheer in volume 2 but not here, sadly.

Malcolm Prentis retired as Professor of History at ACU in 2014, edited the NSW & ACT Synod history journal Church Heritage for 26 years and maintains an active scholarly life along with a burgeoning grand-parenting role.

Easter Exhaustion from page 6

Easter Sunday

Exhausted
tired, drawn, tear stained faces
tread sadly the predawn path
heavy stone,
heavy hearts
grief.

Confusion
Fear
flickering, hope.
He is not here
He is risen.

Faces turn toward the risen Son
Tears dried
Fresh breath inspired.
New life
Hope Joy.
He is not here!
HE IS RISEN.
Christ, Saviour, KING

Go quickly
feet running swiftly
tell the others.
HOPE, JOY
He is not dead!
HE IS RISEN.

Go
tell the good news of salvation.
to the disciples
to your neighbours, friends
to the exhausted
to the sad, lonely, isolated, hopeless
to the world,
on swift, beautiful feet.

Go
Tell the good news
HE IS RISEN.
Sins Forgiven
Death defeated.
Jesus is King.
HOPE, JOY, LIFE.

*He will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away
the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.*

- Isaiah 25:8

*My soul yearns for you in the night;
in the morning my spirit longs for you.
When your judgments come upon the
earth,
the people of the world learn righteousness.*

- Isaiah 26:19

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die

- John 11:25

*Who then is the one who condemns?
No one. Christ Jesus who died—
more than that, who was raised
to life—is at the right hand of God
and is also interceding for us.*

- Romans 8:34

*Praise be to the God and Father of
our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great
mercy he has given us new birth
into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.*

- 1 Peter 1:3-4

REFLECTION

A Word for Today

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence”

(Ephesians 3:10-12).

It has always been God's purpose that through the church the mystery of the Gospel of Christ should be made known. So as the church proclaims Christ, God will reveal Him and people will believe. So is the church up to this task? Does it have what it takes to proclaim Christ before the earth and the heavenly realms? The church is no weakling, and no failure. It is the beloved bride of Christ; it is his body and he is its head. And he is ruling, leading

and guiding his body; he honours the church, builds the church and ultimately we see his love for her in the way he died for her, cleansing her from each spot and stain of sin. Therefore, we as the church are strong and resourceful as we ever look to Jesus our husband. *‘In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence’* for we are his beloved, and we live in his eternal plans doing his will, in his power.

Prayer

Father help us to love the church: your children, and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Father, as we look at others in the church and also ourselves we think that the church is not accomplishing very much at all. Remind us that through the eyes of faith we are a cleansed, new church family, beloved by you. Heavenly Father make our eyes of faith clear. Amen.

Rev. Derek Schiller now ministers with the Church of Christ at St George, Qld. ACC gives thanks for Rev. Derek Schiller's work in developing video based educational resources for ACC members during his leadership of the ACC's Discipleship and Evangelism Commission. These videos are available on the ACC YouTube site.

THIS IS THE ACC

Who we are

Within the Uniting Church context of a very broad range of theology and practice, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations is a nationwide body of congregations and individuals whose vision is confessing the Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming the truth, renewing the church.

Our goals include

- Encouraging the confession of Christ according to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as that faith is described in the UCA's Basis of Union.
- Providing resources, seminars and conferences to build up believers, develop their gifts, and equip them for life, mission and works of service.
- Encouraging Christian believers in earnest prayer through our Prayer Network.
- Encouraging younger members of the Uniting Church in their faith and participation.
- Communicating about current events and issues through our website, our national magazine *ACCatalyst* and local newsletters.

The objectives of the ACC

The objects of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations are:

- a) To confess Christ according to the catholic, reformed and evangelical heritage in the Basis of Union, by:
 - i) upholding the Scriptures' prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ as the final authority for the Uniting Church's faith and life;
 - ii) calling the Uniting Church to determine matters

of doctrine and ethics according to the teaching of the Scriptures and the faith as understood by the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church;

iii) calling the councils and congregations of the Uniting Church to uphold the Basis of Union and Constitution:

iv) providing biblically-grounded leadership in partnership with other confessing movements;

v) developing ecumenical partnerships for the more effective proclamation of the Gospel in our pluralist nation; and

vi) establishing national, state and territory bodies to implement the Charter as approved by the inaugural meeting of the Association, and seeking the renewal of the Uniting Church.

b) To undertake such religious, educational or other charitable activities which are incidental to the above objectives.

How to join us

Membership rates for supporting members:

- ☎ Concession (single or couple):
\$20.00 pa. (financial year basis)
- ☎ Full (single or couples):
\$40.00 p.a. (*see website*)

☎ Contact (0423) 637 576.

☎ Email: accoffice@confessingcongregations.com

☎ Post: PO Box 968 Newtown NSW 2042



A Christian Film Festival providing Hope

Reviews by Peter Bentley

During the Covid-19 isolation time, many groups changed their format and arrangements for their conferences, events and seminars. Movies Change People (Heritage Films) had planned a Christian film festival at major cinemas, and then changed the program into an on-line arrangement spread out over several weeks with flexibility in the timing of watching. This became the Hope at Home Festival.

Twelve films were provided along with a series of Facebook-based interviews with Christian writers, teachers and theologians. Among the many films shown were two Hollywood based films, both of which were well-utilised for Easter (*The Passion of the Christ*), and ANZAC day (*Hacksaw Ridge*).

More recent 'Christian films' included *Beautifully Broken* and *The Least of These* (the Graham Staines Story), and a preview of the new movie about Bethany Hamilton, *Unstoppable*.

This arrangement has provided a good pointer to future possibilities for the on-line distribution of contemporary Christian films.

Same Kind of Different As Me (2017)

Starring: Greg Kinnear, Jon Voight, Renee Zellweger, Olivia Holt

This warm-hearted film recently released online in Australia (due to the changed screening circumstances) will provide encouragement to look at the way people can be changed by common grace. The story is well-known in the USA. A couple befriend Denver (played by Djimon Hounsou), a homeless man, and a growing love and support for each other leads to a foundation that has raised multi-millions of dollars for homeless support.

The USA context is striking with the KKK context providing the initial reference to the story of Denver's life that illustrates the history of the South and the issues that had continued since the civil war. Greg Kinnear is Ron, the unfaithful husband, and film's narrator, who is given a second chance by his wife Debbie (Renée Zellweger). She does not want him to win her back with presents, but wants him to change, and enlists him to serve in the local homeless mission. Here, while providing help, Ron renews his marriage and life

as he connects with the most unlikely person, he would have ever thought he would have connected with.

It is no coincidence that the movie night film at the mission is *It's a Wonderful Life*.

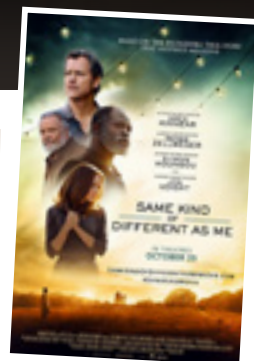
Christian references abound, though this is not a typical 'Christian film', especially with the range of Hollywood actors involved (two Oscar winners as Jon Voight plays Ron's estranged father). It is certainly a film one could see with family and friends and it will prompt discussion about faith, love and hope.

(Same Kind of Different as Me will be released online by Movies Change People)

Messiah (2020)

Starring: Michelle Monaghan, Beau Bridges, Mehdi Dehbi, Wil Traval

I thought I would save members the worry about deciding whether to watch this series. With my keen interest in examining the portrayal of religious figures and depiction of the Christian faith in particular, I watched this during the recent confinement. It had a significant profile build-up due to its connection with people previously involved in major commercially-



produced TV bible series and it certainly looked intriguing.

The official description states it is "A fictional story not based on true events." I sincerely hope this is the case, as it was difficult to know what was really going on as the Messiah figure is a quasi-Jesus combined with other religious figures, spinning various philosophies and social ideas, in a beatific way, while promoting an air of mystery as the CIA follow his emergence and growing following.

While I know there is meant to be a mystery about who this 'Messiah' is, it seems more to do with keeping people watching along the line of the commercially well-worn theme of 'is this really a (or the) holy person and someone worth following, or the devil in disguise', rather than a serious exploration of faith. The combination of religious references and symbols will also probably alienate members of other faiths (and this appears to be one of the reasons for the cancellation of the series), while the Christian content, including some of the church scenes (including a mega-church context), and seeming miraculous events are either somewhat bizarre or at least simply curious. There are some gratuitous scenes that caused me to ponder who the intended audience was and what point is being made. The earnestness of some characters and the bewilderment of others only serves to create a general bewilderment for the audience as to what is happening.