

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 1 | FEBRUARY 2010

# ACCatalyst

ASSEMBLY OF CONFESSING CONGREGATIONS WITHIN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA



STEVE  
ESTHERBY

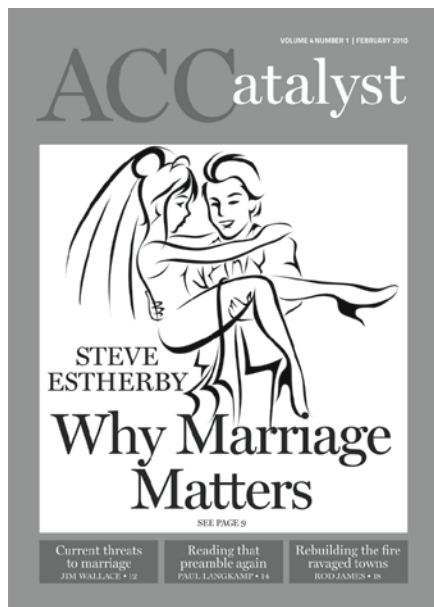
## Why Marriage Matters

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Cover illustration CIDEPIX/istockphoto.com

# EDITORIAL

## Two rebuilding projects

The deconstruction of marriage is well underway in our society. 'Deconstruction' is a way of thinking that destroys both strong and weak traditions and rebuilds on other foundations. This issue of *ACCatalyst* begins the task of rebuilding our understanding of marriage on solid foundations.

Marriage and family life will be a major focus of ACC's work in 2010 and will be the theme of the National Conference on September. 2-4"

We want marriage to stay the same, but while some readers have been kind enough to say they like the new look of *ACCatalyst*, we are keen to hear from readers what ideas they have for the magazine.

*ACCatalyst* is open to more change. It is definitely not a finished work. We'd like to hear a lot more from readers. What gaps should we fill, what ministries should we write about? What ACC members do you want to hear from?

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## The bad tempered disappearing cat

It was night and Rubey sat at the glass door wanting to go outside. I pulled back the curtain to open the door for her, and Rubey looked out and hissed and snarled at something lurking out there. I turned on the light and looked out. I couldn't see anything and wondered what it was that my cat could see out there and I couldn't. Rubey rushed outside looking this way and that, but she seemed satisfied that her enemy was no longer there and went off quite happily.

The next night the same thing happened again, and the night after that. It took a long time, but eventually I worked out what Rubey was looking at that made her so hostile.

Every night, as I pulled back the curtain, there in the glass, Rubey could see her own reflection - a black and white cat looking back at her. Rubey hissed. The cat hissed back. Rubey snarled, the cat snarled back. Rubey went out to teach that cat a thing or two and it had mysteriously disappeared.

Ever noticed that people often reflect back to you your own expression? If you walk down the street and

Hiary Sandeman



smile at someone, they will usually smile back. If you look grumpy, they will look grumpily back at you. If you get cross with someone, frequently they will get cross back. If we speak rudely, most people will speak back rudely. The problem is, then everyone goes off feeling grumpy and we're all more inclined to snap at the next person we meet, and so the circle of grumpiness grows.

As Christians, we are called to break this circle of grumpiness. How?

When someone snaps at us, we respond with gentleness. After all, we

don't know what's happened to make them so grumpy in the first place. It may be that they are desperate for someone to show them kindness, whether or not we think they deserve it.

Jesus taught us to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Proverbs 15:1

reminds us that "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger"

And Proverbs 17:9 "One who forgives an affront fosters friendship and one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend."

If it seems like everyone else is grumpy with me, perhaps it's time to stop and ask, are they reflecting back my own grumpiness? If we show kindness to someone it might encourage them to show kindness to someone else and so on. Who knows what a difference it will make!

*Robyn*

# Our deputy chair makes headlines

ACC members will be interested to learn that prior to Christmas, Revd Dr Hedley Fihaki, the ACC Deputy Chair was prominently in the news in the North Queensland area, fielding, radio, TV and print interviews.

Hedley was born in Tonga, coming to Australia in the year the UCA was formed, and after training at Trinity Theological College undertook his first placement at Bowen (2001-2004), and then Emmanuel Cairns.

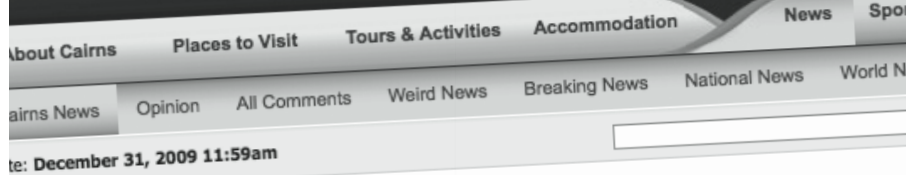
There he became very involved with the setting up of the Good Samaritan Ministry Centre in 2006 which aims "to provide a holistic style of ministry, meeting not just people's physical needs, but their mental and spiritual needs as well through such programs as bible studies, discipleship training, social activities, and individual pastoral care.

"Individuals staying at the centre are encouraged to participate in the running and maintenance of the facilities as well as developing the spiritual life of the community by loving and caring for one another.

"The strength of the Good Samaritan ministry centre is that there is a strong connection between the centre and the life of the congregation as a whole."

The long term operation of the ministry came into question with different needs being presented, with *The Cairns Post* reporting that Blue Care (A UCA agency), the custodial owner of the land occupied by the Good Sam facility, wanted to sell the site to pay for ongoing costs at a Retirement Village. Ongoing compliance issues were also raised by UnitingCare.

The issues came to a head in November, and Hedley and the church stood firm against the recommended closure seeking to negotiate with all the parties involved (church and government) the best possible outcome



## Homeless eviction order defied

Carenda Jenkin  
Wednesday, December 16, 2009  
© The Cairns Post

**A UNITING Church minister is set to defy an order from his leaders to evict 26 homeless people from their crisis accommodation in Cairns.**

Residents at the Good Samaritan Ministry Centre in Gatton St have been told to vacate by noon on Friday because of concerns about fire safety and building regulations.

Uniting Care Queensland has run the facility for nearly four years to help the poor, homeless and marginalised.

A statement from Uniting Care said 16 clients were affected, but a count yesterday by Cairns Emmanuel Uniting Church's reverend Hedley Fihaki revealed 26 clients were using the service.

He has called for agencies across Cairns to unite in support of these people.



The Cairns Post website 16 dec 2009 with a photo of Hedley Fihaki

to a difficult situation during the very difficult time of late December.

Maintaining a ministry to homeless people became the key focus, with a move to finding alternate accommodation so the ministry could be continued.

In an interview with UCA Newspaper *Journey* just before Christmas, Hedley Fihaki said all people had now moved into alternate accommodation. (*Journey online* – Wednesday, December 23, 2009).

"God has provided beautiful, affordable and safe accommodation for the remaining 14 residents at Good Sam through contacts within our Emmanuel Church Congregation," Hedley added.

He said people staying onsite when

the notice to vacate was given to them nine days ago will be "enjoying Christmas lunch together with volunteer staff at the new Good Sam site.

"Good Sam has not closed. It will continue to help homeless people transition to helpful responsible members of society."

Hedley has given *ACCatalyst* an update as we go to press: Good Sam is now leasing and operating out of a 14 unit motel in Cairns called "Heather Court". He is keen to begin conversations again with Synod and UnitingCare regarding the process of getting all the compliance issues sorted out with the hope of moving back to the original ministry centre.

*Peter Bentley*

## Congratulations to ACC council member

Our regular Columnist Robyn McKay (see opposite page) and Council member from South Australia has announced her engagement to Graeme Painter from Victoria (the announcement came first through her Facebook page as Robyn is an avid Facebook member). Robyn is also the Community Minister at Peterborough, an ACC congregation, and has been a great

link for the ACC having been a member of the 11th and 12th UCA Assembly meetings. Graeme is a member of the Ashburton UC ACC group and has been a regular attendee of ACC conferences and meetings. They will be married on Saturday March 6, in the Peterborough church. We wish them both God's blessing as they plan their future together.



# PUBLIC SQUARE

BY P S E U D O - M A X I M U S

## Rights of the unborn

On January 25th *The Age* newspaper ran an article under the headline "Mother vows to fight for law change over death of unborn child". It told the story of a woman, Ms Nancy Asani, who lost her unborn child in the 38th week of her pregnancy. The child was killed when a driver crashed into the mother's car in 1999.

The driver responsible could not be charged with the child's death because, *The Age* reported, Victorian law does not recognise a fetus as a child until it has taken breath.

As a consequence the driver could only be charged with causing injury to the mother. However, although this is the legal situation in Victoria *The Age* article stated that unborn children older than twenty weeks that

are killed in car crashes are counted as people in the Victorian road toll statistics.

Ten years on the mother is campaigning to bring Victorian law in line with the law in NSW where drivers who are responsible for the death of unborn children can be charged with causing an unborn baby's death.

*The Age* went on to quote an Australian Family Association spokesman: "an unborn baby ... is no different really from a baby who was delivered maybe two days later and equipped with a birth certificate. It's nonsense to distinguish between the two."

On January 28th *The Age* published a letter from a woman whose 34 week old unborn baby was killed in an alleged hit and run crash in late December.

This woman wrote that she supported Ms Asani's "campaign to have the law changed to recognise that dangerous driving causing the death of an unborn baby is not just an injury to the mother. Our baby, had she been delivered before the accident, would have had excellent prospects of survival - she was already 2.5 kilograms and 48 centimetres long."

The woman then goes on to strongly criticise the spokesman for the Australian Family Association for trying to "appropriate our loss and turn it to his own political and religious ends." She adds that "to try to draw some connection between abortion laws and recognition of my and Nancy's loss as a loss of life is offensive and ignorant."

This story illustrates a strange disjunction in practice and in language.

Why count the death of an unborn child older than twenty weeks in a

car crash as part of the road toll if, according to Victorian law, a child is a person only when he/she has taken breath?

Is an unborn child a person when it is convenient, and not so when it is inconvenient to the purposes of the State?

Finally while appreciating the pain that the death of a child at a late term stage of a pregnancy must cause, and while also not wishing to use such a tragic situation callously to make a point, it does seem to me that the circumstances I have described are relevant to the abortion situation in Victoria.

If a driver who causes the death of a child at a late stage of pregnancy kills a person, the same happens when a child at the same stage of pregnancy is aborted.

And if it is wrong in the one case one surely has to consider whether it is wrong in the other.

## Pearson 1, Doogue 0

2010 has barely begun, yet it might be possible to announce a winner of the "put down of the year award" which this column just made up. Christopher Pearson, columnist in the *Weekend Australian*, catholic convert and ex-gay, savaged Geraldine Doogue's take on Christmas. (*Weekend Australian* Jan 2, 2010)

The Doogue Jesus, described in her article in the *The Australian* on Christmas Eve was a social reformer who "somehow represented divine forces."

Pearson responds to that comment



theage.com.au



saying Jesus “was much less circum-spect, telling the Pharisees in the temple: ‘Before Abraham was, I am’ and again ‘I and the Father are one’, which to them were the ultimate in self-aggrandising blasphemies.” Nice knife work there, Christopher.

Doogue makes great play of a road away from Damascus conversion in which she decides to observe Christmas as a social event rather than a religious one.

To which Pearson can’t help observing that giving priority to the social side of the Feast of the Nativity “must surely stand as a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bath water.”

## Full bodied

A welcome reflection on the incarnation comes from UCA member Clare Boyd Macrae (*The Sunday Age*, 27/12). She tells of a girl, distressed by a nightmare and dissatisfied with her father’s attempt to assure her of God’s protection, says: “I want a God with skin on.”

The child’s instinct for what is real shows that “the Christmas story invites us to take God seriously because He put on skin in order to connect with us”.

“Ironically, in a faith that has so often demonized the body and all things physical, Christians have every reason to treat the body, the created world and all the messy inconvenience of our lives with reverence and gratitude because God chose to become completely human.”

## Christian leaders

The unexpected election of Tony Abbott as leader of the Liberal Party has created quite a kerfuffle. The ‘mad monk,’ who doesn’t claim to be flawless, has been attacked for his Catholic views on women, abortion and sex and for his hypocrisy on asylum seekers.

The contrast with the positive reception of Kevin Rudd’s Bonhoeffer-inspired faith is stark, giving rise to questions about the nature of ‘Christian’ ethics.

As the dust has settled, interest has shifted to the fact that, in a secular society, leaders of our major political parties are both practising Christians.

This has discombobulated a media and a public now conditioned to believe in the absolute separation of private religious faith and the public secular State.

That such a simplistic view is tenable should remind Christians of their

secular calling and encourage them to participate in public debate on issues of life and death facing Australian society today.

## Unsocial engineers

In “‘Socially infertile’ may cause IVF overload” (*The Sunday Age*, 3/1), Jill Stark reports on the expected logjam caused by “single women and lesbians seeking IVF treatment”.

The Assisted Reproductive Treatment Bill (2008) now extends access for treatment to include women who are ‘medically infertile’ or ‘socially infertile.’ The legislation also allows lesbian couples to list the non biological mother as a parent on their child’s birth certificate, guaranteeing them greater legal rights.

The confusion caused to children by social engineers intent on cutting the nexus between the biological and social purpose of marriage seems a small price to pay for satisfying our individual desires!

## Gay Uganda

The Ugandan Government recently proposed draconian anti-gay laws. While the death penalty has been

dropped in favour of life imprisonment, some Western journalists have been quick to blame the hostility towards gays on the influence of US based evangelical groups, like Exodus International, which advocate healing for those who are drawn to homosexuality.

Jeffrey Gettleman (*The Age*, 5/1) says that critics of the gay movement, as a threat to ‘a marriage based society,’ are dangerous homophobes. ‘Our outrage at Uganda should extend to the entire anti-gay movement,’ says Adrian Phoon (*The Age*, 12/1), as he savages what he calls ‘the fraud of anti-gay therapy.’

Christopher Pearson (*The Weekend Australian* 16-17/1), who is well versed in both the complex dynamics of the ‘gay agenda’ and the requirements of Christian faith, rejects these predictable scaremongering tactics. He says that we should not miss the staunch opposition to the excesses of the Ugandan law by evangelicals and Catholic leaders.

Neither should we neglect our responsibility to love our fellow sinners. See report page 8.

Contributors include Ross Carter and John Sandeman

## IAN CLARKSON

### Martyred

A remarkable story got the attention of a whole nation recently - all about self sacrifice.

Pakistan is a country where Christians are sometimes imprisoned and denied everyday rights. A couple of months ago at the Islamabad International Islamic University a suicide bomber disguised in a burka tried to push into the refectory where hundreds of young women were crowding.

But Parviez Masih, a lowly janitor who like many Christians was relegated to the most menial tasks worked there. Masih had heard the way of Jesus. Sensing what was about to happen he placed himself to stop the bomber getting inside. The bomb detonated and Masih died.

CNN reported the university’s senior professor stating that Masih sacrificed his life to save the girls despite being a Christian. Correction—because of being a Christian. And Pakistan’s President declared

Masih a national hero—while his family borrowed money to bury his remains.

### DIY

Do it yourself. The phrase so common now that DIY will surely make it into the dictionary. Anyone whose life spans beyond gen X recalls the mysteries of equipment found only in the hands of the skilled. Nailguns were once only for builders, multimeters for electricians, and blood pressure readers for doctors.

Not so much in the age of DIY!

But there’s a great irony here; in the wider arena in the things that determine the fate of nations we increasingly demand that others, chiefly the government ‘do it’. Where we once had the inner law plus common sense now we cry ‘there should be a law against it.’ But as Someone put it ‘he who will not control himself will one day be controlled by others’. True for individuals, true for nations.

# Connecting Bondi to the Bodhi tree

Monday, I'm in Melbourne reporting on the Parliament of World Religions. Tuesday, it's Bondi Beach, with cameraman in tow, where I ask random people what Christmas means to them. Despite the obvious connection with matters of faith and belief, the two days could hardly have been more different.

The Parliament of World Religions takes place in a major city somewhere on the globe every five years. This year it was Melbourne's turn and around 6000 people came to engage in inter-faith dialogue and, among other things, work at drawing the devout towards healing the earth and promoting peace. It's an appropriately large gathering of the followers of 228 religions (and their various expressions) with 700 speakers and 800 lectures, workshops and activities.

I only dipped my toe in for one day of the six, but even that was enough to be struck by the bewildering array of activities to choose from. Should I sign up for an East Asian Perspective on Ecology, a Global Ethics Forum for a World-Religions Perspective on Justice, War and Peace, or Native American healing through music? Such dilemmas of choice were endless.

Whatever else you make of this gathering, it is a colourful reminder that the religious impulse remains a strong one, and the desire for connection with the spiritual, perhaps with God, is a deeply human characteristic. The place was teeming with Priests, Reverends, Shamans, Yogis, Imams, Celtic Mystics, Monks and Rabbis. There were chanting priests, drumming monks and American students adept in the art of meditation. Among the throng of participants I met pagan priestesses, Texan Buddhists, Jewish 'radical fairies' and large white Australian men with names like Bhakda Das.



Cynics might be tempted to dismiss the event as little more than a talk-shop, but the reality is that many at the parliament are closely connected with organisations working in poverty relief, environmental care, justice and human rights. They are well placed to make a difference. And if the movement achieves its aim of developing mutual respect among followers of the world's religions, that has to be a good thing.

Fast-forward a day, and I'm bathed in the early summer sunshine of Bondi Beach in Sydney's opulent Eastern suburbs surrounded by an equally diverse, though distinctly less clothed, mass of humanity. Their god appeared to be that of sun, sand, surf and pleasure, and in all honesty it was hard to escape the feeling that heaven perhaps had indeed arrived on earth.

My questions centred on the meaning of Christmas. What place did it have in their lives? Did the traditional story mean anything anymore? Was it a time to be joyful and celebrate?

Reponses were as mixed as the punters whom we happened upon. Some were locals. Many were from other, colder parts of the world. What was common was an almost universal rejection of the Christmas story as something of personal religious meaning. Plenty said it was important not to lose the traditions

of Christmas, but they said it in a way that indicated only the vaguest associations of tradition and childhood memory, rather than personal connection.

It struck me that were these two groups—those I met in Melbourne, and those in Bondi—ever to meet, they would surely regard each other as aliens from another planet, so far apart were their worldviews. One group sought spiritual fulfilment or enlightenment in religion and all the trappings that go with it. The other had cashed in their robes for satisfaction in the here and now. One pursued deity in discipline and spiritual practice; the other, all the creation had on offer today.

It seems a great irony that the message of Christmas might in fact be a bridge between these two groups. For those who believe it, the Christmas narrative celebrating the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is a stunning drama where God enters into the human predicament in physical form, condescending to take a place alongside created beings.

The baby born into poverty and anonymity as the connection between God and us, remains at the heart of the Christmas message, even when so many have forgotten or discarded it. It is a story that ultimately celebrates and penetrates the human desire for God that was so evident at the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne.

And the incarnation represents a God who embraces creation in the  
*Continued page 7*



## LETTERS

### On calling God 'she'

Dear Sir,

I have received a copy of *ACCatalyst* magazine for December 2009.

On page 10, David Millikan states: "... I was asked to be minister and I must say that my time there has been good. God in her wondrous wisdom put us together and I am glad".

On page 11: "So Spong's first thesis could be written like this:" quoting Spong "No one to-day can possibly believe that God does anything to affect the progress of our lives. So we have got to find a new way of talking about Her."

I am confused. I know very little about Spong and I am not aware whether or not he normally refers to God as "Her". If it is recognised that he does, then David Millikan's quote on page 11 can be seen as being in or-

der and understandable. The second occurrence is within a third party quote, however the reference on page 10 is not.

Is it obvious or not obvious to you that a typographical error has occurred? Maybe I'm not seeing the wood for the trees?

Bruce Wall, Hay, NSW.

Dear Sir,

re: *The Liberal Experiment* by David Millikan A great article that I enjoyed reading and agree with wholeheartedly. But I think there may have been an unfortunate typo.

Where Millikan talks about Spong's influence during his interview with the Balmain selection committee he finishes the paragraph with the line: "God in her wondrous wisdom..."

The 'her' doesn't seem to fit the context unless tongue in cheek then it probably should have been in italics.

Hope I'm not being too pedantic!  
David Horton

I am just thrilled with the latest ACC Mag - the best ever in my humble opinion. I wish lots of our Liberal ministers and churches could read David Millikan's article on Bishop Spong ... As I've said the rest is well worth reading, but Millikan's is a stunner! He has certainly been courageous to write like that and do so in our Magazine.

Perry Smith, Newcastle

*Editor's note: we're assured 'she' was just David's little joke. He was being ironic or playful.*

From page 6

most profound manner imaginable. It's an account that affirms the physicality of our lives; that says creation is good, and so is colour and texture, beauty and food; surfing and skating, friendship and family—that is, what was being celebrated with such relish at Bondi.

It's a story that still has the potential to unite the hopes, fears, tears and cheers of both of the apparently distinct and disconnected groups I encountered.

My beachside conversations were fairly light-hearted. But when I dug a bit deeper there were some among the Bondi faithful whose flippant

remarks about Santa betrayed an indefinable longing and sadness.

Amidst the jokes about beer and BBQs were passing references to fighting families, relationships gone wrong, lost opportunities and the disappointments of life.

'Where do you find hope?' I asked. 'In the waves, mate', 'In the surf', 'With my family'. But it didn't always sound convincing.

Most seemed to think of the Jesus story as an important one to hang on to—for the kids. But like all kid's stories, adults read and remember them with a child-like longing that they be real. The wish for happy endings, miraculous escapes, pun-

ishment of wickedness and saving of the innocent; of places where evil is conquered and death is not the end. These are things that never quite leave us. I was left wondering whether the people at either place, with their all too human desires and hopes, ever consider this 'story for the kids' and wonder whether it might also be true; whether it has anything more than sentimentality to offer us as we navigate life's big questions and struggles.

*Simon Smart is the Head of Research and Communications at the Centre for Public Christianity [www.publicchristianity.org](http://www.publicchristianity.org)*

# CONFESSING MOVEMENTS

## UK christians fight new 'equality' laws

A narrow win in the House of Lords for Christians means that the Labour government's Equality Bill, will not narrow church exemptions from equality legislation.

The United Kingdom Government had received a negative report from the European commission which suggested the exemptions were currently too wide.

A number of high profile cases recent have seen Christians refused the right to conscientious objection to same sex unions, in secular jobs. A marriage registrar, Lillian Ladele,

claim exemption from discrimination laws when hiring clergy and key lay staff.

The draft before the Lords had restricted the exemption to Ministers "wholly or mainly" teaching doctrine or carrying out liturgical or worship functions.

The BBC reported the vote as "Government defeated three times over church gay plan". "The turnout for the first division of 394 peers was the biggest for any vote since the Lords struck down plans to allow terrorist suspects to be detained for 42 days without charge in October 2008." ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8479761.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8479761.stm))

Some Liberal Christians have seen the Equality bill as a way to advance their cause against Evangelicals, especially in the Church of England. Their hope has been that the church would be forced to employ gays. This change will make the bill a lot harder to use that way.

### Newsweek and Uganda

A private members bill in the Ugandan parliament seeking the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality" has been the subject of (much deserved) reaction. (see Public Square, page 5). *Newsweek.com* columnist Lisa Miller attacked confessing movement Anglicans in a piece: "Unholy Alliances: The limits of Anglican soulmating". <http://www.newsweek.com/id/230736> published in Mid January.

Miller describes how dissident conservative Anglicans in the US have left the Episcopal Church and sought African bishops including Ugandan ones. Uganda with 8m Anglicans (and Nigeria with 20m Anglicans) dwarf the liberal churches of the Anglican communion.

In 1998 the votes of the Africans created a tidal wave at the Lambeth conference of Anglican Bishops

that produced an official rejection of homosexuality as incompatible with scripture. The US church went ahead and elected a gay bishop, and a second one has just been elected by the diocese of Los Angeles.

Miller claims that the culture war in the US has been exported to Africa. This ignores the fact that the current laws (which provide for the imprisonment of homosexuals) are a hangover from British Colonial times. In addition the Church of Uganda's early martyrs were killed by a Ugandan king for refusing to engage in homosexual sex with him.

The Africans have made up their own mind on homosexuality. Liberal Christians always seem to think that Evangelical ideas expressed by Africans are the product of white Christians influence.

After the Lambeth 1998 vote Bishop Barbara Harris of Massachusetts (who is Black) famously said that the African votes had been "bought with chicken dinners".

Mainline Evangelicals including Rick Warren and Anglican leaders have lobbied against the bill, which as *ACCatalyst* goes to press looks unlikely to proceed. One small ex-gay group did meet with the promoter of the bill, a member of the Ugandan parliament.

### LCA on gays

The major work of the Lutheran Church's Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions (CSBQ) over the past three years has been the revision of the Lutheran Church of Australia's 1975 statement on homosexuality, chairman Dr Rob Pollnitz revealed in an official report to the 2009 convention.

'While not seeking to change the traditional teaching of the church, our paper aims to recognise the feelings of pain and rejection expressed by some church members who identify themselves as homosexual', Dr Pollnitz told Synod.

Dr Pollnitz told delegates that his own 'traditional view of homosexuality' had been challenged and had 'softened' over the past few years, as fellow members of the CSBQ had told stories of the pain of some homosexual people, 'sometimes to the point of suicide'.



mailonline

working at Islington Council was moved to a different position for conscientious objection to celebrating same sex civil unions. Gary Macfarlane lost an appeal for his sacking from Relate, a counselling service for not wanting to counsel homosexual couples. A housing officer at Wandsworth council, Duke Amachree has been sacked for suggesting a dying client put their faith in God.

These losses in secular workplaces heightened anxiety about the equality bill.

But this latest win means the equality law remains unchanged for religious bodies so they can still



# Why Marriage Matters

“Haven’t you read,” Jesus replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” Mt 19:5-6



CIDEPIX / istockphoto.com

Over the 16 years that I was the pastor of the Northern Illawarra Congregation I conducted over 650 wedding ceremonies. This was not because I was particularly good at wedding ceremonies, but because the Church buildings where I served included an old sandstone building in the gothic style that looked really good in the photos. So good did it look, that couples who were not married there also had their photos taken there. Some even went so far as to risk a photo with me.

As a consequence of architectural and photographic popularity I have read aloud the Declaration of Purpose which is a part of the Uniting Church’s marriage rite, well over 650 times.

When you officiate at so many marriage ceremonies, the words of the declaration embed themselves within you and I can truly say that I find them to be a good and proper explanation of Christian marriage.

*Marriage is appointed by God and the church believes that marriage is a gift of God in creation and a means of grace in which man and woman become one in heart, mind and body. Marriage is the sacred and lifelong union of a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in love and trust.*

*It signifies the mystery of the union between Christ and the church. Marriage is given that husband and wife may enrich and encourage each other in every part of their life together.*

*Marriage is given that with delight and tenderness they*

*may know each other in love, and through their physical union may strengthen the union of their lives. Marriage is given that which all people should honour; it is not to be entered into lightly or selfishly, but responsibly and in the love of God.*

This view of marriage, as a way of life which God has created and Christ has blessed, is suffering a prolonged attack in our society and in our Parliaments. Marriage is being defaced and a concerted effort is being made to redefine marriage.

Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young’s Marriage Equality Amendment Bill is a recent example which seeks to redefine marriage as the lifelong union of “two persons” rather than “the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life.”

Such a redefinition confuses the Church’s teaching of the mystery of the union of Christ and his Church, diminishes our understanding of our relationship with God and confuses our understanding of being created in God’s image.

It threatens to undermine family life and tear at the very fabric of our society.

In the 1960’s when I was a small child, I understood that marriage was a special relationship between a man and a woman. It wasn’t too hard to work out because it was a concept that was well understood in our society.

**He looked  
at me as  
though I  
was from  
planet  
redneck**

Some people in the swinging sixties may have considered marriage an old-fashioned or irrelevant social construct but even they managed to work out that marriage was a relationship between a man and a woman. So clear was the concept, that it didn't need to be specially pointed out in the Marriage Act of 1961.

**H**owever, because of a contemptuous response to the blindingly obvious, the Federal Parliament acted amending the Act in 2004 so that it clearly defined marriage as "the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life".

This has enraged those who want to engineer society so that marriage is redefined to include same-sex relationships. The obvious is still under attack by means of ideology, political correctness and political expediency, all of which masquerade as progressive enlightenment.

I attended the *National Marriage Day Breakfast* held in the Great Hall of Parliament House on 13 August 2009. The keynote speaker at the breakfast was Mr James Bogle, an Australian barrister and marriage activist. Before a capacity audience of 470 people, he posed the question. "As we look at the results of change in our society brought about by the liberation from moral taboos, rules and restraint: Are we any better off or are we just left fixing up things as we go along?"

Mr Bogle made a strong case for the social benefits of marriage based on studies that demonstrate the link between declining marriage patterns and escalating social problems. He pointed out the economic costs and the human costs in terms of health and safety.

After the breakfast I was asked by a man outside the Great Hall whether we were celebrating "all marriages or just those between men and women".

When I replied saying, "Marriage is only between a man and a woman that is how it has always been and how it should remain," he looked at me as if I was from another planet, possibly the "Red-necked planet". We need to confess that marriage is a way of life which all people should honour and that this includes honouring God's purpose for marriage.

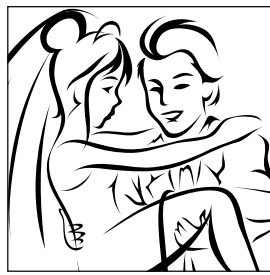
What is happening? What is going on in our world? Looking at people about me, I recognise that people are looking for true love.

Our society provides ample evidence of this quest in songs, poems, film, books, websites and blogs. The world is a-twitter with love. However as we look at our society it is very easy to see that many people have a distorted notion of love. These distortions invade people's homes through television programs like "*Californication*" and "*Big Love*".

Such programming exerts pressure on our society and families. It reduces love to a pleasure that I enjoy, rather than an action through which I show consideration.

People are more interested in serving themselves than they are in serving others. I know this to be reality for I am not a stranger to pride or selfishness. People like me have a distorted picture of reality and we think that the world revolves around us or at least think it should revolve around us. We have given into "self" and our society and our culture is imploding through selfishness. Being served and being loved is more attractive than serving and loving others.

As confessing Christians, who speak out for truth we



**Marriage is not about serving one's own needs, gathering our rights or guaranteeing our own happiness.**

need to truthfully confess our need for forgiveness and confess our love of God in our actions and our attitudes.

So how do we confess our love of God? What are the implications in our lives as Christians? Christianity is not a system of rules by which we attempt to please God. Christianity is a life lived in relationship with God through Christ in which God sets the boundaries for our benefit and safety. Marriage is a portrait of a loving relationship lived within God's boundaries.

Love is not understood until we surrender our lives to God. It is then that we begin to love others and then we can confess that love. True love is about commitment. You cannot be 95% committed. True love is about living in God's love and living out God's love. Marriage is a sacred demonstration, a superb advertisement, and a sustained rehearsal for sacrificial love in which we grow into the image of God. Man and woman are joined together as one in the state of complementarity. The benefits of marriage bless our other relationships.

**M**arriage is to be the place where a love grows so strong that my wife Lyndal might say (at least on a good day), "Steve is kind and patient, never jealous, boastful, proud, or rude. Steve isn't selfish or quick tempered. He doesn't keep a record of wrongs that others do. Steve rejoices in the truth, but not in evil. Steve is always supportive, loyal, hopeful, and trusting. Steve never fails!"

As Darryl Kerrigan frequently exclaims in the film *The Castle*, "Tell 'em he's dreamin'." And so I am, I confess this is what I hope and pray to live out.

People often speak nonsense about marriage because they don't understand marriage. They don't understand commitment or covenant. Marriage is a relationship of commitment made in covenant where each partner promises to love no matter what and whether or not that love is returned. There are no let-out clauses.

Marriage is not about serving one's own needs, gathering our rights or guaranteeing our own happiness. When I married Lyndal I did not make these vows.

I Steve, in the presence of God, take you Lyndal to be my wife. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, but not for worse, for richer, don't make me poorer. In my sickness and in your health. For you to love me, and to cherish me, as long as it suits me. This is my solemn vow.

It would have been nonsense for me to make vows like these at my wedding because these vows are tainted with selfishness and expediency. I wouldn't have been able to look my guests and family in the face. God however watches people live out their marriage as if these were the promises they had made.

Our contemporary society betrays its own selfish

motives. Marriage is not about having rights. Rather marriage is about fulfilling responsibilities within the will and purpose of God. That is why in the marriage ceremony ministers ask couples to declare their intent. Do you believe that God has blessed and guided you and now calls you into marriage? Our happiness ought to rest in our being in the will and purposes of God not in satisfying self, marriages are not to be entered into lightly or selfishly.

The Beatitudes do not read “blessed are those whose emotional needs are being met by their partner or partners” or “blessed are those who celebrate their sexuality” or “blessed are the home wreckers for they are entitled to a little happiness.” We cannot wring such lies out of scripture.

The quest for our own happiness and sense of self-satisfaction does not remove our responsibility for keeping our word and confessing God’s truth. Jesus is all for honesty and integrity. He said, “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matt 5:37)

**T** rue love is about self-sacrifice shown by keeping promises to God and to those he calls us to love. Love is not a soft option. Love is for people who are prepared to act like grownups. Marriage is meant to point this out to all those around us in order that home and family life may be strengthened and so that society may stand upon firm foundations.

That is why we must cherish, defend and confess the truth it teaches.

What some members of our community are demanding is worse than removing a masterpiece from the wall of an art gallery, whitewashing the canvas, inviting people to draw stick figures on the canvas and then hanging the piece as if it is the same work of art.

Some are even demanding the canvas remains white so they can imagine a picture of reality that suits them. Such views desecrate the teaching of scripture and diminish the teaching of the Church - Marriage is appointed by God and the church believes that marriage is a gift of God in creation and a means of grace in which man and woman become one in heart, mind and body.

In western society we seem to be losing the fight. People are being converted from a Christian world view to a self-centered, self-fulfilling self-righteous selfishness in which people want to play God.

Sadly there are ministers and members of our own denomination who are giving in and over to this paradigm shift. They are offended by the light of the Gospel and have no taste for its saltiness. Our nation is giving in and over. But we cannot give up confessing Christ even though we feel disaster is staring us in the face.

Marriage signifies the mystery of the union between Christ and the church. Jesus celebrated this union at the Last Supper with his disciples.

Jesus consummates this union at the cross and his life is given in confession of the Father’s love which binds Christ to his bride through Jesus’ own surrender and sacrifice.

Marriage is no small and insignificant gift. It is to be honoured and celebrated as a proclamation of the Gospel. The shift from a sacramental understanding of marriage in the west, from the time of the Reformation, has reduced marriage from being seen as a sacra-



**That is why we must cherish, defend and confess the truth it teaches.**

ment, to being recognised as an ordinance under God, to being misunderstood in our society as no more than a civil agreement.

So how do we confess true love and the value of God’s gift of marriage in a society that doesn’t want to hear our voice or be challenged by the message we confess? How do we stand fast when some people in our society want to redefine marriage in such a way that it is offensive to God and is an affront to God’s plan and purpose for his creation? How can we shout out loud and clear that marriage matters?

We do it by trying, demonstrating true love in marriage and by fighting for what we believe. This good fight cannot be

won by our giving up or giving in. The challenge we face is not pleasant or easy, but neither was the Cross. We have a task in this generation and the Gospel to confess.

## What is Steve Estherby up to?

Steve Estherby is a Uniting Church Minister and has been involved in evangelism and renewal since his conversion in 1983. For many years he has been an outspoken defender of Biblical Christianity and shown leadership across the Church through EMU, RA and the ACC.



Steve began full-time ministry as NSW State Officer with FamilyVoice Australia in June 2009 and brings 20 years’ experience as a minister and pastor to his role as apologist.

Steve is passionate about preserving and encouraging Christian values. Along with other members of FamilyVoice, he interacts with Christian leaders, congregations and politi-

cians across the nation but focuses particularly on NSW, providing a Christian voice for family, faith and freedom.

He believes that the Gospel has the power to transform lives because his own life has been transformed. He has expertise in mission planning and the use of media and technology in worship and ministry.

Steve offers well-researched material on matters of vital concern to Australia’s future and is committed to equipping and encouraging Christians to speak up for the values we cherish for our nation. He is happy to preach in a service of worship, lead a Bible study, or speak at any gathering that would be helpful to your congregation.

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A Christian voice for family, faith and freedom

# Threats to Marriage

**“I**n every other area, the Government decides what it is going to do on the basis of the statistics which tell you what is happening and what needs to be changed. It is surely crazy to approach policies for marriage and the family in any other way,”

Emeritus Professor, Rob Rowthorn

Cambridge University July 2007

Professor Rowthorn's statement is no less relevant to Australia, where the doctrine of 'political correctness' has been equally at work in defying logic and research. Here, too, we are seeing the central building block of a healthy community – strong marriages – going mainly ignored in public policy despite the growing consequences for child neglect and abuse so evident in the over-representation of children in our homelessness figures alone.

The intuitive advantages of marriage are well backed up by research. It is the best relationship for both your physical and mental health – married “church goers” are actually our happiest people! It provides the best environment for bringing up children. Promoting marriage has also been identified as one of the key ways for lifting people out of poverty, while at the opposite end of the spectrum the cost of family breakdown in Australia has been conservatively estimated at \$50bn per annum.

Sound like good reasons for advantaging marriage? And yet with an increasing number of people – including our politicians – marriage seems to be more ‘out of fashion’ than ever. It is the solution to so much of what we know is hurting society, but because people are fearful of being seen as critical of other family types, we fail to promote it or hold it up as an ideal.

Through this lack of action we are allowing a society to develop where this proven model of relationship and family is being corrupted. Where previously only tragedy – which can affect any one of us – might have varied it, these days cohabitation, single parent families, and same-sex relationships are being presented as having equal social and individual good, as valid first choices.

So where do Christians stand in this equation?

Research carried out as part of the 2006 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) on behalf of the Australian Christian Lobby, found that ‘support for marriage and family’ was the main issue which Christians across the board felt most strongly about.

However, while there is evidence that most Australians also still aspire to marriage, there is less and less understanding in the general community of the commitment marriage entails and the need to retain it as an aspirational goal for commitment in relationships.

While it is only one of many threats to marriage, the battle to preserve and advantage marriage is unfortunately most prominently played out publicly in the gay marriage

debate. For Christians this issue is of course about what is right before God.

But what should be at the heart of the public debate is the importance of not diminishing the commitment in relationship provided by marriage which is so vital to family and children. Changing it to include a different relationship type that – despite well publicised exceptions – doesn't tend to value this commitment in anywhere near the same way.

Christians have well recognised this importance and responded over time in defence of marriage. Perhaps the best example came in August 2004 when Christians made the great bulk of more than 16,000 submissions to a Senate inquiry looking into an amendment to the Marriage Act – thereby helping to thwart the gay agenda.

Instead there was bipartisan political support for the Howard Government's action to amend the Marriage Act to define marriage as the ‘union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’.

A Senate inquiry into gay marriage which reported late last year saw a similarly impressive response from Christians.

But the activists' push for gay marriage continues apace and has been pursued through a strategy to “normalise” the lifestyle by first securing complementary rights and entitlements such as same-sex parenting through adoption and surrogacy arrangements.

In recent times we have seen a strong push for gay marriage by ‘Rainbow’ Labor at the ALP National Conference, both the Tasmanian and Victorian branches of the ALP passing motions in favour of gay marriage, the ACT Assembly passing ‘marriage-like’ civil partnership laws, the Victorian Government legislating to allow same-sex surrogacy arrangements, and both Queensland and NSW looking to permit same-sex surrogacy.

Again and again these decisions are explained away as simply a means to provide equality for same-sex couples – fitting nicely into the agenda of the gay lobby to promote their lifestyle choices as equal.

But marriage and family should not be a political trophy or a method for gay and lesbian rights activists to normalise their lifestyle.

Whatever the opposition, we as Christians have a right and indeed responsibility to preserve and strengthen this God-ordained institution – an institution that reinforces His natural order, rather than offending it.

In 2010 we have four elections, the Federal election and one each in South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. The church must use these elections as an opportunity to reinforce our concern for marriage and to help motivate politicians to defend and strengthen marriage using the impetus that sadly only elections seem to provide.

*Jim Wallace is the Managing Director of the Australian Christian Lobby*



# Voice of America

**E**vangelical leaders in the US have signed the Manhattan Declaration which stands firm against abortion, gay marriage and for religious liberty. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church leaders were among the original 140 signers. This has blossomed to over 400,000 via an online sign-in at *manhattan-declaration.org* which has the full 4,700-word document.

"The Manhattan Declaration is a wake-up call—a call to conscience—for the church. It is also crystal-clear message to civil authorities that we will not, under any circumstances, stand idly by as our religious freedom comes under assault," says Charles Colson who was one of the speakers at the launch.

"The Declaration begins by reminding readers that for 2,000 years, Christians have borne witness to the truths of their faith. This witness has taken various forms—proclamation, seeking justice, resisting tyranny, and reaching out to the poor, oppressed, and suffering.

"Having reminded readers about why and how Christians have spoken out in the past, the Declaration then turns to what especially troubles us today—the threats to the sanctity of human life, the institution of marriage, and religious freedom."

The declaration attracted signatures from Christian leaders who have been reluctant to sign jointly with Catholics in the past. This is because this document deals squarely with social issues and does not fudge theology.

"I am not inclined to sign manifestos or petitions" Southern Baptist leader Albert Mohler wrote on his blog. "While believing strongly and passionately about many causes, I am not usually impressed with the effectiveness of such statements ..."

"But I signed The Manhattan Declaration. Indeed, I am among the original signatories to that statement, released to the public at the National Press Club last Friday. Why?"

"There are several reasons, but they all come down to this -- I believe we are facing an inevitable and culture-determining decision on the three issues centrally identified in this statement. I also believe that we will experience a significant loss of Christian churches, denominations, and institutions in this process."

Colson told *Christianity Today* that the Manhattan Declaration was important because it lifted up the three issues as the most pressing ones for Evangelicals to take action about. "We argue that there is a hierarchy of issues," Colson told *The New York Times*, "A lot of the younger evangelicals say they're all alike. We're hoping to educate them that these are the three most important issues." ([www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/novemberweb-only/147-21.0.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/novemberweb-only/147-21.0.html))

But Evangelical social justice campaigner Ron Sider, also a signer of the Manhattan Declaration issued at state-



**Colson launches the Manhattan Declaration at the National Press Club**

ment "I agree strongly with the Manhattan Declaration, that the sanctity of human life, the historical definition of marriage, and robust religious freedom are under serious threat at this point in our history.

"The Manhattan Declaration does NOT say that these are the most important moral issues of our time. It only says that these are crucial moral issues."

What the statement says on marriage:

... Because the sanctity of human life, the dignity of marriage as a union of husband and wife, and the freedom of conscience and religion are foundational principles of justice and the common good, we are compelled by our Christian faith to speak and act in their defense. In this declaration we affirm: 1) the profound, inherent, and equal dignity of every human being as a creature fashioned in the very image of God, possessing inherent rights of equal dignity and life; 2) marriage as a conjugal union of man and woman, ordained by God from the creation, and historically understood by believers and non-believers alike, to be the most basic institution in society and; 3) religious liberty, which is grounded in the character of God, the example of Christ, and the inherent freedom and dignity of human beings created in the divine image.

... The impulse to redefine marriage in order to recognize same-sex and multiple partner relationships is a symptom, rather than the cause, of the erosion of the marriage culture. It reflects a loss of understanding of the meaning of marriage as embodied in our civil and religious law and in the philosophical tradition that contributed to shaping the law. Yet it is critical that the impulse be resisted, for yielding to it would mean abandoning the possibility of restoring a sound understanding of marriage and, with it, the hope of rebuilding a healthy marriage culture.

# Too many gods

## *Re-reading the preamble*

**A**unty Beryl Carmichael comes from Ngiyaampaa country in western New South Wales and she is a custodian of many Ngiyaampaa stories.

*The stories that we are passing and talking on today, we are hoping that, some way, it will help our people ... our young people in particular to get a better understanding about the lore that governs our lives today.*<sup>1</sup> Her stories are among many told in the voices of indigenous Australia at <http://australianmuseum.net.au/Stories-of-the-Dreaming>

One of Aunty Beryl Carmichael stories is worth reading because it goes to a basic creedal matter of the Christian Faith: creation .

*Now long, long time ago of course, in the beginning, when there was no people, no trees, no plants whatever on this land, "Guthi-guthi", the spirit of our ancestral being, he lived up in the sky ...*

*Guthi-guthi came down and he went on creating the land for the people—after he'd set the borders in place and the sacred sights, the birthing places of all the Dreamings, where all our Dreamings were to come out of.*

*And he looked out over the land and he could see that the land was bare. There was no water in sight, there was nothing growing. So Guthi-guthi knew that trapped in a mountain - Mount Minara - the water serpent, Weowie, he was trapped in the mountain. So Guthi-guthi called out to him, "Weowie, Weowie", but because Weowie was trapped right in the middle of the mountain, he couldn't hear him.*

*Guthi-guthi went back up into the sky and he called out once more, "Weowie", but once again Weowie didn't respond. So Guthi-guthi came down with a roar like thunder and banged on the mountain and the mountain split open. Weowie the water serpent came out. And where the water serpent travelled he made waterholes and streams and depressions in the land ...*

*But then after that, they wanted another lot of water to come down from the north, throughout our country. Old Pundu, the Cod, it was his duty to drag and create the river known as the Darling River today.*

*So Cod came out with Mudlark, his little mate, and they set off from the north and they created the big river. And of course, this country was also created, the first two tribes put in our country were Eaglehawk and Crow ... My people, the Ngiyaampaa people and the Barkandji further down are all sub-groups of Eaglehawk and Crow.*<sup>2</sup>

Well, it is quite a nice story. It starts with exactly the same words as the book of Genesis Chapter 1, "In the beginning." There isn't God though. There is "Guthi-guthi" who or what isn't called a god exactly, just an ancestral

spirit who lived in the sky. And though there were no people, animals nor plants, there was something already existing inside the mountain—and that something had existence that was different from both Guthi-guthi and humans, plants and animals. Creation of humans happened when Guthi-guthi banged on the mountain so that water came out, and with the water, somehow, humans, plants and animals.

But Guthi-guthi is not the same spirit, or god, who was introduced to 12th Assembly by one of the Aboriginal Congress delegates. It was reported, "Mr Garrawurra shared the name of that creator spirit: Wanga."<sup>3</sup>

Why Mr. Garrawurra can say the name is 'Wanga' at the same time Aunty Beryl Carmichael can call the 'creator spirit in the sky' 'Guthi-guthi' is because there were quite distinct groups of aboriginals across this vast continent of Australia and each had different stories to explain things: some had creator-like spirits or beings, others did not.

In fact there are numerous aboriginal religions. One scholar, W. E. Hl Stanner in 1988 observed,

*We now realize there were and are profound differences between the various aboriginal 'peoples' and that we have to speak of aboriginal cultures and religions in plural. When Captain Cook arrived in Australia there were approximately 750,000 divided into some 500 distinct groups using more than 200 distinct languages.*<sup>4</sup>

Now, this information is not widely known. Certainly, the delegates of the 12th Assembly had no idea about this. And the few questions that were asked from the floor reflected this ignorance. It was reported, "However, a number of members raised questions about whether the God known by Aboriginal peoples was the God of Jesus."<sup>5</sup> The questions were answered by one-liners from Dr. Budden "Let me remind you there is one God" and "He said the question of whether God had revealed Godself to the Aboriginal people was one for them to answer, and non-Indigenous members of the church should be guided by the wisdom of Congress and not assume their knowledge of God was better."<sup>6</sup>

But something even stronger is what Dr. Budden got the 12th Assembly to agree to. Point three of the new preamble: 3. *The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God Christ sustained to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.*

That is equivalence: aboriginal peoples (some of them) knew the Creator God worshipped by Christians (some groups had some ideas about a creator) before Christian

missionaries arrived. Here, “Wanga” is another name for “Gunthi-guthi” and is another name for Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One equals another. To refer to one is to refer to the other. This is a philosophical problem and Dr. Budden owes an explanation to members of the Uniting Church.

We need to look at the consistency of the new preamble with the Basis of Union—the document that Dr. Budden and all ministers in the Uniting Church vowed adherence to when they were ordained.

Christians believe God created the earth. It's basic in the historical line of theologians upon whom the Uniting Church relies for guidance in the faith: the Church Fathers, the Reformation witness of Calvin and later John Wesley, and certain useful modern theologians.

There are a number of important features about this Biblical account of creation. God created from nothing, *ex nihilo*. The creation is not God: God is other than his creation. And, thirdly, the creation itself is not evil.

None of these key features of the Biblical account are present in Aunt Beryl Carmichael's story. Guthi-guthi doesn't create from nothing, not *ex nihilo*.

The key action in her story was Gunthi-guthi coming down from the sky somewhere and banging on a mountain so that another spirit or creature or force that lived inside the mountain should open up the mountain and let the waters come out so further processes could take place that result in the establishment of her tribe.

Certainly, there seems to be no standing in fearful, wondrous awe of God in this story that is characteristic of the Biblical account of creation. Perhaps this is because the idea of ‘beginning’ in Aunt Beryl Carmichael's story, only gives an account of the state of affairs existing now.

In other words, time is not sequential. Stanner describes it this way:

*“It is a picture of time, not as ‘a horizontal line extending back horizontally through a series of pasts but rather of a vertical line in which the past underlies and is within the present... all existence cycled, being replenished from The Dreaming, which was inexhaustible.”*<sup>7</sup>

It is a further quantum leap for the writers of the new preamble to say that all aboriginal creation-type stories reveal God in the same way that the Biblical creation story revealed God to Israel and an even further quantum leap to declare such stories reveal the person of Christ and also, the (Holy) Spirit, and more, to make this declaration without examination nor provide any explanation, nor to allow any discussion to take place (this last is a denial of human rights):

*3. The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God Christ sustained to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.*

Rather than make declarations like this of what and in whom aboriginals believed before missionaries preached Christ to them, it's perhaps more instructive for members

of the Uniting Church to see how the Reformers developed the doctrine of creation.

John Calvin, whose 500th anniversary of his birth was celebrated in June 2009, explains in chapter three of his great *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* that, The Knowledge of God Has Been Naturally Implanted in the Minds of Men. And he builds his argument in a way that is relevant to our subject. Battles, in his summary of *The Institutes* condenses Calvin's argument this way: The knowledge of God has been naturally implanted in all

men by instinct, in all times and all places. The proof of this, for Calvin is that men turn to religion when under stress or fear. Calvin insists that an ineffable sense of divinity is engraved upon men's minds and that even the perversity of the impious demonstrates this, as does the worship of wood and stone.

Calvin would therefore not be surprised that the Australian aboriginals had various ideas about creation. That confirms humanity as God's creation.

Calvin, however goes further than the simple acknowledgement of various ideas of, and beliefs in, creation. He insists in chapter six of book 1 of *The Institutes*, *Scripture is Needed as Guide and Teacher for Anyone Who Would Come to God the Creator*. John Wesley also regarded the doctrine of Creation and the authority of Scripture as the first and second of the Articles of Religion.

So tricky problems are raised by the removal of the historic preamble and replacing it with a new preamble that puts the aboriginal religion(s) firmly at the centre of the Uniting Church in Australia.

In aboriginal religion, there is no historical development, there is no idea of sin and salvation, nor is there any clarity that there is a creator and how such a creator is to be understood in relation to creation. Indeed, there is no conceptual means for aboriginals to understand those distinctions.

Max Charlesworth concludes,

*In the light of these differences it is hard to see how the basic themes of Christianity might be meaningfully translated into Australian religious contexts and vice versa, without doing violence to one or the other, although of course there are general analogies and resemblances.*<sup>8</sup>

What is the solution to this disaster-in-waiting? ...

The serious question for the Uniting Church is whether it is preparing to have within it different groups of people with irreducibly different religious visions or spiritualities, apparently both seeing themselves within a fellowship that used to be called “Christian”.

That the Uniting Church wants to emasculate the very foundation of the Christian faith and its faithful witness to the 38 percent of aboriginals who are Christian in order to accommodate the 1.3 percent of aboriginals who practice widely various forms of traditional aboriginal religions is incomprehensibly stupid.<sup>9</sup>

Paul Langkamp is an ACC member based in Seoul

1 <http://australianmuseum.net.au/movie/Why-the-stories-are-told-Aunty-Beryl>

2 <http://australianmuseum.net.au/movie/Creation-Story>

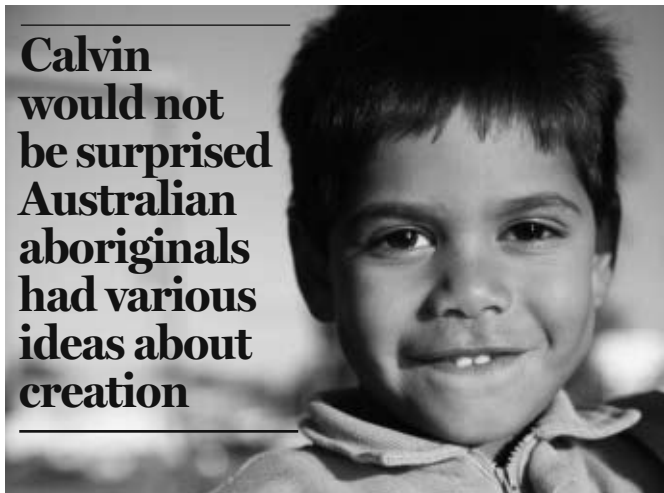
3 *Many words, one God* Saturday, 18 July 2009 01:03 Assembly Report

4 Stanner, W.E.H. Some aspects of Aboriginal Religion 1976 in Max Charlesworth, *Religious Business, Essays on Aboriginal Spirituality* 1988

5 *Many words, one God* Saturday, 18 July 2009 01:03 Assembly Report

6 *Many words, one God* Saturday, 18 July 2009 01:03 Assembly Report

**Calvin  
would not  
be surprised  
Australian  
aboriginals  
had various  
ideas about  
creation**



# Not the President's man

Someone had to watch the UCA President's youtube video. And add some commentary ...

**H**i. My name's Alistair Macrae. I'm president of the Uniting Church. At the recent Assembly meeting of our church the issue that took up the most time and stirred up the most energy related to a new preamble for our Uniting Church's constitution.

I wonder how many of us have actually read the constitution? They normally don't make the most compelling reading.

*In his opening remarks he seems to patronisingly refer to his viewers, Uniting Church members ('we'), as having little interest in a document they couldn't understand, but can trust him to explain it.*

The constitution basically describes what an organisation is for. How people become members, how different parts of the organisation relate to each other, etc. They give the big picture. They give the big picture outline if you like. And then we write regulations. We love writing regulations. Lots of them to fill in details.

*His characterisation of the constitution uses the vaguest and most imprecise language: "big picture outline" from which "regulations" are written, which "we love writing". Anyway, the president and his cohorts have the power to achieve by regulation what is not obtained by theological discussion nor consent of the members.*

The current preamble gives the background about how the Uniting Church came into being.

The new one does this too, but it says a lot more. It seeks to include a critical truth. Namely, that the Uniting Church has its mission and its ministry in Australia. That is, in a land that was occupied by aboriginal people when our forebears arrived here. Those people of course have a continuing custodianship of this land.

*The "critical truth" can't be where the Uniting Church has its place of mission, because Australia is the place named in the Basis of Union, and it can't be that aboriginals lived here before the arrival of other people who became Australian citizens because that is a historical fact.*

*The "critical truth" is the conclusion of this apparent syllogism, that aboriginals of course have a continuing custodianship of the land. His conclusion doesn't follow from his premises. There is a problem with his new term, 'custodianship'. What is meant by that? Is that a legal term?*

So the preamble uses the language of first peoples and second peoples: aboriginal and islander people who have lived here from time immemorial and those of us who came after. The preamble acknowledges that God was here from the very beginning, creating and caring for the first peoples. It acknowledges too the difficult history of

their dispossession and the mixed legacy of Christian mission.

*The term "from time immemorial" rankles against creation which is used in the new preamble.*

*It is deceptive to say that the new preamble acknowledges that God was here from the beginning - the language resonates with Calvin's which acknowledges God's sustenance of all his creation - but the president does not say that the preamble also specifically denies, against the confession of the entire Christian church, including the Uniting Church's own Basis of Union, that knowledge of God is through Christ alone.*

*The legacy of Christian mission is that 63% of aboriginals claimed to be Christian at the last Australian census.*

The whole idea for this preamble came out of our covenanting relationship between the Congress and the wider Uniting Church.

*This is exactly right. The Congress rejected resolution 84 and 108 at previous Assemblies and this new preamble is a compromise to hold aboriginals within the Uniting Church - the compromise is to deny Christ, the very foundation of the Christian church.*

Congress members told us at the Assembly that The Constitution is the White Fellas law. And lore of course is very important to indigenous people. So they wanted this critical truth written into our church's law.

*What critical truth is he talking about this time? Can critical truths be written into the church's law if a new preamble can just be tossed aside so easily as the original one is now being tossed aside?*

So among other things, this is an exercise in truth telling. It's not about guilt or about shaming, it's about truth. And Christians know that the truth will set us free. The critical truth is still the one established with the words "aboriginals have a continuing custodianship of the land"

*Exactly how does this "critical truth" set Christians free? This is exactly the kind of "freedom" mumbo-jumbo that earring-wearing hippies in the 60's went on about, and some apparently still do today.*

And that the basis for any reconciliation is truth.

*What reconciliation between who and whom? Where is the problem with the aboriginals and the Uniting Church? The truth is Congress rejected homosexual acts.*

The new wording now goes out to all of the Synods and all of the Presbyteries for consideration. It can be found on the Assembly's website and I commend it to you all for your thoughtful and your prayerful consideration.

Remember, words are very important. We know that. But words alone are never enough.

I encourage you to continue to pray and to work for deeper reconciliation in this country as together we seek to overcome the grievous disadvantages faced by aboriginal and islander people. And let's continue to look for ways within the life of our own church, to give expression to God's will for reconciliation and justice.

*It's not God's justice nor our reconciliation with Him if we deny Christ.*



# ‘Unfortunately my generation is not sticking around in the Uniting Church’

I see the way for evangelicals to reform our church by letting the church’s structures fall in a heap (as they are currently in the process of doing) and rebuilding afresh from the ruins. If all this is leaving you feeling pessimistic about the future, I’ve got some good news for you. My generation of believers – if they’re still in the church – if despite the culture around them they are still committed followers of Christ, chances are they will be evangelical. I would be bold enough to suggest that evangelicalism is so dominant within the church among Christians my age that many are not even aware of an alternative.

They know that out there somewhere in other churches there are people who have watered down the gospel or deviated off the narrow path, but I’m pleased to say that orthodox evangelicalism is still so dominant that many of them have never really had to confront anything else.

Liberal, pluralist, humanist spirituality is everywhere – so if you’re a young-adult Christian, you have made a decision to reject that ethos and to embrace Jesus as the way the truth and the life. If you want self-affirming liberalism, you can get it anywhere today. Why would we want it in our church?

If the church wants to connect with young adults in the 21st century, it needs to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, pure and simple. The reality at universities is that any liberal presence is dwarfed by the evangelical student unions. What will appeal to my generation in the long run, what will stand the test of time, is to present this timeless truth. The Pentecostals know it, the Sydney Anglicans know it, the Baptists know it, and look at them go.

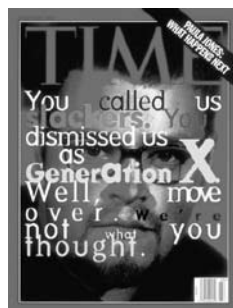
They know what they believe and they offer certainty, hope and life in Jesus’ name.

And their seminaries are packed to the rafters. Which brings me to my next point...

Unfortunately, although my generation of disciples is overwhelmingly evangelical, they are not sticking around in the Uniting Church. Two mates I grew up with at Galston graduated from Moore last year and are now in ministry in the Anglican Church. Others of my peers from Galston are in lay leadership roles in Baptist and Pentecostal churches.

With each Assembly a fresh haemorrhaging of our people occurs. And it’s the young families that seem to have let their feet do the talking. Why, they ask, should we put up with this rubbish when there are other biblically-based, Christ-centred, Spirit-filled churches down the road?

When I was discerning my call and sharing it with friends and family, one of them came right out and told



me straight up: “Whatever you do, don’t stay with the Uniting Church.” The problem is that the Uniting Church’s reputation as a ‘liberal’ church, (though we know it’s not really the case among most members of our church), does tend to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. We are attracting like moths to a flame every disenchanted Anglican and Pente-

costal with an axe to grind.

UTC bears witness to this.

In defence of UTC, I am thankful for my time there in that it helped me to know what I believed and why, and that all the staff there (despite an undoubted liberal bias) are well-meaning and hard-working.

But when you hear candidates saying thing like “Hill-song has a conference???”, you start to worry. When the culture of your theological college leans so heavily towards a theological, social and political liberalism, it will deter the younger generation of leader.

Luckily there is a whole world of conservative thought that can be drawn on via the internet.

So, where to from here for my generation of believers? Perhaps, just perhaps, the wheel has started to turn full circle. Has the church bottomed out in terms of its presence in society and maybe starting to gain ground once again? For my children’s sake I hope so. I see glimpses of it every now and again in popular culture. A couple of good examples come from the positive impact our Polynesian brothers and sisters are having on Australian society. There are some high profile believers, for example, on the rugby league field these days and in popular culture like Australian Idol who are very positive role models for the youth of today.

And what about the ACC – what can we do to help our church reach my generation? Well, I think the first thing is to note is that we are not going to go looking for the ACC or any other body that represents denominationalism and attend meetings like this. I think the best thing we could do is visit churches individually. One of the hallmarks of our post-modern age is an emphasis on the local and a distrust of hierarchy. We need to go to them rather than expecting them to come to us.

If we can say to a congregation: “Can we come and visit you to let you know who we are and what we’re passionate about?” I think we’ll have a much better chance of recruiting young believers (as well as the older ones) to our cause as we seek to reform our church.

*Edited version of a talk at the ACC NSW annual meeting.*

# LOCAL CHURCH



Kinglake Aftermath 2009

Sasha Grant/ Flickr

God drew ROD JAMES into fire recovery work in Straththewen, Victoria. Many of the volunteers and much financial help came from ACC members.

I first travelled to the Victorian bushfire area on Feb 9 2009, two days after the Black Saturday fires. Having friends at Arthur's Creek, near the fire area of Strathewen, I stayed with them. Malcolm and Margaret Macmillan, belong to the Whittlesea UC, an ACC congregation near one of the major fire areas (Margaret is also a past member of the ACC National Council, and a member of the ACC Social Responsibility Commission).

I began working from the Arthur's Creek fire station and the relief centre at the Arthur's Creek hall. This phase of the work consisted in making contact with fire victims as they came in, and also supporting fire-fighters and relief workers at the two centres.

During the first week I had the opportunity of going into the fire area with a CFA patrol. The area was still quite dangerous with falling trees and

smouldering fires, but some people who had stayed and defended their homes were still living in them. While the fire area remained a restricted area, I was able to obtain a wrist-band permit (which stayed on for six weeks) to get past the police road blocks. I began to visit people in the fire area, and have continued to do this making twelve trips to Victoria, each of about a week in length.

In the second week we organised a 'Gathering for Remembrance and Thanks' on the oval at Arthur's Creek. About 500 people came and shared a time of grief, thanksgiving and mutual encouragement. Compering this event gave me the opportunity and privilege of sharing in a gentle way the word of God's grace.

I spoke briefly on the theme, *'When you suffer, entrust yourselves to a faithful Creator and continue to do what is good'* (1 Peter 4:19).

Over the 12 months since the fires I have visited about 55 households, mainly in the Strathewen fire area and some in Kinglake, getting to know them, and seeking ways to encourage and assist them. It has been humbling and awesome to listen to their stories of the fire, and to realise that it will take a long time to make personal and material recovery. 27 people lost their lives in Strathewen which, before the fire, had a popula-

tion of about 200 residents. Some who did survive will not return. Others are determined to stay and begin again, knowing that things will never be the same.

## Prayer Support

Using a number of email networks to which I belong kept many people around Australia informed about the work. The prayer support of these many believers resulted in a tangible sense of being upheld, guided, and empowered in this difficult work. Thank you to all who have laboured together with us in this important way.

## Material help

As well as praying, folk were keen to help in a material way. In addition to the general bushfire appeals I offered two opportunities for more localised financial gifts:

- gifts for the wider Kinglake fire complex area to the Whittlesea combined churches fund,
- and gifts for the Strathewen area to my Rod James Ministry Account.

Over \$25,000 was given to Whittlesea Ministries Inc as a result. Some of this has been distributed to fire victims as vouchers for retail outlets, and some is being used for a shopfront

fire recovery ministry in Whittlesea.

As a result of email about \$28,000 was given via my Ministry Account for use in the Strathewen area:

- About half has been given in grants to fire victims in amounts of \$200, \$300 and \$500, according to need.
- \$2,500 was used to purchase tools such as wheelbarrows, hammers, shovels, brooms, etc. Bunnings provided these items at just above cost price. They were distributed to those who had lost these basic items.
- Work party fuel and meals.
- My travel costs: fuel, vehicle maintenance, food and accommodation.

## Work Parties

The third way in which people responded to my email communications was in the offering of their time to come on work parties to assist in the clean-up and recovery process. Due to the generosity and cooperation of folk in the local community we were able to set up the Arthur's Creek UC building as a campsite for the work parties.

The Naracoorte UC purchased a portable shower and made it available for the duration of the work.

Russell Flavel and Frank Milne of the Aberfoyle Park UC (SA) acted as coordinators for the work parties.

A total of about 50 different people spent two to five days camping at the Arthur's Creek church and working in the Strathewen fire area: 22 from Adelaide and Southern Hills (SA), three from Port Lincoln (SA), five from Loxton (SA), one from Keith (SA), nine from Kyabram (Vic), three from Lockington (Vic), and six from St George (Qld). In addition, folk from nearby districts came for the day.

The work parties worked on over 20 properties, removing burnt fences, cutting up fallen timber, and building new fences.

Special thanks go to Malcolm and Margaret Macmillan who have hosted myself and some of the volunteers. Thanks also go to those who provided wonderful meals, hospitality and various kinds of assistance.

## Caravans, Quilts and Beanies

The St George UC (Qld) folk acquired three caravans and brought

them to Arthur's Creek, and someone in Adelaide donated a fourth van.

These were given to families in the Kinglake area who lost their homes.

I have also had the pleasure of distributing quilts, rugs and woollen beanies (hats), and children's toys and puzzles which have been lovingly hand-made for fire victims.

## The Future

The recovery work in the fire area has been mainly cleaning up burnt buildings, fences, machinery, vehicles and trees. We have also made some good gains in fence reconstruction but still have a long way to go. The replacement of buildings is much slower, and on my last trip before Christmas only two of the 82 homes destroyed in Strathewen were under reconstruction.

A lasting legacy of these days will be an ongoing relationship with the people of the Strathewen and Arthur's Creek area. Such relationships are the enduring sign of the Kingdom of God and the joyful expression of His grace.

## A Personal Note

This has been a demanding but rewarding episode in my life. I confess to having been almost completely distracted from usual ministry responsibilities as I responded to human needs, the like of which I have not previously encountered. Opportunities abounded to pray with people and in other quiet ways to express the grace and mercy of God. I can only say, like St Paul, 'a wide door for effective work has been opened to me' (1 Corinthians 16:9).

It is testimony to God's sovereign grace that I had no idea of what lay before me at the start of 2009. Initially I only offered myself for a week, but God had much more in mind than that.

We should never neglect the sovereign leadings of our heavenly Father, nor underestimate what may unfold when we do His bidding. As a result of the fire recovery work I wrote a leaflet called *Going and Gathering*. I call it a mini mission manifesto. If anyone would like a copy just contact me and I will send it to you.

Rod James

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08 8381 8345

## What happens next:

● February 27 - ACC Victorian Regional Seminar. The Waverley Cluster will conduct a seminar at St Johns Uniting Church, Virginia Street. Mt. Waverley, on Saturday February 27th 2010. from 9.30 am. to 3.00 pm  
Speakers: Rev Prof. Ian Breward, *Reforming the 21st Century Church*, Dr. Rosalie Hudson, *A Declaration of Hope*, Rev. Dr. Max Champion, *Firm Ground or Crumbling Foundation, the Future of the Basis of Union*.  
BYO lunch. Tea and Coffee provided.  
Details 9800 4078 or 9887 6098

● February 27 - Rev. Hedley Fihaki will speak on the new preamble at Innisfail Uniting Church, 8 Scullen Avenue, Innisfail Qld, at 3pm.  
Vice-chair of Congress, Mrs Roberta Stanley, will be speaking in favour of adopting the preamble.

● April 17 - ACC NSW Movement AGM. 10.45 am - Sutherland Uniting Church (Please note earlier start)

● April 18-19 - Visit by ACC Chair Rev. Dr Max Champion to Maitland Westside, and Hunter Regional Cluster.

● May 22 - Wesley Institute regional seminar. New Lambton UC. Dr Holly Schut from Midlife Momentum, a ministry arising out of her DMin research. [www.midlifemomentum.com](http://www.midlifemomentum.com)

● May 29 - ACC Vic Regional Seminar at Ashburton Uniting Church (hosted by Ashburton ACC Group).

● June 7 - 9 - Wesley Institute Ministry Workers Conference: Meroo Conference Centre

● September 2 -4 Annual Conference and AGM: Camden Uniting Church

● National Council Meetings:  
15-16 March - at the Healing Centre 10.30 am start - 4 pm 16 March.  
24 May - teleconference: 1 pm AEST  
26 July - teleconference: 1 pm AEST  
15 November - teleconference: 1 pm AEST

## James is here

*Faith that Works [Six] Studies in the Letter of James ACC Bible Study No. 3*  
Written by Rev Dr Brian Edgar in conjunction with Ron Clough, Ian Hickingbotham, Margaret Macmillan and Nell Muir.

Order forms will be included in the ACC Newsletter and one copy will be sent to each ACC Congregation or group. Cost \$10 (inc. post and GST).





## Brand new aboriginal

Watching this I could not get out of my mind the tune for one of those popular Christian songs of the 1980s, It's a Brand New Day (there are different versions of this), and I don't believe this was incidental. The Christian faith is central to understanding the experience of Aboriginal people in the film.

*Bran Nue Dae*, the latest movie from Rachel Perkins, who made the acclaimed film *Radiance*, provides a bouncy and earthy homage to a period that has often been portrayed more darkly.

There are well-known actors, Geoffrey Rush, playing Father Benedictus, the head of the Mission School (in the suburb of Waterford, Perth, and is now the Clontarf Aboriginal College, where the Clontarf Foundation and successful Football Academy for Aboriginal Youth began), and Deborah Mailman as Roxanne, a Kimberley woman. Australian Idol runner up in 2006 Jessica Mauboy is well cast as the bubbly singer Rosie, and Rocky McKenzie shows more variety in acting than other Aboriginal newcomers as Willie. Victorian-born Singer Missy Higgins is the traveller Annie, and Ernie Dingo reprises his stage role as Uncle Tadpole, giving a comical and yet poignant portrayal as a realistic drunk too aware of his place in life.

The story is simple. It is 1969 with Willie in Broome during the last days of his school break, already pining for his new-found love Rosie. His mother Theresa (thank goodness there were limited jokes on this theme), is also a strong Christian figure and a member of the local robe-wearing gospel community, which appears at different

times, including the opening church scene. Like Father Benedictus she has high hopes for Willie's religious career. After an incident at the school, he runs off, and is pursued by Father Benedictus, creating a minor road movie, where Willie meets Uncle Tadpole, Annie and her hippie German boyfriend Slippery, and together they go to Broome, though Willie is not sure how he will be received by his mother.

*Bran Nue Dae* began as a collection of songs, which were turned into a popular and mainly touring stage musical during the 1990's. The key author and promoter, Jimmy Chi (name reflecting his Aboriginal, Asian and European heritage), and the members of the band Kuckles, developed songs reflecting their experience at growing up in the 1960s away from their community, isolated in a mission school, and living with the developing Western rock and roll era, as well as trying to understand what it meant to be Aboriginal.

The influence of the Catholic experience is significant, and the theological aspects are worth exploring. I could see a link with the initial focus on the Ten Commandments as most are broken at some time (at least in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount), and there is the underlying theme about the need to reinterpret the nature of God as taught at the school which is reflected in Willie's search for his Aboriginal roots and his connection with the land through his journey.

The songs are fundamental, and those who listen carefully realise many are full of political comment, but in a wry and pointed way. This

is a different portrayal of Aboriginal people from many films of the last twenty years.

Given this was first a stage musical developed in the 1980s, one can see the influences of films which were around during the time when Jimmy Chi was writing it, especially musicals aimed at teenagers, like *Grease*, and *The Blues Brothers*, which also contained significant Catholic school references. In the overall script, one could also argue that it is a bit like Dickens writing a contemporary *Great Expectations* with additional help from Jerry Springer. Secrets are exposed, and confessions abound, and all the connections come out.

This is essentially a light relief film, with bright overtones designed to appeal to contemporary audiences and encourage Aboriginal youth. Even the dynamic opening and whimsical closing credits provide a context for this film, and I understand this—it is not setting out to delve deeply into complex and horrifying issues or treatments of Aboriginal people. There is no opportunity for an in-depth consideration of the elements, though the film touches on many areas including a haunting scene highlighting Aboriginal deaths in custody, and there is perhaps even reference to sexual abuse that occurred in some Catholic schools in terms of one element featured prominently.

While many of the characters are stereotyped, especially the religious figures, there is also a warmth about them which may reflect the ambiguous experience of Jimmy Chi. The film also touches on the themes of the oneness of humanity and the place of Christian and Aboriginal beliefs, which is well illustrated by the scenes of repentance and forgiveness, and even at the end of the film with Father Benedictus saying grace as all the main characters gather for a meal.

WA members will see recognisable areas not only in Perth, Fremantle and Broome, but also along the roads, and all viewers will resonate with the beauty of the Western land.

I was intrigued to learn that Jimmy Chi's hymns are apparently regularly sung at funerals of Aboriginals in Broome, again illustrating what I perceive as a quest for reconciliation and also the interest in redemption and forgiveness which is offered through the Christian Gospel.

Peter Bentley