



## *Challenges to change our understanding and practice*

The last two meetings of the Progressive Christian Network have presented challenges to Christianity from very different perspectives. John Dominic Crossan's lectures on the teachings of Jesus and Paul in the first century made clear the radical nature of Jesus' teaching and practices particularly in the context of a country occupied by the Roman military.

Peter Norden's stories of personal experience as a prison chaplain and running a halfway house for young offenders brought the challenge vividly into contemporary Australia. Speaking on "Compassion", he drew a stark contrast between easy language about compassion and the issues Christians and others need to address in Australian society. More details of his address are in this newsletter.

Our final public meeting for this year on 14 November tackles a long standing issue in theology and philosophy – the problem of evil. At the conclusion of that meeting the fourth Annual General Meeting of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria will review the past year and elect the Committee to steer us through 2011.

## **Compassion**

[Peter Norden spoke at the October PCNV meeting.](#)

Peter began his inspirational talk on Compassion at October's PCNV meeting with a reminder of Jesus' Mission Statement: 'to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed...'

With this in mind, and with great stories to tell from his own experiences as a prison chaplain, running a Half-way House for young offenders, coaching sport in schools and a public housing community, heading up Jesuit Social Services, lecturing in law and mental health etc, he challenged us to consider how far the responses of Christian churches to community needs are in fact shaped by compassion.

Huge resources are committed to running big schools and hospitals, but very little is available for developing policy and advocacy work. Are the representatives of Christian churches lobbying in Canberra

simply chasing more financial support, or are they truly representing the interests of the disadvantaged in our society, such as the thousands of 17-year-olds placed in adult prisons? How willing are the churches to raise the hard questions of human rights? We need to help victims, but we also need to investigate the causes of disadvantage and deal with those. And that requires more resources than are currently available.

Have we advanced far from the chain gangs of the past, when a youth in a maximum security prison has only one hour in 24 outside his cell, alone and ostensibly for exercise, but for that time is handcuffed and in leg irons, and is watched by 2 prison officers? Is it possible to apply restorative rather than retributive principles in the area of criminal justice?

Are there ways for the churches to be more creative and innovative in offering training to future leaders and policy-makers in government, unions, and universities?  
*Joy Merritt*

## A HOPEFUL VIEW OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGION

The first meeting of PCNV for 2010 involved three speakers on the topic of the future of faith. The idea was stimulated by one of the most important theological books of recent years that had been published late in 2009 - Harvey Cox, "The Future of Faith". Harper, San Francisco. 2009.

The publishers have announced that a paperback edition of this book is due around the end of the year. It is not often that a book by a leading theologian is highly readable, helps us understand the changes taking place around us in a world-wide perspective, and offers a positive view of the future of religion, including some ways in which progressive Christianity is a promising sign for the future. The following extracts might encourage you to put the paperback edition on your reading list for 2011. It will be available from Rainbow Books for \$25.99.

**The Author:** Harvey Cox was the Hollis Research Professor of Divinity at Harvard, where he has taught since 1965, both at Harvard Divinity School and in the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences. His book *The Secular City*, published in 1965, became an international bestseller and is widely regarded as one of the twentieth century's most influential books of Protestant theology.

'What does the future hold for religion, and for Christianity in particular? At the beginning of the new millennium three qualities mark the world's spiritual profile, all tracing trajectories that will reach into the coming decades. **The first** is the unanticipated resurgence of religion in both public and private life around the globe. **The second** is that fundamentalism, the bane of the twentieth century, is dying. But **the third** and most important, though often unnoticed, is a profound change in the elemental nature of religiousness.

'The resurgence of religion was not foreseen. On the contrary, not many decades ago thoughtful writers were confidently predicting its imminent demise. Science, literacy, and more education would soon dispel the miasma of superstition and obscurantism. Religion would either disappear completely or survive in family rituals, quaint folk festivals, and exotic references in literature, art, and music. Religion, we were assured, would certainly never again sway politics or shape culture. But the soothsayers were wrong. Instead of disappearing, religion – for good or ill – is now exhibiting new vitality all around the world and making its weight felt in the corridors of power.

'However, the third quality, the equally unforeseen mutation in the nature of religiousness, is the most important in the long run. Not only has religion emerged as an influential dimension of twenty-first century life; what it means to be "religious" is shifting significantly from what it meant as little as half a century ago. Since religions interact with each other in a global culture, this tremor is shaking virtually all of them, but it is especially evident in Christianity, which in the past fifty years has entered into its most momentous transformation since its transition in the fourth century CE from what had begun as a tiny Jewish sect into the religious ideology of the Roman Empire.

'... More people seem to recognise that it is our everyday world, not some other one, that, in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, is "charged with the grandeur of God." The advance of science has increased the sense of awe we feel at the immense scale of the universe or the complexity of the human eye. People turn to religion for support in their efforts to live in this world and make it better, and less to prepare for the next. The pragmatic and experiential elements of faith as a way of life are displacing the previous emphasis on institutions and beliefs.

'It is true that for some people "faith" and "beliefs" are just two words for the same thing. But they are not the same, and in order to grasp the magnitude of the religious upheaval now under way, it is important to clarify the difference. Faith is about deep-seated confidence. In everyday speech we usually apply it to people we trust or the values we treasure. ...

Belief, on the other hand, is more like opinion. "I don't really know about that," we say, "but I believe it may be so." ... We can *believe* something to be true without it making much difference to us, but we place our *faith* only in something that is vital for the way we live. ... it will be hard to comprehend the tectonic shift in Christianity today unless we understand the distinction between the two.'

Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*. Harper San Francisco. 2009. Pages 1 – 3.

## PCNV WEBSITE

If you haven't checked the PCNV website recently [www.pcnvictoria.org.au](http://www.pcnvictoria.org.au) you will have missed a range of new material.

There is a link to a very interesting article "[Does the historical Jesus matter?](#)" which provides reflections on the recent meeting of the Jesus Seminar and in particular on the theology of John Dominic Crossan.

There is also a link to an interview with PCNV member Dr John Bodycomb on the Sunday Nights program on ABC Radio National about his new book, "[No Fixed Address](#)".

Also available for downloading are the Discussion Guides to each of the first three DVDs in the [PCNV series "Exploring Open Christianity"](#) featuring interviews with Val Webb, Lloyd Geering and Peter Kennedy. The fourth DVD with an interview with Dominic Crossan will be available soon.

## Listening to the Crossan lectures

As I was interstate when Dominic Crossan lectured in Melbourne, I have recently listened to the 10 lectures downloaded from the PCNV website (one of this year's bargains for A\$40). I found them absorbing listening. Crossan provides a picture of the Roman and Jewish first century background that brings to life in a fresh way what the Gospels and Pauline writings say about Jesus.

One lecture that particularly impressed me dealt with John the Baptist and Jesus. John asked people to prepare for God's intervention. Jesus however learned a lot

from John whom he highly praised. Jesus began his public role when he heard that John's had ended. Jesus taught that God's intervention for the poor requires action by us. The kingdom of God is here and requires our cooperation. Crossan praises highly a summary by Desmond Tutu, "Without us, God won't; but without God, we can't".

*David Merritt*

## Annual General Meeting

Members will receive with this Newsletter a Notice of the Annual General meeting of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria Inc. on 14 November. It will commence immediately following the conclusion of the Seminar "Good God! What a Mess" led by Rev Dr Lorraine Parkinson.

The Committee is confident there is no connection between the meeting topic and the report on the affairs of PCNV for the past year! It has been a year with significant developments for PCNV and we hope members will be present to participate.

The next Newsletter which will be the final edition for 2010 will carry a report on the AGM and the result of the elections for a Committee for 2011.

## Preaching you can (Dis)agree with

9.30 am Sundays, weekly, at Nunawading Uniting Church. 355 Whitehorse Road.

Paul Tonson will explore how Christian faith can be both biblical and progressive, i.e. authentic and meaningful. Monthly theme for November: "Alternatives to Atonement". Enquiries 9878 7145

# The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria



invites you to a Seminar on

## Good God! What a Mess!

with

Uniting Church Minister and Writer  
**Lorraine Parkinson**

**WHEN:** Sunday 14 November 2010  
3.00pm to 5.00pm

**WHERE:** Glen Iris Road Uniting Church  
Glen Iris Rd. near corner with High St, Glen Iris  
(Mel 60 A9) Parking in church grounds and nearby streets

### THE TOPIC

There is no more intractable problem for believers in a good God than the existence of evil. Why should a world created by a good God contain the amount of pain and suffering it evidently does? Why should bad things happen to people who do not deserve it? Why didn't God create a world without evil? The seminar will examine these questions and more from the perspective of progressive theology, plus philosophy, science, and everyday experience. The process will provide opportunities for discussion in table groups.

### THE SPEAKER

Lorraine Parkinson has been writing and speaking about theodicy (the problem of evil in a world created by a good God) since majoring in Jewish Studies and the Philosophy of Religion in her BA at Melbourne University, 1989-91. She wrote further on this topic during her studies in theology, including the degree of Doctor of Theology, researched at the *École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem*. During a 2004 sabbatical at St Deiniol's Library in Wales, she wrote discussion-group studies on 'The Problem of Evil'.

**Cost** is \$7 (members \$5)

*"Open minds, open hearts, open hands"*