



The first five years

The Annual General Meeting on 25 September received the report of the Committee on the year to 30 June 2011. The President, Dick Carter, used the occasion to reflect on the experience of PCNV since its formation in the middle of 2006.

“This is a record of some accomplishment for a group organised by volunteers whose aspirations were relatively modest at the time of its foundation. It does appear that the timing of its formation coincided with a growing hunger among many people to participate with like-minded people in exploring Progressive Christian thought and practice; certainly the growing membership and the greatly appreciated loyalty and support that members have given the PCNV is testament to that.”

The “Learning Festival with Dr Gregory Jenks and Dr Margaret Mayman” on Saturday 15 October, described in this newsletter, marks another development as we try a new format, bringing two leaders from Brisbane and Wellington, NZ, to Melbourne.

LOOKING BACK

“During the first five year period PCNV has staged nearly forty lectures, seminars, regional meetings and liturgical events and the complexity and scope of these events has grown as confidence in our ability to manage such promotions has grown with our experience and financial capability. It has introduced leading progressive Australian and international speakers to members and been a pillar of support for the two “Common Dreams” conferences that have been organised in collaboration with its kindred bodies in Australia and New Zealand. The sale of books, recordings and DVDs of PCNV events and other resources has been a service that has allowed members to access material for group discussions and private study; this culminated in the production of the “Open Christianity” series of DVDs featuring five noted Australian and international progressive Christian leaders designed for group study.” *Annual Report 2011*

LOOKING AHEAD

PCNV exists to encourage consideration of progressive Christian thought and practice as alternatives to some traditional thought and practices. The creative ideas and practical support of members will point the way ahead.

Ideas for wider participation

One of the questions asked at the AGM on 25 September was about the diversity of denominational involvement in PCNV.

PCNV is a non-denominational organisation. An application for membership does not require identifying the religious affiliation, if any, of an applicant. From various contacts we know there are members who are Churches of Christ, Baptist, Anglican, Temple Society of Australia, Catholic, and Uniting Church. There may be others.

The Committee has spent a lot of time working on ways to more widely publicise the Network, including publicity and selected advertising for events in denominational journals or *Eureka Street*, the Catholic online weekly. Ads tend to work for specific significant events such as the Crossan lectures or Common Dreams. The recent new brochure was designed to make it easier for members actively to spread information about participation and membership. The redesigned website now involves many more people than the membership of PCNV in considering progressive perspectives.

The Committee would like to hear your ideas for encouraging more diverse participation. Email your ideas to: info@pcnvictoria.org.au

Rev Dr Gregory Jenks will be one of the leaders of the Learning Festival sponsored by PCNV on 15 October. He is Academic Dean at St Francis Theological College in Brisbane and a Fellow of the Westar Institute actively involved in the Jesus Seminar. His vivid multimedia presentation on the future of the Bible was a highlight of the Common Dreams Conference in Melbourne in April 2010. Following is a review of his new book, published this year.

The Once and Future Bible by Gregory Jenks

The Once and Future Bible is a scholarly, yet easy to read introduction to the Bible, suitable for beginners or for those wishing to deepen their understanding. The book is written with religious progressives in mind, and as the writer of its foreword, Harold Ellens suggests, it self-consciously avoids either glorifying or “junking” the Bible.

The author himself is keen to avoid “squeezing modern realities into the Bible’s simpler understanding of human existence” which he claims would be a way of “averting one’s gaze” from problems in the text. He is also committed to including recent critical scholarship, which again he intends to “embrace” and not “dodge.”

The book is split into three parts: the first explores the historical, social, political and theological influences that shaped the biblical texts. It also establishes the literary character of the Bible and the broad hermeneutical (interpretative) issues that arise from it, as well as offering a comprehensive overview of the tools of biblical criticism that help the reader identify the worlds behind, within and before the texts.

The second part of the book gives a scholarly and in-depth discussion of the nature and content of the *Jewish* texts in the Bible; and the third section has a similarly conceived and structured presentation of *Christian* texts in the Bible. These two latter sections help the reader understand the flow of the narrative timeline, identify key theological themes, and familiarize themselves with some major biblical characters.

The author affirms the Bible as valued spiritual heritage, likening it to “a theological umbilical cord.” This metaphor suggests Jenks’ strong personal connectedness with the ancient texts, and with the people of the tradition. It implies also the perennial power of the biblical texts to nurture and keep alive both the faith and the faithful.

This book is addressed to “religious progressives” Its language reflects this. It speaks of the “invention” of the Bible; of new critical editions being “modern constructs.” Yet also has a lot to say to Christians, and I would claim the bulk of Christians, whose modes of reading fit between the extremes of fundamentalism and progressivism, the two readership poles explicitly identified in the book.

Jenks is a longstanding scholarly contributor to the Jesus Seminar within whose deliberations the word “probably” (he tells us) is a key and highly technical term! Without knowing the Seminar’s definition of (or criteria for the use of) the word, I would suggest nevertheless that this new book *The Once and Future Bible* will “probably,” nay, “highly probably”, offer an invaluable resource for Biblical scholars of a wide range of levels of understanding, for many years to come.

Cathy Thomson

The Revd Dr Catherine Thomson is Rector of Christ Church Anglican Parish, St Lucia, Brisbane, and an Adjunct Lecturer in the School of Theology at Charles Sturt University.

Gregory C. Jenks, *The Once and Future Bible. An Introduction to the Bible for Religious Progressives*. Wipf & Stock, Oregon. 2011. 246 pages paperback. \$25 from PCNV.

From Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*. HarperOne 2009:

Cherished gems and worthless debris

Christianity understood as a system of beliefs guarded and transmitted through a privileged religious institution by a clerical caste is dying. Instead, Christianity as a way of life shared in a vast variety of ways by a diverse global network of fellowships is rising. Page 196

At its outset “faith” meant a dynamic lifestyle sustained by fellowships that were guided by both men and women and that reflected hope for the coming of the Reign of God. But when Christianity became swollen into an elaborate code of prescribed beliefs and ritual obligations policed by a hierarchy, the meaning of “faith” was warped almost beyond recognition. Page 179

We cannot and should not try to reinstall the first Age of Faith. We live in a different world. But Christianity today bears within it both the cherished gems and the worthless debris it has accumulated during the intervening fifteen hundred years of the Age of Belief, which is now expiring. Can we preserve the jewels and get rid of the junk? Page 184

Until his retirement in 2009, Harvey Cox was Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School.

The Future of Faith provides an excellent basis for study by progressive Christian groups wanting to understand the changes taking place in what it means to be “religious” or “Christian” today. Harvey Cox shows how doctrines and dogma are giving way to new movements based on community, social justice, and spiritual experience.

Available from Mosaic Resources, Preston, Victoria. phone (03) 9470 2381 or online at <https://mosaicresources.com.au> Hardcover \$34, paperback \$22. Plus p&p \$3.50.

From Keith Ward, *Re-Thinking Christianity*. One World. Oxford. 2007.

The task of continually re-thinking Christian faith

What should be clear, from a study of the New Testament, is that the church has the task of continually re-thinking Christian faith, as human knowledge grows. The changes evident within the New Testament itself are breathtaking. The recorded teachings of Jesus about the kingdom, about Torah and about the coming of the Son of man in glory are radically revised by the first-generation church. The kingdom is thrown open to gentiles, the Torah is abandoned, Jesus’ life is seen as the incarnation of the divine Wisdom, and the church begins to be seen as a continuing community, or set of communities, in history, as the body of Christ and the vanguard of the reconciliation of all creation to God.

It is highly improbable, on the evidence of the synoptic Gospels, that the historic Jesus said, or could have said, any of these things. They are the creative responses of leaders of the early church to the disclosure of God they had seen in Jesus, and to their own experience of the risen Christ and of the Spirit moving amongst them. The task of the church in the modern world is to continue making such creative responses in its own new and diverse contexts. Re-thinking Christianity is not a betrayal of unchanging Christian truth. It is a demand rooted in the very nature of the New Testament, and in an accurate perception of what New Testament revelation is - not dictated words from God, but a diverse set of testimonies to the acts of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Page 49.

Keith Ward is Professor of Divinity, Gresham College, London and Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus, University of Oxford.



The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria
A Learning Festival

With

Rev Dr Greg Jenks

Academic Dean & Lecturer in Biblical Studies at St Francis' Theological College Brisbane and Adjunct Lecturer in the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University, Australia. A long-time Fellow of Westar Institute, Greg is also a Co-Director of the Bethsaida Excavations Project in Israel. He is the author of "The Once and Future Bible: An Introduction to the Bible for Religious Progressives" (Wipf & Stock, 2011) and editor of "The Once and Future Scriptures: Exploring the Role of Scripture in the Contemporary Church" (Polebridge Press, in 2012).

and

Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Margaret Mayman has been senior minister at St. Andrew's on The Terrace since February 2002. Margaret has studied at Victoria and Otago Universities in NZ and completed a PhD at Union Theological Seminary. She also taught feminist theology and ethics at Maryknoll School of Theology, and undergraduate Religious Studies at the New School for Social Research. During her ministry in Christchurch, Margaret came out as lesbian and has been involved in working to promote the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the Presbyterian Church. She founded Christians for Civil Unions and advocated for the passage of the Civil Union Act. Since 2006, Margaret has been working with the Kettering Foundation in the United States, a non-partisan foundation which fosters citizens' participation in democracy.

Saturday 15th October 2011

10.00am – 4.00pm (registration opens at 9.15am)

At Kingswood College, 355 Station St, Box Hill

(Melway Ref: Map 61, C1)

Parking and Entry: Enter from Piedmont Street, nearest the corner of Station Street or park on Piedmont Street. Venue entry is through the college grounds via the walkway from that car park. The senior school centre is the set of buildings closest to that car park.

Booking is Essential

Print the accompanying flyer or online at www.pcnvlearningfestival.eventbrite.com

Cost: \$45 (PCNV members \$40)

Morning Lectures

Rev Dr Greg Jenks, "Unholy Use of the Holy Bible"

This lecture will explore some of the ways that the Bible is abused by those who claim to care about it deeply. In response to that misappropriation of Scripture, how might religious progressives reclaim and redeem the Bible so it functions as a source of spiritual wisdom for shaping holy lives in the twenty-first century?

Rev Dr Margaret Mayman, "Progressive Religion: Nourishing our hearts for the work our hands must do"

The work of deconstructing the inherited theological tradition has provided a crucial foundation for progressives. However, progressive Christianity has moved beyond liberalism and secular Christianity in its recovery of spiritual practices which empower the living out of the ethic of Jesus. If progressive theology is to be more than 'right thinking' or a new theological orthodoxy, it needs to engage deeply with liberation theology and to take seriously the claim that another world is possible through active compassion."

Afternoon Workshops

Rev Dr Margaret Mayman, "Dirty Hands: Faith communities engaging in community politics"

The next stage for progressive people of faith is to engage in our communities in light of our theological reflection and celebration. Churches involvement in communities has usually taken the form of service, but charity leaves the causes of social inequity unaddressed. An unexamined possibility of progressive faith communities is their potential as incubators of broader social engagement. In a recent work, *American Grace: how religion unites and divides us*, sociologist Robert Putnam (of *Bowling Alone* fame) found that people who belong to faith communities are more generous (to both secular and religious causes), and more likely to be involved in public life. What would it mean if we saw ourselves as communities that fostered citizens who engaged actively in community politics? How might we begin to do that? Can we risk dirtying our hands? The workshop will involve case studies, conversations, sharing our visions and dreams.

Rev Dr Greg Jenks, *An Exercise in Critical Imagination: "From Ash Heap to Golgotha"*

Reading with Critical Imagination invites participants to imagine a conversation between Job and Jesus. Freed from the western obsession with the question of what really happened, how can we work with an imaginary conversation between Job on his ash-heap and Jesus on his cross? Can we move into the open space of post-critical naiveté to exercise our imaginations in our reading of the Bible?

Book online or print the flyer with the booking form