CROSS

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Purposes

a forum for theological dialogue

Contents

CROSS Purposes

Welcome to the third edition of *Cross Purposes* for 2009. Again, the offerings traverse a great deal of territory, ranging from passionate affirmations of modernity to its characterization as a system of dogma which effectively strangles the effectiveness of the gospel.

In a sermon for the congregational reaffirmation of baptism, Avril Hannah-Jones reflects on the way in which baptism ought to bear its fruit in a life risen with the crucified Jesus, a life characterized by counter-cultural hospitality and an impulse toward healing social ills. Bruce Barber's article laments that stream in contemporary theology that is characterized not by an allegiance to the Word made flesh but, rather, a strangulation of that Word by the dogmas of modernity.

In a quite a different vein, Rex Hunt responds to Garry Deverell's critique of the "emerging church" in *CP* 17 by offering what he calls a "progressive" vision of what the church and its worship might become, a vision that is scholarly, life-affirming, and comfortable with modernity. Lorraine Parkinson, in her response to articles by Paul Tonson and Sandy Yule, works through the implications of this perspective for interfaith dialogue, arguing that it is time to put aside St. Matthew's "great commission" towards conversion in favour of more "neighbourly" relations to those of other faiths.

In an addition to the debate on whether or not Christians should fight for the public retention of their holy days in a secular society, Bob Faser argues that some Christian festivals, such as the Holy Week—Easter cycle, might be more faithfully observed by Western Christians if they were not, already, competing with the secular pull of a long weekend. Finally, Janice McWhinney reviews Robert Gribben's most recent book, *Uniting in Thanksgiving*.

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Editors:
Garry Deverell
Craig Thompson
Martin Wright

Letters to the Editor are invited to:

editors@cp.unitingchurch.org.au

or,

Cross Purposes
c/- 81 Oxley Road
Hawthorn 3122

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through a glass darkly

Avril Hannah-Jones

A Welcoming Community

a sermon preached at Romsey and Lancefield, 28 June 2009
Psalm 130 - 2 Corinthians 8:7-15 - Mark 5:21-43

Every Sunday is a day of celebration, as we gather together as the body of Christ on the day of Christ's resurrection. But today is a particularly significant Sunday. Today all of us who are baptized are going to reaffirm our baptism.

This definitely does not mean we are being rebaptized; baptism only happens once. Whether we were baptized as a baby, a young person, or an adult, from that moment we were initiated into the church, fully part of the body of Christ. Baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event, but it is so important and life-changing, and it demands so much from us, that we need the occasional reminder of it. Today we are going to reaffirm the vows that we or our parents made at our baptism; we are going to say together the Apostles' Creed which unites us with every Christian of every century and every country and every denomination; and we are going to reaffirm our commitment to mission.

As I say every time I baptize someone, baptism is our death to violence and oppression and hatred and darkness and death and our rebirth to peace and justice and love and light and life. This rebirth leads us to live in a particular way: as people who gather together to pray and learn and celebrate the eucharist; as people who proclaim the good news of God; as people who love our neighbours as ourselves; as people who strive for justice and peace.

This is what it means to be baptized; it's an incredibly deep and life-changing commitment.

In baptism we become part of the body of Christ. All three of today's bible readings tell us something about what that means. The psalm reminds us that God is a God of forgiveness and steadfast love, on whom we can call and in whose word we can hope. This is the God that we worship whenever we gather together.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminds us that Christians are called to be generous, especially to other Christians. Not, Paul says, that we should be generous to the point that there is relief for others and pressure on us, but that when we have means and others don't, there should be a fair balance between our present abundance and their need. Being part of the body of Christ means sharing, which is why every week we offer to God a proportion of what we have, for the use of others who have less.

through a glass darkly

Finally, today's reading from the gospel of Mark gives us insight into what the body of Christ, the church of which we become part in baptism, looks like.

Today's gospel story tells of two healings. Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, falls at Jesus' feet and repeatedly begs him to come and lay his hands on Jairus' daughter, who is dying. Jesus goes with Jairus, but on the way, a woman who has been suffering from uncontrolled bleeding for twelve years touches Jesus' cloak, and is instantly healed. Jesus, aware that power has left him, asks who touched him. In fear, the woman comes forward and tells him the story. Jesus tells her to go in peace; her faith has made her well. While he's speaking, people come to Jairus to tell him that his daughter has died. But Jesus continues to the house and tells the mourners that the girl is not dead, only asleep. He then takes her by the hand and tells her to rise, and she obeys. And Jesus then orders her parents not to talk about this, and to give her something to eat.

The first person to be healed in this story is a nameless woman. She's been bleeding for twelve years, so it's likely that she has considered herself and been considered by others to have been ritually impure for twelve years. No one has been able to touch her for twelve years. She may once have been rich, but Mark tells us that she has spent all she had on useless doctors. She feels unable to approach Jesus directly, but instead tries to secretly touch his cloak. When she is discovered, she is afraid. In the society in which this woman lives, she is an outcast.

The second person to be healed is the daughter of Jairus. Unlike the woman, Jairus has a recognized role in the community. He approaches Jesus openly, although humbly, kneeling and begging Jesus for help. The "commotion of people" mourning outside his house may have included professional mourners, which suggests that Jairus was well off. The woman and Jairus are united in their faith in Jesus, but they're divided by their gender and class. Jairus is an important man. The unnamed woman is a marginalized and unclean woman.

The story begins with Jairus' request. If Jesus was sensible, he would hurry to Jairus' house and cure his daughter, a child of privilege. And indeed, Jesus does set off with Jairus. But he is then sidetracked by the need of a low-status woman. Jesus not only cures her of her bleeding, he welcomes her into his family. Jesus gives priority to the marginalized woman over the privileged man. This story shows us Jesus as a Messiah who welcomes the marginalized into his family as loved daughters.

I've contrasted the unnamed woman with Jairus, but the story is actually about two women who need healing. I seem to spend a lot of sermons talking about the way that Jesus treated women, the way he welcomed them as equals in a patriarchal society. That's not just because this is a bee in my bonnet, although I admit that equality between women and men is one of my obsessions; it is because equality is a characteristic of the new community that Jesus created, the body of Christ.

Jairus' daughter has a family and some status as the daughter of her father, but like the woman bleeding she is nameless. And, again like the haemorrhaging woman, she may be considered impure. Jesus defiles himself by touching her dead body. The haemorrhaging woman has been unable to bear children for twelve years; the twelve-year-old girl has never borne a child and, if dead, will never be able to. The two women are connected in their need of Jesus and in their marginal status, and Jesus crosses the boundaries between men and women and the pure and impure to touch them and heal them.

Jesus allows the woman to touch him; he welcomes her touch as an indication of her faith. Her touch does not make Jesus unclean; rather Jesus' power makes her well. She is rewarded with health that will continue throughout her life, an invitation to peace and wellbeing that goes beyond physical health, and a place in the family of Jesus as a daughter. Jesus' breaking of boundaries gives an isolated and nameless woman a place in the community. The twelve-year-old girl is also restored to full life. By quoting Jesus' words in Aramaic, "Talitha cum", Mark indicates the affection implicit in Jesus' healing of her. This girl is already a daughter, a daughter of the parents who love her and of Israel, and Jesus' healing enables her to reclaim this status.

Mark is telling us the story of two daughters, brought into full life by a man who is not afraid to cross boundaries. The community that Christ created, which became the church to which we all belong through baptism, is a place of welcome and healing, in which men and women and rich and poor are equals, and in which no one is unclean.

When we are baptized we become part of this community, welcomed and loved as the daughters and sons of God. And we also become responsible for welcoming others. As part of the body of Christ, it's our job to follow Christ by loving others. When we reaffirm our baptism, we claim again our place in this community and all the responsibility that leads to. We reaffirm our commitment to follow Christ, the one who welcomes and heals. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Avril Hannah-Jones is Uniting Church Minister in Romsey, Lancefield, Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon.

on Areopagus Hill

Bruce Barber

Some Contributing Factors at Work in the Contemporary Cultural Crisis Eroding Christian Faith

It is apparent in both culture and church that there is increasing hostility to Christian faith. Much of this antagonism might be considered to be misplaced, or at the very least, as demonstrating a failure to recognize the concealed presuppositions from which protagonists for both (all?) "sides" are operating. There is value in attempting to identify some of these major issues which the culture assumes, and which therefore come into play when matters of religion are at stake. Three amongst others seem to be paramount, recognition of which might provide a way through increasingly unproductive terrain.

The first might be thought of as a restrictive cultural legacy, the second the linguistic consequence of this inheritance, and the third the restriction of Christian language to these confinements.

The Cultural Legacy

or, Heads or Tails?
the theological straightjacket required by the dogmas of modern culture, or how "the world" necessarily absorbs "the text"

The history of religious thought in the West has operated as a pendulum movement between the boundaries of apparently limiting opposites, for example, between God and the world, eternity and time, being and becoming, presence and absence, and so on. In this tradition, one of the fateful consequences of the eighteenth century Enlightenment was to introduce new polarities which demanded then, and still to this day, an exclusive allegiance to one polarity. Most notable of these constrictions are those between subject and object, fact and value, theory and practice,

public and private, material and spiritual, church and state, faith and reason, science and religion. These alternatives function as secular "dogmas", much more abrasive than those customarily attributed to "religion". In so doing this secular fundamentalism requires religious texts to conform to these bifurcations, thus effectively destroying their potentially liberating possibilities. Invariably, in this artificially constructed world, the text is always "absorbed" into these unproductive antinomies, whether consciously or unconsciously, by friend or foe alike.

Two-Dimensional Language

or, the eclipse of metaphor and the rise of atheism

Perhaps the most corrosive polarity of modernity is that which erodes all language, but most disastrously, that of religious language, namely the choice required between what is taken to be "literal" on the one hand, or what is merely "figurative" on the other. The former is understood to be reliable, actual and mandatory, the latter by contrast being optional, detachable from any grounding, and not necessarily either essential or persuasive. With regard to a "text", whether of scripture or doctrine, the modern presumption is virtually unassailable that if one is serious, the language must always be understood to be "literal". The conventional example is that of theological topography: heaven above, earth, and hell below. That is, "literal" now equates with "fact", which therefore must be held to be true or false, believable or unbelievable. Thus modernity divides people along a continuum between believers (idealists?) and unbelievers (realists?). The former may in turn be divided between fundamentalists who believe the facts, and liberals, who may jettison bizarre "facts", while believing in the meaning of those judged according to a contemporary world view to be more palatable.

This disaster has occurred because the dichotomous world of modernity has lost the category of metaphor. And it is metaphor that is the primary form of Christian speech. Speech in general is a human word belonging to the world. The "worldliness" of speaking about God's coming to the world makes metaphor a theological necessity, since language about God must be "transferred" (metaphor, "carried across") from other states of affairs. Metaphor transfers language from one context to another, bringing together two horizons of meaning, linguistically bridging the reality of God and the reality of the world. In so doing, a radically new possibility emerges for the world, not just an extension of present reality.

The primary expression of the metaphor is the parable. It is instructive that the parable is Jesus' preferred language for bringing God and the world together. In this respect, the parable as an "extended metaphor" does not merely state what is the case, though it does do this too, but it is a language which liberates, whereas the language of definition limits and secures.

It is no coincidence that the rise of modern atheism (Dawkins *et al.*) corresponds to the loss of metaphorical language. The fact is that "God created the world", or "God sent his Son", are examples of such metaphors at work. Predictably, sceptics and those hostile to Christian faith are incredulous, even derisive of such claims, since their antagonisms are finally derived from a dogmatic, unsophisticated notion of how language works. For both parties, the acids of modernity have corroded a truthful understanding of language. In the 500th anniversary of the year of his birth, and before scientistic mechanics muddied the waters, it is instructive to recall that John Calvin thought it sufficient to affirm that the confession of God as creator means that "we receive the world from his hands"—another metaphor!

A Reconciled Mind?

on being "transformed by the renewal of the nous*" (Romans 12:2), or the post-modern novelty of how "the text" might absorb "the world"*

Christians seeking to be faithful to the tradition have for at least two centuries been unnecessarily defensive because of these prevailing dogmas of modernity, which see truth only in terms of what are regarded as empirical facts. The well-known injunction to be not "conformed to this world" has been applied primarily to the ethical realm, and not to the life of the mind (*nous*). What is needed is the sort of transformation, or renewal of the mind, that the reconciling character of Christian faith makes possible, so that the superficialities of a decadent culture are no longer permitted to hold us captive. This means that if there is to be a renewal of Christian life, there will need to be a reformation with regard to language. In a world where binaries or bifurcations dictate the terms in which knowledge is to be located, reconciliation of tired categories can offer a genuinely radical discovery. The fact is that "the text", where it is properly understood, has already "out-thought" the categories required by the culture. This apparently totalizing claim is, in the final analysis, a corollary of a foundational doctrine of creation.

There are significant pastoral implications of a better clarification about such foundational matters when it comes to whether or how doctrinal or credal confessions are to be received. For example, when people are confronted by a creed, a good number find themselves silent at what they judge to be intellectually indefensible phrases, or at best, will make the confession but with a bad conscience.

Reservations, it seems, are entertained primarily with respect to two doctrines: the resurrection of Jesus, and one determination of his origin later claiming primary credal significance, namely his being born of the Virgin Mary.[1] The

[1] It should not be presumed that at least there are other phrases in the creed that are more "straightforward", and therefore easier of access. The fact is that if one phrase can be believed, then in principle so may every other. Conversely, if one or two phrases are considered "problematic", so in principle

question is: what would both doctrines look like if the possibilities offered above by means of a renewed language are brought into play?

With regard to the resurrection of Jesus, the way "the world absorbs the text" is to interpret Easter Day in naturalistic terms as the returning to life of a corpse. But Lazarus has already taken care of that. The way "the text absorbs the world", is to reconfigure the post-Easter bodily appearance of Jesus as the One bearing the crucified marks of his obedience. That is to say, resurrection is the way the ministry of the life and death of Jesus is integrated into the possibility of his future appearances—in word, sacrament and faithful witness—as the faithful proclamation of the gospel "to the end of the age". This is why he must be apprehended bodily by us in our bodies.

With regard to birth of Jesus, another way "the world absorbs the text" is to insist that the virginal conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary is nothing more than an arbitrary assertion attaching to a primitive understanding of gynaecology—which can no longer be believed. The way "the text absorbs the world" is to locate the origin of Jesus' mission—his "being" and his "doing"—not merely in the temporality of his ministry, but *in utero*, in the unlikely faithfulness of an unheralded Jewish woman. Human biological necessity has been trumped by theological creativity—literally!

Obviously much more must be said about both, but attempting to bring "a reconciled mind" to these foundational formulations may prove to be helpful, before either discarding them as primitive accretions, or else holding to them, but with a bad conscience.

Bruce Barber is a retired minister and former Dean of the United Faculty of Theology.

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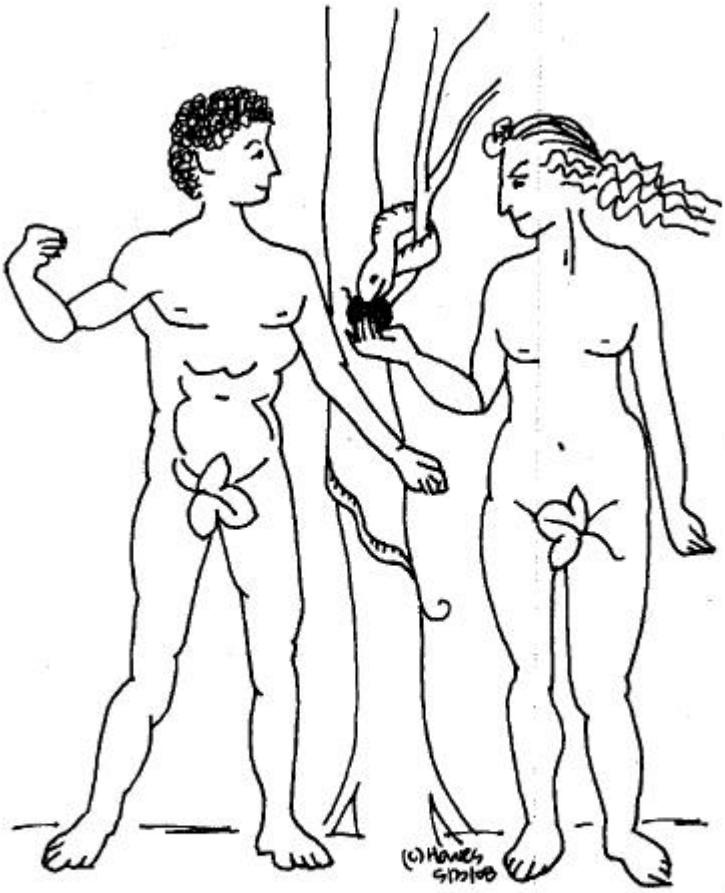
are all. To imagine otherwise is seriously to have misunderstood the character of credal confession.

double take

Hilary Howes

YOUR PARENTS SAID: "Fruit is good for you!"



THE BIBLE SAYS: Genesis 3: 1-24

YOUR PARENTS v. THE BIBLE

op. cit.

Rex A. E. Hunt

The Gift of Progressive Religious Movements

Response to a Response (Garry Deverell, CP 17)

Seven years ago the American theological journal, *The Christian Century*, ran an editorial on "growing churches".

It reported a German church consultant who, after collecting data from one thousand congregations in thirty-two countries, concluded that

> all growing congregations have eight traits in common: leaders who empower others to do ministry; ministry tasks distributed according to the gifts of members; a passionate spirituality marked by prayer and putting faith into practice; organizational structures that promote ministry; inspiring worship services; small groups in which the loving and healing power of fellowship is experienced; need-oriented evangelism that meets the needs of people the church is trying to reach; and loving relationships among the members of the church".[1]

But as my reporter, Roy Hoover (Professor of Biblical Literature), pointed out, noticeably missing from the list

> is any mention of teaching and learning, any reference to biblical or theological literacy, or any reference of any kind to what people have come to *know* and *understand* about their faith. Apparently churches today can flourish even though their members do not know or believe anything important enough to be perceived as a significant factor in their growth as organizations or in the lives of their members.[2]

Now, far be it from me to imply or even suggest the German consultant mentioned in the journal editorial, and the one referred to in Garry Deverell's review article (*CP* 17), are one and the same person. I am sure they are not. But both articles raise again the issue of "being church" and in this case, being the "emerging church" and its companion, the so-called "alternative worship" experience, which are receiving both energy and support in many places today.

But first just a couple of brief passing comments on Deverell's response to Wolfgang Simson's "15 Theses toward a Reformation Church". And a word or three of my own.

The word count of the Deverell response is significant. Simson's

[1] Quoted in Hoover.

[2] Hoover, 22-3.

op. cit.

suggested "15 Theses" number approximately 2,387 words. Deverell's argument: 6,190 words, approximately. A combined total of around 8,580 words.

I am not sure such a Nicean/neo-orthodox "sledge-hammer" is required as the response to the kernal of the evangelical/emerging claims of the "15 Theses". Sure some of Simson's arguments seem a bit thin on the ground, if perhaps not careless, which undermines his cause. But sweeping responses and assumptions including usage of the phrase "the early church" and the mixing of "Christ" and "Jesus" do not, in my opinion, show helpful avenues for dialogue. Instead they point more to propaganda for a certain point of view.

On the former there was not one early church. Modern biblical scholarship shows the origins of "Christianity" are not at all clear. What agreement there is,suggests there were several early christianities, even after Nicea. But power and sword and politics sought to exterminate any different point of view or practice. On the latter, there is a gap between the "historical Jesus of Nazareth" and the "Christ of orthodox Christian faith"—a gap which became a chasm in the 20th century. Indeed, such a difference has been around in serious biblical scholarship since 1865! And is getting exposure currently through the "progressive" (rather than "emerging") Christian movements. Such studies has caused Religious Studies Professor Charles Hedrick to suggest:

> At some point, historians will need to examine whether the historical man, Jesus of Nazareth, has common ground with the Christ of faith. The agreements, if any, between these two figures may help us understand how, and perhaps why, Jesus was elevated in the church's faith from Jewish peasant to Messiah to God.[3]

In other words, neo-orthodoxy does not have the final say on what is or is not "genuinely *Christian* … or *Christian* worship". But, and yes there always seems to be a "but", poor scholarship is not scholarship at all, and Deverell is right to challenge Simson's theoretical (if not theological) underpinnings when they are inadequate. Without the full-stop!

However, all this is a preamble to saying: the church has seldom handled critical scholarship (biblical, theologically, liturgical) well in the congregations. Being a product of the former Presbyterian Theological Hall/United Faculty of Theology in Melbourne in the late 1960s the one thing I can say about my ministry/theological formation is: we were taught to think theologically (thanks Harry, Nigel, Robert, Norman). We were introduced to creative critical scholarship. But… we weren't given an adequate model of how to present it in our preaching and teaching. I, along with a few others, have had to work that out for ourselves.

Observing colleagues, drinking coffee with them and sharing stories about "grassroots" congregation/ministry life, as well as listening to the multiple stories from those who belong to the "church alumni", the gap between pulpit and pew frustratingly remains. When it comes

[3] Hedrick, 93.

to sharing the results of critical biblical scholarship with one's congregation, the options seem to be: (i) ignore it, (ii) resort to confessional apologetics (especially attractive to fundamentalists), or (iii) escape into postmodern doublespeak (tell the story and don't worry folk with facts).

However, as a ministry colleague reminds us, and in the spirit of Roy Hoover's earlier comment on the journal editorial, there is a fourth option: embrace critical scholarship. Be honest. Speak openly and publicly about it in teaching and preaching.

The problem seems to be such scholarship is viewed as a threat to faith. Well, that's right. It does make people question and doubt their confessional heritage and reevaluate what they believe and what they think is important. That is excellent. "Critical scholarship," my colleague goes on to suggest, "is a *gift* to the church. It is our *friend*. Whether or not the church embraces this friendship [still] remains to be seen".

There *is* a change emerging within the grassroots of the church, mostly within main- or old-line churches. It is called a "new kind of Christian" and is reflected in efforts which are either called *emerging* (often identified with "evangelicals") or *progressive* (often identified with "liberals") movements or paradigms. Both these visions are existing side by side "with an earlier vision of being Christian that has been the most common form of Western Christianity for the past 300 to 400 years".[4]

[4] Borg, 9.

A spokesperson for these emerging/progressive movements, Marcus Borg, says "it is a time of exciting Christian renewal and deep Christian division".[5] He goes on:

> The division is not only deep, but often acrimonious. Followers of the earlier vision… see the new way of being Christian as a watering down or even abandonment of Christianity. From their point of view, it makes too many concessions to modern thought, producing an anemic, politically correct, and vague theistic humanism. On the other side of the divide, emerging Christians often see the more rigid forms of the earlier vision as anti-intellectual, literalistic, judgmental, self-righteous, and uncritically committed to right-wing politics. The division is so great that it virtually produces two different religions, both using the same Bible and the same language.[6]

I openly place myself within the progressive/liberal movement.

This emerging/progressive movement does not make up the majority of Christians, but as biblical scholar and researcher Hal Taussig says "some astonishingly new developments with promise for a very different future"[7] are being explored and developed.

Taussig also says the current progressive movement is not the action of theological seminaries or religious bureaucracies:

> [It comes] from an unorganized but broad-ranging kind of Christian response to felt needs for vital spirituality,

[5] Ibid., 10.
[6] Ibid., 10.
[7] Taussig, 2.

> intellectual integrity, new ways of expressing gender, an alternative to [the] Christian sense of superiority, and a desire to act more justly in relationship to the marginalized [and the environment]".[8]

A robust Christianity shaped around those (above) five characteristics. Because of my own particular interests, the blending of these characteristics into the liturgical life of a congregation has consumed much of my energy and imagination over the past 10 years or so—out of a 40+ years of ministry. A combination of a renewed spirituality coupled with intellectual integrity.

So, in my understanding of "progressive" liturgy, it is not about the past, but life in the present. Thus, worship or the "Sunday Morning Experience"[9] is about celebrating life in the continuing, creative presentness of the sacred we metaphorically call "G-o-d".

Hence, when invited to share some thoughts on a colleague's paper, I suggested:

- Worship is a human activity, celebrated in the presentness of God/sacred—rather than praise required of us by God/sacred;
- It must be broad enough to create a cooperative experience (rather than collective)—cognitively and emotionally—what "process theologian" Bernard Loomer calls "size";
- Be a celebration of the whole of life;
- Have form/shape (I have been influenced by the models offered by Von Ogden Vogt and Henry Nelson Wieman—both relatively unknown outside their time or place);
- Make use of artistic media/symbols;
- Be "landscape" and "intellectually" honest; plus
- What is brought to the service can be as important as content.

And the goal of worship? To help us know and feel how we relate as individuals to ourselves, others, the world, the universe. To celebrate that relationship. To touch sources of creative transformation. To reinterpret our experiences. To reaffirm living in this world. Finally, the form or shape of such liturgy will offer six encounter points: Gathering, Centering, Exploring, Affirming, Celebrating, and Scattering.

Meanwhile, the founder of the Westar Institute, better know through the work of the Jesus Seminar, the late Robert Funk, in his editorial in the January/February 2005 issue of *The Fourth R*, issued this radical call to a group of scholars and associate church leaders:

> Throw the old forms out and start over [again] … design a new Sunday Morning Experience from the ground up … new music, new liturgy, new scriptures, new ceremonies, new rites of passage.[10]

The meaning I give to Funk's call is that the liturgical reformation needed in the church today must go beyond the "intellectual two-step" called "latitudinarianism"—preserving one's intellectual integrity by proclaiming belief beyond literalism, but continuing to use the anthropomorphic language/images of the traditional hymns, liturgy and creeds "in

[8] Ibid., 2f.

[9] Funk.

[10] Ibid., 2.

order to remain within the tradition".[11] But playing that game

> [still] compromises our integrity and our religion … [because] it is another example of keeping what we know and what we believe separated.[12]

I reckon church members and "alumni" deserve more intellectual integrity and honesty than that!

Such liturgical reformation as suggested by Funk has not always been easy. There is much "Sunday morning" baggage that must be got rid of. And many Nicean nurturing critics and hurdles along the way, not to mention the prospects of either charges of heresy or unemployment, or both, as one undertakes such a journey.

But for all that, I suspect the agenda items that will continue to shape such a brave progressive journey will include:

- A spiritual vitality earthed in the Australian here and now;
- Non-anthropomorphic prayer, hymns, and God-talk;
- An insistence on church with intellectual/biblical integrity which dances with all the arts;
- A broadening of the religious/biblical tradition to include extra-canonical and progressive contemporary reflecions/readings;
- Community with/for the "exiled" or "church alumni";
- Peace, justice and ecological commitments;
- Meditation and use of centering silence; and
- A rediscovery of lament.

The task for now is to begin, where it needs to, or continue, where it is already in progress, to "reimagine, reconceive (and) reconstruct…"[13] our Australian liturgical/"Sunday morning" worship expressions. And needed are metaphors and images and language drawn from the ways we understand ourselves and experience our particular "southern hemisphere" part of the world, "pervaded as it is by glorious creativity".[14]

Both the "emerging" and the "progressive" movements, it seems to me, are on such a journey, challenging the inherited theology and symbolism "that no longer fits the overall cast of life as it is lived, understood, and experienced in today's world".[15] Indeed, Kaufman continues his challenge:

> What we are speaking about … are quite momentous changes for the churches … changes which form and inform Christian devotion, experience, and worship at deep levels; changes in their understanding and practice of ministry, in their basic rituals … in their attitudes toward the Bible, in many of their hymns, and so on.[16]

Such is the scale of the required task. Yet church leaders, state and national, anxious about the decline in church membership, seem unwilling to initiate or support the changes being flagged by the growing progressive movements.

Returning to the research conducted by Hal Taussig and reported in his book

[11] Loehr, 8.
[12] Ibid., 9.
[13] Kaufman, *Beginning*, 126.
[14] Ibid., 127.
[15] Kaufman, *Mystery*, 437.
[16] Ibid, 437.

A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots, he concludes on this note:

> I do not ask of anyone: Is this your only spiritual home? Is it a final spiritual home? Rather, is it a place now that you can depend on to hold you, to nurture you, and to help you grow? The good news … is that progressive Christianity is far enough along that a whole new range of people can answer "Yes" to this question. Often even enthusiastically.[17]

And that, I guess, is more than enough, for now, for the journey to continue!

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Rex A. E. Hunt (rexaehuntprogressive.com) is a retired minister, founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers Australia and founding director of the Centre for Progressive Religious Thought Canberra. He is a member of the Literacy & Liturgy Seminar of the Jesus Seminar/Westar Institute, and chairs the planning team for the Common Dreams2 Conference (Melbourne, April 2010).

[17] Taussig, 175.

Lorraine Parkinson

Interfaith Relations and the "Great Commission"

There is no question that Christianity's historical roots gave it a decidedly evangelical raison d'être. It is also true that the historic Christian call to evangelism can create dilemmas for contemporary Christians involved in relations with other faiths, whether those relations are formal or informal. The same potential difficulties apply to both conservative and progressive Christians. I will base my reflections around the impact on interfaith relations of "The Great Commission"—"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Along with many Christians, Paul Tonson and Sandy Yule struggle with the implications of evangelical Christian theology in developing their ideas about interfaith relations. I commend Paul for his work in the schools, and for his careful application of aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures to his theology of pluralism. I find interesting his assertion that New Testament proclamations of God's grace have as their catalyst the Lot narratives in Genesis, with their emphasis on salvation outside of God's covenant with Israel. There are many reasons why Christians do well to claim the basic values of the Jewish Torah, including love of neighbour and hospitality for the stranger, or outsider. However, the "new covenant" of Jeremiah indicates a new beginning for Judaism following the exile, where God is to be encountered through careful observance of Torah in any location, not just in the "land", and more particularly, not just in the Temple.

Although such ideas are now "politically and religiously incorrect", the original adoption of the Hebrew Scriptures as the "Old Testament" alongside the "New Testament" without doubt represents Christian polemic designed to stress the superiority of the "new". Sandy Yule's opposition to alternative names for "Old Testament" as "ageism" sidesteps the need for sensitive Christian handling of the Jewish scriptures. Historically, the comparison has been understood by Christians not so much as between "old" and "young", as between "outdated" and "relevant". Hence the move toward "First and Second Testaments", or "Hebrew Scriptures" and "Christian Scriptures".

It is the New Testament which contains the Christian imperative to convert people of "all nations" to belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour. As already stated, the primary impetus is the "Great Commission" of Matthew 28. This is the scriptural passage quoted at Christian baptisms

through the ages. These are the words ringing in the ears of Christian missionaries setting out to "bring the heathen to Christ". The effect of these words on the Christian view of people outside the church has been immeasurable. They have certainly led to the adoption of Christianity by people of primal religions or no religion. On the other hand, for both Christian missionaries and people of other major faiths, those words have been immeasurable in their negative effects. The "Great Commission" has been the heart and soul of forced baptisms of Jews, plus the dreadful slaughter of Muslims and Jews at the time of the "Crusades". For ordinary Christians, the Great Commission has required them to look on people of other faiths as misled, ignorant, and in need of "salvation".

This belief and requirement influenced the words and actions of Christian leaders from St. John Chrysostom in the 4th century to Martin Luther in the 16th century. Chrysostom's disappointment that all of the Jews would not convert to Christianity expressed itself in his antisemitic diatribes delivered from the pulpit: "The synagogue is a criminal assembly of Jews, a meeting of the assassins of Christ, a den of thieves, a dwelling of iniquity, the refuge of devils." Chrysostom was also incensed that many Christians continued to associate with Jews, even attending synagogues (a condemnation of 4th-century interfaith dialogue, you might say). Luther's disappointment and anger toward the Jews of Germany was unbounded: "What shall we do with this rejected, condemned Jewish people? We dare not be partakers in their lies, their cursing, their blasphemy. We cannot quench the fire of God's wrath, nor convert them. With prayer and in the fear of God we must exercise a sharp compassion in the hope of saving a few of them. I shall give you my sincere advice." He then listed measures such as burning Jewish homes, synagogues and sacred books, taking their valuables from them, segregating them into ghettos and denying them the protection of the law.

At the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910, the Dutch missiologist Hendrik Kraemer represented the vast majority of Christians then with this: "The Christian maintains, in the face of the highest and loftiest religious and moral achievements in the non-Christian religions, that they need conversion and regeneration as much as the ordinary sinner needs it. The right attitude of the Church, properly understood, is essentially a missionary one." Some delegates were more reserved. The American theologian Walter Marshall Horton pointed out that Christians cannot claim to possess the truth of God in its entirety. When they face the mystery of the future and the mystery of death, they must humbly acknowledge that much is veiled from their sight. He said: "When we sit down with men of other faiths to speculate on these themes, we sit down with them as fellow mortals, bound like them by our finiteness, still wondering and hoping rather than "knowing" as the agnostics and theosophists claim to know."

Present-day expectation of the second coming of Jesus also contains the seeds of difficulty for Christians in their relations with other faiths. The understanding that all the world must be converted to Christianity before Christ will return to inaugurate the messianic age, means for many Christians that their only relationship with other faiths must be a missionary one. The underlying problem that deters many Christians from willingness even to engage in interfaith relations lies in the origin of "The Great Commission". The original intent of the end to Matthew's gospel was to inspire followers of Jesus to call others to observe his teachings. Given that Matthew was written around 70 CE, and that it includes what are regarded as core teachings of Jesus ("The Sermon on the Mount"), the passage most probably read: "Go and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Jesus is not otherwise recorded as authorizing his followers to baptize. In the time of Jesus the trinitarian formula was still many years into the future. Even though the New Testament mentions all three aspects of the Trinity (God as Father, Jesus as Son, and the Holy Spirit) these were not formulated as doctrine and in use as a baptismal "formula", at the time Matthew's gospel was written. Need we say that Jesus the Jew would never have seen himself as the second person of a triune God.

Given also that these instructions of Jesus are said to have been uttered by Jesus after his death, we are dealing here with the "resurrection" genre of gospel writing which claimed to record words of Jesus between his resurrection and ascension. Matthew does not know of any "ascension" tradition, which supports the strong probability that Luke and Acts came after Matthew. The original version of the "Great Commission" was written by Matthew to address Jesus' followers in the fifth decade after Jesus' death. While the commission's original intent was to expand the number of followers among Jesus' and Matthew's fellow Jews (see the other missionary imperative of Matthew 10:5-6), there are various reasons to see that the Great Commission has been expanded with a later interpolation.

> "The 'Great Commission' has been the heart and soul of forced baptisms of Jews, plus the dreadful slaughter of Muslims and Jews at the time of the 'Crusades'."

The interpolation ("baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit") represents a major post-Easter development in Christian thought. The implications of this for contemporary relations with other faiths cannot be overstated. When the followers of Jesus first began to

baptize Gentiles in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit,[1] they were not intent on converting people from another major faith (i.e. Judaism or Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism) to "Christianity". Even if Matthew had written the full text of the "Great Commission", that obviously was not his intent; Matthew had no knowledge of faiths called "Christianity" or "Islam". The effect of a literal reading of Matthew 28 has been to create an understanding that Christians are called to convert "all nations" (including all religions) to Christianity. Even at the time the Didache was written, in the second century CE, while the three entities "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit" were included in Christian baptismal confessions, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, with its understanding of God as "triune", was still centuries into the future. Christians do well to remember that trinitarian theology was developed when Christianity was intentionally being shaped as the triumphalist state religion of a triumphalist Roman Empire. This has inevitably created obstacles in relations between Christians and people of other faiths.

By definition, interfaith dialogue entails a sharing of faith and belief by both partners in dialogue. Sandy Yule raised the issue of what aspects of Christian belief can be shared with partners in this kind of conversation. He contends that traditional doctrines continue to be confessed as part of the "open and loving stance" of Christian participants in dialogue. I noted above that Christian doctrine which also understands the "Great Commission" as a call to convert people of other faiths to Christianity creates dilemmas for interfaith dialogue. It can lead to a cessation of the dialogue, and even to a breaking off of relations with representatives of the other faith involved. This is history repeating itself; it was ever so between Christians and other faiths. The time has come to move on to a more constructive and accepting approach to people of other faiths.

Having said that, I agree with Sandy that no Christian involved in interfaith dialogue need put aside his or her own Christian beliefs. I concur with his statement: "The special calling of Christians [in building and living out loving community] is to follow the way of Jesus, for which this is the main game." There is, however, the dilemma which arises when Christians interpret trinitarian Christian doctrine based on the "Great Commission" as a command to convert. I want to make a case for interfaith dialogue in which all Christians, whether conservative or progressive, can maintain their own beliefs and still refrain from trying to fulfil the "missionary imperative" of Matthew 28. Explicit and intentional efforts to convert during the dialogue process are "proselytism", which is different from the sharing of faith perspectives called "evangelism". Dialogue which is respectful of the other partner's faith does not exclude evangelism. Evangelism properly understood does not rule God out of the

[1] The Didache (circa 100+ CE) instructs: "Baptize [in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit] in living [running] water."

picture. When people of different faiths share their faith in the one God, there is always the possibility that one or the other may find himself or herself drawn to the other faith. Conversion to another faith, if it should happen, is properly between that person and God. It is not to be orchestrated by others out of a well-meaning but misguided human agenda, especially one based on a literal reading of scripture.

Sandy defends proselytism on the grounds that its aim is the passing on of "gospel values of love, forgiveness, truth, peace and justice". By what measure can Christians claim those values as peculiarly Christian? They are present in the traditions of all major faiths. It is not for Christians to "proselytize" in order to pass them on. Mutually constructive interfaith dialogue occurs when both partners meet on the foundation of values held in common. This is the essential basis for creating community cooperation and harmony between people of different faiths. It can only occur when Christian dialogue partners are prepared to set aside claims to Christian superiority which historically have led to proselytism, including forced baptisms. True dialogue enables the celebration both of shared beliefs and of differences. It acknowledges and accepts that there are many roads to God, while each partner holds fast to his or her own faith tradition. Differences are most often concerned with religious traditions, rather than with values.

There is much confusion among Christians about the difference between proselytism and evangelism. In November 2005 the National Working Group on Doctrine in the Uniting Church produced this explanation:

> The Uniting Church clearly distinguishes between "evangelism" and "proselytism". We understand evangelism is the sharing of the Christian faith in such a way as to model and provide individuals with reliable information about the content and claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is sharing the truth of Christianity with integrity, while being willing to engage respectfully with the truth claims of the other. For this reason, evangelism must never be manipulative or predatory. Proselytism, on the other hand, is distinguished from evangelism in that it is not dialogical. It is often manipulative, resorting to high pressure techniques in the achievement of its cultural and religious goals.[2]

In this time of great tension between adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths, interfaith dialogue both formal and informal represents the best hope for world peace. The word of warning is that such dialogue can help humanity down the road to peace only if it is conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect and acceptance of each other's faith. Christianity can and must maintain its view of God through the life and teachings of Jesus, called the Christ. It must also continue to examine its historical doctrine to ensure there are no roadblocks to its relations with people of other faiths.

Lorraine Parkinson is a retired minister and chairs the Vic-Tas Synod Working Group on Jewish-Christian Relations.

[2] "The Uniting Church and the Difference between Evangelism and Proselytism", an unofficial document of the National Working Group on Doctrine, 8 Nov. 2005.

Bob Faser

An Appreciative Response to John Evans

"Of Holy Days and Holidays" (CP 17)

Firstly, I want to express my thanks and appreciation to John Evans for initially raising this issue, including the fact that he "wore" a high degree of public abuse for doing so. Like John, I also question the value of the Good Friday public holiday and the Easter long weekend, but I do so for somewhat different reasons. In many ways, this is an issue fraught with complexities.

To begin with, as we consider almost every public holiday on the Australian calendar, we can find people in the community who experience the day as a holiday from work but who still, in all honesty, can say, "This isn't really my holiday". The most dramatic illustration of this statement is Australia Day. Most Australians view this day as the beginning of our nation's life. In recent decades, many non-Anglo-Celtic Australians have regarded this day as an opportunity to celebrate Australia's cultural diversity. However, for most indigenous Australians, the 26th of January represents the beginning of the catastrophic loss of their continent and the destruction of much of their culture. There really is no easy way around this fact.

There are other, if less dramatic, illustrations of this statement, as well:

- Republicans receive a public holiday for the Queen's Birthday;
- Pacifists receive a public holiday for ANZAC Day;
- Political conservatives receive a holiday for Labour Day, along with anyone sympathizing with employers on most industrial relations issues;
- The various public holidays observed on a state or regional basis for horse races, agricultural shows, and similar events are also public holidays for those who choose to spend the day doing something else;
- New Year's Day is received as a public holiday by those who see

another day (Chinese New Year, Rosh Hashanah, the First Sunday of Advent, *et al.*) as the start to a year that holds more meaning for them.

For almost every public holiday in Australia, some Australians can claim, "This isn't really my holiday." In this light, the handful of Australian public holidays that are linked either to Christian liturgical observances (Good Friday, Christmas Day) or their aftermath (Boxing Day, Easter Monday) are in very good company.

The issue is further complicated by examining the appeals to Australia's secular society, Australia's multifaith culture, and the need for a day to honour Australia's First Peoples.

While Australian society is, in many ways, profoundly secular, so are many nations in Western Europe that have public holidays for Good Friday and Easter Monday. In contrast, neither Good Friday nor Easter Monday is a public holiday in the flamboyantly religious United States.

Similarly, I believe a growing appreciation of the multifaith dimension of our Australian culture is crucial for our nation's future. But, in this context, I am unaware (speaking as a person involved in interfaith relations) of any call by Australians of faiths other than Christianity to delete holidays with a Christian origin from the calendar. (Australians of other faiths are far more concerned with increasing the willingness of employers to allow members of minority faiths to take time to celebrate their own festivals.)

I personally agree with John Evans that we need an annual day to honour Australia's First Peoples, and in which we can recommit ourselves to the well-being of our nation's relationship with its First Peoples. As a non-indigenous person, I do not wish to suggest the date on which such a holiday should be celebrated. However, before such a day is set, I believe there needs to be a wide level of consultation with Australia's First Peoples both as to the date of such a celebration and (more fundamentally) as to the question of whether or not the First Peoples see their relationship with the rest of us as something they wish to celebrate. This will not be a fast process. Once such a day is established, it would be an open question as to which existing public holiday it would replace.[1]

> "For almost every public holiday, some Australians can claim, 'This really isn't my holiday'."

In considering the question of whether or not Good Friday and Easter Monday remain public holidays, the sole issue I want to address is the level

[1] My own preference is that a national public holiday honouring Australia's First Peoples would replace some of the various "Cup", "Show", or "Regatta" holidays in different localities.

of congruence between the churches' observances of Holy Week and Easter and the observances of the wider community. If no real congruence exists, I believe that the churches should seek to voluntarily relinquish these public holidays by requesting governments to move the public holidays on these days to some other occasions.[2]

To look first at the other Christian observance marked by public holidays in this nation, I believe that a high level of congruence exists between the Christian celebration of Christmas and the Christmas celebration of the broader community. Themes that are never far from the surface in our community's celebrations at Christmas include hospitality, joyful generosity, and the idea of Christmas as an occasion for human ethical transformation (the "Scrooge motif"). All these themes are directly relevant to themes found in the proclamation of the Christian faith at Christmas.[3]

However, I believe that such a congruence of themes between the Christian observances of Holy Week and Easter and the activities of the broader community during the Easter long weekend is markedly absent. There is really far less common ground between the churches and the broader community at Easter than at Christmas.

The Easter long weekend affects a number of practical issues of church life for Holy Week and Easter.

- The existence of the Easter long weekend means that, for many congregations, Easter Day is a very low-key occasion. The non-frequent worshippers who make a point of attending services on Easter Day often do not make up for the numbers of regular worshippers who are elsewhere. Because of the Easter long weekend, there are many regular worshippers who rarely attend worship in their own congregations on Easter Day.
- As well, the structure of the Easter long weekend often means that many non-frequent worshippers are more apt to turn up at their local church for the solemn and sombre observances on Good Friday (before travelling to the place where they'll be weekending) than for the more joyful celebrations

[2] My own preference is that the Good Friday and Easter Monday public holidays be replaced by an autumn long weekend, with the date of the weekend to be set in consultation with state and territory Departments of Education in terms of their preference for the break between the first and second terms of the school year. Such an autumn long weekend may coincide with Easter (on the date celebrated by Western Christians) in some years, but not others. Similarly, it may also coincide with Orthodox Easter, or with Passover, in some years, but not others.

[3] For a fuller treatment of this concept, please see my doctoral project: Robert John Faser, *Christmas as a Season of Opportunity for Churches in Australia to Relate to Non-Frequent Worshippers*, unpublished Supervised Research Project for the degree of Doctor of Ministry Studies, Melbourne College of Divinity, 2003. (Deposit copies can be found in the Dalton-McCaughey Library of the CTM and in the State Library of Tasmania.)

of Easter Day (while they're away). This may have the effect of providing a skewed view of the Christian faith among those for whom this is their sole visit to church in an average year, as well as reinforcing in their minds the popular cultural stereotype of practicing Christians.[4]

In many ways, I envy my Eastern Orthodox colleagues who can, in most years, lead their congregations in the celebrations of Easter without the distraction and the competition of the longest long weekend of the year.

John Evans has done us all a great service by raising the issue of the continued value of the Good Friday public holiday. I personally believe that the Christian churches of Australia would have nothing to lose—and potentially much to gain—if Good Friday (along with Easter Monday) was no a longer public holiday. In any event, I'll end my response with the same words with which John ended his paper: "Public holiday or not, Good Friday and Easter will always be the holiest of days."

Bob Faser is Minister of the Cooperating Parish in Neerim South (Anglican & Uniting Church).

[4] The practice of some congregations (usually within the "evangelical" range of the Christian spectrum) who hold a premature "Easter" celebration on Good Friday is, in my opinion, no help here. Such a practice lacks liturgical and theological integrity by glossing over the pain of Good Friday.

what are you reading?

Uniting in Thanksgiving

by Robert Gribben
Parkville: Uniting Academic Press, 2008
Reviewed by Janice McWhinney

Covering centuries of prayer and practice at the Lord's Table, Robert Gribben explains the biblical theology and historical foundation of the *Sursum Coda, Sanctus* and *Benedictus Qui Venit, Anamnesis* and *Epiclesis*.

These terms are the heart of his new book, *Uniting in Thanksgiving*, in which he invites the reader into a study of the two Great Prayers of Thanksgiving written for the Uniting Church, and the reasons why they are modelled on the ancient "Antiochian" structure.

Using a group or string of words, Gribben "unpacks" the sixty or so lines of the two great prayers. For example, from lines 4-8, praising creation is preserved in the second prayer with different words:

> We bless you for this wide, red land,
> for its rugged beauty,
> its changing seasons,
> its diverse peoples,
> and for all that lives upon this
> fragile earth.

And again, words which retell part of the story from Genesis 2-3 are distinct from the first prayer:

> To Adam and Eve, children of dust,
> you gave the world and its wonders,
> but we misused your gift of freedom:
> we reached out rebel hands to be like
> you.

The book is overflowing with significant history, tradition, teachings from the Didache, sayings and prayers of the early fathers and "doctors" of the church. Some of the struggles, the insights that arose during the drafting stages, and the disputation that might still remain in the prayers' final form are also shared. A practical "how to" pray the prayer, including liturgical gesture and the logistics of preparing and serving, make up the third and final part of the book. To assist in comparing and contrasting, both prayers are printed in parallel in an A5 laminated booklet, which also makes a very useful resource for the presider.

Ministers are encouraged to use their creative gifts in liturgy and prayer to develop a Great Prayer of Thanksgiving within the scope of the faith and doctrine expressed. We are also reminded to think about we mean when we say the word

"sacrifice". This tension is recognized by asking, "What is the relationship of the horrendous events of Good Friday and the victory over death and new life proclaimed on Easter Day?". And also, "In what ways can we speak of sacrifice in a contemporary theology of atonement?".

This publication would be an excellent study and resource for presiders, sacristans, elders, candidates for ministry and others who wish to understand more fully the fibre of the story behind the words of the two prayers.

In my own attempts to do something new with the Communion Sunday liturgy, integrating small segments of the prayer with hymns and readings, the words "continuous whole" ring in my ears, and continue to be a point of exasperation. This study, therefore, provokes and challenges my own recent practice. It also asks me to re-examine my place at the table as "the church's minister".

What I glean from this study is honesty, humour and the author's signature "hyperbole", a faithfulness to tradition, and an integrity to the "authorized" church's prayers. Thanks to Robert Gribben, I now have a deeper understanding of the growth of the great prayers from seed to flowering as the "official canon of the Uniting Church doctrine".

Janice McWhinney is Uniting Church Minister in Kew East.

CP

coming in issue 19...

Walter Abetz

and

Ross Carter

credo — the virgin birth

James Godfrey

on ministry in mental health

Ian Breward

on process and the preamble

Kylie Crabbe

what are you reading