Welcome to the first edition of Red Wings for 2013!

From the Chaplain’s Desk
A message from Jean Shannon about volunteers and a beautiful poem by Noel Davis.

Reflection “Guns, Fear, Faith” by Matthew Bode discusses the gun control debate in the US.

Spirituality in Education
“The Case for Discussing Spirituality in Schools By Vicki Zakrzewski” is an interesting article from the website greatergood.berkeley.edu/

Burning Issues
This issue features a number of articles:

“Flock keeping the faith - and feeling blessed” by Barney Zwartz from The Age (on the National Life Survey);
“The unknown unknowns of the sexual abuse Royal Commission” by Ray Cassin in a recent copy of Eureka Street;
“Andrew Serjeant: art, stigma and other things” by Cate Hennessy of Like Minds;
and a climate change article on Kiribati by Paul Collins, called:
“Climate view from a nation doomed to drown” also from Eureka Street.

The Canberra Affirmation, page 10, developed by St James in 2008, which is the theme of the St James services for the first quarter of 2013.

The Library Shelf discusses books by Rex Hunt and Val Webb, with a review of her new edition of “In Defence of Doubt”.

On a Lighter Note: The Dead Horse Theory.

Editorial: Hope for the World
At the beginning of December last year we put up our Christmas Tree, but instead of hanging tinsel and baubles on it, as we do at home, Jean Shannon invited us to write on a small scroll our hopes for the world.

The tree stood with all its hopes attached until early this year and as Jean and I dismantled it, she suggested that I take the scrolls and record them as the collective wishes or hopes of the St James congregation at this significant time.

We had about 50 people attending that day, including children, and some of the children’s efforts were decorated beautifully, so I have taken a photo of some of them. Not all the details would be evident from the shot (side-bar) but the main themes were: freedom, sunshine, peace and harmony, compassion and safety.

About 40% of the rest of the scrolls mentioned peace; love; freedom from hunger; good health; and fresh water. Another 20-30% included tolerance, compassion, justice, trust, freedom from fear, God’s love in practice, fortitude, friendship and sharing with friends and family.

Given that there were no assumptions made about the expected outcomes, it was to me a rather encouraging view of our congregation, especially while we have been going through some tough times, and the world in such disarray, or so it seems if we listen to the media.

“Hope” is one of those words used often in the Bible, and according to the Oremus browser online it is actually used 207 times, “peace”, is used 344 times, and “love” is mentioned on 872 occasions. It may or not be significant, but one of the hopes we chose, was “freedom from fear”, and hope is a wonderful asset and tool to have when we are subsumed with fear.

As we move into 2013, may some of our hopes be realised: personal, congregational, community-wise, as well as on a national and international level. May we focus on the hope for peace, in relationships between individuals and nations. May we find new ways of making peace and showing love, demonstrating it, as Jesus taught us, in all his words and actions, to the world.

Merilyn Tandukar. Ed.
“Our pastoral volunteers are returning from their holidays and soon you will be meeting Aili, Deb, Felix, Jan and Michelle in the wards again. If you have been thinking of becoming a volunteer, now is the time to raise your hand because there is paperwork, clearances, interviews, hospital orientation and training and all this takes time. New courses are being offered by the Clinical Pastoral Education people – you will find a link below:
http://www.pastoralcareact.org/cpe/

We are hoping to begin the afternoon service at the Canberra Hospital sometime after 15 February. The NEW 2013 roster is posted at the bottom of the page but it is not an interactive post so you have to download it and write your names in the spaces provided. Then email or fax the completed roster. My fax number is 6286 1465.”

Chaplain Jean Shannon

Climbing with Bare Bones of Belief and a Strengthening Faith
by Neil Davis

There are no creeds, doctrines, dogmas
No titles to fasten my rope to the rock face,
Below me there’s what I’ve left behind
And the wounds and scars that mark my way

With me there’s the grieving
And the struggle with guilt.
There’s the story too of a man with a vision
and a passion for his mission
the memory of his followers
and their life changing experience

There’s the truth of my own life experience
and my reflections along the way
the guidance of the silence
the counsel of dreams
the trail food of the mystics
the presence of my companion on the rope below
and the inner imperative
to trust that persistent, small voice
befriending my discontent and dis-ease
intent upon me living fully the gift of life

Now I’m looking to see
Where to hammer my next peg
To fasten my rope.

(This poem was used by Jean in her latest service at St James. I thought it so insightful it was worth repeating here. Ed.)
Guns, Fear, Faith

Matthew Bode
Pastor, Spirit of Hope Church, Detroit

My first scare with a gun caught me completely off guard. A person in my community took a head first dive into a deep depression, finding solace in nothing but a bottle. The depression had become so severe that someone close to him came to me for support and to investigate what was going on in his apartment. No one had heard from him for weeks and we went to find him in the bright sunshine of an early afternoon. We heard no response after knocking, so we opened the door with a key, making sure to make as much noise as possible as not to alarm him. The apartment smelled like bad body odor. Empty bottles of cheap vodka lined the one wall and the person we came to see was at least 30 pounds lighter than the last time I saw him. His drunken stupor was disturbing enough, along with his anger at us for interrupting his day. He lifted up the pillow where he had been laying and revealed a black handgun. While I know very little about handguns, I knew it carried at least a few rounds in the clip. Thankfully his severe drunkenness had taken away any physical or mental ability to use it.

Guns are a part of life in Detroit, and in all of our major cities. After 12 years doing work in this city I love, very little about guns is shocking. Even after living in four different neighborhoods, all considered safe, it is not uncommon to hear gun shots, mostly young people shooting into the air as a cheap form of fireworks and entertainment. When I recently approached a neighbor and told him my house would be empty for a week while on vacation, he made it clear he would be protecting it with his shotgun. What can a person say but, "thank you"?

As the debate about gun control and regulation escalates this year, the reality of gun life in our cities has not surfaced in the largest media outlets. Fear of guns and fear of gun owners tend to dictate the boundaries and terms of our discussions. What if we stopped living in fear?

Not long after I came out of the closet as a gay person to one of the congregations I served, a very mentally unstable person threatened me over the phone. Twenty minutes of rambling, psychotic messages were left on the church voice mail, including a gun threat. She was certain that someone would be bringing a loaded gun to the next church meeting. The police and a lawyer friend diffused the situation. In our world, guns are most often used to intimidate, threaten and create fear.

Faith and wisdom lead us away from fear and into confidence. The roots of all of the major religions lead us to find peace in God and one another. Of course true faith and wisdom are not ignorance or naivety, walking into dangerous situations without an understanding of that danger. Rather, they are a counterbalance to the irrational nature of fear and its cousins, ignorance and hatred. Guns, and especially assault rifles and high magazine clips and all the related weapons that go with them, are sold on a premise of fear, ignorance and hatred, depending on America to empty our individual and collective wallets. Gun manufacturers want us to be afraid. Our fear, especially of one another, makes them more rich.

More guns do not create more safety. If there was a gun on me the day I was carjacked, I would not be alive today. An addict needed a fix and my car and my wallet would get him closer to what he needed. The broad daylight boldness of his offense rocked my world for weeks. The small revolver in his hand remains burned in my mind. Somehow the federal debate about guns has yet to speak to this reality. Gun advocates would want me strapped. A gun, however, would not heal my fear, but increase it. Fear makes people dangerous. It would be irrational and impossible to gather up all the guns and destroy them. It is far too late for that.

Still, we must acknowledge that the cold, impersonal nature of firearms helps us remain cold and impersonal with one another, and allow us to threaten those whom we fear, almost completely devoid of conscience. Most guns are for people who are afraid. They are afraid of the uncertain and uncontrollable nature of life, and in America, we work to control everything. The first gun I fired was put in my hands by my grandfather. It was a shotgun for game birds and I was about 17 years old. That lesson taught me about respect for the weapon, safety for me and others and how not to be afraid of something with which I was not familiar. The lesson was about a gun. Now, in this time, let the debate be about people, that we may respect each other, build safety for all of us and not be afraid of people with whom we are not familiar. Guns do not allow us to achieve these goals, and in fact push us backward toward fear. No civilization has ever survived on fear.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-bode/guns-fear-faith_b_2516990.html?
ncid=edlinkusaolp00000009
The Case for Discussing Spirituality in Schools

By Vicki Zakrzewski | January 8, 2013

“I believe in reincarnation because it just makes sense!” exclaimed 10-year-old Jesse in the middle of a lesson that was on anything but reincarnation. This wasn’t the first time one of my students had brought up a topic related to spirituality or religion. In fact, I found during my years of teaching that most of my students were both curious about and eager to discuss these subjects—a bit of a conundrum when schools generally consider these to be taboo subjects.

Interestingly, however, scientists are beginning to find that just like cognitive, physical, and emotional development, spirituality may also be a universal developmental process—which, given that teaching is informed by child development, raises the question: Can spirituality play a role in secular education?

What is spirituality?

Before I go any further, though, I want to fully acknowledge how divisive and tricky the topic of spirituality in education can be for very legitimate reasons. That is why I am approaching the subject through a scientific lens.

To start, there is no definitive agreement among researchers on the separation between spirituality and religiosity. In general, however, spirituality is viewed as beliefs, practices, and experiences that shape and create a way of knowing and living that may or may not be informed by religious ritual, tradition, and doctrine. A person often inherits religion, but makes the conscious choice to practice spirituality by seeking answers about the self, universe, and meaning of life.

While numerous scientists propose that spirituality is a developmental process, they disagree on how the process occurs. Some suggest we are born with spiritual capacity that is cultivated (or not) through interaction with parents, teachers, and/or our culture. Others think spiritual development occurs in stages as we integrate our beliefs with our feelings and actions.

To determine if there is a universal developmental process of spirituality, the Search Institute—led at the time by Peter Benson, an expert in positive youth development—collaborated with scientists from around the world to study the spiritual and religious beliefs and practices of young people. The Search Institute took their definition of spirituality from a paper published in 2003 by the journal Applied Developmental Science:

Spiritual development is the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than itself, including the sacred. It is the developmental “engine” that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices.

Almost 7,000 persons aged 12-25 from Australia, Cameroon, Canada, India, Thailand, Ukraine, the U.K., and the U.S. took part in the study that included surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. The sample represented a broad range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, and every major religion as well as Paganism, Sikhism, Native or Traditional Spirituality, atheism, agnosticism, other religions, and those who did not identify as religious.

What they found strongly suggests that a spiritual development process exists that transcends the boundaries of culture and religion and that does not necessarily require engagement in religious practices.

For example, approximately 64 percent of the sample indicated that they were actively pursuing spiritual development without strong adherence to a religious path—with more than half stating that they had grown in their spiritual identity in the last two years. Their main means for spiritual growth
included creating positive relationships through prosocial (kind, helpful) beliefs and actions, discovering meaning in life, practicing mindfulness, and aligning values with actions. Findings also suggested that the majority of young people would welcome the opportunity to explore the topic of spirituality in a safe, caring, and non-judgmental setting.

What does this mean for teaching?

Many consider the sole purpose of schools to be cognitive development. Yet, any effective teacher will tell you that every student is a “whole package” of thoughts, emotions, beliefs, family, culture, economics, etc., (and now, potentially, spirituality)—all of which directly influence a student’s learning. For example, science has clearly determined that a child’s social and emotional skills impact academic success.

So here comes the tricky question: If spirituality is indeed a universal developmental process, how do teachers account for this process in their classroom where separation of church and state is paramount? Interestingly, many teachers are probably already doing it—without even realizing it. If we use the definition of spiritual development given above, then teachers who... 

- provide experiences of awe for their students through art, music, nature, or studying great people are helping their students connect to something larger than themselves.
- teach prosocial skills such as gratitude, compassion, empathy, mindfulness, and altruism are helping their students develop positive relationships.
- relate the content of their classes to students’ lives and who take the time to get to know and cultivate their students’ interests and passions are helping their students develop meaning and purpose.
- incorporate service learning into their curriculum are providing opportunities for students to make a worthwhile contribution to society and grow their empathy and compassion for others.

How to talk about spirituality with students

But what about the finding that says young people are deeply interested in discussing spirituality? When students do bring these topics up, understanding that spirituality may be developmental can help teachers respond in ways that are both respectful and affirming to students’ growth process. For example, a simple response to Jesse’s newfound belief could include first asking him how he came to that conclusion and then validating his thinking about the larger questions of life as a positive and natural thing many people do.

A more formal example is the Passageworks program developed by the late Rachael Kessler. After years of listening to students’ stories and questions, Kessler wrote in her book The Soul of Education that “certain experiences—quite apart from religious belief or affiliation—had a powerful effect in nourishing the spiritual development of young people.”

These experiences came through students’ needs for connection, silence, meaning, joy, transcendence (sometimes mystical, but also through extraordinary arts, athletics, academics, or relationships), and initiation into the next stage of life. Passageworks helps teachers establish a classroom environment in which students feel safe to explore these needs.

Spirituality in education is a potentially contentious area, and yet recent scientific findings on spiritual development encourage us, at the very minimum, to ask the question: Do we need to pay attention to this? Perhaps it is apropos of the topic that there are no definitive answers—only big questions.

http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_discuss_spirituality_in_school
Flock keeping the faith - and feeling blessed

Barney Zwartz, The Age, November 07, 2012

Flocking together... churchgoers are 'considerably happier' than they were 10 years ago.

FALLING church attendances in Australia may have plateaued and churchgoers are considerably happier than 10 years ago, according to the five-yearly church "census".

"The complete Australian church is growing stronger, or holding its ground, and those who go to church are feeling pretty good about it," said Associate Professor Ruth Powell, from the Australian Catholic University and research director of the National Church Life Survey.

"The churches are not out of the wilderness yet, but the signs are good."

An initial analysis suggests the attendance decline has stopped. In Britain - which Australia is likely to follow - the decline has plateaued and even reversed in some cases, Professor Powell said.

The survey, believed to be the biggest in Australia after the national census, and the largest survey of church life in the world, involved 3000 churches from 23 denominations, with 260,000 adult churchgoers and 10,000 children aged 10 to 14 questioned.

The results just released are "first impressions", with more detailed research yet to be sent to the denominations taking part. They reveal that the average age of church attenders is 55 - up from 52 five years ago, and older than the Australian average. Six in 10 are women.

Churchgoers are highly educated, with more than one in three having a degree, Professor Powell said.

The Uniting Church faces a crisis, with 67 per cent of its members older than 60 and 45 per cent over 70. One in two Catholic and Anglican church-goers are over 60, but only one in three Baptists and one in 10 Pentecostals.

The mainstream denominations are still feeling the loss of the baby-boomer generation, a long-term pattern that will continue for another decade, according to Professor Powell. Half of all church attenders are Catholics, followed by Anglicans. Sydney Anglicans have a younger average age than the rest of the country.

The survey measures nine "core qualities" of internal church life, nearly all of which continued a strong pattern of improvement over the past decade. These include "an alive and growing faith", with 86 per cent of people saying their faith has grown; "vital and nurturing worship", with 76 per cent finding the preaching at church helpful; and "strong and growing belonging", with 82 per cent of those who attend church going weekly and 95 per cent at least monthly.

"Across nearly all sectors there is increased health and vitality," Professor Powell said.

"More people are saying they are growing in their faith than a decade ago, there is an increase in belonging, a strong sense of commitment to the vision of the church, and churchgoers are more likely to be involved in acts of service, whether as individuals or in organised welfare than 10 years ago, and you can see this trend very strongly."

The unknown unknowns of the sexual abuse royal commission
RAY CASSIN JANUARY 13, 2013

An old adage has it that governments only agree to hold an inquiry when they know what it will find. Yet that has not always been true of royal commissions, and it is certainly not true of the royal commission into the sexual abuse of children in institutions, whose members and terms of reference the Gillard Government announced last week.

At this stage all that can be predicted with any confidence is that the task of Justice Peter McClelland and his fellow commissioners will be long and expensive, and that the evidence they will gather is likely to shame profoundly many of the institutions that come under their scrutiny.

That the commission will cost many millions of dollars and may need to continue well beyond the three years initially allotted for it can be seen as obstacles only by those who think that a desire for quick fixes outweighs the obligation to expose fundamental injustice and acknowledge longstanding grievances.

The nearest equivalent to this Australian inquiry is the Ryan commission in Ireland, which submitted its final report nearly ten years after it began hearings. If that is what it takes here, too, so be it.

The commission’s terms of reference are properly broad, allowing it to investigate allegations of the sexual abuse of children in all types of institutions, public and private.

Such abuse has never been restricted to agencies of the Catholic Church. It can hardly be denied, however, that the chief impetus for the creation of this royal commission has been the appalling record of concealment of abuse in Catholic institutions, and of the protection of perpetrators by bishops and major superiors. If that record did not exist, the royal commission would not exist.

And Catholics — especially bishops and major superiors — cannot evade this fact by complaining, as they sometimes do, about malicious reporting by hostile secular media. If the abuses had not occurred, the reports could not have been written.

Worst of all, the abuse and concealment have evidently continued long after the church adopted protocols intended to redress the grievances of those who have been abused, and to prevent further abuse.

That is the considered judgment of Professor Patrick Parkinson, of the University of Sydney’s law school, who twice reviewed the Towards Healing protocols for the hierarchy. He has since ended that relationship, because he says the protocols have been undermined.

The police submission to the Victorian parliamentary inquiry into child abuse and media interviews by Detective Chief Inspector Peter Fox of the NSW police also asserted that church authorities have frequently stalled investigations of the sexual abuse of children.

These assertions are not rabid allegations by anticlerical, muckraking journalists; they are expressions of frustration and disgust by ordinary cops who have been prevented from doing their job.

Too many bishops and major superiors have failed to act in good faith in the matter of clerical sexual abuse, and in this respect the Catholic Church in Australia has replicated a pattern familiar overseas. Whatever else the royal commission may reveal, we already know there is an entrenched culture of concealment within the church, and public awareness of this culture is shredding the Church’s credibility.

That is why the best response the official Church in Australia has yet made to the child abuse crisis, the creation of the lay Truth, Justice and Healing Council, has been greeted with undeserved but predictable cynicism. It is a step that should have been taken ten years ago, and now it has ten years of others’ dishonesty and evasion to live down.

(cont, on p.8.)
The question that the royal commission cannot answer, but which we must answer for ourselves is why sexual abuse has been so prevalent in Catholic institutions. A facile, often-heard answer is that it is a consequence of clerical celibacy.

This is not true is the sense that is usually intended: the issue is not sexual frustration, for celibacy does not necessarily make a man a molester any more than marriage necessarily makes a man a rapist. But there is a deeper sense in which mandatory celibacy is indeed at the heart of the matter.

The culture of concealment arises because the institutional church’s reliance on what may be called the mystique of the priesthood: on the appearance of the priest (and by extension, a vowed religious, too) as someone special, a man set apart.

In most places and at most times, it has been through manipulating that mystique, rather than by citing official pronouncements, that the church has sought to wield practical authority. How can it not threaten a clericalist church, then, when the mystique is revealed to be a sham?

Ray Cassin is a freelance writer and editor who is based in Melbourne. He was founding editor of Australian Catholics in the 1990s.


Andrew Serjeant: art, stigma and other things

By Cate Hennessy, Like Minds, Issue 51, December 2012

“It is becoming increasingly more important for a society that cares about art, music and science to support people with mental illness. There are so many people with mental illness who are glossed over and overlooked due to stereotypical misconception.” — ANDREW SERJEANT

Some people spend all their spare cash on vices. Artist Andrew Serjeant prefers to spend it on advertising his extraordinary art. The 48-year-old has been diagnosed with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder and low-level schizophrenia, but says that shouldn’t stop him from contributing to society.

“If people are willing to be more flexible about the way contributions are offered and focus on the quality of the finished achievements, there are a lot of people [like me] under the radar who would contribute greatly to society,” he says.

In Andrew’s case, in spite of the terrible problems he has with his medication affecting his day-to-day energy levels and the intense fear he experiences as a result of his OCD, it’s his art that is his gift to others.

Through his art he wants to highlight that people with mental illness care about a range of issues, “such as the environment, unnecessary violence, and exploitation as well as the more positive aspects of life, such as humour, tolerance, understanding, peace, love, and unity”.

He finds inspiration everywhere. “I find music and symbols interesting, a movie I’ve seen, something compelling I’ve read, a photograph or certain people that I meet – it all inspires me,” he says. “And I like to put forward a narrative about those things in my paintings.”

Counsellor and fellow artist Chandra Marks is a big fan of Andrew’s work and loves his “very busy, very comic book style of painting”. She first met Andrew at an art class at Henderson’s Corban Estate Arts Centre. “Andrew’s work is very symbolic. He thinks about the meaning in each and every piece and listening to him talk about it is fascinating,” she says.

Chandra’s interest and encouragement in Andrew’s art came at a point when he was feeling very low. “It felt fantastic to have a timely, much-needed endorsement,” he says. Andrew’s favourite artists are Jean Michel Basquiat, Jackson Pollock, William Dekooning, and Picasso. “I like street art in general.”

Art is a huge part of how Andrew keeps healthy. “Without my art, I don’t know what I would do.” However, he also has other interests that help keep him well. “I love the language and structure of music and play the electric guitar,” he says.

“Exercise is also something that I try and do regularly. I used to exercise at a gym, but now I walk a lot and I have a stationary excercycle and weights.”

Most recently Andrew showed his work in an exhibition “Two Worlds” at a pop-up gallery on New North Rd (October, 2012). In 2013 he would like to get stuck into a new exhibition, producing 50 giant-sized paintings and getting them together in one place to see what people think of them.

“People liked the art and the colours,” he says. “I want to use that to bring mental health concerns to the forefront, but also to highlight that with the appropriate help and viewed with an open mind, people with mental illness can interpret and add to the world with dignity.”

View Andrew’s art on his website: www.andrewserjeant.co.nz/
Climate view from a nation doomed to drown

I’ve been to Kiribati, so I understand its vulnerability. Straddling the equator in the central Pacific Ocean, the sea is everywhere. You’re never more than one or two metres above the ocean on the long, narrow strips of coral atoll that make up a country with a total land-mass of just 811 sq km.

The significance of Kiribati is that, together with Tuvalu, it will be the first country to be drowned by global warming. The 101,998 people of Kiribati can only retreat into the lagoon or the ocean.

Already the islands are badly eroded, and unprecedented long and severe droughts are affecting fresh water supplies and the vegetation on which people depend for food. Wind directions have changed and unseasonal and more violent storms are lashing the 21 inhabited islands. It may be already too late for this unique culture, and the Kiribati government has begun negotiations with Fiji to purchase land to re-settle people.

Given that last year Australia took 170,000 immigrants I find it extraordinary that we are doing precious little for our Pacific neighbours in Kiribati who share much with us culturally and religiously. The islands are 55 per cent Catholic, 38 per cent Protestant and 3 per cent Mormon.

Geographically it’s a long way from Doha to Tarawa, the Kiribati capital, but it’s even further in terms of understanding the effects of global warming.

Sure, at the recent Doha conference the rich nations pledged funds to repair loss and damage from climate change in poor countries. But even though there has been recognition of the impact of global carbon emissions on poor countries like Kiribati, there is no legal framework to guarantee compensation, and high polluting countries are still unwilling to tackle their own emissions.

For instance Australia’s reductions are derisively small while we remain one of the world’s largest exporters of coal, a prime source for greenhouse gases.

As the Seychelles representative Ronald Jumeau bluntly told delegates ‘If we had more ambition [on emission cuts from rich countries], we would not have to ask for so much money for adaptation ... What’s next? Loss of our islands?’ That is precisely what it means for Kiribati.

And the Seychelles face a similar threat.

Nevertheless, despite fierce opposition from the United States, the agreement on compensation was recognised as a step forward even though it stopped short of any admission of legal liability on the part of the developed world and developing world polluters. It was proposed that a fund of $100 billion annually be set up to help poor nations deal with climate change disasters.

Where would these funds come from? Perhaps from existing aid and disaster relief budgets? Climate Change Minister Greg Combet rushed in to assure Australian taxpayers that they would not be exposed to these ‘loss and damage’ provisions, even though many Australians would not object to supporting our neighbours.

The US still refuses to ratify the Kyoto treaty so the Doha conference set up a three year process to negotiate a global climate treaty that would embrace both developed and developing countries cutting their emissions. It is proposed that it be signed in 2015 in Paris, coming into effect in 2020.

This is going to be a massively difficult process, with China, the world’s biggest polluter (much of it from Australian-sourced coal), determined to retain its status as a ‘developing country’ even though its economy by 2020 will be the world’s largest.

Meanwhile, out in the real world, where the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is projecting temperature increases of more than 4°C by 2100, we carry on as though nothing was happening.

The IPCC told the Doha conference that ‘approximately 20 per cent to 30 per cent of species are likely to face increased risk of extinction’ if temperature rises exceed 1.5° to 2.5°C above 1980–1999 temperatures. If the rises exceed 3.4°C ‘model projections suggest extinctions ranging from 40 per cent to 70 per cent of species assessed around the globe’.

The IPCC continues that ‘by 2020 between 75 and 200 million people [in Africa] are projected to be exposed to increased water stress ... Agricultural production, including access to food in many African countries is projected to be severely compromised.’ Add to that ice sheet melting and sea-level rises in regions like the Ganges delta where some 135 million people live, and we have a monumental problem.

While we wring our hands and climate sceptics pretend there is no problem, back in Kiribati people are already in the midst of a climate change disaster.

Author and historian Paul Collins is a former specialist editor — religion for the ABC. His most recent book is Burn: The Epic Story of Bushfire in Australia. Source: www.eurekastreet.com.au
Late in November 2008, after much discussion by the then minister in placement and members of the congregation, St James decided to put forth this affirmation as a reflection of our beliefs.

Recently we have had some discussion of this document and many of the sermons in the past month have attempted to address some of the content.

The affirmation is a “living” and fluid document and is subject to change as we evolve as a progressive congregation within the Uniting Church. It aims to express the common beliefs and understandings of most of the congregation, but of course there will always be personal differences and ongoing discussion and revision where necessary. All are invited to read and reflect on these words.

The Canberra Affirmation

As progressive Christians in the 21st century, we are uncomfortable with rigid statements of belief, as we recognise our understandings are shaped by life experiences within cultural and environmental contexts. Yet, there are some common understandings which continue to shape our lives, both individually and in community with others. These we seek to affirm and celebrate:

• We celebrate that our lives are continually evolving in a web of relationships: continuous with historical humans and their societies; with other forms of life; and with the ‘creativity’ present at the origins of the universe. Over billions of years this ‘creativity’ - the coming into being of the new and the novel - has undergone countless transformations, and we and all other life forms are its emerging products. Thus we are called to live in community, respecting all human beings, all life forms, our planet and universe.

• We affirm there is a presentness in the midst of our lives, sensed as both within and beyond ourselves, which can transform our experiences of this earth and each other. Various imaginative ideas have been used to describe this presentness: ‘God’, ‘sacred’, ‘love’, ‘Spirit of Life’. We recognise all attempts at understanding and attributing meaning are shaped by prevailing thoughts and culture. Ultimately our response can only be as awe-inspiring mystery beyond the limits of our ability to understand our world and ourselves.

• We honour the one called Jesus, a first century Galilean Jewish sage, nurtured by his religious tradition. A visionary and wisdom teacher, he invited others through distinctive oral sayings and parables about integrity, justice, and inclusiveness, and an open table fellowship, to adopt and trust a re-imagined vision of the ‘sacred’, of one’s neighbour, of life. As we too share in this vision, we affirm the significance of his life and teachings, while claiming to be ‘followers of Jesus’.

• We receive the Hebrew and Christian scriptures known as the Bible, as a collection of human documents rich in historical memory and religious interpretation, which describe attempts to address and respond to the ‘sacred’. It forms an indispensable part of our tradition and personal journeys. We claim the right and responsibility to question and interpret its texts, empowered by critical biblical scholarship as well as from our own life experiences. We accept that other sources – stories, poems and songs – imaginative pictures of human life both modern and ancient, can nurture us and others, in a celebration of the ‘sacred’ in life.

• We recognise there are many paths to the ‘sacred’. We respect the diversity and pluralism of truth-claims, often in the midst of serious disagreement. In and with this diversity we honour the integrity and meaning of each religious tradition and the people who practice them. We reject all attempts to convert others to any fixed body of belief which they would not come to through their own open, free, and considered explorations.

• We acknowledge that a transformative path of inclusion and integrity involves living responsible and compassionate lives in community with others. Such a path asks us to adopt values supporting social equality and connectedness. It entails non-violent peacemaking and considered forgiveness. It invites passion and action for social justice, and stewardship of the earth and all its life forms. It encourages humour, challenge, and acts of generosity. At its centre is an awareness of oneness: one with the ‘sacred’, with ourselves, with others, with the universe.

November 2008.
Newly Published Books

St James recently hosted two authors on the Australian progressive scene. The first was Val Webb, who preached and spoke about her recent edition of “In Defence of Doubt” and Rex Hunt, with his first book entitled “Against the Stream: Progressive Christianity between Pulpit and Pew” published by Mosaic Press. Rex has also edited another book with John W Smith, on progressive Christianity - “Why Weren’t We Told? A Handbook on Progressive Christianity” by Polebridge Press. It is also now available in bookstores and online.

Here is part of a review of Val’s book, by Rev. Dr. Sue Emeleus, Anglican Deacon and Interfaith Activist.

“It is a huge pleasure to review this book. I began corresponding with Val while she was still living in USA, after I read “Why We’re Equal”. I had many copies of the first edition of the Doubt book, but all of them were given away as gifts. If you are looking for a book, hot off the press, to give to anyone who is at all interested in faith matters, this is the book. In the preface Val describes the changes she has seen in the seventeen years since she wrote the first edition. It continues to be a book which gives permission to us all to go on doubting and growing, but also throws a lifeline to those caught in oppressive and imposed theologies. I am even more enthusiastic now than I was when I first read it.

In the course of the book, Val explains terms such as liberation and feminist theology, process theology, Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts, what is meant by modern and post-modern thought and how they all relate to the tensions produced by doubt in the lives of people.

The style is simple with no complicated theologies to push, but along the way she gives a bird’s eye view of many of the theologians who are influencing our thinking right now: John Cobb (expounding Whitehad’s process theology), Charles Birch, Albert Schweitzer, Henri Nouwen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karen Armstrong, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Frederich Buechner, John Hick, Mary Jo Meadow, Rita Gross, Natalie Goldberg, Sallie McFague, Catherine Keller, Virginia Mol- lenkott, Richard Holloway and John Selby Spong.

Val Webb loves biographies and autobiographies. She tells a lot of her own story in the book, and introduces other surprises such as the confessions of Mother Teresa, revealed in her letters. The book is worth reading just for these. Val has added another chapter of examples of doubters, with many more women included in this edition....

Messages about doubt are reiterated through the book: “doubts are part of an ongoing process of faith but the first step is key- to accept that doubts are not negative but positive (p76); these moves were initiated by doubt composted over time, and both challenged the authority of a previous paradigm (p82); to doubt and work through our beliefs is not to lose faith. Rather, it is like running away from home, knowing we can come back home for dinner (p84); the element of doubt is an element of faith itself...One can never promise not to doubt (p90); most religious doubt is around traditional ideas about God and how God acts in the world (p106); theology has never claimed a single image of God but rather has evolved through the centuries. The problem for doubters is that such evolution of ideas has not always been offered to those of us sitting in the pews (p106); doubt is being vindicated for what it is in most other disciplines, the honest, creative response to inconsistencies, out-dated truth and oppressive authoritarianism (p173). Quoting Richard Holloway: “our doubts and loves can cause all sorts of lovely flowers to bloom, such as tolerance and compassion...faith has to be co-active with doubt or it is not faith but its opposite, certainty” (p173).

I quote her last paragraph in full. “The invitation to doubt has been extended, to cherish and nurture doubts as sacred gifts that lead into richness and freedom. Freedom is to doubt so boldly that all issues of belief and faith can gain a hearing. What is the promise? Not constant sunshine, instant success, unlimited wealth, immortal health or a personal genie. Rather, it is the hope that, if we open the windows of our lives and allow fresh winds to blow through- and sometimes cyclones, tornadoes and thunderstorms- we will also recognise a caress that lightly touches our face, or the inner joy of interconnectedness with the universe and with something many call God” (p186).

Source: www.eremos.org.au
On a Lighter Note

THE DEAD HORSE THEORY

The tribal wisdom of the Plains Indians, passed on from generation to generation, says that "When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount."

However, in government, with endless taxpayer resources, more advanced strategies are often employed, such as:

1. Buying a stronger whip.
2. Changing riders.
3. Appointing a committee to study the horse.
4. Arranging to visit other countries to see how other cultures ride dead horses.
5. Lowering the standards so that dead horses can be included.
6. Reclassifying the dead horse as living-impaired.
7. Hiring outside contractors to ride the dead horse.
8. Harnessing several dead horses together to increase speed.
9. Providing additional funding and/or training to increase the dead horse's performance.
10. Doing a productivity study to see if lighter riders would improve the dead horse's performance.
11. Declaring that as the dead horse does not have to be fed, it is less costly, carries lower overhead and therefore contributes substantially more to the bottom line of the economy than do some other horses.
12. Rewriting the expected performance requirements for all horses.

And, of course .......................... 

13. Promoting the dead horse to a supervisory position

We want to hear from You!

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