

Areopagus
Hill

in service

through a glass

op. cit.

Issue 13
May 2008

David Merritt

on alternatives to traditional
Christian thought: some personal
discoveries

John Smith

Caro Field

Ross Carter

responds to Ken Dempsey

Issue 12
March 2008
Price \$4

A forum for theological dialogue

EASTER HAS COME AROUND ONCE again, and so has *Cross Purposes*. The four very different articles in this issue all address, in various ways, the question of the church's engagement with the culture in which we find ourselves.

Judith Watkins' Christmas sermon reflects on the universality of God's love which invades creation in the birth of Jesus Christ. There is no part of the world that cannot be reached by this miracle, an extraordinary event occurring in a surprisingly ordinary way.

Brad Harris' reflection on ministry draws on his recent experience at the World Methodist Evangelism Institute Seminar. Brad perceives a lack of commitment to evangelism in the UCA, and wants to reemphasize our "personal and institutional capacity to awaken and invigorate new faith". The situation of churches overseas, often so

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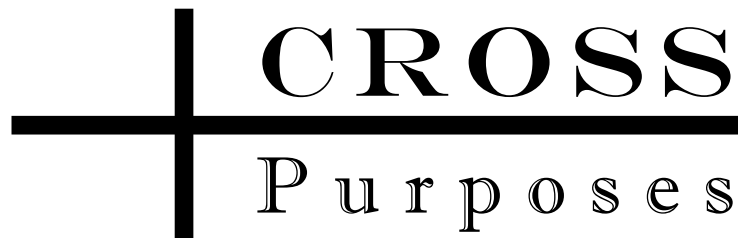
different from our own, can be a helpful guide in this.

Peter Sellick is also concerned with the mission of the modern Western church, but diagnoses a much deeper malady: that “liberal Protestantism, in its eagerness to be loved, has lost the centre of the gospel which is stranger than we can imagine and more terrible”. Our willing conformity to modern culture is rendering us irrelevant, as evidenced by the ready adoption of contentless corporate fads like the “mission statement” and “strategic plan”. A more hopeful future is possible, but it will require hard intellectual work, and will amount to nothing less than another theological revolution.

The “Flags and Funerals” crisis of 2005 was one of the most heated and controversial engagements between the Uniting Church and modern

Australian culture. Both outside of and within the church, the rights and wrongs of patriotism and pastoral care were passionately and vigorously contested. Now, some three years later, these questions are revisited by Ken Dempsey, who has recently returned to parish ministry after many years of research and teaching in sociology. Ken focuses on the symbolic importance of the “sacred soldier” in our society, and the ways in which socially sacred symbols stir the very deepest emotions. He concludes that without taking these emotions seriously it will be impossible to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ. This discussion will be continued in CP 13 with a response from Ross Carter. Feel free to contribute your own thoughts by letter (see below).

We hope the following pages will stimulate some valuable reflections.



CROSS

Purposes

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Each year the numbers of young people feeling an affinity with the sacrifices of servicemen and women grows substantially whilst the number of young people finding relevant the Christian gospel as offered to them by the mainstream churches declines substantially. Surely, there is something we can learn from this? Something about communicating the message of God’s love in action and language that touches the hearts and minds of contemporary Australians. The affinity of young people with the myth of the sacred soldier may provide one point of contact.

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Notes

¹I have used as main sources for this historical section: Jon Davies, “War Memorials” in

cal section: Jon Davies, “War Memorials” in David Clark (ed.), *The Sociology of Death: Theory, Culture, Practice* (Blackwell/The Sociological Review, 1993), and David Cannadine, “War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain” in Joachim Whaley, *Mirrors of Mortality* (Europa, 1981).

²J. M. Winter, “Some Aspects of the Demographic Consequences of the First World War in Britain”, *Population Studies* XXX (1976), cited in Cannadine, 197.

³J. Morely, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (London, 1977) cited in Cannadine, 218.

⁴I am indebted to Davies and Cannadine (opp. cit.) for most of the insights concerning the significance of the memorial movement and the self-sacrificing redemptive character of soldier’s deaths. The parish church of St. Augustine, Queen’s Gate, Kensington, has this tribute: “This Calvary was erected by their friends”.

⁵*Crosslight* June 2005, 11.

⁶*Crosslight* June 2005, 10.

⁷Daniel O’Leary, “Human Touch of Easter”, *The Tablet* (March 24, 2007), 9.

⁸Ibid.

⁹UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, “Establishing the Relationship Between Christian Funeral Services and Civic Rites” (2005), 4.

¹⁰Evelyn Woodward, personal communi-

is important that there be appropriate recognition of the totality of the particular human life for which thanks is being given.” Where I differ is in how this common humanity with God can be expressed. The authors of the discussion paper say, “This task is usually accomplished by the brief summary of a person’s life called a eulogy.”⁹

I believe we should offer much more than this to mourners, and that to do so is consistent with the belief that “By virtue of our solidarity with the Savior, everyone and everything is redeemed and completed”. So, I have no objection to placing an object that is significant to the dead person on a coffin. It seems to me that doing so reflects who the dead person was and what was precious and sacred to him or her. For the dead person’s loved ones it is an action imbued with meaning and profound feelings. Their feelings are themselves sacred and deserving of our respect.¹⁰ We should use the sacred significance of the objects they bring to convey the gospel, and especially to show what is at the heart of the gospel: the fact that God loves them, and yearns to be in a loving relationship with them, a relationship, Christians believe, death will not end.

To paraphrase one correspondent to *Crosslight*: if the RSL rite is to be held outside the church and the flag not be draped over the coffin inside the church, it might appear that there

is no place inside the church for the lives lived by people—in this case a part of it lived on the battlefield. The incarnation means that for God this is a beloved world: all of it, including what we Christians have decided to call secular, is as much beloved as what we have deigned to call sacred.

So I do not believe there is a simple way forward on the contentious matters that the Essendon incident has highlighted. There is no blueprint we can lay down confident it will be implemented. Why? Funerals will always remain contested events, and they will do so for at least two reasons: First, they arouse such strong feelings, and second, there will persist a plurality of competing theological perspectives on the contentious issues that this incident raises. I do not believe that in these circumstances we can expect the leadership of the church to endorse one of these competing perspectives as the official one.

We are left with the difficult task of dealing with each request for a funeral without clear-cut directives to stand behind. We have, I believe, to endeavour in each instance to find a way of communicating the message of God’s love and our hope in Christ in ways that people can comprehend and embrace. We may have more success in achieving such outcomes if we can find ways of integrating what is dear and sacred to such people into the funeral service, without sidelining the gospel message.

Sharing the Faith We’ve Got

This is an edited version of a paper reflecting on the World Methodist Evangelism Institute Seminar, 12-27 June 2007

Brad Harris

THE WIDESPREAD distaste for “evangelism” may have led to an aversion to anything and everything that looks like it. We need a fresh approach.

When an e-mail from Assembly announced the opportunity to share the Atlanta Seminar of World Methodist Evangelism (WME), something told me I needed to be there. I am very thankful indeed that so many people encouraged me and helped make it possible. Time at Taizé Community, meeting with revival figures from eastern Europe and Africa, and later a conventional church in Finland, have formed the background for these reflections, apposite to our realization of steady adverse changes in the UCA.

The grass is usually greener across the denominational fence, or in another city, or another decade or century. The habit of mission consultants to showcase a “gee whiz” minister in some “you beaut” parish can just be depressing. Most of us

have visited a church somewhere which was really switched on, but as a rule, most congregations just get by happily enough. Few can be described as thriving churches.

There is a case that the UCA is doing “the good stuff”. We seek to be “broad church”, well founded in Reformation and Revival theology, well positioned and possessed of a refined strategy to impact Australian public and social life, and are committed in faith and justice. Born of the ecumenical movement, multicultural and very diverse, the UCA can pat itself on the back. But it may be that the “well positioned” tag is misplaced if one subscribes to the “life and death cycle” analysis of church. We are not “well positioned” while our age and membership profile shows that the message of salvation is not getting through in a way that translates into new membership. There is something in us that persists in putting an optimistic interpretation on our life,



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and while we wish it otherwise, members of the UCA become older and fewer by some 1% per year. This is despite major efforts to change. Change, for us, is not easy, and certainly not quick.

I cannot be the only one who has sat in our councils and wondered whether our whole process of being church actually gets in the way of much of the stuff we set out to do in the first place. One suspects, after seeing Jesus' response to the official religious in the gospels, that he would have similar problems with us. Many of us, who participate in the various parts of the church's life, recognize we have a faith to share and a story to tell. We resolve again and again not to let the church stand in the way of its own message: the enjoying and sharing with others our life in the triune God.

It is interesting that in few places around the world, if any, is the experience of the Australian churches being duplicated. One can find the range of moods from triumphalist to defeatist, and in many young people one meets, energy and hope. My impression from a very limited knowledge of Methodism overseas is that a more optimistic climate can be found in Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, Africa and South East Asia.

Methodists have recognized in Wesley's work the power of the word of faith, coupled with the deeds of love, and made vivid and real by the

signs and wonders visible in the church in many places. If, as Christians, we ever lost this uplifting and exciting story, we did not usually lose many of its memories, especially its hope, its refreshment, and its renewing purpose. In a day when visible addition to the profile and power of the church is quite difficult, all of us have it in our hands to kindle in others new faith and the rediscovery of our heritage. It is of our personal and institutional capacity to awaken and invigorate new faith that I wish to write.

In Australia, Christians wanting to share the many benefits of their faith experience have often found ambivalence in the people they talk with. While the spiritual riches and possessions of the Christian life are cherished and respected by many people, the message of our culture is that churches have no special ability to mediate them. In fact the popular message of the ineptitude of the churches, and personal experiences of pushy and vacuous evangelism, have led to Christians going silent, in the mistaken belief that their faith has been rendered outmoded by the forces of history or the passage of time.

The remedy, of course, is not to cast pearls before those who have no interest in them, but to feed those for whom spiritual hunger is a daily reality, who will honour and treasure the gift of faith and the love of God. The evidence today points to a much

writers of the discussion paper, we are in danger of forgetting that symbols—including the cross and the national flag—do not have any meaning inherent within them. We imbue a symbol with meaning and not all members of the same society or sub-grouping, including all Christians, imbue the same symbol with the same meaning. The authors of the discussion paper make a similar point. They say the flag, like any other symbol, cannot be pinned down to a single meaning. However, they go on to ignore the flag's diverse meanings, arguing that there are strong grounds within the Christian faith for the view that the national flag of any country—Christian or not—represents something of the world's brokenness and division. You can make a similar empirical case against the use of the cross as a symbol. It too still represents the world's brokenness and division. It too has been used by rulers and leaders who have abused their power and claimed they were doing it in the name of Christ.

The fact is that both the flag and the cross have diverse meanings and that is a key issue in this debate. The conflict emanating from the Essendon incident shows that churchgoers often imbue both these symbols with diverse and conflicting meanings. So we should be cautious in arguing that some symbols should not be present in the sanctuary because for some of us, and it will never be for all of us,

they have meanings we find offensive, or meanings we believe impede the gospel message.

Thirdly, Wes Campbell said that he was endeavoring to preserve sacred space. He seems to be saying we keep space sacred by excluding non-sacred or secular objects, and the discussion paper seems to be adopting a similar position. For many Christians the dualistic distinction between the sacred and the secular, or the sacred and the profane, no longer rings true and is for them incompatible with the message of the incarnation.

Those who reject this dualistic distinction believe that, in taking on flesh, God discards divine immunity.⁷ In Jesus God gives the earth his divine life forever. God becomes the human one with five senses. He embraces our humanity with its dreams, relationships and all its experiences and the symbols we adopt to represent our humanity. In short, the whole of creation is made sacred by the incarnation. Christ is present in the so-called secular places and events. The world of the incarnate God "is a world in which everything belongs".⁸

What I have just said is also consonant with what is said on the subject of the incarnation in the discussion paper: "We acknowledge that in Jesus Christ, God has embraced the fullness of our common humanity—there is nothing of our humanity which is not taken up in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Therefore it

courage and personal integrity, and I still am. However, the more I have reflected on this course of events, the less convinced I have become about the plausibility and, from my theological perspective, the validity of dealing with the dilemma in this way. The experience of a recent return to parish ministry, which has included conducting a number of funerals, has had a great bearing on my views and feelings about the issues we are considering this evening.

Firstly, much of the debate on this issue has proceeded on the assumption that this controversy is, at its heart, about a clash of symbols. This tells only part of the story, and not the most critical part. In a controversy of this nature feelings rule. We offer rational explanations for our action, but such explanations play only a surface role: feelings such as those of being accepted, of being loved, of belonging, and those of being rejected and feeling alienated are the major motivating forces.

Wes Campbell said, "As a minister, my first responsibility is to ensure that nothing obscures the gospel". And for him that means in this context ensuring those present hear the good news of Jesus Christ's resurrection. But I do not believe there can be proclamation of the gospel without communication occurring. Communication will be next to impossible if we use a method of proclamation that appears to trample on the mementos,

the words, the actions which the mourners are hanging on to for dear life: hanging on to in their desperate effort to deal with their grief; hanging on to because they find themselves in an alien environment, a church; hanging on to because the symbols are for them inextricably bound up with the identity of their dear departed father, mother, child, friend, or with their own identity, or both.

So, for example, the Christian message we are seeking to communicate may go unheard if we say well your father's sacrificial war service will have to be dealt with in the main outside this building, or if we say you can put mementos of his Lodge membership on that table over there but we cannot have what is essentially a non-Christian rite performed within a Christian church.

Sideline these emotionally charged symbols, these beloved objects and it is highly likely those mourning are going to feel rejected, angry, and alienated. They are not going to hear the message of the significance of Jesus Christ's resurrection for them, or their departed loved one, because they are not getting the message that God loves them and that God is grieving with them, even if we utter those very words. On the contrary, they are highly likely to interpret the action as meaning the minister and his church is unfeeling and unloving.

Secondly, if we adopt the approach of Wes Campbell and the

greater interest and hunger amongst the young than has been the case for decades, but it has not yet translated into a hunger to practice the faith in a UCA congregation.

The church remembers great harvests, but in much of the farm there's little crop. The UCA in Victoria has embarked on a range of educational, structural and other changes, remodeling Presbyteries, building the CTM, trading property and building up finance and investments, yet it faces decline. The sower goes out with good seed, but it is as if we keep sowing the stony ground. It is of first importance to find for our context the best way to share the faith. Then there follows the task of identifying gifts and skills. Engaging energetically with our culture promises to be tough, but also stimulating and fruitful, because the soil has effectively lain fallow for so long. One advantage is that we enjoy a fresh start.

The UCA has plenty of avenues for development and enhancing of the skills of faith. The ones which can be identified as amongst our best must include:

- Putting resources into critical areas of need through UnitingCare;
- Engaging in expanded "outreach ministries" in school, health and industry chaplaincies;
- Providing ministries supporting many congregations, especially of non-English-speaking background, but also in rural and remote areas;

- High quality theological education staff, and provision of learning opportunities in the various disciplines;
- Invigorating growth opportunities through Uniting Church camping;
- Resourcing the church through Justice and International Mission, in various campaigns and programs, such as the Millennial Goals and the Climate Change material.

A holistic evangelism holds the promise that the UCA adopts "best practice" in the way she makes the good news heard, known and felt, through the wide range of the lives of her members and of her activities. It will partly be in the recovery of the language of faith sharing, conversion, catechesis, and sanctification. It will partly be in giving voice to our "brightest and best," but also in simply encouraging our people to share the faith that they've got, and encouraging our ministers, pastors and members in the demanding task of finding a language for today for sharing the ancient good news of the atonement won by Jesus Christ.

The World Methodist Evangelism Institute, WMEI, is a movement seeking to support in its participating churches any people able to promote faith sharing as vocation, program and policy. It takes the form of seminars, beneficial partnerships and other educational activities developed over some years, offered wherever needed,

and developed with the many and varied cultures where Methodist traditions are active. It is a means by which people who are excellent exponents of faith sharing can help churches in the Methodist tradition be more effective in their activities to share the good news.

It is a very tough call to go into an Australian town to sow the seed of faith. These communities seem to be hostile and unwilling to hear. We should not be discouraged, remembering the hostility to Wesley, Whitefield, Paul and Christ, and remembering that much is being learned in many countries about effective ways of evangelism. We do well to reconnect with the churches overseas which struggle against odds often much greater than we have here. We need to learn from them. They too can learn from us.

For this and other reasons I would like to see more participation by promising people in international learning events in our reformed and evangelical tradition, especially to be involved with WME, helping with support and gaining from others in expertise and wider perspective. This would entail continued investment in relationships through the vehicle of WME engaging us directly with the struggles of churches in many places, especially in African countries, in Southeast Asia and Latin America.

Today the UCA seeks to engage with new generations of believers and

seekers, as well as many in older generations who want to see the church be true to its ancient message and calling. Much of it is about freeing up latent capacity. Much of it is about sharpening tools and providing opportunities. Much of it is about finding the people and putting them in the jobs. Some of it is about keeping Australians in open communication with each other, and their counterparts in other cultures. For example, bishops from Africa and one from Bangladesh in contact with militant Islam expressed unease about “conciliatory” Australian approaches to Islam, an unease which I explored with some of them. They are still uneasy, but we have learned from each other.

There is a recognizable openness, dynamism and optimism within Australian culture which is a good base for engaging with overseas churches and for further developing our homegrown style of faith sharing. Yet low morale and pessimism persist in many places, as if people in the UCA, bogged down in the present and the past, cannot grasp a vision for the future which is both faithful and purposeful. One hears *ad nauseam* the words “significant” and “exciting” about things which are not. Many ministers are unable to give visionary leadership; it is not enough to plead, as many do, that their congregations are tired and reluctant, their Presbyteries unsupportive, or the Synod out of touch and behind the game. Church

Christ story. Some monuments have a reference to Calvary.⁴

A similar response is often given by young people who visit Anzac Cove and those who attend the dawn service. “It is so moving: their sacrifice has given us our freedom, our democracy, our way of life.” And that way of life includes ensuring every Australia receives a fair go.

In the person of the suffering soldier the profane becomes sacred. There is a twist to this eucharistic story, for the warrior becomes savior; however, *not* through killing but through selfless sacrifice. In a further departure from orthodox Christianity, the suffering soldier is often seen to earn his immortality. A similar point of view was expressed by some participants in the debate surrounding the Essendon incident. The suffering of soldiers is believed to wipe out any misdeeds they have previously committed—they are saved for eternity by their actions.

So where do non-veterans fit into this eucharistic story? We can only share in this redeeming action if we perpetually remember and celebrate the sacrifice. Fail to do this, and we betray the sacred soldier in much the same way as the disciples who fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane betrayed Jesus.

Wes Campbell acknowledges that he was rebuked for not honouring the sacrifice of soldiers, and that the flag does speak to many people of

sacrificial service, but for him, “In its sharpest form, the flag represents and honours war, or at least war service”. So he believes that the flag belongs to civic services and not in services of the church.⁵ However, a growing number of Australians do not view the flag this way. One *Crosslight* correspondent, a retired Army Major, spoke for many people when he said, “The Australian flag used on the coffin does not symbolize war, but the sacrifice the deceased was prepared to make for country and community”.⁶

So, in summary, the language of the sacrificial death of Jesus is applied to the soldier. He becomes a sacred object—it is his sacrifice rather than his qualities as a warrior which make him sacred. Attack the sacred soldier and we attack ourselves, is the implication.

Finally, I think it only fair that I say something about my own views on the issues this debate raises. All ministers and priests who are trying to conduct a Christian funeral face a dilemma quite unheard of when I was first engaged in parish ministry half a century ago. The celebration of the life of the deceased person has moved to centre stage and, on some occasions, it seems as though the wake has moved into the church, even that the gospel message has been pushed out.

Wes Campbell’s action was intended to prevent this happening. I was very sympathetic to the stance he took and very impressed by his

are viewed as sacred, and the dead soldier as a sacred object.

How did this view evolve? To understand what is happening now, we need to retrace our steps to at least thirty or so years prior to World War 1.¹ That was a time when a heroic view of war and its connection to manhood prevailed. Late Victorian and Edwardian public schools provided an ethos in which soldiering and games were equated.

The historian A. J. P. Taylor said that in 1914 no man in the prime of life knew what war was like. Death on the battlefield was seen as something heroic and splendid. And it was believed to be very unlikely. In the first days of the Great War the public school attitude held up. These naïve beliefs were totally destroyed by the first experience of bombardment in the trenches. One in eight soldiers who fought for Britain in that war was killed. Of the men aged 13-19, more than one quarter died.²

Nearly every family in the land experienced the untimely death of at least one of its younger male members. Death was everywhere and grief was overwhelming for the families of the dead servicemen. Victorian rituals of mourning proved totally ineffectual.³ The established church proved ineffectual too. At home, the church could not convincingly answer the anguished questions of the bereaved and disabled.

So when, in the years after the war, traditional religion and ceremony failed, people, especially the mothers of dead servicemen, sought alternative ways of making the losses bearable. One response in the UK was a massive increased interest in spiritualism. Another more widespread response was the construction of war memorials, and the gradual evolution of the ritual of Armistice Day or, in Australia, Anzac Day.

What I want to highlight is that the memorial movement was not so much an expression of patriotism as a spontaneous movement by the bereaved aimed at dealing with their sense of appalling loss. It was the bereaved, especially the mothers of dead soldiers, who pushed for the memorials' erection. Women endeavored to give their sons' lives meaning by erecting these shrines which spoke of how their sacrifice had purchased a precious freedom.

These memorials are, for many, the sacred shrines of the 20th and 21st centuries. In the view of many scholars they constitute a restructured version of the three main themes of Christ's passion story: sacrificial death, betrayal, and redemptive remembrance. Not all will agree, but it is arguable that the war memorials and our war cemeteries rework Christianity and put it at the service of ordinary people. The huge tragedy of self-sacrifice provides an obvious link to the liturgical enactment of the

hierarchy will always seem like that, it is the pastors who are the ones to give the lead, and if they don't do so, for long enough, they will eventually find that it all seems impossible. But when local leaders exhibit passion for sharing the good news, express it in a reasoned and respectful way in the community, and live it with integrity, this can create a place which is attractive to people looking for a new way.

Dr. Jamal-Harrison Bryant reminded the Atlanta Seminar that we must be sure to deliver what we say we stand for, or lose credibility. When I heard that, I thought of the UCA seeking to be a new force for ecumenism and unity in Australia, and wondered how long we will be in our disunity and sectarian attitude before Australians begin to ignore us. Has it perhaps begun to happen? Why exactly have we focused on diversity, when our special act in Australia was unity? The solution seems obvious to me. We did well with a lot of things, though we move terribly slowly. Why can't we do well by taking the plunge, and tell BOMAR, and anyone else who asks, that evangelism, with integrity, energy, resources and the lot, is our top priority, and we are prepared to let most other things find their own level and their own time. *Most* other things, but *this* one will be held up above all others.

Because God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, so too are

we engaged in the work of reconciliation. In adopting evangelism as a primary value for the UCA (it always was), we ensure that in all decision making and at all the critical times, we check our decisions against the evangelism test:

Will this action add to our skills and opportunities for faith sharing?

Will this action position us better for more effective communication where we are?

Will this action reduce or overcome impediments and hindrances to the church?

Will the proportions of our expenditures express the priority we are giving to faith sharing?

We have a great church, and a magnificent calling. We emphasize so many things, have so many reviews and so many committees, we barely have time even to talk about our faith. We will go through a whole Synod meeting without it even being mentioned, or even being intrinsic to any of our tasks.

Bishop Violet Fisher of the Methodist Afro-American tradition, in a thundering address, reminded the WMEI:

We have to understand the culture of the people we are trying to evangelize. People from many cultures have blended themselves in, but one size does not fit all. God is central to who we are...we have to open ourselves to dream new dreams. We have to open ourselves to various forms of worship,

Reggae to Calypso. We have to have God's eyes, visualize God's way. The world is waiting for us... the people are crying out.

As she started to raise the roof a bit she quipped, "And I'm not preaching, I'm just talking!"

I thought she could have been speaking of Melbourne.

Some proposals. *Pass it on.* Some of us who have spent time with WMEI need to find a voice with the CTM, CFM and our Presbyteries at various levels to help with a better focus on evangelism.

Join in. This could include finding some promising people to attend seminars in 2008, and preparing to host an international seminar in Australia. This should include as many people as possible from the far reaches of modern day churches, from the places where it is showing most energy, and from places where it is so sorely missed and needed.

Read the good stuff.

Faith Sharing: Dynamic Christian Witness by Eddie Fox and George Morris.

The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion by George Morris

Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America by Darrell L Guder.

Kicking Habits by Thomas G. Bandy (on systemic change in your church).

(on systemic change in your church).

Small steps locally. I will be pursuing my own ways of recovering evangelism; I understand that the other Victorian participants Peter Whittaker and Graeme Harrison are pursuing their own ways of contributing from their own learnings and reflections.

If nothing changes, why will this be?

The widespread comment by church leaders that they are swamped with demands must be heard. It is the way we choose to work, and the way the church chooses to work us. Like cleaning up the study (or the garage), we need to get ruthless about our priorities. If we keep on doing what we've always done, we'll keep on getting what we've always got.

To quote Eddie Fox: "You can't get there how you got here".

New ministries are inaugurated. Property works are proposed. People are appointed to Presbytery and other task groups. Projects are funded. We ask the question each time, "How will this action enable us to share our story, how will it enable others to hear? How can we multiply the witnesses to the love and grace of God in Christ?"

action so highly emotive, and why did it draw such a negative response from the wider public, the lay membership of the Uniting Church, and many of its ministers?

The sense of outrage occurred in part because Wes Campbell was seen as trampling on a number of core values and beliefs of Australians, values which have sacred status in this society. He also was seen as profaning certain sacred objects—the flag and the body of a digger.

In our society there are two markers that show particular values, beliefs and objects have been enshrined as sacred symbols, or in contemporary parlance, have been given iconic status. First, they have a taken-for-granted quality. Their validity is not up for debate. Second, any challenge draws an immediate and angry response. In these matters, feelings determine action far more than many theological arguments, or sociological arguments for that matter, take into account.

So what were the sacred symbols and objects perceived to be under attack? First, Australians fervently believe that Australia is a society in which everyone should be given a fair go, irrespective of their gender, age, religious affiliation, or lack of one, and class. Neither Dick Vipond nor his family were seen by numerous Australians as having been given a fair go by Wes Campbell and the Uniting Church.

I engaged in more than thirty interviews and conversations concerning the Essendon incident. Except for people who were close friends of Wes Campbell and who held a similar position to him, no one accepted the view that the flag was ultimately a symbol of violence. Nor was anyone troubled by its presence on a coffin. People were generally puzzled by the endeavour to keep space sacred by keeping out the flag, and some saw the action as exclusive and discriminatory: in other words it flew in the face of the iconic value: give everybody a fair go.

What I was struck by was the emotive character of the responses to Wes Campbell's action. Many felt that the pastoral care of the mourning family is the matter of paramount importance. This must take precedence over any endeavour to proclaim the gospel. A funeral should be conducted in such a way as to ensure the wishes of the dead person and the family are carried out.

Wes Campbell said that by taking the position he did he was attempting to protect the sanctity of the sacred space within the church. But inadvertently, in the eyes of many, he was actually profaning a sacred object: the flag draped coffin of a digger. In Australia, it seems the view prevails that the selfless sacrifices soldiers make in times of war constitute saving acts for our society. These sacrifices are meaningful to many Australians; they

Profaning the Sacred Soldier

A Tale of a Public Controversy

Ken Dempsey

AT THE END of February 2005 the family of a deceased digger, Dick Vipond, approached Revd. Dr. Wes Campbell of St. John's Uniting Church, Essendon, and asked him to conduct Dick's funeral in a way he had requested before his death. Wes did not, as the media reported, refuse to bury Dick Vipond. Rather he said that he wanted to give him a good Christian burial. However, he could not agree to a flag adorning the coffin whilst it was in the sanctuary, nor could he agree to an RSL rite being carried out in the body of the church. He endeavored to explain that if he met these requests a conflict would occur between the flag as a symbol of nationalism and the Christian symbols that were in the sanctuary, such as the cross and the baptismal font.

Wes's attempts to negotiate a compromise met with an angry response from Mark Vipond, Dick's son, who immediately left the meeting. Neil Mitchell of 3AW, Channel 7's *Today Tonight* and the *Herald Sun* gave the story extended coverage, and great popular hostility was expressed against Wes and the church. Within

the church's own paper *Crosslight*, all letters published on this issue from lay people were critical of Wes, as were two of the five from clergy.

The Moderator established a committee to examine the issue and to provide the church "with further guidelines so that this situation will not occur again". The guidelines submitted to the Moderator were fairly consonant with the position that Wes Campbell took. They recommended that no flag be placed on a coffin within the body of the church, and that no other service, whether RSL or Masonic, occur inside the sanctuary. They did recommend that personal memorabilia and a flag could, if desired, be placed on top of a table rather than on the coffin.

The document was released by the Moderator not as guidelines but as a discussion paper. In her preamble she made it clear that most ministers, with the support of their councils, allowed the flag to be draped over the coffin during the Christian service. She said they were also free, if they chose, to include any civic rite within the Christian service and within the church building. This was common practice and it would go on occurring.

The Essendon incident, as it has become known, shows just how strong are the feelings, values, and beliefs associated with the matter of the conduct of funerals. The question I want to consider now is this: Why was the response to Wes Campbell's

We Are Not Alone

A sermon for Armadale UC,
Christmas Day 2007

Judith Watkins

Isaiah 9:2-7 Psalm 98 Luke 2:1-20

WHAT CAN WE SAY that Isaiah and Luke haven't said? A child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. I can't hear those words without hearing Handel's wonderful soaring music from *The Messiah*.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. The impossible is made possible. Multitudes of the heavenly host are singing "Glory to God in highest heaven". The world is made new, and God is being glorified in the birth of a child to impoverished parents.

At the first Christmas, something unbelievably extraordinary happens in the most ordinary way. Because of the incarnation, any and every dimension of life becomes an arena of God's extraordinary saving activity. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, suggests that recognizing this fact is the secret to living the entire liturgical year with a sense of God's presence. In the most mundane circumstances, he says, "here we are daily, not necessarily attractive and saintly people,

and saintly people, managing the plain prose of our everyday service, deciding daily to recognize the prose of ourselves and each other as material for something unimaginably greater—the Kingdom of God, the glory of the saints, reconciliation and wonder."

The birth of every child contains something of the miraculous—but this one even more so. In the birth of this child, God's love is breaking into the world in a new way, and the way in which this happens teaches us something about God, about who Jesus will be, and about the call of God's love on our lives.

The stable at the inn in Bethlehem is nothing fancy. It's not a motel. I cleaned stables for a while, I can still recall the smell, the cold draught in winter and the searing heat in summer, and I for one wouldn't want to sleep there, let alone put my newborn baby there and find a way to keep him warm enough to survive the night. Mary and Joseph are poor. The shepherds who visit them are poor—not only poor but regarded with suspicion. This baby will grow into a man who will welcome precisely these



through
a glass
darkly

people—the poor and the outcast. He will himself be regarded with suspicion by many, because the way he lives and the things he says threaten their own sense of stability and power. As Cheryl Lawrie wrote in *The Age* on Sunday, we sanitize the story of Jesus' birth at our peril. This is a story about one who is with us not only in our joy, but in our sorrow. It is a story about the impossible becoming possible, about a God who is not a distant, disinterested deity, but intimately involved in human life, in all its messiness and suffering and rejoicing. The birth of this baby, no different from the birth of any other baby—and yet it is an earth-shattering event.

Does God's love in our lives feel like an earth-shattering event? Just as Jesus turns his parents' world on its head, and offers hope to those with no hope and love to those who are unloved, so he turns our world on its head. To us who are used to being capable and self-sufficient, used to being generous givers where we can, the story of the incarnation tells us that it while it might be blessed to give, it is essential to also recognize ourselves as the receivers of God's love.

Luke goes to great lengths to demonstrate that we—with our power, generosity, competence and capabilities—had little to do with God's work in Jesus. God wanted to do something for us so strange, so

utterly beyond the bounds of human imagination, that God had to resort to angels and pregnant virgins. We didn't think of it, understand it or approve it. All we could do, at Bethlehem, was receive it.

I'm one of those people who like to understand things. I like to grapple with ideas, make sense of them, explain them and help others understand them. The incarnation reminds me that no matter how much I understand, no matter how well I can explain what I understand, there is so much more to God, to God's love.

This is love that never ever gives up. Love that finds a way again, and again and again, to break into each of our lives. Love that we cannot earn and cannot repay. Love as a gift beyond our imagining. Think of the best thing that ever happened to you and multiply the way you felt until it's hard to imagine. Or think of making yourself vulnerable to others. Maybe then, we get to the edge of the depth and height and breadth of the love of God that breaks into the world at Christmas.

This incredible love is both gift and call. The call comes in our willingness to admit our need of God's love, to admit that we are not the perfectly capable, self-sufficient individuals that we like to think we are. Love is vulnerable. For God's love to flow through us to others, we need to take the risk of being vulnerable. This is not just a story for

attitude exposes our practical atheism; we no longer believe that God will do anything in our churches. If we did we would have to ask the question (after Hauerwas) as to why God is killing them. Our brief is to be faithful and that requires hard work because faith has been so obscured. This is not new, faith has always been obscured and theologians from the beginning have struggled to articulate it in each new situation. We must also give up the idea that the Church can be fixed in our lifetime. It is obvious that we will dwindle even

further before any renewal will take place. We, like Moses, may not see the Promised Land. It is not that we do not care enough or try hard enough, it is that we have lost the vision of that to which we have been called.

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Double Take

by Hilary Howes



a corner from which we are unable to make distinctions. We are bound to embrace Islam as one of the great religions of the world and even say that we all worship the same God despite the obvious differences. We think that all we have to do is to be inclusive to ensure our acceptance in a diverse society. In this atmosphere of moral relativism we cease to make the stands we should to protect the unborn, to inculcate the young into the traditions of faith from which they will know that sex is about love and reproduction and that drug taking is a damaging short cut to relieve present difficulty.

In short, liberal Protestantism, in its eagerness to be loved, has lost the centre of the gospel which is stranger than we can imagine and more terrible. Unless we begin to see how we have wandered from the path of the gospel under pressure from modernity nothing will change because the causes of our demise will remain in place and no amount of planning will help.

What then, are our options? The danger is that we judge these according to what looks like success. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are growing, often spectacularly. Do they show the way to the future of the Church? To their credit Evangelical churches, in contrast to their liberal counterparts, take the bible seriously. They train and discipline their people in a way that is

unthinkable for liberals. However, their focus on the literal text is itself a product of modern rationalism and a denial of the Spirit. On the other hand, the Pentecostal churches display favouritism of the Spirit and neglect of the Word. Neither of these paths can be an option for the failing liberals. They both have theological problems that in the end remove them from consideration.

I would suggest that the only option is the path of radical orthodoxy displayed so well by the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. I heard the other day, from one high up in the Anglican Church, that he was too hard to read. I took this to be a symptom that infects us liberal Protestants. We are not prepared to do the hard intellectual work that we need to understand our present situation and to see a theological direction that is faithful to the gospel. This is a move that requires long term theological leadership that will act to transform the way we train our ordained men and women so that they can lead congregations into the surprising and confronting demands of the gospel. Like all of the previous revolutions in the Church, change will only come from a more faithful theology and this will come only when we have built up theological institutions of quality.

In the meantime we must give up the idea that we are responsible for the future of the Church. Such an

today, it's a story for every day of our lives. This love is given for our transformation, so that we might live as God's people of love and compassion and welcome in the world today. As we celebrate today, Luke calls us to remember Christ in the midst of our celebrations, and to think outside the walls of our homes to those who are the poor, the outcast, the marginalized of today, to make a difference where we can.

Noel Davis writes:

The wisdom of our stories tells us that love finds its way like the rain that falls on mountain summits. We all have our soft ground, our rock outcrops, our forests and scrub country, our swamps and desert expanses, our lagoons and treacherous coastlines. All receive the rain in their different ways. It is love that finds its way into the heart of our being, out into the sea through the fractures of our soul. Our first inclination is to close tight when we feel vulnerable. At graced moments when we have the cour-

age to remain open, to surrender our control, love finds a way in to break out. ... Love is both tender and tenacious in its commitment to set us free from our fear, to liberate our joy and gift us with peace.

This Christmas, may we hear the story in all its unsanitized glory—the story of God breaking into our lives in radical, unexpected love, of glory revealed in the ordinary and the least likely people and places, of love that will transform our lives, if only we will be open to that love finding its way into the heart of our being, out into the sea through the fractures of our soul. As that love seeps through our souls, may we find time this day and every day to remember the miraculous gift of God. Jesus, the one who saves, Emmanuel, God with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

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The Church and Management Techniques

Peter Sellick

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DO YOU REMEMBER the time of the mission statements? Everyone from your local bank to the specialist hospital wards to churches had one. The idea was that if a group could decide what its mission was then this would provide a foundation for decision making and planning. Much faith was placed in the process. All of the stakeholders of the group were invited to spend a day under the direction of a facilitator to produce the statement. The mission statement was produced from suggestions and discussion arising out of the group. This process had some of the advantages of democratic process and all of its pitfalls. The resulting statements are bland and self-righteous beyond comprehension. When was the last time you read a mission statement and thought, Oh my! How exciting, how informative? My idea of hell is to be forced to read mission statements for eternity. The eyes glaze over and the mind is numbed by the banality, the sheer goodness, and the obvious motherhood statements that defy criticism. One is gripped by anger and

resentment that something so dull could be seen to be foundational and yet what is there to complain about? Mission statements are truisms that convey little information except of the naivety of their composers.

It seems that the idea of the mission statement is receding but every so often one finds a remnant statement at the bottom of some publicity blurb or on the wall of a government department. But we should not celebrate our freedom from such rubbish too soon. For now we are in the age of the Strategic Plan. Having decided that finding out who you are and what you should do is not enough it has been decided (by whom?) that we need a map to get us from A to B. This cannot be all bad. I am sure that such plans do provide some aid for business and agencies. It is sensible to have some idea of where you want to go and how you are going to get there. To not have some sort of plan is to be ruled by reaction and distracted

On Areopagus



to be ruled by reaction and distracted by “non core” issues. The trick is to allow enough openness to the serendipitous.

To have any hope of doing anything useful, planning must have an analysis of the present situation. Otherwise the plan will be just another wish list, well intended, passionately advocated, sincere but completely separate from reality. The brilliant business man (“man” embracing “woman”) will need to understand as much as he can of the economic, sociological and political environment as he can in order to direct the company in a certain direction.

Just as the Church embraced the idea of the mission statement it is also tempted to embrace the Strategic Plan, hopefully with more effect. I have in mind here large sections of the Anglican and Uniting Church in Australia. The question is whether they are capable of analyzing their situation in the culture of the West in late modernity. Without such analysis any attempt to produce a strategic plan will rely on enthusiasm alone, and that is not a good thing.

It is recognized that liberal Protestant Churches have been in decline for decades and this has prompted all manner of schemes to reverse the trend. It is also recognized that most of these schemes have failed. No amount of talk about the Church being in mission has helped. We may

blame the environment and say that the culture has turned against us or that the language of the Church is foreign to the man in the street but this does not touch the underlying problem. Liberal Protestant Churches have lost their way, they have conformed to the culture of modernity to the extent that they have become irrelevant.

For example, we train our clergy to appreciate modern historical critical views of the bible without, at the same time, convincing them that it bears witness to the Word of God.

Our engagement with social justice issues have more to do with secular aspirations regarding equalitarianism than to a proper ordering of society under God. The Church has thus embraced the slogan of the French Revolution of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” and ignored the gospel promise that death is the gateway to life (on this side of physical death).

The liberal Protestant God has been thoroughly domesticated. He is no longer such a one who could break out among the people and destroy them. He does not stand in judgment of the world. God has become subsumed into pastoral care as the one to turn to in time of need. He no longer speaks a new world into being.

Faith has been turned into therapy as the human potential movement merges with pastoral care and is thus only appropriate for the sick and inept.

Our liberalism has painted us into