

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANS?

**An exploration of hope on a journey of the human spirit**  
at a meeting of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria,  
27 February 2011

With David Merritt and Lorna Henry

## OUTLINE

1. **Introduction to the topic and how we will explore it**
2. **A poem, music, and a story - an invitation to engage your imagination with new possibilities**  
*Where are you on your spiritual journey? What are next steps for you?*
  - Robert Frost "Riders"
  - Beethoven: Andante Cantabile from the Archduke Trio – a selection of variations with piano, violin and cello exploring many possibilities.
  - Arnold Lobel, "The Club" in **Grasshopper on the Road**  
*A story for people up to ninety or a bit over*
3. **How the question "What next?" arises in some local groups**
  - Lorna Henry: "Something for the Spirit", Malvern East
  - David Merritt: "Quest – Connecting spirit and life", Blackburn
4. **Table discussion groups: What is next for YOU?** At this point in **your** journey, what *do you see as next steps in your experience of progressive Christianity?*
5. **Reflection: Music and a parable**
  - Beethoven: Andante Cantabile from the Archduke Trio cont.  
– hearing the darker tones, stepping out with more confidence and into a theme different from the original.
  - "The Hut" *A parable told to a PCNV meeting by Peter Kennedy*
6. **Options and possibilities for what is next**
  - From Lorna Henry
  - From David Merritt
  - Drawing on PCNV and the world progressive Christian movement
7. **Table discussion groups: What are some hopeful next steps to explore**
  - *For local communities – groups or congregations?*
  - *For PCNV?*Please record some hopeful next steps on the Record Sheets on your table
8. **Final plenary session:** Questions to the presenters

# INTRODUCTION

**The objectives for today** can be stated simply:

To identify some hopeful next steps on our spiritual journey

- For each of us personally
- For a group or congregation in which we may be involved
- For the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria as an organisation.

**The program is in two parts:**

- The first leads up to step 4 on the program outline: “What is next for YOU?”
- The second leads up to step 7 on the program outline: “What is next for a local faith community in which you may be involved or for this organisation PCNV?”

Because we don't think finding hopeful next steps is just about logical ideas but involves our sense of where we are now, our sense of what is important to us personally, our feelings and our imagination, there are **a variety of ways of encountering new possibilities:**

- A poem, a story, and a parable
- Music that both expresses exploration of possibilities and invites us to reflection about what is hopeful for us
- Short case studies of two local progressive groups
- Proposals from the presenters
- Opportunities to discuss hopeful possibilities in table groups – working in groups at each end of your table – half of the people around a table in each group.

And in the final plenary session there is an opportunity to take up any point you like with the presenters.

You have the program outline to help you see where we are going. We won't need to announce every step.

We subtitled today “An exploration of hope”

If each of us can see a possibility for us, or a group we are part of, that could be achieved with realistic efforts, then today will be a celebration of hope.

## ENGAGING YOUR IMAGINATION

**A poem, music, and a story - an invitation to engage your imagination with new possibilities**

*Where are you on your spiritual journey? What are next steps for you?*

- Robert Frost “Riders”  
(The poem can readily be found on the internet)

- Beethoven: Andante Cantabile from the Archduke Trio – a selection of variations with piano, violin and cello exploring many possibilities.
- Arnold Lobel, “The Club” in **Grasshopper on the Road**  
*A story for people up to ninety or a bit over*  
*(The book of stories can be purchased on the internet)*

## TWO LOCAL PROGRESSIVE GROUPS

### 1. ‘Something for the Spirit’ by Lorna Henry

This is the story of ‘Something for the Spirit’, a group of Christians who have had questions about their faith.

I am a parishioner of Ewing Memorial Uniting Church in East Malvern. Over several years in the late ‘90s and later, several of us held various meetings at the church to discuss faith issues and questions, assisted by our minister, Greg Crowe at that time. We were looking for a faith for our times

In 2005 we began to meet regularly, once a month at my home on a Sunday afternoon from 5 till 7pm, and we called the group ‘Something for the Spirit’. I thought it important that there be food and drink to create a relaxed atmosphere, and that has been the case. There were just six of us to begin with, including our then minister John Smith, who was totally supportive, but keen that this group not be clergy-led. The second month we met there were 8, then 10, and fairly quickly it became a group with an average attendance of about 15 to 20.

But now we are not simply a church discussion group. Anyone from anywhere is welcome (although we are mainly church attenders).

We've been following pretty closely the thinking of the challengers to the traditional forms of Christianity: John Spong, Michael Morwood, Marcus Borg, Dom Crossan, Lloyd Geering, Greta Vosper, Karen Armstrong, etc. etc.

We've looked at Gospels outside the canon – those of Mary and Thomas - a bit of Yoga theory, mysticism, the Psalms, ‘the atheists’ Dawkins and others, and the creation spirituality of Matthew Fox.

We've also put our toes into the waters of Islam, Buddhism (only one toe here), and Interfaith ministry,

We've had vigorous discussions, and I've been happy to think that anyone is welcome to say anything, without fear of being judged or criticized. It is my hope that these discussions present ideas which help each of us along our own path, but there are no ‘right’ answers.

Along the way, small voices HAVE been saying: Is that all there is? Well no,

but for some reason, we've continued along that same path – essentially seeking meaning through modern biblical scholarship, with a few side excursions.

Last year a survey in our group came up with requests for something 'more'. I too felt that I've done enough deconstructing, fascinating as all that has been, and I need to move on - or sideways. But where to? What next for me?

First of all, I went back to the basics of my own protestant faith, Jesus, Bible, tradition and church, I started to expand that, and asked:

- If JESUS inspires me, How should I live now?  
Is Jesus' life the ONLY one to inspire me?  
Can I look at other lives which will inspire me? – Lives closer to my experience?
- If the BIBLE's gospel narratives are to be read largely as metaphor and symbol, what messages do those metaphors and symbols bring today?
- Is good old Bible study still valuable if we come at it with all our new understandings?
- If the Bible is BUT ONE source of information about the human faith journey, what OTHER sources can we learn from? Be inspired by?
- What about records of other faith journeys, of people from other countries and traditions?
- How can we best learn of other faiths? EXPERIENCE other faiths?  
CO-OPERATE with other faiths?

These last questions turned me in a different direction. We have done a lot of listening, reading and learning in our group, but the words 'Experience' and 'cooperate' are words of involvement and action, beyond learning and understanding. This is what might be next for me. To enter into experiences which will broaden and deepen the faith experience. But what might these experiences be?

## **2. 'Quest – Connecting Spirit and Life' by David Merritt**

The Avenue Uniting Church Blackburn has a long history of varied and innovative adult education. Several years ago in a review of what would open the adult education program to a wider variety of people in the community and other churches, we adopted a new name and focus of what it is about.

The group is called: QUEST – CONNECTING SPIRIT AND LIFE. It is described as an adult study group exploring contemporary understandings of faith and life. Most, but not all, sessions offer progressive Christian

perspectives. It meets most Sunday mornings through the year from 9.00 am to just before the church service at 10.15 am.

Attendance has been in the range 20 to 30 and recently has increased in regularity. There are a few participants from other churches, including two from the Catholic Church who go on to Mass after Quest.

Topics have included: books by Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan, Shelby Spong, studies on thinking about God, Jesus, the Bible, beliefs, justice, Fairtrade, the future of churches, progressive Christianity, healing, Easter, Christmas, living as Christians, ecology ...

### **I can think of 6 working conclusions for me about where Quest is now:**

1. **We are all at different points on our faith journeys.** Even when questions are shared, we can't assume all conclusions are shared. We need to keep a variety of perspectives available.
2. **Some people are excited** and they enthuse about these different approaches to Christianity. They say, "I thought it was just me thinking like that and I kept those ideas to myself." Others say, "Why weren't we told about this years ago?" Other people are considering the new possibilities but are not convinced by them.
3. **We take the Bible seriously BECAUSE we don't take it literally.** The Bible contains very varied messages that need to be read in their context. Some of it can be inspirational; other parts should be rejected. I like Jim Burklo's way of putting it: "Progressive Christians waterski across the gospels, waving happily at Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as they stand, cheering us, along Galilee's shore". But in case that sounds superficial, we often dig deeply into the meaning of the Bible.
4. **It takes a long time to become comfortable with and actually live by new ideas you have welcomed.** I would say years rather than months. For example, though in Quest we have often seen how contemporary scholars help us to understand the Bible in very different ways to those many of us assumed some years ago, there was an "aha!" moment part way through five sessions last November on the meaning of the stories of the birth of Jesus when Dominic Crossan's statement about parables was read: "Jesus told parables to communicate his message; the first Christians told parables **about** Jesus". Suddenly the wisemen, the shepherds in the field, Joseph and Mary, and Herod, were characters in stories as powerful as the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan - and were equally liberated from those dead-end "Did it really happen?" questions.
5. **Traditional beliefs** tell us what some people in other places at other times found helpful; they are not necessarily helpful to us and may be a hindrance.

6. **Working out ways to be Christian** in a rapidly changing world is a demanding task we need to share in together. And it is an ongoing endeavour.

### **What next?**

- I wish we knew more about **how to nurture the spirit** – what enriches our lives, what makes a difference.
- How can **people coming into the group** discover what some participants have discovered over a number of years?
- How do we balance a need to continue the interest of some in **exploring new understandings** of Christianity with the interest of others in focussing more on **how to live as Christians**?
- How do we deal with the discrepancy between the understanding of spirit and life in Quest and what is reflected in the assumptions and words of some parts of some **church services**? The physical distance we walk is 30m; the worldview “distance” can sometimes be centuries. And this is in a church that has been warmly welcoming to people with progressive Christian perspectives.

And how much does it matter? Maybe a lot of what happens in a church service is habitual responses to old patterns.

(You may know about the minister, in a congregation used to liturgical responses, who stopped, tapped the lapel microphone and said, “I think there is something wrong with this microphone”. The congregation responded, “And also with you.”)

Is it even reasonable to expect progressive Christian ideas to be expressed in a service for people with a wide range of assumptions about Christianity? And if not, what do progressive Christians do?

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**Discussion groups: What is next for YOU?** At this point in **your** journey, what do **you** see as next steps in **your** experience of progressive Christianity?

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## **REFLECTION: MUSIC AND A PARABLE**

- Beethoven: Andante Cantabile from the Archduke Trio cont.  
– hearing the darker tones, stepping out with more confidence and into a theme different from the original.
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# OPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR WHAT IS NEXT

## OPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES suggested by Lorna Henry

1. Having discovered anew the power of the original message of Jesus' life and teaching - I am asking now,
  - i. Where is this leading?
  - ii. What is this **doing** in my life? What am I doing about it?  
Am I living more fully for Jesus' Realm of God, for Peace, Compassion and Justice?  
Am I a more fulfilled person?  
Is my spiritual life richer?  
Am I a better member of society?

So, to begin our theme 'Possibilities' on the personal side, I wonder how PCNV or our groups can help us to be more 'filled with the spirit', more fulfilled, more engaged. And what follows now will be an extension of those questions.

2. How can I better develop my **sense of the sacred**? Of **The Holy, the More, the Spirit, the Inspirer**?

This is the big one, and it has been an ongoing murmur in the background in our group for a while. To live fully, I need to live with the sacred as part of me. How best to nurture and develop that? What experiences are others having in making life more meaningful? More deeply satisfying? More nurturing? Where am I finding inspiration and challenge?

I have had friends confide to me that 'something has gone out of worship services for me now and I miss it'. Is this retrievable?

People who would claim no particular faith are seeking personal meaning and fulfilment with passion and a lot of investment. We think we know where the riches lie. How are we going about digging for them?

Perhaps some communal ways to sensing the sacred might be to take up and **use metaphor and symbol**, that which we have found to pervade the biblical narratives:

To tell stories – from the past and the present

To Celebrate together with **symbols of sight and sound**, and minimize the use of words.

To seek encounters with **beauty** in all its forms –in music, art, words, nature, and let that speak to us.

Continue to explore the **experiences** of other faith traditions (sometimes a new perspective is a new awakening). E.g. Celtic Christianity, Islamic Mysticism, Buddhism, Hinduism and more.

3. When I live with **inner fears, darkness and troubles**, what does Progressive Christianity have to say here? I quote from one member of our group who wrote that, in a very distressing family situation 'found myself very,

very alone in a spiritual sense. I realized I had no God to pray to. Progressive Christianity is dedicated to the 'light and bright', and doesn't welcome the dark stories of the spiritually-unsure grappling with the Meaning of Life at 3 o'clock in the morning.

It seems to have an obsession with making church teaching more meaningful rather than Life more meaningful!!!!!!'

Ouch!!

How can we, in our groups and in PCNV, give meaning and spiritual help in the dark places?

4. Faith and religion are **practical and social**. Val Webb in her book 'Stepping out with the Sacred' quotes the Dalai Lama at the Parliament of the World Religions in 2009, who challenged the assembly to take a more active role in promoting world peace, bringing compassion to the planet and listening to indigenous people about caring for the environment.

As a Christian organisation, do we have a **prophetic and public role** to play? Do we have a responsibility to be active in influencing public opinion, policies, in pushing for justice? One example: local churches in East Malvern have organized meetings with political candidates before elections, to ask about their policies. Perhaps that has to be locally organized, but it is a powerful statement in the community that Christians care.

And a couple of other practical questions about PCNV:

5. Most of us in PCNV seem to be in the **older age group**. Will Progressive Christianity be carried on by the next generation? If we think it's so good, what can we do to ensure that it at least reaches a wider audience, and hopefully a younger one?

6. **The church is a suspect organisation** in the minds of many, but would Progressive Christianity appeal any more to those seeking a spirituality for today? It would be interesting to find out by having conversations with the non-churched.

7. We are **Australian Christians**, who have received a lot of wisdom and knowledge from abroad. Val Webb, in her recent address for PCNV a couple of weeks ago, challenged us, the local progressive Christians, to seek a meaningful faith to speak with and for this multi-cultural Australia with its indigenous people. Now there's a task!

## **OPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES suggested by David Merritt**

It is 5 years since PCNV was established by a small group of people in Melbourne inspired by the Jesus Seminar's attempts in USA to inform people about biblical literacy. In that time there has been an explosion of groups and websites exploring and promoting progressive Christianity. There are so many books published around the world in English on aspects of progressive

religion that I don't think it is possible to keep abreast of them let alone read and understand them. And now we are seeing more Australian publications.

It is clear "progressive" is not one position about belief or practices but a broad range of ways of responding to contemporary scientific worldviews and critical scholarship about Christianity and religion. In particular it is about being willing to move beyond traditional beliefs if intellectual integrity requires that.

It seems to me that in USA, Canada, UK, and Australia there is increasing attention being given to the implications of these changing understandings of Christianity for how we live and what kinds of groups nurture the human spirit now. However, some of this new work, particularly by American authors, seems to assume widespread public approval for religion and strong organised conservative voices that we don't have in Australia.

The findings of the recent survey of PCNV members were reported in the PCNV February Newsletter. I think they add support to what Lorna and I are saying here.

So I will offer 5 options and possibilities as next steps for PCNV and for local groups or congregations – and you will have an opportunity to discuss them.

**But first I want to say that I don't think progressive Christianity involves any change to the purpose of Christianity.**

The purpose of Christianity is always quality of living.

- "What does God require but that you love kindness, do what is just and live humbly with your God" - the Jewish prophetic tradition which is included in the Christian tradition.
- "The most important commandments are to love God with all your heart, mind and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself" This is the teaching of the Jewish scriptures and of Jesus.
- Jesus described his mission as transforming life for people – that the blind see, the lame walk, the poor receive good news.
- "I have come that you might have life in all its fullness" Jesus in *John's Gospel*

**This is always 'What is next' – living in ways that respect the reality 'in which we live and move and have our being' so that we express and contribute to compassion and justice.**

What is new for us is that many older ways of understanding the **context for this kind of living** have changed:

- Our understandings of the reality of which we are a part - universe, earth planet and human family - have changed dramatically;
- Our understandings of the causes of human behaviour and the sources of human ideas have changed;

- Our understandings of the many religions of humankind and of our religious heritage and in particular of the origins and nature of Christianity have changed;
- Our understandings of institutions in society generally and of the church in particular have changed,

Not only have these understandings changed but it is a characteristic of this stage in the development of humanity that they will continue to change. So we will continue to explore those changes and their implications for our lives.

**What is next is to be part of communities working out our faith guidelines and practices under these new conditions.**

**These guidelines and practices will be tentative and open to continuous revision. There is no next fixed point. But the guidelines will be sufficient to sustain cooperative communities providing spiritual stimulus, compassionate human support, and coalitions of action for a more just world.**

**NOW 5 specific options or possibilities that I suggest as next steps for local progressive groups or progressive congregations or PCNV.**

## **1. Continue to explore the ideas of contemporary theologians and scholars.**

Open minds, open hearts, open hands” seems to me a good guide . I have read the cynical, disparaging remarks on a recent blog that having open minds means having empty minds. I just say that is superficial bunkum. Inquiry and intellectual integrity are basics to hold to – and be judged by. That should be a continuing focus.

The already amazing rate of growth in knowledge of the vast universe and complex molecular structure of life will increase exponentially. Being open to changing scientific knowledge will increase in importance.

The religion needed 25 years from now is likely to be very different from mine today. And I think it follows that there will not ever be just one position on anything important. Whether we like it or not, there will be a variety of views on most matters of importance.

## **2. Opportunities to find appropriate words to express what we affirm.**

How can we talk about Christianity? What does it mean to be a Christian? What does being a follower of Jesus today mean for us? How can we speak positively about other religions while being committed to living in the perspectives of Christianity?

(A World Council of Churches project I admired was: “How can we live in a world of many faiths, cultures and ideologies while being grounded in one faith, culture and ideology?”) What can we say to friends about God, the Bible, about going to church, about making ethical decisions?

This is not about the “correct” way of expressing “faith”. It is about many ways of expressing “faith” and some ways that are appropriate for each of us.

And it is not about a lot of words – just a few that say something that is right for us.

It is not enough to read or listen to what others say, particularly others in a different social context. We need to find the words that express OUR beliefs and which are comfortable FOR US TO USE. Otherwise we stay silent in the marketplace of ideas in our family, in our workplace, in our church, in our community. We actually need practice in expressing what is important to us.

**3. Actively explore how to break through old barriers** – not just between denominations but between religions and between our favourite categories - including “conservative” “liberal” and “progressive”. Not to abandon critical positions but to engage in friendly open dialogue to form coalitions for action on some matters vital for us all.

It may be true that sometimes how we live is more important than what we believe. But it is profoundly true that what we believe at the core of our being will help to shape how we live. And even particular religious beliefs have big consequences for how we live. Just consider the disastrous consequences of the belief that everything in the Bible is the true Word of God: the toll of suffering for millions of people over many centuries is shattering – Jews, women, slaves, gays and lesbians, innovative scientists ...

We are at a time that provides new opportunities to cross old boundaries. The PCNV program this year includes more diverse speakers than before, including two Rabbis. But how much more is desirable?

Let me quote a Christian leader from USA, Brian McLaren:

“As we try to understand the stories of our religious traditions inside the larger story of this expanding, 14 billion-year-old universe, that might give us the chance to see ourselves in less combative and hateful and fearful ways.”

“A conversation is spontaneously arising around the world among Christians of all different stripes and backgrounds, and it’s a conversation for re-thinking the faith on very, very deep grounds.”

“We have to find ways to introduce youth to a vision of the faith that isn’t in opposition to what they are learning in science class.”

“We have some monumental emergencies that we’ve got to deal with relating to the planet, relating to poverty, relating to peace, and at the core of them is our sense of story.”

*Brian McLaren in an online interview*

#### **4. Encourage, and if necessary establish, groups and congregations that explore and express open Christianity.**

From the inquiries I receive, I would say there are many people who are looking for – or waiting for – churches or groups that welcome them on a spiritual journey of discovery. There are understandable reasons why there are few churches that identify themselves as “progressive”. We need to do something about this blank space. Perhaps we need to find some acceptable description for such churches. Maybe “A church that welcomes open Christianity” (meaning a church open to critical inquiry and contemporary scholarship). The term “Emerging Church” has some attractions but it has been adopted by forward-looking conservative churches.

**5. Invest in resources** that communicate with us as Australians who want to explore open Christianity and express it in lifestyle, groups and/or congregations. PCNV has made a start on this with the series “Exploring Open Christianity”. That is an investment of between \$12,000 and \$15,000 made possible by those of you who pay an annual membership fee which provides some working capital for imaginative projects. Is this something we should do more of?

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#### **Discussion groups:**

Table discussion groups of 4 to 6 people discussed two broad questions:

1. *What are some hopeful next steps to explore for local groups or congregations?*
2. *What are some hopeful next steps to explore for the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria?*

#### **Handout summary of suggestions by Lorna Henry**

1. How can we better develop our sense of the sacred?
2. How can we find ways to give meaning and nurture in times of darkness?
3. How will we nurture our spirits in community? How will we celebrate, give hope and encounter beauty?
4. Do we have a prophetic (social action) role, to promote Peace with Justice?

#### **Handout summary of suggestions by David Merritt**

5. Continue to encourage open minds through a focus on inquiry and intellectual integrity
6. Help to find appropriate words to express what we affirm, what is important about Christianity.

7. Break through old barriers between religious groups and religions
  8. Encourage, and if necessary establish, groups and congregations that nurture the human spirit
  9. Invest in resources that communicate with us as Australians who want to explore open Christianity and express it in lifestyle, groups and/or congregations.
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Some hopeful next steps were noted on Record Sheets for each group.

## **FINAL PLENARY SESSION**

Questions to the presenters