

# The Progressive Christianity Forum 2024

*Where faith intersects with the critical issues  
for the church and the world*

A series of challenging topical presentations exploring how people of faith can engage creatively with a deeply troubled and troubling world.

Those who pursue freshness and authenticity in expressing their faith will find much food for thought in this series.

February to May sessions explored *Critical Issues Facing the Future of Humanity*, *The Contribution of Progressive Christian Voices*, and *The Significance of the Spirituality Revolution*. The text of these three presentations can be found on the PCNet website.

**Join us on June 6th for a presentation by Rev Dr Lee Levett-Olson**

***The continuing task of reimagining God.***

“What we believe about God’s connection to the cosmos has a direct impact on how we act as Christians within the world. The unfolding reality that human impact can irreparably destroy the earth and its creatures is clear evidence that traditional views of transcendence and the divine have failed us. In this presentation Lee will set out some radical alternatives and how Christians are theologically obligated to live by an ethos that defends creation, preserves future generations, learns deeply from ancient wisdom, and leads – not lags – spiritual activism for our planet and all its creatures.”

## PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY NETWORK of SA

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## Task Group 2024

Janeen Barker  
Jonathan Barker  
Kym Bills  
Esmond Dowdy

Maureen Howland  
Fergus McGinley  
Don Sinnott - Chair

## Progressive Christianity Forum Launch 2024

### The challenging launch of the Progress Christianity Forum for 2024

The PCNet program of presentations this year moves on from the pattern set over recent years. Whereas last year, under the banner of Seminary of the Third Age, we offered four campaigns of weekly events distributed over the year under linking themes, we have now moved to an annual structure of monthly events on the first Thursday of the month, February to December. We have also rebadged the program as **'Progressive Christianity Forum 2024.'**

These changes are not only about programming: we are trying to bring into focus how faith intersects with the critical issues for the church and the deeply troubled and troubling world. And this is as much a matter of the heart as the head.

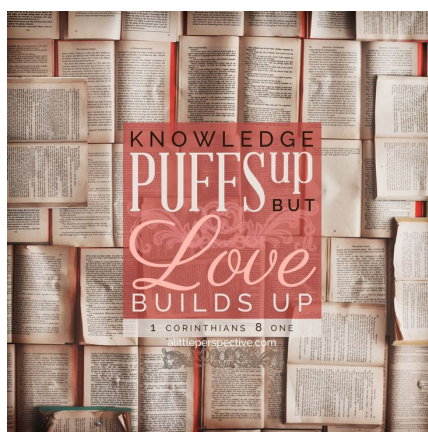
The launch presentation was given by Rev Dr Sean Gilbert on 1 February and attracted a face-to-face audience of over 50, plus those who joined us through live streaming. As we expected, Sean's presentation was stimulating and challenging: he took as his theme the call for humility, drawing on the words of TS Eliot, 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.'

For me, Sean's address was a bit of a shot across the bows. It challenged my tendency to engage first with my head, to seek a reality based on understanding, rather than to engage with my heart. Sean spoke about our human journey as not so much seeking to explain difficult things as engaging with them. Keeping in tension apparently competing concepts rather than trying to arrive at a definitive conclusion.

It's a constant temptation for the Christian who is comfortable with being badged 'progressive' to challenge orthodoxies, to seek to explain, to give reign to curiosity—and leave it at that. What I drew from Sean's presentation was a gentle reminder that, as he quoted from 1 Cor 8:1, 'mere knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.'

The three presentations that have followed the launch of the Progressive Christianity Forum 2024 have, in differing ways, echoed elements of this insight, (see a review of the May 2 presentation by Esmond Dowdy on page 5). We now look forward to Rev Dr Lee Levett-Olson's presentation on 6 June on 'The continuing task of reimagining God.' Don't miss it!

Don Sinnott  
Chair, Progressive Christianity Network (SA) Task Group





Progressive Christianity Forum takes place at the Effective Living Centre, 26 King William Road, Wayville, SA on the First Thursday evening of each month, February to December, 7:00 – 8:30pm

Attendance Cost is \$15 per session, \$12 concession, \$5 per-session live streaming. A full year subscription to all sessions is available for \$90.

Options for registration and payment are,

- the HUMANITIX website at <https://www.humanitix.com/au>; search Progressive Christianity Forum - bookings are now open for the first four sessions and full year subscriptions,
- the booking links for [The Progressive Christianity Forum](https://www.humanitix.com/au) on the Effective Living Centre (ELC) website [effectiveliving.org.au](https://www.effectiveliving.org.au),
- contacting the ELC office on (08) 8271 0329 (Tues – Fri, 10 am – 2 pm),
- cash or credit card on the night.

### Program June to December 2024

<b>June 6<sup>th</sup></b>	THE CONTINUING TASK OF RE-IMAGING GOD Rev Dr Lee Levett-Olson
<b>July 4<sup>th</sup></b>	CRITICAL ISSUES FACING THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIA Mark Waters
<b>August 1<sup>st</sup></b>	WORSHIP: THE PROGRESSIVE EDGE OF THEOLOGY Rev Jenni Hughes
<b>September 5<sup>th</sup></b>	THE WONDER OF THE SCRIPTURES TO BE RE-INTERPRETED - Rev Prof Vicky Balabanski
<b>October 3<sup>rd</sup></b>	THE JOURNEY OF DECOLONISATION: A PERSONAL REFLECTION - Dr Rosemary Dewerse
<b>November 7<sup>th</sup></b>	THE CHALLENGES OF POLARISATION IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH - Fergus McGinley
<b>December 5<sup>th</sup></b>	RECEIVING THE SACRED STORY WITH IMAGINATION Rev Dr Sarah Agnew

## Next Progressive Christianity Forum



### NEXT PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY FORUM

Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> June, 7pm  
at the Effective Living Centre

Tickets \$15, concession \$12, live stream \$5. Please book [here](#)

Rev Dr Lee Levett-Olson coming all the way from Darwin will lead us in the topic:

### THE CONTINUING TASK OF REIMAGINING GOD

What we believe about God's connection to the cosmos has a direct impact on how we act as Christians within the world. The unfolding reality that human impact can irreparably destroy the earth and its creatures is clear evidence that traditional views of transcendence and the divine have failed us.

In this presentation Lee will set out some radical alternatives and how Christians are theologically *obligated* to live by an ethos that defends creation, preserves future generations, learns deeply from ancient wisdom, and leads – not lags – *spiritual* activism for our planet and all its creatures.

After living in North and South America, Lee was ordained by the Presbyterian Church in the USA *on behalf of* the Uniting Church in Australia. After placements in South Australia, he became Principal (Assembly National Director) of Coolamon College, was appointed in 2008 as Principal of Nungalinga College and has served in the Northern Synod for 11 years. His PhD thesis was an early work of eco-theology, focused on an understanding of the divine that could support ethical action for creation. While retired, Lee remains committed to social activism and justice issues, proud of the heritage of Protest, core to the DNA of the Uniting Church.

LEE ASKS THAT PRIOR TO THE EVENT PARTICIPANTS READ THE PREAMBLE TO THE UNITING CHURCH BASIS OF UNION AND CONSTITUTION (<https://wordpress.com/post/pcnet-sa.org/1662>) and read the Basis of Union and note where there are radical and progressive ideas.

### You can find the text of earlier PCForum presentations on our website

7th March 2024

[pcnetsa.org/2024/05/11/jonathan-barker-pcforum-march-7-2024/](https://pcnetsa.org/2024/05/11/jonathan-barker-pcforum-march-7-2024/)

4th April 2024

[pcnetsa.org/2024/04/05/kym-bills-pcforum-4-april-2024/](https://pcnetsa.org/2024/04/05/kym-bills-pcforum-4-april-2024/)

2nd May 2024

[pcnetsa.org/2024/05/09/esmond-dowdy-pcforum-2-may-2024/](https://pcnetsa.org/2024/05/09/esmond-dowdy-pcforum-2-may-2024/)



## PCForum Review

### A Response to Esmond Dowdy's paper May 2 2024

The Christian Church in Australia is in decline, of that there is no doubt. But Rachel Kohn (ABC, *The Spirit of things*) and Hugh Mackay (social researcher) assert that that is not the whole story.

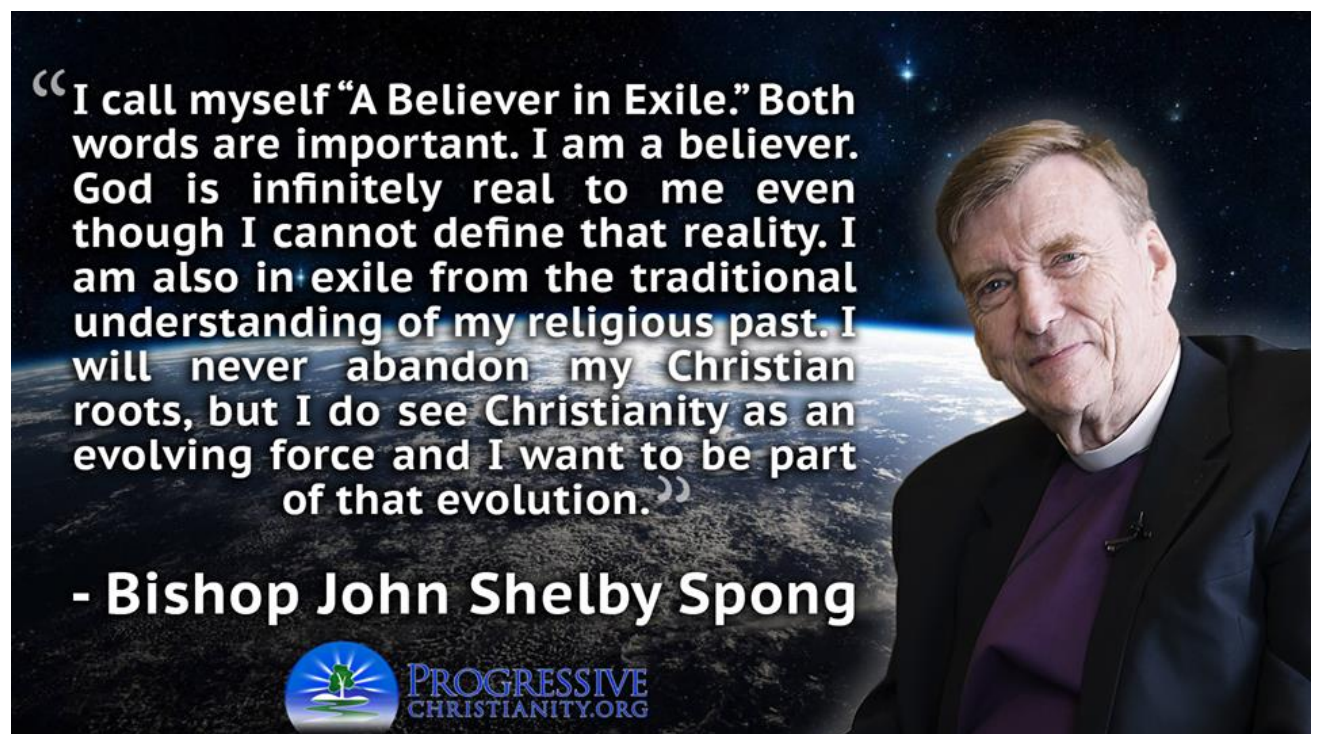
At the May PCForum, Esmond Dowdy brought us a summary of their (and others) findings – that while outward and organised religion is on the decline, interest in things “spiritual” is very much on the rise.

One question Esmond asked us was, “What is the relationship between spirituality and religion?”

Esmond brought us a wide-ranging presentation that carried lots of hope. I was left with two particular questions (among many others!!):

- 1 Is it Western religion that has failed, or is it not that organised religion very often “fails” when confronted by secular prosperity and education (which are concentrated in the West in our world)?
- 2 And if that thesis is sustained, what is the future for, eg, Islam or Hinduism in Australia as their children encounter the education and prosperity that Christianity “failed” to deal with? Watch this space!!

Max Howland May 2024





## Life in the Slow Lane – A View of Life in Palestine

Presented by Andrew Telfer on Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> May at 2.00 pm  
at the Effective Living Centre, 26 King William Road, Wayville.

Andrew Telfer is a member of Seacliff Uniting Church and a retired SA Police Superintendent. An interest in justice, human rights and international development led him to volunteer for deployment in the West Bank/East Jerusalem with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). This programme is currently administered in Australia by Act for Peace. In 2019 Andrew was deployed for three months as an Ecumenical Accompanier (EA) in Hebron in the West Bank and at the end of 2022 was privileged to spend three months in East Jerusalem.

During his illustrated presentation Andrew will provide a brief summary of relevant historical issues but primarily discuss the roles of EAs and his experiences of life for Palestinians living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Their lives, under the Israeli Occupation, are very difficult and Andrew will describe the impact of such aspects as the Israeli Security/Separation wall, checkpoints, permits, and the construction of Israeli settlements in Palestine. But, of course, there were many positive experiences during his deployments, which were a time of great blessing and privilege.

This event is sponsored by the Social Issues and Progressive Christianity Network Task Groups of the Effective Living Centre.

There is no admission charge for this event. However, donations will be received either upon registration, or by cash or card on the day, with proceeds sent to support the work of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), administered in Australia by the Act for Peace arm of the Australian Council of Churches.

[The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel \(EAPPI\)](#) is a program of the World Council of Churches that sends observers to live in the West Bank for three months. [The observers, called Ecumenical Accompaniers \(EAs\),](#) provide a protective presence, monitor human rights abuses, and support Israeli and Palestinian peace activists. [The program aims to end the occupation and encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflict in accordance with international law and UN resolutions.](#)

For further information refer to [Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)

## Reflection – In praise of uncertainty

Paul Kelly's 1992 book *The End of Certainty* is an analysis of Australian politics in the 1980s and the way in which the Hawke-Keating governments brought to an end the comfortable certainties of earlier years. The politics doesn't need to concern us here; what is worth hanging onto is the book's title: The end of Certainty. They're words worthy of adoption as a Progressive Christian catch-cry.

The Christian story is built on expressions of certainties: the apostles' creed sums it up in a list of *I believe*s. These are expressions of certainty, and questioning any of them is unacceptable in many Christian communities. Let me show my colours at the outset: at an intellectual level I can't give unqualified assent to any of them, while still honouring the tradition of the words and the sacred memory of those who have lived—and died—by them. How does a 21<sup>st</sup> century western Christian sustain personal integrity when forced into the uneasy position of balancing the declarations of certainty of our faith against the sensed rationalities of the world we live in?

In the world of quantum physics there are concepts that run counter to the notion of certainty. One is called, in fact, the uncertainty principle, formulated by German physicist Werner Heisenberg in 1927. It states that it is impossible to fix (know) simultaneously both the position and momentum of a particle. This expresses a fundamental uncertainty at the heart of the universe. Another puzzling physical concept is the dual nature of matter and light: both can be seen as having wave-like and particle-like properties, so sometimes a sub-atomic particle is best conceived as a wave, sometimes as a particle. There's no right or wrong; there's both. These uncertainties were highly unsettling to science of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but are today cornerstones, essential to the development of the ubiquitous digital electronics we rely on. If scientists can live with uncertainty, if they must acknowledge there are limits beyond which it is impossible to decide, why, when our attention turns to matters of the spirit, need we be insistent on certainty?

Of course, it's much easier to claim a solid foundation by stating a series of unproveable but unchallengeable beliefs. If science had worked that way, we'd be locked in the world of the 1800s. Is it possible to open our minds, to agree that many of the *I believe*s are opinions that may not be universally shared and that it is possible, as in the world of science, to hold simultaneously to apparently competing models of perceived reality?

In the ecumenical hymnal used in the Uniting Church, *Together in Song*, there's a hymn by Australian Anglican priest, Rev Dr Elizabeth J Smith, which includes the words 'our faith must feel its way about and live with question marks and doubt,' then later, 'Yet, maybe, our faith will thrive on mystery.'

I'm all for an embrace of mystery. For turning down the dial on our statements of certainty. Can people of courage, who are able to respect and love those whose opinions they cannot share, rejoice that we are surrounded by mystery through which the voice of the poet and the visionary may be heard?

Don Sinnott, May 2024

## Reflection – The Kingdom of God is Among You

No, not “within you”. That’s the title of the famous philosophical work by Tolstoy, which I haven’t read (try *Resurrection*, a book I have read, the gripping story of the aristocrat Nekhlyudov who follows his former servant Katyusha to prison in Siberia in remorse for his terrible exploitation of her years before, for a fictional account of Tolstoy’s wonderful philosophy).

It’s also the King James translation of Luke 17:21: “... neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” The Greek word in question, ἐντὸς, or *entos*, is sometimes translated as, yes, “within”, but in other translations it becomes “among” or “in the midst of”, for example the NIV: “... the kingdom of God is in your midst.” And Jesus is speaking on this occasion to the Pharisees, so the “you” in question is probably plural.

I thank Dean Drayton for pointing out this critical distinction (*Apocalyptic Good News*, 2019). Nowhere else in the Gospels, among Jesus’ many prognostications on the kingdom, do we get the impression (if misleading) that the kingdom of God is inside us, that it is an interior state of mind or soul, an individual, personal, private matter. The word itself speaks decisively on the subject: why use “kingdom”, which has an obvious and unambiguous reference to an external state of inter- human relationships, a polity, a form of social organization, when you actually mean an interior state of mind or soul?

OK, so the kingdom of God is not within you or me but among us – so what? Well, the coming of the kingdom of God (or Heaven), its inauguration by Jesus’ incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension, is the central content of all Jesus’ teaching – it’s what the Good News is good news of! So we’d better get it right what it is: there’s a world of difference between an interior psychological state and a state of human relationships in the world at large. The twain might meet, but they’re not the same thing.

Jesus was speaking now more than 2000 years ago, so here we are now, more than 2000 years later (by my calculation) well and truly in the kingdom of God among us – the kingdom, we’re standing in it! It’s such a cliché - “the kingdom of God is inside me”, “Jesus is in my heart”, “my faith is my personal, private business” and their corollaries – but it is critically false, and critically conceals the real nature of the kingdom, the real nature of the world around us now, 2000 year later.

The twain do meet, of course. When we finally open ourselves up, often only after years of futile self-effort, to the God outside of us, to the healing, transforming Spirit, there is certainly a change in our inner state, in our beliefs, our feelings, in the way we see the world. But this change – the Greek word is *metanoia*, a 180° turn around in our mindset - immediately and necessarily plays itself out in our behaviour, our actions, our relationships in the world. It is anything but a merely personal, private matter.

cont.



Inside of us there is only flesh, blood, bones and grey matter, including a whole lot of selfish, self-preservation instincts carried over from our evolutionary past. We see the consequences of this, our natural-born interior state, in all the troubles of our world, everything from kids not playing nicely together in the playground, to the Russians invading Ukraine and climate change. So, thank God the kingdom of God is not within us!

We are never solo, private, personal individuals, self-complete inside our own little head-kingdoms. This is not just the story of the entire evolution of life on earth – all organic life is the expression of, in myriads of different forms, the same one thing – it's the story of little baby you and me born into the instant community of mum and dad. Our thoughts, our feelings, our entire psychic state is relational. So, the kingdom of God is about how you and I, ultimately all human beings and the whole creation to boot, relate to each other, the objective state of the world, now and to come, Amen

Fergus McGinley, May 2024

## Staying in Contact



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email [contactpcnetsa@gmail.com](mailto:contactpcnetsa@gmail.com)