

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.

Next Progressive Christianity Forum

Join us on Sept 5th for a presentation by

Rev Prof Vicki Balabanski

The Wonder of the Scriptures to be Re-interpreted

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PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY NETWORK of SA

Mail c/- Effective Living Centre,
26 King William Rd, Wayville 5034

Office Tues - Fri 10 am - 2 pm

Email contactpcnetsa@gmail.com

Phone 8271 0329

Website www.pcnetsa.org

<https://www.facebook.com/pcnetsa/>

Task Group 2024

Janeen Barker
Jonathan Barker
Kym Bills
Esmond Dowdy

Maureen Howland
David McDougall
Fergus McGinley
Don Sinnott - Chair

Progressive Christianity Forum 5th September 7pm

Effective Living Centre, 26 King William Road, Wayville,

The Wonder of the Scriptures to be Re-interpreted

Rev Prof Vicky Balabanski



Surely everything that could be said about the Bible has already been said?

Not at all! Using new methods and perspectives, there is 'yet more light' to be found!

In this presentation Reverend Professor Vicky Balabanski will introduce two tricky New Testament passages, showing how they can be reinterpreted using new methods and perspectives.

Vicky Balabanski is a New Testament scholar at the University of Divinity and the EO/Principal of Uniting College for Leadership and Theology in Adelaide. An ordained Uniting Church Minister of the Word, her expertise is in the Synoptic Gospels, John's Gospel, Colossians, Receptive Ecumenism and Ecological Hermeneutics. She is the General Editor of the Earth Bible series; her Earth Bible commentary, "Colossians: An Eco-Stoic reading" (Bloomsbury T & T Clark 2020), draws on Stoic philosophy to enrich ecological interpretations. Vicky is a member of the international Society of Biblical Studies since 2017 and has been a keynote speaker for World Diakonia conferences, the UCA President's Conference in Fiji, 2019, and the Christian Conference of Asia, Kerala (2023).

General admission \$15, concession \$12, live stream \$5.

Options for registration and payment are,

- the HUMANITIX website at <https://www.humanitix.com/au>; search Progressive Christianity Forum
- the booking links for [The Progressive Christianity Forum](https://www.effectiveliving.org.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.

The Allure of Managerialism in the Church

An office party to farewell a colleague who had been promoted to a senior managerial position badged as *Inspector General* in a Public Service Department offered an opportunity, almost an expectation, to present him with a small celebratory gift. Most gifts were of the liquid variety, but I chose to make a desk ornament, crude by the standards of machine-made ornaments, but with a personal message. The operative part of the ornament was a small tub holding three flags. The flags were hand-labelled *Effectiveness*, *Efficiency*, *Integrity*. I believe my colleague took my construction in the spirit offered and gave it a very visible place on his new desk.

My experience in management leads me to see these three qualities as the enduring essence of sound and successful management: deliver the goods (be effective), do so with economy in resources (be efficient) and stay within the rules (display integrity). We expect nothing less of those who manage any secular enterprise, and a good deal more when the enterprise is a company whose directors and officers must act in accordance with the Corporations Act and Law. But what of the church? Is it an enterprise for which the tenets of managerialism apply?

A recent book (2016) by Anglican Scholar-Priest Lyndon Shakespeare, *The Body of Christ in the Age of Management*, gives a resounding *No*. The author accepts an almost identical triad as mine as the basis of managerialism and his thesis is that managerialism, so defined, has no place as a governing principle for the church, the body of Christ. Rather, the church is an assembly of individuals in a special relationship with God through Christ and managerialist words like 'success' and 'growth' do not fit. A commentator, commending the book, notes that applying to the church 'criteria of supposed "efficiency" is a mode of "corporatory" that substitutes the body of an idol for the face of God...' He also notes that the book explains 'why the grasp of secular organisation-theory by current church leaders is rather poor in any case.' So church leaders are the inexpert seeking to apply the inappropriate. A double calamity.

All this touches a nerve for me, the same one that has motivated Shakespeare's book. He notes that at multiple levels of church organisation we hear choruses of 'the church needs effective leaders,' 'we must be more missional,' 'better organisation is required,' 'we must target church growth.' The result is 'to see the church as just another social body in need of better organisation' and to apply inadequately understood models from the business and management sector uncritically. cont.

¹ Shakespeare understands 'body of Christ' to be synonymous with 'church' (1 Cor 12:17 and other Pauline epistles.)

² John Milbank, University of Nottingham.

³ Andrew Davison, University of Cambridge

One reviewer of Shakespeare's book sees it, in part, as 'a critique of how the church thinks when it loses confidence in theology.'

To read and appreciate the book requires some depth in the writings of 13th century theologian Thomas Aquinas and of the western philosophical tradition from Aristotle onwards. I lack this depth, so my reading of the book has been superficial. But enough to capture the essence of the message: the church is not a corporation for which the continually evolving methodologies and fads of management theory are appropriate.

Shakespeare argues from a theological viewpoint that is traditional and conservative. As a Christian of progressive persuasion, I depart from this at many points. But we share sufficient common ground for me to appreciate the importance of the overarching message.

Shakespeare, recently returned to his home country of Australia, writes from the experience of a 30-year sojourn in the USA but the managerialism within the church he condemns in that country is replicated here. Mainline churches in Australia all but insist on their congregations having vision and mission statements in religio-corporate speak and in their state-based head-offices organise and plan on managerial lines transparently aligned with corporate practice—or what I would contend is a flawed understanding of it. Have we lost confidence in theology?

Don Sinnott



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A TIME TO REVITALISE THE UNITING PRESENCE

How different the social and religious landscape of Australia is from when the Uniting Church in Australia came into existence in 1977! For example, no one could have foreseen the widespread abandonment of institutional Christianity nor the polarisation of political, social identities both in the church and within the wider Australian community. These days many Uniting Church congregations struggle to keep themselves in existence as their membership ages, numbers decline and resources are stretched to provide stipended ministries and maintain properties. Despite exceptions, the future for most seems bleak.

While the Basis of Union defines what (who) we are as a church with our roots in the British Isles and a faith centred on European reformed and evangelical movements, it seems to me that while the basis (and the regulations) provides a structural guide it is not a guide as to how we are to be the church in our present times. We are now required to fashion ourselves in ways not previously imagined. Can we counter the seemingly inexorable (but not inevitable) decline of the Uniting Church by reimagining ways forward whereby the distinctive contribution of the Uniting tradition is able to respond positively to the socio-religious needs of contemporary Australia?

First, I propose that there needs to be an overarching theme to capture the imagination. In one Synod where I served in an Intentional Ministry, several linked congregations chose the slogan “revitalising the Uniting presence” in the communities or towns where they were situated. “Revitalisation” contrasts with the aim of a previous era which was intent on “church renewal.” Renewal assumed putting life back into something which already exists. The task facing us is required to be far more radical. It is not to resuscitate past models but to imagine something new. Both **REVITALISING** and **PRESENCE** may be the best words to inspire those looking for a new future. What might be the essential ingredients for reimagining how the church can be a revitalised presence?

Any new way forward requires reimagining the identity and purpose of being the people of God called Uniting. Who are we for; who is Jesus Christ for us today; what kind of life together can sustain people with a mission to declare the good news and serve those beyond the confines of a worshipping congregation? How can faith communities rearticulate the gospel in order to address the spiritual hunger of a secular age? Can we develop the theological and pedagogical skills necessary to guide people forward? Perhaps the most appropriate missional paradigm to undergird these ideas is the parabolic imagery associated with Jesus’ new age of justice and truth. Here are some preliminary ideas as to what could be the characteristics a revitalised presence.

First, gathered communities as revitalised congregations are a **GRACEFUL PRESENCE**, consciously and unequivocally offering inclusive hospitality. For example, to be known by their signage that they are a safe place for LGBTQI+ people, refugees, poor, homeless, all ethnicities – and any whose place in society is precarious and unsafe. The good news is not couched in religious clichés but grounded in words and deeds which express how unconditional love leads to the fullness of life. When this happens, a graceful community will become known as a good place to belong. Some may dare to commit themselves to living the “Economy of Life” and be a sign of an alternative way of living in a world facing existential threats. Active hope leads people beyond a sense of powerlessness and links them to a larger vision of a renewed world. They are communities of the resurrection.

cont.

Second, revitalised congregations become a **LEAVENING PRESENCE** able to connect with those in the wider community who are anxious, feel overlooked or unloved. They dare to become aware of and listen to those who on the margins struggle to care for themselves and their loved ones. Congregations will intentionally ask themselves, “who are we for?” emulating Jesus, “the man for others” who calls awakened ones to care for the least. Even small congregations can have the capacity to lead the way in taking actions which change things for the better within their wider community. Being the leaven often calls forth others to care even if they are not part of the worshipping community, particularly when extending hospitality to others. They are communities with a diaconal identity.

Third, revitalised congregations may reimagine how their **SYMBOLIC PRESENCE** can offer something unique to the wider community. Historic buildings and smaller churches are often undervalued and can be too easily dismissed as “not fit for purpose”. While church buildings may be a reminder that these “sacred sites” shaped the religious and cultural sensibilities of past generations I believe they can with some imagination still play a unique role for our present times. They have the potential to be “sacred spaces”, for example: oases of calm in a frenzied world; where meditation, contemplation and prayer nurture the soul even for those living under a secular canopy. Churches can be used for multi purposes where community life happens, people are fed and the arts flourish. Exterior signage and banners too are symbolic, able to communicate that life with purpose happens on this site.

Fourth, revitalisation has the core task of discerning how the **DIVINE PRESENCE** is revealed and active in all that goes on as a part of everyday life. We can be very coy talking about how the Christian faith addresses the challenges of the 21st century. There is much to rediscover here; for example how to discern the meaning of the signs of the times in which we live; how to connect the universal desire to “rise up” over the threats to life with the transcendent mystery and profound love of the one we call GOD; how Jesus the Christ is present among the “least” and able to transform all who seek the liberation which leads to human flourishing; how justice-ing love calls upon us to speak truth to power. Discerning the divine presence is key to humanness and is witnessed to in all that happens as graceful, leavening communities of faith reimagine their presence as sacred places.

How might these ideas be put into practice? It is important to note that what is being proposed here is intended to engage those within congregations who care deeply about the future of the Uniting Church. Those so involved are best understood to be like a “grass roots” movement which nevertheless aims to work within and to transform the formal ecclesiastical structures. To take effect, they would covenant together to discern new ways forward and meet frequently enough to be enlivened and support each other. Planning together, they would then need to sensitively consult with their congregations, in order to implement new ways forward.

Furthermore, congregations sited within the same geo-social region may decide to work together to jointly respond to the presenting needs within their shared wider community. This assumes giving priority to forging a revitalised missional identity for the local churches involved.

A revitalising movement is hard to implement unless ministerial leadership is committed to such a vision, assuming of course there would be the vital involvement and leadership of lay people as well.

There needs to be a framework for implementing these ideas. It just may be that the four categories of PRESENCE - Graceful, Leavening, Symbolic and Divine could be a useful basis for the knowing, doing and becoming a revitalised presence of the Uniting Church.

Where are those who may wish to embark on this task?

JONATHAN BARKER

14th November 2023

Book Review

David Bentley Hart *The New Testament: A Translation*. 2nd edn. Yale University Press, 2023

David Bentley Hart was encouraged by the Yale editors to prepare a full translation of the New Testament in preference to his preferred secular translation projects. He was glad that he did. After publication in 2017, he saw some areas where he could do better leading to this second, and he says final, edition. Hart's Introduction (pp xvii-xi) discusses a number of issues and key aims in translation. A Postscript (pp 533-602) expounds the difficulties in translation exemplified by the Prologue to the Gospel of John.

Hart found past NT translation overly influenced by past textual errors, Church history and theology, and compromise from least-offensive committee consensus. He writes that he *has come to believe that all the standard English translations render a great many of the concepts and presuppositions upon which the books of the New Testament are built largely impenetrable, and that most of them effectively hide (sometimes forcibly) things of absolutely vital significance for understanding how the texts' authors thought*. For example, he says that the more evangelical New International Version has sometimes distorted the text to a 'discreditable degree'. Unconstrained, his *principal aim is to help awaken readers to mysteries and uncertainties and surprises in the New Testament documents that often lie wholly hidden from view beneath layers of received hermeneutical and theological tradition*.

An important example of mistranslation is the Latin Vulgate's 'inept rendering' of the last four Greek words in Romans 5:12 that influenced Western Christianity's understanding of 'original sin'. Here is an extract from Hart's translation of Romans 5:12-15: *Therefore, just as sin entered into the cosmos through one man, and death through sin, so also death pervaded all humanity, whereupon all sinned ... death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not commit sin similar to the transgression of Adam, who is a figural type of the one about to come. ... if by the transgression of one the many dies, so much the more did God's grace and the gift in grace of the one man Jesus the Anointed overflow to the many*.

Hart sometimes chooses translations such as 'Holy One' and 'Anointed' Jesus in place of 'Messiah' and 'Christ', and he prefers to not use loaded terms such as 'eternal', 'redemption', 'justification', 'predestination', and 'hell'. cont.

Five important points among those that Hart makes in his introductory material are:

(1) for the translation, he *worked from the so-called Critical text, which is based on earlier and different manuscript sources (such as those of the Alexandrian Text-type), but I have also included a great many verses and phrases found only in the Majority Text (placing them in brackets to set them off from the Critical text).*

(2) in the time of the original NT passages *the partition between the natural and the supernatural, like that between the physical and the spiritual, did not yet exist ... angels ruled the nations of the earth as local gods, in which demons prowled the empty spaces, in which spirit and breath and wind were all one thing (at once transcendent and materially palpable) ... And above it all, literally seated on high in an empyrean beyond the turning heavens, was God in his true dwelling place, in light inaccessible, from whom humanity was separated by a gulf at once spatial and spiritual.*

(3) passages that seem to imply universal salvation greatly outnumber the very few that appear to threaten an ultimate damnation for the wicked.

(4) it is an 'early modern theological fantasy' that Paul warned against works righteousness in favour of faith 'justification' by grace. Instead, Paul rejected righteousness obtainable through the Old Testament law and ritual observances like circumcision and keeping kosher and insisted, like Jesus, that 'all will be judged in the end according to their deeds'.

(5) because of writers' immanent expectation of a final terrible judgment, seemingly 'extreme' interpretations of NT passages, not our 'commonsense' hindsight views, are almost always correct.

For example, personal wealth was considered a forbidden 'intrinsic' evil and not just a moral danger even if honestly procured and generously used. The first followers of the Way were to renounce private property and own everything communally. (Of course, that, and church leadership and structures, changed as the first NT generation died-out before Jesus' Second Coming.)

As a non-Greek reader, I will continue to rely on well-regarded English translations such as the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition and on various scholarly commentaries. But Hart's translation is fresh and thought-provoking and will provide additional insight to help challenge theological complacency.

Hart's translation is highly recommended and currently available from Amazon Australia in paperback for \$32.31.

Reviewed by Kym Bills, July 2024

New on the Website

Fergus McGinley – Essay

JESUS DIDN'T COME TO ALLEVIATE THE SUFFERING OF THE WORLD—BUT YES HE DID!

An intriguing title, don't you think?! Now for an essay to match it!

In the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, we're right now in the middle of a five-week journey through John Chapter 6—at 70 verses, it's a very long chapter. It's the "I am the bread of life" chapter, because after the drama of the miraculous feeding of 5000 people on the far (eastern) shore of the Sea of Galilee, then some walking on water (verses 1-21), Jesus spends most of the rest of the chapter in Capernaum (on the north-western shore) unveiling the rather marvellous news that he is, yes, "the bread of life". And not just that he will provide such bread, but that he—his body, his flesh—*is* that bread. Inviting us, moreover, to eat our fill of it, with great benefit: "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (51).

And not just bread/body/flesh either, but blood as well: "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (54). Let's just concentrate on the bread bit, however: what in the world does Jesus mean when he says he is the bread of life—obviously it's not literal, physical bread, so exactly what sort of bread is it? And, yes, what has any of this got to do with the long-winded title of this essay?

Read the whole essay at:

<https://pcnetsa.org/2024/08/16/jesus-didnt-come-to-alleviate-the-suffering-of-the-world-but-yes-he-did/>

PCForum Presenters

Mark Waters PCForum 4th July 2024

Some recommended links for further information

<https://wordpress.com/post/pcnetsa.org/1700>

Lee Levett-Olson PCForum 6th June 2024

Full presentation notes

<https://wordpress.com/post/pcnetsa.org/1703>