

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

## SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 14

December 1995

### SOFN Constitution

With this newsletter comes the first draft of a constitution for the Sea of Faith Network (NZ). It is being sent to all network members to allow the widest possible consultation as we move towards registering the network as an incorporated society.

The impulse for this came from the network's annual general meeting during the Hamilton conference in September 1994. There it was pointed out that without such a document, Steering Committee members could be personally liable for debts incurred by the network (for example, if a conference ran at a loss, or if someone took offence at something published in the Newsletter, and sued for libel).

At the Wellington conference in August 1995, the AGM approved a process for adopting a constitution. The first step was to ask a lawyer to prepare a draft. This has been done, based in part on the constitution of the Sea of Faith Network in Britain. We opted for an incorporated society (essentially, a group of people united for a common purpose, with control in the hands of members) rather than a charitable trust (geared more towards holding assets and property, and controlled by trustees).

The second step, now being taken, is to send a copy of the draft to members and invite comments and suggestions on it. The Steering Committee asks you to send any suggestions to:

The Secretary,  
Sea Of Faith Network (NZ)  
82 Kinghorne St  
Strathmore  
Wellington

**To arrive no later than February 15, 1996.**

The Steering Committee will collate and consider those comments, adjust the draft as it thinks appropriate, and have it checked by our lawyer. About the middle of next year a copy of the revised draft will be sent to all members, with notice that it will be submitted for adoption at the 1996 AGM in Dunedin.

That meeting will be asked to approve the constitution as presented, and to authorise the steering committee to proceed to incorporation. There will be provision for proxy voting by financial members of the network who cannot be

present. If the motion to approve the constitution is lost, the committee will initiate a further process of review and consultation.

The committee's approach was to keep the organisational framework to a minimum, while ensuring that the network can function effectively; and to be permissive rather than restrictive, in order to keep options open for the future. Unfortunately the legal requirements for incorporation muddled our vision of elegant simplicity, but that is out of our hands.

The committee commends the draft for your perusal, and looks forward to receiving any comments and suggestions you may wish to make.

**Ian Harris,**  
*Chairperson,*  
*SOFN (NZ) Steering Committee*

### Financial Report

At the Conference, a Statement of Receipts and Payments was tabled and audited accounts were approved.

It will be noted that there is an increase in subscriptions compared with the previous year—this reflects the increase in membership. The "surplus" money from the previous two Conferences was taken into the main Sea of Faith accounts.

The Network now has a cash reserve of \$12,000 — \$8,000 of which is invested in term deposits and another \$2,000 was provided to the 1996 Conference organising committee to provide them with an initial financial injection to enable them to pay a deposit on the venue.

The cash reserve funds will enable us to invite overseas speakers to future Conferences and also provides a back-up in the unlikely event of a conference running at a loss.

I am sure that you will be interested to know that our membership at the time of the Conference was 654 people in 508 households. 42% of our members live north of Taupo; 35% in the southern part of the North Island and the remaining 23% in the South Island.

**Jane L. Griffith**

**"We are human becomings not  
human beings."**

*See Leo Hobbs' Workshop on page 2*

## More 1995 Conference Workshop Reviews

There were nearly thirty workshops at this year's conference. Here is a further sampling of what attendees enjoyed:

**Jim Stuart** led a workshop on "*Social Change and Social Justice*". One of the first points that he made was that we live in times where a lot of changes are happening—and that it is important to distinguish between "change" and "change that is just".

During the time that the group spent working on the topic no easy answers emerged—rather the conviction that if change cannot be managed then it will get out of control—and the results of that will be devastating to those affected. Accordingly the group worked on identifying factors that initiate and influence change and those that are necessary for a successful outcome.

The workshop on "*It or Thou*" led by **Jan Lawson** examined the concept of relationship in going beyond Martin Buber's concept of relationship with another person to:

1. the potential for relationship with all life and the physical universe as a whole.
2. relationship in terms of relation with self and with spirit/gods/God
3. the association of an extended relationship with the survival of life on the planet

In examining the evolutionary basis for "*The Origin of Moral Values*", **George Ridley** showed that the underlying precept is that all plant and animal behaviour is designed to perpetuate its genes.

Our behaviour is inherently selfish, but we balance competition with cooperation in order to survive.

Moral values have arisen from this need to cooperate and are an integrating force in society.

**Ian Cairns'** "*A Non-Realist Reading of Mark*" placed the Bible as a major resource in the Christian tradition while asking whether "non-realist" Christians still draw usefully on Mark's very "realist" book.

Ian faces this very difficult question with long experience as a theological teacher. He suggested that by careful reading we can find, behind the stories of Mark, an entirely human Jesus whose personality and convictions are still relevant and inspiring.

"*Science and The Search For Meaning*" was conducted by **Leo Hobbis**, a retired physicist with an interest in theology and philosophy. Leo is one of those scientists searching for the holistic as against the reductionist approach to the interpretation of experience. He gave an explanatory introduction to the work of the late Darryl Reaney, particularly his last book *Music Of The Mind*. He then showed a video of Darryl presenting a lecture on an approach to the crisis of meaning which is experienced by so many at present. Humanity is in a "phase transition" towards a greater, more inclusive and holistic consciousness. We are human becoming not human beings. There are other ways of knowing, besides logic, and the now-recognised "quantum wave" gives us the awareness of states of consciousness which are possible and only lightly glimpsed previously. The crisis we experience is a symptom of this change. "There is no growth without suffering."

An inspiring, informative and challenging workshop, much appreciated by all who attended.

**Louis Statham's** "*Relationship With A Capital 'R'*" concluded that Relationship in its universal sense, like love in its universal sense, like consciousness in its universal sense, is not a "thing" in itself, but that which gives "things" meaning. Relationship does not "exist" in itself, but is That that gives rise to existence.

With disarming charm **David Simmers** gave workshop attendees an introduction to, and a synopsis of, Karen Armstrong's 500-page historical overview: *A History of God*. This left those who know not the lady or her works keen to tackle it for themselves. Fittingly he closed by reading from the last page—haunting, evocative.

A popular workshop lead by **Margaret Burnett** and **John Eady** of New Plymouth asked "*Can We Stay With The Church?*"

As an opener, Margaret invited attendees to name a bird which symbolised the Church for us. The results: dove or hawk, the parson bird, the lyre bird.

Small groups looked at the boundaries that were, for them, the tension points which contributed to people's decisions to stay or leave the Church. Some examples: sexist language; literal interpretations of the Bible; lack of honesty in expressing our beliefs; intolerance of different viewpoints.

They looked at the Church, distinguishing between the practices and theology developed in later centuries, and the revolutionary Gospel message.

**John Murray** explored "*The Spirituality of Music*" which drew the comment "every conference should have a session like this". Spirituality through participation in silence; a range of rich and varied musical extracts; and a simple sharing of responses. Thank you John Murray (and Taverner, Faure, Bach and others).

**Ralph Pannett** opened "*Windows On The World: The Art of George Rouault*". To most participants, this was their first stimulating and thought-provoking introduction to the religious art of George Rouault. A slide presentation was followed by a discussion which allowed creative juices to flow. This workshop was seen as one that provided a counterpoint to the "cerebral and verbal content" of the Conference.

"*Books For The Voyage*" were discussed by **Liz Robinson** who lead an interactive group in which participants gave summaries of books that they had found interesting, entertaining and encouraging. The breadth and depth of reading was amazing and included the whole spectrum of fiction, non-fiction, humour and poetry. We hope to include the list in a later Newsletter, but you can get an advance copy from Liz Robinson, P.O. Box 12256, Wellington.

## **Dunedin Conference August 23-25, 1996**

Put this date in your diary. The Steering Committee is well advanced in plans for speakers and workshops but still welcomes all suggestions that you have to offer. The Dunedin Committee is busy with all the local arrangements.

## **News from Branch Groups**

A full list of groups and contact persons will appear in the next Newsletter.

### **Wellington**

A Wellington group has been established, in addition to the already existing Ephesus Group. The contact person is: Barbara Millar, 22 Fiona Grove, Karori, Wellington 5. Phone: 476-3858.

### **Joint Regional Seminar**

In view of participants' positive responses to a seminar earlier this year, **Mana and Wairarapa Sea of Faith Groups** plan another residential seminar. This will be from **30-31 March 1996** at Fredric Wallis house, Lower Hutt. The theme: **How come Paul's new myth gripped the world?** Other questions may include: Where did

Christianity come from? Now that the old objective world has collapsed, by what do we live? or create a world we want?.

Enquiries to: Irvine Roxburgh, 3 Picket Boat Lane, Whitby 04-234-8613.

## **Books of Interest**

**Reviewed by Lloyd Geering**

Fundamentalism and Freedom, by Peter Cameron, Doubleday, 1995, 213 pp. (\$24.95, available from Epworth Bookshop, PO Box 6133, Wellington)

Peter Cameron is a Church of Scotland minister who was for some years Principal of St. Andrew's College in the University of Sydney. This is a Presbyterian College, having been claimed by the continuing Presbyterians when the greater number of Presbyterians moved into the Uniting Church of Australia. The continuing Presbyterians are extremely conservative, even to the point of now refusing to ordain any more women into the ministry. Peter Cameron opposed this backward move and soon found himself embroiled in a theological battle within the church. In 1993 he was charged with heresy and eventually ousted. He has subsequently published his story in a book entitled Heretic.

While that book is more personal, and chiefly of interest to the Australian scene, this second book is of greater interest and value to us here in New Zealand, where very conservative theological convictions have already become quite dominant in the so-called mainline churches. The Presbyterian church in particular is deeply divided over the question of ordaining homosexuals to the ministry and this is fast becoming a battle between liberal and fundamentalist attitudes towards the Bible.

This book is not an academic one. The person to turn to for that is James Barr, a Scottish Old Testament scholar, who has been writing about fundamentalism for some thirty years, in such books as Fundamentalism, SCM, 1977, and Escaping from Fundamentalism, SCM, 1984. More recently Barr has written, "Fundamentalism has suddenly become a matter of concern for everyone, whether or not they are personally religious. It affects education in science and history; it affects political elections in some countries, and through this it affects international relations; it may affect the question of whether mankind survives [far] into the twenty-first century. Therefore, if people want to understand the world in which they live, they may find it necessary to understand something about fundamentalism".



So Cameron's book is very timely. Though it is written in a lively and personal style it nevertheless brings clearly into the open why the rise of modern fundamentalism can no longer be ignored, either by the churches or by the community. There are two reasons why Christian fundamentalism has not been adequately countered in the past. The first is that while fundamentalists are often quite intolerant of those who differ from them, more liberal Christians, believing in the value of tolerance, have been reluctant to be openly critical of fundamentalists. In this respect Cameron does not pull any punches at all. He asserts that fundamentalists conceive God to be "an authoritarian idol-god, who bullies his worshippers into submission" and that this inadequate conception of God is "simply a projection of their own fantasies".

The second reason is that fundamentalists, by claiming to be the guardians of the only true form of Christianity, have captured the high moral ground, from which they are able to condemn all who differ from them as renegades and enemies of the "faith", who follow their own (misguided) inclinations instead of being faithful to the eternal truths which God had laid down in his eternal Word.

In adopting this position fundamentalists show not only that they have an inadequate understanding of the history of Christianity but, worse than that, they are setting themselves up as the only true interpreters of Christianity and hence the only true Christians. Fundamentalism inevitably becomes divisive, sectarian and self-righteous.

Fundamentalists are very dismissive of all things human and draw an absolute line between human thought and divine thought. This turns out to be Achilles heel. As soon as it become clear, as it has in the last 150 years, that the Bible is of human origin and reflects at all points the thoughts, customs, and world-views of the various people whose words are there preserved, fundamentalists are raising to divine and absolute status the (human) thoughts of people of ancient times. In other words they are idolising past human thinking and rejecting modern human thinking. Far from being the guardians of the true faith, fundamentalists are guilty of what the biblical tradition regards as the most heinous of all sins, namely idolatry.

Where have all the Christians Gone? (And What Should We Tell Our Children?), Allan Yeoman, 1995. (Available, postfree, from the author, PO Box 139, Kati Kati, for \$14.95) It is encouraging to see a member of the SOFN addressing a similar topic in New Zealand. Describing himself as a

returned serviceman and farmer, with a long-standing involvement with the Presbyterian Church, Allan Yeoman, at his own expense, has written and published an excellent little booklet of 48 pages, in which he analyses what he sees happening in church life in New Zealand. Allan makes no claim to present any original religious ideas and openly draws on such people as Spong and Cupitt, yet he clearly presents the honest questions and concerns which need to be faced within the church, if it is to remain in touch with the community at large. Like Cameron, Yeoman has observed how "some fundamentalists ... have set out to take over the structures of the established churches", leaving many people grieving for the loss of the the more open church they once knew.

Solar Ethics, SCM, (approx. \$28), Don Cupitt's latest book, will be reviewed in the next newsletter.

God and the New Physics, a somewhat enlarged version of the lunch-hour lecture series delivered in October by Lloyd Geering. (\$10 plus postage from St. Andrew's Trust, PO Box 5203, Wellington.).

Remember that if any of the Trust's publications are being used for group study and discussion, orders of six or more can be obtained at the wholesale price. (Apply through Lloyd Geering).

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## Subscriptions

If there is a red dot on this Newsletter it means that your subscription is due and that you may not receive further newsletters. The subscription of TEN DOLLARS per annum should be sent to the Secretary: **Jane Griffith**, 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore, Wellington

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## Next Newsletter

The next Newsletter is planned for March, 1996. Any contributions or news you have to offer will be welcome and should be sent to either of the joint Editors:

**Lloyd Geering**, 5B Herbert Gardens, 186 The Terrace, Wellington

**Noel Cheer**, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay

### The Network On The Net

If you would like to join in the cyberspace version of the Sea of Faith network, then send an e-mail to Ralph Pannett at [pannett@flagstaf.wgtn.planet.co.nz](mailto:pannett@flagstaf.wgtn.planet.co.nz)