

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 130, May 2017

THE VENUE OF THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

With the previous Newsletter, we sent out a Referendum to ask members which method of selecting the Conference venue they prefer.

We sent out about 300 forms of which 84 were returned which expressed a preference. 79 chose the Wellington venue and 9 did not.

Subject to ratification at this year's AGM, the Steering Committee will adopt the policy of holding future Conferences in the Wellington region.

Holding the annual Conference in Wellington will be the default process – that is what we will do 'usually', but not 'always'. If special circumstances arise – for example, an event out of Wellington that has a strong relevance to SoF, the Steering Committee will consider making the switch.

The former Arrangements Committee has been changed into the semi-permanent Conference Committee, appointed by and servant of the Steering Committee. The Conference Committee is currently comprised of Noel Cheer, Norm Ely and Peter Cowley.

We have calculated a Region-specific subsidy to compensate those who come from a greater distance and for whom there are no (or few) discounted airfares.

We are advertising the subsidy in this Newsletter (see the next paragraph) and we plan to mail the Registration Form for Conference 2017, containing the updates, with the July Newsletter.

The biggest change is in the provision of a subsidy to recognise the imbalance of travel costs between the regions in this long, thin country of ours.

Region 1: Greater Wellington (Wellington to Upper Hutt and Waikanae) – no subsidy

Region 2: Main Trunk – Greater Auckland, Greater Christchurch:

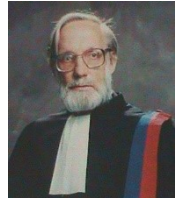
areas with access to discounted airline fares. Subsidy of \$25.

Region 3: All Other – Subsidy of \$50.

These provisions will appear on the Registration Form with the July Newsletter.

We welcome comments on these changes. Send them to either noel@cheer.org.nz or Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay 5022.

ADIEU, EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF FRENCH FRED MARSHALL



Emeritus Professor Fred Woodward Marshall

Born 28 September 1930, died 27 April 2017. Dearly beloved husband of Jocelyn, beloved father of Christopher, Timothy, Jeremy, Stephen, and Andrew, and their partners, grandfather of Max, Lincoln, Ethan, Rebecca, and Samantha, Em, Sarah, and Olivia, and their partners, and great-grandfather of William and Evelyn

This tribute was delivered at Fred's funeral by Jock Crawford of the Waikato Sea of Faith Network.

I can claim Fred as a good friend and mentor over that period during which those of us in the Sea of Faith benefited greatly from his experience and thoughtful writings on matters of interest: aspects of theology, philosophy, social justice; our understanding of the divine and particularly the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. (Indeed, such subjects are the lifeblood of the Sea of Faith, a loose-knit organisation considered in some quarters of the traditional Church to be somewhat subversive and heretical – which it is. It is also a refuge for those with commitment to intellectual integrity and spiritual sanity, peopled these days by a majority of individual seekers of truth.)



Fred, a Life Member of the national organisation, (this photo was taken at a 2009 meeting of the Steering Committee) was instrumental in hosting the first national conference of the Sea of Faith here in Hamilton in 1992, and three subsequent ones over the next 20 years. It was his connection with the university that saw us meeting there regularly for some years at the Buttery for a meal together – and subsequently here at the Cathedral Centre until five years ago.

It must be now a decade or more since he embarked on writing a series of essays, one of which is entitled “No other hands but yours – an evolutionary imperative” and which is revelatory of his thinking. Its opening paragraph contains the following:

It is in the everyday, the ordinary that what we have hitherto called ‘God’ is manifested. I think we are hung up on a notion of the divine which belongs in the past and even those who reject the notion of God are blinkered by an out-of-date model and so reject a hypothesis which has proved false without considering alternatives. What I propose is to share with you my ordinary, lived, spiritual experience, with which some of you may concur, and then look to see if there is another hypothesis which answers questions, resolves difficulties and leads to a better understanding of humanity’s place in the great adventure of evolution.

For those who may wonder how Fred Marshall, the grandson of an immigrant Methodist minister, could come to hold such views, a clue may be found a little later in that same essay:

I was reared in the Church from birth but the theology of my adolescence got off to a bad start when I read in a bible-class primer “God was lonely so he made humans to keep him company”. Even to a 15 year old that seemed naïve nonsense.

Although over his life Fred became critical of much that the traditional Church proclaimed and indeed he discarded such to the point where he said of the Nicene Creed that all that was left for him was belief [e.g. in the sense “to have trust in”] God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he nevertheless was aware of a Presence accompanying his life to which he was attuned. He likened it to the air he inhaled and exhaled, rarely aware of it, part of the ordinariness of life, “*part of the fabric of the world we occupy*”.

His family, friends from academia and elsewhere, both within and without the Church, will remember a loyal and patient man who never let the difficulties of life overwhelm him; some of us will remember with gratitude his intellectual integrity and commitment to the questions of life being of greater importance than possible answers. Like others before him – some world famous – his views were not appreciated by everyone, particularly in certain clerical circles. At the conclusion of one of his thoughtful essays on a subject which greatly interested him Fred wrote:

We each make our own Jesus. For me he is not the whitewashed plaster idol of a hybrid God, nor yet the safely pigeon-holed figure of The Jesus Seminar, or the sentimentalised alter-ego of the evangelicals. He was a man, shaped by his circumstances as we are, facing doubt and fear as we do, with a faith, a wisdom, a courage and a love we try to emulate, and driven by a divinity we all share. I believe he was guided as we are guided towards an end we cannot know, which, for us at the moment, goes under the name of evolution.

It is now nearly three weeks since I learned Fred had been in hospital for over a week. I rang to see if he was allowed visitors and went without delay to find him quite relaxed about his situation and imminent death. “*They had to shock me five times to bring me back. They say they can’t do anything more for me. They’re sending me home on Monday to die.*” He didn’t seem upset at the prospect – certainly not on his own account. The Presence was almost tangible.

Someone once said that we should live to die well. That is not always the case and we know it but Fred Marshall, good and faithful man of ability and integrity, met the final challenge of his life with grace and dignity. After a short spell at home, he slipped away in his sleep, lying next to Jocelyn, his adored wife for over sixty years, his lifelong quest for truth and meaning finally resolved.

Jock Crawford, 2017

ALL ABOUT US

SEA OF FAITH:

EXPLORING VALUES, SPIRITUALITY AND MEANING

We are an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

Our formal name is The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Inc.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

"Sea of Faith" both traces the decline of traditional Christian influence in the West in the past 250 years and invites the viewer to consider what might replace it. In New Zealand, Sea of Faith provides a forum via annual Conference and Newsletter, for the continued exploration. The Sea of Faith Network itself has no creed. We draw our members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

Our national **Steering Committee** publishes a Newsletter six times each year, maintains a website at www.sof.org.nz, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have four **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, and Ian Harris. . (The late Alan Goss, and the late Fred Marshall were, for a time, Life Members).

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The **Copy Editor** is Shirley Dixon, **Newsletter Distribution** is by Yvonne Curtis (paper copies) and Peter Cowley (emailed copies).

Steering Committee Members in General: Adrian Skelton, Doug Sellman, Jan Calvert, Daniel Phillips, Ian Crumpton

To offer a comment on material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact **The Editor, 26 Clipper St., Titahi Bay, Porirua 5022**, (04) 236-7533 or 0274-483-805 or email to noel@cheer.org.nz

Publication deadlines for submitted Newsletter copy for the remainder of 2017 are 21/6/17, 21/8/17, 21/10/17, 21/12/17.

Members may borrow books, CDs, and DVDs from the Resource Centre which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall phone (07) 578-2775 email susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz Refer to the catalogue on the website at www.sof.org.nz.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$25 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$20 if the Newsletter is emailed and not on paper. **Bonus:** If you already receive the paper version, then you can receive the email version in addition, *at no extra charge*. Send an email requesting that to pcowley@paradise.net.nz

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LOOKS A LITTLE THIN?

Yes, this issue is only 8 pages (but with the quality of 12!) because we have recently incurred a lot of printing costs with the recent Referenda. The July issue will be accompanied by the printed Registration material. But twelve pages remains our normal size.

DO FUNDAMENTALISTS RECOVER?

Doug Sellman thinks so, and he invites others to give it a go.

"The concept is simple; for there to be an hour or so available on the Tuesday afternoon of the Conference (i.e. what was previously Saturday afternoon) for those who have previously been fundamentalists (in whatever way people would define the term for themselves) to meet together to compare notes on their recovery experience to date.

I'm happy to lead/facilitate the group. Perhaps there would be five of us. I wouldn't expect more than ten to come, but if twenty came that would be fine. I'm used to facilitating small and large groups."

We'll keep you in touch nearer the Conference.

REFORMATION

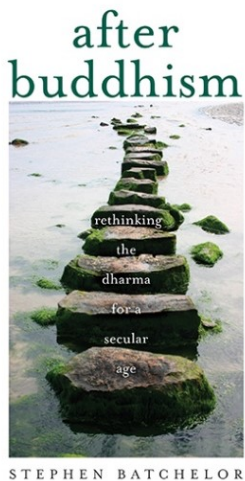
OUTSIDE CHRISTIANITY

BUDDHISM

After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age
Stephen Batchelor

Yale University Press, 2015, 400 pages

Some twenty-five centuries after the Buddha started teaching, his message continues to inspire people across the globe, including those living in predominantly secular societies. What does it mean to adapt religious practices to secular contexts?



Stephen Batchelor, an internationally known Buddhist author and teacher, is committed to a secularized version of the Buddha's teachings.

The time has come, he feels, to articulate a coherent ethical, contemplative, and philosophical vision of Buddhism for our age.

After Buddhism, the culmination of four decades of study and practice in the Tibetan, Zen, and Theravada

traditions, is his attempt to set the record straight about who the Buddha was and what he was trying to teach. Combining critical readings of the earliest canonical texts with narrative accounts of five members of the Buddha's inner circle, **Batchelor depicts the Buddha as a pragmatic ethicist rather than a dogmatic metaphysician.** He envisions Buddhism as a constantly evolving culture of awakening whose long survival is due to its capacity to reinvent itself and interact creatively with each society it encounters.

This original and provocative book presents a new framework for understanding the remarkable spread of Buddhism in today's globalized world. It also reminds us of what was so startling about the Buddha's vision of human flourishing.

Amazon promotion

There is a strong affinity between this book, which seeks to change the notion of 'noble truths' to 'noble tasks', and Robin Meyers' book Saving Jesus from the Church subtitled "How to stop worshipping Christ and start following Jesus". Both books retreat from orthodoxy ('right belief') and promote orthopraxy ('right action'). Was Jesus also a pragmatic ethicist? Was 'Christ' a disconnect from 'Jesus'?

Noel Cheer

ISLAM

Don Cupitt wrote:

We especially liberal Protestant Christians "are products of the Reformation. The crucial point is that it has been shown that **religion can be criticised and reformed**; and, if that is so, then anything else can be criticised and reformed. For us, the individual may be right *contra mundum* – against the world. Nothing is sacrosanct. Tradition is dead. As Marx commented, the criticism of religion is the basis for all criticism; **once the legitimacy of critical thinking had been demonstrated, the project of modernity was launched.** In the west, that is. Not in Islam.

Before about AD1550, Christianity had been, for more than a millennium, a whole civilisation. 'Christendom' was a great, objective and compulsory cultural fact.

In the Muslim heartlands, Islam is still seen as an entity of that kind, whereas after the Reformation in the west, Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, had become something quite different - a personal faith, a kind of internal guidance system by which an individual could shape a religious life in an increasingly secular world.

Islam has never undergone such a change. It has never reconciled itself to critical thinking, or to the idea that the individual thinker may be right against the world. It cannot accept the idea that religion needs continual self-criticism and reform in order to develop aright. It does not accept the idea of an autonomous, secular sphere of life that can and should function independently of religious control.

[Attempted modernisations of Islam] have all failed because they did not tackle the underlying question: **how can something analogous to the Protestant Reformation come about within Islam?** Perhaps it cannot. Even in the west, doctrine remains unreformed and religious thinking is not yet free.

Protestantism has largely decayed into fundamentalism. If we are still not able fully to accept our own principles, we can scarcely expect Islam to embrace them. Perhaps none of us yet understands the magnitude of the religious and cultural revolution the world now needs.

Don Cupitt Guardian, Saturday October 27, 2001

Is this an over-critical assessment of Islam? Or are there multiple renderings of Islam? Send Letters to the Editor.

Noel Cheer

REFLECTIONS ON MY INVOLVEMENT WITH THE NEWSLETTER AND THE WEBSITE

PART 1: THE NEWSLETTER

The reasons for my writing and publishing this piece are as follows.

First, I currently have no intention of either sharing or surrendering the role of Editor of this Newsletter. I enjoy the processes of soliciting or finding copy and assembling it into a twelve page Newsletter, six times a year. But democracy and mortality could step in at relatively short notice and it would be something of a service to whoever takes up the reins to leave a record of the current methodology.

The first NZ Sea of Faith Newsletter appeared 25 years ago this November, with Lloyd Geering as Editor. In a series of events that lie between kidnap and invitation, Lloyd persuaded me to take over. The change of the editor role occurred in stages towards the end of 1995. Edition number 13 in that October can be thought of as when I took over – 117 issues ago.

THE NEWSLETTER TEAM

Newsletter Editor:

The Editor has delegated discretion over the material published and the quality and presentation of the Newsletter and for its timely publication.

Shirley Dixon is the Copy Editor – commas, apostrophes and all that!

Printer:

1. Printing is done by the Wellington City Council.
2. Digital printing is done on receipt of a PDF file from the Editor and forwarded to Wellington City council Printers at publication@wcc.govt.nz (Account Number is 66395)
3. Costs are paid on invoice by the SoF NZ Treasurer

Distribution Volunteers:

Postal: Yvonne Curtis (paper) and Peter Cowley (email)

Composition and Typesetting

There are no standard layout criteria other than A4 page

size.

I use Microsoft Word as the typesetting tool. Having fully set up the final copy I make a PDF copy and send that, by email, to the Printer as mentioned above.

The printing is done onto A3 sheets (two A4 pages joined down one side and backed up with the appropriate matching pages. Since there are twelve reader pages arranged in groups of four, there are three A4 sheets, collated, folded to A4 size and stapled down the spine. Placement of the staples is such that the finished copy can be folded for an envelope.

Typical instructions to the printer are as follows:

- File: sofnl129.pdf
- Copies: 250
- Paper: A3, 100gsm smooth
- Colour: all sides
- Folding: all copies A3 folded to A4
- Stapled: Two staples, positioned 65mm from each end. (To allow for enveloping).)

EMAIL COPY

The same PDF file which is sent to the printer is sent also to Peter Cowley who sends it to the mailing list of members who elect to take the Newsletter by email.

PART 2: THE WEBSITE

I act as the Webmaster for www.sof.org.nz.

Our host is godzone.net.nz and support is available by phone (Mon-Sat 9am to 8:30pm): 06 357 8168, mobile 027 542 4015 and email support@godzone.net.nz

I update the material on the website in real time by using ftp which I have found as a Tool associated with the webs browser Mozilla Firefox.

I regularly put new issue of the Newsletter onto the website but always the issue-before-the-current.

Peter Cowley pcowley@paradise.net.nz s exploring ways by which I can hand over the reins of this task, if you want to help then contact him.

Noel Cheer

Newsletter Editor and Webmaster

It all started here

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NEW ZEALAND)

Newsletter No 1.

November 1992

This comes to you because you placed your name recently on a list indicating your interest in the formation of a Network of people in New Zealand, who have similar interests to the Sea of

The SOF Network has no creed. It draws its members from most of the major Christian churches and embraces men and women from other faiths and from those with no attachment whatever to religious institutions. It accommodates a similarly rich and diverse spread

BITS AND PIECES

WRITING IN THE NAME OF GOD

A book about Biblical forgery.

Forged: Writing in the Name of God – Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are.

Bart Ehrman

Harper Collins 2011



Our guest 'Last Word' author wrote:

"Luther inspired Protestants to declare the Bible to be the supreme authority for Christians. Evangelicals delight in quoting 2 Timothy 3.16 – "All scripture is inspired by God" – in order to authenticate the content of the canon. So we can rely on scripture because it says so in scripture!!"

But it just isn't so. What the discovery or admission that some passages are not written by those who claim to have does to your faith (biblical or otherwise) is for you to grapple with but facts (as distinct from proclamations deserve an honest hearing.

Bart Ehrman pulls no punches. If you write a piece under someone else's name it is a forgery unless you make the effort to inform the reader. If your principle motive is to deceive then you may be forgiven (perhaps even by God), but its still a forgery.

A tolerant assessment might separate the forger's motive from the effect that it has. But Bart insists that it is still a forgery. Here's a sampling of the secondary motives (this is my term, not Bart's):

- Hitching a ride on the coat-tails of someone famous. Broadly thought to be the case of the authors of the synoptic gospels. Maybe Luke was genuine.
- Expressing admiration by imitation. Similar to the above.
- Reactivating a good idea that was once widely held but which has faded.
- Putting the story right – there have been many documents, some allegedly written by Pilate, which "by exonerating Pilate in the death of Jesus, the accounts make the Jews, not just their leaders, bear all the guilt". [p159]
- Commissioning a secretary to write the letter (in whole or part). This has the effect of putting writing-style analysts off the track.
- Writing down divine revelation – John of Patmos, Muhammed and many more. Of course if you, as the real author, sincerely believe that you have received a divine revelation then surely it has no intent to deceive.

Noel Cheer

TALKING TO HAL TAUSSIG, KEYNOTE SPEAKER

From an Amazon.com review of Hal's 2011 book *A New New Testament*



Q. Aren't the texts of the Bible set in stone?

A. Although the western branch of Christianity has implied that the Bible is eternally stable, this has really never been the case.

Both now and for the past 400 years Catholics and Protestants don't agree on what is in the Bible, and neither do Episcopalians and Lutherans. Internationally the eastern Orthodox, Ethiopian, and Syriac Bibles all contain different books than the western Catholic and Protestant Bibles. From this perspective *A New New Testament* is simply yet another variation on what is in the Bible and what is not. From another perspective, it is the first edition of a Bible ever to include the gospels, letters, and prayers that have been recovered in recent times.

Q. What will Christians learn from *A New New Testament*?

A. They'll learn that their early roots are deeper, more diverse, and more widespread than the general story of how Christianity began is told. Perhaps most importantly for Christians, they will be able to claim a set of new resources for their 21st century life. *A New New Testament* opens the door to a wider set of expressions, practices, stories, and teachings than they have previously known.

Q. What will non-Christians learn from *A New New Testament*?

A. Non-Christians will learn that some of the narrow-minded doctrines of orthodox Christianity and the old-fashioned ideas of the traditional New Testament are not the only way that the early Christ movements expressed themselves.

Q. 19 religious leaders gathered to debate which non-canonical texts would be included in *A New New Testament*. What credentials do they have to make such a decision?

A. Eight of them have held national and international leadership positions in the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, and Reconstructionist Rabbinical movements. Others are best-selling authors. Others are nationally known scholars. Sixteen are Christian, three are non-Christian. Four have had the highest rank possible within their own national or international Christian denomination.

Q. Won't changing the Bible offend people who have a deep connection with it in its current state?

A. The Bible has always been a contested book. Christians argue about it regularly, even within the same denomination. Indeed, it is a fairly regular occurrence that one Christian will be offended by another's understanding of what the Bible does and does not say. Martin Luther himself tried to remove some books from the New Testament, and successfully did so from what he called the Old Testament. Debating about what the Bible does or does not say is a primary way that Christians claim who they are.

Q. The Gospel of Mary, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and The Thunder: Perfect Mind, which are parts of A New New Testament but weren't in the traditional New Testament, each have strong female characters. Why weren't they included before?

A. The traditional New Testament includes both strong attacks on women's rights ("women must not speak in the assembly") and strong affirmations of women's mutuality ("there is neither male nor female in Christ"). So it is difficult to make a case that the traditional New Testament portrays a consistent bias against women. Since, however, there are a number of texts in the traditional New Testament which do reject leadership for women, it is certain that some parts of the traditional New Testament and early Christianity may not have liked the affirmations in these three new books.

**Hal Taussig will be a Keynote Speaker
at this year's Conference.**

OOPS ... SORRY PALMERSTON NORTH

Roger and Barbar Purchas purchas@inspire.net.nz
of the Palmerston North group wrote:

In an article on page 12 of the March 2017 SoF Newsletter the setup and activities of Local SoF Groups were summarised. Unfortunately there was no information regarding the Palmerston North group.

Features of the Palmerston North group are set out below more-or-less in the sequence of the items in the above article.

- The Palmerston North SoF group has been meeting regularly for many years.
- The monthly meetings of are set at 1 hour, but they often extend beyond the hour. They are held in private homes with typically 10 or 11 meetings per year.
- Numbers attending have varied widely (over the years) with it ranging from about 5 to 12 during recent years with significant changes in those who are regular attendees.
- Ages of participants have mainly been > 50 years.
- There has been about a 50/50 split between genders, and attendees have been predominantly Pakeha.

- More than about 60% have a regular association with an established church.
- Only a few of the current participants have attended a national SoF Conference.
- No charges are made for meetings as nothing in the way of food or other refreshments are provided, so that no bank account is needed.
- The responsibility for meeting format varies, but meetings are generally pretty informal. Items for discussion at the following meeting are decided mainly by consensus, but there is usually considerable scope for discussion of unplanned topics.
- There have been several new members/attendees over the last six months, not all of whom have continued to attend.
- No external speakers have been involved over recent years.
- Notices of meetings are usually circulated by email a few days (2 to 6 days) prior to a meeting.
- The group does not have a website or a social-media site. Communication is by phone and via a group-contacts email list.



- **Sir Lloyd Geering**
"500 years: From the Reformation of the Church to the Reformulation of Christian Faith."
- **Hal Taussig** *From the Westar Institute.* "Reformation within the Christian church, and the Progressive Christian take on this."
- **Rachael Kohn** *From ABC Radio, Australia.*
A wider view on the need for reform in the world's religions, we hope including Islam, Judaism, and also within the Catholic Church.
- **Sue Bradford** *Former politician.*
"Making it Real: Beyond Reformation to Transformation in Aotearoa 2017." Sue will share some of her story and reflections on a life of fuse-lighting, before posing a series of challenges about where we might go from here if we would like to conceive not just a reformed but a transformed Aotearoa.

In the meantime ... go to the website www.sof.org.nz
and read the paper on Luther provided by Alan Jackson.

LAST WORD, MAY 2017

THE ENDGAME OF THE CHURCH

By Guest Correspondent

Adrian Skelton, Steering Committee Member

What a challenge and temptation for anyone to write a Last Word and arrogance to think there can be a last word! The Christian Church formally decided that the last word had been said once the scope of the New Testament was defined, when the 'canon' (defined list of books) was sealed, and the apostolic age was declared at an end.

Today, who aside from Biblicists, would want to deny spiritual value to other writings, novels, dramas and films of much more recent date? Yet, for Catholics at least, the authoritative list of biblical books was settled at the Council of Rome in 382CE.

Subsequently, Martin Luther was not the only one troubled by the inclusion in the New Testament of particular writings: he found little or no value in Jude, James, Hebrews or Revelation – yet he did not feel he could exclude them from his German translation of 1522. He placed James and Hebrews, along with Jude and Revelation, at the back of the corpus – paradoxically giving them the Last Word!

Luther inspired Protestants to declare the Bible to be the supreme authority for Christians. Evangelicals delight in quoting 2 Timothy 3.16 – “All scripture is inspired by God” – in order to authenticate the content of the canon. So we can rely on scripture *because it says so in scripture!!* To be consistent, evangelicals should also be troubled that the Bible does not define within itself what is scripture; which books are definitive?

Classical Christianity was anyway about a First Word: “In the beginning was the Word... And the Word was made flesh.” Later Christians reversed this ‘humanist’ doctrine (humanism originally referred to the humanity of Jesus) and turned flesh back into word: too many words... So Thomas Aquinas, principal theologian of the Catholic Church is reported to have said, late in life, “all that I have written seems like straw to me.” And he left his *Summa Theologica* incomplete.

This year we commemorate not only the 500th anniversary of Luther’s 95 theses at our November Conference but the 50th anniversary of Lloyd

Geering’s ‘heresy’ trial will also be marked just prior to that. I have been privileged to see the Church from the inside for those fifty years. And now we are into the endgame of the Church. The question that Sea of Faith often addresses is ‘what comes next?’

We are living in reformation times: “Christianity must change or die,” Jack Spong was saying twenty years ago. Twenty years later there is a real crisis in church leadership at a local level due to economic pressures and ministers awakening to the credibility gap.

No longer a parish minister, I still have affection and concern for those in the Church, together with frustration and disappointment that things did not go differently from the 1960s, when John Robinson was inviting us to be “Honest to God” and Lloyd Geering was obliged to defend contemporary academic theology before the Presbyterian General Assembly.

But now cats are debagged and horses have bolted: the big questions have been opened up – and much of that world has moved on, whereas the Church has moved little, and Islam awaits even an initial reformation.

There are signs of the future in alternative Sunday gatherings: small meetings in homes and the Sunday Assembly in large cities, where the attempt is to “keep the best bits of church, but with no religion.” Sea of Faith groups offer the exploration of ideas, without a liturgy. The Society of Friends offers a liturgy of silence (and a few words) as a backdrop to the living out of peace and justice issues.

These locally-gathered groups with a global awareness are perhaps the way forward. Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering have encouraged us all to claim autonomy in our lives: to realise that religious life evolves, and that no one can have the Last Word.

Adrian Skelton,
Steering Committee Member

