



Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship
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Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

3 April	Jan Tendys	“Unitarianism in Africa”
Unitarianism is taking hold in a number of African countries, but not in a uniform way.		
10 April	Candace Parks	“What is Greatness?”
What is the difference between being great and having a quality of greatness? Which should we strive for and what does it take?		
17 April	Ginna Hastings	“Why do I Choose Unitarianism?”
This talk is as much about my personal journey towards Unitarianism as it is about understanding what the faith means in those who follow it, as I observe it.		
24 April	Janet Horton	“Is Religion the Opiate of the People?”
This phrase from Karl Marx is often quoted. But what was Marx really trying to convey? We will look at the content of this quote as well as the context - is Marx sympathetic towards religion or critical or both?		
May 1	Linda Horton (Guest speaker)	“Why don’t we have them? (What keeps people from becoming Unitarians?)”
May 8	Martin Horlacher	“Transhumanism: Today's Dream or Tomorrow's Nightmare?”
May 15	Colin Whatmough	“Learning from Easter Island”
May 22	Laurence Gormley	To be announced.
May 29	Janine Matthews (Debut talk)	“Live in the Present Moment”.

A Successful Event.

Candace Parks

A huge thank-you to everyone who pitched in to make the Lloyd Geering day such a success. It was great to see so many members make the effort against the odds of change of venue (sorry about the bum steer re: "under the bridge"), foul weather and no trains. And although I didn't get a chance to count heads, I saw quite a few new faces and to make it on a day like that, they had to be keen. Here's hoping at least a few of them will come back.

Sundays with a special guest speaker do not happen without a lot of hard work. Although everyone contributed to the day's success in their own way there are a few people I feel deserve an extra special thanks:

Eric was critical in getting us out of the starting block. It is through his association with Lloyd that we were able to secure him as a guest speaker.

I would like to thank **Ross** for coming up with the idea of the venue, making the initial enquiries and assessing its suitability.

GINNA was an absolute gem making sure all the t's were crossed and i's were dotted as well as teaming up with **Carolyn** to provide our morning tea - no easy task when you are operating in a strange venue.

Thanks to **Colin, Helen and Ginna** (there she is again!) for Joys and Concerns.

Our newest member **Janine** rolled up her sleeves and had a hand in writing the script and run sheet for the service, showing right from the start what a great addition she is to our group.

And to all of you who showed up early and helped cart everything from KNC in the pouring rain, bless your cotton socks!

Vietnam's Fight for Justice

Colin Whatmough

I was moved by the article "Thirst for Justice" in the February 2011, 'Beacon' – the journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church.

The last decade has witnessed a growing movement in Vietnam to campaign for help and compensation for medical costs for victims of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War – from the US.

However, the official U.S. response has been to deny any legal liability and to contest that the medical conditions are related to dioxin. This is despite the fact that in 1991, congress passed the Agent Orange Act which granted compensation to U.S. veterans who had served in Vietnam and had any of the seventeen illnesses 'presumed' to be caused by Agent Orange.

The Vietnamese government pays an estimated \$76 million annually in benefits to people with dioxin disabilities; further help for victims is left to campaigning charities like VAVA – the Vietnamese Association for the Victims of Agent Orange. The extent of deformities and illnesses have been horrific.

In all wars, there is tragedy, but the consequences should be immediate, rather than using chemicals of mass destruction that affect future generations.

It's an unforgivable crime and unless the U.S. takes responsibility for their Agent Orange legacy, the suffering will continue in Vietnam for many generations to come.

I have outlined this situation to the Foreign Minister and Shadow Foreign Minister and asked whether they support Vietnam's campaign for compensation and help from the U.S.

A Progressive Letter

Eric Stevenson

As an enthusiast for Progressive Religious Thought, its inclusiveness and its emphasis on truth and justice, I have pondered long about how to share its good news without being seen as obsessively evangelistic or destructive of the beliefs of others. I have found that writing a Letter to the Editor is an inexpensive medium for doing so. The article about Tony Abbott and the royal wedding in the "Herald" on Monday March 21 gave me my opportunity. He was reported as saying that the Prime Minister was hypocritical for accepting the invitation to the Prince's church

wedding when she was neither a believer nor a loyalist. His remark brought forth a spate of progressive letters the very next day but mine was too late! However, I will keep trying.

Eric's letter: Unlike Tony Abbott, I am not a Catholic. But is he questioning the behaviour of people like me (SMH 23/03/11)? I went to Mass with my friends on Christmas morning. I also openly differ from the traditional Christian beliefs of members of my own family, but that didn't mean I refused to attend my daughter's church wedding.

I think attributions of greatness and loyalty under the British flag are out of date, but that doesn't stop me from living with Australia's current status as a member of the Commonwealth. Neither am I a Labor supporter, but that doesn't mean I cannot encourage Julia as our leader to represent us at the wedding of William and Kate!

Eric Stevenson (Centre for Progressive Religious Thought - Sydney).

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## God and Me.

*Rev. Lloyd Geering*

I cannot remember when I was first introduced to God. The family in which I was brought up was not one that went regularly to church. It is true that from age five to twelve, I was sent by my mother to the nearest Presbyterian or Methodist Sunday School, and I simply accepted this as part of the process of growing up. I was not aware of any sense of holiness in all this. I was aware that there were different kinds of churches: a girl of my age, for example, from the Catholic family living next door, told me with pride that in her church, God was kept locked up in a box on the altar. Well, of course, I had already absorbed sufficient Protestant prejudices to know that that was a piece of superstition, and I took little notice of it.

That was in Victoria, where I was brought up for some four years. And when my family moved back to New Zealand for me to start high school, my Sunday School days were over then, and I had no further connection with the church for the next six

years.

In 1936 I started university, and I happened to find board and lodgings in a Roman Catholic home. The landlady had a son who was a priest, her only daughter had already entered the closed order of the Carmelites, and I was much impressed by the devoutness of this home – so much so that I was quite happy to eat fish with them every Friday.



At the end of the year, a fellow student of mine, who had gone all through high school with me in every form, invited me to a Sunday tea at his home. And after the meal, he said “we as a family usually go to church in the evening – would you like to accompany us?” So this I did. And I still remember thinking, during the course of that service, that it actually wouldn't cause me any harm to go to church – and perhaps I might even learn something from the sermons. So when I returned to university the next year in 1937, I began to go to church. Before long, I found I had already joined a Bible class, I was going to church twice a Sunday, I was singing in the choir, and was even teaching in Sunday school. So you can see that this year – 1937 – was one in which I changed direction and style of life quite dramatically.

Now, some people would call that a conversion. But what had it to do with God? It never occurred to me to say I had “found God”, or that God had found me. Insofar as I thought of God at all, God was simply part of a total package. The Christian story, and everything associated with it, provided me all of a sudden with a framework of reference. It helped to give me some direction in life. I was not aware of any special relationship with God, of the kind I sometimes heard my fellow Christians speak. **Yet I did submit myself during that year to a program of personal devotional exercises: reading the Bible, praying. I assumed that that was the way to get some experience of the reality of God. However, nothing par-**

**came, except one thing – which was eventually to change my life. It was this: during that year, I had a growing (if somewhat uncertain) conviction that I was being called by God to enter the Christian ministry.**

So at the beginning of 1938, I applied to the Presbyterian Church to be accepted as a theological candidate. Actually, I was secretly hoping I would be rejected as unsuitable because of my lack of church background – because if so, that would have told me quite clearly that my conviction of being called by God was simply a psychological illusion. However the Church, with its all-too-frequent lack of wisdom and insight, accepted me – and that shaped my life from then on. I was now living, I felt, for some particular purpose, and I delighted in that.

So then, when I commenced my three-year theological course, I still continued to accept whatever I was told – after all, my teachers were supposed to know all about the Christianity I had decided to embrace, and I was only a novice, I was not in a position to question that. **But I found systematic theology rather boring. It seemed to me to be over-theoretical, and not to have much to do with life. My chief interest in theological studies was in the study of the Bible, particularly when approached through the original languages of Greek and Hebrew, which I loved. This appeared to me to be a much more solid base onto which, as it were, to build one's understanding of the Christian tradition.** The Christian message could be expounded and defended, I was taught, by appealing to the historical testimony to it.

The liberal Protestantism in which I was being trained affirmed that Christianity, unlike many religions, is the historical religion par excellence; it is built into history, and its foundation was not to be found chiefly in revealed truths, but in historical events. It was in historical events such as the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, the resurrection of Christ – as well as, of course, the crucifixion of Christ – that divine revelation was to be found, rather than in any dogmatic system, or in the exact words of the Bible. And its central figure, Jesus Christ, was a historical figure, testified to by historical reliable testimony. The Incarnation was a historical event, which di-

vided history into two: into B.C. and A.D., so that the God worshipped by Christians could be called “the Lord of history”.

But how did I relate to God in all this? As I look back now, after sixty years, I realise I was still simply accepting the being of God as part of a total Christian package. It certainly seemed to make some sense to say that God was the Creator of the world, but this God was distant, beyond all human understanding. **I realise now that I was more of a deist than a theist – to distinguish between the terms of a God who is simply the Creator, and a God who is a personal being with whom one communes. Indeed, in those days I was rather suspicious of the evangelicals, who loved to ask me “do you believe in a personal God?” – for they seemed to treat God as a kind of friendly protector. But I never thought of God in that way.**

So thereafter, I was happy to leave God simply as the name of the ultimate mystery of life. I rarely ever preached about God as such in my ministry; I always felt I was on much more solid ground preaching about Jesus Christ as portrayed in the Gospels. And even then, I steered clear of all the so-called miracles – they didn't make much sense to me, nor did I find them historical. But I found plenty of material in the Bible as a whole, in both Old and New Testaments, that I had sufficient to draw upon for all the preaching that I ever did. For I saw my task as one of expounding the Bible in a way that provided insights on how to live the Christian way of life.

Well, it was my desire to keep up my theological study during my ministry. I had already found much in the parish ministry that was deeply satisfying – but at the same time, I was finding myself frustrated. After all, I hadn't entered the parish ministry by choice, but only under a sense of inner compulsion that I was called to do it, in spite of what I wanted to do. So when I spotted an advertisement in the church paper, that the Presbyterian Church of Queensland was calling for applications for a new Chair of Old Testament Studies, I submitted my name. I held out little hope of being successful – but successful I was. And that proved to be another turning point in my life: I could now devote myself full-time to the study of the thing that

interested me most.

Well, there was nothing very controversial about the Old Testament in those days. There had been earlier, but nearly all the great battles about who wrote the first five books of the Bible – and it wasn't Moses – they'd all been fought out in the 19th century. And so now, as a student of the Old Testament, I was quite free to study and explain the Old Testament as a set of human documents. They reflected the limited beliefs – and even the prejudices – of the people who wrote them, and you had to look at them critically in order to get the best out of them. Of course, this wasn't yet the case with the New Testament, because even liberal scholars at this stage still mostly accepted the New Testament as a reasonably authentic record of the history and words of Jesus.

Now, having learned already to reinterpret the myths and the legends that are in the Old Testament – particularly in the book of Genesis – I felt quite free to approach the New Testament, if necessary, in the same way. I was attracted to Rudolf Bultmann's assertion that the New Testament message has for too long been "imprisoned" – imprisoned in the mythological worldview of the 1st century – and that to make it relevant to the 20th century, it needed to be "demythologised", a word that he created. And by the word "demythologising", which no doubt many of you have heard, he meant that it had to be radically reinterpreted to fit the way we view the world in modern times.

So without realising it perhaps at the time, my interests then (while I was still teaching Old Testament) were beginning to move beyond the limits of the Old Testament, to the wider biblical field – and later, of course, wider still.

So on my return to New Zealand, to take up the Chair of Old Testament in my alma mater, I began to read some other very significant books, outside the scope of the Old Testament – books that influenced my thinking on the subject of God. One of them was the three-volume Systematic Theology of **Paul Tillich**. And here at last, I found a theologian who, like the biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann, was aware that he was living in the 20th century and not the 19th, and certainly not the 1st century. And from Tillich, I learned that when one talks about God, one

is talking about whatever it is that concerns you in an ultimate way. Or sometimes he said God is "being-itself" – although I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that.

**And a second influence was that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who – imprisoned by Hitler in a Nazi prison, and had plenty of time on his hands to meditate there – began to realise why it is no longer possible for people in the 20th century to be religious in the way they had been in earlier centuries. And while in prison, he sketched a way of what it means to be Christian in the modern secular world.**

Then thirdly, I excitedly read the magnum opus of the Jesuit scientist **Teilhard de Chardin: The Phenomenon of Man**. I read this book over one weekend, hardly putting it down. Because here was a vision of the evolving universe which put into one developing, continuous story all that we have come to know about physics, and astronomy, and chemistry, and biology, and theology. I was simply awestruck. **This visionary sketch of an evolving universe, which eventually produced the human species, was much more convincing as a description of God than Tillich's rather enigmatic phrase "being-itself". God was to be seen not so much as the maker of the world, or even as the cause of this evolutionary process. The evolutionary process itself, of an evolving universe, was in fact the ultimate mystery that could be called God.**

It was just at this time that there appeared – and the year was 1963 – the little publication by **Bishop John Robinson Honest To God**. Now, this was far more radical than the Protestant liberalism I had been brought up in. Of course, those who had been reading Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer didn't find a great deal new in Bishop Robinson's little book. What this little book did was to alert masses of people – often people outside the church – to what was going on in academic circles. Indeed, it became one of the most widely-read theological books of the 20th century. However the rising tide of Christian conservatism was already, by the 60s, beginning to challenge the now-declining era of Protestant liberalism. And I was destined personally to encounter this rising tide.

It came about through another little book of John Robinson's called The New Reformation. Now, the editor of the Presbyterian journal called "The Outlook" had invited me to write an article for Reformation Sunday. So taking the lead from John Robinson, I discussed why a new reformation in the church had become necessary. I asked: is the Christian faith inextricably bound up with the worldview of ancient humankind? Or can the substance of it be translated into the worldview of 20th century humankind? I then went on to point out that some of the things asserted by the 16th-century Protestant reformers were just not true. For example: the Bible is not literally inerrant. It does have errors in it, of all sorts of kinds. I said the Bible is not a simple guide, setting forth what every Christian in every generation must believe and do, because it belongs to the ancient world.

Now, this article raised a few eyebrows. But it would have been quickly forgotten if the editor of "The Outlook" had not – foolishly, I suppose – invited me to write another article for his Easter edition. So in this, I raised the question of what it really means, within the modern worldview, to assert that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven – where on earth is it? And to do this, I drew upon a statement from **Professor Gregor Smith** of Glasgow, in his just-published book called "Secular Christianity" – largely based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. **And in this book Gregor Smith said "we may freely say that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine. Christian faith is not destroyed by this admission. "On the contrary", he said, "it's only when this has been said that we are in a position to ask about the meaning of the resurrection as an integral part of the message concerning Jesus".**

This time my article raised a veritable storm. The next issues of "The Outlook" were filled with letters to the editor – some in praise, some in violent and angry disagreement. Then the newspapers reported that the Auckland Presbytery had met in private, in order to discuss some controversial article, and its members were bound in secrecy to say nothing about it. Well, you couldn't ask more for a journalist, could you? So the news reporters were now anxious to find out all about it, and to meet public demand, the offending article was now published in all the metropolitan papers.

So what started as a Presbyterian debate now quickly became a public debate. I tried to pour some oil on troubled waters by writing four more articles explaining the background of the debate. I rather naively thought that it was only necessary to bring people up to date with a short course in current theological thinking, and they would all quickly see it in a different light. Alas, the articles were like throwing petrol on an already-blazing fire, and the public debate went on apace.

Only three months later, in March 1967, I was invited to preach at the annual inaugural service at Victoria University – I wasn't there then, I went later – and I chose to speak about the Book of Ecclesiastes. Because I have found this book is one that reflects many of our modern theological problems. You see, it was written by a Jewish author, probably in Alexandria, about two-to-three hundred years before the Christian era. And he was pondering about his Jewish heritage, living in a Hellenistic context where it just didn't seem to fit at all. In the course of this sermon, **I happened to utter the words "of course, man has no immortal soul". Well, an enterprising journalist in the congregation, sensing another radical departure from orthodoxy, seized upon this one sentence, headlined it in the next morning's paper, and then proceeded to telephone all the various church leaders to ask them what they thought. And of course they mostly appeared terribly shocked. Obviously they had not been keeping up with their reading, because in academic circles it had been recognised for some twenty years that the idea of an immortal soul didn't come from the Bible at all – it came from the Greek philosophers, and particularly Plato. After all, what the New Testament says is that "only God is immortal" – I do quote the New Testament sometimes.**

My sermon was subsequently published in all the newspapers again, and then followed widespread discussion on the sensitive issue of what happens to us when we die. There has probably never been a time in New Zealand when so many people were all thinking at the same time about the question of life after death. There seemed to be something in the newspaper every day, for weeks on end. News of it of course reached Austra-

lia. The "Sydney Morning Herald" devoted an editorial to it, and then followed it up with a full-page article in their weekend magazine, on whether we humans have immortal souls.

The newly-established Laymen's Association called for a special meeting of the General Assembly, to defend what they took to be the unchangeable Christian truths. This request was declined, and it was left to the normal meeting of the General Assembly to deal with the issue. But the debate went on. It didn't stop the daily newspapers, the church journals, the Catholic newspapers, along with many secular journals, from continuing to publish numerous articles and letters to the editors on the subject.

**And I found myself being referred to in the most extreme terms – from "the devil incarnate" to "the new Galileo". In most of this I didn't recognise myself at all. It was as if some new mental image of me had been created by the collective consciousness of New Zealanders, an image which some hated and others honoured.**

Well, around me there swirled a storm. And it made me realise that a very sensitive nerve had been touched, both in the church and in society. I just happened to be the person who did it – it could have been anyone. The Christian tradition was clearly at a crossroads, because the gap that had been opening up between traditional and popular Christian thought on the one hand, and academic enquiry on the other hand, had now so widened that it had reached breaking point. And it was the recognition of this that encouraged me to accept the invitation of the publishers Hodder and Staughton to write a book about it. So over the next six months, I wrote a chapter every fortnight. I didn't write about the Resurrection or immortality – that book was to come later – I thought it was first necessary to explain, in non-academic language, what lay behind the whole controversy. And that's how I came to write my first book, called God in the New World. Little did I realise then that this was destined to be only the first in a series of books I've written, several of which include the word "God" in the title.

Now, this book had to be finished by October, when the General Assembly was going to meet in order to hear charges that had been laid against me – charges of doc-

trinal error. Two Presbyterians – one a minister with good theological training, another a layman who had a very simplistic view of Christianity – had laid charges separately. And so on Friday, November 3rd 1967, I was called to the Bar of the House – the General Assembly turns itself into a court of law at this stage – where I heard the charges being expounded by my accusers. There was an electric air of expectancy. More than a thousand people had packed into the church, with an overflow into the hall. The lamps of the television crews served only to increase the heat. On Monday I answered the charges, addressing the Assembly for an hour and a half. After lunch came the debate. **But before there had been very much time for any adequate discussion of the real issues, a motion was put to the House, and later carried firmly on the voices – and it said that "the Assembly judges that no doctrinal error has been established, dismisses the charges and declares the case closed".**

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The above is part of a talk given by Lloyd Geering to Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney, in October 2004. The rest of the talk will be given next issue of *Esprit*. Permission to publish was given by Lloyd Geering via Eric Stevenson. This talk became the first chapter in Lloyd Geering's autobiographical "Wrestling with God".

Eric has some copies of the booklet he reviewed in an earlier *Esprit*, "Jesus Rediscovered," for the very reasonable price of \$8.00.

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## Japan Relief Fund

**The Unitarian Universalist Association and the UU Service Committee have set up a Japan Relief Fund:** Following the devastating earthquake and resulting tsunamis on Friday, March 11, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) has been in contact with our religious partners in Japan to express our concern and our willingness to partner with them in recovery efforts.

UUA President Peter Morales issued a statement in which he said, " We, at the UUA, will hold the country of Japan in our hearts, as we work to support them in their time of great need."

Our partners, including Rissho Kosei-kai, Tsubaki Grand Shrine, the Konko Church of Izu, the Tokyo Dojin Church, and the Japan Chapter of the International Association for Religious Freedom are all in discernment about the specific efforts they will be taking to support recovery work, and the UUA and Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) will walk with them in the directions that are ultimately chosen and will make all appropriate decisions about the distribution of the funds.

<http://www.uua.org/giving/funds/179219.shtml>

*If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for publication.*

**Please note that Esprit is assembled usually in the last week of the month so longer items should be handed in or sent by the second last Sunday of the month. Items for the Schedule of Services (talk titles etc) should be in by the Friday of the last week. Variations to this timetable may be necessitated by circumstances.**

Preferred method is as an MS-WORD or email to [jtendys@bigpond.com](mailto:jtendys@bigpond.com)  
Hardcopy (or electronic media) submissions can be hand-delivered to Jan or posted to:

Spirit of Life  
PO Box 1356  
LANE COVE NSW 1595

Please note:  
If space is limited, submissions may be subject to editing.

### **Do you have a topic of a spiritual nature that you would like to share with the congregation?**

As Unitarians, we support an "Open Pulpit" and invite members of the congregation to lead the service if they so wish.

### **Just let Candace know what you would like to speak about and when you are available and we will fit you into the schedule.**

Also, please feel free to give us your feedback on any of the services. This is the best way to ensure the services address the needs of the congregation.

**Would you care to join us? Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter** If you would like to join us as an active member of Spirit of Life, please ring 9428-2244, consult our website [www.sydneyunitarians.com](http://www.sydneyunitarians.com) or speak to one of our members before or after the Sunday service. Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee.