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NEWSLETTER

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Our sources of hope

Editorial by Peter Whiting

These days it is very easy to become despondent. The hurt of the Victorian fires of February 2009 is not yet healed and yet we find ourselves again threatened by a savage fire season. Our region has been beset by natural disasters – tsunamis, earthquakes and typhoons, just to mention a few.

Our Australian political and religious leaders are divided over the climate change issues even as the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd played a significant role in Copenhagen where some 100 world leaders and more than 50 environment ministers attempted to achieve some sort of climate change “deal”.



Deep, seemingly intractable political, cultural and religious differences sustain war conditions in Iraq, Afghanistan and in the Israeli / Palestinian border areas. The world is still in the thrall of the Global Financial Crisis and searching for signs of a clear and sustained recovery in the global economy. All of this occurs against

a backdrop in which the poor of many nations not only do not advance, but are falling further behind in their living conditions.

Where is the optimism that ushered in the UN Millennium Development Goals? Where is that conviction that with sound farm production practices, trade policy reform and genuine political goodwill we could feed the world's population and lift all from hunger and poverty? A brief era of optimism associated with the election of President Obama has seemingly waned in the face of the scale of the domestic and international issues facing him.

Each of us committed to bringing about greater equity and a sustainable model of living on our Earth needs to sustain or recapture that optimism and drive for ourselves. For some, the words of Benedict XVI in his recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, may spark inspiration: to live a life of charity seeking not only the individual good of others, but the common good for all in our own and the global community.



For others, such commitment may spring from prayer and meditation such that we become again awed by the goodness of God's creation and the importance of the call of humanity to commit to the flourishing of all creation. Or the conviction may stem from working together with the inspiration and energy that comes from producing measurable and worthwhile differences in the lives of others.

I confess to being most moved by this last element – working with others. In my various involvements, I am associated with people whose concerns go to the welfare of the young, trying to inculcate in school and local communities the values and behaviour which will allow our youth to become fulfilled and generous adults; others are concerned with the elderly so that in their declining years they may be well cared for and valued for their own sake; others again work in their church and parish environments to bring practical witness to the gospel message and to promulgate the conviction that we are all redeemed in Christ.

Each of these people at some time struggles, yet their generosity of spirit, their deep faith conviction, their commitment to the common good, brings out actions that are not only aspirational but, for me, also inspirational. The experience has been no less in my involvement with the members of Social Policy Connections and the Yarra Institute.

These members are hardly unique. Each of us has our own talents, knowledge and life understanding, but the key element that directs them I think is that each has a shared conviction that life is not just about the individual but rather about relationships, familial, personal and communal.

So as 2009 approaches its end, and each of us to varying degrees takes pride in what has been achieved and laments what has not, we can source a renewal for 2010 in the spirit, generosity and commitment among those around us. In quietly committing themselves to working for the betterment of others, it is those people we daily encounter who most clearly attest to the reality that, despite everything, we live in a grace-filled world. We have much reason for optimism. The love that comes from God as a gift is evident every day in those around us.

The Yarra Institute's AGM

Dr Stephen Ames, Chair of the Board of the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy, delivered his report to its first Annual General Meeting on 2 December (see the SPC website). He warmly acknowledged the support of Yarra Theological Union for hosting the Institute and for encouragement from the Melbourne College of Divinity.

Dr Ames said that as an ecumenical research and teaching body investigating the links between religious beliefs and social policy, the Yarra Institute with funding from the MCD had nearly completed one project by Dr Joan Daw on 'Faith Education and Justice'. Another project was under way with Dr Cal Ledsham on the morality of torture, with a grant from the Laurdel Research Foundation. Negotiations are continuing for research on the churches' involvement in the development of social policy, as well as on their reception of refugees.



In November, jointly with SPC, the Yarra Institute, arranged a public forum on Pope Benedict's encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, with Anglican Archbishop Dr Philip Freier; Dr Rufus Black, Master of Ormond College; and Ms Julie Edwards, CEO of Jesuit Social Services (in photo). The ABC taped proceedings for its 'Encounter' program in 2010.

Dr Ames said the Yarra Institute was fortunate to have such a Board of eminent scholars: Dr Wes Campbell, Dr Jim D'Orsa, Dr Therese D'Orsa, Dr Rowan Ireland, Dr Peter Price, Dr Robyn Reynolds and Dr Paul Rule. Dr Bruce Duncan is the Director of the Yarra Institute. The Institute would take a more public role when its website is launched in early 2010. Dr Ames particularly thanked Matthew Howard for his work in constructing the new website.

SPC's AGM

The President of Social Policy Connections, Mr Peter Whiting, on 25 November reported on its activities during the year (his full report is on the SPC website). A highlight in 2009 was undoubtedly launching the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy by Prof. Brian Howe in April. This had taken some years to achieve, and the Institute offers a significant research capability within the Melbourne College of Divinity.

Events.

SPC has held a series of public forums, including with Prof Brian Johnstone speaking on the Iraq war; John Fox on equity in taxation; Geoff Lacy and Stephen Ames on issues of global warming; and Dr John Langmore on the global financial crisis as an opportunity to do things differently.



Part of the audience at the forum on the new encyclical at the Centre for Theology and Ministry, Parkville

Mr Whiting also acknowledged the contributors to our website, offering topical and insightful comment on current affairs and their religious or moral dimensions. Writers included Bill Frilay, Brian Lewis, Cal Ledsham, Arthur Gibbs and Prof. John Pilgrov. Bill Frilay also visited Canberra as part of a deputation making submissions on the Inquiry into Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.

Nor would SPC have operated so well without the help of our volunteers, especially Mr Joe Annetts with his promotional work, helping to keep the office running smoothly and helping with the website.

The Treasurer, Frank Webber presented the audited accounts, commenting that while SPC had accumulated some reserves, the plan to appoint an Executive Officer in 2010 would strain the finances and fund raising for 2010 would be an important consideration. Frank retired from the Board at this AGM after many years of keeping SPC's books in a most efficient manner. Peter Whiting acknowledged how much the SPC Board has valued his companionship, input and guidance.

The SPC President welcomed Ms Judy Benson and Mark Walsh to the Board, with Dr Arthur Gibbs.

After the AGM, the historian Dr Hugh Jackson spoke on 'Australians and the Personal God', shedding fresh light on the social significance of belief.