

The Voice

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Standing Firm: reflections on Ephesians 6: 10 - 18

Barry Mitchell and John Bottomley

In our regular service of Contemplative Worship, participants read the scripture passage a second time, seeking to enter into the story of the passage, and engaging in a process of reflection on how the scripture speaks to each participant's experience. As the Ephesians reading is read a second time, this is what Barry and I will do. We speak out of our experience as members of both the CMN Board and the new congregation.

¹¹Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

These are very strong words: *the struggle against the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of darkness, and spiritual forces of evil.* It immediately makes me think of those who have been treated unjustly, people such as indigenous Australians whose ancestral lands have been taken away and exploited, such as boat people arriving in Australia who are subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment, people who cannot access proper health care because of their lack of income, people who have been injured or died at work because of inadequate training or unsafe workplaces.

I am attracted to the Church when it analyses the economic and political forces at work in the world, and decides to take the side of those who suffer most. When the Church is engaged with the world around it, I am encouraged to play my part.

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CONTENTS

Standing Firm	1	Reputational Risk	3
Work injury, compensation, mental health	5	Restorative Justice service commences	5
Spiritual challenges for an ageing Church and an ageing population			7

30 years ago I resigned from my local congregation because my time and energy was being used up in the administration, with little opportunity to reflect on my faith.

This new congregation is different. It has grown out of an agency which has a deep engagement with the world around it, and a desire to see this engagement from a faith perspective. I am excited about this new venture, as well as somewhat apprehensive about how it might turn out. The call to stand firm is also a call to remember that we each have a purpose in life, a ministry to carry out.

¹⁴*Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.*

¹⁵*As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.*

The first gatherings of the members of our new congregation came to a shared understanding of the sort of truth the writer of Ephesians may be speaking about. Our understanding reflects a turning away from as well as a turning towards. Within the group there was a shared experience of being hurt by the church when it insisted the truth was a set of propositions about God to be believed. Others had been alienated from the Church when it insisted the truth was a set of moral standards to be complied with in the way we lived. In both cases, truth was external to the person, and was wielded by the church as a weapon to be feared and conformed to.

But the image of the belt of truth around your waist and the breastplate of righteousness or justice are embodied images of truth and righteousness. Truth and justice are part of the clothes we wear, and have their energy because they come from God. Already the congregation members have affirmed a desire to listen to and be open to

the truth that has been lived by each other when we have lived on the margins of church and society. We seek to be an inclusive congregation where the truth of each person's experience is heard and accepted as part of equipping each other to act for justice and peace.

We could not stand firm in a world too often ruled by the powers of darkness unless we are clothed in God's gift of truth and justice. Being equipped with truth and justice will make us ready to live out the good news of God's desire for peace on earth, as it is in heaven. God has individually gathered each of us in, we who seek to be part of this new congregation, by stirring our hearts desire for truth and justice.

Now let us take up what has been given to us, and clothe ourselves in God's truth and justice.

¹⁶*With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.*

Nurturing faith requires that we share our experiences, our dilemmas, our questions, our doubts with others who can listen and reciprocate. It requires looking at those experiences in the light of scripture, and building a base for future action and reflection.

This action/reflection model was the central plank of the ecumenical program Action for World Development which began in the early 70's. It had a profound effect on my life, helping me understand how my faith can respond to the powerful forces in our world which try to turn us into mindless consumers who accept the status quo without question. It also reminded me that I am part of a worldwide community of faith whose starting point is concern for the people and the planet.

The Jesus I read about in the New Testament is the one who is truly human, who is not afraid

to take on the dehumanising powers, and alive to the needs of those around him. That is the Jesus I am called to follow.

¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

The movement towards discerning the need for this congregation has come from individuals who could not attend the Sunday evening CW, but who were willing to use the material if it was emailed to them. This has been happening for nearly a year, with a growing sense there was a scattered community united by a common prayer and worship under the umbrella of the CMN Board.

The movement has also been strengthened by the quarterly faithful conversations convened by the Board for Board members and others to reflect on work and faith issues in a dedicated time and space. A pattern for these meetings evolved that connected reflection on lived experience with meditation on a scripture passage from the Board's Directions Vision and a concluding integrative conversation.

These elements may well echo the writer of

Ephesians belief that the church is best equipped to stand firm against evil and the darkness of this present age through the integrative and healing power of God's love. This power comes to us as a saving grace, that is, it comes as a power that connects us with God, the source of love, and it connects the broken parts of our lives with a renewed sense of our worth in God's sight, and it connects us with others who have been similarly encountered by this Spirit. This is some of the reality tasted by those who have participated in CW and faithful conversations.

Paradoxically perhaps, the further some of us have moved into these experiences provided by the CMN Board of prayer and reading scripture, the more uncomfortable many have been with the traditional understanding of God, Christ, and Spirit we grew up with. Our congregation is committed to living with that paradox. The writer of Ephesians encourages the church to hold on to its experience of God's presence however it is named, but to keep alert about what this experience calls us to be through listening to scripture and prayer.

So let us keep alert, listening to scripture and being in prayer, that we may be equipped through the generous gift of God's life-giving love to serve the world in its present darkness.

Reputational risk: the challenge to finding the ground for ministry in a violent world of pain and suffering

Recently CMN Director, John Bottomley spoke with a group of Sri Lankan born ministers about the challenge of ministry in a violent world of suffering and pain. This article reports his comments to them.

In 1996, I began my ministry with people bereaved by a work-related death by working with Lisa to set up a support group for bereaved families. Lisa's father had been killed on a road construction extension of the Monash freeway, and Lisa had asked for my help. We worked together for two years, and had over twenty people being supported. I wrote submissions for funding to support the program, and we were successful in attracting \$30,000 in that time.

In December 1998, I received a phone call from the Executive Director at the Synod's Commission for Mission. "I've got a letter here from a leading law firm saying you have taken money from a support group for your Network and you have to give it back to them. What's going on?"

I was in total shock. Lisa had joined our Council of Management only three months earlier and then had suddenly announced that she was leaving our organisation to set up a new support group with herself as Director. She was alleging that our Network had taken money that rightly belonged to her.

The Synod legal office looked through our files and replied to Lisa's lawyers on our behalf. There was no substance to Lisa's claim, and the law firm withdrew the claim. But the damage had been done. I felt that my reputation had been dragged through the mud, and I felt sick, angry and bitter, and full of hate towards this woman who had abused my trust.

For weeks later, my morning prayer and meditation was overwhelmed by these feelings. I wanted God to give me peace - the peace of knowing I was right. I wanted God to rescue my good reputation before the growing network of people who were taking Lisa's side after hearing her story. But this peace and this rescue never came.

Until one morning, I saw beneath my anger, my sense of loss. As I sat with my sadness at what had happened, I became aware that my sadness was because of the loss of my good name. I hurt because I had lost my reputation. And in the quiet of that moment, I asked God how God saw me stripped of my good name, without my carefully developed reputation.

There is a pivotal moment in Mark's gospel when Jesus turns on Peter and rebukes him. Why? Because Peter wanted a Messiah that enhanced Peter's status and reputation in the depressing world of Roman occupation. Peter can't imagine a *suffering* Messiah, only one who is powerful enough to get rid of the brutal Roman occupying forces. And Jesus says to Peter "Get thee behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things" (8³³) Jesus strips Peter of his pretensions to status and power. Jesus speaks a searing word of rebuke that demolishes Peter's carefully developed reputation and hard work as a loyal disciple.

Only when we are stripped of our pretensions about how good we are, and how hard we have worked, and how deserving we are – only when all our human self-justifications are stripped away by Christ's rebuke can our hearts be open to hear God's gracious words of unconditional love. That morning when I heard God loved me in the midst of my shame and bitterness, I began to heal.

When Jesus commands you to deny yourself and take up your cross to follow him, he has already offered your broken and despairing heart the overflowing grace of God's love. Jesus' command is not some heavy burden of duty. From the day I heard again the promise of Christ's love for me, my ministry around work-related death and grief shifted. Putting aside the self I had built to hide my fear and shame was a liberation. I was freer to listen with new insight to the fear and shame of families, employers and co-workers who were grieving a work-related death. In giving up my dependence on my hard work and reputation to justify my ministry, I was freer to enter new depths of solidarity and service in ministry to people who knew the trauma of violent death.

Jesus pulls Peter into line, and restores Peter to his rightful place as a follower of Jesus. While Peter desired an all-powerful Messiah who is always in control of events, Jesus needs Peter to understand how God is bringing healing and justice and reconciliation through a suffering and deeply human Messiah. This Messiah knows and shares in our powerlessness, and its despair. Jesus may be stirring up your hearts for this same purpose, to bring you into line with his solidarity in suffering love. When you confess to Christ your shame, your bitterness and hatred for the injustices done to you, the Son of Man will not be ashamed of you. Indeed, he will welcome you into his glorious love, and by his grace, you will be liberated to serve the world in all its darkness.

NEWS FROM CMN**Research into work injury, compensation and mental health**

by Margaret Neith

Previous research by the CMN has found that work factors such as work stress and workplace bullying appear to contribute negatively to a person's mental health and wellbeing. Coronial findings suggest some of these people can experience suicidal thoughts or may commit suicide.

The work-related suicide of a loved one also leads to immense grief and suffering for their family. This is well understood from the increasing number of WGS clients whose loved-one has committed suicide after injustices experienced at work. CMN's earlier research into work factors in suicide noticed up to one-third of work-related suicides occurred amongst those with a work injury. Coronial findings of suicide also noted that a number of those who committed suicide were on workers' compensation at the time of their death.

In 2012, CMN is beginning a new research project to document for the first time the mental health changes experienced by injured workers themselves. CMN has recently appointed researcher Sarah Pollock to carry out an exploratory study into the experience of mental health and suicidality of long-term injured workers on compensation benefits. Sarah will be interviewing sixteen injured workers currently on workers' compensation. The research aims to identify factors participants believe may have contributed to their mental health status (legal, medical, work, social, psychological) and the way the workers compensation experience impacts on work, family and social relationships.

The project will assist by shedding light on what injured workers believe contribute to their

deteriorating mental health, so that compensation authorities, employers and unions can improve the ways to reduce mental illness or suicidality amongst compensation clients.

CMNs Restorative Justice Service commences

Margaret Neith

CMN has recently appointed Michael Mitchell to start setting up a Restorative Justice Service for Work-related Grief Support clients. The service will begin small and hopefully, if new funding can be located, will grow year by year. Michael will start work for one day a week and also works as a conciliation officer at the Accident Compensation Service. He has a Masters Degree in Mediation and Conflict Resolution. Previously, he worked in a branch of Ryan Carlisle Thomas Lawyers in the personal injuries area, representing many injured workers and their families.

Stage one of the Restorative Justice project will expand the restorative justice focus to families affected by the road trauma death of a loved-one. This extended focus will make the restorative justice service available to a wider group of families affected by the sudden traumatic death of a loved-one.

The Restorative Justice Service will endeavour to bring families into a safe formal environment where, if they so choose, and under the guidance of qualified RJ facilitators, they may meet their loved one's former employer (or the person who was responsible for the car accident). The RJ process may involve an apology, information about the cause of death, conversation about the harm done, and a formal agreement about

what reparation will be provided. This process would take place only after all prosecution procedures have been completed. Restorative Justice is designed to focus on the fact a person has died, and the family has suffered a tremendous loss.

Our research has shown this focus will be welcomed by many families who are not satisfied that the legal process has delivered justice for them or for their loved one.

How to leave or make a bequest in your will to the Creative Ministries Network

If you may be interested in making a bequest in your will to the Creative Ministries Network, here is some wording you could use.

"I GIVE AND BEQUEATH (insert details - for example)

- a specific amount
- a percentage of estate
- residue of estate
- particular property or item

to the Uniting Church in Australia Property Trust (Victoria), 130 Little Collins Street, Melbourne, for the purpose of the Creative Ministries Network.

If you would like more information about the mission and work of the Creative Ministries Network, please contact the Director, Rev. John Bottomley tel: 98278322 or john.bottomley@cmn.unitingcare.org.au

I would appreciate a telephone call from the Bequest and Public Relations Office of the Uniting Church

Please send me the new Wills and Bequests Booklet and my free Personal Will Planner

Name _____

Address _____

_____ Postcode _____

Telephone _____ Preferred time to call _____

Please send this form to

The Bequest and Public Relations Officer
Ms. Mariska Meldrum
130 Little Collins Street, Melbourne, 3000

All information will be kept strictly confidential.

Chaplain to the veterans' community: position advertisement

The CMN wishes to appoint a Chaplain to the Veterans' Community to develop our Veterans Faith and Wellbeing Support program. The Chaplain will support the program by addressing the trauma of war and peacekeeping service on veterans and their families through a ministry of spiritual care.

This is a new position at CMN, and builds on a small community-based program of support that has developed a range of innovative projects over an eight years period. Examples of the CMN ministry may be accessed at <http://www.cmn.unitingcare.org.au/06Peace.html>

The position is initially funded for two days per week (15.2 hours) for three years, during which time the CMN will be pursuing other funding sources to increase the time a Chaplain may be employed.

A copy of the position description is available from the Administrator, Margaret Neith admin@cmn.unitingcare.org.au or 9692 9426. Enquiries may be directed to John Bottomley, 9827 8322.

Due to the challenge of establishing this position, CMN is willing to negotiate aspects of this position to secure the right person. Applications for this position or expressions of interest are invited by 14 May 2012, to Margaret Neith by email, or to CMN, P.O. Box 362, St. Kilda 3182.

Spiritual challenges for an ageing church and an ageing population

This paper was given by CMN Director, John Bottomley at a recent workshop on 'Old challenges and new opportunities for well-lived longer lives' organised by the Australia Dreaming project of the Church of All Nations.

Who can live well while injustice festers?

The question of retirement is primarily a concern for the work-saturated culture of Australian society. But the concern about being ready for retirement may have little significance for Aboriginal people shaped by their Dreaming. In fact, there is a disjunction between these two worldviews about how we are to live, and what the purpose of our living is. So when the church begins to study questions of retirement and ageing, we need to understand which particular worldview shapes our enquiry.

The predominant worldview in our nation has

cultivated an ideology of progress that forgets injustice. The ideology of progress dismisses the injustice done to Aboriginal people since 1788, indeed all injustice, by blaming the victims of injustice for their suffering. The Uniting Church has its own problem with the ideology of progress, which has blinded the church to the shallowness of our belief that we are reconciled people, the first fruits of Christ's new creation.

Christ's gift of reconciliation seeks to create in the church a new humanity and light to the nation. But who can have well-lived longer lives when we are not a reconciled nation? Who can have well-lived longer lives when the humanity of all Australians remains mired in the injustice done to Aboriginal people?

The issue of what 'being human' means is a theological struggle over competing beliefs, or more precisely, competing trusts. In what do you put your trust for the fullness of your humanity? Is the God testified to in scripture the being in whose image we humans are given what it means to live well? Or is our humanity a consumer good we achieve through hard work, so the quality of

our retirement is a reward for hard work, or a material benefit purchased in the market place?

Unjust deaths: the bitter fruit of self-induced spiritual blindness

The history of this theological struggle began in Australia from 1788. Until then, traditional indigenous peoples embraced all life as part of a complex system of relationships which can be traced directly back to the ancestral Spirit Beings of The Dreaming. This structure of relations had the result of maintaining ecological balance and an economy of abundance in the indigenous world. But colonial society was blind to this web of relationships. Its economic and political development soon trampled on Aboriginal spirituality, and uprooted Indigenous people from their roots in the land and in their Dreaming. The consequence of this dispossession on Aboriginal people's health has been well-documented. So the question that our theme of longer lives, well-lived invites is 'whose long-life, and how well lived?'

Both Indigenous men and women live around 20 years less than non-Indigenous men and women.¹ Also Indigenous men live less years on average than Indigenous women. Similarly, non-Indigenous men live less years than non-Indigenous women. New opportunities for well-lived longer lives are unequally distributed in Australia by both race and gender. But both of these findings have been known for many years – they are old challenges. Yet if they are old challenges, what has rendered them so resistant to change?

In one sense the answer is quite simple. If you ignore a problem, it is not likely to get fixed. Australian society has been resistant to change because the myth of progress has within it an ideology of forgetting the injustices caused by the march of so-called 'development' and 'progress'. Our nation has learned to forget the pain inflicted by the unjust abuses of power exercised in the name of economic growth

I became acutely aware of that in my recent ministry at St. George's East St. Kilda. The church was on Crown land gifted to the Presbyterian Church by the colonial government – Crown land that was simply appropriated from the local Aboriginal population. Yet there is no mention in the church's jubilee or centenary books of the prior ownership of the church land by the Kulin nation

and the Bunurong, or of the Crown's gift of the land to the Presbyterian Church. The report of the church's initial three years notes 'there is cause for congratulation in the steady progress that has been made'. Progress and growth of the 'winners' wipes out the pain and injustice of the losers. The church has long benefitted from the colonialists' belief that the land was *Terra Nullius* – that the land was unoccupied, or at least Aborigines had no land tenure.

Terra Nullius is the self-legitimising belief system on which colonialists built our 'modern' world. It is a belief system that forged a culture which could bury the grief and loss of Aboriginal people, and 'forget' the injustice done to them. Forgetting injustice and burying grief have deep historical roots, which have shaped Australian society and the challenges our society faces today. This history of forgetting is so pervasive it still derails too much of our social policy.

A personal blindness revealed: the personal is political

In 2007, CMN was funded by the Share Appeal to research the integration of faith and spirituality amongst Aboriginal people in leadership of the Aboriginal Congress. The research was designed according to advice from Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) that "it is essential that Indigenous peoples are participants in any research project that concerns them."² We employed an Indigenous project worker, and consulted with the Aboriginal congress. But when our project worker had completed the interviews, he was unable to write them up. After I listened to the recorded interviews, I learned my cultural assumptions about social science research had led our researcher to a place where ultimately he felt unsafe about reporting his experience of the project to a public audience.

When I provided our researcher with a draft of this reflection for his feedback, I was shocked by his response: 'John, I feel like I have let you down'. The response forced me to acknowledge a truth I had until then ignored. The project worker had (perhaps unknowingly) named the power difference in our relationship. I set up the project. I controlled the funding, the development of the design, and the employment relationship with the Indigenous researcher, yet he felt the failure of

the research was his fault. Why?

The major focus of the guidelines for research with Aboriginal people is on enhancing Indigenous people's power and rights, their communities, their knowledge systems, cultures, languages, histories and perspectives. What is completely absent and ignored in the research guidelines is the impact the proposed transfer of power, control and rights may have on white, male, 'anglo', tertiary-educated middle-class researchers. What is literally forgotten in the so-called 'ethics' of Aboriginal research is whether the researcher is willing and able to relinquish the taken-for-granted power and identity they have as representatives of the dominant research culture of western science. As a researcher, am I able to 'die to my Self', in the way the gospels advocate for genuine transformation? (Mark 8:35: John 12:24)

A central feature of western science's post-Enlightenment assumptions is that the researcher is objective, and value-free in their study of the 'facts'. This belief is a large measure of the researcher's power and integrity in the scientific community. Yet my forgetfulness of the power and intellectual tradition in which I was rooted as an 'anglo' researcher suddenly seemed highly problematic in that project. The purpose of an ideology of forgetfulness is to hide the researchers' awareness of their subjectivity behind the so-called 'objectivity' of science. If I kept silent about my subjectivity, the only emotion in view is that of those being researched. So the blame for the researched population's suffering and grief is shifted back on to them, and the historical injustice of the colonial world's invasion remains hidden. This burden of self-blame was revealed in the anguished cry of our Indigenous researcher.

Colonial society was empowered to 'forget' injustice through three critical developments that have a profound bearing on how we enquire into ageing in 2012. First, the scientific revolution carried the promise that humankind could learn the secrets of nature, and leave behind superstition and religion. Second, scientific method privileged the knowledge of objective facts over human feelings, and located facts in the rational public world of science, politics and economics, while relegating emotions and beliefs, such as grief⁸ to the private sphere of home and family.⁴ And third, scientific method also asserted that human reason better explained human affairs than "religious cosmologies"⁵, so

belief in God was also consigned to the private realm.⁶

Australian society has been developed on a belief system that dismissed Aboriginal people as 'primitive'. Generations have been socialised into beliefs that elevated the white race to a self-justifying superiority while pathologising Aboriginal grief as their personal weakness, a black-ribbon view of history. From 1788, the prevailing beliefs demonised Aboriginal dreaming as heathen. The myth of progress constructed a series of 'truths' about the human condition that Aboriginal people failed to live up to. The injustices caused by the power of these so-called truths violate both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, yet their power persists because of the prevailing culture which has institutionalised forgetting or burying of injustice, grief and sorrow. The church's enquiry into ageing today needs to be freed from our society's minimising of injustice, and our culture's deep fear of death, dying and grief.

An unmentionable blindness: the UCAs politics of reconciliation

Sadly, the Uniting church is deeply in the grip of this culture of forgetting injustice, and of distancing itself from the profoundly human cries of grief and sorrow. We live as if we did not know we are living in the shadow of a grief denied. At the inauguration of the UCA in 1977, the first Assembly issued a 'Statement to the nation' declaring; "People of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches have united. A new church has been born." Here is the first act of forgetting. A new church was born, and an old church –the Presbyterian Church - was torn in two. The first Assembly chose to forget the enormous grief, suffering and injustices that the split Presbyterian communion brought into the Uniting Church. From day one, the UCA has been captive to the modernist ideology that promotes forgetfulness of injustice in power relations and lives at a distance from the reality of injustice, pain and grief.

The statement to the nation went on to say the Church "addresses the people of Australia in this historic moment. The path to unity has been long *and at times difficult*, but we believe this unity is a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race" (my italics.) The Basis of Union talks about reconciliation rooted in a crucified Christ,

but our practice as Church at union begins with the inaugural Assembly minimising sorrow and grief at the painful wound in the Body of Christ represented by the split within the Presbyterian Church. A church that could not speak about death and violence to the Body of Christ, has little to say about the wholeness of life, let alone life in Christ that is the source of reconciliation.

By its forgetting of the Church's pain and grief at union, the Assembly inaugurated the UCA into living the colonialist's progress myth that reconciliation comes when the losers in the exercise of power accept political reality. A church that can so comprehensively live in denial of the suffering and weakness we experienced at our birth, today finds itself trapped in an ideology of reconciliation that has little spiritual depth to respond to the deeply human issues of an ageing population.

For over thirty years, the UCA has responded to its ageing membership in the pattern that I believe was established at union. That is, the powers that be in the church cajole ageing and declining congregations to amalgamate so they can have new life. But this is not the new life promised by the reconciling intent of God in Christ. What is strikingly evident is that what was promised as new life has been patterned on the old congregational form. We have experienced organisational restructuring rather than new creation. This reflects a lack of faith that God may be present in the suffering and grief in our life as church.

Heart disease: the high cost of our sickness at the heart of national progress

Now the spiritual challenge we face to recover our vocation as church will require us to reflect more deeply on the myth of progress and what it is that is in need of reconciliation. I will examine this challenge by the way the myth of progress 'explains' the incidence of heart disease in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

The leading cause of Indigenous deaths in 2004-2008 was cardiovascular disease, which includes heart disease and stroke. Indigenous people died from cardiovascular disease at a rate 2.5 times more than non-Indigenous people.⁷ The reason for the high rate of these deaths amongst Indigenous people is ascribed by the prevailing medical opinion to 'life-style factors', such as family history, smoking, poor nutrition, high blood cholesterol, physical inactivity, diabetes, high blood pressure,

being overweight, depression, social isolation and lack of social support.

But this so-called evidence-based diagnosis rests on the myth of *terra nullius*, the lie that there was no dispossession of Indigenous people from their land in the colonisers' pursuit of economic growth and social progress. Science's 'forgetting' of the trauma of injustice removes the stress of violent dispossession of Aboriginal culture and land from the horizon of causation for their incidence of heart disease. Once again, the myth of progress shifts the blame for Aboriginal people's lack of opportunity for living longer lives onto them as victims of their own decisions – it is their life-style choices that cause their deaths! This is the same myth that science is value-free, rational and objective, the myth that has underpinned our technological and economic development since 1788.

But heart disease is not only massively over-represented in the Indigenous population, it is the greatest cause of death in Australian society, with heart, stroke and vascular diseases causing around 33,000 deaths per year.⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, the National Heart Foundation believes the high incidence of heart disease in Australia is also due to the same 'life-style factors'. It bases its position on a 2003 review of the scientific evidence that in particular, discounted the claim that work stress was a cause of heart disease.

However, there is an ideological and material underpinning of the Heart Foundation's 'science'. Commenting on the deliberations of the expert panel that formulated the Heart Foundation's 2003 statement, expert panel member and cardiologist Murray Esler reported that the panel chairman stated in his opening address to the panel, "there is no evidence that stress causes heart disease, *nor will there ever be*"⁹ (my emphasis). The chairman of the Heart Foundation's expert panel announced what the scientific evidence would show before the panel's review of evidence commenced.

Esler suggests the medical research establishment has an ideological opposition to integrating the substantial body of scientific evidence linking work stress with cardiovascular diseases into the clinical practice of medicine. He suggests the main reasons for blindness to the scientific evidence are money, conflict, and power. "The spectre of workplace litigation hangs over the field, clouding arguments and polarizing medical opinion."¹⁰ But as we have

seen with the blaming the victim approach to Aboriginal health, such blindness is immune to correction by information alone because “the ideological personality is constantly on guard against the intrusion of reality, of the unallowable question, of the ‘data’ that does not fit the system”¹¹.

The function of the blame the victim ideology is to blind the whole society to the deep-seated injustices and violence at the core of the progress myth. As such, the ideology protects the beneficiaries of unjust economic and power relations by hiding the harm they do to others in pursuing their own interests. Hiding the causal relationship between work-related stress and cardiovascular disease protects the economic interests of workers’ compensation insurers, employers and medical ‘experts’ at the expense of those who die from work-related heart disease and their bereaved families.¹²

Solidarity for non-Indigenous Australians: deep listening, sorrow and a surprising gift

If we could listen deeply to the grief of Aboriginal people about the devastating impact of heart disease on their communities, we might see the depth of the stress on their hearts caused by oppression from their dispossession from their land. And in their anguish we may hear the passion of Christ crucified, innocent victim of a self-serving empire. Scripture teaches God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself, that is, God’s work of reconciliation only begins at the great depth of human suffering where the brokenness and pain of victims is fully understood by the perpetrator and brings forth their genuine repentance and sorrow.

This is the moment when we who are non-Indigenous begin to see with new eyes how our own heart disease is also contributed to by stress, but it is the stress we generate in our pursuit of progress and nationhood at the expense of all Indigenous Australians. In the company of Christ crucified, the hearts and minds of non-Indigenous Australians may at last be open to the promised new creation, a new humanity born of our shared vision of Christ’s love and justice.

The social construction of masculinity for a death-denying culture and church

I have one further reflection on the distribution of death rates is the lesser life-span of men compared with women. Let me suggest this reality is also

grounded in the progress myth, and embodied in the ideology of work. The ideology of work has constructed assumptions for masculinity that focus on work as a sphere for rational thinking, and which assigns emotions, values and beliefs to the private sphere. This ideology is embedded in the modern worldview that arrived in Australia in 1788, and which has shaped Australian men’s identity ever since.

An employer I knew agreed to provide some information to his workforce about the impact on his apprentice’s work-related death on him and the company, as a way of increasing his workers attention to workplace safety. We worked alongside the employer to produce a brochure that told the story of the young man’s life and death, and the importance of safety on the job. But when the time came to handing the brochure to his employees, the employer could not do it. He said, “I am fearful I will break down when I speak to them. I am their boss, and they need to think I am strong. I won’t have their respect when I need them to do what I ask them on the job.”

The ideology of work is very enduring in encouraging men’s efficient and productive effort, and in fostering our sense of self worth in productive achievement. It is also profoundly unhealthy in legitimating an internal dualism within men between mind and body, between rationality and emotion, between the worthy, strong man and the weak, effeminate man. This dualism has alienated many men from the health needs of our own bodies.

If we could listen to the voices of men who have died from their work, we might see the depth of the unjust powers that prosper by destroying lives. And in our wakening to patriarchy, homophobia, and the myth of redemptive violence (that is, violence that justifies itself by claiming it was the only way to rectify injustice caused by violence) we may hear the voices of the powers that crucified Christ, a man fully human. If God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself, we who are males may then see with new eyes how our masculine identity has hidden from us our wholeness as human beings. In the shadow of Christ’s cross, our hearts and minds may at last be open to the promised new creation, a new humanity.

Our nation's belief in progress is a fatally flawed foundation for building new opportunities for well-lived longer lives. Because we cannot give up our trust in the progress myth, the best our nation can do to develop new opportunities for Indigenous people's longer lives is the Howard government's 'practical reconciliation' or Labor's 'closing the gap'. There is overt racism in defining the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians according to a set of indicators (employment, education, health) embedded in the modern world. As God's people, the church is called to trust the future to the One who desires for us that we be a fellowship of reconciliation, which is a new creation, a new humanity.

Authentic Christian spirituality as a prophetic dreaming

Our challenge to be a new creation is to discover how to live in the knowledge of that time which the UCAs Eucharistic prayer says 'is beyond our dreaming', when God created the cosmos in its goodness. If the Aboriginal dreaming is a story that holds all of life in its embrace, then it is also a model for what authentic Christian spirituality promises. We have lost the spiritual heart of our story of God's goodness in all creation, but a similar truth is still remembered in stories of Aboriginal dreaming. We have a new opportunity as church to learn from Indigenous Australians what it means to have a prophetic dreaming that integrates the whole of life, both physical and spiritual, and holds all of time, past, present and future in community embrace.

We may look to reconcile what our science-based culture keeps pulling apart. We may see again that Christian spirituality embraces both darkness and light in the human story of church and nation. The truth of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection reveals the fullest dimensions of what it means to be human. Here is grace by which we may enter with prophetic hope into the pain and grief of past injustices that still dehumanise both oppressed and oppressor, trusting that God's mercy will bring forth a new humanity.

Reconciliation in Christ also gets to the heart of what it means to be human. As reconciled people, we will resist our society's ideology of work and its distorted vision of what it means to be 'human'. When we in the church refuse to see the worth or value of people defined by productive effort and a

consumerist life-style, we may be free to consider the future for ageing people as a far richer question than suggested by the category of 'retirement'.

We confess that the church's enquiry about new opportunities for well-lived lives takes place in a nation erected on generations of broken hearts of Indigenous Australians. It is not surprising perhaps that heart disease remains the primary cause of death amongst Aboriginal people, and paradoxically, amongst non-Indigenous Australians also. We yearn for a dreaming where heart speaks to heart, and neighbour is at peace with neighbour. Christ understood our need long ago, when he taught his followers to love God with all of our humanity, because God's love for all humankind is at the heart of how we learn to be fully human.

This enquiry into ageing reveals there is much ideological blindness to the injustices alienating so many from God's love and justice, which is the source of authentic humanity. If the church was to recover its trust in Christ's reconciling work, then perhaps we may contribute to restoring wholeness and fruitfulness for all ageing people to have well-lived longer lives, irrespective of race or gender.

Endnotes

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- ² AIATSIS, 2004, *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies*, p.4
- ³ Frost, J., Bradley, H., Levitas, R., Smith, L., & Garcia, J. (2007). The loss of possibility: Scientisation of death and the special case of early miscarriage. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 29(7), 1003-1022.
- ⁴ Valentine, C., (2006). Academic constructions of grief. *Mortality*, 11 (1), 57-78.
- ⁵ Harvey, B., (1999). *Another city: An ecclesiological primer for a post-Christian world*. USA: Trinity Press, p. 97
- ⁶ Middleton, J.R. & Walsh, B.J., (1995). *Truth is stranger than it used to be: Biblical faith in a postmodern age*. Illinois. InterVarsity Press.
- ⁷ Overview of Australian Indigenous Health Status 2011, <http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/health-facts/overviews/mortality> (4/3/2011)
- ⁸ M. Metherell, 'Heart attacks get less deadly' *The Age*, 22/3/2012, p.2
- ⁹ M. Esler, R. Schwarz & M. Alvarenga, "Mental stress is a cause of cardiovascular diseases: from skepticism to certainty", in *Stress and Health*, vol. 24, 2008, p.175
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p.179
- ¹¹ D. Hall, 2003, *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the suffering world*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, p.25
- ¹² If work stress was acknowledged as a contributing factor in even one per cent of Australian heart disease fatalities, it would constitute an approximate nine-fold increase on the number of compensable work-related disease fatalities reported in Australia in 2006-07.