

COMMON DREAMS

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THE NIGEL LEAVES MEMORIAL LECTURE

*Always Progressing and Evolving:
but from what to where and how and why?*

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Dr. Val Webb

I am privileged to give this lecture in honour of Nigel Leaves and I commend this conference for dedicating keynote lectures to three people who contributed much to Progressive thought and Common Dreams. Thank you, Jewlz, for your words. Nigel had the gift for turning complex theology into ideas lay people could understand. He encouraged them to think broadly without throwing out baby *and* bathwater, or resorting to blind faith.

I have presented at each Common Dreams from the beginning and seem to have evolved into the one who introduces the conference theme. Since I'm not involved in *choosing* the theme, it's like drawing a mystery topic out of a hat. When I heard *this* conference's topic, Progressive Spirituality, I confess to a groan, which may surprise you, but you will see why later. When asked six months ago for a summary of what I would say, I wrote a vague paragraph to cover a host of different directions I might go. I suggested that such gatherings were helpful to think about our history; where we are now; where we may be going. I noted that progressives come from various theological backgrounds and contexts, each evolving *to* somewhere, regardless of where they might then erect their nomadic tents. I asked what binds us together and suggested we consider future *contexts* in which we might find ourselves so we can be pro-active in thinking about *our* future.

I admit to some writers' block in the interim, not because I had nothing to say – that rarely happens – but because there was *so* much to say on this almost 10th anniversary of Common Dreams. We are in a different place from that first conference, but our own Rev. Dr. John Bodycomb's description still serves us well - “To call this a movement is misleading. Instead, it is a momentum, a stream of thinking that is slowly but

inexorably spreading over the religious landscape like a river spreading on a flood plain”. Now I am a visual person, so work with me on this image - a vast plain stretching into the horizon as the water at our feet moves slowly forward, soaking every available space. There are rocks and obstacles on the way, some almost blocking the path, others small enough to give some resistance and force the water to find a way around them; but the *momentum* of the increasing water is unstoppable, even if it pools in places for a while until invigorated by more water; and, in its wake, green shoots emerge in areas that had been parched, stunted or dying.

This image is different from a river, winding down a prescribed course towards a destination, occasionally bursting its banks if some conditions change, but soon returning to its limits. A flood, on the other hand, has fluid, unpredictable edges with no prescribed way to go. It spreads wherever it is *possible* to go. Furthermore, flood waters begin *small* from many different places, surging forward with combined force when they meet. Now, before any of you say it, the *opponents* of progressive Christianity could *also* claim this imagery, seeing those same floodwaters leaving a trail of soggy damage to traditional Christianity and church dogma in their wake. That is both the beauty and danger of metaphor!

The progressive groups in Australia that coalesce at these conferences have meant so much to so many people. Countless of you in this room and many, many more who could not be here credit the liberation and transformation in their thinking to what they have heard and been able to share in such groups. I could mention names of people who have done much to enable this movement and conferences to happen, many of whom have endured considerable opposition for their efforts. But naming people is fraught with the very likely possibility that some who work behind the scenes may be inadvertently left out, so I won't name names – you know who you are. The movement has been like that V formation of Canada geese in

flight. One takes the lead for a while, enduring the full force of the wind, then drops back for a spell while others lead. Thank you from the rest of us!

Ten years ago, we gathered around the writings of John Shelby Spong, the late Marcus Borg, the Jesus Seminar and others, sharing what we were *rejecting* in church tradition and gaining permission to explore new ways of thinking. The “progressive” groundswell today, however, both in and outside churches, is so much bigger than just this group. We realize we are not progressing alone, but are part of a great cloud of witnesses, a rising, questioning flood of people sourced from many contexts and moving in many directions through different terrains. The myriad of groups call themselves “progressive Christians” because they all see themselves as *progressing* on the way from one place to another. When I typed “Progressive Christianity” into Google, there were 293,000 results, and it was a revelation to read blogs from progressive Christians with large followings, whose names had not crossed my radar. Now and again, some people rise to the international stage, but that is no indication of the momentum’s size and impact. I can hardly keep up with new books coming from writers I *know*, only to find so many more to discover.

The Emerging Church, for example, consists of *evangelical* progressives from fundamentalist or more conservative churches – whatever those labels mean - seeking new ways to “do church”. They want a decentralized structure; networks rather than hierarchies; a flexible approach to theology with questions welcomed and different beliefs accepted; an emphasis on social justice and care of the planet; a recovery of spiritual practices and an emphasis on creating communities. They may not, however, make the same *theological* challenges as some here – that is the diversity of the flood waters. Unitarians have been around for centuries saying much of what many progressives are now saying – actually, they must wonder what our progressive fuss is all about, us Johnnies come lately.

There are progressive Catholics vitally interested in peace and justice issues and enthusiastic about institutional change. They want freer forms of worship and alternative spiritualities, and they see doctrines and moral precepts simply as *flexible guidelines*. There are Seventh-Day Adventists calling themselves progressive, disillusioned with the organized church and disagreeing with some beliefs held by mainstream Adventists, including the observance of a seventh-day Sabbath. And there are hosts of ecumenical and spirituality groups. *Eremos*, to which some of you here belong, is a long-standing group exploring spirituality in the Australian context and raising similar questions. The *Sea of Faith* began in the UK in the 1980’s as a place for non-dogmatic discussions of religion, faith and meaning, around the writings of Don Cupitt. Robyn Ford says of the Australian branch:

There are thousands of Australians now who are finding conventional religious orthodoxy untenable; there will probably continue to be many thousands of Australians in this position as time goes on. Making the break is not easy, and it is comforting to be able to share both the enlightenment and the disappointments of this process with like-minded people. ⁱ

Recently, I found a multiple choice questionnaire on Facebook, offered by the publisher Chalice Press, to test if you are a progressive Christian, asking questions about care of the planet, inclusivity, openness to other religions, and yet no *theological* questions about God and Jesus which other progressives might see as the core of *their* progressive thinking. In this conference, there would be a variety of opinions about who, what or if God is and Jesus’ relationship to God – and, by the way, I use G-O-D to signify whatever people see as the Something More or the Sacred. This diversity is the beauty of the floodwaters – many people on the move from one place to another, not leaving from the same place or arriving at the same place, or even wearing the same uniform. The rocks and pebbles of religious traditions and institutions that refuse to be displaced by the floodwaters are simply left behind.

So, after almost ten years of *Common Dreams*, let's stop a while to consider - what does being "progressive" mean for *you*, given the breadth and diversity of the label; and, given this increasing diversity, does the label progressive still usefully describe who we are? I will play the devil's advocate in this opening session to raise questions to ponder over the coming days. For those without a Catholic background, the Devil's Advocate was an official church position established in 1587. A canon lawyer, also called the *Promoter* of Faith, was employed to argue *against* God's Advocate, the Promoter of the Cause, in discussions about the canonization of a saint. The Devil's Advocate took a skeptical but constructive approach to show up any flaws or inconsistencies to be considered.

To go back to school for a moment, "progressive" is an *adjective*, a word that modifies a noun to make it more specific – like *rotten* eggs or *mushy* peas. *Progressive* Christianity, therefore, suggests a certain *type* of Christianity, something with identifiable boundaries that distinguish it from other kinds of Christianity. We have many such adjectives – conservative, feminist, postcolonial, evangelical – each describing what makes a type of Christianity unique. Yet Progressive Christianity from the beginning was determined *not* to suggest a new set of beliefs or borders or a type of Christianity, so is an *adjective* helpful? The term "progressive" was originally used to reflect *momentum*, moving forward. Fred Plumer, who is with us from The Center for Progressive Christianity USA, says "progressive" reminds us "we are on a spiritual journey into the Great Unknown. The idea that we are always progressing helps us not only from becoming complacent about our faith, but hopefully it keeps us from assuming we have arrived ... we are constantly moving, with a faith that assumes we are moving toward something good, something holy and something divine".ⁱⁱ This is why my title tonight is "Always Progressing and Evolving" to evoke the moving, rather than a type of Christianity.

Progressing as moving forward however, describes *many* groups and churches today trying to make themselves relevant in the 21st century.

The Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* spills much ink declaring itself a pilgrim people on the way, open to "sharpening its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought" and "ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds".ⁱⁱⁱ As for social action, it is a leader in Australia in many arenas. It is therefore, under this meaning of moving forward, a progressive church "constantly moving, with a faith that assumes we are moving toward something good, something holy and something divine", as Fred Plumer said. So, this self-appointed Devil's advocate asks, what does *our* "progressive" label mean *beyond* this – does it really mean anyone moving forward, as the Uniting Church and others see themselves doing, or a particular *type* of progressing that makes us different? We must ask such questions if our label is dividing us from others in our church communities.

"Progressive" as an adjectival label has been questioned as long as it has been used. Some of you may be thinking, "Oh, she's at it again", but if we are to think about who we are and our future directions, we need to regularly think about whether our label accurately and adequately reflects our meaning and purpose - to ourselves but perhaps more importantly, to others. The buzz word in business today is branding, how you identify your business and how customers recognize and experience your business. It is more than a logo – it reflects what you do, what you stand for, why your customers should be attracted and loyal to you, and what sets you apart from competitors. A strong brand gives a better chance of success,^{iv} which is why companies and organisations change their labels when no longer helpful. Kentucky Fried Chicken became KFC when fried food was considered unhealthy, and Bob Jones III, President of Bob Jones University, suggested after 9/11 that they drop their label fundamentalist. Jones wrote, "The term now carried overtones of radicalism and terrorism. Fundamentalism evoked fear, suspicion and other repulsive connotations in its current usage [So]... Many of us ... feel it is appropriate to find a new

label that will define us more positively and appropriately.”^v To talk about our brand may seem a cold, analytical approach to this topic tonight, but I am not averse to finding metaphors and correlations from worldly wisdom. What does *our* progressive “brand” mean to us and does it tell others anything about who we are? Do we see Progressive Christianity as a *type* of Christianity different from other types, even others who claim the progressive label, or do we simply mean anyone moving forward, regardless of their beliefs and where they are heading?

Interestingly, calling ourselves progressive is a *subjective* call, depending on what we see as the *better* way towards which to move. In an online article entitled “Twelve Reasons why Progressive Christianity will die out”, the author undoubtedly saw *his* position as the progressive or radical position, not Progressive Christianity. “Historic Christians [his position which we might call traditional or conservative] are now the *radicals*”, he said. “When the whole world becomes liberal, it is the *conservative* who is the radical... When the whole world is devoured by relativism, the *dogmatist* is the radical. When the whole world is blinded by materialism, it is the *supernaturalist* who is the radical. Christianity is only good news when it is radical and so it is the historic and heroic Christians [that is. The traditionalists] who will prevail”.^{vi}

Being “progressive” has a long history, even without without a label - wherever people have challenged and moved beyond the doctrinal and ecclesiastical status quo, starting with the early church, as I trace in my latest book “Testing Tradition and Liberating Theology: finding your own voice”^{vii} - there, I got in my plug! Good theology, or talking about God, always has *two* parts – telling the story of God; *and* making that story relevant for today’s world. They cannot be separated. Theologian Phil Hefner said:

“ ... every generation of Christians grapples with God and [God’s] revelation in terms of the symbols and categories of knowledge that its age furnishes ... We do not deny that our ways of understanding

and appropriating God’s truth are continuous also with the ways of previous generations, but our integrity demands that we be faithful to our own age’s categories and to the contours that they provide for our understanding”.^{viii}

Some American Christians were actually *labeled* “progressive” at the end of the Nineteenth century, including Harry Emerson Fosdick who described their task as “deliberately, sometimes desperately work[ing] to adapt Christian thought and to harmonize it with the intellectual culture of our time”^{ix}. Australian so-called heretics, Charles Strong, Peter Cameron and Samuel Angus were also called progressives. Our current “Progressive Christianity” movement emerged more recently in the United States as a counter-voice to the growing, politically influential Religious Right. It was strengthened by the writings of the Jesus Seminar, a group of biblical scholars including the late Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan who examined the historical Jesus; and also the groundbreaking writings of John Shelby Spong and others. Since Marianne Borg is here, I will read a letter I received in 1994 from a retired minister from our church in Minnesota who was reading Marcus’ then newly released book *Meeting Jesus again for the First Time*:

“Val, what do you think of Marcus Borg and the Jesus Seminar people? Is this heresy or progress? And how much danger is there in opening up ancient scholarship to current debate by church members? My own idea, not without some questioning, is that the more open we can be the better, and even heresies are best answered by discussion than by dictating required answers, and the process of discussion can stimulate interest and growth.”^x

As progressive groups have developed around the world, they have been cautious about drawing up guidelines for Progressive Christianity to avoid any new orthodoxy, but those that have emerged are broad spectrum: For example, progressives:

1. Seek God, however understood, guided by the life and teachings of Jesus

2. Affirm many ways to experience the Sacred, drawing on diverse sources of wisdom
3. Recognize that following Jesus leads us to act with compassion and confront evil
4. Practice hospitality, celebrating our common humanity
5. Build communities that accept anyone, without insisting on conformity
6. Know that how we behave towards others is the best expression of our faith
7. Search for understanding rather than insist on certainty
8. Work together to achieve a just and sustainable world

While these broad goals may not fit conservative or fundamentalist Christians, they actually appeal to many people in churches today which is why we have this *widening* flood of people calling themselves progressive.

This brings me to a second point about branding. Labels have multiple meanings, depending on how they are used and interpreted. For opponents of progressive Christianity, “progressive” does *not* mean “progressing on the way”. It is seen as the opposite of “regressive” or the “status quo” – not going forward. Elitism and intellectualism are seen at the progressive core because progressives challenge the traditional doctrines with their own scholarship. Just as “Methodist” and “Lutheran” were originally negative labels for those emerging groups, “progressive” has become a negative label to those wanting to preserve the ancient doctrines of the One Holy Catholic Church, or those who take the Bible literally or as inerrant. When “progressive” is *not* seen by opponents as suggesting superiority or elitist head stuff, it is seen as vague, believing in nothing, denying the very core of Christian belief. Progressives are therefore accused of, or dismissed as being revisionists, un-Christian or dangerous

heretics, because of other peoples’ check lists of what is a Christian. My American granddaughter in her first year at Colgate University sent me her recent religion essay “Progressive Ideas in a Conservative-dominated Faith.” She framed her essay as a conversation with a friend who said, “I wasn’t even aware that Progressive Christians existed. I always just thought being more liberal meant that you didn’t take your religion seriously”.

Many Uniting Church leaders, for example, have formed their negative stereotype of a progressive and would not set foot in this conference, yet would relish the conversations going on. They are having the *same* conversations in their circles, but we are on separate tracks passing in the night because of perceptions. As a theologian, I have taught Christian traditions across the theological spectrum, but because I have been labelled a “*progressive*” theologian, I am excluded from teaching places in my church where “progressive” is seen as dodgy. We label things, people and groups all the time as conventional and convenient shorthand, but such branding is problematic if it misrepresents or dismisses peoples’ voices. Does the label progressive, in your experience, do more harm than good in your church environment? If so, what should we do if it is blocking our message in those places? This is a fraught issue, I realize, since the label is engrained in our language and literature and many progressives who question it themselves simply put it in the “too hard” basket - like changing our email address. The Devil’s Advocate asks us to ponder our brand.

The conference topic, however, is Progressive *Spirituality*, which brings us to another slippery term. I imagine “spirituality” was chosen to be inclusive of *many* experiences, rather than the terms “Christianity” or “religion” which have limited and often negative connotations. “Christian” has been commandeered today by vocal groups who make belief claims many of us find uncomfortable or simply wrong. Here, I applaud the Australian

Progressive Christian Voice, engaging in public discourse to offer a different voice from the Australian Christian Lobby's claim to speak for us all. I cringe whenever I see an advertisement from a *Christian* plumber, suggesting that automatically makes him or her a better plumber, with a level of reliability not found in other plumbers. In the lead up to the

American elections, we are watching the strenuous attempts to make Donald Trump a *proper* Christian and, from our Royal Commission into child sexual abuse in religious institutions, Christian is no longer a safe label, even in the *church*. "Religion" also has negative connotations, either as the realm of institutional power, dogma and rules, or a label for the piously unattractive, thus an increasing number of people calling themselves "spiritual not religious" because they do not want to be associated with such images.

The label spirituality is used today in so many directions. *World Spirituality: an encyclopedic history of the religious quest*, consists of 25 volumes covering all religious and non-religious usages. But what does spirituality *mean*? In an internet search, the *psychology today* website begins, "Spirituality means something different to everyone." Religion scholar Ursula King describes it as "almost any longing of the human heart".^{xi} Google's introductory paragraph says, "Spirituality is a broad concept with room for many perspectives." The final authority, the Bible of Wikipedia, says "There is no single, widely agreed definition of spirituality". Spirituality is used with different *adjectives* – ecumenical spirituality, esoteric, new age, Hindu, ecological etc. It is recruited in management, sociology, tourism and health. It is equally diverse in Christian history. *Before* the Middle Ages, spirituality usually meant being animated by God or guided by the Spirit, but later became the *superior* activities of mind and spirit, as opposed to profane matter and bodyliness, setting up harmful dualisms that graded male against female, heaven against earth, body against spirit, church against world. Later still, higher and lower forms of spirituality were identified, the higher more deeply Christian than others. Such grading is reflected in *The Oxford*

English Dictionary - spirituality is "...attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests ... pertaining to, affecting or concerning, the spirit or higher moral qualities especially as regarded in a religious sect."

^{xii} By the nineteenth century, spirituality suggested an intuitive, experiential approach to religion and faith; and it would become disconnected from religion as something subjective and personal that drew on mysticism and meditation from other religions as well.

Today "spirituality" includes *anything* in life through which people seek meaning, purpose and transcendence. Religion scholar Ursula King says:

[Spirituality is]... lived experience, an experience linked to our bodies, to nature, to our relationship with others and society. It is an experience that seeks the fullness of life - a life of justice and peace, of integrating body, mind and soul.^{xiii}

Lived experience, linked to our bodies. Those words intentionally move away from any duality that casts the spiritual life over against, and superior to, bodily life, affirming instead that life *is* simply life and not lived on two levels, secular and spiritual. That is definitely a healthy move, but this Devil's Advocate asks, is the label "spirituality" then too vague and fuzzy to mean *anything*, especially when linked with the equally broad adjective "progressive"? Think for a moment - does "progressive spirituality" actually *tell* us anything, or does it simply put us in a corner with a host of other wonderful, complex people looking for meaning and purpose? If the latter, do we need the phrase – progressive spirituality as opposed to what?

But now the light bulbs go on! Perhaps that's it! We have chosen such vague labels with many meanings that don't say anything definitive because we realize that labels, by their very nature, *limit* who we are, which we resist; and labels usually feature only *one* aspect of us anyway – conservative, Greens, Asian, gay, left-handed. But life is not just about being Christian or non-Christian; spiritual or not spiritual, old or young. Too long we have been identified, or have identified ourselves by categories according to what we believe or to which group we belong - Christian,

Hindu, Agnostic, Atheist - allowing ourselves to be praised or judged, depending on how well we stay within the label's bounds. Yet each of us are a conglomerate of interwoven events – musician, mother, author, knitter, artist, doubter – none describing the whole of “me” but all contributing to who I am. Rather than answering to a hierarchy of labels – my religion, politics, class, family, sports, sexual orientation, hobbies - it is about being a whole person, living life fully in *all* its aspects, free of gradings of spiritual and secular, good or bad. Jesus said – “I am come that you might have *life* and have it abundantly”.

This is what American Henry David Thoreau discovered, living in isolation in the woods of Concord:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life ... to put to rout all that was not life.^{xiv}

It's about what Bishop Jack Spong calls living fully, loving wastefully and being all that we can be. And it is what a very down-to-earth non-philosophical, hardly theological Facebook post said, “You have only one life. How exactly are you going to spend it? Regretting? Crying? Dieting, Questioning? Hating yourself and others? Running after things that don't mean anything? You have one life. Spend it well. Go out and live.”

Perhaps the phrase “Progressive Spirituality” is so vague and all-encompassing that it virtually means being alive - whole persons progressing and evolving. Such vagueness suggests we are searching for a place *without* labels, a way to live wholly embodied, not as dissected or truncated people according to what we believe. This means that, whatever we think about God – our theology - must evolve *out of* this experience of being human. This is not do-it-yourself theology, but rather giving ourselves the authority and permission to choose to whom or what we will pay attention, rather than what others thrust upon us;

to sift through the wealth of wisdom in the world; to listen to our own bodies and experiences; to dive deep into nature and be present there; to allow relationships to be our teachers; and to look for meaning in our lives.

This may sound like New Age mumbo-jumbo – I just need now to pass around a few crystals. I might have called it that once. It was a long journey for me to progress *into* the world rather than always trying to move out of it into some *spiritual* place where God was. “Be ye in the world but not of the world” and “Rejoice and be glad because your reward is in heaven” were poisonous mantras that made us eternally suspicious of living fully and deeply in the world. We need to realize that the Bible does not contain the earth's story, but that the *earth* contains its *own* story and the Bible contains human attempts to “read” that story. The dualism of spiritual and secular needs to be upturned so we see the life of Jesus of Nazareth lived firmly in the dust of this earth, for the good of this earth, with a passion for people of this earth, not like a donkey following a carrot leading to heaven. Rather than throwing away the core of Christianity, as some opponents might say, I see this as reclaiming the whole apple, drawing on our rich Jewish and Christian heritages, as well as other stories and experiences, as cameos of how to live fully and justly. In this sense, I prefer the label “radical” to “progressive” – from the Latin “root or source”, arising from or going to the source, the life and teachings of Jesus. Radical also has that rich meaning of challenging the status quo, the norm, the tradition; and it immediately indicates to others that we have something different from the usual to say. Anyone for a new label?

The third part of the conference topic is future directions. To talk about future directions, we have to think about future contexts – what is happening in our world today that will change the environment in which we live and do theology in the future? Let me consider three arenas – as progressives; in our faith communities; as world citizens.

Where do we want to be as progressives – those returning to the root, the way of Jesus? For what do we hope and what are the realities? A newsletter last year from the Australian *Sea of Faith* launched a discussion about future directions because their membership is ageing and numbers dwindling.^{xv} They identified many changes with which progressives also identify:

- Churches are in decline and society is less interested in religion, so anyone trying to rescue and update religion generally attracts less interest, especially if religious institutions have too much invested in structures and practice to be moved to change
- Society is bombarded with so many new or perceived threats to our way of life that people develop a switch-off mentality to groups and causes, in part for self-protection. They are selective in joining things and often join, not as active participants but simply by registering concern. Non-life-threatening stuff slips from view
- An organisation tolerant of religious diversity has no sharp, attention-grabbing focus like Fundamentalism – a seal raises less adrenalin than a shark!
- Groups focused around a few authors can become rigid, its members saturated in one line of thought and needing a new generation of thinkers to refresh/widen the debate

Sea of Faith thinks their groups will fade if they simply become a talk-fest for like minds, rather than constantly widening their scope and appeal to be inclusive of the many progressing on the way. This last issue is always a concern for me - the need to keep our progressive groups open to the *spectrum* of ideas and the different staging-posts on the way, so we are forever inclusive, preserving the original intent of safe spaces where people can ask questions without fear of rebuke or disdain. Our groups can become so comfortable, self-assured and homogenous in our progressive conclusions that they are simply scary for people taking first

steps beyond the traditions. When I read the enthusiastic blogs and comments of new “progressive Christians,” feeling both liberated by their first steps beyond certainty, while still slightly nervous about reading the Bible critically, I shudder at what exposure to some of our progressive discussions might do to them. To welcome and embrace this broader emerging progressive momentum, we must remember *our* own scary first steps outside the box and be intentionally conscious of making them feel safe in our company. What we have discovered may not be what they will discover or need. We need to ask ourselves - *who* would be comfortable in *our* local group?

Future directions in our churches. If I went around this room, I would find a huge variety of experiences with church. Some of you are active in religious communities that embrace fresh visions and provide supportive community. Feel blessed! Others remain in churches as a struggling minority, trying to entice fresh winds to blow. Some are supported by clergy, but more often face clergy resistance, or clergy claiming to be ‘all things to all people,’ which usually means preaching to the mainstream with a nudge of support out of earshot to progressives. Churches are also at the mercy of leadership change, where lay people work hard with a progressive clergyperson, only to find the replacement clergy resistant. Recently, I commended someone on being able to worship in a progressive environment, only to hear the new minister was not following that history. Her response was, “It makes you wonder why we bother?” Other progressives simply experience overt opposition and leave, but not without guilt and regret at something important to them being taken away.

It is not as if churches can afford to lose members. Since the Australian census allowed a “no religion” category, the figure has risen from 6.7% in 1971 to 22.3% in 2011 and is higher today. Yet studies show that many Australians who no longer go to church still meditate, pray, or engage in spiritual practices. With church numbers declining, ageing membership and lack of families

and youth, the church reaction is often to revert to more traditional positions, as if that was why people left. But there are lots of reasons given for decline – people no longer interested in sitting in rows being lectured (unless they have their iPad with them); doubts about core church doctrines; youths leaving for school or university and not joining local churches; more Sunday options, with church no longer seen as the best way to spend Sundays.

This last view is not just from the *non-religious*. Since it is no longer fashionable, or even socially acceptable, to go to church, Frank Rees, Principal of Whitley Baptist College in Melbourne, calls Sunday “breakfast, bike-riding and Bunnings”^{xvi} - a time for families, friends, relationships, activities, or being home doing the necessary to maintain family life.^{xvii} Rather than simply denying church decline, this Devil’s Advocate suggests we start imagining what following the way of Jesus might look like in the future - *beyond* or *without* church walls. The biblical idea of Sabbath was not about what God does *not* do on the seventh, but about celebration and rest – Jesus said, the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath (Mark 2: 23-28). Breakfast, bike riding and Bunnings (if we resist a sole pull towards consumerism) has, Rees says, “... something of the character of Sabbath, the kind of active rest that allows renewal and recovery from the stress and the demands of work and...our lives.”^{xviii} Arguing this *theologically*, Rees points to contemporary images of

God as Divine Breath *in* the world, not an elsewhere Being encountered only in a church. Ordinary lives in-filled with the Spirit are *also* loci of meaning and value and, if the divine breath is active in everything, *everything* is spiritual – or I might say, everything is *life*. “It may seem a stretch to speak of [making beds and digging ditches] as having ‘spiritual’ significance”, Rees says, “but this is because we have so reified the ‘spiritual’ as to separate it from the practical, the physical, and indeed from life as it is lived ... we need to rethink the idea of the Spirit’s presence precisely to embrace the ordinary, the practical and physical,

including the beautiful *and* those things we might consider merely functional.”^{xix}

Rees is not alone here. The *Sabbath Manifesto*,^{xx} from a Jewish organization reimagining meaningful life, urges people to slow down in our increasingly hectic world. When God said, “On the seventh day you shall rest,” the meaning was simple: Take a break. Call a timeout. Find some balance. Recharge - but somewhere along the line, this mantra for living faded. As Devil’s Advocate, however, I realize this will raise the eyebrows of those who judge Christians by whether or not they attend church and serve on committees, and those who focus on creating new church programs to attract more people *into* church buildings, but I challenge you to consider the future of what we call church; and I assure those who have left dysfunctional churches, by eviction or choice, they are not alone.

What about future directions for radical living in the world? We deal with climate change, ecological disasters, terrorism, sexual and domestic abuse, dishonest politics, scientific advances with ethical consequences, overseas political changes and destabilization – I could go on and on, and these are what we know about *now*. As human beings firmly embodied in *this* world, these impact us. There are ways to avoid some of them, of course – turning away, buying our way out of them, seeing them as someone else’s problem, ignoring them as “worldly”, claiming they do not exist. I could say a cursory, all-too-brief paragraph about each of these, but you know the issues. Instead, I suggest a theology of attention and interruption. Back to the Thesaurus. Attention. The synonyms for “attention” are listening, observing, taking to heart, considering, being aware. We might think we do this, until we note the antonyms - ignore, disregard, forget, misunderstand, neglect, not get, overlook.^{xxi} To put faces on these antonyms: Climate change – neglect; domestic violence – misunderstand; increasing poverty – overlook; scientific advances with ethical overtures – ignore; bullying – forget. Between the nightly news and social media, we can become overwhelmed with all the challenges and

feel impotent to do anything. We can simply expect our scholarly experts to address the problems. We can convince ourselves that politicians have it under control and are working for justice.

Paying attention is not a passive watching. It is intentional work. It demands we read broadly around what is happening in our world, not just theological journals or progressive books. We need cross-fertilization of our minds by meeting with unlike minds. I remember going to medical meetings with my husband and wondering why all the new information emerging in medicine did not impact our *theological* discussions – we stayed in our own tunnels with our own scholarly heroes often saying similar things, but living in parallel universes. Theologian Kwok Pui Lan says:

“We will need to cultivate a reading habit outside our field to catch up with the world, since the study of religion is so backward looking ... if our scholarship is to have some intellectual appeal, broadening our scope and updating our subject matter is crucial.”^{xxii}

We also need *conversations*, evaluating as best we can what people tell us, rather than simply allowing the media to inform us. We need a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” the term emerging feminist theology used to approach with healthy suspicion biblical texts written in male-dominated societies about women. When politicians tell us something is “best for jobs and growth”, paying attention reminds us that the *rich* will always get best access to anything that eventuates. When women and children are raped in war, paying attention helps us to realize that sex is a cheaper weapon for degrading and destroying people in war and shaming victims to keep them in control. Paying attention is listening, observing, taking to heart, being aware; and, as French mystic Simone Weil said, “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer”

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If a theology of attention sounds passive to the action-oriented, I add a theology of interruption. If our paying attention is real, it will interrupt us. In fact, ethicist Laurie Zoloth says we must act as if the *interruption* is the Real and the other stuff of our lives the Distraction (repeat).^{xxiv} Zoloth was talking to a group of scholars about climate change, but we can apply his words to many situations. We are often so busy with daily life, *including* good works, that, while we recognize the immanent dangers and injustices, we don’t take time to be educated or involved in what is happening. If we care about climate change, Zoloth says, we need to forfeit four hours of emails a week to read a scientific paper on climate change, rather than taking sound bites from the media. If we care about the poor, refugees, literacy, let these interrupt us as the *Real*. Zoloth says:

“What can I do to interrupt your life? [Zoloth says] To pull you over and make you attend to this crisis? ... *we must be interrupted; we must stop*. To make the future possible, we need to stop what we are doing, what we are consuming, what we think we need, what makes us comfortable. We need to interrupt our work - even our good work - to attend to the urgency of this question ...is our society unable to stop careening towards the deep trouble of the coming storm because we have not fully attended, we cannot stop?”^{xxv}

We have a rich smorgasbord to interrupt us this weekend and make us pay attention. I end with something from Prof. A. J. Brown, borrowed from that great Brisbane example of radical spirituality, St. Mary’s in Exile (be sure to see the play about them now showing):

We should always remember that the future is not somewhere we are going; it is something we are creating. Every day we do things that make some futures more probable and others less likely... As sailing lore says, we cannot choose which wind will blow, but we can set the sail.’^{xxvi}

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