“A most meddlesome God”: A Christian future for the church

Stephen Pickard

Introducing Ernest Henry Burgmann

Ernest Burgmann (1885–1967) served for 26 years as Bishop of Goulburn (Canberra and Goulburn from 1950) from 1934 until his retirement in 1960. He died on 14 March 1967, aged 82. Burgmann was a church leader, social critic, prophetic voice, theological educator, and the first Australian-born person elected to the Anglican episcopate in this country. Burgmann’s vision was for an indigenised Anglican Christianity that could contribute to the development of a robust national life. His vision and hope is not far from any of us. What I mean is that etched into the entrance to the chapel at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture are some words of Burgmann: “I want the great things of abiding value . . . thoroughly baptised into the Australian scene, blown through by Australian winds, bathed in Australian sunshine, and even coated now and then with Australian dust.” On the other side of the entrance to the Chapel are the words: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). In short, this is a vision for a local, enculturated, prophetic, compassionate Christianity for Australia.

The Rt Rev’d Professor Stephen Pickard has been Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture since September 2013, and is currently an Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Canberra & Goulburn. This article is a revised version of the 2017 Burgmann Lecture, presented at the chapel of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C), Canberra, in partnership with St Mark’s National Theological Centre, on 17 May 2017. This year’s lecture marked the fiftieth anniversary of Burgmann’s death. This article has been peer reviewed.
In 1934 Burgmann was elected bishop of the Diocese of Goulburn. As bishop of this essentially conservative country diocese that incorporated the fledgling national capital, Burgmann was obliged to spend most of his time rehabilitating it from the effects of the Depression. Yet, as his biographer Peter Hempenstall notes, Burgmann refused to abdicate the role of social and church critic. He maintained his interest in working-class struggles and took up rural issues, such as soil erosion and hydro-electric power. His monthly letters to the diocesan paper, Southern Churchman, became national news. Energetically improving his “team”, he promoted university and continuing education for the clergy, and sought well-trained men and women for posts in the diocese: his episcopal colleagues accused him of “sheep-stealing.”

Hempenstall continues:

World War II catapulted Burgmann into new prominence as president of the Australia-Soviet Friendship League. He was criticised by conservatives for his support of the Russian alliance and for his endorsement of the Federal Labor government’s reconstruction strategies. Though he never joined a political party, his heart and head were always with Labor. He admired J. B. Chifley and forged a mutually respectful friendship with H. V. Evatt who appointed him to the Australian delegation at the 1948 United Nations Assembly in Paris. Burgmann was active in the campaign against Sir Robert Menzies’ attempt in 1951 to ban the Communist Party of Australia. In 1956 Burgmann was again dogged by controversy when he and the Catholic archbishop Eris O’Brien accepted the Commonwealth’s offer to subsidise interest payments on loans raised to erect church schools in Canberra.

Burgmann’s great obsession was the building of a collegiate library in Canberra—founded on the lines of that in Westminster Abbey, London—to stimulate advanced theological research by postgraduates.
What came in its stead was the building of St Mark’s Anglican National Memorial Library, opened in 1957. Burgmann hoped “to provide a setting wherein a distinctive Australian theology might develop.” Not a seminary, but a library; a place for public intellectual engagement in the nation’s capital. The idea of a training college for Anglican clergy came later, under a different episcopate.

Assessments about Burgmann’s legacy vary. Certainly his was a prophetic and often controversial episcopal voice. During the years of the Great Depression, when he was Warden of St John the Evangelist College, Morpeth, he was outspoken in his support for the unemployed. A recent incisive and illuminating assessment of Burgmann’s significance is offered by CSU research professor, resident scholar, and colleague at the ACC&C, Professor Wayne Hudson, in his masterful book, Australian Religious Thought. Hudson identifies Burgmann as “evidence that a sacral approach to the secular has continued to be possible in the twentieth-century.” Burgmann’s was an early example of a “church in society” public theology. Hudson draws attention to the various streams that flowed into Burgmann’s thought and social engagement. “Grounded in the sociology and psychology of the period, and informed by developments in the natural and social sciences, Burgmann’s theology aimed to provide a Christian response to the emergence of modernity, which he interpreted in terms of the breakdown of the harmony between the spiritual and the rational which should exist within the human personality.” Behind this quest for the recovery of harmony between the sacred and the secular, the body and the soul, the personal and the public, the spiritual and the rational, Hudson discerns the influence of Burgmann’s studies in neo-Platonism which no doubt resonated with his abiding love for the Gospel of John and his reading in Patristic thought. This was “fused with a modernist commitment to the new and attempts to revive a more communitarian and enchanted past.” The result was a kind of Protestant sacramental socialism through which Burgmann pursued “transcendent value within the secular domain.” Hudson states: “For Burgmann, a truly public Christianity was implicit in the Christian conception of the Kingdom of God and the church needed to work for human betterment in all areas of social life.” I agree with Hudson that for Burgmann, Christianity “was a liberation movement in human history, of which the church was only one form.” In line with this view, Burgmann “preached a Jesus who drew no
A question arises and has been put sharply by my colleague and friend, Professor Tom Frame. To what extent did Burgmann’s vision of the Kingdom of God become too wedded to a localised national church agenda for renewal? This is a longstanding issue for the Christian socialist who is impatient for transformation of present structures and, in order to hasten the day, confidently proclaims the imperative of the gospel, works tirelessly for change, and is always tempted to see every improvement as the sure and certain sign that the kingdom of God has come. The deeds of the church become too quickly and in an untroubled manner associated with the shape and character of the coming kingdom. Yet this is the problem of Christian eschatology—everything is provisional; we ought never stop praying “your kingdom come”. This is a sentiment that I imagine would have struck a chord with Burgmann, who remained highly critical of the church’s failure to embody gospel Christianity.

It is also important to recognise that Burgmann was never simply a social critic, whether the issue was capitalism, war, social and economic inequalities, education, or the condition of workers. He was an inveterate builder of new things. I think of his early days: he came from a timber-getting family. He acquired the skill and strength to cut down. But he also learnt to build with wood. Burgmann evidenced the strength of character and vision to work on both fronts. As in wood, so with people, structures, church, and nation. He was both a critic and a builder. He took the hard road—the higher road—and lived with the tension between his idealism and a critical realism and the art of the possible.

One thing is for certain; there aren’t many Burgmann’s in the Anglican Church of Australia in the twenty-first century. By and large the Anglican Church has retreated into an enclave dominated by concerns for survival while espousing a missional calling. I wonder what Burgmann would make of the developments on the land that was formerly called Rottenbury Hill. St Mark’s Anglican National Memorial Library (opened in 1957) continues to serve a wide public regionally, nationally and internationally, with its significant collections including the Alan Tippet library. In 1995 St Mark’s became the foundational institution of the newly formed School of Theology of Charles Sturt University. And almost twenty years ago (1998) the remaining six hectares of the Barton site were set aside for the establishment of
the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C). This visionary initiative of the then bishop of the diocese, the Rt Revd Dr George Browning, resonates with the best ideals of Burgmann for an engaged public Christianity.

Burgmann’s great obsession, the idea of a St Mark’s Anglican National Cathedral, has not come to pass; but St Mark’s National Theological Centre with its excellent library, the ACC&C, and a swath of native grasses occupy a prized site on the edge of Canberra’s parliamentary triangle. No doubt its sub-lease fills developers with envy and I am sure Charles Sturt University with glee. I trust and pray that the Anglican diocese is both proud and excited about the mission and witness of the whole site and its activities, set as they are in the geographical and political heart of the nation. Surely a jewel in the crown is deserving of care and encouragement. Its flourishing invariably contributes to the wellbeing, confidence, and inspiration of the wider church.

**A personal reflection: origins and identity**

I must confess a deeper affinity with Burgmann that may surprise some. Burgmann was born in Lansdowne near Taree in the most northern reaches of the Hunter Valley in the Diocese of Newcastle. I grew up not that far away in the coal-mining town of Cessnock and spent my first three decades in the Hunter Valley. The coal mining, timber getting, and agricultural environments of the Hunter Valley produces some common features among the people of the place: a certain habit of plain speaking; an aversion to all forms of pretension; an underlying insecurity about being up to the mark; and a dogged resilience not to give up. It generates not simply a “can do” attitude but a “will do” attitude. My own connections with Burgmann run deeper. Burgmann influenced a generation of clergy and lay people in his Newcastle days and then in Canberra and Goulburn. One such was the rector of the parish I grew up in, Canon Bill Childs. Bill became rector in 1956 when I was four years old. When he left Cessnock in 1970 to become rector at St Peter’s Anglican Church in Hamilton, Newcastle, I also left to work at BHP and attended the same Newcastle parish. Not, I hasten to add, because I desired to follow Bill, but rather because another person had caught my eye in the fellowship. The point is that from the age of four until I was an ordinand for the Anglican ministry at the age of 25, I was deeply influenced by Bill Childs who was, if ever there was one, a “Burgie
boy” in every way. Bill would thunder away in the pulpit on Sundays and on Monday morning he’d be marching with the striking coal miners. His was a brand of sacramental socialism—no nonsense, prophetic, unapologetic Christianity with which the host culture had to do business. Of course I had little idea about any of this growing up. It was only in later years that I came to appreciate my own roots, their significance in shaping my own discipleship, and the traces of the Burgmann tradition that ran through my veins. Which is why, when I was appointed as director of St Mark’s National Theological Centre in 1998, I genuinely felt I had finally come home. And why, having left St Mark’s nine years later, I now find myself back on home turf 15 metres across the lease, consciously applying myself to the vision of a centre. And I fully expect that Burgmann is among the heavenly throng in Christ interceding for the work at Rottenbury Hill and the Church of God.

How many people have a story to tell about the influence of Burgmann? How many might testify to the encouragement he has given them for their Christian journey? Their names are legion and their contributions to the coming kingdom are not to be decried or minimised. I am told there are five “Burgie boys” still living—that is, five men he ordained. In my view the gift Burgmann passed on for generations is quite simple: he gave an example in his life, thought, and ministry of what it could look like to pray that part of the Lord’s prayer: “your kingdom come; your will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.”

Burgmann was once referred to by a politician as “a most meddlesome priest.” It was not intended as a compliment and the young journalist reported that the politician (Jo Gullet in the Menzies’ Government) had said “meddlesome beast.”13 No doubt Burgmann would have been quite bemused, if not happy, to receive the tag “meddlesome priest.” Is that not precisely what the gospel of God calls disciples of Jesus to be? Meddlesome in the best sense, being involved in everything because everything has to be raised to the full stature of Christ. The Christian disciple ought not leave one stone unturned in the effort to find God at work and to bear witness to that surprising work of God. The path of the disciple is thus clear: to travel to Emmaus via Calvary, and from there into the whole world.
Questions on the agenda

I want to move from these somewhat personal and general remarks to address more directly the title for this article, “A most meddlesome God: A Christian future for the church”. Let me begin with a few preliminary comments. First, my approach is less historical in the line of Hempenstall, Kaye, and Frame, and more theologically focused. Second, I want to explore briefly the theological and ecclesial streams that fed Burgmann. Specifically, I want to locate his life and work within the Anglican tradition of Christian socialism that emerged out of the industrial upheavals of nineteenth-century England. Third, I want to identify some contemporary societal issues that demand engagement by Christians. The possibility for a genuine Christian future for the church hangs in the balance to the extent that the church can respond to several contemporary issues in a manner that is faithful to the gospel of God.

To begin, I want to clarify what kind of questions underlie the theological tradition exemplified by Burgmann. They are quite simple, really: Where is God working in the world? What is God doing? What must the church do to follow the gospel of God in the world? These three questions need to be placed firmly on the agenda for today’s church. Our theology and practice, our preaching, teaching, writing, structures, governance, pastoral work, evangelism, welfare, and mission ought to be directed to seeking answers to these three questions. These three critical questions embody first principles; they belonged to the core of Jesus’ ministry revealed in the Gospels. It is incumbent upon obedient followers of Jesus Christ to seek answers to these questions. And then act accordingly.

The Christian socialist tradition

Theologically the headwaters for Burgmann’s particular brand of Christianity can be located in ideas about theology, church, and society associated with the early-nineteenth-century Church of England priest, theologian, and controversialist, Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–72).14 Maurice’s life coincided with the massive upheaval in British society consequent upon the industrial revolution. One hundred and fifty years later it is almost impossible for us to grasp the enormity of the change industrialisation had on society: the emergence of the great industrial centres of Britain; the shift from rural, agricultural life to new cities; the primitive working
conditions, unemployment, and disease; and increasing tensions between the employer/industrialist bourgeois and workers. And all this happening in the shadow of the French Revolution not many decades before. For the most part the Church of England was aligned with the ruling aristocratic powers. Its support base was in the middle to upper classes of society. But the inherited social and economic arrangements were under strain in the wake of an expanding empire, trade, and merchant and entrepreneurial classes alongside the growing squalor and poverty of the new industrial cities, and of course transportation of undesirables to the underbelly of the world. It was a time of political, social, and economic tension. The old order was passing; something new was emerging and in places it appeared extremely ugly. Industrialisation and mechanisation threatened the coherence and unity of the social and political fabric of society. This legacy remains a fundamental matter for our contemporary world.

Foundational for Maurice’s Christianity was a conviction that Christ was the centre of everything and the great point of unity. Through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God embraced the whole of humanity. This for Maurice was the great universal truth. In this sense, for Maurice, Christianity was the truly revolutionary ideology.\textsuperscript{15} He could state: “A Baptism of the Spirit and of fire is needed, as much for the physical as for the moral regeneration of the earth and of man . . . In daring to say we have a gospel to the poor, we affirm that there is nothing in His creation so low but He designs to raise it.”\textsuperscript{16} People needed to discover this great reality. The Kingdom of Christ had brought all things, all peoples, into one great fellowship of humankind in the world. If this was foundational for the constitution of the world, then there was nothing that had not been claimed by Christ for the Kingdom of God. The corollary was simple: there was nothing that lay beyond the reach or legitimate concern of God. This universal conception of the kingdom of Christ in the world was embedded in Maurice’s understanding of the church. Maurice espoused a “one-city” theology; there was no room for Augustine’s two cities (earthly and heavenly), just the one city won by Christ.\textsuperscript{17} The danger of this view was that it could lead to a rather too optimistic view of possibilities for social renewal.

The church was the agent through which this good news that all humanity belonged in God was to be made known and practiced. Fellowship or communion with one another and with God was the deepest reality of all life. Behind Maurice we can discern the influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s
conception of the organic unity of God and society. This organic conception overcame all divisions and placed a strong accent on issues to do with justice and fairness in all dealings. Christianity was essentially and primarily a social and communal reality; this was the environment in which personal commitments, faith, and life flourished. This meant God was not removed from society, above it, owned by any part of it, nor the property of the wealthy and rich. Rather God was immersed in society and was accordingly to be discovered in its midst.

For Maurice, Christianity was social and this meant that society needed to be Christianised, while Christianity needed to be socialised. Christian socialism—a controversial term in the light of events in Europe throughout the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—was the most natural form of faithful discipleship in the world. This approach to God in the world shifted the focus of the doctrinal tradition from atonement to incarnation, from wrath to love, from Jesus as savior to exemplar, from transcendence to immanence, from awe to fellowship, from eschatology to the present manifestation of the kingdom.\footnote{This shift had practical consequences nicely captured in the words of a “slum priest”: “I speak out and fight about drains because I believe in the incarnation.”\footnote{How this fundamental theological understanding of Christ at the centre of everything worked itself out practically in Maurice’s life and work is a complex story that cannot be pursued at this time.}}

The Maurice line flowed into late nineteenth-century Anglican theology in the persons of Brookes Foss Westcott, Charles Gore and Scott Holland. Westcott (1825–1901), the famous Bishop of Durham, theologian, biblical scholar, advocate for the northern miners and President of the Christian Social Union (CSU) could state: “The one denial of Christ is to leave him out of any sphere of life.”\footnote{His book, Christus Consummator (1887), proposed a Christ who was the fulfiller of every aspect of humanity.}

It was during the late nineteenth-century that Charles Gore, later bishop of Birmingham and Oxford, emerged as a controversial social critic, prolific writer and speaker, defender of Christian orthodoxy, and ardent advocate for an updated Christianity. He was involved in the justly famous book of essays, Lux Mundi (1889), that would have been read by most ordinands during the early decades of the twentieth-century. One of those essays was entitled “Christianity and Politics”. Gore championed justice, not charity. Somewhat dark and irascible in disposition, Gore considered “dreams of a fresh start” a vain hope but equally he felt that “mere ambulance work...
He famously stated at a meeting in 1907 that a system that produced huge discrepancies of poverty and wealth “stands condemned in the sight of our Lord”. As bishop of Birmingham he advocated social reform rather than revolution in education, provision of open spaces, removal of slums, and town planning.

Gore was a powerful preacher and prolific writer, and his many works would have been staple diet for Anglican ordinands for many decades. Perhaps his most profound theological insight concerned the theology of divine kenosis (self-emptying). The self-emptying of Christ in the incarnation had profound implications for the life of the church and Christian discipleship. As Christ emptied himself into the world taking on the form of a servant, so too the church was called to pattern itself on the incarnate life of Christ and empty itself in a servant like way into the world, not just the ecclesiastical world. It could lead to a rather wooden notion of the church as an extension of the incarnation.

Gore’s general approach was shared by Henry Scott Holland (1847–1918), sometime Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, London, and the founder of the Christian Social Union. He was described as an evangelical, catholic social reformer. Holland looked to the world for its transfiguration. Holland was highly influential at the turn of the nineteenth century. He considered “that most church people oscillated between a-moral economics and individualistic pietism”, and accordingly lived in “miserable double-mindedness”. He was a proponent of the phrase, “a company has no conscience”. For Holland, true religion equalled social righteousness; repentance should be done for corporate as well as personal sin. “Like Maurice, Holland believed that all are redeemed by Christ whether they realise it or not. Thus one of the primary purposes of the church was to uncover the activity of God in the secular world.” Holland’s was a fully communitarian Christianity close to Maurice’s and, as I read it, deeply resonant with Burgmann’s approach and theology.

By the time William Temple (1881–1944) became Archbishop of Canterbury he had already established a track record for social and political involvement, and had been the President of the Christian Social Union. He was a leading influence on the course of the Church of England during the depression and war years. He followed in the steps of Gore and the Lux Mundi tradition, and wrote and spoke extensively on the matters of moment in the public life of the nation. His mantra was a new church for a new time. He learnt from the American theologian Reinhold Niebhu’s statement that
“the primary form of love in social organisation is justice”. Accordingly, for Temple private interest was subservient to public good. Burgmann would, no doubt like many of his generation, have read Temple’s *Christianity and Social Order* (1942). Temple’s heritage was the F. D. Maurice, Westcott, Gore and Holland tradition of Christian socialism. This line of thinking and action embodied a Christian sacramental socialism. The pivotal thinking for this tradition was the *Lux Mundi* essay collection and its offspring. Such writing articulated a responsible and involved church in which the sacramental witness to Christ in the worship life of the church flowed out into the world in the form of a social and just redistribution of the gifts of God equally for all. As Holland said, “the brotherhood [sic] of the eucharist pointed towards a reordered society.”

**Burgmann in the Christian socialist tradition**

The purpose of this brief overview of the development of the Christian socialist tradition in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglicanism is to help us locate and appreciate Burgmann within a broad and extremely important vein of Christian social ethics teaching and practice. A maverick, some have called him, a political irritant and meddlesome, a controversialist and prophetic, but lacking theological precision or depth. In truth Burgmann was heir to a rich vein in Anglican social teaching during the turbulent period of industrialisation of Europe with its overflow impact on Australia’s development. He was well read in the key texts of the tradition; he thought deeply about the issues of the day. He fed off an organic conception of God, church, and society. Its roots were in Samuel Taylor Coleridge and F. D. Maurice, and its development can be traced in late-nineteenth-century through to mid-twentieth-century thought and practice in the Church of England and its derivative church in Australia.

Foundational to this tradition in which Burgmann stood was a theological conviction about the presence and action of God in the world. This arose out of twin co-ordinates of incarnation and redemption in Christ. The doctrine of the incarnation pointed to God’s radical en-fleshment in the world; moreover, it was in a stable, not a palace; it occurred by the Galilean shores as much as Jerusalem; it was among the poor, unclean, and despised as much as the well-to-do and self-righteous; it was controversial for the cause of the coming kingdom rather than the unthinking baptism
of the status quo; it was costly and at times lonely; it was misunderstood and parodied. The incarnation was not a lonely doctrine hanging in the air, but it was of the earth; it indicated a divine self-emptying into the world in obedience to God for the redemption, healing, and repair of the world. The gospel of the incarnation of Jesus Christ was the mandate for the church's radical involvement in society. Yet it wasn't just involvement, but rather a hard-headed engagement. The intention was to contribute to the renewal of society and humanity—in Scott Holland's phrase, “the transfiguration of the world.”

This incarnational sacramental socialism, as I choose to speak of it, meant that there was no part of society that the light of the gospel of God could not shine into, illuminate, and renew. This implied a hoped-for redemptive process, but its foundation, as Maurice never ceased to argue, rested upon God's redemption of the world in Jesus Christ. Accordingly, the church's purpose was to bear witness in word, sacrament, and deed to the revolutionary action of God through which all things were being raised to their fullness in God. Burgmann, we might say, stood in a tradition of messy church; in a tradition of a meddlesome church. Why? Because the gospel revealed a meddlesome God who did not shy away from the world and human messiness. Society was the business of God.

Of course Burgmann, like the tradition in which he stood, was only too aware that things were not yet right. There always remained a great and God-given work to accomplish. And being the builder that he was, Burgmann seemed to have boundless energy and good humour in pursuit of that work. And it began with the church itself. Over a century before, F. D. Maurice had named the problem of the church with arresting clarity. It was the problem of the church's own atheism:

[T]he necessity of an English theological revolution . . . has been more and more pressing on my mind. We have no right to talk of theistic France, Atheistic Germany, true as the charge may be even now, fearfully as it may be proved hereafter. Are not we Atheistic? Is not our Christianity semi-Atheistic? We have theories of sin, of justification, of apostolic succession, schemes of divinity Protestant, Romish, semi-Romish, Anglican, Dissenting. But where is God in them all? Not first at least, not a Father; but merely
the provider of a certain scheme for our deliverance, the setter-up of a church system which is to go on without Him by help of popes, kings, doctors . . . When we have confessed our own Atheism and repented of it, we can call upon all the nations to abandon theirs. But do not let us preach a Protestantism, Catholicism, Christianity with God.25

Maurice is railing against the practical atheism of the church of his day. It was atheistic in practice—in its failure to incarnate real Christianity. Perhaps it sounds a tad harsh. Here is Burgmann’s assessment over a century later: “The Church is not yet Christian.”26 Burgmann was indeed “the disturber.”27 It’s the sort of thing that John Chrysostom might have preached some 1,600 years before in his bishopric of Constantinople. Wealth and power generate immense inequalities and the church, having been populated by the well-to-do, could so easily cease to be functionally Christian in practice.28 I think we get to the heart of the matter with this.

The Christian socialist tradition is profoundly impatient for the renewal of the world, for society, and, more recently, for the planet. That same tradition is fundamentally ecclesial and communal in orientation, and profoundly impatient with a certain kind of Christian pietism that is curved inwards and that only, with great difficulty, ever gets tangled up in the messiness of the social, political, and economic issues of the day. In this sense the Burgmann tradition is directly counter to private religion—that approach that can be at times so heavenly-minded that it is of no earthly use. It’s not that the personal side of faith and conversion is unimportant. Rather the true test of that inward quickening of the Holy Spirit has, as any good sacramental theology would argue, a visible outward embodiment in the world. Hence sacramental socialism generates a most natural symbiosis between giving God glory in worship and glorifying God’s name in the world. Such, I believe, are the chief tenets of Burgmann’s Christian socialism and of any practical Christianity worthy of the name today. And wherever this kind of Christianity is found, albeit in poor and inadequate forms, then the church may have a Christian future amid all the other practical atheistic and semi-atheistic options too often in evidence—idolatrous practices that give testimony to the gods of this world: money, property, self-aggrandisement, private religion, and the like.
A Christian future for the church

Finally, I want to flag some contemporary issues that require renewed engagement in order for the church to remain functionally Christian. This might be seen as a kind of WWBD—what would Burgie do? But to put it like that would be a profound mistake, and immediately rejected by Burgmann. If we stand in the same stream as Burgmann did, a stream that flows from its headwaters in the upper reaches of the gospel of the incarnation, then the issue is more direct and urgent. It can never be simply, “what would Burgie do”? That stream holds new water and that makes the stream in which we stand today very different from Burgmann’s day. Christian nostalgia is not the future direction in which we must head. 2017 is not 1950; nor is it 1967. Things are radically different. For example, when you discover that there are far more lobbyists in Parliament House than journalists, you already know that the fundamental relation in the nation is Government and big business. The church has become a peripheral institution. This of course should only serve to encourage its meddlesome calling. The church of the future will have to find its habitation around Galilee and on the Emmaus roads of the world, though without forgetting its witness in Jerusalem.

What do we need to be engaged in for the sake of God’s Gospel in 2017? I pose this question alert to the fact that the prevailing values of contemporary society are driven by self-interest. I have heard nothing in the public space in recent months, amid so much talk about Australian values, that speaks of compassion and hospitality to the stranger. Not a sentence. It seems that our values are seriously constricted and clothed in the rhetoric of stability and security. The Jesus of the Gospels knows no such language. Contemporary preoccupation with self interest—usually under the guise of national interest—runs counter to the gospel of self-giving. If you doubt this, consider for a moment the matter of diminishing foreign aid and its increasingly close link to national interest.

The church is often called to exercise a prophetic role, a countercultural role. It will inevitably be a costly discipleship. The road to Calvary is so unwelcome. Is it any wonder that a private faith is so attractive? What does a public faith mean today? What ought the Church of Jesus Christ be engaged in? To whom ought the church’s doors be open? To whom ought disciples go? What’s on the list? What are the particular social issues for the
churches of Australia? Can we identify and prioritise? How might a fresh public engagement offer a genuinely hospitable and welcoming church?

I briefly name a few issues (unranked) and invite you to consider what social issues are on the agenda of the churches and the nation. I am concerned to press the question: what might a “wisdom for the common good” look like through the lens of the following heads of inquiry? The issues identified below are all susceptible to being captured by contemporary identity politics from either the left or the right. Genuine wisdom for the common good points to a more encompassing and challenging horizon, informed by a robust and intelligent Christian faith. While this should never breed a uniformity of opinion, it should include a critical moral vision that challenges the predictable pragmatic utilitarianism that infects Australia society.

a. Looking beyond our shores the relationship between Australia and Indonesia (politically, economically, culturally, and religiously) seems to me to be deserving of a major investment of our time and energy as a nation. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, the fourth largest population in the world, and only a couple of hours’ flying time from northern Australia. There are more Christians in Indonesia than people in Australia. Here is a fundamental relationship that we ought not ignore. In this respect I note that Burgmann was prescient. Over 70 years ago in 1944, in the midst of the Second World War, Burgmann wrote *The Education of an Australian*. In the final chapter, “Wither Australia?”, Burgmann stated that the first priority for the nation was to take stock of its geographical place in the world. Noting that Australia was an island off the south-east corner of Asia, he declared bluntly: “We belong to the Orient, and in relation to it we must live and grow.”

b. The plight of refugees and asylum seekers. Here is a fundamental question about our humanity, values, and national identity. I have found no better reflection on this matter in relation Australia’s national conscience than that offered by the historian Alan Atkinson, provocatively entitled: “How Do We Live With Ourselves? The Australian National Conscience”. Atkinson notes that the refugee crisis comes at a time when Australia’s national conscience is “especially feeble and the way forward especially dim.” He finds the brutalities of the present moment a continuation of that longstanding brutality in
relation to the First People of this continent. Which leads me to name this matter as one deserving of renewed engagement by the churches.

c. Reconciliation with the First Peoples of Australia. Here too is a litmus test of our fundamental values. The particular complexities associated with this mean there are no simple solutions; only a willingness to find new forms of solidarity in a journey of suffering and hope. It is too easy to fall victim to rhetorical flourishes on such a profoundly weighty matter. There is a sense in which our life as a nation and its aspirations for the common good hang in the balance in relation to the way we as a country find a pathway to walk together with the First Peoples. I continue to be inspired by those people who give voice to a common journey on the unfolding reconciliation road. I think of Lowitja O’Donohue AC, an original visionary for the ACC&C as a place that might contribute to a reconciled people beyond injustice, a place to promote peace between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Fr Frank Brennan SJ, an associate of the ACC&C, offers moral, intellectual, and practical commitment to this same cause.

d. The challenge of climate change. Here is a moral imperative to seriously invest in renewable energy sources for the sake of the planet, humanity, and the gospel. Seriously, the clock is ticking on this life or death matter. There can no longer be simply world history; rather, there must be a planetary history that embraces and impacts upon world history. Earth system science in the age of the Anthropocene points to the disastrous impact of human habitation on the future of the planet and all life. It raises a fundamental existential and theological question about the nature of hope. Immanuel Kant’s third question haunts us as never before i.e. what may we hope for?

e. Inter-religious engagement and common action in the service of peace and social flourishing. According to the 2016 census, two-thirds of Australians indicate an adherence to a particular religion. It stands to reason that the public disdain and marginalisation of the deepest spiritual impulses of a people, expressed through particular faith traditions, is truly a great folly and hubris. Indeed, such attitudes threaten to undermine one of the few domains of
contemporary Australia life that can draw upon ancient wisdom in the pursuit of peace. Christians in Australia have a great responsibility and opportunity to work towards peace in society through joining with those of different religious traditions in a new engagement with the things that matter. Of course such engagements take place under two shadows: first, the shadow of the abuses revealed in the current Royal Commission into sexual abuse in the churches and other institutions; and second, the shadow of the cross which ought to cause followers of Christ to seek such fresh engagements in a spirit of humility.

f. The church’s welcome of gay and lesbian people. This matter is exceedingly controversial and generates strong views. It is a matter that is easily caught up in contemporary identity politics. And there are no ready-made, quick fix solutions. How might the churches together learn a better way beyond sharp extremes and political jockeying by various advocacy groups to the left or the right? Minimally the church needs to offer a fresh and generous gospel witness that recognises that we are all fellow travellers along the Emmaus Road. A common pilgrimage requires open and welcoming conversations marked by truthfulness, humility, and hope. I commend the recently published report of the Public Issues Commission of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, *Being the Body of Christ: conversations on same-sex relationships, marriage and the church.*

The above issues alone will necessarily have political implications regarding laws, policies, and redistribution of resources. They will provoke controversy as we seek the truth together. In this respect Burgmann’s final public words, broadcast on the ABC, are worth repeating: “My conviction is that nothing is worth believing if it is not ready to be subjected to repeated scrutiny. God does not want us to believe lies. Truth is shy and hard to woo, but she is very lovely and worth a life’s devotion.”

The purpose of Christian social engagement with the issues of the day is to discern where God’s light is shining, revealing darkness, and pointing to the horizon of the coming kingdom. Christian social engagement is an imperative of the Gospel of a meddlesome God. Accordingly, it is an imperative for Christian discipleship. And it is an imperative for the church if it desires a genuinely Christian future.
Endnotes


12. Tom Frame, “The Tragic Failure of the Burgmann Episcopate”, unpublished paper delivered at the Canberra and Goulburn Diocesan clergy conference, 2013. Frame concludes thus: “In my view, Bishop Burgmann started with an expansive vision of the kingdom of God which was eventually constrained to reflect the contours of the church’s self-interested outlook at a time when the parish church was enjoying unparalleled growth and expansion. He was in some respects a Gulliver among the Lilliputians.” For Frame it is essentially a problem of putting the church before the Kingdom.


26. Peter Hempenstall, “This Turbulent Priest: E. H. Burgmann during the Great Depression”, Australian Journal of Politics and History 27 3 (1981): 331. Burgmann is worth quoting in full. Speaking on matters of economics, property and class he states: “The churches have not yet become Christian and they have bound the Christ whom they name in the grave clothes of their tradition . . . the churches today unfortunately seem about as ready to rise to the demands of the Spirit of Christ as Judaism was in the days of his flesh.”
27. This is the title of the booklet to commemorate the twenty-six-year episcopacy of Burgmann. It was compiled by Ethnie Jeffreys and Ted Buckle, and is held in St Mark’s Library.
31. Hempenstall, Meddlesome Priest, 339.