



# NEW VISION

The Newsletter for Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church

Feb / March 2011

## Progressive Christianity: One Man's View

*by Lloyd Geering*

**D**uring the 20th century the world experienced more cultural and intellectual change than in the previous 19 centuries. The Christian culture which pervaded Europe for more than a thousand years looked at the world from inside the Bible. Our forbearers viewed reality through biblical spectacles. Indeed, when they drew their maps of the world, they placed the holy city of Jerusalem at the center. It seemed self-evident to all but the fool that the world had been created by God. Time was cut in two – BC and AD – by the coming of Jesus Christ.

Because of the transition to modernity, things are now the other way around; we look at the Bible from the world outside of it. What is more, we can look at Christianity itself from the world outside or what we call the secular world – a world best understood by modern empirical science.

Traditionalists in general, and fundamentalists in particular, refuse to acknowledge that anything of significance has changed. They still look at the world through biblical spectacles and continue to preach the time-honored Gospel of a God who sent his son to die on a cross that all may be saved. At the other extreme are the secularists, who see the church as an outmoded institution. Their attitude to Christianity covers a wide spectrum from outright rejection to a more positive but rather vague acceptance of some of its values. In Europe and Australasia this group has been growing at an accelerating rate.

In between these two extremes there is a third response. These people no lon-

ger feel comfortable with the Christian tradition in its classical form but believe the secularists are throwing the baby out with the bath water. They continue to draw inspiration from the Christian tradition but claim the freedom to practice their Christian allegiance in new ways – ways that are consistent with modern knowledge.

What is Progressive Christianity? If you will excuse the pun, it could be called ‘a work in progress’, for progressive Christianity to be true to itself, it will not only be always on the move but will contain wide diversity within it. As its name suggests, it does not hesitate to draw from the Christian past, but it is open-ended, seeks to move on and encourages creative initiative.

The three chief features of Progressive Christianity, as I see it, are these: First, it abandons the traditional image of God as a supernatural being who created the world and continues to control it. It acknowledges that the very concept of God was initially created by the ancient human mind and has undergone a long and varied history since. “God” can now be understood as a symbolic word. In the past it helped us to unify our world and it still refers to the highest values that make a claim upon us. That is why the New Testament says “God is love.”

Second, Progressive Christianity is more concerned with the historical Jesus of Nazareth than with the Christ mantle with which the early church clothed him. They transformed him into a divine, superhuman figure that was meaningful in the world as they saw it but is out of

place in the way we understand reality today. On the other hand, we can identify with, and listen to, the man Jesus who calls us to love our enemies.

Third, Progressive Christians see Christianity not as a set of beliefs but as a Way of life – a way characterized by love and concern for others. They see the Church, not as a rigid institution, exerting its authority from the top down, but as a fellowship of friends who inspire one another and give one another mutual support and encouragement in walking the Christian Way.

Stephen Batchelor, a Buddhist, wrote: “Buddhism has become for me a philosophy of action and responsibility. It provides a framework of values, ideas and practices that nurture my ability to create a path of life, to define myself as a person, to act, to take risks, to imagine things differently and to make art.”

But that is exactly how I see Christianity. For me Christianity provides a framework of values, ideas and practices that nurture our ability to create a meaningful path of life and define ourselves as persons. Valor and initiative are nurtured by the fellowship we experience and the support we give to one another, as together we seek to walk the way of Jesus.

*Lloyd Geering is Lecturer, St. Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, and Emeritus Professor of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*



## Catching Up

**H**ow many of you noticed that we have not published a NewVision since September? We are suffering from lack of resources – time, energy, and yes, money. So this will be the last edition for the foreseeable future. But we invite you to visit our webpage, [www.noevalleyministry.org](http://www.noevalleyministry.org), and hit our Blog. Marshal Cousins has set this up and will be happily revising it and writing news of the Ministry. This will serve as our “online newsletter” for the foreseeable future. It is really a splendid Blog (and not a bad website!)

### The Future

Our major news, of course, is our foreseeable future, which will begin on Ash Wednesday, March 9, with a 7 pm Ash Wednesday Service at St. Luke’s Hospital Chapel. We will celebrate our present space on Sunday, March 6, with a fun-filled Mardi Gras Festival, Communion, and Pastor’s Lunch. We will then begin Lent at St. Luke’s. Come and see, as we claim this new space for worship, on our way to claiming a renewed and revitalized building some 20 months hence.

The set-up will be different, but our deep commitment to worship and to community remain the same. When Deacons and Elders met last month, we stipulated our ongoing priorities as “kids, choir and coffee” – shorthand for a pledge to keep our kids and their families engaged and included; to maintain the quality of choir and music and worship; and to continue to foster community, through coffee hours and other ways to bond and care for ourselves. We identified two new priorities: re-evaluating our mission outreach (that is, will the hospital and our new neighborhood provide opportunities for service?); and upgrading our networks (not only Web and Blog, but Facebook and Yahoo groups, etc. We want to engage all the newest tools!). So you see, church life will not slow down!

Efforts continue on both the sale of the Parking Lot to the City of San Francisco and the creation of a tri-faith alliance, the Abrahamic House of Community. Chris Keene is the key player for our parking lot process, along with Bill Jackson and (to a lesser extent) myself. The tri-faith effort is led by Bill Jackson, along with Chris Keene and (to a lesser extent) myself. The members on the Tri-Faith Working Committee are Cindy Cake, Irene Kaufman, and Roy Seto. Jewish congregation Or Shalom continues to express an eagerness to pursue community and partnership. Several from that community will be at our final Sanchez Street service on March 6th. There is also interest in our three faith groups hosting some sort of service in honor of the 10th anniversary of 9/11 this coming Fall.

This is a lot for our church. It is providential that the Book of Matthew is the Gospel focus this year. How do we face change in our lives is the question that Matthew helps us to answer.

Knowing that our lives are not static, but dynamic, and that any successful life requires us to make changes along the way, some of them costly and potentially risky, Matthew tells us not to shrink from change but to enter into it.

### The Past

On New Year's Day I sat and reflected on the past year – in fact the past dozen years, as I have passed my 12-year anniversary with you. The feeling that rushed through me was gratitude to God, who gave us this mission over 25 ago and continues to sustain us. Amazing grace all around.

In many ways, 2010 was a difficult year. Our commitment to social justice is always to live out Christ's call for us to be his hands and feet in this world. As “social justice Christians,” we are not “America-first” Christians, but “Christ-first” Christians, and there is a difference. Reaching out and building bridges with those who are different, or “the other” is part of our mission. Yet polarization in national politics and within our PC(USA) are both paralyzing. “Love your enemy” is more challenging than ever, yet we are asked to remember that to others, we also are the enemy. My deepest hope is that we carry that with us, and keep alive and well our rush to mercy and our commitment to justice

The year has been difficult financially. Our building users began to vacate for transitional space last September, and our members continued to feel the crunch of job loss and financial downturn. That, combined with not really knowing what our expenses will be going forward, for whether meeting all pledges will be possible, make us uneasy. Still, we proceed in faith and trust in God’s providence. We actually end our year breaking even, however narrowly!

We pray that God helps us to understand our identity as Christians, to follow Christ into a world desperate for justice and peace, and to think critically about the issues we face as a church and a nation.

We invite everyone to come along with us, to keep in touch, to know that our arms remain open. Without friends, faith, and faith community, we simply cannot become the persons we want to become. Not over the long run anyway. As the African proverb says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

Blessings,

*Keene*

## Looking Ahead to the Abrahamic House of Community

by Irene Kaufman

**W**ith the start of 2011, Noe Valley Ministry is approaching the time to move out of our building to our interim home in the chapel at St. Luke's Hospital. When we return, we anticipate a beautifully remodeled space – and the beginning of sharing our building with two other faith communities, one Jewish and one Muslim. What will that mean in terms of space use? What are the customs and practices we want to understand, to ensure that all worshipers in our building feel respected? The most logical place to start is with worship schedules.

For observers of the Jewish faith, Shabbat, or the Sabbath, begins at sundown on Friday night, historically a time set aside from normal, daily activities and work, for rest and spiritual enrichment. Our partners will undoubtedly worship Friday nights and perhaps Saturday as well. In Jewish literature, poetry and music, Shabbat is described as a “bride” or “queen”. (In ancient times, setting aside a day of rest was an extraordinary, radical concept. Remember, leisure time was considered the exclusive right of the wealthy, not the working classes.) For a more tradi-

tional Shabbat, preparation begins at 2:00 or 3:00 pm on Friday – the house is cleaned, people get dressed up, and the table is set as if for the arrival of a special guest. The woman of the house lights the Shabbat candles and recites the blessing over them, traditionally no later than 18 minutes before sunset. Then the family attends a brief service. (You may have heard someone speak of going to “shul” – another word for synagogue – that refers to this traditional Friday evening service.) Services are held again on Saturday morning, and at the end of Shabbat, the Havdalah, or ritual of separation, is performed. This is the reciting of blessings over wine, spices and candles, and blessings regarding the division between the sacred and the secular, between the Sabbath and the working days.

In the Muslim tradition, one is to pray five times a day. If praying in a mosque, the faithful are to remove their shoes, to keep the sacred space clean, and to wash their hands, mouth, throat, nose, ears, arms up to the elbow and feet before coming in to pray. This symbolizes spiritual cleansing and purity in readiness for

coming before God. Prayers are to be spaced fairly evenly throughout the day, so that one is constantly reminded of God and given opportunities to seek guidance and forgiveness. These times are: after first light and before sunrise (Fajr); after the sun begins to decline from its zenith [after noon] (Duhr), between mid-afternoon and sunset (Asr), just after sunset (Maghrib) and at night (Isha). While services are held at the mosque every day, the most important service is on Friday at noon; known as Jumaa, this consists of a sermon and a prayer, and takes the place of Duhr on that day. In some mosques, the men and women pray separately, in others they pray together in the same room, and the rooms are very simple, as they use prayer rugs rather than chairs to sit/pray upon. At NVM, there will be a space appropriate for Muslim worship throughout the day, as well as time for Friday's longer service. Our plans include full "wudu" or washing facilities for both men and women.

We will offer more insight and information as the tri-faith alliance progresses.



2010 Wine Tasting Event. Photo courtesy Marshal Cousins.

## Ministry Uncorks on April 1st

What: 2nd Annual Noe Valley Uncorked Wine Event

When: Friday, April 1, 2011 from 6-9pm

Where: Noe Valley Ministry, 1021 Sanchez Street

Ticket prices: \$30 in advance (\$35 at the door)

*Come join us for the 2nd Annual Noe Valley Uncorked Wine Event on April 1, 2011, 6:00-9:00 pm at Noe Valley Ministry (1021 Sanchez Street). Sample over 20 wines, talk with the experts, nibble on tasty hors d'oeuvres, and order your favorite wines. Ticket \$30 in advance and \$35 at the door. This is an opportunity for one last nostalgic evening at the Ministry building before it closes for renovation. Proceeds benefit Noe Valley Ministry.*

Check out [www.noevalleyministry.org](http://www.noevalleyministry.org) for more details.

Noe Valley Ministry  
Presbyterian Church USA  
1021 Sanchez St.  
San Francisco, CA 94114

# NEWVISION

In March, our Worship Space will change, but not our worship itself. Deeming God worthy of praise and gratitude, we will continue to come together, reminding ourselves of the call to live fully and honestly in the manner of Jesus. Our time together unites us in Community and calls us into the presence of God. As we combine rejoicing and inspiration with humility and gratitude, as we bring faith seeking understanding through Word and message, we continue to be an authentic Community of Faith.

February Worship will highlight a progression of musical genres. March 6th will celebrate our final service in NVM before renovation begins; a Mardi Gras focus will include communion, jazz, liturgical dancer, and pastor's lunch. Ash Wednesday marks our first worship at St. Luke's Chapel, as we move into Lent. It will be an exciting adventure as we transition to a new experience. Come and see!

## Newsletter Staff & Contributors

Publisher ..... Keenan Kelsey  
Managing Editor ..... John Bird  
Contributors ..... Keenan Kelsey, Irene Kaufman,  
..... Lloyd Geering, Marshal Cousins  
Editor, proofreader ..... Irene Kaufman  
Photography ..... Marshal Cousins  
Printing, folding, mailing ..... Marshal Cousins

NOE VALLEY MINISTRY  
1021 Sanchez Street  
San Francisco, CA 94114

Pastor's office: 415/282-7798  
pastor@noevalleyministry.org

Administrative office: 415/282-2317  
Fax: 415/282-8526

email: office@noevalleyministry.org  
Website: www.noevalleyministry.org

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## Noe Valley Ministry now has a blog

There are two ways to access our blog. Go to the NVM website home page (noevalleyministry.org) and click on NVM blog. Or go directly to <http://officenvmsf.blogspot.com>.

This blog does not replace our website. It will have frequent posts of Ministry news and activities, plus images of the progress of our building renovation. Check our blog often!

*Marshal Cousins*