

Dunedin Sea of Faith says farewell in its current form

The Dunedin Sea of Faith group was started in 1989 by Ian and May Cairns, with encouragement from Lloyd Geering. Many who joined did so because they had read Lloyd Geering's books and, in some cases, those of Don Cupitt too. It was a vigorous group for over twenty years, bringing friendship, acceptance, release and relief to its members.

More recently our group has been getting smaller and, inevitably, older with a number of members less able to hear. One of our most able supporters - Don Feist - brought in a new tranche of members about ten years ago, with a 12-hour series for Dunedin U3A 'Beyond Theism'. Since his untimely death, and that of his wife Margaret some years later, we have found ourselves unable to bring new members into our group in sufficient numbers.

We have wondered whether the work of enquiring into a world without God, or having a 'safe place to say unsafe things', are not so urgent these days. Whatever the reasons, the Dunedin Sea of Faith Committee decided that we would no longer continue the group in its current form. There is a plan to have a 'house group', which could use a DVD as a discussion starter for each meeting.

We decided to celebrate Dunedin Sea of Faith's nearly thirty years by accepting Bruce and Marjorie Spittle's invitation to have a meal at their home. We had a very pleasant evening, with all our active members able to come and including much-respected and long-standing member Nora Calvert. After the meal we each spoke briefly about our time with Sea of Faith.

Lloyd Geering's influence has been significant from the beginning - his books, lectures, an early

seminar at First Church, as well as his presence and presentations at national conferences. Many have valued the space he set up - a place to express doubts, the freedom to think honestly, and to discuss the big issues in life without needing to be part of a belief system.

People have enjoyed the welcoming, friendly atmosphere of the group, a place that was accepting and without judgement. The discussions were often profound, allowing us to examine our own thoughts, and discover new things about ourselves in this place of trust.

Some members also belong to a church community. Several noted their relief that Sea of Faith has no commitments, no baggage, no dogma ('I believe'), a reduction in theism and no need for a personal god.

There were some disappointments. One person thought the word 'faith' in our title misrepresented Sea of Faith to the extent that people were put off even coming to see what we were about. Another has, for many years, been sad that Sea of Faith maintained itself as a 'talk fest' and didn't choose to respond more actively to the challenges we all face.

We have been grateful to stand on the shoulders of giants - our Sea of Faith founders, and many both nationally and locally. We remember with great fondness the people we have travelled with and who are no longer with us. We say 'Kia kaha' to our national body. Now we pass the Dunedin

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baton to another generation who will have their own questions to explore, and likely very different ways of doing so.

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What Next?

There are a few members who are thinking of continuing as a “house group” taking a monthly theme – maybe using some of the DVDs in the Sea of Faith library as discussion starters. It would not be fair to mention names here as discussions are in their infancy but Gretchen has agreed to be “go-between” for the next few months.

The hiring of a hall for meetings, obtaining food to stave off hunger pangs during the meeting, publishing the newsletter and maintaining the web site as well as keeping a meticulous track of the finances and ensuring bills are paid falls on fewer and fewer shoulders.

It is ironic that groups such as ours are finding difficulty in attracting new members since the present is full of key issues that need discussion and thought.

We are beset by articles in the papers and on TV about; climate change, fossil fuels, ethical investing, population issues, recycling, the advantages of a vegetarian diet (or even partial vegetarian – Sir Paul McCartney and his “Mondays without meat”), stem cell research, abortion, gene splicing, genetic engineering, euthanasia, children’s welfare, immigration, peace-making, religious tolerance, politics and much much more.

We don’t take these problems on our shoulders in the hope that we can solve any of them. We do need to be as well informed as possible about as much as we can to help us to understand how we fit in amongst it all.

Information, processed by discussion and more reading, can become knowledge, opinion and belief and thus help us to exist sanely in this complex world. When we make up our minds, we can live and celebrate life fully and be grateful for what we have – good friends in particular.

YouTube is a brilliant “place” to find talks by experts in dozens of fields. So you can do a YouTube search for lectures on Church History, Don Cupitt, Sir Lloyd Geering, The Dalai Lama, Bishop John Spong, Richard Holloway, Karen Armstrong, Stephen Dawkins, Stephen Fry, Yuval Harari, Jordan Peterson and hundreds more.

There will be enough there to stimulate an enquiring mind for five years or more.

However our good friend Don Feist always argued that Orthopraxy (what you do) is a better test of faith that Orthodoxy (what you say you believe). I hope I am remembering him accurately as he is not here to correct me if I have erred.

Don Cupitt started it all – here is a note from his Wikipedia entry...

In his writings Cupitt sometimes describes himself as Christian non-realist, by which he means that he follows certain spiritual practices and attempts to live by ethical standards traditionally associated with Christianity but without believing in the actual existence of the underlying metaphysical entities (such as "Christ" and "God"). He calls this way of being a non-realist Christian "solar living".

The series of BBC programmes which gave rise to the Sea of Faith are to be found in full on YouTube.

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