

Michael Morwood Interviews

PART ONE

Most 21st century Christians have grown up indoctrinated by a conventional religious experience that offers the assurance of having all the answers tied up in a little bow, just for the believing. Many still find this to be comforting, but a growing number are antsy. On the verge of becoming what Bishop Spong calls “church alumni/ae,” they know too much. Archaeology, astrophysics, and any number of other scientific disciplines continue to make discoveries that compel us to re-evaluate our true place in the universe – and we are right to be feeling increasingly humble.

So, many are feeling stuck. Even as deeply religious questions of origins and purpose continue to persist, the Bible seems to be more of a hindrance than a help. Rational thinkers know that the Bible and much of what people consider to be “core doctrines” of Christianity reflect the fanciful notions of a pre-scientific mindset. Cosmologists have shown without a shadow-of-a-doubt that the ancient notion of a three-tiered earth-centric cosmos is just a quaint throw-back to the fertile imaginations of primitive thinkers.

The question is, can religion as a whole adapt to a new template? A new reality? A brush with mystery? Can religion reflect modern scientific discoveries, honor the mysteries of the universe, and dump the requirement of maintaining allegiance to primitive claims and beliefs?

As we face this latest decisive moment in our collective human experience, champions of just such a new model are emerging – and one of the most articulate is Australian author Michael Morwood.

With over 40 years' experience as a sought-after retreat leader and educator, Morwood is well known around the world. Bishop John Shelby Spong writes: "Michael Morwood...is raising the right and obvious questions that all Christians must face. He provides fresh and perceptive possibilities for a modern and relevant faith." With a dozen books to his name (two of which were banned before he resigned from the Catholic priesthood), Morwood brings an extensive background in spirituality to what he sees as the urgent need to reshape Christian thinking for a new millennium.

What follows in interview form is the first of several columns inspired by a presentation Morwood offered at the Common Dreams Conference in Brisbane, Queensland, in 2016. In it, he offers a re-visioning of who Jesus was, new perspectives on prayer and worship (from a non-theistic perspective), and thoughts on whether our conventional ideas of religion have any real value anymore.

Felten: What are some of the new discoveries that fire your imagination in formulating a new template for religion?

Morwood: In February of 2016, Australian scientists, using a radio telescope at the Parkes Observatory in western New South Wales discovered a cluster of over 800 hidden galaxies behind the Milky Way – a third of which had never been seen before. The report noted that our galaxy is being drawn to this cluster at a speed of two million kilometers an hour. Two million kilometers an hour!! Hold that in mind for a moment.

Scientists estimate that most galaxies contain about 100 billion stars – and how

many galaxies in our universe? The current estimate is between 100 and 200

billion. That's at least 100 billion galaxies each with 100 billion stars all hurtling through space at unimaginable speeds.

Let's also hold in mind that galaxies like the Milky Way probably have about 17 billion earth size planets.

Felten: I'm feeling pretty humble.

Morwood: Well, in the grand schema of galaxies, stars and planets, planet Earth rates in comparison with it all as little more than what a speck of dust is to hundreds of millions of planets. A speck of dust.

If this speck of dust and everything on it were to disappear, the rest of the universe would not blink.

Felten: That seems dark...

Morwood: Maybe not as dark as the fact that all the known matter in the universe – all those galaxies, stars and planets – make up less than 6% of the universe's composition. "Dark matter" and "dark energy" make up the other 94%. These realities are called "dark" because scientists can deduce that they exist, but they can't detect them.

Felten: So, here we are on this speck of dust surrounded by the mystery of indefinable "dark" matter and energy – where does that leave our ideas of "God"?

Morwood: Well, it's not only any understanding of "God" that becomes problematic within this scientific data. Christians now have quite a list of topics that have become problematic against such a background: revelation, Jesus, salvation, worship, prayer, sacraments. At the very heart of the "Christ" religion now looms the problematic

question— how can we justify elevating a Jewish prophet to becoming the Christian notion of “the Christ”, the triumphant cosmic figure way out in front of us, God-himself, leading creation to its glorious fulfillment? In the light of what we know today it seems too grandiose, too far ahead of ourselves in religious thinking to keep maintaining that the “Christ” is the be all and end all of the universe’s existence.

Felten: What’s the likelihood that the institutional church will be able to adapt to these new realities?

Morwood: Unlikely. All institutional Christian understanding of these supposedly religious essentials were shaped in a worldview that was pre-scientific, ignorant, limited, and now extremely outdated. Religion based on that worldview is like trying to use a floppy disc in your new Mac.

Felten: OK, then considering your background in adult faith formation, what hope can you offer those of us who are trying to upgrade our theological or spiritual Operating Systems?

Morwood: In any process of adult faith formation, I think there are three key questions that need to be raised and answered for each concept being considered:

1. What are you asking me to imagine?
2. Where did that image come from?
3. How does that image or picture of reality fit with what I know of reality today?

Felten: OK, Let’s start off with something easy. How about the idea of “God”?

Morwood: If you’re asking me to imagine “God,” I’d have to simply say that I don’t know what “God” is. No one does, really. I’m one of many people who don’t even like to use the word “God” anymore

because it is so misleading and so tied to outdated ideas about the universe and earth's place in the universe.

Our understandings from scripture, creeds, doctrine and liturgy is of a personal being essentially located "somewhere else." The prayers we were taught and the prayers commonly used in Christian liturgy presume the notion of a heavenly deity who demands to be worshipped, who listens in, who sometimes responds, and who is in control of everything that happens. These ideas are not only cemented into our imaginations, but as a picture of reality, are really beyond questioning. But those floppy disc theologies just don't fit with the operating system we have on hand today.

Our pointers to this greatest of mysteries need to be expanded beyond the biblical and doctrinal and liturgical and prayerful notions of a personal deity. Our

pointers may best be found in notions such as "ground of all being," or "source

and sustainer of all that exists," and in universal realities such as energy and

consciousness. In other words, we need to take seriously that this mystery is

indeed everywhere.

The mind-blowing, ever-expanding knowledge we have about the age and size of this universe compels us to have a mind-blowing and expansive notion of whatever we think "God" might be. At the very least we should acknowledge that we are not dealing with a reality that can disconnect from our tiny piece of the cosmos, intervene from somewhere above us, and play mind-games with the human species.

Felten: What kind of precedent do we have for this kind of “reboot” in our tradition?

Morwood: There’s a long-established religious belief that mystery is everywhere. Today’s scientific discoveries are pointers that re-enforce ideas expressed as long ago as the 4th century. Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

“For when one considers the universe, can anyone be so simple-minded as not to believe that the Divine is present in everything, pervading, embracing, and penetrating it?”

As you know, a significant feature in Christian tradition has been a sharp divide between the Mystics and what we’ll call “institutional” theologians. On the one hand you have the Mystics who, in keeping with the above quote, speak the language of presence, relationship and intimacy.

On the other hand, we’ve had the institutional theologians focusing on disconnection and the need for “someone” with whom we can reconnect. Turning that “someone” into a God and seeking forgiveness for whatever human fault caused the separation in the first place has become an obsession – and reconnection and renewed friendship with a heavenly God is the only achievement worth pursuing.

The time for such theological thinking is over. It makes no sense any more. It’s

time to state this publicly, clearly and unapologetically. It is time to stop

defending nonsensical images and to move on to the challenges that face us as

we wrestle with the pointers we have today – pointers to a template that reflect the greatest of all mysteries.

PART TWO

David Felten: It seems to me that one of the most persistent “proofs” people use to add credibility to their beliefs is the notion that God has personally communicated certain “truths” to human beings through some sort of direct – but external — revelation.

Michael Morwood: Yes, since the beginning, Christians have been expected to embrace a picture of reality that imagines an external deity who, although disconnected from humanity, manages to manipulate people and circumstances to further his own devices. God “chose” the Hebrew people to be his “chosen people” to fulfill his plans on earth. But when they failed, God sent his son from heaven to reveal God to us and to open the way to heaven for us.

For many Christians, an essential aspect of the revelatory process is the idea that God himself chose particular people to reveal his thinking and his opinions on a wide range of topics through “sacred texts” – and almost thirty years after the supposed reforms of Vatican II, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) continued to promote the same fanciful idea:

“To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.” (#106)

The only way that image of reality has any credibility is when we are locked into imagining a distant male deity intervening from the heavens.

Felten: Then how is wisdom or insight conveyed to humanity in this new template for religion?

Morwood: If we believe that what we're dealing with today is a mystery present and operative throughout the whole universe, then our understanding of "revelation" and "inspiration" changes quite dramatically — and has monumental consequences.

Rather than coming from elsewhere, the revelation of the great mystery we are dealing with comes from the ground up, from what is all around us. The great mystery we are trying to comprehend is embedded in everything that exists. Everything that exists gives expression to it.

Felten: So we move from our fixation on the peoples, texts, and stories of, say, the last 3,000 years, to a perspective that embraces the whole of creation?

Morwood: Just think about it: on this small planet in a cosmic nowhere, this mystery has been given earthly expression for four-and-a-half billion years — and we can marvel at what is possible when the conditions are just right: life in abundance.

Felten: And the human species is a product of this abundance of life.

Morwood: Yes! And in telling the contemporary story of the emergence of the human species, the significant theological shift is to move from imagining an external deity directing that emergence to taking seriously and imagining this creative, energizing, mysterious reality being embedded within human beings — just as it is in everything that exists.

The big mistake in theological thinking has been to misplace the grounding of reality in the heavens in the form of gods. Then human "middle-management" needed to be developed to deal with the gods.

Case in point is the Hebrew people developing the notion of one almighty deity. This was a time when people thought gods ruled the world from above. So within this framework, they developed the most inspiring religious understanding of themselves they could imagine: a people selected by this God to create “God’s rule” on earth. This vision embodied their highest aspirations, a society characterized by justice, compassion and peace.

However, along with the development of their structured, institutional religion came the distractions of power, political influence, wealth, and straying from the goals set before them. So prophetic voices of great wisdom and insight were raised to keep this religion on track.

Inevitably, these voices were couched in the religious thinking of the times. God was perceived to be a heavenly deity who intervened in human affairs and made his thoughts known through human messengers. So, the insights of many a wise human being is therefore attributed to “God” and we end up reading and hearing: “This is what the Lord God says...” “This is that God wants...”.

Felten: And this is another element of what you referred to earlier as the “floppy disc version”?

Morwood: Yes, and if we’re to make sense of this great wisdom and insight in the 21st century, what we need is a whole new operating system. These ancient insights and wisdom are real and not to be cast aside. But they need to be understood and appreciated as being a by-product of this mystery embedded in human speakers and writers, not coming from outside or coming down to them from “heaven.”

This mystery, this source of this wisdom – call it “GOD” if you wish – is embedded in humans.

While Amos and Hosea and Isaiah and Ruth and Naomi were giving expression to this great mystery in human words and actions, the same was happening all around the world in all peoples, in all cultures, and in all places. Men and women gave human expression the best they could to this presence and power and mystery within them.

While Jeremiah was speaking and acting and allowing this embedded reality to have its way in and through him, the same phenomenon was happening in the aboriginal people who lived throughout what is now Australia. Revelation is no longer a matter of one people hearing and giving human expression to this "GOD" reality. It is a matter of acknowledging this reality everywhere, in all people, at all times, and putting an end to exclusive institutional or cultural claims to access this mystery.

Felten: You mentioned earlier that changes to our understanding of "revelation" and "inspiration" would have monumental consequences. Can you elaborate?

Morwood: Briefly, here are just four consequences:

First, most Christians are familiar with the response to Scripture readings, "This is the Word of the Lord." Going forward, this "Word of the Lord" language has to be explicitly understood as metaphor or figurative language – and as such has to be expanded to include all human wisdom.

Secondly, let's pull Paul back somewhat. He was a first century Jewish theologian. Let's treat his writings in the same way we would explore the writings of any theologian of any religion. The writings of Paul have to lose their mystique as the never-to-be-questioned "Word of the Lord." In other words, stop trying to end all discussion about the resurrection, about "the Christ", about the end times, about the sending

of God's Spirit from heaven, about God's eternal plan of salvation, about justification, about God's wrath, and about salvation with proof-texting from Paul

Three. I believe the "Christ" religion – in its many official formats – is generally more concerned with defending ideas that protect and preserve its institutional identity than it is with open and honest theological thinking. It closes its thinking to new understandings of revelation because new understandings may call into question its institutional identity claims – claims that depend on the understanding that God is disconnected from humanity and the connection can only be restored through one particular interpretation of "Christ."

So, for number four, I believe that the day is over when a religion can put revelation in a box and say, "No more."

Felten: So being aware of the "everywhere" nature of revelation opens up the possibility that everything is cause for wonder – even the pedestrian task of being human.

Morwood: Today we can tell the story of our beginnings in a wonderfully dramatic way, borne out of the explosion of a giant star four-and-a-half billion years ago. From the stardust of that explosion, every atom in our bodies began a long journey, through transformation after transformation, to who and what we are today. There are atoms in our bodies that were once in dinosaurs, carbon atoms that were once in the Buddha, in Jesus, in Constantine.

Going forward, this scientific story will be foundational for religious thinking and imagination for future generations.

Felten: So what does this scientific story say about being human? What does this new template for religion say about the nature of our humanity?

Morwood: We are stardust. We are stardust become human. We are a life-form that gives the universe a way to reflect on itself. Each one of us has the gift of a lifetime to give human expression to whatever drives the universe and the evolutionary process that drives the development of life on earth – but not without some urgency. We only have one chance to do this, just one lifetime.

Hopefully, religious thinking will use and build on the scientific story of our beginnings and come to the inevitable conclusion of, “Wow, there’s another, even more astonishing, dimension to the human story.” To be human is to give human expression to the great mystery that sustains and holds everything in existence. We all give this great mystery – call it “GOD” if you will – a way of coming to human expression.

Felten: Ooooh. I can think of a lot of conventional Christians who would object to this idea. They’d say, “Jesus was the only human expression of God!”

Morwood: OK, so let’s tell an updated story of Jesus, one that reflects the scientific story and an understanding of the world in which we actually live (instead of clinging to the institutional Christology of the creeds). Instead of telling the story about Jesus as if God had disconnected from humanity and withdrawn friendship and forgiveness, and that Jesus alone had “the Spirit of the Lord” within him, and that the Spirit of God was waiting for something momentous to happen on earth before descending onto selected humans, let’s tell a story of this great mystery, of “GOD,” being embedded in all humans.

And since this great mystery is truly in every person, we would expect its presence to be revealed among all people. It would surface in the creativity of gifted men and women the way Mozart gave expression

to music. Wasn't his brilliance an expression of this great mystery in the human species?

Likewise with Jesus and his religious insight. In the language of his religion and time he was able to say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," as he knew it had been in the prophets before him. Jesus looked around and saw his reality dominated by violence, military power, greed, fear and oppression. With this Spirit in him and knowing that the dream of his religion was to create God's rule on earth, he must have wondered, "Is this the best we can do?"

Knowing that the ideal behind the Torah was to make people God-conscious in their everyday activities, Jesus must have wondered how he could be so God-conscious and so many people around him were not. How come people couldn't see and experience what he saw and experienced? How could this dream of "God's rule or kingdom" be realized in the reality he encountered?

In the long term, the only option with any hope was to go to the populace, the "crowd," and try to help them become aware of the "Spirit of the Lord" in them. He did this by addressing their fear of God and their sense of distance from God. He wanted to affirm a presence, a power in them. His task was to convince people that there was more to who they were than they realized. He wanted to empower them to take responsibility for making the world a better place.

The way Jesus saw it, there was nothing more urgent than for people to grasp and work with the Spirit already within them. It may be like a small seed, but it had to start somewhere. He was driven by this dream and the task it presented.

I doubt that Jesus ever thought he would see his dream realized in his lifetime. Human experience tells us that it can take decades for

significant religious and social change to take place. I think Jesus worked on the "Go home and think about this" principle of educating people as he told parables and gave clear teaching on how God's rule could be implemented. I think Jesus was looking well ahead to what could be in place when the Roman Empire ended and people began looking for a more satisfying way of life.

Felten: But I can hear well-meaning traditional Christians asking, "What about Jesus suffering and dying to save me from the "wrath to come"?"

Morwood: There is nothing in Jesus' preaching about a God whose forgiveness was conditional on some dramatic human event. There is nothing about a God disconnected from people. There is no concern whatever about saving people from God's "wrath" or getting to heaven.

There is nothing about Jesus needing to be anointed by God in heaven to become the central figure in a cosmic story about salvation and God directing the universe to its final conclusion with this heavenly "Christ" as the pinnacle of creation.

The Jesus we know in the synoptic gospels focused on this world, the desperate need for people to work together to make it a better place, and a Way this could be accomplished, despite the world being organized in a way that blocked the "kingdom of God" from being realized. And for attempting to empower people so they might question and challenge the religious, social, and political status quo, he paid the price.

The future for any group that gathers around the Jesus' story has to return to and focus on these basic issues if its members are, in any true sense, to be called followers of Jesus.

David Felten: We've moved away from using the word "worship" in our local faith community, opting for words like "celebration" or "gathering" instead. The concept of "worship" has so much baggage: all those ancient formalities and royal protocols that don't fit post-Enlightenment ways of thinking – yet people are somehow loathe to give it up.

Michael Morwood: Personally, I would stop using the word "worship," too. The notion of "worship" belongs to an old paradigm, an outdated template for religion.

I was in Canada not long ago conducting a weekend for a progressive United Church community. The audience was very on-side with what I presented. At the end of the weekend, I asked some of the community leaders, "Why, with such a progressive community, do you have the large 'WORSHIP HERE 10:00 am SUNDAY' sign outside the church?" I was met with puzzled looks, as if to say, "Why wouldn't we have this sign?"

So I asked some questions:

- Worship whom?
- For what reason?
- What do you imagine is at the other end of your worship? A deity taking notice? A deity taking some delight in homage being paid?
- Is your Sunday gathering for God's sake?
- Where did this imagination come from?

I'd ask the same questions regarding "the Mass" and what Catholics imagine "Mass" is all about (but I don't get invitations to Roman Catholic parishes these days!).

Overall, I prefer to use words like "liturgy" or "service" for a new template. The roots of the word "liturgy" (leit, people; ergon, work),

means the “work of the people.” For me, this understanding of liturgy expands beyond ritual to mean participation in a sacred or divine action.

David Felten: So what’s the “work of the people” and the “divine action” you have in mind?

Michael Morwood: I think our primary task is to gather around the story of Jesus and seek to understand its full implications for all human interactions. Our challenge is to let it reveal to us the truth of who we are, to challenge us to commit ourselves to being the best possible human expressions of the Great Mystery, and to do this as faithfully and as courageously as Jesus did.

And none of this has anything to do with reception of a sacred object, with a priesthood with special powers, or being “fed” at an altar — it certainly has nothing to do with Jesus shedding his blood for the sins of the world. It has nothing to do with singing songs to or addressing prayers to a listening deity.

What it does include is:

- Remembrance of Jesus and of others who shared his vision
- Awareness of the presence/power within us
- Commitment to working for a better world.

David Felten: So, what about the songs we sing and our liturgical prayers? What about the efficacy of the prayers we offer in our faith-sharing groups?

Michael Morwood: What are we being asked to imagine when we ask God to listen? When we thank God? When we address God with personal pronouns? We know where this imagination comes from. The question is, how does this image resonate once the notion of a “God in the heavens” has been abandoned?

By all means, let us sing hymns and address prayers to “God” that suggest this

divine “being” is listening in and taking note. But, let us do so mindful that whatever words we use are metaphor and poetry. They’re not to be taken literally, but as a means of giving expression to longing, pain, gratitude, joy – all those movements our minds and hearts struggle to convey otherwise.

Then let us embrace one of the key challenges that faces us today: to shape

prayers (the hymns may take a lot longer!) that affirm a “presence” within and

among us. We need a growing collection of metaphors and images that help develop our awareness that this “presence” is not only here with us in the ordinariness of our everyday lives but challenges us to live out the best possible human expression of this “Great Mystery.”

David Felten: For as long as I can remember, one of my mentors, Bill Nelson, has advocated that we simply stop using the word “God” altogether. We need images that are free from so many centuries of the theistic and human-centric God that is “out there” somewhere.

Michael Morwood: Exactly! In practice, stop addressing prayers to “God.” Just stop doing it. If you still practice a traditional style of spoken prayer, all it takes is the determination to not begin as if you’re speaking to a theistic God. Try it and see what happens! I resolved to do this 15 years ago. It resulted in my book, *Praying a New Story* which *Spirituality & Practice* included in its list of “Best Spiritual Books” of 2004.

With regard to their own private prayer, many people ask me, "If I let go of the

idea of praying to "God," how do I pray now?"

One way I think about it is remembering a Syrian monk known as "the golden speaker." St John Damascene was born and raised in Damascus in the early 8th century, but he's given the church words that have been carried down through the centuries: "Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God."

Today, if we substitute "great mystery" or "power" or other similar concepts for the word "God," the definition still holds – understanding it to mean raising our minds and hearts to a presence here, all around us; in the depths of our being. So a key concept for any prayer becomes "awareness." The goal of my personal prayer is to deepen my awareness, to be conscious of the reality that I embody this "great mystery" in human form.

It's also important to acknowledge that my personal prayer is not for God's sake. It is for my sake, it is meant to change me. Someone recently asked me, "Can prayer change the world?" and I said, "Of course! If prayer is intended to change us, then we can change the world." Otherwise we become trapped in the religious cop-out version of prayer: "Let's leave the fate of the world in God's hands."

I think Jesus had the same conviction about personal prayer. It's what motivated

his ministry to "the crowd." He wanted people to become aware of the power and

the presence within them and use it to change the world. That was his dream.

What a pity that this fundamental stance of Jesus has been buried beneath a layer of prayer asking God to “deliver us from evil.” That’s not God’s task; it’s our task.

David Felten: Well that should give the proponents of conventional Christianity heartburn. The Church has thrived for centuries convincing people that they are but loathsome sinners and depraved worms, incapable of any good without Jesus vouching for them. It sounds like your new paradigm puts some pretty high expectations on us lowly humans.

Michael Morwood: The major shift in my theological thinking and prayer life in the past 25 years has stemmed from a growing – and a completely new – appreciation of what it means to be human. Much of my appreciation is grounded in the scientific story of our origins in stardust and the four billion years of atoms undergoing transformation after transformation until the 60 trillion atoms that are Michael Morwood enable me tell the story of who and what we really are.

Now that’s a truly remarkable story. But what I find just as remarkable is to have discovered that throughout human history the other side of this story – without the great scientific story we have today to back it up – has made itself known. Call it “enlightenment”; call it whatever you will, but there has been this constant awareness, insight, revelation – in both religious and non-religious people – of an awareness of a power, an awesome reality beyond our imagination, within and among us, a presence that binds together everyone and everything.

Rumi, the great Muslim scholar, teacher, and poet said it well 800 years ago,

*“You are the fearless guardian of Divine Light,
so come, return to the root of the root of your own soul...”*

*“Why are you so enchanted by this world
when a mine of gold lies within you?
Open your eyes and come,
return to the root of the root of your own soul.”*

Here is the proper focus for religion, today and in the future. Here is where religion can get beyond dogmatism, thought control, the disregard for common decency, and claims of exclusive access to the divine. Jesus is not alone in urging men and women to “return to the root of the root of your own soul” and use what is discovered there to create a profoundly better human community.

And here is why the “Christ” religion needs to change its thinking about Jesus so dramatically: Jesus is not and was not a god-figure essentially different from the rest of us because only he could gain access to God’s dwelling place. Rather, he presents a movement, a presence, a reality – a great mystery – that is within every woman, man, and child. That is the good news that needs to be proclaimed and acted upon.

David Felten: So what’s next? Can the Church – can we – actually change our thinking?

Michael Morwood: Thirty years ago I wrote that if I were to recommend one book for Catholics to read, it would be Karl Rahner’s *The Shape of the Church to Come*, written in 1974. Rahner is regarded as one of the greatest Roman Catholic theologians of the 20th century – and while much of his writing is too academic for the people I had in mind, this book is a gem from such an academic.

Rahner wrote:

“Our present situation is one of transition ... to a Church made up of those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach

a personally clear and explicitly responsible decision of faith. This will be the Church of the future or there will be no Church at all."

"It seems to me that the courage to abandon positions no longer tenable means asking modestly, realistically, and insistently, whether it is always possible to take with us on this march in to the Church's future all the fine fellows whose out of date mentality is opposed to a march into an unknown future ... we shall also estrange, shock, and scandalize not a few who feel at home only in the Church as they have been accustomed to see it in the past."

And, he writes,

"If we are honest we must admit that we are to a terrifying extent a spiritually lifeless Church."

Overall, Rahner lamented the failure of the Church to address the life experience and questions of the faithful. And along with this failure, he said we fail to proclaim Jesus "vigorously." We neglect, he wrote, to start with "the experience of Jesus" and we talk about Jesus and God "without any real vitality."

Rahner's words inspired me 30 years ago when I was naive enough to think that

institutional Roman Catholicism could and would change. The ensuing 30 years

have taken me on a journey I could never have envisioned – not in my wildest

dreams! I'm not so naive now, but his words still inspire me to work for a more relevant, dynamic, realistic faith or spirituality, faithful to what Jesus really

believed and was ready to die for.

Theologically, I think we're living through the greatest theological challenges the "Christ" religion has ever experienced: the old template, used for the past two thousand years, is hopelessly outdated.

At the same time, I believe this new template offers a way ahead for humanity – the opportunity for vitality, for engagement with peoples' lives and questions, for engagement with the exciting scientific knowledge we have on hand, for wonder and appreciation for being human, and a way to bring the message of Jesus – and other men and women of spiritual insight – to a world that is in desperate need of a new template to heal the harm and divisions caused by religion.

I love working with this new template. It has proven to generate just the kind of excitement and challenge that opens up the possibilities and dreams that a vital future demands of us.

— Rev. David Felten with Michael Morwood