

About this Journal

Editorial

We are privileged to be presenting two issues of *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* this year. This Issue 7, like Issue 6, has come out of a conference and is edited by Robert (Bob) Dixon, whose guest editorial follows. I'm excited that such conferences are being represented in our journal. It not only exposes our readers to a wide range of topics in the broad field of contemporary ministry but also opens us up to a wider range of perspectives than we might otherwise publish. Hopefully this will stir up more thinking and many conversations: as you'll see in Issue 8, that has already happened from our first special issue. So let me introduce our guest editor.

Robert (Bob) Dixon was the Foundation Director of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office (now the National Centre for Pastoral Research) from 1996 to 2016. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Divinity and a former Honorary Professor of Australian Catholic University. In 2022 he was made a Life Member of the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania (APTO). He is the author or co-author of numerous publications and reports about the demography of the Australian Catholic population and aspects of Catholic belief and practice. Bob has a PhD in sociology from Monash University as well as degrees in science, theology and education.

Jon Newton

Guest Editorial

Healing is at the core of the mission of practical theology. How can churches contribute to bringing about healing in our troubled world? A prior question: *can* churches contribute to bringing about healing in our troubled world? This issue of the journal contains six articles that, in a broad range of ways, look at the need for healing in church and society and ask how well the churches and their ministers are equipped to offer healing to others and to themselves.

The six articles all began life as papers presented at the December 2020 online conference of the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania (APTO). Originally scheduled to take place in Melbourne in May of that year, the conference was initially postponed because of COVID-19 and eventually held as a fully online conference, featuring three keynote addresses and 47 presentations by APTO members and other academics, graduate students and ministry practitioners. In addition to these six articles, another 14 papers from the conference are being published by Coventry Press as Robert Dixon and Mary Eastham (Eds.), *Encountering God: Practical Theology and the Mission to Heal*, the third volume in the *Explorations in Practical Theology* series.

All of these articles were written in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; indeed, the APTO online conference where they were all initially presented was an early and successful effort at presenting an entire conference online, at a time when we were all still getting accustomed to using Zoom for conference presentations. Furthermore, all of them, with the exception of the paper by Philip Hughes, which is based on data from a 2018 survey, consider the impact of the pandemic on individuals, Christian ministers and ministries, or the wider society.

In this respect, then, **Philip Hughes** provides a baseline for the pre-COVID levels of Australian levels of confidence in the churches. He points out that, in 2018, only 11 per cent of Australia's adult population said they had a great deal of or complete confidence in the churches and religious organisations, compared to 22 per cent just nine years earlier, and asks how effective the churches can be in their ministry in the face of such lack of confidence. His analysis of data from the 2018 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes suggests that confidence in the churches will not be regained unless the churches can overcome the common perceptions that religious organisations are too powerful, that they contribute more to violence than to peace,

and that religious people are intolerant when it comes to matters such as gender equity and gender identity. Have Australians' attitude to the churches changed during the pandemic? We won't know that until the next comparable survey is held, but the remaining papers in this issue perhaps point to places where we might look for hints of change.

In his article, **Stephen Beaumont** notes the numerous challenges created by the pandemic, including the provision of pastoral care and support in a time of social distancing and isolation. While, in his view, these pandemic times have not resulted in much in the way of innovative pastoral care methods and models other than the increased use of technology, he argues that pastoral care can borrow the concept of "greenspacing" from urban ecology and apply it to the diverse practices of eco-spirituality, particularly in the form of walk-and-talk therapy, a practice he has himself adopted for use with clients.

Chaplaincy in all sorts of contexts – educational, industrial, the defence forces, sporting clubs and so on – is another means by which spiritual and emotional support can be offered to Australians, and was particularly pertinent during the time of significant social crisis caused by the pandemic. There was a time when we all thought we knew what a chaplain was, but now the concept of chaplaincy, what it entails and who can do it is confused and contested. In their paper, **Des Cahill and Susan Ennis** examine the state of contemporary chaplaincy in Australia, noting that chaplaincy in multifaith and secular Australia appears to be at the crossroads, with mainstream churches gradually withdrawing from chaplaincy services even while the need for spiritual care services continues to expand. They discuss some of the challenges facing chaplaincy, including chaplaincy training and pluralisation and integration of faiths other than Christian, in relation to an underlying theological framework based around a ministry of presence, professionalism in institutional settings, and pastoral outreach and social care in multifaith contexts.

If the pandemic created problems in the provision of pastoral and spiritual care, it also created difficulties for those who provide pastoral and spiritual care, specifically clergy, counsellors, chaplains and other ministry professionals. As agents of the churches' mission to heal, they too need access to psychological and spiritual resources while also offering healing to others. **Maureen Miner and Dion Khlentzos** argue in their article that a vital resource both for Christian healers and for those in

need of healing is secure attachment to God. This is particularly true in the context of the pandemic when lockdowns and other restrictions on our normal personal interactions have strained human attachment relationships. They use both the literature on attachment to God and insights from Trinitarian theology to suggest ways in which churches can help their healers maintain secure attachment to God and thus resource them for their challenging but vital work.

Rev Associate Professor Darrel Jackson, who spent much of the first three decades of his life living on the Isle of Man, provides an interesting case study that takes us beyond Oceania to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on undocumented migrants and refugees entering the European Union. He notes that, while European churches play an active role in refugee advocacy and welfare, fostering processes of welcome and integration, there has been an increasing tendency, due at least partly to COVID-19, to prioritise the claims of the nation state above all other obligations, including those of international law or any sense of moral or ethical obligation. His article contrasts this approach with a constructive diaspora theology that is fit for purpose within the context of the European Union and its member states.

The final article, by freelance liturgical artist **Jenny Close**, reminds us of the importance of ritual in relation to the Christian mission to heal, and the problems encountered in this respect when the COVID-19 pandemic severely limited opportunities for communal ritual. Drawing on the theology of aesthetics and the practice of liturgy, and recognising the limitations of dualistic thinking, she explores seeming opposites such as illness/wellness, breaking/healing, absence/presence, celebration/lament and praise/reproach in terms of relationships rather than as mutually exclusive opposites. Her article provides an insightful conclusion to the collection.

In accordance with the usual standards of this journal, all the articles in this issue have been double-blind reviewed.

Robert Dixon.