

# Editorial

In 1987, I attended my first conference on Asian women's theology in Singapore.

Since then I have been enriched by a number of workshops and conferences in which I have learned more about Asian women's theology and the challenges that it poses to middle-class, "first world" feminist theology. I hope that with this edition of *In God's Image*, Australian women might make a contribution to Asian women's theology.

First, let me offer a little basic information about Australia. It has a population of only 17 million people, most of whom live in cities. The land is about the same size as the USA., but supports a much smaller population because Australia has large areas of desert or limited fertility. Most of the population live in the fertile strip of land along the south eastern coasts. While Australia has high average economic output per capita, a significant minority of people are poor, especially the one million unemployed and their families. About half of all women are in paid employment, many working part time.

Australia has three main population groups: the Indigenous people (Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders), now about 1.5% of the population; the Anglo-Saxon. English speaking population, who began to arrive here as colonists in 1788, and who are now the dominant culture, and a range of other ethnic groups, who have mainly come in the last fifty years, and who between them speak over a hundred languages and represent every continent.

The four main Christian traditions in Australia are Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox (several) and Uniting Church, but there are also several smaller churches. Jewish and Muslim people constitute significant minority religions. The articles in this collection have been chosen to represent a range of Australian women's experiences. The cover painting is by artist Margaret Ackland. The painting of the Last Supper, which includes women and children, was commissioned by the Uniting Church in Australia, as Muriel Porter explains in her review of *A place at the table*. The original is a large painting in acrylic on canvas.

Vicki Balabanski's bible studies were first presented at a national church conference for women early this year, *Women remembering the future*. In addition, she offers a liturgy based on one of those studies. The studies have not been re-written for publication, since it seemed important to give readers as close an experience of the original presentation as possible.

The most vulnerable, exploited and disadvantaged women in Australia are Indigenous women, who are probably also the strongest women in many ways. Australia's whole economy is based on the colonists having taken the land from Indigenous people. This has had devastating effects on both their economic and cultural survival. The articles by Anne Pattel Gray and Jean Pattel tell part of the story. There is also an article by Jenny Tymms, a non-Indigenous woman who looks at the most controversial issue in Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations at the moment: native title to land. She gives insight into the way the colonisers' law has responded in the past to Indigenous assertions that they own the land, and how the law has recently been re-interpreted to recognise native title. Unfortunately, many Australians, including the executives of large business corporations, do not want to understand the history of colonisation or the legal issues, and seek to undermine this recent development in law.

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Work for women in Australia is a good experience for some of us, particularly if we are well educated, but a bad experience for others. Fran Gale offers a general overview of the situation of less fortunate women. Debbie Carstens reflects on a project in which she is involved, which seeks to empower one of the most vulnerable groups of Australian women workers - migrant women from a non-English speaking background, many of whom are of Asian origin. Dorothy McRae-McMahon, looks at the issue of violence against women, and church responses to this. Photos of her sculpture "rape" accompany the article. She has also provided a liturgy used at a community meeting in a small town whose women were being terrorised by a rapist. We hope that it never needs to be used in such a situation again. However, it can be used in a variety of other situations in which women confront the violence against them. In addition to her comments, it should be noted that several churches, including the Uniting, Catholic and Baptist churches, now have official policies condemning domestic violence, and encouraging parishes to support women who decide to leave such situations. Photos of her sculpture of the Madonna and Child have been used with Camille Paul's articles.

The Uniting Church in Australia has attempted to change its institutional life to ensure the equality of women, by setting up a Commission on Women and Men to help it change. Noni Wales offers a description of this model for change, and reflects on how well it is working.

My article on Genesis 1-3 challenges the patriarchal interpretations of Genesis 1-3 which have been used to support violence against the environment. It is an important matter, because business groups have recently criticised some churches for comments on environmental issues. For example, the churches have criticised governments because they allow logging of very old native forests, in contravention of their own policy.

Two articles reflect on experiences of Australian young women in Asia. Debra Goodsir tells of her experience in a rural area of Korea. Miranda Mallett, as a result of experience in Australia and the Philippines, raises some questions about the way in which the concept of "beauty" is being determined by commerce rather than culture.

The articles of Camille Paul and Elaine Lindsay result from their PhD research. Camille's articles are based on her examination of women in Catholic Social Teaching. Elaine Lindsay introduces readers to the spirituality of a number of Australian women novelists, and the way in which their approach differs from that of male novelists.

Bernice Goh and Tiffany Winterbottom have read the articles and provided the illustrations, based on their own interpretation of the issues. They offer contrasting styles.

The drawings of Indigenous people were provided by the Aboriginal and Islander Commission of the Australian Council of Churches.

Marjorie Lewis Jones is responsible for the photographs used in several of the articles, including the photos of Dorothy McRae McMahon's two sculptures.

Special thanks go to Tanya Banhan for her help in preparing the articles for publication, and to the Joint Board of Christian Education for providing the transparency of "The Last Supper" and the review of A place at the table. I hope you find this selection of Australian women's work both stimulating and useful.

Ann Wansbrough

# CONTENTS

Editorial.....2 by <i>Ann Wansbrough</i>	Liturgy for the Women of Bulli..... 49 by <i>Dorothy McRae-McMahon</i>
Amnesia : The Struggle to Remember.. 4 by <i>Vicki Balabanski</i>	Journeying Towards Wholeness.....50 by <i>Nonie Wales</i>
Liturgy of Tears.....9 by <i>Vicki Balabanski</i>	To Nurture or to Trample upon the Earth?..... 54 by <i>Ann Wansbrough</i>
Anamnesis : Remembering Through the Lord's Supper.....11 by <i>vicki Balabanski</i>	They gave Us Raincoats Instead.....65 by <i>Fran Gale</i>
Getting Things—Right Aboringinal Land Rights in Australia.....15 by <i>Jenny Tymms</i>	A Place at the Table, Women at the Last Supper..... 69 by <i>Muriel Porter</i>
The Popes and Social Justice.....23 by <i>Camille Paul</i>	Beauty is?..... 70 by <i>Miranda Maflett</i>
Is Biology Still Our Destiny?.....28 by <i>Camille Paul</i>	An Australian Experience of Korean Rural Life..... 71 by <i>Debra Goodsir</i>
Asian Women at Work in Australia... 31 by <i>Debbie Carstens</i>	For our Children.....76 by <i>Anne Pattel-Gray</i>
Not the Desert Experience.....36 by <i>Elaine Lindsay</i>	Down, but Not Out!.....80 by <i>Jean Pattel</i>
A Sub—Culture of Violence.....46 by <i>Dorothy MoRae-McMahon</i>	

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