

SOFiA Newsletter 185 August 2026

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

Thanks to some intrepid sleuthing by your committee, we are able to present Lloyd Geering’s analysis of the religious meaning of Colin McCahon’s art. Generally, art critics are one world and theologians another, but Lloyd has crossed the boundaries to provide an illuminating analysis.

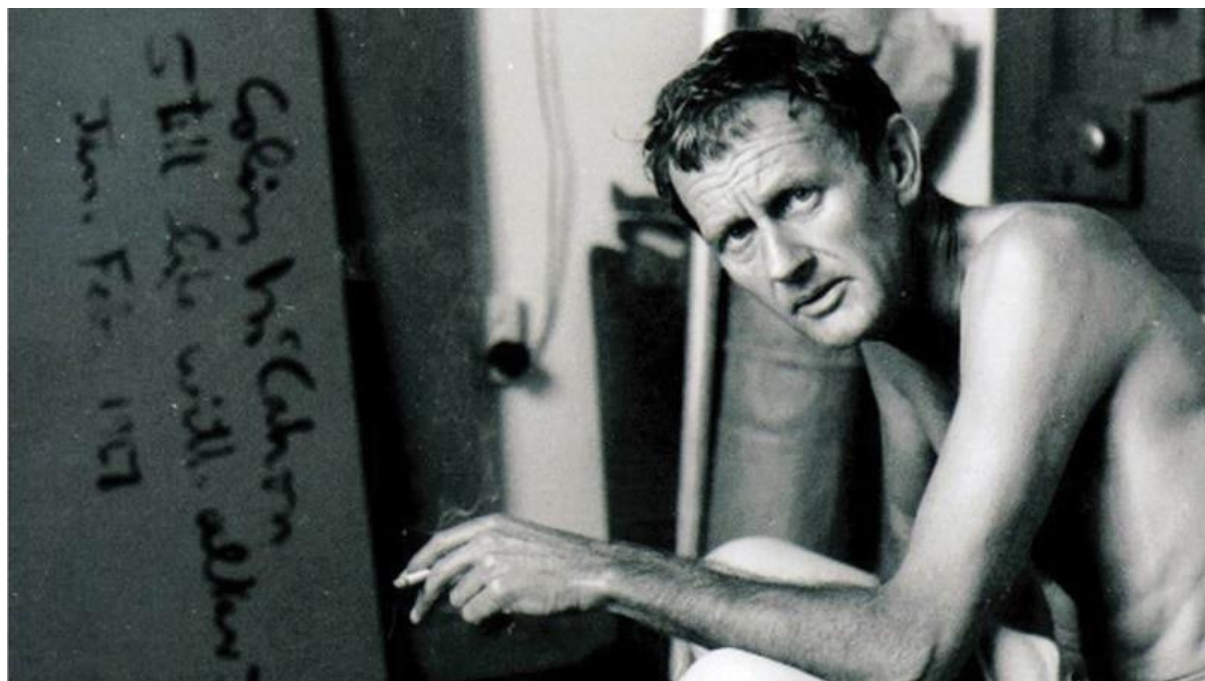
Thanks to John Thornley, we have the unusual phenomenon of an Australian thinker authoring a play on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in his clear-sighted insights into the Nazi regime and courageous action to oppose it, remains an inspiration.

Shirley Dixon, who has a masters degree in art history, provides a professional analysis of an image (I won’t dignify it by calling it a work of art) that Trump posted but removed shortly thereafter. It is hard to believe that he understood so little of the evangelicals and fundamentalists who voted for him, that he thought this image would endear himself to them. In fact, they would regard it as something close to blasphemy.

The Editor

Colin McCahon (1919 –1987): Prophet in the Wilderness

Lloyd Geering first delivered this address to the Christchurch Art Gallery on April 12 2008. Here is part 2. We have added links after the discussion of most artworks that you can follow to see them.



To realise that the world we live in is partly of our own creation makes us realise that what we often take to be as objective as a rock is partly subjective. Our world changes as we change and grow. And our world comes to an end when we come to an end. We have to come to terms with our mortality. During the 20th century it was becoming more common for people to accept their mortality as the old Christian certainties about immortality began to lose their power. That is why death in one form or another surfaced regularly throughout McCahon's painting career. To accept our human mortality, we have to see death in a more positive light. Death is actually just as important a part of our world as life. This McCahon expressed in **Sacred to the Memory of Death** (1955). The words come from a Turner drawing in the Auckland City Art Gallery and suggest a positive attitude to human mortality, such as that found in the hymn of St. Francis, who spoke of 'kind and gentle death'.

Faith and doubt – 1958 and 1959

This led McCahon back to pondering the significance of the death of Christ, and a whole series of Elias Paintings. No more do we have scenes of the crucifixion. He now resorts to words and abstract symbolism. His **Elias Triptych**

(1959) would make a genuine altarpiece. For the left-hand panel McCahon selected these words from Matthew's Gospel, spoken by the chief priests:

Sir, we remember that the deceiver said while he was yet alive, 'After 3 days I will rise again.'

He shortened Pilate's reply to *Seal the stone and set watch*, and enclosed it in the stone which sealed the tomb. The right-hand panel draws from Luke's story of the two who encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. *Then he opened their understanding.*

The centre panel is a fiery burst of activity; it symbolizes at one and the same time the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus. Yet it is strangely like the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. We know that the threat of nuclear war greatly exercised the mind of McCahon at that time. In 1961 he joined the NZ Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. He later confessed that one of his paintings was like an exploding nuclear bomb - both beautiful and deadly - perhaps this was it.

Now come several paintings that deal with issues of faith and doubt, by taking up of the words of the bystanders at the crucifixion scene - **He calls for Elias** (1959) *He calls for Elias. Let us see whether Elias will come to save him.* There is no need to paint the figure of Christ; the cross is sufficient, since this is now so clearly symbolic. McCahon could well be asking, through the words of the bystanders, whether the world will be saved from a nuclear holocaust – notice the colour he uses. Or it may be – Can Christianity save itself in this period of its twilight? - in which case it becomes the colour of the sunset.

Then it becomes a question - *Elias, will he save him?* The cross is becoming less distinct, almost fading into the background as the question becomes more urgent. Doubt now becomes dominant and even more pronounced in **Will he save him?** (1959) Notice the oscillation between *ever* and *never*.

Finally, in **Elias cannot save him** (1959) McCahon delivers his own verdict, interspersing the statement with the taunting words that reflect those of the chief priests and scribes found in Mark, *'He saved others; he cannot save himself'*.

One of the reasons why McCahon was attracted to religion was the way it understood the important role of symbols in communicating visually what could not be adequately put into words, or what we call 'the ineffable'. Even when McCahon used words, it was their symbolic power he was drawing attention to. In the sixties he painted two very important symbolic paintings.

Symbolism: XP and One

XP (1965) is an ancient Christian symbol that uses the first two letters of the Greek word for *Christ*. The first Greek consonant is one we do not have in the Roman alphabet. It is transliterated as 'ch', being like the 'ch' in Scottish word 'loch'. It fascinated the early Christians because it was written like a St. Andrew's cross. Superimposed upon it is the Greek letter for 'r', as the Greeks write it, though to us it looks like a 'p'. The whole became a symbol for Christ and even for the Christian tradition itself.

In **One** (1965) McCahon focused first on one of the basic biblical terms for God. 'The Lord our God is *One*'. This is a quote from the passage in Deuteronomy that the Jews call the Shema and serves as a kind of Jewish creed. But into it McCahon inserts the Roman numeral 'I', that is also the capital 'I'. This is all of a piece with the great 'I AM's. Carl Jung's depth psychology would lead us to see here at work the archetypes of McCahon's unconscious. Jung believed we all share the same archetype in the structure of our psyche. It was because of a particular archetype that monotheism – the belief that the divine is one – triumphed over polytheism, the belief in many gods. But it is this same archetype that enables us in our internal experience to reach a mature sense of self-identity, or what Jung called the process of individuation. In the life of each of us, out of a plurality of early conflicting experiences we hopefully achieve, by mid-life onwards, a strong sense of self-identity. All this and more can be taken out of this richly symbolic painting.

See <https://share.google/Co4fZIXAFxImBJphP>

A question of faith – 1966 to 1980

During 1966-68 New Zealand was caught up in a widespread and very public theological controversy in which all sorts of people were airing their views on God, miracles, the resurrection of Jesus and life after death. In the aftermath, it is hardly surprising that in 1969 McCahon announced a new series that we may call 'Shall we gather at the river'. Three of them are in the Australian collection. The one on the left simply says:

Let us then stop discussing the

rudiments of Christianity-
We ought not to be laying over again
the foundations of faith in God
and of repentance from the deadness
of our former ways,
by instruction about cleansing rites
and the laying-on-of-hands,
about the resurrection of the dead
and eternal judgment.
Instead let us advance towards maturity;
and so we shall if God permits.

These words come from the New English Bible, Hebrews chapter 6. Colin's wife Anne had just given him a copy and he spent much time pondering it. He used it in a whole series of paintings, some of them extremely large. We may group them under the title of *A Question of Faith*, a title he once used himself.

McCahon became fascinated by the Lazarus tradition, which he spoke of as 'one of the most beautiful and puzzling stories in the New Testament'. McCahon realized this story cannot be taken literally without undermining the story of the resurrection of Jesus, for Jesus' resurrection was acclaimed as the first. The resurrection of Lazarus is a symbolic story and is now widely recognized as such in New Testament scholarship.

The story of Lazarus is told in **A Question of Faith** (1970). The words *I am* and *I am life* are central in this painting. We now see that I AM, the symbol both for God and for self-identity, keeps returning. But seeing this is all symbolic, what does Lazarus symbolize for McCahon and/or for us? Is Lazarus the symbol of Christianity, now ebbing away? Is Lazarus a symbol of church, once full of faith but now losing its faith and its life? Something like this is confirmed by what came next.

See <https://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm000015>

In Practical Religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha (1969 - 1970) McCahon continues with the texts of the New English Bible. What chiefly grasped McCahon is to be discovered in the words he highlights. '*Let us go back to Judea*'. '*Lazarus is dead*'. '*Even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will grant you*'. And then even more important than 'I am the resurrection' is simply '*I am*' and '*I am life*'. McCahon's paintings have become his own form of meditation in which he looks for answers to his doubts - he looks for meaning where there is chaos – for hope

where there is despair. But he is also reflecting what was going on more widely in New Zealand, particularly in the light of the widespread public discussion and debate during 1966-70.

See <https://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm001019>

I AM becomes the focal point of **Gate III** (1970-71), once held by Victoria University. This is a gathering of all the major concerns McCahon had during the 1960s. Black clouds over a sombre landscape. Let us read from left to right. *'In this dark night of civilization'* we read. Here we find words of doom from the prophet Isaiah - *THE FLAME OF A DEVOURING FIRE - The earth staggers like a drunken man - Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed. 'Teach us to order our days rightly, that we may enter the gate of wisdom'*. Then the prayer:

*God be gracious to us and bless us,
God make his face shine upon us
that his ways may be known on earth
and his saving power among all nations.*

Compare this with **Victory over Death (1970)**. This was the controversial painting that the NZ Government presented to Australia as a gift. So-called because it celebrates the victory of Christ over death. It records words that St. John's Gospel puts into the mouth of the victorious Christ going to his death:

*Now my soul is in turmoil and what have I to say?
Father save me from this hour.*

No, it was for this that I came to this hour.

Then come the confident words,

I have glorified it and will glorify it again.

See <https://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm000661>

If this is also self-affirmation on the part of McCahon, it does not last. In the closing years of McCahon, as if assailed again by doubt, he focused on life and death. The predicament of human mortality and the uncertain future of the world itself allow no room for easy optimism.

In 1980 McCahon painted **Storm Warning** (1980). McCahon assumed the role of an apocalyptic prophet. Like a Hyde Park Preacher declaring 'the

End is nigh', McCahon reflects here his strong premonition of the uncertain future facing humankind on this planet. If he had lived to witness the frightening destruction of the Twin Towers and the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the Western countries he might have felt his fears being confirmed. He chose the words from 2 Timothy 3:1-2 in the New English Bible:

YOU MUST FACE THE FACT. (becoming his very dominant heading), followed by

*the final age of this world
is to be a time of troubles.
Men will love nothing but
money and self; they will be
arrogant, boastful and abusive;
with no respect for parents,
no gratitude, no piety, no natural affection;
they will be implacable in their hatreds.
Paul to Timothy*

See <https://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm001187>

Ending with Ecclesiastes

But McCahon was also facing the end of his own world. This had become all the more imminent because of the alcoholism to which he had become addicted. So near the end of his career McCahon turned to the book of Ecclesiastes, the most neglected book in the Bible. Ecclesiastes' expressions of disillusionment with life fitted McCahon's own mood at the time, downcast as he was because of so much hostility to his work and because he was already suffering the mental condition which brought his painting career to an end.

There is no book of the Bible which so pertinently fits our time as does the book of Ecclesiastes. These words could be McCahon's final reflection, not only on his own life but also on the fate of Christian culture and even on the fate of humankind. Over 1980-82 he painted several paintings with texts from this book.

In **I applied my mind** (1980 - 1982) we read such words as:

*I applied my mind to all this and I understood that the righteous
and the wise and all their doings are under God's control;
but is it love or hatred? No man knows.
Everything that confronts him, everything is empty,*

*since one and the same fate befalls everyone,
just and unjust alike, good and bad, clean and unclean.
In my empty existence I have seen it all,
from a righteous man perishing in his righteousness
to a wicked man growing old in his wickedness.
Why make yourself a laughing-stock?
Why should you die before your time ?
This is what is wrong in all is done here under the sun;
that one and the same fate befalls every man.
True, the living know that they will die;
but the dead know nothing.
There are no more rewards for them;
they are utterly forgotten.
Never again will they have any part
in what is done here under the sun.*

See <https://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm001660>

Some may dismiss these last paintings of McCahon as the ramblings of an ill man facing death, disappointed that work for which he had given his whole life had not received better recognition. But there is more to it than that.

Ecclesiastes is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Qoheleth, which means 'the one who calls or summons'. Qoheleth was a Jewish thinker who lived, about 300 BCE, in a rapidly changing world where his own Jewish traditions seemed to be dissolving into unreality. He summoned his readers to face reality, to accept that nothing lasts forever, and to learn how to make the most of life while it lasts. Yet Qoheleth has been largely neglected by Jews and Christians until now. Its very frank expression of humanism now fits the current mood in western culture, as it did McCahon's own personal state.

In moving through from 1947 to 1982 we have seen McCahon oscillating between confidence and doubt. We have seen him receding from the traditionally religious and moving further towards the very human. He expressed this in the way he moved from the colourful to the predominantly black and white. He began with the familiar biblical scenes, that still reflected the spiritual world of the ancients and he ended with the unfamiliar Ecclesiastes, that takes this all too human world as reality. As he did so he was also reflecting what has been taking place religiously in New Zealand culture. McCahon has been a modern Qoheleth, summoning us to have the faith to see

the world as it really is, so that we too can get the best out of life. But it was only after his death that McCahon could be seen more widely as a prophet in the Wilderness.

Though he began with biblical scenes, at the last he was painting only words. If some object to his increasing use of words he could no doubt retort that he was only going back to the beginning of things, for do we not read that:

*In the beginning of God's creation of the heavens
and the earth God spoke the words,
'Let there be light!'*

Much later the Fourth Evangelist began his Gospel thus:

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God and
the Word was God.*

Bibliography

Apart from a multitude of smaller publications, many written for specific exhibitions, the two following comprehensive books are recommended. Both are generously illustrated, and should be readily available in New Zealand libraries:

Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon Artist*, A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1984; revised edition (Auckland, Reed, 1993).

Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith* (Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum and Nelson, Craig Potton Publishing, 2002.

Lloyd Geering

Bonhoeffer – Prophet and Martyr

A Play by John Henry Queripel

Resource Publications: Eugene, Oregon 2016

As one who cites Bonhoeffer's life and writings as central to his own faith pilgrimage, I ordered a copy of this book. Not until I received it did I realise it was a play reading, not one more contribution to the many published books on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. So this was a genuinely unique angle – not as a publication for stage performance, but a play resource in seven Acts for learning more about Bonhoeffer's life and writings.

There are twenty-four actors in this play, which rules this out of any staged performance! The resource offers an alternative. Throughout the readings, roles can be shared among those attending. Roles can be taken by different readers, though it may help to have key players – Bonhoeffer, Van Wedemeyer (fiancée of Bonhoeffer) – read by the same reader.

The publication has an Introduction A Life of Witness covering thirty three pages, followed by the play reading of around seventy pages. The group leader plays a key role. They will find the Introduction a helpful source of key points in the life of Bonhoeffer along with key theological themes in his life. Two key topics are explored in this play reading: ethical living in an age of uncertainties, and the nature of human love. Guided by the leader, the group can decide how many sessions will be held.

If I were to recommend Bonhoeffer to newcomers, four key publications would include: *Cost of Discipleship*, *Life and Letters from Prison*, *Life Together*, and any illustrated biography of Bonhoeffer. *Cost of Discipleship*, an early theological work which contrasts ‘cheap grace’ with ‘costly grace’. *Life and Letters* arose out of correspondence Bonhoeffer wrote while in prison. *Life Together* is a brief description of ministry training secretly conducted by the Confessing Church (the church that did not bow down to Hitler) and the illustrated lives remind us that it is as much his life as it is his writings that is the lasting legacy of Bonhoeffer.

I have reservations about *Ethics*, not completed. It is a subtle study of the metaphysical foundations of Protestant philosophy and theology in Europe. It is one of the achievements of Queripel’s book that his Introduction explains the ethical writings of Bonhoeffer, especially in *Ethics*, which have a significant part in the play reading.

I quote lines from the Introduction, beginning with *Cost of Discipleship*: ‘In this work Bonhoeffer called the Christian to go past absolute ethical ideas, which all too often serve as a means of opting out of decision making and action. Rather than maintaining moral purity by adhering to an abstract ideal, a Kantian ethical imperative, a Christian is called to action in obedience to the call and will of God. Too often, he wrote, Christians were reduced to inaction due to their often ego-centred concern for their moral purity rather than getting actively involved in a world where ethical decisions were not usually black or white and involved acting in a manner contrary to absolutes.’ The theological discourse titled ‘Situation Ethics’ explores this further. In the play

Act 2, Scene 3, with Bonhoeffer in discussion with Judge Roeder, advocate for the Nazi legal regime, explores the ironies of Bonhoeffer's life as a 'double agent'. Laurie Chisholm's article 'Pastor, Spy, Assassin' in Newsletter 179 August 2025 gives more details.

Bonhoeffer's engagement to Van Wedemeyer illustrates equals in the rigour of theological debates. At a more personal level, there is the excitement of planning their wedding, and glimpses of the ardour of physical intimacies.

John Queripel, who lives in Newcastle Australia, has written four books, covering Easter, Incarnation, Buddhism, Bonhoeffer. An initial contact can be made via email: queripel@tpg.com.au Photocopying pages is breach of copyright. A bulk order for group study makes a lot of sense!

John Thornley

Trump as Divine Healer/Modern Jesus!?



I am not offended by religious spoofs such as Monty Python's witty, clever & often insightful skits.

However, my immediate reaction to the image of Donald Trump as a divine healer in the guise of a Jesus-like figure was - & continues to be - contempt.

Below I will consider some of the attributes of the image that collectively create such a strongly negative reaction in me.

I find it appalling that this image – I cannot bring myself to name it a work of art - was apparently commissioned by Trump not as a spoof – which still would have been in bad taste - but as something to be regarded seriously.

I find the attitude of anyone who considered it appropriate to have themselves portrayed in the guise of any leader of any world religion – Mohammed, Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu – equally offensive for the sheer arrogance, conceit and hubris of the idea.

This image is a visual testament to Trump's attitude of political messianism - a belief in himself as a messiah, as anointed leader & saviour, as a leader who is endowed with godlike attributes that Trump has brought to his position as President. In a 2019 speech, Trump referred to himself as 'the chosen one' but, as the political theorists observed, there can be no messiahs in a democracy.

The messianic idea is further stated by the light emanating from Trump's hands, which is a visual representation of the concept of an inward light, the light of God within. Which then leads to the image's contention that Trump can use this godly light to perform miracles of healing. No wonder that the expression on the face of the nurse as she gazes up at Trump is one of awe, though perhaps incredulity would have been more appropriate. And to whom is the woman on the left praying? Is it to God to thank him for having Trump as President? Ye gods!

In contrast, the men in ersatz military uniform positioned either side of Trump are portrayed as more stoic, though one of them gazes up approvingly at Trump. The upward gazes of this man and of the nurse, along with conveying approbation, indicate submissiveness – the yielding of the people to the authority of a god-like leader.

Patriotic imagery pervades the image. The dominant motif of the American flag which is shown as the same size as the figure of Trump, along with the smaller images of the Statue of Liberty, White House, Lincoln Memorial and bald eagles, position this activity as happening in the U.S. Though the relative sizes of the flag and statue position patriotism as more important than liberty. I am inevitably reminded of the contention of Samuel Johnson that 'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel'.

But what I find the most anachronistic and disturbing of the motifs in the image are those relating to the military. In addition to the images of war planes, it must be remembered that bald eagles, in addition to symbolising strength and courage, are also birds of prey. Nothing about the real Jesus would suggest to me that men and machines dedicated to killing the enemy – combatants and civilians alike - is appropriate to being shown in conjunction with a Jesus-like figure. I know that in previous wars, prayers have been said by

pastors for God's help in the combat and for gaining victory, though I believe that this custom is somewhat compromised in light of the instruction of Jesus to love one's enemy.

The most puzzling imagery is that of the figures at top centre. Because of their aerial positioning & their indistinct focus, I interpret the figures on either side to be dead soldiers who have been raised to heavenly glory. But I find the central figure a real enigma. At first, I thought that this, too, was an image of a dead soldier with his arms raised in victory. But then I saw that he was holding hands with the figure on the left – so what are the raised appendages? And why is the figure depicted with a radiate crown in the place where one would expect his head to be? A radiate crown symbolises divinity and power, and in antiquity it was an attribute to honour pagan sun deities like the Greek Helios and the Roman Sol. Later, Roman emperors adopted the radiate crown to project their divine status. Also, the Statue of Liberty wears such a crown with its seven rays symbolising the seven continents and seven seas. So just who or what is this central image, and what does it symbolise?

Considered together and in relationship to each other, these attributes create a very disturbing and alarming picture of the self-concept of the current leader of the U.S. Many countries, large and small, have been led at various times by people who are less than satisfactory personally and as politicians, diplomats and military leaders. But, as we see in the daily news, when the disordered leader is the head of a country that is significant among the nations of the world, the negative effects of such leadership cause chaos in international affairs and result in enormous suffering for millions of people.

In the end, my overarching reaction to this awful image is a great sadness that we live in a world where a self-obsessed, self-glorifying, solipsistic and narcissistic person, who is also a liar, a chauvinist and a bigot, and who thought it was appropriate to have himself depicted in the guise of Jesus, could be considered by the millions of people who voted for him and who continue to support him, as a person suitable to lead one of the world's significant nations.

Shirley Dixon

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives. SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, and/or attend a local group. We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from “Sea of Faith”, the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

Chairperson: Pete Cowley prcowley@gmail.com 13 Leith St Gisborne 4010

Secretary: John Thornley johngill@inspire.net.nz

Treasurer: Pete Cowley prcowley@gmail.com

Membership Secretary and Webmaster: Pete Cowley

Local Groups Coordinator: Mary Ellen Warren mewarren1@gmail.com

Newsletter Team

Editor: Laurie Chisholm laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com mobile 0212010302,
Address: 117 Collins Road, Christchurch RD4 7674

Copy Editors: Shirley Dixon, Maria Cash, Yvonne Curtis and Jocelyn Kirkwood.
Distribution is by Peter Cowley.

Life Members: Sir Lloyd Geering (ONZ), Ian Harris, Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis, Laurie Chisholm, John Thornley, Peter Cowley, Mary Ellen Warren, Shirley Dixon, Maria Cash and Jocelyn Kirkwood. Also (deceased): Don Cupitt, Fred Marshall, Noel Cheer and Norm Ely.

Copy deadline for the next Newsletter is 1 October.