

# Progressive Christianity Network – Britain



March 2009

Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

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## My world of doubt by John Cook



*John Weir Cook is a Church of Scotland minister, who in the past worked for 8 years in India, has been actively involved in clinical theology, and for a long time served*

*as minister in Kilmarnock. Now retired, he lives in Edinburgh and is a member of our local group there. This is from a talk he gave to the group in January 2009.*

I have been amused at the reaction to the advertisement on buses placed by the humanist society in the United Kingdom. It reads: 'There is probably no God, so relax, sit back, and enjoy yourself.' My colleague said in a sermon: 'I wish I had enough money to pay for an advertisement on the buses: 'There probably *is* a God, so relax, sit back, and enjoy yourself' ... That *probably* is the key word. It is recognition of doubt. Doubt is not the opposite of faith but rather the atmosphere in which faith must breathe. Blind faith very often leads to destruction. Doubt is the foundation for faith. 'There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.' (Tennyson: *In Memoriam*)

I remember a feisty old professor in Princeton who railed against the hymn 'Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine', proclaiming that it should read instead 'Blessed disturbance, I am His'...!

There are many things I am not sure about but I want to concentrate on three.

First, the Church. I am a Presbyterian and was brought up inside this strange old institution which so suits the Calvinistic Scottish soul. I made some remark in a sermon on the Island of Arran about dancing and was reproved. 'Surely,' I said 'David danced before the Ark of the Lord?' 'Aye', came the grudging reply 'and I dinna think much o' him for that.' The protestant claim was *sola fide*, by faith alone; and I am all right with that, except that faith for me includes doubt.

I am not at all sure that the way the church arrived, grew and now maintains itself is an expression of what is best, or even what Jesus hoped for. What has emerged does not strike me to be in accord with the man from Nazareth - his lifestyle or his teachings, How ever did we get bishops and popes; or presbyteries and assemblies, or in such a tangle over wealth, property, status, rank, power all in the name of the servant king?

My own church is Presbyterian, one of seven different kinds of Presbyterian churches in Scotland. We have experienced schisms, splits, doctrinal differences, and an excessive zeal for the Sabbath. A lady boarding with a Wee Free couple was anxious about what the Sabbath would be like. The more so when she saw at five minutes to midnight the

head of the house open the budgie's cage and take out the swing!!!

I am vexed with the state of a church in our day fussing about sexual orientation, the status of women, and the cost of maintaining our ancient buildings. Though they may display magnificent architecture, they are often not fitted for 21<sup>st</sup> century worship.

My second area of doubt is in the Holy Scriptures. I have promised to accept that the holy scriptures contained in the Old and New Testament are the supreme rule for faith and life. It is sad to be calling them a rule when there is so much magnificent poetry, prophecy, and piety wrapped up in their glorious idiosyncrasy. The exciting thing for me is that continuing studies by gifted scholars with no axe to grind uncover and reveal treasures from these sacred writings, however flawed in historical fact. Their revelation of truth and their visions of the grandeur and glory of God send spirits soaring. Thank goodness for John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, and Dominic Crossan in this generation, and the giants on whose shoulders they stand.

And the third of my concerns is what we mean by the word God. Because we start with Jesus - a man - we are imprinted with that image. And since he calls his God 'Father' then it is a father - son thing, and these are concepts to which we can easily relate, but they are utterly misleading. We also believe in the Holy Spirit but have trouble with definition. And the picture of the Old Testament God so excited our depressive and repressive nation that they

took it all as absolute... Texts do not supply answers.

In our prayers we instruct God to do what we want, and when something bad happens we often stop believing in him. How pagan is that? We are obsessed with our sins, breast-beating and soul-searching to an unhealthy extent. It seems horribly, obsessively joyless.

The struggle to move beyond the anthropomorphic is ongoing - to comprehend the spirit, to feel the wind and call it God; to be struck by the sound of hope and echo it, to feel a love that is not sexual nor greedy or needy and raise that love to the n<sup>th</sup> degree is to come some little way closer to the divine. I need to construct a whole new vocabulary to use in prayer for describing the 'immortal, invisible, God only wise,' (though much of my worship will be in silence).

Finally, Christianity has made much of suffering - the death of Jesus by crucifixion, and what that meant. Did he take the sins of the world upon him to appease a just God? So distasteful it's hardly worth mentioning. Indeed the classic teaching on the atonement is completely alien to my understanding of God in Jesus.

My world of doubt cannot ignore suffering and cannot explain it either. I hope this doesn't smack of pessimism. I live in as many of the realities that I can absorb and understand, and still am moved to look forward and upward. Life is great - a rich, full, exciting experience, hugely enriched by other people. Yes, I can live with my doubts. I have to. They are how I can go on believing.

## What is Your Portrait of Jesus?

### *Don't miss PCN Britain's St Deiniol's Weekend*

Friday 15<sup>th</sup> – Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2009. St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, North Wales. Led by Jim Cotter

During the weekend, there will be time for presentations, conversations and meditations on Jesus the Mystic, the Host, the Healer, the Storyteller...Creating, Repairing, Transforming ...The Landscape of the Domain of G\*...The Working Out of Love as Justice and Intimacy.

What is your portrait of Jesus? What is the Gospel according to the scholars – like Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan – and what is the Gospel according to you – and according to me? What do we imagine his eyes and his touch were like? What was his 'voice-print' – a phrase used by Robert Funk as he tries to distil what it was that Jesus

most probably said?

The weekend will start with an informal get together around 6.00 pm on Friday, followed by plenary sessions on Friday evening, Saturday morning, Saturday evening and Sunday morning. There will be free time on Saturday afternoon *There are still a few places left.* If you have never been on a PCN weekend, you will not know what an enjoyable and thoughtful time it can be. The all-in cost is £125. Why not book a place now by contacting Alan Powell by email [alanepowell@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:alanepowell@blueyonder.co.uk), phone 020 8878 7355, or post - 2A Vicarage Drive, London SW14 8RX.

# PCN Britain's new strategy 2009 to 2012

*Jill Sandham, the Network's Secretary, reports on the recent strategy consultation with members, and the decisions made at the recent short residential meeting of the Management Committee at the Emmaus Centre near West Wickham.*

Thank you to all those who responded to our membership consultation, following our last newsletter. The Management Committee considered all responses at its 24 hour planning session in January; development of our strategy is still work in progress, but these are some of the outcomes.

## Work in partnership

- To produce a series of booklets, in partnership with one or two closely associated organisations, designed to be affordable, accessible for lay people, thematic and practical. We hope that the first in the series will be available by the end of the year
- To consider a signposting portal/gateway for radical/progressive resources
- To explore a DVD production (an alternative to Alpha)
- To continue to host at least 2 major conferences per year, in partnership with the Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield.

## Supporting and resourcing members

- To begin a weekly newsletter, written by a variety of authors, which will be available on the website very shortly.

## Local groups

- To write a new leaflet about starting and sustaining local groups, including resources – already work in progress, and available by the summer
- To set up a resource-sharing space on the website for group convenors
- To encourage development of local group 'hubs', to host regional events and strengthen the Network.

Watch this space for further developments.



The Management Committee at St James's, Piccadilly, March 2009

## Have you renewed your membership for 2009?

If you find an affiliation form enclosed with this newsletter, then you have NOT yet renewed your membership for this year – and this will be your last newsletter! The affiliation fee has been held at the same rate as the last three year.

Please send your completed form, with cheque or commitment to Standing Order, to me at St Faith's Vicarage, 62 Red Post Hill, London SE24 9JQ, as soon as possible. Thank you.

Jill Sandham, Secretary

### ADVERTISEMENT

## Part time Administrative Assistant 11 hours per week, £6267 per year inclusive

Do you have excellent administrative skills?

PCN - Britain urgently needs an administrative assistant to manage the membership database, put members and enquirers in touch with local groups, take occasional minutes, assist with event management, and provide general administrative support to the Chair and Secretary.

You will need to be efficient, reliable and able to work independently, be competent in Microsoft Word, have experience of using a database, and ideally live within accessible distance of St Alban's, Herts.

You can download an application pack from our website, [www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk), or obtain one from the Chair, by emailing [john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk).

Closing date: 25<sup>th</sup> March 2009

Interviews: 8<sup>th</sup> April 2009.

# Blessed disturbance



**Mary Henderson heard John's Cook's talk** My World of Doubt **and took up the challenge of what was said about**

Blessed Assurance.

**Here is her own**

Blessed Disturbance. **I**

**hope members will enjoy it personally and may be able to get it sung in the churches to which they belong – it deserves to be! Ed.**

Blessed disturbance! God speaks the Word.

'Let there be light!' in the darkness is heard.

Cosmic explosion; life has begun.

Praise to Creator, Spirit and Son!

*Sunshine by day and moonlight by night;  
everything new is a source of delight.*

*Fish in the oceans, birds in the trees;  
woman and man give thanks for all these.*

Blessed disturbance! Prophets proclaim warnings of judgement in God's holy name.

Poor folk exploited; rich ones don't care.

In righteous anger, Yahweh is there!

*'I hate your feasts!' says the God who is just;*

*'Sort out your lives, then pray if you must.'*

*'My law is love', says the God who is good;*

*'Care for the poor, then pray as you should.'*

Blessed disturbance! "Come, follow me.

Leave what is past - create what's to be."

Sinners respond while good folk say 'no';

praise to the Son for making it so!

*Goodbye to riches; welcome true wealth!*

*Goodbye to sickness; welcome true health!*

*Goodbye to all that binds us to earth;*

*Goodbye religion – welcome new birth!*

Blessed disturbance! God's here to stay;

subtly transforming work, rest and play.

Spirit of justice, laughter and love;

wily as serpent, gentle as dove.

*God of surprises, disturb us again;*

*speak to our fears with your presence, and then,*

*heavenly Gadfly, sting us to life!*

*Help at our birthing, heavenly Midwife.*

H Mary Henderson, February 2009

## And more from Scotland

### Edinburgh Sings a New Song!



On Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> February, having first being delayed in North America, then diverted on the train from Glasgow to Edinburgh because of an accident, John Bell arrived at the Braid Centre to address and then sing with

an audience of 125 – a gathering organised by the local group of PCN Britain.

His topic was 'Words and Music for Tomorrow's Christian', so the first part of his presentation was an analysis of what our hymn-singing should be representing in terms of liturgy and worship. Helpful insights followed, peppered with great humour and well seasoned with anecdotes from his experience in other countries.

He stressed that what we sing shapes what we believe, so that if a child grows up singing hymns such as 'Jesus loves me' then that child may internalise the picture of a loving God, whereas if the diet is of hymns such as 'Do no sinful action', the seeds of guilt and fear are sown ... We were reminded that hymns are the folk-songs of the church, meant to express real lived experience – reminded, too, that it is in the nature of tradition to keep changing, that the church is not (should not be?) an 'antiques road-show', a place where the ideas and language of another age remains iconic.

He quoted the Celtic people as examples of those who worshipped largely outdoors, and without benefit of either clergy or many churches, and thereby avoided the perennial danger of dualism – one language for inside the church, another for everyday life in the 'world' ...

Then we sang! John moved to the grand piano, and with the greatest of ease played and sang some of his own songs, inviting us to join in – which we did, infected by his enthusiasm, and

delighting in the integrity and melody of the songs, which reflected the spectrum of human experience as well as naming issues around social justice.

This was a delightful, refreshing evening – a taste of new wine! We thirst for more...

Mary McMahan

## From the new Chair of PCN-Britain



*John Churcher, (photographed alongside at last year's Methodist conference) took over as Chair of the Network at the Committee's short residential meeting in January. Here he introduces himself to members as he takes up this role.*

Early in 2008, Hugh Dawes announced to the PCN-Britain Committee that he would serve as Chair for one more year. At the Committee's recent 24 hours residential to discuss issues such as budgets, strategy and the future support of members, Hugh stepped down. I count it an immense privilege and responsibility to have been elected, by fellow-Committee members, as the new Chair. As members of a growing organisation we owe an immeasurable vote of thanks to Hugh for the way he has guided the Committee and the organisation from the beginning of PCN in Britain. He has approached the work and the Committee with a light touch but a clear focus; with courtesy and wisdom. Although Hugh has stepped aside from the Chair, I am extremely pleased that he is not leaving the Committee! Personally, Hugh has been a great support and encouragement to me as my own ministry has moved from local church pastoral work to a much wider 'roving ministry'. Elsewhere in this Newsletter there is a more extensive appreciation of Hugh's work written by Jim Adams, the founder of The Center for Progressive Christianity. This was the first progressive group, established in the USA in 1994, upon which the later Progressive Christianity groups around the world have been based. Jim writes about the work and impact of Hugh upon the development of progressive Christianity in both Britain and the USA.

Also, sadly, the Administrator's job is becoming vacant. Olivia has been competent, efficient and good-humoured as her role has changed and developed over the past couple of years, but has decided to leave this work in order to develop her professional music career. We thank Olivia for the past and wish her well for her future. Details of the vacancy are on page 3 of this Newsletter. If you are interested, or know someone who might be, an application form is available from me or from the website. With the development of the Internet the location of the home-based office is not important.

On behalf of the Committee I also thank you, the membership, for your loyal support of the work of PCN-Britain. Without your financial support of, and personal commitment to the cause of progressive Christianity, PCN-Britain could not have achieved so much or be able to continue to do the work in the future. Many exciting initiatives and possibilities for the future development of PCN-Britain were discussed at the recent residential, and these will be progressed at the March Committee Meeting and shared with the membership as soon as we possibly can. PCN-Britain does not 'belong' to the Committee – each member is PCN-Britain. The role of the Committee will remain as the 'hand upon the tiller' to continue to ensure that the membership receives relevant support and encouragement. It is with gratitude that I look back at what has gone before, and anticipate the future with great optimism. Together, under Hugh's vision and guidance, we have achieved much and there is so much more that can be accomplished as all members of PCN-Britain work together in the coming months and years. I hope to meet as many of you as possible at the Birmingham Conference.

Blessings,  
John Churcher.

# News from Local Groups

## Coventry and Warwickshire

(Eric Johnson 024 7630 3712)

eric.johnson@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Meetings are held at 7.30 pm at MIND, Horizon House, 28 Cromwell Road, Rugby, except for Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> March.

Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> March: Eco-congregations with Jo Rathbone at the Quaker Meeting House, 28 Regent Place, Rugby

Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> April: Living the questions: an introduction. This is a source of curriculum and media for both seekers in and outside the churches that provides a variety of flexible resources to help explore Christianity and what a meaningful faith can look like in today's world.

Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May: The God Problem with Adrian Smith.

Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> June: Creation or Evolution? with John Pierson.

## Exeter

(Liz Vizard 01392 668859)

liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Exeter group started the New Year with the first of three talks by the Revd Anthony Freeman, a Church of England priest, member of the Exeter group and author of *God in Us*. His title was *Whatever next? Christian Attitudes to life after death*.

Two responses to his talk are printed straight after the news from local groups.

The dates of the next talks in this series are Sundays March 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> June. There will be a CD of all three talks available for purchase from Chris Avis after the last in the series.

The Revd Iain McDonald will continue leading discussion on the eight points of PCN-Britain on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> April, *Embodying Faith*, and Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> July, *Abandoning Certainty*.

Everyone is welcome. Meetings are held in the Southernhay URC hall, Southernhay, Exeter from 2.30 - 4.30 pm, and include a break for refreshments and informal talk.

## Hertfordshire

(Diana Reddaway

dianakreddaway@ntlworld.com)

Ian Lawton's final speaking engagement on his March tour of England will be on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> March at 3.30 p.m. (note earlier start). His subject will be 'Prayer and Spirituality'. There will not be a meeting in April but the May meeting will be on the 24<sup>th</sup> (back to usual 4 p.m. start time) and the speaker will be John Churcher. His subject: 'Where next for progressive Christianity in a secular society?' Peter Herriot will speak on 28<sup>th</sup> June (4 p.m.) addressing the issues raised in his recent book 'Religious Fundamentalism: Global, Local, and Personal'. All meetings are held at the Backhouse

Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City. The speaker for July 26<sup>th</sup> is to be arranged.

## Tunbridge Wells

(Pat Churchill 01892 531541)

pat.churchill@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims continue to meet monthly on a Thursday at the home of two members. Numbers vary between eight and twelve. The group is ecumenical but also with members who no longer belong to any church.

At a recent session, following a WEA day conference, two members led a discussion on the Middle East. The difference was the hope that one member expressed. She spoke as a member of both Jerusalem Peacemakers and Spirit of Peace. The former is an interfaith organisation and we were led through some of the aspects of their work. It was refreshing to hear something positive about the situation there.

Future meetings include:

March 26<sup>th</sup> A discussion of American politics and religion sparked by Frank Shaeffer's book *Crazy for God* and his various articles.

April 30<sup>th</sup> A meal with another group in the town with a similar outlook to ourselves.

## West Midlands Group

(Tessa Carrick 01527 873135)

tessa@carrick.myzen.co.uk)

Everyone is welcome to our meetings. The group has had some lively discussions lately. All meetings begin with coffee and biscuits and are planned to last an hour and a half.

The arrangements for the next two meetings are:

1. Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April at 7.30.p.m. at 5 Orchard Close, Hagley, Worcestershire DY9 0LE

2. Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> June at 7.30.p.m. at 29 Malvern Road, The Forelands, Bromsgrove B61 7HE.

The topics for discussion will be chosen from Tony Windross's *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith* - get in touch with Tessa for more details.

## Yorkshire – Leeds

(Sandra Griffiths 0113 258 2652)

sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Leeds Group meets at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church Centre (LS7 4NB), usually on the second Saturday of the month - coffee/tea available from 9.30 - between 10 and 12.

On 4<sup>th</sup> April (the first Saturday to avoid Easter Saturday), 9<sup>th</sup> May and 13<sup>th</sup> June we will have discussions based on chapters from *Together in Hope*, each of which is followed by suggestions for discussion. In the May session we will be looking at chapter 6: Finding Hope in our Contemporary World.

We hope to resume our Wednesday evening meetings in someone's home on 6<sup>th</sup> May.

# Whatever next? Christian Attitudes to Life after Death

Anthony Freeman spoke recently on this theme to the Exeter local group. We print two responses to what he said from members of the group.

This was the first of a series of three talks by Anthony Freeman which arise from his concern that a religion with resurrection at its heart seems to have very little coherent to say on the subject. He began with a fascinating overview of the evolution of thought in the Bible. How many Christians realise that only one person in the entire Bible is described as having died and gone to Heaven? Full marks to those who did (the person is Jesus himself!) Such is the power of the folk myth that Heaven is a place where we will meet our loved ones again and where everything will be OK that we have almost completely forgotten that, apart from Jesus, the only people in Heaven are Enoch and Elijah who are there precisely because they did not die but remain mysteriously alive!

The earliest Hebrew Scriptures portray a very matter-of-fact acceptance of death as the end (everyone simply descended into 'sheol', i.e. the grave) with its inevitable corollary that this life is the focus of human existence. This led eventually to the notion that this life is so unsatisfactory that there must be something/somewhere better. It is a long journey from there (which perhaps reflects a deep dissatisfaction with life on this earth) to a complete focus on the next life which sees earthly life as just a preparation for the afterlife.

This is but a glimpse of what Anthony had to say and which generated an animated (if that is the right word in this context!) discussion about, among other things, funerals and appropriate words to use at them. We look forward eagerly to his next two talks on the subject, which will look

next time at mediaeval thinking and the rupture created by the Reformation - and finally at modern attitudes.

Iain McDonald

Death, whether or not there is an afterlife, and if so what form it will take, is a mystery. We need to get on with living life now without worrying too much about death.

The Prayer Book can be problematic for some of us. Clergy present, especially Anglicans, shared their difficulties in having to use the set prayers for Funeral Services. The URC ministers had more freedom. There was some awed talk of scientific discoveries and what they might mean for Christian faith. Particularly that many more universes may come to light. Can God really care about every living creature on every planet in every universe?

Altogether a challenging afternoon!

I didn't understand why the C of E clergy felt obliged to recite prayers they didn't believe in, or perhaps were reluctant to inflict on unbelieving mourners. It was explained to me that C of E clergy are obliged to do this because they undertake to their Bishop that they will use the Order of Service with Prayers as laid down in the Prayer Book. I was shocked! I puzzled about it all the way home! How little I know about the C of E. The churches in my area are not as stuffy as I had thought. They are loyal and obedient to their Bishop. It is the churches I knew previously which must be unorthodox or worse. I know special dispensation was given to offer bread and wine to children as an experiment. Perhaps this extended to encouraging the laity to compose liturgies for Evensong and for their own funerals.

Sylvia Reid

## Poetry (A Pathway to God?) By Brian Wilson



*I was asked by the North Somerset PCN Group to introduce a discussion of poetry and readings by members of their favourite poems. I suggested the broad theme of "Poetry as a pathway to God." Ever since I started my first Commonplace Book at the age of 15, I have collected (amongst many other pieces) definitions,*

*descriptions, and observations on Poetry, and I circulated to members beforehand a selection of these, as a suggested focus for their selections and a stimulus to discussion.*

*Deus escreve direito por linhas tortas – God uses crooked lines to write straight (Claudel)*

I am by profession an ancient historian – in both senses of the word; my disrespectful children would probably say "very ancient." But I am by inclination a student of literature, with poetry and drama perhaps my first loves; and low-level theology has always been a hobby. And now I find with mild surprise that in old age these three interests have somehow begun to coalesce.

My increasing problems with traditional Christianity have much to do with an historian's concern for evidence and the absolute impossibility of taking the Bible literally. Even as an undergraduate, I was beginning to find the description of Herodotus as "mythistoricus" (ie a "myth-historian") apposite when applied even to the Gospel writers. Classical studies led me to believe that there was little really new in many of

the Bible stories – they were transparently mythical, with a veneer of history over the top. (Jesus' teaching is an entirely different matter). But of course myth is a richer form of truth than mere fact. As Stephen Verney says, "myth is a story which has universal significance and yields up a deeper meaning at every stage of human history. It is a story which nobody has invented, but which has arisen out of the depths of human experience."

As one who loved poetry, I have long felt that the poet sees more deeply, more accurately, and far more sensitively into the world around us, and that poetic truth is something rather more profound than so-called literal, historical truth. To be literal-minded is often to be superficial, unimaginative, and dull – albeit at times it is a regrettable necessity. To be poetic is to add whole new dimensions to experience by making, as it were, magical connections. Inevitably in time I reached the obvious conclusion that poetic truth and mythical truth are almost one, and that religious truth is closer to both than to any other mode of expression. For, to quote Sir Philip Sydney, "myth is a tale which holds children from their play and old men from the chimney corner."

There was nothing very original in this, except perhaps for one who, like me, was a very conventional believer for his first twenty years of life, until at last I began to think for myself. But in a sense I suspect that intuitively I began to perceive what others had long thought. I have no idea where I found for my commonplace book the quotation from Duns Scotus in the 9<sup>th</sup> century that "Theology is a kind of poetry," but it is gratifying to find that I had at last caught up with the older theologians unaided. Increasingly I find that I have been walking the same pathway as some of the more modern ones also.

Poetry is profoundly metaphorical – you could almost define it as "truth expressed as metaphor." Interestingly in his book, "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time", Marcus Borg states explicitly that "the Bible is a combination of history and metaphor", and that "the ancient communities that produced the Bible often metaphorized (his word) their history. This is the way they invested their stories with meaning."

I hope that this preliminary set of observations explains why I suggested that we try to pick poems that express for each of us the thought behind the three thematic ideas: "Beauty is truth; truth beauty"; "Poetry is a Greater Truth"; and "Poetry as a pathway to God."

Let me now focus on poetry. Ezra Pound once famously remarked that, "poets are the antennae of the race". It is not the function of the poet to deal in facts, to record information, nor (usually) to report events. That is the task of the duller species of historian or of the journalist - an altogether humbler trade. But as any insect will tell you, antennae are essential if you want to sense where you are heading and to identify where you want to go and also what opportunities or dangers lurk ahead. Poets are in the business of sensing things for the benefit of all of us.

If a reader seeks to know not so much what happened at any given point in the past, or even why it happened, but rather what it felt like at the time, what were the responses and perceptions of sensitive and articulate contemporaries (the "antennae people") to the events in which their lives were inextricably entangled, then the poet's value is considerable. Could we, for example, fully understand the enormity of the suffering of the First World War without the War Poets? Or the intensity of the feelings of Irish Nationalism without Yeats? Or the pain of exile for the Jews without the psalms, which are traditionally, but un-historically, attributed to the much earlier King David.

Poets deal in perceptions, insights, moods, emotions, responses, desires, hopes, fears. Historical and journalistic virtues, such as accuracy, objectivity, comprehensiveness, balance, exactness (save of language) are not for them. The poet's virtues are: ambiguities, suggestiveness, compression to the point of obscurity, image and association, echo and overtone, implication not explication, metaphor, simile, symbol, intensity of feeling. In short his whole task is to make connections – not least connections between the seen and the unseen, between the visible world that we touch and see and the invisible world, which we experience through imagination and express through metaphor, and which believers see through faith – in fact connections between earth and heaven. In essence poetry is metaphorical expression, and in poetry, to quote Ortega y Gasset, "metaphor is something whose efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of his creatures".

No-one would think of asking a poet to write only what is literally true. So, if the Bible is at least as much myth as history – or as Borg puts it, history metaphorized, - and if myth is, as he also suggests, poetry plus, not factuality minus, then the Bible is arguably more akin to poetry than history, and similarly, theology is arguably a

poetic activity, as Duns Scotus suggested. So the message is clear: if you want to think theologically, think poetically; if you want to say anything meaningful about God and religion, speak poetically (ie. metaphorically). Plato, who was a fine poet as well as a philosopher, said much the same: there comes a time, he argues, when logical argument runs out – and then you must have recourse to myth. And for myth, poetry, or at least poetic language, is the proper mode of expression.

When I was working on a source book for undergraduate and A Level students of the reign of the emperor Augustus, I had no difficulty in persuading my directing editor that we must have a section of material from the Roman poets, even though this was a history book. I included a short essay in defence of poetry as historical source material. But now I find that what I wrote about poetry as source material seems to me surprisingly similar to what Borg says when talking about how we should read the Bible.

He recommends what he calls “a state of post-critical naivety”, reading it metaphorically, hearing it as a series of true stories, even as one knows at the same time that they may not be factually true. It’s like the classic schoolboy definition of faith as “the power to believe what you know isn’t true” and reminds one uncomfortably of George Orwell’s Double-Think in his novel 1984, but I can see the point Borg is trying to make.

He goes on to say that “Israel’s primal narrative combines historical memory with metaphorical narrative.... but the metaphorical approach needs controls ...which are provided in part by the historical approach (that is, as I understand it, an understanding of the historical context) and in part by the discernment of the community to which the interpretation is offered. In short the historical and metaphorical approaches need each other.”

In similar vein in my brief essay, I had suggested that, “Always we must read with care. We must take the poets in the context of their time - a time in which men had grown tired of civil war and turned to Octavian/Augustus as to a god, in gratitude for the gift of peace and as the source of inspiration for old values restored and new ideals espoused. (As a contemporary parallel, think of the Obama effect, though that is of course so far an expression of hope for the future rather than of gratitude for the past). To such feeling the poets helped to give expression.” Like the prophets and psalmists of the Jews, they were speaking to and for their time, but what

they had to say had relevance for all time – as great art always should.

Virgil was regarded as an honorary Christian by the Middle Ages; Dante used him as his escort through the Inferno, and in his fourth Eclogue (40 BC), for example, Virgil tells of the birth of a child who will usher in the Age of Gold, in language that could have come from Isaiah. The coincidence with the approaching birth of Jesus influenced the more simple minded to call it the Messianic Eclogue, while earlier scholars often thought, also wrongly, that it referred to the anticipated birth of a son to the emperor Augustus, even though at that date he was still called Octavian and was little more than a successful revolutionary leader. But the poem speaks, always, of the hope enshrined in every new generation and symbolised (or in Borg-speak, metaphorized) by every new birth - the hope that as a species, a nation, a family, next time we will do better. In that respect its message at least is indeed Messianic. Writing a little later, the poet Horace tells us that Augustus will become a God, and like Julius Caesar, his adoptive father, he will ascend into heaven and be seated at the right hand of Jupiter. That was how they thought then – it was not simply court flattery. Augustus was indeed deified, and like Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Pompey before him, he was widely worshipped as a god in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire. To us, of course, it seems fanciful nonsense; and I doubt very much if the poets really believed it. But it was true, metaphorically, even if they knew it was untrue literally. And it was certainly a true reflection of popular feeling. The poetry gave expression to a genuine and deep feeling of contemporary gratitude.

“So what is truth?” asked jesting Pilate, “and would not stay for an answer.” Back to Poetry. As Robert Frost says, “poetry is what gets lost in translation”, and it is the poetic dimension, the metaphorical expression, that is so vital to a proper understanding of Biblical texts and the expression of religious thought. Inevitably, if we cannot read metaphorically and hear the Bible poetically, we will miss what Francis Thompson called the “many splendour’d thing.” Like myth, great poetry “yields up a deeper meaning at every stage of human history.” And that is what is so miraculous about the King James’ Bible. It was of course written to be heard rather than read, but it was written in the language of Shakespeare, which probably above any other period of our native tongue, was wonderfully rich, supremely poetic in its imagery and expression, its cadences and rhythms. The English

language came to its finest flowering at the end of the mediaeval era, when in the contemporary mind there was still a close kinship between the literal and the metaphorical way of looking at things. All this made that great translation appropriate to its great original. And since then it has almost taken on a life of its own, enriching our language and inspiring the creative imagination of our greatest writers. But above all it encouraged our capacity for metaphorical and religious thinking, because it had the poetic power to move, "to arrive at the intellect by way of the heart", as R S Thomas puts it.

Contrast that with the dreary language of some modern translations (not all), which we have to listen to in church – pitched in language that sometimes sounds more appropriate to a railway timetable or instructions for assembling a piece of DIY furniture, and sometimes making little more sense than the original passages. The Oxford Bible Commentary on Imagery in the Psalms illustrates my point and says all that is needful – I quote: "Poetry is always seasick when it is ferried to another country. Translation cannot convey the rhythms, overtones, resonances, sounds,

alliteration, and plays on words in the original. Metaphor and simile play a very large part in the appeal of the psalms, and the ultimate horror of the ability of translation to destroy the poetry is seen in the Good News Bible." Such translations are, doubtless, more up to date and scholastically sound, but possibly also at times the fruits of the inevitable fudges and compromises imposed by a worthy (or even desperate) desire for consensus. But in an age of scientific realism, where we have lost the capacity to think poetically, is it any wonder that we find our faith blighted by fundamentalist biblical literalism, reinforced by unpoetic, literalist translations and liturgies?

Meaning in poetry is not like meaning in prose; poetry is many-faceted, subtle, in-apprehensible. Prose conveys information; poetry indicates connections and suggests response. Poetry is "what gets lost in translation", theology is poetry; myth is "poetry plus theology". George Steiner suggests that all creative artists, "together with the saints, secular and religious, in some manner ransom mankind."

Poets and their poetry are what we all need to ransom mankind's religion and make it live again.

## Conferences and events

### Surrendering all our certainty

**Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2009, 11.00 am to 4.30 pm. Book NOW.**

**A PCN Britain day conference in Birmingham at The Priory Rooms (Six minutes from New Street Station), led by Nicola Slee, Ian Lawton and Jim Mein**

Hurry. There is still time to book for this imminent and exciting day event.

It explores, in a variety of ways - thought, interaction, creativity – the freedom and the challenge of living without certainty. Our speakers between them cover a broad sweep of interests and concerns. Jim Mein is the former Dean of Edinburgh Cathedral and co-ordinates Initial Ministerial Education in that diocese. Nicola Slee is a research fellow on the staff of the Queens

Foundation for ecumenical theological education in Birmingham, and is a theologian, poet and liturgist. Ian Lawton is the minister of Christ Community Church in West Michigan. In an earlier life he was Vicar of St Matthew-in-the-City in Auckland New Zealand, and a prominent figure in progressive Christian thinking there.

The cost is £12, but £10 to PCN members (and members of CRC). Book online via the website today.

## The World To Come?...

### Global Responses to Global Threats

**Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> April 2009, 10.am to 4.00 pm**

**St Mark's CRC at St Marks Church, Broomhill, Sheffield. Speakers include Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies, Bradford University , Simon Barrow, Ekklesia, and Philip Austin, Northern Friends Peace Board.**

This spring conference will address some of the major threats which we face as global citizens. How can people of faith respond to the

challenges posed by some of the root causes of conflict and insecurity in our contemporary society? The day will examine the interrelating

issues around militarisation in the face of terrorism, financial insecurity and the competition over resources. Can the major world religions offer positive ways forward? How does a radical understanding of the Christian faith bear upon these global issues?

How can we bring about change? The cost of the day is £10, but £8 to members of CRC and PCN Britain. There was a booking form in the last newsletter. Or you can download one from either our or CRC's websites.

## Bishop Jack Spong's October UK Tour October 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>

### Eternal Life: A New Vision



is the title of Jack Spong's next book, now with his publishers and due to hit bookshops in the US on 1<sup>st</sup> September.

*The Book's subtitle is Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell.* In his most

recent online column, Bishop Spong writes: "This title will move beyond the old paradigm. It will transcend the limits of religion, of parental deities above the sky and of the old reward and punishment mentality on which ecclesiastical power has always rested. It will not deny death, but dance with it. It will seek eternity by walking deeply into life to discover transcendence in deepened consciousness."

PCN Britain is extremely proud to be organising Jack and Christine Spong's tour of Britain this autumn when he will be speaking to the themes of the book.

Jack will speak in four locations.

- In Colchester (at Lion Walk URC) on the evening of Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> October.

- In Sheffield (at St Mark's, Broomhill) on the evening of Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> October.
- In Edinburgh (venue still to be finalised as we go to press) on the evening of Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> October.
- In London (at St James's, Piccadilly) for a day conference on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> October, which will also include the short annual meeting of PCN Britain.
- And finally in Exeter on the evening of Monday 26<sup>th</sup> October.

The meetings will provide a unique opportunity to hear the latest thinking of one of the most skilled advocates of progressive faith understanding, in an area where he has said that expects to surprise friends and disarm foes. There will also be bookstalls selling the new book in each of the venues.

Booking forms for the meetings will be available soon from the PCN Britain office and will also be downloadable from the website. We expect there to be a strong desire for places. You can express your interest in advance either by writing to the PCN office (details on the back page) or by emailing [info@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:info@pcnbritain.org.uk). Don't delay!

## A New Spirituality for a New Era

**Adrian Smith in Southampton. Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2009, 10.00 am to 4.00 pm  
Avenue St Andrews URC, Southampton**

A day for open-minded Christians and others who wish to develop their spiritual way of life to better meet the challenges of a complex global culture with its new ecological and economic problems. Adrian Smith is the author of several very readable books in this and related areas. His talks will be illustrated and there will be opportunities for discussion in small groups.

The attractive venue is situated at the southern end of Southampton Common on the main road (A33) into the city from the M3. It is also easily reached

from Junction 5 of the M27. Plenty of free parking nearby, and on a direct bus route that links the main rail stations.

The event is organised by members of the Hampshire Local Groups of PCN, who would be delighted if members of other groups in Central Southern England could join them. The cost is £12 including cold buffet lunch and tea/coffee. For further information and to reserve places contact Martin Godfrey by e-mail [m.godfrey212@btinternet.com](mailto:m.godfrey212@btinternet.com) or telephone 023 8076 6312.

# Book Reviews

Space for Grace

Giles Goddard. Canterbury Press 2008. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-85311-916-3 £12.99



**Adrian Alker - a member of PCN Britain's Management Committee, until recently the vicar of St Mark's, Broomfield in Sheffield and secretary of CRC, and now Director of Mission Resourcing in the Diocese of Ripon and Leeds - commends the new book by the chair of**

## ***Inclusive Church.***

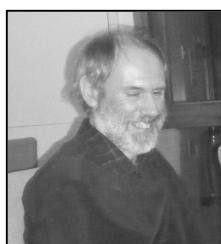
Giles Goddard has been the Anglican Rector of St Peter's Church in Walworth, London for a decade. Today St Peter's boasts a lively community of Christians of different races and backgrounds and through the transformation of the crypt (InSpire) is also a place fully engaged with the community. Giles Goddard is an energetic priest who happens to be gay and happens, not through chance, to be chair of Inclusive Church. The intention of this book, as explained in the author's introduction, is to make the connections between the life and work of this particular church community and the implications of the 'inclusive imperative'. In his foreword, Peter Selby, a former Bishop of Worcester, goes on to say that the book challenges its readers 'to discern in personal experience and in the life of their communities the outworking of God's passionate love for all humankind.'

Does the book live up to these claims? In many ways, yes.

The nine relatively short chapters each have an internal dynamic which moves the reader from personal story to biblical exegesis to wider contemporary reflection to instances from the life of St Peter's Church. This order changes around in different chapters but these elements are generally present. For example in the first chapter the key biblical passage is the body imagery of I Corinthians 12, followed by reflections on the Declaration of Human Rights,

## **Why There Almost Certainly Is a God**

Keith Ward. Lion. 2008. Paperback. ISBN 978 0 7459 5330 4 £7.99



**Duncan Craig, the new treasurer of our Network, and another member of the remarkable Edinburgh Group, articulates some of his frustrations with the approaches of both Richard Dawkins and Keith Ward,**

more reflection on the Pauline passage, a quick glance at the Balkans and on to a description of the congregational make-up of St Peter's.

The book covers a number of issues – the tension between tradition and change, power and Christ's 'downward mobility', limits to inclusion, specific matters around race and gender. Although the framework of reference is obviously Anglican and the current controversies in the Church of England, this thoughtful piece of writing will indeed challenge all of us involved in the life of the Christian Church, whatever the denomination. I liked some of the detail – suggestions as to how church councils can judiciously promote civil partnership blessings, for example. And Giles is not too proud to admit mistakes in his leadership at St Peter's, for example at not truly attending for quite a while to some of the desires of the African members of his congregation. He does his best to try to explain the seeming inconsistencies on St Paul's take on women; I only wish he had read the more radical and compelling scholarship of Crossan on the Pauline letters. He would find a more convincing defence of Paul.

Space for Grace is well written by a knowledgeable cleric. The author writes with passion and puts his theological narrative in the context of his life and work as a parish priest. A criticism I would voice is that I found the book a little too wandering in its style. I would have wished for a rather more consistent approach to biblical and theological reflection and I found some of the chapter headings idiosyncratic. Unlike the book 'Inclusive God' by Shakespeare and Rayment – Pickard, Space for Grace will not be a book to keep returning to for a consistent and helpful piece of writing on inclusion and ecclesiology. It didn't intend to be such. It is a good read by a fine parish priest born out of his 10 years on the Walworth Road. The helpful bibliography will point the reader to more weighty writings.

**but praises Ward's book nonetheless as a useful introduction to the current debate.**

The sub-title of this book is "Doubting Dawkins". Keith Ward is a philosopher who received a letter one day which told him that he had been appointed Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford. He has had a number of public disputes

with Richard Dawkins who, of course, denies that there is such a subject as divinity to be a professor of.

This book is probably not the last word in this running debate, but it exposes one of the many weaknesses in *The God Delusion*, namely Dawkins' failure to set out a philosophical basis for his arguments. To my mind, this points to the central problem of Dawkins' book: while it raises important questions, it races through a succession of incomplete and sometimes garbled arguments. As a scientist, Dawkins claims intellectual superiority, while failing to argue his case with any semblance of intellectual rigour. That's my view. Keith Ward, however, takes a kinder view, perhaps because he finds Dawkins as charming in person as he is aggressive in print. Ward sees science as limited to observation and experiment, neither of which can take us far in seeking first causes, an arena which he claims for philosophy. Science can propose, and seek to base predictions on, natural laws, but can say nothing to the question of how those laws came to be. He goes on to construct a logical case for the existence of God in a clear, warm and readable style. No doubt, there will be counter-arguments which could be brought to bear, but it is interesting to see an attempt to break out of the received wisdom that says that religious belief is necessarily irrational.

The final chapters of the book are concerned with personal experience of God and at this

point, sadly, all philosophical rigour seems to disappear. We are left with assertions of conventional theology, apparently protected from challenge by the gambit that if God exists, everything else is possible. From a progressive perspective, this feels like a missed opportunity to see a philosopher's approach to questions of interest. However, for the "general reader" if not perhaps for the theologically-trained, the bulk of Keith Ward's book offers an enjoyable, non-technical introduction to both a philosophical perspective on God and the logical tools which may be employed to work on bridging the gap between reason and belief.

### **Please Support Cornerstone Bookshop, Edinburgh!**

The Cornerstone Bookshop is situated under St John's Scottish Episcopal Church at the west end of Princes Street in Edinburgh, within sight of the castle. Through the Edinburgh diocesan magazine it has put out a plea for support during current difficult trading conditions. While nominally Anglican, Cornerstone is an important resource for liberal Christianity, social, political and theological, and I would urge PCN adherents to help to keep it going. The only alternative in the centre of Edinburgh is Wesley Owen, which has a marked evangelical flavour. The bookshop is conveniently next door to a café --- where in good weather you can have your coffee outside in the graveyard --- and a fair trade shop, as well as being close to other city centre attractions. **Duncan Craig**

## Built of hopes and dreams and visions

*In a time of much darkness, gloom and anxiety, Barack Obama's Inauguration in January was a promise of hope for many people - Progressive Christians included. We print first Bishop Gene Robinson's prayer at the Lincoln Memorial on the eve of the inauguration; and then part of the President's address at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington a few days later.*

### **Bishop Robinson's Prayer**

Welcome to Washington! The fun is about to begin, but first, please join me in pausing for a moment, to ask God's blessing upon our nation and our next president.

O God of our many understandings, we pray that you will...

Bless us with tears – for a world in which over a billion people exist on less than a dollar a day, where young women from many lands are beaten and raped for wanting an education, and thousands die daily from malnutrition, malaria, and AIDS.

Bless us with anger – at discrimination, at home and abroad, against refugees and immigrants, women, people of colour, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

Bless us with discomfort – at the easy, simplistic "answers" we've preferred to hear from our politicians, instead of the truth, about ourselves and the world, which we need to face if we are going to rise to the challenges of the future.

Bless us with patience – and the knowledge that none of what ails us will be "fixed" anytime soon, and the understanding that our new president is a human being, not a messiah.

Bless us with humility – open to understanding that our own needs must always be balanced with those of the world.

Bless us with freedom from mere tolerance – replacing it with a genuine respect and warm embrace of our differences, and an understanding that in our diversity, we are stronger.

Bless us with compassion and generosity – remembering that every religion's God judges us by

the way we care for the most vulnerable in the human community, whether across town or across the world.

And God, we give you thanks for your child Barack, as he assumes the office of President of the United States.

Give him wisdom beyond his years, and inspire him with Lincoln's reconciling leadership style, President Kennedy's ability to enlist our best efforts, and Dr. King's dream of a nation for ALL the people.

Give him a quiet heart, for our Ship of State needs a steady, calm captain in these times.

Give him stirring words, for we will need to be inspired and motivated to make the personal and common sacrifices necessary to facing the challenges ahead.

Make him colour-blind, reminding him of his own words that under his leadership, there will be neither red nor blue states, but the United States.

Help him remember his own oppression as a minority, drawing on that experience of discrimination, that he might seek to change the lives of those who are still its victims.

Give him the strength to find family time and privacy, and help him remember that even though he is president, a father only gets one shot at his daughters' childhoods.

And please, God, keep him safe. We know we ask too much of our presidents, and we're asking FAR too much of this one. We know the risk he and his wife are taking for all of us, and we implore you, O good and great God, to keep him safe. Hold him in the palm of your hand – that he might do the work we have called him to do, that he might find joy in this impossible calling, and that in the end, he might lead us as a nation to a place of integrity, prosperity and peace.

Amen.

## Faith should be about hope not hate by Barack Obama

Far too often, we have seen faith wielded as a tool to divide us from one another – as an excuse for prejudice and intolerance. Wars have been waged. Innocents have been slaughtered. For centuries, entire religions have been persecuted, all in the name of perceived righteousness.

There is no doubt that the very nature of faith means that some of our beliefs will never be the same. We read from different texts. We follow different edicts. We subscribe to different accounts of how we came to be here and where we're going next – and some subscribe to no faith at all.

But no matter what we choose to believe, let us remember that there is no religion whose central tenet is hate. There is no God who condones taking the life of an innocent human being. This much we know.

We know too that whatever our differences, there is one law that binds all great religions together. Jesus told us to "love thy neighbour as thyself." The Torah commands, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow." In Islam, there is a hadith that reads "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." And the same is true for Buddhists and Hindus; for followers of Confucius and for humanists. It is, of course, the Golden Rule – the call to love one another; to understand one another; to treat with dignity and respect those with whom we share a brief moment on this Earth.

It is an ancient rule; a simple rule; but also one of the most challenging. For it asks each of us to take some measure of responsibility for the well-being of people we may not know or worship with or agree with on every issue. Sometimes, it asks us to reconcile with bitter enemies or resolve ancient hatreds. And that requires a living, breathing, active

faith. It requires us not only to believe, but to do – to give something of ourselves for the benefit of others and the betterment of our world.

In this way, the particular faith that motivates each of us can promote a greater good for all of us.

Instead of driving us apart, our varied beliefs can bring us together to feed the hungry and comfort the afflicted; to make peace where there is strife and rebuild what has broken; to lift up those who have fallen on hard times. This is not only our call as people of faith, but our duty as citizens of America, and it will be the purpose of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships that I'm announcing later today.

The goal of this office will not be to favour one religious group over another – or even religious groups over secular groups. It will simply be to work on behalf of those organizations that want to work on behalf of our communities, and to do so without blurring the line that our founders wisely drew between church and state. This work is important, because whether it's a secular group advising families facing foreclosure or faith-based groups providing job-training to those who need work, few are closer to what's happening on our streets and in our neighbourhoods than these organizations. People trust them. Communities rely on them. And we will help them.

We will also reach out to leaders and scholars around the world to foster a more productive and peaceful dialogue on faith. I don't expect divisions to disappear overnight, nor do I believe that long-held views and conflicts will suddenly vanish. But I do believe that if we can talk to one another openly and honestly, then perhaps old rifts will start to mend and new partnerships will begin to emerge. In a world that grows smaller by the day, perhaps we

can begin to crowd out the destructive forces of zealotry and make room for the healing power of understanding.

This is my hope. This is my prayer.

I believe this good is possible because my faith teaches me that all is possible, but I also believe because of what I have seen and what I have lived.

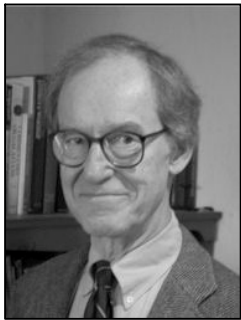
I was not raised in a particularly religious household. I had a father who was born a Muslim but became an atheist, grandparents who were non-practicing Methodists and Baptists, and a mother who was sceptical of organized religion, even as she was the kindest, most spiritual person I've ever known. She was the one who taught me as a child to love, and to understand, and to do unto others as I would want done.

I didn't become a Christian until many years later, when I moved to the South Side of Chicago after college. It happened not because of indoctrination or a sudden revelation, but because I spent month

after month working with church folks who simply wanted to help neighbours who were down on their luck – no matter what they looked like, or where they came from, or who they prayed to. It was on those streets, in those neighbourhoods, that I first heard God's spirit beckon me. It was there that I felt called to a higher purpose – his purpose.

In different ways and different forms, it is that spirit and sense of purpose that drew friends and neighbours to that first prayer breakfast in Seattle all those years ago, during another trying time for our nation. It is what led friends and neighbours from so many faiths and nations here today. We come to break bread and give thanks and seek guidance, but also to rededicate ourselves to the mission of love and service that lies at the heart of all humanity. As St. Augustine once said, "Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you."

## In appreciation of Hugh Dawes by James Rowe Adams



*Jim Adams, founder of the Center for Progressive Christianity in the United States and still its distinguished honorary advisor, was approached to write this piece by our new Chair, John Churcher. The editor had no part in its commissioning. For once, however, he is content to act as one under authority!*

If Christianity in the industrialized world survives the twenty-first century as anything more than an odd sect, much of the credit will belong to Hugh Dawes. In 1992 with the publication of his provocative book, *Freeing the Faith*, he helped to crystallize the progressive thinking in the church that had been going on for some time among professionals but out of the public view. Hugh saw that for the church to have a useful future, Christianity must become free of superstition, prejudice, and dogma. Hugh had developed a vision of a rational, inclusive, and generous church.

By 1994, *Freeing the Faith* caught the attention of a group in the United States that was organizing a network they had named The Center for Progressive Christianity. They asked him to join their executive council, a position he held for 12 years. Hugh offered his insight and wisdom to his colleagues on the council and agreed to be their featured speaker at major conferences held in various parts of the country—such as Seattle, Houston, Cape Cod, and southern California. With his low-key British humor and astute observations of the religious scene, Hugh won

the respect and affection of his American audiences.

As TCPC grew, Hugh was one of the first to realize that it was becoming primarily a U.S. network and that other countries would need to develop their own. With that thought in mind he helped to organize "A Day Conference on Open Christianity" for the U.K. held in November of 2001 at Leeds. The leadership that emerged from that conference drew in others who had similar concerns. With Hugh's guidance, they launched what has become the Progressive Christianity Network-Britain. Once the leadership group recognized that the time had come for having a more formal organization, Hugh was the obvious choice to chair the network.

One other contribution Hugh Dawes made to the progressive Christianity movement in both America and Britain deserves public recognition. He introduced Jill Sandham to the TCPC council. The members of the council immediately and unanimously invited Jill to join them. She played a key role in their deliberations for almost four years. In addition, starting with the Leeds conference, Jill took on a variety of tasks for PCN-Britain, all her responsibilities loosely grouped under the title, Secretary of the Network.

On a personal note, my wife Ginny and I have found our lives immeasurably enriched by our acquaintance with Jill and Hugh. Not only have they been outstanding leaders of the progressive Christianity movement on two continents, but also they have proved themselves to be delightful friends.

## From the editor

Editing this issue of the newsletter has been an odder experience than usual. I had originally hoped to put a piece of my own in, but with so many really good contributions from others – not least from Edinburgh - that would have been a misuse of editorial freedom!

There has also been the feeling of being the person waking up to find his own obituary in the morning newspaper. John Churcher and Jim Adams have both been extraordinarily generous in what they have written about me – far more so than I deserve, and way more than any actual obituarist will ever be.

To be first a midwife for and then the chair of the Network has been a tremendous privilege over the past eight years – longer than that with

my earlier engagement with TCPC in the United States. I remain, I promise you, totally committed to PCN-Britain. I shall continue to edit this newsletter, and I look forward to opportunities to do other things I have not had time for up until now – including visiting local groups and local churches.

I am delighted that John has now taken on the position of chair. He has great gifts – clear already in the Management Committee setting - and will guide us into new places. If Christianity is to survive as a vehicle for faith in the west, it can only be as Progressive Christianity. For me it matters that it does survive. That is the challenge for us all.

**Hugh Dawes**

## Ian Lawton's Tour

Ian Lawton, minister at Christ Community Church, Spring Lake, Michigan, is speaking across Britain in March. We list those venues which we hope he won't yet have reached before you receive this newsletter.

**Monday 16<sup>th</sup> March:** London Herne Hill PCN-Britain Group, at St Faith's Church, Red Post Hill, SE24 9JQ, 7.45 p.m. for 8 p.m.

**Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> March:** Manchester Integral Group 7.30 p.m. at St Agnes Church, Gorton Lane, North Reddish, Stockport, SK5 6NX.

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> March:** Manchester PCN-Britain Group 7.30 p.m. at St Agnes Church, Gorton Lane, North Reddish, Stockport, SK5 6NX.

**Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March:** Malvern PCN-Britain Group, 7.30 p.m. at St Mathias', Malvern Link.

**Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> March:** at the PCN-Britain Conference, Birmingham.

**Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> March:** 'Permission to Speak' / Hertfordshire PCN-Britain Group, 3.30 p.m. - 5 p.m. at the Backhouse Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City.

**Booking information:** Please contact John Churcher for further details  
john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk

**Copydate for the next newsletter.** Contributions for the June issue need all to be with the editor (hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk) by **Friday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2009**, and earlier if possible. Pieces with a summer slant – the natural world, green matters, celebration - would all be particularly welcome. So would a bit more news from local groups; people like it, but few have sent it this time. Please put **NEWSLETTER** in the header of any email, or on the envelope of any posted contributions.

The **Progressive Christianity Network – Britain (Registered Charity No 1102164)** is itself part of a wider international network of Progressive Christian organisations, and has links in particular with the Centre for Progressive Christianity in the United States. PCN Britain's website is online at [www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk), with information and resources. TCPC's website also offers a wealth of material for open and progressive Christian understanding. Visit it at [www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org). You can email us at [info@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:info@pcnbritain.org.uk), phone us on 020 7274 1338, or mail us at PCN Britain, St Faith's Vicarage, 62 Red Post Hill, London SE24 9JQ.

The members of the Management Committee are:

Chair: John Churcher  
[john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Vice chair: Charles Hedley  
[charles.hedley@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:charles.hedley@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Secretary: Jill Sandham  
[jill.sandham@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:jill.sandham@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Treasurer: Duncan Craig  
[Duncan.craig@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:Duncan.craig@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Adrian Alker [adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Hugh Dawes [hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Philip Goodwin [philip.goodwin@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:philip.goodwin@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Sandra Griffiths [sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Mary McMahan [mary.mcmahan@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:mary.mcmahan@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Anne Padget [anne.padget@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:anne.padget@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Brian Wilson [brian.wilson@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:brian.wilson@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Administrator and web manager (till March 31<sup>st</sup>): Olivia McLennan [olivia.mclennan@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:olivia.mclennan@pcnbritain.org.uk)