

Experiences and Reflections on starting a PCN group

These experiences are related in detail by the author in the hope that for any prospective Group Convenor they may answer any queries or settle any anxieties they may have.

A - PRELIMINARIES

These observations are addressed primarily to someone who has been asked (or more probably been reluctantly persuaded) to take on the task of Coordinator/Convenor for a newly formed Group. But it may be helpful to encourage all members of the new group to read it, since a degree of self-awareness and group-awareness is important, if the project is to avoid disharmony or disappointment.

No two PCN Groups are the same and there is no official template for the formation of a Group. The contents of this text are “what it says on the tin”: thoughts and suggestions only.

1. Motivations

It is important to establish, and discuss, why the Group wishes to form and what its expectations are. It is an important principle for PCN, as a network, that it does not seek to operate in opposition to any established church or worshipping group. It seeks only to support, encourage, and resource those who are seeking in their own way to explore their faith – or lack of it – and find that their needs are not adequately met by what is available locally. In that sense PCN exists to complement, not to replace, and very much hopes that its members will be helped to remain part of their worshipping community.

That said, PCN does aspire to be liberal and progressive in outlook, and as an organisation to be totally inclusive in the widest possible sense of the word. It is avowedly Christian, but welcomes those of all faiths and none, who wish to explore the basis of their own belief system – or lack of it.

PCN Groups are formed both within and outside existing church and worshipping communities. They form with or without the active support of local presiding ministers or leaders. It is important to be aware of these sensitivities, to avoid divisiveness, and not to give the impression of being in competition with or threatening to the ethos of existing communities.

PCN’s Credo is set out in the so-called Eight Points, and any Group that wishes to call itself a PCN Group should feel able to assent to and support the principles set out therein.

2. The Eight Points

PCN Britain recognises the value and significance of tradition and the scriptures in the shaping of Christian faith. It takes the *Eight Points* first formulated by the Centre for Progressive Christianity of America and adapted for the UK by PCN Britain, not as a creed or statement of faith but as an expression of how we live as Christians. They are to be found on the PCN publicity flyers, and on the website.

We are Christians who ...

1. Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus;
2. Recognise the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the gateway to God’s realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us;
3. Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus’ name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God’s feast for all peoples;

4. Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including but not limited to:
 - a. Believers and agnostics
 - b. Conventional Christians and questioning sceptics
 - c. Women and men
 - d. Those of all sexual orientations and gender identities
 - e. Those of all races and cultures
 - f. Those of all classes and abilities
 - g. Those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope
5. Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe;
6. Find more grace in the search for understanding that we do in dogmatic certainty, more value in questioning than in absolutes;
7. Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people; protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation; and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers;
8. Recognise that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

3. Relations with PCN

1. PCN is a registered charity, and this has implications for its member Groups. For example, the proceeds of any Group event with which PCN has agreed to be associated and for which a fee is charged must be passed through the PCN accounts. For more details, see the booklet "Starting a new PCN Group" on the website on the 'Resources' page.
2. PCN is run by an elected management committee, which meets regularly, and holds an AGM each year. It has no "head office" and its officers, including its one part-time Administrator, all operate from home. It depends largely on the voluntary work of its Committee and membership, and for its finances almost entirely on the membership fee and supplementary donations.
3. It does not insist that all members of a Group must be PCN members, but the Group Convener must be. It does ask Group Conveners to make their members aware of the importance of a subscribing membership to the financial viability of PCN, and at some stage invite their members to join. The annual fee is currently £30, modest especially if paid monthly or quarterly, by Direct Debit or Standing Order - think of it as 58p per week of church offering. There is a minimum fee of £15 for anyone who feels unable to subscribe fully.
4. The Group Convener will receive a PCN email address, may insert group information into the Newsletter via the administrator, will be included in the group listing on the PCN website, and will have access to the GCs' Resource Base page on the website forum.

B - GETTING STARTED

Starting

There is no single pattern. This writer saw an advert in the PCN Newsletter saying that X wished to start a PCN Group in the area and giving a contact number. He mentioned it to his Vicar who suggested two or three other names, and thereafter friends recruited friends. Other groups form

because like-minded members of a worshipping community want something different or more stimulating than their community currently offers. One small group simply meets in a pub.

How Many

Some groups are large; others very small. Most are between ten and twenty-five. Ten can meet in a house; twenty-five probably cannot. The writer's group have agreed that if we get to fifteen, we should probably divide. There again one group has 40-plus registered members and often 20-plus at a meeting, but the consensus is that the relaxed ambience allows all members to feel free to contribute, and hence without any need to divide.

Structure

Informality is the keynote, but it is important to have someone who acts as convenor/coordinator and (probably) someone who acts as a "Leader" or "presenter" for each meeting or for an agreed period. For groups that meet frequently (e.g. once a week) and for those that follow a formal Course, the demands on the "Leader" can be considerable in terms of preparation of materials and a structure for each meeting.

Recruiting members

This can present problems. If you rely on members bringing in friends, there is a real danger that the group will become somewhat incestuous in outlook, or a mutual admiration society. But a basis of mutual trust is best ensured initially by the security of meeting among friends. If you go public and invite applications, there is a risk of domination by those who come with an 'agenda', or by the opinionated and talkative. A degree of compatibility in the membership is desirable. But it is important to remember the PCN principle of inclusiveness. All are, or should be, welcome.

One obvious enquiry should be to the Administrator, who can identify PCN members in your area. Likewise you should enquire of 'friendly' churches on the 'progressive churches map' which was researched and drawn up recently.

If you feel adventurous, or have contacts, publicise via the local press, radio, church notices and magazines, Churches Together website.

Rules

The potential problems in the previous paragraph shows why it is important to have rules of procedure within discussion – no interruption, agreement to disagree, disciplined refusal to hog the conversation, confidentiality, and a degree of encouragement from the Leader of the day to the quieter voices to make their ideas heard.

Communications

E-mail is cheapest and easiest; but not all have internet access. Neighbours will sometimes agree to pass on copy. Minutes are not necessary, but reminders of the next meeting probably are.

Where to Meet

Members homes reduces costs; but not all can accommodate a large group. It is important to be sensitive to this. If the church has a hall which it is willing to make available, that helps to eliminate

problems. But there may be costs of rental, light and heat, the key etc. However a degree of impersonality may seem an advantage - or not!

Officers, rules etc.

Can liberals, by definition, ever agree on anything? Some mild degree of structure probably helps. A guillotine can be a useful discipline for the group as a whole; some means of curtailing the voluble while encouraging the reserved may be desirable; the importance of confidentiality and trust is very important – especially, perhaps, if some members are practising clergy with congregations less open-minded than themselves!

Prayer and Meditation?

Should a meeting have space for prayer? To some this is a sine qua non; to others, it is a kind of inhibitor, causing a feeling of artificiality. The group must work this out and may find a compromise in starting or finishing with Silence. It may decide to leave the decision to the Leader of any particular session.

Money:

There is no such thing as a free lunch. Groups resolve their finances in their own way, some by chipping in a pound or two each time; others by sharing duties of hosting, convening etc.

C - TOPICS, SUBJECTS, ACTIVITIES

1. It is probably important for the Group to have a programme, however loosely constructed. This will give focus, purpose, meaning, where otherwise there may be a drift towards a sense of futility.
2. The obvious programmes are those available through PCN, of which two obvious examples are the relatively expensive DVD *Living the Question* series or the relatively cheap booklet *Together in Hope*, produced as a cooperative venture in preparation for the 2008 Lambeth Conference by a number of progressive and inclusive organisations.
3. Another approach may be to explore the Eight Points, for a which a Study Guide is available from PCN. Alternatively members may prefer to read and discuss a particular book.
4. A surprisingly successful approach for one particular group was to have each member (if willing – one or two of ours felt unable to) in turn telling their “Faith Story” or “Journey”. So far from running dry, in every case there proved to be a stimulating discussion, and the very varied experiences recounted were often profoundly moving.
5. Though groups generally so far seem to have been discussion groups, it is to be wondered if, as the movement develops, some groups may choose to supplement cerebral with practical activity. Local projects, meeting local needs or helping local organisations, are as admirable as any other form of activity.

In the end, as St Augustine once observed, God welcomes his children by whatever road they come. Every Group will bring something different, something unique, to the feast. And in our diversity we shall find our unity.

D - FURTHER RESOURCES

1. One of PCN's strategic aims for the next three years is to produce a series of small booklets on key issues and topics. These, it is hoped, will provide inexpensive material for Group exploration.
2. There is a Group Conveners' resources page on the PCN website forum where GCs can input, for the use of others, discussion topics which from first-hand experience have prompted particularly active and useful discussions. This page is accessible to Group Convenors only.
3. Another possibility is to download sermons and essays from the increasing number of websites and blogs available on the internet. Bishop John Shelby Spong publishes a free weekly Q&A article, and for subscribers a weekly essay. The Chair of PCN has launched his own independent website, 'Permission to Speak', which, though not a PCN "product", offers challenging material which lends itself to discussion.

E - FURTHER ACTIVITIES

Attendance at main PCN activities as a group is rewarding, and is enhanced if your group members go together. These activities can be the one-day conferences where there will be a leading speaker, also the AGM is mainly speaker-cum-mini-conference orientated as soon as business has been done, and finally there are weekend retreats. Non-PCN members are equally welcome.

A possibility, yet to be tried, is the proposal of developing Regional Hubs, to act as a focus and source of stimulus for Groups in a given area. The hope is that a number of such Groups will together run their own Regional Event, as a way of encouraging the current membership and attracting additional members. The publicity would also help to make the unaware and indifferent realise that there is another story to be told besides that of fundamentalism or decline.

Once established, there is no reason why a single Group with the confidence, expertise and resources cannot similarly stage its own event. But again it is important that the organisers acquaint themselves fully with the laws governing charitable status. These important topics and more are covered in the booklet 'Starting a new PCN Group'.

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Appendix 1

A FIRST MEETING

Here, for illustration, is an Agenda for the inaugural meeting of our group, followed by the Minute (deliberately designated merely an "aide-memoire") of that same meeting. Both have been rendered anonymous. They may be helpful in illustrating one approach to launching a new group. After each item of the "Minute", comments are added in italics. They were not part of the original document. The description of the Agenda as "non-prescriptive" was the convenor's attempt not to seem too bossy.

1. Informal (Non- Prescriptive!) Agenda

(Modified from the original in the light of comments or suggestions received from members)

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Recommended principles from PCN

Confidentiality >> Trust >> Confidence

Restraint: let everyone be heard; let silence be respected

Inclusiveness: All are welcome irrespective ofetc (see The Eight Points)

Other suggestions

3. Recognising that everyone comes with their own agenda, would people like to say what they hope to get (and not get?) from the meetings? Has anyone read the blog of pluralistspeaks.blogspot.com? Does it help?

4. Group title?..... PCN Group – Other

5. Becoming members of PCN?

6. Convenor/Secretary for admin? Leader for each meeting?

7. Communications - Does everyone have email?

8. Meetings: How often?/When/Where?/Timings?/ Transport?

Numbers/ Guests (policy needed)?

Recruiting members

Spreading the progressive gospel

9. Report from Kendal Meeting. (Discussion of *Living the Question* DVD)

10. The PCN Research Project: Chair of PCN has asked for Group and individual help.

11. Structure of Meetings: Refreshments/Symbolic Meal?

Topics – Programme – Who chooses? – Who introduces?

12. Possible starting points:

The Eight Points

Our personal spiritual paths – a series of sessions led by members in turn on this topic, those that are willing. We have one volunteer prepared to start it.

Topic randomly chosen and introduced by individuals

Books read and discussed

PCN DVD such as *Living the Questions* 1 and/or 2

Invited speakers from other faiths

Other

13. AOB

14. Finally:

Do we want to continue? When, where, shall we next meet and what topic?

2. Aide memoire of the Inaugural Meeting

Present: Names

The Group met on Tuesday October 2007 at as guests of XXX and YYY, for whose hospitality we were very grateful.

We agreed

1. that what was said in group meetings was to be respected as a confidence and should not to be repeated.

(This is important – it builds confidence and honesty)

2. that we would call ourselves the XYZ PCN Group, so as to encourage interest across a reasonably wide area.

(Deliberately avoiding any linkage with a single church or community)

3. that ultimately membership of PCN was a matter for individuals, but if most of us were not members, it would be difficult in conscience to use the PCN title. For some, formal membership might be a difficulty. We would make a decision after three months. The cost of individual membership seemed high and the possibility of group membership and couples' membership merited

exploration.

(**Action:** DDD will enquire further.)

(In fact PCN is very flexible on this – see A.3.3. above - and there was no need to force the issue)

4. that we would not have a formal Chair or Leader, but that someone would volunteer to lead each meeting. XXX offered to lead the next meeting and issued a document. Other possible topics/formats were discussed and there was some interest in the PCN DVD *Living the Question*, which was being evaluated by the Kendal group. But for the time being we would stick to ad hoc decisions at each meeting.

(**Action:** YYY to try to source the DVD)

(In fact the cost of LTQ proved an inhibiting factor and it was not pursued. PCN now has a lending system, thankfully)

5. that it was necessary to have a convenor/secretary just to coordinate meetings. YYY said s/he was willing to do this until someone else offered to take on the task.

(Costs to the convenor could become a problem. Email reduces these and meeting with a different host each time shares the burden)

6. that meetings would be monthly, with different members as hosts, as far as possible; that refreshment should be limited to coffee (and perhaps biscuits!) at the start, and normally the timing would be 7.30 – 9.00 pm., probably on Monday or Tuesday towards the start of each month.

(Less than once a month probably weakens continuity; once a week is pretty challenging for Leaders and would-be regular attenders, and probably hard to sustain unless a group is quite large. (The limit to refreshments was deliberate - to avoid competitive hospitality)

7. that we would welcome guests and new members of all creeds or none, and we strongly endorse the inclusive philosophy of PCN; if the group became too large we would be happy to split, but we took no view of what was an optimum membership or size of meeting. It would be a help to let the Convenor know the names of guests, so that s/he could warn our host in good time and, if necessary, forward reading material etc.

(There is a genuine problem here. Too small a group quickly begins to feel inadequate; numbers can be hard to recruit; size can be create its own difficulties. Open discussion is essential)

8. that the next meeting (led by XXX) would take place at 7.30 pm in December, at (next door to the pub) as guests of BBB.

9. that the third meeting (leader as yet undecided) would take place at 7.30 in, January 2008, at as guests of CCC.

(A programme, however informal or tenuous, is important. A Group needs to see where it is going)

10. that as far as possible communications should be by email and that everyone would send the Convenor an email giving address, telephone number, email address. No-one seemed worried about the need to keep email addresses confidential, which was a great relief to the technologically challenged convenor.

11. Matters discussed within our examination of future topics for discussion included: a) the difficulties of answering the PCN Questionnaire on PCN-Supporting churches; b) other “progressive” groups, such as Sea of Faith, Affirming Catholicism, Inclusive Church, and others; c) the concept and function of “story” within the debate on biblical literalism; d) the importance of combating biblical fundamentalism.

At the end, we agreed unanimously that we wished the Group to continue.