

Progressive Voices



Sept 2023, PV46

Our Need For God

**Before each of us lies the canyon of non-being;
the abyss that we must all face at the end;
the place of our non-existence
that we all face with horror,
for we shall no longer be!**

**It is into this terror that God emerges,
as our saviour from worthlessness,
to give point to our lives;
to provide something
to which we can
appeal.**

**For, if God is there eternally,
then mankind may also have eternal value.
We may play out our lives on a larger stage.
We may have meaning to our existence;
may even, as a further conjecture,
find worth beyond the grave.**

**Thus our God rescues us from the terror of non-being
generated by our realisation of personal existence,
and the unknown that lies after our death.**

**We need a God to console our fears
of a lack of personal purpose,
but does this give reality to
that divinity?**

Edward Conder

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Welcome

Firstly, thank you to all of the folk that put fingers to keyboards and built up my reserves of copy. It was nice to be spoilt for choice and welcome some new and returning contributors into the pages of PV.

There is a reflective tone to this edition, which is quite appropriate as we are in our 20th year. We share reflections from partner organisations on what they think the main priority for the progressive movement is right now. Ponder the Bible, Jesus, Heaven, and how history seems to repeat itself. We discover potential fellow travellers in unexpected places. Carla Grosch-Miller concludes her exploration of the Church and Sex and Martin Smith shares the transcript of a talk he shared following the death of George Floyd.

Welcome to the 46th edition of PV.

Enjoy!



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Chair's Letter

Dear friends,

In one of his many highly quotable lines the late Bishop Spong commented that, "The church is like a swimming pool. Most of the noise comes from the shallow end." It certainly does feel that way sometimes, particularly when the media reports on 'reaction' from Christians on hot topic issues and we witness the same tired old arguments being trotted out for another turn around the paddock.

The problem seems to be one of nuance. Of course, some people in the Church will have simplistic or conservative attitudes – at times I probably do too, maybe without realising it, but engaging with the wider spectrum of Christian thinking is much more complex. Across the Church, we are in full agreement, it seems, on remarkably little.

Depending upon your point of view, this lack of agreement is either a blessing or a curse, sometimes it's suggested as both. I recently heard a speaker bemoan the fact that there are 42,000 Christian denominations. "It's sinful!" he exclaimed. Heads nodded around the room. The speaker who followed him seemed to take a different approach, talking about diversity in the Church she commented "diversity is a gift from God." The same set of heads nodded around the room.

I tackled the first speaker about this apparent disparity in the pub afterwards. "Don't these two ideas cancel one another out?" I asked. He leaned back and thought about it. "I suppose that if you could convince me that the different denominations were separated for good reason, then I might be okay with it," he said, thoughtfully, "but a lot of the time it just seems to be because people can't get on." We had a long discussion about his two-word proclamation.

When we get into discussion with people, sitting around the table, or, in this particular case, in a beer garden, we can start to get into the complexities of an argument that may otherwise seem simplistic. A bold, bald, statement like 'it's sinful' makes a neat

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rhetorical point but it doesn't stand much scrutiny. We could apply the same critique to Bishop Spong's quote too – it catches the eye and makes a clever point, but is it really sufficient?

One of the things that simplistic statements do is present binary options, we're either *this* or *that*, memorably we're either 'remain' or 'leave', for instance, which doesn't allow any room for the complexities of argument. I'm not convinced that it's good enough for people who take a progressive approach to Christianity to allow ourselves to fall into talk of simple binaries. That feels a little like 'shallow end' stuff to me.

For this edition of PV I asked some of our friends in other progressive Christian organisations to let me know what they think the main priority for the progressive movement is, right now. Maybe that was too simple a question. But what particularly interested me was the overlap in their answers, I won't spoil the surprise, but I will say that if we are to work together more effectively then we will need to find ways of moving past simplistic binaries and be ready to sit around the table to talk about our differences in perspective.

The late physicist turned philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, when he was asked about the concept of truth, remarked that there is no such thing as a whole truth. "All truths are half-truths. It is trying to treat them as whole truths that plays the devil," he said. I like to think about this in terms of mosaic, the full picture doesn't emerge until all the pieces have found their place.

This idea serves to highlight the importance of bringing together a range of voices and perspectives. From my point of view, the progressive 'conversation' needs to be one which does precisely this - brings people together while remaining open to the subtlety of argument and the many sidedness of truth. Scarcely a trustee meeting goes by without some discussion of what the word 'progressive' means, and this, for me at least, helps to explain it.



MEMBERSHIP

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Imagined teachings of Jesus

The analogy of the whale

Later that day, when Jesus and the disciples were preparing supper back in their camp by the sea of Galilee, Thomas said, "Master, would you tell us more about what you said earlier today - about prayer being the breath of the soul?"

Jesus called over a group of children who were playing nearby on the beach. They often appeared from the local village around supper time. They were used to talking with Jesus and sat around him in the sandy grass. "Children" said Jesus, "Who can tell me - what is the largest creature that lives in the sea?" One of them, a small grubby boy, sprang to his feet. "The mighty whale, Rabbi. My father told me he saw one once whilst fishing far out to sea. He said it was at least ten carts in length." Jesus walked over to the boy and ruffled his hair. "Yes son, you are correct. And truly I tell you all, we are like the mighty whales of the sea - our sea is the world, but we must also breathe."

"Master, I do not understand" said Thomas. "Listen carefully." said Jesus. "The mighty whale lives in the sea. That is where it eats and sleeps and produces its young. The sea is the whale's world. But it also must return to the surface again and again, to fill its great lungs with air." Jesus stood up and looked out across the Sea of Galilee, to the hills on the other side. "Our world is like the whale's ocean. It is where we eat and sleep and produce our young. But beyond this world there is another, as strange to us as the air is to the whale. A place we must visit again and again to fill our souls with God's wonderful life. Taking such a breath is prayer and without it our souls will slowly die just as surely as the whale will die without its great breath."

On many religions

A few days later, at about the ninth hour, a group of men and women who had travelled a great distance came to Jesus and his disciples at their camp by the Sea of Galilee. Their leader, a tall serene man, approached Jesus and said, "O Wise One, stories of your knowledge and divine power have travelled many miles to the East, and we were inspired to trace them back to their holy source, that we may taste their pure, spiritual waters. At last, we have found you." "My friends", Jesus said, "You are very welcome here. Come, sit. You must be tired after your journey. We will find you some refreshments."

The group of men and women who had travelled many miles, gathered around Jesus and his disciples and sat down in the long wild grass. One of the disciples brought two large jars of water and a number of clay mugs. Another brought a selection of olives, figs and flatbreads. After they had eaten



Robin Drummond

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Jesus said "You may ask me one question and I will answer truthfully." The leader spoke. "O Wise One, in our land there are many religions, each dividing into many groups, each group with its own distinct spirituality. God has become clothed in a patchwork cloak of many threads and colours!" The man paused and looked around at those who had travelled with him. "But we seek God Himself and not merely his outer tunic. Therefore, we ask you, O Wise One, what is the one true religion?"

Jesus knelt to the ground, reached out his hand to a buzzing patch of grass and allowed a grasshopper to leap onto his arm. He then looked at the man and his companions, their tired faces squinting in the late afternoon sun. "I tell you the truth, you should not be surprised when you encounter such variety. Consider the living world, how it is full of creatures and plants as different as they could possibly be. Think of the grasshopper, the eagle and the catfish. Look at the fig tree, the mustard plant and the mighty cedars of Lebanon. It is as clear as the nose on one's face that God loves to work in many different colours. I tell you the truth, there are as many ways to God as there are people in the world." At this the group who had travelled many miles became agitated and began to whisper to each other. "But Wise One", the tall man replied, "we have travelled many miles and faced many hardships so that we might see through such variety and into the Eternal - into God's eyes."

"Trying to see through life," said Jesus "is like trying to see through a beautiful painting -there is nothing on the other side! No, life is not something to be seen through. Rather, we are invited to see God in life. Our task is to learn to see the Eternal in that which is here and now; to become conscious of heaven on earth and let such light transform us into Sons of God." Jesus continued, "You asked 'What is the one, true religion?' but in asking such a question you are like one who asked 'What is the one, true fish?'" At this some of those listening laughed. Even the tall man smiled at Jesus' words, seeing for the first time something of the folly of his question. Jesus continued. "The sea contains many kinds of fish and new species are discovered often. Stay with us for a few days and I will tell you about a new kind of religion. I will tell you about the kingdom of God." So the men and women stayed with Jesus and they talked about many things.

The Church and Sex #2

Self-inflicted wounds and wounding

Since the Reformation and particularly in the 20th and 21st century, the change in societal sexual mores has accelerated. (Including increased lifespan, decreased child mortality, contraception, and women's liberation, as well the pornification of society and environmental sustainability.) The sex question – who can or should engage in sexual activity and under what circumstances, who can marry and whose marriages will be blessed by the Church – is one that has been a flashpoint for division. Concurrently, there have been significant shifts in philosophical and theological thinking.

I subtitled this article *Self-inflicted wounds and wounding*. My basic premise is that the Church has wounded people (Christians and others) through some of its words and deeds, actions and inactions, in the area of sex. We have the opportunity and the responsibility to look closely at how we've done that and how attention to our theological method may assist us to stop harming people and to further develop of the tradition.

Woundings include causing sexual shame, contributing to sexual dysfunction, promoting sexual ignorance, confusing form (a marriage license) for content (a loving relationship) and disrespecting loving relationships, and encouraging people to stay in abusive marriages.

There are two areas of wounding I want to highlight. The first is clergy sexual misconduct. It is alarmingly prevalent. It's hard to get a bead on the actual numbers as it requires truthful self-reporting. In 2002, CTBI's report *Time for Action: Sexual abuse, the Church and a new dawn for survivors* reported that ¼ of Church of England priests surveyed admitted that they had engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviour with a person not their spouse. James Poling, a leading expert in the field, estimates that a minimum of 10-20% of clergy have at some time sexualised a pastoral or mentoring relationship with an adult to whom they have a duty of care. Other studies suggest it may be closer to 40%. A Canadian study found that ministers were twice as likely to transgress sexual boundaries than secular counsellors.

Why so high? Several factors are at work, including these: Ministers/priests are powerful (though they may not feel powerful) and susceptible people (possibly with a tendency to carry narcissistic wounds that manifest in a craving to be a helper or saviour). We are in stressful jobs without clear boundaries, many of us working without supervision (secular counsellors do not do that), inadequately trained in interpersonal psychology (e.g., the power of transference and countertransference), we are invited into intimate situations, we work in an

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ecclesiastical culture dominated by sexual shame and endemic secrecy, and we have been shaped by scriptural and societal ethics that view women as sexual and domestic servants to men (most offenders are male with female victims).

People who transgress sexual boundaries of people in their care may be 'wanderers' whose personal needs spill over into sexualised relationships, or they may be predators, who groom vulnerable women or children.

No Christian denomination is free of clergy sexual misconduct; it is also prevalent in other faith communities: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism. It is a feature of the intimate work in which we are engaged and the religious and cultural contexts within which we live.

The impact can be devastating for individuals, families, the clergy person involved and their family, and for congregations – with effects lasting for decades, as issues of trust and spirituality are touched in all involved. Because we have been ordained, our actions implicate God and the Church. A young woman who was abused in the confessional by her Catholic priest spoke of having been raped *physically, emotionally and spiritually... stealing her self-esteem, confidence and carefree youth... left with an inability to trust or form proper relationships....my soul has been burnt out.* (URC 2006. Preserving the Integrity of the Body: Sexual Ethics within the United Reformed Church. London: United Reformed Church.) And of course, ministerial sexual misconduct impacts the public face of the Church, undermining our credibility to speak about sexual ethics.

The second area of wounding that requires us to think deeply about theological method is the impact of Church teaching on the health and wellbeing of LGBTQI young people and adults. In 2017, the Oasis Foundation published a report entitled *In the Name of Love: The Church, Exclusion and LGB Mental Health Issues*. The most alarming finding was the significantly higher risk of suicide ideation, attempt and completion for young people struggling with their sexuality. I worked from 2016 until recently with the Tragedies and Congregations project, which published an academic book on the practical theology of trauma in 2019. (Warner, M., Southcage, C. Grosch-Miller, C. and ISON, H. (eds.) 2019 Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma. London and NY: Routledge.)

We researched a range of congregational traumas including one church where the fourteen-year-old daughter of a prominent lay family hung herself. She didn't think God could love her because she was queer. The church, a large Evangelical church which had been largely silent on sexual issues, was sparked to serious soul searching and theological reflection. It ended up getting kicked out of the Evangelical Alliance after changing its position on homosexuality. A small number of people left the church with the change, unable to adapt. The Church has continued to thrive with a renewed sense of an inclusive mission.

Theological method

In the 20th century there was an epistemological revolution. There is now in the sciences a recognition that an observer's perception of 'truth' is shaped by the observer's experience and assumptions. (Polanyi, Michael. 1962. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.) In other words, our assumptions and experiences shape, and limit, what we can perceive, in science and in other endeavours. This is at base a recognition of human limitation. The outcome of this shift is that truth is no longer necessarily considered universal, and institutions do not carry the authority they had in the middle of the last century. In theology, American theologian Edward Farley calls this the *crumbling of the House of Authority paradigm* that the church long operated under: the assumption that the truth of all things in God has been revealed once and for all and captured in the stories and symbols that make up the Christian faith. (Farley, Edward. 1988. *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press.) This assumption has been seriously eroded in Western society, contributing to the decline of the faith in the West.

While the authority of scripture and the Church has been eroding, there has also been a rise in the power of experience as a source for theological thinking. Scripture continues to be a primary source in churches but experience, which has long been considered the slipperiest and most problematic source in the quadrilateral of theological sources, has become a leitmotif in general. (I think this is in part a consequence of living in a consumerist capitalist society where personal wellbeing/wealth is the bottom line – it's all about me!) This shift has included taking the experience of the human body seriously as a source for understanding the divine. The development of body theology and its correlate sexual theology is in strong contrast to the body-negativity of the early tradition – recall the anti-matter dualism: human bodies and human desire (thank you, Augustine) were not to be trusted as they were a source of evil.

Experience as a source of theology is both powerful and problematic. It is powerful in that one's personal experience of God is a convincing and converting

reality, think of John Wesley's heart warmed. It is problematic in that experience is subjective and interpreted, and how do we know what is of God?

As suspicious as we are of experience as a source of theology, I suggest to you that it has been the silent partner to Scripture and tradition. The Bible was written to testify to people's experience of God in the world; the witness of scripture is that God is revealed through human experience in the body. (Johnson, Timothy Luke. 2015. *The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art*, Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans, pp.2-3,7.) Tradition, too, bears the fingerprints of experience, developing over time through argument and innovation. (Macintyre, Alisdair. 2007. *After Virtue*, London, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, p.222) Scripture and tradition codify collective experience – in particular the experience of heterosexual males. (Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 2007. 'Feminist Theology: Methodology, Sources and Norms' in *Theological Reflection: Sources*, ed. Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward. London, SCM, p.295.) The patriarchal cultures of the Ancient Near East left more than their fingerprints on the sacred texts; they significantly shaped them. Accordingly, theology has had an inherent ignorance of the experience of God in the lives of the invisible and underclass – until the explosion in the decades of theological scholarship exploring the embodied experience of people of colour, women, and queer people.

How do we know what is of God in human embodied experience? Scripture itself gives us the yardstick: The Gospel of Luke reports that when the followers of John the Baptist asked Jesus 'Are you the one to come?', he replied, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them' (Lk 7:18-20). Likewise, the Johannine community criticised people for not recognising Jesus despite seeing the works that he did in God's name (Jn 10:22-39). In Galatians the faithful are instructed to recognise the works of God by the fruits of the Spirit – attributes that will be visible in the follower's life.

One can discern whether an experience reveals God by looking at the fruits of that experience: Does it beget the flourishing of life, love and justice? Does it call forth action that would enable such flourishing? Rowan Williams conceives of revelation as God establishing Godself among us as 'the loving and nurturing advent of *newness* in human life – grace, forgiveness, empowerment to be agents of forgiveness and liberation'. (Williams, Rowan, 'Trinity and Revelation' in *Theological Reflection: Sources*, *ibid*, p.30 (emphasis in original).) These things are manifested in human experience and recognisable.

Given the importance of experience to the whole theological endeavour and the limitations of a primary source that comes out of ancient cultures, theology is best understood as an inductive art (Johnson, *ibid* at p.7) or as historically situated reflection

and interpretation (Farley, *ibid* at pp.128, 133-162.) that takes seriously human experience in critical and creative conversation with scripture and tradition as revelatory of the divine.

When I teach, after hours exploring the Bible and tradition's portrayal of sex, I ask students to identify **theological foundations** that would enable them to reimagine Christian sexual ethics. They identify such doctrines and principles as: the Imago Dei; the Great Commandment; the mutual, respectful self-giving that is the Trinity; Incarnation; the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit; Covenant theology.

We then consider how biology, psychology and sociology approach sex, review my research findings about the role of sexual expression in human life and consider how sexuality and spirituality are intimately related. (Timmerman, Joan. 1992. *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*, New York, Crossroad.)

The final task of the class is to use the theological foundations they identified and human knowledge from other sources to reimagine a Christian sexual ethics for the 21st century, beginning with the words *Thou shalt*. Why 'thou shalt'? Because a sexual ethic that is all about prohibition is problematic. Punitive, rigid proscriptions of behaviour can actually stimulate rule-breaking ... they can result in the inability to conform, starting off a cycle of guilt, shame and compulsivity. (Bancroft, John. 2009. *Human Sexuality and its Problems*, 3rd ed, Oxford, Elsevier Ltd., p. 332.) Moreover, internalised ethics are far stronger than an imposed external set of rules. Positive regard for self and for sexuality is a foundation for sexual well-being and for ethical behaviour. Attending to sexual formation and sexual-spiritual integration in a life-affirming way is more apt to enable faithful adherence to Christian sexual ethics.

Here are some of the ethical precepts students have come up with over the years, *Thou shalt*:

- Know, accept and love thyself.
- Receive others as a Thou (with regard, respect, curiosity) and seek their well-being.
- Build trust and mutuality.
- Be sexually literate – able to give and receive pleasure.
- Be aware of and responsible about the potential of bringing new life into the world through some kinds of sexual activity.
- Be faithful to one's partner.
- Let loving be an embodiment of the love of God.
- Be aware of your power as a person and a minister/priest and do not abuse it.
- Seek help when you need it.
- Never make anything more important than God: whether it is sexual pleasure or the desire to procreate. (Ind, Jo. 2003. *Memories of Bliss: God, sex and us*, London, SCM.)
- And, of course, some students will always say: only engage in sexual activity with your opposite-sexed spouse.

It is not enough for the church to insist on the rules. We need rules, of course, but they make no sense unless one has at least some initial glimpse of the Christian meaning of sexuality ... We need ... ways of gradually opening people's eyes to the beauty and dignity of the human body and its grace. Learning to live our chastity well is not primarily a question of the will, bottling up our wildest passions, but of a way of life that sustains us in the truth of what and who we are.

Radcliffe, Timothy. 2005. *What is the Point of Being a Christian?*, London, Burns & Oates, p.104

Psalm 90 redux

I stand beneath a canopy of stars and marvel –
If all time were held in this graced movement,
If every story began in the swirl of dust and gas
that shimmers,
Still you would be greater.

I kneel beside a hoed garden bed, head covered -
If all beauty coalesced in the soft petals
of this rose,
If its scent captured the prayers
of countless pilgrims,
Still you would be more beautiful.

I hold my lover in my arms, my breath a
thanksgiving –
If all human longing were satisfied in this,
If all tenderness and all courage were born here,
Still your love would be larger.

Our lives are so small,
yet their drama is writ large:
a slender reed reaches
into the earth for nourishment
and up to the sky for warmth,
vulnerable to drought and flood,
so easily crushed,
so elegantly bowed
by the evening breeze.

We would be beautiful in your sight,
should you glance this way.
Again from your lips would we hear
It is very good, indeed.

Bless, O Lord, our immense fragility.
Kiss our bowed heads
and take our shaking hands in yours.
Lift our eyes towards your beauty,
and make us to stand
as those who know their own.

Carla A. Grosch-Miller (2014) *Psalms redux: Poems and prayers*, Canterbury Press

Letter

I have read Heather Whyte's article – 'Corporate Prayer in the 21st Century' (PV45) several times and I am trying to get my mind to accept this Quantum Theology way of looking at meaningful prayer. For many years I have understood prayer to be in three stages, first of all meditation about something I feel needs doing. For example, an old person who can no longer cut their lawn. Meditation leads on to contemplation on how, or who can cut the lawn. The third stage is action, getting the job done. I must say that the prayers I hear every Sunday in church are to me only symbolism, as Heather says, 'The desire or hope for a thought to come alive, without the emotion to give it that life, is a wish, it is simply the image of what is possible, in the absence of the emotion needed to bring it into the world of reality.' I have made the article available for any members of my church, who may be interested; I wait to see if I get any response, but it may be a step too far for most of them – it's taking me a lot of contemplation to come to terms with some of the aspects of Quantum Theology. It does seem to me that Quantum Science and Theology are showing us a more believable meaning to that little word 'God'. I feel that in time this understanding of science and all major world religions will converge together, which I see as the only way forward for the well being of all life on our planet. The only hope for our world is if all people join together in showing universal love, not only to other human beings, but to all life, after all as Quantum Science tells us – we are all connected – all life is part of what 'God' is.

George Drake

Response

Trustee statement in response to Martin Bassant's letter in PV45

The trustees are grateful to Martin for raising the issue of PCN's role in political campaigns in the last edition of Progressive Voices. At a meeting in June 2023 the trustee committee were able to discuss not only the specific issue of fossil fuel exploitation, which Martin raised, but

also political campaigning by way of petitions more broadly.

In doing so the committee took into account correspondence received from members, and feedback from PCN group members who had discussed the issue.

One of the clearest results of this was that there was no clear 'settled position' that represented the feelings of the wider network. Correspondence had been received supporting either side of the argument.

PCN is a network of people with a variety of opinions and perspectives, that is part of its beauty and strength. This diversity of view includes the specific issue at hand as well as a wider range of concerns. It is evident that across the network there are people engaged in various different, important causes. We respect and value the fact that our members are engaged with these concerns, but also recognise that precise approaches to them differ among us. As such the committee felt it was simply not appropriate to start signing petitions that committed the network to supporting one particular view or another.

We also recognised that the Charity Commission has clear expectations of the way in which charities as legal entities engage in political activity – the committee recognises that if we are to benefit from the positives of being a charity (e.g. Gift Aid), then we should abide by the rules set out for us. The role of a trustee is partly to ensure that those rules are adhered to, such that the charity status of the network is not put at risk by a failure to live up to our responsibilities.

Finally, we accepted that on some, unforeseeable, occasions there might be the need for PCN to make a political point. This has been in the past with issues such as same sex marriage, for example. Should this be the case the committee will endeavour to consult the membership and then to explain our position in as clear a way as necessary. We believe that this will allow us to demonstrate our commitment in a democratic and responsible way.

PCN Trustee Committee



Treasurer

I have shared with the trustees that I shall not be seeking re-appointment at the next AGM. This was not an easy decision but by next year I shall have served for seven years. I believe that it is good for PCN, and for the role holder, that there is a limit to the time spent in such a role and that it will be good to have a fresh mind taking a look at the role. I can honestly say that working as a trustee for the network has been both challenging and rewarding. Ideally it would be good for someone to volunteer sooner so that we could work together and help achieve a smooth handover. It probably appears a daunting task but there is excellent support from Sarah in the PCN office who maintains the spreadsheet records. These do not need any particular Excel expertise to operate, using a series of filters to extract information to prepare the accounts. Payments are made electronically via the website where two people are needed to authorise any payment.

The role of the Treasurer includes:

Finance

- To secure and maintain financial stability for the organisation.
- To file Gift Aid claims.
- To renew and periodically review insurance cover.
- To ensure that the bookkeeping is up to date, in liaison with the Administrator. The administrator provides day to day support and completes the spreadsheet record, though responsibility remains with the treasurer.
- To monitor payments and ensure there is an invoice or appropriate paperwork to cover payments.
- To provide annual accounts for the AGM and to ensure that they are appropriately examined beforehand

Meetings

- To provide a financial management report of the year to date, at quarterly intervals, usually to be presented at a committee meeting.
- To produce an annual budget
- To provide draft annual accounts at the committee before the AGM for approval

If you feel that this could be your opportunity to use your skills to help the network, then let me know at peter.sribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk, or phone me on 0791 891 6466

George Floyd's Ladder

This article is one of 43 talks that were recorded at home during the Covid pandemic and broadcast in *Backchat*, a radio magazine programme produced by Anthea Page for BCfm, a Bristol local community radio station.

The talks were broadcast early in the morning at weekends between May 2020 and April 2022. *George Floyd's Ladder* was transmitted on the 13th and 14th of June 2020 and appears on p.43-47 of *Matters of Life and Death: Living with History in a Pandemic*. The self-published book is available from Amazon in the UK and USA.

'I have a dream that one day...'

I worked for five years in America, directing documentary films and a Holocaust exhibition. I worked in Boston, in Seattle, and in the capital itself, Washington DC.

Nowadays, at home in Bristol, when I see on television things like George Floyd dying under the knee of a white policeman, my thoughts turn inwards and back to the lives of two other African Americans, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, civil rights leader and Paul Robeson, singer, actor and political activist.

As a child hearing Robeson sing on the radio was a moving experience. As an adult, I wanted to make a documentary about his life – the life of a man who once said: "My father was a slave and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay right here and have a part of it." My script won a prize, but like most scripts never became a film. Robeson's songs are still in my head. Here he is singing his version of an American spiritual, during his 1958 farewell concert in New York's Carnegie Hall. [Paul Robeson sings a traditional song]

We are climbing Jacob's Ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's Ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's Ladder,
We're soldiers in this life

Every rung goes higher and higher
Every rung goes higher and higher
Every rung goes higher and higher
We're soldiers in this life

Rise and shine and give God the glory
Rise and shine and give God the glory
Rise and shine and give God the glory
We're soldiers in this life
We are climbing, join me,

[The audience join in]

We are climbing Jacob's Ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's Ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's Ladder
We are soldiers of the world...



Martin Smith is a retired EMMY award-winning documentary filmmaker who was the first exhibition director at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Those words are sad but filled with a call to action. When we see black lives in America today still being destroyed by racism, crime and police violence we need powerful thoughts that give us strength. This is Dr. Martin Luther King, in 1963: [Historic recording]

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted (*"Yes" crowd responds*), every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain (*"Yes"*), and the crooked places will be made straight (*"Yes"*), and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed (*cheering*), and all flesh shall see it together (*"Yes, Lord"*).

"This is our hope (*"Yes. Yes"*). This is the faith that I go back to the South with (*"Yes"*). With this faith (*"My Lord"*) we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope (*"Yes, All right"*). With this faith (*"Yes"*) we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation (*"Yes"*) into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood (*"Talk about it"*). With this faith (*"Yes, My Lord"*) we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together (*"Yes"*), to stand up for freedom together (*"Yeah"*), knowing that we will be free one day. [Applause]

"This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children (*"Yes, yeah"*) will be able to sing with new meaning: "My country, 'tis of thee (*"Yeah, yes"*), sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing (*"Oh yes"*). Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride (*"Yeah"*), from every mountainside, let freedom ring!" (*"Yeah"*) And if America is to be a great nation (*"Yes"*), this must become true. So let freedom ring."



Rowland Scherman, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Dr King spoke of his dream for America on August 28th, 1963.

Less than five years later, he was assassinated by a white racist in Memphis, Tennessee. That same evening, April 4th, 1968, the brother of former President John Kennedy – Senator Robert Kennedy – was scheduled to speak at an election rally in Indianapolis. These were his words:

“I have, I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight. [Audience cries out]

“Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, he died in the cause of that effort.

“In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of nation we are and what direction we want to move in.”

Sixty days after making that speech, Robert Kennedy was killed by an assassin’s bullet in Los Angeles, California.



The dreams of a better United States were shared by millions in the 1960s, and many still yearn for something better. In our twenty-first century we need to remember that more Americans voted against Donald Trump than voted for him. But the murder of George Floyd is a stark reminder that Dr. King’s dream of America is still just that – a dream. This is Reverend Al Shapton in 2020:

[Broadcast recording]

“George Floyd’s story has been the story of black folks. Because ever since four hundred and one years ago, the reason we could never be who we wanted to be, and dreamed of being, is you kept your knee on our neck (*Applause*) We was smarter than the underfunded schools you put us in, but you had your knee on our neck (*Applause*) We could run corporations and not hustle in the street, but you had your knee on our neck. We had creative skill, we could do whatever anybody else could do, but we couldn’t get your knee off our neck.

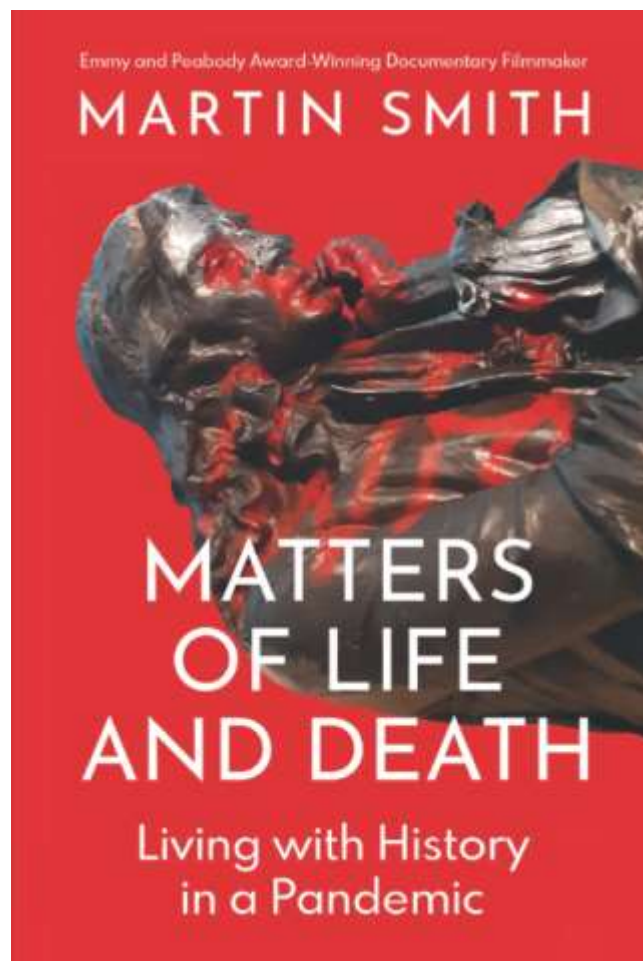
“What happened to Floyd, happens every day in this country, in education, in health services and in every area of American life. It’s time for us to stand up in George’s name and say ‘Take your knees off our necks.’ (*Organ chord and cheers*).”

There are still many rungs to climb on Jacob’s Ladder. Not least in England, where many grew rich by buying, selling and chaining African men and women into slavery. Today, we still allow racism to be a disfiguring part of our lives. Here’s hoping it really is a time and a season to change that.

[Paul Robeson sings a traditional song.]

There’s a man going round taking names
There’s a man going round taking names
He has taken my mother’s name
And has left my heart in shame
There’s a man going round taking names
There’s a man going round taking names,
taking names
There’s a man going round taking names,
taking names
He has taken my father’s name
And has left my heart in pain
There’s a man going round taking names
Now death is the man taking names,
Yes, death is the man taking names
He has taken my brother’s name
And has left my heart in pain
There’s a man going round taking names.

[Fade out]



Progressive Priorities

Until I was a teenager I lived on farms in Scotland and North Northumberland. The place I remember best was a mixed farm, growing crops and rearing livestock. At harvest time a big shed became temporary home to an enormous pile of grain.

Different farms had alternative ways of storing grain, one of them was the silo. Huge cylindrical structures that housed vast amounts of corn, keeping it free of contaminants and also relatively safe from the rodents that used to scurry around in our big shed.

The term 'silo' is also used in business speak to refer to the way that different groups or teams keep information separate – like teams that don't tell each other what they are doing. Like on one of those American police dramas where different agencies suddenly arrive at the same crime scene and a dramatic argument breaks out over whose case it is. When it comes to anything beyond storing grain, silos are generally not thought of as a good thing.

There are a number of organisations working within the sphere of progressive Christianity; some of them have a more specific focus than others, but we share a lot of the same goals. In order to break away from silo-thinking it is vital that we talk to one another; that way we can support one another rather than, effectively, compete.

For this edition of PV I asked leaders from three of the organisations with whom PCN tries to work most closely, 'OneBodyOneFaith'; 'Modern Church'; and the 'Open Table Network' to tell me what they think the priorities are, or should be, for the contemporary progressive movement.

Specifically, I asked them to answer a deceptively simple question: "What are the main priorities for the progressive movement today?"

I asked this question expecting to get answers that reflected their particular concerns. What I read surprised me, not because of their differences, but because of their similarities.

to me. Ahimsa can mean non-violence, or no-harm, and it applies to how we treat ourselves just as much as how we treat others and the world around us. Since then, I have spent some time reflecting on the teachings of Christ in the Beatitudes, particularly what we read on perhaps one of the more challenging behavioural shifts: to love our enemies.

I am deeply concerned that the current dialogue between those who might consider themselves progressive, and those who consider themselves whatever that isn't, is increasingly polarised. As we continue to entrench in our positions, what harm are we causing ourselves, and are we loving those who aren't on the same "side" as us?

I believe that a significant priority for those who champion progressive values may need to engage in some introspection. Perhaps we need to begin the hard task of first asking: is what I am doing harmful to myself? You don't need the data, although that is available and very useful, to know that those who are activists, pursue social justice, advocate for minorities, and who take a keen view on contemporary issues, are also the people who are facing burn-out, cause-fatigue, strains on their relationships, and physical and mental health issues. There are few accessible structures in place to support us, particularly if we are working on the fringe of established traditions and denominations.

Another, likely as important priority, is the hard task of loving our enemies. This may seem all but impossible when confronted with the hate and vitriol that many experience online in the increasingly harmful world of social media, and when hate-crime, hate-speech, and polarised communities are very present offline too. Yet, I believe there is no future for anyone, progressive or otherwise, if we destroy our humanity, and ignore the call of Christ to love our enemies, whilst trying to get there.

As I continue my work, I will endeavour to think like a doctor and "do no harm", to myself and, crucially, to my enemies.

Luke Dowding is the Executive Director of OneBodyOneFaith



www.onebodyonefaith.org.uk

"Do no harm..."

During my sabbatical earlier this year I was afforded the opportunity to embark upon a yoga teacher training course, in which I continued to hone the practice I had taken up during the first lockdown. This experience proved to be radical in many ways, not least as it reintroduced the principle of "ahimsa"

Alison Webster is General Secretary of Modern Church, Programme Co-ordinator at Sarum College, and Theologian in Residence for Citizens UK.



modernchurch.org.uk

'Joining the dots...'

In short, we have to emulate the title of the 2022 movie blockbuster, to tackle 'Everything, Everywhere, All at Once'. We need a progressive theology that joins the dots. One that assumes intersectionality in matters of identity, actively

pursuing the 'deep solidarity' that goes with that, and that excavates the structural economic roots of every form of oppression and injustice.

In the words of Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, 'It is no coincidence that crises such as climate change and the rapid depletion of natural resources are occurring in combination with other symptoms of social breakdown: rising mental disorders, mindless consumerism, materialistic conformism, status competition, civic disengagement, startling economic inequalities, global financial instability and widespread political inertia. Whilst these crises are usually studied in isolation, they are all interconnected.'

This may sound like the progressive task has got unmanageably huge. Paradoxically, though, I think it's the opposite. The imperative is to resist as best we can, wherever we can – according to our own experience and location. Don't try to be a person from everywhere (or nowhere); be a person from somewhere. Don't try to work alone – reach out to others. That is our new vocation: our new discipleship.

Join with others and build collectives; make change where you can and grow hope; build relationships with those who are different from you and invest in soul. Be part of what Joanna Macy calls, 'The Great Turning'. Our survival depends on it.

Roo Stewart is a trustee of the Open Table Network and works for the United Reformed Church equipping congregations to pursue justice and systemic change.



opentable.lgbt

'Solidarity and support'

My priorities would include building a power base by uniting people who are progressive under different focuses together under one banner. LGBTQIA+ is one example of this, but needs further development, expressing solidarity and offering support as one group even though it is a mix of people who have at some point experienced discrimination due to their sexuality or being transgender.

We need to have a softness, malleability, and teachability that allows for constant learning and adjustment - with a 'tent' that is always growing bigger and walls that are always growing smaller. In LGBTQIA+ circles, allies are highly valued and we need more. Purposeful listening and encounters with others beyond our usual spheres is to be encouraged.

It's important to maintain an unwillingness to leave others behind, until it is likely that harm will result. Even then, keeping channels of communication open where possible.

Finding a language that effectively communicates

our message with people who are outside of our group is also crucial. Being able to speak both the language of progress and the language of conservation is a bonus.

I also think we should work on ensuring the progressive Christian voice is heard in the public square. For example, avoiding the situation where one part of the Church was thought to be speaking for all regarding the UK government's planned conversion therapy Bill.

Finding a mechanism where one progressive voice is agreed by consensus might be challenging; in this case, expressing a range of progressive Christian voices would still be valued.

One of the things that surprised me, in a good way, about these responses was the way these three answers intersected. Everyone is talking about the need to remove divisions or pull-down walls, whether that is by 'joining the dots' or by communicating better between groups.

Luke Dowding is clear that the growing polarisation of 'them and us' is a problem. We might even say that it's antithetical to what it means to be progressive. Alison Webster is clear too: "That is our new vocation: our new discipleship. Join with others and build collectives," while Roo Stewart says that we need a bigger tent and smaller walls.

In a time when culture wars are being stoked by provocateurs who seem bent on stoking divisions, the progressive voice needs to be counter cultural, we need to bring people together rather than pull them apart. We need not only to be allies to one another, but to find ways of engaging in productive dialogue with those who don't see themselves as 'progressive'.

As we go forward, perhaps there are two areas we can work on – firstly the way we use language: Do we use words to build bridges, or barricades? As we seek to define ourselves, have we let our language become divisive? At times we seem to be under pressure to define ourselves against others rather than to find ways to work together.

Secondly are we actively reaching out to others, making peace and building relationships? Or are we living in a 'them and us' paradigm? We have choices to make about how we engage, or don't engage with people who share our views. Nelson Mandela once said that 'when people are determined they can overcome anything' – a determination to work with others can help us overcome any differences between us. Where we can find people who share our values, attitudes or goals, let's find ways to collaborate with them. This is at the heart of our eight points, that we work together with others. As culture tries to pull people apart and set them against each other, this has never seemed more urgent.

Simon Cross

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Meeting the Bible

In his book, 'Meeting Christianity Again: for the First Time', published by Red Balloon Publishing, Tony Rutherford attempts to facilitate a new way of being Christian in the 21st Century.



Tony Rutherford was a PCN Trustee, is a member of the Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims group and a retired Anglican priest.

The Bible no longer communicates easily to millions of people. And it is now likely that those who have grown up with the Bible find it difficult to imagine what it's like for those who haven't.

But what if we can 'meet' the Bible again for the first time. Look at it as if we had no previous knowledge of it. How would it read for people who have never seen it before?

First question, what is the Bible? I was brought up to think of the Bible as the 'Holy' Bible - it said so on the spine - 'holy' as in special, to be revered and respected: after all it is known as 'God's book'. Looking a bit more closely, we see it is not a single book, but a collection of books - like a library. There are different books telling different stories, some - but not all - are historical or based on a cultural memory. Some books are collections of poems and sayings, some are the voices of prophecy, (though not fortune telling!) Mostly, biblical prophecy is described as 'God's will', and if you don't follow it, such and such will happen. Some biblical books have a teaching purpose, some are private letters, and some are accounts of dreams, and so on.

But what is meant by saying the Bible is the word of God? My first answer is to suggest that "The Bible contains the Word of God." It is a book that was written by people who were inspired by someone or something that they called their God. This leads to a lot of other questions about who or what is meant by the word "God", but before we face that, we need to pause and check we are happy to ask questions!

If we were brought up to accept the Bible as a 'given', as a literally true document, then we are unable to ask questions of authorship and intention. But if we recognise that we have been created with brains, as well as a sense of responsibility, then we can take a leap of faith, and go ahead and explore the Bible - preferably perhaps with others.

This leads to discovering meanings. And we can learn to accept each other's searches for meaning 'in good faith' if we can trust in our love and respect for one another. We can discover not so much what is either right or wrong, but how to follow a way of life and if and what differences our discoveries make to the way we live.

Back to the question: Why do people have different ways of reading the Bible today? Taking the Bible literally is actually a relatively new phenomenon - beginning in the late 19th century. Up to then, the

Bible was mainly read in church by priests who then preached on the words of the passages that they had just read as a 'lesson'. The Bible was taken as read, so to the vast mass of churchgoers, the Bible was literally true. And it worked - for them - then.

Most priests were educated people while most of their congregations were illiterate. Parish priests were employed by rich landowners. They held their 'living' (job) for a particular parish on behalf of either the King (Rectors) or the Bishop (Vicars). It was part of their job to read the Bible in church and to teach the lessons contained in it - such as the Ten Commandments, which are a set of rules ascribed to the Hebrew hero Moses and reproduced in the Hebrew Bible: what Christians call the Old Testament. Their world was understood in a simple, top-down, accepting and literal way, so the Bible was interpreted similarly.

Slowly, over the last 100 years or so, our thought forms have changed, our understandings of the world have changed, and we have learnt new ways to read the Bible. We can now see that the language of the Bible is at times pictorial, metaphoric, allegorical and symbolic. It is not simply a history book. Neither is it just a statement of belief and practice. We have brains, so we need to use them to read the Bible, and to try to understand it.

The 'truth' of the Bible is not a literal one but a truth of meaning. It is not true because it says it is, but by its ability to inspire people to find a positive purpose in their lives. For example, take the phrase, 'Jesus is the Light of the world' (John 8: 22). Obviously, Jesus is not literally a lamp, torch or a beacon but he can be seen as an inspiration to show us the way, to illumine our hearts, to be a symbol of purpose and be a guide to enlighten life's journey.

Another problem with biblical literalism, is that it lays itself open to misuse. We might find a passage that suggests it's OK to take a life - see the stories of King David - but also we can read another part of the Bible which says the opposite, for example Jesus preaches the gospel of peace to the world. Also, the Bible contains two different stories of how the world began! There are other contradictions, so clearly, the intention of the Bible is not to be a book of literal truth or even a history book.

By its very diversity, the Bible is teaching us to hold onto different ways of seeing things, to apply these to our own situations and so to make wise decisions

for the benefit of our own society. John Dominic Crossan sums it up neatly, '(It's) not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are dumb enough to take them literally.'

In ending his book, 'Meeting the Bible Again for the First Time' Marcus Borg says this: 'The Bible has a central role in shaping Christian identity and vision in community. As the foundation of the Christian tradition, the Bible is the source of our images and stories for speaking about the 'passion of God'. This interpretation shapes our vision of what it means to take the Bible seriously. The Bible is a symbol of the mystery of God and a means of understanding what we mean by using the name 'God' today.'



MWiB (Cornwall) Welcomes PCN

To be fair, the title is a bit misleading, in so far as the Cornwall District of Methodist Women in Britain (MWiB) really had no idea what they were letting themselves in for!

Just to clarify, MWiB is a volunteer-run charity within the Methodist Church in Britain, aiming to bring women together both in this country and overseas, not only to 'make Christ known' but also to work in partnership with others to raise awareness and act upon issues of social justice. To this end they organise training courses, residential conferences and one day events. As far as I am aware, every woman who is a member of the Methodist Church is deemed to automatically be a member of MWiB.

In Cornwall, every spring, MWiB hold two District Days, one for the western pointy end of the county, and the other in the east, hosted by Methodist chapels. These are generally all day events with a guest speaker for both the morning and afternoon sessions followed by a traditional Cornish cream tea. The two events are generally held on consecutive days with the same speaker for both.

This year, my daughter, Revd Mo Lawson-Wills, who has recently taken up a full-time appointment in the District, was invited to be the speaker. Mo is a passionate supporter of PCN and was a Trustee until a few years ago. So what better opportunity to introduce the Methodist women of Cornwall to PCN! She chose four of the short films, 'Made of Stories' produced by PCN and which are available on the PCN website. She showed two in the morning session and two in the afternoon but unfortunately there wasn't enough time for us to watch all six. After each film we broke up into groups to discuss the issues raised, and then Mo invited us to share our thoughts with everyone, and to ask questions. We watched Gemma's and Nathaniel's stories in the morning followed by Holly's and Greg's stories in the afternoon.



Gwen Wills is a retired Methodist minister and is a PCN trustee.

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The films received a mixed reaction from this theologically diverse group of women. It was generally agreed that both Gemma and Nathaniel were very brave in the sharing of their stories, although regrettably, although maybe inevitably, they received judgmental criticism from a few. Holly and Greg received more support and people were keen to share their own stories both of their individual actions against climate change, and other projects similar to Greg's that they knew of. Our Chair of District, who took up her appointment here in Cornwall only about a year ago, led the opening and closing worship on the first day when we were down in the west of the county. After watching Greg's story we were delighted when she told us that she had at some time previously been stationed in or nearby Wythenshawe and knew all about the project there, and even recognised the minister who appeared in the film.

At the end of each morning Mo invited me to speak a little bit about PCN, why I am a member and what it means to me, and it was also an opportunity to advertise our recently formed Cornwall Group which is now going from strength to strength. I left some leaflets and back copies of PV scattered around and I was delighted when a couple of people said they were interested in joining. I haven't heard anything from them since but you never know! But having said that, a PCN member is the newly appointed vice-president of Cornwall MWiB, so perhaps the title wasn't so misleading after all!

Gwen Wills

Mark's Jesus

The Gospel of Mark and the Theological Development of Rabbi Jesus

Some years ago I was driving and overtook a van with a eye-catching logo painted on its side: "You have tried the cowboys, now try the Indians: Patel & Singh Builders". I have often thought about it in reference to the Church – not that we are cowboys, BUT we continue to tell the traditional Jesus stories and yet still fail to stem the haemorrhaging of membership, so is it time to try another approach?

What I write is not intended to undermine the Church or the faith of anyone, but it comes from my passion to help breathe new life into our struggling churches. I fear that we are entering the swan song of the major traditional, organised denominational churches because, so far, we seem to be trying to manage decline in the hope that revival will come again. But as I see it, saying the same will get us the same, and that is constant decline. Of course, there are exceptions but the trend is downwards.

What I am trying to do is signpost to an alternative church structure, one in which we positively commit to keeping the local churches open for as long as is practically possible but, at the same time, dedicate resources to creating new ways of 'being Church', emphasising not the building structures but the community of faith meeting again in small local groups in homes, united by the passion to genuinely and actively follow the Way of Jesus.

I acknowledge that our churches have tried various types of explorations such as "Fresh Expressions", "Café Church" and "Mission on the edge", and many have been successful in small ways. However, I now contend that these should no longer be add-ons to retell the ancient story of Jesus captured in creeds and doctrines. Their primary focus should be supporting local individuals and communities of those wishing to follow the Way of Jesus to create their own personal and community experiences and explanations of their encounters with Jesus. This will be a threat to the power and organisation of the denominational churches but this is the way in which Christianity, disorganised and very local until the First Council of Nicea, originally developed.

The early Christian presence was among Jews worshipping as the Jesus Sect in their own synagogues. Itinerant leaders such as Paul helped create and then encouraged and supported these local communities of those who responded positively to his developing experiences of walking in the Way of Jesus as he saw it. Is this not the way in which John Wesley developed Methodism, initially within the Anglican Church, with those who responded positively to his social holiness Gospel? Or George Fox encouraged the birth and growth of the Quakers?



John Churcher is a writer, Methodist minister, past Chair of PCN Britain, and his website is: www.permissiontospeak.org.uk

Surely, if the will is present, there is a way in which organised denominations can foster and encourage these new local communities to discover and to grow into the Way of Jesus that is relevant to them and to their micro-local communities that they will serve. This would be nothing short of the New Reformation that is desperately needed if the Jesus Message is to flourish again in our cultural, political and religious contexts. In our contemporary world the ancient mega-story of the One Way, Truth and Life has little relevance to normal life for the majority of people 'out there' today. So, I suggest that we will need to learn from our contemporary Bible scholars so that our Jesus may make sense to others. And to do that, I also suggest that we will need a deeper understanding of not only the social, political and religious contexts in which our Christian Testament was written, but also the contexts in which Jesus grew up and later, as an adult, conducted his itinerant wisdom teaching and healing ministry.

From the little evidence that there is in the Gospels, I think it reasonable to assume that Jesus spent his childhood within the exclusive Pharisaic teaching of the Nazareth synagogue in which their God, Yahweh, was considered to be only interested in those Jews who faithfully tried to live by the 613 Laws attributed to Moses – those Jews just like themselves! And as I read the Gospels I conclude that the adult ministry of Jesus started with him still locked into the exclusive teaching of the Pharisees, but that was about to change.

Mark's Gospel not only was the first Gospel in our canon of Scripture to have been written, but it was also a major source for the Gospels attributed to Matthew and Luke that followed at least a decade later. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel we see Jesus being baptised by John, who was himself an itinerant wisdom teacher proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John also declared the Good News of God's impending deliverance of His people from the domination systems of the Roman Empire, of its puppet kings like Herod Antipas, and of the corruption and exploitation of the poor in the Jerusalem Temple, as well as the exclusiveness of the teaching in the Pharisaic synagogues.

Jesus began to gather his own disciples to mark the beginning of his itinerant wisdom teaching and healing ministry. Jesus called first the fishermen,

Simon and his brother Andrew, James and John the sons of Zebedee. And then, after miraculous healings, Jesus went with his small band of followers to the synagogue in Capernaum where controversy emerged when the synagogue leaders saw his unorthodox interpretation of those 613 Laws. Breaking the Sabbath laws and eating with those considered to be the dregs of Jewish society, and therefore unloved by God, led Jesus into conflict with many Pharisaic leaders as he travelled.

As an example, Jesus came across Levi, a hated tax collector [in Matthew's Gospel he was called Matthew]. Jesus invited Levi to stop supporting the system of economic and political exploitation and to join him in his developing ministry. And as his fame spread so thousands began to gather to hear what Jesus had to say and to see how he healed people and exorcised demons. But notice that in Mark's version of the Jesus story, in the opening four chapters Rabbi Jesus had only worked his wonders among the Jews, especially those Jews who were rejected by the all too respectable Pharisees.

However, in Mark 5 [and retold in Matthew 8 and Luke 8] Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile region of Gerasa where he was confronted by a Gentile man who was greatly troubled by a legion of demons. Beginning to realise that God's love was for all people and not just for Jews, Rabbi Jesus had compassion and exorcised the demons from this individual Gentile. But in showing such individual compassion for the Gentile he destroyed the livelihoods of Gentile pig farmers, thereby still showing little respect for Gentiles as a whole.

However, even though Jesus healed this Gentile demoniac he was not yet ready to grant the request of the healed man to become one of the companions of Jesus. That was still a step too far.

But there is so much more that we Christians often fail to notice in this Jewish story, such as this being the second exorcism by Jesus. The first is back in Mark 1 where Jesus expelled demons from a Jew in Jewish Galilee. And there is still more: the name of the Gentile region "Gerasa" has its roots way back in the Hebrew word "gerash" which means "expel" and it is first seen in Exodus 23:28, written during the Babylonian Exile, 6 centuries before Rabbi Jesus. It was used there in the context of the God of the Hebrews expelling the enemies from God's land. Again, do not miss the point that at the time of Jesus many Jews, including both John the Baptist and Rabbi Jesus himself, were looking again for God's "gerash": for God's expelling of the Gentile Roman army from God's land.

Rabbi Jesus even had compassion upon Jairus, the male leader of the Pharisaic synagogue in Capernaum, when Jesus raised his daughter back to life. This demonstrated that NOT all Pharisees were against Rabbi Jesus. Indeed, as Mark's Gospel continues to unfold Rabbi Jesus continued

to go out from and to return to this prominent Capernaum synagogue that became the base for his developing ministry.

Notice also that even though it does not appear in Mark, there is a story recorded in Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10 and John 4:43-54, telling of Rabbi Jesus extending his compassionate ministry to include a servant of a Roman centurion. And even though this army officer was another representative of Gentile violent oppression of the Jews, he had impressed the leadership of the Capernaum synagogue because he was not like other army officers. This centurion loved the local Jews and had built a synagogue for them. And nor should it be a surprise that this story in Matthew comes soon after Jesus teaching his followers not to judge others, and to love one's enemies [Matthew 5:38-48]. Similarly, but in reverse order, Luke's version of the healing of the centurion's servant comes soon after the Jesus teaching of loving one's enemies and not judging others [Luke 6:27-38].

Both of these healings of Gentiles, the demoniac and the Centurion's servant, demonstrated that Rabbi Jesus was moving ethical teaching away from the exclusiveness of the Pharisees, and towards the new ethics of loving your enemies.

Now the vision of Rabbi Jesus expanded further, this time to include a Gentile woman, as recorded in Mark 7 and Matthew 15. Notice that the previous women and young girl who had been healed by Rabbi Jesus were all within the community of Jews. However, at first Rabbi Jesus called the Gentile Syro-Phoenician woman "a dog" - a derogatory statement still revealing traces of his Pharisaic upbringing. It was her response that finally opened the eyes of Rabbi Jesus to the truth that God's love was unrestricted and for all regardless of their being male or female; young or old; Jew or Gentile; saint or sinner - Jesus was God's love in action!

And as I read the Gospels I conclude that Rabbi Jesus was never "gentle Jesus meek and mild" - Jesus became a radical reforming Jew who was a compassionate, non-violent political and religious agitator defending the poor, the exploited, the marginalised, and those who were oppressed by the abuses of power and control within some synagogues, the Temple and the Roman Empire.

Concluding questions:

1. What may be the relevance of this contemporary and progressive interpretation of Mark's Gospel to both ministry and mission today?
2. To what extent is it possible that our traditional mainstream Church structures can envision and then commit to the suggestion of this paper that a contemporary and progressive interpretation such as this can and should lead to a New Reformation in which an alternative church structure is created?

Christians Asleep



The fascinating talk by Linda Woodhead in February followed by an interesting discussion at the Woking “Quest” group sparked something in my mind. Rifling through a box of mid-20th Century hymns and papers on “New Dimensions in Worship”, I came across a booklet. Entitled *Christians Asleep* it was a collection of articles and associated correspondence reprinted from *The Times* in 1966.

Its starting point was the decline in baptisms, confirmations, marriages and Easter communicants in the CofE over many years, together with a shortage of ordained ministers. A major problem was the difficulty of communicating in intelligent terms with a secular society, exacerbated by a lack of respect for clergy who many felt didn’t talk sense.

Sounds familiar? A recent review article in the Church Times about interviews with a group of “liberal intelligent” baby boomers (Robin Gill: Lessons in lapsing? Review in Church Times 24 March 2023) suggests that they drifted away from church soon after Sunday School. There was nothing to counter their teenage doubts and they felt that the church’s patriarchal and sexually restrictive assumptions were outmoded. They held moral commitments but few religious convictions. This seems to conform with my perception of many people working in the public service who held to principles derived from a Christian upbringing but would not regard themselves as Christian. Some expressed horror at doctrines like Substitutionary Atonement.

The Times investigation highlighted a dichotomy over tradition. Some were devoted to the Book of Common Prayer, others wanted complete experimentation. The work of the Liturgical Commission in trying to reform the prayer book was criticised on both sides, and the article ridiculed the fundamental difference between Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic practices when celebrating Holy Communion. *Honest to God* was blamed by some for creating uncertainty and a polarisation of attitudes in theological colleges.

An interesting comment, especially considering the near schism today over *Living in Love and Faith*, was that the Church’s Board of Social Responsibility and many bishops in the House of Lords were actively promoting a more liberal approach on the main moral issues of the day, including illegitimacy, abortion, divorce and cruelty. Another area on which progress was being made was ecumenism, with

conversations between various denominations and the start of united services. I remember being in one of the very first parishes to hold a joint Good Friday “walk of witness”. However, the article foresaw trouble and noted the growing influence of conservative evangelicals in demanding “unity on his terms” (The “his” is deliberate – there were no women priests then, and only one of the many letters commenting on the articles advocated them.) As we now know, within a few years progress on unity stalled on narrow theological grounds and the implications for Establishment. The ordination of women priests eventually became accepted – but still not by all.

Looking back, then a young PCC member and chorister in a forward-looking parish, it was a time of hope. The Liturgical Commission produced (to my mind) a very reasonable approach to the meaning and symbolism of the Eucharist although later prayer books kept many archaisms to please different factions. We did hope that a more radical revision of the liturgy and hymns reflecting the then “new theology”, together with new forms of musical expression would be taken up, but with a very few exceptions this has not happened. The theology in worship songs seems to have gone backward.

Linda Woodhead’s analysis leads to a feeling that decline is inevitable. Numbers are falling and the age structure rising alarmingly so there will be very few left soon, even at festivals. Some say that conservative evangelical churches will grow – some church plants have displaced long-standing congregations – and the movement inspired by Holy Trinity Brompton seems to be thriving. But will this be sustained? Another recent article in the Church Times suggests that the backlash against the rigid forms of dogma and lifestyle will cause lapsing and no little pain when the realities of life come to challenge the teaching (Olivia Jackson, Church Times 10 March 2023: Faith that expects you to fall).

Progressives need to seek solutions to the problems and this article is no place to set out one person’s view on what might be done – perhaps local PCN groups will discuss in the light of the statistics and their own experience. However, I will offer one thought derived from my re-reading of *Christians Asleep*. At the time, I thought that much more fundamental change had to take place than was likely. This needed to start with a clear expression of what we believe, having regard to theological insights and biblical scholarship. Many patterns of worship were unsustainable and needed reform of language, not least to articulate our beliefs and stimulate a lifestyle based on them. Half a century on the need seems even more urgent.

John Hack

Whose Heaven?

Three members of an international relief and medical emergency organization were making their way along a rough potholed track in the latest war-torn disaster area. Despite the grim situation there was an atmosphere of camaraderie in the Land Rover. A strong bond had developed between them as they served together over several years in fraught situations around the world and there was mutual liking and respect, although the three were of different nationalities and of different faiths – John was a Christian, Shezan a Muslim, and Shamir a Hindu. All at once, the Land Rover went over a landmine and all three died instantly.

The next they knew, they found themselves walking together along a dusty road. As they walked and talked, they became thirsty and were pleased when they came to signs of habitation. It looked like a very large and prosperous estate with tall walls that gleamed like marble. Eventually they came to large gates that seemed to be of pearl. Stretching beyond the gate they could see a driveway of what looked like pure gold, bordered by neatly ordered flower beds, and there were lots of high internal hedges. As they stared in wonder, they heard the strains of ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’ begin in the distance behind one of the hedges. Almost at once a plain chant was started in another part of the garden and then a modern chorus joined in. The three renderings gradually grew louder and louder, almost as if they were in competition.

John saw a man in a white robe just inside the gate, holding a large black book. He asked, ‘Could we have a drink of water? We’re very thirsty.’ The guardian of the gate opened the gate just wide enough for John to pass through and replied, ‘You are very welcome. I’ll have a glass of iced water sent out straight away. Would you like a twist of lemon in that?’ ‘That is very kind,’ John said, ‘But what about my friends?’

‘I’m sorry,’ answered the guardian, ‘Only Christians are welcome in Heaven.’ ‘You don’t understand,’ explained John, ‘These people have given their lives to helping others.’ ‘Rules are rules,’ retorted the guardian, waving his book, ‘Chapter 14 verse 6: if you don’t have the right beliefs, you don’t come in.’ John pondered sorrowfully for a while. Then he closed the gate carefully – from the outside.

The three companions continued their way along the road, until they came to a farm track, leading across open countryside. There were no walls or fences and the hedges had wide gaps. In the distance were mountains and forests and the sun shimmered on a lake. From a motley collection of buildings in the distance came the happy sound of laughter. John approached a man in casual clothes who was reading in a deckchair by the side of the

track. ‘Is there anywhere we could get a drink?’ ‘Of course,’ came the ready reply, ‘There’s a pump over there with a jug and glasses. Just help yourself.’ ‘Does that invitation apply to my friends as well?’ enquired John cautiously. ‘Most certainly,’ laughed the man. ‘The water comes from a living spring that never dries up. It is free to anyone who is thirsty. The more you share it, the sweeter it tastes.’

‘What is this place?’ asked John. ‘Heaven,’ smiled the man. ‘But what is that place down the road with the pearly gates?’ puzzled John. ‘Actually, it is a branch of Sectarian Scenarios, a franchise that caters for those with fixed views of the afterlife,’ came the response. ‘Then are you not concerned that they are telling people that it is Heaven?’ pursued John. ‘Not at all,’ grinned the man. ‘They and the franchises for the fundamentalists from other religions take those who think that they have the only truth, and those who are willing to put their personal salvation above love and friendship. It helps to keep this a peaceful and happy place.’

‘If this is Heaven, where is God?’ enquired John. ‘God is definitely here,’ came the ready response, ‘but we each have to find them for ourselves.’

‘Can you give us some indication of where we should look?’ pursued John. ‘Certainly,’ smiled the guide. ‘The first stage is to detect the signs of divine presence. Just as astronomers can see from the gravitational force on a planet that there must be an unseen star, so you can recognize the influence of spiritual power on our lives long before you can explain it. Its effect is most obvious in great spiritual leaders. As a Christian, for example, you will see the power of God embodied above all in Jesus. Then as you begin to explore this quality in closer detail, you notice these same signs of love, truth, and beauty in those closest to you. You three are well into this stage. As you progress in the search you learn to appreciate special qualities in people you hardly know and eventually you can acknowledge the evidence of a loving presence even within the lives of those you actually dislike.’

‘Is that the goal of the search?’ queried John. ‘Not quite,’ continued the guide, ‘As you change your life by responding to the signs of God’s presence in others in the way you speak to them and act towards them, and above all in how you think about them, you will finally recognize that the God of love is also within you. The end of the journey towards God is when you realize that God has been with you all the time and that being loved means that you are totally accepted just as you are.’

Philip Sudworth

Local groups

Please contact group convenors or see the relevant PCN Britain web page for further details. Newcomers are always welcome.

Aberdeen

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Peter Morgan

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Our membership has been steady in the last year of around 20 and monthly attendance of around 16. We have had several discussions inspired by the videos of John Spong. We have read and discussed Ben Whitney's books "On Not Being A Christian" and "On Still Being Honest to God - sixty years on". In Sept we watched a recording of Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture by Rev Dr, Robin Meyers, entitled "Quantum Physics and God" and in October, "Keeping Alive the Rumor of God" by Martin Camroux. Finally we have held some brainstorming sessions on subjects such as: "What Does Your Faith Mean to you?", "Most people living in Scotland do not attend Church. What are the barriers and how can we bring them down?", "We live in a multi-cultural society. Could we foster more integration regarding our faith tradition and beliefs?", and "How can Christian communities influence those empowered with making decisions which affect our lives?" We made a Facebook page to publicise us and look forward to our ongoing meetings and discussions.

Abingdon

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Cliff Marshall

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We continue to meet via Zoom, on the first Tue of the month at 7.30pm. Over the past few months we have discussed topics such as: What being Unitarian means – led by a local Unitarian minister; What Being Progressive Means – led by Dave Tomlinson; Billionaires and Beggars - Reflections on Life and Work in Modern India – led by one of our members, Bob Harvey. In July we discussed the book, Meeting Christianity Again for the First Time, with its author, Tony Rutherford. In August, we shall be meeting in person for an afternoon tea and it will be good to have a rest from Zoom. Sept meeting will be focusing on what, as progressive Christians, we believe and how Jesus fits in. This meeting will give us the opportunity

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to look ahead to map out topics we may look at in the following months.

Bolton

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Jim Hollyman

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At our July meeting we began our discussion of Diana Butler Bass's book "Christianity after Religion" – subtitled "The end of the church and the birth of a new spiritual awakening". Much of the material in the first chapters details statistics of the churches decline in the US, but a good deal of this is relevant to the UK, so we shared our thoughts on their significance, not least of the large number of people who have fallen into what Diana calls the "belief gap" – meaning the gap there is in people's minds when they realise they can no longer believe the dogma that Christianity has preached over the years. We then moved on to chapter 4 entitled "Believing" with sections on "What do I believe?", "How do I believe", "Who do I believe?", "Belief as Experience". We found it a thought provoking and challenging chapter and look forward to the next ones – "Behaving" and "Belonging". Normally our meetings continue to be on the first Wed each month at 1.30-3pm, always ending with some moments of silent prayer. We meet at the URC of St Andrew and St George, St George's Road, Bolton. In addition, we send out a link to those who have indicated they wish to join us on Zoom.

Cornwall

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Gwen Wills

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We have been delighted to welcome several new members and interest has been expressed by a few more, our existence is spreading! Back in May we continued our discussion of Marcus Borg's, 'The Heart of Christianity.' One of our members, who had suggested the book, gave a presentation which kept us focused – well a bit more focused than we had been before! In June we spent some time discussing Martin Bassant's letter concerning the signing of petitions. There were mixed views and I was able to share them with the trustees meeting later that month. We then went on to discuss the phrases 'eternal life', and 'salvation' and how we understand them, or not.

For our July meeting we had been invited to bring any articles or books we would like to share. One brought our attention to the PV article about corporate prayer. That evening we had welcomed a new member to our group who just happened to be a scientist, a marine biologist, who gave us a fascinating insight into DNA, and shared group experience, from a scientific point of view. He has agreed give a talk as both a Christian and a scientist. He received a particularly warm welcome because his name is Michael and all the other men in our group are called Andrew! We have agreed to continue meeting throughout the summer, and for the time being not to have a pre-arranged programme for more than one or two meetings ahead.

Edgehill

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Val Trinder

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We have been meeting for just over a year now and enjoy discussions over a range of topics. Meeting on the last Thurs each month. Last month our topic was 'The Bible', and while most of us agreed that we don't take the Bible literally or as the words of God dictated to the person writing it down, that the Bible can be inspirational, comforting, moving and challenging. We felt that the words were trying to express people's experiences and feelings, rather than actual events. Several of the group shared some of their favourite Bible verses and read them aloud. We discussed why we do not take the Bible literally but agreed that it can still 'speak' to us in different ways. We also touched on the fact that other literature can also have the same effect on us.

Newcastle

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Liz Temple

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Our recent meetings have been held in fellowship with a couple of local churches. In May, jointly with Newcastle Unitarians, we invited Liddy Buswell from Christian CND to lead a workshop for us. We considered issues and questions which most of us would probably rather not think about and Liddy gently encouraged us to be honest with ourselves and each other. In June our speaker came from Northern Lights Metropolitan Community Church. Finding out about our respective groups and exchanging individual experiences and viewpoints came together to

make a great evening. This year our 'day out' was a trip to visit the home of Revd Elizabeth Baxter who is the Director of Holy Rood House (the Centre for the Study of Theology and Health). The sun shone, our group was warmly welcomed and each was invited to speak about their various spiritual journeys, as well as hearing about the ministry of the Centre.

Oakham Peter Stribblehill
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This summer we broke with the tradition of meeting at Launde Abbey and instead met in Ketton, a small village in deepest Rutland. We met at the Parish Church, an 800 year-old Grade 1 Listed building kept in good repair in the past by a succession of local gentry. The focus of our visit was the 'Millennium Tapestry', a magnificent portrayal of the village, its landmarks and groups in 2000. It was designed and made by locals who clearly showed great skill, imagination and determination. From there we walked a short distance through the beautiful village to the Methodist chapel where we were told about a heating renewal scheme that turned into a major re-fit. We were also welcomed by a huge quantity of tea and cake which was much appreciated. Finally we had a reflective talk from a member. We look forward to our regular fortnightly meetings in the autumn.

Want to reply? Have your own burning question? A comment on a recent event? Want to check whether a thought is unique to you? If so, please get in touch dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Inter Faith Week

Sun 12th - Sun 19th Nov

Inter Faith Week, on which the Inter Faith Network for the UK leads, makes a significant contribution to inter faith understanding, harmony and cooperation.

www.interfaithweek.org

But What Can I Do?

We're a bit short on articles for Progressive Voices (Hint Hint) so on committee, knowing I'd end up being in the first batch, I suggested each of the trustees take it in turns once a year to submit a piece. This would hopefully lead to another three or so articles each publication. I had no option but to agree to the next PV as it was my suggestion, but I also knew I'd forget so I set a reminder on my phone which I kept snoozing every day until the inevitable happened – I'd missed the deadline!

Whilst I procrastinated, I did think every day *about* the masterpiece I was *going* to write but changed my mind everyday and never actually put fingers to keyboard. Listening to Alistair Campbell's "But What Can I Do" finally cemented what I would write. His book is in 2 parts, the first describing the mess the political world is in and reasons why. The second, as the title suggests, describes, and attempts to inspire all of us to get involved in politics to make change for the better. For some reason this inevitably got me thinking about the church...

It's complicated but I attend an evangelical Anglican church. Most of the time during the hymns / songs I just stand silently as I find the words awful rather than awe-full. During the sermons I give the speaker a chance but usually end up reading a book on my phone by Borg, McLaren, Crossan, Ehrman, Armstrong etc for more inspiration. The church in general per se is in a mess and it would take a lot more room than I have here to describe why, but I'm sure most readers of PV would agree. In his book Campbell quotes Nelson Mandela, "It always seems impossible until it's done" as inspiration for all of us to get involved and do something. But what can I do?

At church we have a small group of men who meet, and it usually falls to me to suggest what we do. They know I'm a *bit* more liberal than them, and I think they feel able to share and discuss what they are thinking as the environment is perceived as "safe" as none of us are officially in the hierarchy of the church. We've actually been watching Crossan, McLaren, Borg, Armstrong and Holloway (not plucked up enough courage to watch Spong yet) and they have lapped it up and we have had hours of discussion. I firmly believe there are an awful lot of people sat in church who aren't fully signed up members of the evangelical belief system, yet just sit there. Don't tell anyone (I feel like a naughty schoolboy) but sometimes I look around during the prayers and there are a large percentage of people who also don't have their eyes closed, are looking around, looking at their phones etc and I would love to know exactly what they are thinking. I think if I bluntly asked, I'd get a standard response which probably isn't what they really believed.

What Can I Do? Well as my first thing to try and make church better and more inclusive I've decided I'm going to suggest to the hierarchy that an anonymous survey is sent to all the congregation to try and ascertain exactly what their beliefs are. If the questions are well worded the responses could be very enlightening and I hope it could lead to more open discussion in our church. Who knows! I'll let you know how I get on. I hope this inspires you to action in your local church.

Now for me to grovel and apologise to Dave for being late with the article.....

Paul Onslow

PCN Britain's 20th Anniversary

November 2023

In November this year there will be two events held to celebrate 20 years of PCN Britain. More details to follow.

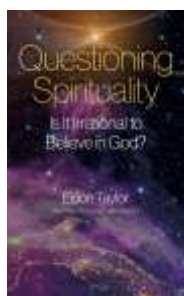
01594 516528 info@pcnbritain.org.uk

PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire, GL14 1BB.

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Reviews

Questioning Spirituality by Eldon Taylor, O-Books



As the father of two boys myself I was intrigued that Eldon Taylor had written this book with his two sons in mind. Their move from agnosticism to an embrace of atheism forms the backdrop

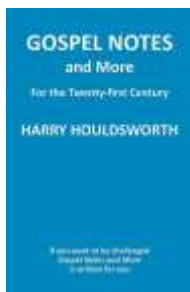
to this book being written. The purpose of the book is to help those who – like his sons – accept that belief in a higher power or an afterlife is irrational. His claim, the argument of this book, is the opposite. He seeks not to prove God exists, but that it is not irrational to believe in a higher power or life after death. The book's structure echoes the Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis with each having its own part. Various arguments that could be raised to argue that belief is not rational are presented in Part One as the thesis. The antithesis is unfolded in Part Two exploring whether it is irrational to believe in a god and in arguing for the rationality of belief he seeks to use practical reasoning. The synthesis comes in Part Three in which he draws things together, and even includes nine exercises to change your life.

The real strength in this book is the author's genuine openness to ask questions without providing answers and his ability to think outside of the box and draw upon a wide variety of fields. Throughout there are various interesting discussions of a variety of topics: free will, epigenetics, neuroscience, paragnosis, and reincarnation being but a few. Taylor's method is to provide a range of things for the reader to consider, providing the space to reflect and draw our own conclusions. Personally, I found the book thought-provoking and although I remain unpersuaded, he establishes his case beyond reasonable doubt. Why not read it yourself?

Richard Sherratt

Gospel Notes and More by Harry Houldsworth, HKH Publishing

Most Christian churches are underselling the importance of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth,

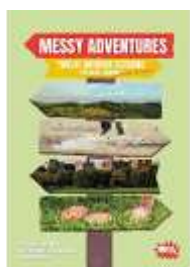


writes PCN member and retired lecturer Harry Houldsworth in his "Gospel Notes" now in its second edition. In an attempt to stimulate a more open debate about

religious beliefs than he believes is encountered in many Christian churches, the author identifies numerous New Testament questions that he feels need a greater airing if there is to be any hope at all of attracting more people into the churches of the Western world. In his view, young people in the West are being educated to view religions with some scepticism, to reject non-scientific reasoning and supernatural explanations. So, adopting what he calls a no-frills, non-preaching approach to the Synoptic Gospels, the author draws together parallel verses in the form of a commentary but with added questioning thrown in: "Do we believe this today?" "Did Jesus believe this would happen?" "What did the disciples make of that?" Also included are notes on the Fourth Gospel, Acts and some of the NT letters. So "Gospel Notes" might well make a good introduction for someone setting out on the progressive Christian path before they perhaps go on to tackle the big trail blazers such as Borg, Spang, Crossan and the like.

Paul Harrington

Messy Adventures by Lucy Moore, BRF



This gives a treasure chest of ideas which can relate to the twelve suggested themes. Anybody used to using a pick and mix method of planning will find

inspiration. Each theme gives a section to be used 'on the move' and a section which may be used as 'Adventure in one spot'. Each section is followed by activities to explore the theme, scientific information and explanation. Safety notes and risk assessment help are included as required alongside activities. Before delving into the theme activity session, both seasoned pick and mix users and those more used to a structured layout, would do well to read the How to use Messy

Adventures chapter. Explanations as to how to fit into 'Messy Church' structure are also included as Celebrations and suggestions regarding menus to enable you to enjoy food together outdoors. The reader is then invited to go on an adventure planned to suit their group, and invited to activities and scripture to 'think outside of the box'. However, should some of the ideas feel a little outside your comfort zone, other options can be found. This is a valuable and practical resource.

Denise Beckley

Fans by Michael Bond, Picador,



Have you ever looked at a group of football supporters singing a club anthem, or listened as Jane Austen devotees discuss the way her writing continues to transform their

lives? If you have, perhaps you have noticed a certain sort of similarity to the way that religious people behave. 'Fans' can be found everywhere; some admire from afar; others are obsessively devoted; they have all the outfits, know all the words, go through all the rituals – so far, so religious.

In his entertaining, insight-filled, and highly readable exploration of fan culture, Michael Bond explains how being a fan enriches people's lives in surprising ways. For anyone interested in the way that the church or any organised religion works, then this may prove to be an illuminating and revealing read.

Bond considers a range of what he loosely describes as 'fans', not just people who love celebrities but also the surprising number of people who are obsessed with serial killers or school shooters, and even the people who dress up as (or even believe they are) animals. Along the way he explores the way that people, himself included, negotiate their identities in a fractured society.

Simon Cross

Cherishing then Earth-Nourishing the Spirit by Maria Curtis (ed.), Lindsey Press

This is a collection of contributions from a range of Unitarian writers whose words have a strong resonance as we deal daily with reports of the environment in crisis. It



links the spiritual with the ecological and asks what it might look and feel like to 'live in a right relationship with the earth'. The five parts, each with a range of

contributions, tackle the issue from different but complimentary perspectives. We start with the prophetic, two essays interspersed with poems and questions for individual or group discussion. Part two has essays on spirituality and eco feminist perspectives. Again, there are guidelines for reflection and group activity. Part three leads us to think about the forces at work which cause damage and ways in which changing mindsets can repair our relationship with the earth. 'Our fragile, floating home, we hear your weeping. As we sit in comfort, help us to see how changes, large and small, can make a difference....' In Part Four we move into 'Active Hope' with essays on 'redeeming a rubbish dump and some lessons learned' and 'growing together, from pansies to apple trees'. Part Five is dedicated to words from the young. Out of the mouths...a contribution from Toby Powell, aged 11. 'I feel sad because we shouldn't treat the world like a sandbox where we can do what we want to it and in it.' This is a lovely and loving collection of reflections, encouragement and plans for action. It would make a great study book for any group or individual looking to learn and explore this area. I hold my hand up to being one of those people. I thought I was quite switched on in relation to the environment but here I have found many more connections and reflections. A quietly special book.

Christine King

Sermons in Stones & Inside the Preacher's Mind by Brian Thompson, self-published



Brian Thompson is a retired teacher and a Methodist local preacher. He produced the first of these books during the COVID lockdown when he was unable to preach but could not



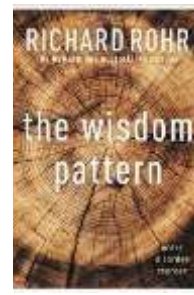
resist continuing to write sermons. The second book is a selection of sermons preached in different settings during his long career.

They present to us a preacher with a realistic understanding of people's concerns and questions. His approach is conversational, humorous, and winning. He sometimes brings the fruits of critical scholarship into a sermon, always in an accessible and pastoral way, expressing respect for any in the congregation who may disagree. He makes clear his open attitude to issues of sexuality and gender. In one sermon (Inside the Preacher's Mind, p.123) he says something I have often thought but never yet said openly to a congregation: 'I sometimes joke that the church will not really have arrived until we have a black female lesbian as the Pope'. The last sermon in Inside the Preacher's Mind has the title 'Praying for President Putin'. It is very short, and he concludes by saying that perhaps it does not qualify as a sermon but more as 'a discussion document from a confused.com preacher'. This was a sermon shared with a couple of friends but not preached. I would suggest he preaches it to a congregation at the first opportunity in order to make the important point that preaching is not an expert telling people what to believe but a conversation in which believers open their hearts to one another and share their doubts and dilemmas. Publishing sermons can be an invitation to lazy preachers to plagiarise! However, in these days of small congregations and shortage of ministers, a congregation could do much worse than read one of Thompson's sermons together and discuss it. They would be better fed by that than by listening to many preachers one hears these days, including ordained ministers.

Ray Vincent

The Wisdom Pattern by Richard Rohr, SPCK

Sometimes, when I read Richard Rohr, I feel that there is something important going on although I do not always quite tune in. Other times, I read his words and want to punch



the air and say 'yes!' This is one of those air punching times. This book is spot-on for our times and our private and public angst about our lives and the world in which we live.

Since the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, toxic politics, fears for the impact of AI and for the planet, our conversations, both public and private, have changed. We hear of despair, of opting out, working from home, moving to the coast, of struggling to pay food and energy bills and of the NHS and others in crisis. The world, as we know it, is seen to be in trouble. The church is not immune - the recorded numbers of believers is going down in the UK and religious practice is in decline - except, around the world, amongst those who hold literal and 'fundamentalist' beliefs, from faith groups to Trump's followers. Richard Rohr offers a brilliant analysis in this book of just what is going on, showing how the certainties we once thought we had, and we feel we have lost, leave us adrift, self-centred and without meaning, except in a very personal and selfish way. Rohr shows us we have lost our grasp on the real order, taught by St Francis and visible in the life of Jesus and other great leaders which is not linear certainty and constant progress but a pattern of order, disorder and then harmony. He speaks of this pattern throughout life and certainly in faith; Jesus' birth, death and resurrection is one example of the pattern we need to understand and embrace, not least in our churches with their bland patterns of tradition and certainty. There is so much here that really speaks to our times, both in faith and in secular terms. I warmly recommend this book.

Christine King



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This is gentle and engaging film-making
Paul Northup, Creative Director, Greenbelt

I highly recommend the beautiful new short films from PCN
Brian McLaren

*These films invite and inspire us to engage in the holy complexity of
Christianity* **Naomi Nixon, CEO, Student Christian Movement**

A powerful and moving film (Holly's story)
Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford

*Spiritually generous and heart-warming, Gemma's film shows that
only love can prove a faith* **Richard Holloway**



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