

Progressive Christianity Network – Britain

December 2009



Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

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Christmas: thoughts to ponder

by Mary McMahon



Mary McMahon is the co-ordinator of the Edinburgh local group, and a longstanding and respected member of the Management Committee. Hers was the refreshing and welcome female form

chairing this year's AGM at St James's Piccadilly in October.

Christmas comes at a time of darkness – shorter days, wilder weather, winter woollies, and for those fortunate enough to have them, log fires. We look forward to the activities and celebrations of the season – reunions with families and friends, singing, inevitably a degree of feasting, and equally inevitably some remembrance of other Christmas times....There's tinsel, canned music and unbridled commercialism galore. And there's war in Afghanistan and grieving families, poverty in the greater part of the world, injustice reflected daily through the media, and all too often, sorrow in our own communities...

Advent reminds us, I think, of the imperative of hope. We wait. The world waits. Not passively, but actively seeking the coming of the light. Seeking reasons for hope. Waiting is hard sometimes. Think of the long gestation period between conception and

birth – expectant mothers know plenty about waiting!

Traditionally, Mary, the mother of Jesus sang the Magnificat when she met her cousin Elizabeth. It's a lovely affirmation of the way things might be in the kingdom of God. Like the Beatitudes, the world as we know it is to be turned upside-down (or maybe right-way up at last?). The culture of success and power will yield to compassion and gentleness. I'm reminded of the *Sunday Times* List of what's 'going up' and what's 'going down':

He will topple all the powerful from their thrones,

And raise up all the humble.

He feasts all the hungry with good cheer, sends the rich away empty-handed....'

For this we wait. Maybe the Advent season helps to remind us that light will always penetrate the darkness – that's the lovely message of a candle. That seeking the light and finding it reflected in even the most unlikely 'other' may be what we're about as people of the Way...

Because we all get habituated to the fuss and bustle of Christmas, suppose - just for a moment - we were to give ourselves three gifts this year:

- the gift of wonder, some awareness of the splendour and beauty of the world around us - and time to treasure it.
- time with a baby, to realize afresh all the potential and grace found in surprising places, and the vulnerability of love.
- spot a star! Then perhaps to ask ourselves what star we follow, and

why...Remember Auden's three wise men who say:

*To discover how to be human now,
Is the reason we follow the star.*

Adeste fideles. Come to the manger. Look. Listen. Wait. Receive. Speak only if you can improve on silence. Celebrate the coming of the Light. And know that the promise made to our forebears is for us too...

Christmas

The miracle of a beautiful story

by Dorothy Haughton

Dorothy Haughton is a member of Shrewsbury Unitarian Church, which is on our list of places where PCN members can expect to find a welcome. It is a place without a minister of its own; there are visiting ministers, but otherwise ministry is shared by its members. It is also where Charles Darwin worshipped as a boy with his mother and sisters, and attended the minister's school for some years.

Sometimes when I am asked to explain what being a Unitarian is all about, my interlocutor says brightly, "Well, you don't do Christmas then" and I explain, patiently that yes, Unitarians do do Christmas, for Christmas is a story and a very beautiful one, full of different resonances, and that we love it.

There was this man, see. Just a carpenter, from Galilee but his message fills everyone who hears it with hope and with joy. His preaching becomes so popular that he appears to be a threat to the Sanhedrin, a charge is cobbled together and the Romans, to prevent civil unrest, crucify him. And that should be the end of this wandering prophet, among so many wandering prophets and pseudo-messiahs. But it's not. His message spreads and spreads. It is carried out of Jewry and into foreign lands, lands where the people are used to a panoply of gods and also used to putting on little playlets to celebrate the birth of heroes. So, a little pageant is put together. Bishop Spong suggests that the Christmas story becomes a play so readily because that is how it started. So, 2,000 years of little boys with tea-towels on their heads! The Roman taste for

pageants meets the Jewish tradition of Midrash (Read Jack Spong's *Jesus for the Non-religious*). The child is born of a virgin – Ecclesiastes with a bit of doctoring. The birth has to be in Bethlehem because of a prophecy, so a tax is invented. There is no contemporary record. Mary and Joseph set off on their journey across a thousand Christmas cards. Joseph provides, weirdly, the blood line of David but none of the blood. He seems to inhabit the Christmas story solely as a donkey guide. The midwinter birth, the cave and the shepherds come from the birth of Mithras, the reluctant landlord is a nice touch. The magi come from Isaiah and Solomon. There is no contemporary record of a star, there may have been a comet but not in the reign of that particular Herod. There is no contemporary record of a slaughter of the innocents, that presumably comes from Moses in Egypt and the death of the first born. The Holy Family flee into Egypt so that the new covenant and the new law can, like Moses' law, come out of Egypt. And there we have it. And it becomes part of our Christmas memories, intertwined with all the pagan rituals we scooped up and added to the mix: the holly and the ivy, the presents, the yule log, and then the cake, the pudding and the mince pies. And finally there comes the entirely personal.

Take some time to identify how much of Christmas for you is made of memories. And rejoice in the miracle of a beautiful story that has captured hearts for 2,000 years.

Time to renew your membership!

PCN membership runs from January to December. So now is the time to renew yours for 2010. Included with this newsletter you will find a new affiliation form for next year. Please try and fill it in and return it as soon as you get this newsletter - and before it gets lost in Christmas! If you do by any chance mislay it over the holiday period, you will be able to find a copy as a pdf on the website in the Membership section.

- If you chose to pay by standing order last year, and your standing order is working, then your renewal will be automatic, but please return a form to us anyway, to ensure your Gift Aid and contact details are up to date.
- If you were one of those people who were notified that your standing order has failed, then please return the form in order to set up a new one.
- If you have not yet set up a standing order, please do consider doing so this year. By this method, you can spread payment of the membership fee over the year in monthly or quarterly installments.
- Otherwise send a cheque, which can only be paid in one annual installment.
- If you can't remember whether you renewed by standing order or not, then email or write to Andy, and he will tell you!

The committee has decided to maintain the fee at £30 per person for 2010 – the same as in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009. As for previous years, if members feel that they have a limited income, for instance if they are in receipt of benefit, then they can pay a minimum fee of £15, and receive all the benefits of full membership. And for those members who want to support the growth and development of the Network by paying more than £30, they are invited to make an additional donation of £15, and pay a total of £45. This way we can raise an average of £30 per member, and set our budget accordingly. We leave it to your own judgement to decide what you pay, and this of course remains confidential to the secretary and the administrator. Donations continue to be very welcome – if you can afford more than £15, but less than £30, then please send that.

And whatever you determine you can pay, do please rejoin. Numbers count, if we want people to hear and to take seriously the Progressive Christian voice. Andy looks forward to receiving your membership renewal.

Jill Sandham, Secretary
Andy Vivian, Administrator

Farewell, Fred, from those you have helped to sing with integrity in our churches

Most of you reading this will identify Fred Kaan as one of the great hymnwriters of the twentieth century, but perhaps not as a United Reformed Church minister. We celebrate all that Fred has brought to hymnody and ministry as we recognise his death in the early hours of Sunday 4 October 2009 at the age of 80.

Fred's hymns are found in most Protestant English language hymn books, with first lines including 'For the healing of the nations', 'The Church is like a table' and 'Put Peace in to each other's hands'. At the Free to Believe

conference almost a year before Fred's death, and in Fred and Anthea's presence, Brian Wren led us through a number of the hymns in Fred's book 'The Only Earth We Know', a title that encapsulates much of Fred's conviction. Many of these hymns are used variously in our worship, sung of course but also used as prayer, reflection or meditation. During the conference Brian Wren praised Fred's writings with the deceptively throwaway line, "that'll preach", as well as recognising what Anthea describes as 'the cruellest of diseases to

destroy memory and personality' when he remarked: "My dear Fred, you might have forgotten how to write these hymns, but the church will never forget how to sing them". A few months before that conference, Fred Kaan also made a special appearance at the United Reformed Church General Assembly, where he took part in public discussion and a celebration of hymnody with Brian Wren and Alan Gaunt.

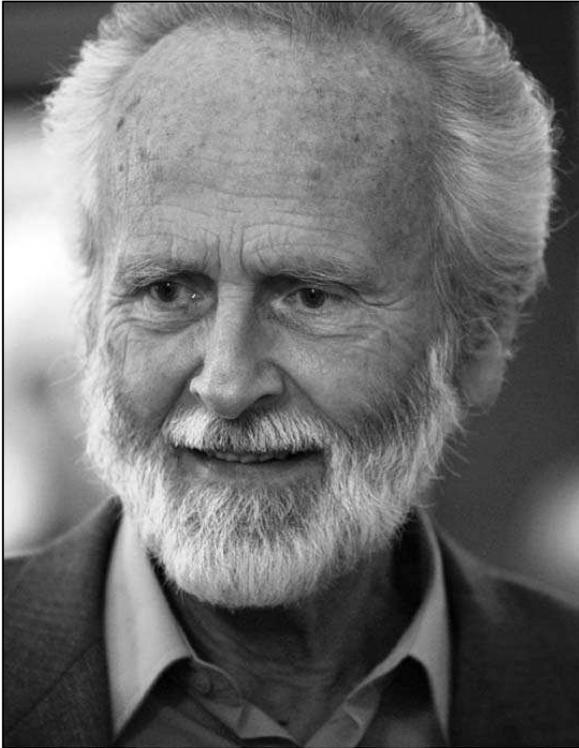


Photo credit: Mark Howard

Born in the Netherlands, Fred spent the war years under Nazi occupation, an experience which marked his life with a deep concern for peace and justice. Later he decided to study theology and psychology at Utrecht University. On a visit to England he stayed with a family belonging to a Congregational Church and was so impressed with Congregationalism that, when he decided to offer for the Christian ministry in 1952, he chose Western College. After a first pastorate in Barry, he was called in 1963 to Pilgrim Church in Plymouth where he began to be known for his hymn writing, arising out of a strong desire for words to enhance the worship he offered with his congregations but which could not be found in the hymns available to him. After five years, with his wide experience, strong convictions and a gift for languages, he became the minister-secretary of the International Congregational Council which united in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

In 1978, Fred returned to England to become the Moderator of the West Midlands Synod of the United Reformed Church, also serving as an officer of the Council for World Mission and becoming its chairman. His final pastorate was in Swindon and he retired in 1990, later becoming a willing and valued Honorary Advisor to PCN Britain.

With his first wife, Elly, Fred had two sons, Martin and Peter and a daughter, Alison. Later he married Anthea, their devotion for each other leading her to care for him without flinching through retirement and especially in his final years. She seized every opportunity for them both to rejoice in all that each has brought to lives lived out fully, with their special gift of making people feel valued along the way. There is no doubt that Anthea will continue that enriching philosophy.

Their last months together were spent in the constantly changing company of many visiting friends; when impending mortality was powerless over the continuing sounds of regular laughter. Right up to his final days in the sensitive care of those at Yanweth Care Home he enjoyed sharing food and wine with others, living out even then something of those hymns he has given us with which to celebrate communion.

It is difficult to speak of Fred Kaan without reference to some of his intensely clever word play amid the amazing simplicity of the words he leaves for us in his hymns. How striking it is to take a familiar word like 'thanksgiving' and simply divide it to drive home with heightened understanding a way in which we should live our lives. 'There can be no thanks without giving'; and we remember with thanks all of Fred's giving to us, allowing all that he held so dear to continue to enrich our lives.

The Revd Roberta Rominger, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church said: "We thank God for the gift to us of Fred Kaan, whose passion for peace and justice, ecumenical drive and ability to enable the Church to sing the faith in plain but moving speech have had a major influence on the Church in the last half of the twentieth century."

Bon voyage, Fred.

Chris Avis and Linda Harrison

Chris and Linda are both United Reformed Church members as well as of PCN and FtB. The editor is grateful for their writing this tribute together.

Anthea Kaan to the members of PCN

Anthea Kaan spoke about Fred towards the end of the day with Jack Spong at St James's, Piccadilly. Here is what she said.

I am grateful for this opportunity on behalf of myself, Fred's three children, Martin, Peter and Alison and my two daughters Rachel and Joanna and the rest of the family to thank all the loving wonderful friends around the world who have supported myself and Fred, including our lovely Dutch Alzheimer's nurse Ons Epskamp and the caring, sensitive staff from Yanwath Care Home through these last difficult months. I can only say Alzheimer's is the cruellest of diseases to destroy memory and personality. The real Fred died some time ago. Others can speak better than I can about Fred, his work, his hymn writing, his passionate belief in working to make peace.

But I can speak about Fred as a passionate husband, a loving father and grandfather, a man who loved travel, a man with a great concern for using simple good language and not abstruse, meaningless, religious, old-fashioned words and a man with a good sense of humour. Also a man who could always relate well to children and as increasingly the Alzheimer's took over his thought processes a man who made a point of engaging with children when we were sitting on a plane, or a bus, or a train and during endless hospital visits would stoop and bend down and share a smile with a small child we might pass in a corridor.

During the Nazi Occupation of Holland the Scouts were banned, but after the war they started up again. One evening The Scoutmaster came in with his Baden Powell hat and asked all the scouts to pull out a name because scouts in England wanted to be pen-friends. Fred pulled out the name of Peter Hayward who received his first letter on Christmas Day 1946. He invited Fred to come and stay with him and his family and Fred discovered the Congregational Church, liked their democracy and after reading theology in the Netherlands came to read theology at Western College in Bristol.

Speaking of his passion for language he said he had to write simple English when he felt the need to write a hymn to illustrate a sermon, because he couldn't find anything appropriate in the hymn-book and his understanding of the English language and its colloquialisms was still slightly

limited when he first came to England. Vivian Buddle – a colleague of his when he was training at Western College in Bristol told me he came into the common room one day to find Fred poring over a book of English phrases saying he couldn't anywhere find the meaning of 'Blow you Jack' whereupon Vivian told him it meant to 'get stuffed'.

Before retiring to the Lake District we were living in Birmingham. Fred had already retired before me and I knew I was about to retire from the inner-city practice, where I was working and knew we could not possibly afford to keep our Birmingham home and the Lake District bungalow we had inherited from my parents. I was secretly longing to go to the Lakes, but had already discovered that having been born in the Netherlands Fred did not have a good head for heights and probably would want to stay in Birmingham. One day he said to me 'Why don't we retire to the Lake District whereupon I said 'But you are doing it for my sake which isn't fair. Fred then said 'You enjoy climbing mountains. What makes you think I can't enjoy looking at mountains!' And so we came and Fred loved it here and said it was one of the best decisions he had ever made.

I would sometimes on a lovely day go out and have a climb on my own. When I got back Fred would always ask me how I had got on. I often choose to go to a quieter mountain and would say on returning 'I haven't seen a soul all day' to which Fred would ask me 'What does a soul look like?'

I don't know what a soul looks like either. Fred always felt that life was in the here and now and I do not believe in life after death, but all I can say is that whatever soul means I hope a bit of Fred's soul can live on in you, as it does in me, remaining a precious part of me.

In Fred's words:

Pray that at the end of living
of philosophies and creeds,
God will find his people busy
planting trees and sowing seeds.

It has been good to share this day in London with you all and to hear Jack again. Fred felt so at one with all that PCN stands for and aspires to.

Anthea Kaan

Companioning, not frightening

Hilary Wakeman coordinates the Open Christianity Network in Ireland. When John Hetherington's Spiritual Awakening: a global vision appeared in the September issue, Hilary emailed John (copying me in) thanking him warmly, but also concerned for "for those who are writhing out from under the deadweight of unuseful doctrine and dogma, and looking for support. What do we, can we, do to companion them without frightening them?" Since that rang many bells for me I asked her to pursue that question. Here she does. Hugh Dawes

Recently I was on the receiving end of a very long phone call from a colleague in this diocese whom I have never met but who has read my book *Saving Christianity*. He is an evangelical, suddenly distressed by matters like 'virgin birth', 'penal substitution', etc, unable to express his new thinking from the pulpit, and needing to pour it all out on the phone. I considered inviting him to one of our Open Christianity meetings. But I think maybe that would frighten him, because we represent quite a wide range of thinking, maybe wider than he is ready for. Would he perhaps fear that if he got involved with progressive Christianity he'd be in danger of losing his Jesus?

So my concern is for people, perhaps especially clergy, who are writhing out from under the deadweight of un-useful doctrine and dogma, and looking for support. What do we, or can we, do to companion them without frightening them? I put that question to other members of the Open Christianity steering group. Some recommended various books, including JW Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (Harper, San Francisco, 1981/1995), and also D. Tomlinson's *The Post-Evangelical* (Triangle, 1995). The following eleven-point response came from Bill Patterson, who is a Methodist local preacher in Northern Ireland.

- 1 Provide the assurance that questioning is acceptable and natural for a mature faith.
- 2 Provide the assurance that the person is respected and accepted no matter how radical the questions - or conclusions. Most evangelicals assume that if you question the resurrection in any way it's all over, everything is lost - or that the whole of Christian doctrine is a closed system and taking one card out means the whole of Christianity collapses!
- 3 Stress that s/he is not alone: many have travelled the same path.

- 4 Indicate that it is acceptable 'not' to believe - if one is not free 'not' to believe one is also not free to believe. The road is one of faithful reconstruction not negative deconstruction leading to nihilism or total isolation within the church.
- 5 Recognise that pain is unfortunately part of the process, both mental, emotional and social. Fear of the unknown is a natural part of this change process.
- 6 I regret to say that some will reject a questioning person as this challenges their own stability in 'the faith'. Or they are simply unsympathetic, intolerant or at worst bigoted. There will be problems to face up to but not insurmountable ones.
- 7 Take Paul Tillich's point to heart and have 'The Courage to Be'.
- 8 It may be useful to refer to thinking conservatives, such as Tom Wright and his dialogue with Marcus Borg in 'The Meaning of Jesus' (Wright and Borg SPCK 1999). This offers two perspectives on the central issues relating to Jesus. The most important part is the respect both writers have for each other.
- 9 It would be important for a questioning evangelical to read or preferably meet with other former evangelicals who are making or who have made the same journey.
- 10 Stress that there is a real ministry within the Church for someone who is questioning and changing. Strictly speaking anyone who is not holding tensions together as part of their life has 'passed on to their maker'.
- 11 A bit of humour can go a long way - we tend to take ourselves far too seriously.

Bill's points are indeed helpful, especially in a one-to-one context. But there are also other aspects to consider, and they don't apply only to evangelicals. What sort of publicity should groups like PCN and OCN be engaging in that will encourage newly-thinking people to contact them, so that a safe space can be provided for discussion? Should it be clear from our publications that we are not *all* of us extremely far out, theologically (as might sometimes be assumed by newcomers)? Doctrinal matters like 'virgin birth' and 'penal substitution' are probably not generally discussed in the average church or congregation, so that the average lay person hardly knows what s/he thinks about such things. Would it be good if they were discussed? And if so, how might PCN and OCN encourage it?

Some very personal reflections on being a progressive Christian



Jill Sandham has been actively involved in PCN from its earliest beginnings, and its secretary since 2002. Here she writes about the living out - the being - involved in

progressive faith; the giving it asks of us; and what the network has meant and means to her.

Journeying with the Progressive Christianity Network in its formative years, I have come to realise all the more starkly that 'being progressive' is not something cerebral, but simply something I am. That's not to say that I don't use my capacity for objective reflection to think too – but being progressive is not for me primarily a 'thinking' thing. I have also become increasingly aware of what a complex thing progressive Christianity is, simply because it must embrace diversity beyond our imagining if it is to reflect a following of Jesus.

I am fortunate always to have assumed, since my teenage years when I first found church, that the words we use in worship are symbolic and poetic, and not literal (for instance, I've never been very hung-up on 'did it really happen like that' or literal understandings of virgin or blood). But I do mind very much about style of liturgy, inclusive, participative and boundary-pushing language and drama, and re-remembering through the eucharist. Tony Windross, through a talk he gave at a Sea of Faith in the Churches event, helped me see that I am the kind of person who has a fundamental need to worship - to the extent that if I miss a week or two, it feels a bit like starvation. Not everyone has this blessing or problem, depending on how you see it.

Church is the place where I gather my thank you's, and my sorry's, and most importantly is the rooted community to which I belong as the person I am, at my worst and at my best. It is a community which is broken and vulnerable, and I can be that within it. It is at its most progressive when it is in touch with its own vulnerability and brokenness, and can give

individuals the space to be held in their own vulnerability. It is the place, the people, that has held my tears of grief, my indignation and pain, and celebrated my joy, and provided my son with a diverse community of folk who love him. It is like a table, to use the words of Fred Kaan's powerful hymn, which has "no sides or corners, no first or last, no honours;no protocol for seating, a symbol of inviting, of sharing, drinking, eating; an end to 'them' and 'us'". At least, that is what it strives to be, and when it fails (as it does, all the time), it tries again. I cannot conceive ever of not being part of such a community striving to be thus.

Earlier this year I had a short but scary time in hospital. For a brief time I thought I might be dying. It was good practice for the real thing – not least because it made me see that dying people were grieving people. But most of all, it located me, as belonging, caring about firstly and most passionately my close family, and then second, my church community. For that short period, my work environment (about which I am passionate) and PCN (which has also been my lifeblood) sadly didn't even enter the race in terms of what I cared about. Being prayed for did. Not because I believed for a moment that prayers would cause an interventionist god to make me better – I've never thought that. But because I was held in love, and that I mattered. That in its own way sustained me, and 'made me better' – even if I had then died.

I first heard the Eight Points at The Center for Progressive Christianity conference in Philadelphia back in 2002 (where I first properly got to know Jim Adams and met Jack Spong, and where the seeds of a close friendship and loving relationship with Hugh, who became my husband in 2004, were sown). But to stick to the Eight Points – I found them easy to embrace, as a satisfactory reflection of my own faith journey. The Point which stood out for me was number 5 – 'We are Christians who know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe'. Closely followed by number 4 – 'We are Christians

who invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us to be acceptable... ‘

Ministry is what I do in life, not exclusively what I do in church. I am a social worker by trade. That has taken me through varied and interesting jobs – with parents trying hard but frequently not managing to care for and protect their children enough; with oppressed and depressed communities, finding courage and confidence to celebrate and have a voice; as a manager of a charity for children and parents, having to take tough decisions to ensure its future survival, and care for staff in the process; and now, as an adviser on safeguarding in a diverse and complex diocese. And alongside that I have brought up three boys, much of the time as a single parent, through some challenging times.

In all this, being a progressive Christian has been – and is - very complex, and difficult. It is something to do with giving away, not claiming. Giving away power, most definitely, to those who have too little. Not seeking privilege or status. Listening to others, working out solutions together. Being gentle, as Yeats expresses better than ever I could: “I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread carefully because you tread on my dreams”. Giving away to those who are weak and powerless is a risky business. Ironically the job I now find myself in – safeguarding – is all about creating environments of safety. ‘Welcoming all’ involves setting limits on some, in order to keep others safe, otherwise by default those others are no longer welcomed. There are not many communities who welcome sex offenders. Church at its best does. And in my experience, the evangelicals do it best of all. That is being progressive, grappling with the complexity of what we are asked to do as followers of Jesus, and that is very costly (reference point 8). Along the way, I’ve discovered some very surprising fellow travellers on the progressive path, who would never have described themselves (indeed in some cases would have been insulted by) being labelled progressive; and some who have proclaimed themselves as progressive, but

have not always demonstrated that by the way they have treated others.

Now anyone who knows me will know that I fail miserably in all this ‘giving away’ stuff most of the time – always got too much to say, hog the floor, don’t listen, push my agenda, think I know best. But for all that – I think much of the time, even in PCN, we are in danger of missing these fundamentals of what being progressive Christians is about, and need gently and respectfully to keep ourselves and each other on track. The ending of St James’s Piccadilly’s mission statement has become my mantra: “We don’t manage it all the time, so we try again”. When things feel fragile, as they often do, the progressive Christian way may be to be in touch with vulnerability and allow for, even enable and encourage, diversity and difference in an open and transparent way, rather than rally for leadership and direction and a closing down.

PCN has often been space for ‘breathing oxygen’ for me, especially at its gatherings of members, and often at its Management Committee meetings. There’s been much laughter, shared frustration, and freedom to say what we really think, and an absence of the all-too-common arrogance of ordained clergy over lay. Indeed PCN gatherings are probably the only places where I can rarely distinguish clergy from lay, and where clerical collars are not, by unspoken common understanding, the dress code.

I’m stepping down from the role of Secretary, and from the committee, from the end of December this year. This short piece is a thank you, for all the ways which you the members have journeyed with me, and helped to form and grow in me what being a progressive Christian is about. I’ll end where I began – it is much more complex than I ever imagined, but the wrestling with it has been and will continue to be worthwhile. I may not have been an easy travelling companion for some of you. But I have made good, treasured friends through the UK, and ‘across the pond’, which will be lifelong. Thank you to all of you who have shared my progressive path thus far.

Jill Sandham
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St Deiniols Weekend 2010

The successful series of PCN-Britain sponsored St Deiniol's Weekends will continue in 2010. The weekend is booked for 21st - 23rd May. The booking form containing further details can be found in this mailing. Places are limited and again will be allocated on a first come basis.

Affirming Catholicism An introduction



PCN has a series of partners it seeks to work with. This is something the Management Committee has worked hard at, and Adrian Alker has had a key role in its development. Some of those partners feature

regularly in these pages; others less so. Here Liz Terry, a regular book reviewer for the newsletter, introduces us to 'Aff Cath' and its work and concerns.

Affirming Catholicism began in 1990 in response to what was seen as an undermining of the long-standing Catholic tradition of Christianity. The word "Catholic" in this context is not to be confused with "Roman Catholic". Here it is used in the more general sense of being open to all things. In their publicity they describe themselves as "bringing together and strengthening lay and ordained people who recognise the positive, inclusive and joyful currents in the Catholic tradition of Christianity"¹. Since its beginnings at a meeting in St Albans, Holborn, London, the movement has grown year on year, and there are now local Affirming Catholicism groups all over Great Britain and Ireland. They are a registered charity, and rely on supporters for all their funding.

Aff Cath (as it is affectionately known) has been a liberal and progressive voice within the Anglican Communion for a long time, and is highly respected. Their website² is a veritable treasure trove of literature, campaigns, conference details and reports, advice on vocations, publishing – you name it, Aff Cath have got a hand in it. Their wide network of local groups provide a focal point for many of its members, with a range of activities and events including talks by prominent Anglicans, workshops and quiet days. For those members who live in diocese not known for their liberality, this can be a lifeline. However, Affirming Catholicism do not limit their activities to local groups.

There are nearly one hundred of its members in the General Synod of the Church of England, making them a force to be reckoned with when decisions need to be made by that body. Most recently, this has been shown by their vocal support for the campaign to allow the ordination

of women bishops into the Church of England. The Affirming Catholicism Standing Committee made a substantial submission to the Women Bishops Legislative Drafting Group in 2007. In it, they called for a clarifying of the Church's position on those who refused to accept the decision to ordain women to the episcopate: "Specifically, we conclude that it would be simply impossible to contain within one church those who hold that women have been ordained bishop in the Church of England, and those who believe that those ordinations are not genuine. We believe that provision can and should be made for all those who accept the church's decision but retain their private doubts, but cannot be made for those who regard that decision as null and void and who wish to live apart from the rest of the church."³

They have also welcomed Civil Partnerships, producing a booklet calling on the Church to accept them as a pastoral opportunity. The foreword to the booklet has been written by the Very Reverend Dr Jeffrey John, the openly gay dean of St Albans, who was forced to stand down from his appointment as suffragan Bishop of Reading in 2003. A massive furore over his celibate gay relationship caused the Archbishop of Canterbury to fear the division of the Church if he was appointed. He is a founder member and trustee of Affirming Catholicism. He states in his foreword:

"We know that the road to full and equal acceptance of gay relationships throughout the world will be long and hard, but we can rejoice that in this country the partnership law is a very big step along it."⁴

They also issued a press release after the much-publicised House of Bishops Pastoral Statement on Civil Partnerships came out, in which the Reverend Richard Jenkins (director of Affirming Catholicism) stated:

"This was a chance to reach out to lesbian and gay people in a way which would reflect Jesus' care and affirmation. Instead their advice falls short of genuine pastoral care and reflects the contradictions at the heart of the Church's current position. Something better is called for."⁵

All of the above quotes are a source of hope to those of us who often feel that we are shouting in a vacuum. It helps to know that such a large and well-respected organisation is on our side.

As well as their campaigning work, Affirming Catholicism members are supportive of anything

that is fresh and different, and which changes the Church for the better. Progressive Christians the world over want their church (of whatever denomination) to move with the times and embrace new ideas, and to this end, Aff Cath are supporting the Archbishop of Canterbury's "Fresh Expressions" initiative, which hopes to engage people who would not normally approach the Church, and ensure that our rich tradition does not die out:

"At its best, the Fresh Expressions programme invites us to integrate the wisdom of traditional patterns of the Church with contemporary society in the twenty first century. Such fresh expressions of Christ can offer to us a vision of communities of the crucified where new things are brought out and the tradition is handed on."⁶

Affirming Catholicism is a liberal voice of reason within an increasingly intractable Church. With

recent decisions by the General Synod and resolutions from the Lambeth Conference tending to espouse the ideals of a bigoted, fundamentalist and narrow-minded few, it seems that they are just as needed now as they were in 1990, if not more so. We can be assured that progressive Christianity has a voice within the Church through this established and respected organisation.

1. Leaflet: "Affirming Catholicism – Inspiration and hope in the Anglican Communion", available from Affirming Catholicism website.

2. www.affirmingcatholicism.org.uk

3. Affirming Catholicism Submission to the Women Bishops Legislative Drafting Group of the General Synod, 30th March 2007, page 4

4. Civil Partnership: A Guide For Christians by Jonathan Sedgwick (Affirming Catholicism, London)

5. Affirming Catholicism Press Release, 25/07/05

6. Affirming Catholicism website section about Fresh Expressions: <http://www.affirmingcatholicism.org.uk/pages/default.asp?id=10>

Letter from the chair John Churcher

Communication is the life blood of any organisation. In this respect the Newsletter will continue to play a major part in communication between members and groups. Also in the future the website and email will be additional sources of communication. Members who are on the PCN-Britain email list will have received the first of regular Occasional Updates from the Chair in early November. I do encourage members to make use of the website and email facilities to let one another know what is happening in your area, and also to share your thinking on developments in progressive Christianity, especially in the Forum.

Those who received the November email update will have read my thanks to both Jill Sandham and Hugh Dawes for arranging and ensuring that Jack Spong's speaking tour of PCN-Britain groups was such a success. And if you have yet to read Jack's latest book "Eternal Life: A New Vision" then I strongly recommend that you do so: part autobiography and part a challenging exploration of life, death and 'beyond'. Jack's writing is always inspirational but this is, as far as I am concerned, one of his best. I also thank all local organisers of the venues and meetings for Jack's tour.

PCN-Britain has achieved much since its inception, and there is much more that can and will be achieved in the future. These are exciting times to be developing this work

locally and nationally. The Management Committee is here to serve the membership and as part of its work, members of the MC will be meeting at a 24 hour residential in January. The first day will be an open agenda to review the roles of MC Officers and to discuss ways in which work load and role specifications can be developed to meet the changing needs of this growing membership organisation. There is a wealth of expertise within the wider membership that should be used much more in developing the local and national work of PCN-Britain. Ways in which to increasingly involve all members, and not just those who can get to the AGM, may also be discussed. Changes are inevitable. Co-options onto the MC will need to be made. There may need to be amendments to the Constitution, and if so, these will be brought to the next AGM.

All organisations change or die. There is no standing still anymore. PCN-Britain has achieved much in these years of establishing and in consolidating its place in the progressive network of similar organisations in Britain. Now we need to look to the next stage of development. Where as many Christian organisations and Churches are moving into strategies of survival at least PCN-Britain is looking to cope with the fresh challenges of growth! I ask you to bear with us as the Management Committee works through the future needs and strategies to deal with the present and the future.

Blessings, John Churcher

A further note from John

Change is always difficult and loss of friends and colleagues can be very unsettling. This is especially so when those whose original vision and on-going commitment have brought an organisation to a point of success and continuing growth, decide to step aside. In this respect, both Jill Sandham and Hugh Dawes have been instrumental in the life and work of PCN-Britain. Their commitment and expertise has been enormous and they have given so much and so freely to the work. Therefore it is with great sadness that both have decided to step down from the Management Committee as from 31st December. Their departure will leave a huge

hole in the centre of the work but both Jill and Hugh will continue as members of the organisation. Appropriate ways of marking their departure will doubtless be discussed in the months to come, but in the mean time I wish to thank them both, on behalf of all members, for their commitment, dedication and vision. Without Jill and Hugh there may never have been a PCN-Britain. We are grateful and immensely indebted to both of them. On behalf of all the membership I wish them joy and success as they 'retire' from the Management Committee to continue being active in the work of progressive Christianity in their local area.

John Churcher

News from local groups

Birmingham and West Midlands

(Tessa Carrick 01527 873135
tessa.carrick@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group welcomes new members. Meetings are held approximately bimonthly in members' homes and are usually about ten people. We have just finished discussing the topics in Tony Windross's *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith*.

Our next meeting will be in Hagley, Worcestershire on January 14th 2.30. - 4.00.p.m. when we shall discuss Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion released on 12th November: <http://charterforcompassion.org> and <http://charterforcompassion.org/about> and also Karen Armstrong's article in The Guardian on Tuesday November 10th: Charter for Compassion: At one with our ignorance, which is available on <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/nov/10/charter-for-compassion>. For details about the venue, please telephone Tessa Carrick as above. At the following meeting (date and venue to be arranged) we will discuss Rowan Williams' sermon from Remembrance Day (downloadable from <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2600>) After that we plan to discuss some ideas raised in Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*, so we suggest people borrow the book and begin reading it now.

Edinburgh

(Mary McMahon 0131 441 3337
Email: mary.mcmahon@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We are fitting in an extra meeting this session, to allow for an appropriately seasonal celebration in December, following our book discussion at the November meeting.

In the New Year our programme is:

Mon 25th January – exploring one of the DVD sessions from 'Beyond Theology', led by Jim Moffat

Mon 22nd February – a talk by Elizabeth Templeton on 'A credible faith for to-day'

Mon 29th March – 'Science and Religion –Why all the fuss?' Speaker: Rev Dr Michael Fuller.

We meet in the Cluny Centre, Braid Road from 7.30-9-30 (with a welcoming cuppa on arrival) All are welcome, whether members or not.

Exeter

(Liz Vizard 01392 668859
liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We hosted Jack Spong on the last leg of his UK tour and again managed to fill the URC Southernhay church with members and friends from all over Devon and Somerset. As always, Jack delighted his audience with his devastating analysis of the church's failure to align doctrine with the reality of practice with regard to life after death. His wit and clear thinking are undimmed. His life journey towards an understanding and acceptance of death was clearly laid out, as in his book. How that encourages us to make our own peace with such questions remains to be experienced.

We had a very enlightening and unusual meeting on November 8th with Brian Wilson on *Poetry as a Pathway to God* (alerted by his article in a PCN newsletter) and this was a very much more 'right brained' event (see Jack Spong's reference to being dominantly 'left brained' in his new book). Many of the 25 plus attending had brought poems to share and we had a very thoughtful and wide-ranging discussion following Brian's excellent and extremely well researched talk.

Brian showed us how poets as 'seers' have and still can lead us beyond science and rationality (though they are essential) through myth and metaphor, to a language that can articulate a sense of God that is truthful. Brian suggests we should develop and use this language further, in order to help others 'rediscover God': a task he sees as the primary one now for the church of the 21st century. But how do we do that when we can see through recent history 'the eclipse of poetic and intuitive truth by the rise of scientific and prosaic truth'.

Deep and difficult questions that did not duck the most difficult: how we replace our demolished inadequate theology; how to build again. A question

our group returns to often, especially after a visit from Spong!

'...through poetry, we may find that the God of all truth has arrived at the intellect by way of the heart.' Our next meeting will be on Sunday January 17th at 2.30 in the URC Southernhay Hall in Exeter at 2.30pm when Rev Iain McDonald will complete his series on the Eight Points of PCN. All are welcome.

Gloucestershire

(Frank Godfrey 01452 533825
frank.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We continue with the question "Can we rely on the N.T record?" One member led a study of stories of the birth and the baptism of Jesus, and in future meetings we will move on to the miracles, followed by the resurrection, with Jack Spong's work being a primary source. At the time of writing this we were looking forward to John Churcher's visit to us – "Exploring the Gospels as Social Commentary", which was widely advertised in the hope of publicising the activity of our group more widely. [Ed: the meeting took place before we went to press – we look forward to news of it in the March 2010 newsletter.] Our next meeting will be on January 9th at the regular time and place.

Hertfordshire

(Diana Reddaway
diana.reddaway@pcnbritain.org.uk)

A very full programme for 2009 ended with a discussion on 'Creation and the Cosmos' that also opened the Welwyn Garden City Interfaith Week activities. The meetings organised for early 2010 commence on Sunday 17th January with speakers Rachel and Sarah Hagger-Holt introducing their new book 'Living it Out: A survival guide for lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians and their friends, families and churches" published by Canterbury Press in November 2009. The February meeting on Sunday 21st will be on the subject of Abundance and will be introduced by Rev Nina Johnson, a Methodist minister heading up pioneering work of Christian hospitality on a major new brown field housing development and university campus. The meeting on 21st March will be introduced by Rev John Churcher who will be discussing his new book "Setting Jesus Free", published by O Books in December 2009. All meetings take place at the Backhouse Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City [4 – 5 p.m. followed by refreshments].

London: Herne Hill

(Ted Offerman 020 8852 7063
ted.offerman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We continue to meet regularly at roughly monthly intervals and we are now well into The First Paul by Borg and Crossan. This is a stimulating and interesting book putting a new and in depth perspective on Paul. Some of the writers' conclusions have proved controversial (largely because the book lacks references) and discussion has been lively. The Anglicans in our group are concerned for the status of women in the Anglican Communion especially with regard to the ordination of women

Bishops. Many of us have made representation to the revision committee to ensure that a just solution to the situation will be presented to the Synod when it next convenes early next year. Our non-anglican brothers and sisters have been asked to keep our branch of the Church in their thoughts and prayers.

London: Richmond

(Alan Powell 020 8878 7355
Email: alan.powell@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Richmond Group meets on Saturday afternoons at about six weekly intervals. It is about 12 strong and now includes members from Putney and Ealing. We are currently discussing "Between The Poles - creative living between atheism and religion" by Chris Scott. The next meeting is on Saturday 12th December. Anyone interested in joining us would be most welcome and should contact Alan Powell for more details.

Manchester

(John Ramsbottom 0161 456 5119
Email: john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group has met on a monthly basis, and sessions have been based around the "Living the Questions" DVD course for the most part, although we have been flexible and taken in other items of a topical nature where necessary. October saw a number of the group attend the Bishop Spong lecture in Sheffield, and that month's meeting took the form of a review and discussion of reactions to what he had to say. Plans for next year are for the following dates: 25th Jan; 24th Feb; 24th March - all at St Agnes church, Reddish, Stockport. An open invitation is extended to anyone who might like to join us. Attendances have averaged around 12 so far - contact John Ramsbottom for more details.

Newbury

(Maria Grace 01635 47196
Email: maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Four of us attended the stimulating Jack Spong occasion in London. We reported back at our next meeting. Different things had struck different people. We could certainly identify with encountering the God experience in Jesus. However we had a question. Jesus was a person of his culture and times so he must have been deeply motivated by his understanding of God, which was presumably Jewish and theistic. But Progressive Christians now have a very different understanding of God to the one Jesus had. So are we right to still call ourselves Christians? Any feedback on this appreciated.

Salisbury

(Lavender Buckland 01722 780488
Email: lavender.buckland@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our inaugural meeting was on a stormy evening, when Martin Godfrey joined us with a wonderful array of books, DVDs and CDs. We valued his comments, on both the materials and on the setting-up of new groups; and warmly welcomed the chance to ask him questions. We have agreed to meet on the THIRD Wednesday of each month, at 7pm for coffee, with the meeting at

7.30 to end at 9.30. The Group welcomes enquirers: we now have 10 members and look forward to our Christmas Meeting on Wednesday, 16th December at the URC Chapel, Broad Chalke. For directions, and for all other details, contact Lavender Buckland.

Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims

(Pat Churchill 01892531541
pat.churchill@pcnbritain.org)

Everyone is welcome to our meetings which are generally on the last Thursday of the month. (ring me to check time and venue). We tend to pick topics to discuss rather than following a set course.

Members have had a busy three months, attending lectures, involving themselves in climate change and fair trade issues. These included listening to Rowan Williams, and attending the Living the Questions presentations.

The start of our autumn programme saw us joining our sister group in Hastings for a day seminar presented by David Catchpole titled 'Jesus of Nazareth, crucified but why?' It was a very thought provoking day which gave us an insight into how a religious historian reaches conclusions.

This was followed a short while later by reports of and extracts from a couple of talks at Greenbelt. The first by Gene Robinson and the second Dave Tomlinson, both thought provoking and leading to discussion.

One member, having been on a retreat at Worth Abbey, entitled "Finding Happiness" shared her experience with us. Happiness was described in terms of contentment, fulfilment and engagement needing a balance of work, prayer and study. It gave freedom to do what one liked as long as it does not harm others, a tall order!

A group of us attended Jack Spong's lecture about which some of us are still pondering. The November discussion on this ranged widely with various thoughts being aired.

We look forward to future meeting: December 17th A radical Christmas; January 28th Darwin; February 25th

COP15-Climate Change, Copenhagen; March 25th
David Catchpole.

Vale of Glamorgan

(Janice Proctor 01446 401152

Email: janice.proctor@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our regulars continue to be inspired by our meetings. One commented that it is motivating to be in a group where you can say whatever you like and it will be accepted without bias or judgement but as a helpful contribution to our discussions.

Representatives of our group were at the PCN AGM and Jack Spong's lecture in London. Others, who were unable to make that date, hired a minibus to Exeter. It was well worth the journey.

Topics which are on our minds at the moment include the perennial issue of young people and the equally important theme of world peace.

We love our meetings but we are mainly over 60 and some over 80. We noticed that there were very few young people at Jack Spong's talk in Exeter. We understand how Evangelical churches can appeal to young people through a message of certainty and through emotional and enthusiastic hymns but most of us have reached our present understanding of Christianity through a process of discarding elements of the faith we were taught in Sunday School and church. How can we communicate this re-fined and re-defined faith to a generation which has never had any faith to discard? How can we speak enthusiastically and yet at a level youngsters will understand and feel attracted to? And, the first and greatest problem for a group of "oldies", how we get in touch with young people in order to try to communicate with them? Any comments?

On the theme of world peace, we all believe passionately in inter-faith working and inter-faith dialogue. We think this ought to have a higher profile in all denominations at a national level. We wonder how we can put it into practice at a local level. Ideas, please!

Jack Spong's Tour – Eternal Life

Visit of Bishop Spong to Colchester, near the Spongy Bottoms of Norfolk

On Tuesday, 20th October, 2009 a number of those from Lion Walk Church pulled together to fling wide the church doors and welcome 148 people from East Anglia who joined us to listen to Bishop John Shelby Spong at the first of five venues on his PCN Britain tour. Jack Spong's subject was 'Eternal Life: A New Vision', the title of his recently published book, copies of which were eagerly purchased by many after the talk. Encouragingly, a good proportion of the audience was hearing Jack for the first time, although many had read his books and already received his weekly question and answer through Waterfront Media online. There had been minor hiccups along the way: on two attempts to deliver the carefully prepared packs from PCN, Parcel Force had seemed unable to identify our prominent Victorian Gothic-style tower and steeple marking the Colchester



skyline and marrying our past with our modern church built above the town centre shops. Our other worry, the noise from the major modifications to the

shopping precinct (that will allow those who choose Colchester for their Christmas shopping to feel they could be shopping in almost any town in Britain), was drowned out by concentration levels during the challenging talk followed by pointed and equally engaging questions and answers.

It was a great privilege to welcome Jack and Christine, as well as Hugh Dawes, to share time with us in East Anglia. There is some disappointment that the four new itching-to-be-born PCN Britain local groups along the A12 Essex/Suffolk artery have not as yet had interest generated from the evening as hoped. The four contact names are on the PCN Britain website and you are welcome to be in touch at any time. I am aware of several local church groups who have gone on to discuss the content of our evening together.

To Edinburgh

Over 250 people attended the lecture given by Bishop Spong in St John's Church, Edinburgh. Standing at the door as people came in, I heard only one hostile comment about PCN ('Is that the atheists' association?'). A few people were uncertain, preferring to reserve judgement until they had heard the talk, but the vast majority were open, interested and hugely grateful for the opportunity to explore issues of faith in an open, honest way. The talk was warmly received, and there would have been more questions at the end had those that were asked been answered more briefly.

Spong began by highlighting the way in which Christian funerals have become so much 'thinner' in recent years, turning into little more than a memorial service for the deceased, as conviction about life after death has faded even among eminent theologians. This, he claims, is because the faith system that gave birth to the original conviction has been rendered obsolete by the discoveries of modern science, from Hubble to Newton to Darwin.

I was a little concerned that so much time was going to be spent 'debunking' traditional understandings of God and eternal life that there would be no time left for reconstruction. However, having outlined two extreme responses on the part of religious believers to the new scientific knowledge – either to refuse to engage with it, or to abandon faith altogether – Spong proceeded to develop his own, radical approach to exploring questions of eternity, much of which would be familiar to those who had heard him before.

As far as he is concerned, the only way for time-bound creatures to enter into the mystery of God is to journey more deeply into this life, time and our humanity, not to look for answers which lie beyond them.

His account of where his journeyings have taken him thus far was masterly, compelling and poetical. He paid tribute to the heroism of humanity, having to live with the chronic anxiety that is the price of self-consciousness. He described some of the wonders of nature encountered in the Amazonian forest: remarkable examples of the inbuilt drive of every living thing to survive. He showed how all of life is both indivisible and interdependent, from plankton in the

Some have indicated they were disturbed, but keen to follow the spark that has been lit; some felt they had heard much of the talk before; but those I have spoken with all recognised a masterful delivery, captivating and awakening us to maturity in our thinking – opening and encouraging us all to look beyond our traditional, safe boundaries. There is a CD available containing the talk (see page 16), plus a bonus disc including Q&As from our own and other venues. Thanks for these go to Mike and James at Lion Walk and Chris Avis in Exeter (please use my local group contact e-mail if you are interested).

For all you may have awakened near the spongy bottom lands of your ancestors in Norfolk, thank you Jack and thank you PCN Britain.

Linda Harrison, Colchester

ocean depths, to human beings, to matter in the most distant galaxies: all are made of stardust.

Thus far atheists and agnostics, and indeed all but the most extreme creationists, would have had no difficulty with Spong's reasoning, and no cause to challenge his conclusions. At this point, however, just as we were waiting for the 'new vision' that would reveal once and for all the mystery of eternal life, the speaker pronounced, "That's as far as I can go in human words!"

Frustratingly, tantalisingly and perhaps inevitably, the final stage of Spong's otherwise rigorously logical argument turned out to be a leap of faith, different in content but similar in kind to that of every other human being who has ever tried to explain from inside the bounds of humanity what divinity and eternity may be about. The only reason he could give for not joining what he describes as the 'Church Alumni Association', was that the 'god reality' was so deep in his life that he could not abandon it. And when pressed by a questioner to say whether we would know our loved ones after death, he simply stated his belief that the self-conscious human (himself) was more than just the product of a highly evolved brain.

I was left, at the end of a fascinating roller-coast ride through time and eternity, with a certain sense of frustration, wondering whether Spong had really delivered what he said he was going to give: a new vision of eternal life. Yes, as self-conscious creatures, we can remember the past and imagine the future; yes, by 'living fully, loving extravagantly and being all that we can be', we can have a sense of experiencing that 'something more' which used to be thought of as God 'up there' in heaven; yes, the interconnectedness of all life means that the component parts of my body will be still be part of the universe just as my ideas and actions will continue to have an (albeit infinitesimal) impact after my death, but can this be described as 'eternal life'? Is it enough to calm the existential anxiety that is part of being self-conscious and mortal? Is it any more than someone like Dawkins can offer by way of reason for 'getting up in the morning'? And if we have indeed moved 'beyond religion; beyond theism; beyond heaven and hell', does it matter?

J Mary Henderson

To London

“You don’t need to be born again; you need to grow up.”

The quip raised a ripple of amusement among the three hundred plus audience at St James’s, Piccadilly. It was typical Spong – taking a side swipe at fundamentalists while coincidentally offering something profound. For Spong, eternal life is the life on offer when our humanity finds fuller expression, as exemplified by Jesus.

Appropriately in this year of Darwin, Spong started with evolution. As humans became self-conscious, they acquired a unique sense of vulnerability and isolation. We are the first and only living creatures to fear death. We have become burdened by thoughts of survival.

“Human beings are chronically anxious people,” Spong told us. “The human image of God is created by humans’ anxiety”.

In this way the human person came to believe that s/he would prosper and survive if s/he found favour with a God who could guarantee these things. According to Spong, this self-interested formula still has almost universal application.

“Flattery of God and reverse flattery (denigrating ourselves) for the purpose of manipulating God is what we do in worship”.

Well, no definition of God is eternal, Spong promised us, and it was clear he wished to deliver the *coup de grace* to this one. His alternative image turned out to be rather more mystical, echoing the God language used by Paul Tillich. Spong described God as: “The Ground of Life coming into our consciousness”.

He also offered other possible images.

“Maybe God is the experience in all things... the life that flows through the universe...”

“Maybe God is that quality of love that calls us to go beyond our survival mentality, freeing us to love wastefully”.

And with that thought Spong sent us off to lunch.

And to Exeter



It was a great responsibility but an even greater honour to organise the Exeter evening at Southernhay URC for Bishop Jack Spong’s West Country appearance on his 2009 UK tour. Jack and Christine

In the afternoon, Spong returned, initially, to his critique of traditional Christianity. He said that people who are required to denigrate themselves to gain favour with God are more likely to become persecutors themselves, listing Jews, coloureds, women and homosexuals among the victims of Christianity. But he reserved his greatest scorn for the doctrine of justification.

“God becomes a child abuser and punishes his own son and as a result you and I become a guilt laden people. Guilt is the currency that keeps the church going... Gratitude never produces wholeness”.

So what makes Spong a Christian? Eventually, he told us.

“In Jesus we see a freedom from fear about people who are different, a freedom from the survival mentality... Jesus loved beyond the boundaries of self-survival.”

“If we see God as the source of love, the source of life, then we have a new way of seeing Jesus – as portraying a human so whole and full that all of God could be expressed through him.”

And this in turn leads Spong to a new way of seeing humanity, expressed in two typically pithy one-liners:

“We are not fallen sinners, we are incomplete human beings”.

“The Holy Spirit didn’t make us religious, it made us human.”

According to Spong, Jesus showed us that the fruit of self-consciousness need not be the burden of a survival mentality, it can be:

“Unity with God – to let God live in us and through us.”

“Our mission is not to convert people but to transform people; to be all that they can be, to love wastefully and to live fully.”

“You can be part of who God is and God becomes part of what you are... You come into being.”

Andy Vivian

drove down from London and arrived earlier than expected, so after booking in at their accommodation and reconnoitring the evening venue they invited me to share some lunch with them in Exeter. There are many eating-places near the church, but all were very busy in this coincident half-term week and lunch for us took over an hour. However, that was no problem in Jack and Christine’s good company with the conversation ranging from current progressive shifts within the URC to Jack’s disappointment at leaving his favourite very old coat behind in Sheffield (much to Christine’s relief)!

More than 160 from all over the south west gathered at the church that evening to hear some characteristically engaging and challenging ‘Spongery’. Much of the early content of Jack’s talk was familiar to Christian progressives, describing the often-anachronistic nature of the church in a post Galileo-Newton-Darwin-Einstein world. Fresher to many

ears was his conviction of the inter-relatedness of all creation, both animate and inanimate, and the 'eternal life' embedded in the Tillichian ground of our being.

Is this Jack's 'Songsong'? When I asked them during lunch if they were considering winding down now Jack

is well into the 'third half' of his life, he replied that Christine had bookings arranged for 2011. Here's to the next tour!

Chris Avis

And another conference

Jesus of Nazareth, crucified but why, resurrected but how?

Daphne Pollard reports on a day organised by the Hastings local group.

We often hear "modern scholars think...." but David Catchpole in a fascinating day showed how they come to their conclusions and, without insisting that his was the definitive answer, how he came to his.

For someone, like me, who has no formal theological training that was an eye-opener.

First, a bit of literary criticism

By boxing certain verses in a story, for instance, Matt.27 vv 24 & 25, in the story of Jesus' trial, he showed how the story flows better without them. This suggests they were an insert. In this case the piece about Pilate washing his hands of responsibility and throwing it back to the Jews was probably added - perhaps as a payment for Christianity becoming the religion of the Roman Empire I am thinking. I did not need much convincing anyway that the crucifixion was the work of Rome.

Referring to History

David was able to show us how *much* influence the Jews had under Rome. He spoke of the execution of James, the brother of Jesus, which happened in a space between Roman Consuls. James was stoned to death. Roman history states that in 3-4 years five High Priests were appointed. The last was Caiaphas who lasted for 18 years and several times modified the high-handed decisions of Pontius Pilate and was thus a friend of Rome. So, perhaps the Jewish authorities did have some influence in Jesus' case, but certainly not the Jewish people.

Customs of the time.

Had the Jews been responsible for Jesus' death, crucifixion would have been a most unlikely method. They used stoning, strangulation and beheading, with exposing the body afterwards as a deterrent.

Witness the death of a Jeremiah-like prophet, who forecast doom boldly and repeatedly before the

uprising of 70CE in which the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. He was handed over to the Roman consul several times for torture and when that didn't work, they pushed a huge boulder off the walls and flattened him. A more Jewish means of disposal!

He also told us about Jewish burial rites of the time. A body would have been anointed immediately after death and wrapped in a cloth with spices before burial. Anointing after three days would have been most unusual. After complete decomposition the bones would have been collected and buried in an ossuary. The bones of a crucified man with a "nail" embedded in the ankle shows that there were occasions when crucified people were buried rather than being thrown on the rubbish tip, so what Joseph of Arimathea did was not unique.

Growing in the telling

The above suggests that part of the resurrection stories were added by the early church before they were written down. The place of the women seems original because their names were added as a kind of footnote in the story previous to Easter, as if it were preparing us for their (most unusual for the time) part in its climax. The historic details of the appearances of Jesus are really hard to decipher, especially as the Gospels don't agree on any of them. David would like to emphasise the empty tomb and the other-worldliness of the body (perhaps angelic) which gave rise to resurrection language. He allows that people have been seen by the bereaved after death, but people don't usually conclude that the dead person has risen. The mystery of the resurrection remains for me a mystery, though its effect persuades me something incredible did happen. David gave me some more things to ponder here.

Daphne Pollard

Special Offer - Eternal Life for a Fiver

As with most advertising, all is not necessarily what it seems, though this is still quite a bargain!

The Exeter recording during Bishop 'Jack' Spong's lecture tour last October, when he spoke about his latest book 'Eternal Life – a New Vision', is now available on an audio CD. Included is a second disc containing a total of 13 questions and answers from sessions at the Exeter and Colchester venues. The discs are packaged in a single case with an attractive cover including photographs and a detailed track index.

The total cost, including p&p, is just £5 per set and you can order in either of two ways:

1. Post your order (including your clear name and address please!) to Chris Avis, 37 Clifton Road, Exeter, Devon EX1 2BN with a cheque payable to C. Avis.

OR 2. Email your order to me at chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk (remembering to include your postal address!) and use Paypal to meet the cost. If you do not have a Paypal account it costs nothing to set one up at www.paypal.co.uk and you do not need to have funds in the account. You can use your card for payment if you wish and the site is extremely secure. As soon as Paypal notify me that your payment has been transferred to my account, I will despatch your order.

As someone remarked after Jack's visit to our church, "That was classic Sponge!" and I look forward to

receiving your eager orders!

Chris Avis

The Greenbelt Festival – A place for progressive Christians?

As a member of a local PCN group my husband and I have been most surprised no other members of our group had been to the Greenbelt Festival. Given that our PCN companions are all exceptionally well informed, and are always keen to attend conferences all over the country, it seemed very strange to us that Greenbelt was unexplored territory. On questioning people further about this we found that the image people had of Greenbelt was that it was an evangelical festival for young people.

There is some truth in this image. I started going to Greenbelt as a teenager in 1986 and at that point its message was a fairly mainstream evangelical one with the arts and music reflecting this approach. However as someone who has now attended 18 festivals over the last 3 decades I can confirm things have changed.

One of the key changes is the age profile. Greenbelters got older. Many families with children wanted to come, and there was a demand for better facilities, rather than the traditional festival camping field. Consequently Greenbelt moved to Cheltenham Racecourse in 1999 and now the festival combines a festival village of tent and marquees, plus the indoor and outdoor facilities of Cheltenham racecourse. As well as the option of camping on the racecourse, attendees can also choose from a range of other accommodation including university halls of residence, and local hotels and bed and breakfasts. Greenbelt is certainly a more civilised experience these days! Perhaps more interesting than the practicalities however, is the theological shift which has occurred. Whilst Greenbelt is in essence a diverse festival which welcomes and caters for people from a wide range of Christian backgrounds, many attendees are people who have moved from a traditional evangelical understanding of faith to something more progressive and the speaking

Living it out

Rachel & Sarah Hagger-Holt write about their forthcoming book 'Living It Out: a survival guide for lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians and their friends, families and churches.'

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people and the church... it's a well-worn topic, there have been numerous polemic and theological contributions to this heated debate.

So, why would a book be of interest to those of us who have made up our minds and moved on? We felt the interesting issue is not, 'Is it okay to be LGB and Christian?' but the questions that come next. What to do if you're a Christian parent who wants to affirm and support your child whose just

programme has reflected this change. The talks programme is specifically designed to be challenging, push boundaries, and be culturally relevant. There are a large number of guest speakers every year, and recent visitors such as Richard Rohr, Dave Tomlinson, Keith Ward, and James Allison might be familiar names to PCN members. This year Bishop Gene Robinson was invited. They needed the biggest venue to host the thousands who were keen to hear the Bishop and his talks were received with huge standing ovations.

There are many aspects to such a large festival, and people's experience is consequently very different. A part of Greenbelt which to me feels unchanged over the years is the very significant focus on social justice. This is a hugely prominent part of the festival and every aspect of the programme reflects this commitment. It is also essentially an Arts Festival, and the schedule of events also now reflects the all age punters with theatre, classical music, visual arts, and literature/poetry events all occurring alongside the more traditionally youth orientated music programme.

If you are still sitting at home thinking you might be a little old for a festival let me end by telling you that this year we were fortunate in persuading one of our PCN group members to join us at Greenbelt. Our friend enjoyed her first festival at the age of seventy eight. It would be great for other PCN members to give it a try too, not only would it feel good if PCN had a wider presence at Greenbelt, it also feels very likely that it is place many of you would feel very much at home.

The Greenbelt festival occurs on the August bank holiday every year, and more information can be found at www.greenbelt.org.uk. CD's and MP3's of recorded talks from the festival are also available to purchase from the website.

Rhian Taylor

come out, or a minister who's been approached by a same-sex couple asking for a relationship blessing, or someone wondering how to introduce your same-sex partner to their church congregation, or a Christian trying to explain to your non-Christian friends why the church is so hung up about LGB people?

More than 50 people contributed to **Living It Out**, sharing stories that we've woven into an honest, upbeat narrative incorporating readings, prayers, cartoons and top tips. Our contributors range from 16-77 years old, lay and ordained, covering more than eight different denominations.

We took care not just to speak to LGB people, but to straight families, ministers and friends. The church's

attitude to sexuality and sexual orientation, and how LGB people are seen within the church, is just as much an issue for non-LGB people, as it is fundamental to justice, inclusion and above all the way in which we reflect the unconditional love of God to all.

One church in Liverpool with a declining congregation experienced this in a very concrete way. Their vicar explains in **Living It Out**: "There is a large gay community in the parish and the congregation felt

And another new book – *The Ordinary God* notes from the far west of Ireland.

This is by Hilary Wakeman, author of the article Companioning Not Frightening on page 5. We quote from the publisher's blurb.

A bible discussion group, parishioners of various ages, was getting tied up in knots on a rather basic subject – God. In frustration, one woman said to another, 'But, what sort of God are you talking about?' The other woman looked puzzled. 'Just the ordinary God,' she said.

That is what this book is about. The ordinary, everyday God. The 'God' that comes instinctively to most of us. The essays in this book come largely from that point of view.

Some of them appeared in *The Irish Times*. Most of them appeared in the *Southern Star* newspaper between 2007 and 2009. These were addressed to

strongly that welcoming gay parishioners and affirming their God-given sexuality was a step we wanted to take in a very public and joyful way. Offering prayer to those joined in civil partnership and striving to make our worship LGBT inclusive has helped us to broaden our vision of what it means to be a community, of who God is and of how God welcomes all of us."

Living It Out by Rachel & Sarah Hagger-Holt was published by Canterbury Press on 28th November We hope to review it in our next issue.

the ordinary people of West Cork, a people for whose down-to-earth-ness the author has had a huge respect since 1996 when she became the rector of the furthest south-west parish of the Church of Ireland.

Now retired, she has written these articles for Catholics and Anglicans and Protestants, and the people in-between and outside: for anyone who is interested in the difference between religion and spirituality, or in what our churches are doing ... or not doing ... or more importantly should be doing in the future.

Hilary's book is published by The Liffey Press. ISBN 978-1-905785-73-5 Price: €14.95. We hope to review it too in our next issue.

Breath of eternity: Spaces where God is

Elaine Cobb was one of the first members of the embryonic PCN and of its steering group which became the Management Committee. Co-ordinator of the London Mill Hill group, she is herself a Salvationist. She sent us this lovely piece – Breath of Eternity - by Commissioner Catherine Baird, who was born in 1895 and died in 1984.

Catherine wrote a number of Salvation Army songs and edited some Salvation Army publications. "I take comfort from it", Elaine writes. "Perhaps Catherine would have joined PCN!!"

I meet him
When I'm walking down
Long avenues of Thought
In a broad land of Silences,
Where I explore
When I feel stifled
by Life's little, narrow places.

I cannot tell
The words He speaks,
What robes he wears,
Or, if his form
Be fair to look upon.

I only know,
When I return,
I have inhaled a breath
Of spaces where God is;
It cannot be subdued
By little, narrow places.

Shifting Paradigms: Theology & Economics in the 21st Century

is the title of the 2010 Modern Churchpeople's Union Conference which will run from Tuesday 13th to Friday 16th July at High Leigh Conference Centre, and focuses on the topical subject of economics.

Politicians and economists have called for a 'paradigm shift' in response to the credit crunch. The unprecedented circumstances of the current global recession provide a unique opportunity for dialogue between theology, ethics and economics as we appraise economic life today. The conference is a contribution to that discussion.

Full conference fee is £245 for an *en suite* room and £200 for a standard room, with all meals included. Day bookings are also possible. For more information, the Conference Booking Secretary, Elizabeth Darlington, 1 The Woods, Grotton, Oldham OL4 4LP. Tel 0161 633 3132 E-mail: conference@modchurchunion.org.

Faith and reliability

One of the perks of being the newsletter editor is that you get to read everything in it - well, you *have* to read everything in it, and most of the time that is a bonus! – and that you notice themes and continuities unfolding. Our Gloucestershire group, having devoted a lot of time to the study of the Eight Points (interestingly their chief quarrel seems to have been with ‘progressive’, a word which doesn’t actually feature at all in the points themselves), has now moved on to consider the ‘reliability’ of the gospel records, or of the new testament. I tried to persuade them to share with us something of where they are getting to with this in this issue, but they declined. I hope they will want to in March 2010.

Their quest raises what for me is the bigger issue of the connection between faith and ideas of reliability, historicity, proof, or whatever. What do we expect out of documents which were all of them written out of faith, and written so as to inspire and also sustain faith in others?

What sort of reliability do we expect of a Shakespeare play, or of a novel by a contemporary author of distinction? Even with the so called “histories”, it’s not to the bard that I will turn to find out ‘what really happened’ in the reigns of the monarchs he wrote about. Nor will I read the novels and short stories of William Trevor, whose work I love, if my interest is simply in the events of the long years of Ireland’s troubles which are regularly the backdrop, and in part the subject, of so much that he writes.

What I expect of a writer of talent is something other than what I want of a gifted historian – though I don’t expect the latter only to tell me simply, let alone definitively, what ‘really happened’ for if that were possible the writing of history would have ceased long ago. I want Shakespeare, or Trevor, or whoever it may be to give me a story that ‘rings true’; one that illuminates what it is to be a human person in a particular situation and set of circumstances, such that it sheds light on others, and also on me, and on that wider ‘creation’ and also human family of which we are all part. That draws out the response, ‘yes, that is me,’ or else ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’

Move from that then to the reliability of the gospels. If we are looking for and wanting the ‘definitive’ ‘Jesus of history’, portrayed so clearly and accurately that it makes perfect sense to believe in him, then I think we are always going to be disappointed. I love and have been deeply helped by the portrait of Jesus which emerges

from the writings of Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan and other members of the Jesus Seminar. It is an attractive portrait, and one I can be inspired by and work with. But when my old friend and colleague Don Cupitt in a recent book writes of it as being the most reliable and accurate portrait we have, my own historical training kicks in to protest.

The great English Jesuit theologian George Tyrrell (a leading modernist and a true forebear of progressives today, the centenary of whose death fell earlier this year) wrote in his final book, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, of the work of his German Liberal Christian contemporary Adolph Von Harnack: “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.”

It is no different with the Jesus Seminar. A twenty-first century American Democrat Jesus, challenging the ways of the Emperor of our time, George Bush - and perhaps now of his successor also - shines out of the pages of Borg and Crossan. It is a perfectly reasonable portrait of Jesus for our time, and carries with it a good contemporary story of what companioning Jesus can mean for open believers to commit themselves to. It works in terms of discipleship. For me personally it sits alongside of other, longer-established strands of the story which I need as well – themes well nuanced in the first two reflections in this issue by Mary McMahon and Dorothy Haughton, and in Elaine Cobb’s offering to us of Commissioner Catherine Baird’s *Gift of Eternity* and her experience of the return from ‘encountering’ Jesus: “I have inhaled a breath / Of spaces where God is; / It cannot be subdued / By little, narrow places.”

For a variety of reasons I have quite a bit of opportunity to read at the moment, but struggle just a little to finish things. Among books on the go at the moment are Diarmaid MacCulloch’s *The History of Christianity* – all 1170 pages of it! – and André Comte-Sponville’s *The Book of Atheist Spirituality*.

MacCulloch is a brilliant historian and also a fabulous story-teller. And he has a great story to tell. The capacity of Christianity to re-invent itself endlessly and to recreate itself for changed settings, times, places, people and circumstance is what has allowed this faith to flourish in ways no others have. He accepts all its eclecticism and treats with as much respect both 18th century Methodism and the little-known 19th century

Catholic Apostolic Church. The latter produced some remarkable buildings and glorious liturgy, but has generally been discounted by self-righteously 'believing' church historians who label its members 'Irvingites' after its inspirer, Edward Irving. The Catholic Apostolic Church died out because it made no arrangements for an ongoing ordained ministry. Some might wish that other forms of Christianity could have been similarly neglectful!

MacCulloch would I think agree with John Churcher, in his *Letter from the chair* here, that "All organisations change or die. There is no standing still anymore." But he would also point out that plenty both change *and* die; and that many have changed and do change *for the worse*.

Comte-Spongville's book is an elegant and persuasive case for 'spirituality' - a word which turns some progressive believers dewy-eyed - not being in any sense the preserve of theists. But he is also very aware of how much his own spirituality owes to the Judaeo-Christian tradition; and how much that is good for all people can be offered by religion. Communion, fidelity and love are all vitally important for us humans, and are all well-nurtured, albeit not exclusively, by religion.

Which is why I personally, with all my doubts and downright unbelief about so much, am such a

deeply religious person. Always nourished by church (whether its of my own type or not), and looking forward and needing to be fed by bread and wine once again at Midnight Mass as we celebrate Jesus' birth on Christmas Day. Of course he wasn't really born on 25th December. Of course all the stories told about that birth are pure glorious myth. In any obvious sense, they are totally *unreliable*. But that really doesn't matter, because they plumb depths of what being a human person, and making 'God' flesh, mean. If indeed Jesus had never lived - which I don't for one moment think - that would not matter either, for the living story set in train remains a true source of good. The gospels *tell* the story, but it is the church which *lives it out and embodies it*. Which is why PCN Britain has always supported people in churches.

I am stepping down from the Management Committee at the end of the year, because I am unconvinced that some of the changes currently in the air are ones I could or would support. That includes changes to our constitution, and a significantly more directive leadership style. It has been kindly suggested that I might be able to continue as editor of this newsletter, and that I would enjoy. In which case, *à bientôt* until March. And Happy Christmas!

Hugh Dawes

Copy date for the next newsletter. The next newsletter will appear in early March. Contributions for it should be with the editor, Hugh Dawes (hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk, or by classic mail to the PCN office address below) by **Friday 26th February 2010 at the latest** - a bit earlier if you can manage it. We'll be into Lent by then, Mothering Sunday will be coming up, and Holy Week and Easter won't be that far off. Easter Day is 4th April, so there are there are a good number of themes to stimulate writing there. And there's plenty to reply to in this – our biggest issue ever. Please put **NEWSLETTER** in the header of any email, or on the envelope of posted contributions.

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

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