

# Progressive Christianity Network – Britain



June 2011

Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

A meal with a difference	2	Impressions of the AGM & formal report	2-5
Letter from the chair	5	A perspective on the eternal	6
News from local groups	7	Can we be radical in practice	11
Future events	13	Book Reviews and a good deal more	14 -16

## God as Being...God as Becoming

by Jon Cape



*Jon Cape is a member of Stirling Methodist Church and has been a PCN member for five years. He leads local church activity on fair trade and the environment.*

Duncan Craig's piece in the March Newsletter was thought-provoking and merits follow up.

There is useful follow up to be done perhaps on the character of PCN, but I will focus here on broadening the ways in which God can be depicted. Duncan expresses a choice between just two ways: God as a being or God as an abstract principle. This is too narrow a choice.

It has been said that religious faith is an encounter not an argument. My words here are thus personal and reflect my own experience.

What I experience as a living God is more than a principle and yet is not a being. This God is a personal God but that does not make God a person. God is rather what makes being a person possible: the ground of our personhood. God is not so much a being as a becoming. And at the heart of reality are not so much substances and entities as capabilities which lead to relationships. God is a seed and God is the flowering of that seed. God is a living process that we can relate to, draw strength from and seek to be in tune with. God is the core of reality and God is reality becoming much more than its core.

There is a hymn which knocked me for six when I first came across it and came across these, for

me allegorical, lines: "God with the uncompleted name, I am what I will be". We are part of that process of becoming and God, for me, is experienced most as a verb not a noun.

For me, this has been quite important really. For as long as I sought to relate to God as one would to a person or being, there was a roadblock. The block took several forms. The most basic one was not to feel the company of a being. Was this I who was not letting God into my heart? But then, could I place my trust in hearing a voice which I felt to be from God? From Abraham to George Bush, many have heard what to me feels like an errant voice. Beyond this, I have not for myself fully found a way to reconcile the classical notion of an all-loving all-powerful being with the way our world works. In saying this, I respect that others have done so and do so today. I do not want for a moment to undermine the profound faith from which they are able to draw strength.

But for me it has been possible to draw strength in a different way.

I am not categorical about this, even for myself. Faith, like science, should always be provisional in its statements. Our spirituality should be much more about what we do, how we relate and who we are than about our statements of belief. I do not discount belief in God as a being, but I do not put weight on it either. Such weight would, for me, be too fragile and liable to collapse.

And once this roadblock has been passed, for me there can again be a prospect of continuing with others on a spiritual journey and relationship with God which is true to oneself, nourishing and ever-challenging: one which bears fruit.

## A Meal with a Difference

Let's try something a bit different! The Edinburgh group has been pleased with its basic diet of talks and discussion, but has also found that other formats for our get-togethers have been productive. We had a "show and tell", where each member brought along an item of personal significance and explained what it meant to them. Similarly, on another occasion, we brought a valued quotation/saying/poem to share with the group. These meetings had proved to be quite helpful in sharing our experiences in religious matters and in expressing our hopes for "progress" within Christianity. This time a member suggested "a meal with a difference" for our session just prior to Easter and offered - very bravely and generously - to devise an appropriate structure.



On the appointed day, our group of 21 people seated themselves around one large table to share a modest evening meal. One place was set for the unseen member of the group, as a reminder of the many meals Jesus of Nazareth must have shared with his friends and followers. We were reminded of the roots from which Christianity initially grew by echoes from the religion of the Jewish nation. We started our meal with a token hand-washing and then used three of the admirably short prayers from the traditional liturgy of Passover: as two white candles were lit; as we took our first sip of wine (or juice) from our glasses; and as we started our first course.

While we ate, our assignment was to decide which of the twelve disciples we most identified with, and to explain our reasons for the choice to our immediate neighbour at the table. For our dessert course, we changed places around the table and



explained to a new neighbour our reasons for choosing the disciple with whom we had *least* in common. After dessert the table was dismantled and we sat in our customary circle of chairs with our coffee to exchange a few of the more significant points that had come up in our discussions.

This was no "X Factor" competition to select the winning disciple to go on to the next round. Rather, the very lively non-stop discussion around the table made us think a little more about the state of mind of the Twelve as they ate together knowing that their leader – and they themselves – were moving into the extreme danger zone. Was it a successful exercise? Time and further reflection will answer that question, but the continuing animated discussions and the smiling faces suggested a positive answer as we bundled out of the premises to let the caretaker lock up. Thanks go to John Weir Cook for suggesting the idea and for gently guiding us through our "meal with a difference".

**George Haskell**

## Impressions of the AGM or "What a lot some of us missed!"



*Maria Grace has been a member of PCN for a number of years and is convenor of the Newbury group. Her husband is a valued newsletter contributor. The editor is pleased he persuaded her to share her personal view of last month's AGM last. Andy Vivian's more formal report follows it.*

It's Saturday May 7<sup>th</sup> and I'm off to the AGM. I'm not really a 'meeting' person, but I'm looking forward to this. There will be people there who I have met before, and also names that I would like to put faces to. At Paddington I meet up with a friend from our Newbury group and after a short tube ride and walk we enter Bloomsbury Church 4<sup>th</sup> floor meeting room. There is a buzz of people already arrived and we feel welcomed, first at the

registration desk and then by various friends and with coffee!

When we are called to order and take our seats, Mary McMahon, PCN's vice chair, takes us ably through the official AGM procedure. Motions are proposed and seconded and, with a little reminder to Mary, also put to the vote. Then there was the issue of the quorum. After a head count it turns out we are 3 short. Are there any people who are not members here and would like to become members? Yes, there are two, bless them! Still one short, until Andy Vivian remembers that he has forgotten to count himself!

We hear John Churcher's Chair's report. A sentence that struck me was: 'Giving people a new concept of God – PCN has done that increasingly.' We discussed the importance of partner organisations, so that PCN as a group in a possible alliance has a bigger voice in the country.

Two authors, John Hinton and John Simmonds give us an update on books. There is a new series of booklets, of which 2 have now been published, called 'Together in Hope'. This interests me and later I visit the book table and buy two books from Di Churcher, who is having a busy time selling.

We then settle down for John Churcher's talk on 'The future of PCN' which engages me fully. I will just give you some bullet points on what I jotted down:

- The 'More Than God' The God of Progressive Spirituality that cannot be described
- Engage in the present and contemporary truth
- Importance of the journey now, not a destination after death
- Transformation – Jesus differs from us in degree not kind
- Breaking down of barriers by communication, not attack
- Steeping ourselves in scholarship – knowing why we believe what we believe
- Progressive thinkers in other religions
- Accepting the cultural aspect of why we are what we are and then go to the 'More than God'
- Go back to Jesus the Jew, before the Gentiles got hold of him. Jesus was never a Christian
- Jesus is central, but he is not the only gateway to the sacred
- Belief in Possibility.

As I have recently joined a Quaker fellowship, I liked the story of 5 Quaker women pinning John to the wall after a talk, saying: 'All this is not new. George Fox said it 4 centuries ago!'

John also talked about the Charter for Compassion that the author Karen Armstrong is associated with, which centres on: Restoring compassion to the centre of religion, with respect towards other religions.



Members in conversation together

We had some group time to discuss these issues, too little, about 15 min, and then time to munch our lunch. I enjoyed chats with various people. I was also my self appointed photographer, so enjoyed myself going round catching people out!

In the afternoon we heard from 3 speakers. Rev. Roberta Rominger, General Secretary of the URC spoke about a new advertising campaign, which will be launched in Jan 2012, to begin with in URC churches. A few catch phrases will be:

- Radical Welcome. Jesus turned no-one away, neither do we!
- Our faith is 2000 years old, our thinking is not.



Hilary Topp from SCM speaks to members

Hilary Topp, National Coordinator of SCM spoke about PCN's partnership with this organisation. As I am not English (Dutch), I have to get my head around these abbreviations, but now know it stands for 'Student Christian Movement' and has an open minded ecumenical approach. She spoke enthusiastically about a number of ways we specially could get through to young people. 'Young people are interested, be proactive!' Be evangelical in your approach. Young people do like security. Having security (a secure environment) without certainty is possible.

Our third speaker was Betty Saunders, a retired Methodist minister who gave us a talk of substance on Worship, Ritual and Prayer. A few points that struck me: The cross is a symbol of risk. In silent prayer we are united, when we open our mouth

we start the problem. Now that speaks to a Quaker!

There was a bit more time for group work, but not a lot. I joined another group and met some other interesting people. It takes time to get a discussion going. For a next time I think it would be better to

## The details, from Andy Vivian, administrative assistant

Fifty members and five visitors assembled in the Forum Room at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church to consider the direction in which progressive Christianity is travelling.

John Churcher said that while the destination was still unclear, there were a couple of route maps which progressive Christians might wish to take with them.

The first is Borg's central theme, that following Jesus is about transformation of ourselves and our society. (This links progressive Christians with all who take discipleship seriously).

The second was Spong's assertion that Jesus was not different to us in kind but in degree. (This links progressive Christianity with new insights into the meaning of the New Testament).

John reaffirmed the value of PCN's Eight Points on the progressive Christian journey, reflecting as they do both these ideas - the significance of how we treat others and the abandonment of exclusive claims about Jesus.

He counselled against being too "evangelical" about progressive Christianity. We should offer the best of modern scholarship towards the understanding of what Jesus stood for, but allow our listeners to make their own judgement and be true to themselves.

Other faiths deserve our respect too. We should aim to foster a new spirituality of compassion in which all faiths can share. He said this was not about deserting Christianity but recognising that God is always "more than" our imagining.

John then used case studies from around the world to illustrate the direction in which some progressive Christians have already gone.

The first example was Ian Lawton, a former Anglican priest, who now leads a spiritual community in Michigan where Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and non-religious people all worship together.

There was a ripple of shock when John told us that this congregation had gone so far as to sell the large cross that hung on the external wall of the building. Ian is a leading member of the Spiritual but not Religious movement.

The second example was a new Christian network spreading from the US called the Progressive Christian Alliance. This is an assemblage of local projects - prison chaplaincies, retreat centres, house groups - all united by an umbrella organisation largely focussed on its website. John drew parallels with the start of Methodism and the Quakers. The PCA now ordains members as 'ministers'.

The third example came from Fred Plumer, founder of The Center for Progressive Christianity, out of

have one good group session, not two short ones, so that we can warm up **and** get somewhere!

I spoke to a few more people, but then it was time to get to Paddington in time. In the train I reflected on the enthusiasm of a young organisation, and that I was glad to be part of it!

which PCN Britain grew. Fred recently took part in an evangelical convention called The Big Tent in which progressive Christians shared the podium with evangelicals like Brian McLaren of Emerging Church. Afterwards Fred praised the young audience. They weren't interested in fixing a broken church so that it could be how it used to be. They were interested in how following Jesus would change their lives and the world. They were open to the insights of modern Biblical scholarship but not bothered by arguments about Christology.

The fourth case study concerned the production of new liturgy by Rex Hunt, director of the Centre for Progressive Religious Thought in Australia. Rex publishes his liturgies on the web every week at: [www.rexaehuntprogressive.com](http://www.rexaehuntprogressive.com).

The last example was a home grown one: Karen Armstrong, author of *The Case for God*. She has founded the Charter for Compassion movement. The Charter is a way to restore compassion to the centre of moral and religious life, transcending all traditional religious boundaries.

And with that John invited group discussion with the aim of considering three scenarios for the future of progressive Christianity: -

- it becomes subsumed in a new global spiritual movement
- it remains a leaven in the "lump" of the mainstream churches, working for change
- it operates outside the mainstream of traditional churches.

After lunch we heard from three other speakers, each offering practical ideas for progressive Christians.

Roberta Rominger, General Secretary of the URC, raised the possibility of a poster campaign. Her church is doing this. Their Radical Welcome campaign will be launched at the start of 2012. This will seek to convey the twin messages that "Jesus never turned anyone away and nor do we" and "Our faith is 2000 years old but our thinking is not". The URC will offer other churches the chance to take part in this campaign.

The next speaker was Hilary Topp, the National Co-ordinator of the Student Christian Movement. She suggested we learn lessons from the way that evangelical Christians conduct themselves. For example,

- They don't go around referring to themselves as evangelical Christians. For the most part they call themselves simply Christians and we should do the same, not always inserting the word progressive.

- Evangelical Christians are never shy about proclaiming their existence and nor should we be. Hilary praised the URC poster campaign and reminded us how often newcomers say, “I wish I’d known about you sooner”.
- Evangelical Christians are hospitable; meals are a regular feature after worship.
- Evangelical Christians are serious about their giving. If we find people doing things we agree with, we should support them. Hilary reminded us that we don’t have to re-invent everything for ourselves. “Look for where the energy is and support it”.

Finally, John Churcher introduced a Methodist minister, now retired - Betty Saunders. She argued that in its next stage, progressive Christianity needs to develop worship, prayer and ritual. She welcomed the PCN Liturgy Project. Ritual has the power to fix our story in the present moment. It provides a gateway for people who would never dream of picking up a theological book.

Betty said we need a re-envisioning of the old rituals, especially the Communion service. We have to find

new metaphors. The cross, for example, could become a metaphor for the way of risk.

After the three speakers had taken questions from the floor, John Churcher once again sent us into group discussion – this time on the future of PCN Britain.

Putting together the group feedback it seems that most felt that John’s three scenarios are not in conflict. The “leaven in the lump” role was important for most and PCN should help members to become more effective leaven. Alongside that there was recognition that some kind of activity outside the mainstream churches was needed to connect members together and to offer an alternative spiritual foothold. Several spoke up for the need to collaborate with other like-minded organisations.

It is hoped that local PCN groups may like to take time to discuss these issues as part of PCN Britain’s Three Year Strategic Review. The next stage of consultation will be through feedback forms sent out to members with the September newsletter.

**Andy Vivian**

## Letter from the chair



As there are other articles in this Newsletter concerning the recent AGM I will not report directly upon the event itself - apart from adding that it was a very successful and encouraging day, especially as it was the beginning of the Management Committee’s consultation process with the membership concerning the strategy for the coming 3 or so years.

However, as I reflect upon the discussions on that day and continue to observe developments of open, progressive Christianity both in the UK and North America, it seems to me that an important [seismic?] shift is happening. The situation for many members of PCN Britain is also reflected in the experience of The Center for Progressive Christianity in the USA, as we continue to seek to be the ‘leaven in the lump’ of the institutional church, offering an evolutionary advance that will help ‘save’ the institutional church from continued decline. But this process of seeking an open and progressive institutional church carries a

‘health warning’ straight from the second of the Eight Points that unite PCN Britain members: we “recognise the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the gateway to God’s realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.” And that, of necessity, applies equally to friends of other faith communities as it does to friends within the institutional churches who either have no interest in or actively reject the work of personal and corporate transformation sought by those who are members of PCN Britain.

The shift that is now underway will inevitably impact upon the future strategy of PCN Britain. As I have commented at the AGM and on other occasions, whilst the majority of our members continue to see themselves as the ‘leaven’, more are joining us who are now experiencing the transformation of their lives in a spirituality that has gone beyond the institutional churches. Part of the challenge over the coming 3 or 4 years will be in keeping together those members who are the ‘evolutionary leaven’ and those who have lost patience with the institutional churches and now live a ‘revolutionary’ spirituality without those churches.

Another consideration is the continuation of the current strategy to develop informal partnership links with similarly minded groups in the UK. This is demonstrated most

obviously in our publishing partnership with Modern Church, Free to Believe and CRC/St Mark's Sheffield. As I see it, we not only need to continue building these partnerships but we also need to be aware of new organisations of open progressive Christians on both sides of the Atlantic. I am convinced that these should be partners with rather than rivals of PCN Britain.

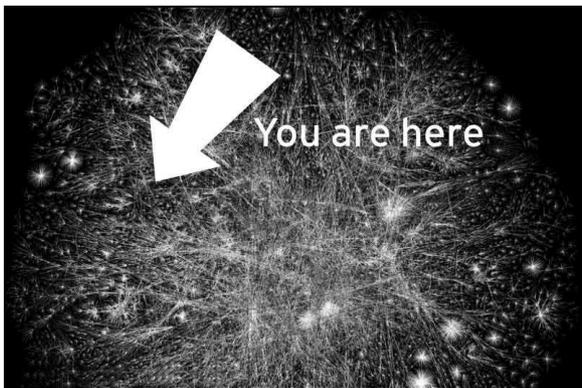
This is where you come in! The Management Committee is inviting you to get involved in the strategic review/consultation process. We need input from members. Perhaps each local group could consider spending one session of their next programme of events dedicated to discussing their contributions to this consultation process? The annual St Deiniol's Residential Weekend [see flier inside this Newsletter] will be part of this consultation. I have the privilege of facilitating that weekend,

## A perspective on *The Eternal*

by Howard Grace

*"We talk about God as though we know what we're talking about."*

Some people, who interpret certain biblical stories literally, believe that creation happened about 6000 years ago. Personally I go with evidence pointing to a 'Big Bang', which dates the universe at about 13.7 billion years, with the emergence of human beings some hundreds of thousands of years ago.



What I write above doesn't negate my belief in God. Far from it. But it certainly gives perspective to my perception of the Divine, and hints at humanity's very limited ability to comprehend what we are talking about when we use the word 'God'.

To us the earth is enormous, complex and rich in diversity. But we have also come to know that it is but a minute dot in the vast space of our Solar System. And our Solar System is itself an equally minute dot in a hugely vaster Milky Way galaxy with 200 to 400 billion stars. This is mind-boggling. But it goes further than that – much further. The most current estimates lead us to believe that

exploring "From there [30,000BCE] to where [the future] for open progressive Christianity?" We will consider together the implications of Karen Armstrong's book 'The Case for God'. Places are limited and will be allocated on a first come first served basis.

As we look at the numeric decline of the institutional churches in Britain it could be all too easy to be despondent. However, I am excited by the possibilities of a new synergy between members of institutional churches and the broader spirituality that now exists beyond those churches. These continue to be exciting times in which you can help shape the future of PCN Britain so that, together, we can offer not only a positive alternative to declining church membership but also a renewed and vibrant spirituality that will be truly transformative for us all.

John Churcher

there are 100 to 200 billion galaxies in the Universe. So, how many stars are there? Even if these figures are wildly inaccurate there are still one heck of a lot.

No wonder that J. B. S. Haldane, the Scottish mathematical biologist wrote: *Now, my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.*

In a book I was reading recently someone wrote: *"Thinking of my cat eating his tinned tuna, I wonder whether we know as little of what is out there in the world of the spirit as he did of the process, from the Big Bang onwards, that put the food on his plate."* Indeed, just as a cat's brain is incapable of comprehending the immensity, diversity and complexity of the universe, I suspect that the human brain, in its present state of development, has also only scratched the surface in taking a lot of this on board, especially the dimensions beyond which we presently relate to. From where comes life, love, loyalty and the *ability to begin to ask* some of the big questions?

Without even our limited perspective on the universe it is not surprising that some of our biblical ancestors perceived a Creator as out there, separate from and beyond the earth, just above the clouds, who created everything. We thought we understood! Naturally, we thought we were the centre of all that is created - created for us. But in the light of what I allude to above, what is going on is far bigger and more complex than our forefathers could have dreamed about. Are the 10 sextillion or so stars really created for our benefit?

Or are we just a component of something much, much bigger? 13.7 billion years of the past is hard to contemplate. But the universe is thought to be going to continue for *trillions* of years. When our Solar System, and earthly life with it, explodes to extinction - the universe will still be in its infancy!

My faith is in that creative 'something' which incorporates, is within, and is vaster than the universe as we know it. We human beings strive to understand our relationship to this 'something'. It is this mystery that I perceive as God. There are numerous windows through which we may glimpse this mystery, most of which we haven't yet discovered. For me, as a Christian, I see Jesus as one of them – a decisive one – in terms of how humans should best relate to our perception of that greater 'something', and to each other. But I sense that it would be wrong, somewhat idolatrous and very inadequate for me to start perceiving or worshipping any of these windows, including Jesus, as anything more than entry points.

Some say that a well-established religious belief is necessary to be productively, morally and spiritually motivated. But to me the acceptance that there is much about reality that we can't know, overrides the temptation to take on board beliefs that are, to me, untenable. I feel increasingly at ease with the sense that I emerged from 'mystery' into this

world, should make my best contribution to my fellow humans and to the greater good, then merge back into the Divine. I do not expect to exist then as an individual but somehow as part of *The Eternal*. My peace of mind and heart comes from acceptance of this mystery.

PS.

I sent this article, for comment, to a young Austrian friend who is studying theology there. She wrote back an appreciative e-mail but also saying: "Jesus had a very personal relationship to the divine or 'god'. That means, I have feelings towards God like I have to other humans - deep love, thankfulness, friendliness, admiration, harmony but also sometimes anger, disappointment, frustration, sadness. So I agree with you in understanding God as a mystery, but on the other hand I experience him as very close to and caring for humanity, personal, to be addressed, reaching out to humans from his side and touching them. I was missing this personal touch of the divine in your article."

I much appreciate her observation. As well as trying to get my mind round these 'mystery' issues, it is important that I work more on the matters of the heart in relationship with the Divine and with my fellow human beings.

**Howard Grace**

(Howard's article first appeared in *The Friend* Ed)

## News from local groups

### **Bath**

(Sheena Carter 01225 331806  
s.m.carter@pcnbritain.org)

We have had a lively year during which we have been delighted to see some new faces at our meetings and I have been particularly pleased to make contact with the newly formed Mid Wiltshire group. Topics we have dealt with have included chapters from Living The Questions 2 (we still have a few more we have not yet tackled), a very interesting session on how we in PCN can view the nativity narratives, several sessions using the CD of Marcus Borg's talks in Edinburgh, and an evening based on a chapter of the book, *Are you there, God?*, written by one of our members, Edward Hulme.

We do not meet over the summer but are busy putting together a programme for the autumn, starting again in late September. We are particularly looking forward to having John Churcher speak to us on October 17<sup>th</sup>. Full details of the autumn programme will be in the next newsletter and, of course, on the PCN website.

We continue to meet on the fourth Monday of the month from September to May (excluding December) in the Central United Reformed Church Halls (Grove Street entrance) at 7.30 pm. Occasionally, for various reasons, we do deviate from the 4<sup>th</sup> Monday, as will be the case for John Churcher's visit, so do remember to check the PCN website for exact details. If you are in the Bath area and would like to

come along, please do, and feel free to contact the convener at the phone number or email address given above.

### **Berwick and Borders**

(Gabrielle Ayerst 01289 302680  
gabrielle.ayerst@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our new group continues to meet on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday in the main of each month at 3 pm, 6 Bell Tower Park, Berwick and we are currently a third of the way through the 'Living the Questions 2' course, which we are all finding stimulating and encouraging, confirming in many ways what we have come to understand in our own faith journeys, but the contents of which are not generally raised or discussed in our local churches which are more theologically conservative or more fundamentalist in their interpretation of the Christian scriptures. There are now 9 people who attend our group and another who will be rejoining us in June. Our latest member is a retired URC minister, otherwise we are all Anglicans, both lay and ordained and including 2 readers, so we are seeking to expand ecumenically as we find ourselves in general agreement over much of the content of 'Living the Questions', which is heartening nevertheless and leads to lively discussions and fellowship!

We are of course always open to new people joining us. You would be most welcome! Two of us were able to attend the excellent conference led by Marcus Borg in Edinburgh last year and one or two of us will

be attending Dominic Crossan's conference in Leeds in September. I will also be attending Jack Spong's last conference in Glasgow in June with a couple of London PCN friends.

### **Chelmsford**

(Jane Anderson 01245 466160  
jane.anderson@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Chelmsford PCN group meets on the second Sunday of the month at St Augustine of Canterbury Church hall from 6.15 pm (coffee) 6.30 pm (start) till 8 pm. We have been meeting since October 2009 and there are around 10 -12 at each meeting. We are using the 'Living the Questions' DVD and enjoy the open discussion this leads us into. If you would like to come along please do give me a ring with any questions you may have. Jane 01245 466160.

### **Chesterfield**

(John Simmonds 01246 251599  
john.simmonds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

This group of 10 was convened 8 months ago to engage with *Living the Questions 2*, some for the first time, others for a second. The group meets monthly in an evening at the same house, though soon intends to move from home to home. Participants very quickly committed to each other and now share a variety of views and experiences. People attend to each other's stories, sometimes painful, sometimes challenging. They are finding that it is possible to explore doubts and convictions freely – a new experience for those who have been rebuffed in local congregations. This group seems to take LQ2 with a pinch of salt but still finds it a remarkable resource.

### **Dundee**

(Gordon Sharp 01382 643002  
gordon.sharp@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Back in December a meeting had to be cancelled due to blizzards and freezing temperatures. The worst snow storms for 40 years. On May 23<sup>rd</sup> we had arranged for John Bell of the Iona Community to visit. This time it was hurricane winds with speeds of up to 100mph recorded on the river and all trains cancelled with severe disruption to buses. In any event, it was another meeting cancelled.

Perhaps we should spend more time thinking about how we can tackle global warming and be more sustainable as a species than discuss matters of faith? Thankfully, John did attend morning worship on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and preached the sermon. It was truly inspirational with a rare blend of humour, provocation and encouragement in the faith. His presentation made the Old Testament come alive and helped people to feel part of the ancient tradition of faith in God – hewn out of the same rock and quarry as Abraham, Moses, David and even the fisherman of Galilee. PCN members able to get to hear him at CRC in Sheffield should. (see page 14, Ed)

Other dates for future meetings are: June 23<sup>rd</sup>, Sept. 20<sup>th</sup>, Oct. 19<sup>th</sup> and Nov. 24<sup>th</sup>. All meetings are held in the Dundee West Kirk (Perth Road) – Church of Scotland (7.00 pm). Members of the group will be leading discussions on topics suggested at past meetings. One key discussion is in June when we are

thinking of what the Lord's Supper means to us. There is a sense in which people want to move on. Most of us have appreciated the freedom and community found in PCN meetings, but this is only the start of our journey of faith. It's as if a new faith requires an expression that isn't just about discussion. Coming up with a liturgy will be challenging, but it is a start and hopefully we can get some feedback from the 1<sup>st</sup> October seminar in Sheffield through the newsletter and website.

### **Edinburgh**

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

At our March meeting, Jim Mein introduced us to Spirituality Wheel, a circle divided into four quadrants – 'head', 'heart', 'mystic' and 'kingdom' – differentiating how we both conceptualise and go about 'knowing' God. A brief questionnaire asked us to rate how we thought that the church understood itself, and then how we understood spirituality ourselves. The ensuing discussion was lively – mostly light-hearted! – and helped us to recognise and value different ways of seeing these things.

In April, Jim Moffet helped us to open up the debate on 'Whither progressive Christianity?' We think this is a question that we need to keep on the agenda, so that we stay focussed on our purpose, even if we have no easy answers. It was good to see it surface again at the AGM in John Churcher's talk to us, and we will continue to 'live with the question'.

At the end of May we look forward to welcoming Tim Maguire, a celebrant from the local Humanist Society in Edinburgh, with whom we expect to have much in common.

And to wind up this session's programme, the group meets in June to evaluate this year, and to pool ideas for the next session. A glass of wine and summer nibbles tends to facilitate this process!

As always, everyone is welcome.

### **Exeter**

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

Our group members are now watching the PCN DVD series *Saving Jesus*. We enjoyed what we have seen so far (though the music still annoys!) and our discussion ranges widely. On Sunday 26th June we are looking forward to a visit from PCN Britain chair John Churcher, speaking on his book *Setting Jesus Free* and hope that members near and far will join us for this opportunity to meet John.

The next DVD session will be on Sunday July 17th. We then have a break until the autumn when we will resume meetings, still to be arranged.

All are welcome to our meetings, which take place on Sundays in the hall of the URC Southernhay Church Exeter, in Southernhay (at the rear of the church) from 2.30 pm until 4.30 (tea and coffee provided). Recently our contact email group (those willing to have contact with other members, so we comply with data protection legislation) have been discussing the TV programmes over Easter, including *The Story of Jesus* and Anne Widdecombe's take on the future of

Christianity: this is proving a useful occasional debating forum. Do other groups do anything similar? I send out alerts of TV or radio programmes which look likely to be worth watching - such as the recent *The Big Questions on The Bible* (BBC1) with Richard Dawkins, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, Francesca Stavrakoulou (from Exeter), among others. Some of us feel that progressive Christianity fails to make its voice heard sufficiently, others are more positive. We still wrestle with the question of how to reach more of the many potentially interested people in or outside our churches, especially younger ones, and may try an informal meeting aiming at contacts like this later in the year.

### **Gloucester**

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

We have been working on John Simmonds' book "Walk the Jesus walk". We appreciated in chapter two the bringing together of the various historical sources of our knowledge of Jesus, "What did Jesus stand for?" the promising theme of chapter three unexpectedly provided one of our least inspirational discussions! We asked "Is this our picture of Jesus - what else needs to be added or included?" We posed questions such as "Is this picture of what Jesus stood for one that St Paul held?" "Is this the portrait offered by the 'Traditional' church?" It was because almost everyone claimed agreement with what John presented that there seemed little provocation for discussion!

At our meeting on June 2<sup>nd</sup> members were to choose two hymns: one they found expressing the essence of the Christian faith as they understood it now, and one which they found themselves unable to sing because it jarred with the faith as they now understood it. Hymns are probably more significant even than the bible in maintaining the spiritual growth of many worshippers and I suspect that our discussion will have indicated more themes we need to explore together more closely.

### **Hickling, Norfolk Broads**

(Merrie Longbottom 01692 598844  
merrie.longbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We are based in Hickling in the centre of the Norfolk Broads and our members come from the surrounding villages and churches of different denominations (although most from their parish church). Our small group meets in a member's house and is a continuation of a Lent course two years ago, initially based on the DVD "Living the Questions", that inspired and encouraged us to question and discuss. Following mention in a sermon, one new person came to join us and we are currently thinking about ways in which to outreach to others who may, like us, wish to ask questions of the bible and the creeds and rites of the established church.

Our weekly get-togethers are friendly and relaxed and cover many issues such as our relationships with our current churches, what it means to be a Christian in today's society, Jesus' teaching, watching and discussing PCN material, reading extracts from the

*Church Times*, exchanging relevant books and, most importantly, helping to support each other with our spiritual, emotional and physical lives. Come and join us!

### **Leeds - Yorkshire**

(Sandra Griffiths 0113 258 2652  
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Leeds Group meets at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church Centre (LS7 4NB), usually on the second Saturday of the month. Coffee and tea have been available from 9.30, and the gathering proper has taken place between 10 and 12. From September the starting time will be 10.30, with coffee/tea available from 10. We will still finish by 12.

By the time you read this we will probably have had our last session before the summer break - on 11<sup>th</sup> June we will be listening to Borg's final main lecture at the Edinburgh conference in September 2010. We have benefited very much from discussing these talks and matters arising from them. Curiously, the numbers attending meetings have gone down, while the (e)mailing list has risen steadily to about 70; perhaps there is room for thought here. We will gather again on 10<sup>th</sup> September.

Our fortnightly Monday evening meetings, Questers, continue to take place at the home of one of our members in Roundhay, Leeds (further details on request).

We are always pleased to see regulars, occasional visitors and newcomers alike, and both groups contain all such.

Please contact me for further information or directions to any of our meetings. It might be possible to arrange a lift too.

### **London Richmond**

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

The group's most recent meeting was on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> June, when the Group was discussing two documents downloaded from the Radical Faith website - an Honest Sermon for Easter 7, and an article by Tony Windross "Why bother to take God seriously?".

Three further meetings are being planned for the autumn and early winter; the subject matter is also under discussion.

The Group has grown beyond its original Mortlake with East Sheen boundaries and now has five members from other parts of South West London. Please contact Alan Powell for further information.

### **Manchester**

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

The regular monthly meetings this year have been using the DVD course "Countering Pharaoh" featuring the Old Testament scholar Walter Breuggemann. His approach is interesting in that he relates the experience of the ancient Israelites in Egypt to present day situations and to how we can still be in "bondage" to a system based on consumption and exploitation. However, one or two members found some of the connections somewhat tenuous and difficult to relate to, so there were

mixed reactions to the value of this course. This was something of a trial run with this type of material and one reason for selecting this particular one was the fact that it is only 5 sessions and therefore could be covered in a reasonable time frame, given that we only meet once per month. The availability of loan material from the PCN library is a tremendous advantage for a small group who would otherwise find the costs rather prohibitive.

There will be a meeting on Wed June 29<sup>th</sup> (note change of date from original plans) when we shall further review the DVD and also plan for the autumn - this at our venue of Heaton Moor United Church 7:30 - 9:00 pm. Thereafter we shall break for the months of July and August and hopefully resume meetings in September.

As always there is an open invitation for anyone interested to join us.

### **Newbury**

(Maria Grace 01635 47196)

maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk)

At Newbury we have just finished the first 7 sessions of 'Living the Questions' and have enjoyed the discussions it evoked. For a one off session we hope to try out the Word Box (see last PCN newsletter) where we will pull out discussion ideas from what people put in the box! In July we will start the next third of the Living the Questions course. Numbers mostly between 6 and 8 people, with visitors always welcome.

We look forward to the visit of John and Di Churcher on June 23<sup>rd</sup> and hope to get a good group together to hear John. I enjoyed going to the PCN AGM in London as you can read in my article on page 3 of this newsletter.

### **North Derbyshire and Sheffield**

(John Simmonds 01246 251599)

john.simmonds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The 14 participants value this group enormously. Their attendance is close to 100% and everyone is eager to participate. We meet in each other's homes and always eat a picnic lunch together. In the early days, the group negotiated topics for conversation ahead of each meeting. Then we embarked on a two-year journey with *Living the Questions 2*, an immensely stimulating resource with remarkable contributors. It's great to have such people to stimulate discussion. Mind you, we could have done without the schmaltzy background piano music! Our use of LQ2 was quite laid back; we played the disc and then encouraged the conversation to flow. Participants had already received the additional notes and could draw on them as they wished. For the past year or so, we have engaged in a wide range of topics, nominated in turn by participants. Each host has given prior notice of their choice, provided a brief introduction and then led the conversation. Often we encourage each member to make a contribution before the free-for-all. All this may sound ordinary but the level of trust, challenge and respect in the group is remarkable.

### **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. (do ring me to check time and venue). We tend to pick topics to discuss rather than following a set course

At our March meeting we watched a video of Celtic Christianity narrated by the late John O'Donohue which was enjoyed by all.

Our April meeting was concerned with what we could do practically.

In early May, Sonya Brown a member of the PCN committee came and talked about her progression from the local area to the ministry. We also shared ideas about how to attract younger people to more radical ideas. There was a good exchange of ideas. Towards the end of this month we are having a talk on "Postmodernism and God" given by David Derrington. June's meeting will be personal experiences of the Kirkentag which he has attended a number of times.

A couple of members are visiting Glasgow to hear Jack Spong, and others are planning to visit Greenbelt in August.

### **Vale of Glamorgan**

(Janice Proctor 01446 401152)

janice.proctor@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group still meets fortnightly in a member's home (phone 01446 401 152). The average attendance is about 14. We welcome new members and visitors. We have been studying John's Gospel, in the light of the findings of the Jesus Seminar, and trying to work out its meaning for us. Sometimes it seems that there are as many meanings as there are members in the group!!!!!! When we disagree, we do so with humour and affection. However, several members are looking forward to studying the Gospel with Jack Spong, and the rest of the group will be eagerly waiting for feedback.

John Churcher's sermon on the Seven "I AM" metaphors was published on Permission to Speak's website at just the right time so we'll be discussing that at our next meeting.

### **Woking**

(John Craig 01483 762059)

john.craig@pcnbritain.org.uk)

After several years of ad hocing it we have just started the 'Living the Questions' course and the first session went off very well. As a result of a publicity drive our pre LtQ group of 8 or so has expanded to about 16. So we are now meeting monthly in two groups - one on a Saturday morning and one on Wednesday evening. Our venue is a room in the Woking Methodist church which is near a car park and the railway station. More details from John above.

### **AND A NEW GROUP STARTS IN JULY**

#### **East Shropshire**

(David Cotterell 01902 373660)

david.cotterell@pcnbritain.org.uk)

People living in the West Midlands will soon have more choice when looking for a local group of progressive Christians. The seeds were sown when

John Churcher gave a talk to the local C of E Deanery Synod in July of last year, with a workshop next day. For some people these occasions provided a wonderful freedom to be able to ask questions which they had been nervous of asking before, for others the new thinking was challenging. There was uncertainty as to how to take things forward but ultimately it was the new vicar who suggested the formation of a local group of PCN.

The group's first meeting will be on Monday, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2011 at 7.00 p.m. for 7.30 in St Chad's Church, Boningale, WV7 3BY. Boningale is a tiny village near to Albrighton on the Eastern boundary of Shropshire and the origins of the church go back to Norman

## Letter to the editor

### After all, there are no absolutes...

by James D Quinton

I really enjoyed March's newsletter, specifically the pieces by Sonya [Brown], Duncan [Craig], Michael [Wright] and especially Richard [Tetlow's] article. Richard would you believe I was sat at a table, in 2009 I think it was, with some 'Christians' and when a news report came on about Geert Wilders being allowed into Britain one said, in all seriousness, 'oh good, they've let him in at last'. When I'd pulled my jaw off the floor, I swiftly left. I would certainly support your five suggestions to help close the divisions between Muslim and Christian communities.

As a person from the 'younger generation' I thought I could just offer a brief insight into why there is a growing interest in the PCN. Many of the younger members I have spoken to feel a deep, passionate need to rescue and wrestle the Christian faith away from the literalists and fundamentalists, and to promote progressive, open understanding and contemporary thought and to demonstrate to the general public that there is an alternative to the 'mainstream' version of Christianity, with its alpha courses and such. Many feel it is essential to encourage and support our way of thinking as Christianity evolves and embraces the 21<sup>st</sup> century and comes to terms with its own history. Also important are social, ecological, economic issues (I certainly agree with Michael). The PCN across the board is experiencing growth and I'm positive that if more young people who are currently enthused by liberal Anglicism and the American Emergent Church

times. Anyone interested in exploring progressive Christianity, whether a PCN member or not, will be welcome at the meeting. Don't be worried about having to "make a contribution", you may just like to enjoy the fellowship of others in a quiet, country church. It would be helpful, but not absolutely necessary, if anyone wishing to come could contact David Cotterell. The intention is for a monthly meeting, but this will be for the group to decide.

**AND IN NORTH LONDON,** Mary Stacy hopes to start a group; contact her at [marystacy@lineone.net](mailto:marystacy@lineone.net), or on 0208 883 3131.

movement knew about us our ranks would swell even more! It's heartening to know that there are an increasing number of resources available, which, along with the experience of older members, are extremely crucial. However it's unfortunate we don't have the capital to push this further. I know Sonya is going to be involved with the 'youth movement' and I certainly hope to get involved in this important area.

Duncan asked 'who are we?' I have pondered this question a lot. And you can't get away from it; it is a thin line. Yet I feel, a clear obvious line, which we seem to overlook as we fight to remain true to our own personal beliefs. Firstly, there is room within our horizons for differing opinions with regard to the essence of God (and many other issues), because, of course, we are reading this newsletter because we acknowledge and support the Eight Points (the backbone of our network), so subsequently individual distinctions can surely be appreciated and acknowledged without fear of exclusion. Secondly, I like to think that one of the enlightening aspects of the PCN, along with the Eight Points, is the fact that we're not rigid in telling people what to believe. We come together under a broad umbrella, welcoming and recognizing our differences, yet converging to enjoy discussion, new ideas and thinking, and to advance a faith, which is anything but narrow, but rather inclusive and, I suppose, quite radical! After all, there are no absolutes...

## Can we be radical in practice?

Jesus for Today and Tomorrow, by Tony Rutherford

What is the future for the organised church - established or otherwise? And how will it relate to the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus? Can, and if so how will, the church be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

I see the church as the Christian people of God organised in many different ways, formal and informal. There is no one body called The Church. We may be united but we are all different, we are not uniform. In our difference, we all relate to our local communities in different ways. Yet each group will declare it has a

purpose. But does that purpose include a potential for growing, developing and therefore changing? Or are we just kneeling in the sand and waiting for the world to become like us?

To be a relevant faith community and radical in practice, I believe, means:-

- being a living, caring, compassionate and active body of people
- being alive to the fact of our being and to the reality of the world around us
- praying for and with this world AND putting our prayers and actions together into action
- doing so both in our liturgies and in our daily lives, both as individuals and as groups.

Underpinning our faith and action is the question, "How do we RE-discover God, Jesus and the Bible?"

We might begin this process in reverse by starting with a new look at the Bible.

Over the last 10 or 20 years, there has been a revival of biblical scholarship with a particular reference to the Gospels. The key element of these studies is that they are written in the language of the lay person. The main writers in this field are Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, Jim Cotter, John Dominic Crossan, Richard Holloway, Adrian Smith, Jack Spong, Richard Rohr, Keith Ward and Walter Wink. Each can be heard regularly in the UK. More challenging writers include James Alison, Don Cupitt, James Funk and John Hick. All of these have been inspired and liberated by the late Bishop John Robinson.

Their words are being read and heard by a growing number of members of open-minded national and international bodies such as the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN), Modern Church, Spirited Exchanges, Affirming Liberalism, Sea of Faith, Green Spirit, Christians Awakening to a New Awareness, Free to Believe and CRC in Sheffield.

Their common approach is to be open to one another, to listen to each other and to share insights. All views are heard with respect and much thoughtful and prayerful and active faith is generated. This approach has a dynamic quality without being overwhelming. It has the potential for growth and the power to demonstrate a living and a loving, relevant faith. It is a broad alternative to the more limited fundamentalism, the narrow conservative evangelical churches and groups, and the traditional "middle of the road" churches. This dynamic, broad and relevant approach to Christianity has a sustaining power which, being rooted in an open minded approach to the Bible, leads to an open approach to God. Much is being written now about the meaning of Jesus in terms of his life as well as his death and resurrection. Jesus' ministry lasted probably only a few months, yet so much traditional teaching about him has focussed only on his last few days.

The Creeds, for instance, don't mention Love, the Great Commandments, Jesus' life style, his teaching, his healing ministry, his prayers, his political action or his compassionate concern for others. It's as if our traditional faith is being defined by narrow creeds and limited doctrines, and that the birth, death and resurrection stories are the only events that relate to today.

Borg has coined the phrase, "Jesus shows us what a life full of God looks like." When we re-open our eyes to see Jesus, we will see God in a new way: as his book title says, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Richard Rohr has presented a graphic way of understanding "repentance" as a "re-turning" to God. So many writers are leading us into a new way of being Christian, that is open-minded, aware, living in the real world and committed to faith, based on life styles of prayer and action – for instance, a concern for Christians to respond to the effects of Climate Change.

Potentially, the future of the "church" is bright, the future is a range of new doors opening, new ways of being a church body, new styles of being a worshipping and serving presence in our local communities. Listening, learning and leading. If not the Church will die.

But there is now a need to move forward, to move on from *talking* about being radical to *being* radical: a need in our groups, to promote and work together for a different way of being God's people - focussed and serving, alert and prepared to be different, to move away from unexamined assumptions and to take a leap of faith into tomorrow. If we as groups, or as collections of groups and conferences etc, are unable to move on and make a radical difference to how we express "Church", then even the radical groups will fade away as we age, and many of these groups have a high age profile already.

The key issue now is to capitalise on all the writing, speaking and conferring, to do something creative and constructive. To make a difference. To stimulate this new way of being Christian. Those of us in the mainline churches, can all show our sisters and brothers a way of growing, spiritually **and** practically. Those of us in the church alumni association can continue to develop new ways of being Christian outside the church.

So let us now walk the talk and make a difference. How can we work towards being radical in practice?

**Questions:**

1. What does it mean for your group to be radical in practice?
2. Do we need a new way of being church? What would it look like?
3. What is the future for your church?

**ADVERT**

**"GOD WAS NOT A BABY"**

**A new booklet exploring Incarnation by Graham Hellier**

Copies available by post from Graham (author of *Free Range Christianity & Is God a Delusion*) at Monmouth End, Marden, Hereford HR1 3EZ. £2, post free. 25% discount for discussion groups, 5+.

## Free to Believe's reading party A Case Productively Unpacked

The challenging book for this year's Free to Believe Reading Party at High Leigh Conference Centre from 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> May 2011 was Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*. The even more challenging task of leading ten study sessions on the contents fell to John Churcher, PCN Britains' chair.

Intimate reading parties necessarily accommodate smaller numbers than conferences and this one was close to the practical maximum with 24 attending. Open and progressive gatherings seem often to generate an almost instant relaxed conviviality that infuses and enthuses 'regulars' and newcomers alike. We were not long into the first session before John's engaging friendliness and humour was ensuring that the warm atmosphere could only increase – metaphorically and literally!

Although not everyone had been able to fulfil John's recommendation to read the whole book in advance, this was not essential as he made extensive use of Powerpoint 'text bites' from relevant pages displayed on a large screen as we explored them. Each session lasted around 90 minutes, of which about half entailed discussion in smaller groups followed by a report-back plenary. Those who had worried that discussions would be in the realms of remote, dry scholarship (one lady remarked that she had nervously anticipated that "everyone would be so intelligent!") soon had their fears dispelled as assorted comments and points of view were tossed around in a productive mix of the serious, the fanciful and the (intentionally!) hilarious.

In the surrounding grounds one of our group, Merryn, had spotted a tree where the main trunk had split, causing the tree to partially keel over (see picture). However, the new 'branch' had developed fresh and shared roots; and subsequent new life. All agreed that this was a perfect visual metaphor for the 'progressive' church.

There was a bar open from 9.00 every evening to which some of the group headed regularly after the close of 'business' for continued discussions of a more, er, catholic nature where wit and sagacity were in abundance - or perhaps it was just the applied lubrication.

## Future Events

### John Dominic Crossan **What the Gospels really teach about the birth and death of Jesus**

St Andrew's URC, Roundhay, Leeds - Friday 16<sup>th</sup> – Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> September

A flier in the last newsletter gave full details of a very special 'long weekend' PCN conference at which John Dominic Crossan, a distinguished figure in the Jesus Seminar and a most exciting progressive New Testament scholar, will be speaking on "What the Gospels really teach about the birth and death of Jesus." This is a unique and rare opportunity to hear Crossan speaking in this country. Tickets are still available. **Book before they all go.** 400 years on from the King James

Previously, the thought of nearly four days and ten sessions on an amazing but difficult book had seemed to many of us to be a daunting prospect. However, no sooner had we arrived than it was time to depart, wondering where all the time had gone. John Churcher's earlier teaching career had encompassed every age group from nursery classes to post-graduates in the university sector, as well as headships at three primary schools. This background undoubtedly enhanced his communication skills but, more than that, we experienced a gifted, passionate teacher who enlarged our understanding and re-energised our enthusiasm.



The tree 'a visual metaphor'

Karen Armstrong's latest book is *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* and near the end of our course we spent some time on *The Charter for Compassion* which was launched by Ms Armstrong in 2009 and now has around 72,000 supporters. This was seen as the primary path to a truly Christ-like world [[www.charterforcompassion.org](http://www.charterforcompassion.org)].

Warm thanks were expressed to our organiser Alison Micklem and to John Churcher of course, who together had created an unforgettable experience for us all, beautifully concluded by a thoughtful and engaging communion service led by John Hetherington.

**Chris Avis**

## **In Spirit and Truth: Belief, Worship & Discipleship** led by John Bell and Jo Lovell

St Mark's Church, Broomhill, Sheffield, Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> October, 10.00 am – 4.00 pm. £8 waged, £5 unwaged

What is the relationship between belief, worship and discipleship? How do our convictions about God, the universe and human being inform our worship? What would worship shaped by Jesus' kingdom vision look like and how would it equip us to embrace that vision in our lives? These are some of the questions that John Bell and Jo Love will be

exploring in what promises to be an insightful, energizing and enjoyable day.

In Spirit and Truth is an open, ecumenical conference and assumes no specialist knowledge or experience beyond a lively faith and an inquiring mind. Refreshments will be available as well as a bookstall. Booking form on the CRC website under *Other Events*.

## **Marcus Borg Reclaiming the inheritance of Jesus**

Centre for Radical Christianity at St Mark's Church, Broomhill, Sheffield – Friday 11<sup>th</sup> and Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> November

Jesus and Christianity have often been domesticated by Christian theology and cultural accommodation. This weekend seeks to reclaim the radical significance of Jesus from its cultural captivity by exploring a historical and metaphorical approach to seeing Jesus, God, and Christianity, picking up on key themes in Borg's new book, *Speaking Christian*. On Friday evening he will speak on *Reclaiming Christian Language*. The Saturday

lectures' theme is *Being Christian* looking in turn at: *Reclaiming the God of Jesus*, *God and Atheism*; *Recent reverberations* *God and Jesus*; and *Original impulse* *God and Jesus*, contemporary resonances. The cost for Friday is £10 and for Saturday £20, but members of PCN pay only £8 and £18. (Special student rates are £2 and £5 respectively). The link for booking tickets is on the PCN website.

## **The PCN Britain Annual Residential Weekend**

This regular and popular event will again be held at Gladstone's Library, St Deiniol's, Hawarden, Flintshire, CH5 3DF from 18<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> November. John Churcher will facilitate the weekend. For further details and booking form see the insert in this Newsletter.

## **Book reviews**

### **Jesus Then & Now, by John Simmonds**

St Marks CRC Press Sheffield. 2011. ISBN 9780955959318. £2.95.

#### **Reviewed by Robin Story**

Close on the heels of "Walk the Jesus Walk" comes the third in the *Together in Hope* series. John Simmonds' aim is "to dig deeper into the Jesus story in the belief that the Good News which he proclaimed and embodied can be a potent force for good in the contemporary world". In his introduction John fully acknowledges the many scholars, theologians, enquirers, friends and others who have informed him throughout his life in his quest to make sense of the Jesus story. His intention is to draw together what he has learned and experienced in this book to share with others. In particular "Was it possible to discover Jesus as he was before the church got its hands on him?"

The seven sections allow the material to be used as the basis for group discussion. The first, "Who was Jesus?", summarises the documents, their supposed authors, their probable readers and messages. In pointing out that the Gospels contain a mix of spoken and written tradition, metaphors, Jewish symbols and ideas, he by implication deftly removes any possibility of literalism. Bearing in mind the shortcomings of the texts, the character of Jesus and his teaching can be

extracted with confidence. In "Jesus - announcing of Good News" the essentials of Jesus' ministry are discussed: inclusiveness, primacy of the poor, condemnation of hypocrites and social contact with sinners and outcasts. The third section, "What did the good news mean for Jesus' disciples?", explores discipleship in a wide sense and describes a new way of living. Up to this point most Christians would accept the portrait of Jesus and his teaching that has been presented, but there is bound to be controversy in "Who did Jesus become?" How and why did the Jesus in Mark get transformed into the Jesus Christ of the institutional churches? The process is summarised clearly and convincingly. By restoring the real Jesus he becomes more effectively our inspiration and example. However, discarding ancient dogmas may be too much for some. Next, after a summary of the new way of living, both individually and collectively, the reader is exhorted to action in "Jesus and the Way: Jesus and his followers". Even more personally challenging is "Jesus is mine!". It poses a series of questions and suggests practical exercises to stimulate a personal response. Finally, "Will you come and

follow me?" Thinking and understanding are not enough: Again it is action that distinguishes disciples. Yet there is likely to be a cost, including suffering. This book presents a well-documented case for re-examining Jesus and his teaching. John Simmonds has

## God was not a baby: Exploring Incarnation, by Graham Hellier

24 pp. £2 (p&p free) from the author, Monmouth End, Marden, Hereford HR1 3EZ

Graham Hellier is an important champion of gentle progressive faith understanding. He has written on occasions for this newsletter, and all of his recent writings have been reviewed here. He writes extremely well, and in a way attractive to those who might reasonably balk at many heavy theological tomes, and he is obviously an omnivorous reader. His pages are full of quotations – and not only ones supportive of his own arguments – and worth having for those alone. And he encourages readers, whether individuals or members of groups, to reflect further on the ideas he opens up.

This little booklet is similar in size and format to his response to Richard Dawkins *Is God a Delusion*, which was used widely by PCN groups. Its theme is Incarnation which he takes to mean “the presence of God in all humanity and in all creation.” God’s presence in the man Jesus as part of that; but in much else besides, which he explores under 8 separate headings. It would again suit local groups very well. To some of the conversation going on in this newsletter at the moment, and perhaps in other settings, it sounds a generous and irenic note.

But there are areas where I part from Hellier. At times he seems to set aside his usual scepticism about words attributed to Jesus in the gospels. He warms to passages in John’s gospel ‘where Jesus speaks of God as separate from himself.’ But if you want those to be taken as authoritative, you can’t just discount Jesus’ contempt for ‘the world’ in John. Some similar picking

## Postcards from France

Liz Terry, one of our regular reviewers, has published a book of comic shorts stories called “Postcards from France”, which she wrote whilst she and her partner were living in France between 2002 and 2008, plus a couple of new ones written this year.

When Liz started writing them, she sent them home to be published in her father’s parish magazine. The editor of the magazine was a man called Peter Sergeant, who loved her stories, and sent her regular email replies of delight on getting them. His support and encouragement really helped her, Liz says, to feel

## Chris Avis’ lecture recordings

Chris’ recordings of lectures are known and appreciated by many PCN members. He has three new ones. *The Lust for Certainty* is a 4 cd set of recordings made at the Sea of Faith London conference earlier this year. Speakers are David Boulton and Julian Baggini and the writer/broadcasters Mark Vernon and Kenan Malik. The set costs £12, of which £1 goes to Sea of Faith. *The Bible, the birds and the bees* is Chris’ recording of a lecture by Dr Adrian Thatcher in Exeter in February, which was actually

stripped off the gaudy doctrinal vestments to reveal a credible Jesus and the essence of his teaching. It challenges us to live our lives inspired by the original pattern. Those who find creeds incomprehensible now have a practical manual to help them.

and choosing shows in his approach to Luke’s gospel and the book of Acts.

There are gaps in what he allows to be incarnational. He praises a long list of 18<sup>th</sup> century scientists, but makes no mention of music and musicians. His most glaring omission is the sacraments, reflecting what feels like a quite deep non-conformist suspicion of these. Word and wisdom can be incarnational, but bread and wine apparently can’t. I understand some of his criticism of Roman Catholic Christianity. But as a catholic Christian myself within the Church of England, his portrait of the eucharist is just caricature. Christian people make and celebrate eucharist together. The president is just that, enabling the ministry of many, many other members of the body to flourish and find active expression in worship.

Most of all, the title seems to me just horribly wrong. It echoes Nestorius in the fifth century, “God is not a baby three days old’. But can God be present ‘in and through all things’ yet not in a new born child? There’s possibly a hint here of Protestantism’s insistence on ‘understanding’ when it comes to baptism. And there is a very strange paragraph where the unborn child is described as being ‘parasitical upon [the mother’s] body’, and eventually being ‘let be into the world of adulthood.’ Whether it’s authentic Jesus or not, I much prefer Matthew: ‘Unless you change and become like little children....’

But this booklet is good. Get it and use it.

**Hugh Dawes**

good about her writing skills. In July 2010 Pete died from cancer, he and his family being wonderfully cared for and supported in his last few weeks and days at St Barnabas House Hospice in Worthing, West Sussex. Liz has published her book to raise money for the Hospice, and it is dedicated to him.

To buy a copy of “Postcards from France”, go to [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) and search for “Postcards from France”. The book is available for £5, as a paperback or a downloadable e-book, and is easy to buy online by debit/credit card or a Paypal account.

called “Towards a Gay-Friendly Church: New Arguments for Inclusion”. One CD, £4.50. *Why We Need a God Outside Us* was recorded at a meeting of the Exeter PCN local group exploring the edge of philosophical approaches to ‘God’ with Gareth Dyer. One CD, £4.50.

Chris’ email is [chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk); his address 37 Clifton Road, Exeter EX1 2BN. You can pay by Paypal or by cheque. An email to him will get responded to with any further information you may need.

## From the editor's chair

Resisting the undertaker's promoting a hearse and wooden coffin and having instead a Volvo estate and a cardboard one. Declining an ordained minister and himself conducting the service for his sister after her death from cancer. Personally writing and delivering the main eulogy, since he had known Rosemary for all but the first four years of her life, with two friends she had chosen giving shorter ones. Borrowing the football ground's one minute's silence when a player or past manager dies, and borrowing from there also the long and loud applause in appreciation of the life ended.

So Jon Canter described in *the Guardian* recently the godless funeral that his sister wanted. It plainly was a wonderful occasion, and Canter has the gifts to do it. (He's an author and a scriptwriter.)

But Rosemary wanted music too. *We plough the fields and scatter*, for nothing better evoked her early childhood. The *Lacrimosa* from Mozart's Requiem; *Huic ergo parce Deus, pie Jesu Domine, dona eis requiem*. And as the reading Milton's *On His Blindness*: a man, losing his sight, finding that his soul is *more bent / to serve therewith my maker*. She wanted a godless funeral, but still invited God. "She knew that He elevates. God is the man for the big occasion." Canter concluded: "We are not a

religiously observant nation – except when it really counts."

I offer two thoughts linking to this issue of the newsletter. Given the age profile of our members, which needs to be lowered, some of us should be planning our funerals! As a priest I regularly told others to do this, but only now am I trying to do it myself, strongly prompted by Jill. She reckons if I outlived her I would get hers right, but - and more likely - she needs to know about mine (as I do too about hers.) I wouldn't trust it to *any* minister unless they've seen what I want and agree to do it. Hymns, prayers, music, 'ritual' - these things all matter if a funeral is to be true to the person we were. If your minister's unwilling, find someone who *will* do what you want. Don't leave it too late!

The second. For all that spirituality seems the flavour of the month, loads of people – football and cricket crowds, concert and theatre audiences, and many of those in churches, actually need and want *religion*. I know I do. It is, when we do it well as people gathered together, what nourishes love and care and concern and community, and in that process nurtures the depths in us all. Others, I know, take a different line. But it's been around for a very long time. Let's not knock it! **Hugh Dawes**

**Are you reading this newsletter after a first encounter with PCN Britain?** Are you enjoying it? Joining PCN Britain will ensure you receive all four editions each year. Membership starts from £15 and these subscriptions fund the work of PCN Britain in bringing progressive Christian understanding to a wider audience.

**Copy date for the next newsletter.** Contributions for the September issue (including local group news) **must** reach the editor, Hugh Dawes by **Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August 2011 - at the very latest**, preferably a bit before. Email them please to [hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk) or if you cannot use email, post them to Andy Vivian, PCN Britain, at the address below. All posted contributions must be typed in scan-friendly font. Fresh beginnings are very much part of September; thoughts on that would be very welcome. It's the completion of harvesting too, so suited to natural and environmental themes. This issue has a lot on the AGM and on planning the future for PCN, and there will be feedback forms for you on that in the next issue. But why not get your thoughts about that down on paper for the next issue – lots of you, and so short pieces – so we can share them together. Please put **NEWSLETTER** in the header of any email, or on your envelope if you post to Andy.

The Progressive Christianity Network – Britain (Registered Charity No 1102164) is itself part of a wider international network of progressive Christian organisations, and has links in particular with the Centre for Progressive Christianity in the United States. PCN Britain's website is online at [www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk), with information and resources. TCPC's website also offers a wealth of material for open and progressive Christian understanding. Visit it at [www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org). You can email us at [info@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:info@pcnbritain.org.uk), phone us on 01594 516528, or mail us at PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire GL14 1BB.

The members of the Management Committee are:

Chair:	John Churcher <a href="mailto:john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk">john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>	Adrian Alker <a href="mailto:adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk">adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>
Vice Chair	Mary McMahon <a href="mailto:mary.mcmahon@pcnbritain.org.uk">mary.mcmahon@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>	Sonya Brown <a href="mailto:sonya.brown@pcnbritain.org.uk">sonya.brown@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>
Secretary	Ian McAllister <a href="mailto:ian.mcallister@pcnbritain.org.uk">ian.mcallister@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>	Philip Goodwin <a href="mailto:philip.goodwin@pcnbritain.org.uk">philip.goodwin@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>
Treasurer:	Terence Cooper <a href="mailto:terence.cooper@pcnbritain.org.uk">terence.cooper@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>	Sandra Griffiths <a href="mailto:sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk">sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>
		Paul Onslow <a href="mailto:paul.onslow@pcnbritain.org.uk">paul.onslow@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>
		Anne Padget <a href="mailto:anne.padget@pcnbritain.org.uk">anne.padget@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>
		Angela Smith <a href="mailto:angela.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk">angela.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>
		Richard Tetlow <a href="mailto:Richard.tetlow@pcnbritain.org.uk">Richard.tetlow@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>
	Administrative assistant and Web Manager: Andy Vivian – <a href="mailto:andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk">andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk</a>	