

# Progressive voices



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**Progressive Voices** is the magazine of the Progressive Christianity Network Britain (Registered Charity No. 1102164), and is published quarterly in March, June, September and December.

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Progressive Voices editor, Hugh Dawes

**The copy date for the September issue will be Friday 31<sup>st</sup> August 2012.** It's the season of what the French call la rentrée; a time of returnings for many and new beginnings for others: school, work, college and more. Thoughts on any of those would be welcome. It will be the end of harvest, prompting reflections on our care or otherwise for the planet. We might know who the next Archbishop of Canterbury will be. You could write on the archbishop you would like to have. The email address for all that and more is [hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk).

The cover picture of the Pembrokeshire coastline was taken by Don MacGregor, and shows the St David's peninsula looking west towards Ramsey Island. Don's article *Morphic fields and the works of Christ* is on page 4.

Welcome to Progressive voices, the new name - with a bit of a new look - to what has been up until now PCN Britain's newsletter.

This is very much work in progress; I am actually very pleased with how it has turned out – at least on my home printer! Do let me know what you think of it so far, and do keep your copy coming in. Yours are the prophetic voices we want to be heard – and ourselves to hear.

Hugh Dawes

## Some network events coming up in the autumn

Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims and The Rochester Theological Society have a day conference - *How to be A Bad Christian .....and a better Human Being* on **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2012, 10:15 for 10:30am to 4pm at St James Church, St James Road, Tunbridge Wells TN2 3RL** The speaker is Dave Tomlinson, well known priest and author of "Re-enchanting Christianity" whose new book of the same title is due out in August. Bookings at £10 (concessions £7) from Pat Churchill, 4 Rusthall Rd, Rusthall, Tunbridge Wells, TN4 8PA Tel 01892531541 or email [pat.churchill@tinyworld.co.uk](mailto:pat.churchill@tinyworld.co.uk). On the day, £15/£10. Cheques payable to: St Paul's Church, Rusthall.

**On Saturday, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2012** the East Shropshire Group will be hosting a day of exchange and exploration by people from different faith backgrounds. In addition to Christians and Muslims there will hopefully be representatives of a wider spectrum. It will be held in Albrighton, a village in Shropshire between Wolverhampton and Telford, and will be run by Richard Tetlow, a member of PCN's Management Committee. More details in our September issue, but book the date now.

If you are planning to go to the Greenbelt Festival in Cheltenham this year, be sure to look out for the progressive corner of the G-source tent. PCN is partnering Modern Church, Inclusive Church and the Centre for Radical Christianity on this project. If you are willing to volunteer to greet visitors at our stall, please contact [andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk). We are looking for a team of six or eight people.

**DVD library.** We now have twelve titles in the DVD library and a further two are available from next month. Details are on the PCN website in the Resources section under PCN Documents.

# A Good Friday for the Church?

by Chris Avis



*Chris Avis has been a member of PCN from its first beginnings and is a stalwart of the Exeter group. He also serves on the committee of Free to Believe, and is a regular producer of excellent recordings of their and our meetings. (See page 16 for details of some of the latest.) Here he offers some Easter*

*afterthoughts – and a thoughtful poem.*

When they're out shopping and sightseeing on a Good Friday morning in UK towns and cities, what message does the general public receive from the churches' annual dramatised Walk of Witness processions acted out on the streets? Traditionally the churches may have wanted to say: "See and believe in this perfect man who was crucified and died to save you from your sins!" However, I suspect the responses more likely to be engendered include "Pious nonsense", "Totally baffling", "It's upsetting the kids", "Weird churchgoers at it again", or just plain indifference.

Though there will be a few present with more enlightened understandings of the Easter story, there is no doubting the traditional 'washed in the blood' belief structure that is energetically promulgated on occasion. But there are other views on the last days of Jesus at least as worthy of consideration as the Church's established Easter narrative. Here are brief walks of witness around three alternative approaches

+ The earliest crucifixion references from Paul, more than 20 years after the event, are scant on narrative, with no Garden of Gethsemane, no Judas, no Pilate, no trial, no Barabbas, no denial, no words from the cross, no Joseph of Arimathea and no tomb. "He was buried", writes Paul. It is not until Mark about 20 years later that the familiar stories begin, subsequently embellished by Matthew, Luke and finally John by the close of the 1st century.

+ Jesus as the 'Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world' has its origins in the ancient Jewish ritual of Yom Kippur or 'Day of Atonement' when a bodily perfect lamb was sacrificed to reconcile the people to their God and a goat was symbolically laden with 'the sins of the people' before being released (like the Barabbas character?) to carry the sins away. As it was customary Jewish literary practice, Mark can

reasonably be supposed to have re-visioned both this ancient ritual and the Passover from Hebrew scripture to interpret for his readers the death of Jesus the promised Messiah through recognised symbols of Jewish worship.

+ Mark's Passion story is divided into eight three-hour segments and is far more likely to be liturgical rather than historical. From Mark 14:17 onwards we can read in succession from Passover around 6.00pm (on what we now call Maundy Thursday), on to the Garden of Gethsemane (9.00pm), the arrest and Sanhedrin interrogation (12 midnight), the denial/cockcrow (3.00am), the trial (6.00am), the crucifixion (9.00am), 'darkness covered the whole earth' (12 noon for 3 hours), the death of Jesus at 3.00pm, followed by negotiations with Joseph of Arimathea to entomb the corpse by 6.00pm, ie sunset and the start of the Sabbath day of rest.

It occurs to me (as it has to others) that the story of the cross was never meant by its authors to be literal, but interpretive, revealing to us through the death of Jesus his very nature and the transforming power of his life. If churches could witness to *that* message as they walked the streets, now that would be a real Easter resurrection.

## This is the Life

This is the life to live: that seeks what can't be found,  
yet ever craves a joyful search and looks a lifetime round.

This is the life to live: a gift, a grace, a goad,  
a journey into idle thought or on the open road.

This is the life to live: a venture filled with chance  
and chance encounters in the steps of life's contingent dance.

This is the life to live: of nerves exposed to pain,  
with nerve to heal a wounded soul and raise to life again.

This is the life to live: a life so darkly seeing;  
a speck of cosmic dust and yet a vital spark of Being.

This is the life to live: no certain God or fate.  
Just life today is life enough; the rest of life can wait.

# Morphic Fields and the Works of Christ

By Don MacGregor



Don MacGregor is a vicar in Fishguard, West Wales. This article is based on his new book, 'Blue Sky God: The Evolution of Science and Christianity', to be published 27<sup>th</sup> July 2012 with Circle Books, and to be available on Amazon, both in print and as an ebook.

Something which has intrigued me in recent years is biologist Rupert Sheldrake's theory of Morphic Resonance. This arose out of his study of what it is that determines the form of a body. The DNA in every cell in the body is the same, so what is it that makes some liver cells, some skin cells and some brain cells? What is it that draws the cells into a particular 'form' when they all start off the same? He proposes that every species of being has a morphogenetic or form-shaping field that determines not just its form, but also its behaviours, its social and cultural systems and mental activity, and he has developed the understanding of these morphic fields to include the idea of *morphic resonance*. Resonance happens when one vibration sets off another, For instance, an opera singer can make a glass vibrate to the point where it breaks - the sound vibration from her voice makes the glass resonate, or vibrate in sympathy.

Sheldrake applies this to his understanding of morphic fields. The morphic field for the whole species has a kind of in-built memory that stores information relevant to that species. Thus, there is a species memory, based on what has happened to the species in the past, shaped by the experiences and behaviour of all the previous generations. *Morphic resonance* is the concept that an individual organism can be influenced by the behaviour of another organism of the same species, despite having no physical contact with it, because there is a connection through the morphic field of the species. Any new development or behaviour by one individual becomes a part of the morphic field and the expectation is that it will be easier for any member of that species to acquire the new skill or habit that has been learnt by another member of the same species. Sheldrake cites various experimental and anecdotal evidence for this. Applying this theory to human beings means that whenever a human being does something which goes further than anyone has gone before, it affects changes in the morphic field for the whole human race, making that act more possible for everyone to do.

The theory of morphic resonance was initially received with scepticism by many, because it is seen as unverifiable, but is gradually gaining support from

many corners. If we assume for the moment that this actually is the way the world works, then the theory of morphic resonance has profound implications for the death and resurrection of Jesus and the theology of atonement. Christian theology tells us that Jesus was fully human. Therefore what he did and how he behaved will affect the morphic field of humanity, and enable others to do the same. In the gospel of John, Jesus says: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

Consider what Jesus is reported to have done in his life and death. He demonstrated the ability to heal the human body, and he lived a life given in surrender to God. Jesus' path was one of 'kenosis', or self-emptying. In Philippians 2, Paul first applies this word to Jesus, but it is precisely the path Jesus took. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but **emptied himself**." (Philippians 2:5-7)

Jesus was able to surrender his ego to God, and awaken fully into God's consciousness. And yet he was fully human, the same as us, so he had an egoic nature. The story of his years of ministry show him repeatedly going beyond that ego, that self, and becoming one with God, fully divine, or as fully divine as a human being can be. He repeatedly emptied himself and surrendered to the process.

We see this particularly in the temptation narratives at the beginning of his ministry, and at the end in the Garden of Gethsemane and in his trial and crucifixion. As Jesus faces what he has to go through, he is tempted to give it all up – but, "not my will but yours" he said to God. He surrendered to the process and put his own ego aside. This self-emptying kenosis continued in his reactions to the process of the trial, the torture and the crucifixion. Surrender and kenosis was his way, to act out of the love and compassion that became his as he put aside his egoic nature and awakened into the immense field of God's compassionate consciousness. He acted and was energised from the deep well of love, the ground of our being that is God - and the implication is that this is possible for all humanity.

If we consider this in terms of morphic resonance, Jesus was the first to follow fully the way of transformative love and therefore forged the path and changed the morphic field for all humanity, making it

*continued on page 14*

# Chair's Letter

It was good to meet many members at the AGM in York but unfortunately we did not manage to achieve the quorum to enable changes to be made to the Constitution. Andy Vivian has a full report elsewhere in this newsletter. Immediately following the AGM we were encouraged and challenged by Chris Howson's presentations concerning ways in which progressive Christianity can be actioned on behalf of the poor and the marginalized.

At the close of the day the new Management Committee [MC] went to work. It began with the annual election of Officers. I am grateful to the MC members for electing me to be its Chair once again. It is an immense privilege for me to work with such a dedicated group of volunteers, very ably supported by the Administrator, Andy Vivian. Having completed her term of elected office, Mary McMahon also stepped down from being Vice Chair. In her place the MC elected Angela Smith. It also re-elected Paul Onslow as Secretary and Andrew Burrell as Treasurer. Not only did we welcome back all the other MC members but also the newly elected members, Alison Morley and Alan Race.

Two major items to emerge from this meeting concern forth coming PCN Britain conferences. The first will be held in London on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2012 at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 235 Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2H 8EP. Adrian Alker will be leading the day and delivering 4 lectures of approx. 25 minutes each, to be followed by group discussions. The title for the day will be "A Jesus Shaped Church: Christian Shaped Lives". His lecture titles are:

1. A Jesus shaped faith
2. A Church shaped Christianity
3. A Jesus shaped Church
4. A Christian shaped life.

The day will commence with registration/coffee at 10 a.m. and conclude by 4 p.m. Please put this into your diary now as it will be a stimulating and encouraging day. More details to follow.

In the spring of 2013 we will conclude our current theme of what it means to be a progressive church. Three congregations from different regions and traditions have agreed to share how they go about their community life

## PCN Spring Gathering – AGM

### *Andy Vivian reports*

This year's AGM was not quorate, we were 8 members short. But the meeting was useful and progress was made on all matters except the vexed issue of the quorum itself. We could not reduce it to 5% of membership because only a quorate AGM can do that.

The three nominees to the Management Committee were elected without a poll since there were three seats available. This brings the total number of trustees to twelve. The newcomers are:

Andrew Burrell (Cumbria), co-opted as treasurer last November, who has a background in business and charity work.

through a day of talks and workshops. The latter will focus on different aspects such as worship, youth and social justice.

Next year also sees the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of John A T Robinson's 'Honest to God' and this will be marked by meetings and events around the country – more details soon. The MC encourages local and regional groups to work together to arrange meetings and events. What better way could there be for regional groups to arrange 'Honest to God' celebration events across Britain! If you are interested in developing something locally or regionally please contact me as soon as possible. Help is available on the PCN Britain web site.

We are coming to the end of the consultation with the membership on the question of Gay Marriage. The scale of the response has been quite amazing and the MC will be making a decision on if or what to say concerning the Government's Green Paper. As I write this letter over one third of the membership has responded and the highlights are as follows:

- 100% would like PCN to make a submission in response to the Government's Green Paper.
- 91% would like PCN to go further than the Government's current proposal and ask for an option for churches to conduct religious gay marriages.
- 91% would also like PCN to request that churches may opt for a religious ceremony for civil partnerships.

The final decision about if and what response the MC makes on behalf of the membership will be notified to you as soon as possible.

Although elsewhere in this newsletter there is a report concerning the members' residential held at The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick in early May, I would like to thank Mark Townsend the speaker and all 28 PCN members who attended for exploring and experiencing a deeper spirituality within the often 'rationality' of progressive Christianity. It was some weekend!

Finally, thank you all again for your involvement in the work of PCN Britain. The organisation is here to support one another as we, together, continue our journey as progressive Christians. Best wishes, John

Alison Morley, (Wiltshire), a Methodist minister, who stressed the need for PCN to provide a "homecoming... to the many Christians who are no longer able to feel part of a superstitious or dogmatic establishment".

Alan Race (London), an Anglican rector who comes with a background in theological writing. He believes that PCN needs to be credible both intellectually and socially. They were united in their belief that progressive Christianity is not just about theology but about spiritual growth and transformed lifestyles.

One of the main achievements of the meeting was to give the go-ahead for PCN to apply to become an official partner of the Charter for Compassion. Fortunately, this

decision did not require a quorum. Three members volunteered to assist Angela Smith, a trustee, to draft our application which will spell out how PCN plans to incorporate the aims of the Charter into our programme. The volunteers are Gabrielle Ayerst, Gerry Leake and Pat McCulloch.

The meeting took a sounding of those present to see if there was enthusiasm for PCN's programme to include an occasional retreat. Of the 46 present, 23 raised a hand. Several people spoke of the spiritual refreshment provided at the recent residential at Swanwick led by Mark Townsend.

Even if the meeting had been quorate, it is doubtful that the motion to include a new Aims section in the constitution would have been passed. This was due to an appeal by Hugh Dawes, PCN's founder, former chair, and editor of this magazine, to reject the three Aims proposed by the committee in favour of an earlier set of Aims produced at a special general meeting in 2004 and of which the drafters of the new set had been unaware. The meeting felt that both

sets of aims had merit and proposed that further discussions be held with a view to draw on both and come up with a new proposal. Three members volunteered to serve on a working party – Hugh Dawes, Paul Dawson and Maureen Foxall. They will be joined by three Trustees, Paul Onslow, Angela Smith and Richard Tetlow.

Chairing the AGM was the last duty of retiring vice chair, Mary McMahan. At the close she spoke of the graciousness and fun she had experienced on the committee and reminded us that she was its first non-English member. Her farewell was marked by an enthusiastic and well deserved round of applause. Later in the day, at a short Management Committee, Angela Smith, from Dundee, who has been a Trustee since 2010, was elected as vice chair in her stead. The AGM also paid grateful tribute to Peter Stribblehill the outgoing Independent Examiner, who is replaced by Monty Lynds a former PCN treasurer.

## Liberation Theology in 2012 PCN AGM: Talk by Chris Howson

### *Sonya Brown reports*

What does liberation theology mean in the UK in 2012? How do we enact our progressive Christian beliefs in the world around us? These were two of the prominent questions that guest speaker Chris Howson posed to those gathered at the AGM in York recently. A self-confessed liberation theologian for our times, Chris told us about his ministry as Anglican priest come social justice toiler within the *fresh expressions* field in the city of Bradford. From nuclear protesting to challenging traditional perceptions of church, Chris's 'kingdom seeking', calls for a new vision of 'church' in the world to be realised.

His belief in 'protest theology' being an intrinsic part of mission today seems to be built not on any new wave of theological discourse but more of a renewal of Christian socialist values of the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The principles of Christian socialism are something that I'm sure readers are not just familiar with but which potentially lie at the heart of many of PCN members spiritualities and theologies. Chris's theological perspective and praxis imperatives might be understood as more of a renewal of the objectives of Christian socialism that gave birth to left wing gospel proclamation many years prior to the fairly recent church's *fresh expressions* enterprise in the UK today. Although I recognise that this perspective is building on the foundations of a previously vibrant Christian socialist period, it is perhaps a renewal and renaissance of such values that is called for within church communities today, at a time of national and European economic turmoil. But, as we are told in the study of liberation theology, change can only come about through the empowerment of the oppressed and it is always the challenge of liberation theology within the context of Western society to identify who the oppressed really are. Although the gap between poor and wealth appears to be ever widening in the UK (reverting back perhaps to William Booth's awareness of such socio-economic gaps in Victorian society) it is still unclear how to authentically apply traditional South

American models of liberation theology to our present day UK context. It would have been helpful to have heard Chris's take on this issue if we'd had more time.

For me, Christian vocation is of course about seeking justice for those who are forced even further on to the margins of society and to not allow ourselves to be ruled and oppressed by single capitalist empires that dominate our consumer lives (I feel particularly enslaved by my Virgin phone/internet package at the moment and I'm sure I'm not alone!) but Christian ministry is also about engaging with people in our church communities and encouraging those in the mainstream to think about the Gospel values of economics, justice and liberation and our application of this in the world.

Chris is doing marvellous things, passing on left wing gospel values to new generations (and I'm all for this). His work is edgy, exciting and inclusive - everything that Christian faith should aspire to be, but not all of us can be chained daily to railings for the purposes of protest (although many PCN members have been in the past; I am assured of this by recent conversations – a radical nature in many of our members and this is why I admire PCN).

In spite of this edgy ministry which is so valuable, it is also important to remember that some of us have to keep the radical discussions going with people in our communities who are in the mainstream of society and 'middle of the road' in terms of theology and spirituality. This quiet, often frustratingly long term vocation of assisting those in the mainstream to 'work things out' theologically and apply it to their lives is what progressives such as ourselves are called to do as well as the edgy stuff that Chris seems to do so well. As they say, 'Rome wasn't built in a day' just as small steps towards a more progressive understanding of faith will be a long journey for many and for those who accompany them.

# An Exploration of a Contemporary Spirituality

PCN Britain Weekend Conference, May 2012, The Hayes, Swanwick

## Pat McCulloch writes:

This gathering proved to be an amazing transforming experience in so many ways. Perhaps it was not what the participants were expecting. When PCN groups gather around the country the discussions are mainly cerebral. As one participant put it after the first session on the first evening, 'This is not what I came for. I expected to have deep theological ideas poured into my head.' Afterwards she wrote, 'I thoroughly enjoyed the weekend and have come home inspired and refreshed.'



The weekend was facilitated by Revd Mark Townsend, priest, member of the Magic Circle, writer and leader of retreats. Mark's book, 'The Gospel of Falling Down' formed the background to the sessions. In the foreword to that book Stephen Verney wrote that Mark sees his magical skills as something that can open people up to the state of wonder, mystery and awe which is sometimes difficult to evoke in the modern church.

As the 29 people of several denominations, and some of none, met for the six sessions over the weekend, the recognition that the treasure that we search for is already within us, proved both healing and encouraging. As we looked at the stones we each had chosen at the beginning of the first session and spoke about them it became clear that through our own imaginations we are our own teachers and the treasure is within. The journey we are on is a journey to ourselves and an awakening to the present

## News from Local Groups

### Bath

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

Since Christmas, members have had two lively meetings on Dominic Crossan's lectures at the Leeds Conference in September 2011 on the themes of Jesus, the Roman Empire and the Nativity, and on the Crucifixion and Resurrection – I think we all got new insights into what the gospel writers were trying to convey when writing their accounts. As a complete contrast, in February, Edward Hulme, one of our members, showed us some slides of religious paintings, so we could consider whether our understanding of Jesus is enhanced by looking at such works. Edward also had a short piece published in the last Newsletter on "The or a

moment. The story of The Prodigal Son figured prominently and so did a cracked clay pot. Out of one group discussion came the idea that the cracks in our being can let light in, and bring new awareness and the truth, a new reality, can set us free. The realisation that failure can be creative and transforming was a strong message which came out of our exploration within the sessions.



Jenny Morgans and Betty Saunders, the youngest and oldest attenders The Conference certainly offered a safe space to express our own ideas and the spiritual feeding and sustaining was profound. PCN local and regional gatherings are good at considering the words of twentieth century liberal theologians and how we might live out the gospel in the twenty-first century, but the conference extended that by offering us a chance to explore a contemporary spirituality. Another participant wrote afterwards that the conference had been both 'reassuring and thought provoking at the same time'.

As Jenny, the youngest participant, put it:

'I was amazed at the atmosphere of inclusion, warmth and honesty that I found on the weekend. The safe space facilitated by Mark and created by all of us meant we were able to tell our stories and be heard. It was great to have some time talking about spirituality as well as theology.'

All in all it was 'another great conference' and 'a wonderful weekend'. After the final liturgy grateful thanks were given to Mark for his gentle and incisive leadership.

Son of God" – the use of the definite or indefinite article makes a remarkable difference to the way in which the phrase can be interpreted. Our final meeting for this season was on "Compassion: the heart of Jesus' ministry", a very insightful session based on a chapter from "Living the Questions 2".

We have been busy planning next year's programme, which will commence on Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> September with Edward Holme leading us on "Progressive Christianity: eight points".

We meet at 7.30 p.m. on the fourth Monday of the month in the William Jay Room, United Reformed Church Halls, Grove Street, Bath. Do come and join us if you are in the area. You will be most welcome.

## **Birmingham**

(Richard Tetlow 0121 449 4892,  
richardtetlow@pcnbritain.com)

Beginnings are significant. Our group has developed from a conference in Birmingham in January 2011 on the theme: 'Reclaiming a radical faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: an exploration together'. It was billed as a conference for Christians to reclaim a radical faith from a presentation of a personal understanding of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths' i.e. the speakers were Muslim, Jewish and Christian. The progressive motivation was to urge that 'progressive Christians' consider their stance in the light of the other great world faiths. It was organised by the West Midlands/B'ham Branch of PCN Britain. Birmingham itself had no PCN group. Now it has. 16 of the 48 present came from Birmingham. They now meet bi-monthly having become, give and take, 'PCN Birmingham' group: 'questioning, listening, thinking, acting...'

We do therefore already have a good issue of size of group. Most of our homes are not comfortably large enough for that number!

We felt justified in giving time to choosing our name. Membership is typical PCN, 50% mixed sex, of most denominations and mostly laity. We enjoy a silence at the start and the end. So far we have had a brief talk from one of our members then mixed small groups (of 3s) then full discussion. Topics have clarified what is at stake related to our faith, issues with church worship, managing them and then a dialogue about staying in church or not. A PCN-type Christmas party with a Christmas PCN quiz worked well.

In April Michael Hell, a local member, very movingly introduced a discussion on prayer. He questioned whether we expect too much from prayer ('feeling holy'): prayer might be anywhere in the spectrum from a specific act to the way one lives. The litmus test of prayer is the effect it has on the life of oneself and others. He introduced his own morning prayers including his version of the Lord's Prayer. Next time we shall continue together on: a) what might be involved with praying; b) what effect prayer might produce. This meeting is on Wednesday, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2 for 2.30pm - 4.30pm at Liz and Nigel Blakey's home, 12, Woodrough Drive, Moseley B13 9EP, 0121 449 2937. Please ring first if you would like to come.

## **Bolton**

(Jim Hollyman 01204 456050  
jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The next meetings of the Bolton group will be on Tuesdays, 10th July, 11th September and 13th November at 1462, Junction Road West, Lostock, Bolton, BL6 4EG. At the July meeting we will discuss the final chapter of Michael Taylor's "Sorting Out Believing" which we have found to be a most helpful small book. We will also decide the subject/book for our September meeting.

## **Exeter**

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

The group's April session discussed the Saving Jesus DVD session seven, *Jesus programme: The Kingdom of God* ed by member Rev Maria Hearl. This was well received and one of the best of the series we felt. It produced very good and wide-ranging discussion.

Our recent meeting on May 13<sup>th</sup> was the next in our series *Pearls of Great Price*, when we invite speakers from different faiths and also different Christian perspectives, to share their central beliefs and practices. In some cases this has become a fascinating spiritual autobiography. This session was given by Jude Taylorson, who follows Vietnamese Buddhism. She explained that there are many forms of Buddhism and described it as a philosophy rather than a faith, with no proselytising aim. Her Vietnamese teacher, Tich Nhat Hanh, started his retreat centre in France (The Plum Centre) during the Vietnam war. He was encouraged by Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton when he visited the US as part of a mission to bring peace to both sides. He is a practitioner of *Mindfulness*, which is becoming the way many in the West understand and practise Buddhist philosophy and is now finding its way into UK school curriculums. This form of Buddhism is aimed at using the practice to enable engagement with the community and not to retreat from it.

Jude emphasised that Christians as well as other non-Buddhists attend their retreats and find the practices helpful.

Our next meeting is on July 1<sup>st</sup> when we welcome Rev Peter Brain, a retired URC minister, to talk about and discuss his new book: *Relatively Religious*, published as an ebook at: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/148274>

We welcome everyone to our meetings and look forward to meeting any new PCN members, and others seeking fresh insights, in our area.

## **Gloucestershire**

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

We are halfway through Dominic Crossan's dvd *The Challenge of Jesus* in which Crossan stresses the importance of understanding the 'matrix' of Jesus life i.e. the time and place of the world in which he lived, its ruling powers, visions and traditions. Just as we cannot understand why Martin Luther King said what he said and did what he did unless we take account of the serious violent racist society of the USA in which he lived - the matrix of his life - so we cannot understand the challenge of Jesus unless we take account of the matrix of his life. That matrix included the powerful ancient tradition of Hebrew law and prophecy; but Crossan wants us to recognise the equally powerful and violent presence of Roman imperialism. When Octavian ended the Roman civil war with victory at Actium and became Augustus Caesar he was deemed 'Saviour', 'Lord', 'Son of God', 'Bringer of Peace' throughout the Roman World. Why did these titles become attached to a provincial peasant in Galilee? What was the Jewish experience of Roman Occupation? Why was so much of Jesus' ministry focussed round Galilee and Capernaum? Jesus responded to the mission of John the Baptist and honoured it but did not imitate it. Why? Where did the alien notion of substitutionary sacrifice come from? All these questions provoked lively discussion in our group. Jesus' challenge is to Jewish hopes and Roman violence. The book-box library grows. One member has read *The Shack* and has been helped by what he sees as the portrayal of the Trinity. Another has completed *Taking leave of*

*Alexandria*, Holloway's autobiography of his experience of and leaving of the church – and, maybe, - the faith. Also being read are John Churcher's *Dying to live* and Tom Wright's *How God became King* – Wright is sharply critical of liberal theology.

#### **Hampshire hub**

(Martin Godfrey 023 8076 6312)

[martin.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:martin.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Brian Mountford's book *Christian Atheist - Belonging without Believing* has attracted lots of interest following his talk to the *Sea of Faith in the Churches* day conference in London last March. The A27 Book Club has adopted it for in depth discussion starting next Autumn. The belonging without believing theme has also been taken up enthusiastically by the Alton and the Southsea local groups. Copies of the discussion paper used are available from me on request. The new millennium has seen an increase in the desire for personal spirituality rather than organised religion. In a lecture at the Southampton Solent University, John Bell of the Iona Community examined why there is a new passion and how traditional faiths might respond.

Several members of the Hampshire Hub were among the 400 who attended a fascinating Christians in Science public lecture at the University of Southampton by an American neurobiologist who addressed the question *What is Free Will?* There was a follow up discussion the next day at the West Hampshire local group of the Scientific and Medical Network. The lecture will appear on the web site of Christians in Science – Central South.

These are just a few highlights in what has been a bumper Spring of activities of interest to progressive Christians in this part of the country.

#### **Hickling, Norfolk Broads**

(Merrie Longbottom 010692 598844)

[merrie.longbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:merrie.longbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our group - now named 'Shoreline' - continues to meet every Thursday afternoon from 2-4 at the home of a group member. We feel that a weekly meeting enables us to maintain continuity and a sense of moving forward; in fact, we value these informal weekly get-togethers so much that they have begun to replace the traditional Sunday worship experience for several members. It also allows us to continue to manage the local Food Bank collection scheme, which we started last year. The response from our four villages has been very impressive - but the need for this kind of support is growing all the time.

Currently, we are about half-way through one of the PCN library's new dvd offerings, *Beyond Theology*. Although it is an American production, the dvd has been very well received so far and provoked much thoughtful discussion - and we highly recommend it to other groups. Our group is small, but once a month we travel to Norwich to meet with a larger group (newly affiliated to PCN) and recently joined them in a discussion on the emotive issue of abortion, after which we 'decompressed' with a social time and delicious lunch. Three of our members have just returned from our first PCN residential weekend, and that was another wonderful experience. Joining with another group occasionally - or travelling to meet up with other PCN members at various events - is a great way of pooling ideas, concerns, and suggestions with like-minded people. We are

NOT alone on this fascinating journey! If you are in this area and would like to join in, please contact me.

#### **Ipswich**

(Liz Smith 01473 462875)

[liz.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:liz.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We still meet on one Wednesday a month, at the Robert Ransome pub, Tower Ramparts, Ipswich at 7.30pm (upstairs). We are small in number and are studying the book *Doubts and Loves* by Richard Holloway. We take turns at leading.

For dates of meetings and more information, contact Liz.

#### **Manchester**

John Ramsbottom 0161 456 5119

[john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Regular monthly meetings have been held this year as usual. We have enjoyed a varied programme with two interesting visiting speakers. There have also been a number of new faces who have joined us recently.

Our June meeting will be the last of this session as we will then take the customary summer break for July and August. During this evening on 27<sup>th</sup> June we intend to plan our activities for the autumn and also include a time of worship shared by our members. Once details of the autumn programme are decided, the information will be published on the PCN website. Meetings should resume on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> September at the usual venue in Heaton Moor, Stockport and old and new members will be most welcome to come along.

#### **Newcastle (upon Tyne)**

(Pat McCulloch 0191 2963727)

[pat.mcculloch@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:pat.mcculloch@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Newcastle Group meets monthly, usually on the second Tuesday in the month. At present we gather at St Thomas the Martyr's Church, Haymarket. The Metro and the bus station are just across the road.

The group started meeting in February and are just finding their feet. *Living the Questions 2* is used to stimulate discussion. This does not suit everyone but the group feels it gets better as it is worked through. People who come to the group meetings travel from quite a wide area, including Hexham, Consett, North Shields, Morpeth and Alnwick, as well as from Newcastle itself. It is hoped that a small discussion group will start up to cater for those north of Newcastle, possible around Morpeth and meeting in the afternoon.

Gradually the group, which started with 26 at the first meeting, is settling to about 10, not always the same 10. The discussion following the DVD session, 'Thinking Theologically' has probably been the best one yet and people are growing in confidence as they recognise they are in a safe open environment to explore their own ideas with each other.

Five members of the group attended the PCN AGM in York and one member went to the PCN Annual Residential Weekend.

The next two meetings are on Tuesday June 12<sup>th</sup> and Tuesday July 10<sup>th</sup>, both beginning at 7.30pm, at St Thomas the Martyr's Church. Those who are looking for a space to begin a liberal, more radical exploration of Christianity for the twenty-first century are very welcome to come along.

### **Newcastle (under-Lyme)**

(Ian Gregory 01782 614407

ian.gregory@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The DVD in which Jack Spong speaks of Jesus for the non-religious was shown on Saturday May 19<sup>th</sup> to a group at Newcastle under Lyme via the Stoke on Trent Branch. Members have also been led on a journey through Karen Armstrong's book *The Case for God* by member Nigel Jones. Some of us have read the anguished cry of Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh *Leaving Alexandria*. Our June 10<sup>th</sup> meeting is on the subject *What is education for?* with contributions from a teacher who visited Stafford gaol, and a college lecturer. On July 1<sup>st</sup> we have an official of the new local hospital telling us about its service to the community. On September 2<sup>nd</sup> we wonder whether we should ditch the Old Testament, but with members describing the bits of the OT they find really worth reading. October 7<sup>th</sup> is about the *Tyranny of Sex*, to which a French actress who has played saucy parts in films, and the owner of a 'gentlemen's club' are invited to tell us their stories. In the following months and into 2013 we will look at sections of Ian Bradley's splendid *Grace, Order, Openness and Diversity* (Reclaiming Liberal Theology) Continuum 2010. Convenor Ian Gregory was recently at the annual assembly of the Congregational Federation in Stirling, and writes: 'Over the dinner table I sat next to an American minister who was telling everybody about his large Bible-believing congregation. On hearing that I knew about Jack Spong, Marcus Borg and co he became fairly loud and aggressive. Others at the table had no knowledge of PCN and were intrigued to hear that there was an alternative to Bible-based fundamentalism. So some hitherto unaware people now know there is an escape route from Alpha! Ian's new booklet 'In Simple Trust' is now available (£8 inc p&p) from him at 16 Grice Road, Stoke on Trent ST4 7PJ. It traces a discipleship journey through 50 years of ministry and journalism.

### **North Lincolnshire**

(John Sharp 01472 509857

john.sharp@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our group is continuing to meet on the first Saturday of each month and to follow Adrian Smith's course, *Christ in us Today*. It is wonderful that we are still evolving as a group. Each member brings his or her unique perspective on life to enrich our discussion and to challenge the complacency we might otherwise sink into. Recently, one of our members particularly wanted us to pray together more and partake in a shared Eucharist, but we do have more agnostic members of the group who would find this, at the best, meaningless so we have reluctantly set aside this suggestion. However, we do start each session with a silence which each member can use as he or she wishes. We have to be very sensitive to the members who have been hurt by their experiences in organised religious settings and are finding some degree of hope and acceptance in our group. We also have members of both Anglican and Methodist churches who take the insights of the others in the group to their more conservative congregations. We would welcome more members who are in Richard Holloway's term, "dancing on the edge", particularly any who cannot subscribe to any organised Christian denomination.

### **North Worcestershire**

(Tessa Carrick 01527 873135

tessa.carrick@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We always look forward to welcoming new people to our discussions. It is a particularly good time to join us because we are beginning a new book, Adrian B. Smith's 2005 *Tomorrow's Faith* (O Books). Our next meeting is Monday 9<sup>th</sup> July at 2.30 pm when we will be considering the first part of the book, *The Bible and Revelation*. The following meeting will be on Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> September at 2.30.p.m. when the topic will be the second part of the book, *God*.

The group feels it would be a good thing to try to produce our own statement of faith and this book, which presents a short contemporary understanding of each aspect, seems a good preparation for tackling this task. Please phone or email Tessa for details of the venues. Anyone living in North Worcestershire area is welcome to come and explore today's faith with us.

### **Nottingham**

(David Turner 0115 976 4909

david.turner@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We cancelled our normal meeting in May as some of us had booked into a conference at St Mark's Sheffield (Centre for Radical Christianity); unfortunately the changed date clashed with PCN's AGM which some of us would have attended. However Tariq Ramadan took us on a 'Quest for Meaning' suggesting paths for followers of all religions; in his second lecture he explained the different ways Muslims and Christians look at Jesus.

June 9<sup>th</sup> sees us return to our usual pattern of meetings on the second Saturday of the month when we plan to share the various conferences we have been to during May. We meet at Sherwood United Reformed Church (NG5 3AA) where there is plenty of parking and good bus services to the front door.

### **Norwich**

(Alun Thomas 01603 488931

alun.thomas@pcnbritain.org.uk)

After several attempts to revive the local PCN group, we now have one - from an existing group of friends who got together about seven years ago for purposes largely identical to PCN. After a few attempts to persuade the group of the benefits of affiliating to PCN we have now done so. As you may have read in the reports from the Hickling Group, they have been joining us for quite some time now in our monthly meetings. We meet on the last Friday in the month, and although the venue is currently a regular one, with the recent increases in our numbers it looks as if we will have to use alternative accommodation - the best thing to do would be to contact me, Alun Thomas, for current details. Anyone is most welcome to join us. We function under the original name of the group, "Fishpond."

### **Richmond**

(Alan Powell 0208 878 7355

alanepowell@blueyonder.co.uk)

The group, which is about twelve in number, meets on Saturday afternoons (2.30 pm) in East Sheen. The next meeting is on 4<sup>th</sup> August. The Group is currently basing its meetings around Tony Windross's book "The Thoughtful

Guide to Faith". Please contact Alan Powell for further information.

### **Swindon**

(Marian Evans 01793 528864

ceri.evans-ford@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Swindon Group have been studying Marcus Borg talks, sent by the Barry group (many thanks to them).

As is our way we have strayed slightly and have got a little stuck. Maybe the wider PCN community could pass on their thoughts?

We have been debating belief, what should we believe, who should we believe, why should we believe etc etc, and we have found ourselves at an impasse on the statement 'you can only enter heaven through Jesus'.

It troubles us. Would Jesus really want to exclude people? Can this really be the teaching of Jesus? The wife of one in our group is a Buddhist, He feels it not right that she may be seen as not worthy of heaven (what is heaven is probably a debate is for another day) Like most of the group he wonders at how this could have been said, since it excludes so many?

Could other members of the PCN community give us some guidance on this? We would be very grateful for your input and for some wider debate on what Jesus meant.

### **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.

In early December we met to discuss the birth stories of Jesus with some extracts from both Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, but with other observations.

We were blessed with a fine, mild day at start January and having with a shared lunch we had a very pleasant walk in the woods. It was a great opportunity to get to know each other a bit more.

At our evening meeting towards the end of January we watched a short video clip of the prayer flag fluttering with many others at a base camp in the Himalayas and then went on to listen to part of a talk by Dave Tomlinson on Re-enchanting Christianity. Dave will be coming to Tunbridge well to address a one day conference our group is organising on 20<sup>th</sup> October this year. Do contact me if you would like further information.

## **PCN Britain in Kendal 8 years on**

*by Norman Burnell*

Kendal Ecumenical Group has a discussion group that has acted as the South Lakes local group for PCN since PCN Britain's formation some eight years ago. It grew from reading 'Why Christianity Must Change or Die' by Jack Spong, in preparation for his visit to Kendal for the northern launch of PCN Britain. We did not realise the effect it and he would have on us.

We are a moderate size group, attendance varies from 30 plus down to 7, irrespective of subject. We welcome all-comers and have no faith or belief requirements. Some are PCN members, some Free to Believe, Christians of several

We shared favourite poems and short articles at a recent meeting in February. With each member contributing something which tied in with the previous offering. We all felt uplifted and left with the intention of finding more works from the authors.

In April we watched the streaming of talks from Lucy Winkett and Robert Beckford from the St Paul's Cathedral Forum. These gave us plenty to think about

We spent an evening considering liturgy during which we shared prayers, readings and hymns but also considered movement and actions.

At our next meeting we will be looking a translation of the Aramaic Lord's Prayer and Beatitudes.

### **Warwickshire (meeting in Rugby)**

Nicola Phelan 01788 562562

nicola.phelan@pcnbritain.org.uk

Meeting dates and themes for the period of this newsletter:  
Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> June: The "Good Life": where does the shoe pinch and where are our agreements and disagreements about it as individuals?

Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> July: Making the idea of 'Christian' Community real locally: Emmaus and Hope 4. How does faith relate to them? Tim Brooke, founding chair of Emmaus Coventry and Warwickshire, will be joining us. Tim spent more than ten years experiencing what it is like to live in different sorts of community - not to mention going to Israel to see what one could learn from kibbutzim and visiting a number of religious communities in this country and abroad – as well as his more recent involvement in community building.

Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> September: What makes a 'Good enough Organisation' - the 'producers', 'predators', 'wealth creators', 'asset strippers', public and private, churches, other religious groups and charities? What about explicitly 'Christian' or other faith-titled organisations, such as Christian Aid? What does Christian mean in this context? Do we want to develop interfaith organisations?

Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> October: Interfaith initiatives for the future? What might they look like? How could they best evolve? What place, if any, would there be for agnostics, atheists and people of no faith?

Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> November: Looking back to look forward: a review of 2012 for us personally and for PCN locally and nationally.

varieties, Bahá'í, Quakers, Unitarians, an occasional Buddhist, plenty of questioners and seekers, some 'alumnae', in Spong-speak.

Under the guidance of Tim Baynes, one of four trustees of Kendal Ecumenical Group, a recent meeting produced the following summary for Progressive Voices.

### **The Bible Then and Now**

If our local group told you that we got all excited when we discovered *Post Critical Naivety* you would perhaps be mystified. But that is probably the most significant outcome

of our long series of discussion sessions extending over those eight years.

We are very much aware that traditional churches are ageing and even dying. Following much study of Borg, Crossan, Spong and others, we have been struggling to explore what 'faith' and 'church' might look like in the future. For the benefit of the local community, every year KEG has invited to Kendal a modern theologian or Biblical scholar to address larger audiences drawn mainly from our local area. In our small discussion group we have used books, CDs and DVDs to good effect. In the process have grown able freely and openly to share our personal experiences. We encourage and support other such groups.

Inevitably one major area we discuss is how to treat the Bible. We studied a chart showing eight possible stages through which the present form of the New Testament has come down to us. The first four stages are: What Jesus said; What people understood or remembered Jesus had said; Stories circulating about Jesus, perhaps filled out to emphasise what an extraordinary character Jesus was and the impact he had on people; and, between 60 and 90 AD the writers of the first three gospels wrote in Greek from oral accounts and from Aramaic texts, choosing material with a particular purpose in mind for the audience they wanted to inform. Some of us were surprised to learn that these were not written until between 30 and 60 years after Jesus lived.

Before getting to *Post Critical Naivety* there is continuing *Pre Critical Naivety*.

To take a prime example, the Christmas story, which is the basis of all those Nativity Plays that children love to perform, is also the way that congregations, on the whole, approach the Christmas story and the first three Gospels. The books of the Bible have long been treated as factual history and are commonly accepted as such.

## Religion and public prayers

by Nigel Jones



*Nigel Jones is a recently retired Mathematics teacher. Since 2002, he has been an accredited Methodist Local Preacher in the Newcastle under Lyme (now North Staffordshire) Circuit and since then also a local Liberal Democrat Councillor on the Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council.*

Earlier in the year there was a controversial decision made by a judge in the West Country ruling that prayers should not be part of council meetings. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government disagreed, saying he would change the law. He soon issued a statement encouraging councils to carry on with prayers. It has since been clear that councils can begin meetings with prayer, so long as it is not part of the formal agenda, hence allowing some to wait until prayers are finished before entering the meeting. Where I am a local councillor, we have prayers at the start of every council meeting and I have never been completely happy with this, due to the presence of people who do not

Drawing on the work of recent biblical scholars, who have built on the work of others going back 150 or more years, we have been encouraged to look at the inner meaning of the elements of the story. The process comes under the general name of Biblical Criticism, which is where we get onto *Post Critical Naivety*. For example; Why did Matthew and Luke put in those long lists of the ancestors of Jesus? Because they wanted to convey how important he was. Matthew goes back to Abraham while Luke goes right back to Adam. They somehow overlooked the awkward fact that they were also claiming he was born of a virgin, and so the patriarchal line was fundamentally broken.

Was someone writing down the words of the mother of Jesus when she spoke what we call the Magnificat? No. Jewish people of the time would immediately have recognised that Luke was quoting the words of Hannah from 1 Samuel Chapter 2. 'Threatened by Herod' shows that there is a fundamental conflict between the powers of this world and Jesus. 'Born in Bethlehem' was to emphasise that there was a link with King David. 'Laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn' was to demonstrate that this great man was not born in a grand palace but born in poverty. 'Angels', for the people of the first century, would point to the fact this person was directly linked to heaven and to God. 'Shepherds' shows that ordinary people are attracted to Jesus. 'The wise men' show his message is for important people as well. 'The flight into Egypt', that he was a refugee and therefore can identify with modern refugees. And so on.

There is no doubt that Jesus lived. However we have accepted the conclusion that the Gospel writers were not writing history but were building up a portrait of Jesus in such a way as to enable people to grasp just how remarkable and radical a person he was. But how to convey that to an apathetic world?

subscribe to the religious language used. However, I do feel that prayer is a good way to start the meetings, if only the words used could be more inclusive and less religiously exclusive.

Letters and articles in our local newspaper have shown once again that many people misunderstand what prayer is all about. A local atheist wrote a feature article and he played on the fact that Stoke City Council has been constantly criticised for not doing much good for the people it is supposed to serve. He said Stoke City Council has prayers at each full council meeting and yet (jokingly) cosmic interference prevents them having the good effect intended. Thus he displayed the common misunderstanding that prayer is about asking God to do what we want and then expecting it to happen.

True prayer must come from the 'heart', accompanied by the right attitude and actions; words alone are not enough and in any case the words need not be in a religious form. That is one reason why Quakers worship in silence. It is also good reason in some public contexts for having a form

of words which can be acceptable to everyone present whatever their religion or none.

The essence of prayer is a time out of the busyness of life to quietly contemplate what one's activity should be all about, to remember that it does not just depend on yourself or your own group and that there is a spiritual dimension to the activity, whatever you think that means. Furthermore, if care for others and service to the community are at the heart of one's prayer then it is good for everyone, even if words such as God or Christ are not even mentioned. Yet there is more to be said regarding the essentials of prayer.

Thus, true prayer is an expression of how we feel and can bring great comfort. It can express sadness, happiness, confusion or whatever is the form of words relevant to the occasion, without using traditional language of thanks or invocation to a being called God. But if our feelings are completely self centred then of course we have no right to expect our own way to happen as a result of our words, particularly if it is harmful to others. Thus, when sportspeople try to invoke spiritual aid to help them win, that means they are asking that others loose. On the other hand a statement that says we wish decisions for the good

## A letter to the editor *(but for all readers plainly Ed)*

Dear Hugh

I have just been enjoying the March newsletter and write to thank you for the many articles which help me in my questioning of the traditional Credal faith. I believe that one can go further and would, so I comment as follows.

The word 'God' is a naming noun, and we therefore are inclined to suppose that 'God' must be a person or exist in the sense that other things exist to which we give a name. NLP makes a useful distinction between words one can put in a wheelbarrow and words that one can not. 'God', like justice and beauty, clearly belongs in the latter category and is indeed described by Karen Armstrong as a "construct of the human imagination". Such a concept can hardly be the progenitor of a physical human being, as it does not exist outside our individual and shared experience. Jesus can only have been a man of his time, and this shows clearly in the way he expressed himself. Geza Vermes has demonstrated that, just as 'son of man' is a circumlocution for 'I', so the term 'Son of God' was applied to any holy man through whom the nature of God was made manifest: I agree with Edward Hulme who says that Jesus was exceptional in this respect, an idea I first heard from Professor Roger Haight.

The idea of action and reward, of crime and punishment, was, and still is, prevalent. The doctrines of sin and redemption were an attempt to rationalise these ideas in a way which gives people hope - or perhaps enables the priestly caste to control their flocks. I have long felt that Christianity has become obsessed with sin in an unhealthy way. Jesus upset the priestly hierarchy and was put to death like the prophets before him: the physical torture of crucifixion is enough to justify his use on the Cross of Psalm 22 without importing the weight of the sins of the world.

of the people to win over those who are only concerned for their own advantage, that could be said to be true prayer.

True prayer also involves honest reflection on the good and bad in our own lives or that of the group or groups present at the meeting; indeed a reminder of the good and bad of the entire council is apt. If this is done in the right way, this can have tremendously good psychological consequences for individuals, for the organised group and hopefully for the communities they serve. This is a reference to confession, which I think can happen without even mentioning the religious word 'sin'.

Christianity preaches love for neighbour and all the main religions have equivalent statements that if taken more seriously in all practical affairs, both public and private, this would not only enhance people's personal lives, but also enhance our communities, our society and our political affairs. So we should be seeking to have at the centre of our council and government affairs a religionless form of prayer; true to the traditions of faith but using words that are inclusive to all who have a caring attitude to others, a sense of ambitious hope for what can be achieved, together with an awareness of our faults and limitations.

It is encouraging to see that there are Muslims who face the same sort of problems as we do and feel as isolated. In such conversations as I have had with Muslims, I get the impression of fundamentalist and conservative faith which allows no room for questioning and uncertainty. Any suggestion that authority is relative is immediately assumed to establish the authority of relativism, whereas all it means is that we still have to work out our choices for ourselves.

With regard to Non-Violence, I would like to draw the attention of the group to Marshall Rosenberg's 'Non-Violent Communication', from which I have learned most about being kind to myself and to my neighbour, because he provides a technology, a process, for thinking non-violently. Essentially, we have to learn to stop judging: as Jesus said: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged'. I never understood what this meant until I read NVC. It's a short book, some 200 pages, with stories and tests, easy to read, but a lifetime's study in practice.

I have not read John Crossan's book, but from the review it appears to me that he does not give adequate weight to the fact that The Lord's Prayer is based on Jewish cosmology of a heaven above and earth below. In his book 'Where on Earth is Heaven?', Jonathan Stedall concludes with the words of Angelus Silesius: 'Stop, whither are you running? Heaven is in you; if you seek God elsewhere you will forever miss Him.' To make sense in the 21st century, now that we see heaven on earth and the Eternal in the NOW, we need to rewrite the prayer in terms which recognise our very different cosmology and our contemporary science. I have tried to do this and would be happy to pass on my attempt to anyone interested.

I could go on, but perhaps I have written enough by way of a heartfelt 'thank you'.

With all good wishes  
Michael Hell

## Morphic Fields and the works of Christ *Continued from page 4*

more possible for all to rise beyond the ego and have this mystical experience of connection with the compassionate consciousness of God. In his life and death, Jesus modeled this way of being and thus, if Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance is correct, made it easier for us all to live in the same way, as the morphic field of humanity was altered to enable this new way for us all. Jesus thus established a breakthrough in consciousness and potential for all humanity. It was not his death that accomplished it, but his life. You could say he didn't die for our sins, he lived for them! His life enables us to be *brought* back, not *bought* back, into the awakened awareness that we are a part of

## Book reviews

### Leaving Alexandria by Richard Holloway

Canongate 2012. ISBN 978-0857860736. Hb. 368 pp. £17.99 (£10.79 on Amazon, Kindle £9.59)

#### Reviewed by Rhian Taylor

I loved this book; the autobiography of Richard Holloway, a lifelong clergyman, who ended his career as the Bishop of Edinburgh, resigning in 2000. He is also a theologian and writer. For many, however, he is a figure of controversy.

The first thing to say is that this is a well written autobiography. So many autobiographies involve the author insistent on chronologically detailing their lives. This is an autobiography written by someone who can really write, who pulls out the key periods and symbols of his life and uses these to find meaning in his experience.

It is also a candid book. There is a vulnerability here which must have been costly for him, yet it is this ruthless analysis of the motivations of the different phases of his Christian journey that proves so illuminating. He tells us of his boyhood attraction to the mysteries offered by the church and the hints of another life, creating a needed distraction from some of the challenges of his working class childhood. He describes his move to Kelham, a monastic boarding school for priests and monks in training. He was attracted to the romance of monasticism and the level of self-sacrifice where 'nothing counts but lifetimes'.

He explores his life as a clergyman where he reflects on the different phases of his churchmanship: a phase of certainty where he describes his attempts to the name 'the absence' at the heart of Christianity; the period where he enjoyed the release and joy of the charismatic movement; and his on-going commitment to social justice and work with those on the margins of society. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly is his examination of the period when he was Bishop of Edinburgh. His refusal to be silenced when it came to his critique on the church. In particular, his condemnation of homophobia and his support for women's ordination made him increasingly unpopular with the establishment of the church. He admits he lacked the 'gene of carefulness' when it came to church politics, but it is also a narrative of someone with huge integrity.

Woven within this compelling story are his theological reflections and, in my view, they are really worth reading. In his chapter on sexuality he laments the repressive attitude which haunted teenage years and early adulthood and suggests an approach where we say to our young people "we know you are going to be enthralled by the mystery of

the immense consciousness of God. His death was the consequence of his life of surrender and kenosis. Our spiritual journey is then to follow the transformative path that he blazed and enabled for us.

So the idea of morphic resonance can give us a radical new insight into the atonement, based in scientific theory. It also gives us a further insight - other great teachers and masters both within Christianity and other religions will have contributed their parts to the change in the morphic field of humanity as well, so the Buddha, and other teachers take their place in the picture.

sexuality, which is hardly surprising since it is the energy of life itself....Try to think of its potential consequences Recognise that sex has the potential to hurt and devastate, as well as the capacity to thrill". What a relief to read advice on sexuality from the church that I actually want to pass on to my children.

Whilst his position in the church ends at the liberal end of the theological spectrum, he is not unrealistic that this too has its constraints. He acknowledges that the liberal tradition has not been good at 'gathering people' into the church. Its very lack of certainty can mean people miss the 'imperative to act'. Yet his most strident critique is levelled at ends of the church where certainty is celebrated. On issues of homosexuality and women's ordination he sees a moral imperative to act, to admit the church has got it wrong, that it can learn from secular society. Ultimately he observes that the biblical moralists of the evangelical tradition are not willing to negotiate; they are not willing to change their positions whatever rational arguments are put in front of them. Perhaps it is this dynamic which makes dialogue and change so difficult within the Church of England.

So what is left when you abandon certain beliefs? Doubt? Certainly but if, as he states, the opposite of faith is not doubt it is certainty, then this is a book of much faith. It is a book that hints that there might be glimpses of meaning in the sorrows of life; that Christianity finds its home and consequence there.

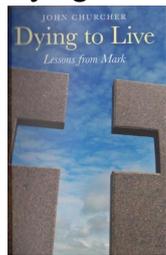
'Maybe religion was best understood not as a science that explained why there was suffering but as a way of gathering people round the mystery of suffering itself and sitting with them before it.' I think C.S. Lewis is right when he says we read to know we are not alone. For me this was a book that gave voice to questions and thoughts very significant to my own experience and understanding. His last chapter contains the following reflection:

'I am tugged still by the possibility of the transcendent. But only whispers and tugs; nothing louder or more violent. Religion's insecurity makes it shout not whisper, strike with the fist in the face, not tug gently with the fingers on the sleeve. Yet, beneath the shouting and the striking, the whisper can sometimes be heard. And from a great way off

the tiny figure of Jesus can be seen on the seashore, kindling

a fire.

## Dying to Live: Lessons from Mark by John Churcher



Circle Books 2012 ISBN 978-1846947155. Pp. 240 pp. £12.99 (£9.09 on Amazon, Kindle £6.58)

### Reviewed by Liz Terry

This book is the follow-up to John Churcher's successful 2009 book on the life of Jesus, *Setting Jesus Free*. As he makes several references to it, it may be helpful to read that first, but this book is also fine to read on its own.

I think it would be fair to say that many books on theology, which are supposedly written for the average lay-person to read, can be somewhat impenetrable. Theologians, as with anyone who specialises in a particular academic discipline, often use language which seems simple and easy to understand to them, but is incomprehensible to the rest of us! Luckily, John Churcher does not fall into this trap. This book is extremely readable and often quite funny.

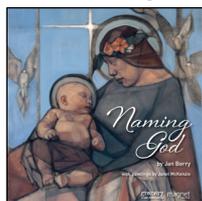
The book's premise is a detailed exploration of the Gospel according to St Mark, from a progressive Christian standpoint. As a progressive Christian, none of what he says is exactly new to me, but he does have a way of clarifying things I have privately thought or believed for years which has made the book feel like a conversation with a learned friend.

Mark's gospel is believed to have been the first of the four, written only a few decades after Christ's death, and a major source for all three of the other gospels, some of which plagiarise him blatantly. John Churcher believes that this means his is the first gospel where you can really see the beginnings of the Christian theology which has been handed down to us today. Unfortunately, the way in which it was written and the "Chinese whispers" effect mean that, in his view, we are not reading the gospels as they were meant to be read. His detailed breaking-down of each chapter of Mark's gospel makes fascinating reading, particularly when

## Naming God by Jan Berry, with paintings by Janet McKenzie

Granary. The URC 86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT. ISBN 978-0-85346-286-6 Pb £14.99

### Reviewed by Jill Sandham



Earlier this year, I was very pleased to meet Jan Berry, whose prayers I had regularly used for many years in public worship for intercession and litany. I participated in the worship she guided through the conference, and enjoyed her use of word, touch and visual

symbols as complementary avenues into prayer and reflection.

The title *Naming God* aptly embraces the theme of this book, her first publication, as well as reflecting Jan's own ongoing exploration of imagery which pushes the margins of what we understand by 'God'. God is invoked as mother, companion, lover, storyteller, dreamer – all of which may be familiar to many of us progressives, but radical and alien thinking in Christian communities still focused on 'Almighty – male – God'. Jan emphasises sharing the journey of faith with companions who shape and inspire our experience of prayer and spirituality – music to the ears of one who thinks that the Christian path can only be trodden in community.

he compares different versions of the same story across the four gospels. It soon becomes clear which sections are "logos" (i.e. faithful recording of the facts of what happened) and which are "mythos" (i.e. stories or embellished narrative designed to teach Christian theology several decades after the death of Jesus).

One criticism I would have of this book is that the chatty writing style can sometimes come across as patronising. There is large section using the analogy of a theatre, during the analysis of the events leading up to Jesus' arrest, which grates a little after a while. I can see the point of it (helping us to realise how the narrative has been enhanced for dramatic effect), but I feel he labours it a little too much, going into details of lighting and staging that are not really necessary. I would also say that the sections where he expounds on his own views about social justice and the ills of the world, although interesting in their own right, don't always fit with the overall theme of the book, and can seem to take the reader off on unnecessary tangents.

However, John Churcher is careful throughout the text to be sure that we understand that this is simply his interpretation, albeit bolstered by the interpretation of eminent theological scholars such as Jack Spong and Marcus Borg. This leaves the reader free to make their own interpretation in their turn, which I think is the basis of what progressive theology should be about.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, and I'm sure many others, whether they are progressive Christians or traditionalists looking for a new way to experience the gospels, will too.

In naming God as female, she challenges readings of God told from a male perspective, and leads us to reconsider our assumptions in the retelling the stories of women in the bible from a feminist theological standpoint. She prays and reflects on stuff of the body – sex, intimacy, sickness all as things of God. There is a chapter of seasons which gives quick access through the Christian year. There is a new and contemporary understanding of stations of the cross through the town – using, for instance, the local supermarket as one such station. In her section on occasions, you can delve for gems such as liturgies for retirement, anniversaries, renaming, moving in. And there are plenty of resources for the eucharist – gathering, confessing, intercessing, blessing, including, creating and sharing. And to conclude, some hymns – welcome new and refreshing words to familiar tunes, which will not alienate change-resistant congregations!

Many of the prayers and hymns have been previously published elsewhere. But her book brings together and orders rich resources in a way easily accessible for public worship. The paintings which accompany the text by artist Janet McKenzie are themselves icons for reflection.

Here is a rich resource for those of us who, as progressive Christians, seek to understand the meaning of prayer,

### Answering That Of God – discovering Spirit within by Peter Parr

The Kindlers UK( 2012) paper. 44pp. ISBN 978-0-9562245-3-8. £3.00

#### Reviewed by Adrian Alker

There will be many members of PCN Britain (including this reviewer) who, if not themselves members of the Religious Society of Friends, have great respect for the Quakers and their religious life. Peter Parr, the author of this booklet, says that he discovered Quakers in 2005, after finding the doctrinal approaches of other churches unable to speak to his condition. In this fourth booklet in a series published by 'The Kindlers' project of the NW London Area meeting, Peter offers an exploration over seven sections around that central assertion of the Friends, that in each person can be found 'that of God'.

This book is less a theological study and more a set of guided reflections to enable the reader to meditate more deeply on the spiritual values which lie behind the Quaker witness to Truth, Equality, Simplicity, and Peace. It is written out of Quakerism and for Quakers but its gentle style, written by a person who is authentically attempting to live by these religious tenets, would be attractive to any individual or group wishing to reflect upon its message. In the opening section, Who We Are, I am reminded of the more elaborate writings of Marcus Borg over our understanding of God – the God who is I AM, the 'Isness' of life, that very 'Ground of Being' explored decades ago by Tillich.

The radical equality which this invites, all human beings bearing this imprint of the divine, means for the author that even the Hitlers of this world have within them that divine essence, albeit often overruled by our ego. I would have

#### Take note

Two more senior members of PCN have each produced interesting self-published booklets which are well worth exploring. Graham Helier's *Discover the Bible: a waymarked trail* is precisely that – and in just 24 pages. Described as being for 'those visiting the bible for the first time – and for those who wish to know more', it amply fulfils that purpose. So many introductions to the bible are out to plug a prescriptive line. This one genuinely encourages open-mindedness and free thought. It costs just £1.50 (p&p included) and is available from Graham at Monmouth End, Marden, Hereford. HR1 3EZ.

### Beyond our wildest imaginings – making real the love of God

Chris Avis writes: If you missed the Free to



Believe conference in March at which Bishop Gene Robinson was the speaker, you can still catch up on what was said. As usual, a set of four

especially if we are facilitators of prayer on behalf of others, whether in public worship or in PCN local groups

valued rather more reflection about the propensity towards evil in the hearts of many of our earthly brothers and sisters!

Peter calls upon his readers to live lives of greater simplicity and this rings many bells in an age of conspicuous consumption, a predilection for 'growth' and an alarming global carbon footprint. I liked a number of quotations in the book, such as that from the mouth of Howard Thurman, the philosopher and civil rights leader: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive".

That pretty well sums up what the author is saying. He is attempting to cultivate in his own life a discipline of attentiveness to the God within, through meditation and silence, through a respect for others, through a peaceful attitude of mind and a simplicity of life style.

Those of us in other church traditions might equally value a whole stream of writings of Christian mystics from Meister Eckhart to Thomas Merton but would at the same time agree with Parr's reference to the Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly who wrote "too many well-intentioned people are so preoccupied with the clatter of effort to do something for God that they don't hear Him asking that he might do something through them."

If you need to get away from the clatter of organised religion and be refreshed in your spiritual searching, you will find this modest offering from Peter Parr worth reading

Ian Gregory's *In Simple Trust: Positive Faith for the hurt and the bewildered* is bigger (74 pages) and more expensive (£8, p&p incl), but very definitely a 'must have'. A series of reflections on faith experience and life experience, blend Ian's own thoughts and writings with those of others (Bing Crosby, Isaac Watts, Tom Jones and Helen Kellar among them, with humour – what would Solomon have given for Viagra? - into gentle meditations on fear, illness and old age. From Ian at 16 Grice Road, Harthill, Stoke-on-Trent. ST4 7PJ.

audio CD recordings of the conference are now available, PLUS A BONUS DVD providing a 45 min taste of the atmosphere and content of the occasion. All this for just £12 including postage from Chris Avis, 37 Clifton Road, Exeter EX1 2BN (please make cheques payable to C. Avis) or use Paypal for direct payment to [chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk). (The photo shows Bishop Gene with the Rev Dr David Peel and the Rev Elizabeth Gray-King, artist in residence).