

Progressive Christianity Network – Britain



March 2007

Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

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Progressive Christians and climate change



Adrian Alker, vicar of St Mark's in Sheffield, secretary of the Centre for Radical Christianity there, and a member of the PCN committee, offers a progressive Christian take on what is fast becoming the principal concern of our time.

Many people, maybe the majority, now see the central importance of climate change as THE political, scientific and humanitarian challenge of our day. Only a few years ago people of different faiths and no religious faith were bound together in the campaign to rid the poorest countries of the world of their debt. That Jubilee imperative to cancel debt and the more recent coalition of organisations to Make Poverty History impacted on public opinion in a significant way. The general public saw a unity of mind and heart amongst folk of all backgrounds and ideologies. Two hundred years ago another movement in which the Church and political life came together was of course in the bringing forward by Wilberforce of legislation to end slavery.

The scientific evidence for climate change and its effects on our planet has been steadily convincing hearts and minds that action must be taken to cut down our carbon emissions and reduce global warming. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) produced its

latest findings in February of this year. This panel is 90 percent certain that human-generated greenhouse gases account for most of the global rise in temperatures over the past half-century. Moreover they said there is an overwhelming probability that human activities are warming the planet at a dangerous rate, with consequences that could soon take decades or centuries to reverse.

In February I had the privilege of being invited to a conference at the University of Sheffield at which the chief speaker was Al Gore, former vice president of the USA. Gore has spent much of his political life campaigning on climate change and his film *An Inconvenient Truth* is a MUST SEE. When asked about the difficulties which climate change action faces in the political sphere (not least in the USA) Al Gore responded that the only way forward was to insist that this issue was a **moral issue**. And that is the key starting point surely for us all.

Most of us remember the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa, another great moral issue of our time. In 1985 a group of theologians in South Africa produced 'The Kairos Document'. It began:

The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived. South Africa has been plunged into a crisis that is shaking the foundations and there is every indication that the crisis has only just begun and that it will deepen and become even more threatening in the months to come.

It is the KAIROS or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the Church and all other faiths and religions.

The issue of climate change for us is even more pressing and it is for the whole planet. This is our **kairos**.

Archbishop Rowan Williams speaking on Climate Change on 28th March 2006 said: "The Bible and the Christian tradition suggest that those who have that challenge put before them, and not only that challenge but the evidence for it, and don't respond, bear a very heavy responsibility before God."

For progressive Christians this issue is of vital importance. Why?

Firstly as Rowan Williams points out our Christian faith impels us to be good stewards of this planet. The Hebrew – Christian scriptures affirm the goodness of creation and our calling to build the kingdom on this earth. Progressive Christianity refuses to see a stark dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, the earthly and the heavenly. Our incarnational faith and our understanding of the teachings and actions of the Jesus of history compel us to be immersed in all the messiness, challenges and glory of our life together on this earth.

Secondly this faith we share calls upon us to love our neighbours as ourselves, thus revealing the compassion of God as shown in Jesus. Our neighbours are the millions on the planet in danger of drought, flooding and loss of homes and livelihoods if global warming is to continue the present trend. God has no favourites. We cannot bury our heads in the sand. We are all in this together.

Thirdly this is a call for justice. Climate change will affect the poorest on the earth who have not the means to defend themselves in the ways in which the richer countries of the north will do, at least for a while. As with the debt campaign, this is a matter of justice. It is a call for a change of lifestyle, of priorities, a call which enjoins us to look critically at our consumerist society, its goods and its goals.

Progressive Christians are most likely to embrace working with people of other and no faith. For we do not claim a superiority over others in our religious

convictions. Indeed we say that we see find more grace in the search for understanding than in dogmatic certainty. We claim that it is important to form ourselves into communities to strive for justice and to restore the integrity of all God's creation.

I believe that this issue of climate change can give us the opportunity in small groups to work with others. This in itself might give progressive Christianity a marker on the landscape of thought and religious praxis. But where do you start? At St Marks in Sheffield we have hammered out a 5 session course. The course looks at:

- The global picture and the implications for us, both as citizens of a wealthy and heavily polluting country and as members of humankind who have a God-given responsibility for the *whole* of God's world.
- What we ourselves contribute to global warming; how we can reduce it; what Christian imperatives we need to consider; and how we should take a hard look at the political implications.
- How do we share out the total CO₂ emissions that can be allowed in a way which is practical, effective and just? We will have to look at the unpopular but vital issue of rationing.
- What is life going to be like in a low carbon society? It will be different but it need not be worse and it could be better—perhaps more co-operative, more local and slower. (Luke 8 v15)

The test of the course will be to discern what steps you need to take now personally, corporately and politically.

You would be welcome to access the course, either via the church website (www.stmarkssheffield.co.uk) or email me at adrian@stmarkssheffield.co.uk

Finally as Christians we have the gift of hope to offer to each other and to our world. Let's be enthusiastic about this gift we share!

Adrian Alker

Have you renewed your membership for 2007?



This issue of the newsletter carries details of a whole range of events – conferences, speaker meetings and a weekend too being organised by the network and its partners this year. Jill Sandham, the network

secretary, offers a timely reminder to make sure your subscription is up to date!

If you find an affiliation form enclosed with this newsletter, then you have not yet renewed your membership for this year – and this will be your last

newsletter! The affiliation fee has been held at the same rate as last year.

We are doing well – already well over half of last year's membership has rejoined, and that's without any reminder.

So if you have yet to do so, then please send your completed form, with cheque or commitment to Standing Order, to Olivia McLennan, Administrator, at St Faith's Vicarage, 62 Red Post Hill, London SE24 9JQ, as soon as possible. Thank you.

Jill Sandham

Lent, judgement and justice – a reflection

I spent much of Ash Wednesday this year in a court – an immigration tribunal to be precise in a dire building in North London – supporting someone who was appealing against the Home Office's decision to deport her from Britain. Quickly caught up in what was happening there, and concerned for her and her partner (people I got to know through my work as a parish priest, but who have become friends in the process) the day's religious chores of burning palm crosses so as to make ashes and writing a homily for the evening service seemed at the start of the day to belong to another universe.

Yet it did not take long, sitting there watching and listening to the court's proceedings, to realise that what was going on had a lot of connections with the themes of Ash Wednesday and of Lent, the season of this newsletter's appearance.

For what we were witnessing there were processes of justice and judgement. What was just for the person at the centre of it, represented by their solicitor, supported by people like me? What was just for the government, represented by the Home Office? (Though it seems indicative of the current workings of the Home Office that in the end their officer didn't turn up for

the hearing.) And what judgement was the person presiding over the court – unwigged and ungowned, but still quite unmistakably a judge – going to make on it?

And on what basis? Well only one, of course – the law. Which led to what was for me at least an extraordinary two-tone and two language aspect to the whole occasion. One moment we were exposed to the most intimate details of people's lives: their feelings (what are your feelings this morning was the first question to the person appealing and to their partner); their mental and physical health; what might happen to either or both of them if the one was expelled; what might happen to the children involved. And then the next minute, judge and solicitor were discussing in very specialist legal terms – article 3, article 9; and legal manner – your submission what then is – how these related to the situation in the country the person was to be deported back to and, most of the time, to the human rights act. None of this was done unkindly or uncaringly – yet it still felt strange, disturbing and, after all the intimacy, very cool and detached.

Lent too speaks of justice and judgement. And the Christian faith – like other faiths – has sometimes seemed

much better at being judgmental than merciful; and itself much concerned with law. 'Against you only have I sinned,' says the psalmist, 'and done what is evil in your sight; so that you are justified in your sentence and righteous in your judgement; I have been wicked even from my birth, a sinner when my mother conceived me.'

The gospel passage we read at our service in the evening was that story in chapter 8 of John's gospel about the 'woman who had been caught in adultery'. (A passage bracketed in many modern translations, its location in John being unclear.) In the story it is, of course, the scribes and Pharisees who by implication want to condemn her. "Making her stand before all the people, they said to Jesus, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women.'" But Christians are also quite capable, even now, of casting a well-aimed stone; and can fall back on law as justification for that.

Yet Jesus, in the story, will not be drawn on the issue of law. After some time simply bending down and writing with his finger on the ground, his response eventually to the question of what should be done is not to pass judgement on the accused, but to speak instead to the accusers. Not doing that so as to condemn them either, or their way of condemnation, but simply to say 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be

the first to throw a stone at her.' In theory any one of them could have done that. In reality not one of them did. The self-awareness he asks of them disarms conceit.

In the not so distant Christian past Lent did sometimes feel, if you were minded to treat it seriously, like an occasion to throw stones at ourselves. There has been at times a masochistic element to this season of the church's year which has wounded and hurt people, rather than healed them. Law has seemed to allow little space for love – which is perhaps part of what I was struggling with in that court. On the surface it might not look the most 'progressive' of Christian observances.

But at its best, properly, Lent could be seen as inviting us to unbutton ourselves to ourselves. To open up rather than clam up – whether alone or with someone alongside of us (which is what a spiritual director can do).

To open ourselves and expose ourselves to the deepest emotions and fears in ourselves, as I and the others who were in that court on Ash Wednesday (friends, lawyer, judge) were exposed to the intimacies of those two people's lives. And doing that, then to love ourselves in the honesty of that self-exposure; as I certainly found myself loving them that day. Done properly, that is not cheap, and it is certainly not easy. But it can be deeply healing. For it is to see ourselves through the eyes of God.

Hugh Dawes

Saving Jesus – very well worth doing!



Many local PCN groups, and a growing number of churches with progressive members pushing for it, have been using and benefiting from the Living the Questions

course. Here John Churcher, a member of the Network's management committee and a Methodist minister in Welwyn, praises the latest production from the LtQ team.

To quote David Mellor, "If you liked that you will like this"! 'Saving Jesus' [DVD set] is a follow on from the successful DVD 'Living the Questions',

written and produced by Jeff Proctor-Murphy and David Felden of the United Methodist Church in USA. Although identifying 'stars' in a DVD series is subjective, when following 'Living the Questions' most participants at the Methodist Church [Ludwick Way] in Welwyn Garden City identified Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong, Nancy Ammerman and John Dominic Crossan as the outstanding contributors. However, from time to time the message was adversely impacted upon by wobbling hand held camera shots, an odd cactus apparently growing out

of the head of a speaker, and an over flying aircraft drowning out the speaker. For some who attended the 13-week course, a number of the speakers were far too strident in their condemnation of Christians who maintain the traditional teachings of the Creeds and doctrines of mainline churches.

These criticisms have been addressed in 'Saving Jesus', but sadly replaced by other production problems. Not only are there further occasional handheld camera problems, but some superb interviews are marred by constantly switching camera shots from colour to monochrome. A few clips from 'Living the Questions' seem to appear again in 'Saving Jesus', and at one point an incorrect name is captioned against a speaker.

This is all by the way. The content of 'Saving Jesus' is excellent and challenging. Although Borg and Spong have lesser inputs, they nevertheless have much to say that is stimulating. Once more, when using this follow-up series, the star is John Dominic Crossan, especially when he is talking about the nature of the Roman world into which Jesus was born. Crossan clearly demonstrates that the early followers of Jesus were asked to choose between Caesar, who was called 'Lord and Saviour', and Jesus to whom these titles came to be applied. Additionally, Matthew Fox makes a major contribution when exploring the 'real' Jesus. Amy-Jill Levine and Helen Prejean also make gentle but important contributions. Other familiar names from 'Living the Questions' also return, including John Cobb, Lloyd Gearing, Stephen Patterson, Tex Sample and Emilie Townes. New speakers who make very interesting and thought-provoking contributions include Walter Brueggemann, Hans Kung, and the pick

of the 'lesser players', Bernard Brandon Scott.



The chapter titles show the direction of the series: "Jesus through the ages"; "Who was Jesus?"; "Jesus' Birth - Incarnation"; "Teachings of Jesus: Wisdom Traditions"; "Jesus' Program: The Kingdom of God"; "Jesus' Ministry of Compassion"; "Killing Jesus: Who Killed Jesus?"; "Killing Jesus: the Atonement"; "The Resurrection of Christ"; "Why Jesus is worth Saving". Here we have an excellent discussion resource, dealing with Jesus as a unique man of wisdom and compassion, so much so that in the fullness of his humanity people experienced the fullness of the Divine within. It continues to flesh out Spong's recurring theme that Jesus was different to us not in kind but in degree. It is also an excellent teaching resource for those for whom traditional Creeds and Doctrines are an increasingly foreign language.

'Saving Jesus' is less emotive than 'Living the Questions' and consequently more scholarly. 'Saving Jesus' is thoroughly researched, clearly delivered and well worth the purchase price of £190, including first class postage and protective packing. It can be obtained from Richard Titford, 2 Chestnut Mews, Friars' Street, SUDBURY, Suffolk CO10 2AH (Tel & Fax 01787 880303) Email: titford@keme.co.uk

John Churcher

Three pages of events for progressive believers in 2007 and 2008

A treat of events are being planned for the coming months by PCN Britain and by our sister body the Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield. All offer a special discounted price for both PCN and CRC members.

But you need to book promptly, especially for the Sheffield events.

Here we list first the PCN Conference in Leeds in May trailed in the last issue of the newsletter. Then Sheffield events this month, in November (John Dominic Crossan) and in April 2008 (Marcus Borg). There are booking forms for both venues inside this newsletter – don't delay. Finally we list venues, dates and timings for a tour by Jack Spong in October. He will be speaking in Malvern, Leeds, Edinburgh and London. Booking forms will be available soon from the PCN office and on the website, but you are encouraged to get in touch now so as to get one as soon as they appear. There's also advance notice of this year's PCN St Deiniol's Weekend – again in October.

How honest is your Christianity?

Saturday 12th May 2007. 11 am till 4 pm.

Chapel Allerton Methodist Church, Leeds.



How far do I have to adopt certain values and a strict moral code if I am to call myself a Christian? Do I have to hold particular tenets of faith? What about pressure from the worshipping

community that I attend (or not) to conform to patterns of worship or behaviour? Can I with integrity recite traditional creeds or sing hymns containing language and concepts I am uncomfortable with? Where and how can I be an honest Christian today, a follower of the 'way' (rather than of the 'answer'



that some Christians seem to have substituted for 'way')?

The speakers at the PCN conference to be held in Leeds from 11am till 4pm on

Saturday 12 May 2007 will address issues such as these concerned with the integrity of our Christianity. Elizabeth Templeton - a theologian, writer and speaker from Perthshire, and Ray Gaston - vicar of All Hallows, Leeds and 'community priest' will also answer questions put by conference attendees. The venue is Chapel Allerton Methodist Church, Leeds.

The cost is £15 per person, £12 for PCN members, £7.50 for unwaged, to include coffee/tea. Please bring your own lunch. (Booking form enclosed in this newsletter.)

Resourcing one another to share our faith in the inclusive God

Saturday 17th March 2007. 11.00 am — 2.30 pm

St Marks Church, Broomhill, Sheffield.

Speaker: Revd. Dr Steven Shakespeare on *The Paradox of the Inclusive Church*



St Marks Centre for Radical Christianity is delighted to offer PCN members and others the opportunity to come together for this special spring gathering.

Very often people ask about what resources are available to enable open minded Christians to speak of the inclusive God in a religious world which seems increasingly dogmatic and narrow minded. St Marks CRC has therefore great pleasure in inviting Steven Shakespeare to give an opening address

The cost is £5. (Booking form for this and other Sheffield events enclosed in this newsletter.)

Paul and the Justice of Equality with John Dominic Crossan

Saturday 10th November 2007. 10.00 am – 4.00 pm (and Friday 9th and Sunday 11th also – a weekend not to be missed!)
St Marks Church, Broomhill, Sheffield.



John Dominic Crossan is a co-founder of the Jesus Seminar and Professor Emeritus at De Paul University, Chicago. He is the bestselling author of many books, including *The Historical*

Jesus, Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography and *The Birth of Christianity*. In 2004 Dom Crossan and Jonathan Reed produced the groundbreaking book *In Search of Paul*. Using archaeological and textual evidence, the authors show that Paul was a faithful apostle who took Jesus' message of God's Kingdom as opposing Rome's empire out across the Mediterranean world.

Friday evening cost CRC/PCN members £5, others £8. Saturday Day Conference The cost for CRC/PCN members is £15, others £18, students £5 (20 places only). (Booking form for this and other Sheffield events enclosed in this newsletter.)

based around his excellent book *The Inclusive God*.

There follows a kind of market place when you will have the opportunity to view, handle, discuss a range of different resources which can enhance worship, group discussion, private study AND social action. View material such as *Living the Questions*, Jim Cotter's latest web based resources, speak with Janet Morley about her books and writing. There will be material from the Churches Regional Commission about social justice issues. And we will have a selection of books from publishers like John Hunt (O books).

The weekend will be devoted to this study of Paul and his message of a just and equal society.

On Friday November 9th at 7.30 pm there will be an opening lecture on *The World of Paul and Roman Imperial Theology*.

On Saturday 10th there will be three lectures on the Mission, Message and Legacy of Paul.

On Sunday 11th Dominic will preach at the 10am service at St Mark's.

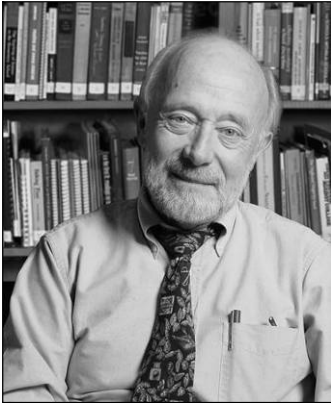
The Friday and Saturday lectures are separately costed and you may wish to come to either or both.

Since we anticipate a sell out for this weekend, we are offering CRC and PCN members the first opportunity to book before bookings are open to the general public. **Be sure to get your booking in before the end of March.**

Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary

with Marcus Borg

Saturday 12th April 2008. 10.00 am – 4.30 pm
St Marks Church, Broomhill, Sheffield.



Marcus J. Borg is Hundered Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University. His writings have given progressive thinking

Christians the tools to rebuild their Christian faith with integrity and relevance for the twenty first century. Borg brings a fresh understanding of

The cost for CRC/PCN members is £15, others £18. (Booking form for this and other Sheffield events enclosed in this newsletter.)

Jack Spong's British Tour. October 15th, 16th, 18th and 20th

Jesus for the non-religious



is the title of Jack Spong's latest book, just published by HarperCollins. In his most recent online column Bishop Spong has written about the birth of the book, and his desire in it

to present that "Jesus who, in the fullness of his humanity, opens for me a pathway into all that our human word God was created to reveal."

It promises to be a book many, many PCN members will want to read, and use in local groups. Your committee is very pleased to have been actively involved in the organising of Jack and Christine Spong's tour of Britain this autumn.

Jack will speak in four locations.

- **In Malvern**, on the evening of Monday 15th October.

Jesus, an intelligent reading afresh of the scriptures and an exciting journey into the mystery of God.

His latest book 'Jesus' was published last year.

Walter Wink writes: 'In every generation there is a handful of writers of whom it can be said, Read everything they write. Marcus Borg is one of these today'

Since we anticipate a sell out for this conference also, we are offering CRC/PCN members the first opportunity to book before bookings are open to the general public. **Be sure to get your booking in before the end of March.**

- **In Leeds** on the evening of Tuesday 16th October.
- **In Edinburgh** on the evening of Thursday 18th October.
- **And finally in London** for a day conference on Saturday 20th October. After that he will be going on to South Africa, having been in New Zealand before coming to Britain.

The meetings will provide a wonderful opportunity to hear the most recent thinking of one of the most skilled advocates of progressive faith understanding. Booking forms for the meetings will be available from the PCN Britain office soon. We expect there to be a strong desire for places. You can express your interest in advance either by writing to the PCN office (details on the back page) or by emailing info@pcnbritain.org.uk. Don't delay!

And finally – the St Deiniol's Weekend

This year the Network's weekend at St Deiniol's, Hawarden – always a very popular event in our calendar – will be from Friday October 26th to Sunday 28th. It will be led by Charles Hedley, the rector of St James's, Piccadilly and the

vice-chair of the Network, and will explore the theme of Spirituality and Progressiveness. More information will be available soon. To express an interest, email alan.powell@pcnbritain.org.uk, or write to him care of the PCN Office.

News from Local Groups, compiled by Alan Powell

Quite a lot of groups have not submitted news information for this issue. Maybe there has not been a lot to say. But this is an opportunity for people to share and swap information on what they are finding it helpful to read, watch, do practically or otherwise explore – and to give other members ideas about what they might be doing. So do please pick up your pens again.
Hugh Dawes

London – Central

The group is currently dormant, pending the appointment of a new co-ordinator.

London – Mill Hill

(Elaine Cobb – 020 8346 5502; elaine.cobb@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Mill Hill group continues to meet on a fortnightly basis. We have one new member, and are currently studying Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity*.

London – Herne Hill

(Jennifer Pearson – 020 7720 3240; jennifer.pearson@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group is presently studying the DVD series *Saving Jesus*. Each member is given a copy of the prepared notes and the DVD is interrupted at appropriate intervals for discussion. As a group we are being stimulated and stretched by this course and are encouraged by both the diversity and unity of our opinions.

London – Richmond

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

The group is currently discussing Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity*. The next meeting is on Saturday 3 March at 2.30 pm, when we shall be considering the chapters on Opening the Heart and Transforming the Heart.

Epsom

(Ruth Hayter – 01737 353275; ruth.hayter@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Maidenhead / Windsor

(Malcolm Stebles – 01628 630699; malcolm.stebles@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group is currently looking at some of the themes in John Dominic Crossan's book: *Jesus - A Revolutionary Biography*. The next meeting is on Wednesday 21 March when the topic will be - The search for meaning of a shocking death. The topic at a subsequent meeting on Wednesday 18 April will be - How we see Jesus "then" as Christ "now".

Mid-Herts

(John Churcher – 01707 390898; john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Mid-Herts group continues to meet on a [roughly!] monthly cycle. The 3 early meetings of 2007 are based on the *Saving Jesus* DVD series. January's meeting looked at John Dominic Crossan's "The world into which Jesus was born". The February meeting considered a contribution from Matthew Fox, "Who was Jesus?" The March meeting, to be held on Sunday 11th, will feature a discussion between Amy-Jill Levine and Helen Prejean on "Who killed Jesus?"

After Easter we cease to use the DVD and return to 'live' speakers! In May [13th] the speaker will be Rev Bob Forrest [retired Methodist minister now living in Somerset]. The June meeting (10th) will be introduced by John Paull, (the other John Paul!) "An open and inclusive church - what is it?". The first half of this year will be concluded on July 8th with a discussion of midrash, introduced by Lucia Hidveghyova from the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations. All meetings begin at 4.30 p.m. and are open to all.

Brighton

(Martin Preston – 01273 884177; martin.preston@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Hampshire & Isle of Wight

(Martin Godfrey – 02380 766312; martin.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Forthcoming meetings of the various sub-groups established with the Sea of Faith are shown below.

Alton:

Next meeting: Tuesday 20th February at 10.30 in Oakhanger. No fixed topic.

Freshwater:

Second Thursday evening of each month

Havant:

Next meeting: Thursday 22nd February at 2 pm. Topic: John Dominic Crossan, Lecture 3 of 4

Southampton Area: M27 Group:

Next meeting: Tuesday 27th February 10.30 am in North Baddesley. Topic: Jack Spong's 'The Sins of Scripture'

Southampton Area: Solent Coast Group:

Next meeting: Thursday 8th March 7.15pm in Barton-on-Sea. Topic: John Robinson's 'Truth is Two-Eyed' Part II. Leader David Bending

Southampton Area: Chandler's Ford to Winchester Group:

Next meeting: Sunday 11th March 7.30 pm in Chandlers Ford. Topic: 'Leaving' from Richard Holloway's 'Looking in the Distance'.

Southampton Area: Theology on Tap Group:

This new group will meet in the 'Cafe Boire' of 'The Gate' pub Burgess Road (adjacent to Southampton University) on Thursday evenings 15th, 22nd February, 1st, 8th March.

Newbury

(Eileen Crossley 0163 532857; eileennewbury@aol.com)

Devon – Exeter / Crediton

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

Liz writes: Looking back to Jim Adams visit on 12th November, I'm sure all who were among the 50 or so present would agree that it was an inspiring talk and a very worthwhile discussion. Jim has a disarmingly clear approach to the use of metaphor that I found a great relief. It seemed that he gave 'permission' – no, encouragement - to enjoy the imagery and metaphors of the great religious musical works and church liturgy without feeling a new kind of *progressive* guilt (is there no end to the guilt thing!) I much enjoyed his simple answer to my question about how we teach children: 'just tell the stories: don't explain'. This is something that I had realised when my children were young and those leading worship would attach a 'moral' to every story, but I had somehow lost sight of. This is a personal account – I

would like to hear others' reflections on Jim.

On Sunday 4th February we had a stimulating talk from our member George Garner on *Why Believe Anything? - Faith and belief in scientific thinking*. George was a pilot and later a physics and maths teacher and his journey of faith took him through atheism and conventional C of E to a desire for a rational faith which he has found support for in PCN. He took us on a journey from the Copernican universe with its music of the spheres, through the theory of Special Relativity and the deterministic universe to today's quantum physics, where uncertainty is a principle (if only at the smallest level).

George suggested that we should test our religious beliefs in the way that scientific hypotheses are tested - destructively - and be prepared to change them as new truth emerges. He suggested that it is reasonable to believe that there is a being sustaining the universe, which is not at base chaotic. A grossly simplified summary....

The discussion following was wide-ranging and thoughtful. One theme that arose was that of how do we know and what is 'knowing' - what value do we give to *gnosis*? Some people shared their experiences through meditation or other means, of feeling at one with something beyond themselves, and questioned the idea that all we experience is our own mediation of incoming information.

Two further general meetings are planned. Brian Turner, a local artist, will be talking about his biblical narrative paintings on Sunday 1st April; and on Sunday 3rd June, there will be a discussion on God and climate change, led by Martin Goss.

The Group has also started the *Living the Questions* DVD study course and sessions are planned for Sundays 18 March, 24th June and 15th July. A possible date in May will be notified soon.

All meetings take place 2.30 – 4.30 p.m. in URC Southernhay Hall, Southerhay, Exeter.

South Wales

(Sue O'Hare – 01446 735839; sue.ohare@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Gloucestershire

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

We completed the *Living the Questions* programme. It was valuable but had more material than we could follow up effectively when meeting only once a month. We did

return to one of the more provocative sessions - 9 - "Lives of Jesus" (which was also found by some to be disturbing when running the course in a local Methodist Circuit). We have moved on to discuss what factors we should take into account when we are facing difficult ethical questions - focussing on worrying population trends. Our 'book box' -book lending service - is increasingly used. The group is still growing.

Northants and North Bucks

(Monty Lynds - 01908 543206; monty.lynds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group, which varies in number between 8 and 14, meets on the second Thursday of each month and is currently discussing Richard Holloway's *Doubts & Loves* - a favourite book of one of the members. The next meeting is on Thursday 8 March.

Coventry & North Warwickshire

(Eric Johnson - 02476 303712; firsjohn@supanet.com)

Eric writes: About a dozen members and friends have continued to meet at approximately five to six week intervals during the last year, and dates have now been scheduled until the end of 2007. Recently, individual members have been sharing something of their faith journeys with the rest of the group and this has been the starting point for discussion. We meet now in Rugby, generally on a Thursday evening, in comfortable surroundings but there is room for more chairs!

West Midlands

(Anna Barnsley - 01902 701713; anna.Barnsley@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group, which has about 10 members, meets bimonthly and is currently discussing chapters in 'God at 2000'. The next meeting is on Tuesday 24th April at 29 Malvern Road, The Freelands, Bromsgrove B61 7HE (Tel.01527 873135)

Nottingham

(Claire Jenkins - 01159 783299; claire.jenkins@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Sheffield

(David Thorpe - 0114 2630710; david.thorpe@pcnbritain.org.uk)

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Manchester

(Clive Larsen - 0161 223 0692; clive.larsen@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The group, which started in October 2006 with the intention of meeting on a monthly basis, has now accelerated into a new dimension of fortnightly gatherings. The next gathering is on Wednesday 7th February at 7pm. Each evening begins with a simple meal, followed by the DVD and discussion.

The group meets at St Agnes Church Rectory, 551 Gorton Road, North Reddish, Stockport SK5 6NX

Bolton / Leigh

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

Jim writes: The group has 14 members at present - both sexes, Anglican, Methodist and URC denominations are represented. We meet next on Tuesday, 3rd April, 2007 at 10.00.am (until about 11.45.am) at 7, Redwaters, Leigh, WN7 1JD, when we will be looking at Section 5 "The Bible and Children" of Jack Spong's *The Sins of Scripture*. The following meeting date will be on Tuesday, 12th June.

If you are in the area and feel like joining us - just turn up on the day - or, if you prefer, let me know you hope to be there. The coffee's good (Fairtrade of course!) - and the discussion is (usually) lively. A comment from the newest member encourages us! "As a relatively new lay member to the group, I would like to like to say how reassuring it is to find so many professional clerics of a like mind."

Cumbria - Kendal

(John Hetherington - 01539 726181; john.hetherington@pcnbritain.org.uk)

On 20th February 2007, the group will take an introductory look at the recently purchased *Living the Questions* DVD study course - which it may use in earnest in Autumn 2007. A conference with Gerard Hughes at Castle Street Centre is planned for Saturday 21st April.

Cumbria - Sedbergh

(Martin Dodds - 015396 20308; martin.dodds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Cumbria - Keswick

(Hylton Boothroyd - 01768 775142; hb-jtb@dircon.co.uk)

Cumbria - Carlisle

(Maureen Davenne - 01228 573631; davenne@infinnet.co.uk)

Tynedale

(Bridget Hewitt - 01434 602897;
bridget.hewitt@pcnbritain.co.uk)

Scotland

(Mary MacMahon - 01314 469481;
mary.mcmahon@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Scottish group is widely dispersed geographically, but has a growing membership. On the horizon is another residential with Elizabeth Templeton in central Scotland during May at Scottish Churches' House in Dunblane. Dates are Tuesday 15th - Thursday 17th May, and further details will be available by early March. We had a lively time of discussion and shared insights on the topic of 'Journeying' in October 2006, as well as poetry, laughter, and-getting-to-know one-another time, but felt we needed longer than 24 hours together this year!

The local Edinburgh group continues to discuss the issues raised in the 'Living the Questions' DVD, and would welcome anyone who wishes to come along to our meetings, which are held at 7.30pm in Christ Church Centre, Morningside on the last Monday of every month. We are also delighted at the prospect of hosting an evening with Bishop Jack Spong in October.

Room for new groups.

We want very much to extend our network of local groups to make them available to more members. The current ones exist in a variety of different ways, but all seem to be valued. Anyone living in areas not currently served by a local group and who would be willing to try to coordinate a group should let either Alan Powell or Olivia McLennan know by email (their email addresses are in the box on the back page) or via the PCN postal address also given there.

Book reviews

The Creative Christian: God and Us: partners in creation

by Adrian B. Smith

O Books, 144 pp, 2006, £11.99. 1-905047-75-4

This book claims to give a new insight into the Christian message, and as such should be of great interest to those of us Christians who are searching for a new way of looking at the teachings of Jesus which pulls away from the more hierarchical, patriarchal and exclusive aspects of the Christian message still taught by much of the Christian Church today. Adrian B. Smith's style can be a little patronising and self-consciously politically correct in places. However, in general this book is extremely readable, and I found his arguments and theories easy to follow.

He begins by asserting the importance of Jesus of Nazareth as a teacher, and attempts to move away from the current Christian emphasis on Jesus' death and resurrection, and instead concentrate on his teachings. He concentrates particularly on Jesus' vision of the "Kingdom of God" (or "Kingdom of Heaven" as it is sometimes referred to). He refutes the established Christian view that the "Kingdom" refers to a "heaven" which is beyond this physical world and instead makes the claim that Jesus was in fact challenging us to create the "Kingdom" in this world. This is not a

new theory, but it is a powerful one. In my view, it challenges us to ask ourselves: how can we create this "Kingdom" here and now?

The author seems to me to have a somewhat rose-tinted view of modern society, claiming that we are becoming more unified in consciousness and thought due to the rise of technology (in particular the internet) and the "global village" that this creates. He seems to ignore the current rise of religious fundamentalism and also nationalism, which to me seems short-sighted. However, his view of the world is persuasive, and certainly something which I think many Christians will wish to aspire to.

His theories on the interrelation that is possible between science and religion are again not new, but are none the less important for being repeated. The chapter in which he deals with the relationship between human beings and the divine (which he terms the "Transcendent") was so interesting that I found it difficult to put down.

Where I feel Mr. Smith lets himself down is in his final chapter. Having led the

reader through an increasingly compelling series of chapters, which seem to promise an equally compelling conclusion, he chooses to use the last chapter as a vehicle to preach the benefits of Transcendental Meditation when forming a relationship with the "Transcendent". I use the word "preach" advisedly, as this chapter does seem to do just that. There is ample evidence that meditation is extremely beneficial to many people. I am unfortunate enough to have seen it used both to manipulate others and as a self-serving device, and so I am sceptical, but this is not my reason for finding fault with this final chapter. Having carefully backed up his claims throughout the rest of the book

with careful and considered analysis, he lapses into a kind of fundamentalism, where his theories are backed up by unsubstantiated claims to "research" that has been done into the benefits of this form of meditation. It is a considerable let-down after the promise of the earlier chapters.

Despite this, I do feel that this book is worth reading. It offers a different way of looking at modern progressive Christian theories about the gospels and the life of Jesus, and has led to lively discussions in my house, as I'm sure it will do in the houses of other readers.

Liz Terry

The Gay Disciple: Jesus' friend tells it his own way"

by John Henson

O Books, 176 pp, 2007, £9.99, 1-846940-01-X

Modern day retellings of ancient texts are always interesting to read, and a retelling of the Gospels particularly so. After all, the Gospels themselves represent only a small fraction of the many Christian texts that were probably written after the death of Jesus, and a new and more accessible take on them is always fascinating.

John Henson assures us in the introduction to this book that he is trying to make a point with this retelling. He doesn't tell the reader what that point is, but hopes that we will find it ourselves. I have to say that, although I think I see the point he is trying to make, I was often irritated by the style of his writing. By far the most irritating thing is the constant use of nicknames for all the main characters in the story – St. Peter becomes "Rocky", Mary Magdalene is "Maggie" and so on. I can understand that the author is attempting to write as he feels an amateur gospel writer such as Mark might write if he were writing today, but I'm afraid I found it distracting, and I often had to spend some time puzzling over who the person was before I could get involved in the story again. It's amazing how annoying it is to read something where the story is familiar but you can't place the name of the narrator or one of the characters!

Like Adrian B. Smith in "The Creative Christian", John Henson uses the idea of Jesus as Teacher (rather than Divine), which appeals to me personally, and works well in this context. After all, to the people of his own time, Jesus was just another teacher/prophet among many who were travelling and preaching at that time. The majority of the book is told in the voice of Lazarus (whom the author identifies in his introduction as being the most likely disciple to have been "the disciple whom Jesus loved" mentioned often in the Gospel of St John). Lazarus is the gay disciple of the title, but in actual fact, his sexuality is by no means the focal point of the story, and as such I wondered at the reasons behind choosing such an emotive and potentially off-putting title for the book. Lazarus has a love affair with Jesus, and at the time of the crucifixion, Jesus entrusts his mother, Mary, to Lazarus' care. The idea that Jesus may have had gay relationships is an emotive one, and unfortunately it is not well handled by the author. For a start, Lazarus regularly refers to Jesus as his "special friend". If, as he states at the beginning of Chapter One, he is finally telling his long-hidden "love story", then I personally doubt that he would use this phrase, which seems to imply that he is still trying to hide the true nature of the relationship. It also implies that the author wants to shy

away from using words like "lover" or "boyfriend", which seems to defeat the purpose of bringing the relationship into the story at all, and weakens the point he is apparently trying to make.

Despite this, the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus are handled well, and the general feeling of panic and disbelief that the disciples must have felt at that time, and also the speed with which it all happened, is well described. I also appreciated the almost immediate signs amongst the disciples of a power-struggle, with a small group quickly proclaiming themselves as "The Twelve" and the arguments beginning over what Jesus' teachings really meant. This showed very deftly the way in which the Truth can very quickly be corrupted by limiting it to a human perspective, and could be read as an indictment of certain aspects of Christian teaching today.

At certain points, Mr. Henson is quite innovative in his take on particular aspects of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. For example, rather than raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus gently calls him out of a deep coma,

something which seems more real and immediate, and indeed more moving, than an actual defeat of death itself. Jesus' resurrection is also handled well, with some of the disciples seeing him in a physical form, but still others simply feeling the presence of Jesus amongst them or within them, something which I know many of today's Christians will be able to identify with.

The last few chapters of the book are told from the perspective of others who met or were disciples of Jesus, and I was pleased to discover that a few of them were told by women, including Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. These were very readable chapters, and I enjoyed them more than those told by Lazarus.

On the whole, I did not like the style of this book very much, but I did end up appreciating what John Henson is trying to achieve. There were many small things which would have made this book better. However, it has made me want to go back and re-read the Gospels, and that can't be bad, can it?

Liz Terry

A New Spiritual Home – Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots by Hal Taussig

Polgate Press, 203 pp, 2006, 0-944344-71-2

Be it snow, rock and roll or coca cola, the saying goes that whatever happens across the water in the USA will eventually come our way. I guess we all have feelings, positive and negative about the States. Some of us have family and friends there, whom we love to see and when we do so we enjoy the incredible landscape of that vast country, its energy and its freedoms. But then we have the tragedy of Iraq, the refusal to sign up to Kyoto and some of us get very cross!

The USA is indeed a land of contrasts and contradictions in all spheres of life, not least religion. Just as the American people are divided about foreign policy, the significance of climate change and various moral issues, so too with Christian faith. We know it is a land of conservative religious forces such as the Southern Baptists but also of brave radicals such as the Sojourners. The States have also given us our 'parent

body' the Centre for Progressive Christianity, born out of the vision of Jim Adams, former rector of St Marks Capitol Hill, Washington DC.

Now Hal Taussig of Union Theological Seminary, New York, has published new book - a MUST read for members of our own Network, for like snow and coca cola, it may anticipate what might be the future of progressive Christianity in the UK. Hal Taussig has undertaken a detailed analysis of progressive Christianity across the whole of the USA. He chronicles examples of what is happening in all kinds of churches and groups from all backgrounds, from Episcopal cathedrals, community Mennonite churches to Roman Catholic resistance movements.

The author asks, What are the defining characteristics of progressive Christianity? How would you answer that? For Taussig they are:

- spiritual vitality seen in participatory worship and using the arts
- intellectual integrity
- the transgression of gender boundaries
- concerns with justice and ecology.

In many ways the defining 8 points of our Progressive Christianity can be held alongside what Taussig sees and analyses. Like the UK, denominational attendances are in decline; as Jack Spong repeatedly reminds us, the alumni of the Church is growing daily. Unholy alliances between Roman Catholics and conservative protestant churches over abortion and gay rights are being formed and are dominating the religious scene. We are beginning to see this here in the UK. Over against this however are signs of hope, in that groups of progressive Christians are witnessing to a new understanding and experience of Christianity, helped by the writings of people like Marcus Borg, John Cobb, Dom Crossan and others.

Well how are progressive churches to develop? Taussig believes that grassroots matter first: the building up of progressive churches from local bases, the linking up of such groupings, the sharing of resources and experiences. In the States TCPC has an important role to play at the national level and what he has to say does have bearings on PCN and its role in the UK.

I believe that as in the USA, we will see in the UK the growth of progressive

Christian groups, some within denominations, some newly hatched. Controversies over gay adoption and women bishops, the stifling dullness of so much organised religion, the lack of intellectual integrity in so much church teaching – all of this encourages us to work for a progressive church which gives honour to the God revealed in Jesus.

Dominic Crossan says that if you get the Jesus of history correct, you get your Christianity correct. Part of our work at PCN is to offer the opportunities through our conferences and meetings, through the sharing of resources and ideas, to get our Christianity 'correct', to model our discipleship and our churches on the way of Jesus. Marcus Borg speaks, in his latest book 'Jesus', of the emerging Christian paradigm. This has its foundations in understanding the gospels as historical memory and metaphorical narrative. This new paradigm is now being embraced at the grass roots by millions of Christians.

So I think it is an exciting time for progressive Christianity. Hal Taussig's book gives an account of what this means in the USA. Maybe a similar account will one day be written about progressive churches in our own country. For now let's get on with the work of building them up!

Adrian Alker

Jim Adams' book and talks

We still have six copies left of Jim Adams' book *From Literal to Literary* after his tour in this country last December. They cost £11 each (nothing extra for postage or packaging) and can be purchased from me at St Faith's Vicarage, 62 Red Post Hill, London SE24 9JQ. Cheques should be made out to me personally – Hugh Dawes. All profits go to the Network. We also have three copies of one of Jim's earlier books *So you can't stand evangelism*. They are £8 each.

Two of Jim Adams' talks recorded during that tour are also now available on separate CDs.

'Troublesome Words in the Bible' was presented in Exeter on Nov 12th and 'The Future of Progressive Christianity' was Jim's topic after the PCN AGM at St Faith's, North Dulwich on Nov 18th.

Each disc costs £3 plus £1 post and packing, but both can be purchased together for £5 post free.

Please make cheque payable to C.Avis, write your name and address clearly (including your email address if you have one) and send your order to 37 Clifton Road, Exeter EX1 2BN.

And finally

The Guardian, as this issue went to press, carried a article headlined *How the division between the religious and the secular got nasty* Guardian, G2, Monday 26th February 2007). Well-written and well-researched, it is worth giving attention to.

I found personally interesting a comment from Colin Slee, the Dean of Southwark, that we witness 'a triangle, with fundamentalist secularists in one corner, fundamentalist faith people in another, and then the intelligent, thinking liberals of Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Baptists, Methodism, other faiths – and indeed thinking atheists – in the other corner.

There is a debate here which it would be worth attending to, and the article and the subject could well provide food for thought for local PCN Groups.

My own thought, for what it is worth, is that the secular/sacred (religious) distinction is a false one, and that progressive believers ought to be saying this clearly. In an important sense there is only the secular – everything pertains to the world, the age, the present.

That isn't to discount the religious or the spiritual, or spirituality (though that is a

word I personally deeply distrust. It is to say that they all belong to the world, they are all located in it, they are not things apart or in contrast or in conflict. All religions are in the most obvious sense human works. The spiritual is a human way of perceiving life and the world. We should delight in being part of the secular – not hostile towards it.

Few things have depressed me more recently than seeing religious leaders once again claiming that religion should have special treatment, that it stands above the laws of the state, that it is immune from the principles of the which pertain to all other human organisations and systems.

Religion at its best is what binds people together, what unites, what takes seriously each and every person as precious, simply because they are human and yet, at the same time, a child of that which we name as God. At a time when faith does very often seem to be a force for division, progressive believers should be speaking of and living out its capacity to unite and to heal.

Hugh Dawes

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

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