

Progressive voices



Issue 8, March 2014

Published by the Progressive Christianity Network Britain



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“Truth, Lies and the Spirit Level: Poverty and Inequality in Britain Today”

by Jenny Jacobs



Jenny Jacobs is a PCN member from Harrogate. She works for her local Council, where she has the thankless task of negotiating provision of affordable

housing with property developers.

More than a hundred people gathered in York on 31st January to attend “Truth, Lies and the Spirit Level: Poverty and Inequality in Britain Today”, a free day conference organised for Poverty and Homelessness Action Week. The diverse crowd included clergy of many denominations, lay people, front-line workers in homelessness, prisons and drug-abuse, local politicians, students and concerned members of the public.



This event brought together Kate Pickett, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of York and co-author of “The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always do Better” and Paul Morrison of the Joint Public Issues Team, author of “The Lies We Tell Ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty” – known as the Truth & Lies Report for short. Joining them on the platform were Jonathan Bradshaw, Professor of Social Policy at the University of York and Trustee of the Child

Poverty Action Group, who spoke about austerity and the impact of the recession on child poverty, and Dr Paul Edmondson-Jones, deputy Chief Executive and Director of Health at City of York Council (CYC), who explained what factors influenced health inequalities and talked through some of the policies being implemented by CYC following its resolution to become a poverty-free city last year. In the Chair was The Very Reverend Vivienne Faull, Dean of York, who managed the proceedings superbly.



Vivienne Faull, Dean of York, with Professor Jonathan Bradshaw
Jonathan Bradshaw spoke first with a talk which he unashamedly described as “a rant” but which laid out the facts and the effects of current Government policies which protect pensioners at the expense of their children and grandchildren. He reminded us of the world as it was before the recession, with improvements across the board in education, health, child care, housing quality and neighbourhoods and inequality stabilised. He pointed out that following the banking crisis in 2007, the then Labour Government adopted a broadly redistributive approach and the economy was actually growing again by 2010. He then painted a graphic picture of the world since the last election, with the aspiration of the austerity regime to reduce the deficit (£81 billion) by 2014. Crucially, little of this shortfall was to come from increased taxation; the vast majority (around 85% now) has come instead from cuts in services and benefits.

The results include mass unemployment (currently 2.3 million), 18% youth unemployment, £3.8bn real term cuts to working age benefits, a rise in absolute child poverty (2% up in 2011/12 alone) and falling living standards all round. Whilst there are more jobs around than there were a year ago, these jobs do not pay sufficient to get people out of poverty. Depressingly, if not shamefully, 67% of poor children now live in working households.

At the same time there has been a sustained attack on the definition of poverty and a flagrant abuse of statistics. Professor Bradshaw painted a grim picture of cuts yet to come - things will only get worse as the need for front-line services grows even as they are cut to the bone. And whilst the rich do pay more in tax than the poor, our current system is so regressive that when indirect taxes such as VAT are taken into account, it is clear that the poorest pay relatively far more in tax than the rich, losing about 43% of their gross income in tax as against the richest decile's 35%. Meanwhile there has been a £28bn giveaway in taxes on fuel, alcohol and corporation tax, not to mention the abolition of the 50% tax rate.

Next up was Paul Morrison, who told us that if Professor Bradshaw had given us a rant, he was going to make us livid! He started by reminding us that way back in 1753 John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said, "So wickedly, devilishly false is that common objection, 'They are poor, only because they are idle'."

Yet that false objection is still common currency more than 250 years later, and it's no more true now than it was back then.

Paul ran through the half-dozen myths about benefit claimants contained in the Truth & Lies Report. As he said, these are by no means the only myths, but they are some of the most common. They include the myths that "they are all on drink and drugs" and "they have enough money, they just can't manage it properly". He showed how there was no evidence to back up these lies and how in fact, the evidence pointed the other way. On the myth that "they are all on the fiddle", Paul told us that whilst benefit fraud runs at between 0.7% and 0.9%, tax fraud runs at 4-6%. As Paul pointed out, headlines SHOULD read, "Benefits claimants are much more honest

than average". But headlines like these don't sell papers!

He also exploded the myth about "three generations of worklessness". Apparently there is no evidence whatsoever to back up this claim. Government ministers, challenged to produce the figures, tend to prevaricate and merely claim to have met such families on their travels. Asked – and Paul Morrison has asked several times – who these families are, he gets no replies at all. It's hard enough being poor without having lies spread about you in the press and coming out of the mouths of Government ministers. As Paul pointed out, if such things were said about people in society with money and thus power, they wouldn't get very far. But the poor have no voice, no money, no power. They can be lied about with impunity. And yes, by the time Paul Morrison had finished his eloquent talk, the audience was pretty livid!

Dr Paul Edmondson-Jones followed with a practical case-study borne out of York's resolution in 2013 to become a poverty-free city. York, he told us, was a relatively affluent city, with unemployment so low as to be negligible compared to the national and regional average. Nevertheless, the data showed that the rich live longer lives and whilst poor women in York lived lives just a few years shorter than those of their richer sisters, the bottom 10% of men had much lower life expectancy and the City authorities were looking at ways of addressing this. York has also implemented the Living Wage for all its employees; given office space to the South Yorkshire Credit Union to help people avoid using loan-sharks; boosted take-up of free school meals and is developing a group purchase of fuel to cut energy prices for poorer residents. Paul had a shorter slot than the other speakers (too busy with the day job fighting poverty on the streets of York!) but managed to give the audience an impressive whistle-stop tour of practical measures to fight poverty and inequality on the ground and, as he put it, kick them off the streets of York.

Lively question-and-answer sessions followed all three talks and the speakers were challenged and asked questions over a very wide range of topics. After lunch, Kate Pickett gave a lively and sometimes very funny talk on inequality and how

more equal societies do better for all their citizens. Although Kate got the post-lunch “graveyard slot” there was no danger of the audience falling asleep! Using material so new as not yet to have been published as well as significant material from “The Spirit Level” Kate established how inequality affects a whole range of issues across society, from teenage pregnancy to rates of imprisonment, mental health issues to obesity. She also explained how, oddly, people in more unequal societies such as the USA often “big themselves up” and claim they are doing better than they really are. They claim to be extremely healthy even when their life expectancy is way below that of people in other countries (such as Japan) where people live longest but claim to have average or below-average health. It’s not that the Japanese are a nation of hypochondriacs, more that in the USA people are terrified of being “have-nots” as the gulf between the rich and the poor is so extreme. There’s an issue of losing face and keeping up appearances and a lot of interesting research showing how self-image gets increasingly skewed in unequal societies.

Interestingly, there’s also research showing how the rich in these societies develop a sense of entitlement and come to believe that they are particularly talented and deserving of success, not that they were perhaps born into privilege and have been lucky. Kate also mentioned the research which has shown that rich people are less generous and more likely to lie and cheat than poor ones, whether it’s in terms of giving

way to pedestrians, how they behave in negotiations or taking candy from children (yes, Paul Piff in the USA has entertainingly proved this to be the case!).

However, the research has also established that this sense of entitlement is learned, not innate, and can be unlearned too – so there is hope.

This conference report would not be complete without emphasising how brilliantly the speakers and audience were managed by Vivienne Faull. Vivienne spoke eloquently on the impact of “The Spirit Level” on her work and ministry when based in Leicester and asked the audience to think about ways in which they could help combat the pernicious stereotypes promulgated in the press and what actions they might take to help combat inequality. She invited everyone to submit names of organisations they were involved with or were aware of so that we could keep in touch and grow networks to work together in future to continue the fight against inequality and the image of poverty and the poor in society. Vivienne managed the entire event so it was seamless yet unhurried whilst keeping to the programme timings with admirable accuracy.

Presentations, suggestions and feedback will all be available on the event website in due course (www.comehear.org). Finally, the audience were invited to donate to the three good causes represented: Church Action on Poverty, the Child Poverty Action Group and The Equality Trust, all of whom benefited from the generosity of those present.

PCN Britain invites you to
a day conference led by Mark Townsend
‘Seeing Jesus Again with New Eyes’

Exploring progressive Christianity
from different perspectives

11.00 – 16:30 on Sat. 17th May 2014

Priory Rooms, 40 Bull St., Birmingham, B4 6AF PCN

Members £12, non-members £16

Booking form enclosed with this magazine

PCN’s 2014 AGM will take place during lunch

Letter from the Chair



For most of us, seeking to be a progressive Christian involves us in making a journey, and often moving to a new spiritual home or location. The journey is seldom easy, is likely

to be stressful and bounded by a multitude of uncertainties. We may feel mixed up inside and rather lost.

Right now I am in the process of moving home for the 4th time in a little over 5 years. Sitting surrounded by an endless sea of boxes acutely reminds me of just what a difficult and fraught process moving to new locations and ways of being is. To quote from a welcome to your new home card received the other day, *'The kettle's done a runner and the bed is in the hall, the sofa's in the doorway and it just won't budge at all. There are boxes in the kitchen, the living room and loo, I'm really stressed and tired with a million things to do!'*

Such upheaval and activity rather concentrates the mind as it includes a certain amount of throwing away of stuff, even ideas, that have been dear but will no longer be needed in the new home. I rapidly find myself musing upon the many similarities that exist between moving to a new physical location and moving as part of a faith journey. Both necessitate much sorting of personal matters, hoarded papers and books; even long forgotten mementos. There is baggage to be discarded and some to keep a little while longer. It is easy to see the parallels between moving house (an external process) and the spiritual journeys we make to new homes, landscapes, friends and thoughts (an inward process). Ceasing to be a traditional Christian is potentially an emotionally wrenching experience not to be undertaken lightly. But what is the alternative when you need to move on and can no longer go on living with old paradigms, or no longer believe certain ideas are literally true?

'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a

time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted...' (Ecclesiastes 3: 1 ff) The writer of Ecclesiastes recognised that there is a timeliness to much of life, and perhaps more importantly, that there are seasons: times when one thing is appropriate, times when the opposite is needed; times when it is right to do one thing, times when something different needs to happen; times when things begin and times when things draw to a close.

As I move from the east coast to the west coast of Scotland I must draw to a close some aspects of my life, yet these changes will be followed by a time of new beginnings and fresh opportunities. Everything changes, in fact, without change there cannot be life, without caterpillars there are no butterflies.

With these thoughts, I am pleased to announce that two new affiliated groups have started in the last month. Our good wishes go to Jon Cape who has set up the Radical Pilgrims group in Central Scotland and to Chris Wolfe who has just created a new group in Sutton Coldfield in the West Midlands. Our thanks too to Ruth and Mike Hayter for restarting a group, which serves the Bookham and Leatherhead area of Surrey, after a break while they moved house. I have also heard that the group organized by Jane Westland last November in Balham, South London, is doing well. More details about these and all other groups are available in this magazine and on the PCN website - www.pcnbritain.org.uk.

I look forward to meeting up with many of you again during 2014, with a reminder that the next opportunity for us to be together and share our news will be at the Spring Conference and AGM on 17th May in Birmingham, where we will welcome Mark Townsend as our speaker.

But please keep an eye out for the regular Chair's Update bulletins, which most of you receive by email, as there you will find the latest information about all forthcoming events.

Best wishes,
Angela

Lent reflection

by Gabrielle Ayerst



Gabrielle writes of herself: "My husband, John and I moved to Berwick upon Tweed 7 years ago as we fell in love with the Scottish borders. We have one grown up son. John and I are members of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis. I am also a self-supporting Anglican priest having been brought up in the Roman Catholic Tradition. I worked

for many years in the addiction and mental health field and am part of a spiritual accompaniment group up here."

'An ancient tradition from the desert fathers and mothers teaches us that 'to save yourself from pride when you begin a fast the first day you must break it, then the keeping of the fast becomes less a self-improvement programme or an achievement, and more of a gift freely given of ourselves to God.'

Encouragement indeed for those of us who have regularly broken a discipline that we had intended to keep for Lent!

For some Christians, Lent can be seen as a negative rather than a positive and life giving

Being Honest to God

An extract from Richard Holloway's after dinner address at the conference

Tillich said religion was obsessively asking us the question of the meaning of existence because it doesn't come to us: we didn't come into this world with a manual like a new computer, telling us all what it means. We came into this world asking questions about the meaning of our own existence and the meaning of the universe itself. That passionately addressed is religion and there's no one way of doing it.

One of the things passionate religionists have done is challenge passionately the answers they gave to the questions they asked about the universe. Diarmaid MacCulloch has got a book out – his Gifford Lectures last year - "Silence in Christian History". It's a fascinating book not only because it's about contemplative silence, the silence that waits. It's about

experience. John Henson in his Lenten studies book for adventurous Christians says this:

"I have discovered in company with others, something very important about the Christian life. It is more a matter of what you do than what you don't do. It is not about 'giving up' but 'taking up'. I was brought up on a version of Christianity that seemed largely to do with a series of naughty mustn'ts – don't drink, don't gamble, don't swear, don't put the washing out on Sundays and don't even think about sex etc. Some have a longer list than others. There are things a Christian should not do. A Christian should not judge others! But the call of Jesus to discipleship is based on two maxims, both positive – love God and love your neighbour"

Lent provides us with an ideal opportunity to reflect on these positive maxims and gives us permission to take time out and make a journey inwards, into our inner desert, there to reflect on our own wild beasts and demons, which Jesus himself had to confront before beginning his public ministry and throughout his life. On our spiritual journey, we are encouraged to become 'reflective practitioners', so that in getting to know ourselves better, we can become more effective in our ministry to others. No easy task. But as we allow the love and healing of God into the shadier parts of our nature, we find ourselves being slowly changed and transformed.

the ugly silence of the cover-up, the silence of things not admitted. He talks about the Church's silence on slavery. Let me read you what he said about slavery in that book. "The distressing fact for modern Christians is that Slavery is taken for granted in the Bible, even if it's not considered to be a good thing at least for oneself. One would have to have been exceptionally independent minded and intellectually awkward to face up to the consensus of every philosopher in the Ancient World, and the first Christians did not rise to the challenge. Paul's epistle to Philemon in which the apostle asks his correspondent to allow him the continued services of Philemon's slave, Onesimus, is a Christian foundation document in the justification of slavery." It took us 1800 years to get rid of it.

What I didn't know is that the first Christians who challenged it, according to MacCulloch, were the Pennsylvanian Quakers of 1688. Here's McCulloch

again: “Quakers believed in the prime authority of the inner light. Many of their earliest activists had through their sharp critique of the problems of the scriptural texts pioneered the modern enlightenment discipline of Biblical criticism. The Quakers’ disrespect for the established convention of Biblical authority was the reason they could take a fresh approach to Biblical authority and reject it. It took original minds to kick against the authority of sacred scriptures. What was needed was a prior conviction in one’s conscience of the wrongness of slavery, which one then might justify by a purposeful re-examination of the Bible.”

Note those words: What was needed was a prior conviction in one’s conscience of the wrongness of slavery. In other words the Quakers decided that slavery was wrong. We know that. If the Bible appears to justify slavery, then the Bible is wrong. They created by that moral supremacist approach to scripture the beginnings of the scientific critique of scripture that we all live and wrestle with. But not completely, because one of the problems that Christians have because of our attachment to the theory of revelation is that we find it almost impossible to do the right things for the right reason without a *religious* justification. We can’t just decide that it’s absurd not to ordain women - and just do it: we have to find religious reasons for doing it.

I remember when we were debating it in the Scottish Church – and you had your own versions in England – we raided the scriptures for texts to allow us to ordain women; and we found one, of course. There’s a wee verse in Galatians, remember it? “In Christ there is neither slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor Greek”. Thank God. We breathe a sigh of relief. We had a scriptural mandate for doing the right thing. Then we started doing it.

Unfortunately Paul didn’t add “neither gay nor straight”, did he? Rather than say “Yes, we have learned the inappropriateness of the subordination of women, we know that it is wrong: we have our inner light, our conscience, which tells ourselves we have permission and must ordain gay as well as straight.” That’s the strength of Quaker disrespect towards authority which churches don’t manage.

I feel affection towards the churches struggling with the ordination of women, struggling intensively about gay relationships. You have to respect people who have been taught these things are wrong. They have, as it were, integrated within their hearts and minds this idea of authority that doesn’t enable them to think something for the first time and move into a

new understanding of truth and morality and justice because, as it were, they are held with this pious approach to the tradition. I respect that. There’s something quite moving and beautiful about it.

There was a headline in a Scottish newspaper not very long ago. There was a woman standing outside a house in the Highlands. She had been running it as a bed and breakfast place and she refused to allow a couple of gay men to spend the night there and she got done for it, so she was selling the business because she had broken the law – because there is a law that prevents that. There was a picture of her standing outside. My heart went out to her because I realised she was being faithful to her tradition. Her tradition had taught her to believe that what these men would have done in that bed was an abomination. A priest friend of mine left me in his will a Victorian plate of the sort that hangs above the bed in cold bedrooms in the Highlands. It’s a big eye and beneath it says “Thou, God, sees me”. So in a sense you have to respect the loyalty of people to the tradition and it makes even kind people cruel because they’re being faithful. Maybe one of the lessons we have to learn is a kind of loosening, a kind of lightening up of the understanding that – yes – we need our understanding of our institutions and organisations, our sacred scriptures, our texts - things that help us understand and interpret and make our way through this muddled existence, but, if you hold them too tightly, you idolatrise them in fact. If you turn them into gods, then you make it impossible to change your mind: certainly quickly, even at all.

It’s the most faithful people that find it most difficult to make these changes. This is the thing that breaks my heart about the debates that we’re having because these are good and faithful people – of course you’ve got the people who are secret haters and love to have a scriptural text that gives them permission to the thing they deeply hatefully want to do - but that’s not true of most people. Most people are simply imprisoned in the theory, a theory of revelation, a theory of permanence, and wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could all liberate ourselves from this and say “It’s so uncertain where all this stuff came from. It’s full of beauty, truth, mercy and forgiveness.” It’s also full of ancient attitudes that we should give ourselves permission to pick our way through.

(This is just a short extract from what Richard Holloway said. The full text of his address at the conference, and those of all the other speakers, will be available soon as a Together in Hope book.)

What Atheism taught me at Theological College

by Des Williamson



Des is married with 4 children. He has been atheist, fundamentalist Christian, Church of the Nazarene, scientist, missionary, Presbyterian, independent house church, Anglican, Atheist, agnostic, pantheist, Anglican Priest and Anglican/Methodist minister in that order (with lots of overlap)!

“I have more faith than all these people put together” that was the bizarre thought that shot through my head as I walked away from my tutor’s office. It was bizarre because the tutor had just grilled me about what I believed and in frustration had asked “why should I even call you a Christian?” My initial answer of “because I’ve been one for years” just infuriated him. After I told him what I knew he wanted to hear he let me go. Did I believe in God? Did I believe Jesus was the Son of God? Did he die for our sins? The most positive answer I could give was “maybe, I don’t know”. How could I possibly have more faith than my fellow theological students? Because I was walking in the dark; I was sticking at my vocation despite having lost my sense of God being there. My colleagues all had a ‘happy God experience’ to rely on; I had nothing but the fact that I was at college because somewhere in the past that was what God told me to do. Somehow here I was trusting in the God I no longer believed in.

My private study told me I was in transition; Stage three faith giving way to Stage four to use James Fowler’s terminology. I had used his ideas to study children’s understanding of Holy Communion, I had read of them again in *Churchless Faith* by Alan Jamieson. I had left the security of a peer faith and was setting out on a solo voyage. My little ship of faith had left the harbour and the storm was raging. From the security of believing the same as everyone else to the lostness of exploring; from the sense of belonging to isolation; from certainty to investigation. But I knew it was a journey I had to make, not for the faint-hearted but faint-heartedness had never been my way.

It started before college when people at church explained that they had questions, doubts, uneasiness with the Evangelical views our church held to. They shared their experience with me because I hadn’t preached certainties. For some, Jesus was the answer. For me it seemed more true to the Gospels that Jesus was the question. ‘Who do you say that I am?’ Who is this man that even the wind obeys him?’ I wasn’t

having doubts about doctrine when it struck, it was more a case of why is the church spending £30k on sending me to college when I have helped run a church for 8 years, why uproot my family for this. It was during the creed; “I believe in God the Father...” - no I don’t! I could pretend to believe it and fit in but that’s not my way either. I decided to be honest with people, I wrote articles in the college paper, I discussed and debated, I even had friends pray for me – In Korean and tongues, for an hour of each on one occasion!

That first year at an Evangelical college was the worst of my life. I was so depressed I couldn’t muster the energy to end it all. Every morning, waking brought the disappointment of still breathing; here was another day to endure. Another day of misery, another day of the suffocating experience of college worship, another day of darkness of the soul, of grieving for my dead God, of missing the one who was my source of life; a living death. There was a little light in the darkness; football. It sounds flippant now but playing for the college team, playing for two different church teams kept me going... Football and Holy Communion. The experience of bread and wine was somehow bearable, somehow welcoming, somehow allowed me to breath in the midst of suffocation.

I made a point of trying to help others. Every morning when I got to college I would sit with a Bible and open it at a random verse, if it seemed appropriate I would write it out and put it in a college member’s pigeon hole, I was the ‘mystery prayer’. Because I did it anonymously people would write notes of thanks in the college rag or on the notice board saying how relevant and helpful the verses were, if only they had known who it was!

An atheist at vicar school didn’t seem right when I thought about it but I knew it was the right place for me. Something drove me on. I felt strangely secure. One morning I started to laugh ... and laugh... what an irony, I thought; here are these Evangelicals worrying about the wiles of the devil and here is me, an atheist absolutely sure that if there were a God there would be no reason to worry about a puny devil! God was getting out of my box. Atheism was opening my eyes to what God wasn’t. God had no intentions of conforming to my image of Him/Her/It. Meister Eckhart, a thirteenth century mystic spoke of Godhead as the unfathomable reality. God, he saw as the image we create to get our heads around that ultimate reality. I had had a close relationship to God, having been brought up unchurched I had come to faith in my late teens with all the fervour one associates with a persecutor turned convert. Yes I had

given the Christians a hard time and when I joined the other side it was natural to share my faith, so much so that I became an evangelist with a student outreach organization. Now I had that same desire to talk about faith with others but it was to see if they had any answers rather than any chinks in their armour that I could use to squeeze Jesus through. I hardly recognized myself anymore.

At first I knew what I didn't believe but then things started to change. One morning I noticed a major shift. As I rode into college on my bike I thought, "God as father", instantly the thought "God as mother" flashed across my mental horizon. God as light, God as dark... God as transcendent, God as immanent... God of life, God of death... God of welcome, God of rejection... inclusive God, exclusive God. It went on and on, all the way to college, I had to write it down to make it stop. When I looked at the list I was stunned that I had gone from nothing God to everything God in a two-mile bike ride. I was still an atheist, but there was something different. As I read more from David Jenkins and John Robinson, I rejected the notion of Theism. When I say Theism I mean the model of God that sees God as up there and out there, one who intervenes in history as He deems fit. Jenkins described it as 'a laser beam notion of God'. God provides a parking space to someone who prays – hallelujah, thank you God (Yes I had done that on several occasions); but that same God allows genocide. If God is so fickle why would anyone

want to know that God!? He is more to be pitied than worshipped.

Agnosticism seemed the way forward. How could I be sure? How could anyone be so arrogant as to say they understand God? If I understand God then surely there are four of us not three and bang, there goes the Trinity. It was John Robinson and his ideas from Tillich that provided a way forward. Pantheism I understood; God is in everything. Panentheism; God is in everything but also beyond everything. Like a fish in the sea, the fish is in the water but the water is also in the fish, God in and through all things but also more than all things. I could live with a God like that but is that just another image of God, another idol created to put God in a box?

What has atheism done for my faith? It has exploded the God box and restored the search for life's greatest mystery. It has taken away the arrogance that wants to push my views on others rather than explore the roads of faith together. It has led my little boat of faith to new lands to explore; sometimes I long for that old harbour of certainty but I know I can't go back that way there are too many new lands to see and the mystery of Godhead draws me on. Am I still an atheist? In the technical sense, yes in that I am not a theist, but in the popular sense; do I believe in any God? Let's say I am open to the mystery that we call God and I am certain 'God' has no intention of getting back into my God-shaped box.

Inside out

by Tim Baynes

Tim Baynes is a retired Anglican priest who worked in industrial mission for almost thirty years in the diocese of Manchester. Drawing on that experience, he outlines here a thesis for a changed strategy for the church in our time.

I call this booklet "Inside Out" because it is suggesting a reversal of Church strategy. To explain it simply, it would involve moving from the underlying idea that has dominated church strategy, which has been about trying to get people to 'come' to a church. This approach is based on the idea that there are certain crucial 'truths' that have been handed down from the past. The assumption has been that the Church has an important message which people need to come to church to hear.

In its place will be proposed a strategy which involves going out into the world and seeking to find where God is at work and then celebrating this and becoming co-operators. This is not to suggest some outlandish doctrine dreamt up by some maverick, but is rather a core message derived directly from the life and teaching of Jesus. It is the central theme chosen by the writers of the first three Gospels, namely the Kingdom of God.

We need to be careful over how we can use the bible today, given 150 years of Historical Critical scholarship. We cannot use short references to get at the truth. Therefore all the references to the Kingdom of God in the New Testament are listed in order to gather an overall feel for what Jesus was about. There are about 90 such references which gives an idea of just how central the theme was to the writers.

The next stage of the argument would be to establish a link between mission and worship. The final stage being to look at the changed role of the Church.

Other chapter titles include: The Value of Experience (A Quaker idea); Radical rather than liberal; The Experience gained from Mission in Industry; and the Implications for today - Signs of the Kingdom.

The booklet could be of real interest to any local group wanting to explore a fresh approach to seeking God and God's church in the world, and can be emailed to anyone interested in doing just that. Email: timon@homecall.co.uk

Does the Environmental Crisis challenge our faith?

by Nigel Jones



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

At the start of Lent 2012, Cardinal Keith O'Brien,

Rowan Williams and Desmond Tutu called for repentance over indifference to climate change. Pollution and climate change are key signs of an environmental crisis, but it is unfortunate that public debate is only about that. It also involves loss of biodiversity, water shortage, and encroachment of deserts. More fundamentally it is about selfish greedy human behaviour, and how we are missing the benefits of a more sustainable way of using the earth's resources and a greater sharing of wealth. There is a need to reform our theological understanding of our relationship with Creation and take action that leads us to a lighter and fairer way of living.

In 1991, an international conference called for a new ethic for sustainable living and wrote in a concluding report: "Establishment of this ethic needs the support of the world's religions, because they have spoken for centuries about the individual's duty of care for fellow humans and of reverence for divine creation."

(International Union for Conservation of Nature, United Nations Environmental Programme and Worldwide Fund for Nature) This was reiterated by Ban Ki-Moon in 2009 and more recently by Lord May, former UK chief scientist. In contrast, an historian Lynn White, slated Christianity in publications from 1967 onwards, because he felt it saw nature as only existing for the sake of humans.

In 1992, the World Council of Churches declared the peril we face if we don't change our ways and that it is a spiritual matter. Christian Aid, Tear Fund and Islamic Relief have since made it clear that degradation of the environment affects the poorest most; hence it is a matter of social justice. It is connected also to the complex issue of population growth and distribution.

Traditionalist Christians are coming round on the basis that God has put us in charge and we have done it wrong; so 'technical' correction is needed. The word 'dominion' in Genesis is now coming to be understood as not meaning domination over the Earth and the second creation story speaks of us being told to take care of it. Long forgotten were passages such

as Isaiah 24 and Hosea 4, which speak of human behaviour badly affecting the Earth. But is that enough to inspire people to make the effort and sacrifice needed to correct our ways? Have we also to rethink our understanding of God and nature ?

The theory of evolution should make us realise that humans are part of nature and there are good grounds for reviving an understanding of God within nature which was found in people like St. Francis and many of the Celtic Christians. Is not incarnation about the presence of God in all creation, not only in Christ Jesus?

Sir Ghillian Prance, world renowned Botanist, Ecologist and Christian, wrote a book about this in 1996. He describes what he discovered on the Indonesian island of Siberut. "The influence of Christian mission work has been detrimental to the societal structure of these people who, as animists, originally believed that each object had its own spirit. They believed in an internal harmony of creation". He refers to a bold form of Christianity; that is one which is loaded with a greedy capitalist approach to use of resources and assumes that non-Christian people know nothing of God. Of course, he does not suggest worshipping creation but calls for seeing God within it and ourselves as part of it rather than living as a disconnected predator.

In 2001 I was with a group of Methodists in the headquarters of the Church of North India and on the back wall in one room was a quote from the Bishop of Madras: "When the Christians came to India, they thought they were bringing us God; when they arrived they discovered that God was already here."

A few years ago Christian Aid published a comment by Pastor Pirilau in Mozambique, saying that Christianity had helped his people have a better understanding of the spirit of God, but that spirit had already been sensed by them, albeit perhaps unknowingly.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn said in his Nobel Prize speech that there is something of God in every single human being and something of the character of God in every nation and every tribe.

In Genesis chapter 9, we find that the covenant after the flood is between God and "living creatures of every kind on earth". In St. Paul's letter to the Colossians we find him referring to the involvement of Christ in the whole of creation and that his reconciling purpose on the cross was for *all* things.

Among the signs of hope today are organizations such

as the Christian Ecology Link and A Rocha. The latter was formed in 1985 in Portugal, now has branches around the world and sees environmental action as integral to Christian mission, not just one of a number of optional Christian duties from which individuals can choose.

Sir Ghillelan Prance says in the same book referred above, "Christ did not come only to rescue a few believers in him from this world. He came to renew creation, to restore humanity and nature to full

Self-Assessment?

by Chris Avis

How do you feel about your death? Recently someone told me that as he grows older he thinks about death more and worries about it less. Although society has moved on from some of the earlier taboos surrounding our mortality, euphemisms still abound, especially in Christian circles. Some faiths maintain a comforting belief in some form of 'heaven' after death, but many folk view death in negative terms of defeat, failure and loss. The ultimate goal of the medical profession to save a life can sometimes, with the best of intentions, result in extreme measures being taken to maintain life signs in someone who longs desperately for the release of death.

A recent fascinating book by Dr Penny Sartori PhD RGN called *The Wisdom of Near-Death Experiences* (ISBN-13 9781780285658) was prompted by the author's experience of twenty years nursing dying people in intensive care, where she became interested in Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) and undertook the UK's first long-term prospective study. She currently teaches two courses she has written entitled 'Death and Dying as Spiritual Transformation' and 'Science, Spirituality and Health' at Swansea University.

Ms Sartori's concern is not to prove the existence or otherwise of any 'afterlife' but to use people's experience of NDEs to better understand the process of dying and thus enhance the care of terminally ill patients. Even so, many of the remarkable NDEs related to her in the course of her research certainly seem to contradict the proponents of 'this is all there is'.

One surprising NDE is reported by Dr Eben Alexander, who is a neurosurgeon and thus not easily convinced by such fanciful notions. He is one of the few in the medical profession who has not been afraid to talk publicly of his own NDE experience, as a result of which he is now convinced that the current belief that consciousness is created by the brain is incorrect. Most who experience an NDE find that they 'return' with positively changed attitudes to living (sometimes

communion with God." If St Paul is right then is not the cross and the resurrection about the renewing of our relationship to God with and through, the whole of creation? Does not the teaching to love our neighbour, whatever their culture or faith, mean we must cooperate with all people across the world in this new relationship with creation?

Cooperation with nature and sharing with our fellow human beings and with all living creatures, is the way to be in tune with that spirit we call God.

dramatically so) and no longer have any fear of death. Many believe their 'postponement' has occurred because there are still purposes waiting to be fulfilled in their earthly lives; it is 'not their time' yet.

The popular notion that as we die 'our life flashes past us' is sometimes confirmed by an NDE, often with the awareness of a non-judgemental presence and/or an intense, loving light. This is not a biblical sheep and goats moment but the time to review past events in our life and form our own judgements. This scenario has long occurred to me as the most likely and powerful form of divine 'judgement', with no access to earth-bound excuses or justifications – just a necessary, naked self-assessment of our past life and behaviour, made within an all-embracing environment of unconditional love. For me, that prospect is simultaneously reassuring and scary; and way deeper than any farmyard metaphor.

After 'judgement', then what? Our earthly experiences of the inhuman cruelty of others often lead us to desire the punishment of those involved (we're only human, after all...), preferably in this life, but the next will do if necessary. Will all earthly inhumanities be suitably dealt with after death – ours included? I find a degree of reassurance by extending the famous quote of Martin Luther King Jr by one word: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice, *forever*."

Ms Sartori's book has a powerful relevance to how we should be living our lives and learning better treatment of the dying. There is a quote which begins the book and now most fittingly ends this earth-bound effusion –

"Everyone knows they're going to die but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently... Learn how to die and you learn how to live." Morrie Schwartz

PS Check out the late Morrie Schwartz on line, plus the book 'Tuesdays With Morrie' by Mitch Albom, made into a 1999 film with Jack Lemmon.

Did Jesus really sweat blood?

by Mark Rees

In 2002, amongst all the ideas jostling in my mind, both mundane and profound, there suddenly came the realisation that a television programme I'd seen the year before carried a significant insight into the meaning of a verse in Luke's gospel: Ch 22 v44. This conjunction was present in the programme, but it and its implications did not permeate through my intellect into the deeper layers of my mind until several months later.

The incident described by the writer of Luke's gospel was how, as he prayed in anguish on the night of his arrest, Jesus' sweat fell to the ground, ". . . like great drops of blood."

In his book, *Companion to the Gospels*, (published in 1970) the eminent scholar, the Revd A E Harvey, described this bloody sweat as, "a violent metaphor" used by Luke to convey Jesus' agitation. The OED definition of metaphor is, ". . . a figure of speech in which . . . a descriptive term is transferred to some object to which it is not properly applicable."

Before seeing that programme I would have certainly not questioned Mr Harvey's interpretation. Now I do, because the scientific experts featured in *Son of God* stated that such bloody sweating does occur. Ian Wilson, in his book, *Jesus: The Evidence* mentions this and quotes a New York forensic pathologist, Dr Frederick Zugibe, who suggests the bloody sweating to be a rare medical condition known as *haematidrosis*. Subcutaneous blood vessels rupture into the sweat glands. It has been observed in some people experiencing extreme anxiety, such as convicts being taken for execution. Regrettably, because the USA still executes people, their scientists would have current knowledge of this physiological phenomenon. In my view Luke's graphic description was not therefore a literary device, but a report of an actual incident, brought on by *agonia*, i.e. intense anxiety about the imminent future.

This realisation brought home two points:

Firstly, the authenticity of the account. Someone saw what actually happened and reported it. With executions taking place on a horrific scale under Roman rule, probably many ordinary people, including perhaps the writer of the gospel, would have witnessed the terrified victims being dragged to their agonising and humiliating deaths. They would not have needed experts to tell them about the

physiological reactions to acute fear. With the "clinicisation" of modern executions, we are spared such awful spectacles. I believe that this detail, mentioned in a few words, gives the passage what J B Phillips called the "Ring of Truth". It is not referred to in the other gospels, which might signify that it was familiar enough not to be mentioned. It is interesting that Luke was traditionally thought to be a doctor. Is this why it was recorded?

Secondly, the humanity of Jesus. Were this "bloody sweating" unique to him, that would make him different, not a human like the rest of us. Likewise, if he had not experienced what many people had suffered under similar circumstances, then it was no more than, "a violent metaphor" inserted by the writer, as suggested by Mr Harvey. Now I feel as certain as one may be, that neither of these apply because Jesus did sweat blood as others had done both before and after him. In doing so he showed his full humanity.

There is a belief held by some (fundamentalist) Christians, that faith in God removes all fear. By implication therefore, those who are anxious somehow haven't quite made the spiritual grade. Consequently they may feel unhappy, because they are anxious and guilty because they feel they shouldn't be.

On a personal note, I am terrified of operations and, in 2001, was expecting to undergo very major surgery. As I described in a previous article written decades earlier for our parish magazine, fear gripped me with its icy talons. I could not escape its clutch. The acute anxiety over several weeks was hell. My Evangelical Christian friends introduced me to a gentleman from their church. He had undergone similar surgery to what I was expecting. They thought his experience would be helpful to me,

"I was never scared," he said, "because I knew the Lord was with me."

After that encounter I felt worse than ever. Clearly the Lord hadn't bothered with me! I was stuck in my personal Garden of Gethsemane. That was the term I used at the time, but didn't then connect to the fact that Jesus had been there too. He'd not smiled beatifically and said, "I'm never scared, the Lord is with me."

Instead, he had sweated blood.

News from local groups

Balham, South London

(Jane Westland 0208 772 1937

jane.westland@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We are a new group and have been meeting on the second Tuesday of each month since November 2013. We meet at a member's home in Balham, SW12 at 7.30pm. We have been giving time to sharing our stories and experiences as progressive Christians as we get to know each other. We have also started on the Living the Questions 2 DVD course which has stimulated lots of interesting discussion, and we are ending each session with a short period of quiet reflection on a brief spiritual text/poem/prayer. New members are very welcome to come and join with us.

Berwick and Borders

(Gabrielle Ayerst,

gabrielle.ayerst@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We've been in existence now for four years and have about 12 active members. We very much enjoy our meetings together in a stimulating, safe and confidential environment. We are currently running the 'Living the Questions' course again as there is so much food for thought in it and for our newer members, but are also alternating our meetings with discussion on themes of interest and concern.

Early in 2014, 10 of us met for a 'bring and share lunch' and Pat McCulloch, the Newcastle group convenor was able to join us. Before we ate, we used the Emmaus Communion meal liturgy from the PCN website, which was very powerful. During our lunch, different members offered us some food for thought between courses and we ended up discussing PCN's eight points including an alternative name for God – not easy!

At our meeting in February, a member led us in a discussion on John Robinson's book, 'Honest to God', 50 years on, and we reflected upon an article he found on the 'Thinking Anglicans' website and the resource material from the PCN's conference on the same.

Birmingham

(Richard Tetlow, 0121 449 4892

richard.tetlow@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our next meeting is on Monday March 3rd, 2/2.30- 4.30pm. We'll be watching and talking about the DVD of Bishop Richard Holloway talking at the PCN/Modern Church recent conference on 'Honest to God' about his personal life and faith. Venue: Liz and Nigel Blakey's home, 12, Woodrough Drive, Moseley B13 9EP, 0121 449 2937. (Please park around the entrance to the cul-de-sac.)

Bolton

(Jim Hollyman, 01204 456050

jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our next meetings will be at 10 o'clock on Tuesdays 11th March and 13th May. We are reading Karen Armstrong's "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" – published by Bodley Head - ISBN 978184 7921 581.

Karen argues that compassion is hardwired into our brains, yet is constantly restrained by our more primitive instincts for selfishness and survivalall faiths insist that the Golden Rule is the test of true spirituality – "Always treat others as you wish to be treated yourself".

Meetings are usually held at 1462, Junction Road West, Lostock, Bolton, BL6 4EG but the March meeting will be at 121 Junction Road, Deane, Bolton, BL3 4NF. Newcomers always welcome. It helps if you let us know you hope to come by contacting Jim on the number above. We begin with a cuppa and end around 11.30.

Cardiff (Pontprennau)

(Sue O'Hare, 02920 866684

sue.ohare@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Bob Charnley writes:

We continue to meet at Pontprennau, by Cardiff East Services on the M4, on the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of each month, at the Church/Community Centre (CF23 8LL). We have had three stimulating visitors speak recently, who have initiated particularly good discussion, and on the other days have been listening to, discussing and occasionally disagreeing with what is said on CDs.

Two new people have recently joined us, which widens our horizons.

We are also making links with the Barry, Vale of Glamorgan, group. This is proving very valuable. But most valuably, we can open up and discuss between ourselves issues which, for some, is much more difficult to bring to the ordinary church meeting.

Chelmsford

(Jane Anderson, 01245 466160

jane.anderson@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our Chelmsford group continues to meet on the 2nd Sunday of the month 6.15pm at St Augustine of Canterbury Church, North Springfield.

We are currently looking at the Painting the Stars DVD. At our last session we took the opportunity to have a 'free chat' - subjects such as prayer; the relevance of the bible to us and particularly to children about to leave Primary Education; Mysticism and the lack of open, progressive 'seeker' courses for use with new church members. We all enjoyed the evening. If you would like more information please do give Jane a ring on the number above.

North (-East) Derbyshire

John Simmonds, 01246 251599

john.simmonds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We spent several months of 2013 working chapter by chapter through *Honest to God*; a rewarding experience which left us somewhere between celebration of the great changes within the church and regret for the lack of changes. Certainly it left us with a personal admiration for John Robinson and what he endured in order to speak his mind.

Latterly, we have been exploring topics chosen by members: a political discussion prior to Ann Pettifor's conference at Saint Mark's CRC, a look at genocide and forgiveness, and a consideration of the desirability or otherwise of faith schools. The review of PCN's Eight Points stimulated a robust and good natured conversation.

East Shropshire

(Miriam Walton 01743 243 167)

miriam.walton@pcnbritain.org.uk

The ever-lively, inquiring and assorted group of religious dissidents that is ESPCN continues to grasp the many

nettles which seem to grow on the fringes of our various churches as we know and (mostly) love them. In recent months, we have discussed or had talks on: The case for legalising drugs, The 'Uncertainty Principle' and alternative liturgy (this time in our usual venue). We have had a talk on the difference between Jesus and Christ and six members went to the Bleddfa Centre in Wales to hear Sir (!) Mark Tully lecture on 'Humility, the Earthiest of Virtues'. Being ESPCN, the irony of his title was not lost. Coming up is a discussion on why Progressive Christians should follow Jesus (as opposed to any other major religious teacher) and in March we will discuss the work of Dignity in Dying from a Christian perspective. We hope to have a feedback session on the Being Honest to God conference, probably in April.

Edinburgh

(Mary McMahan, 0131 441 3337

mary.mcmahan@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our May and March speakers have swapped, so that on Monday 31st March, we will be having John Miller as speaker on the topic of 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community'. We have been delighted to welcome John (and his wife Joan) to the group, following his retiring from ministry in a URC church in Reading, and subsequent move to Edinburgh.

On Monday 28th April we hope to have our annual 'light supper' conversation dinner, with this year's theme being 'The question I would most like to ask God'.

Scott McKenna will introduce the topic 'Beyond the Historical Jesus' at the 26th May meeting. Scott is a member of the group, and minister of a progressive Church of Scotland parish in the city.

Our session ends with the customary 'Looking back and looking forward' meeting on Monday 30th June, when we brainstorm ideas for next year's programme, before breaking for wine and strawberry tarts!

Exeter

(Liz Vizard, 01392 668859

liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Exeter group have had some very stimulating sessions since the autumn.

On Sunday 17th November we very much enjoyed Fay Sampson's talk, giving us a comprehensive overview of the Celtic Christians. Her story telling ability came to the fore and she painted a picture of the very different individuals and situations during that period of Christian history. Fay brought several of her books and we snapped up all the copies of her most recent: *Visions and Voyages, The Story of our Celtic Heritage*..

In January another member of our group, Rev David Ireson, presented an audio-visual meditation and discussion on our relationship with creation, other animals and the supernatural entitled: *Being Human: Being Spiritual?* This was an eye and mind-opening session taking us through history from cave dwellers (though they didn't live in the caves, just illustrated their lives on the walls) and prehistory into the 'big mistake' of farming and to modern attempts at co-existence with wild life. Human spiritual development was illustrated with various images and David's deeply informed commentary.

Our next event on Saturday March 8th at 2.30 is a special meeting entitled *The Future of Welfare* led by the research director of the *Theos* think-tank Nick Spencer. Nick will

speaking on this topic with a Christian perspective, but without taking a particular point of view on welfare.

On Sunday April 6th Chris Avis will share his experience of the Honest to God PCN weekend and on Sunday June 29th we welcome Dr Chris Southgate, Exeter University theology lecturer and poet, on a topic to be announced.

On Sunday July 27th we welcome Dr Michael Van Buren, a Bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church (lccgrail.org) to speak about his church and its theology.

Hampshire Hub

(Martin Godfrey 023 8076 6312

martin.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk)

A new venture in Southampton is a series of Sunday Supper Discussions held on the fourth Sunday of the month at the Edmund Kell Unitarian Church. The discussions are from 7.15 to 9 with supper at 6.45. The first two in December and January were on 'Science and Religion – Human Creations?', and 'How Modern Cosmology influences our views of God and Spirituality'. They were well attended, but there is space for more.

The West Hampshire Branch of the Scientific and Medical Network has resumed open meetings in a new venue, the Lymington Community Centre in the town centre. These meetings are popular with progressive Christians. They are held on the third Friday afternoon of the month (not April since it is Good Friday) at 2 for 2.15 until 4. Recent topics have been 'From Magi to Magic – what place for mystery in a scientific world?' and 'The Study of Bio-chemicals involved in the emotions'. There is a small charge of £2 to cover the hire of the room.

Information on these and many other events in and around Hampshire are in the Hampshire Hub Newsetter. Contact Martin if you would like to be added to the circulation list.

Harrogate Day-time Group - the Journey Group

(Philip Goodwin, 01423 563990,

philip.goodwin@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We meet at Harrogate Wesley Chapel on the first Thursday of every month, 2.30pm or 2.15 for coffee.

See the Harrogate Wesley Chapel website/church family/Journey Group for a summary of the ethos of the group.

Please feel free to join us. We welcome visitors, 'tasters', or the downright curious! Our topics are those offered by group members on a 'next time' basis.

Hertfordshire

(Diana Reddaway 01707 883359

diana.reddaway@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Recent meetings have watched and discussed the DVD 'Beyond Forgiving' [highly recommended]. There will be no meeting in April (Easter Day!) but we will be together on May 18th and June 15th. The programme for the summer has yet to be agreed but details will be available from Diana Reddaway.

Leeds

(Sandra Griffiths, 0113 2582652

sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Leeds group has had a varied programme from December to February: one of our members gave a superb presentation on writers who had influenced him in his life/faith journey; 20 of us considered care of the planet/creation; we had a 'bring and share' session, which is always popular - where we brought poems, writings, music, etc which meant something to us.

On 8th March we will be having a PP presentation on an inter faith theme; on 12th April John Churcher will be speaking on 'Resurrection it wasn't but it is a truth to be lived daily'.

All gatherings take place at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church/Centre in Leeds on a Saturday morning from 10.30 till 12, with refreshments from 10.

On 10 May we will consider 'What is there left to believe?' - suggested by a member who had just read Jack Spong's 'Why Christianity must change or die.'

We look forward to seeing you.

Manchester

(John Ramsbottom, 0161 4565119

john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk)

After a break for Christmas, meetings resumed in the New Year. As the national organisation is considering a revision of the Eight Points, we thought it appropriate to spend some time looking at this. A productive discussion was held at our January meeting, comparing the merits of the current UK version with the American counterpart and we have submitted the thoughts of the group.

Last year, we used the book by Marcus Borg "Speaking Christian" as the basis for several of the meetings. As we did not complete the book, we shall look at a further chapter for our March gathering, and possibly use other sections in later months.

Everyone is welcome to our meetings, and more information can be obtained from John Ramsbottom.

Market Harborough

(Jill Cooper 01858 433865

jill.cooper@pcnbritain.org.uk)

After 9 months we have reached double figures at our Sunday evening meetings, now held over wine and nibbles every 4 to 6 weeks as our individual commitments permit. We returned in January to the crucial question posed at the Honest to God conference: *Is it possible to be honest to one's intellect and experience (ie head and heart), and also to the inherited sources of tradition?* It was generally agreed that this dilemma creates tension, which in itself can be creative of new understanding and practice. In February we shared our thoughts and reading on *The Kingdom*, introduced by Trevor whose breadth of reference and depth of understanding we all found helpful. In March we shall grapple with the question: *Why the crucifixion?* We know most of the classic (sometimes rather glib) answers, but hope to explore more deeply with the help of wide preparatory reading, and trust that we shall not in our turn be glib. We have room for a few more members!

Newbury

(Maria Grace, 01635 47196

maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our group continues fairly stable in numbers, we are about 8, not growing particularly, but each of us enjoys the group and the sessions.

We have now done 3 studies of Marcus Borg's 'Reading the Bible Again for the First Time', the last one on the Pentateuch. We considered what the significance is of a nation having a story, an epic, and how that relates to our present multi-cultural and global world.

For one session we enjoyed engaging in the revision of the PCN's 8 points and we look forward to hear what other groups thought and what the committee comes up with.

Quite a task!

In April we look forward to an evening occasion with Dave Tomlinson, author and vicar, where we can invite a wider group of people to meet him and with us.

We have one member in ordained ministry and one studying for it, which gives focus to our meetings.

Our baby member is growing up now, 9 months and keen!

Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire

(Monty and Jane Lynds 01908 543206

monty.lynds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We continue to meet in each other's houses once a month. We are a very social and enthusiastic band of searchers. Each month we decide on the topic and venue for the following month and a volunteer accepts the challenge of preparing the discussion material for the next meeting, a system which seems to work well. Recent topics have included sessions from Karen Armstrong's "The case for God" and Meditation and Prayer. Our meetings always start with a shared meal and end with a short worship time. Monty's successful fifth Sunday services continue, the New Year day's topic was "Laughing with God" and included using play dough and lots of laughter and music. The next service is on Sunday 30th March at St Nicholas Church, Potterspury at 4:00pm and will be themed on "Mother Earth" as it is Mothering Sunday.

Our meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month. Our April meeting will be 9th April – theme still to be chosen.

North Worcestershire

(Tessa Carrick 01527 873135

tessa.carrick@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We are a growing group but will always welcome new members. We meet about bimonthly, in people's homes beginning with a drink but spending most of the time on lively discussion. Our backgrounds are varied and since everyone feels free to contribute this adds to the value of each meeting.

Our next meeting is on Tuesday 25th March at 2.30.p.m. in Bromsgrove.

The topic for discussion will be the final 3 chapters of Jack Spong's Together in Hope booklet on *Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection*.

The following meeting is on Wednesday 4th June at 2.30.p.m. when we will discuss the Creative Arts Retreat Movement (CARM). The venue is to be decided.

Nottingham

(David and Avril Turner 0115 976 4909

david.turner@pcnbritain.org.uk)

At our November and December meetings we used Adrian Alker's 'Christmas: Ancient Meanings, Modern Faith' to help us prepare for the Christmas season and this proved beneficial to our thinking and celebration.

We are a small group and have been hit recently by illness, accident and absences that couldn't be avoided so we cancelled our January and February meetings.

We normally meet on the second Saturday of the month at Sherwood United Reformed Church, Edwards Lane, Nottingham NG5 3AA; there is plenty of parking space in the church grounds and frequent buses from the city centre to the church. Needless to say everyone is most welcome to join us from 10am for coffee/tea before we start our meeting at 10.30am. As things are at the moment it would be as well to ring or email to check on the meetings.

Oadby Questioning Believers

(Gerald Gardiner 0116 2713869)

gerald.gardiner@tinyworld.co.uk)

Our group which meets at Oadby in Leicester feel we are at something of a watershed. It's a good place to be because it seems to indicate growth. Three years ago we emerged as a group out of Trinity Methodist church. Numbers have varied from 6 to 12, and over the past months four new members have shared our meetings, bringing their own stories and experiences. Occasionally visiting relatives of members, whose home churches have not proved to be supportive or encouraging to those of a more liberal spiritual outlook, have joined us, and it has been good to think that such encounters have helped 'fellow travellers' to know they are not alone.

Recently we've had an invitation from a neighbouring group at Market Harborough exploring the possibility of a joint meeting/meal. Do we move out of our house base meeting into other premises, with perhaps better facilities for visual material to be shared, or does the home venue offer a warmth and homeliness to be preferred?

One reoccurring theme in our discussion brings us back to asking about the relationship that members of a PCN group can honestly have with a traditional church fellowship. There are rich memories of a pilgrimage shared, and resources enjoyed along with some aspects of worship. And then there are quite profound differences. Liberal followers of Jesus are not superior disciples.

Richmond

(Alan Powell, 0208 878 7355)

alan.powell@pcnbritain.org.uk

The group meets on Saturday afternoons (2.30 pm) in East Sheen at approximately six weekly intervals and is currently discussing the talks given by Adrian Alker at the Abingdon Conference. The topic for the next meeting on Saturday 12th April will be 'Honest about God'.

Rugby

(Nicola Phelan, 01788 562562)

nicola.phelan@pcnbritain.org.uk)

General group- The discussion group now meets every two months and the next meeting is on March 13th.

'Christmas: Ancient Meanings, Modern Faith' compiled by Adrian Alker was discussed at our November and January meetings. The discussion was interesting as not all had come across the writings of Borg et al or completely dismissed the notion of factual truth in some of the narratives. Some felt that children and adults can grasp hidden meaning in the stories without becoming preoccupied with a need for belief in miracles. Others were concerned that the literal interpretation of the gospel narratives can lead to a lack of engagement later. A general discussion about the impact of how Biblical stories are understood and conveyed led to further reflection. One member, a local vicar, described a recent bereavement visit to a man who had lost his wife suddenly. It was clear the man had disengaged from church because of the way aspects of faith were interpreted to him by another member of the clergy. One couple wondered if they might introduce the book at their church where no one else is apparently asking the same questions and it would be good to hear if that happens and to hear feedback - maybe next year?

Book group- Also meets bimonthly. Members swap books and do not necessarily read the same books at the same time. Currently we are gaining much from the thoughts of Dave Tomlinson, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Sarah Miles. The novel 'I heard the Owl Call my Name' by Margaret Craven has been praised by those who have read it so far and I am now eager to read it. Next meeting April 9th.

Sedbergh Conversation Group

(Martin Dodds, 015396 20308)

martin.dodds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Meets roughly every other week through the winter months. An open group, we enjoy discussing topical issues in relation to a faith perspective. Contact MJ Dodds.

St Albans

(Leonora Jagessar, 01582 713110)

leonora.jagessar@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The St Albans group continues to meet every 4th Thursday of the month at 7.30pm at Trinity URC, St Albans. On average about 15-20 of us meet and together decide on the topics we would like to reflect on. In our January meeting we read excerpts of Desmond Tutu's book "God is not a Christian" and we discussed his pleas for tolerance of, respect for and inclusion in church and society of all people of whatever race, religion, human sexuality, etc. In our February meeting we are looking at the "Theology of Land" and how the ideological force of the claim of "promised land" impacts on the contemporary issue of Israel/Palestine (Walter Brueggemann "The Land. Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith"). In our March meeting Revd John Churcher will lead us in a discussion on the "Eight Points of Progressive Christianity" and the suggested amendments to it. If you are living in the St Albans area, you are most welcome to join our meetings, whether regularly or occasionally!

Stoke on Trent

(Ian Gregory 01782 614407)

ian.gregory@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Society of Friends continue to host meetings of the Stoke group, and various members lead discussions while convener Ian Gregory is having medical treatment (he hopes) for a possible hip operation. On April 6 we consider the word 'grace', wondering why a popular hymn continues to be published alleging that a 'higher gift than grace' can refine flesh and blood. Is that trans-substantiation? On May 11th we ask whether 'Almighty God' is an oxy-moron, and on June 1st we ask whether churches need priests to exert authority. All meetings at the Friends Meeting house, Miller Street Newcastle under Lyme at 7.15 on Sundays. Subsequent meetings. Human moods - hope, anger, greed, achievement and gratitude - are topics we will consider through the autumn.

Sutton Coldfield

(Chris Wolfe 07710 659386)

chris.wolfe@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Chris Wolfe writes: the new Sutton Coldfield group has held 2 meetings so far, with a small but enthusiastic membership. We began with discussion on the nature and authority of the Bible. For our second meeting we started looking at the issues of Spirituality, Christian Humanism and the Trinity as from John Churcher's new Lent course. This formed a good basis for animated discussion.

Our Sutton Coldfield meetings are at Chris Wolfe's home, 3 Squirrel Hollow, B76 2RQ. Potential new members are invited to contact Chris, details as above.

Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims

(Pat Churchill 01892 531541

pat.churchill@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Everyone is welcome to our meetings which are generally on the last Thursday of the month but please contact Pat to check time and venue. We tend to pick topics to discuss rather than following a set course.

In November we reviewed where we were now and how we had grown. We had all been glad to find that we were not alone as far as radical ideas went. The problem was that one idea seemed to lead to more questions. We felt that we concentrated too much on the head and not enough on the heart.

There was a sharing of book recommendations and speakers well worth listening to.

In January one of our members having recently conducted his brother's funeral led us in a discussion on death using an article by a gentleman with a terminal illness and his comments, in Reform the URC magazine. We considered the effect, if any, of prayer and holding a person in one's mind. We felt this often led to action on our part. For the dying person prayer in action such as having visitors and knowing that others were praying seemed to be helpful. Several felt that the process of letting go of life would be more difficult. Life after death might or might not exist.

Vale of Glamorgan

(Janet Davies, 01446 410033

janet.davies@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The Barry group in the Vale of Glamorgan meet every fortnight from 7:30 – 9:30 pm on a Wednesday evening. We are an open-minded discussion group in which we respect everyone's viewpoint and where everyone's voice is heard. Fellowship, and conversation with discussion is very much part of our evenings together; and we are all at different stages in our faith journey. We do at times join

with the Cardiff PCN group which widens and enhances our subjects of discussion.

During the run up to Christmas and into the new year we have listened to, and discussed a series of 4 DVD's featuring Bishop Richard Holloway – an amazingly, interesting and comical man who took us through his faith journey. During January the group also discussed and provided their viewpoint on the 8 points of PCN Britain – this took two evenings, a lot of ideas and a few drafts to complete – I am sure we could alter them again, but it had to be laid to rest and we were running out of time!! Good luck to the working group who are looking at this.

We are now looking towards Easter (lent) when we hope to look at, what we believe to be, a progressive and adventurous Lenten study - we will let you know how we get on, so watch this space.....

Woking

(John Craig, 01483 762059

john.craig@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Having progressed through the three *Living the Questions* DVDs, Woking's two small groups are moving on to the *Saving Jesus* material, meeting monthly through the spring and summer. As an intermission from LtQ, one of the groups spent a few sessions in 2012-3 looking at the book (and extracts of the associated radio talks) *Priestland's Progress*, written in 1981. Gerald Priestland was the BBC's religious affairs correspondent at the time. One thing that was striking about his discussion of doctrinal issues with religious leaders and thinkers was the degree of convergence that was both apparent and expected, suggesting a widespread tolerance of differing viewpoints within a core belief system. However, as *Leaving Alexandria* has shown, recent years have not been so optimistic. The other observation that we noted was the paucity of female interviewees, so here at least some progress has been made. The two groups meet monthly - one on Wednesday evenings the other on Saturday mornings.

Janice Proctor of Barry, Vale of Glamorgan

Janet Davies writes:

Our treasured friend Janice lost her incredible fight with cancer on 14 August 2013. Her family were of course first and foremost to her, but she was also a dear friend to many, including those in the Vale of Glamorgan PCN group which she was very much part of. Having being diagnosed with cancer just over 18 months ago, Janice faced her illness and treatment so positively, facing the certainty of death head on - she was truly an amazing, courageous person whom we all admired and who certainly lived her life to the full. Janice's husband Colin died of cancer a few years ago and both he and Janice travelled widely during their years together.

Janice was an incredible, knowledgeable, caring and loveable person who touched the lives of many people. She was also a great encourager. She was one of the finest examples of a progressive Christian and contributed greatly to its development and progression. She had an immense knowledge of the world which came through her travels and reading; she spoke eloquently of the places she visited showing her immense knowledge of the country's history, culture and their many faiths. Her knowledge helped the Vale of Glamorgan group in forward thinking and in their discussions. Her knowledge was expressed, beautifully and wonderfully showing respect and love to everyone, whether or not they were following the pathway she had chosen to follow or otherwise. Her respect for people of every culture and religion was an example of her own journey of faith and of the Jesus way of living,

She is most certainly a great loss to her family and to us in Vale of Glamorgan and Cardiff Progressive Groups, as well as to many others. She was loved and respected by many and I know that I speak on behalf of the Vale of Glamorgan and Cardiff Groups, when I say that it has been an immense privilege to know her, to love her and have been part of her life. She will always be remembered.

The editor apologises for the very late appearance of this tribute to a pioneering member of PCN and a lovely person.

Modern Church

A Liberating Spirit?

Exploring Spirituality for the 21st Century

What might be a “liberal” approach to spirituality? Many in our world have lost interest in institutions and are weary with dogmatic arguments but are looking for authentic, intelligent and accessible ways of reflecting on the realities and mysteries of life which can actually make a difference to their own lives. Modern Church is organising a conference which will create opportunities to explore some of the contemporary approaches to spirituality through the lens of open minded and well-informed enquiry.

Canon Prof Martyn Percy, principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxford, is known to those PCN members who attended the Honest to God conference in November and they will remember his lively address on that occasion. He is going to chair the conference and so has been able to attract a wide range of interesting speakers. Spirituality will be explored in a variety of contexts, ranging from Professor Grace Davie, talking about her work studying the trends in religion and spirituality in the European context, to Dr John Peacock, an academic and a Buddhist practitioner for over forty years sharing his experience of Buddhist understandings of spirituality. Other academics addressing the conference are Dr Abby Day who has studied religion amongst young people and Dr Rachel Muers who has written on the theology of silence.

Not all the speakers are from academia: Mark Oakley is chancellor of St Paul’s Cathedral and readers may have heard him at Greenbelt last year, Emma Percy has been a parish priest and is now a college chaplain and writer, and finally Dave Bookless, National Director of A Rocha UK.

The conference is residential over four days, 14th to 17th July, which gives the opportunity to get totally immersed in the thinking and discussion. We are always well looked after at High Leigh Conference Centre, which is set in lovely grounds in Hertfordshire. Further details can be found at www.modernchurch.org.uk/conference/conference.html or telephone Christine Alker, Modern Church’s administrator on 0845 345 1909.

Progressive Conferences from PCN Britain and friends in 2014

See PCN website for further details

Thursday to Saturday March 27th – 29th

Free to Believe: Dominic Crossan on the Challenge of Christmas and the Meaning of Easter at Swanwick.

Saturday May 17th

PCN Britain: Mark Townsend on Seeing Jesus Again with New Eyes at the Priory Rooms, Birmingham

Saturday June 7th

St Mark’s CRC: Martyn Percy on Progressive Church: Reconceiving Christian Community at Sheffield

Friday to Sunday June 13th – 15th

PCN Britain: Janet Morley’s spiritual poetry residential at the Windermere Centre

Monday to Thursday July 14th – 17th

Modern Church: Dave Bookless, Martyn Percy and others on A Liberating Spirit? Exploring Spirituality for the 21st Century at High Leigh

Friday to Sunday July 18th – 20th

Sea of Faith: Derek McAuley, Pippa Evans and Keith Porteous Wood on Making Connections at Leicester Uni.

Friday and Saturday September 19th – 20th

PCN Britain: Greta Vosper (with Scott Kearns) on Christianity with or without God in Newcastle

Tuesday September 23rd

PCN Britain (with Non-theist Friends Network) : Greta Vosper on Christianity with or without God at the Friends Meeting House, Manchester

Wednesday September 24th

PCN Britain: Greta Vosper on Christianity with or without God at Bloomsbury Central Baptist, London

Friday and Saturday September 26th – 27th

PCN Britain (with Sea of Faith): Greta Vosper (with Scott Kearns) on Christianity with or without God at the Friends Meeting House, Oxford

Saturday November 8th

St Mark’s CRC: Rowan Williams on Faith in Search of Understanding Today at St Mark’s church, Sheffield.

Friday to Sunday November 14th – 16th

PCN Britain (with SCM): Peter Rollins (with George Elerick and Katharine Sarah Moody) on the Emerging Church dialogue and Radical Theology at Swanwick.

Eight Points Consultation

First impressions by Brian Wilson



The PCN chair, Angela Smith, launched a review of the Eight Points last October, sending a letter to every member inviting submissions about what, if anything, needs changing. The consultation is being analysed by Brian Wilson whose report will be presented to the next management committee at the

*end of March. Brian is a former headteacher and author of several books including *Lost Certainties*, which was reviewed in an earlier edition of this magazine.*

I have read through the responses several times, and to me the most impressive thing about the whole exercise lies in the number, the quality, and the general tone of the responses, which were thoughtful, wide ranging, and expressed with gracious moderation. There were 128 responses and of these eleven came from PCN affiliated groups. There were 76 “longer” and 51 “shorter” responses. The shorter

responses were particularly helpful for their clarity and focus on specifics; the longer replies for their sincerity and thoughtful account of the reasoning that lay behind the ideas and suggestions offered.

It is my impression that opinion was widely in favour of the exercise and supportive of the need to revise our existing Eight Points, whether in whole or in part. Significant numbers seem to think that the new US version is in broad terms “better” than the current PCN version, on varying grounds, such as conciseness, clarity, the lack of reference to the Eucharist, and the use of more inclusive terms. Others were happier with the UK version, perhaps with some adjustments. Many preferred a bit of both and some wanted to start again with fewer or more points. I must stress these are initial impressions. I have not yet made any attempt to measure the weight of opinion by counting numbers. That will come later.

I am grateful to those who reminded us that we are not writing a creed.

Sabbatical study: How progressive is the United Reformed Church?

David Coaker seeks help from fellow PCN members

This year I will be marking the 10th anniversary of my ordination to serve as a minister within the United Reformed Church. Over this time I have become more fully aware, and explicit, in placing myself within the progressive strand of our faith. As such I wish to spend my sabbatical this autumn exploring how congregations are living out Progressive Christianity. My first area of exploring is within the URC with a simple questionnaire being circulated through our Synod Clerks to ministers and church secretaries. It basically asks them to read the ‘8 points’ and decide if they’d like to talk further. This will then form the basis

of a series of visits between September and November. I would also welcome contact with congregations of other denominations who are walking this path who would be willing to share their stories.

As well as visits I intend to catch up on my reading, and if you have any suggestions of books or articles in this area please let me know.

It is my hope that I will be able to collect these stories together and offer some reflections to assist us all in expressing progressive Christianity as communities. dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk 01772 4622

Ash Wednesday, Justice and judgement

by Hugh Dawes

A few years ago, when still a parish priest, I spent most of Ash Wednesday in a court – an immigration tribunal – supporting someone who was appealing against the Home Office’s decision to deport her from Britain. And I quickly sensed that what was going on had many connections with the themes of Ash Wednesday, and the biblical texts set for that day. 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 her solicitor, supported by people like me? What was just for the government, represented by the Home Office? – though their officer never actually turned 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

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.

PCN Britain is itself part of a wider international network of progressive Christian organisations, including ProgressiveChristianity.org in the United States. We are online at www.pcnbritain.org.uk.

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it? And on what basis? Well only one, of course – the law. Which led to an extraordinary (for me at least) two-tone and two language aspect to the whole thing. One moment we were exposed to the most intimate details of people's lives, their feelings, their mental and physical health, what might happen either or both of them if the one was expelled, what might happen to the children involved. And then the next, judge and solicitor were discussing in very specialist legal terms – article 3, article 9 – and legal manner – your submission is – how these related to the situation in the country the person was to be deported back to and, most of the time, 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 rather better at being judgmental than merciful, and itself much concerned with law. 'I have been wicked even from my birth, says the psalmist, a sinner when my mother conceived me.'

The gospel passage that same day was the story from John, of the woman caught 'in the very act of committing adultery'. The scribes and Pharisees want to condemn the woman, and to get Jesus to do the same. "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 no less capable of hurling a well-aimed stone, and as the recent statement of the Church of England's Bishops regarding clergy seeking a same-sex marriage shows, can fall back on law to justify that.

Yet Jesus, in that gospel passage, will not be drawn on the issue of law. His response 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 was perhaps what I struggled with in the court that morning.

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, like a spiritual director or confessor.

To open ourselves and expose ourselves to the deepest emotions and fears in ourselves, as we in the court (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. Done properly, that is not cheap, and certainly not easy. But it can be deeply healing. For it is to see ourselves through the eyes of God. *

**The tribunal judge found against the woman's deportation. The Home Office immediately appealed against that. After months of anxiety, that appeal was finally rejected, and the whole family - parents and children - are safe in the UK. The cover shows a woman protester for change in Grozny as this issue was going to press. Copy date for the next issue Friday 16th May.*