

# Progressive Voices



**'He was in the  
wilderness forty days ...'**

**What does Lent  
mean to you?**



**March 2015**





# Marcus Borg

11th March 1942 – 21st January 2015

It is an unwished-for honour to pen this appreciation of Marcus Borg, whose death in January was a hard truth to take in what was, for us in Sheffield at least, a bitter wintry month. Christine called out the news as I drove out for a long journey to north Yorkshire. All day long on that cold Thursday I kept in mind the warmth of affection and deep respect which I and countless others had for this dear scholar, teacher and friend.

I am sure that all of us who have read any of his 21 books (translated into 11 languages) or who have met, heard, or seen him on a Living the Questions DVD, will share that same sense of loss and sadness which Andy, our PCN administrator described as 'like the passing of a favourite uncle who cannot be replaced.'

Tributes poured in from all quarters of the theological world, not least from evangelical Christians who have disagreed with much of Marcus's work. Nicolas Perrin, professor of biblical studies at Wheaton College, USA wrote: "We should thank Borg for forcing us to take seriously Jesus as a political thinker." "He was the kind of scholar one could not and did not want to ignore," said Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary. "He patiently listened to all sides of the debates and knew the strengths of evangelicalism and historic orthodoxy, even if he pointed more often to weaknesses. Borg was the kind of progressive/liberal theologian who welcomed evangelicals to the table - as long as they would listen, as well."

The generosity of such tributes highlights the gentle, humble and yet passionate person who was not only a fine scholar and an enthusiastic educator but also a brilliant communicator. Unlike Jack Spong, Borg perhaps did not present to the church establishment the same threat 'from within' that a radical bishop did. Unlike his great friend Dom Crossan he did not have a major fall-out with a particular Christian denomination. Indeed he counted amongst his scholarly friends more

conservative ones such as Tom Wright, with whom he co-wrote the splendid "The Meaning of Jesus."

Of course those deeply conservative elements on the Christian Right in the USA found Borg's writing deeply troubling, especially in his exposition of scripture. However Marcus gained the respect of all serious students of the Bible and Christian apologetics. Many considered him a 'friendly provocateur'. Whilst being an important influence in the early days of the Jesus seminar, he nevertheless avoided the tendency to be critical in a reductionist fashion. Rather his approach bore the hallmarks of a person deeply convinced of the presence and transformational power of God. Hence his long standing desire that we look afresh at Jesus, at God, at the Bible, as it were 'for the first time'.

Can you remember the first time you came across Marcus Borg? It would be good to hear your stories of being influenced by Marcus. I clearly recall a retired clergy friend entering St Marks Broomhill just before the beginning of the morning service, holding a copy of 'Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time.' "You should read this" he said. My initial reaction was of bemusement at this seemingly evangelical title. My feeling after reading through the book was one of deep gratitude that a learned scholar should so lucidly present the kind of picture of Jesus, and Christian faith, which had sustained liberals despite the years of our being marginalized by the Church establishment. 'Let's invite him to come and give a lecture' I suggested to my church council. That was the beginning of a new phase of life for me and for the church community which I was serving in Sheffield. Marcus came in Dec 2000 to speak to a title 'Meeting Jesus Again'. The church was packed, the enthusiasm overwhelming. Here was that eloquent speaker, with notes prepared for the audience and with timer fixed to the lectern, announcing he would speak each time for 45 minutes and he did so to the second!

Over supper I asked Marcus whom we could next invite and immediately he said, 'my friend Dom Crossan'. Annual lectures from Dom Crossan, Jack Spong, Richard Holloway and many others followed and in 2003 the Centre for Radical Christianity was launched as part of the progressive Christian network. But we owed all this to his first visit. He returned to Sheffield again in 2008 and 2012. Meanwhile in 2010 PCN hosted Marcus at a weekend at St John's Church in Princes Street, Edinburgh, where he spoke to the subject of "Being Christian in the 21st Century", this time to an audience which included an attentive Bishop of Edinburgh.

In many of his books Marcus alluded to his own modest traditional Lutheran upbringing, of his journey of fascination with the New Testament, which led him to graduate study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Further study followed at Oxford under Professor George Caird at Mansfield College, a place rooted in the nonconformist tradition. Under Caird, he developed his doctoral thesis published as "Conflict Politics and Holiness in the Teaching of Jesus". In this he explored the conflict between a politics of holiness and a politics of compassion, and their implications for Israel.

In returning to the USA he eventually joined the faculty at Oregon State University in 1979, becoming the Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture. Here he taught generations of students until his retirement from there in 2007. Marcus in lecture and in print often told of the response he made to students who said that they did not believe in the traditionally portrayed God, simply responding that he didn't believe in that kind of God either!

The God in whom Marcus did place his trust was for him 'definitively disclosed' in Jesus, a God of deep compassion, searing justice, inclusive love, transforming power – a Presence, a More – grasped so often through silent meditation and that mystic communion of the Christian tradition.

His wife Marianne was on the staff of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland Oregon where Borg was made a canon theologian. With characteristic humour he said his wife informed him that 'canon' means 'big shot.'

A 'big shot' Marcus certainly was, both in the academy and in the reputation gained for writing books so accessible to a general readership. Every one of us will have a particular one or more of his books which are special to us. It would be interesting to hear from PCN members about which books are their favourites and why. For me after the groundbreaking book, 'Meeting Jesus' and the fine dialogue in the 'Meaning of Jesus', I have come to value most 'The God We Never Knew', in which Borg explores different meanings of salvation, multiple images for God and that wonderful idea of the dream of God for God's world.

Borg, like generations of biblical scholars elucidated with rigour the context and form of scripture and yet

was unafraid to assert that the Bible could be seen as a sacrament of the sacred. In 'The Heart of Christianity', for many a much valued introduction to the foundations of Christian faith, he shows how the term 'born again' can have real meaning to searchers of the truth.

He co-authored of course with Dom Crossan those splendid books on the birth and passion narratives and in The First Paul, put forward a case for liberals to begin to love the man from Tarsus.

Walter Wink said that Borg, through his scholarship and his passionate faith might well change your mind about Christianity and change your life. I am sure countless thousands of people, even millions across the continents, have felt able to own the title 'Christian' because of Marcus Borg. He has given new life to individuals and church communities.

When PCN marked its 10th anniversary at the Honest to God conference in November 2013, on behalf of the trustees I asked Marcus if he would send a greeting to PCN. This was the last correspondence I had with him:

*My memories of my times with you are rich – as Bob Hope used to sing, "Thanks for the memories."*

*What you are doing is important, both in the present and for the future of Christianity. There are some forms of Christianity that will not survive, and candidly do not deserve to survive. Progressive Christianity is the best hope for an authentic Christianity that is true to the passion of God and Jesus.*

*May the dove of God's Spirit fly over the white cliffs of Dover. All the best, Marcus*

In 2011 he returned once more to Sheffield to lead another packed conference. Sadly this was to be one of his last visits to lecture in England and his plan to speak at Greenbelt last year was cancelled.

Brian McLaren quotes an email from Marcus written during his illness: "I have always known that we are all on death row. Never would have gotten that wrong on a true-false test. But it's different to know it." Still, he said, "in the midst of all this I am unreasonably happy. Not all the time. But more than I might have expected."

Before his illness and in his final book, 'Convictions', Marcus ends by saying: "What's it all about? What's the Christian life all about? It's about loving God and loving what God loves. It's about becoming passionate about God and participating in God's passion for a different kind of world, here and now. And the future, including what is beyond our lives? We leave that up to God."

We shall miss Marcus and his work deeply and our thoughts and prayers go out to his family and his wide circle of friends across the world. But I am sure there will be ways in which we shall honour him and move forward with fellow progressive Christians as we too seek to be passionate about God's kingdom on this fragile earth.

**Adrian Alker, Vice Chair PCN Britain**



# Welcome

It is a great privilege to welcome you to the 12th edition of Progressive Voices, and my thanks for the positive responses to my first issue as editor. I hope that together we can continue to develop our magazine.

In this edition we remember Marcus Borg who sadly died in January. In September we are dedicating the issue to reflecting on his life and work (see below).

Elsewhere within these pages you will find reports on the Godly Mayhem conference, and encouragement to attend our AGM in May, and the tour by Dr Val Webb in April. You will also find an introduction to the strategic plan for PCN Britain, setting our aims for the next three years. You'll find some items that clearly tie in with the season of Lent and Easter, but that theme did not seem to inspire you as much as Christmas did last time? Also the '8 points' revision resulted in only one message in my inbox. So for June we won't have a theme, so send in for consideration whatever is intriguing you.

You'll also notice that the Group reports are shorter this time. Four pages are reserved up until the copy deadline convenors, so please put the future dates in your diaries.

So here it is, the 12th edition of Progressive Voices. Enjoy!



## Call for Contributions

Our focus for the September edition will be to reflect on the contribution of Marcus Borg to Christianity. We are seeking articles giving serious consideration to his life and work in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and the Christian life.

Please send your proposals (title and précis) to the editor: [dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Proposal Deadline: Friday 26<sup>th</sup> June 2015

There is an open invitation for submissions. Your reflections, questions, events, poems, images, reviews, letters, comments, news, prayers and other contributions are all welcome.

Publication is at the discretion of the editor:  
[dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## Copy Deadlines:

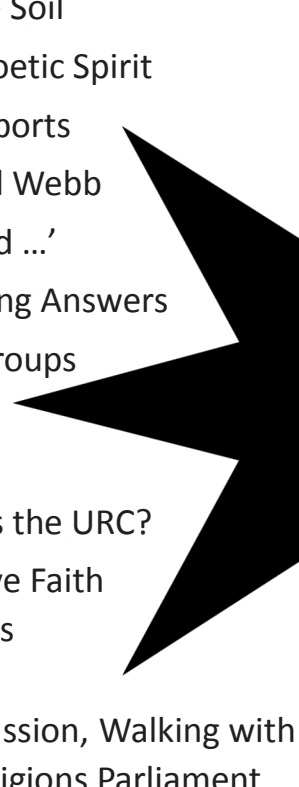
**June: Friday 15th May 2015**

September: Friday 14<sup>th</sup> August 2015

December: Friday 14<sup>th</sup> November 2015

March: Friday 12<sup>th</sup> Feb 2016

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You can contact us at 01594 516528, [info@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:info@pcnbritain.org.uk), or PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham, Gloucestershire, GL14 1BB.

Further information, including details of publications and conferences, is available at

**[www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk)**



# Letter from the Chair

Over Christmas the news that a Scottish nurse had contracted the Ebola virus and was critically ill in a London hospital set me thinking about the very real inter-connections between health, economics and poverty. How, as progressive Christians, should we view – and respond to – this crisis, even though this is a humanitarian concern, which spans all faiths and none?

The 2014 Ebola epidemic is the largest in history, affecting multiple countries in West Africa and killing many thousands of people. Farmers in Sierra Leone who deserted their land because of the Ebola crisis are now being encouraged to go back to work as the UN warns that the region could face a food crisis as a result of the outbreak. Burial workers in Sierra Leone staged a protest by dumping bodies in public over the non-payment of allowances for handling Ebola victims, even though the government and World Bank had released funds for high-risk pay to district health management teams. West Africa suffers from so much deprivation, so much poverty, so much dependency on the richer nations of the world for medicines, resources and food and a desperately needed vaccine. We can send aid, in response to the immediate need, but is it possible to prevent history repeating itself?

Much is spent annually in keeping nuclear-armed submarines patrolling our waters to 'protect us' from a threat that is unlikely to materialize, whilst our government invests comparatively little towards the prevention of something as tangible and probable as virulent infectious disease. With the Ebola virus, for example, it remains far from obvious who will pay for the vaccines when they become available. Millions of doses are needed, not just to help end the current epidemic but also as an important stockpile to prevent future outbreaks from getting out of control. It is a costly process to bring a vaccine to market, so with a virus like Ebola, which kills cruelly, occurs infrequently and usually in poor African countries, vaccine manufacturers are unlikely to see a great return on their investment. The virus has reached the West, but still the financial incentives are not around as there is no really profitable market. There will always be a significant funding gap standing between vaccination and the people in West Africa (or in other poor countries) who desperately need it.

It would help if the West stopped waiting for evidence that a disease is becoming a global threat before it treats it like one. If we want to prevent major outbreaks of diseases like Ebola and the poverty and misery that follow, then a prerequisite is to invest in developing new vaccines and stockpiling them so that they can be made available to all, regardless of the wealth of nations or their citizens. This then becomes a matter of global political will and involves something far more



Julien Harneis via Wikimedia Commons

complex than simply sending out medical aid and food parcels to those who live in poorer and less developed countries than ourselves, important as this activity is.

Does faith, progressive or otherwise, have a distinct contribution to make in this? Can faith drive positive political change? Could faith engender a global ethic that places the health and wellbeing of all people ahead of wealth and profit? It seems to me that good health is a crucial pre-requisite to ensuring thriving economies and a reduction of poverty.

Finally, a couple of other matters: In the coming year or two we need to recruit a generation of committee members (trustees) able to take PCN into the future. So, please could you give serious thought to whether you would consider taking forward your own hopes for progressive Christianity by becoming a trustee this year? To find out more please contact Andy, myself, or any of the current committee. All nominations for the 2015 AGM on 8th May must be submitted in advance to the PCN office by April 25th at the latest.

And last but not least, we recorded with sadness the death of Marcus Borg in January. I first came across Marcus in 2008 at a conference arranged by St Marks CRC in Sheffield. A very able communicator, he possessed a gentle wisdom and openness that encouraged so many of us to explore progressive Christianity. Once when asked, 'But how do you know that you're right?', Marcus paused, looked at his questioner thoughtfully and in his inimitable unassuming way said, 'I don't know. I don't know that I'm right.' He will be remembered with great affection and greatly missed by all.



**Angela Smith** serves as the  
Chair of PCN Britain  
[angela.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:angela.smith@pcnbritain.org.uk)

# Introducing: Mark Oakley

*If prose is a river,  
poetry's a fountain*

A day in the  
fountain  
with Mark Oakley  
Saturday May 9th



Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church,  
235 Shaftsbury Avenue, WC2H 8EP.

10.30am for 11.00am start. to finish at 4.15pm.

There will be a short AGM for PCN Britain during  
the lunch break to which all are welcome.

£17 for non-members and £13 for members.

'If prose is a river, poetry is a fountain'. The words of Michael Longley go some of the way in explaining why poetry has been so vital to people of Christian faith. Christianity is too important for us to be literalistic about it. From its very beginnings it has been poetry in motion: the stories of Jesus, the crafting of the evangelists, the imagery of Paul, the vision of John. These all allusively build on the poetic artistry of the creation myths and the poetic honesty of the psalms, as well as the protest poetry of the prophets. The whole scriptural enterprise is that of trying to listen to life as a divine gift and to be imaginative enough to read the love between the lines. Christian liturgy naturally began to shape itself into sacred and poetic drama.

Prose fills endless pages of lines in a relentless language that stops with a small dot, takes a breath and starts again. It travels with you, demanding little more than the occasional pause to have another thought. Poetry, on the other hand, slowly places words around spaces, is wary of punctuation that staple words to a page in the hope of finalising meaning and congratulating the intellect. Poetry asks of you a more creative reading, a willingness to allow confusion to be part of the joy and seriousness of somehow letting language form you, more than inform, you. Poetry is wary of first impressions, quick clarity and the easy answer. It resists closure and paraphrase, defies summary. Poetry runs ahead of us shouting 'you can't catch me!' It doesn't have a single view in mind but has multiple epiphanies in its sight, having discerned that truth is much richer in connectivity, and more riotously colourful, than the prosaic world of prose would have you believe.

Poetry is therefore the native language of the person of faith. God cannot be caught: 'always before us and

leaving as we arrive' (R.S. Thomas). The One whom we are to love most is the one whom we can never fully possess; so the language of faith is a language of increasing desire, ache and search. We know that in a fallen world nothing is less self-evident than the self.

We need the poet to help us read ourselves, glimpsed in a stronger light, and we need poetry to deepen the mysteries of God more than resolve them. This poetic vocation can only be approached with a language that is not relevant to the noise of now but resonant to our greater depth. Poetry will always be healthily sceptical of our cheerful pulpit fluency when it comes to the divine reality and will work harder to see everything, from the human heart to the humility of heaven, from fresh and dislocating angles. It will warn us of the curse of religious literalism, its immodest certainties setting flames of hate across so many parts of the world. Poetry encourages our mind to think in metaphors. It teases our soul to be ready for the surprise of wonder and the gift of tears, the moment when we say 'yes, that's how it is and never quite knew it like that'. Poetry has both immense intimacy and intimate immensity and in its pledge to a more attentive perception, faith celebrates the sacramentality of poetic words as a beautiful and frightening gift of the God who is in this world as poetry is in the poem.

Those who long for a more progressively-oriented Christianity are often caricatured as being mere cold, rationally analytical children of the Enlightenment. Progressive Christians, it is true, will never be unafraid to reason but nor will they be ashamed to celebrate and deepen the mystery of God and with the rich artistry and challenge of words cascading like a refreshing fountain in the soul. Any Christian faith in the future that is not poetic at its very heart will be a poor and shallow affair.

The Reverend  
Canon Mark Oakley  
is Chancellor of St  
Paul's Cathedral.

He is responsible  
for educational and  
outreach activities,  
engaging with

ethical issues concerning the City, finance and human wellbeing, and is responsible for the visual arts policy.

His interests are the relationship between faith and poetry, human rights and the place of faith in the contemporary world. He is the author of several books, is a regular lecturer and broadcaster and is a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London. He is a Trustee of the Civil Liberties Trust.





# A Vision to Realize



I am soon to retire as a Director of Mission in the Church of England. My working days with churches have been filled with mission statements, vision days, action plans and strategic planning. Ah, all soon no more! But such exercises have their place and purpose in every organisation, not least PCN Britain.

Since our inception as a nationwide network we have attempted to listen to our members and to reflect back to them our direction of travel and the goals we move towards. We have tried as trustees to put forward plans for a three year programme with specific objectives which we hope we can achieve. If we have a clear overall aim, it is encompassed in those eight guiding points. But if I were pressed to give a short and succinct answer to the question, 'What does PCN Britain hope to achieve?' my personal response would be to enable people to be passionate about being Christian today. And that owes much to Marcus Borg.

Below then are half a dozen objectives or targets which, having consulted members in last year's questionnaire, will form the basis of our work through to 2017.

## **1. To work with like-minded organisations to stage nationally significant conferences.**

We are not the only fish in the sea of open minded, open hearted approaches to Christian faith, thank goodness! We work with other organisations through our Together in Hope publications; we share resources, have links to each other's websites, and organise joint conferences (like the 2013 Honest to God weekend). Conference means what it says - bringing together folk for friendship, for learning and for walking together the progressive way. We want to do more of this.

## **2. To meet a demand for more groups and regional activities by equipping members to collaborate in achieving this target.**

The network of groups, some long-standing some newly born, are at the throbbing heart of our network. The trustees intend to do their utmost, together with group convenors and others, to support, equip and encourage members to organise gatherings of all kinds which benefit people in their neck of the woods or slopes of their vineyard.

## **3. Based on the revised Eight Points, to produce a set of new leaflets targeted at group formation, church transformation, open theology, and joining PCN.**

We are enthusiastic in sharing with others about PCN and our aims, and we wish to place into your hands good material which can serve this purpose.

## **4. To meet a demand for progressive worship material through a programme of training and workshops aimed at producing worship resources**

For many members there is a heartfelt need to create and offer worship which offers integrity to progressive Christians and we will seek to support this.

## **5. To appoint a communications team to promote a progressive Christian voice across all media, and to develop links with higher education chaplains and teachers.**

We want to be heard! To collaborate with like-minded organisations to respond to events. We want young minds to be open to fresh ideas and progressive thought. We are unafraid to promote our cause!

## **6. To seek out progressive partners not only among Christians but also from other faiths.**

In the desire for truth, we welcome and wish for searchers from all faith traditions and none, with whom we can share the journey.

We need each other in and through our network to achieve these objectives and realize our vision. We think we are in for an exciting three years ahead!



**Adrian Alker** serves as the  
Vice Chair of PCN Britain  
[adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk)



# Keep the Oil in the Soil

The fossil fuel disinvestment campaign is the fastest growing boycott campaign in history. And we can all play our part. In this time of Lent, is it time to resolve to give up something we seem to love, if there are things we love more which it puts at risk?

Climate change may have moved to the back-burner politically, but the world keeps warming up just the same. A January 2015 NASA report has shown that 2014 was the world's warmest year since 1880. It states that:

*"nine of the ten warmest years have taken place since 2000. Since 1880, Earth's average surface temperature has warmed by about 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit (0.8 degrees Celsius), a trend that is largely driven by the increase in carbon dioxide and other human emissions into the planet's atmosphere. The majority of that warming has occurred in the past three decades."*

World leaders have accepted that the global temperature rise will need to be kept within a 2 degree limit, for a reasonably safe future for most of us. Even this rise will result in loss of habitat or worse for many people in low-lying islands and coastlines – the impact is being felt already. Even with a 2 degree rise, low lying islands like the Maldives are put at risk. Famously, the Maldives cabinet met underwater in 2009 to illustrate the point. The Pacific Islands Forum last year described climate change as the greatest threat to the future existence of its member island nations. With many of these being no more than a meter above sea level – which is predicted to rise by at least half a meter this century - it is easy to see why.



As the World Bank reported last year in its report - Turn Down the Heat - *"the significant climate impacts observed today will pale in comparison to 2 degree C warming, let alone the potentially catastrophic impacts of a 4 degree C increase...an alarming scenario"*

Here is the point: most of the fossil fuel reserves already identified will have to stay in the ground - never mind new and unconventional reserves such as shale gas.

There has been a hope that technology, in the form of "carbon capture and storage", could allow us to carry on burning fossil fuels. This may be true technically, but the economics of CCS mean that at best it could allow us to burn a little more of the reserves already identified.

And the issue of financial prudence for our pension funds, and others, should weigh just as heavily as environmental concern. There is a rising fear, shared amongst others by the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, that fossil fuel stocks become "stranded assets" - that the "carbon bubble" will burst with a sharp decline in fossil fuel stocks. Because the value of those stocks is based in exploiting, not conserving, fossil fuel reserves.

In the short term, the collapse in oil prices is causing oil company stock values to fall and investment plans to be slashed. This is a short term phenomenon, but with oil and gas company stocks having fallen on average by 10% in six months, now is a good time to get out. Desmond Tutu is a passionate advocate of fossil fuel divestment and has made the link with the apartheid boycott movement. As he has memorably said:

*"the corporations understood the logic of money, even when they weren't swayed by the dictates of morality."*

So how can we, as churches and individuals play our part? First, this does not mean stopping using oil. Someone once asked me "won't I be a hypocrite if I support divestment when I still fill up my car with petrol every week?" Not at all. Fossil fuel companies need investment in the main not to exploit existing reserves but to find new ones. Over 180 organisations have decided to take their money out of fossil fuels. These include the Church of Sweden and, here in the UK, the Quakers. Reviews are being held by the Church of England, Methodists and others.

So here is what each of us can do.

As individuals: If you have a pension plan – whether you are paying in or taking a pension, spend just a few minutes contacting your fund. This is very easy. Go to **[www.greenlightcampaign.org.uk](http://www.greenlightcampaign.org.uk)** Look up the name of your pension fund and type it in. The site will help you do the rest. I have done it – and it has helped the campaign. Green Light can handle the follow up. If you bank with one of the main high street banks, visit **[www.moveyourmoney.org.uk](http://www.moveyourmoney.org.uk)** and click Current Campaign. Here you can contact your bank and ask them to disinvest.

As church members: Operation Noah is helping divestment campaigns in several denominations through



[www.brightnow.org.uk](http://www.brightnow.org.uk) and lend your support to the Bright Now campaign in your own denomination – or link with others to start a new campaign if yours is not yet one of them. For example, in the Methodist Church, Operation Noah is working with a group of a dozen or so people across the UK to engage with the fossil fuel investment review process which is looking at the £50million or so which the Church holds as fossil fuel investments.

Lent is a time for giving up things. But it is also a time for renewal of our faith and our love.

So as a final Lenten action, why not take part in the “For the Love of...” campaign promoted by Christian Aid and others. Go to [www.fortheloveof.org.uk](http://www.fortheloveof.org.uk) and share one of the things you love which climate change puts at risk. The love I shared there was for the sheer joy of a sunlit cliff walk with sparkling sea alongside. What would yours be?



**Jon Cape** is a leader of the PCN Forth Valley local group in central Scotland and is a member of Stirling Methodist Church.

## Easter Morning

You, Lord Jesus, didn't stay  
Quietly dead and hid away  
You're still here to cause dissension  
To challenge clerical invention

For there is still a need of men  
To respond as you did then  
To overcome their normal fears  
And face the world with fresh ideas

Give us then the strength divine  
To step completely out of line  
Going after where you led  
Doing always what you said

Not putting you upon a throne  
Nor making monuments in stone  
But out there with you doing stuff  
Where life is true and life is tough

Be our strength when we are weak  
Be there when we your comfort seek  
Be there in glory when we win  
Be there in mercy when we sin.

Lord Jesus, with the Spirit fill us  
With his awesome power instil us  
For it is then that we can do  
and follow truly after you.

**Edward Conder** (Chelmsford PCN Group)

## Poetic Spirit

Humans are gregarious animals: we live in groups that are protective of their members. We need to gather together regularly otherwise we become lonely, and we are all aware of the dangers of loneliness.

We engage in many types of assembly from sports matches through theatre to church. We can take our pick of the many variants that suit our mood (and ability to pay). I think these massed gatherings of more than a roomful are essential to our well-being. Don't ask me to explain why I think that, I can't, but I can muse. They are spectator events: I can't contribute other than in joining in the reading or singing out loud of a prepared text. Everyone is joining in and there is safety in numbers. All this covers our embarrassment. In sporting events I can shout in reaction to the game, or join in songs or chants; I get a rush of excitement from that. At the theatre, cinema, concert hall or lecture I'm expected to remain silent in order to allow my fellows to pick up on fine nuances otherwise lost in unwanted hubbub, but I am allowed to applaud at the end, and that's exciting.

If I want to discuss my thoughts with others then I need a roomful of people, not a crowd. I think there is an essential place for small discussion groups where everyone knows everyone else and is prepared to argue constructively. I have heard it said that I am not entitled to hold a view of my own unless I have defended it in open argument or discussion, call it what you like, with someone else; unless I have submitted it for peer review. It works in the scientific community.

So what do we go to these large gatherings for? I think it's excitement and inspiration. Some don't involve words: sporting events and music, for example, and also the excitement of simply being in a crowd. However, at others I go to hear someone say something, and in those I am interested in the quality of the words and the ideas behind them. I can still be bowled along by the excitement of the moment and, if I'm lucky, there will be the inspiration of thoughts of my own as I listen or in later reflection and group discussion.

I can sit in solitude and read, and that can be exciting, but it doesn't meet my human need for the excitement of the crowd. The need for gathering is not an end in itself: there has to be an attraction in order to attend otherwise I just get bored and leave, or don't go again. If it's a church service the attraction is probably in the words I hear or take part in reciting or singing, or possibly being carried along with my own thoughts and contemplation. For some it will be the reaffirmation of their faith. Familiarity with the words, remembering them, saying them from memory, taking them away with me, repeating them to myself in later contemplation: this is poetry.

**Nigel Blakey** (Birmingham PCN Group)



# Godly Mayhem reports

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Each response since the small underground movement of Acts 2 emerged, has in some way attempted to be an answer to the Church's place in history. From sharing a bed with political power in Constantinian Christianity, to the monks who disavowed their place in society, to Luther who challenged institutional religiosity, the Church has been fighting for its relevance for some time. But what does this fighting prove? If we have to fight to defend our place in history, then is there not something deeper lurking in plain sight? Is this desire to be heard, this desire for relevance, is itself a confession of institutional anxiety?

Famed French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan once made the claim that anxiety compels us, as if driven by a motor, to coordinate our lives and spiritual experiences in such a way as if to respond to a series of repetitive questions: Who I am? Why am I? What do I have to offer to the world? These questions force us to give an answer; for Christians it is God. But what if the stereotypical conservative theology of a God who comes to save humankind ends up no longer being enough? What if the mainline Christian worldview loses its relevancy in relationship to how we might all experience the rest of our lives? Would there be anything else to offer or is atheism the only option?

These questions and many others were explored in an intimate setting at the Hayes Centre, in Swanwick. The Godly Mayhem conference boasted well-known author and speaker, Peter Rollins, along with two up and coming heretical voices in the Emergent Church and Progressive Christian arenas. The event was hosted in partnership by the Progressive Christian Network and The Student Christian Movement. One of the main reasons behind this temporary organizational merging was to reach out to younger groups who were also interested in the investigation of these existential queries. Peter Rollins, a widely sought after speaker and the inventor of pyro-theology, was the main speaker who gave a series of thought provoking messages centred around doubt and developing supportive communities that allow for the emotional, spiritual, and sometimes physical responses to doubting one's faith.

Many audience members were concerned about the practical aspects to coming to the realization that God does not meet all of our needs or exist to make us happy, as projected in many Western theologies today. Rollins response was that the point of these communities, his most well-known one being Ikona in Ireland, was not to promote a perpetual state of depression, but to deal with the reality of such a loss in a way that the people are able to move forward.

In his typical self-deprecating humorous fashion Rollins shared personal anecdotes, stories and Irish jokes to

tease out his otherwise philosophically dense concepts. His work intersects with many other historical philosophers, as did the content of the other two speakers, Katharine Sarah Moody and myself, George Elerick. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a German philosopher who was best known for philosophical idealism. The extremely unfair condensed version of that philosophy would be: what you see is not what you get. Language limits us. Which is a concept successfully visited in Rollins' first work, 'How (not) to speak of God'. The idea that language fails us is not one that is new. The mystic Meister Eckhart once prayed the controversial prayer, "God, rid me of God". Eckhart also made an appearance in Rollins' talk on the need for us to doubt our doubts, a phrase he borrows from rock-star Pastor and friend, Rob Bell.

In Eckhart's prayer we hear the same claims to what the philosopher Hegel claims: Our ideas of God are limited, constrained and siphoned through ideology, history and human interpretation. In an axiomatic sense, we can say that, God is never the God we think. Jacques Lacan also emerges many times in and through the work of the three main presenters, albeit in different ways. For Rollins, psychoanalysis provides the basis for a form of cathartic confession. That, even when we think we have nothing to confess, it hides behind that exact sentiment. I employed Lacan to demonstrate how the unconscious works on a social level. My first talk centred around institutional racism and how this kind of racism pervades our culture, society and churches. I used pop-culture examples, such as the Meghan Trainor song, "It's all about the Bass" to show that although this song has been highly praised for being feminist, the underlying ideology still sees the woman as an object for men to worship. I then brought this into focus with the church and how theology, no matter how progressive, still relies upon the Bible which is itself steeped in patriarchy and domination. A lively debate ensued. My second talk focused on the problem with Western approaches to social justice, Christian missions, and even the failed idea of Western Judeo-Christian Human Rights. The main argument was that there is an attempt to make ourselves feel good when we go to help others, and if that is what drives us then we do more damage than good. I also made the point about how organizations like Compassion International do not fix systemic inequalities, but in reality must sustain an iota of injustice to bring justice, otherwise justice would not be necessary if the world was fixed completely.

Katharine Sarah Moody is a Research Associate at the University of Liverpool, who is working on the AHRC-funded Philosophy and Religious Practices research network. She works at the intersection of continental



philosophy of religion and religious studies, with a particular interest in the relationships between deconstruction, materialism and the emerging church. Katharine's talks were centred around notions of Hegelian thought, the practiced elements within the Emergent Christian Movement, and how Rollins' work intersects with her own in a lived context. His knowledge of philosophy, and research in the practical steps of combining philosophy with theology, made for an interesting discussion that challenged many of the audiences pre-conceived notions of community, identity and whether or not they were truly progressive Christians.

The weekend made for some quite exciting and challenging content.



**George Elerick** is an author, activist and filmmaker. With his wife he started Cross Culture Consultancy: [www.crosscultureconsultancy.com](http://www.crosscultureconsultancy.com)

Peter Rollins, a philosopher with a sense of humour is well known as a theologian to Greenbelt people and popular for his stories. But each one is designed to make a point. They are modern day parables.

So how do you report an experience such as our conference at Swanwick? Answer, give a flavour. Give sound bites. Try this: "Jesus was Irish - he lived with his mother for 30 years and she thought he was God."

Here are a few more sound bites/parables; "Allow yourself to be disturbed by what people say to you. You don't have to say whether you agree or disagree".

"Enter a conversation prepared to be confronted and in conflict." Then he gave one of his many asides by saying "War is a way to avoid conflict"

And some more: "The other's otherness exposes our own otherness" "De-centring ourselves draws us forward. Even if we come back to our old views, we will do so differently"

"Radical Christians want to get rid of hell and keep heaven". "If we can bring up our own stuff (repressions) we will grow."

Now for one of Peter Rollins' stories with a meaning: "One Monday evening Seamus went into a bar and drank 5 pints of Guinness one after the other and then went out. He did the same thing every night for a week. On the Saturday the barman asked him, why did he drink 5 pints of beer each night? Seamus said, "It's one for me Da and one for my three brothers and one for me". The next week Seamus only drank 4 pints every night. On the Saturday the barman asked him why. "Oh," said Seamus, "Me Da has died". The next week Seamus only drank 3 pints each night, so on the Saturday the barman said to him, "Has one of your brothers died?" "No," said Seamus, "The doctor has told

The task is ended. Go in pieces.  
Our faith has been rear ended,  
certainty amended,  
and something might be mended  
that we didn't know was torn.  
And we are fire, Bright, burning fire,  
turning from the higher places  
from which we fell,  
emptying ourselves into the hell  
in which we'll find our loving and beloved  
brother, mother, sister, father, friend.  
And so friends, the task is ended.  
Go in pieces to see and feel your world.

Pádraig Ó Tuama  
'Readings from the Book of Exile' (Canterbury Press, 2012)  
<http://www.padraigotuama.com/>

me to give up drinking". Rollins then asked, is the church hiding its repressed pain?

And another: "A bully went into a bar and ordered a pint of Guinness. He asked the barman if Paddy was in tonight. The barman hesitated so the bully hit him. When the barman got up the bully asked the same question. Again the barman hesitated so the bully hit knocked him down again and kicked him in the ribs. A third time, the bully asked the barman if Paddy was in tonight. This time the barman fell over, was kicked in the ribs and in the head, but then got up laughing. A visitor came around and asked him why he was laughing. The barman said, "This man doesn't know that I am Paddy". Rollins explained we are all being beaten up by the system, and accept it because we don't know how to deal with it.

In his second talk, Peter Rollins looked at the nature of a healthy church and an unhealthy church by examining the ways in which we relate to each other. "We tend to demonise an individual, group or a religion if we don't like even just one thing about them". We are in danger of using the church as a crutch. "What," he asked, "If the message of Christianity is to get away from a dependency on God?" Faith is like love - without a life of love, life is meaningless. Like Bonhoeffer, Peter Rollins finds God in the mess of life. He also said, there should be a warning on the side of every 'church packet' - "This church may have boring, nauseous and laxative effects"

In conclusion, Rollins read a poem by Pádraig Ó Tuama with the line, "Go in pieces to love and serve." I came home much challenged.



**Tony Rutherford** is a PCN Trustee, a member of the Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims group and a retired Anglican priest.



# Introducing: Dr Val Webb



Maurice and I are looking forward to our return visit in April 2015 to progressive groups around the UK. We have a long history with the UK, coming from the colonies and growing up with Peter Pan, Paddington Bear, Enid Blyton, Biggles, Agatha Christie and the Queen.

All our grandparents emigrated in the mid 1800's and, like other immigrants, it took a few generations for us to call Australia home, keeping closer contact initially with the "old country" than with other Australian states.

In the 1970's, Maurice and I headed to Portsmouth for eighteen months while Maurice did his Membership at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the colonial custom in those days. With two children under three we spent weekends discovering Britain's highlights in a Hillman Imp. Much later one of those toddlers became Head of Development for the Royal Court Theatre Sloane Square, so we continued to visit from our then American location.

I thoroughly enjoyed my 2013 speaking tour, organized by Rev. John Churcher and PCN Britain. We stayed with many delightful families and revelled in meeting numerous church people and church alumni struggling with the questions about which I write. This April 2015 tour stretches from Stirling in Scotland to Truro, and my topics range across my eleven books, including: In Defence of Doubt, Like Catching Water in a Net, human attempts to describe the Divine; Florence Nightingale, the making of a radical theologian and Stepping out with the Sacred, human attempts to engage the divine.

I am particularly looking forward to introducing my latest book, *Testing Tradition and Liberating Theology: finding your own voice*, which literally (if all goes as planned) comes off the press a few weeks before this tour, published in the UK by Wipf & Stock. This book was inspired by the hundreds of people I meet in churches who unquestioningly believe there is only one way to think theologically. Down the centuries, churches have done a great job of wrapping the Christian story in infallible packaging and silencing any who disagree. Even though there are many teachings with which people are not comfortable, they assume they must believe what they are told since so many others have preached that version for centuries. Yet there has never been one truth, despite what people claim. Theological ideas have waxed and waned through history, taking conflicting turns with changing leaders, worldviews and political forces. Even in the first four centuries, conflicting ideas about Jesus raged such that, three centuries after his death, they were still debating whether this Jewish peasant was God or "like" God.

This variety of "truths" has continued down to the present, even as churches and their passing parade of leaders try to declare "correct" doctrine.

Testing Tradition and Liberating Theology traces changing theologies down the centuries in user-friendly lay accessible language, shining a spotlight into dark corners and dusty shelves to show that all the questions people ask today have already been asked by theologians, even if those questioners were later silenced. Readers will discover a variety of thinking by reputable theologians through history and the considerable influence that context, circumstances, politics, philosophy, science, knowledge, world view and personal experience had on the theologies that emerged in different times. Until laity realize this and take permission to do their own theology in their own context, circumstances, knowledge base and experience today, churches will continue to empty in silent revolt against outdated and ineffectual dogmas. Doing our own theology, however, involves understanding what has come before and how these "truths" were formed, so that we can offer a critique of their continuing usefulness today, hence my passion to invite lay people into the theological conversation as full members.

I am also eager to share with you some of the Australian progressive scene. One Australian clergyperson has called progressive Christianity "a stream of thinking that is slowly but inexorably spreading over the religious landscape like a river spreading on a flood plain ... a grass-roots cry from members of all mainstream denominations, (together with those who have walked out) for a faith worth living and dying for. It cannot be quantified: neither can it be denied or stopped". Initially this momentum shied away from declaring beliefs, more concerned about giving people permission to challenge old "truths". Progressives find themselves in a new stage now, facing questions about how much to abandon and what then is left. Some progressives have moved beyond God-talk, whether theistic or non-theistic (and even those terms are debated). Some call themselves "atheists", which causes difficulty since that word has different connotations and can confuse faithful lay people struggling in the early stages of progressive thought, taking small steps rather than large leaps.

Lay people have always been my concern as a theologian. I believe the challenge for progressive groups today is to keep an open space that encourages all people to take first steps without fear of being steam-rolled into more radical conclusions from the "old hands". Progressive theology has been, from its beginning, a grassroots liberation theology for people struggling against oppression - in this case, the oppression of infallible doctrines and their purveyors. We must take care not to become the new oppressors,



parading our own basket of ideas to be espoused if "truly progressive". Nothing is gained, whatever the side, by arrogant certainty or scathing disdain. New ideas need open, respectful and affirming discussion where people can push limits in safety. Nick Kazantzakis, author of *Zorba the Greek*, said, "The only thing that matters is that we exercise our minds in order to keep certainty from turning us into idiots, that we fight to open every closed door we find in front of us".

I look forward to some great discussions with you all, and I will have my books with me for sale! **Val Webb**

[www.valwebb.com.au](http://www.valwebb.com.au)

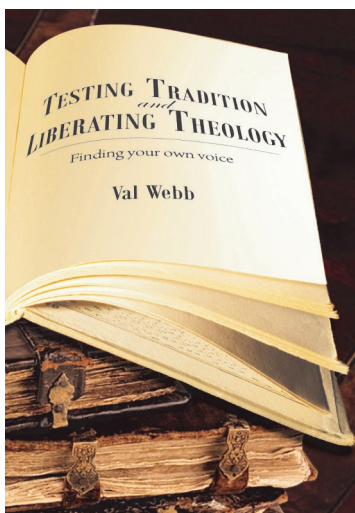
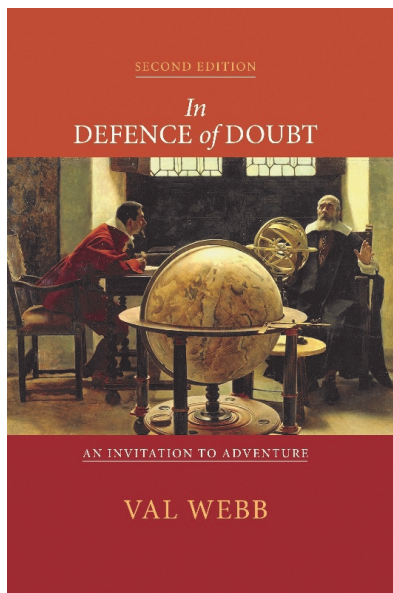
Facebook: "Dr Val Webb theologian and author"

Australian theologian Dr. Val Webb holds a graduate degree in science and a Ph.D. in theology. She has lived on three continents, taught religious studies in universities in the United States and Australia, and has written eleven books. She now lives in Mudgee, Australia, writing and travelling on speaking engagements there and overseas.

*Revd Dr Nigel Leaves, the Canon St John's Cathedral, Brisbane, Australia, and author of a number of books says of my new book:*

"Val Webb has done it again – bringing God-talk out of both the Academy and the Church; and into the everyday. We are all theologians – God is in our midst and we do not need permission to express what that means to us.

This is a book of liberation in that it allows each one of us to 'do our own theology' - to express what we mean by 'God' and not leave it to the ecclesiastical or scholastic authorities to make up our minds for us. Moreover, as Webb argues, theology has always been what ordinary people declare 'from their heart' about someone/something beyond themselves. This is a brave and challenging book that puts God back in the midst of people – where God belongs!"



### Wednesday, 8 April 2015 at 7.30pm

PCN Forth Valley "Like Catching Water In A Net" Free event  
Stirling Methodist Church, Queen Street, Stirling FK8 1HL

### Thursday, 9 April 2015 at 7.30 pm for 8.00 pm

Cairns Church of Scotland "Liberating Theology"  
11 Buchanan Street, Milngavie, Glasgow G628AW  
£7 office@cairnschurch.org.uk 0141 956 4868

### Saturday, 11 April 2015 at 7.30 pm

PCN Manchester Group & Grove Lane Baptist Church  
"Stepping out with the Sacred"  
Grove Lane Baptist Church, Pingate Lane South, Cheadle Hulme, Stockport SK8 7NP Donations. 0161 456 5119 then "5" on Call blocker. john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk

### Sunday, 12 April 2015 at 10.00 am

St Mark's, Broomhill, Sheffield  
Parish Eucharist; Preacher: Dr Val Webb

### Sunday, 12 April 2015 at 6.00 pm

Centre for Radical Christianity "Liberating Theology"  
Upper Room, St Mark's, Broomhill, Broomfield Road  
Sheffield S10 2SG £5.00 admin@stmarkscrc.co.uk

### Monday, 13 April 2015 at 7.30 pm

East Shropshire and Birmingham PCN groups  
"In Defence of Doubt"  
The Red House, High Street, Albrighton, Wolverhampton  
WV7 3LU Retiring collection. 01743 243167  
miriam.walton@pcnbritain.org.uk

### Tuesday, 14 April 2015 at 7.30 pm

Tavistock PCN Group:  
"Faith, Doubts and Beliefs at the table together: Being Communities of Theological Hospitality"  
Tavistock URC, Russell Street, Tavistock, PL19 8BD  
Pre-booked £5.00 (collect at door); on the door £6.00  
revrog@gmail.com 01822 614613

### Wednesday, 15 April 2015 at 7.30-9pm

Truro Theological Society "In Defence of Doubt"  
The Chapter House, Truro Cathedral, TR1 2AF  
Assemble for a glass of wine from 6.30 p.m. Admission £4 (Under-18s free; f/t students £2) includes a glass of wine.

### Friday, 17 April 2015 at 7.45 pm

Newbury PCN Group "In Defence of Doubt"  
Friends Meeting House, 1 Highfield Avenue, NEWBURY  
RG14 5DS £3 maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk  
15 Lewis Walk, Newbury, RG14 6TB.  
Cheques made out to Maria Grace. Add SAE and tickets will be posted to you. Otherwise your tickets will be at the door.

### Saturday, 18 April 2015 at 2.30 pm

Oadby and Market Harborough PCN Groups  
"Faith, Doubts and Beliefs at the table together: Being Communities of Theological Hospitality"  
Oadby Trinity Methodist church LE2 4LA £5.00 including refreshments. 0116 2713869  
gerald.gardiner@tinyworld.co.uk  
jandpcooper@yahoo.co.uk 01858 433865

### Sunday, 19 April 2015 at 4.00 pm

Hertfordshire PCN "Liberating Theology"  
The Backhouse Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City  
AL8 6TA. Followed by refreshments. Donations (min. £2.00)

# 'When I was a child ...'

So begins one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. It is found in chapter thirteen of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. The task of copying out this text was the favourite punishment of the Headmaster of my old alma mater to deserving pupils seventy years ago. The connection between a treatise on love and the punishment eluded me. More understandable is its regular use in the marriage ceremony.

The sentence continues "... I spoke, thought and reasoned as a child." In this portion of his letter Paul sets out to chart his own progress into full maturity. His thoughts and his reasoning informed his understanding and speech. Certainly his 'conversion', and subsequent companionship with the early followers of Jesus, drastically altered the course of his life and his discernment of what God required of him.

*The way we treat our children, particularly the very young, will shape tomorrow's society.*

As babies we arrive in the world knowing nothing except hunger, thirst and vulnerability. Those of us fortunate to be born of caring parents will be fed and cared for. As we progress through childhood and our needs increase, these too are met. We are helped to find our feet and propel ourselves, taught how to feed and groom ourselves, and given guidance throughout our formative years. Hopefully, we are encouraged to be good citizens - something I feel noticeably missing today as 'Citizenship' needs to be on the school curriculum. We are only now realising that proper care and nurture in our earliest years determine the way in which our brains develop. Neglect in this area of parental responsibility is all too obvious when one learns of the enormous number of neglected children needing the intervention of specialist social care.

The way we treat our children, particularly the very young, will shape tomorrow's society. We are all aware of, and distressed by, the abuse suffered by many of them at the hands of predatory adults, some of whom may have been the products of inappropriate behaviour. The training and treatment of the young begins at home, supplemented by the education system, which in historical terms is a relatively modern institution. Education is of the utmost importance and owes its existence to the Church.

One of our foremost concerns in Britain is the radicalisation of young Muslims, some of whom are converts from Christianity. Whilst we should be justly critical of the distortion of Islamic teaching, we should be aware that the same concern could be expressed

about Christianity. A few weeks ago, we learned of massacres committed by the Christian Militia in the Central Africa Republic. Some of the divinely ordained activities related in the Old Testament are not dissimilar to that presently occurring in many parts of our world.

Currently there is some debate about the suitability of promoting faith schools. One may see, for example, that people who received their education in Catholic convents find it virtually impossible to relinquish the dogma with which they have been indoctrinated. Such religious certainty resulted in the Crusades and the Inquisition. Some of us who were sent to Sunday school from our earliest years have taken a lifetime to learn that what we were told as historical truth can be understood in a very different way, as modern Biblical scholarship informs us. It is infrequent that the benefit of such enlightenment is heard in the average church.

It has long been recognised that given extensive or even exclusive access to a child for the first seven years of life ensures a firm grounding of belief. The young, with a clean slate of a brain and everything to learn, will eagerly absorb any new information. Look how quickly they grasp and master new technology. If magic and mystery is involved, the interest is keener. As we mature we become more sceptical about magic, trying to detect the sleight of hand. The more we discover about the cosmos, we realise that mystery is only something for which we presently have no explanation. Is it possible that Jesus used his 'miraculous' powers to attract naive listeners to hear his message? We'll never know.



Most of us can recall an illustration of Jesus, like this one surrounded by multi-racial children enjoying his company. We can remember the kind of songs we sang about Jesus telling them stories. These images probably derive from four verses in Mark's Gospel, although the incident appears in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. The account does not mention any story telling. The sentence 'whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it' would appear to grant children special privilege. However, some fellows of the Jesus Seminar note "Jesus' dramatic reversal of the child's traditional status as a silent non-



participant, thus illustrating his sympathy for the marginalised and outcast".

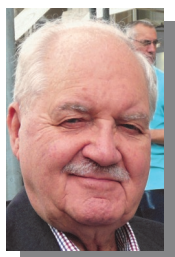
Jesus may have been saying that no-one has any more value than anyone else and should not be understood as demanding unquestioning acceptance. No-one can argue that he had no time for children, women, the poor, the crippled or blind - any whom the religious authorities dismissed. Perhaps Jesus saw in children something which we adults could profitably learn. Did he see, as we in Britain today can, that young children of every creed, culture and class, live together without prejudice. As we mature divisive prejudices develop and erode societal well-being.

One Sunday morning we were astonished to find a tramp sitting in the church vestibule, sheltering from the weather. Somewhat hesitantly, he accepted our invitation to join us inside the church and after the service he asked for some refreshment, which fortunately we were able to supply. A further surprise awaited us when he returned in time for the evening service. Again, he accepted refreshments but this time in the presence of the minister and many of the congregation - who not only avoided this unkempt stranger, but pointedly ignored him. I found myself wondering if we had been set some sort of test which we, as a Christian community, had failed.

In our Christian lives, we seem to need to visualise Jesus - the nearest thing to visualising God. Do we see a white clad, charismatic figure or an unwashed, taciturn vagrant? The immanent God comes in many guises, all of which call for our compassion. In her book, Gretta Vosper calls God 'something we can love . . . but it is not something that loves us'. I think that when someone shows us compassion and seeks the justice of distribution for others, we experience God's love

Jesus' life was inspired by a vision of a just and compassionate world, as it would be if God was the supreme ruler. The way to create that kind of society was quite clearly shown by the way he lived. This same objective lies at the heart of all the main faiths from Buddhism to Zoroastrianism. If this kind of a world is worth striving towards, we must remember that Jesus did not offer a suggestion. He commanded us to love one another, even our enemies - a tall order indeed.

- When are we, as Christians, going to take him seriously?
- It's time to put away childish things.
- Progressives - let us demonstrate how to grow up!



**Jack Dean** attends the Maidenhead PCN Group, and is a member of Free to Believe and St. Mark's CRC . He attends, but is no longer a member of the URC, having served as Elder and Lay Preacher since its creation.

# Review

**"Questioning Answers" by Howard Grace**

This internet age has been a remarkable one for home publishers, enabling millions of people to share their most intimate views of the world - the profound, the strange, the dangerous and the inspiring. Amongst them, PCN faithful

Howard Grace has produced what can only be described as a potpourri of insightful views on the world, faith and society in a pamphlet under the name "Questioning Answers". It contains enough gems to make it a worthwhile read.

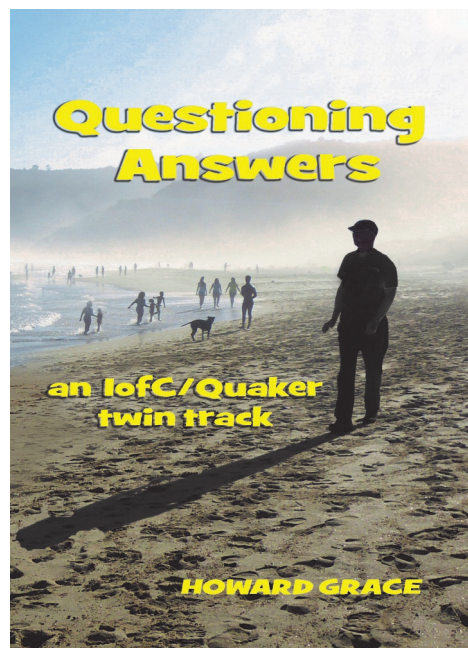
It is largely a series of sometimes unconnected reflections from the intriguing life of a global traveller who was born at the beginning of WW2, and who continues to lead a multifaceted and active life. The backdrop to those reflections is truly global, reflecting a youthful period as a continent hopper, a settled period before a police eviction from apartheid South Africa, teaching in the Home Counties of England, an almost lifelong relationship with Initiatives of Change (formerly known as Moral Re-armament) and more lately finding a home with the Quakers.

Amongst a good number of pearls found in "Questioning Answers" is a striking one called "Beyond Forgiving". This refers to a film produced by Howard Grace himself which features Letlapa Mphahlele, a South African liberation army commander during the apartheid era. In that role he ordered retaliatory massacres of white civilians. Mrs Ginn Fourie's daughter was killed in one of those. She later forgave Letlapa, and they now work together as peacemakers. Their friendship with Howard and Marie Grace brings their experience to life, both in the pamphlet and the film. You can watch a 2-minute trailer via the PCN website. (Click on Resources, then DVD Library. The third item is this film.)

Howard has a view of the world and of faith which will be shared and understood by very many of PCN, and this is an affirmative collection of those views.

For a copy contact: [howard.grace@uk.iofc.org](mailto:howard.grace@uk.iofc.org)

**Geraint Rees** (PCN trustee)



# News from local groups

Group report editor: John Churcher, [john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk)

**Please contact group convenors or see the relevant PCN Britain web page for further details.**

**Newcomers are always welcome.**

## Abingdon

Cliff Marshall

01235 53048 [cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our recent meetings have delved into Tony Windross's book, *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith*. So far we have discussed three themes the Soul, Evil and Sin and the Trinity. It has been good to have a particular focus, introduced by particular members, to start the discussion though, inevitably, other topics have crept in as well. We shall probably continue to look at chapters from this book for the coming quarter. Once again this year we are looking forward to meeting together at St Ethelwold's House in Abingdon for a Bring and Share lunch. Forthcoming discussion meetings will be held at 7.30pm as follows: 7th April at Trinity URC/ Methodist Church, Abingdon; 5th May at St Michael's Church, Abingdon and 2nd June at All Saints Methodist Church Abingdon. Full details for each meeting are posted on our PCN Britain website page.

## Bolton

Jim Hollyman

01204 456050 [jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Our next meetings will be at 1.30pm on Wednesdays the 4th March and the 13th May. We are reading Karen Armstrong's *"Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life"*. We'll be looking at chapter 10 entitled "Knowledge" at our March meeting. We are discovering that Karen's book is wonderfully relevant to our present day world issues. Karen argues that compassion is hard wired into our brains, yet is constantly restrained by our more primitive instincts for selfishness and survival ....all 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.

## Edinburgh

Mary McMahon

0131 4413337 [mary.mcmahon@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:mary.mcmahon@pcnbritain.org.uk)

In January we watched part of the DVD of Gretta Vosper's talk to PCN last autumn, followed by a lively discussion led by John and Ann McKechnie from the local group, who had visited Gretta's church in Canada last year and so were able to share their experience of worship among her community. We welcomed Kathy Galloway to the February meeting to speak about 'People in the wilderness', those who define themselves as the 'church alumni, who feel themselves to be either outside the church or inside but not 'belonging'. Our March meeting will be an in-house exploration about what a new church community of the future might look like, and the April meeting will be facilitated by John and Joan Miller on the topic of 'A Bridge to Islam.' We meet in the Cluny centre in Morningside and invite anyone who may be interested to come along.

## Exeter

Liz Vizard

01392 668859 [liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk)

After considerable discussion based on a membership questionnaire, our small organising group has sadly decided that we will 'pause' in our meeting schedule, at this ten year point in its history, after the one arranged for 25th Jan with Francis Rothery on *Missional: Impossible*. This proved to be very worthwhile and well attended and stimulated good discussion. The questionnaire responses amounted to 31 - just 20% of the 155 plus membership. The majority want at least one high profile speaker a year, seventeen would like more if it was possible. Eleven would like this combined with a small group meeting and

might be willing to attend and/or host one. However, this seems only to be practical in Exeter and Exmouth. Sadly, no one has offered to assist with chairing or practical help with chairs and tea arrangements on a regular basis. We understand that this is not easy for many, but this means that the small group feels unable to continue as we have done for ten years. Finding new speakers and topics also gets more difficult as time goes on. So we will hope to have one meeting a year (possibly more) with a high profile speaker whom we know to be able to draw a good number and add to our thinking, but we will look for other groups to liaise with to make this possible. We will need more people willing to suggest, communicate with and host speakers, who may charge quite high fees or expenses. We will need those willing to commit beforehand to helping with the practicalities of seating, tea preparation and clearing up. This may be easier if we meet only occasionally. We would need to charge for these meetings: £5 is suggested, but must not exclude those who cannot afford it. We think the very size and wide geographical spread of the group has made it difficult to create a cooperative shared aspect to meetings - no one's fault. Many members have a great many other commitments, or by virtue of age, health or distance are unable to do more than attend meetings. There are two small groups (maximum 10) planning to meet, one in Exeter and one in Exmouth and we will try to support the Tavistock group's special meetings if we can. Liz will continue to maintain communication with the extensive mailing list when issues or meetings of interest arise. If you wish to join this mailing list please contact Liz via the PCN email address.



**Hertfordshire** Diana Reddaway  
diana.reddaway@pcnbritain.org.uk

Having started the New Year with Gerald Drewett reviewing Greta Vosper's 'With or Without God', the February meeting then discussed 'A relevant Christianity for the 21st century: the revised 8 Points'. The March meeting will 'Follow Jesus to the Ballot Box'! The April meeting will host Val Webb - this will be Val's final venue on her 2015 tour. The subjects/speakers for May and June have yet to be arranged. All meetings take place at the Backhouse Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City at 4 p.m. on the 3rd Sunday of each month.

**Newbury** Maria Grace  
01635 47196 maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are in the middle of a study of Marcus Borg's book *Reading the Bible again for the First Time*. It was a shock to hear of his death, but what a wonderful legacy he has left behind in his inspiring writing, which has benefited so many people. We are also preparing for Dr Val Webb's visit to Newbury on April 17. Details elsewhere in this issue. Our group member Howard Grace will be running a workshop at the *Space to Breathe* weekend March 14/15. This will explore our response to issues around violent extremism, and will draw on the film *Beyond Forgiving* of which he is the executive producer. His new booklet *Questioning Answers*, which is reviewed elsewhere in this issue, is also relevant to this.

**North Worcestershire** Tessa Carrick  
01527 873135 tessa.carrick@pcnbritain.org.uk

It is wonderful to be able to report that our group is really thriving. At our latest meeting there were fourteen of us to watch the Living The Questions Series 2 DVD on The Myth of Redemptive Violence and then discussing how we understand the atonement and the problems that the liturgy sometimes causes for us. We come from a wide variety of backgrounds and meet in people's homes for a drink and discussion. Sometimes we have

chosen topics ourselves, sometimes we have studied a book but currently we are using DVDs. Everyone feels free to contribute to our discussions. Our next meeting will be in Bromsgrove at 2.30.p.m. on Monday 16th March. We will watch and discuss the next Living the Questions section: Practising resurrection. If you would like to join us, please get in touch with Tessa for further details and the preparatory notes for the meeting. You will be welcome. On 13th April we hope that quite a few of us will be able to travel to join the East Shropshire group's meeting at Albrighton to hear Dr Val Webb.

**Pontprennau, Cardiff** Bob Charnley  
01792 582569 bob.chnarnley@talktalk.net

We are pleased with our recent progress. We have a superb meeting place at the Community Church in Pontprennau, which is warm, comfortable and we usually have tea, coffee and cake. What more could one ask for? The answer to that question is good company; and that we have in large measure. Our numbers are growing at the moment, and we have a healthy range of ages and experience. We have, of course, a great advantage in that Cardiff is a Capital City, and has a University, and our membership reflects that in no small measure. Before Christmas, we were led in a discussion about "Gender", by John Henson. This was achieved in two evenings, the first with just our group, the second jointly with the Barry (Vale of Glamorgan) group. We also had a remarkable evening led by Tom Arthur (a retired U.R.C. minister from City Church). Tom introduced us to "Expression in Art", then let us loose with pencils, paint and chalks to express ourselves on paper. It was messy, fun and self-revealing. James Karren talked about "Llan", a new expression of Church in one of Cardiff's Art Centres. Sally Thomas and Ray Vincent, both members of the group, also led interesting sessions. We were happy with the

results of the discussion on the "eight points", and felt that our views were well represented in the final report.

The new year has begun well. Our numbers have grown and again our own members are leading with topics of their choice, and three of our meetings will be led by those leading for the first time.

**Richmond** Alan Powell  
0208 878 7355 alanepowell@blueyonder.co.uk

The group will be concluding their discussion of Marcus Borg's "Heart of Christianity" on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> March when they will address the final two chapters "The Heart of the Matter" and "Heart and Home". The agenda for subsequent meetings has yet to be decided.

**Rugby** Nicola Phelan  
nicola.phelan@pcnbritain.org.uk

Christmas was the theme in November. Being moved by the retelling of nativity stories despite seeing them as Midrash, avoiding events and literal interpretations and reading Spong's account instead, the joy of total immersion in family tradition and church services, singing with the community choir holding onto the joy of it and charity money raised. These were among thoughts shared. Some members also attended events in a full interfaith week in the town where stories and music were shared. A peace walk is due to happen in March. In January the themes of 'letting go' and finding 'new purpose' while being challenged but learning from others arose from member John Reeve's telling of his life and spiritual journey. Brought up in the Anglican tradition and now a Quaker, John had to give up his career in teaching and eventually his home due to a progressive illness. He now resides in a church run care home where his experience and insights are adding to our knowledge, hopefully for the benefit of others. We were grateful for the chance to reflect on the issues raised. The next meeting is 16<sup>th</sup> March, details on the website.

**Newcastle upon Tyne** Pat Fuller  
01670 719800 pat.fuller1@btinternet.com

On Tuesday 14th April, Angela Smith, Chair of PCN Britain, has been invited to our meeting at St Thomas the Martyr Church, Haymarket, Newcastle. The meeting begins at 7.30pm. We will look at the new 8 points that underpin the PCN movement in Britain and Angela will give details of the 3 year strategy which PCN Britain has recently drawn up and which appears in this copy of 'Progressive Voices'. Both of these topics should give rise to some interesting open discussion and conversation starters, hopefully leading to some quite productive debates. We would like to invite any PCN members from the North-East groups and anyone who is interested in knowing more about PCN Britain to join us for this event. Light refreshments will be served. It would be helpful to know that you are hoping to come so please contact Pat. The Newcastle group look forward to welcoming as many of you as possible.

**Stoke On Trent** Nigel Jones  
01782 632895 nigel.jones@pcnbritain.org.uk

Rev'd Ian Gregory was on top form last December when he led our meeting for the last time as convenor. We are indeed grateful for the way he initiated these meetings several years ago. He occasionally wrote letters to the local newspaper and was subject to condemnation by religious letter writers. He also incurred severe criticism by a few members of the congregation he previously ministered to, in spite of the fact that he was a good pastor and has continued to show that very caring side of his character, which is central to what Christianity is all about. At the same meeting, I suggested some ideas for future meetings and the response was enthusiastic: I am now the new convenor. At our March 1st meeting we explored RE in schools, led by a very experienced and still practising teacher. This will be followed by

considering the subject of God for those with mental disabilities (12 April), led by Ian. Then there will follow a session based on a recent choral composition about the meaning of Christmas as a present day experience deliberately discussed far from Christmas time. A future meeting will view the film 'The Imam and the Pastor'. We will also look at 'spiritual' poetry, but not ones that use specifically religious words, the new eight points of PCN etc. and all will be published on the website. We meet on the first Sunday of the month at the Friends Meeting House in Newcastle under Lyme.

**Sutton Coldfield** Gareth Davies  
01213543617 gpdavies.penzance@tiscali.co.uk

About a year ago a member of the established Birmingham PCN group, Chris Wolfe, was inspired to gather a group of like-minded people at his home in Sutton Coldfield. Chris' departure for Canada meant a change of venue and we now meet in Streetly, thanks to the hospitality of one of our members. Discussions have been based on 'A New Kind of Christianity' by Brian McLaren, taking a chapter at a time. Coming from a wide variety of traditions - including Anglican and Methodist - we have found that an honest exchange of views promotes mutual understanding, if not always agreement. At the beginning of February we joined with our parent Birmingham group, at their invitation, to air some of our conclusions after completing a survey of this book. The enlarged meeting, held at St Mary's Church, Moseley, proved stimulating to both parties and enlarged the horizons of those taking part. This open exchange of opinions is a milestone on our quest and, by introducing both groups to a wider circle, was felt to be supportive.

**Tunbridge Wells** Pat Churchill  
01892531541 pat.churchill@tinyworld.co.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 early January, 16 adults and two children sat down to a very pleasant Pub Lunch when a lot of catching up with news was done. The intention was to go for a walk in the nearby park. The rain dissuaded all but two who walked round the lake passing only dogs, their owners and wildfowl. Later on in the month we had a very enjoyable evening when we shared poetry and passages from books. These gave much to think about and led to some interesting discussion.

### NEWS ITEM Calderdale and Kirklees

John Lockhart (jockhart@me.com 01706 814195) is interested in setting up a local group in the Calderdale/Kirklees area (broadly, Halifax, Huddersfield and Todmorden / Hebden Bridge). Please contact John if you live in this area to arrange to meet up. His local church has acquired the Living the Questions course and this might be a useful resource for a local group just starting out.





# Was Jesus joking?

‘This Jesus,’ said an affable man who lifts a glass with me from time to time. It was an interesting start to our conversation. ‘Yes?’ I encouraged him. ‘Well, was he joking?’ The man knows that I belong to a church that is serious about Jesus, and have expressed the view that he was by far the greatest human being who ever lived. If we took him seriously then he would be a very big challenge to everything we normally think about life.

‘Joking?’ I said, hastily trying to remember where the bit about a camel and the eye of a needle occurs in the gospels, and that other bit about a friend knocking neighbour up at midnight, the things we usually refer to when we need to show that Jesus had a sense of humour. Is that what he meant? ‘No,’ he insisted. ‘I mean those things he says we need to get right before we can really call ourselves his followers.’ ‘Such as?’

This man is truly, but not offensively ‘of the world’. He reads the Daily Mail, and thinks a bit about some of their strong opinions and doesn’t always agree with them. He wants to know how life works for a man on an average wage. He follows Stoke City, has a wife and two children, is only in the pub on one night a week, he doesn’t smoke, and cares a lot about his invalid mother. He respects my Christian beliefs. A nice chap, then?

So what makes him think that Jesus was a joker? ‘Well, to start with’, he says, ‘we should give to anybody who asks. I get begging letters every day from one worthy charity or another. I can’t give to them all. It’s a joke to suggest that I should. Then there’s the bit about not getting rich, but that’s what we all want, look at the lottery ticket buyers! If I get rich I can help more people! Is it wrong to ask God to make me just a bit rich? Then this about not worrying about tomorrow! Come on, we all worry. Will my firm still be in business? Will my kids start on drugs? Will I get cancer? Can we afford to go shopping, or have a holiday? Will the Potters win on Saturday? Chatting at work is all about people worrying about tomorrow, it’s a way of life.’

He had also read that Jesus told us not even to call some other person a fool; otherwise we will be cast into hell fire. ‘I call my boss a fool, along with the Prime Minister, my football club manager, my noisy next-door-neighbour, and other drivers. I’m sure for the furnace any time now. It’s a joke to ask me seriously to change everything I say and do all the time, Jesus cannot possibly expect me to do that?’

This man had obviously been doing that very dangerous thing: thinking. He had read the Sermon on the Mount and sundry other of Jesus’ ‘hard sayings’, and realised that he was being challenged in every part of his normal daily life. Jesus was obviously joking, or asking people (men in particular) to behave as if they were superhuman.

The conversation went on for some time after this. It covered a whole lifestyle agenda: looking lustfully after women (‘It’s not lust, mate, honest: just admiration’), not resisting an evil person, turning the other cheek, and not liking it when people said nice things about you and taking no luggage on a journey.

I bought him another pint, needing the time it took at the bar to get my thoughts together enough to offer a response. He had made out a good case for not being a Christian in the real world of 2015.

I tried. Honestly, I tried, and said something like this: ‘Do you think most people you know are content?’ he shook his head. ‘You’re right; they are not. It’s because we miss the best joke of all.’ ‘And what’s that?’ ‘It is that if we trust the one we call Our Father, there is nothing to fear.’ ‘Nothing?’ ‘Yes, funnily enough, nothing; and it’s your round’.



**Ian Gregory** led the Stoke on Trent group for 12 years, and was a Congregational minister for 20 years after 30 as a journalist. He founded the Campaign for Courtesy in 1984.

## ‘8 points’ Review

Many thanks to all those who spent time analysing our response to the proposed changes to the ‘eight points’ and to Andy Vivian for presenting the findings and thinking behind the rewriting. This process makes me value PCN even more. The breakdown of views shows we can have different understandings, particularly about God, but be open and respectful. Affirming that the search for meaning is more important than certainty. This process, which sought to find out what individuals think and feel, is something that is sadly lacking in many churches where there is an assumption about what we do and should believe. In such settings it can be difficult to express and have a different understanding acknowledged. Anything that we can do to foster a more open and inclusive approach to different theological understanding is to be applauded. It was also good to see this philosophy reflected in the letters from Carol Palfrey and Liz Vizard (Sept PV).

In Marcus Borg we have a wonderful role model. Adrian Alker in the Church times obituary describes how Marcus drew respect from those who didn’t agree with all his views and also mentions his friendship with Tom Wright and the book they co wrote. Perhaps promoting the shared reading of that book in church circles would be a good thing to do in Marcus’s memory.

**Nicola Phelan** (Rugby PCN group)

# How Progressive is the URC?

During September-November 2014 I was on sabbatical and explored through a series of visits the question: "How Progressive is the United Reformed Church?"

My experience of places that expressed an interest in finding out more, was that there was clearly openness and receptiveness to it. As local congregations we can be limited by existing experience, the issues around individual gatekeepers and the volume of material available to us; but it seemed that there is an appetite for this path within congregations. As with all aspects of church life the sticking point is communication but there is clearly an opportunity and a need for advocacy, and raising the profile of PCN groups and the network.

St. Andrew and St George URC in Bolton; and St. Columba's URC in Oxford; are listed on the PCN website but the decisions were taken by the elders and not the full church meetings. Both would fall into the category of being broad congregations with members drawn from a variety of theological backgrounds and church traditions. Each of them is trying to maintain the balance of not alienating their existing membership. St. Andrew and St George URC are taking a more cautious path than St. Columba's URC who maintain that balance whilst still having an acknowledged student and LGBT ministry. I sensed some of this from Southernhay URC in Exeter. The opposite was my experience at Oxted URC in Surrey where their appearance on the PCN website had fallen from the living memory of the elders' meeting. Here my reminding them of the progressive path was enthusiastically responded to and clearly reflected who they saw themselves as, but they had forgotten there was a label and a resource they could utilise.

My final two examples in this category are doing similar work in very different contexts. They are Tavistock URC and Augustine URC in Edinburgh. Tavistock is a small congregation in a market town in rural Devon. Augustine is a large congregation in Scotland's capital city. Both offer service and are open to their communities, and seek to make their worship lives relevant. Tavistock offers a social and social justice ministry to their rural community as does Augustine to their urban one, alongside arts and LGBT ministries.

Tavistock have been on a journey with their minister and are actively engaging with what it means to be progressive on a weekly basis in worship and in discussion. Augustine is building on their existing tradition. Tavistock, apart from the Quakers, is surrounded by more evangelical neighbours and Augustine has formed an ecumenical partnership with two nearby congregations who hold similar views. Both of these congregations offer an effective model for living out the progressive path but are doing so in completely different ways. There is a great difference in their contexts and histories, which offers the assurance that

if the progressive path takes root within a community there is the possibility for it to become established and to discover its own form which is compatible with where it is.

My only visit to a non-URC was St. Brides Church of England in Liverpool which shares attributes of both Tavistock URC and Augustine URC. It is a small church, but is in a major city. It also has a strong emphasis on social justice and LGBT ministries. The more stark difference I felt was in their style of worship. Whilst it was very different from what I have experienced of Anglican worship it was also much more open, participatory, and informal than anything I'd experienced or led within the URC on a Sunday morning. This experience and some of my reading made clear a gap in my worship leading. Alongside a desire to engage with the Bible in a radical way, hymns and prayers that express my theology, and an openness to all ages, there is also a need to make worship more participatory and engaging of more of the senses.

So how progressive is the URC, or the British Church for that matter? Well, it can be as progressive as it wants to be! As with all steps along the Christian path they begin with individual encounters. Conversion happens within individuals who then give expression to it within communities. If individuals embrace this path it follows that communities may do too.

Progressive Christianity offers this alternative to Christians, and seekers after faith, wishing to explore rather than being given a list of answers; who expect to be accepted for who they are rather than excluded and rejected for some aspect of their lives; who want to find ways to make a better world now, rather than to accept things how they are and wait for the hereafter; those who are tired of the silent, hypocritical, judgemental, life-less, arrogant, inexplicable or irrelevant Church they have come to expect.

I truly believe that church-goers and our communities are ready to be surprised. Surprised by a church community that lives out the Jesus life together, that follows Jesus' example, and invites and welcomes them with open hearts, minds, and arms.



**David Coaker** is a member of the Bolton PCN Group and the editor of Progressive Voices.



# Review

**'Progressive Faith and Practice: Thou Shalt Not Stand Idly By' by Roger L. Ray, published by WIPD & Stock**

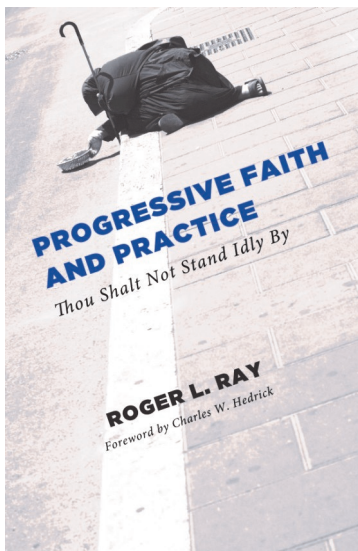
Revd Dr Roger Ray is the founding pastor of the Springfield Community Christian Church Missouri, USA. Roger strongly advocates civil rights and social justice from a faith perspective. His weekly sermons are broadcast on social media to a worldwide audience and many have been published in professional journals.

This book states clearly that Christianity is not about dogma and creeds, but is essentially experiential in sacrificial service of others. In the opening 4 chapters there is a deconstruction of traditional Christianity that some non-progressives may find difficult. Here he explores evidence-based faith; panentheism; the meaning of the word 'God' and the place of the Bible within progressive Christianity. He also considers the number of Jesuses that exist, and which one progressives may choose to follow.

The rest of the 12 chapters reconstructs Christianity and religion for a post-modern and increasingly secular world. He considers other religions; what happens when Christians gather in community; the place and nature of prayer; and the vexed question for progressives of what, how and when, we teach our children. There are many helpful pointers to develop relevant Christian worship.

Throughout the book there is the explicit coming together of faith and political action. This climaxes through exploring some of the answers to the 'big questions' that progressive Christianity may have to offer. There is consideration given to the prophetic nature of creating heaven on earth with chapters dealing with 'Holy Water, Sacred Land', 'Just War Theory in a Nuclear Age', 'The Justice System and our Prison Nation', and 'Our Preference for the Poor'. These are key chapters in helping the reader to understand Roger and his radical social and progressive ministry in a conservative community. The final chapter is most illuminating as it explores 'What is in the Crystal Ball?'

Whether it was the intention or not, the final [and occasionally penultimate and final] paragraph in each chapter builds / offers a very fine summary of the book as a whole. However, there are two faults I find with the book: first it is, not surprisingly, very American and some of the issues 'over there' are not so much the issues 'over here', and, secondly, it is a book of edited sermons



and so there is inevitably the occasional repeating of ideas and contexts. Having said that, it is a well written and provocative book that will help progressive Christians, no matter where they live, to identify the issues with which we need to engage. The alternative is an inevitable death of institutional Christianity. It is a book that I highly recommend as being suitable for both individual and group study.

**John Churcher** (PCN trustee)

## Faiths standing together

The Paris attacks of early January had a perverse benefit for they provided a focus, and a reason, for both Muslim and other faith communities to stand up together under the banner 'Not in our name' and cry out against such frightening atrocity. Meantime Fox News had reported an imagined Islamic conquest of Birmingham, much to its citizens' wonder and amusement for its absurdity.

Two Birmingham inter-faith groups took the opportunity to organise a public rally outside the City Council House in the centre of the city on January 25th. The Central Mosque printed 5000 leaflets and the Roman Catholic Church paid other expenses. The civic authorities were very co-operative and pleased that local initiative was responsible. The Lord Mayor spoke along with the lead Councillor for 'Social Cohesion, Equalities and Community Safety'. Rabbi Dr Margaret Jacobi from the Progressive Synagogue spoke for the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group. All three arrested our human spirit of unity. Six people from each of the major world faiths read a brief passage of their scripture, all poignantly alike. As the convenor, I concluded and that was it.



The rally only lasted 30-40 minutes – in beautiful sunshine. Numbers began at 150 and grew to 350 of all faiths and beliefs. The symbolism was very significant, the publicity from BBC Midlands excellent, the message clear and simple: the murders were not done and could not be done genuinely in our name particularly in that of Islam, faith is fundamentally about peace not violence and we were, and are all, proud to belong to our cosmopolitan and inclusive great city.

The roots of faith were challenged in discussion and in action, while partnerships were both begun and matured. What part progressive faith? A mixed picture! A natural and logical next step into progressive inter-faith relationships? Yes.

**Richard Tetlow** (PCN trustee)

# Charter for Compassion

World Interfaith Harmony Week took place in the first week of February. The week was first held in 2011 after a resolution of the UN General Assembly which pointed out that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace.

This year Charter for Compassion appealed to all its partners to promote World Interfaith Harmony Week and PCN was glad to respond. On the website we encouraged members and friends to take the opportunity to reach out to those of other faiths.

It's impossible to say what effect this had but we can report that the PCN office hosted an enjoyable discussion over afternoon tea between a youth leader from the Gloucester Muslim community, the Newnham parish vicar and your own administrator.

<http://charterforcompassion.org>



## Subscriptions

Want to join? Can't remember whether you've renewed for this year?

Please get in touch with Sarah: 01594 516528  
[sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk)

<http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk>

Remember to visit our website to keep up to date, share your comments (particularly your reflections about Marcus Borg) and contribute to the ongoing life of PCN Britain.

## 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions

Thursday 15 October — Monday 19 October  
The Parliament is the oldest, the largest, and the most inclusive gathering of people of all faith traditions. If you care for religions and nations working together in harmony with each other for the good of humanity, you are welcome to attend.

<http://www.parliamentofreligions.org>

# Walking with Death



Death accompanies us all.

Waiting silently for acceptance.

Not frightening, except for those who fear shadows.

Peaceful.

I'm grateful for those who show me how to transition from the life we know into this unknowable mystery.

So many names and angles of understanding: eternity, resurrection, dust-to-dust, forever, eternal peace, walking with the ancestors.

Death opens the door for so many possibilities.

I love being alive.

Yet, I do not fear death any more than I fear going to sleep at night.

I just don't like the idea of not waking up.

I will miss my husband, my children, the sunshine, the sound of the city moving around me.

Someone once suggested I live each day as if it were my last.

Good advice.

Remembering this not only helps me try to live a decent life today,

it keeps me close to death, close to my humanity.

It helps me remember to write that thank you letter to a good friend,

so that I don't go without having let her know how much she has meant to me these past 50 years.

It helps me show up when it's important, because there may not be a next time.

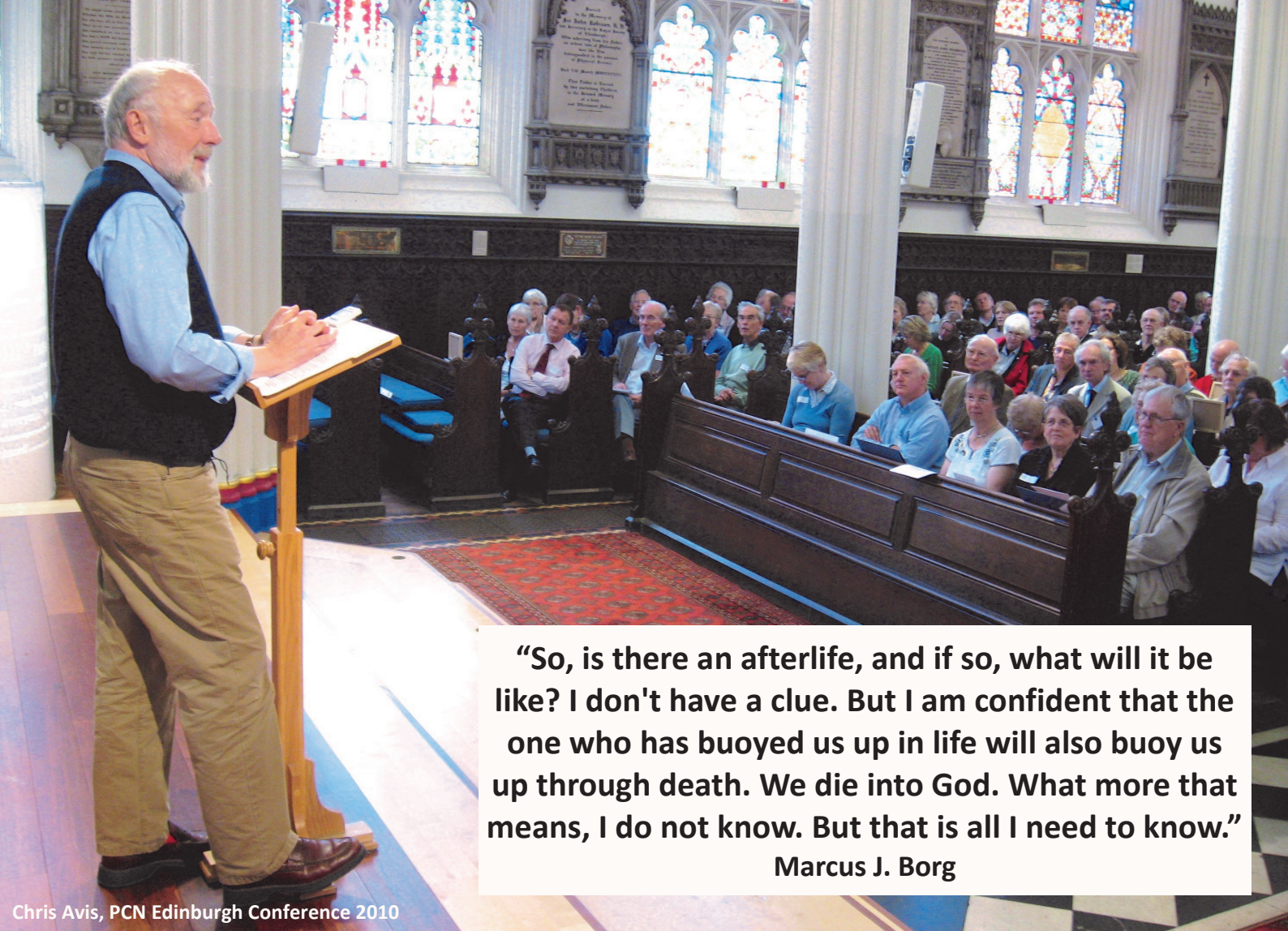
Walking in the valley of the shadow of death -- a peaceful lush valley abounding in magnificence and life.

That's where I plan to stroll today.



**Ana Gobledale** is a URC minister serving in south east London. Her theology has been shaped by four continents.





**"So, is there an afterlife, and if so, what will it be like? I don't have a clue. But I am confident that the one who has buoyed us up in life will also buoy us up through death. We die into God. What more that means, I do not know. But that is all I need to know."**

**Marcus J. Borg**

Chris Avis, PCN Edinburgh Conference 2010

## Progressive Christianity Lent Course 2015



**"On the Edge" by John Churcher**

pdf copies of the course are available for download from [www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk) or email: [john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk](mailto:john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## Struggling for the right thing to say?

A new set of pastoral care leaflets will help face 12 real life emotional challenges. PCN member Ian Gregory draws on 30 years as reporter and minister with responses to bereavement, terminal illness, depression, loneliness, marriage (meeting, mating and separating) etc. Shed Publications - ST4 7PJ 16 email [iancongist@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:iancongist@hotmail.co.uk)

As we enter the period of Lent a reminder that we have a study book in our Together in Hope series entitled 'Examining the meaning of Resurrection' written by John Shelby Spong.

A number of groups have found this useful preparation for Easter. Why not consider using this and other books in the series in your group or for individual study? You can buy the books in the PCN shop on our website.

## Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection



John Shelby Spong

Together in Hope -  
Resources for Christian Faith Today

## Marcus Borg at the 2010 PCN Edinburgh conference

4 CDs including:

What's Christianity all about,  
Speaking Christian -  
Redeeming Christian  
Language, Beyond Literalism,  
Beyond Convention -  
Participating in God's Passion  
for Transformation, and his  
Sunday sermon  
£5.00 + £1.50 postage  
[www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk)





# **Easter Mystery - a quantum reflection**

**I hear the Easter story, a story of betrayal and anger, of sadness and despair, of agony and anguish, of loss.**

**A story of hope?  
A story of life beyond death?  
A mystery!**

**Jesus is a name given to a relationship of energy.  
Jesus is the body. The body died. The body was put in the tomb  
but that which gave consciousness to the body was never in the tomb!**

**Jesus was not resurrected, the body was not brought back to life.  
That which gave consciousness to the body was not resurrected  
for it was never dead, it is for all time.**

**Life as we know it is a box of time in the space of infinity; a reality of our choosing; a choice we have forgotten and the remembering of which is the quest of our life, glimpsed through moments when our soul connects to the beyond and we fly; when we do not see with our eyes but with our whole; when we leave the physical and move to the energy without.**

**When for a fleeting moment 'I am' becomes 'we are' and oneness is reality. We reach for the reality of oneness for this is to be fully human.**

**A man from Nazareth, in that moment of history 'I am' became physical, a relationship of energy creating the illusion of matter but for all time 'I am'. His name in that moment was Jesus, a name given by his physical mother and father, but for all time 'I am'.**

**For this moment I am physical, a relationship of energy creating an illusion of matter but for all time 'I am'.**

**My name in this moment is Heather, a name given by my physical mother and father but for all time 'I am'.**

**My life is continuous but in different realities; for now I am on a quest to remember the life beyond this life and to connect with the 'I am' of eternity, the unbounded energy of the cosmos, that, which in this reality I call God.**

**My example is Jesus who showed that the connection is possible when all had forgotten they were connected.**

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