

Progressive Christianity Network – Britain



December 2008

Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

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Strategy 2005 – 2008

What have we achieved? What next?

by Jill Sandham for the Management Committee



Our Fourth Annual General meeting took place at St Agnes Church, North Reddish, on Saturday 22nd November. (See page 6.) In the morning we looked at the Annual Report and

Financial Statements (a copy of which is with this newsletter). The afternoon was spent reviewing the strategy of the organisation, and considering its future direction. Jill Sandham, on behalf of the Management Committee, produced for the meeting a summary of our achievements over the last three years.

We print it for all members' benefit below. Do please make time to read it – and then let us have YOUR comments. A response sheet is included in this Newsletter.

Try to complete and return it to us straightaway. We do need to have them back by January 5th, to give us time to read them and record what you feel. The committee will then consider all responses at their planning meeting in the middle of January.

After consultation with members in November 2005, the Management Committee set priorities for the Network for the three years which followed. This is a succinct report on what has been achieved in that period.

1 A coalition of theologically open Christian organisations

Vision

To enable the Network to:

- take the lead in developing a coalition which would have the strength and status to stand alongside the Evangelical Alliance
- be a respected voice within our denominations
- respond politically, locally, nationally and globally to issues of the day with a known and credible 'media' voice, which reflects a developed theological position.

Action

- The committee appointed Adrian Alker to take this forward, for expenses only
- Adrian visited key people in a variety of open/liberal Christian organisations, and found a high level of commitment in each, with different aims and tasks. He was given a warm welcome and encouragement to pursue further collaboration
- He considered a range of options – key members meeting for a day; establishment of a new collaborative website; a booklet for the Lambeth 2008 conference; production of visual and written resources for lay people, including a DVD; larger joint celebrations; major conferences; enlisting of theologians, writers, public figures and religious leaders to endorse a coalition

- The St Ann's Network was formed leading up to the Lambeth conference – including Inclusive Church, Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement; Modern Churchpeople's Union; PCN
- From this came the collaborative publication of Together in Hope, edited by Adrian
- PCN had a stall at the Lambeth conference, clearly identified as working collaboratively with organisations who were part of the St Ann's Network
- This is work in progress, and always acknowledged to be a slow and developing process.

2 Resourcing of individual members through local groups

Vision

- To connect local groups as part of the Network and with each other
- To provide them with inspiration and focus
- To link with and have impact upon local church communities
- To encourage individual development
- To grow the Network's membership.

Action

- The committee appointed Trevor Dorey and Sandra Griffiths to undertake visits to as many groups as possible, for expenses only
- Their report identified specific needs, and a wide range of groups, with diversity of strength/fragility, study/worship, size, location, attached to a church/freestanding. On the basis of their report:
- The committee commissioned a Mapping exercise of PCN-friendly churches, with a view to promoting the Network, expanding the membership and signposting enquirers to places of worship. Brian Wilson was appointed to research through the membership and other churches; with the assistance of the Administrator, the Map is now on the PCN website
- The PCN website was developed to include local group information, each updated by Group Conveners
- Regional clusters of groups were identified, in particular in Leeds, Sheffield and Exeter, some of which have hosted regional events
- There has been a consistent organic growth of local groups, as new members seek people to meet with face to face
- Awareness of PCN Britain has been promoted at national denominational conferences (Lambeth, Methodist, General Assembly URC) with a view to putting the

Network on the map and increasing membership

- Some local groups have been resourced through visits from Hugh Dawes, Jill Sandham and more recently by John Churcher, who is available to nurture and support new groups as well as speak at existing groups
- Local groups are also resourced and advertised through the quarterly newsletter
- Philip Goodwin is developing a collection of materials, which local groups have found helpful, planned to be available on the website.

3 Administrative support to sustain the network

Vision

To administer the network efficiently and effectively in relation to:

- membership, including signposting new members to local groups
- requirements as a charity
- publicity and marketing
- events management
- finance and fundraising.

These tasks were fulfilled by members of the committee in a voluntary capacity to a greater or lesser extent. The size of the network made sustaining this unmanageable.

Action

The committee recruited first Helen Atkinson, and then Olivia McLennan as Administrator for 9 hours per week, working from home base. Olivia has worked an additional maximum of 3 hours since April 2008 in order to develop and manage the PCN website. She undertakes the following tasks:

- Membership: correspondence, renewal, new members
- Sales of books
- Bookings for events, in particular the Spong tour 2007
- Routine queries
- Website development and management
- Minuting of meetings, servicing the committee.

Resourcing

PCN continues to run on a very low budget. In order to resource the above activities, the committee raised the membership tariff to an average of £30 per person from 2006.

There has continued to be significant generous voluntary resourcing in time from members of the committee (in particular those named above in the specific areas referred to, and the chair

and secretary for ongoing maintenance and development).

In order to expand or develop the network further, eg by employing more people/increasing the administrative hours, revenue would need to

be generated, either by increasing the membership tariff (currently our only source of income, save a small amount through sales) or through applications for grant funding for specific pieces of work.

Time to renew your membership!

PCN membership runs from January to December. So now is the time to renew yours for 2009. Included with this newsletter you will find a new affiliation form for next year (as well as the strategy consultation response form). Please try and fill it in and return it as soon as you get this newsletter - and before it gets lost in Christmas! If you do by any chance mislay it over the holiday period, you should be able to find a copy as a pdf on the website in the Membership section.

If you chose to pay by standing order last year, then your renewal will be automatic. If you have not yet set up a standing order, please do consider doing so this year. By this method, you can spread payment of the membership fee over the year in monthly or quarterly instalments. Otherwise send a cheque, which can only be paid in one annual instalment. If you can't remember whether you renewed by standing order or not, then email or write to Olivia, and she will tell you!

If you do use standing order and none of your personal details on the form have changed, you don't need to fill the whole form in. But it would help us be sure of your intentions if you could return it nevertheless with your name and address, and a note at

the bottom saying 'standing order already set up'.

The committee has decided to maintain the fee at £30 per person for 2009 – the same as in 2006, 2007 and 2008. As for last year, if members feel that they have a limited income, for instance if they are in receipt of benefit, then they can pay a minimum fee of £15, and receive all the benefits of full membership. And for those members who want to support the growth and development of the Network by paying more than £30, they are invited to make an additional donation of £15, and pay a total of £45. This way we can raise an average of £30 per member, and set our budget accordingly.

We leave it to your own judgement to decide what you pay, and this of course remains confidential to the secretary and the administrator. Donations continue to be very welcome – if you can afford more than £15, but less than £30, then please send that. And whatever you determine you can pay, do please rejoin. Numbers count, if we want people to hear and to take seriously the Progressive Christian voice.

Olivia looks forward to receiving your membership renewal.

Jill Sandham, Secretary
Olivia McLennan, Administrator

News from Local Groups

Bolton

(Jim Hollyman 01204 456050
jimhollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Currently we are studying Adrian B. Smith's "Tomorrow's Christian" - ISBN 1 903816 97 1 - published by O Books at £9.99.

We will meet next at 121 Junction Road, Bolton, BL3 4NF on Wednesday, 21st January 2009 at 10.00.am till about 11.30.am when we will use chapters 16 and 17 as our starting points. The following meeting will be on Wednesday 18th March.

If you are in the area and feel like joining us - just turn up on the day - or, if you prefer, let Jim Hollyman know you hope to be there. The coffee will be good (Fairtrade of course!) - and the discussion will be lively!

Coventry and Warwickshire
(Eric Johnson 024 7630 3712
eric.johnson@pcnbritain.org.uk)

About a dozen of us meet every six weeks or so in Rugby and we have a programme covering a wide range of topics which are usually introduced by one of our members, followed by

a varied and free discussion. A slot for 'worship' in its broadest sense is also included. We are a mix of plain-clothes clergy and lay people from several denominations. Meetings are mostly but not always at Horizon House, 28 Cromwell Road, Rugby, CV22 5YL at 7.30 p.m.

We are currently finalising the 2009 programme which should be on the PCN Britain website by early in the New Year. It will include evenings on The God Problem with Adrian Smith, Eco-congregations; Greenbelt; Faith into action: is PCN more than a talking shop?; what does evolution tell us about God?; and questions about healing. We also plan to have opportunities to look and listen to some videos by Jack Spong and Matthew Fox as catalysts for conversations.

Edinburgh

(Mary McMahan 0131 441 3337
mary.mcmahan@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We have been getting used to our new venue in the Gillis Centre, a former seminary and school, and have welcomed a few new members this session. During autumn we have enjoyed a varied programme including a discussion about progressive Christianity focussed on the eight points of the PCN logo, then a presentation from Jim Mein who is to be one of our speakers at the Spring conference, and in November a workshop entitled 'What shall we tell the children?' in which we looked at a couple of the lessons from 'Jesus and his Kingdom of Equals' (reviewed in a recent PCN newsletter). This is a book we felt was on the right track for avoiding teaching children things they will later have to unlearn.

At the final meeting before Christmas – on 8th December- we plan to discuss a chapter from 'Tomorrow's Christian', before partaking of a little 'seasonal refreshment!'

In the New Year our plans are:

Tues 27th Jan (in Christ Church centre): A talk by Rev John Weir Cook – 'Welcome to my world of doubt'

Mon 23rd Feb (in the Braid Centre, Morningside): John Bell – 'Words and Music for Tomorrow's Christian' (Tickets £5)

Mon 30th March (in the Gillis Centre) A talk by Bishop Bob Halliday – 'Jesus' sense of humour'
As always meetings are open to all. Everyone is welcome.

Exeter

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

In January we shall be continuing our series on the eight points of PCN Britain, led by Rev Iain

McDonald. These will be interspersed with sessions by Rev Anthony Freeman on "Whatever Next? Christian attitudes to life after death". The first of these will be on January 25th.

Gloucestershire

(Frank Godfrey 01452 533825
fragod@blueyonder.co.uk)

We are still working through the "Saving Jesus" DVD and finding our discussions very helpful. (Don't know how we will all respond to the next - rather strange – 'resurrection' sermon!)

We made a group visit to a local mosque where we were welcomed very warmly, learning a great deal about our neighbours, afterwards meeting for soup and sandwiches and further reflection. We are still meeting on the first Saturday afternoon of the month.

Hampshire Local Groups

(Martin Godfrey 023 8076 6312
m.godfrey212@btinternet.com)

The A27 Book Club is currently discussing Lloyd Geering's Christianity Without God. They meet on fourth Tuesday mornings at various locations between Romsey and Fareham. The Solent Coast Group is discussing a somewhat less radical book – Hilary Wakeman's Saving Christianity. They normally convene on the first Monday evening in Barton-on-Sea but occasionally vary the day and location.

A group that used to meet in Havant has now relocated to Southsea. Two members who attended a series of talks by the Dalai Lama in Nottingham are sharing their experiences with the aid of DVDs. The meetings are normally on the last Thursday afternoon.

A fourth monthly group meets on third Tuesday mornings at various locations between Odiham and South Harting. This autumn they have been tussling with the perplexing question of 'What is Truth?'

A fifth group focuses on Spirituality and gets together less regularly than the others. It met recently in Southampton for an evening of Chinese culture in company with some liberal minded friends who had visited various places in China including Tibet.

The five Hampshire groups are linked through the Hampshire Hub, a database of people living in and around the county who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from an open non-dogmatic standpoint. The quarterly newsletter advertises various local and national events, courses and web sites of interest to the 80+ people on the list. For example, in November alone, the local events included open meetings of the Scientific

and Medical Network in New Milton and Winchester, South Central Christians in Science, South Hampshire Humanists, and the Southampton Interfaith Link.

We hope that progressive Christians from elsewhere in Central Southern England will join us on Saturday 9th May next year for a Day Conference in Southampton led by Adrian Smith.

London, Herne Hill
Ted Offerman 020 8852 7063
edward.offerman@btinternet.com

We continue to meet every four to six weeks. Numbers through the autumn have been a bit lower than previously; many members have full diaries. However we have been having lively and thoughtful conversation as we work our way the PCN Britain-inspired new publication 'Together in Hope', concentrating on the questions raised by the authors at the end of each chapter. New members are always welcome at the group. We meet at 7.45 pm for 8 at St Faith's Vicarage, 62 Red Post Hill SE24 9JQ. Our first meeting of the new year is on Thursday 15th January 2009.

Mid-Hertfordshire
(Diana Reddaway.
dianakreddaway@ntlworld.com)

Hertfordshire Group continues to meet at the Backhouse Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City. The meetings begin at 4 p.m. and finish at 5 p.m., followed by informal discussion over coffee. The programme for January 24th and February 28th will have sessions taken by Nick Heap and John Paull. The March 22nd meeting will be taken by Ian Lawton, Minister of Christ Community Church, Spring Lake, Michigan.

North Derbyshire and Sheffield
(John Simmonds 01246 251599
john.simmonds@pcnbritain.org.uk)

Most of the group's members enjoyed a great day with Don Cupitt at CRC in November. We are continuing with Living the Questions 2 and enjoying it immensely. New people are enquiring about the group. We are looking forward to 2009 with hope!

North Lincolnshire
(John Sharp 01472509857
john.sharp@pcnbritain.org.uk)

As our numbers have increased, we can no longer fit comfortably into any of our living-rooms. We have, therefore, with some reluctance, decided to split into two sub-groups on a geographical basis. One group will meet in the Lincoln area and one in the North East Lincolnshire area. We will still both meet on a

monthly basis and will remain in close contact with each other. In the new year, the two groups will be following a parallel course, based on "Living the Questions 2", so that we will have the option of attending each others' meetings, perhaps if we have been unable to get to our own on a particular occasion or if we want the alternative stimulus of the other group's perspective. On a quarterly basis, because we want to be sure that we continue to enjoy the benefits of the friendships already forged, we expect to have joint meetings at the Unitarian Church in Lincoln. These will normally be a sharing of interesting areas of discussion which have arisen from our exploration of "Living the Questions", but we are also interested in inviting speakers to visit us. The success of the group reflects the need of our members to explore their thoughts and feelings in a non-censorious, receptive atmosphere and we are only too willing to extend this opportunity to other enquirers who wish to get in touch.

North Somerset
(Brian WJG Wilson 01934 876940
brian@bwjgw.plus.com)

We have entered our second year with a regular membership of about twelve. This may seem a small number, but we have all valued the trust and open-ness of a small group. We have welcomed occasional guests and would be delighted to have new members, but we believe that if numbers get above about fifteen, we would probably have to split. But in many ways this would be a sign of strength, not weakness. We reached a broad agreement on how for the time being we would like to proceed in our monthly meetings, and at present there is no wish to increase the frequency. We have deliberately avoided an over-structured programme or choice of topics – flexibility and individuality are the keynote. There is no great enthusiasm yet for a fixed programme such as LTQ – the cost is one off-putting feature. We welcome individual Faith Stories, as and when someone feels ready to offer theirs. We seek to avoid having a formal leadership - each meeting is led (and chaired) by whoever introduces the subject. Opinion is divided on whether to start and/or finish with a prayer.

The 2008/2009 programme began with a shared meal and open discussion. Subjects already covered or planned for the current programme include: Prayer, a Faith Story, A Musical Soiree, Poetry (Beauty is Truth), The Soul, and Christian Humanism. Suggested topics for future sessions include: Myth – its power and function; What do I/we mean by "God"?; The state of the Church of

England; Current anxieties; favourite paintings (as per Faith in the Frame); Books I/we have found interesting; Eternal Life; The Church and its attitude to current issues such as : Materialism, Pacifism, Energy & the Planet, Violence, Values.

West Midlands group
(Anna Barnsley 01902 701713
annabarnsley611@hotmail.com)

The group is continuing to grow with about a dozen at a meeting. We're finding 'The Thoughtful Guide To Faith' a good source of discussion material. The next meetings are on Wednesday 3rd Dec 7.30 pm at 4 Paradise Lane, Hall Green, Birmingham, B28 0DS on Christmas, and Wed 4th Feb 2009, 7.30 pm at 11 Rectory Road, Stourbridge, DY8 2HA, on Evangelism. All welcome. Coffee & biscuits provided!

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

We meet twice a month:

1. The main meetings (usually of 20+) are on the second Saturday morning of the month, 10-12, with coffee/tea from 9.30, at Chapel Allerton Methodist Church, Chapel Allerton, Leeds. On 13th December, Dr Edward Echlin, a former Jesuit priest and Honorary Research Fellow in Theology at a Leeds College, will speak about 'Climate Change, a Christian response'. On 10th January we will have a talk by one of our members and discussion on "What can Christians learn from the Philosophers?", while on 14th February another member will speak about industrial mission. We have a small mobile library at our main meetings, with books on loan or donated by members, occasionally bought, which has proved quite popular.

2. A small evening discussion group meets on the first Wednesday of the month, 7.30-9.30, with coffee/tea about 9 in a home setting. Currently, and until June 2009 we will be looking at a chapter of Adrian B Smith's book Tomorrow's Faith (O Books, ISBN 1 905047 17-7) and discussing that particular topic. It is not necessary to have bought the book or to have read the relevant chapter.

New faces are always welcome. For further details about any of the above, including venues and directions, please contact Sandra Griffiths, as above.

And a new group, we hope, for North East London

Hazel Day writes:

We are interested in forming a local group in the area of Walthamstow, Woodford and Chingford in North East London. Interested readers are asked to contact Anne Sardeson (tel. 020 88509 2205, or email revanne.el@virgin.net) or Hazel (tel. 020 8805 9465, or email dhazel@waitrose.com) Please tell us where you live and can be contacted as this may help in deciding on a venue for meetings. We will then arrange a meeting to discuss the best way forward.

Members of the committee are very enthusiastic for new groups to be formed across the country, and keen to give all the support we can so that this can happen. Groups play a key part in our supporting open Christian understanding and people who share that view of faith.

If you are keen to get a PCN Britain going in your area, please email us at the info@pcnbritain.org.uk or write to us. We can offer you names of members in your area, and other forms of help too.

Our Fourth Annual General Meeting Saturday 22nd November at St Agnes, North Reddish

St Agnes's, just outside of Manchester, proved a fabulous setting for our annual meeting. It was stimulating and exciting and it felt really good to be in a place where a progressive understanding of faith was quite newly arrived, yet was plainly really valued.

As one long-standing local resident and member of the congregation said as she welcomed us and made us feel at home: 'All my life I've been told in church what I've got to believe. Now I'm being allowed to think for myself.'

Everything about the place spelt 'welcome': the greetings on arrival; the physical warmth of the building on a very cold Manchester morning; the delicious lunch, the work of Clive Larsen, the vicar, with his team of supporters; the spiritual richness and diversity of the 'Sacred Space' which some of us had opportunity to spend a few minutes in; the inclusion of so many voices and such a lot of variety in the concluding worship we joined in.

Lunch

It was good to hear from a presentation shared by several members of St Agnes's of what was

going on there now, and how people were being drawn to it. Two 'Saving Jesus' courses were going on concurrently, because there were just too many to fit into one, drawing in a mix of local people and also those from further afield. Food and fellowship plainly served as ways in to openness and honesty - and feature in all areas of the church's life. I would have liked very much to share in their Sunday worship the next day - and hope on another occasion I might!

The only cause of regret, sadly, is that more people didn't take the opportunity to come. We work very hard at PCN Britain to ensure that we are not a London-centric organisation - and are not seen as one. Moving the AGM around is one way of saying that clearly. And with a large number of members within easy transport reach (public or personal) of Manchester, we were hoping for a big turnout.

You don't know what you missed - though I hope I've managed to give enough of a hint to make you wish you had been there! We did manage, in amidst such richness, to 'do the business'. In the morning at the Annual

General Meeting, John Churcher, Duncan Craig, Sandra Griffiths, Anne Padget, Philip Goodwin and Brian Wilson were elected onto the Management Committee. Duncan is the new PCN Treasurer; Anne is vice chair of the Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield, and will be a very helpful in forging closer links between the two organisations. Thanks were expressed to Monty Lynds, who has held the role of treasurer over the last few years, and also to Alan Powell, who has encouraged and co-ordinated the growth of local groups - both of whom have stepped down from the Committee.

The afternoon of the AGM was spent reviewing the strategy of the organisation, and considering its future direction. You too have an opportunity to comment (see pages 1 and 2). Please complete and return the enclosed response sheet by January 5th. All responses will be considered at the Committee's mid-January planning meeting.

Hugh Dawes

Snapshots of a day



Forthcoming events

Surrendering all our certainty

Saturday 21st March 2009, 11.00 am to 4.30 pm

A PCN Britain day conference in Birmingham at The Priory Rooms (Six minutes from New Street Station), led by Nicola Slee, Ian Lawton and Jim Mein

The title of this exciting day event comes from a collect for Ascension Day by Janet Morley. "O God, you withdraw from our sight that you may be known by our love: help us to enter that cloud of unknowing where you are hidden and surrender all our certainty to the darkness of faith in Jesus Christ."

The day will explore, in a variety of ways - thought, interaction, creativity – the freedom and the challenge of living without certainty. Our speakers between them cover a broad sweep of interests and concerns. Jim Mein is the former Dean of Edinburgh Cathedral and co-ordinates Initial Ministerial Education in that diocese. Nicola Slee is a research fellow on the staff of

the Queens Foundation for ecumenical theological education in Birmingham, and is a theologian, poet and liturgist. Ian Lawton is the minister of Christ Community Church in West Michigan. In an earlier life he was Vicar of St Matthew-in-the-City in Auckland New Zealand, and a prominent figure in progressive Christian thinking there.

It will be an exciting day. The cost is £12, but £10 to PCN members (and members of CRC). Email info@pcnbritain.org.uk or write to us at the regular address for further information and a booking form – or download one from the website.

The World To Come?...

Global Responses to Global Threats

Saturday 25th April 2009, 10.am to 4.00 pm

St Mark's CRC at St Marks Church, Broomhill, Sheffield. Speakers include Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies, Bradford University, Simon Barrow, Ekklesia, and Philip Austin, Northern Friends Peace Board.

This spring conference will address some of the major threats which we face as global citizens. How can people of faith respond to the challenges posed by some of the root causes of conflict and insecurity in our contemporary society? The day will examine the interrelating issues around militarisation in the face of terrorism, financial insecurity and the

competition over resources. Can the major world religions offer positive ways forward? How does a radical understanding of the Christian faith bear upon these global issues? How can we bring about change?

The cost of the day is £10, but £8 to members of CRC and PCN Britain. A flier and booking form is included in this newsletter.

PCN Britain's St Deiniol's Weekend

What is Your Portrait of Jesus?

Friday 15th – Sunday 17th May 2009. St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, North Wales. Led by Jim Cotter

During the weekend, there will be time for presentations, conversations and meditations on Jesus the Mystic, the Host, the Healer, the Storyteller...Creating, Repairing, Transforming ...The Landscape of the Domain of G**...The Working Out of Love as Justice and Intimacy.

What is your portrait of Jesus? What is the Gospel according to the scholars – like Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan – and what is the Gospel according to you – and according to me? What do we imagine his eyes and his touch were like? What was his 'voice-print' – a phrase used by Robert

Funk as he tries to distil what it was that Jesus most probably said?

The weekend will start with an informal get together around 6.00 pm on Friday, followed by plenary sessions on Friday evening, Saturday morning, Saturday evening and Sunday morning. There will be free time on Saturday afternoon. The cost of the weekend in a standard room is £125 per person. There are 4 en suite rooms available at

a supplement of £24 per room. A limited number of bursaries are available for anyone who feels they may need a contribution towards the cost. For more information, a flier and a booking form, contact Alan Powell by email, alanepowell@blueyonder.co.uk, phone 020 8878 7355, or by surface mail - 2A Vicarage Drive, London SW14 8RX.

Book Reviews

God, Energy and The Field

Adrian B Smith. O Books, 2008. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-84694-135-1 £9.99 (£6.99 on Amazon)



Liz Terry was until recently our resident member in France and a regular reviewer for us, but has now returned to the UK. Here she reviews this year's new book by Adrian B Smith.

I reviewed one of Adrian B Smith's previous books, "The Creative Christian" for this newsletter in February 2007, and I had mixed feelings about it at the time. I'm sorry to say that this new book has also left me feeling a little uncomfortable.

The author continues his clever deconstruction of what he refers to as the "sky God" - the traditional view of God as some sort of celestial form of a human being, "up there" and looking down on us. He takes it one step further than in his previous book by claiming that God is not a separate being who has power over us and what happens to us, but rather "God" is the energy which makes up the Universe, and this energy forms a "field" all around us which can be tapped into. This is a theory which many of us who are searching for an alternative to the "sky God" image will find very interesting, and it also does a credible job of marrying up religion and science. His style is extremely readable, sometimes tackling quite complex scientific theories, but in a very simple way.

He also builds on a theory from his previous book which will chime with many of us who have studied the life and works of Jesus, which is that the relatively recent designation of Jesus as Divine has led us away from Jesus the man, who Adrian B Smith believes to have been born as a man at the next stage of human evolution, something which he refers to as Homo Luminus/Spiritus, a more enlightened form of humankind, capable of using some, if not all, of the 90% of the human brain which scientists believe is currently unused. This is a highly visionary theory, and one which I cannot hope to

explain in a short book review! Suffice it to say that I found it very interesting and challenging. Where I started to feel uncomfortable was when he began to come up with theories and research which he did not substantiate, and which seemed highly dubious. This is something which he did a little of in his previous book, and I am sorry to say that his enthusiasm for this kind of pseudo-science seems to have increased. From the very beginning of the book I found myself questioning his sources, most of which he does not quote except in a very non-specific bibliography at the end of the book. One example of this is in the section on death in chapter 8. He states blithely that "our early ancestors...had no sense of differentiation either from their fellow creatures or from their surroundings. They felt at one with everything and at one with the present, without a sense of time or space." (p.95) He makes no effort to quote his source for this odd statement, and it made me uneasy. After all, how can we claim to know how our early ancestors "felt" at all? These sorts of statements abound throughout the book, and seem to betray a rather fanciful side to the author, which unfortunately tainted the rest of his theories for me.

As with his previous book, he writes a great deal about the benefits of Transcendental Meditation (TM). There is no question that meditation in all its forms can be highly beneficial, but the slightly preachy tone of his writing about it makes uncomfortable reading. He is keen to set us on our journey to that next stage of evolution which he believes Jesus embodied, but the only way he seems to see us getting there is through TM. It is a theme he comes back to again and again in the book, and his insistence on it, accompanied by yet more pseudo-scientific claims about its effectiveness, is something I found quite off-putting.

On the whole, I enjoyed this book, and his theories about God and Jesus are fascinating,

offering us a quite different way of thinking about our Christian theology. However, his insistence on wrapping this up in “science” theories which have little or no substance and his claim that

Who on earth was Jesus? – The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History.

David Boulton. O Books, 2008. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-84694-018-7 £14.99 (£10.49 on Amazon)

It is an exciting time for the ordinary reader who is interested in New Testament scholarship but how do we distinguish between the serious scholar and the charlatan? How do we locate the most recent scholarship in the context of earlier traditions and access a balanced understanding of differing opinions?

It is this need that David Boulton’s book sets out to meet. His focus is on the search for the ‘Jesus of History’, so he begins from Albert Schweitzer’s ‘The Quest of the Historical Jesus’, published in 1906, and studies by his immediate predecessors.

He then describes the work of the nineteenth century German pioneers in ‘biblical criticism’ and their identification of possible ‘sources’ within the canonical and non-canonical gospels that laid the foundations for modern New Testament scholarship, considers the oral tradition and takes us through the discovery first of the Gospel of Thomas at Nag Hammadi and of many lesser known gospels and fragments from different sites in the Middle East. He completes his list of sources with an account of contemporary Jewish and Roman references to Jesus.

In Part 2 he turns to an examination of the major modern interpretations of the evidence available. He considers the Jesus Seminar scholars, who began work together in 1985 and published their joint conclusions in 1993 (*What did Jesus really Say?*) and in 1998 (*What did Jesus really Do?*) and the opinions of some of their critics, James Dunn and Thomas Altizer. He follows this with an account of the diverse portraits of Jesus found in the work of individual Jesus Seminar scholars, including Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan. He has early identified as the main dividing line between scholars the question of what Jesus understood by ‘the Kingdom of God’ and next develops a section on ‘Jesus as Prophet of the Apocalypse’, where he first outlines the three different positions adopted by scholars after the time of Schweitzer – the Kingdom as here and now, the Kingdom as an Apocalyptic event and the kingdom as both here and now and to come. He then considers the work of E.P. Sanders, John P Meier, N.T. Wright and Joseph Ratzinger. His next section focuses on Jewish interpretations of Jesus by Vermes, Maccoby and Eisenman and finally looks at those who interpret Jesus as myth and legend.

All New Testament scholars agree that the sources of reliable information outside the canonical and non-canonical gospels are meagre - not surprising in view of Jesus’ humble origins in an obscure part

meditation is the only way in which we can hope to reach the next stage of our evolution let the rest of the book down. An interesting book, but one to be read with a pinch of common sense.

of the Roman empire. Historians in general acknowledge that even where there are plentiful original sources, and the subject is of less religious and emotional significance, it is difficult to write a scientifically objective account of historical events and characters. Some of the interpretations here are widely at variance with one another, even in their understanding of the physical and social conditions in which Jesus lived. The impoverished, illiterate peasant society of Galilee under the heel of the Romans described by Crossan is in marked contrast to the luxuriantly fertile, semi-independent Galilee of Vermes and Sanders.

Having given a fair and balanced account of all these widely differing interpretations, David Boulton endeavours to sum up those matters on which the majority of scholars appear to agree.

Finally, he returns to the subject of the Kingdom as Apocalypse. Up to this point he has succeeded in keeping his ‘resolution to maintain a respectable neutrality in the face of scholarly dissension’.

Having described the development of apocalyptic ideas from Zarathustra onwards to the book of Revelation, he asks what it means to see Jesus within this tradition. What would it mean if the Jesus of history endorsed a violent God, if God’s final solution to the problem of evil is the slaughter of evil-doers? Addressing the adoption of apocalyptic ideas by various groups in our contemporary world, he quotes Crossan who describes the idea of Apocalyptic consummation of history by final extermination of evil-doers as the ‘Biggest Evil around’ that ‘puts transcendence squarely within the ambience of evil.’ He concludes with Stephen Patterson that the quest for the historical Jesus leaves us facing two Jesuses, the apocalyptic Jesus and the wisdom Jesus and the two different religions they inspire. In the end David Boulton, the Quaker layperson, leaves us in no doubt that he finds his own inspiration in the Jesus who ‘perhaps in his death experienced the truth of his life: that in the dreamed of coming kingdom, the kingdom already in the making, it was the poor, the oppressed and persecuted, the merciful, the peacemakers, the God-forsaken, who lay the foundations of his visionary kingdom, our republic of heaven.’

Boulton’s book is comprehensive, and also clear and easy to read. It provides an honest appraisal of the wide variety of scholarly opinions. It is well referenced so that it would be easy to follow up any of the authors he mentions. I strongly recommend it.

Betty Saunders

Prayers for an Inclusive Church

Steven Shakespeare. Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2008. Hardback & CD Rom. ISBN 978-1-85311-915-6
£16.93

Liturgists – the official ones certainly – are not a wildly progressive bunch. There are honourable exceptions of course. Janet Morley and Jim Cotter spring to mind, and we reviewed here in June a splendid collection by Claire McBeath and Tim Presswood. But these are the exceptions.

And, from the other side, many progressive believers display a deep suspicion of anything ‘liturgical’, in the sense of structure, set forms, discipline and constraint. Which is why – to make this reviewer’s position clear – so much ‘progressive’ worship, so called, is frequently dreadful!

Steven Shakespeare brings a new, younger and very welcome voice to the field of radical liturgy. In this collection he tackles chiefly, though not solely, one of the most ancient (some might say most archaic) elements of liturgical worship - the collect, the opening prayer of the eucharist - and gives it stimulating, challenging, but properly ‘prayerful’ new life.

His book offers a collect for each of the Sundays of the Christian Year, following the three year Revised Common Lectionary nowadays used by many churches of all denominations. The prayers are linked, in most cases, to the gospel passage for the particular Sunday, and draw on its themes. This was a pattern used creatively in the first new prayer book of the Church of England, the *Alternative Service Book 1980*. But it was dismissed and rejected by the brave young Turks (many of them now not-so-young bishops!) behind the later revisions which issued in the book *Common Worship 2000*. The resulting collects in that book are mostly a disaster.

Shakespeare goes back to linkage, but with a radical and inclusive agenda, playing with the richness and poetry of biblical imagery rather than just deferring to it as scripture. And in doing that, he deepens the experience of the passages and also of prayer, in ways which both surprise and delight.

Let me illustrate that with a gospel passage chosen at random. Mark 7:24-37 includes the stories of the Syrophenician woman whose daughter ‘had an unclean spirit’, and that of Jesus’ meeting with a deaf man ‘with an impediment in his speech - the ‘Ephphatha’ passage. From such questionable incidents historically - and you need to read the passage first - Shakespeare crafts this living prayer:

Liberal Voices

Linda Harrison reports on this year’s autumn conference of Free to Believe, our sister body within the United Reformed Church.

On Wednesday 15th October, 98 people from far and wide descended on High Leigh, Hoddesdon, to

Lord of the changing,
you help us find our voice
that we might find our faith:
we praise you for the Gentile woman
who answered back
the Son of God;
release us from the crowds
which command our silence
and free our tongues
to demand from you
the healing of the earth;
through Jesus Christ, the opener of the gate.

The phrase ‘demand from you’ might cause a few progressive hackles to rise, suspicious of appeals for divine intervention. But Shakespeare doesn’t only write prayers. He also writes *about* prayer, in a thought-provoking short preface. This thoughtful paragraph, picking up the word ‘intervention’ has had me returning to it regularly. “The church is... called to be an inclusive community. Not... in a cheap and bland way, but by uprooting our assumptions and practices, and freeing us to live in a new way. Prayer - because it is a work of body, mind and heart, of feeling and imagination as much as anything rational - can put us in the way of this uprooting. It can open us to the difference God makes. Is it too much to say that prayer *is* the intervention it asks for?”

As well as collects this collection offers Eucharistic prayers, short penitential forms, words for use at the Peace and more. Not all of it will suit everyone. But its use would do much to make worship properly inclusive (in a deeper and realer sense than much use of that word in church circles), challenging, enriching – and progressive. It’s a good book to use at home too. And certainly one to give to your minister or priest for Christmas - and insist that they use it! 2009 would start as promise if you used these words at Epiphany:

Shepherd of Israel
and Light of all Nations,
made known in the gifts
of those who call to other names
and walk on different ways:
may unjust powers
and the hatred within us
be dismayed by your friendship
and dethroned by your love;
through Jesus Christ, the open arms of grace.

Hugh Dawes

locate their accommodation before assembling for an evening meal, followed by the first of seven sessions over the following two days led by Brian Wren and Ian Bradley, accompanied by pianist Alan Bullard. ‘Liberal Voices!’ was the latest conference

organised by Free to Believe, an informal open and progressive network within the United Reformed Church, also supported by those from Methodist, Baptist, Anglican and Roman Catholic backgrounds. The conference was originally born out of requests, mainly from worship leaders, to take time to consider how they can sit comfortably with their own faith and yet offer worship that is both recognisable and true to expectations. Since the conference I have received lots of comments about the inspiration that was felt, so my hope is that many of those present have been able to return to their local churches truly reinvigorated to offer all of that; whilst a comment in my own church magazine, written by a member who attended with me, mentions being 'encouraged to re-examine my approach to my Christian faith – and to read the hymn-texts with greater care!'. Brian Wren, through his own hymns plus those of Shirley Murray, Fred Kaan, Colin Gibson and with reference to others, painted a wonderful picture of hymnody and all it can offer, ably accompanied by Alan Bullard who helped our understanding of the part music plays within worship, alongside such meaningful words (as well as composing 'High Leigh' for the words of Brian Wren's hymn 'And can this newborn mystery').

Ian Bradley, Reader of Practical Theology at St Andrews University as well as an author, broadcaster and journalist, inspired and challenged us to express our liberal Christian theology and

break through the 'wishy-washy' label so often assigned to liberalism. He asked that we consider the Grace, Order, Openness and Diversity thus demanded of us (the acrostic was no coincidence!).

The full measure of the contribution of both speakers will best be appreciated through listening to the CDs that Chris Avis has preparing for us.

There is also news of some very up-to-date books just, or just about to be, published by Brian Wren and Ian Bradley: 'Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany: Liturgies And Prayers For Public Worship' by Brian Wren (Westminster John Knox Press, published October 17, 2008, UK £16.99) and 'Pilgrimage: a Spiritual and Cultural History' by Ian Bradley (February 2009).

From my own viewpoint as organiser, there could not have been a nicer body of like-minded folk to organise – several with us for the first time – some wonderfully familiar faces – all blended together – many asking for their names to be added to the next conference as they left!

The CDs Linda refers to – more than six hours of them - can be order for just £15 with postage and packing included.

Cheques for £15 payable to C. Avis should be sent with your clear name, address, phone number and (optional) email address to Chris Avis, 37 Clifton Road, Exeter, Devon EX1 2BN. Chris Avis 01392 425322. chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk

From the editor

Apologies if this issue appears a bit thin – but actually very little has come in from readers. I hope a New Year may energise members to contribute more! **The absolute deadline for the March 2009 issue is Friday 27th February.** Thoughts on Lent, Easter – anything! - would be welcome. I'm fully back now after sabbatical, so all contributions (and local group news) should be sent to hugh.dawes@pcnbritain.org.uk, with **NEWSLETTER** in the header or posted to the office address below, again with **NEWSLETTER** on the envelope. Happy Christmas! **Hugh Dawes**

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

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