

Progressive Christianity Network – Britain



September 2008

Supporting and promoting open Christian understanding

LAMBETH CONFERENCE SPECIAL ISSUE!! - Included on inside pages

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Together in Hope – I hope so!

by Adrian Alker

Adrian Alker - a member of PCN Britain's Committee from the beginning, vicar of St Mark's Sheffield for many years, founder of the Centre for Radical Christianity there, and soon to be Director of Mission Resourcing in the Diocese of Ripon and Leeds - writes about the challenges for the Network in working together with others; what has been done, and what the future might hold.



*Our picture shows Adrian and Christine, together with Martin Wharton, the bishop of Newcastle (holding up his copy of **Together in Hope**) and Mrs Wharton on our stall at the Lambeth Conference.*

PCN members may recall that they were canvassed back in late 2005 on the desirability of certain strategies for the network to employ. A clear majority of the members who responded to the consultation

affirmed that one desirable objective was to work for a coalition of theologically open Christian organisations. The wide variety of comments received thought a coalition was important because:

- It would give a voice at a public/media/church governing level
- It would provide an alternative progressive voice to other organisations eg Reform, the various evangelical/fundamentalist voices
- The Evangelical Alliance must not be seen to represent all Christians
- There might be an opportunity for joint ventures, better sharing of resources and information.

As a result of this grass roots feeling I spent some time on behalf of PCN visiting a variety of open/liberal Christian organisations. It was a very rewarding exercise to meet with some of the key people in these organisations, all of whom gave me a warm welcome. I was heartened by the level of commitment in each of the organisations, different though the aims and tasks were. I then listed for the PCN management committee steps which might be taken to strengthen collaboration between the groups. Here is that list again:

1. An opportunity created for the key figures in many of the more significant

organisations to meet together for a day which could include a meal, a guest speaker, some time of reflection in an attractive venue. Such an opportunity would deepen friendships and allow an informal growing together. I believe the more that these key people in all the different organisations can see themselves as part of a growing progressive movement, the more encouraging and fruitful it will be.

2. A collaborative endeavour to establish a new website, providing information about the various organisations, being owned by all such groups, demonstrating at the very least a likemindedness and common vision.
3. A collaborative venture which has the imprimatur of the organisations, for example a booklet produced before Lambeth 2008 offering a vision for the Church, for use by lay people.
4. The making of a number of visual and written resources for lay people. This could include a DVD outline of progressive Christianity, a kind of visionary presentation, a 'taster'. People cry out for a liberal alternative to the Alpha course.
5. Occasions for larger scale celebrations on the St Albans Cathedral model, when a significant speaker is invited as part of the worship/celebration.
6. A major residential or day conference, building on the conference expertise of organisations such as MCU, St Marks CRC, Inclusive Church
7. The enlisting of a whole host of theologians, writers, public figures, religious leaders to give endorsement to any coalition.

Well you can gather that from that list, that number three, the Together in Hope book, was attempted with some success. As a result of the need for groups to work together at Lambeth, a St Ann's Network was formed, with people from different organisations such as Inclusive Church, LGCM, MCU, PCN and others meeting at St Ann's Church in Soho for a number of times prior to the Lambeth Conference. Here was

the possible beginnings of some collaborative work and out of this came the book.

Together in Hope is proving a success with requests from churches as far flung as Liverpool, Bristol and Cardiff wanting copies to use in their groups. Great!

But my experience of editing such a book on behalf of so many groups reinforced the fact of how hard and patient a task collaborative work is! Not everybody will be enthusiastic about the same kind of thing; groups have widely differing strengths. Nevertheless 'Together in Hope' is I believe an important beginning.

So where do we go from here?

My personal hope is that the St Ann's Network, which will need to be imaginatively renamed, should be broadened from its fairly Anglican concerns. The experience of meeting around a table has been enjoyable. But many other tasks could now be attempted if the different organisation were willing to pool resources. Secondly from my wish list above, I think we should now press ahead with other publications helpful to our members as resource material. PCN Britain and St Marks CRC in Sheffield and others could work together on publications. In particular PCN might follow through on the idea (some work has already been started) of some kind of visual learning course in contrast to Alpha but aimed at a similar wide age group. I also think that 'the big top' occasions can be important in attracting media attention, especially if by working together we can afford some big names in the world of religious thinking.

Together in Hope?

My hope is that we really do press on to see how viable collaborative working is. I hope that none of us try to defend and protect our own organisations so dearly that we are less than willing to listen to the ideas and learn from other groups. After all the Christian denominations have been doing that for centuries! Can we be people of hope that together with other progressive minded pilgrims we might be a force for open hearted and open minded Christianity?

Adrian Alker

Our Fourth Annual General Meeting – near Manchester

Saturday 22nd November 2008, 12 noon

at St Agnes Church, St Agnes Street, North Reddish, Stockport SK5 6RA.



St Agnes Church is delighted to welcome PCN for the AGM. In addition to teas and coffees (and probably some wine), they can do a selection of lunches for members, such as chilli con carne with rice or jacket / salad; thai green chicken curry with rice / jacket; a vegetarian Mediterranean slow cooked vegetables with home made crusty bread; home made soup with home made crusty bread; a selection of beans / cheese / ham with jackets; all priced £3.50 - £5.

There is ample street parking around the church, and easy access from Manchester City Centre.

The AGM will be combined with a review of PCN's three year strategy, 2005-2008 – you will have the chance to comment on what has been achieved, and contribute your hopes for the next three years. In addition we will hear from PCN members in and around Manchester, who will share some of their experiences of being progressive in their local churches.

All are welcome to attend, although only members of PCN will be able to vote - and we hope lots of people will. If you would like to come, and expect to want to buy lunch, please contact Olivia McLennan, PCN's Administrator *as soon as you possibly can*. Do it NOW! – don't delay. (email and postal contact details are on the back page).

Would you consider joining the Network's Management Committee?

We are seeking 5 newly elected members to serve for 3 years.

Primarily, we need people who are PCN members, and:

- are passionate about the growth and development of the network
- can commit themselves to attending an all day meeting 4 or 5 times per year (days and venues negotiated between the membership)
- have some time (not necessarily much!) and energy to give.

We are not currently represented by people from:

- minority ethnic groups
- Wales and South West England
- Southern England (except London)

and would particularly welcome more members who are:

- non-Anglican
- female
- lay
- younger (ie under 50!).

But if you can't tick any of these boxes, please don't let that put you off.

There are four committee meetings per year, currently all on Saturdays. We try to be flexible to accommodate the needs of the majority. There is also one planning meeting per year, already fixed for 2009 over 24 hours, near London for 17th – 18th January 2009.

For committee engagements, all fares by the cheapest available route are covered.

If you would like to nominate yourself, or someone else, then please complete the enclosed nomination form and return it to me. Nominations need to reach me by Saturday 8th November 2008.

Jill Sandham
Secretary

Email: jill.sandham@pcnbritain.org.uk
Post: St Faith's Vicarage, 62 Red Post Hill,
London SE24 9JQ

LAMBETH 2008 – Views from the Progressive Christianity stall

A dedicated team of PCN Britain members took turns to look after the Network's stall at the Lambeth Conference – which carried information also about our sister networks around the world. Thank you to everyone. All have tales they could tell!

Three members have written up their impressions. Richard Titford (at the stall in the picture below) is a longstanding Suffolk member and our Living the Questions agent.



Richard was in the 'Marketplace' many more days than anyone else and there both for setting up the stall and taking it down. He shares his recollections.

"The Lambeth Conference will seem like a long dental appointment..."

Now a month on, it seems a bit of a dream: Jill, Duncan and I arriving early one morning at stall D4 in the Market Place "tent", not knowing quite what we would find. It was a posh tent – but wow did it get hot! However The Episcopal Church (was ECUSA) gave away fans; as it turned out more useful than free umbrellas. There were lots of different stalls and one could meet others who tire for a progressive approach to Christianity; and those who don't. Near us I liked (anti-malarial) Nets for Life. There's real work.

"Our people are lucky to make their communion fortnightly." "Lack of clergy?" "No, lack of bread."

"What is so special about our 8 points" I found myself wondering as I tried sticking yet another copy to the wall of our stand; "surely that is how we have all been trying to live for the last 2000 years". Obviously not, so stick it up, Titford: it might just make someone think: I wish!

"Just talk to people – and carry on talking. Never stop."

We stallholders – Jill arranged a rota of PCN helpers for a whole two weeks! - soon settled into a routine. Above all we knew the conference timetable so could make sure we were lunched and ready for the next wave of wandering, wondering bishops. And they did come – though mostly foreign ones, fewer from the UK. For me it was a privilege meeting people from such different worlds that made the experience valuable; perhaps not so much for PCN as for me...



The Episcopal Church's Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, at our APF neighbours' stall.

"I am...the Primate of Mexico...the electrician...the Bishop of the Arctic...from Tonbridge Wells...the Bishop of Jerusalem..."

We all had to wear security badges. They were never checked and many like mine soon became adorned with the LGBT rainbow colours: they seemed to mark out progressive minds from those less imaginative. They were a clear statement that progressive thinkers positively want the church to embrace ALL God's children. Whatever else is said about Lambeth '08 that issue was very much there: the last bastion of conservative bible interpretation. I found it a real privilege – yes, a real privilege – to meet Bishop Gene Robinson whom I have long admired and publicly to stand alongside our LGBT friends.

"To stand still is for us to regress: we can only move on."

In the Market Place main hall were the clerical outfitters (only if you were a bishop, naturally), silverware suppliers, books galore etc: very churchy. In our tent were gathered those who really had something to say about their understanding of God. This led to a much more vibrant atmosphere than “next-door”.

“I am the Primate of The Episcopal Church and I’ve just been talking to the car-park attendant.”

So it was on our PCN Britain stand in the tent that you could buy the book “Together in Hope” that Adrian Alker so brilliantly put together for Lambeth with other members of the loose progressive alliance that calls itself The Inclusive Church Network: we had badges, too. We sold a good few copies.....and you can still buy yourself one NOW for just £4.99: see details

Musings from PCN’s Lambeth stall

Chris and John Simmonds came all the way from Chesterfield for their turn on the stall, and offer their thoughts as well.

‘PCN Britain at the Lambeth conference – can you help?’- so said the December 2007 PCN newsletter. ‘Why not?’ was the reply at our breakfast table. After all we are so grateful to PCN for enabling us to find fellow-enquirers and we’re always glad of a chance to take a trip in our retirement motorhome. So that’s how we came to be at Lambeth.

It was the hottest week in August; dire warnings about the heat came from Jill Sandham who staffed the PCN stall in the first week. So we dressed as lightly as one can for episcopal company. Our stint was to be Thursday and Saturday in the second week.

We dropped in at the PCN stall on the Wednesday just to make sure we knew what was expected of us. Sandra Griffiths, who was staffing the stall that day was extremely helpful. Then we took time to look round at other stalls in the ‘market’ marquee. We were delighted to see Gene Robinson signing his new book, ‘In the eye of the storm’. He had been banned from the conference but was gloriously conspicuous by his presence - such a gentle and gracious man moving around the periphery being warmly greeted by person after person.

What an array there was of organisations - some seeking to make a difference in the poorest parts of the world, - including Christian Aid, Episcopal Relief and Development from the U.S.A. (we’re still

elsewhere in this newsletter and revel in articles by Borg, Clatworthy, Clifford, Crossan, Cotter, Herbert, Rees, Sandham, Shakespeare and Ward - and our own redoubtable Dawes!

“Living the Questions?...good, we use it all the time; keep going with it.”

Much has been spoken about Lambeth. We were not party to any discussions nor to much gossip. But we met many interesting people – Bishops and others - and we tried to promote our vision of progressive Christian thinking, even if a few needed no reminding: that was so heartening...

“...go well”

Richard Titford

enjoying their free fair trade coffee), Anglicans in World Mission and many more.



Gene Robinson, ‘gloriously conspicuous by his presence’, moves to visit the Network’s stall on the first full day of the Conference.

A number of stalls, including PCN, were displaying the new Inclusive Church Network logo as well as promoting Adrian Alker’s book, ‘Together in Hope’. The essays in the book came to life as we talked to representatives of inclusive groups: members of WATCH - Women and the Church – their stall was opposite the PCN’s, with its caption ‘A Women’s Place Is In The House... of Bishops’

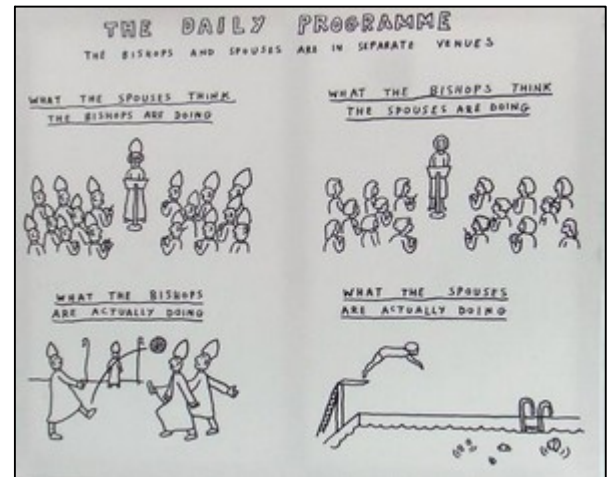
Their joy was unbounded now that women bishops are to be appointed in England. The Modern Churchpeople's Union and The Student Christian Movement were next to PCN. The SCM proclaimed on bright cards 'our diversity is a gift to be celebrated' with pictures of everyone included – socialists, hoodies, knitters, evangelicals, punks etc. MCU had many splendid publications on offer – ideal for PCN groups. The LGCM: the Lesbian and Gay Christians' movement were most gratified that they had been allocated one of the most prominent and largest stalls in the market. Ten years ago they were not allowed to be there. Then there were the vestment retailers (surveyed somewhat quizzically by these two non-conformists). Some very expensive garments were for sale; their very presence raised big questions about the church's sincerity about its mission alongside the poor.

At the end the day, we missed our last bus back to the campsite and hailed a cab. The convivial taxi driver asked about our day. 'Oh, the Lambeth Conference', he said 'all we cabbies have noticed something different this time. Ten years ago the bishops were very standoffish, treating us like servants, but this year they are all so friendly and courteous (even generous!).'

Our days staffing the staff were most enjoyable. The new PCN Britain leaflet was well received and led to many conversations about its content - 'What role does Christianity have in the 21st Century?'; 'Can Christianity be Rational?'; 'Why was PCN established?' etc. The 'eight points' rang bells with plenty of folk. Note was taken from the new website of possible PCN groups to join and 'Living the Questions' provoked a lot of

interest. People came from many different countries, a French journalist, several Canadians, who took information about PCN Canada, Australians, Africans and Asians, as well as British.

At our stall, we felt both engaged and marginal. We met lots of wonderful people but felt distant from the bishops' and spouses' deliberations.



"Distant from the bishops' and spouses' deliberations". The official conference cartoonist's view of what Chris and John might actually have been missing. Would that it could have been so!

Yet there were big moments to savour; first our meeting with Gene Robinson – such a brave and generous presence – and, secondly, a comment of an African bishop. After he had been talking about the shortage of priests in his diocese, the conversation turned to the frequency of communion in his parishes. He said that many people would be fortunate to have communion once every two or three weeks. 'Is that due to the shortage of priests?' he was asked. 'No', he replied, 'It's due to a shortage of bread.'

Chris and John Simmonds

PCN at the United Reformed Church General Assembly in Edinburgh: 11th -14th July

The General Assembly of the United Reformed Church has met annually until this year, but is going to be biennial from now. Partly for this reason, and partly because PCN is little known in many parts of the URC anyway, we thought it would be a good idea to staff a PCN stand at the Heriott-Watt University. Including URC personnel from Church House in London, Synod of Scotland stewards and other helpers, UK Church and international Church representatives, some local visitors, and of

course official delegates from all over the UK who constituted the majority, there were approximately 650 men and women – and children too. The latter had their own assembly running parallel to the main one, although much of the time it seemed that they were having rather more fun!

The PCN stand had the good fortune to be positioned in the main thoroughfare between the meeting hall and the corridor leading to the various eating places, with the result that neither

PCN nor I could be missed! I was pleased that some URC PCN members from outside Yorkshire (I live in Leeds) came and made themselves known to me – and equally pleased at the steady amount of interest shown throughout the weekend. Joining forms were filled in or requested, while many took back editions of our newsletter. Copies of *Together in Hope* were snapped up too. Some stopped to look at *Living the Questions*.

I thought it was well worth my while being there – almost constantly, though also when I was temporarily absent; keeping a close eye on the number of back newsletters, it was very interesting the way the pile went down when I went off for a cup of coffee! Among those showing more than a passing interest were not only retired and serving ministers, but also current and former Synod Moderators, and our new General Secretary. I had first met her at a *Free to Believe* conference some years ago – a conference where Bishop Jack Spong was the speaker, and where I first heard of PCN! It felt good to be helping to raise awareness of PCN, telling people about local groups etc., and at times finding how delighted and relieved people were to discover us.

Sandra Griffiths

We were at the Methodist Conference in Scarborough as well.

Sadly it was impossible to contact John Churcher as we went to press – but at least have this photo of him at our stall there.



News from Local Groups

Bath
(Ron Garner 01225 426882
trisjuw@aol.com)

The Bath Progressive Christianity Network will hold its first autumn meeting on 25th September. This meeting will be devoted to looking at the programme schedule for the next year and beginning our planning for Dominic Crossan's visit in December 2009. The meeting on 9th October will be a discussion of Marcus Borg's presentation 'The Study of Jesus and Adult Theological Re-Education Today.' On 13th November, Ron Garner will report on the autumn meeting of the Jesus Seminar which he will have attended. The programme for 4th December meeting will be determined at the September meeting. All meetings are held at Central United Reformed Church at 7.30 pm.

The Bath PCN will also be sponsoring seven Sunday evening sessions on the subject, 'Who is Jesus?' Revd. Ron Garner will use the book by the same title, co-authored by Dominic Crossan and Richard Watts as the foundational text for the seven talks. The seven topics are: What did Jesus teach?; Did Jesus perform miracles?; Did Jesus intend to start a new religion?; Who executed Jesus

and why?; What does John the Baptist have to do with Jesus?; Son of God, Son of the Virgin Mary?; How did we get from Jesus to Christ?

The Bath PCN also has a blog up and running located at <http://bathpcn.blogspot.com>. For additional information contact Ron Garner.

Coventry and Warwickshire
(Eric Johnson 024 7630 3712
e.djohnson@btinternet.com)

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 and followed by a wide-ranging 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. A copy of the current programme is available from the contact details above.

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

We're changing location this session, and will be meeting in the Gillis Centre on Whitehouse Loan, normally on the last Monday of the month, but with one or two unavoidable changes. One being that

our first meeting of the session will be on Tuesday 7th October.

At our June meeting we looked back at what we had explored during last session, and forward to what we might incorporate into the new programme. As a result our autumn meetings are planned as follows:

Tues 7th October: A discussion: 'What is progressive Christianity?'

Mon 27th October: 'The withdrawal of God in human evolution' Speaker: Canon Jim Mein, formerly Dean of Edinburgh

Mon 17th November Workshop: 'What shall we tell the children?'

Mon 8th December: Book extract from 'Tomorrow's Christian' (followed by seasonal refreshments)

We are an ecumenical group, and everyone is welcome to our meetings.

Exeter

(Liz Vizard 01392 668859

liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We finished last term with a well attended meeting led by our members Rev John and Gretel Cohen, speaking about 'Emerging churches': new ways of being church without the traditional trappings of 'the church'. Chris Avis reports:

"The presentation and much of the discussion centred on a 30 minute video of assorted UK churches which have become involved with their particular surrounding communities in various ways, often successfully. The presented examples seemed encouraging, with the churches meriting praise for their efforts. However, our group expressed some concern over the motivation and aims behind these endeavours which, though not openly expressed, seemed to harbour a traditional church theology and ultimate 'conversion' (the essence of one church leader's comment in the video: 'We've got them interested, but now we have to do the mission bit!'). Our thanks to John and Gretel for a good afternoon with much food for thought."

Our term starts on Sunday October 5th at 2.30 in the Southernhay URC hall in Exeter. We will start a series led by the URC minister Rev Iain McDonald, based on the eight points of PCN. The first meeting will focus on the first two points, entitled by Iain:

'Approaching God and Acknowledging faith'.

The second on November 23rd, same time and place, is 'The Jesus meal'.

In January we intend to continue these studies and intersperse them with sessions by Rev Anthony Freeman on "Whatever Next? Christian attitudes to life after death". The first of these will be on January 25th.

We welcome everyone to our meetings.

Gloucestershire

(Frank Godfrey 01452 533825

fragod@blueyonder.co.uk)

We continue to meet on the first Saturday in the month, 2.30 p.m. at Christchurch Abbeydale, Gloucester. We are halfway through the "Saving Jesus" DVD, finding it a useful tool in exploring our understanding of our faith. Our lending library – the "book box" is steadily used. We thank those who helpfully responded to our query about how groups publicise their meetings. We have yet to 'process' those replies.

Keswick

(Joan and Hylton Boothroyd 017687 75142

hylton.boothroyd@pcnbritain.org.uk)

The 12.25pm and 7.00pm Contemporary Faith Groups are due to continue with Adrian Smith's "Tomorrow's Christian" on seven Tuesdays from 9th September to 9th December: see our PCN webpage for details, or ring us if that's too technical. As convenors we continue to read intensively and to travel gratefully to the big meetings we learn about through PCN. So we ourselves are currently deep in Crossan and Geering, and looking forward to Cupitt in November.

Leeds

(Sandra Griffiths 0113 258 2652

sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk)

We meet twice a month:

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. Our programme for the next few months: 13th September - further discussion on 'Fresh Expressions of Church'; 11th October - one of our number will talk about his own journey of life and faith; 8th November - to be decided; 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'.

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. From September 2008 to June 2009 we will be looking at a chapter(s) 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.

London, Herne Hill

(Ted Offerman 020 8852 7063

edward.offerman@btinternet.com)

We continue to meet every four to six weeks, the numbers ranging from eight to sixteen members. After Easter we completed 'The Last Week' by

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, a book that produced new insights into St Mark's account of the Jesus story between Palm Sunday and Easter. We were particularly struck by the fact that the disciples, all men, deserted him and it was the women who stayed with him to the end!

We have just completed 'God in Us' by Anthony Freeman. While our group had a lot in common with his position vis-a-vis belief in God, this book also provoked a lot of discussion and some questions which still hang in the air. Perhaps this is because to define God in any way is dangerous – there always seems to be something more!

We now embark on a study of some of the contributions in 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.

Forthcoming dates are: Wednesday 24th September; Monday 3rd November; Tuesday 9th December; Thursday 15th January 2009.

Mid-Herts

(Diana Reddaway.
dianakreddaway@ntlworld.com)

Autumn dates are:

Sunday 28th September: Roger Payne introduces 'The Psychology of Religion'

Sunday 26th October: Gerald Drewett introduces 'Spirituality: Engaging the Soul'

Sunday 23rd November: Rev Betty Saunders introduces 'The New Atheists'

The venue has changed to The Backhouse Room, Handside Lane, Welwyn Garden City, and the new co-ordinator is Diana Reddaway. All meetings begin at 4.30 p.m. and conclude with light refreshments at 5.30 p.m. Further details, directions to venue, etc, available from Diana.

North Derbyshire and Sheffield

(John Simmonds 01246 251599

jc@simmonds4041.fsnet.co.uk)

Our group has its origins in St Mark's Church Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield. Most of our members come from Chesterfield, whilst others are from Buxton, Sheffield and Wirksworth. We began meeting in early 2007.

We meet in each other's homes once a month, normally on a Friday morning, finishing with a sandwich lunch (bring your own!). We are currently following Living the Questions 2. Discussions are lively and leadership is shared.

North Lincolnshire

John Sharp 01472509857

john.sharp20@ntlworld.com

This new group meets every month on Saturday mornings, alternately at Lincoln and Grimsby/Cleethorpes. We are 14 in number. What we have in common is that we are all interested in

a spiritual dimension to our lives, honest when discussing our beliefs and actively tolerant of views different from our own. In other ways, we are diverse: some of us belong to Christian churches but question some of the traditional modes of expression of faith; others are agnostic but have a residual interest and, in some cases, yearning for a faith which may be subscribed to intellectually as well as emotionally.

At present, we are reading and discussing Marcus Borg's "Heart of Christianity". We use two chapters a month to stimulate discussion, but are prepared to digress freely if it is helpful.

The group has grown even in the five months since its inception. If we have a further increase in numbers, we expect to split into two, a Lincoln group and a North East Lincolnshire group. We would still probably meet together occasionally, perhaps on a quarterly basis. We welcome enquirers.

Tees Valley & North East England

(Michael Wright 01642 851919

michael.wright80@virgin.net)

A group of about a dozen people have met regularly at Middlesbrough for the past 3 years as a book club we call "Journeys". We have read books by Jack Spong, Marcus Borg, J.D. Crossan, Karen Armstrong, Lloyd Geering, Tom Wright, Elaine Pagels, Keith Ward, and David Boulton. Some of us go to the meetings in Newcastle of "Breathing Space" and between us we are in touch with a variety of progressive avenues of exploration.

We meet next on Monday October 20th at 7.30 p.m. or the following day Tuesday October 21st at 2.30 p.m. (people come to whichever time suits them best) at Middlesbrough Quaker Meeting House, 131 Cambridge Road, Middlesbrough. TS5 5HL.

We will begin a series of meetings discussing Marcus Borg's "JESUS - uncovering the life, teachings, and relevance of a religious revolutionary", published by Harper One 2006. ISBN 978-0--6-143434-1. We are a mixed collection of Christians on a journey - Quakers, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Roman Catholics - and will welcome anyone wishing to explore their own journey of faith, from whatever place they are.

Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims

(Pat Churchill 01892531541

pat.churchill@tinyworld.co.uk)

We continue to meet on Thursdays with numbers varying from about six to thirteen. In April three members of the group travelled to Sheffield, enthusiastically reporting back at our May meeting. They were very impressed by the excellent organisation and friendliness at St Mark's as well as by Marcus Borg himself.

This was followed in June by a discussion about how we should go about presenting the Gospel to the children. To this end, in the autumn, we will have a session looking at 'Jesus and his Kingdom of equals' mentioned in the book review in the June issue of the PCN magazine.

In late June we were joined by two members of the Hastings group for a pub lunch and woodland walk to the ruins of an old mill; a pleasant time for catching up on news and views.

The group met again in July to hear of one member's experience helping to staff the PCN stall at the Lambeth Conference where apparently many bishops did not know about PCN. The remainder of our time was spent on talking about what we had gained from the group over the past two years. Apart from the mutual support the main gain was that we felt more confident to comment openly, but non-confrontationally, about some of the ideas that we have been uncomfortable with for some time.

We are beginning to build a small library of books, tapes, articles and CDs that we can share.

Plans are going ahead for our second one day conference led by Adrian Smith on November 8th. The subject will be Tomorrows Faith. Do contact

me, see above, if you are interested and want further details.

Meetings for the coming months are:

August 28th: Discussion of part of one of the CD's of Marcus Borg's Sheffield address.

October 2nd: Looking at the 'Jesus and his Kingdom of equals'.

October 30th: Report by a member of a URC conference conducted by John Bell and Ian Bradley.

October 8th: Adrian Smith 'Tomorrow's Faith'

December 4th: Contributions from members towards a Radical Christmas.

As always there is time for discussion at all meetings.

West Midlands

(Anna Barnsley 01902 701713

annabarnsley611@hotmail.com)

The West Midlands group continues to grow steadily with a nucleus of around 12. We meet in members' homes bi-monthly, looking at chapters in The Thoughtful Guide To Faith by Tony Windross. We are next meeting on Thursday 25th September. at 7.30 – 9 pm when our subject will be Funerals.

Please contact Anna for the venue.

The Eight Points Competition

– not many dead!

Your editor was persuaded by his Management Committee colleagues to run a summer competition for short essays on the Eight Points of Progressive Christianity. Generous prizes were offered, and there were hopes of a PCN booklet with articles on each of the points.

Even in a wet summer readers have plainly been occupying themselves in other ways – only two essays were received. No booklet therefore – at least not yet. But two excellent essays nonetheless, which we are pleased to print below. Thank you to Ilse Boas and Philip Sudworth for contributing them. We hope they will stimulate thought – not just for the newsletter's readers, but for members of local groups together. And, who knows, they might generate further newsletter contributions??

The 5th Point

We are Christians who: Think that the way we treat one another and other people is more important than the way we express our beliefs.

Jesus was a good Jew. We tend to skip over that one - it feels uncomfortable. But he was and one of the basic tenets of Judaism is to love God with all one's heart, mind, soul and strength, and one's neighbour as oneself.

Neither is well expressed, is done well, by talking about love. Indeed, if that were all, we would be inviting some very cynical replies. But actions - yes, that's different - and there's the rub.

Actions may demand sacrifice: anything from inconvenience upwards! Loving means putting the other first, whether God or neighbour. Ego has to step aside, which it may not like very much. And just to add another twist: love of

God may be best expressed by loving one's neighbour.

The God I know wants me to speak up for people who need allies, rather than sing hymns. He wants shelter and clothing for people who are without rather than new vestments for church services.

These two sentences are, of course, professions of belief. God does not directly communicate physically: no letters, emails or telephone calls. So we have to look out for instructions, be careful to pick up signals. Even visions have to be tested for authenticity. None of this would be possible without our belief in God. No belief, no action.

Ilse Boas

The 8th Point - Faith into Action

We are Christians who: form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people; protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation; and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers."

Is this currently true? It may apply in those cases where whole churches are affiliated to PCN, but do the majority of PCN members in the UK really form themselves into such communities?

If we look at the *News from Local Groups* in the June 2008 Newsletter or at the descriptions of these groups on the website, the constantly recurring words are 'talk' and 'discuss'. The topics for those discussions and talks are almost invariably about theology and what we can and can't believe. Even the outcome of this essay competition is to be a booklet of thoughts on how we should understand the Eight Points – this in turn, no doubt, to be recommended as a starting point for further discussions.

I am quite sure that the discussion groups serve a very useful purpose in supporting forward thinking Christians, who often feel isolated within traditional churches, and in introducing them to writers, teachers and scholars who will help them to take their thinking further. I know from personal experience that, after struggling with faith for years amongst those who have simple, unquestioning, traditional beliefs, it is very comforting to realize that one is not alone and that there are many others on the same quest with whom one can be open about doubts and dreams.

Yet, if our approach to God is truly to be through the life and teachings of Jesus, we must realize that faith is far more about challenge and commitment than feeling comfortable. While coming to a personal position on theological points is important in establishing our individual integrity, it is only when this is translated into action on behalf of others that it begins to have real value. To paraphrase James 2:17: *"It doesn't matter how modern your faith is. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless."*

Of course, PCN members will all be active in a wide variety of charity work as part of their discipleship, but how many of them are doing this in their role as a PCN member or feel that they are "equipped" or even supported by PCN, practically or spiritually, in the work they are called to carry out?

The reason I have remained within my local evangelical Methodist church, despite being told frequently that I am not a Christian, is because it

provides a societal framework through which I have been able to respond much more effectively to local community needs than I ever could as a lone searcher after truth. PCN may keep me spiritually sane, but it is the traditional church that supports me in expressing my faith practically, even as it reiterates that good deeds will avail me nothing without the 'right' beliefs.

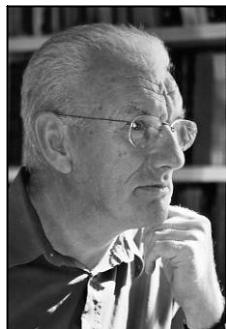
PCN will come of age when its focus moves from what we believe to what we are going to do about it. This would probably involve a change in its mission statement from *"to promote and support open and contemporary Christian understanding"* to something like *"to provide encouragement, support and training for open and contemporary Christian discipleship."* Then its conferences and courses will spend far less time in differentiating itself from conventional Christianity and far more on practical issues. How do we communicate our modern thinking to the great majority who don't read theology without appearing to debunk Christianity totally? What words of comfort do we give to the dying and the bereaved, if we don't believe in a traditional Heaven? What are we actually going to do to carry out the mission Jesus declared - struggling for justice for the oppressed, ministering to the broken-hearted, supporting and encouraging the poor and giving those leading restricted lives new horizons? How do we bring hope to a European continent that is increasingly rapidly losing faith?

From my experience churches don't become communities because the people share the same beliefs or participate in worship together but when its members care for each other. The best way of engendering the spirit of community is to work together on some project that is focused outside the church. We need to look at how we make our local PCN groups much more than talking shops.

In PCN we have to be more passionate about people than points of theology, we need to see ourselves as doers rather than doubters, and we must express our liberalism through the way we love and live. It is then that we become true followers of Jesus and can justifiably begin the Eight Points with - *"We are Christians."*

Philip Sudworth

Forthcoming events



The Meaning of the West: a Radical Christian Interpretation

with Don Cupitt

Saturday 1st November 2008. 10.30 am – 4 pm.

The Centre for Radical Christianity, St Marks Church, Broomhill, Sheffield.

Don Cupitt is probably the most gifted and brilliant – and certainly often the most maligned – British theologian and philosopher of religion of the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries. In his writing, and in the various societies he has tried to foster, Don has sought to develop new thinking for a new epoch: a new philosophy, a new ethics, and a new religious thought.

Cupitt was born in 1934 and educated at Charterhouse, Trinity Hall Cambridge, and Westcott House Cambridge. He studied, successively, Natural Sciences, Theology and the Philosophy of Religion. In 1959 he was ordained deacon in the Church of England, becoming a priest in 1960. In the early 1990s he stopped officiating at public worship, but he remains technically a priest in good standing. He has been successively: a curate in the North of England; Vice-Principal of Westcott House; and then from 1965 fellow and Dean at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. In 1968 he was appointed to a University teaching post in the

Philosophy of Religion, a job in which he continued until his retirement for health reasons in 1996.

At this exciting day conference he will explore themes from new book, due to be published at the end of November. In it he proposes a reinterpretation of Christian history, arguing that the meaning of the West is not *Catholic* Christian, but *radical* Christian. The original Jesus was a secular figure, a utopian teacher of ethical wisdom. Cupitt argues that the core of Western culture is simply the old Christian spirituality extraverted. It should be a 'tonic for the nation' – certainly for progressive believers, after so much depressing religious news of late.

The cost of the conference is £10 (students £2), but for paid-up members of PCN Britain (as well as of CRC), the cost is £8. You can download a booking form from www.stmarksarc.co.uk/news-and-events/crc-events. We'll put it on the PCN Britain site as well.

Tomorrow's Faith

A day Seminar with Adrian Smith

Saturday 8th November 2008, 10.30 am for 11.00 am to 3.45pm at St James Church, Tunbridge Wells. Organised by Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims.

Admission for the day is £12, or £8 for concessions. There are free Fairtrade refreshments, but you need to bring your own lunch.

Further details and booking forms can be obtained from Pat Churchill, 4 Rusthall Rd, Tunbridge Wells,

TN4 8PA. Tel. 01892 531 541. email pat.churchill@tinyworld.co.uk.

(For a new book by Adrian Smith, just published, see the back page of this issue of the Newsletter. We shall aim to review it in December.)

Day Conference in Birmingham

Saturday 21st March 2009

Speakers will include Ian Lawton TCPC America Executive Board Member and Pastor of Christ Community Church, in West Michigan, and Jim

Mein, former Dean of Edinburgh. Many more details will be in the December newsletter. But for the moment, be sure to keep the day free!

And Jack Spong will be back in October 2009

The Committee will be starting to plan soon for a new British tour by Jack Spong, organised by PCN Britain, in the second half of October next

year, Jack will be speaking to his forthcoming new book, which will be published then, around the theme of death. Watch this space.

Meanwhile! - PCN Britain's St Deiniol's Weekend with Jim Cotter

Friday 15th – Sunday 17th May 2009. St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, North Wales (near Chester)



PCN Britain's St Deiniol's weekend is back next year, but at an earlier time of year – mid-May rather than late October. More light and longer days – and perhaps, we can hope, a bit warmer too!

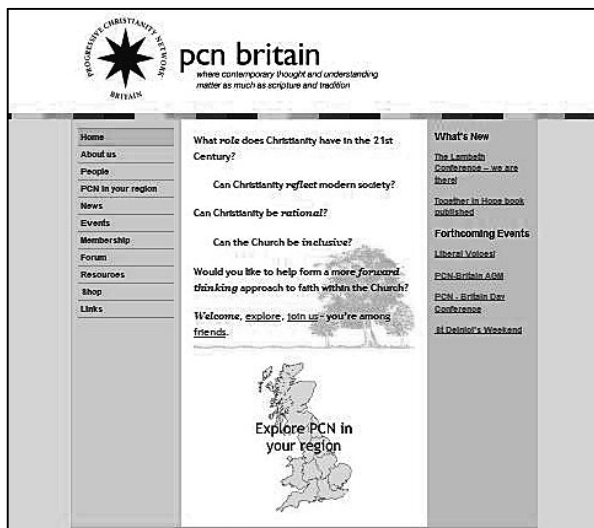
Jim Cotter – an honorary advisor of our Network as well as a member – will be leading it, and sent a summary of what he plans to do over the weekend, from Friday supper through to lunchtime on Sunday, just as the newsletter was going to press. What he wrote is so delightful we print it exactly as received by the editor.

“This is as far as I've got: Gospel according to Jim with the help of the Gospels according to Marcus (Borg), Dominic (Crossan), Robert (Funk), and James (Mackey...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...And what is your portrait of Jesus, and what is the Gospel according to you? Do you think that will be enough?!”

It sounds like a fabulous weekend. Expecting that many will want to come, we have at this stage booked the whole of St Deiniol's. A leaflet with fuller details, including cost, which we still have to calculate, will be available very soon. But you can book your place now, to be sure of getting one, and we strongly recommend that people do. Send a cheque for £20 (as a non-returnable deposit) to PCN Britain at the regular address on the back page of this newsletter. Mark your envelope 'St Deiniol's 2009', and include names, addresses, phone numbers and emails of those who will be coming. If you want a double room (there are not that many), be sure to indicate this. Those who book in this way will receive all additional information just as soon as we have it settled.

PCN's new look



Have you visited our new website? You will find a brand new clean design, we hope easily navigable, and with easy access by region to what is happening locally – both local groups, local events and the map of local PCN friendly churches. There is still some work to be done – such as loading picture galleries, and giving local group convenors direct access. But we welcome your feedback. If you want to advertise local

events or add to the list of PCN-friendly churches, please contact Olivia McLennan, our Administrator.

And we've printed new PCN leaflets, aware that the old ones - though familiar friends to longer-serving members – were both a bit homespun, and didn't really communicate the energy and activity there is in our Network. Others who do far less were outpacing us in publicity.

We produced the leaflets in time for all those conferences. But we had many more printed than were required for those, because we really do want PCN Britain to be better known. People regularly comment – and have done so a lot this summer with all that has been happening – that we punch far above our weight.

That's good. But we wouldn't mind a little more weight! And we do think there are a lot of people all over Britain who would like to know about us, but don't.

For that reason, we are including one of the leaflets in every newsletter this time for you to see. **If you would like a bundle to share and to distribute locally** – we hope very much you will - then please contact Olivia McLennan.

Book Reviews

Inclusivity? Count me in!

Together in Hope.

Ed Adrian Alker. St Mark's CRC Press, 2008. Paperback pp 96. ISBN 978-0-9559593-0-1. Available online from the new PCN website (Shop) for just £5.60, including postage and packing.

In an amazingly few months Adrian Alker on behalf of the Inclusive Church Network conceived the idea, raised finance, recruited eminent contributors took on the role of editor, organised the printing and published under the inaugural imprint of St Mark's Press "Together in Hope". It is both a manifesto for progressive Christianity and a resource book. Adrian gives two reasons why such a book is needed at this time: first, most people in the Church want collaboration rather than confrontation; and second, there seems to be a desire for a "truly fresh expression of what it means to be people of faith today".

Following Adrian's introduction there are concise articles by ten eminent scholars, thinkers and leading professionals. Steven Shakespeare in "The God of Hope: The God Difference" sets the theme by dismissing ideas of an interventionist God to give us a wider vision and new understanding of the divine reality.

Sadly it is still necessary to demonstrate the value of a scholarly and critical approach to the Bible as if a geography textbook needs to start with evidence to prove a global Earth. Marcus Borg, "The Hope Seen in Jesus", presents the character and nature of Jesus as the "decisive disclosure of what a life full of God is like". A memorable phrase is "The Word of God in a person trumps the Word of god in a book".

John Dominic Crossan "Hoping for God's Kingdom on Earth" argues straight out of the Gospels that John the Baptist's Kingdom was imminent whereas Jesus, having first accepted this view by being baptised, later insisted that the Kingdom was present now: "It is among you".

Keith Ward, "Hope through the Scriptures", reflects on what Jesus' message of the Kingdom means for us today: liberating love, pursuit of the good and justice.

Having established a convincing rationale derived from the life and teaching of Jesus, the remaining authors relate these insights to contemporary situations. Jill Sandham and Hugh Dawes "Hope for Church in the 21st century" speak not of "the Church" (the institution), but "Church" (the Christian community). Institutions are about power: local gatherings that reject this model and embrace equality, open-mindedness and mutual respect resemble Jesus' Kingdom. It is the one now needed if we are to have hope.



Together in Hope's launch at the Lambeth Conference. The Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, Idris Jones, introduced the book. With him are the three PCN contributors – Adrian, Jill and Hugh – Clare Herbert, one of the other essayists, and representatives of some of the other bodies in the Inclusive Church Network.

Jonathan Clatworthy, "Finding Hope in our Contemporary World", wonders where hope is in recent historical events. Attempts to right the world seem doomed. Science, technology and political structures alone are not an answer, but, if these are treated as means and not ends in themselves, purpose, progress and hope have meaning. .

Paula Clifford, "Hope for the Poorest of the World", suggests ways to make our inadequate response to injustice and the resulting poverty more relevant and effective.

Christina Rees in "Out of Eden" begins with Eden and Golgotha. What is essential is Jesus' humanity not his masculinity. She summarises past appalling theologies on the nature of Woman. The "malignant remnants" of these remain with us today. If "we are all one in Christ", there are no barriers to the full incorporation of women as full and equal members of the Church.

In "Singing in the Rain : the Hope of Inclusion" Clare Herbert asserts that her experience in and out of the Church, ordained and lesbian and her parish work at St Anne's, Soho, convince her that much more open dialogue with gay and lesbian people, will result in better understanding and lead to full acceptance. Thus the church will benefit from sharing their insights.

Jim Cotter "Transforming Prayer - Renewing Hope" exemplifies vividly his plea for replacing over-familiar language that is clichéd with new expressions. By spending more care on the language of worship and prayer we can be refreshed.

Each of these persuasive presentations justifies the theme of "Together in Hope" and fulfils its editorial aims. .

The centre pages provide a useful directory of organisations that share the same platform, but

Jesus - uncovering the life, teachings, and relevance of a religious revolutionary
Marcus Borg. Harper One, 2006. Paperback. ISBN 978-0--6-143434-1. £8.99

Marcus Borg is perhaps the best known scholar in Britain of the American "Jesus Seminar". Best-selling books by him include "The Heart of Christianity" and "Meeting Jesus again for the first time". He and Bishop Tom Wright collaborated on the book "The Meaning of Jesus".

This book is written for people who are not specialists in theology. It introduces readers to up to date knowledge on the gospels. It is well written – not at all "heavy". He talks of two paradigms – two very different ways of seeing Jesus. One is the traditional way of taking the gospel accounts as historically authentic narratives: the other sees Jesus in the light of modern knowledge of biblical literary and historical criticism, of the natural and human sciences, and differentiates between the metaphorical elements in the gospels, and the remembered history.

He gives a brief but very helpful account of the development in biblical scholarship over the past 300 hundred years, the different sources for our knowledge of Jesus, and demonstrates that the gospels were written as part of a developing tradition. He distinguishes between the pre-Easter Jesus, and the post-Easter Jesus – the Jewish teacher of a revolutionary gospel, and the Christ of faith.

His descriptions of how he and other scholars make judgments on what is probably history, and what is more likely to be metaphor, are illuminating for a modern understanding of some of the otherwise perplexing elements of the gospels.

It is helpful to read his account of the social and religious conditions of Galilee and Jerusalem in the life-time of Jesus, with its domination system which oppressed the peasants. Jesus brought to them a challenging message of hope and good news.

Jesus' teaching arose from his own spiritual experience – not theory. Borg emphasises Jesus' ministry was grounded in his personal experience,

have different emphases.

Although timed for the 2008 Lambeth Conference, this attractive paperback at the modest price of £4.99 is intended to stimulate discussion and reflection by a wide readership. Of course it will be taken up by those already sympathetic and those who are searching. The question arises: "How are we to catch the attention of those for whom "God", "Church" and "Christian" are tainted terms? How do we meet the needs of those who find an academic approach difficult? How do we teach children? More resources are needed if this message of hope is to be extended to reach more people.

What effect did "Together in Hope" have on those Lambeth Conference participants who read it? My hope is that, given time, some of the primitive primates will evolve into Homo sapiens.

Robin Story

beginning with his own vision of the Spirit, grounded in deep silent prayer.

The imagery of Light was very important to this Jewish prophet and mystic. "Mystics know the immediacy of access to God...God is accessible to experience apart from mediators, that is, apart from institution and tradition."

Borg explores the ministry of Jesus in rural Galilee, the journey from there to Jerusalem, and finally the confrontation with the Jewish and Roman authorities that led to his crucifixion.

Jesus' message is grounded in the here and now. The kingdom of God that Jesus taught, was, according to Borg, not something focused in the hereafter, but in building a better world in this one. His God is a God of compassion, with a passion for justice, which he illustrated in a variety of ways.

Jesus' methods included his parables, and his one-line memorable sayings. He used metaphor a lot, a vivid poetic way of communicating that challenges, inspires, and changes people.

He challenged the traditions that bound so many to structures of family, wealth, honour and purity in ways that stunted their spiritual creativity and potential growth. He taught the people to centre in a loving God, as he also practised a ministry of healing and exorcism. Fellowship meals were also a prominent feature of his way of doing things. Who he chose to eat with, demonstrated his inclusiveness, as it courted criticism when he ate with social outcasts.

He was a revolutionary who advocated non-violent resistance in a variety of ways. With dramatic prophetic actions he rode into Jerusalem, and overturned the tables in the Temple, as part of affirming that the kingdom of God challenged the domination system of the empire and its taxation stranglehold on peasant life.

Borg gives his account of why and how he believes

the infancy and the resurrection narratives came to be written. As he makes the point more than once, "believe what you like happened at these time, but recognize the powerful truths that metaphors convey". As a historian he treats the most spectacular stories as metaphorical narratives and not as remembered history, but he is sensitive to those who feel insecure with this line of thinking.

How do I get...?

Jesus and his kingdom of equals. An interdenominational curriculum for 4th-7th grades on the life and teaching of Jesus.

This book, reviewed in our June issue by Carol Fulton, was published in the United States in 2001 by Polebridge Press, the Jesus Seminar publishing arm.

People have been finding it difficult to get hold of the book. Chris Avis has kindly been researching the matter on behalf of the rest of us. Polebridge no longer sell to UK addresses. They have UK agents, Eurospan, part of Turpin Distribution Services Ltd, www.turpin-distribution.com, who by now should

A new title by Adrian B Smith

God, Energy and the Field is Adrian Smith's latest book, just published by O Books, which reached us as the newsletter was going to press. In his introduction the author writes about a new concept of God Manifest, one 'which shifts from that based upon the

This is an important book for those who wish to look afresh at the roots of the Christian way in the gospels, our relationship with Jesus of Nazareth, and the Christ of faith. It is also important to bring readers to an awareness of much modern knowledge of Jesus and his time. Whether you think this reflects or distorts truth, it is important to realise the breadth of modern thinking on this subject. **Michael Wright**

have copies in. In July they said they would cost £34.50 + £3.50 postage, though the fall in the pound may well have increased the price. Amazon was saying then that it cost £36.49 post free from them, though they did not have any copies in. Those then are the routes to finding it.

It is a book worth chasing. If anyone does manage to get one, please tell us how, and we'll aim to put something more up on the website.

human person to one which appreciates God in the energies and fields which are the basis of all creation.' The book costs £9.99, and is available now – on Amazon for considerably less than its publisher's price.

From the editor

This issue has been produced from sabbatical exile. Apologies for any inadequacies!

The *very last* date for copy for the NEXT issue of the Newsletter is Friday 28th November 2008. Try NOT to leave it that late – Christmas looms!

Email all contributions (and local group news) to info@pcnbritain.org.uk, and make sure you put

NEWSLETTER in the header; or post them to our usual office address – again including

NEWSLETTER on the envelope. For all enquiries, email info@ as usual or write to the address

below. No phone messages, please, before early November! Many thanks.

Hugh Dawes

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

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