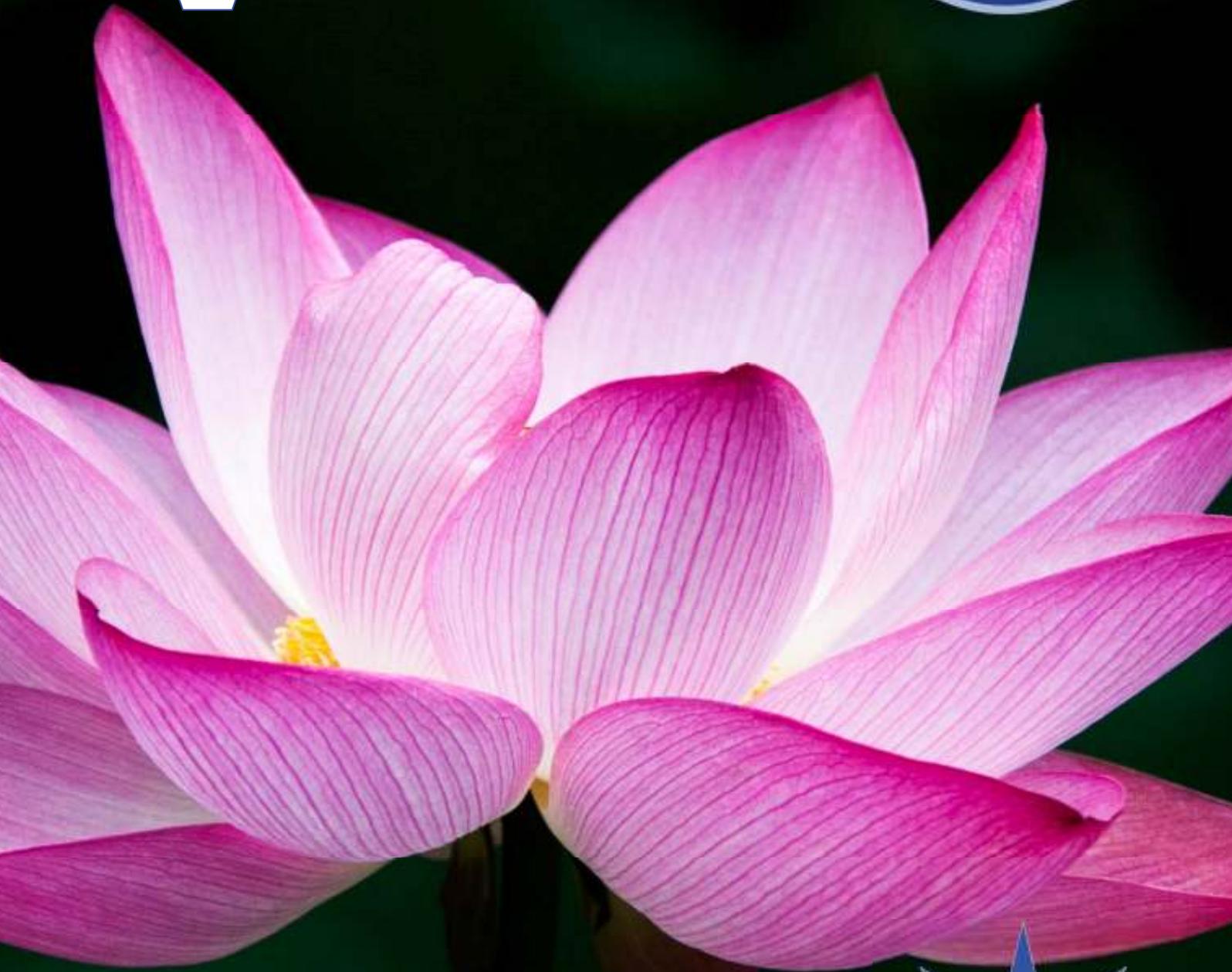


Progressive Voices



*Is not transformation into Christ
what it is all about?*

*That transformation into love and a
blossoming of the fruit of the Spirit?*

26

September 2018

Footprints in the snow

It's easy to see footprints in the snow.

Virgin purity despoiled with tracks

which path is lost

when comes the thaw,

and the path, well trod, is known no more.

It's easy to see footprints in the sand.

Sea swept beach patterned by steps

Which, come the ebb of tide

are washed away

And the journey, lost, belongs to yesterday.

It's easy to see where saints of old have trod,

Landscapes scattered with pilgrim paths and places,

Rituals and rites set in church and chapel stone,

But, cultures ebb, generations flow, certainties thaw,

And the way to 'God' is much less certain than before.

A new path is needed for this generation

The old ways have only brought us here - not there

To where we journey, forward, together,

Equal, sharing, honest, accepting whosoever.

Break new ground,

make new tracks –

leave footprints

which forge a way -

for faith to flourish,

soul to soar,

Hearts to race, and

embrace in the love of the Divine,

To dance the real,

touch the earth

and find -

heaven.

Meryl White

Welcome

The words on our cover are taken from Richard Eddleston's article on page 11 as he shares five ways that work for him as he seeks to be transformed into Christ. Before we get there, a range of contributors reflect on their beliefs and why they continue to go to church. We are helped along this path with poetry and the encouragement to write our own creeds if existing ones no longer express our faith.

We shall reflect on being faithful whilst not believing, (a review of that contributor's book), renewing PCN membership, on three emerging types of church, a round up of news from our groups, more poetry and a prayer, some book reviews, a poem and the encouragement to engage with One World Week in Oct.

As well as OWW you will find a whole host of events and conferences on page 5 for you to consider this autumn.

Welcome to the 26th edition of Progressive Voices.

Enjoy!



Marcus Borg Memorial Conference Rev Canon Marianne Wells Borg

'Days of Awe and Wonder:
How we see makes all the difference'

Friday 19 October: Informal reception, 7.30-9pm, £5

Saturday 20 October: Conference, 10.15am-4pm
Members of PCN and/or St. Mark's CRC £18, Non
members £20, Students: £5, under 18s free

St. Marks Broomhill, Sheffield, S10 2SE

info@pcnbritain.org.uk
www.pcnbritain.org.uk/events

Progressive Voices is the magazine of the Progressive Christianity Network Britain [Registered Charity No. 1102164]. It is published quarterly in March, June, September and December. PCN Britain is itself part of a wider international network of progressive Christian organisations.

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

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

www.pcnbritain.org.uk

Contents

- 2 Poem: Footprints in the snow
- 3 Welcome; Marcus Borg Memorial
- 4 Chair's Letter; Staff and Trustees
- 5 Your letters; Members' Residential; Conferences: CANA; Free to Believe; Rupert Sheldrake; Dave Tomlinson; Richard Holloway; Paul Razor; Matt Carmichael; Alastair McIntosh; Deconstruction Retreat
- 6 Describing what I believe?
- 7 Go to Church; Poem: How to ...
- 8 What now?
- 10 What are Creeds good for?
- 11 Transformation into Christ
- 12 Faithful, not believing
- 14 Review: Christian Middle Way
- 15 To Renew or not
- 16 Emerging Positively
- 18 News from local groups
- 21 Poems: Our Father ..., Psalm 100; Compassion
- 22 Reviews: Waiting For The Last Bus, The Prayer Wheel, Healing Spiritual Wounds, If the Church were Christian
- 23 Meditation on Ploughed Earth
- 24 One World Week

Cover Image: **Hong Zhang** (jennyzh2008) [CC0 or CC0], via Wikimedia Commons https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f5/Lotus_flower_%28978659%29.jpg

Your reflections, questions, events, poems, images, reviews, letters, comments, news, prayers and other contributions are all welcome.

Publication is at the discretion of the editor:

dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Copy Deadlines:

Dec: Friday 9th Nov 2018

March: Friday 8th Feb 2019

June: Friday 10th May 2019

Sept: Friday 3rd August 2019



Chair's Letter

Progressive Christianity Network Britain

www.pcnbritain.org.uk

www.facebook.com/pcnuk/

Trustees

Adrian Alker, Chair
adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Martin Bassant
martin.bassant@pcnbritain.org.uk

Dave Coaker, editor of
Progressive Voices
dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Simon Cross
simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk

Ian Geere
ian.geere@pcnbritain.org.uk

Sandra Griffiths,
Honorary Secretary
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk

Sue Hobley
suehobley@btinternet.com

Paul Onslow, Vice Chair
paul.onslow@pcnbritain.org.uk

Peter Stribblehill,
Treasurer
peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk

Richard Tetlow
richard.tetlow@pcnbritain.org.uk

Mo Wills
mo.wills@pcnbritain.org.uk

Staff

Sarah Guilfoyle,
administrator and
assistant web editor
sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk

Steve Ireland Web host

Janis Knox,
Social Media Editor
janis.knox@pcnbritain.org.uk

Jess Lee, DVD Librarian
jess.lee@pcnbritain.org.uk

Andy Vivian web editor
andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk

There are two issues which keep returning to my mind in regard to our work as a progressive Christian network. The first is the struggle, which many people feel, about remaining members of their church, with its traditional doctrines and beliefs, alongside their open, questioning, progressive outlook. In this PV, Chris King, Christine Whitworth and members of our Bolton group all reflect upon this dilemma in different ways. The second issue is one of age. PCN, alongside other similar organisations, has very few members under the age of 50. Why is this and how do we respond?

I am a lifelong church attender and, like our contributors in this PV, I can list the benefits and the contribution which a church makes to the common good. The greatest privilege of my life was the opportunity for twenty years to be part of the progressive church of St Marks in Sheffield and to play my part in its shaping. From those experiences I wrote my book, 'Is A Radical Church Possible?' I am still of the opinion that it is worthwhile that PCN continues to have a role in challenging and encouraging clergy and congregations to be open, honest and truthful about the claims of the Christian faith - truthful about the fruits of biblical scholarship, open to the big questions about what we mean by 'God' or prayer and honest about our deepest feelings, our doubts and our experiences.

I take for granted that we value the friendship and that sense of community which being a church member often brings. I take for granted that most churches try to put into practice 'good works' as they follow in the footsteps of the 'Good Shepherd'. It seems to me that it is the hour of worship that challenges us most. If I were to attempt a kind of progressive reconstruction of the main elements of that hour - bible readings, sermon, hymn singing, receiving bread and wine, praying, I do think that we have the resources and imagination to create worship and liturgy in such a way that we honour all that is good from our past inheritance but in a newly fashioned garment. I mean by this the confidence to explore bible passages critically and intelligently; to discuss the sermon afterwards; to choose hymns and songs, old and new, which are life-affirming, celebratory of the life of Jesus, inviting us into the mystery of 'God'; to offer an open table for an all-inclusive community and to recognise that prayer gives an opportunity to enter the silence.

I do believe that we can keep plugging away with these kind of worship ideas and resources in kindly and also challenging ways. I recognise that the struggle may 'naught availeth' and that we may have to walk away from some situations with a heavy heart. But let's hear of those churches which can appeal to mind and heart, which feel to the attender that they are 'on the move'. Let's hear of resources which have re-fashioned worship, of churches which don't ask us to leave our brains at the lych-gate, of honest sermons and an open-hearted spirituality.

Now to the second issue. The other day, travelling into town on the bus, I realised that I was probably the oldest passenger. Age hits you a little bit like that, creeping up on you until you are forced to reflect that you might be a little out of touch with how younger generations see and live their lives. Of course, we observe much within our families, we think about the kind of world in which our grandchildren are growing up and wonder how our progressive Christian outlook might resonate with them. This second important issue is how PCN connects with children, young adults and those in mid-life. What are we trying to say and share?

Recently we were awarded a generous grant by Westhill to develop some short films about progressive Christianity. Should these films be aiming to challenge and attract younger people to our cause? Should the films themselves be made by young people? When we plan our conferences, organise our group meetings, dare we hope that these will be all-age affairs? Or are we so used to seeing an array of grey heads, that we have assumed that the 'young' have no interest in such gatherings? A recent ComRes survey commissioned by Hodder publishers reported that 51% of people ages 18 – 24 had a positive experience of Christianity, whilst only 38% of those aged between 45 and 64 reported the same. Wouldn't it be a great thing if PCN could build on that positive experience of Christianity which some younger people clearly have and at the same time try to present a Christian faith fit for the 21st century to those disillusioned by their experiences. Food for thought and challenges for us all.

On both these issues, church and age, PCN members will, I'm sure, have many experiences and ideas to share. Let's keep the conversations going. The trustees would value your thoughts!

Adrian Alker serves as the
Chair of PCN Britain
adrian.alker@pcnbritain.org.uk



Your letters

What Price Honesty?

Some thoughts on Adrian Alker's article in the June 2018 edition of 'Progressive Voices', where he asks the question – "What price honesty and has dishonesty always been there?"

The short answer, as I see it, is yes dishonesty has always been with us. In the Bible looking at the second chapter of Genesis we learn of the first recorded dishonest act when Eve eats the forbidden fruit and later in chapter four verse nine Cain denies knowing what has happened to Abel, although he has killed him, he says to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Turning to the New Testament, at Jesus' Crucifixion, Peter denies knowing Jesus, (see Mark c14 v 66-72 for full account) - just three examples of many instances of dishonesty contained in the Bible.

If we are honest about it, we are all guilty of dishonesty to a greater or lesser degree.

My thoughts on the matter are that we should concentrate on the fundamental message of Jesus, that we should love one another and treat other people as we would want them to treat us. This I feel would lead to a more honest approach to the people we deal with and to the world in general.

If the Church is to take a lead in this it must put its own house in order first. Adrian points out that membership of nearly all denominations is falling at an alarming rate, due in my opinion largely, but not exclusively, to the Church still preaching First Century philosophy in a Twenty-first century world.

I myself was hanging on by my finger tips until I discovered 'Free to Believe' and then PCN. What can PCN offer in the debate about honesty? - I'm not sure, but to me the over-riding issue is to spread the message of love for each other and for all of God's kingdom; the rest will follow.

George Drake

Want to reply? Have your own burning question? A comment on a recent event? Want to check whether a thought is unique to you?

If so, please get in touch
dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Members' Residential

12 - 14 October

Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today

The Hayes, Hayes Ln, Swanwick, Alfreton DE55 1AU

We will be looking at Bishop Spong's latest book of this title. We ask you to purchase (and read) the book beforehand. .

The cost of the weekend will be £160 per person, en-suite.

Please contact Sandra Griffiths
sandra.griffiths@pcnbritain.org.uk

Rupert Sheldrake

Science and Spiritual Practices

Thursday 20 September

7-9pm

Cost: £10.00

Tunbridge Wells Camden Centre, off Victoria Road. TN1 2SW

info@spiritofpeace.co.uk

Dave Tomlinson

An afternoon with ...

Saturday 6 October, 2.30pm

Cost: Donations

Christchurch, Abbeydale, Gloucester, GL4 5EQ

hilma.wilkinson@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are all One

Christians Awakening to a New Awareness Conference

Saturday 3rd November, 10.30am

Cost: £40.00

Essex Unitarian Church, Notting Hill Gate, London W8 4RT

janeupchurch@blueyonder.co.uk

www.christiansawakening.org

Richard Holloway

Believing, Forgiving, Dying: Our Walk Across The Stage

Saturday 6th Oct, 10am - 4pm

Cost: £20.00

The Church at Carrs Lane
Carrs Lane, Birmingham, B4 7SX
0121 643 6151

office@carrslane.co.uk

www.carrslane.co.uk

Free to Believe

Radical Faith 8 - 10 November

The Hayes, Hayes Ln, Swanwick, Alfreton DE55 1AU

www.freetobelieve.org.uk

will include Bible Studies led by Trevor Dennis, along with speakers: Martin Camroux;

John Churcher; Kate Gray

and worship led by Fiona Bennett
conferences@freetobelieve.org.uk

The Future of Faith lecture series

Rawtenstall Unitarian Church and Unity Centre, Bank Street, Rawtenstall. Rossendale BB4 7QY

Cost: Donations

Paul Rasor

Saturday 6 October, 11am

'The Challenge of Liberal Theology in a time of declining liberalism'

Matt Carmichael

Saturday 1 December, 11am

'Rekindling the Spirit of Community – Restoring Depth in an age of Screens'

Alastair McIntosh

Saturday 23 March 2019, 11am

'Towards Third Millennium Christianity: Activism, Nonviolence and the Mystical Imperative'

Deconstruction Retreat

Saturday 3 - Sunday 4 November

Cost: £160

ensuite accommodation & meals

The Hayes, Swanwick, Alfreton, Derbyshire, DE55 1AU

simon.cross@pcnbritain.org.uk

Describing what I believe?

I call myself a Progressive Christian. Yet I worry about the use of the 'Christian' when I hear and see things said and done under that banner, in the USA and closer to home. I hear racist statements, pontification against gay marriage and claims for exclusive 'salvation' for 'believers'. I hear all this, and more, based on supposed 'biblical truth' and I want to loudly say, 'not in my name'.

Whilst I cannot recognize Christ in these 'Christian' messages, I do recognise Christ and struggle to understand and to follow what I believe is his amazingly radical and life affirming teaching. So I attend church and do the usual 'progressive' bit by keeping silent when we pray for 'pagans and sinners' and smile sadly as the contemporary evangelical hymns bash out stories of 'mighty towers' in which the 'righteous' are all gathered.

When I recite (some) of the creed I say loudly 'I believe in one God' - because I do - the God of people of all faiths and none, and of our amazing world. The shining eyes and raised hands of the converted and saved scare me - as does the worldwide growth in their numbers.

In my local church there is a gentler form of this enthusiasm, although its roots are the same, and I struggle to join in. At the same time my fellow congregation members show tremendous love to each other and work tirelessly in the neighbourhood to support the hungry and homeless. I feel a great affection for them. They arrange the most eclectic sets of social activities to send money overseas and work with energy to make them successful. The problem for me is that so much of this money goes to support various conversion ministries - converting the Jews seems a special favourite. Why would we do that?

I am not ready - and am not sure I will ever be, to join the circle of so many of my friends who have just given up on the whole game and become happy humanists. That 'Hound of Heaven' continues to haunt me as I reflect on a lifetime of church worship, theological reflection and many life experiences. I do not have the language - but in my heart, I believe that life is 'eternal', whatever that means and that it, and we, are part of a story that has meaning.

Perhaps I am attending the wrong church, or maybe seeking answers in the wrong religion? I am strongly drawn to many of the teachings of Buddha and find these compatible with, not contradictory to, my hold on Christianity. Christianity however is my tradition and my language and it does not, for me, exclude other teachings or insights into the meaning of our lives.

Maybe then it is just the wrong church? I was brought up and remained most of my life in the High Church tradition. I keep this quote (I do not know its source) on my desktop 'I value beauty, order and calm in worship; I find the idea of sacraments and icons helpful; I

hymns. In these ways, I'm Anglo-Catholic'. I love traditional hymns and prayers and liturgy because their language is so poetic and there is no way in which it could be taken literally and still make any sense. I love the poetry of mystery where the answers do not have to be shouted out in God's name, but quietly pondered in the heart and where doubt is a precious 'crack in everything' where the light shines through.

Here's the rub - I also call myself a 'Progressive'. I discovered 'Honest to God' as a student and studied theology in a context of radical criticism and 'demythologising'. I read Spong, Marcus Borg and PCN articles. I enjoy PCN speakers and conferences and say 'yes' to what I hear. But being a Progressive is not a place of faith for me and I think maybe I am missing something. I call myself a Progressive Christian because I approach the Bible, church history and theology with a 'critical' mind, and I do not even seek to find straightforward 'answers' in them.

So, intellectually, I am straight down the line PC. But emotionally - I do not know how to explore and express and develop my faith. How might I worship? How might I meditate/pray? What may I believe about eternal life? Can I be PC and still believe that my much-loved late parents are 'safe in the palm of God's hand'?

I attended the Alpha course at my church and found it just awful, in every way. As each doctrine was described I moved further and further away from any sense of reality. When we were asked to raise our hands if we wanted to be prayed over because the session had been about the devil and 'he' might be around still, I sat promptly on my hands and sang nursery songs inside my head to stop myself upsetting others by speaking or walking out. I joined a House Group and eventually had to gracefully (I hope) resign because I was becoming the 'false teacher' by asking questions however gently and carefully. I look forward with enthusiasm to the PC course and hope it becomes widely available.

Maybe I am not a Progressive but a 'Liberal', whatever that might mean? The Progressive critique rings so true to me that I have to sign up to its questioning stance and I support its 'eight points' with enthusiasm. I know that the manifesto of Progressive Christianity is to support the asking of questions and not the provision of answers. But I feel that I do not know how to take what for me are the next steps into believing and experiencing and practicing my faith in a way that lets my heart sing.

Am I missing something?

Chris King is an academic in the fields of Theology and History, a former Vice Chancellor, and she now lives in Devon.



Go to Church

I have decided to try and answer a question that so many of my friends and family ask of me – ‘Why do you keep going to church when you believe so little of the general doctrines and creeds?’ Some of my reasons are purely personal but I do believe that the institution of the Church still has a lot that it can offer to the world. Yet, I am finding Sunday services increasingly difficult to sit through. I find people’s blinkered acceptance of various doctrines infuriating and their inability to see the church’s irrelevance to most people! My mission at church seems to be to get folk to ask questions!

I was raised in a dyed-in-the-wool Methodist tradition, with local preachers in abundance and would feel so disloyal to my parents were I to stray too far from my roots. Church has been very much part of my daily routine and I would be bereft without the familiarity and all the church-related things that I am involved in. I find great comfort too, in knowing, as I sit there, that throughout England, Scotland, Jamaica and Brazil other people dear to me are doing the self-same thing.

Those are my personal reasons, the rest, I think, will be applicable to most. So, in no particular order:

A sense of belonging, of a oneness, not just to a specific congregation, not even to other people of faith throughout the world, but to the whole of humankind.

An acceptance that all are equal, again not just within the church, but an acknowledgement that all people, whatever their circumstances, are of unique value and should be treated accordingly.

The chance to hear about other parts of the world, especially where there is need, and the opportunity to do something about it. The knowledge of partners ‘on the ground’ in areas where aid can be safely channelled.

A concern for the local community and a wish to be involved, to provide a useful service that is not being met by other organisations/councils.

The social life and fellowship – as a widow I appreciate that everyone is included and that no one is excluded.

The genuine care and support of all within the extended church family, shown in so many ways.

The gradually emerging opportunities to discuss matters of faith with others.

The prompts and the opportunity to take up challenges to make a difference in whatever way possible.

And finally, even when I disagree with what is preached, it does make me take stock and go back to study the topic raised. It is a reminder to follow the way of Jesus and two of John Wesley’s maxims: ‘All the world is my parish’ and ‘Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.’

Christine Whitworth

How to ...

How to unravel the myths of childhood
expose a thought-out, an adult, faith
when those very myths are seen
as the backbone of belief;
the definitive creed?

How to undo the constructions of ages,
the biased, buildings of religion,
its turreted walls designed
to exclude heresy, sin,
which deny reality?

How to find a true and stable path
in the mire of conflicting beliefs.
the dreams of ancient clerics,
the mix of pagan myth
and fragile history?

How to share one's doubts with others
without causing fear-filled rejection?
How to tell out uncertain truth
amongst those deceived
yet blindly certain?

How to undermine the religious castle
without slaughter of its defenders;
to remove the walls and turrets
of fixed and unthinking trust
without utter loss of faith?

How to risk exposing one's difference
without becoming separate from the herd?
How to deny the valued talismans of religion
without being cast out from our fellowship,
without rejection from our friends?

Cracks expose the faulty underpinning.
The lack of thought, illogical convictions.
The need to rethink, to find another highway,
For this road has shown its imperfections;
The gaps that show the fires beneath.

Yet, loving Lord, what would you have me do?
You have taken me from the place of comfort,
of rest in Your arms, of security and approval.
You have thrust me off the rock of conformity
Into unstable shifting sands and new ideas.

“Follow me” he said, and died,
which route we are bound to go, but how?
Have I the moral strength to face rejection,
when out and proud in non-conformity,
facing anger, loss of fellowship, alone?

Edward Conder



What now?

After several years of attending the Bolton PCN group, and recently reading 'Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind' by Yuval Noah Harari, a member raised the questions: "What do we believe now" and "Why do we still go to church?" At their meeting in December and January the group each offered their responses:

"What I believe now"

God is the obvious answer to the question "why is there anything?" He is love, there being so much love in the world as well as the other stuff. That is because, in creating, God limited himself to allow the universe to develop and man to be free. Therefore I have great difficulty in believing in an interventionist god.

I believe that the difference between Jesus and the Buddha (and others) is one of degree and not kind. And Jesus is wholly human which rules out more than it rules in, including a physical resurrection.

Yet I am convinced that Jesus is in some sense alive. I have to believe that this life is not everything as for countless people it hasn't been anything worthwhile.

I believe that life is a great mystery – forever to be explored and questioned. I believe at the heart of this mystery is a Living Spirit of Love always seeking to act for good – within each person and in the world.

I believe that Jesus was a fully human person who was so open to the working of the Living Spirit that his life reflected full and unconditional love.

I believe that, if I am to play my full part in this world's life, I should try always to be open to the working and enabling power of the Living Spirit of Love.

I believe and trust that death is not the end of life – though what lies beyond is part of the great mystery.

I believe in one God, a supreme being greater than our understanding. I believe that Jesus Christ came into this world. He grew up with Mary, Joseph and his brothers and sisters. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was crucified for his deeds. As a Christian, I try to follow his example, his teachings of peace, joy, justice and love.

I believe in the power of prayer, the means of grace and the relief of forgiveness. I believe in eternal rest of the spirit at the end of our journey.

I believe that my thoughts and actions are largely generated from within myself and are not directed by an external, omnipotent power. My thoughts and actions are influenced by my experiences – education, people I've known or become aware of, Christianity (and other religions), history and contemporary ideas about justice.

At times I act instinctively which is less easy to explain.

Good things happen in the world but these are often due to the work of people or simply to chance (This also can explain why bad things happen). I would like to believe that there is an external power acting for good in the world and continue to hope that it is so.

I'd like to paraphrase David Jenkins creed, "God is. He is as he is in Jesus. Therefore there is hope." I think, "God is love. Love is as it is in Jesus. Therefore there is hope."

I find it hard to believe in a supernatural God. At the same time I feel that there is "something more", which I tend to refer to as Love. This is found within people and between people, individuals and groups. I probably cherry pick biblical references to Jesus that suit this belief. I feel inspired by the underlying and overcoming Love that is shown by Jesus and those who follow his way. I recognise that much of the Bible is either poetical or an attempt to describe feelings and ways of living in parables and midrashic styles of teaching. I am agnostic about the "afterlife", yet feel comforted by a persistent belief that in some way we remain within Love. I write Love with a capital "L" in these contexts and am happy to use "Spirit" in association with it. I am also inconsistent in my attitude to prayer, feeling I need it and that there is a feeling of being linked to others and that it may sometimes result in seeming answers to prayer, perhaps partly through actions that people may take following such prayer. I am not prepared to define the word "Love". Perhaps it is just another word for what is indescribable other than through loving.

I don't believe that 'believe' is a useful description. I have faith. I trust that there is more to life than what I can physically sense. I have an awareness of 'something' beyond me which I cannot fully explain, only feel.

I enjoy the mental activity of trying to explain it, and weighing up other approaches, but am content that it all remains a work-in-progress while I'm breathing.

What I believe has changed over the years. Without listing what I do and don't believe, following the example of Jesus is a good way to live your life.

Humans have always felt the need to worship something other. I believe that is God. Where or what it is I do not know, but I feel it is something deep inside us, and I feel the need to worship it.

Jesus came closest to understanding it and having a relationship with it. This gave him the confidence to show us and tell us how we ought to live in relationship with other people.

I must admit that, preparing again Christmas services has brought me to the 'Grand Perhaps' as Robert Browning notes in his poem Bishop Blougram's Apology.



either to some extent, so long as they do not consign me to hell. In such cases I stay away from Church. On the other hand, I have worked with and prayed with some people from these backgrounds who have shown Love and even prayed for me, not just to save my soul, but to seek blessing on my own work.

I go because I have the privilege of trying to create a space each week where others might experience a sense of something beyond themselves, question their attitudes, behaviours, or understandings, engage individually or collectively with making the world a better place, and feel that they are loved, welcome, and accepted as they are.

I often question if this is the experience of those attending, and I'm not sure whether I would attend if I weren't leading. I might just go to a Quaker meeting for my spirituality, and volunteer to live out social justice.

The church has been part of me from childhood – it is part tradition – part of my being. Church services can challenge and stimulate me (not always the case). I am also part of that community and it is where I find support and love.



“Why I still go to church?”

To be part of a community of people, committed to following the way of Jesus, exploring the mystery of life and learning how to live and work in this world for our own good, the good of all and the growth of love, justice and peace.

I go to church because it allows me to re-evaluate my life and find solace - the space to just be. To be with like-minded people, in an environment of love not hate and argument, of acceptance of who I am and not having to prove something. Church life for me gives purpose and meaning.

Church is a place I go to to re-focus my attention on moral and ethical matters and try to follow the example of Jesus, which often gets forgotten in the daily humdrum of life. Church is also my community where I join with other people who have similar (and sometimes quite different) reasons for being there and we sing and pray together as part of this focusing process. Church is also a place where I have historical connections and I go there to give thanks for the good things that have happened in my life. Occasionally a good and inspiring sermon is preached.

One reason why I go to church is to play the organ! More seriously, going to church disciplines me into making time to think about life. In a service I hope to have my mind stretched and fed (which doesn't always happen). I believe prayer for others can be fruitful so it is good to pray with others.

I keep going to Church partly because of a sense of belonging to its community; perhaps a sense of loyalty to the URC; perhaps because I was born into a religious but questioning family and community. However, I am seriously and serially put off by dogmatism such as propositional revelation and by hierarchical and often patriarchal establishments that tend to oppose further reformation and in some way seem to accept and encourage a denial of Love – or practise an “us and them” attitude. I may disagree with both the traditional conservative evangelical and the conservative-in-another-way ecclesiastical attitude, yet be able to accept

Questions for reflection / discussion:

Do any of the thoughts from Bolton ring true for you?

Do any of them spark a negative reaction?

How would you answer these questions?

What aspects would you appreciate being explored in greater depth?

What are Creeds good for?

This is a summary of the discussion led by Ben at the East Shropshire PCN in January 2018.

Virtually all Christian denominations have creeds of some kind, with the notable exception of the Quakers and Unitarians. In some churches these are versions of the ancient historic statements of faith hammered out by the Councils of the 3rd/4th Century, though some probably didn't reach their current form until much later. These tend to be pretty brief and to stick to the basics, without going into too much detail. No doubt many of those who repeat them in worship, (and they don't all say the same things), understand the words differently from each other, or perhaps have no great sense of what the words actually mean; they're just part of the furniture.

In other kinds of churches the statements may not be even written down, just assumed, or if they are expressed more formally, they prescribe things much more tightly; there are certain expected beliefs if you want to be a member. These might cover the authority of the Bible (which the ancient creeds hardly mention), the meaning attached to Jesus' death and resurrection, or other statements to which the true adherent is required to assent. I know of one that runs to far more words than this article, every word of which you are required to accept, including the subservience of women to male leaders.

How did we get the creeds? It is clear that the classic examples evolved over time. You won't, for example, find the word 'Trinity' in the New Testament, (or clarification of the exact relationship between Father, Son and Spirit which so preoccupied the early church) but it became essential to belief. The last man burnt to death for heresy in England for denying it was Edward Wightman in Lichfield in 1612, but you couldn't go to university without affirming it until about 150 years ago.

The first 'creeds' were probably fragmentary memories of words ascribed directly to Jesus, for example at the Last Supper, or, as Paul's writings grew in influence, quotations from his letters. It is clear that there was already much disagreement over what it meant to be a 'Christian' and it was only later that, like any human organisation, the leaders felt it was necessary to set some boundaries in order to clarify who was 'in' and, probably more importantly in their eyes, who was not.

Some Christian communities have tried to devise more inclusive approaches. But the Alpha course, for example, is not about helping people to explore their spirituality. It's about teaching them the 'truth' and getting them on message. Asking questions that are not in the booklet is not encouraged. Evangelical churches and many Christian Unions in our universities may have statements of faith that claim one particular understanding of what Jesus may mean as 'the' understanding. But their

claims to the 'truth' are often built solely on an interpretation. They don't tell you that, but when you believe that only you are right there's no need to worry about anyone else's point of view.

So would those of us who see spirituality as an open, experimental discovery of our full humanity, not as membership of an exclusive religious club, be best to ignore creeds altogether? Are creeds always meant to be prescriptive or can they be liberating? The argument against such an approach is often that once people stop believing in something they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything! But is that fair?

Maybe we each need to write our own creed, not look to be signed up to anyone else's. Can anybody else ever really know what it all means to me, or tell me what I 'should' believe? Only I can travel where I am going, even if it's always good to have others to chat to along the way.

The following is what I shared with the group. It's not, of course, enough for most Christians and I don't now use the word Christian about myself. I can't get past the first line of any conventional creed! But perhaps it's a useful exercise that anyone can do, even if the results won't always be the same.

I 'believe' (trust in, think to be good for us) the extraordinary possibilities that being human presents. Life is good but it is often a struggle; it has to be thought about and an individual and corporate meaning found within it.

There is no God, higher plan or external authority to do the job for us. We are all we have to rely on. Religions and their scriptures are all human creations - worth knowing about but not to be inhaled! Kindness, justice and care for one another are better ways to live than the opposite; emphasising 'sin', guilt and a dependency on a God for survival is fundamentally destructive to our well-being.

Being human ends when you die, so this is the only chance we get. Truths about how to live well can be found in the little things around us and the people with whom we travel and who love us.

The journey is the destination. This may be rather like what Jesus of Nazareth called 'seeking the Kingdom (on-going rule) of God' on earth, so his example is one I try to follow.



Ben Whitney was briefly a Baptist minister and is now a retired education social worker.
www.ben-whitney.org.uk/humanist-spirituality

Transformation into Christ

I am sure we have all come across people in churches who have been attending worship and study groups for 50 years, but who still seem to be as full of prejudices as ever. Why is that? Is not transformation into Christ what it is all about? That transformation into love and a blossoming of the fruit of the Spirit?

There are different ways in which this transformation can happen, but I have found in my experience, along with spiritual literature, that there are certain ways that seem much more helpful than others. At the same time, transformation is much less likely to happen just by reading about it or thinking about it. There is first a need to desire to transform into love. Many people do not actually want to be transformed. Further, relying on God alone, as many in churches do, is rarely enough. Nor is relying on yourself alone good enough. It is all about partnership with God.

There are five key areas that I have identified that work for me and which all inter-relate. The first is to have a daily discipline of silent meditation/contemplation. This is more than just mentally reflecting on my life. It is a deeper connection with my core being, that Spirit of God within me. It is the deepening of my relationship with the Divine. But meditation alone, I have found, is not enough either. I have met those who have been meditating for 20 years and are also still as full of prejudices.

The second key area is the development of a strong inner observer or witness. This tends to happen through meditation, but needs to be worked on as well. The inner witness is not the super ego of Freud. It is the Spirit within me that needs to create enough internal space to really watch – with fresh eyes and adequate distance - what I am thinking, feeling and doing in my everyday life. This is not an easy task to do with the humility of complete honesty. But becoming aware is the first step to resolving it.

The third is the movement from being in the head to the body. The suffering I endure in life and the way I relate in distorted ways in relationships is due in part to the buried hurts from my early childhood. These are held in my body, not in my head as we tend to assume when thinking about them. The issues are in the tissues, and this is where they need to be resolved.

The fourth is making use of the Welcoming Prayer. This is a process whereby I become aware of how I feel and act in distorted ways, of welcoming those feelings, staying with them, then letting them go. The key thing however, is that I concentrate on how my body is reacting. I don't try and analyse the situation, as that would take me back into my head. This is extremely hard as we are brought up to analyse things. However, I experience it in my body as tension, anxiety, butterflies in my stomach, sweating palms, heat, or whatever it

may be. I welcome that feeling then stay with it, then let it go. This whole process will last just a few minutes, but can be done repeatedly throughout the day.

The last area is an understanding of the Enneagram. This is a system for understanding my personality. However, unlike Myers-Briggs, this concentrates my attention on those areas of myself that I am blind to, because they are those parts of me that I like least and would prefer to deny. It looks at my motivations rather than my actions, which are not always so sweet and innocent as I would like to think. This could be likened to the shadow self that Jung speaks of. Yet it is these very areas that will distort all my relationships if I do not face up to them. The Enneagram highlights the specific areas that I need to target. The inner witness then highlights when I am experiencing one such distortion. Without the inner witness I would be oblivious to them. I can then use the Welcoming Prayer to tackle these issues specifically.

With these five inter-related areas in place, then transformation really will become a reality for me. But I hasten to add, that it will still take a whole life of repeatedly dealing with these issues at ever deeper levels.



Richard Eddleston is a retired social worker and lives in Nottingham. He is a Quaker, facilitator of spirituality and contemplative groups and a Green Party activist.

The Welcoming Prayer Method

<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>

There are three movements of the prayer:

Feel and sink into what you are experiencing this moment in your body.

“Welcome” what you are experiencing this moment in your body as an opportunity to consent to the Divine Indwelling.

Let go by saying “I let go of my desire for security, affection, control and embrace this moment as it is.”

Contemplative Outreach is a spiritual network of individuals and small faith communities committed to living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel. The common desire for Divine transformation, primarily expressed through a commitment to a daily Centring Prayer practice, unites our international, interdenominational community.



Faithful, not believing

Despite a Christian family background, I have never managed to be a Christian in the way defined by most churches. I am not a 'believer' and could recite no creed without a sense of hypocrisy and conflict. But after many years of engagement with other traditions – Buddhist, philosophical and psychological – it has become increasingly clear to me that 'belief' is not what Christianity is most importantly about. It is quite possible to drink deeply of what Christianity has to offer, indeed to be 'Christian' in all the ways that matter – morally, spiritually and intellectually – without 'believing' such absolute propositions as that God exists, or that Jesus is the Son of God, or that Jesus saves believers from sin. Indeed, I will go further. Such beliefs have no positive practical effects on the lives of Christians, beyond being shortcuts to group conformity which may also have many negative effects.

Belief, especially of an absolute kind, is in no way necessary to inspiration and faith. It is God, or Christ, who inspires Christians to campaigns of justice and acts of love: not because they have committed themselves to abstract propositions about God, but because they experience the inspiration of God, who fills them with positivity and confidence. In the meantime, the 'belief in' God and in revelation tends to inspire only inner repression, narrow partisan defensiveness, and even holy war. Far from challenging our capacity to love, absolute belief provides an endless resource for rationalisation, with the appropriation of divine sanction providing a handy justification for whatever groups, social traditions, and authoritative leaders may prescribe.

To be faithful, on the other hand, is to remain confident in a greater potential that one has experienced, for both oneself as an individual and for humankind. One feels that confidence in one's body and wider awareness, which is where it needs to stay – not being appropriated into a narrow-intellectualised form the betrays that state of awe we can feel before God. To reduce God to abstract belief, taking those beliefs to be the whole story, is idolatry of the kind that Moses evidently sought to warn us against. The idolatry of verbally-formulated beliefs, in a modern literate society, is now far more of a problem than the idolatry of images, and it is in the spirit of the avoidance of idolatry that theistic tradition should avoid absolute belief.

Our faith is shaped by our cultural context but is a version of the more universal confidence that can be accessed in any religious tradition. Those from a Christian cultural context may need to consider the words of Jung's Red Book: 'You can certainly leave Christianity but it does not leave you. Your liberation from it is delusion. Christ is the way. You can certainly run away, but then you are no longer on the way.'

What I take Jung to mean by this is that Christ, as an archetype, fulfils a certain function in the psyche, and, for those who are culturally Christian, that function is not easily fulfilled in any other way. 'The way' for each individual leads from their starting point to their destination, and if one denies the full conditioning effect of one's starting point, one's way may be lost.

The distinction between faith based on meaning, and belief that assumes absolute representational language, can also be corroborated by a variety of recent developments in human thought. Embodied meaning theory, as developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, makes it clear that the words we use are rooted in the neural associations we have built up through personal experience. Statements of abstract belief, that are generally assumed to stand independently, are thus shown to be meaningful because of bodily experience extended by metaphor, not by correspondence to some source of abstract truth beyond experience. The neuroscience of brain lateralisation, as explored especially by Iain McGilchrist, also shows that absolute beliefs arise from the over-dominance of self-validating assumptions in the left hemisphere of our brains, when it is the right hemisphere that provides the wider awareness on which experienced meaning and faith depend. Absolute beliefs are a sickly, forced outgrowth of our bodily faith, not its foundation.

To be faithful, rather than idolatrous, Christians need to be agnostic: to be willing to admit that they don't know whether or not God 'exists'. Indeed, they need to put all the fruitless wrangles associated with God's 'existence' firmly aside. Agnosticism has been very unfairly treated by a popular tradition – both religious and atheist – that has failed to understand its potential. There is nothing wishy-washy, indecisive or necessarily vague about agnosticism. Indeed, it takes considerable resolve to avoid the magnetic pull of absolute affirmation or denial of belief, together with the social institutions that entrench that duality. These opposed social institutions could, most obviously, be the institutions of the church versus secular humanist movements, but might just as easily be illustrated by the entrenched opposed sides arguing about abortion, or about whether Islam is or is not an intrinsic threat to liberal democracy. Nor is agnosticism only about God: wherever there are absolute beliefs on either side (for example, about freewill and determinism, mind and body, or any kind of absolute categorisation or boundary) agnosticism offers a challenge, in the form of a brave flag of peaceful resistance raised in between the lines of the warring armies.

It has taken me a long time to realise what a profound part agnosticism plays in Christianity and helps to explain all that is best and most inspiring about it. We,

as humans, are not God: God is infinite and beyond us, an object of holiness and awe. We are responsible for our own lives, as the story of the expulsion from Eden indicates. Since we live in a post-Eden world, we live in an experience of uncertainty in which meaning is not written on the heavens – rather it is found in our bodies and brains. The intense pain and conflict created by that state is symbolised by Christ’s crucifixion: an event that could hardly have the same sting for us if it was merely the unfolding of a set of pre-determined events, part of a story staged by a heavenly father. It is perhaps only if we feel the abandonment that Christ himself expressed on the cross, being prepared to let go of all reassuring ‘belief’, that we can find the resurging hope symbolised by the Resurrection. To be faithful, and to engage in the meaning of these events, we need to be agnostic.

‘Faith’ has often come to be a euphemism for absolute belief, but on the contrary, I want to suggest, faith can involve the positive avoidance of absolute belief and the positive embrace of uncertainty. One does not have faith because one expects certainty in the future, but rather because one recognises that the human state is one of uncertainty. Faith by its very nature needs to be provisional: a recognition of aspirations whose meaning may be infinite and vastly significant for us, but nevertheless cannot result in absolute belief, because any such belief is recognised to undermine rather than to support that faith. In a state of faith, we are orientated towards a meaningful God whom we experience: a God who offers an archetypal foretaste of an integrated self and an integrated world. But such a God could only be meaningful to us in such a way if we remain uncertain even about God’s very existence, let alone about claims of world creation or producing human offspring.

Such faith excludes belief in revelation. To believe that God sends us messages requires an absolute presupposition that God exists and is of a particular nature: a presupposition that in our uncertain and embodied state we are not entitled to make. In a post-Eden existence, we are also required to take responsibility for our own interpretation of whatever texts or other sources of information we encounter. The granting of absolute authority to any such text, or even to a believed-in historical figure, involves an avoidance of that responsibility. It is us that gives authority to the Bible, or to any other source, through the values we attribute to it. Scriptures may offer us inspiration, but do not, above all, licence us to give absolute authority to



words. Those words have actually been interpreted by us, and thus it is bad faith to claim that absolute authority for ourselves.

The Christian tradition of the last two hundred years or so has proved to be a remarkably fragile tradition. So naïve was the faith of many Christians that it has been decimated by scientific progress in astronomy, geology, biology and psychology, with this damage then compounded by the even more profound effects of consumerism in distracting people from the religious life itself. But the fragility that made that damage possible is caused by absolute belief: belief that must discontinuously either be held fast or broken. In many cases belief in Christian ‘truths’ has been broken. In others it has been retrenched into a fundamentalist version that is no less fragile but maintains itself by actively ignoring and repressing alternatives.

The more I consider and re-read the most inspiring Christian figures from the past, the more it seems that what they offer is in terms of faith, not belief. Of course, much of what is written by or about them makes regular reference to Christian belief. Amongst those who stress it most, one is more likely to find those who are often labelled as narrow-minded oppressors, inquisitors, crusaders and bigots. But alongside this there is a whole culture of Christian meaning. That culture is one in which loving, creative and courageous action is inspired by the integrative spirit of God and of Christ, engaged in the resolution of conflicts both within and beyond ourselves.



Robert M Ellis has a Ph.D. in Philosophy and a Cambridge BA in Oriental Studies and Theology.
www.middlewaysociety.org

Review: Christian Middle Way

**The Christian Middle Way by Robert M. Ellis,
Christian Alternative Books**

“The case against Christian belief but for Christian faith” is the subtitle for this substantial work. An appetizing title for anyone who counts themselves a progressive Christian, and, hopefully, intriguing for a person who is not, but who is interested in exploring spirituality. The Middle Way is a core aspect of the Buddha’s teaching, namely the balance between spiritual exploration that is highly ascetic on the one hand and dryly conventional on the other. It is Ellis’ core hypothesis that the Middle Way is not simply a Buddhist ideal but a universal principle which can be applied to all aspects of life, including faith and, in this case, the focus is on Christian faith.

Ellis does not disappoint. Concise, dense at points, the text is both accessible and scholarly, rooted in his own longitudinal academic and personal pursuit of his subject from his Ph.D. thesis, through several weighty volumes exploring the concept of integration in particular and now to this popularisation. The core hypothesis is that Christianity offers a distinctive exposition of the Middle Way as it is fleshed out in a person, Jesus Christ.

Ellis confesses to not being a believer, but insists that Christianity is not essentially about belief either. Rather, it is about faith, a way of living and being rooted in the example of Christ. Beyond the provocative sub-title, Ellis does not rule out belief, but insists on its provisionality – another key concept in his understanding. There is no place, however, for absolutism, for revelation and certainly not for Creeds. He advocates that churches abandon the recitation of Creeds; and that metaphysics is essentially worthless and indeed delusional.

Aside from the Buddhist derivation of the concept, Ellis uses two further tools to develop his thesis.

The first is psychoanalysis, in particular the work of Carl Jung. Ellis is indebted to Jung for his understanding of God which is as an archetype, defined as a meaningful symbol. The language of Jung runs through the book in particular in the development of the concept of integration which is key to the Middle Way – the drawing together of opposite desires, meanings and beliefs in a reconciled whole both in terms of the individual and of societies. Christ, we discover, epitomises the Middle Way and therefore the integrated life, for, as Ellis explains, the meaning of atonement itself is “at-one-ment”, in other words integration.

The second is brain lateralisation. The dominance of left brain thinking in Christianity has led, he asserts, to a damaging emphasis on absolutising, and on rationality to the detriment of imagination and creativity. Here, too, the need for integration is apparent.

Ellis has huge admiration for the Christian mystical tradition. He cites Augustine, Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen. They are shining examples of the

Christian Middle Way: agnostic on God (the apophatic tradition), positive about the body and corporality, humbly creative and rooted in the experience of divine love rather than simply expostulating about it.

Thus, Ellis moves through the disciplines of Psychology, Theology, Biblical Studies, History and aspects of Science. In his application he touches too on Ethics and Politics. The Middle Way is essentially a wholistic approach to understanding the world and living life well.

I especially enjoyed the practical application of the thesis. There is a fascinating section on feminism. I found his questioning of the prevailing notion of ordination highly convincing, reliant as it on a belief that priesthood is fundamentally an intermediary role and therefore presupposes that God is essentially external. I’m challenged too by his argument that authentic worship should be participatory and creative. Discussing understandings of the Eucharist, Ellis asserts: “Powerful symbolism simply does not need metaphysics”. A loud ‘Amen’ from me there, but also a question as to why Creeds are so dismissively treated. Can’t they be interpreted without reference to metaphysics too? Are they not equally powerful symbols of what we are reaching for when we contemplate the ineffable? There are fascinating sections too on rites of passage, on ethics and on politics, though the latter left me puzzled as to why there is no discussion of the political Jesus until the penultimate chapter. The chapters on Jesus are an exploration largely using the tools of psychoanalysis only. I am perhaps asking too much.

That leads me on to my criticisms of the book. Much of this has in fact been said already, even if this is a fresh take. I note Ellis’ acknowledgment of the Sea of Faith Birmingham group, but am puzzled by the lack of reference to the work of Cupitt. I wondered why his consideration of the Gospels did not reference the Jesus Seminar, in particular the work of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Anyone looking here for insight into the Christian tradition from Buddhism will be disappointed, though his knowledge is clearly profound.

My second criticism is equally simple. I’m not sure what I’ve read here depicts a middle way – it is right out on the radical edge, surely? It’s not exactly a book that draws ideas together, despite it ranging over different disciplines. I hope I have indicated already that it is something of a polemic and, with that, Ellis is perhaps guilty of a reverse absolutising, just as liberals can sometimes be thoroughly illiberal!



Nick Jones is a Church of England priest and Rector of Acton in West London.

To Renew or not

I never expected to be writing something for Progressive Voices: in fact, a couple of months ago I had expected that I had read my last copy of the magazine and that my PCN membership would lapse.

So, what happened? I received an extremely polite reminder in June that I had not renewed my subscription at the start of the year. I had not done so following a conversation I'd had over Christmas to the effect that PCN seemed "humanism with a bit of God" and with no room for anything miraculous. We felt that in our approach to faith there was still some room for the miraculous, a small probability however implausible. Thus, some of the events in the bible might just be miracles. Although by my own simple definition a miracle is a rare thing and many so-called miracles I believe are not so at all; even some in the first century.

We had the impression that an acceptance of an actual resurrection was not tenable for someone involved with PCN. While I can accept many doubts and questions, and do not see them as barriers, I still see the Resurrection as the one true miracle that did occur. I am less sure about the need for a virgin birth but accept various views. Thus, my initial reading of articles in PV in 2017 lead me to question whether PCN was right for me.

However, I was shortly to have a meeting with my Spiritual Director as luck (or providence or divine intervention – you choose) would have it, and I raised the topic. We both knew that my approach to faith is very much in a minority where I sit in the Church of England. My parish is newly formed of four smaller parishes with a predominance of the conservative evangelical tradition, although there is a small but significant group in one church what might be described as a modern liberal catholic church (I am always wary of these labels). Some are more fundamentalist in their approach and, to use our Bishop's phrase, we sit with our 'diverse complementarities'. I am regularly asked do I really believe 2 Timothy 3:16 as written? And never seem to give an answer that satisfies my accusers!

Feeling quite lonely in my spiritual journey, I have been looking to see what sort of organisations cater for me to discuss and consider matters of faith. Having a leadership role my involvement in the parish is to serve and I find less support than I might expect. Over the last year or so I have met only one or two outside my immediate circle with whom I can relate my faith and, unfortunately, I have experienced a sense of being considered as "not quite Christian" by those whose faith is much more concerned with the exclusive "heaven when I die" idea than mine. So, although I had some misgivings, I considered PCN again.

As it happens, I actually seem to know more atheists than Christians and sadly, have often found more real friendship and care amongst them than with those who



profess faith. One suggested that I probably had more in common with secular bodies and should consider them. They welcomed my non-confrontational approach and readiness to listen to their arguments and accept them.

However, as my Spiritual Director and I thought about this, I realised that I have no problem having good friendships with atheists who reject all notion of God, why not with Christians who see things differently to me? So perhaps I owe an apology for being a touch judgemental?

However, I had not picked up PCN as being a broad organisation in terms of views. But one often gains from being involved within an organisation and it allows me to ask questions. It was a struggle in 2017 as I was unsure PCN truly represented me: but then we are all unique in our journeys and any grouping has to allow different views.

It was Sarah Guilfoyle who suggested that I write something down and, whether published or not, the process has been cathartic. So rather than fading away I have renewed and would like to know of the experience of others. I hope one day to get to my local meeting, about 30 miles away, but so far other commitments have come in the way. Possibly I need to make room for it, as I suspect that it will be helpful.

So, I leave you with some questions:

How broad a group is PCN?

How we can hold the range of approaches alongside each other?

How can we encourage each other and help us feel less isolated on our faith journeys?

How can we dispel the myth of PCN being "not quite Christian"?



Rod Tickner is a former menswear sales assistant, chemistry teacher, NHS manager, and lecturer. He is a CofE Reader in Keighley.

Emerging Positively

As I look at Christianity I see a confusing and myriad number of denominations and theological approaches.

Traditional churches highlight the time-worn theology that we are all sinners, guilty and condemned by God. It then offers a way to be forgiven and to receive eternal life through the blood of Jesus. It is a guilt / redemption cycle. To question this approach is to be accused of back-sliding or of losing one's way. It is dogma that stops theological thinking outside of the cycle because that is what dogma is designed to do. It is a command and control mechanism. It will be the death of the church in our challenging post-modern culture.

In contrast to this I wish to reflect upon three types of emerging church that I have observed and experienced.

First there is the non-credal community which lives out a kind of practical democratic socialism, akin to Matthew 25, in which the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given something to drink, the stranger is welcomed, those in need are helped, the oppressed are supported, and the sick and the imprisoned are visited. An example of this is the Emerging Church in Springfield, Missouri. It is a non-credal and non-sectarian community in which actions and not words of belief are core to community living. As exemplified by founding pastor, Dr. Roger Ray:

"If you understand that faith is a matter of mind as well as heart, and that taking the Bible seriously means it cannot always be taken literally... If you know that God's love embraces all persons equally, no matter their gender, race or sexual identity... If, for you, diversity, tolerance and inclusiveness are strengths to be taught... If you believe that the Christ calls us to be nothing less than global citizens, that the social expression of love is justice, and that spiritual concerns are inseparable from commitment to the natural world... If you've wished for a more open and embracing community of faith to nurture your spirit and raise your children, and haven't yet found a place of belonging... Then we warmly invite you to visit us..." [www.spfcc.org]

They really do walk the talk. They campaign on behalf of, and feed, the poor and marginalised; for universal health care across the USA; and campaigning against labour reform that will impact adversely upon working people.

The pastor and members stood shoulder to shoulder with the Sioux first nation people at Standing Rock in the depth of winter, as well as visiting Nicaragua regularly to assist in building projects alongside the disadvantaged.

There are many traditional churches that do similar things, which is thankfully true, but the difference is that non-credal gatherings, along with some liberal-leaning churches, practise the truth within the stories without reference to the action of some interventionist god out there. For example, the feeding of the 5000 is presented not as a miracle from on high but as a gathering shamed by a small boy into sharing the food that they had brought with them. It is a human story, about a human sharing, so that no one went away hungry!

A second type of emerging church is a local non-theistic community such as West Hill United Church of Canada in Toronto, led by Gretta Vosper. The West Hill mission statement says, "Moved by a reverence for life to pursue justice for all, we inspire one another to seek truth, live fully, care deeply and make a difference." On Gretta's own web site she explains part of her journey,

"In 2001, I made it clear that I did not believe in a supernatural, interventionist, divine being. At first, I identified as a non-theist as I do in my first book, 'With or Without God,' published in 2008. In my second book, 'Amen', I felt the need to further distinguish myself from those who used the term "non-theist" but retained a belief in the supernatural aspects of god; there, I identified as a theological non-realist. In 2013, I embraced the term "atheist" which means, literally, no belief in a theistic, supernatural being. So, in 2001 I shared my beliefs which were consistent with atheism but I did not actually identify as an atheist until 2013." [www.grettavosper.ca].

Sadly, but without surprise, the otherwise very progressive UCC is not yet prepared to accept such an approach by one of its ministers and Gretta has been under a disciplinary review since 2015.

I am happy to be associated with both of these, but there is a third type that concerns me greatly, the 'post-evangelical' emerging church. Based upon both personal experience, and recently watching a random selection of God channels, I acknowledge that some of these churches are excellent at building a depth of community. Unfortunately, they seem to do so by utilising the abusive techniques of neoconservative psychology to create an enemy to boost their own theological leadership's command and control over the members.

The only way for members to be successful in this war-like context is to follow the teaching of the self-appointed leadership, both within regular heavy shepherded home groups and the Sunday worship and sermon. The leadership offers its interpretation of Bible passages to reassure the members that by following their teaching they will experience God empowering them to successfully withstand the enemy. Notice, however, the 'enemy' has moved on from the traditional concept of a devil or Satan to be anyone who criticises, opposes or mocks the leaders or members of the church for taking a stand for the leadership's interpretation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

As such, this psychological / theological approach creates a common enemy that becomes the scapegoat for the ills of society and the traditional Church. In this way, to use a Jack Spong analogy, "the wagons are pulled into a circle" to protect the people from the enemy beyond. The circle also allows time to teach and send the current members out beyond it for recruits. Such mission work will inevitably meet with opposition and an occasional success, but this neoconservative

psychology is intended to support members going out on their daily living / 'recruiting' drive. Perhaps this is similar to pyramid selling, in that what matters more than the loss of a few too-challenged members, is that even more recruits are brought in?

It is in this 'pyramid' process that some of these churches have a tendency to emphasise:

"All are welcome here but if you disagree with what we say and do there are other churches in this city that you should go to. There is no place here for an enemy within who disagrees with what we say and do."

The outcome is that another enemy has been created to keep the teaching of these churches as the only real 'truth'.

Also implicit is that other churches are the 'enemy' if they publicly disagree with the teaching of the leaders. This is an essential scapegoating psychological strategy. It sets up barriers between themselves and other churches. It is another example of the dogmatic approach, a command and control mechanism, employed by the leadership over its faithful followers.

Although there is no Bible text that says that worship, including the sermon, should not go a minute over the hour, it seems to me, as a regular preacher, that it certainly is an unwritten expectation on the part of most congregations! But in my experience these churches' services do regularly last for some 90 minutes. They often consist of very creative use of high-tech video projection and dramatic stories and testimonies. Often there is an opening set of three or four worship songs led by a typical [and very good] band and talented soloists, each song repeated several times and lasting some 10 to 12 minutes each.

All this extremely well-rehearsed worship leads into around 40 minutes of a very shallow and experiential sermon which builds up to a psychological impact like:

"Jesus calls us to believe (believe the leaders teaching) that will take us out of our comfort zone. It is the normal thing to be attacked for our stand but don't worry. It is in the resulting discomfort that we will find ever greater blessing and the peace within. Being attacked for standing up for [our] truth is God's proof that you are doing the right thing."

But why is such worship and shallow, experiential theology attractive, especially to the generations that are missing from most traditional churches in the UK and elsewhere? If numerical success is what matters then these churches are very successful. I think that the answer is in their passion and emotional energy, often the opposite of much that passes as worship in mainstream churches. It offers certainty, hope and security in an increasingly uncertain world. It offers peace within the church community when all outside is presented and experienced as chaotic and threatening. It is optimistic. It is highly organised, from the genuine



warmth of welcome offered to first timers and on into the heavy shepherding structure for returners. Compassion is the core of life within any community, religious or secular, and these post-evangelical churches are compassionate. But perhaps here compassion is a tool of evangelism rather than because compassion is sacred and is the right way to live.

I have serious concerns about what I see as the psychological impact of the neoconservative strategies employed by post-evangelical emerging churches.

I offer two questions for further consideration:

1. Does this form of neoconservative psychology amount to a psychological abuse of its followers?
2. And if so, what business is this of those of us who look into post-evangelical churches with scepticism and concern?

For now, I will reserve judgement, but I am convinced that churches should be in the business of building bridges that unite and not walls that separate.

I conclude with a quote from Jack Spong's book 'A New Christianity for a New World' published in 2001:

"Tribal boundaries are powerful dividers of human life. They are the source of some of humanity's most inhumane behavior. Yet in the biblical portrait of Jesus we see him relativizing those dividing lines and calling people to enter the experience of non-tribal humanity. I believe this is a major step beyond our evolutionary security system, reflecting a call to become that which we human beings have not yet ever been. It is an invitation to enter the 'New Being' about which Tillich speaks - a humanity without barriers, a humanity without the defensive claims of tribal fear, a transformed humanity so full and so free that God is perceived to be present within it." [p. 133]



John Churcher is a writer, conference speaker, Methodist minister, and past Chair of PCN Britain.
www.permissiontospeak.org.uk

News from local groups

Please contact group convenors or see the relevant PCN Britain web page for further details. Newcomers are always welcome.

Bedford

01234 317847

Tim Hern

tim.hern@pcnbritain.org.uk

Although we have been meeting for more than two years, we decided to become a PCN group less than 12 months ago. Our new identity has provided a focus for our meetings and we hope that we will draw in new members from the area. At our last meeting we discussed what worship may mean to Progressive Christians. Our next meeting is on 3 Oct in the afternoon and we will be looking at the sort of service that may be appropriate in a Progressive Christian setting. Currently we all attend local churches and are aware of the tensions that this can produce. It is good to have the occasional opportunity to exchange experiences and air our concerns.

Bolton

01204 456050

Jim Hollyman

jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

We meet next on Wed 12 Sept and 10 Oct at 1.30pm at 1462 Junction Road West, Lostock, Bolton BL6 4EG. Our discussion in Sept will be around chapters two and three of the book "Jesus Asked" by Conrad Gempf. The chapters are titled "Questions Easily Answered" and "Ducking Questions with Questions". The Oct meeting will follow chapters four and five – "Questions that Cut to the Centre" and "Rebuke by Questions".

Exeter

01392 668859

Liz Vizard

liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk

We enjoyed a very stimulating and informative talk from Prof. Grace Davie (sociologist of religion) in May, based on Religion in Public Life: Levelling the Ground (Theos 2017). We recommend her as a speaker to any groups wanting to get to grips with the way people's approach to religion in Britain has changed, and is changing, profoundly. We

should be aware of the whole contemporary pattern of worship and practice in order that our critique is relevant to fellow Christians of all hues. Our audience included a journalism student who asked why students tend to be so conservative in theology.

On Sun 14 Oct at 2.30pm Jonathan Draper, former Dean of Exeter and Chair of Modern Church will speak on: 'Evolutionary Theology: why change is all there is'.

We meet in Southernhay United Reformed Church Hall, Southernhay East, EX1 1QD. All are welcome. We ask for a donation of £2.50 for expenses on the door, but there is no charge for your first visit to us.

Some of us are involved in planning an event on Sat 17 Nov, 'Hope in Conflict' at the Forum on the Streatham Campus of Exeter Uni with Pádraig Ó Tuama, the Leader of Corrymeela, N. Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation. This is open to those of all faiths and none. Please see the details on its Facebook page @HopeinConflictCorrymeela, where you will find a link to book tickets for the day event and an evening of poetry with Pádraig and four other poets. Pádraig will also preach at an ecumenical service at Southernhay URC on Sun 18 Nov at 10.30 am.

Harrogate (Aft) Philip Goodwin

01423 563 990 philip.goodwin@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our 'Journey Group' meets at Wesley Chapel, Oxford Street, Harrogate, HG1 1PP at 2.30pm (2.15 for coffee) on the first Thurs of each month. Attendance 16 to 20. Following the Bolton AGM, one member suggested we bring our favourite hymns. Such was the interested discussion that we only got through 3 hymns, but finished with a hearty rendition of "Dear Lord and Father of mankind" (No-one offered "In Christ alone..." with 'the wrath of God' etc. !!!) We start again on 6th Sept when a member will talk about his

experience as an RE teacher. Members comment on the benefit of conversations in an open atmosphere where personal experiences, beliefs, un-beliefs, doubts and questioning can be freely expressed and shared.

Hertfordshire

John Churcher

john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk

We continue to meet on the fourth Thurs evening each month at Trinity URC, St Albans. Our programme over the past year has been varied, some sessions led by members and others by guest speakers including return visits by Dr Roger Ray (founding pastor of the Emerging Church in Springfield, Missouri) Dr. Jonathan Gorsky (Lecturer in Jewish Studies at Heythrop College, London). Roger led our May weekend conference delivering four lectures, "What do progressives mean when we say "God"?", "Which Jesus do we hold dear?" "What do we do when we gather as a Community?" and "Our preference for the poor." Jonathan gave an excellent lecture in June on "Judaism and the early years of the Christian Church." Both are highly recommended speakers.

Manchester John Ramsbottom

0161 456 5119 john.ramsbottom@pcnbritain.org.uk

We concluded the spring session with our own version of "Singing hymns again for the first time" - where we looked at, and tried out, more relevant ways of Singing the Faith. We also formed plans for autumn before taking the usual break during July and Aug. We will resume in Sept to think about Bishop Spong's Theses which started last year. Other topics for the autumn will be a consideration of our attitudes towards mental health issues – self-harm, depression and suicide, and whether Christianity has anything to offer in this area. In Jesus' day it was attributed to demon possession, but from the gospel records, was clearly

of concern to Jesus himself. Then with the upcoming anniversary of the end of World War One, we intend to explore approaches to commemoration of war and how we should remember what happened. The idea of using a book as the basis for some meetings was felt to be a good idea for the future, provided it was short enough to be covered in a few sessions. Accordingly, we decided to look at the PCN Together in Hope series as possible material. We do not meet in Dec, but this will probably be incorporated into the programme for next year. Meetings are generally on the 4th Wed of the month at Heaton Moor United church in Stockport.

Newbury

01635 47196

Maria Grace

maria.grace@pcnbritain.org.uk

We have not featured recently in these pages, but we are still alive and well. With a few new members, there are now 16 of us, meeting monthly in the Quaker Meeting House. We have had varied sessions this year, for example, 'What gets you out of bed in the morning?'. We explored to what extent our Christian beliefs consciously motivate how we live our day to day lives. On another occasion one member, a trustee of a small local charity, the 'Miriam Dean Fund', shared inspiring stories of how lives were bettered, amongst the very poor in India and Africa. Most recently, a former member of the group who had since trained for the priesthood, told us of his first year as a curate, experiencing and expressing ministry in a progressive way, with a place for symbolism, doubt and poetry. He described a real emphasis on faithful living. In our last two sessions, we concentrated on our encounters with other religions, and what we can learn from them. One member wrote about this: "I was very interested in our two excellent sessions where our group shared various encounters with people of other religions, including Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims and Christian Humanists. We were struck, not by

the details of the religions, but by the commonality of people in search mode to answer the big questions - questions that are mostly beyond the capacity of our human brains." Others commented: 'It was good to be part of a non-judgemental group open to and sharing insights from the faith journeys of other religions'. 'The promotion of justice and compassion seems to be central to every faith and also common to believers and non-believers'. "It was the similarities that struck me, rather than the differences" In Aug, we will have our yearly planning meeting, where we all come with ideas and diaries. This seems to work well.

Apart from our local group we are pleased to be part of PCN Britain, and PV plays a valuable part in inspiring us. Thank you!

Newcastle

01670 519800

Pat Fuller

pat.fuller@pcnbritain.org.uk

We 'are' getting organised. We now have a treasurer and a bank account and held an annual meeting in June. It was interesting to look at the pattern of meetings which developed over last year. We included a piece of secular literature to illicit discussion and an evening of our poetry choices (see website). Anne Morrell and her friend performed a drama based on her book, 'Bread and Stones'. A visit by a Buddhist helped us understand a little more about his faith. Then we looked at the last chapter of 'Grounded' by Diana Butler Bass. Ali came from The West End Refugee Service and shared a powerful story of how he escaped from Rwanda. In May Richard Firth introduced his paper on The Lord's Prayer (see website). It is a good discussion document which others might find useful. In May we had a very successful evening with Dave Tomlinson and from that gained three new members. We have had sessions led by members

and invited guests. One comment from Rob was that we needed more time to talk among ourselves. I think everyone in the group agreed that this is the strength of our meetings. It is sometimes difficult to stay on the way of Christ in a world which seeks 'certainty'. Those who 'question' often have no home. We are made up of those who go to several denominations and those who now go no-where. We begin again on Tue 11 Sept where we will begin considering 'Unapologetic' by Francis Spufford.

Oadby

Keith Baker

keith.baker@pcnbritain.org.uk

Over the last three months we have been preparing to lead morning worship at Oadby Methodist Church in Jun. Most of us are members of there, but there was ecumenical input. Our initial discussions involved sharing thoughts about what is important and meaningful in

worship and what we find difficult. This included a debate about how much progressive theology to share with the congregation. We used the theme "Journeys". All of the group took part and we used poetry, meditative prayers with music, times of silence and material from Jack Spong,



Margaret Silf and Doris Klein. There were familiar hymns, but only those we felt comfortable singing. A shared blessing closed the service. Our minister was present and supportive. It was a moving experience and we only had positive feedback from the congregation.

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

We continue to meet once a month, but at times find it harder to find leaders. There has been a small change in those attending, due to a small number leaving and a small number of new people joining us.

I began the year showing a leaflet produced by Muslims that I picked up while visiting the Grand Mosque at Kampala, Uganda. It makes criticisms of assumed Christian beliefs, some of which I agree with, and attempts to persuade Christians that they can become Muslims while still following Jesus. At the next meeting one of our group showed a recording from Al Jazeera, in which a well-educated broad-minded Muslim debated with an atheist; it was very good.

Another member gave us a lecture on Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer who's thinking in the 19thC about the French Revolution led to a more Christian emphasis on education in Holland and beyond, together with Charlotte Mason who similarly influenced education policy.

Then we talked about Adam & Eve as presented by Dave Tomlinson in a book. The PCN AGM about hymns suggested we discuss a few hymns ourselves and we had a good discussion of some which people presented either because they liked them or disliked them. This followed on from a Methodist meeting in North Staffs that was led by John Bell, which three of us had attended.

At our Aug meeting one of our group talked about faith in Egypt where she had recently been; in particular that many in the Coptic Church hold to a simple faith, with belief in miracles, God's intervention through prayer etc. This led to a strong discussion, due to disagreements on these matters. We were informed that Christians in Egypt

do not generally question these matters and it is accepted that the traditional teaching is required to be held by all Christians.

Teesside Michael Wright
01642 851919 michael.wright@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are a lively gathering of 12-15, who meet once a month for a discussion about something we have all been reading. We are a mix of Quakers, Methodists, Anglican and Catholics - Anglican has "Anabaptist leanings"! Last year we spent time exploring Jack Spong's book "Biblical Literalism - a Gentile heresy". It is a very helpful commentary on Matthew's gospel, though we were inclined to think that Jack stretches his argument further than the evidence allows.

This summer we have been exploring the themes in the book "If the church were Christian" by the American Quaker pastor Philip Gulley. We frequently find ourselves critical either of institutional attitudes in churches, or theological concepts we do not share. We feel that it is often easier to be critical than to offer a positive view of our understanding of the gospel. We are now trying to explore together some positive ways of explaining our perspective on Jesus, on the gospels and other biblical material, that we can with confidence offer to people who do not realise there are other ways of confidently expressing a Christian faith without being biblical literalists. Maybe the fruits of our endeavours together will appear in print in the future.

Mid-Wilts Janet Tanner
01380 738155 janet.tanner@pcnbritain.org.uk

We meet on the first Thurs of the month at St. James' Church, Church Walk, Devizes SN10 3AA. Our summer programme ended in Aug with a social gathering over food at the home of two of our members. Over the previous few months we have been looking at and listening to Robin Meyers talking about 'Saving Jesus from the Church' and many of us expressed again our sadness that there is so little education in modern theological scholarship from the pulpit, or in more formally instructive

sessions in churches.

In Sept we are embarking on a study of Islam, using the DVD 'The Jesus Fatwah' and YouTube pieces about Islam's history together with some study of Karen Armstrong's book and the academic work of one of our members. We felt that this study was timely, an opinion reinforced by an article by Ian Burrell in the 'i' of 30 July this year, and other recent remarks! We will be circulating the local churches to ask them to publicize this study. Who knows?

West Yorkshire Michael Burn
michael.burn@pcnbritain.org.uk

Thinking Faith Group

At the end of April we were pleased to have a visit from PCN chair, Adrian Alker. Adrian spoke of two books he had been reading, George Monbiot's "Out of the Wreckage" and Jack Spong's "Unbelievable". Monbiot wrote about a crisis in politics and Spong about a crisis in the Church. Monbiot says that the lesson religion has to teach politics is that we should first know our values and then evangelise them in the form of powerful narratives. For Spong, the ancient creeds and the Reformation can't produce a living faith for today. The old stories of divine intervention don't stack up and if the Church is to survive, another narrative is needed. In June Michael Burn introduced a discussion on Borg's "Convictions", stressing the importance of context, faith as a journey, and God as a real mystery. We may consider other chapters at a later meeting. After a rather prolonged summer break the next meeting will be on 1 Oct when Phil Carlin will introduce a discussion on John Gray's "Seven types of Atheism". Anyone in the local area is welcome to join us.



Our Father...

Our Father who...

You mothered here untidy finches and puzzled
snails and there - in another place further than
time's arch - yarrow that does not wither.

A cloudburst of glory drenches earth and gives it
name and purpose.

Little lives pulse with eternity. Their profusion is breathless:
sunflower seed, apple pips, sperm
from ram and skate. With earthly meal
give heavenly bread.

Others have offered bitter thoughts to bring us
harm. And we have bred their faults. Forgive
them and us.

Sirens of night pursue us. Silence them before
they drag us to places from which there is no
flight.

Muddy potatoes, squidgy soil and all that is here
- canticles and crowns and all that is there - are
- everlastingly yours.

OK?

Derek Webster

Psalm 100

Listen for the joyful noise of Creation.

With crash of wave, rush of wind, tremor of fault line,
warmth of sun, and refreshment of rain

– glad songs are sung.

With the cry of an infant, the play of children, the
business of adulthood, and the patterns of old age

– glad songs are sung.

With the cycles of growth and decay, the seasons of
the year, and the dance of the stars

– glad songs are sung.

Be confident that God is, was, and ever shall be. That
the ground of our being was present at our conception,
knows us by name, recognises the divine image within
us, and seeks after our true path for life.

Live life as a thanksgiving to God. Live life offering
praise to God. Be thankful for the blessings of life.

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends
toward justice” (*Dr. Martin Luther King*)

Let us do our parts in doing justice, loving mercy, and
walking humbly the Way of Christ. Amen

David Coaker

Compassion



Are you disheartened by the increasing division showing
up around the world?

Are you concerned for our future — and for the future of
generations to come?

As troubling and overwhelming as the events filling our
news feeds are, as a human race, we actually have
within us what it takes to transform our world...

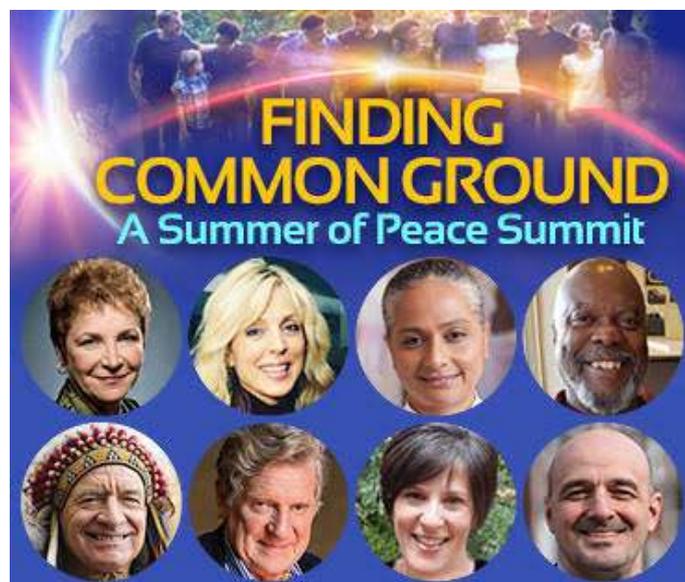
We have the will, the intelligence, the resources, the
heart, and the leaders to address and heal the areas of
our planet that need it most...

In fact, there are brilliant changemakers all over the
globe making meaningful progress on critical issues —
the environment, health, human rights, women's issues,
economic justice, and peace, to name a few.

Now we're being called to work in collaboration and
partnership like never before, to create the
comprehensive changes we need... for a world that
works for all.

And Finding Common Ground, which took place
between August 7-9, sought a path forward...

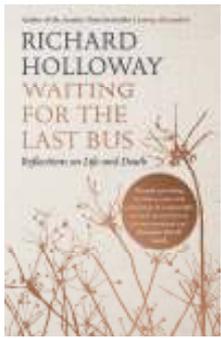
<https://shiftnetwork.isrefer.com/go/sop18CC/CCI/>



This highlighted changemakers and their personal stories
of transformations that led them to authentic and
powerful action. These stories included a Palestinian
living in Bethlehem who turned to the ancient wisdom of
Jesus (love your enemy) to learn how to love Israelis; a
former CIA counterintelligence agent working with the
U.S. military in the Iraq war who has created a global
movement, “others into brothers,” turning enemies into
allies; and an African American musician who befriended
KKK leaders and engaged them in the work to end racism
in America — and so many more.

Reviews

Waiting For The Last Bus by Richard Holloway, Canongate



Now over 80, the ever young at heart Holloway offers us another inspiring book, this time reflecting on life and death in a characteristically wise and warm way. Drawing on his many pastoral

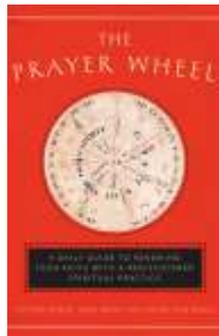
experiences, summoning up appropriate and insightful quotations from poets and other writers, this book is a delight to read as it deals honestly with the realities of our mortality, our fears and hopes to do with dying, the role religion has played and above all, perhaps, how a brave and reconciled death can perfect an imperfect life.

Richard plunges in with an opening chapter on the realities of ageing and the bodily changes we all experience (and often try to defy)- in his case early balding! Amongst all creatures, our human self-consciousness of our own mortality leads him to reflect upon the role of religion and the dying process too of the churches. Perhaps like many PCN members, Richard sees that religion did attempt to give meaning to life and mortality but finds little comfort in what E.M. Forster called 'poor little talkative Christianity', preferring now the poetry of religion as delivered in a choral evensong service to its prose. Richard quotes the famous Kierkegaard phrase about understanding life backwards but living it forwards. As he explores that dictum he calls for a radical honesty with our selves with a plea to be kindly, neither to excuse nor to blame, as we look back on our lives. This is not a book which allows for easy summary. We need to reread to take in the many thoughts and reflections, the richness of the quotations and the ambiguities which are presented to us. But above all it is a life-affirming read, by one whose lifetime's wrestling with Christianity has allowed his enormous humanity to shine.

Adrian Alker

The Prayer Wheel by Dodd, Riess, and Van Biema, Convergent Books

This little book takes the reader on a seven-week path of prayer and reflection, designed to follow an illuminated manuscript of the gospels



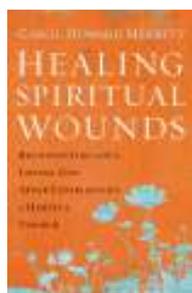
from an abbey in Liesborn in Germany that was rediscovered a couple of years ago. It was a daily monastic practice. The prayer wheel takes a path through phrases from the Lord's

prayer, gifts of the Spirit, key events in the life of Jesus and the Beatitudes. We begin and end each week by tracing a particular path and on the individual days we meditate on one particular step along that path. An example path would be: Holy is your name – wisdom – incarnation – peacemakers – children of God. Each day and each page start with a couple of verses, followed by a short reflection and a guided prayer.

Now, whether or not you find this kind of book useful depends very much on how you perceive the concept of prayer, and progressives tend to have a wide spectrum of views on that subject, so this book may or may not be for you. Personally, I have enjoyed using the book and found it a useful focal point for the day. At the close of the cycle there are suggestions as to how the wheel might be used to describe other reflective paths. You might opt to use the wheel as a guide for prayer around certain events of everyday life, or to pray alongside Bible passages for instance. If you are interested in monastic practices or Biblically-guided prayer you might enjoy this well-presented and uncomplicated approach.

Andy Long

Healing Spiritual Wounds by Carol Howard Merritt, HarperOne



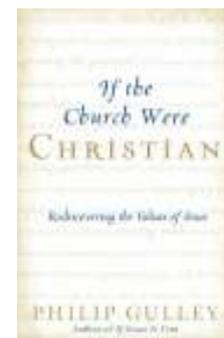
Carol is a respected Presbyterian (USA) minister with a strong commitment to serving the poor and disenfranchised. However, it was the conservative evangelical church of her childhood and

youth which she found hurtful. Brought up in a strict Christian family dominated by a bullying and abusive father, and, initially, attending a fundamentalist bible college, she found that she could not accept a form of Christianity which appeared to condone sexism, physical

abuse, sexual harm and emotional manipulation and she began to search for a compassionate, loving and healing God. The story of her journey of faith provides the basic framework for this book but, as well as her own experiences, she recounts those of others. Although biographical, she places the emphasis upon healing and provides exercises which, for example, enable victims to recover their emotions, redeem their broken selves and regain hope. The underlying message is the importance of loving God, our neighbours and ourselves - Jesus' Great Commandment. "Religious wounding", she tells us "occurs when people and communities violate love of God, self and neighbour." "How do we love our neighbour or ourselves" she asks "if we think God is ready to torture and kill us if we ever step out of line or fail to conform to God's rules? How do we love God or ourselves if we think it is required to hate others who do not measure up to our religion's standards? How do we love ourselves if we think we must continue to suffer abuse?" This thought provoking book provides help and support to those who are seeking spiritual healing but also has much to offer to other readers who are committed to progressive Christianity.

Nigel Bastin

If the Church were Christian by Philip Gulley, HarperOne



Gulley is an American Quaker pastor of many years' experience, though his upbringing was Catholic. He has encountered among American Quakers, and in other churches,

hidebound attitudes, some examples of very uncaring behaviour, rigid thinking, and fearful anxiety by some Christians about facing anything which challenges in any way their firm beliefs. His whole approach is open, loving, caring, and sensitive to pastoral needs.

Each chapter contains personal stories which illustrate his approach vividly. It is warm, easy to read, and has provided us with lots of prompts to think about our own reactions, and the environment in which we meet with fellow Christians.

Michael Wright

Meditation on Ploughed Earth

Ourselves, creatures of the soil,
at one with the soil, both once dust within the stars,
ourselves to return whence we came, earth to earth,
atoms recycled into soil, to grow again and again,
soiled and sinful, made new in God's unwasting Creation.

The turned earth, to be broken down by rain and frost.

Our lives turned over by God,
breaking through the hard crust, renewing friability.

Ourselves, a seedbed for Christ the Word.

Rain, nourishment from God's Spirit.

In God's good time, a harvest,
thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold,
unimaginable from one little seed,
hard-cased yet bursting forth with God's tremendous energy,
pulsating with new life, renewing this half-wrecked world.

Each of us a mini-resurrection,
following the pattern of that mighty bursting forth
from the mouldering grave,

breaking the hard crust of human inhumanity.
God's weakness mightier than human strength,
reconciling the world with its Maker.

Ploughed earth, symbol of God in the world
help us to grow to God's glory.

Ros Murphy

