

# Progressive Voices



Sept 2019, PV30

# Life-energising God

(A prayer inspired by the one of Hezekiah in Isaiah 37:15-20)

Life-energising God, ground of being,  
Spirit within, around and beyond all that is.

In you is life, truth, hope, justice and love.

All that is, was, and shall be, echoes the beat of your heart.

My limited life is but a dot in the eternity within you.

Yet the awe in which I stand before you  
is felt by others as absence.

Your all-encompassing nature  
is seen by others as a power for them to wield.

Help me to trust. Encourage me to have confidence in my  
not knowing. Show me the path you desire me to walk  
along. Embrace me within your Shalom.

Dave Coaker

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

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# Welcome

Change of plan. This was to have been the Greenbelt special edition, but unfortunately spaces at this year's festival filled up very quickly. So this is back to being a 'normal' edition and we have plenty of time to plan how we can make an impression next year!

So in this issue we engage our noses, personality, and spirituality. We ponder the eternal, life, demons, church buildings and our message. We reflect upon a prayer, sculptures, a communion liturgy, Bible verses (larger version on website), the colour pink and the call to love our neighbour. As well as the usual letters, news, events, and book reviews.

As always we aim to express the diversity of PCN and offer support, encouragement and challenge to each other on the way.

Welcome to the 30<sup>th</sup> edition of PV. Enjoy!

## Members' Residential

Is a Radical Church Possible?

Fri 22 - Sun 24 November, £160

The Hayes Conference Centre,  
Swanwick, DE55 1AU

We ask you to purchase, and preferably read, the book beforehand.

£9.99 inc. postage via

[www.pcnbritain.org.uk](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk), 07595 249791  
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<https://www.pexels.com/photo/sunset-hands-love-woman-5390/>

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## Progressive Christianity Network Britain

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# Chair's Letter

In the last PV I voiced the view that being labelled a 'progressive Christian' means to work for a world and a society where there are economic, political and social structures in place which enhance the well-being of all citizens; where the planet is not exploited and disfigured by human activity; a country proud to be called a liberal democracy (despite President Putin's claim that liberalism is dead) and where everyone is treated with respect and dignity. Our touchstone is the remarkable human life, filled with godly love and compassion, that we see and follow in Jesus of Nazareth.

Well not much has changed since writing my last letter, except that when this PV arrives in your email box or through your letter box, we will have a new Prime Minister and a new government to lead us through the complexities of Brexit – to where we do not know! But we do know that a crunch time is coming over whether or not we leave the European Union, and on what terms. And we also know that in the USA the political temperature is also rising as the President, and many presidential hopefuls, begin their campaigning in situations often driven by division and hatred of 'the other'.

I recently attended the annual conference of Modern Church, whose General Secretary, Jonathan Draper, gave an excellent presentation on the Church and its response to populism and extremism, so often associated with the Brexit debate. I hope we will reproduce his talk on our website. Jonathan reminded his listeners of two occasions in the last century when Christians dared to stand up against the way in which their country was heading. First there were those Christians, like Bonhoeffer, so opposed to National Socialism that they gave up their lives in attempting to overthrow the regime. And secondly there was the Kairos Document, a theological statement issued by a group of mainly black South African theologians which challenged the churches' response to the vicious policies of the Apartheid state under the State of Emergency declared on 21 July 1985.

Germany in the 1930s and apartheid South Africa were times of enormous political and social upheaval, with the denigration of huge swathes of the population. The UK in 2019 is not there but we do see a dangerous form of nationalism, a rise in hate crimes, and an increase in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Again Christians, the churches, people of all faiths and none, do need to speak out and to work for a society where compassion, love and justice walk hand in hand. It is timely that PCN is sponsoring a conference in November on Bonhoeffer and the "Trials of our Times".

I was pleased to be at the conference, and know that PCN Britain works alongside many others in

trying to work for the 'common good'. But I was also reminded that PCN is different from Modern Church in two ways. First our membership is taken very much more from all Christian traditions and none. Our trustees are from Baptist, United Reformed, Unitarian, Methodist and Anglican backgrounds. We have strong representation in the network of Quakers and those who would be regarded as the 'Nones'. Whereas Modern Church has fulfilled a role of being the open, liberal voice of the Church of England, there are those in our network who have given up on the possibility of radical church reform, not least though feelings of hurt and exclusion. This leads me to suggest that we as PCN Britain are campaigning on two fronts: as a Christian voice of compassion and justice speaking into our societal structures, and trying to re-imagine Christianity and offer a faith fit for this third millennium.

But there is one feature common to both MC and PCN and that is a singular lack of younger people in our ranks. I hope that we are addressing this in part by the release, in the coming months, of six short films where people, often young, tell their life stories. The intention is to lead the viewer to think, contemplate, and be challenged about the place of faith in our contemporary society. Such films will hopefully find their dissemination on many social media platforms and hopefully younger folk will be drawn into talking about what a progressive Christian faith might look and act like.

Finally, as we look ahead to 2020 the trustees have discussed making the subject of science and religion central to our conferences in the coming year and this has met with a very positive response from members. Very much then a case of watch this space!

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



## Membership

PCN Britain has charitable status, and depends wholly on its membership for funding the work we do. Membership of the Progressive Christianity Network Britain is for all who value an open, progressive and theologically radical voice within British Christianity, and want to maintain and promote that generous understanding of faith.

**01594 516528**

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

# Letters ....

## Beyond the Divide?

I suggest we should look at pronouns. I feel that Julian Baggini, at the 8 June conference, skilfully ignored 'Beyond?', showing us the building-blocks for bridging across within the Ten Commandments. Commandments 1-3 are all 'I' and 'Me', with such a model it is no wonder we are so ego-dominated. 'I' immediately generates 'You' and 'Them', expressing, or creating, the divide or boundary. He ended by suggesting 'a new commandment' as common ground: 'Love all'. I suggest, as a development: "WE love all of US". A sentence that begins 'We' (rather than 'I') neatly puts the ego in its place.

Tom Hinds

## eight points

They are wholly unmemorable. If someone asks me about them, I am very hard pressed to say what they are. For Jesus, two Laws were sufficient summary of his beliefs. Predictably the "wordy" Anglicans have thirty nine; Martin Luther needed ninety two. So much for the Reformed Faith.

I think we could amalgamate: 1, 2, and 7 into a single point focused on what I believe is our paramount task – the search for God and all the other manifestations of the Sacred by which humanity describes divinity. 3 and 6 could then acknowledge that PCN calls itself a Christian movement and that following Jesus is a core principle; but it should acknowledge the difference between what we think we know about Jesus' life and teaching and the doctrinal edifice subsequently erected by the Church. Jesus set an example of godly living; he didn't found a church. 4 and 5 could be combined into some expression of the Golden Rule and the "sharing of bread and wine" should be quietly dropped. (Edward Hulme's article "Communion: Bridge or Barrier" in PV29 says all that needs to be said on this subject – I find that some thoughtful worshipping members of my present church incline to agree. The service gives me little help or comfort partly. 8 can stand, though it is implicit in the amalgamated 4 and 5.

Brian Wilson

## Religion and Atheism – Beyond the Divide?

The French Protestant Church in London's Soho Square was the unusual and very welcoming venue for this PCN Britain day conference in June 2019 featuring talks by Harriet Harris, Julian Baggini, Fiona Ellis and Richard Holloway. Is it possible to go beyond that divide? Listen to these excellent speakers for some answers!

Talks and discussion on three tracked and labelled audio CDs for £8.00 including postage from

Chris Avis, 37 Clifton Road, Exeter, EX1 2BN with payment via Paypal to [chris.avis2@hotmail.com](mailto:chris.avis2@hotmail.com) or by cheque payable to C. Avis please, not PCN.

[Please note that if you were present that day and had difficulty hearing some of what was said, you should find it much easier listening to these digitally enhanced recordings]



## Faith...the Art of Unease?

Revd Canon Mark Oakley  
Sat 5 October, 10am-4pm, £15

The Church at Carrs Lane,  
Birmingham, B4 7SX

0121 643 6151

[office@carrslane.co.uk](mailto:office@carrslane.co.uk)  
[www.carrslane.co.uk](http://www.carrslane.co.uk)

## Borders and Belonging

Day Conference with  
Padraig Ó Tuama

Sat 19 October, 9am-3pm  
£20 PCN/CRC; £25 Non-  
members; £10 students

St Mark's Church, 4 St. Mark's  
Crescent, Sheffield S10 2SG

[https://bordersandbelonging.  
eventbrite.co.uk](https://bordersandbelonging.eventbrite.co.uk)

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](mailto:dave.coaker@pcnbritain.org.uk)

## "The trials of our times"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Sat 9 Nov, 10am – 4pm

Oasis Academy Mediacityuk,  
Salford

£25 (inc refreshments & lunch)

Booking: [https://bonhoeffer-  
salford.eventbrite.co.uk](https://bonhoeffer-salford.eventbrite.co.uk)

We are holding a special day conference to give space for the exploration of some of the themes from Bonhoeffer's life and work.

It will include PCN Britain's Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture.

Speakers confirmed include Rev Steve Chalke (Oasis) and Rev Dr Noel Irwin.

## Church of England 2020 General Synod elections

A range of inclusive organisations across the CofE are campaigning to seek a diverse range of people on Synod. If you'd like to find out more please contact Nic Tall: [synod@inclusive-church.org](mailto:synod@inclusive-church.org)

# Ahead by a Nose

It is hugely important for Progressive Christians to reclaim the act of smelling. Firstly, because it's universal - we all do it. Secondly, because we have a rubbish vocabulary for it. That means the difficulty of talking about smell offers an analogy for expressing the inexpressible when it comes to deep universal experiences. Thirdly, it's important because early Biblical descriptions of smell help us to restore distorted liturgical meanings. Finally, it's important to reclaim the act of smelling because maybe - just maybe - we've all been obtusely missing the point of smell for generations while our innate, universal, undervalued, overlooked God-detector has just been sitting there, plain as the noses on our faces. D'uh!

Native English speakers are in a good place to pursue links, as the same 5-letter word describes both what is smelled ('smell') and how it is detected ('smell'): this punning confusion is a veritable gift to English "my-dog-has-no-nose" jokers! The pun works because, linguistically, the process is indistinguishable from the content. The same quirk operates, albeit in a different way, in Biblical Hebrew where many features overlap between what is smelled and how it is smelled. Just one verse into Genesis, for example, even before we get to the part about Adam being vitalised through his nostrils (Genesis 2:7), we get the animation of the whole world by God's ruach (Genesis 1:2). Throughout the Old Testament, ruach contains the ideas of breath, spirit, wind, breezes and storms. In some translations therefore we get 'the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters' (KJV, NRSV, ASV, NASB & etc). Others differ. The Jewish Publication Society version of that same verse, for example, reads: A wind from God was sweeping over the waters. Both translations are right in terms of lexis and grammar, however they imply quite different things. The sheer breadth of meanings for ruach doesn't half make narrow ideas of 'scriptural inerrancy' look daft.

Noses and smelling are vital throughout the Old Testament. God's nostrils are either calm and steady (Exodus 34:6, Psalms 103:8), or else flaring with power and destruction (Numbers 25:4). We're used to seeing references to God's 'patience' and 'long-suffering', but actually the original Hebrew puts it that God has a 'long nose'. Fair enough, plenty of translators have pointed out that such language is simply idiomatic because having flaring nostrils is a sign of anger whereas having an unwrinkled nose is a sign of being calm. True, but nope, sorry; I think we're seriously missing a trick if we just sit back and let it stop there, because those frequent Biblical references to smells and noses are reminders that human senses of smell provide

extraordinarily powerful internal engines for divine communication.

Smells help people to navigate worship. They open a channel to God. In Exodus 30:22-38, and throughout Leviticus 1-5:13, detailed recipes and instructions for sacrificial scents are given. Fragrant

compounds of pyrolysed frankincense, myrrh and oil must be set aside for the exclusive purpose of marking out God's temple, God's priests and God's sacrifices. It is worth remembering that the Israelite practice of sacrificial anointing is very much older than their introduction of kings, some c.600 years later (1 Samuel 15:1). The ingredients of the holy anointing oils make an olfactory bridge between the Old and the New Testaments: both the Hebrew word 'Mashiac' ('Messiah') and the Greek word 'Christos' ('Christ') mean 'the anointed one'. This, in turn, impacts on what we think of baby Jesus' first recorded presents. What, frankincense??? Myrrh??? Scents for burnt sacrifice????!! Hey, thanks a bunch, wise guys.

The use of frankincense and myrrh goes back even further than that. Can I explain the technicalities of sacrificial scent production here? The method of extracting frankincense and myrrh is the same. Frankincense and myrrh trees grow in plantations, and the manufacturing process is to get a big knife, to score a deep line into the bark and to wait for the tree sap to come out as beads or 'tears' of resin that you can snap off. So in a very real sense, frankincense and myrrh are the tears and the blood of wounded trees. The sacrificial smells made from frankincense and myrrh are taking us back again to our origin story: we are straight back to the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the tree of Eternal Life. Eeeeeek.

So there we go. Smells equal Sacrifice equals Eden. As Paul says in Ephesians 5:2 (NRSV): Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Help is good and very welcome. For an extended version, see the PCN website)



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**Hellen Giblin-Jowett** has a doctorate in Literature, is a fellow of the RSA and a member of the Newcastle Upon Tyne PCN group.

# Demons?

I don't believe in the reality of demons. Yes, the Bible mentions several of them, tells of possession by them. Our art galleries have many images of them. Literature, films and television make frequent use of them. But I don't believe they are real.

Which is probably why you won't find my name on the petition asking Netflix to stop showing Amazon's 'Good Omens', and that I'm quite looking forward to when it appears on the BBC in six months' time.

Demons are part of the dualism of good and evil. They are personifications of evil, just like their boss the Devil and people from history who behaved horrifically outside the norms of society. By creating a being that is responsible for heinous acts we separate ourselves from such acts and turn from exploring how a fellow human being was capable of them. They are part of the shorthand of language that allows us to push away what we do not like or understand. Using the word gives us an explanation for things we find impossible to fully comprehend.

I do not deny that people experienced, and the gospel writers recounted, events they described as Jesus casting out demons. I just do not believe that was the underlying reality of what happened. The gospel accounts tell of the healing that occurred through Jesus, and other contemporaneous accounts speak of other healers who did the same. This was how people of that time understood what was happening. But I do not believe that the fundamental nature of the universe has changed since then. Reality is reality, but how we understand it has dramatically altered and will continue to do so. So what do I think was the reality of these events? I do not know. But all of the facets that make up our human life are probably very similar to those of our fellows in 1st Century Palestine. Our understanding has leapt forward, but we are still the same species. If demon possession was rife then, it probably should be still. So maybe the whole mix of psychological factors, mental illness, and social exclusion that we encounter today would have been explained then as demon possession? Jesus definitely had the power to bring wholeness and maybe to a large extent this was through his selfless personality and example. And when this fails as an explanation we use the word miracle, which gives us an explanation for positive things we find impossible to fully comprehend.

So maybe the lesson for us is to also seek wholeness, for ourselves and others. To follow Jesus' selfless example when we come alongside people and not be limited by our experience, understanding, or what we think they need, and to have the humility to place our trust in God and in the professionals who serve our society.

David Coaker

# The silent cries

Visual portrayals of the world's travails speak boldly and unflinchingly into our reality.



This confrontational sculpture in the placid Bishops Palace Garden at Wells Cathedral, cries out for attention and consideration. It's such a heavy cross, and there are so many children.

'In this moment, as they stop for breath before staggering on with their burden of the cross, we are given an opening to relate to this group of deserted children,' Josefina de Vasconcellos describes her sculpture, 'The weight of their sins.' The descriptive sign adds, 'The artist represents each child to symbolise a crime against children in the world today: AIDS, drugs, genocide, abuse, landmines, homelessness, infant mortality, lack of education.'

And what of this portrayal of Jesus unveiled in 2015 in the heart of Dublin, Ireland?

'Homeless Jesus' sleeps in the shadow of Christ Church Cathedral. The sculpture is 'supposed to make you feel uneasy' explains Canadian artist Timothy Schmalz, a Christian. It does! Other casts of it reside in cities around the world.



And what of 'Famine', vivid representations of the starving during the Irish Potato Famine, created by Rowan Gillespie in 1997? Walking along the Dublin riverbank, one must walk

through the emaciated and forlorn, as one would have in 1854, confronting their stark humanity. God speaks to us in a myriad of ways, sometimes through the silent cries of cold grey stone.

## For Reflection:

- What other artwork has made you 'feel uneasy'?
- What cold grey stone has fired up a passion for justice in you?
- What creative spirit has spoken boldly and unflinchingly into your reality?

## Prayer points:

Praise God for artists who awaken us from complacency.

Pray for the willingness to make a difference in the lives of the homeless, hungry and vulnerable.

Ana Gobledale

# Personality of same-sex marriage

The debate about same-sex marriage is one of the most divisive and highly charged in the church today, rising to the level of a culture war. Conducted at international, national and local levels, it is an issue that can be seen as intractable and unresolvable because of the seemingly irreconcilable arguments and assumptions employed by protagonists on all sides.

In certain ways, akin to Brexit, the issue of same-sex marriage serves as a litmus test of deeper fault lines that exist within churches and society. A study I recently undertook into personality traits and the same-sex debate, was from a largely Anglican perspective, but the research upon which it was based appears to be replicated across a wide range of churches, and across other faith traditions and cultures. The research indicates that the positions advocated within the same-sex debate are not only significant in themselves, but also reveal deeply held, but often unconsciously espoused, psychological preconceptions of the way the world does or 'should' function. These predispositions reveal people's notions of fairness, justice and identity, whether they view the world as frightening or benign, their bias towards an atavistic desire for continuity or a greater openness to change.

I contend that the underlying causes of the debate, although they present as theological disagreements, are significantly influenced by the interlocutors' personality traits, that were later and unconsciously rationalized into firmly held religious convictions. The study distinguished between more surface and changeable levels of personality, i.e. attitudes, opinions and values, and the deeper 'traits' that help shape our choices and behaviours from birth and throughout our lives, often unwittingly. Shaped by genetic and biological influences, these traits display only limited susceptibility to social and contextual influences and are therefore relatively enduring, trans-situational and heritable. Simply put, the way we think and the political and theological opinions that we advocate are significantly influenced by our personalities that were formed long before we were capable of engaging in what we supposed to be unbiased reasoning and prayerful reflection. In a way, we have always suspected this, people with one 'right-wing' view tend to espouse many, and people on the 'left' tend to hold a range of views that equally seem to cluster. We view these as our 'values' and they are, but personality 'trait' research indicates that we are also shaped and influenced by factors that predate and continue to sit under our cognitions. Something deeper, unconscious and visceral is going on.

The analysis employed the Five Factor Model of personality traits (FFM), known as the 'Big Five',

devised by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae, who built on the earlier work of Galton and Allport, Cattell and Eysenck. (Pervin, L.A., *The Science of Personality*, (Oxford University Press, 2003). p.47-50) The 'Big Five' enjoys wide acceptance



Anna Tunikoval CC BY 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wiki-grafik\_peats-de\_big\_five\_ENG.png

among personality psychologists with its structured and robust taxonomy, strong intrapersonal stability over time, and a high degree of validity across ages, languages, cultures and methodologies.

The FFM has become the dominant framework for the measurement of personality traits, with each broad factor comprising several distinct sub-factors relating to specific tendencies. Using self-scoring questionnaires, the five inventory dimensions are measured as positive or negative correlations of the following: *Agreeableness* which subsumes altruism, trust, straightforwardness and modesty.

*Conscientiousness* connotes deliberation, a preference for order, striving, self-discipline and achievement. *Openness to Experience* implies the desire to explore a range of ideas, aesthetics, one's own and other's feelings, comfort with change and a lack of dogmatism. (The remaining factors are less significant in the study of religiosity.) *Extraversion* reflecting gregariousness, assertiveness and excitement seeking, whereas *Neuroticism* reflects anxiety, a propensity to negative emotions, self-consciousness and moodiness.

The FFM has been extensively applied to research of political orientations demonstrating how traits correlate to specific political opinions, including immigration, abortion and gay rights, areas that cross over to religious convictions. FFM research into religion, by such leading researchers as Vassilis Saroglou, (Saroglou, V. & Jaspard, J. M., 'From Eysenck's Taxonomy to the Five-Factor Model', *Personality and Religion: Archive for the Psychology of Religion*. Vol.23, (2000) .p.41-70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23909943>) has hitherto been largely confined to the more amorphous area of 'religiosity' (whether people hold religious convictions of any kind), but the signs are that the FFM will prove as revealing about faith convictions and the espousal of specific doctrines as in the realm of politics. Current FFM research identifies that whilst *Conscientiousness* and *Agreeableness* correlate to most people with religious or spiritual convictions, it is the value *Openness to Experience*

that influences whether a person's faith is more conservatively or more flexibly held.

Most people with religious conviction can similarly score themselves as *Agreeable* and *Conscientious*, but they do so in quite different ways. Those of 'conservative' stamp (in Saroglou's research called 'religious') interpret *Conscientiousness* as the assiduous, even literal observance of authority based positions (whether derived from authority figures or texts). Whilst they believe that *Agreeableness* should be extended towards those of the same faith tradition, or those who 'do the right thing', they tolerate higher levels of injustice towards those considered 'out-groups', whose attitudes or behaviour render such treatment as being not unfair or discriminatory, but justified and deserved. This conservative orientation displays a resistance to change and opposition to equality, a desire to reduce uncertainty and threat, the need for reassurance, predictable environments, structure and the *status quo*. Duty is valued, also obedience to rules and stability, and there is distrust of novel social, cultural or economic change. They often reject challenges to social norms embodied within liberal social policies, and the 'religious' orientation is highly predictive of negative attitudes towards homosexual behaviour and people.

Conversely those of progressive views (termed in the research 'spiritual' or 'questing') can display similar scores for *Agreeableness* and *Conscientiousness*, but dig into the sub-values and a different picture emerges. A Danish study found that for those with higher *Openness to Experience* scores, social conformity is counter-intuitive and disheartening; liberals regard the inclusion of immigrants and other 'out-groups' as socially and aesthetically desirable, since high *Openness* is positively correlated towards creativity, novelty, experimentation and social universalism. (Dinesen, P.T. et al, 'Attitudes Toward Immigration', *Political Psychology*, Vol.37, No.1, Feb,2016, p.13.

[doi.org/10.1111/pops.12220](https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12220).) The 'spirituality' orientation, being more symbolic and questioning, has a broader prosocial scope; research reflecting that 'spirituality', contrary to 'religiosity', represents an extension of prosocial concern beyond peer groups (benevolence), towards all people (universalism); a 'citizen of the world' identity that transcends ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, religious and national affinities. Such attraction to novelty and tolerance of diversity encourages a propensity towards social and economic policies that promote innovation and the overturning of existing practices. Indeed Caprara and Zimbardo (Caprara, G.V. & Zimbardo, P.G., 'Personalizing politics: American Psychologist', Oct. 2004. Vol.59, No.7. p.581-594. [doi:10.1037/0003-066X.59.7.581](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.7.581)) found that those high in *Openness* seek out constant social disruption and novelty, being attracted to change, sometimes for its own sake.

So, where does all this take us? A short article can only scratch the surface, but at a base level, individual believers should become prepared to accept, in humility, the subjectivity and contingency of often fervently held beliefs. We cannot know, we can only believe, and in believing we project our own personalities.

That in itself is a valuable insight for our own spiritual development in becoming more aware of our unconscious predispositions and to reckon with them in our theological reflection and spiritual direction. There are implications for the conduct of theological debate, where the acknowledgement of our predispositions could shed light on areas of impasse. There are implications for the selection and training of clergy to reflect the variety of personality traits within the Church and wider society, and to recognize previously unacknowledged influences. We might look back and wonder how personality traits have shaped the councils and doctrines of the past and whether we might revisit certain teachings through this new lens. We might wish to do so with our current Church leadership?

And the same-sex marriage debate? Those of us who seek ethical and doctrinal innovation should be alert to the views of the conservative thinkers in our churches, without whose agreement change will be frustrated and delayed. We might reflect that the conservative viewpoint need not permanently oppose an issue (the slave trade was once rigorously defended by some Christians but is now roundly abhorred), but will remain committed to the *status quo* for as long as an issue is perceived as innovatory and challenging. Once the idea is seen to have been widely assimilated and perceived as mainstream, i.e. as part of a new *status quo*, conservatives may also be ready to change.

To argue with Jesus just for a moment, it may well be that for some, new wine can only be consumed if it is presented in old wineskins. This is something for 'progressives' to ponder as we seek to advance an agenda, in terms of the time the persuasion process might take, the obstacles to be overcome and also how ideas might be communicated in less threatening ways. Our own personality traits with the desire for change, to be seen in the vanguard, for our opinions to be viewed as 'out there' and thereby badge ourselves as progressive, can serve to exacerbate any delay in the acceptance of new ideas, and consequently we may, unwittingly, be part of the problem.



**Kevin O'Brien** is Vicar of St John the Evangelist, Burgess Hill, chair of Together in Sussex and of Burgess Hill Community Food Bank

# A perspective on The Eternal

*At a recent monthly meeting of the Newbury PCN group we explored human experience as being the reference point to what we have in common, rather than religious or other beliefs. This was based on the article: 'A Narrative of Shared Humanity', PV 29. But we are aware that for some people in the wider world the bottom line is 'belief in the truth' revealed by God as advocated by their own religion. So, we started our discussion by looking at our limitations as human beings to get our minds round the big questions, whether religious or scientific.*

Human beings have vast differences in religious (or non-religious) beliefs and worldviews. It is easy to become blinkered in thought and action, believing that we, our organization, our religion, has found 'the answer'. But in reality, should we all recognize the constraints in our mental capacity to take on board the bigger picture? Let us consider our limited comprehension - all of us.

Some people, who interpret certain Bible stories literally, believe that creation happened about 6000 years ago. Personally, whilst realizing that I too may be wrong, I go with evidence pointing to a 'Big Bang', which dates the universe at about 13.7 billion years, with the emergence of human beings some hundreds of thousands of years ago.

To us the earth is enormous, complex and rich in diversity, the wonders of which ordinary people can tap into via television and publications about NASA and other Space Programmes. These show us that our planet is but a minute dot in the vast space of our Solar System. However, our Solar System is itself an equally minute dot in a hugely vaster Milky Way galaxy with 200-400 billion stars. This is mind-boggling, but it goes much further than that. The most current estimates lead us to believe that there are 100 to 200 billion galaxies in the Universe. So, how many stars are there? Even if these figures are wildly inaccurate there are still one heck of a lot.

From another perspective, it is largely agreed now that various mammals have some form of consciousness. However, dogs for instance, although conscious, aren't able to ponder the origins of stars, galaxies, the universe, the nature of love and realities like this.

Just as a dog's brain is incapable of comprehending these immensities, I suspect that the human brain, impressive though it is, has also only scratched the surface in taking a lot of this on board, especially the dimensions beyond which we presently relate to. From where comes life, love, loyalty and our ability to begin to ask some of the big questions?

For some, the answer is 'God'. But whether 'believers' or 'non-believers', we humans seem to talk about God as though we know what we are



talking about. However, I suspect that we are not that much further developed than our pets towards the greater comprehension needed to respond to all the big questions. No wonder J. B. S. Haldane, the Scottish mathematical biologist wrote: 'Now, my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.'

Two thousand years ago many people thought the earth was flat, and had a three-layer concept of earth, with hell (below), and heaven (above). Without even our limited perspective on the universe it is not surprising that some of our biblical ancestors perceived a Creator as out there, separate from and beyond the earth, just above the clouds, who created everything. We thought we understood! Naturally, we thought we were the centre of all that is created - created for us.

In the light of what I allude to above, what is going on is far bigger and more complex than our forefathers could have dreamed about. Are the ten sextillions or so stars really created for our benefit, or are we just a component of something much, much bigger? Also, a past of 13.7 billion years is hard to contemplate, but the universe is thought to be going to continue for trillions of years. When our Solar System, and earthly life with it, explodes to extinction - the universe will still be in its infancy!

A further question. If our universe originated from a Big Bang, is it realistic to think that there was only one Big Bang? That thought takes us even further into what is queerer than we can suppose!



**Howard Grace** is a member of the Newbury PCN group, a teacher, and executive producer of the film 'Beyond Forgiving'.

# Life?

Why do we have a universe when there needn't be anything? Why does time and space exist? In some way a positive decision must have been made to create the cosmic big bang. In Genesis, the source of that positive decision is called 'God'. That word 'God' has to be understood as the initial creator of everything and is therefore uncreated. But as aspects of God continue through created time and space, then the uncreated perhaps needs to be differentiated by being named as the Godhead?

In whatever way we try to understand our creation, we are struggling to express the inexpressible with human words and worldviews which have been formed within historic time. At best, many of these words are a metaphoric or symbolic expression of what we are feeling or thinking.

The cosmic big bang, like every other human or animal birth, was a seeming miracle. The changes that happened were so finely tuned to the millionth of a second that it enabled four principal scientific constants to guide the evolution of the universe, so that life as we know it now exists. If it had not been so, even by a millionth of a second, there would be no humankind. The Godhead, like science, is supremely rational.

Besides these constants, what we learn from quantum or sub-atomic physics is that the manner of the interaction of the ultimate units of physical reality is, in part, unpredictable. This becomes the fifth 'constant'? Unpredictable freewill. This is entirely consonant with the Godhead being characterized anthropomorphically by what we call unconditional love. Love can only exist if it is given and received freely. It cannot be made to order as with the scientific constants. Although the personality of the Godhead reflects unconditional love, it cannot directly create love. We can call this unconditional love of the Godhead 'God the Father' as portrayed in Luke's story of the prodigal son.

With any creative work, the creator inevitably puts much of themselves into it; something of their skill or personality will show through; it will always be their creation. The same with the creation of the living universe; it can be an incarnation of an aspect of the Godhead. The personality of the Godhead is embodied in the creation of the universe. Orthodoxy calls it 'God the Holy Spirit'. The Spirit effects continual creation, moving evolution forward within a scientific context that allows freewill (and therefore natural disasters, mosquitos, etc), which also causes God to suffer.

The cosmic big bang can be an expression of the Godhead's unconditional love and continuing activity in producing something lovely, something divine. From our perspective we can only see that that 'something divine' is the potential outcome for

the human being, insofar as we appear to be the present peak of evolution.

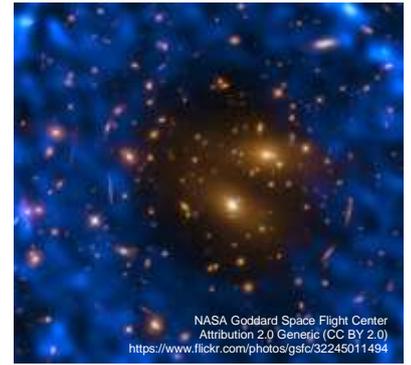
This potential in the human being to realize perfection or divinity we have come to call 'God the Christ' (the Jewish Messiah or the

Quaker 'that of God in every human being'). This would be a consequence of the successful work of God the Holy Spirit which must be concerned to make all creation perfect and therefore divine.

If we look through this trinity of the Father, the Holy Spirit and the Christ, three aspects of the personality of the Godhead, we see that the Godhead appears to be continually replenishing or re-creating itself in a timespan way beyond our ability to comprehend. Somewhat like the human being which re-creates itself at the rate of ten million cells a second. Human self-consciousness has taken about 14 billion years to evolve.

The human being can be seen to have evolved from a relationship between material elements (the physical) and that of God (the spiritual). Insofar as everything physical has a limited lifespan, we are essentially spiritual beings, though it takes most of us a lifetime to appreciate the implications of this and some never do. Essentially, the physical is immersed in the spiritual, but it is the physical sensory system which controls our lives. But when the physical expires, the spiritual sensory system takes over and continues life in a different plane of existence, as determined by the new sensory system. This new plane of existence is here now. Our physical sensory system cannot access it, but almost touches it in near-death experiences.

The spiritual is the Holy Spirit of God whose work is enhanced or diminished by the human spirit (the personality) and it continues the journey of life after the physical has expired. From our human point of view this is called resurrection. All human beings are resurrected. The nature of the unconditional love of the Godhead is such that it cannot let us go. After physical death the journey of life continues in its search for wholeness or perfection, using as its base the life created in this seemingly physical universe.



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# Multi-layered Spiritual Identities

*How may we 'draw on diverse sources of wisdom on our spiritual journeys'? (PCN's point 2)*

When I visited the Viking exhibition at Norwich Castle Museum, and found carvings combining the Norse deity Odin with Christian symbols, I felt affirmed in my attempts to draw on the wisdom I've encountered in different people around the world.

The merging of two religions, and the resulting multi-layered spiritual identity, continued in Britain during and after the Vikings. In the same way when traditional religions encountered Christianity in Africa, Asia and the Americas many of their followers continued to value their inheritance while following Christianity. Thus they created multi-layered identities.

My research in the Malaysian state of Sarawak in Borneo has been among the Iban, the largest ethnic group among the indigenous people there. They have formed an identity which embraces both the Christianity brought by European missionaries, and their traditional culture and religion. The Iban show a lack of interest towards the Christian focus on individual sin and salvation, but have a rich religious practice. Many celebrate both Christian festivals and their own community ceremonies. They participate in rituals such as making a food offering to the spirits and then sharing a meal. The Christians of Sarawak think of the spirits as expressions of the Divine and that they make their offerings in a traditional ritual to the God made known to them by Christianity. So becoming Christian has not led to assimilation into something else or a loss of their own customs. The Iban have created supportive communities within church congregations, and engaged in social action which flows from their sense of caring for the natural world. (Peter Varney, "From Longhouse to Modernity: The Encounter between the Iban of Sarawak and the Anglican Mission")

Another experience has been my encounter with Yoruba religion, while researching at Ibadan University in Nigeria. There, and in the Americas, the practice of ancestral religion continues. Yoruba religion and Christian myths both explain how the estrangement between God and humankind came about. In the Judeo-Christian story, brought first to Nigeria by Anglican missionaries, it was Adam's disobedience to God, the archetypal sin, which produced the expulsion from Eden. Jesus' death on the cross was described by the missionaries as a redemptive sacrifice to lift the burden of sin. The Yoruba myth tells that heaven was very near to the earth, so near that one could stretch up one's hand and touch it. A human offence led to God's withdrawal. The Yoruba believe that the gap can be closed through acts of sacrifice to *oriṣa*, who are



Gold brooch, armband, and pendants from the 10th century, found on the German island of Hiddensee in the Baltic Sea. The jewellery uses both Christian and Norse pagan symbols: the cross and Thor's hammer.

expressions of the Divine and remembered in the shrines, and who are mediators with the Supreme Being.

These two ways of continuing the relationship between mankind and God remain. Most Nigerian Christians today worship in mega churches but many also go to the village *oriṣa* shrines.

*Santería*, the cult of saints, developed in the Spanish Empire among the descendants of the Yoruba people brought there as slaves. The colonial authorities forced them to be baptized and attend Roman Catholic worship. But *Santería* followers continued their traditions and adopted the images of particular saints as *oriṣa* and the focus for their worship. They offer sacrifice by killing chickens; they say the blood is received by the *oriṣa*, as an expression of God, and then the people eat the meat as an act of communion with God. In old Havana in 2016, I visited a catholic church with an adjacent *Santería* shrine. I observed women holding chickens in the church. I was told they pray there first, they then make their offering at the shrine, and finally return to church for mass.

In North America, as African Americans re-connect and learn from their ancestors' beliefs, they have come to recognise that claims of theological truth cannot be based on just one revelation. Renée Hill, an African American Episcopalian priest working in the Bronx, has written of her discovery of Yoruba traditions. (Renée L. Hill, "Still Here: The Promise of Complexity and lived religion", *Modern Believing*, 2019, 60.1 p.39-48) She engages with people who are healed, supported and protected by *oriṣa*. She has made her own relationship with *oriṣa*, who she says protects and guides her to fulfil her purpose in

this world. Renée Hill writes: “The Divine is not limited to the confines of theologies that are the product of human beings and institutions. The *orişas* inhabited the lives of many who were engaged in the life of the church. I engaged with people who witnessed to being healed, supported and protected by these expressions of the Divine. I was invited into this world both by practitioners and *orişas* themselves, thus deepening my own connection to the depth and complexity of Divinity, Ancestors and Spirits. I am convinced that this has sustained me in environments that would have otherwise disempowered me. Praise to the *orişas!*”

For Quakers their *Advices and Queries* tell them: “remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way”. This is reflected in the encounter between Quakers and Australian indigenous peoples, where Quakers have discovered that indigenous understanding substantially aligns with the Quaker way. (This We can Say (Australia [Quaker] Yearly Meeting: 2003) The list of indigenous principles and practice includes:

- Appreciation of silence
- Sense of awe in nature
- Caring for the land
- Respect for the whole person, including those who are different
- Deep sharing gathered in circles
- Simplicity through non-hierarchical, non-competitive, non-materialistic society
- Decision-making by general agreement and concord
- No priests as intermediaries — the individual contributes his or her abilities and gifts for the benefit of the whole society
- Spirituality permeates the whole of life — no holy days, everyday life is sacred.

This gives us reason to affirm, even more strongly, that around the world people live out their lives in ways which respect the natural world and their communities. These examples lead me to suggest that we too may have multi-layered identities, and the way we form our spirituality makes up part of these. We know that belief and practice are matters for each individual and we should never allow them to be decided or dictated by others. We know that forced conversion cannot work. Rather multi-layered spirituality can give us life in all its fullness.

I do try ‘to draw on diverse sources of wisdom on my spiritual journey’ and find something that helps me, as an inheritor of European and Middle Eastern traditions, is the awareness that, along with most of the world’s traditional religions, Judaism does not share the Christian concept of salvation, it does not believe people are born in a “state of sin”; there is no inherited “original sin”. If sins are committed an individual or community can pray directly to God

and ask for forgiveness. If the sin has affected others reconciliation is achieved by asking their forgiveness. I add the beliefs of Eastern Orthodoxy: that human nature was created well, in the likeness and image of God. For them the Garden of Eden story describes humanity’s turning away from God.

Orthodox Christians also reject the idea, introduced by Augustine, that the descendants of Adam and Eve are guilty of “original sin”. They believe that, in Christ’s suffering and death and his resurrection, it was the power of death that was destroyed. They reject the idea of vicarious atonement, that Christ died to give God satisfaction, or as a vicarious or punitive substitute for the human race. Visitors to Orthodox churches in Greece will not usually find the cross as a central focus but rather the glorified Christ, the Pantocrator, depicted in the dome.

I’m also attracted to the Orthodox Christian understanding of salvation, as enabling humans to become “partakers of the Divine nature”. Western theology has developed differently and made God into a “sacrifice demander” and “fearsome judge”, with Jesus as a “punishment bearer”. Salvation through Christ is understood, by the Orthodox, as enabling humans to become “partakers of the Divine nature”, to be united to God in Christ. Salvation also has a communal sense as Christians grow in their relationship with God within the fellowship of the church. The congregation gathered for the Eucharist, an act of thanksgiving and praise is also an expression of the deification of humanity both now and in the life to come.

For thirty years I have juggled between my role as an Anglican priest and as a member of the Religious Society of Friends. I have realised that I was probably never going to be able to opt definitively for one or the other. What has been important for me has been to recognise that the Quaker way and the Anglican tradition both acknowledge doubts and uncertainties but above all they ask us to live out what we have received, that God’s ‘new community of hope may be realised on earth as it is in heaven’ (*Iona Prayer Book*).

Around the world this pattern of multi-layered spiritual life is emerging more strongly. The tenaciousness of the indigenous peoples of the world to hold their own religious and world views, and the way many in the West also embrace multi-layered religious identities, seeking to integrate faith, belief and living, is affirmed.

May we continue to ‘draw on diverse sources of wisdom on our spiritual journeys’.



**Peter Varney** is a Quaker, a retired Anglican priest, and member of the PCN group ‘Fishpond’ in Norwich.

# Doing 'Church' Differently

What is to be done with all our church buildings as fewer people want to attend them? Perhaps the deeper issue is whether the whole idea of a parish or local church system, each with its own worship centre, is now well beyond its sell-by date? One ex-church near me is now a superstore; another is plush offices. A former church in the centre of Lichfield is now a magnificent public library and concert venue, as well as home to several community groups. The chancel, complete with stained glass, has made a stunning computer area. I recently stayed in a hotel that has been sensitively converted from being a Benedictine nunnery. Its chapel may now be a 'secular' wedding venue, but its history is still evident for those who want to see it. Redundant buildings can often be put to new uses with sufficient imagination to make it happen. No building lasts for ever, but not every community can muster the resources needed to keep them fit for use. We have to let many of them go. There is a long tradition going back to visionaries like Auguste Comte and continued by writers like Alain de Botton, who have suggested that such unwanted buildings could be used for other philosophical and creative purposes. Eminently sensible where it is possible. Some might be best used by those of other religious traditions who need a place to meet. How about asking whether this may also be an opportunity to build a new kind of 'Church'? Not a crisis or a disaster, but an invitation to a different, more relevant future. It seems to me that people get much more out of worship and other gatherings when what is done there is done well. Cathedrals are bucking the national trend of decline because they offer a range of high-quality activities, including services, which can compete with other options people might consider. Why go to a draughty building, to participate in a bit of a non-event, that so often seems to involve rather poor quality and ill-considered content, when you can get a much more uplifting experience at a football match or concert? Big events work. The cracks are showing in your local church and it simply can't hope to compete. Of course any new approach has to be ecumenical; I'm not just talking about C of E congregations here, even if they are better placed to take the lead. Perhaps we would do better to focus on maintaining far fewer places offering a varied diet of organised worship for people to choose from; maybe only 20% of those we have now? Most people can travel to what would then be better-supported centres, and those who can't can be given a lift or hire a minibus! Put on a lunch and an opportunity for discussion afterwards. Make a day of it. Make this the local synod/church meeting as well. Bring people together who've never met before and make it all



much more worth the effort. Have people leading and contributing, (and of course we'd need far fewer of them), who are well-trained, skilled in music or public speaking and communication and who know how to make an event unmissable. And this doesn't have to happen only on a Sunday. Maybe another day would work?

Then 'Church' in every locality could also meet as often and wherever it wanted to; in people's homes or in school and village halls. It could be entirely 'lay'-led. It wouldn't have to worry about keeping up with the bigger more professional venues and would offer pastoral support and care to those within and beyond the fellowship. It wouldn't need to raise a lot of money to keep a building open and could concentrate on supporting people in their lives outside the Church rather than everyone having to attend endless meetings. Perhaps they might even be 'allowed' to celebrate Eucharist together!

Personally, I also see all this as a metaphor for what we need to do with the whole Christian enterprise. The beliefs and creeds also need a refresh to make them fit for the C21st and beyond. The idea of one person talking, and everyone else sitting listening to what they need to be told from on high, is as redundant as many of the buildings in which we do it. New generations need new approaches. They need inspiring not herding. People can actually think for themselves! If Christianity is to survive in our culture we need models of both faith and practice that actually engage with where they are.

That is not about keeping the old 'Temples' standing whatever the cost. It's about creating new ones, not necessarily made of stone, bricks and mortar, until they too have to be replaced by those who will come after us. Otherwise they may not exist to do it.



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# Evangelism?

**The fields are not “ripe for harvest.” Far from it. Most people just don’t care about religion any more.** The focus of the evangelist has for many years been salvation from eternal torment, through divine forgiveness. To earn this people have been called to “to turn to Christ” and to repent of their sins. The Good News has been proclaimed as the opportunity to be forgiven through the atoning death of Christ on the Cross. This was the message of the Billy Graham crusades, is continued in the message of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and is at the heart of Evangelical Christianity.

We have been taught to preach the Gospel of Salvation through Christ alone. It is a self-centred message; my salvation, my justification, my eternal life. It is exclusive, dominant and purveys a wrath-filled God of vengeance. It was not what Jesus taught, but a product of imposing his message on a more ancient agenda. It does not follow his example, nor, today does it inspire a wide-spread following. Many see its precepts as selfish and exclusive, and view its motif as toxic, but it is the message that appears to fit the Church’s agenda.

If we are to touch the vast numbers who have rejected the relevance of Christianity, we need to think more deeply; to ask what message would lead to the purposes of divinity. How can we bring people together to love each other and their neighbours as a community, as a nation, as humanity, and so fulfil God's purposes? What could lead people to follow divine reality, without the threat of a pain-filled eternity wielded by a dominant priesthood?

Our focus on individuality and an exclusive Gospel has led to acceptance of vast economic inequalities, warfare between nations, destruction of our environment. Our existence, the whole of Creation, is under threat. Unless we change our ways, we face the end of life as we know it, either through atomic warfare or through global warming. We are effectively and realistically doomed unless we change the present focus on individuality, in church, state and society; unless we refocus on mutual care, bonding, and shared resources; on humility and service rather than on dominating power.

This was also at the heart of the message of Jesus, as he struggled with the power-mongers of his day. This can be our message. This message presents Christ's teaching rather than medieval doctrine.

In promoting Christ's message, we are called to offer ourselves as sacrifices, expounding God's ways of love and mutual sharing through what we do. We are called to act as convincing examples that others around may follow. Our problem lies in how to realign the thinking of the priesthood, of those clinging to the concepts of childhood and those placed in positions of power. We need to



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shed the dust of ages to find honest truths.

Our new message needs to be that of Jesus as the light of the world, who said:

- Love your neighbour as yourself, without schism or division or domination.
- Share your all with those in need, even giving your life for theirs.
- If someone offends you turn the other cheek, forgive, realise their need.
- Let your light shine so that others may see your good life and so promote God's purposes.

This is the Way of the Kingdom of God, and it can be all around us, as Jesus said.

We can realise the ways of God in our society, if, or when, we are all singing from Christ's hymn sheet.

The alternative is becoming all too apparent as we watch Creation bow to human destruction, pollution of our planet, and the hell-fire of global warming.

Evangelism should point to the practicality of global destruction brought about through our present self-centred ways of living and propose a better pathway of love and mutual care; a way that opens the possibility of a future for mankind. Jesus would be our saviour if we followed his way. Extinction is the likely alternative.

The task of the evangelist is to undermine the preconceptions of the people, the blinkered teaching of priest and childhood, to expose the reality of faith in action.

The evangelist is to be an agent of change, unsettling the comfortable and comforting the unsettled - just as Jesus did.



**Edward Conder** was a born in 1939, then 20 years each of: growing/ schooling; Army officer; computer analyst; evangelical evangelist leading to liberal seeker.

# A Progressive Communion service

There is a small group of Progressive Christians who regularly attend worship in the Methodist churches of Brighton & Hove who meet together monthly at our Progressive Christian gathering "Thinking Allowed" at Hove Methodist church.

Here's an outline of our Communion. It's still a work in progress and can be adapted to location. All the elements are just suggestions so feel free to pull it apart and put in different hymns, blessings etc. Anyone is most welcome to take the bones and build their own to make it relevant to your own situation:

*The room is arranged in the round, with a large table at the centre, laid with a table cloth, place settings of wine glass, small plate, perhaps cutlery and a serviette, perhaps cheerfully folded into the glass. There could be a small bouquet of fresh flowers at the centre and perhaps candles. The table should look elegant, colourful and welcoming. Chairs are placed at each place setting – making sure there is room to squeeze in a few more! Around the room are 3 or 4 tables with bowls and jugs of warm water, a pile of paper towels and chairs placed around the tables. If water and jugs are too difficult or unsuitable for the location, hand gel could be substituted. Those who have been able to, will have brought food to share, which is placed on a table towards the back.*

## Introduction and explanation

The point of communion is to celebrate the essential story of Christendom. For generations it has been "salvation history" – the story of our fallen nature, our struggling journey through history, and God finally rescuing us through Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection. In a traditional communion, it is essential that that rescue is rehearsed in the "Words of Institution" – where we talk about what happened "on the night in which Jesus was betrayed" and go on to quote words about the bread and wine, body and blood – shed for the forgiveness of sins. In sharing bread and wine, we symbolically re-enact that evening.

Arguably however, Jesus did not intend for us to focus on his death as being what our faith is about. To get to that conclusion requires believing some things about God, sin, sacrifice, blood and so on which did not feature in Jesus' teaching. Moreover, it takes the focus off what is infinitely more important about our faith: what the incarnation teaches us about God living in us, what Jesus teaches us, what could happen to the world if we became as Christ to each other and the ultimate power of Jesus' teaching revealed through the resurrection. So our communion needs to tell that alternative story.



## Welcome

Jesus often gathered around a common table to share the first fruits of the earth, and all were welcome: unpopular people, foreigners and those judged by others to be sinners. Their sharing became a time of renewal and transformation, opening out possibilities of hope and joy, love and new life. So now, we are invited to this table of possibilities – an open table for all, friends and strangers, where we will share the things that sustain and cheer us.

We gather and **sing "Come all you people, come and praise your maker"** Singing the Faith (StF) 22 as we move towards the washing stations

## Preparation

Remembering the washing of the disciples' feet as a reminder of the servant nature of our faith, and as a symbolic washing away of the burdens of the day, so we seek to be refreshed as we prepare to share table fellowship. You are invited to help one another as you wash your hands at the tables and then take a moment to recall the things you would like to have washed from your life.

## Gathering

People gather around the table and bring the food which is placed on the table and sit down.

**Sing "Will you come and follow me?"** StF 673

**Reading Mark 6:34-44** (expanded NRSV)

"Jesus saw a great throng who had run along to meet him and he was profoundly moved by a deep concern for them, for they seemed confused and troubled, like sheep without a shepherd. So he began to teach them many things about loving, about forgiveness, about trusting God for all things, about generosity of spirit, about the abundant blessings of God's kingdom. When it grew late the

disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and it is now very late. Send these people away so they can go into the country and villages and find something to eat." But Jesus said to them, "You give them something to eat." The disciples scoffed. "Are we to buy 200 denarii worth of bread for them all? That is equivalent to 200 days work!" Jesus said, "How many loaves do we have? Go and find out." When they had found out, they said, "Five and two fishes." Then Jesus told the crowd to prepare for a festive party and recline on the soft green grass in banqueting groups. So they made themselves comfortable in orderly groupings of various sizes so that they looked like colourful flower beds in an elegant garden. Taking the five loaves and two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people and he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were content. And there was an abundance of food left over: twelve baskets of bread and fish. Those who feasted on the loaves numbered 5000 men."

The story of the feeding of thousands of people from a few loaves and fishes is told in all the gospels as a sign of God's astonishing abundance and the power of sharing it. Each version is different and when Mark tells the story he creates a picture of the blessings even the humblest person can know in the transforming presence of Jesus, blessings which are a sign of God's kingdom. Note the incredible transformation within the story from tired, worn 'peasants' to elegant, colourful party guests.

*Silence*

### **The Thanksgiving**

We thank you God that Jesus taught and lived the life of your kingdom where all is transformed:

Distracted and confused your "sheep without a shepherd" become calm and wise

Those who are hungry and thirsty can eat and drink to their heart's content

Those who are weary and worn can become elegant party-goers

Those who are fearful and anxious can know the joy and hope of eternal love.

Thank you God for this your table of possibilities, where we meet you in one another and in the gifts of creation, joyful signs of your kingdom.

Thinking of all the people of the earth, we say the prayer of the kingdom:

The Lord's prayer. **Amen! ( sung) Cheers!**

**Grace** (from a grace dice perhaps, said by anyone)

**Amen! Cheers!**

### **Cup of blessing**

Jesus has shown us in the example of his life and through his teachings that life is to be celebrated and that love is all powerful. Although Jesus died,

his love lives on and the resurrection is embodied in all the people of 'his way' as they live lives of joy and hope. Their lives reveal the abundant blessings of God's kingdom which can be known by all who walk in the way.

As people who follow Jesus we are grateful for many things:

### **Sing "Give thanks with a grateful heart" StF 78**

A jug of wine (or other suitable drink) is passed from one to the next each giving thanks (aloud or in silence) for some blessing of their lives then pouring the drink into their glass and passing the jug along. There should be several jugs or bottles around the table so none is too heavy or runs out.

We share the cup of thanksgiving

All take a drink of wine. **Amen! (sung?) Cheers!**

### **Fruits of creation**

As people of God we celebrate the creative spirit without which there is no sustenance; as people of the earth we celebrate creation without which there is no food and we become weak. Therefore we eat together, acknowledging that what started in creation becomes community.

Each person takes one small piece of food. We share this food with one another recognising it as a symbol of our abundant life in God. **Amen! Cheers!**

### **Sing "Brother, sister, let me serve you" StF 611**

We all eat the rest of the food ministering to each other, as Jesus ministered to us, by discussing our hopes and the possibilities of the coming days and delighting in one another's company.

Theme or conversation-starter suggestion cards might be appropriate.

### **At the end of the meal the dismissal:**

We have shared in a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, so let us be thankful and commit ourselves once again to be the eyes, hands and heart of Jesus and the love of God, to make a difference in our community and seek God's kingdom in all we do.

### **Closing Responses**

Suggest "Look at your hands" from 'A Wee Worship Book' (Wild Goose Publications, 1999)

**Amen! (perhaps sung) Cheers!**

We bless one another by saying:

Suitable blessing of choice. **Amen! Cheers!**

Sending out Song: **"We will walk with God my brothers."** StF 484

Take any remaining food to a homeless drop-in or project if practical/possible

We would love to know if anyone tries this or uses it and to hear their feedback.

**Sue Harrington and Cynthia Park**

# Local groups

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

Newcomers are always welcome.

## Abingdon Cliff Marshall

01235 530480 cliff.marshall@pcnbritain.org.uk

Five members were able to attend the London conference on 8 Jun; it was a stimulating experience and great to meet friends from across the country. We look forward to discussing the contribution of the speakers with the whole group when we get a copy of the recording Chris Avis made. At our July meeting we were able to discuss Richard Holloway's typically thoughtful and thought provoking talk which was made available in transcript. We would highly recommend this as a focus for other groups. At our Aug meeting we plan to review our year and plan our year ahead. One event we shall be organising will be another public talk, hopefully by a local prominent biblical scholar. We especially look forward to Adrian Alker's visit on 5 Nov.

Our meetings will be at 7.30pm on Tue 3 Sept, at St Peter's Church Room, Drayton, OX14 4JS and 1 Oct at St Michael's Church Room, Abingdon OX14 1DU. On 5 Nov and 3 Dec our meetings will be at 2.30pm in St Michael's Church Room. Typically between 14 and 20 attend. Our next meetings will be held at

## Bolton Jim Hollyman

01204 456050 jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

1.30pm on Wed 14 Aug, 4 Sept and 2 Oct. We will be completing our study of Adrian Alker's book "Is a Radical Church Possible?"

Adrian calls for an honest look at the life of Jesus and the faith of the Church and suggests a radical and more honest reshaping of the churches to enable them to face the challenges of the present day. We will be welcoming a visit from Adrian at our meeting on 2 Oct. Starting in Sept our meetings will be on the first Wed each month at 1.30pm until about 3 pm. They are usually held at 121 Junction Road, Bolton, BL3 4NF.



## Exeter Liz Vizard

01392 668859 liz.vizard@pcnbritain.org.uk

We will be moving to Crediton for our next meeting on Sun 21 July 2.30-4.00pm (Hall open from 2pm)

Crediton Congregational Church 98, High Street, Crediton. EX17 3LF.

[www.creditoncongregational.org](http://www.creditoncongregational.org)

This is an experiment to see if we can broaden our reach to those in other parts of Devon and possibly tap in to the local church life of this lively small town. We would love to widen our age range too!

Liz will be retiring as convenor after this meeting (though very much still involved) and handing over to Fran and Ian Lovett who live in North Devon. They have been members of PCN Britain for some time and very much enjoyed their experience as members of the Edinburgh group. Ian, who is a Canon Emeritus of Liverpool Cathedral, has degrees in Science, Theology, and Fine Arts, and a Doctorate in 'Organisational Theory' and has been an Anglican priest for forty years, will lead this meeting on the topic of John Selby Spong's book: 'Unbelievable'.

## Gloucestershire Andy Vivian

andy.vivian@pcnbritain.org.uk

In the last quarter we've enjoyed visits by two speakers and listened to a video. The first speaker was Neesa Cople, an interfaith minister from Stroud. She shared a faith journey that reshaped her Anglican upbringing into a ministry without religious boundaries. She plays a leading role in the Spirit of Peace movement. Our second speaker was Peter Knight, a former PCN trustee and retired priest. Like many members of PCN he has moved away from a theistic image of God. He challenged us to consider why children are given a version of the Bible which they will later have to unlearn in the light of modern scholarship. Our video was a talk by the theologian, Trevor Dennis, entitled "The Bible can be Bad. He argued that the Bible is an inspiring book but its authors occasionally tell stories with dreadfully immoral conclusions about the nature of God. It's up to Christians to point this out. We meet on the first Sat afternoon of the month in Gloucester.

## Manchester John Ramsbottom

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

The group concluded the spring session of meetings with the final session of the book "Re-thinking worship". The general feeling about this resource was that people did not find the ideas terribly helpful but that it had provided a useful starting point for subsequent discussion.

Thereafter we looked to planning ahead for the autumn, and have a number of suggestions to include, although the final programme has not yet been prepared. These included a session on a Christian response to the "Extinction rebellion" protests that have been taking place recently – should we be supporting this sort of movement, given our concerns for the future of the planet? We may also have a bible study evening – which strangely does not appear to have featured in a meeting yet. There may be presentations of a book that an individual has found helpful, and consideration of real life situation dilemma, where someone must take a decision that could potentially impact on many other people. There will certainly be a wide range of topics for us to look at. We do not meet during Jul or Aug, so hope to resume in Sept.

Meetings are generally on the 4th Wed of the month at Heaton Moor United church in Stockport.

## Newcastle Pat Fuller

01670 519800 pat.fuller@pcnbritain.org.uk

At time of writing, we have one more meeting under the inspiring guidance of our (nearly emeritus) convenor, Pat Fuller. Thank you Pat, for creating and maintaining such a great PCN atmosphere since setting it up here back in 2012. We all hope that you will find time (whether enjoying the family or cooking in Tuscany; playing with the dogs; travelling with Peter; raising radical protests; gardening; sharing labyrinths; undertaking Green Party activism; unravelling the world's philosophies, or exploring your many, many other passions) to relax one day soon! The group owes you sincere gratitude and a considerable amount of yummy finger food. Long may we journey and question. Plans for Sept onwards are afoot and, as usual, as multi-faceted as the group itself. After our introductory session, Dan will continue in Oct by leading a session on the theme of journeys, asking how individuals get

to the place they're in now. Pat will lead us in conversation about Richard Holloway's 'Religion and Atheism' talk at the PCN conference in Soho. Jean and Daryl will direct an interactive evening on a Biblical theme while Richard and Joyce will encourage a pre-Noël search for inclusive, progressive hymns. Members' fizz and energy show that Pat is clearly passing on her baton in fair fettle. It is a delight to announce that our new convenor, Liz Temple, will be accepting this fresh role. Welcome, Liz!

**Oakham** Peter Stribblehill  
07918 916466 peter.stribblehill@pcnbritain.org.uk

We are a new group to PCN though have been meeting since 2008 under the name "Living the Questions". We formed like many other groups as a reaction to traditional Christian doctrine and a wish to make more sense of faith and the Christian life today. Although we meet at Oakham Methodist Church we have a number of members with Anglican, Quaker and agnostic backgrounds. We meet fortnightly from Oct to Easter and hold an away day in June to maintain momentum during the summer. Normally 20-25 attend our meetings which are usually based on a DVD or CD; we take it in turns to lead each session. Our original series used the DVD "Living the Questions" and the name stuck. Our most recent discussions were based on the Richard Holloway Radio 4 series of talks "Three score years and ten" – much of which appears in his book, "Waiting for the Last Bus." We have become familiar with the contributions of most recent progressive thinkers – Spong, Crossan, Borg, Holloway Brueggemann, Rohr and so on and are used to the idea that in religion, as in so many other areas of life, certainty is an illusion.

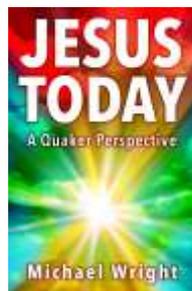
**Tavistock** Mike Dennis  
01822 618142 mikedennis\_uk@yahoo.co.uk

We are a small group, but that does not deter us from seeking to maintain a presence in the town. We meet in the United Reformed Church about once a month though the days vary between Tue and Wed. Though we are on the fringes of Devon, we like to support Exeter when possible which ensures that we keep in touch with a wider membership. Since the turn of the year we have included discussions on Dave Tomlinson's "Black Sheep and

Prodigals" and also his "The Bad Christian's Manifesto". Also Youtube clips featuring John Spong on "The story of Jesus Iscariot" and "The passion of Holy Week". Since Easter we watched a clip by Marcus Borg entitled "Why Jesus Matters" and Spong's "What a new Christianity for a new world will contain" in addition to the Bible Society's "#SheToo" on violence against women in the bible. In early July we hosted a public talk by Jo Baker on the theme of "Rethinking Security in a time of climate change". This was in conjunction with Tavistock Peace Action Group who we are always pleased to support. It is always encouraging when we are able to welcome those who are not regulars but who have heard about us from miscellaneous sources especially if they have previously felt excluded from what goes on in other churches.

**Teesside** Michael Wright  
07966 527697 michael.wright@pcnbritain.org.uk

For more than 12 years we have met monthly to discuss books by a range of authors. The membership consists largely of Quakers and Methodists, with some Roman Catholics and Anglicans. From these discussions emerged a feeling that we wanted to articulate something positive about what motivates us in seeking to live by the teaching of Jesus. At the same time, I, as a Quaker, was aware that in some Quaker Meetings, reference to Jesus and his teaching is rare, and in some cases not always welcome. So a year ago I began a book and shared drafts with members and took on board their comments and contributions. The book was published on July 1st as Jesus Today - a Quaker perspective, by Michael Wright, Sixth Element. ISBN 978-1-912218-57-8 £9.99. (A review will be in a future PV.) This book invites readers to discover more about Jesus, and also something of a Quaker perspective on him. I am a former Anglican who has found the Quaker way one which has given my spiritual practice a new lease of life, so I commend it to others. I have found that Quaker ways can also help enrich the lives of those who belong to other religious communities at the same



time as sharing in aspects of Quaker life and worship.

**N Worcester** David Tubb  
01562 884344 david.tubb@pcnbritain.org.uk

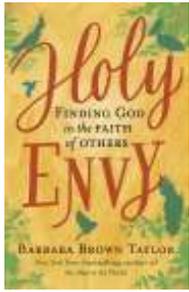
We have continued watching and discussing the 'Painting the Stars' DVD about the full implications of evolution for our faith and that of others. I have personally felt (and I believe this has been shared) that the issues raised are profound, and require all of us committed to the Christian gospel to look forward to a different kind of future. The age of empire is past! But how to nurture and promote the essence of that gospel message in the future?

**West Yorks** Michael Burn  
07712620303 michael.burn@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our meeting on 13 May was devoted to consideration of Jonathan Clatworthy's "Why Progressives Need God – An Ethical Defence of Monotheism". He argues that belief in God can provide a better foundation for ethics than a wholly secular approach and denying any moral authority higher than humanity, at least in public matters, leaves the ruling classes as the decision makers – not only in what we do but also in what we ought to do. He suggests that a society that gets rid of all its gods ends up creating new ones. Clatworthy believes that contemporary progressive secular thinking is parasitic on Christianity. As I write we are looking forward to our meeting on 15 July when Sue Holey will lead a discussion on a talk given by Julian Baggini at the June PCN Conference "Religion and Atheism – Beyond the Divide". He described his take on the Ten Commandments. Julian is a philosopher, author and Guardian columnist who says he is an atheist. Group members will also have received a copy of Richard Holloway's talk at the Conference. David Bidnell, the Superintendent of the Huddersfield Methodist Circuit, will lead the meeting on 23 Sept. He will speak on the subject "In Search of Truth With the Help of Narrative Parables in Luke. Anyone in the area is always welcome to join us. It would be helpful if you contacted the convenor to give us some indication of numbers likely to attend.

# Reviews

**Holy Envy by Barbara Brown Taylor, Canterbury Press**



Barbara provides an innovative way to explore faith experiences. This book is not an introduction to the major religions but rather describes the course she taught at Piedmont

College in Georgia. The book is enlivened by the student's accounts as they are transformed by their encounters with Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. The major omission is the indigenous religions of America. Those who have also made an interfaith journey will identify with much of what Taylor says. It is an honest account of the complexities of teaching about faiths and takes a more academic approach when she describes the evolution of her students' thinking following their visits to sacred and holy places. The challenge of choosing between participating or observing rituals will be familiar to those working alongside other faiths. For Taylor it came when asked to join in a Hindu prayer ritual. 'We crossed over from observation to participation. There appeared no way out.'

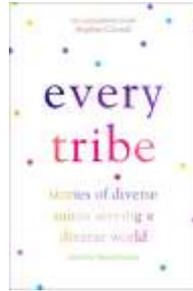
What Taylor learns is not what she expected, and her response to these experiences becomes biblical exegesis as she applies the lessons of other religions to her own understanding of Christianity. She re-evaluates teachings that have been used to exclude rather than embrace strangers and re-discovers biblical accounts of God choosing outsiders. In her chapter *Divine diversity* she says 'I have left as many of [Christianity's] truth claims as I can, arriving at a place where I can resume loving God and my neighbour as self-forgetfully as possible.' 'When religion comes between me and my neighbour I will choose my neighbour.'

Taylor writes 'My envy of other traditions turned into holy envy'. She suggests we should go beyond 'respect for difference' to recognising that each 'spiritual well' is 'fed by the same great underground river that feeds all wells'; a different well may offer the particular refreshment

which she calls 'holy envy'. Her conclusion is that the 'Christian cup works well enough' but 'the water in the Christian well does not belong to Christians.' Read and enjoy this!

**Peter Varney**

**Every Tribe edited by Sharon Prentis, SPCK**



All societies seek out their heroes; ordinary people made extraordinary who go on to help the vulnerable and promote good. Our secular saints are from film and fantasy. At the

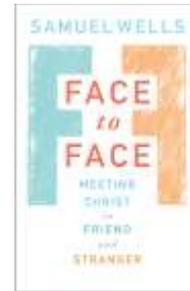
same time the stories of Christian saints continue to resonate, sometimes with little reference to their history. St George, England's patron saint, and sometimes aggressive symbol of nationalism, was in fact a Palestinian Christian born in Turkey, adopted as a saint across a number of diverse cultures. His multi-cultural identity, his biographer argues, makes him a perfect symbol for today's England. This collection of essays arose from discussions at the CofE's Committee for Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns. It highlights the lives of saints and holy people who originate from outside Europe. The book aims to address with these stories, set in their proper historical and cultural context, the tendency within the church to set the Christian faith within a dominantly white Anglo Saxon cultural context. Why, they ask, are all the saints in our stained glass windows white?

This is gentle and thought provoking. It explores the lives of twelve holy people, from a range of countries of origin and cultures. They share the fate of having been detached from their cultural context and having been appropriated and 'relocated by history'. The contributors are sympathetic to the story they are telling. Each biography is supported by words of prayer and reflection. It really serves its purpose.

**Christine King**

**Face to Face by Samuel Wells, Canterbury Press**

The author describes this slim volume as 'a book of epiphanies' about surprising results delivered through everyday encounters between ministers and lay people. An overarching theme is that the salvific boot is frequently on the



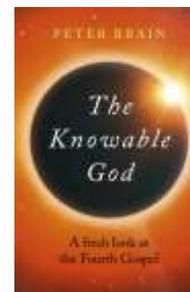
other foot: that the minister is often rescued by the laity. Another theme is the necessity of pacing oneself since certain events will take plenty of time to shake down (the first anecdote

details a 75 year-long shakedown). In all cases however, he defends the Church - despite its shortcomings - as the epitome of loving community. The book is full of Wells' signature perspicacity. He evokes lay characters in an almost Dickensian fashion, letting the quirks of twitch, clothes and habit fill in an assumed background for his people. Never resorting to lazy stereotypes, all manner of social class, nationalities and genders make an appearance: I suspect that few of us will escape the feeling of being 'nailed'.

Wells himself proposes that his book is intended primarily for the clergy and he suggests occasions when it might come in handy as a present. Reading as a layperson, however, I felt unsure that the book offered much more than the fun of being a fly-on-the-wall eavesdropper. So sometimes humble laypeople can teach professional clerics a thing or two about how God works? Call me an old-fashioned cynic, but I've never been under the delusion that clerics make a better fist out of being human than the rest of us. All the same, this book is a joy to read and even to share on the right occasions.

**Hellen Giblin-Jowett**

**The Knowable God by Peter Brain, Circle Books**



Peter Brain's fresh approach compares the fourth gospel to a Wagnerian music drama complete with the prologue as an overture, a cast of symbolic characters and recurring motifs:

"life, light and love ... creation, incarnation, rejection and glory". He gives a welcome realism often absent from similar books: "All the four gospels are the fruit of conscious selection and editing, whether by one or more than one hand, and all are an impressive mix of reporting, imaginative retelling and underlying belief." Authorship is disputed, but the script is distinctly

original differing markedly in content from the earlier Pauline letters and the synoptic gospels. A useful chapter contrasts these differences. The marked change is needed because the author's aim is not to paint a picture of Jesus' life and ministry, but to demonstrate that "God chose to be Jesus". And that the lives of believers are testimony to God's living Spirit. We can see the thinking of the late 1<sup>st</sup> century Jesus movement as its message is designed to appeal to Gentiles.

Although there is much scholarly detail throughout the commentary, this book is eminently readable. As the curtain comes down on this drama, we have gained new insights.

**Robin Story**

**God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today? by Helen Paynter, BRF**



Helen is Director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence at Bristol Baptist College and Editor of BRF's Bible reading notes. She is well placed to write this very accessible book.

She deals with the problem in a very straightforward, systematic way, beginning with the less difficult and moving on to the most difficult ones. First she considers the places in the Bible where violence is simply described as part of the story. Then moves on to where suffering people pray for vengeance on their oppressors – a natural human reaction. Next, violence against animals, pointing out the huge cultural difference between the Bible's world and ours. Then with violence as divine judgment, and finally with the most difficult problem, the places where God seems actually to command acts of violence against innocent people.

Paynter approaches the problem humbly, freely acknowledging that she does not have the answers but is still wrestling with the questions. However, it seems to me that her perception of the violence as a 'problem' comes from her relatively conservative view of the Bible as the Word of God. While acknowledging the humanity of the Bible and reading it in the light of critical scholarship, she seems nevertheless to be trying to justify everything it says, and hesitates to say that parts of it may be simply mistaken. I

suspect that the way in which most of us perceive the Bible means that we do not see the violence in it as a 'problem' in this kind of way. At the same time, this book is clear, honest and admirably arranged. It is well worth using as a basis for discussion in churches. Some PCN groups too might find it useful. It is informative, reminding us of parts of the Bible we sometimes neglect, and it is thought-provoking and sometimes challenging.

**Ray Vincent**

**The Love Line by John Henson, Matador**



The relationship between religion and sexuality has presented challenges. The 'line' here is that of a continuum between morality and promiscuity, and the stance

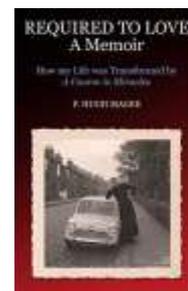
taken by the Church - and by how we read the Bible. John, a Welsh Baptist pastor, argues that homophobic prejudice and patriarchal assumptions exclude and repel anyone who is (or is seen to be) different.

The Church has been left behind and it is time 'to shut up and listen' to the wider narrative of faith, gender and sexuality. Such listening involves looking at what the Bible says in new ways - Jacob, Joseph and David as men with a feminine side, Naomi, Ruth and Esther as women facing sexist stigma. All are complete human beings, made in God's image. Jesus mixed freely and found true equality natural. He did not judge or exclude the centurion (Matt. 8:5-13) for being gay: all types of relationship were an expression of humanity. The line is a 'unity'. Henson hits out at conventional attitudes - women and original sin (Eve's 'sin' forced human beings to make the first hard choice), suspicions that an over-sentimentalised Mary was raped yet still believed in God, and 'homosexuality bad, heterosexuality good' (think of David and Jonathan). Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and Paul in Romans, need re-contextualising today, not biblical literalism. Through knowing God's kindness, looking at Jesus's inclusiveness, we stand a chance of clearly seeing sexuality and gender today in all its 'rainbow' colours. This

does not dilute or betray, but reinvigorate and act as a reality check grounded in a thoughtful faith. Most Christian churches in Britain face decline. Ones that flourish often do so by being fundamentalist - or morph into secularised social clubs. Gay, lesbian and transgender issues remain complex and sensitive, as Adrian Thatcher's God, Sex, and Gender (Wiley Blackwell, 2011) and others have made clear. If the message of 'all are welcome' is to be believed, it needs prophets like Henson to tell us so. Is the church up to it?

**Stuart Hannabuss**

**Required to Love by Hugh Magee, CreateSpace**



I first came across 'A Course in Miracles' in the early 1990s. I tried to read it but, perhaps crassly, soon lost patience with what seemed to me to be West Coast American

pop spirituality. Although interested in 'radical' Christian thinking, I made no connection between the two. Not so for this author - an Anglican priest who was a total convert. He believed that the 'Course' is a new revelation from Jesus himself, although I do not recall its authors making such a claim. The 'Course', in practical terms, consists of three parts; text, a workbook for students and a one for teachers. The workbook for students has 365 days' worth of study to guide you towards inner peace through the power of forgiveness and love. God and Christianity are part of the context - there are references to the work of the Holy Spirit, but it also deals with 'universal truths'. This is the third book in this vein by Magee. This one he describes as a 'spiritual autobiography' of how his life had been transformed by it. The interplay between 'New Age' spirituality and progressive Christianity is fascinating. I shall find a copy of 'A Course in Miracles' and look again to see if it speaks to my radical thinking on faith. I have my doubts - the idea of a 'new revelation' and the evangelism that goes with it disturbs me. This book is written with passion and sincerity. I am glad to have read it.

**Christine King**

# Bible verses and the eight points

The East Shropshire group share their reflections upon our eight points and the Bible (NRSV) - David Wood

## 1. Seek God, however understood, guided by the life and teachings of Jesus

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6*

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:3-12*

## 2. Affirm that there are many ways to experience the Sacred and that we can draw on diverse sources of wisdom on our spiritual journeys.

*"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" John 14:2*  
*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Psalm 19*

## 3. Recognise that following Jesus leads us to act with compassion and to confront evil.

*As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. Mark 6:34*  
*Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" Luke 6:9*

*She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." John 8:11*

## 4. Place hospitality at the centre of our communal and worshipping life and see the sharing of bread and wine as an expression of our common humanity.

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:2*

*Be hospitable to one another without complaining. 1 Peter 4:9*

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Acts 2:42*

*He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you*

*give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Luke 14:12-13*

## 5. Seek to build communities that accept all who wish to share companionship without insisting on conformity.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6*

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 1 Cor.12: 12-14*

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. 1 Cor. 13:1, 12-13*

## 6. Know that the way we behave towards others is the fullest expression of our faith.

*But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing. James 1:22-25*

*"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." John 13:34*

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of*

*me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) John 4:7-9*

## 7. Gain more insights in the search for understanding than we do in certainty.

*"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3*

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Matthew 5:6*

## 8. Work together within and beyond the Church to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

*... learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Is. 1:17*  
*Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. Jer. 22:3*  
*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Romans 12:15-18*

*"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." Matt. 7:12*  
*How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 1 Jn 3:17-18*  
*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land. Leviticus 25:23-24*

*"... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me ... 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" Matthew 25:35, 40*

# Let there be ...

(Dedicated to Isaac Paul White, who loves pink.)

And God said, 'Let there be ... pink!

Fox gloves spearheaded the mission, nodding their approval;

Sleepy Oxalis awoke, unfurling her face to the sun;

Smiling Campions stretched out their petals - eager to please;

Simple Herb Robert, simply - was.

Gentle Mallow, prized in its presence.

Grey dry stone walls became cushioned with Stone Crop;

Thrift hemmed the cliff tops;

Clover carpeted, even hard headed Thistles softened.

Tinges of pleasure dimpled Daisies and Bindweed,

Highlights lit up Hawthorn and Honeysuckle  
– their scents coloured the air.

Dandelion roared with delight!

Buttercup splashed around sunbeams.

And, looking on, a coy blush crossed the face of God,  
tickled pink, – for it was very good.

Meryl White

Love your neighbour  
who doesn't



look like you



think like you



love like you



speak like you



pray like you



vote like you

Love your neighbour

no exceptions