

Progressive Voices

**Wishing a very happy
90th birthday to
Bishop Jack Spong!**



Sept 2021, PV38

O God who longs to make us whole

A hymn celebrating the founding and work of the NHS, written in 1998 for a special service in Leicester Cathedral celebrating the NHS 50th anniversary.
Verse 3 was added in 2021 to recognise the efforts and courage of people other than NHS staff during the pandemic.

Tune: Kingsfold – English traditional melody collected by Lucy Broadwood (1858-1929)

1

O God who longs to make us whole in body, spirit, mind,
we praise you for the hopes and dreams you share with humankind:
for those in pow'r whom you inspired to share the nation's wealth,
that rich and poor alike might know security and health.

2

We give you thanks for those who strive that knowledge might increase;
for all in office, ward or home whose efforts never cease;
for those who give of wealth or self, who care or who campaign,
and all who bravely watch and wait to share your people's pain;

3

for those in countless walks of life who daily work and strive
to keep each other safe and well, and help the weak to thrive;
for those who go beyond the call in myriad other ways,
and keep alive the light of hope in dark and cheerless days.

4

O give us grace to trust your love when hope remains concealed,
to watch and pray beside the ones who are not swiftly healed.
And grant us faith, when death itself provides its own release,
to trust in your undying love to give them perfect peace.

5

Give us, O God, your loving zeal to comfort, heal and save,
to care for one another 'from the cradle to the grave'.
Then north to south, and east to west, let love and hope extend,
until the universe is whole and justice knows no end.

Michael Forster

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Welcome

It had been our intention that this edition would be a promotional one for Greenbelt. With the festival's cancellation we are back to offering a 'normal' edition!

So, in this issue we give thanks in song for the NHS, reflect on the last issue, hear about a progressive pioneer ministry, consider religious children's books, think about the art of spiritual practise, look to a progressive future, learn from an atheist gathering, reflect on progressive Christianity, ponder one of our films, and introduce a couple of our trustees. We will also hear news from our groups, give thanks for the lives of two of our number, and be challenged to show solidarity. (There's also a poem to get us ready for autumn!)

As always there is an open invitation for contributions, so please consider sharing something with us for the December issue.

Welcome to the 38th edition of PV.

Enjoy!



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Chair's Letter

Every movement for change needs its heroes. Those who have spoken up for the truth as they see it, with honesty and integrity, unafraid to ask the big questions and to challenge those in authority. The progressive Christian movement across the world is no exception and this year PCN Britain sent its good wishes and heartfelt thanks to Bishop Jack Spong, who marked his 90th birthday on June 16th.

I hardly need remind the readers of Progressive Voices what an inspiring and influential church leader Jack Spong has been. The author of over twenty books, a serving bishop for 24 years, a worldwide speaker and a friend, not only to all who seek a more progressive faith, but to those who work for a more inclusive church and society, free of prejudice of all kinds.

The London launch of PCN Britain took place on 18 May 2003 when Jack Spong preached at St James's Piccadilly. Since that time, and on various occasions, Jack has graced us with his presence at national conferences and local groups. Earlier in 1998, Jack had received a far from gracious reception at the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops. His book, *'Why Christianity Must Change or Die'* sent shock waves through the church establishment. I have personal memories of inviting Jack to a weekend at St Marks in Sheffield and the then bishop of Sheffield receiving complaints from some local clergy that this 'heretic' should not be allowed to enter the diocese, as if the very name Jack Spong was like a virus, infecting the whole of the church politic. Needless to say Jack came and enthralled an audience of over 200 people!

Jack Spong was not alone in encouraging honest debate and critical reflection about the Christian faith. PCN has been equally indebted to the late Marcus Borg, whose gentle and precise lectures and accessible writings redefined for thousands, if not millions of people, what it meant to be called 'Christian'. And as I write this letter in mid-July I am looking forward to our online evening event with John Dominic Crossan, a titan of biblical scholarship and another friend to PCN.

These three men, alongside women theologians such as Diana Butler Bass, Gretta Vosper, Barbara Brown Taylor and many others have fed and sustained us on our journeys. But what of the future both for progressive thinking and scholarship and its influence on the churches across the world? On a pessimistic note, it would seem that despite all the books, lectures and conferences, the depleting churches of the rich countries, be it in North America, Europe or Australia, continue to offer the same unthinking approach to faith as evidenced in their liturgies and creedal statements. Christianity seems to be dying and refuses to change!

Adrian Alker serves as the
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However, during the pandemic some people discovered that there were churches and communities in the UK and across the world who offered a more inclusive, open-hearted and open-minded approach to Christianity: places like Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Canada, with its pastor, Dawn Hutchings. And hope also lies beyond the churches where we find many younger people showing a great deal of interest in 'sacred community', in the fight against systemic racism, in the move toward gender equality, in the desire for a more equitable society and a concern for the environment. In and through these movements we glimpse something of what it means to be fully human and, across religions, what that means to be open to the possibility of a creative Spirit.

As we look back to a past where we have been shaped and influenced by some outstanding thinkers and brave church leaders, so we must also look to the future eighteen years on from that launch of PCN in London. We continue to be guided by those 8 points which have been our signpost since we began this organisation. We are guided by the life and teachings of Jesus, affirming that there are many ways to experience the sacred, drawing on diverse sources of wisdom, working in and beyond the churches to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

May I end with those famous words which Jack Spong used on many an occasion:

"I rather experience God as the source of life willing me to live fully, the source of love calling me to love wastefully and, as the Ground of Being, calling me to be all that I can be."

Amen to that and thank you Jack.

MEMBERSHIP

PCN Britain has charitable status, and we depend wholly on members for funding. Membership is for all who value an open, progressive and theologically radical voice, and want to maintain and promote that generous understanding of faith.

£30 (£15 for limited income)

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Letters

Caterpillars and Butterflies

I was most impressed with the cover of PV37, a butterfly being released from someone's hand, to fly away to who knows where.

This made me think how like a butterfly the Christian Church is – or rather how like a caterpillar it is! As I see it the Church started like a caterpillar and has not evolved much further. Most church services still follow first century theology, which is unbelievable to the majority of people in today's world.

To survive as a viable force for good in the world as it is today, it needs to enter the 'chrysalis' stage, just like a caterpillar, to be reborn into something that may not resemble the Church as we know it today, but just like the caterpillar, now evolved into a butterfly, still contain the essential message that the only way for our world – God's world, to have a future is to spread universal love. I don't see this happening in the established churches, to any great extent. Thank goodness that we have the Progressive Christianity Network and like-minded Christians supporting Free to Believe, and Modern Church; keep up the good work I'm convinced this is where the future of the Christian faith lies.

George Drake

David and Goliath

I enjoyed the item about David & Goliath (PV37) and the summary of the background and the situation as it developed says it all - but how did David actually kill Goliath? The simple fact is that a slingshot was not a high-powered sniper's rifle, capable of penetrating the skull, and all archaeological evidence suggests that a Philistine's forehead would have been very well protected by his helmet. In addition, the account makes it clear that David killed Goliath with his own sword (v51). Years ago I read a discussion on the subject by Jonathon Magonet, noted Jewish scholar and past Principal of Leo Baeck College. In his book 'Bible Lives' (SCM Press) he pointed out that the Hebrew words for 'greaves' (leg-armour, mitzchat, v6) and 'forehead' (meitzach, v49) are remarkably similar and within the limits of Hebrew grammar could easily be confused. It was therefore suggested that David's slingshot struck Goliath around the knee-area

and the "stone sunk into (behind) his greaves". As a result Goliath could not straighten his leg and instead stumbled forward onto his face (v49), whereas a 'powerful-projectile' into the forehead would almost certainly have toppled him backwards. His armour, which had been his strength, was too heavy for him to get-up unaided and became his weakness. David was then able to go forward and use Goliath's own sword to kill him! Notwithstanding what we were told in Sunday School, this is more plausible than a deadly slingshot and more faithful to the text.

The lesson would seem to be use the 'gifts and talents' that God has given you and trust God to vindicate your efforts in God's service.

Jeff Smith

Truth and Reality

Chris Vosper's discussion of 'truth' (PV37) is highly entertaining. His conclusion, that humans cannot compile a complete account of truth, is not surprising: we live with uncertainty. Perhaps we may look at the problem in a different way. To begin with Jesus' conversation with Pilate, we may ask whether this is indeed a "report". When we compare John's gospel with the synoptics, it is difficult to imagine that Jesus as a Jew said what is written in John. John sounds like a Hellenistic Christian of the 2nd Century writing what Jesus might have said as the "Son of God" as he was becoming to be understood. The synoptic Jesus is more human, concerned with people's relationship with God and one another. We are then able to consider the word "truth" without the definite article. The word is an abstract noun derived from the word "true". It enables us to talk about what is true without having to give numerous examples. The word "beauty" is an exact parallel: it is the anglicisation of the French "beaute", derived from the adjective "beau". The changes over the years in the ideal of beauty prevent any possible compilation of beauty. The same applies to truth. The Oxford Concise Dictionary gives as the first meaning "the quality or a state of being true or truthful". We can substitute "Is that true?" for "Is that the truth?". Notably, this question is most frequently asked when the speaker has reason to doubt the truthfulness of what he hears. The same applies to "real" and "reality": any sentence with

these words or "really" arouses instant suspicions that the speaker is begging the question.

While we do not need to define the scope of truth, we may look more closely at Vosper's definitions of "Truth" and "Reality". To be able to speak, the human mind does not process the totality of its experience but assesses that against what it already has in mind. We may amend our conclusions in the light of practical experience, but what we see depends on what we bring to it. At the quantum level, as described by Carlo Rovelli in "Helgoland", things cannot be accounted for "as they are": they exist only in relation to other things. The external world becomes as slippery as the words with which we try to describe it as our understanding of it develops. Finally, we may look at the word "God". In Sofia 135 (March 2020), I find that God may no longer be useful in the 21st Century and suggest that the word "god" may be useful to describe what gives meaning to life for each of us. Long ago, we had many gods. Progressively, they became obsolete as we came to understand the physical world better. Half the world manages without god altogether, but the idea of an external God has persisted. It is convenient for the powers that be as a control mechanism. Individually, we may find consolation in the idea of a "real reality", or we may be terrified by the way it is portrayed by some of its acolytes. Whatever view of it we take, it is we who decide how we are going to live in relation to our fellow humans and the rest of nature: that will determine what god means to us. By analogy with truth and beauty, we might retain god as a symbol of our various aspirations. I prefer to use the word love as signifying the affectionate and respectful relation we may have with our world. To adapt two lines from Psalm 100: "Know that it is love that makes the world go round: The life of love gives perfect freedom."

Michael Hell

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

What's in a Name?

“What shall we call ourselves?” “The Gathering – because that’s what we do: ‘gather’.”

And so the group was named. We weren’t sure what we were for, but we knew what we were against. We were fed up with a church life of restricted theology and unappetising devotions, and an institution shaped by the past but seemingly unwilling to be shaped by a post-Christendom reality. Inevitably the initial enthusiasm suffered from our lack of focus and, as life intervened with other commitments, the group dwindled over time.

A couple of years later: “Wow, I never thought I’d be having a conversation like this with a Methodist minister!” We were having a one-to-one conversation in his university workplace. As a student his academic mind had soon despatched the contribution of his Sunday School upbringing. He valued ideas and community; he was amazed now at the breadth of Christian faith possibilities open to him and knew others who would be interested. And so began another Gathering.

The first Gathering changed its name as it was scooped up into my pioneer ministry centred on Open House. It developed into a number of monthly activities from theological discussion and ‘table fellowship’ to spirituality and meditation. We have used PCN resources and other videos and podcasts to explore ideas; in another activity we have considered the application of faith to our daily life and times. Spirituality has included online retreats with contemporary monastic expressions, walking the labyrinth, and Taizé Prayer; silent meditation and seasonal reflections have also been included.

The new Gathering had just found a home when the pandemic arrived. It was about to branch out into a reflective outdoor type of event, enabling us to express the spiritual dimension of our lives. Up until that point our principle activity had been a theological discussion group, expanding horizons on the scope of religious faith. Plans are in hand, aiming at a wide audience with a focus on the environment, about which they are passionate.

Both Gatherings have been able to meet via Zoom during the past year.

Who is interested?

The starting point for the original Gathering was to gather with people who were still attending church or who had recently left. The initial interest for the new Gathering was mainly from people who had had little contact with church as adults. Interestingly, the original seems to find its natural level at about a dozen people engaging with one or more of the activities. The regular participants in the new one comprise half a dozen people with a fringe of people dipping in occasionally.



Judith Jessop is a PCN member and a Methodist minister based in Parson Cross, north Sheffield.

As I consider the current participants across the two gatherings I estimate that:

35% of them are still part of a mainstream church, 30% of them have left church in the last decade, 25% of them have had limited contact with church since early adulthood

10% of them have had varied faith-based journeys over the years.

What have I learned?

Buying a copy of the Living the Questions DVD course (home edition) has been a sound investment. Both Gatherings have seen it through to the end. In honour of that achievement, the original Gathering’s theological discussion group has been named the Cactus Group. Let aficionados of “Living the Questions” understand!

Each group is unique. Members decide what would be appropriate to do – maybe taking up suggestions from me – but ultimately shaped by them. Thus each has its distinctive character. Perhaps a useful metaphor would be to see myself as the leader of different music groups, enabling tuneful melody from musicians and singers expressing themselves through their particular styles of music.

Following on from that, leadership style is that of facilitator. I am not in charge! We follow a flat structure with me acting as organiser and host. I think there is recognition that someone needs to do the preparation work or else nothing will happen. I give my time and, for the original Gathering, my home as venue, but in a way that attempts to make it an offering, not a power and control issue. It does seem important to some that I am an ordained minister of the Church and therefore representative of some bigger entity.

There feels to be real choice in whether people are part of these Gatherings. Different people engage in differing amounts according to what is right for them. No demands are made on them; instead, their contributions of food, ideas, insights, poetry, experiences are welcomed. I hold the space and enable the event to happen, gently moving things along as required or requested.

For me there is great satisfaction in exploring a breadth of faith and depth of spirituality with people. I am being challenged to accept non faith-based insights and also experiences from a broader faith

perspective. I am journeying with people and learning with them rather than feeling like an expert with knowledge to impart.

What does the future hold?

I don't know! At the time of writing we are involved in conversations about how to move forwards post-lockdown. I shall continue to listen to the hopes and requests of the people involved in both Gatherings and put them alongside my dreams and availability. Developments may include an additional Gathering with other people in a different part of the city.

Changes to my ministry role allow for me to work with a "non-congregational mode of church" (a term coined by Steve Aisthorpe in *Rewilding the Church*). I think "Gathering(s)" would be a lot easier to say!

However, the serious point here is that our understanding of Church needs to grow beyond church-as-we-know-it. There is a significant number of people who have left church-as-we-know-it and do not plan to return plus others who are interested in a proper exploration of faith and spirituality but would not choose to do that in church-as-we-know-it. There is a role for safe spaces gently held or curated by those who eschew control. That role enables all-comers to be the sharers of their own story and experience and to take responsibility for their particular faith journey in grace-filled communities of pilgrims.

This is a very different model to church planting beloved of the church institution. It involves human listening and discernment plus a response to God's presence and prompting (and I appreciate that this may be a problematic concept for some readers). It does not assume that I have the answers or even the appropriate pathway for unsuspecting people. It is more about gathering together those people who welcome the opportunity to meet with others in common cause. I'm an advocate for face-to-face meetings but online gatherings work too.

There is an inherent fragility to this model of church. Gathering takes place because there are people who want to do so and I am able to facilitate it. However, one of my favourite phrases is "life intervenes" and so people move on because of other factors in their life or because their faith journey takes them elsewhere. Some activities stop and others may start. There is no guarantee that Gatherings will continue, but while they happen they are life-giving and a celebration of the fact that people matter in all their variety and experience of life.

Church-as-we-know it? Non-congregational church? I guess the future is both/and.

How do we connect with people? At least church buildings are visible!

Yet relationship building is so important.

Gathering – that's what we do.

Introducing

Tony Sánchez PCN Britain Trustee

I work as a counsellor / psychotherapist. Currently, I have a private practice and work part-time for an Employee Assistance Provider. In the past I've worked for a drug and alcohol service, a psychiatric residential home, and volunteered in a prison chaplaincy.



I was born in London to Spanish parents. They were not very regular churchgoers but they had a strong conservative Catholic faith. Around the age of 12 I identified as Christian and as gay. I spent the rest of my teenage years trying to reconcile these two identities. I got some resolution when I went to university to study Religious Studies at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne. It was a small eclectic department that is no longer there. It was like a little sister department to the one in Lancaster that also had a more critical approach to religion and theology. At university I also engaged with evangelical Christianity through the Christian Union but it was in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) that I was most active. It was the path of radical Christianity that I was to continue to follow.

After graduating I studied law. I worked various legal jobs, the longest in a Magistrates Court. After some years, frustrated with my lack of progress, I trained in psychotherapy as an alternative career.

At Newcastle I was lucky to have chaplains who were very open. After I left I tried engaging with a Roman Catholic Church but I found it too defensive so I stopped going. I didn't go to a church for a number of years until I came across St James' Church in Piccadilly, an Anglican church in Central London. Donald Reeves was the rector at the time. It operated the way I believed a church should be but never believed I would actually see. It practises a radical openness and hospitality. I've had some involvement with it for about 20 years, including being a Churchwarden for six years.

I discovered PCN when I was looking for a group where I could openly explore and develop my faith as I had started to do at SCM. The first group I went to was in Mill Hill. I then moved to Acton and started going to the group in Richmond. After a few years it was suggested that I become a trustee, it has been an interesting experience so far!

I enjoy reading, going to concerts, the theatre, cinema, as well as travelling. I also enjoy eating out and spending time with friends, as well as trying to be a better cook.

Silverwing / Writing for children

Silverwing by Kenneth Steven, Neem Tree Press

A review article on writing for children

Writing for children and young people is too often seen as easier than writing for adults – a view that accounts for the scores of stories submitted to publishers of children's books that disappear without trace. The blend of storyline, theme, language, tone, and empathy eludes many writers competent in other fields. As Scottish writer and poet Kenneth Steven says in his book *Writing Poetry*, to some extent writing for children is writing for the child in yourself. But that is not the whole story, as his books for children demonstrate.

Well known for picture books like *The Sea Mice and the Stars* (young mice go on a dangerous journey in search of the stars), *Dragon Kite* (a young boy's kite reconciles villagers to a lonely dragon), and *The Biggest Thing in the World* (a young polar bear goes exploring in a Dr Seuss-like story), Steven has shown how able he is both to tell a compelling story and enter the imagination of the child.

In a series of stories for children between seven and twelve, he has ably shifted gear with stories about young boys facing change and loss – *The Boy Who Wouldn't Swim* (his mother drowned, his father drinking to forget his loss, a credible story of growth and reconciliation), *February 29th* (mum rushed to hospital where she dies of cancer, the emotional fall-out on a young boy and his dad), and *The Santa Maria* (a story of the Scottish islands, of bullying and self-realisation through plausible adventure).

As the second of his 'Highland Trilogy' is called, *The Summer is Ended*, Steven captures that transition between childhood and adulthood, between the real and pragmatic world and the world of mystery and spirit. The ability to tell a story able to grip the attention and challenge the imagination of children and young people is elusive enough. He succeeds in yet a further challenge, which is that of trying to write stories for children and young people that reflect not just central human themes but also spiritual ones too.

His picture book *The Bearer of Gifts* is a good example of this – a Nativity story in disguise, about a Lapp wood-carver who sees a star in the night sky, travels to give a carved star to the Christ child, and returns to tell the story - not heavily 'religious' and beautifully illustrated by Lily Moon. With older children, Steven maintains this subtlety of touch by approaching topics like suffering and hope, loss and joy by embedding them within a readable story about convincing characters.

The story comes first, without there being an ulterior therapeutic message, or a hidden piety or evangelical intention as many readers find irritating



Stuart Hannabuss is a member of the Aberdeen PCN group, honorary chaplain at Aberdeen University, and an active musician.

in C. S. Lewis's 'Narnia' series. A broader point might be made here about religion and writing for children and young people. Much of the material available is heavily Bible and doctrine-centric, much coyly evasive of overt messaging or else employing oblique forms of sentimentality. There is an unmet need for plain-speaking books about liberal and progressive Christian beliefs for children and young people, even though publishers like Lion Hudson, Hodder, and others are so active in religious publishing generally.

With Kenneth Steven, too, we have an added dimension: he is a writer and poet keenly engaged with Christian beliefs and practices, as his poetry sequences centred around Iona and Columba reveal. His interest in Celtic Christianity shines through collections like *Sanctuary*, *A Song among the Stones*, and *The Spirit of the Hebrides*. For him, too, the natural world (as in the sequence *Making the Known World New*) is part of the wider glory of creation. So it is that, when we come to the book under review, *Silverwing*, a book for children between seven and twelve, we have many different critical strands in place.

On the surface, *Silverwing* is a story of a young boy who finds an injured goose unable to fly away with the autumn migration from Scotland to Iceland. Like the earlier story *Ghostwing* (Argyll Publishing, 2018), *Silverwing* works as a story on more than one level – his relationship with the bird, the way caring for it unlocks the tense sadness of his bereaved father, and how the boy faces up to the challenge of loss when the bird flies away in the spring. Both father and son miss the mother yet find hope again in spending time in the old house where she grew up as a girl, and finding from her diaries that she too was close to the birds.

Steven's work generally is multi-layered, as we see from stories like *West of the World* (about the last inhabitants of St Kilda) and from factual travel books like *Beneath the Ice: In Search of the Sami* (Saraband, 2016). He is fascinated by stories of marginal people, whether they are islanders, the Sami themselves, or his children and young people who face loneliness, bullying, and unnerving change in his fiction. The extent to which these (and such) stories are themselves parables in disguise is a matter of choice and debate. Like those of Jesus himself, the stories place themselves knowingly within the cultural and intellectual frame of their

readers (in Steven's case young readers and families today).

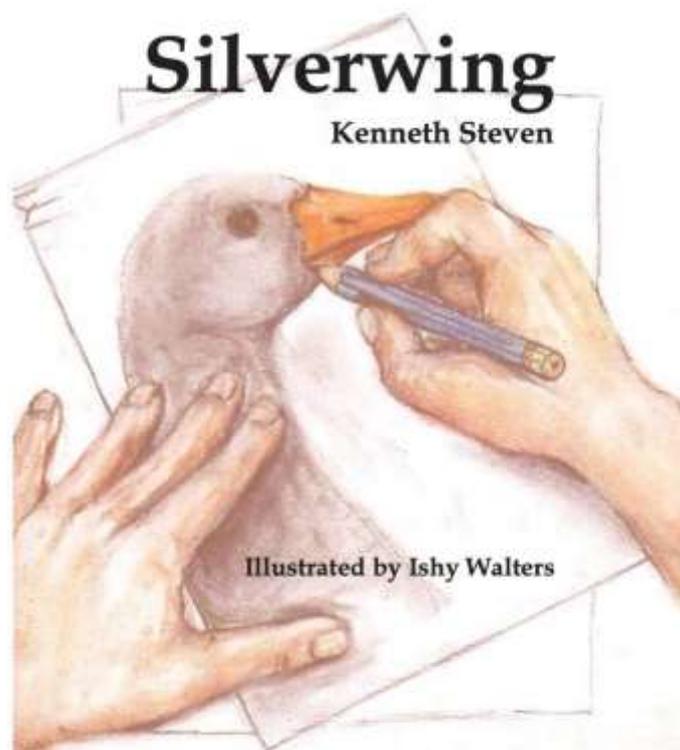
Each age, too, has its own style of story-telling where it comes to the spiritual, numinous or mystical. A recent story is *The Well of the North Wind* (SPCK, 2016) about a young boy's journey of faith during the time of Columba. Such a title is certain to evoke memories of *At the Back of the North Wind*, by the well-known nineteenth-century writer George MacDonald, whose writings so influenced C. S. Lewis. Both Steven's and MacDonald's stories hang between worlds – literal hard-nosed reality and the mysterious that is fed by (and arguably created by) the imagination. Science fiction, of course, notably Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* trilogy, still proves an able vehicle.

Both have an underlay of firmly-held Christian belief, and, while for us today, MacDonald seems fey and sentimental, Steven's is a voice (in prose and poetry) that does confidently speak to that sense of duality in our spiritual experience usually denied by most secularists. For some, the message is an agenda tantamount to indoctrination. We have the challenge, as progressive and liberal Christians, to work out where we stand on such issues, and how we want and feel we need to communicate our ideas about faith to children and young people.

Many of the central ideas in Christianity do not lend themselves easily to mediation and interpretation for children and young people; or at least without grotesque over-simplification. This is so, in fact, for most everyday men and women, who would admit, if they believed at all, that their understanding of atonement and grace, the redemptive role of the Cross and the divinity of the human Jesus is sketchy. Historical children's books dealt with this head on in a very literal and didactic way, often through catechistic dialogues or transparent parables like those of Mrs Trimmer, Christina Rossetti, or Mrs O F Walton.

The cultural frame for us is very different now, and, while most of us accept the importance of behaving morally to each other and knowing the difference between good and bad, the religious and theological assumptions of earlier ages no longer apply. This presents an immediate challenge to writers for children and young people, on top of the usual competitive climate of publishing and the book trade, and the wealth of fringe apocalyptic evangelical writing along the lines of 'Left Behind'. It comes as no surprise that atheists like Philip Pullman in his 'Dark Materials' series presents readers with an alternative universe where Christian (or mainstream religious) ideas are re-deployed in the serious moral analysis of choice, fate and consequentiality.

One way writers seem to square the circle is to deploy various forms of metaphor (the journey for the faith journey) or crisis (the trajectory from loss



through suffering to hope), and this seems to be the conventional way of 'dealing with faith issues' today. Perhaps this is Christianity-lite, perhaps a realistic compromise most likely to sell books, promote Christian ideals, and help shape a fair society. After all, children and young people are the citizens of tomorrow. Steven's work opens up a wide range of topical and controversial issues on which this discussion has tried to expand.

Worship In A Digital Age

2pm, Sat 2 October 2021 - Cost: £5

An online conference with CRConline.

The theme will be Worship in a Digital Age and the keynote speaker will be Stephen Burns, Professor of Liturgical and Practical Theology in the University of Divinity, Melbourne.

<https://crconline.org.uk/content/worship-digital-age-online-conference>

Hope for the Future?

8pm, Tue 19 October 2021 - Cost: FREE

Marcus Borg Memorial Online Conference

In association with the 2021 Carrs Lane Lectures in Radical Christian Faith, will bring together two leading and younger voices for progressive Christianity in the USA and Australia.

Deshna Shine, former Executive Director of ProgressiveChristianity.org & Progressing Spirit
Jeremy Greaves, assistant Bishop of Brisbane in the Anglican Church of Australia.

www.pcnbritain.org.uk

sarah.guilfoyle@pcnbritain.org.uk

The art of spiritual practice

'You create a path of your own by looking within yourself and listening to your soul, cultivating your own ways of experiencing the sacred and then practicing it. Practicing until you make it a song that sings you.' Sue Monk Kidd

Spiritual practice has always been at the heart of the world's great religious traditions. When Buddhists meditate, when Christians take communion, when Hindus perform puja, when Jews observe Shabbat, when Muslims perform Salat, when Native Americans cleanse themselves in a Sweat Lodge, when Sufis whirl, when Taoists perform Tai Chi movements, they are engaging in spiritual practice. Furthermore, spiritual practice is not only important to those of us who are religious. It also plays an important part in the lives of those of us who are forging our paths outside the walls of organised religion, who might prefer to see ourselves as 'spiritual but not religious' or 'spiritually independent'.

From a progressive perspective, any form of intentional activity that we undertake on a regular basis and that is designed to resource us in deepening our relationship with the Divine or with our innermost self or soul is a form of spiritual practice. This includes not only traditional religious practices such as prayer and fasting but also a whole range of other activities that we might not think of as being religious or spiritual in nature. It recognises that for many of us, ordinary, everyday actions and activities such as breathing, walking, running, singing, dancing, reading, writing, creating art, making music or communing with nature can become imbued with spiritual significance and can also play a part in our search for the Divine.

Spiritual practice and 'thin places'

In his book, 'The Heart of Christianity', the progressive Christian theologian, Marcus Borg spoke of spiritual practice as 'the heart of the matter'. In other words, he saw it as central to the Christian life. For Borg, spiritual practices are essentially about 'paying attention to God'. Their central purpose, he said, is to function as 'thin places'. In Celtic spirituality, thin places are those places where the visible, material world and the spiritual 'Otherworld' meet. Thin places are 'sacraments of the sacred' to use Borg's words. In other words, they are 'a means whereby the sacred becomes present to us'.

Thin places take us into sacred space. They awaken us to the presence of the sacred both within and around us. They lift the veil between the visible and the invisible. They help us to see the world



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through sacred eyes and in so doing, they remind us of who we are, why we are here and what we seek. They enable us to hear 'the still, small voice' of the Divine. Thin places can of course be geographical places such as the island of Iona for Celtic Christians, the river Ganges for Hindus, Jerusalem for Jews and Christians or Mecca for Muslims. But there are many kinds of thin places and not all of them are explicitly religious. For many of us, for example, nature is a thin space as are art, music, poetry, dance and even people. Silence and solitude can be thin places too as our inner stillness takes us into an encounter with the Sacred Mystery.

Spiritual practices function in the same way. They are essentially paths to the Sacred. Their primary purpose is to take us into 'thin places', to enable us to 'touch the sacred' as psychologist, David Elkins puts it. They wake us up, draw our attention, engage our emotions and invite us to notice the presence of the Sacred within and around us. The spiritual director and teacher, Jane Vennard (2014) believes that being awake to the fullness of life, to our innermost self and to the wonder of the present moment is our essential nature. She argues that though we may sometimes resist it, there is a force within us which seeks to draw us to those spiritual practices that have the capacity to wake us up. In so doing, they help us to cross the threshold between the mundane and the sacred, the secular and the spiritual. They create a sense of entering into another dimension of being. Philip Newell, a



Teacher of Celtic spirituality, calls this 'touching the Center' or 'reaching into the Presence'.

Furthermore, spiritual practices help us to hold onto our sense of the sacred in the midst of our busy, and often stressful lives. They keep us on the path, bring us back again and again to the Way. They enable us to sustain our relationship with the Sacred in the midst of the inevitable pressures and challenges of everyday life. They also nurture and nourish us spiritually. They enliven the spirit and feed the soul in ways that often seem beyond words.

The art of spiritual practice

In his book, 'Beyond Religion', Elkins outlines a number of key points that we need to keep in mind when we are making decisions about what shape our spiritual practice should take. As he sees it, the art of spiritual practice rests on the understanding that each of us is unique and therefore has different spiritual needs and preferences. What may be right for someone else may not, therefore be right for us. It also recognises that our spiritual needs will change as we move through life and that 'While the soul always needs to be fed, the food it prefers changes over time'. It calls us to be open-minded and adventurous in searching for the food we need rather than relying only on what is familiar, conventional or traditional as the particular food our soul may need is sometimes to be found 'in strange and unlikely places.' It reminds us that it is not enough simply to 'go through the motions', that we need to approach our practice both with an open heart and a genuine intention and desire to connect deeply with the Sacred. And finally, it urges us to let our soul be the guide, to listen to her promptings, to trust her intuitive knowing and wisdom to set us on the path that is right for us.

Vennard echoes this when she urges us to ask ourselves the question 'How am I called to practice?' She encourages us to examine our spiritual practice from time to time, asking ourselves which of the practices we engage in 'deaden and diminish' us and which of them help us to 'wake up fully aware and present to life as it is'. When we find ourselves drawn to practices that are foreign to us or that seem inconsistent with the beliefs and practices of our tradition or faith community, she encourages us not to dismiss them automatically but to be willing to experiment with them and to allow our own lived experience to measure them rather than relying on that of others.

The art of spiritual practice requires, therefore, that we approach it in an open-hearted and open-minded way, that we learn to rely on the inner voice of the soul in choosing our own unique path to the Sacred, that we dismiss neither the old nor the new as we search for the 'thin places' in our everyday lives and that we commit ourselves wholeheartedly to walking our own path, wherever it may lead.

Don't be afraid ...

Don't be afraid of the Fall

Praise for the leaves,
Russet and gold,
Crimson and bold,
Life affirming,
Life giving.

Don't be afraid of the Fall.

Glorious celebration!
Job well done,
Bountiful harvest;
Wind driven seeds dispersed,
Hedgerow dwellers fed,
Hibernator's larders stocked,
Landscape shaped,
Roots deepened,
Growth assured,
Planet breathes.

Praise for the leaves,
Russet and gold,
Crimson and bold,
Life affirming,
Life giving.

Don't be afraid of the Fall.

Sun blessed leaves transcend,
Softly falling,
Gently resting
Kissing earth tenderly.
Humus embraces,
Enfolding,
Absorbing,
Transforming,
Eternal reciprocity.

Praise for the leaves,
Russet and gold,
Crimson and bold,
Life affirming,
Life giving.

Don't be afraid of the Fall.

Meryl White

The Future of Progress

On the 4th July I was ordained to be a deacon within the Church of England. This is something I have felt called to since I came to the UK in 2013. After many hurdles and moving from Liverpool, to Romford, to Poole, to Durham, to Sunderland and now in Manchester, I can finally wear that so distinctive black shirt and white collar. Publicly proclaiming to people around me that I am a Christian and I work for the Church.

My desire for ministry is to help people know the love of Christ Jesus that transcends all understanding. Being brought up as a Jehovah's Witness instilled in me a relentless passion to proclaim truth to people. Since my radical conversion to Christianity in 2014, this has not changed. I truly believe Jesus is good news. I want people to know the person of Christ, not the judgemental, homophobic, sexist, make-believe Jesus many people believe, but rather the Jesus of human flesh.

Since moving away from theologically conservative circles, due to conviction, I have found a lack of eagerness and urgency from my fellow progressive sojourners. Now, I know that progressive is a loaded term. The term means different things to different people. I could be seen as following a more mainstream version of theological progressivism. I know many people disagree with each other even within a progressive theological circle. But instead of advancing our sacred faith, at times (at least within Great Britain) we live our faith on the defensive rather than the offensive. Maybe this is because there are many people who have been seriously hurt and burned by the Church, or by individuals representing the Church, so they feel the need to defend. But maybe there is another way? Maybe there is another way of being a progressive? Maybe being a progressive is not about fighting with conservatives but rather proclaiming the good news of Jesus as it has been revealed to you? Maybe instead of arguing about large conservative churches having lots of resources and planting more churches, we ought to use the knowledge we have through advertising and marketing to grow our



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congregations? Maybe, just maybe, we need to challenge ourselves to give sacrificially to this project that would equip the Church to bless more people? It is not because we believe we want to build a Church Empire, far from that, we believe and have experienced that Jesus gives life to the full.

It is easier to make a tweet and then sit in your lovely lounge chair with some port in your hand and a nice book in the other, than to radically change your life to advance the message you so desperately desire people to hear. It is fascinating that some of the most progressive Christians are so traditional and conservative with their framework in growing the Church. So make sure your websites are up-to-date and you have a good presence online. Seek advice from younger and diverse people. Have a good logo and design to appeal to people. As a millennial, we use our phones to book places and see the vibe of the restaurant, venue, and the public reviews. If the company has a website or logo that looks over ten years old or an outdated design, then we place a low value on the organization. Believing (rightly or wrongly) that the experience will not be worth our time because they did not put much time into the outward facing dynamics. Progressive Christians write well thought-out, researched and meaningful articles and speeches, but at times lack all initiative outside the confines of our theological discourse. If we refrain from the praxis, then our theological message will be lost. If we continue in this vein, then we truly are, as conservatives say, "mere limiting factors".

I believe the Holy Spirit is saying it is time to pass the baton to the next generation. Many senior leaders in the progressive Christian movement have reached an age and life stage where it is time to mentor younger more diverse people to take on the challenges of tomorrow. We should not allow Christian progressive traditions to only be for white western elites. We need to hear from progressives from the whole of the Church. And believe it or not 2/3's of the Church doesn't reside in North America and Europe. Letting go of control and power is difficult, but as an example from our Saviour Jesus Christ who emptied himself, we too must do that. We too must pass the baton to call afresh the gospel to this generation. And remember friends, a team that always plays defensively, instead of offensively, will always perish.



Lessons from Sunday Assembly

What can the Church learn from an “atheist congregation?”

In my work as a theologian I sit at the edges of church and cultural change. For a few years now I’ve been thinking about how these intersect, particularly with regards to a downturn in mainline church attendance and a (much debated) narrative of rising secularisation. Church rhetoric on these issues tends to focus on mission or expanding the congregation. In my research I approach this from a slightly different angle. I am interested in church leavers, but I want to know more about where they go, and how their perceptions of ultimate meaning are shaped outside a framework of God and faith.

I spent several years researching a world-wide movement of atheist “churches” called the Sunday Assembly. In this “church” congregants gather to hear short talks instead of sermons. Songs by Queen and Fleetwood Mac are sung, in place of hymns. There are poems instead of scriptural readings, and reflective pauses rather than prayers. Superficially, the Sunday Assembly looks quite a lot like Church. There are some differences, but I think the Church can learn a lot from this atheist congregation.

The Sunday Assembly (in its own words) seeks to extract “the best bits of church.” Their choices include communal singing, the celebration of major religious events and holidays, and hierarchical structures. Are these really the best parts of church? What about inclusion, social justice, and loving the most marginalised in our communities? In a theological sense, we might argue that the Sunday Assembly is not sacramental community, nor is it one in which worship is pointed towards the Triune God. It is not “church” in the ecclesiastical sense. Still, the existence of the Sunday Assembly confronts Christians and Church structures with the question, “what is distinctive about you?” What marks the Church as different to other social



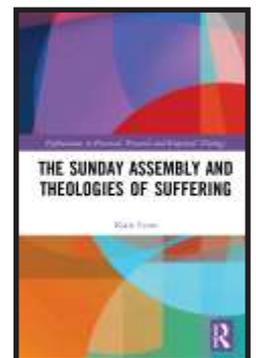
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gatherings? At the very least, this should encourage the Church to reflect on how its values and priorities are viewed externally.

During my time with Sunday Assembly congregations in London and Edinburgh, I noticed that both communities would talk about “celebrating life,” focusing on inspiring stories, narratives of winning, and overcoming life’s challenges. In placing such an emphasis on celebration these communities sometimes left little room to address wider societal issues. Global disasters, bereavement and death were all largely omitted from services and Assembly rhetoric. In some ways this is understandable; members of the Sunday Assembly are part of a new community. They have no shared history, founding documents, or central texts, and so there is no centralised guidance on what to do in the event of suffering. The church, on the other hand, has a wealth of resources which deal with suffering, including (but not limited to) the use of scripture and lament practices. Despite this, in further research I found that the Church doesn’t always use these resources well. It became clear to me that many of us, whether religious or not, have a problem confronting and talking about suffering.

More recently, the Assembly has experienced its own downturn in attendance. In my book, *The Sunday Assembly and Theologies of Suffering* (Routledge, 2020) I examine some of the issues that have led to this. These include a shortage of “people power,” differing views on atheism, competing against other Sunday morning commitments and a lack of shared identity. All are familiar issues for the Church.

There is a lot that the Church can learn from the Sunday Assembly. Is it concerning that the Church does not stand out against other social organisations? Is it somewhat hopeful that an “atheist church” experiences the same issues of congregational retention? My research points to the fact that people often leave church for reasons that are not directly related to faith and doctrine. My hope is that through further research, we will continue to raise and examine these questions, and add some necessary complexity to the cultural changes that the Church is living through.



Revisiting Progressive Christianity

Affirmation, Critique and Possibility

Is Progressive Christianity a Thing?

To discuss Progressive Christianity is complex. Depending on who you speak with you will find different views. In actuality Progressive Christianity cannot be defined as a single coherent entity. There are many Progressive Christianities.

When I was planning to do my sabbatical tour of the United States in 2018, a Google search for Progressive Churches showed everything from Neo-Pentecostal churches to Fundamentalist Churches that proclaimed 'progressive' as doing modern songs and technology, Evangelical churches focussing on Social Justice issues, main stream Liberal Protestant churches of every denomination, and Interfaith churches. Everyone considers themselves progressive if they are doing something they think is new and contemporary.

However, the Progressive Christianity that I wish to focus on is one that seems to be reflected in the various Progressive Christian Networks here in Australia and New Zealand and has particular links to two movements emerging in the United States. Many of us have heard of the Jesus Seminar, which is part of the WESTAR institute; a group of scholars from all over America, and at times other nations, participate in what is known as a Seminar, a period of research into a particular aspect of Christian Theology and Biblical Studies. The Jesus Seminar that many know of was a Search for the Historical Jesus. Subsequent research areas include 'Early Christianity' and 'God and the Human Future' seminars. The Progressive Christian movements in Australia, New Zealand and the UK have drawn largely on the works of the scholars and resources from these two projects emerging in the USA.

When it comes to understanding this progressive movement in the Western Christian tradition of these nations (USA, Australia, NZ and UK) we need to understand something of the history and movement of Christian Theology in the Western World. I would suggest that the terms Modernity, Liberal Theology, Historical and Literary Criticism, Enlightenment, Reason and Rationalism, Relativism, Neo-Orthodox, Postmodern and Pluralism, all have some connection to Progressive Christianity as it currently exists.

Rooted in Liberal Enlightenment Theology

My own observation, affirmation and critique of Progressive Christianity is that it has its origins in Liberal Protestantism that emerged in the Enlightenment period. Prior to the 17th Century, Christian Faith was expressed in creeds and confessions based on the authority of Scripture and Apostolic tradition. Orthodoxy required specific and



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certain affirmations contained in the doctrines and dogmas of the Church.

Throughout history there have been schisms and divisions in the Church based on doctrine and Apostolic authority. Though what occurred in the Enlightenment was not a schism of doctrine but a total shift in how a person knows and thinks theologically. Strongly influenced by the German intellectual movement, and finding its way to the UK in what was known as the modern theological movement, liberal theology sought to address the new age of Enlightenment seeking, a contemporary rethink of the relationship between religion and culture, religion and science, politics and the arts.

Within liberal/modern theology, no longer was faith based on an external authority. The only coherent world view that could claim any authority was one based on reason and rationality. It was a period of harmonising between science and religion, in which all things were to be critiqued as a pre-requisite for progress and knowing. Using the more intellectual methods of critical observation and analysis at work in the academic institutions, Liberal Theologians used Historical and Literary Criticism methods to analyse and critique the biblical texts to understand and interpret the scriptures afresh, free from the orthodox doctrines of the past.

One such quest in this time was the 'Quest for the Historical Jesus'. The 18th and 19th centuries were rich with many academic efforts into understanding the life of Jesus. Will the real Jesus please stand up! It is then no surprise that the Jesus Seminar of the later 20th and 21st century was a return to the search for the historical Jesus.

Liberal and modern theology and associated scholars dominated the Western European Christian landscape up until the 19th century. It was experienced as a time of freedom, of progress and emerging self-sufficiency and belief in human supremacy.

Here comes Neo-Orthodoxy...

In the late 19th and early 20th century there was a pendulum swing, as there is in most historical cultural movements. A reaction came in the form of a Neo-Orthodox movement arising from a dissatisfaction with the liberal movement and its understanding of truth. In the UK this was known as the Oxford Movement. The Neo-Orthodox

movement sought a return and conformity to a new form of doctrinal definition of truth and authority.

One of the key players in this movement was Karl Barth who had been raised in the hallowed halls of liberal theology. Barth's most famous, and unfinished work, is actually called "Church Dogmatics". Barth sought to reclaim what he saw was lost with the Liberalism of the Modern Theological movement. For Barth, the Bible was God's means of 'self-revelation' to humanity. God could not be discovered by humanity's own intuition, reason or experience, and that the revelation of God comes to humanity vertically – from above!

While there was the ongoing presence of a more liberal theological perspective in 19th century Australia, Neo-Orthodoxy became more influential in the hallowed halls of the theological institutions, and Karl Barth was certainly a central character. It is this Neo-Orthodoxy that the current Progressive Christian movement seems to be reacting against, but more out of a modern liberal approach: a continuation of the rational and reason theology of the enlightenment period.

Postmodernity – Back to the Future

Emerging in the later part of the 20th century was a way of intuiting things that came to be known as postmodernity. In many ways it shouldn't be called postmodern because it is not simply a progression of modernity. Rather what is called postmodernity is a reaction against the liberal / modern / enlightenment quest. The postmodern way of thinking can also be seen to exist in ancient cultures and philosophies from before the Christian era, particularly in Eastern Religions and philosophies.

The hallmarks of postmodernity are a distrust of absolute confidence in the objectivity of human knowledge and the autonomy and sufficiency of human reason. The Liberal Modern Theological enterprise sought a harmonising of religion and science and a progressive principle to an ultimate goal to which everything is pointed. Even in its current form, liberal theology tends to hold on to the Metaphysical idea that there has to be an ultimate origin to the foundation of everything.

Within postmodern thought there is no pure origin, or creator; everything is grounded in what preceded it. Nor is there a final consummation or goal to which experience can find its fulfilment. Even the notion that there are many paths to God is not postmodern. That is more relativist. There is not one God to which we are all on a path. Nor can God be whatever I believe God to be. For the postmodernist this is wishful thinking.

Postmodern Theology values diversity, but not as tolerance and relativism, but of necessity of engagement. Plurality rather than relativism is the



mark of postmodernity. Pluralism differs from Relativism in that it holds diverse and seemingly contradictory views in tension at the same time. It has the capacity to hold a multiplicity of truths as being correct simultaneously but also doesn't hold that individual and religious truths are localised in a cultural vacuum.

The difference between Relativism / Pluralism:

Relativism: Each one is entitled to one's opinion based on the cultural and communal context they have been raised in.

Values are grounded in the beliefs of the people that hold them. We all have our own truths based on our personal beliefs. All truths are equal.

Relativism doesn't hold for any belief to be grounded in some authority. Everyone is entitled to their beliefs and to believe they are equally true. Christian relativism says there are no absolute truths, only truths that a particular person or culture happens to believe. Relativists understand that people can have different views. Relativists though, say that there is no right answer, only what is right for me. The liberal belief in tolerance is an extension of relativism. Relativism acknowledges diversity and tolerates difference. I think the current Progressive Christian movement has at its foundation a link to this relativism of liberal / modern theology.

Pluralism: Truth is not merely subjective opinion or belief. Just because I think something to be true, doesn't mean it is objectively true. Pluralism doesn't dismiss someone for having a different view, or holding to that view. Nor is Pluralism a mashing together of beliefs to find a coherent unity or how religions and beliefs are similar. Rather it is the way in which ideas are debated – the plurality of ideas.

Pluralism moves beyond Relativism, in that while everyone has their own ideas, proposals, or countering argument, it requires the capacity to enter into debate about those plurality of ideas. Pluralism allows for the challenging of ideas. People have differing views and have the right to have them

heard, but Pluralism doesn't stop at having them heard and being tolerated. There is also the right to have those ideas challenged and explored. There may be more than one 'correct' moral framework or view or opinion that can be applied or used in life. But not all frameworks, opinions or views are equal.

Relativism tends to focus on individual preference and personal opinions. Pluralism says that it is possible to make judgements between various frameworks and judge some better than others, and our ideas are transformed. Here postmodern Christianity begins to find common realisation with other religions, especially Hinduism, that, of necessity, diversity is of God and actually applies to God. This is different to trying to find acceptable, tolerable, common, homogenous forms of belief! Not all roads lead to the one God! It is not what is similar that unites us but what is different.

Plurality of beliefs, cultures, religions, etc, invites a balance between what we are and know, with an openness and humility to what we aren't and what we don't know. The critique from postmodernists is that liberal modernity has created a spiritual wasteland in the West, but does not support a Neo-Orthodox return and conformity to doctrines and dogmas to address that wasteland. Postmodern Theology says any concept of God is inadequate and idolatrous. Postmodernity suggests that characterising God at all, even according to liberal thinking, is a temporary solution to the theological problem.

Possibilities lie in the Wisdom of the movement and flow of Moments and the passing of Moments – this is life...

The Modern world view, driven by liberal theology, can easily fall into a simple notion of optimism where the power to act ethically and morally in the world is associated with our over-insistence on the absolute nature of human goodness and human power to change. Progressive Christianity can at times be lured into this thinking.

Postmodernity challenges this notion as a critique, a naïve over-insistence on our absolute goodness. It offers a healthy scepticism and caution against the human quest for a homogenised (uniform) certitude based on our own achievements, goodness and power to change. Reason is not discarded, but it no longer reigns as the only way to "know." Rationalism alone does not work anymore in the postmodern worldview.

Progressive Christianity can respond to this new age, this postmodern critique, if it allows itself to go with the flow of postmodernity, rather than remain in the safety net of enlightenment liberal rationality... This requires both affirmation and critique, not just for Progressive Christianity, but for us as a Church as a whole.

Introducing

Jenny Jacobs

PCN Britain Trustee

My family are Jewish refugees from various corners of the globe. All arrived here escaping persecution - my maternal grandfather leaving Russia around 1909, my father, aged 9, leaving Berlin in 1938. My family history informs my attitude to refugees today.



I grew up in a secular Jewish household; religion often felt like a club from which I was excluded. Nevertheless, I was exposed to quite a bit of it and was always intrigued by the easy way so many of my schoolfellows wore their Anglicanism. I was told by my parents that if asked, I was "agnostic". You can imagine how that went down!

At university (York) I read Philosophy. Realising the traditional "proofs for the existence of God" proved nothing of the sort, I went through an atheist phase. But, underneath, I was searching.

Work and family life absorbed me for many years, but following my divorce I felt drawn back to the search. I started reading and came across Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan. I heard about PCN and the groups in Harrogate; once I joined a group, I never looked back. Being able to discuss all these issues which had occupied my mind for so long but about which I'd never been able to talk was wonderful and quickly became essential.

Whilst attending services at Ripon Cathedral I got involved enough to audit the Reader training course – all useful stuff. But then I heard about and visited the Unitarians and, from the very first service I attended, knew I'd found my spiritual home. Finally I'd found a whole group of people with very different backgrounds and different spiritual paths, but all travelling hopefully together in an atmosphere of safety, seeking and companionship. It actually felt like I'd stumbled across a PCN group at prayer.

For anyone who feels like a bit of a square peg in their current church – or for anyone who's given up on church altogether – you could do worse than check out your nearest Unitarian chapel.

Outside of the Unitarians, I'm a member of the Effective Altruism movement and am an active member of my local Green Party. I sing with Wetherby Choral Society. And I'm still working for the Ministry of Justice, where I sit as a valuer member in the First-Tier Tribunal.

Patrick and Davy

For better or worse, I'm three-quarters Irish – so the story of 'Patrick & Davy' appealed to me. The story connects up with other material which I've recently studied – not least from PCN. I'm also wary of 'institutional' or 'systematic' behaviours, under whatever label – and of course that's very topical just now. Patrick and Davy come from opposite, polarized political and religious systems – neither had met anyone from 'the other side'.

During the Christmas holiday I heard Richard Holloway, retired Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh, speak on BBC R4 about the parable of 'The Good Samaritan' – set in the opposed political and religious systems of Jews and Samaritans. The priest and the Levite (who didn't help), and the Samaritan (who did) all had similar religious codes which forbade contact with blood or with a corpse; but the Samaritan had a 'gut feeling' (says the Greek) which wiped out man-made religious codes. I'm not a classicist (and of course the Greek text is a translation of spoken Aramaic), but I asked a classicist friend about the meaning of this parable. It seems that 'concrete' language (rather than 'abstract') would be a feature of ancient Greek, and of Hebrew, and very likely of Aramaic. Our English versions of this text seem rather 'sanitized'!

So religious systems or codes have limits. Jews, Samaritans, and for that matter modern church members may have all the 'head knowledge' in the world about the Jewish 'Torah' (Law), or Scripture, or theological 'Tradition', but all of that is subject to the 'gut reaction' in the parable. Holloway speaks of the 'imaginative, explosive possibility of openness to all humans' versus religious 'certainty', which (I assume) gives a feeling of security but at a price.

Here Christ causes a revolution. He destroys our laws and introduces the law of God. At the end of the parable is the big question: which of the three characters proved to be a 'neighbour'? The answer in English is: the one who **showed** mercy. Interestingly, the Greek verb is '**did**' – it's a versatile verb, like the French *faire*. The English idiom is to 'show' or 'have' mercy, but it's 'do' in Greek – and in Irish, as it happens, with a similar verb, *déan*! 'Lord, have mercy' in Irish is '*a Thiarna, déan trocaire*' – literally 'Lord, do mercy'.

Patrick and Davy may well stay loyal to their traditions; but I think they **do** (and they **show**) something greater. Richard Holloway says that religious people should be wary, and ask: Does my religion make me cruel, or make me kind? Let me illustrate this with a couple of examples:

Ernie Rea is a BBC broadcaster and ordained Presbyterian minister from Northern Ireland. In an interview with the Belfast Telegraph he shares that



Kieran Fitzsimons is a member of the Newcastle group and is a semi-retired school music teacher, cathedral musician, and railway 'nerd'!

division and partisanship there "struck at the heart of what the Christian religion was all about". He gives individual examples of kindness and integrity, sometimes defying denominational rules, but also says elsewhere that the churches failed to exercise the ministry of reconciliation.

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/features/rev-ernie-rea-on-faith-my-roots-are-in-irish-presbyterianism-but-im-ashamed-of-its-direction-37796512.html>

John Bell in his 'Light in the Darkness' talk in February, said in the context of loss and grief, he'd like (if he could) to form a kind of task force for life after the present pandemic – people whose altruism is "greater than their political allegiance". He has also written that the church should be where "to put it theologically, water is thicker than blood", so "our horizons are extended and the potentials unrecognized by our biological family are identified and affirmed". Adding that this is "the radical identity which most churches have hardly glimpsed".

I think it's significant that Patrick and Davy are young men – and that so many young families are mixing together where a sport, without sectarian associations, makes all equal. I don't agree that 'only sport' can achieve this; but we can adopt competitive loyalty – 'mild paranoia' as the psycho people say – and if we are emotionally healthy, we can then drop it afterwards. As Davy says, we can bring 'baggage' into the arena; then we can take it away with us, or leave it behind.

In April more trouble broke out in NI, and without trying to diagnose the complex causes, I find that young people were involved deeply worrying. Perhaps it's significant that the Belfast Giants' games have been suspended? That healthy opportunity for temporary competitiveness is missing; has something ugly taken its place?

My colleague Martin Ashley, a musician and recently retired Professor of Education, has written – in the light of the terrible murder of Sarah Everard – about the need to educate young people (in particular boys) for emotional intelligence. By the time many grow into young men, he says: "The horse is miles down the road and the stable door is banging aimlessly in the wind on its broken hinge".

I hope 'Patrick & Davy' – indeed all the **made of stories** – will stimulate discussion and awareness. In matters of psychology and mental health, church attitudes are too often dated and ignorant. We owe better insights to the generations following us.

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

We have recently been thinking about what our new normal might be after restrictions have been eased. We have valued meeting by Zoom allowing friends from afar to join in, yet we know that there are others who are unable to. Zoom has also given us the opportunity to invite speakers to come along for discussions of their recent publications. It seems likely that we shall be adopting a hybrid approach including both online meetings and in-person gatherings, especially for more social purposes. Keep an eye on our web page for the topics and do get in touch. We shall continue to meet on the first Tue each month for the next quarter and will continue our exploration of what we can say in answer to non-church goers who ask us about what we think and do as progressive Christians.

Bolton Jim Hollyman
01204 456050 jim.hollyman@pcnbritain.org.uk

Because of Zoom, we continue to grow. We now have 20 members, spaced out over a fairly wide area, including north Wales! So, though we will be allowed to meet face-to-face, we are continuing to use Zoom. When we have sorted the technology, we may be able to meet together in a building with a zoom link for those further afield. Our meetings continue on the first Wed each month, 1.30pm - 3pm. We are now reading through and discussing Robin Meyers "Saving Jesus from the Church".

Bristol Kaitlyn Steele
07713 475673 kaitlyn.steele@pcnbritain.org.uk

Space for Soul has continued to meet by Zoom. We were delighted when our patron, Dave Tomlinson, joined us. He spoke about the future of church and the role we may play. We continue to have searching discussions including: 'Is it time to debunk the economic deficit myth', our place in creation, and listening to a sermon from Pastor Dawn. Journey groups are enjoying the freedom to meet face-to-face again.

Our book club is studying 'Pillars' by Rachel Pieh Jones and considering what we can learn about our faith from our Muslim siblings.

We plan to have a walk in Aug and hope to meet in person again at Eastville Old Library in Sept. It is great that we now have to find a way of accommodating our distant on-line friends who have joined us. Our publication, 'Awakening' can be viewed on our website.

Hampshire Martin Godfrey
023 8076 6312 martin.godfrey@pcnbritain.org.uk

In 2005 Martin Godfrey created the 'Hampshire Hub' network. A number of discussion groups started. The two long-lasting groups are the Southsea Group and the A27 Book Club. Since Mar 2020 it has been impossible to meet in the homes of members, and it is still not clear whether or when that will happen again in the future. But for the present a few members have been meeting via Zoom, monthly on a Mon morning. We enjoyed discussing the 5 PCN films, with their excellent talking points. We are now discussing topics led by members of the group, including articles from 'Reform' (URC magazine), some ideas of Jung, and reflections on the 'Jefferson Bible'. Future topics will include 'The wounded healer', and 'Zen Buddhism and Christianity'.

Newcastle Liz Temple
01207 505564 liz.temple@pcnbritain.org.uk

James Poore shared deep insights on spirituality in May. He said that spirituality 'sings in the senses, the body and the mind'. There was much to take away and reflect upon. We were pleased to meet in person in Jun, in the city centre at Brunswick Methodist Church. We are grateful to Ben Whitney for providing copies of his 'The Apostate's Creed' and for the helpful discussion notes. At our recent planning meeting we shared thoughts and ideas for Sept onwards, everyone contributing with a wealth of suggestions. They could involve other local communities or visiting speakers. We did decide to look at a range of publications including Richard Rohr's blog on the website and Inderjit Bhogal's book 'Hospitality and Sanctuary for All'. There will also be space for a social!

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

Our Jun and July meetings were 'back to basics' sessions talking about what we mean by the term 'God' and then looking at worship and prayer. Jackie reasoned that it's easy for us to talk about what we don't believe but much harder to be positive about what we do believe. There was lively debate at both sessions, looking at thoughts from Spong, Rohr, Borg, Vosper etc., leading as ever to no particular conclusion. We now look forward to greeting Simon Cross who will be leading our away day at Launde Abbey in Aug - our first chance to meet in person since early 2020; appropriate restrictions will be in place but it seems a momentous step for us. Then we hope to end our Zoom activities and start again at Oakham Methodist Church in Sept.

Richmond Alan Powell
020 8878 7355 alan.powell@pcnbritain.org.uk

Since Covid restrictions were eased in May, we have held two meetings in members' gardens. Useful as Zoom meetings were, we have really welcomed the opportunity to meet again in person. At our last meeting, we started a series of discussions based on Marcus Borg's "Days of Awe and Wonder". The next meeting is on Sat 11 Sept.

Stirling Jon Cape
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It seems a long time since we last met in person, squeezed, in a way that now feels unnatural, into a small room in Stirling Methodist Church to discuss the sabbatical report of a tour of progressive churches in the USA from Greg Crowe. As Covid restrictions begin to ease, we are now hopeful of in-person meetings beginning again in Sept. Over the intervening 18 months we have kept together with various Zoom-based meetings sharing favourite (and unfavourite!) hymns, a poetry evening, listening to a Marcus Borg sermon, and savouring the PCN film series. We have enjoyed the opportunity to share meetings with other local groups and hope this practice might continue in the future.

Teesside Peter Brophy
01609 761182 peter@brophy.org.uk

We were saddened to lose two long-serving members: our coordinator, Michael Wright and Kitty Grove-

Stephenson. We held a silence to remember them at our last meeting. We meet as a book club and we continue to work our way through Marcus Borg's "Days of Awe and Wonder", a compilation of some of his most noteworthy sermons and essays, edited by his wife, Marianne. At present our meetings are held on Zoom, though we hope to resume face-to-face (but suitably distanced!) soon. We meet on the second Tue of the month at the Friends' Meeting House in Great Ayton.

Tunbridge Wells Sandy Elsworth
radpilgrims@gmail.com

Our group, founded in 2005, consists of about 20 people. Having contact on Zoom has not only kept us going, but has helped us to grow together. We "meet" every Thurs morning for a chat. Sometime there's a theme but quite often someone will raise an issue and the group just gets to work. We have varying session leaders and sometimes none; but there is much listening, fun, awareness, storytelling and learning. We share books we have read such as Cynthia Bourgeault's "Wisdom of Transformation" and are getting into the implications of Quantum Theory! In addition, we have our regular Tue monthly Zoom evening, which does have a leader with a theme and a sense of continuity. Topics have included the webinar with Julian Baggini, and discussing reports from members who have "attended" other video conferences and events including Sam Wells (Vicar of St Martin's in the Fields) interviewing Lucy Winkett, (Rector of St James Piccadilly) and the PCN St Albans Zoom with the indefatigably radical Church of Christ pastor, Rev Dawn Hutchings from Toronto, Canada. Future events being considered include "The Apostate's Creed", thanks to the generosity of Ben Whitney. We are looking forward to the webinar with the indispensable John Dominic Crossan. And anything else that comes our way. I hope we might continue to share this wonderful virtual experience, even after lockdown ends.

West Yorks Michael Burn
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Our latest Zoom meeting on 14 Jun was led by Bob Young on the topic of "What Is A Progressive Church For?", referring to Adrian Alker's "Is A Radical Church Possible?" After our summer break the meeting on 20

Sept will discuss Ben Whitney's "The Apostate's Creed". Zoom enables us to welcome people from outside our normal catchment area.

It may be possible to meet in person by Sept in which case we hope to be able to meet in Honley and also over Zoom for those living too far away.

Memoriam

John Hetherington



John died in July at Hillcroft Care Home where he had been living since Jun 2019. John was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease in 2015 and was a shining example of how to live well with dementia until his behaviour became too challenging for him to live at home. He was still very active physically before lockdown, but by the time his wife was allowed to visit again his brain had stopped talking to his legs and things deteriorated more quickly. John was in at the beginning of PCN, being on the management committee at our launch in 2003. John was active in promoting a group in the Kendal area and was responsible for the northern launch of PCN at Kendal URC. John represented Free to Believe on the Together in Hope planning group which produced the booklets. In John's Free to Believe booklet, Reshaping Christianity: Mysticism, Spirituality and Global Faith he writes: 'The Australian, David Tacey has written "Religion taught me to find God in heaven; aboriginality has shown me how to find the sacred on earth." I have made this journey too, from a mainstream Congregational upbringing in Lancashire, to conversion through the Manchester University Christian Union, eventually moving to post-evangelical liberalism while training as a non-stipendiary minister in the URC on a diocesan training course. This booklet arises from my desire to share this process of ongoing change – and my excitement at where the journey might take us.'

Michael Wright



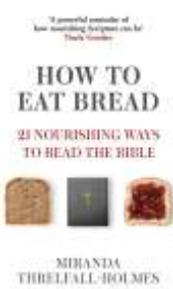
(On Saltburn Pier - he faced terminal illness with inspiring realism, hope and openness.)

Quakers on Teesside and members of other denominations and faith groups have been saddened by the death of Michael Wright. For very many years he has been a great networker and community facilitator. His own faith journey was long, testing and subtle, from a non-believing family, via CofE ministry to the Quaker movement, where he settled, fortunately for us. His departure from the CofE was precipitated by his willingness to lead funeral services for members of other denominations and non-believers. He felt called to continue this, in the face of hierarchical opposition, which eventually led to a complete breach with the CofE. His own experience enabled him to engage with the similar and different journeys of others with respect, understanding and benevolence. Never reluctant to accept responsibility, he was Clerk of Middlesbrough Quaker Meeting until just before his death. His contribution to this Meeting, as well as his friendship, will be sorely missed. He is remembered with deep respect and affection, (and also some wry smiles at his energetic efforts to engage all of us in more activity for good causes, from Interfaith dialogue to Friends of the Earth and Extinction Rebellion!) Luckily his unfailing sense of humour easily coped with some wary responses. I am a member of the Ecumenical Book Club that he founded and had led for many years. We are glad that we are able to continue with this, whilst missing his contribution very much. He has left us a legacy, in the form of his recent book, Jesus Today: A Quaker Perspective, which is online. Even a couple of sentences from it are characteristic of his work and values. I leave the last word to him, 'There are different ways of being Quaker. We cherish diversity in unity. What I have described here is one way of being a follower of Jesus of Nazareth.'

Kate Allen
Sept 2021 | 19

Reviews

How to eat bread by Miranda Threlfall-Holmes, Hodder



If you have a hunger to read the Bible, to savour some of its hidden depths and to feast on its diverse menu, then this is for you. The author describes 21 different practices

for reading the Bible intelligently, spiritually, and faithfully without needing a theology degree or being versed in Ancient Greek or Hebrew. Miranda is a CofE priest; she wrote the book, 'in the hope that it will fundamentally change your approach to reading the Bible'. Having been asked for Bible study book recommendations she noted a gap between reading notes and scholarly texts – this book aims to fill the gap. The sections provide Bible reading practices from the Bible itself, church traditions and more current ways ranging from: meditating on the law, Ignatian, Augustinian to Messy Church and Godly play.

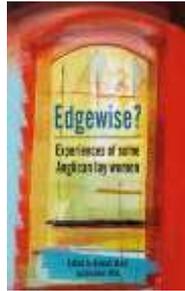
The writer likens these to using recipes from the store cupboard, Grandmothers recipe book, and molecular gastronomy. Personally, I found this extra, illustrative layer of presentation unnecessary. However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The writer describes how these practices have been applied to local church situations and have made the Scripture more accessible to many people at different levels. Suitable for individuals it would also be good for small group use. The practices need to be tried and tested; no one will like them all but perhaps a family favourite will be discovered. It's not recommended to read at one sitting; it is a smorgasbord to be returned to time and time again. It is an invitation to 'taste and see' - I wish you 'bon appétit'!

Meryl White

Edgewise? edited by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, DLT

This collection of personal essays looks back over fifty years of engagement with ministry and pastoral life, highlighting the landmarks of such change – women's liberation, feminism and feminist theology, and the journey towards two contested goals: the

ordination of women, and the full recognition of equality between ordained and lay members of church. It is now a mixed picture, from full inclusion to firmly-held



tradition, feeding through to liturgical choice and church policy and leadership.

The core essays make their position clear: all too often marginalised as women in

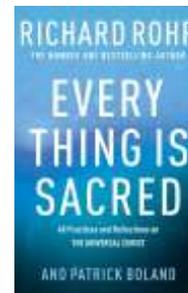
organisational structures that privilege men and the ordained (traditionally the same thing), searching (sometimes vocally) to make themselves heard in the interests of change. 'Lay' and 'ordained' denies parity of esteem and unfairly excludes women, in a church professing to be as inclusive as Jesus himself is to men and women of all types in the gospels. They describe how networks, like the Lay Women's Group, provided companionship and support. The tone of the collection is measured and persuasive, accepting the transformative role of social change and feminist ideology and making it clear, without rant or rancour, that there is more to do. One irony is that, by agreeing to women's ordination in the 1990s, the Anglican communion (by no means all of it, of course) institutionalised much of the 'feminist' energy, and by embedding feminist theology in training and education, took the alleged sting from it.

The real strength of the collection lies in the calm and reflective tone of the essays as they discuss their personal and bitter-sweet life 'in' and 'with' the church, with much mixing with non-church and trying prayerfully to understand and encourage open-minded diversity of views. Two essays describe real church life where this seems to work and where church is 'who we are' rather than 'where we are'.

Stuart Hannabuss

Everything is Sacred by Richard Rohr and Patrick Borland, SPCK

Rohr is a Franciscan and author of the daily email from his Centre for Action and Contemplation. Borland is a psychotherapist and member of the Centre. Richard's recent book 'The Universal Christ', explores the idea of 'The Christ' present in the earthly Jesus and also in all creation



as a part of God's unfolding work. 'Everything is Sacred' is an exploration of the main themes in the 'Universal Christ'. It takes the format of forty brief essays, each followed by a

'Reflection' and an invitation to contemplation and a personal journal writing exercise on a brief extract from 'The Universal Christ'. I offer the example of the very first one from p.241 of 'The Universal Christ' which reads: 'Your worldview is not what you look at. It is what you look out from or look through'. The section goes on to outline four fundamental world views which reflect our thinking and experience. They are The Material, which sees the visible world as 'reality'. The Spiritual, which considers the inner or 'spiritual' self as the seat of reality. The Priestly, which looks to structural practices to link us with the visible and invisible worlds and The Incarnational. They each have their role and their time in our lives but the fourth, The Incarnational, brings all four world views together and allows us to connect with the visible and the invisible. We are asked throughout to consider where we are, and have been, on this spectrum. Contemplation, Rohr tells us, allows us to see things in their wholeness and to take each moment more seriously and respectfully. This book is an accessible and exciting tool in that process. I am so glad to have read it and recommend it warmly.

Chris King

The Joy of Caring by Miriam Subirana, O Books



At a time when there is concern for individual well-being as a result of the pressures brought about by the pandemic, this is a timely book as it is about caring for ourselves and for

others and how to do this. Miriam writes that this is essential 'if we are to live with dignity and reach wholeness'. Yet this is not about looking after number one. Rather, it seeks to show that by ensuring that one's life is 'whole' one is, as a result, better able to give and serve others. Our relationships with

ourselves and one another are key to creating a healthy and harmonious planet. To see the relevance of this, consider how much conflict arises, both individually and globally, where those relationships break down. It is our relationship with our self that determines how we relate to others. So if we want to live in harmony with others we need to look at ourselves. Putting that relationship in balance and seeking to live in the present are issues that are addressed. Is our inner dialogue healthy? Are we seeking happiness or contentment outside our self, in some illusory nirvana? As Miriam says for many 'We live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction'. This is driven to an extent by the cultures we live in, the constant desire for possessions, power, importance, status. The book suggests ways to help one recognise these pitfalls and provides guidance on how to re-orient oneself into a more caring, whole, human being. She describes our vital core and the importance of living within it rather than allow this to be covered by negative emotions. Key to finding one's inner space is the use of silence and meditation to better connect with oneself and others. Miriam addresses important issues and this is a book that warrants careful reading in order to appreciate its wisdom and depth.

John Hamilton

The Space Between, Mark Bradford, BRF



There are few of us who have not, albeit to varying degrees, experienced what Mark describes as 'the space between'. It can describe those times of transition, when we have left a time of peace and order and we are waiting, 'in the wilderness' for a new phase, whatever it might bring, to begin. The book takes us through such times, which can feel like exile, like being at the heart of a storm or being in what might be described as 'the pit'; a time of bereavement, loss or despair. The space between is often a place of pain and disorientation but the experience, the author argues, provides a unique opportunity to reimagine our lives. He writes as a committed Christian and aims to explore ways in which God works in

and through the lows and the times of change and uncertainty as much as when life goes at a steady or joyful pace. Throughout the thoughtful text exploring the theme, Mark includes a number of prayers, poems, exposition of biblical messages, especially the Psalms and the Gospels, as well as stories from the lives of saints and 'contemporary saints' - people of courage and growth. One of his many secular saints is Nelson Mandela whose transformation took place during his own personal 'space between' in prison. These stories add force to his argument that, in his view, God works uniquely in and through these disturbing experiences to bring about transformation. Each chapter ends with a number of questions for reflection which makes this an excellent tool for a study group. The book throughout is a rich resource of Christian thinking and teaching as well as a thoughtful and often moving, journey through difficult terrains for any reader.

Christine King

**New Horizons by Jon Robinson
murrell.robinson@protonmail.com**



This short booklet offers texts for an inclusive Eucharistic liturgy. Robinson's aim is to find a form for Eucharistic worship which

can be used by those outside mainstream Christianity as a spiritual practice to give meaning to their lives. He seeks to provide a 'more inclusive understanding of the meaning of faith' which 'respects other spiritual traditions'. I find such an aim unreachable. All Eucharists have an essentially Christian basis; attempts to make them open to people of different spiritual traditions mean they have to move away from this base. My copy of the Eucharist of The Liberal Catholic Church, a group with a theosophical basis, shows how this was attempted more than a century ago. That church has survived, but only as two small faith groups with a precarious place on the edge; their attempt to appeal to those who were aware of their oneness with all creation did not succeed. Robinson's liturgy, however, is

actually based on Christian liturgical tradition, and does offer something more satisfactory. It includes the cosmic themes found in the letters to Ephesus and Colossae and developed more fully in Richard Rohr's The Universal Christ. This liturgy needs a presider prepared to connect with those who join the service and find ways to include what they bring to the celebration. It provides worship which recognises that we live in an interconnected world and universe. Using symbols of earth, air, fire and water it marks our oneness with the natural world. Giving space for meditation it makes silence an essential part.

His aim, to rediscover 'the inner spiritual meaning of the eucharist', so that it 'connects with us and the world we live in', is worked out with love and care. This liturgy has been used in Oxford diocese, with apparent success in engaging the hearts and minds of those who find traditional worship too narrow. The booklet, with its suggested intercessions and other prayers, will be a useful resource for many.

Peter Varney

Outlove, by Julie Rodgers, Broadleaf Books



In view of pending legislation to ban conversion therapy, the publication of this book is very timely. Julie Rodgers' journey from self-hate to joyful self-acceptance, and

from being a prominent itinerant speaker for the world's biggest 'ex-gay' movement to playing a major part in closing it down, makes a dramatic and deeply moving story. The author writes very honestly about the joys and sorrows of her life, her psychological problems including self-harm and bulimia, and her guilt about the harm she did to others through her mistaken beliefs. She relates the swings of the pendulum between acceptance and guilt. She exposes the way in which fundamentalism encourages its followers to distrust their feelings and experiences in order to control their minds, and the political calculation behind the pious language of many evangelical leaders. While showing the basically cruel, oppressive and anti-Christian nature

of anti-gay fundamentalism, she has a very forgiving and compassionate attitude. She is ready to see the best in those who have caused her the most pain. 'It wasn't that evangelicalism consisted of bad people', she says, 'it was that a broken system made good people behave in ways that caused great suffering for people who were different from them.' (p.155)

This book could be a lifeline to people who, like the author once was, are looking for a way to change. Sadly, the rest of its potential readership are likely to be divided into two camps – those who won't touch it with a bargepole, and those who will think they already know they will agree with it. To the latter I would say: you may well learn some history you were unaware of, and in any case it's a thoroughly good read – as gripping and heart-warming as any novel.

Ray Vincent

'Outlove' subtitled 'A Queer Christian Survival Story' details life as a woman who identified as lesbian in a conservative evangelical family and church. Julie describes how this affected her relationships with her family and how she struggled to reconcile her sexuality with her faith. This led to involvement in an ex-gay movement.

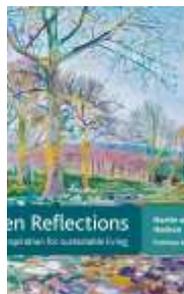
She was enrolled in an evangelical movement to help her become straight and lead her away from a fully lesbian lifestyle. She details her involvement with 'Exodus' a movement dedicated to "freedom from homosexuality" where she became active, then questioned its operation, and finally became a major contributor to its downfall. She talks of other queer Christians she met along the way who became damaged in their struggle to conform to a faith that would not accept their authentic sexual expression. She herself suffered from difficulties in her mental health, including self-harm. The book details the distorted preconceptions this organisation promoted about queer people. As she questioned the movement's theology on queer people she also came to realise how evangelical churches treated other people who are marginalised. She starts to see Jesus as someone who favoured those without power and discovers the importance of bringing her body into theology.

Eventually, Julie marries another

woman. However, she does not want the book to be seen as a happy ever after story. Her struggles have left scars and she has to continue to work at healing them. Given the current debates on banning Conversion therapy this is a really important book on the damaging effect it can have on queer people. It's written in a very readable open style and at times painfully honest. We have come some distance in being able to affirm sexuality in our Christian faith but churches still have some way to go in being able to do that fully.

Tony Sánchez

Green Reflections by Martin & Margot Hodson, BRF



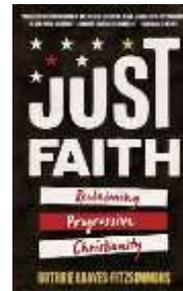
Martin and Margot Hodson bring together scientific and theological wisdom to offer 62 biblical reflections. Clearly laid out and accompanied by pictures by Martin Beek, it is an

attractive guide for church groups, pastors, and young people. This book celebrates the 'world charged with the grandeur of God' (from the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins). The book alerts and reminds us of the fragility of the natural world and need for stewardship and responsibility. They divide things into six categories (each made up of passages, commentaries, and prayers, each a double-page opening): Biblical guidelines, sharing resources, trees and weather and landscapes, and rounding up with Christian reflections on environmental issues. There are times when the metaphors are pushed to the limit (the almond tree stays active through time and so should we as we get older; rain falls on the desert, a symbol of hope if you suffer loss; rivers keep moving, so don't look back with regret). But most reflections make good sense as environmental theology, and are topical and grounded in good practical sense (like food banks, global debt, hospitality, what churches can do). Throughout quotations from OT and NT are used to make the point. We can trust in God yet we only have ourselves to blame if we don't step up to the plate. God's gift of creation is under

threat, and Green Reflections is a timely resource offering hope and challenge. 'This century is going to be tough', they sign off.

Stuart Hannabuss

Just Faith by Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, Broadleaf books



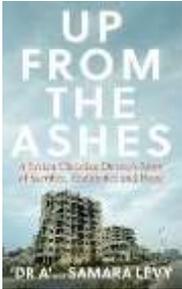
Emerging from the shadow of the Trump presidency, this is both a personal account from an LGBTQ perspective as well as something of a call to action. While it is entirely focused

on the USA, readers from elsewhere might find it interesting for two reasons: firstly, it offers an insight into the current deep divisions within American society; secondly, it wrestles with the divide between evangelical and progressive Christianity. Guthrie shows that Christianity in the USA actually "looks very different from the current state of our public imagination." To many outsiders, Christianity has become synonymous with right-wing nationalism, militarism and deep conservatism evidenced by the 81% of 'Christians' who voted for Trump. According to Guthrie, these evangelical fundamentalists have hijacked Christianity to the extent that many moderate and progressive Christians find it difficult to represent themselves publicly as Christians because of the dominant association of the term. He claims that statistics suggest that the number of progressive Christians is nearly double that of conservatives, but acknowledges that the latter have been far more successful in capturing public attention and attracting new followers. It is time, he writes, for progressive Christians from many different denominations and none to work together to "take our faith to the public square" and "preach the gospel of radical inclusion, an equitable economy, setting the oppressed free and tearing down every border and boundary that separates us." Progressive Christians need to attract more media attention and become involved in political organisations that produce voting guides and recommend candidates. They need to give active counter-witness to "our capitalist and military-obsessed society" that "blesses

might, domination, greed, selfishness and toxic masculinity.” Unlike the Christian nationalism of the right, progressive Christianity is not political as such, but it needs to fulfil its role as the state conscience.

Alastair Smurthwaite

Up from the Ashes by ‘Dr A’ with Samara Levy, Hodder



Many medics left Syria when the war started in 2011 and have not gone back. Remaining anonymous was and is necessary for Dr A for political and religious reasons.

This allows him to describe the challenges of providing emergency care in hospitals themselves in danger from bombs and the jihadist state. For him it also involves the loss of home and family, forced displacement or emigration, bribes, manipulation and betrayal in the face of the persecution of Christians by the Muslim authorities in Syria. Rupert Shortt’s *Christianophobia: a faith under attack* (Rider) discussed this well, and the literature on Christians in China is extensive and worth comparing. Dr A’s approach is personal, albeit impressionistic rather than politically astute.

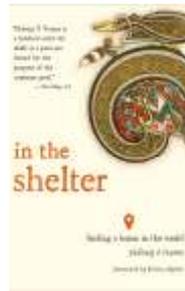
The authors are both evangelical Christians, and as such restrict themselves to the personal narrative of faith in Jesus and its ability to help believers face anything with God’s help. With their focus so much on the example of Jesus and on God’s promise, both ignore the complexity of the politics of war and the diversity of players like Christian Aid – it is ‘that sort of book’.

A hint of something subtler comes in a brief mention of different scriptural and pastoral interpretations among Syrian Christians and those in the West. All this suggests this is more a series of episodes and memories rather than a coherent book. Its repetitive preachiness merits severe editing and it adds very little to the literature in its field.

Stuart Hannabuss

In the Shelter by Pádraig Ó Tuama, Broadleaf Books

To read ‘In the Shelter’ is like taking a long, companionable, meandering stroll through the rich, varied landscapes of the author’s life. The reader is invited to view the scenes



through the eyes of a poet, hear and agonise with the deep resonances of faith, feel with the heart of Celtic spirituality, and reflect with the wisdom of a peacemaker. Life

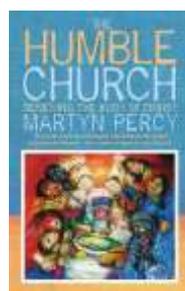
encounters are greeted with a ‘Hello’; acknowledgments and making acquaintances are essential to the experience.

Pádraig Ó Tuama is an Irish poet, theologian and conflict mediator. He has been the leader of the Corrymeela Community, Ireland’s oldest peace and reconciliation community. Theologian in Residence for the On Being community - he is also the host of Poetry Unbound.

Neither memoir, autobiography, poetry, Biblical commentary nor story alone, yet including all, the author himself observes that the book is not neatly categorized. He favours the description of, ‘a long letter about how I’ve been saved by lines from books and poetry: sometimes holy, sometimes not.’ I found the immersion in the power of words and language compelling, from the curiosity of poems and stories shared to the exploration of sacred texts, the journey of self-discovery to the understanding of another. The snippets of the Irish Gaelic language add a delicious flavour. However, those wanting a structured argument or a direct route from A to B will be disappointed. This is a gentle yet provocative read about finding belonging, acceptance and home; discovering shelter in the company of others.

Meryl White

The Humble Church by Martyn Percy, Canterbury Press



The Venerable Martyn Percy is a distinguished theologian and controversial senior Anglican cleric who is a harsh critic of the institutional church. This is evident in this book

which, we are told, is underpinned by the assumption that “the church is consumed with its own pride and reputation” and needs to “recover its identity and revitalise its mission by

drawing on the example Jesus set us by associating with the downtrodden and outcasts of his day”. The church, he argues, should turn itself upside down and start from nothing – no plans, targets and grand plans – and put God and the needs of the world before the church. He has little time for the church’s present emphasis on growth which, he suggests, can have the opposite effect and empty churches. In looking to the future, which he terms AC [i.e., after COVID], he considers that the social challenges and changes will be profound. In the case of the challenges facing the church, the author examines some of the research on church membership and attendance. He points to the growing interest in spirituality pushing traditional religion further into the background. He urges the church to listen and learn. He then goes on to consider other challenges especially those relating to the church’s record on sexuality, gender and equality where the church has appeared resistant to change. On the painful matter of child sexual abuse, he considers that the appointment of safeguarding officers in each diocese responsible to its bishop is not good enough. He argues for the establishment of a fully independent regulatory authority to deal with such issues. This is something with which we can all agree and urge that its remit should be extended beyond abuse and cover issues of racism and discrimination and all matters of professional misconduct by clergy and others within the church. In his discussion on “Mission” the author points out that the church does not seek to find out why people do not join commenting “if you do not research the reasons for your lack of footfall, it is no use blaming the stay-away consumers”. The underlying message of this book is that the church needs a new purpose and direction which is not based on survival or preserving its status but one that is rooted in humility and service to others. There is much in this book for the reader to think about and, to encourage debate, a Study Guide is provided for groups and individuals. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the text is enriched by the inclusion of poems many of which have been written by his wife Rev Emma Percy.

Nigel Bastin

COME INHERIT THE KINGDOM
YOU HAVE OUR BLESSING

FOR I WAS CURIOUS
& YOU ENCOURAGED MY QUESTIONING



FOR I WAS COMING OUT
& YOU STILL LOVED ME



FOR I WAS CALLED "BUTCH" "FAG" "HOMO" "TRANNNY" & YOU CALLED ME BY MY CHOSEN NAME



FOR I WAS KICKED OUT
& YOU INVITED ME IN



FOR I WAS ASSAULTED
& TOGETHER WE DEMANDED JUSTICE



FOR I THOUGHT I WAS ALONE & YOU STOOD WITH ME

