

Progressive Voices



**"The Christian life is not about
pleasing God the
finger-shaker and judge.**

**It is not about believing now
or being good now for the
sake of heaven later.**

**It is about entering a
relationship in the present
that begins to change
everything now.**

**Spirituality is about this
process: the opening of the
heart to the God who is
already here."**

Marcus J. Borg

11th March 1942 – 21st January 2015



Sept 2015

Letter from the Chair

It is a privilege to have been elected to chair the trusteeship of PCN Britain and I thank my fellow trustees for their confidence in me. I particularly want to pay tribute to Angela as she steps down from this role, and also to Andy and Sarah, our administrative staff, who hold together our whole organisation so brilliantly!

I look back with affection to the formative years of PCN Britain, when after initial meetings in Leeds and other places, we held an important launching of the network in St Faiths Church, North Dulwich under Hugh Dawes' impressive leadership. In the past twelve years our network of groups and our membership has grown considerably. We can look back on many an inspiring conference, on yearly retreats for members, on an increasing number of regional groups, on a growing working relationship with sister organisations, on the success of the Together in Hope publications and on an ever changing website, full of useful information and resources.

Looking ahead we have a vision to realize, encompassed in our eight points guidepost and listed as half a dozen objectives in the March edition of Progressive Voices. In that March summary of our strategy I said then and repeat now, that so much of our endeavour has been influenced by the writings of Marcus Borg and I am delighted that this edition of Progressive Voices pays due honour to him. Elsewhere in this edition I invite all our members to come together for a thanksgiving day next May, when the work of Marcus will be held in honour as we are led in conference by Diana Butler Bass, a writer and broadcaster who has been described by Marcus Borg as 'one of our foremost commentators on twenty first century Christianity'.

The strap line on our website is an attempt to summarise what PCN is about :

Members of the Progressive Christianity Network seek a credible and inclusive way to follow Jesus. We are unafraid to question traditional church teaching; we value contemporary thought and recent biblical understanding. We do not offer a set of answers but we invite you to join us in asking the questions.

Yet alongside or behind this strap line there lies, I hope, a deep desire and enthusiasm to share with others what a passionate follower of the way of Jesus means in today's world.

I know and understand that many members of PCN Britain who attend a church are frustrated by much of what they experience in its life. Many other members of PCN Britain have given up on organised religion as mediated through the churches. We encompass in our groups and membership theists and non-theists, agnostics and believers and all shades between! But I

hope that one of our starting points might be the man of Nazareth who showed radical love and compassion, a yearning to end injustice, to challenge the religious establishment of his day and to put his passion for godliness on the line, even if it led to his death.

This radicality is, of course, not the preserve of religious people only. In the field of politics we are in a very interesting time of debate within the Labour Party about what are its values and principles, when one of the leadership contenders speaks out against nuclear weapons, calls for the renationalisation of many public utilities and a fairer distribution of wealth. Such a radical programme seems to attract the vision of many young people and yet cold water is poured upon this by many others who claim it is an unelectable platform. Principle versus power?

I am currently reading Naomi Klein's book 'This Changes Everything', which is a lengthy and detailed argument as to why there needs to be radical changes in the world's power structures if we are ever to combat the disastrous effects of climate change.

Be it in politics or so many other aspects of our life together, it is so often the radical call for change which seems to both threaten and enthuse in equal measure. The way of Jesus, being a passionate Christian today, can seem to make us, in the eyes of many Church leaders, 'the enemy within'. But I remain convinced that the growing strength of PCN Britain and many other progressive voices is testimony to the increasingly accepted view that only a radical challenge to the churches (as also to political parties and powerful corporations) will make Christian faith fit to address the needs of our twenty first century society.

As we journey together in this network and movement, characterised by the love and compassion of Jesus in all we do and say, I hope, as chair, to be able to meet as many groups and members as possible. We as trustees are appointed to serve PCN Britain to the best of our abilities and to work with you on realizing our vision.



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

Welcome

In this issue we aim to give due honour to Marcus J. Borg with reflections from the UK and from our brothers and sisters in North America. Our thanks to our contributors and especially to Marianne, Marcus' widow, for permission to reproduce Marcus' sermon (p.4) which inspired his final book 'Convictions'. Thanks also go to all those who allowed their photos to be reproduced and to Harper Collins and SPCK for the book covers.

Hopefully this will encourage you to read, or reread, his work and we are also offering the opportunity to attend a memorial lecture in his honour next year and to make a contribution to a memorial fund PCN Britain has established in his name (p.13).

Elsewhere you will find news from local groups, reports on events, articles, and a couple of questions for us to ponder on page 17:

1. Are the '8 points' a barrier?

<http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/news/post/creed>

2. Are we too timid?

http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/blog/post/am_i_a_christian

Hopefully those will spark some conversations, and we will reproduce the items on the website so we can all take part in offering our views. If they inspire you to a longer response then please submit an article for consideration for our next issue.

Also in our next edition we will have many suggestions for books to go on your Christmas list. My thanks to all our volunteer reviewers, but the challenge remains for more poetry, prayers and images.

If you would like a guide to subjects for articles: have a read through the '8 points' and think about which we need to cover more; how can we implement the PCN Britain Vision (Issue 12, p.7); or how we can encourage younger folk to participate more?

But first, welcome to the 14th edition of Progressive Voices. Enjoy!

Dave Coaker

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PCN Britain is itself part of a wider international network of progressive Christian organisations.

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

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

www.pcnbritain.org.uk

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There is an open invitation for submissions. Your reflections, questions, events, poems, images, reviews, letters, comments, news, prayers and other contributions are all welcome.

Publication is at the discretion of the editor:

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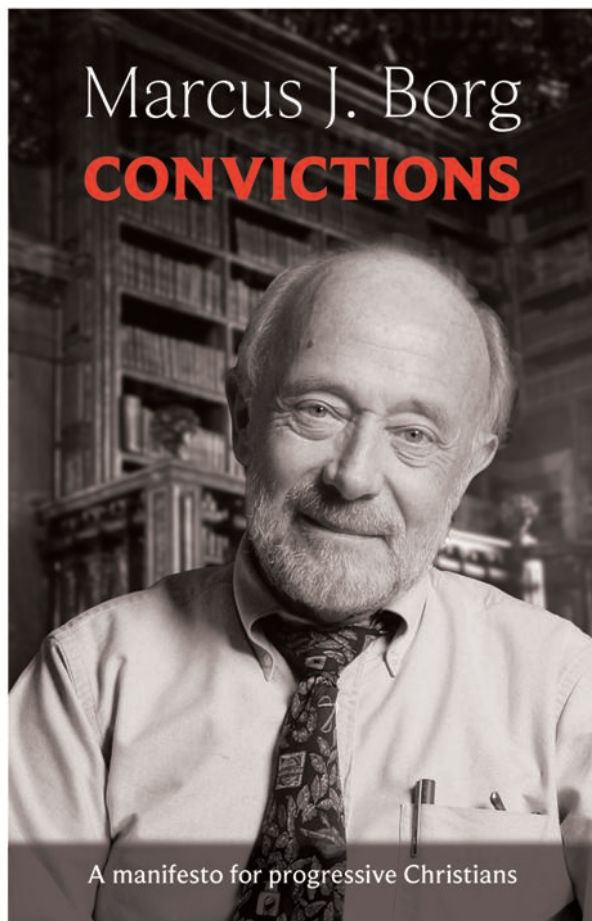
On Sunday 11th March 2013 Marcus Borg delivered this sermon at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon. It was also his seventieth birthday, and that sermon gave birth to the idea for his final book: 'Convictions: How I learned what matters most', or the UK subtitle: 'A manifesto for Progressive Christians'.

We are incredibly grateful to his widow Marianne for allowing us to reproduce it.

My sermon this morning is quite personal, even as it is also a Lenten sermon.

Today is my 70th birthday. Seventy. To some of you, that will seem young. And to some of you, it's unimaginable.

The symmetry between my 70th birthday and Lent is perfect. A major theme of Lent is being reminded about our mortality, our death. Lent is a grand and sustained memento mori, a Latin phrase that means "Remember your death." (the same Latin root from which we get mortal, mortality, mortuary.) Lent began, as it always does, on Ash Wednesday with the solemn and sobering words: 'Dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return...' The words echo the rite of Christian burial: 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' [They are also echoed in the pop song by the group Kansas: "Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind." (1977)]



Lent is about more than death. But it is a season for taking death and our own death seriously. With your indulgence – or without it – I want to talk for a few minutes about turning 70.

It seems like a significant rite of passage. Sobering. I have lived 3 score and 10 years, the biblical phrase for a good span of life. Seventy was old when I was growing up. The new 60? Perhaps. But it is seventy.

In one of John Updike's last novels, the main character is turning seventy. He reflects about a statistic: half of American men turning 70 will die before they're 80. Soldiers in combat have a better chance of survival.

For me, it has not been as difficult as turning 60 was.... Not sure why. 60 as the end of youth? The end of potentiality? And my life is marked more and more by gratitude and appreciation. Appreciative - not just thankful – but able to be present. ... "This May Be the Last Time"

Death can be a teacher of wisdom. Ageing, if we do not get in the way, has a way of helping us out.

A mantra for us all: Don't be afraid – and don't be stupid. Life's too short to walk around being afraid. But don't be stupid.

And the advent of seventy has been interestingly "empowering". If we aren't going to say and do what matters to us now, then when? "If not now, when"? Seventy isn't a guarantee of wisdom or a licence to be dogmatic. It's quite easy to be an opinionated old fool. And so I want to speak as directly as I know how about "what it means to be Christian": What's Christianity about?

We have to acknowledge that "being Christian" is not the only way of being a good person, and not the only way of being a lover of God. Christianity has no monopoly on goodness or on God, or the sacred.

Christianity is about transformation. Not very much about 'believing' as that word is often understood in modern Western culture. You can believe all the right things and still be untransformed. Unhappy. Bitter. Mean. Even brutal. So it is in all religions. Religions, including Christianity, are an ambiguous phenomenon – sometimes the source of great goodness, and sometimes of great evil. And the jury is still out about which is more common, stronger, or winning...

But religions at their best are about transformation. Christianity at its best is about transformation.

Christianity is about personal transformation, and also about the transformation of the world. It is about God's dream, God's passion.

How does this transformation occur? It happens through a deepening centring in God, as known especially in Jesus. A deeper centring in God, a deepening relationship with God, which like human relationships grows and deepens by spending time in it, by paying attention to it.

As known especially in Jesus. For us as Christians, he is the Word made flesh, embodied, revealing or disclosing what can be seen of God in a human life. In him, we see what God is passionate about. Jesus is the norm of the Bible. Sometimes the Bible is wrong, and Jesus is the norm for discerning that.

And being Christian is about living one's life with God in a tradition and community that seeks, celebrates, and seeks to embody that. For me, it is home. It is the tradition into which I was born and which has nourished me. It has also often been the source of consternation. There are forms of Christianity that seem to me to be the antithesis of being Christian. At its best, it is a magnificent tradition. At its mediocre, it is basically "convention." At its worst, it is a source of judgment, hatred, and violence. But it is home.

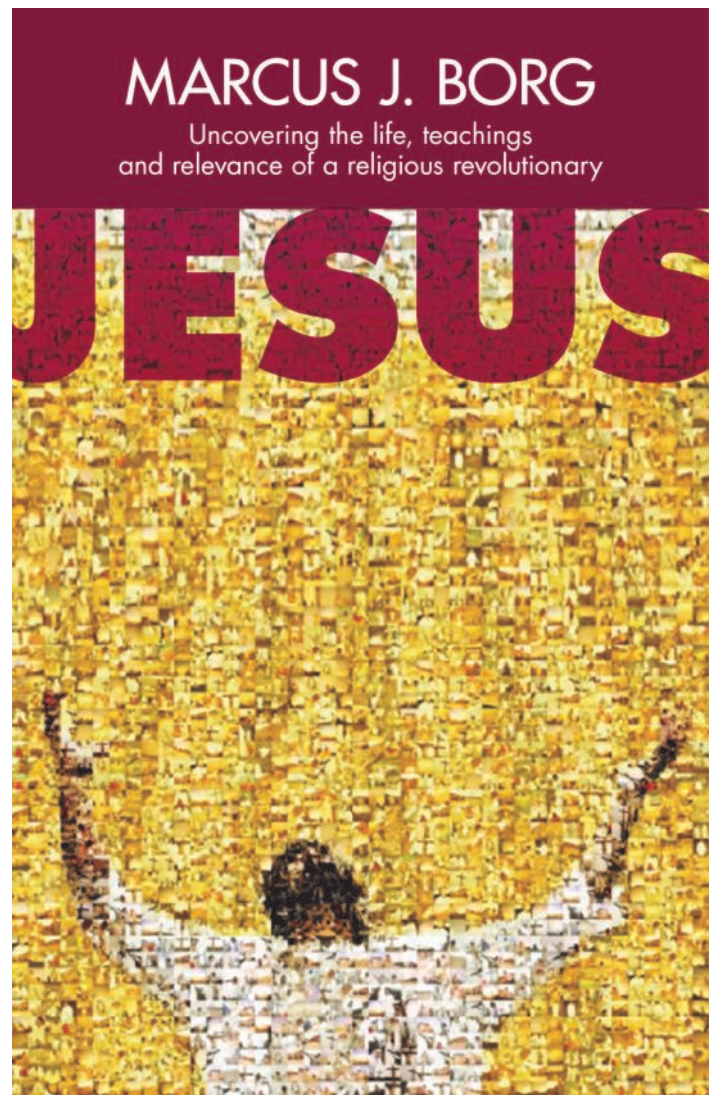
To return to Lent: Lent is about the twofold transformation at the centre of the Christian life as disclosed in Jesus. With its climax in Good Friday and Easter, it is about death and resurrection, an archetypal image of personal transformation. Dying to an old way of being, being born into a new way of being. Dying to an old identity, and being born into a new identity.

And Lent is not only about Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is also about what precedes it – namely, all of Jesus' final week in Jerusalem, what we call Holy Week. And the passion that led Jesus to go to Jerusalem: his passion for the kingdom of God, for the transformation of "this world." That is what animated his mission and teaching – that is what his final journey to Jerusalem was about.

Lent is not very much about believing in Jesus. Rather, it is about following Jesus to Jerusalem. It is about participating in his passion, not about believing in his passion. That is the Lenten journey, and that is the Christian journey.

And we began that journey with the reminder: We are dust, and to dust we will return. So teach us to number our days as to give us a heart of wisdom.

Marcus J. Borg



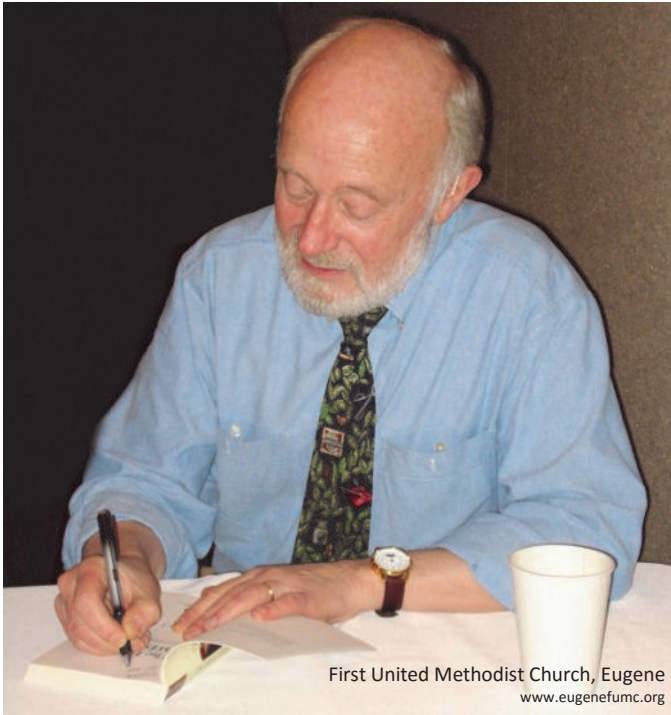
*God loves us already and has
from our very beginning.*

*The Christian life is not about
believing or doing what we need
to believe or do so that we can
be saved. Rather, it's about
seeing what is already true that
God loves us already and then
beginning to live in this
relationship.*

*It is about becoming conscious of
and intentional about a
deepening relationship with God.*

Marcus J. Borg

Tributes to Marcus Borg



First United Methodist Church, Eugene
www.eugenefumc.org

In 1998 I was on sabbatical in Philadelphia. My host showed me a book with a huge commendation. “You’ll like this.” It was Borg’s “Meeting Jesus AGAIN for the First Time.” As Adrian Alker said in his excellent appreciation of Marcus in the March Progressive Voices, it seemed an evangelical title. But I began to read it straight away and immediately realised this was a key moment in my life. It was an amazing experience. Here was a man saying things I only dared think about, and saying things so clearly, in an accessible language and making the whole message of the book seem important, relevant and, in my case, life affirming. I soon realised the book had been out in the USA for 4 years and already “The God We Never Knew” had been published. I bought that immediately.

At last a theologian writing in a convincing, learned and accessible way. Borg presented an understanding of the essential message of Jesus, with no apologies, no recourse to argument whilst providing a dynamic basis for living the Christian Faith in a contemporary setting. He produced a string of books and collaborated with others, especially long term friend and colleague John Dominic Crossan, all equally exciting, challenging and, for a radical Christian, vital.

If you’d told me then that I would one day meet the author, I would not have believed it. So it was a wonderful opportunity for me and for every one who had come across these brilliant books, that Adrian Alker and the good people of St Marks Broomhill, Sheffield, first invited Marcus to England in 2000.

For ever after that, people were quoting his books, referring to his clear expositions and recognising how he had given progressive Christianity a shot in the arm.

At the end of the 2008 conference in Sheffield,

Marcus had preached a sermon, and when the recessional reached the back of the church, it was announced that before the dismissal Marcus would like to say something. After a few gracious words of thanks he said, “I’d like to assure all of you that you are not alone”. All us liberals, radicals and progressives went away on a high. We were being valued, sent on our way in a warm confidence having been assured we were sharing a great journey with a fine man.

In 2010, during the PCN conference at St John’s Church in Princes Street, Edinburgh, I was standing during a coffee break, when I realised I was close to Marcus. For a brief moment, I realised he was on his own. With a little hesitation, I moved up for a chat. He was so friendly, open and quietly encouraging. I asked him if he would ever come to the UK with Dom Crossan and co-lead a conference. He said, “Just ask us”. Sadly, it was not to be.

At the end of the Centre for Radical Christianity’s 2012 conference, I spoke with Marcus again. Clutching his latest book, I did the usual groupie thing and asked him for his autograph and if I could take his photograph. He was delightedly obliging. Once again, I realised the quality of his life style, the consistency of the link he saw between our faith and how we demonstrate it in every day living.

Marcus Borg was both convincing in the detail of his clear exegesis but, even more so, in the convictions of his way of being. No wonder he called what was to be his last book, “Convictions”.

Marcus Borg will always be in our hearts and minds. A constant guide and inspiration. Those who knew him and read his books will always be inspired and thankful.



Tony Rutherford is a PCN Trustee, a member of the Tunbridge Wells Radical Pilgrims group and a retired Anglican priest.

I have been invited to write a piece about Marcus Borg, which I am hesitant to do, because I have only read some rather than all of his major works, and because I am not among those privileged to have attended a conference where he was the speaker.

I read his work on Easter, and when preparing my own book on Christmas I hastened to make myself familiar with Marcus’ work in preparation. So I have not been unaware of the immense impression he has made on the world-wide community of Progressive Christians.

Here I hesitate to use the over-used word ‘iconic’, almost as over-used and eventually meaningless as the word ‘cool’, but he does stand with a small group of

scholars/speakers who you will find on the lips of members of PCN, such as Spong, Crossan, Holloway, and for the oldest of us in these islands, Bishops John Robinson and David Jenkins who first put the cat among the pigeons here. It is unavoidable perhaps, but we are as inclined to speak in reverential tones and make idols of our favourites as famously do conservative evangelicals. But I believe Marcus Borg well deserves the praise he has received.

One of my concerns about PCN and other supposedly non-dogmatic expressions of Christianity today is the way in which they are inclined to own a creed, or rather a creed in reverse. We are identified and kept together not by what you believe but what we do not believe. We don't believe in a personal God, we don't believe in life after death, we don't believe in prayer, we don't believe in angels or miracles etc, rather like the first century Sadducees' response to the Pharisees. But I do not get this impression from my reading of Marcus Borg. Here is a man who has been rediscovering Jesus and making him real again, inspired at first at Oxford, as was I, by the lectures of George Caird at Mansfield College (and possibly too, like me, by the lectures of David Jenkins who was tearing the Church Fathers apart at Queen's at the same time.)

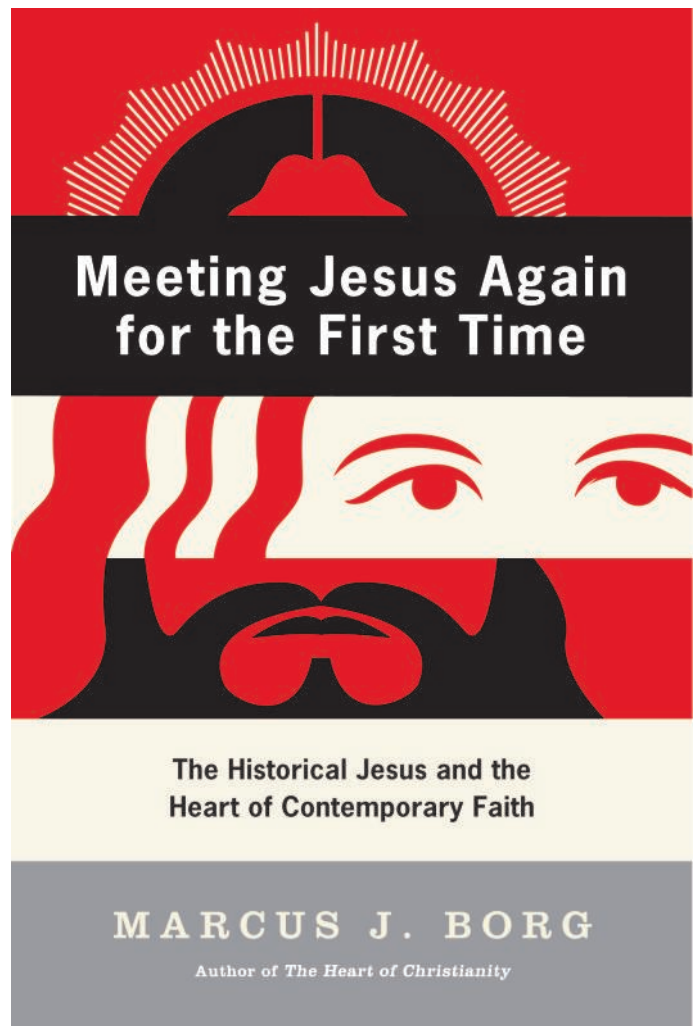
Interesting and informative though the understanding of the scriptures as a collection of 'myths' and 'midrash' may be, this is not the line that Marcus follows for the main part. He is interested in the challenge that Jesus made to the powerful and privileged of his day, and the relevance that has for our own times.

I particularly enjoyed his depiction of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey as comical farce, while the Roman legions with their triumphant banners were riding in on their horses through the opposite gate. The Monty Python of the Thirties C.E.! On the matter of the Resurrection and the trust in life after death it portends, Marcus is content to encourage his readers to make up their own minds, rather than lay down one interpretation. I am grateful to Martin Camroux for this quote which gives us some idea of Marcus Borg's assessment of his own prospects when facing death.

"So, is there an afterlife, and if so, what will it be like? I don't have a clue. But I am confident that the one who has buoyed us up in life will also buoy us up through death. We die into God. What more that means, I do not know. But that is all I need to know."

Marcus is not dogmatic, not certain, but not negative either. He is hopeful. I too hope to make up my loss by meeting him some day.

John Henson is a progressive Welsh Baptist Minister, an LGCM pioneer, Labour party member, author, musician, knitter, family man and Facebook enthusiast.



For Jesus, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue: it was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community.

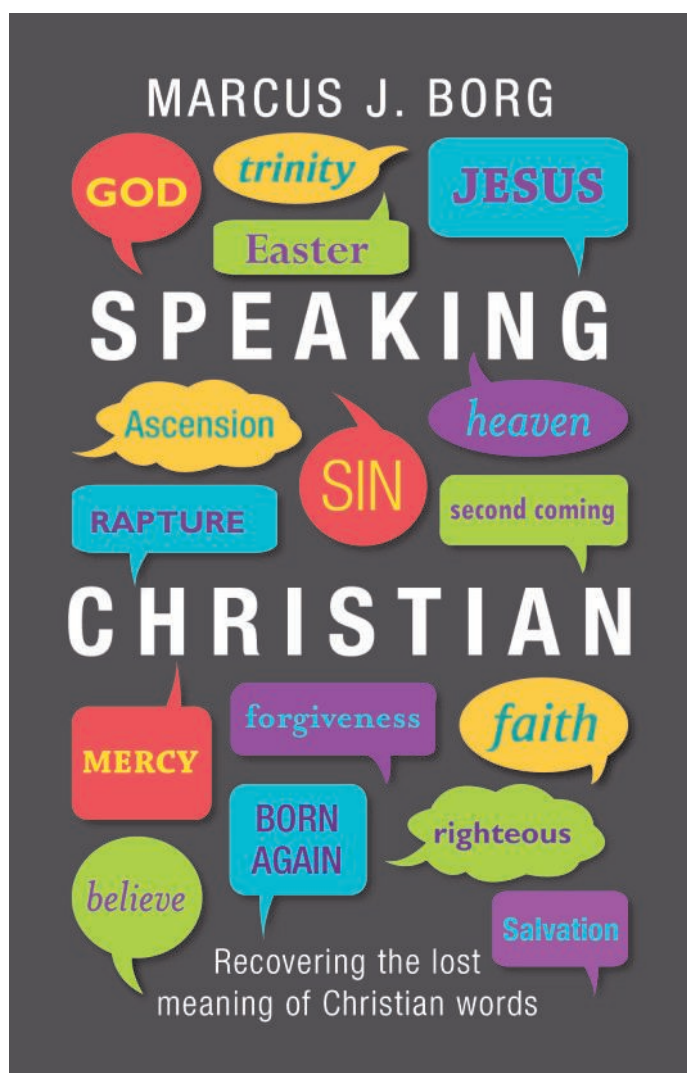
To put it boldly: compassion for Jesus was political.

Marcus J. Borg

Christianity's goal is not escape from this world.

It loves this world and seeks to change it for the better.

Marcus J. Borg



event in order to paste the conference registration address onto my own website's events page, I gaped at the side by side pictures of Marcus Borg and me, his the portrait of a sedate, confident scholar; mine a photo of me screaming with delight when I opened the package containing the first off-the-press copy of 'With or Without God'. I, a newbie author, was going to work side by side with a scholar who had years of research, lecturing, and writing behind him, whose opinions were celebrated by the Jesus Seminar of which he was a prolific member, a brilliant speaker whom I had heard and admired at a Homiletics Festival some years before, and whose work I had soundly criticized in my newly minted book. The side by side portraits mirrored the manner in which I imagined we each approached the week: he with grace and decorum; me with what might not be easily differentiated from hysteria.

It was, without a doubt, one of the best speaking experiences I have ever had. Marcus was everything I admire in an author and speaker: clear, forthcoming, responsive, and graceful when confronted. We alternated our presentations and question and answer periods until the last day when we shared that special time that unfolds when a group has developed trust amongst its members and risks the questions that have been lurking, unspoken, under the surface throughout the week. I was asked to speak to things I was not prepared to speak to but, alongside the humble confidence Marcus exuded, was drawn out of my comfort zone to explore experiences I had not previously shared publicly. Marcus was encouraging, responsive, and wise. Later, as we shared a meal and reflected on our experiences, I found him equally approachable. That might not be a surprise, but that he was interested in the experiences I shared was revealing. He was a gentleman and a scholar. I know; that's likely been said a lot about him, but it is true. Very true.

A long list of scholars, theologically invested individuals, congregational leaders, and authors, were circulated a letter I wrote to Gary Paterson, Moderator of The United Church of Canada, by Rex Hunt a leader in progressive religious thought in Australia. Marcus was on that list as he had been the last time the group had engaged in broad discussion after I expressed concern regarding a hymn that had been shared. I was unaware at the time that he was so unwell. It was a conversation I would have liked to have with him. In the midst of it, we learned of his death and mourned the passing of one upon the integrity of whose work, many of us stood.

My letter to the Moderator was in response to a prayer the UCC had posted on its website following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris and lamented the continued use of language that claimed a moral authority grounded in a supernatural divine source, one uncomfortably close to that which had motivated the Paris shootings. My

But Christian illiteracy is only the first part of the crisis. Even more seriously, even for those who think they speak "Christian" fluently, the faith itself is often misunderstood and distorted by many to whom it is seemingly very familiar.

They think they are speaking the language as it has always been understood, but what they mean by the words and concepts is so different from what these things have meant historically, that they would have trouble communicating with the very authors of the past they honour.

Marcus J. Borg

I remember my horror at learning that the Atlantic Seminar in Theological Education event I had agreed to lead in Truro, Nova Scotia was to be a shared leadership event and that the other lecturer was someone I hadn't been particularly kind to in my first book. Apparently, the organizers had thought they had advised me but, in fact, they had not. So it was that, searching for the

response to some comments by others on the email thread was centred on the enormous loss we each felt that day. What follows is a portion of that response.

"[Marcus'] steadfast belief and desire that Christianity retain its exclusive language (exclusive in a positive way to him) allowed many who would otherwise have remained ignorant of contemporary progressive scholarship to take their first steps within a sheltered space. For that I am deeply grateful. There are few who are willing to leave hold of the words and stories that are central to Christianity and grasp in their stead a post-theistic, barrier-free lexicon. (Most of those I have found who do that, jump right over liberal Christianity on their way from evangelical roots to a staunch atheist evangelism. They have no tolerance for the Word or any metaphorical extrapolations of it once they have discovered, often traumatically, that it is not divinely authored as they had been taught.) My comments would not have been surprising to Marcus. We built our work on two sides of a fence, but he was a wonderful neighbour to engage."

"Acknowledging the loss of the influence of liberal Christians in the political arena, I wonder if the impact of that is not given over too generously to the loss of a Christian lexicon. I do believe the dwindling presence of the liberal church in local communities has left a void in the larger civic arena. But I believe much of that loss to be the result of the use of the larger umbrella or bigger tent concept being applied to language. Rather than challenging ourselves to create new language decades and decades ago, we changed our definitions, got a bigger umbrella to include those new meanings and a bigger tent to include those who no longer held to the traditional doctrinal explanations. But we neglected to advise our congregations that we did so and we were unable to convince those not in congregations that what our congregants still thought we were saying was no longer what we meant. I don't know if we even tried."

"Marcus and those who have made biblical and theological contemporary scholarship accessible filled the chasm that had existed between the pulpit and the pew. But we did not bear the cost of that. We did not acknowledge publicly and consistently where we, as representatives and leaders in an institution, had found ourselves and our moving through Marcus' Critical Thinking stage. We simply began speaking in the language of post-critical naiveté which, very problematically, sounded just like pre-critical naiveté. To hear us speak beyond these kinds of forums, one could very easily assume that, despite the inclusion of a significant socially progressive agenda, we still believe the old theologies, the agency they presume, and the promise they make. 'Even' [a "progressive" hymn shared by one of the email correspondents] could be understood to suggest that the bread and wine have the power inherent in them to accord divine grace even

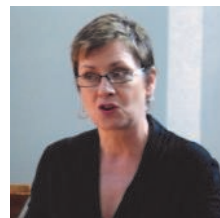
if one refuses to receive it until all are fed or all have access. It continues to lift Mary up in her privileged place, speaks of salvation, and suggests that while access is made universal, there is a benefit in coming to the table that Christians prepare. It could easily be sung in an evangelical (though sacramental) church and be interpreted to reinforce all the normal, traditional doctrinal beliefs."

"Still, even were we to agree that the loss of the political arena to religious conservatives was the result of the removal of theistic language from liberal, mainline congregations, there could not be a more urgent reason for us to create a post-theistic values-based ethic to which persons of every creed and ideology might be drawn, edified, and challenged. The removal of privileged texts, story, and language from the place of privilege does not remove them from our human story. It demands, however, that we distil from those texts, stories, and language only that which can be universally acknowledged as beneficial to human community and the creation of a sustainable future. What we carry forward, then, is only that which is worthy of their endeavour."

"Marcus retained the language for two reasons, one of which was a feeling of nostalgia. The second was his belief that, as with cultural languages, if we lose the language that is unique to Christianity, we would lose Christianity. I expect he was very likely correct on that front. But I believe that we should be willing to risk the loss of something, as we always do, if we are creating something better. We should be willing to relinquish the label Christianity especially if we condemn its use as a tool of privilege to be wielded to the advantage of the few. We should be willing to extract ourselves from the realm claimed by religion, even and especially if we determine that religion no longer offers a sum benefit to the human experiment or the health of the planet and all life dependent upon it.

"The reality of the indifference of evolution to our plight is jarring and frightening. Still, I believe that we have it within us to imagine new stories, new ways to engage the human heart, new technologies that can guide our neurological development toward greater empathy. Who knows whence it will come? I fear, however, that our continued obfuscation and reliance on ancient myths that are used as frequently for ill as for good, will impede that creative process and continue to stoke religious hatred and violence. As frightening as the looming future may be, it is our responsibility to stand up to it and drag it, to the best of our abilities, toward the good."

Gretta Vosper is a minister and atheist, an author, and founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity.



I met Marcus Borg for the first time when I took a class he taught during summer school at the Pacific School of Religion in the late nineties. By this time I had read his two books, *Jesus a New Vision* and of course his best seller *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. When I read *Meeting Jesus Again*, I knew then this man was going to be an important leader in a movement that was just beginning. I was both a pastor in a local church and was deeply involved with The Center for Progressive Christianity, now ProgressiveChristianity.Org

During the five days of classes I also learned something else, which for me was even more important. On the first morning of the three-hour class, Marcus informed everyone in the packed classroom we would begin class every morning with 15 to 20 minutes of meditation. He let everyone know if they could not get there in time to meditate with the rest of the group, they would not be welcomed to attend class that day. He explained the latecomers would simply be in a different mindset if they did not meditate with the rest of the group. And he indeed did quietly let two people know they would have to leave when they showed up late one morning. I sincerely believe the class was different than anything I had before experienced in a classroom. And I believe it was at least in part because of this discipline. It was a model I adopted for the rest of my teaching days as a pastor. This man, I realized, took his spiritual path seriously and I wanted to get to know him better.

We had lunch that week and I asked him if he would be interested in anchoring a conference PC.org planned in Southern CA. This kind of thing was still relatively new, especially for the very conservative area where we were going to hold the conference. We spent over a year and a half talking about other speakers we might invite and the setting. He was always cordial and helpful and I believe in the process; we became friends.

Marcus became one of our most active Honorary Advisors, making suggestions and contributions over the years. We ended up several times at the same conferences and we usually found time to catch up on things from books to family. He never hesitated to let me know when he felt we had published something that was incorrect or with which he disagreed. We always appreciated his input. Marcus and I did have an ongoing, energetic conversation about the role of reciting ancient creeds which made statements we no longer believed, but we finally managed to agree to disagree. Those things are easy when you respect and love someone.

It will be impossible to ascertain just how big an influence Marcus has had on the Progressive Christian movement, but I believe his biggest gift was the fact that he was a consummate teacher. It did not matter if it was one of his books, one of his lectures or if you were lucky enough to experience it, one of his quiet conversations, he always wanted to communicate in such a way you would get it.

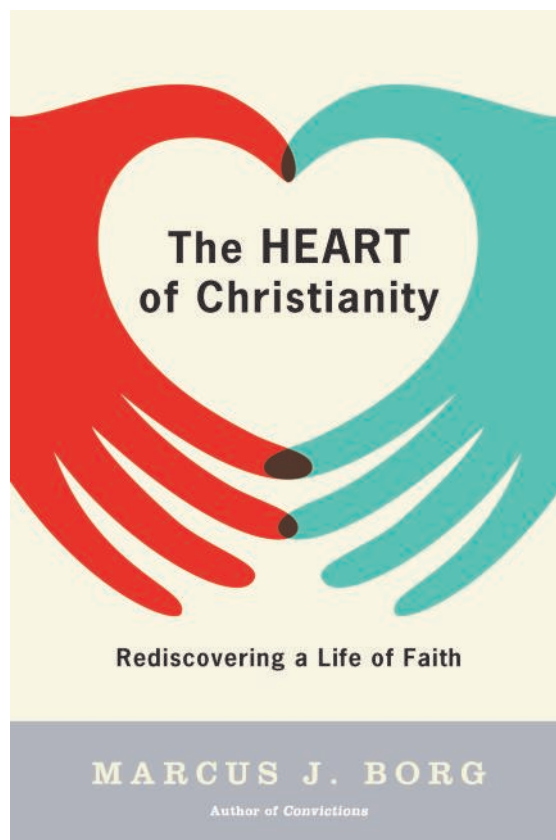
My last direct contact with Marcus was at a conference a little over a year ago in Houston Texas. I believe there were well over four hundred people who attended the evening lectures. There were three well known scholarly authors, all of them seasoned speakers. They had been on the road together several times over the years. Two of those speakers talked without notes, probably sharing some of the work they were doing on their current book project. Although everyone seemed to love them, I honestly could not tell you what was the main theme of either of their talks. Before Marcus went to the podium he had someone pass out two pages of notes. As he talked he referred to those notes. Unlike his wonderful sense of humour, his talk was not dry. But you knew exactly where he was and where he was going. And best of all, I took his notes home so I could study them. It was as if he wanted me to get an "A" in my hypothetical exam.

I could not help being a little jealous of the possible thousands of students Marcus Borg must have taught and touched, including myself over the decades. I hope, like me, they did get it.

We will miss him as a leader of an important movement. We will miss him as a trusted and admired advisor of our organization and I will miss him as a friend.

Thank you Dr. Borg. We love you. It is time to rest.

Fred Plumer is a retired minister of the United Congregational Church and President of ProgressiveChristianity.Org



What a pleasure to have known Marcus Borg. What a kind and beautiful human being. What a loss to us all.

I originally heard of Marcus through his association with the Jesus Seminar, which, in the Evangelical circles I hail from, was not a good thing. My first direct encounter with his writing came through a dialogue book he did with N. T. Wright. Again, my background predisposed me to disagree with him and dislike him, but he made it hard to do either, especially the latter. Hardly the hard-bitten “liberal theologian” out to eviscerate Christianity of any actual faith, he impressed me as a fellow Christian seeking an honest, thoughtful, and vital faith, ready to dialogue respectfully with people who see things differently.

We were featured speakers together on several occasions, and from our first contact to our most recent email exchange a few months ago, Marcus was a gracious gentleman, a Christian brother, and a genuinely friendly colleague. He never asked to what degree I agreed or disagreed with him; he made it clear that his acceptance of me was not dependent on agreement and that his heart and hand were equally open in similarity and difference.

Some friends of mine wrote about Marcus somewhat uncharitably on a few occasions. I remember a dinner where he asked me many questions about them, utterly non-defensive, sincerely trying to understand where they were coming from and how he could still seek common ground with them, something I wish his critics had done more earnestly with him.

Once several years ago, Marcus, Diana Butler Bass, and I spoke together for a few days at Harvard. Two memories stand out.

First, on one Q & A panel, nearly all the questions about theology and Christology were directed to Marcus, the questions about church history and trends went to Diana, and the questions about pastoral work and spirituality went to me. Near the end of the panel, a question on prayer was directed - predictably - to me. After I responded, Marcus spoke up. “I pray too!” he interjected, and shared some tender and meaningful reflections on his own prayer practice. I was deeply touched that Marcus didn’t want to stay in the zone of theory, as important as that is, but wanted to talk spiritual practice as well.

Immediately after that panel, lines formed with people asking Diana, Marcus, and me to sign their books. My line, being the least popular, left me standing there somewhat awkwardly for long periods, but it also gave me the chance to eavesdrop on what people were saying to Marcus. Person after person said almost the same words, “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be a Christian today ... I dropped out of church but came back after I read one of your books ... I’m still a Christian because of you ... I became a Christian because of your books.”

Their effusive comments brought me back to the Evangelical revival meetings of my childhood where people “testified” to how they were “saved,” how they once were blind but now see, how they saw the light and were born again. I remember thinking to myself, “Well, it turns out that Marcus Borg is an evangelist too, just in another way and to another community of people.”

In a recent email, understanding the severity of his illness, Marcus wrote, “I have always known that we are all on death row. Never would have gotten that wrong on a true-false test. But it’s different to know it.” Still, he said, “in the midst of all this ... I am unreasonably happy. Not all the time. But more than I might have expected.”

My prayers and thoughts go out to all Marcus’ family and to his wide circle of friends. May those of us who remain carry on his good work of helping people seek an honest, thoughtful, and vital Christian faith.

Marcus Borg did justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly with God. I miss him deeply, honour him warmly, and will always remember him with great respect and gratitude.



Brian D. McLaren is an author, speaker, activist, and public theologian.

<http://brianmclaren.net/>

God wills our liberation, our exodus from Egypt. God wills our reconciliation, our return from exile.

God wills our enlightenment, our seeing. God wills our forgiveness, our release from sin and guilt.

God wills that we see ourselves as God’s beloved. God wills our resurrection, our passage from death to life.

God wills for us food and drink that satisfy our hunger and thirst.

God wills, comprehensively, our well-being—not just my well-being as an individual but the well-being of all of us and of the whole of creation.

In short, God wills our salvation, our healing, here on earth. The Christian life is about participating in the salvation of God.

Marcus J. Borg



I come new to Marcus Borg and write to pay my respects to a man who has clearly changed many lives. I suspect I am one more to add to that list.

Many years ago I bought 'The God We Never Knew...' one of those books that jumped off the shop shelf, as books do on occasions for most of us. It has remained on my bookcase, always tempting me as I struggle to make sense of my faith as well as my 'liberal' and multi-faith theological leanings. I have dipped in and pondered ideas which made sense and which took me back to the thrill of excitement and liberation as I first read 'Honest to God', but which I struggled to combine with my church membership and with a search for understanding around issues of 'eternal life'.

Not until I discovered PCN and the Modern Church, however, did I learn more of Marcus Borg, read the book in a new light and order a great big pile of his books to work through.

What is so very good is a feeling of recognition as I read his words. What had felt frightening so many years ago, when I read that first book, now has a good shape and allows both faith and questions. His words feel authentic, scholarly and 'honest to God'.

The two books on the beginning and ending stories about the historical Jesus, 'The First Christmas' and 'The Last Week', both with John Dominic Crossman, are seminal for me. They lift the lid on a literal, and cheapening sentimental view of Jesus' life and death. The works do much more than demythologize, however, so what I once feared would strip away belief, now opens doors to an understanding, which, to me, makes so much sense. Knowing Tom Wright's work, I look forward to reading their debate on the meaning of Jesus in the book of that title.

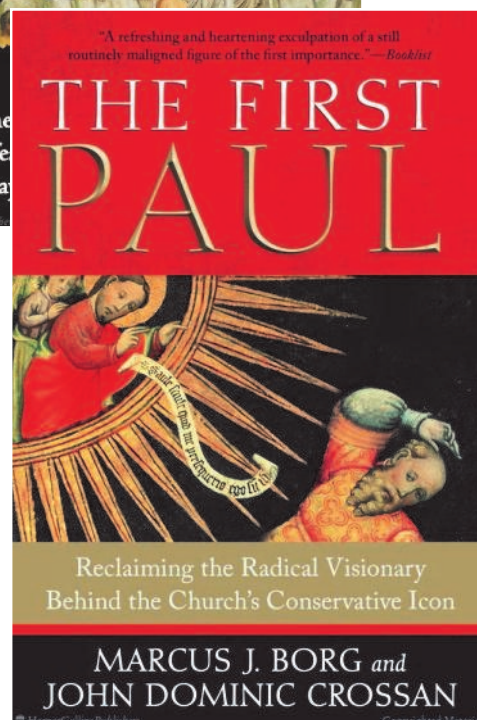
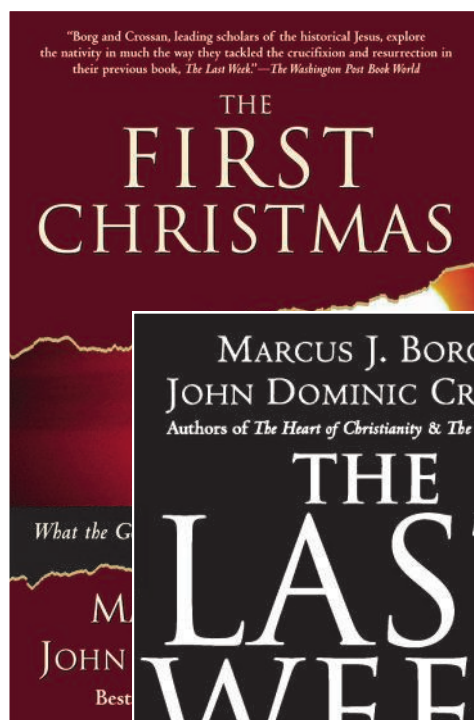
As I learn more about Marcus Borg's writing, in some 21 books, translated into 11 languages and of his talks and recorded essays I begin to grasp something of the depth and power of this man as a scholar and as a teacher.

Those who worked and studied with him and those who heard him speak and those who heard but disagreed with his views, all pay tribute to a remarkable and, it seems, very loveable man.

What an achievement his life and work has been; in his final book, 'Convictions' he speaks about the end of life and what, if anything may continue. 'And the future, including what is beyond our lives? We leave that up to God'. God Bless, Marcus Borg; your influence and your work will endure.



CMF Public Media



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



Memorial Fund

The PCN Britain 'Marcus Borg Memorial Fund'
Our opportunity to honour and remember a remarkable teacher and friend of PCN Britain.



David Yonke / ToledoFAVS.com

In tribute to the life and work of Marcus Borg, the trustees of PCN Britain have decided to set up a new memorial fund which will be used to underpin financially a series of annual lectures in Marcus's honour and we invite all our members and other friends to make a donation to the Marcus Borg Memorial Fund.

You will see that four organisations wish to jointly sponsor an inaugural conference in memory of Marcus but the PCN trustees also wish to continue with four more annual lectures which bear his name. We may even be able to extend such a series if we can afford to do so. All the monies donated to the Fund will help us to plan with confidence these annual events, often with distinguished speakers. Just as there are the Reith lectures, the Dimpleby lectures and others, so we want to honour the great debt of gratitude we owe to Marcus for his inspiring work. We hope you will agree with the trustees that this is a worthy initiative.

As with most charitable organisations, PCB Britain has to run a fairly tight ship in terms of our expenditure. Therefore we would really value having a dedicated fund of ring-fenced money to promote this series of Borg lectures for the coming years.

Are you able to help us in this way alongside your existing and much valued membership subscription?

Please make your contribution either by cheque payable to PCN Britain - Marcus Borg Memorial fund which you should send to the office at 26 High Street Newnham, Gloucestershire, GL14 1BB or else by going to the Shop section on the PCN website where you will find the option 'Donate to the Marcus Borg Memorial Fund', which will allow you to pay by card or PayPal. (www.pcnbritain.oth.uk/shop)

On behalf of the trustees may I thank all our members for their continuing support and if you feel able to make an additional donation to this Fund, we would be most grateful.

Adrian Alker (Chair of trustees)

Memorial Lecture

The First Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture
Grounded – Finding God in the World

Speaker : Diana Butler Bass

A Day of Thanksgiving - Sat 14th May 2016

We were all extremely saddened by the news of the death of Marcus Borg at the turn of this year. PCN and other organisations want to honour the memory of Marcus for all that he has done to promote progressive thinking by holding a day which celebrates his life and continues his work of inspiring people to be passionate followers of the way of Jesus.

We are therefore pleased to invite you to a day conference on Saturday 14 May in 2016 at The Church at Carrs Lane in the centre of Birmingham.

During the day there will be two talks given by Diana Butler Bass whose latest book, 'Grounded' will form the basis of our discussions. Diana describes herself as a Christian, 'who attempts to live the generative, inviting, inclusive, and transforming practices at the heart of Christianity that can heal the world'. Her book 'Christianity without Religion' is a truly inspiring piece of writing, very much in the footsteps of Borg.

There will also be the opportunity to meet up with old friends, to make new acquaintances and be inspired to carry forward the progressive Christian message.

I would hope that this day might be seen as a kind of convention, bringing together people from different organisations who wish to be identified with progressive ways of thinking and talking about the Christian faith and being Christian.

Full details of the day and booking arrangements are on the PCN website but may I encourage you to put the date in your diary now and to book as soon as possible.



News from local groups

Group reports editor: John Churcher, john.churcher@pcnbritain.org.uk

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

Abingdon

Cliff Marshall

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The Abingdon group continues to grow steadily with typical meetings attracting 16 -20 members. Earlier in the year we got together for a shared meal which proved to be a most enjoyable occasion. In our monthly meetings we have discussed Miracles, Easter and Holy Communion. A large group of us also enjoyed the opportunity to hear Bishop Jack Spong speak in Windsor. Recently we have discussed issues which Mark Oakley raised at the AGM meeting. In particular, we homed in on the need to make the progressive Church resonant, rather than merely relevant, for its members and newcomers alike. In the coming quarter we shall start looking in detail at how the new PCN Britain Eight Points might be a guide for us and our congregations. Our coming meetings will be at 7.30pm on 1st Sept, 6th Oct, 3rd Nov and 1st Dec. All meetings will be held at St Michael's Church Room, Park Road, Abingdon. Full details for each meeting are posted on our PCN Britain website page and new members are always very welcome.

Cornwall

Richard Gray

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Just over a hundred people attended the talk given by Barbara Brown Taylor when she visited Truro in July. She spoke on her most recent book "Learning to Walk in the Dark" and from the comments received after the event folks enjoyed the evening. She also spoke at the Sunday morning Eucharist in the cathedral. Barbara Brown Taylor was in the UK on a ten day tour which included Durham Cathedral,

Christ Church Oxford and St Pauls Cathedral and spoke on Radio 4 Sunday worship from St Martin in the Fields. She is a New York Times best-selling Author, Professor, Theologian and Episcopal priest and last year Time magazine placed her in its annual TIME 100 list of most influential people in the world. She went on from us to Taize to be a part of their 75th anniversary celebrations. A link to her talk can be found at:

[http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/assets/uploads/group_files/Learning to Walk in the Dark.mp3](http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/assets/uploads/group_files/Learning_to_Walk_in_the_Dark.mp3)

Driffield

Raymond Eveleigh

01262 420062 raymond.eveleigh@pcnbritain.org.uk

Our Last Meeting consisted of a talk by Mr. Richard Zerny, an Anglican layman of considerable experience. Richard raised several important issues, chief among them was the problem of the origin of evil. He felt that the traditional attitudes and doctrines were inadequate for the 21st century thinking Christian. This gave rise to a thought provoking discussion. It was good to hear a lay theologian speak with such deep concern for the truth. At our next meeting we begin a series of lectures on the Historical Jesus. Professor Bart D Ehrman has recorded 24 lectures in which he examines historical evidence regarding the man Jesus of Nazareth. We hope to listen to each lecture (30 mins) and spend the rest of the evening in discussion. His method involves an objective approach to the examination of New Testament documents as well as extra biblical material. We feel that it is important to make this study for two principal reasons: first that the pursuit of truth is fundamental to our *raison d'etre*, and second, it is important for those who would 'defend the faith' to be informed of the findings of modern biblical studies.

Hertfordshire Diana Reddaway

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Our previous regular venue has changed and we will now meet in the home of Diana Reddaway on the 3rd Sunday of each month [4pm for an hour, followed by light refreshments]. Our Sept meeting will be a planning session to discuss topics for the coming months. That meeting will also take the form of an exploration of the importance of story and two or three forewarned group members will introduce the idea of 'getting to know one another in the things that are eternal'. It is with great sadness that we report that one of the founding members of the Hertfordshire Group, Rev Betty Saunders, died in July. Her wisdom and wit, her support and encouragement will be greatly missed.

Leeds

Sandra Griffiths

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PCN Leeds meets at Chapel Allerton Methodist (Church) Centre, Town Street, Leeds LS7 4NB usually on the second Saturday of the month between 10.30 and 12, with coffee/tea available from 10.00. Due to holidays only a few managed to see "Beyond Forgiving" at our July meeting. We agreed we would show this again at some point to give more people the chance to see such a powerful, moving short film, and discuss some of the issues that arise from it. The relevance of the film for today's world cannot be overestimated. The 10th Oct meeting is based on the Dalai Lama's book "Beyond Religion", subtitled "Ethics for a Whole World". It is described as a 'surprisingly radical and interesting read' and the leader would find it useful if at least some of the group had read it beforehand! Future meeting dates are: 19 Sept, 10 Oct, 7 Nov, 12 Dec.

Manchester John Ramsbottom

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A meeting in June discussed future plans and in particular, how we should deal with low attendances. It was felt that the actual content of the meetings was not the problem and that we should continue in the same vein whilst trying to promote the group more widely. One suggestion was that a theme for the year might be helpful, so it was decided that "Exploring what I believe" should be adopted to give a focus for the coming months. Our meeting on Wed 23rd Sept will be held at Grove Lane Baptist Church. Rex Hunt will explore progressive approaches to liturgy and worship, based around ideas from a forthcoming book. For the remainder of the year we will go back to our normal meeting venue in Heaton Moor, where we shall look at the following topics:
Oct 28th – An interventionist God?
Nov 25th – Sin, exploring this from the understandings of Marcus Borg in his book "Speaking Christian"

NE Lincolnshire John Sharp

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Our group has now outgrown the sitting room which has been able to accommodate it for the last few years and has moved for its monthly meetings into an attractive school library where we have enough room to break into smaller discussion groups in most of our meetings. From time to time we wonder whether we should adopt a more outward-looking, evangelistic role or whether we should be content with catering for the concerns of our members only. At a later meeting we will confront this challenge directly. It is an important issue and we are interested to know whether other groups have faced the dilemma and if so, what conclusions they have come to about it. This year, we have looked directly at the Sermon on the Mount - trying to put preconceptions to one side. Resulting discussions were invigorating and thought-provoking.

Recently, we have also explored the response of N. Douglas-Klotz to the Aramaic Lord's Prayer. This has proved fascinating. He points out that Aramaic is a much less precise, more allusive language than Greek (and English) and is more suited to poetic, picturesque utterances. His poetry based on possible wider meanings of the familiar words is beautiful and challenging.

Cardiff, Pontprennau Bob Charnley

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Since our last report we have had a good Spring and Summer of meetings. Our numbers are increasing steadily, and we have a good spread of age and experience. We do have the great advantage of meeting at Pontprennau Community Church, which is modern, comfortable and well suited to our needs. We have also had a good spread of topics, not all of which have been "mainstream" progressive ones. These include an evening thinking about Spiritualism; a fascinating talk by Phil Wall on the use of (cinema) film – we shall probably follow this up by showing a film which could be described as "fringe"; a guided tour of the route and land of the Exodus – a subject researched very thoroughly by Stuart Fletcher, who is to do a follow-up soon. We had a very interesting and revealing evening "Death Café" led by one of our members. Other topics were "God and the doctor", by a G.P. member and the Kirchentag, the German 2-yearly international conference, this year in Stuttgart, attended by Ray Vincent. We have a good number of members qualified to talk about their own specialisms, an excellent meeting place, an open-minded membership and to quote from the hymn "All are welcome, all are welcome in this place".

Rugby

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In May we were pleased to welcome new attendees Jackie and Jim who had relocated from Yorkshire and soon abandoned the

planned discussion to hear about the church they had come from where open exploration was encouraged. Their minister had taken them to a Val Webb talk and they had sought out a PCN group in the hope of being directed to a similar spiritual home which led onto more discussion. We were saddened to learn of the terminal illness and recent death of Fiona who attended our meetings with her partner Michael and our thoughts were with them at our July meeting. Fiona trained in bereavement counselling, psychotherapy and psychodrama and had talked to the group about this. She brought quiet reflection to discussions while we wrestled with theological concepts. We will miss her. We have planned another meeting for Christian / Humanist dialogue as we began to explore this in July. Carol will hopefully be telling us about the Sea of Faith conference when we next meet. Next date: 20th Sept.

Shoreline (Norfolk Broads) Julia Morris

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We meet every Thursday at 2.00pm. We are looking forward to "Beyond Theology" but meanwhile were moved by the DVD "Beyond Forgiving" and learnt from "Visiting Faiths". We join in with Fishpond Meetings in Norwich on the last Friday each month and enjoy discussion on many and varied subjects.

St Albans

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We continue to meet at Trinity URC on the fourth Thursday evening [7.30 p.m.] of each month, and 24 September is in the middle of World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel. Our on-going exploration of Roger Ray's book 'Progressive Faith and Practice' takes us to Chapter 13 concerning "Just War Theory in a Nuclear World." The October meeting will discuss Chapter 14 "The Justice System" and Nov's meeting will be Chapter 15 "Our preference for the Poor."

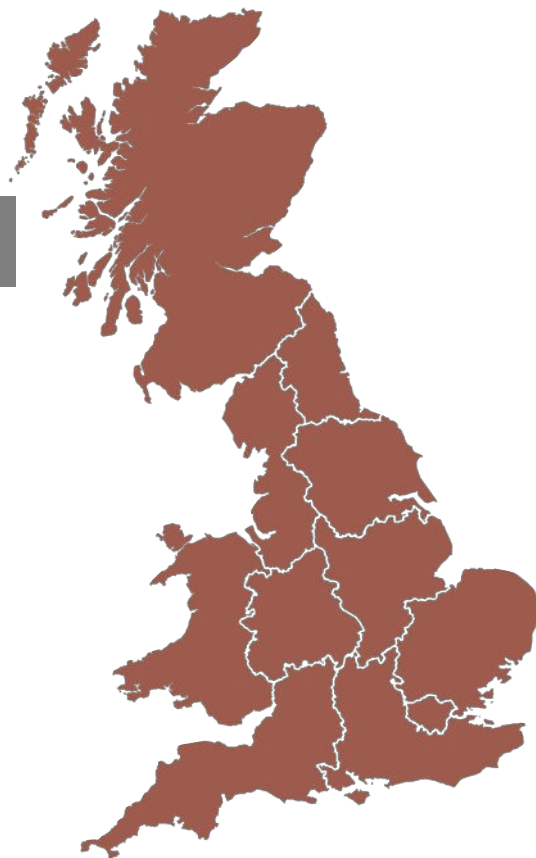
Tony Rutherford writes: Nine of the twenty people on our contact list gathered recently to see part of "A Day in the Fountain" - Chris Avis's brilliantly edited DVD. Our group was particularly interested that Mark Oakley set his scene for the day by introducing himself, and how his own education and early life had led him to value poetry as a way of expressing religious experiences. The group was so impressed with the video that we decided to meet again in Aug to look at the second DVD in the pack. If you live within range of Tunbridge Wells, and would like to join us at future meetings, do contact Pat Churchill.

Our group still meets alternate Wednesdays in a member's large living room. Our next meeting will be in Sept where we will continue to read and discuss Dave Tomlinson's book "The Bad Christian's Manifesto – Reinventing God". Dave is an inspiring and interesting author and we are enjoying reading and discussing his book. We are a lively group (about 16 people) with differing viewpoints and we do challenge and question each other but this is not done to provoke, undermine or make anyone feel uncomfortable! There is certainly no pressure to speak out - if any individual just wants to listen then that's fine. We also come from a variety of denominations – Catholic, Methodist, United Reform, Baptist, Welsh Congregational (no Anglicans as yet) and a few who do not attend church. At various times we join with the Cardiff group in order to listen to a speaker and enter into discussion. One of our last meetings before our summer break was a garden party at a member's house. It was a beautiful evening in beautiful surroundings and we spent most of the time outdoors, sharing laughter, food, drink (a kind of communion!) and companionship. Each of us

brought something to share, a story, a song, some jokes, music, anything which helps to inspire us on life's journey.

NEWS ITEM Beyond Belief

A new Brighton-based group called "Beyond Belief" meets for the first time on Monday, Sept 21st at 7pm for a 7.30pm start at The Paris House (Le Pub), 21 Western Road, Brighton BN3 1AF when the evening will be introduced by the lead chaplain of the University of Sussex, Chris McDermott. He will be taking as his topic "The God we don't believe in" to be followed by questions and discussion. Food & drink is available on a buy-your-own basis. For more information about the evening email: sue@paulharrington.co.uk



Poetic ideas

During our Spring Conference Mark Oakley, a canon at St Paul's Cathedral, asked participants to consider the following poems.

Maybe you'd like to as well?

A Martian Sends a Postcard Home - Craig Raine

Autobiography - Louis MacNeice

Getting it Across - U A Fanthorpe

Procedure - Jo Shapcott,

Let Evening Come - Jane Kenyon

Prayer Before Birth - Louis MacNeice

Names - Wendy Cope

Missing God - Dennis O'Driscoll

Night Sister - Elizabeth Jennings

Paternoster - Jen Hadfield

Walking Away - C. Day Lewis

Religion and Poetry - Les Murray

The Sunlight on the Garden - Louis MacNeice

The Woman in the Moon - Carol Ann Duffy

The Way - Edwin Muir

Wedding - Alice Aswald

He also recommended the following anthologies:

Poems That Make Grown Men Cry: 100 Men on the Words That Move Them edited by Anthony Holden, Ben Holden, Publisher: Simon & Schuster Ltd, ISBN/EAN: 9781471134890

Here to Eternity: an Anthology of Poetry, edited by Sir Andrew Motion, Publisher: Faber & Faber Poetry, ISBN 10: 0571228283, ISBN 13: 9780571228287



Creed?

An introduction from the Chair of the trustees to this open letter from Pat Fuller, a newly elected trustee.

From the beginning PCN Britain adopted the 8 points of The Centre for Progressive Christianity (TCPC) in the USA. PCN Britain made a slight change to the 8 points at its inception and after consulting our membership a more major change in September 2014. Whilst the trustees never intended that these 8 points should be seen as anything more than a signpost, showing our direction of travel as an organisation, clearly some members feel anxious that such points might be felt to be coercive of thought and practice.

The trustees feel minded at present to hold on to the importance of having the 8 points as an expression of the Christian life but welcome Pat's letter as we continuously review our work. Your comments on Pat's letter would be welcome.

I submit this letter to PV with some trepidation but there is something I need to raise with its readers and hope there will be some responses. What I write are my own personal thoughts and not those of the Newcastle PCN. Recently I attended a group which meets in Newcastle every three months or so. They invite a speaker and the group includes many forthright, thinking people who you would think would like to join with PCN. In fact I think several of those who attend are or have been PCN members. However, when asked by one of our PCN group if they would join together with PCN Newcastle, the answer was that the Eight Points got in the way. They did not want to subscribe to yet another 'creed'.

I had never seen the Eight Points as a creed but after such a challenge perhaps it is. It begs the question as to whether some of the EP seem to stop PCN being an open inclusive group that I thought we were.

The PCN group in Newcastle meets to share food and to wrestle with the challenges thrown up by our faith journeys, each one of which is unique. We want to offer hospitality to all who bring their struggles of what it is to be human and who want to work for a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

Of course there is no criticism intended on the other group, but I wonder what readers of PV think about this challenge. Do the Eight Points get in the way of openness? Do we need them? If we didn't have them how would we define PCN Britain?

Liz Vizard's letter in the September 2014 edition of PV seems to be raising similar issues. We are a Network but I was shocked to think that a group of similar thinking people would certainly not join with a PCN group because the Eight Points made us too narrow. I look forward to your responses:

<http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/news/post/creed>

Pat Fuller (Newcastle PCN group and PCN Trustee)

Too timid?

I look forward to each copy of Progressive Voices and enjoy a newsy, informative and stimulating read. They seem to get better each time and the June edition, for me, topped them all.

Karen Armstrong's quote on the front cover was, I thought, very apt and pertinent to the thinking behind several of the articles. I particularly enjoyed three of the main writings, Ashram of the Holy Trinity (R J Harvey), The Jesus of History? (Brian Wilson) and A Simple Supper? (Jack Dean).

I wish we could discuss, in church, the ideas in these articles without upsetting the more literal members of the congregation but at the present time it would probably have a very negative effect. Are we too timid? Jesus did not hesitate to challenge the orthodoxy of his day when he considered it was not in accordance with his understanding.

The 'Progressive' thoughts, with which I feel very comfortable, do, however, raise several questions:

1. I was brought up in an unquestioning environment of the chapel and have 'evolved' in my thinking. Would I be in the same position if I had not had the grounding in Bible knowledge? Do we need to start, like children and Father Christmas, accepting the stories literally and grow into a wider and fuller understanding or could we dive in at the deep end?
2. Rituals and mystery have been an important part of Christianity. If those that no longer have relevance or reflect our thinking are removed, what is to replace them – if anything?
3. Can I consider myself a Christian when I challenge many of the fundamental ideas I am expected to accept? I think 'A follower of the life and teachings of Jesus' would more accurately describe my position.
4. Many people I know do not attend regular church services but they do live good, kindly, loving and generous lives. Would they be attracted to a church stripped of outmoded ritual and beliefs? Spiritual understanding is rather vague and can give few hooks upon which to hang our faith. This brings me back to the first question and how 'timeless hooks' can be offered.
5. Where do we go from here?

I try to sow seeds of my own faith in the hope that one day they might grow, especially with members of my own family. They, like many of their generation, are very busy and, when I think back, it was only after I retired that I gave myself the time and space to think deeply about these things. Meanwhile I try to live my faith and look forward to the next edition of Progressive Voices.

http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/blog/post/am_i_a_christian

Yours sincerely, David Kemp



Seeking the Sacred - Report

I thoroughly enjoyed this my first Modern Church conference. I was excited about the prospect of meeting new people and engaging with the topic of learning from other faiths. I refer people to the conference website for more information about the speakers - I am offering my personal response to it as a whole. See www.modernchurch.org.uk for info on the conference, plus recordings of the main sessions.

There were about 90 people attending the conference. This was great, as I had the opportunity to meet so many new people interested in progressive Christianity, most of whom were not members of PCN local groups. The conference is a real community, with Modern Church members coming back year after year. As a result, the event felt like being with family, and I was made to feel very welcome.

I enjoyed the chats between the sessions as much as the sessions themselves. The conference was a co-operation between the Modern Church and the World Congress of Faiths (<http://www.worldfaiths.org/>). It felt a very equal partnership, with both organisations (and individuals) keen to learn from each other.

On the first evening, we were treated to a very hands-on exploration of spirituality from Justine Huxley from St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace (<https://www.stethelburgas.org/>). Justine argued that the younger generation want to build a better world, and that religions and dogmas are much less important than action and communication.

The second day started with a discussion on 'Revelation and Scripture in Abrahamic Faiths', and much common ground was found. The concept of revelation was also explored and questioned.

Dr. Elizabeth Harris then gave us a personal story of her encounter with Theravada Buddhism during her ten-year stay in Sri Lanka. She reminded us that Buddhism has many forms and that she deeply experienced only one strand of this philosophy and religion.

Dr. Nikki Singh and Rev. John Parry's Sikh-Christian dialogue was very warmly received. We saw how lived experience of religion leads to deep commitment to a spiritual path, and also to deep respect for other people's paths and for the communities of faith.

Day Three started with a lecture by Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel entitled 'Religious Pluralism in 13 theses', which was philosophical and a lesson in the logic of plurality, which was very positively received. This lecture was a reminder to me that even though we all shared a passion for Progressive Christianity, what engaged some people at the conference did not engage others. A good reminder that unity does not require conformity!

There were a number of workshops in the afternoon, which helped us get to know each other a bit better.



Personally, one thing I would have enjoyed is more opportunities to interact with each other in the sessions. A Hindu-Christian dialogue took place in the late afternoon, but I needed a break so missed this unfortunately.

The final day brought the faith stories together by looking at the issues that affect all of the world religions. We looked at the role religion plays in the violence and conflict of contemporary society with Dr. Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi. Finally Harriet Crabtree, Director of the UK Inter-Faith Network, gave us an overview of the development of inter-faith dialogue in the UK in the last 25 years, and then looked ahead to future challenges and opportunities.

Throughout the conference there were plenty of opportunities to worship together which I appreciated. Again this had a multi-faith emphasis. A body meditation preceded each Morning Prayer, and elements from the different world faiths were threaded into the Anglican worship.

A few personal reflections on the conference:

- It is inspiring to meet people who are seekers, and open to learning more
- I felt a lot of gratitude to the clergy who serve (or served) in their local churches, sometimes with great opposition
- High Leigh is a beautiful and inspiring place to spend time reflecting
- As the prayer goes, 'Seek first to understand, rather than to be understood'. This is a real strength of the Modern Church
- Above all, meeting other people, and building relationships, was key to me



Julian Wood is a Unitarian and Quaker who passionately believes in Christianity's value, and is very interested in the interplay between spirituality and personal growth.

That we may become wise ...

I wonder if you have ever attended a German 'Kirchentag' (Church Congress)? The German Protestant Kirchentag, as it is generally known in both Britain and Germany, takes place biennially in a different city in Germany. My first experience of such came this year in Stuttgart, and was really not comparable to anything I've been to before. It lasted from a Wednesday evening till the Sunday morning closing service.

Within that time span and under the umbrella title That we may become wise ... (a quote from Psalm 90) there were over 2000 events to suit all ages and stages in a variety of languages in addition to German, often with headphones provided. There were bible studies, talks, discussions, meditations, church services, concerts in churches and huge arenas , stands and stalls for all areas of life and living - advertising, selling, informing - from the German post office to a 'cool religious slogan' T-shirt outlet, reasonably priced food stands, and designated water taps.

Represented were over 100 countries, denominations other than Protestant ones, faiths other than Christianity, a vast theological spectrum, a significant number of politicians, countless children and young people. School classroom floors, hostels, guest houses, hotels and private local hosts all provided accommodation.

International visitors (I was one) received a special reception, and enjoyed a 'centre' where you could meet a rich variety of people from many countries.

About 2,500 'helpers' were on hand to direct, translate, explain, welcome, assist

And how many visitors were there in all? I understand that 100,000 attended over the four days, with another 60,000 part-timers!

Truly mind-blowing was the diversity and yet somehow the unity, and if I needed a reminder that neither the church nor Christianity possesses any kind of uniformity, this was it: there was neither Jew nor Greek, neither Protestant nor Catholic, neither religious nor secular, neither progressive nor non-progressive ...



Within the Kirchentag there was church, religion, spirituality, economics, politics, music, so many offerings for body, mind and spirit, life in all its variety, the concerns of the world; in fact it would be hard to see what if anything was missed out; and everything was intertwined, bound up together.

The sheer scale of the whole undertaking threatened at times to overwhelm even a German speaker like me, and I wondered what non-German speakers made of it all, particularly those from outside Europe. It wasn't that there was a lack of help, but with so many venues, travelling around in underground and overground trains that were always bursting at the seams, being unable to move in certain places for the volume of people, having to choose between so many events, and working out how to arrive at least 30 minutes beforehand to get a seat ... However, I am assured by another trustee who attended - Tony Rutherford - that the care and assistance for those requiring translation is excellent.

The highlights for me included a bible study by John Bell, talks by Angela Merkel and Kofi Annan, encounters with other Kirchentag visitors who were all over town - recognisable not least by their Kirchentag lanyards, the opportunity to stay with a particularly lovely German family, and the atmosphere at the closing service where the majority of the 95,000 present chose to receive communion.

I came away impressed by the 'roundness' of the whole experience and the meticulous organisation, encouraged by the large measure of integration of church, society, politics and the world, and grateful for the rich mixture of kindness, hospitality and opportunities to meet new people and visit a new area of Germany. Berlin 2017, here I come!



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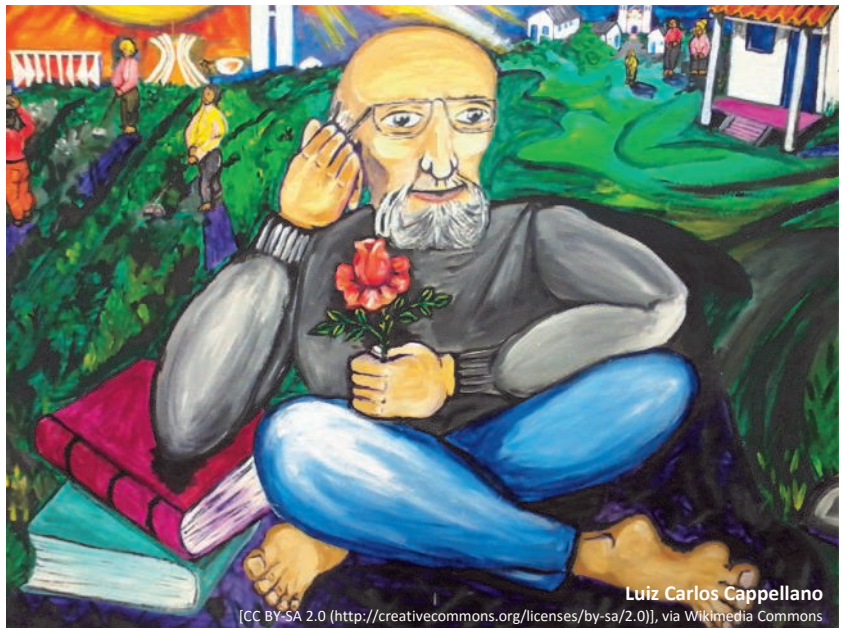
The Untold Story

People's lives can throw up many surprises. At funerals we discover things about the now deceased which we wish we had known while they were alive. I had an inkling of this at a young age. The quiet, likeable old man that I used to meet and talk with while he was out walking his dog turned out to have been a lifelong communist who had volunteered for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. There was clearly more to that genteel man than I had appreciated.

We can easily miss people's hidden depths. In my work I run educational programmes based on the approach of Paulo Freire, the radical educator who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The Freirean approach is about posing problems, not simply delivering answers, and seeks to tap into people's experience to help them discover new possibilities. It is affirming and empowering. This seems very far removed from the educational process in our churches, where the assumption is often that we are there only to be told what we should be doing and what we should be believing. In many churches the sermon is still delivered from a pulpit raised above the congregation, giving the unquestionable word from on high. Interaction with the congregation is virtually zero.

It saddens me that church ministers and pastors so consistently underestimate the potential – and the intelligence – of their congregations. Biblical scholarship is somehow confined to the theological college, too easily cast aside when it comes to people's experience of church. Bart Erhman writes about an occasion when he was asked by a pastor at a Presbyterian church to present a series of four lectures on the historical Jesus. He talked about the discrepancies in the gospel accounts, the malleable nature of the oral tradition and scholarly methods for trying to understand more about Jesus. "Afterward," he says, "a dear elderly lady came up to me and asked in frustration, 'Why have I never heard this before?' She was not distressed at what I had said; she was distressed that her pastor had never said it. I remember looking across the fellowship hall to the pastor, who was talking to a couple of other parishioners, and wondering the same thing myself: Why had he never told her?" (Bart D. Erhman, *Jesus, Interrupted, Revealing The Hidden Contradictions In The Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)*)

Other clergy are actively resistant to the lessons of scholarship reaching their congregations. Bishop John Spong tells the story of an Episcopal church in Louisville, Kentucky, where a priest discovered to his horror that a study group in the congregation had been reading books by writers such as Marcus Borg, Elaine Pagels, Rowan Williams and Karen Armstrong. The priest



presented the group with an approved reading list and said that henceforth they would have to be "monitored regularly and perhaps even led by one of the church's clergy," otherwise they would have to leave the church. Rather than back down, the offending study group decided to move to another church. (John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture*)

Clergy can fall into the trap of telling themselves that their congregations want certainties and simple truths, that they will be offended by any questioning of the prevailing orthodoxy. They fool themselves that their pastoral role in reassuring the faithful prevents them from introducing uncertainty. In my view, this is to underestimate – or even wholly to misjudge – the average congregation. It is perhaps not the congregation's comfort zone that is being protected, but the clergy's.

Apart from my formal role as an educator, I also serve as a pastor for a small Baptist church. That is equally an educational role – for me as much as for the congregation – and here is the great element of 'surprise': people are hungry for genuine insights into scripture and theology. They are not afraid of critical readings of the Bible. They do not wince at learning new perspectives. They are comfortable with metaphor.

The idea that people are upset by challenging old assumptions is, I suspect, hugely overblown. When someone finally confronts the twin pillars of literalism and superstition they are frequently relieved rather than offended. They have just been wondering why they have never heard it before.

John Lockhart is director of the Freire Institute (www.freire.org) and pastor of a Baptist church in Calderdale, West Yorkshire.

Faith-free funerals

As churchgoing declines more people than ever are facing bereavement without the traditional support of their local priest or minister. Does it matter?

What is the Christian minister to do when a funeral director asks them to conduct a service for a deceased individual who has no connection with any church, or even any sign of a Christian belief? How can the minister in all conscience go through the traditional form of service, with its reference to 'God in his mercy taking to himself the soul' and very specifically the hope of resurrection to eternal life?

The first instinct is to take the money and run. A crematorium funeral offers, depending on area, £100 plus to an officiating minister. Unless your tradition requires you to hand it all over, you only need three or four of those a week to land you in a higher tax bracket. Some clergy, and some faux clergy, are making a handsome living in this way.

Do the bereaved really care whether the person taking a service is a 'proper' member of the clergy? Probably not, never having had dealings with one. But one undertaker tells me: 'We know the clergy in our area, and if they are actively serving as ministers, look and talk like ministers then we don't ask to see their qualifications.' At certain times of the year, when the mortality rate rises, funeral directors are glad to call on people who are free to help and do a 'good job'.

As an aside, are your local funeral directors on your church prayer list? They are often the first to respond to a death, at all hours of day and night, and are expected to offer understanding and comfort well beyond the practicalities of bereavement.

Many families are asking for a Humanist service, which at least is honest, and the humanist minister in my locality is professional and sympathetic in her conduct of services and the support she offers to bereaved families. But the bereaved are often baffled when asked who they might like to take a service. 'Oh, I'd like that humorist' said a widow, eventually settling for someone other than Ken Dodd.

Funeral services, especially those increasingly taking place in crematoria, are no longer always going to be centred on Christianity. This may be a good thing, as very few have well-founded ideas about life and death. The majority may be so overwhelmed by personal grief that they have no intellectual reaction at all to what is going on or being said.

Increasingly mourners will offer recorded music to be played before, during or after the service, and most crematoria are equipped to play it. The organist who plays for around eight funerals a day is so used to playing 'Abide with me' and 'All things Bright and beautiful' that they may welcome a recorded interlude



with 'My Way', 'Danny Boy' or the 'Match of the Day tune'. One widower thought it amusing to ask for Gracie Fields singing 'Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye'.

Funerals for non-churchgoers can present major challenges to the ordained ministry. Not long ago a man stopped me in the street and asked if I would take his funeral. He had just been told that he had about six weeks live and wanted to make proper arrangements. He recognised me from a funeral he had attended and wanted something similar for his own. As he looked to be in good health the request came as a surprise, but he told me that the doctor had given him six weeks to live and so it turned out. He wanted an occasion at which he could give thanks for 55 years of a busy and enjoyable life, 'but light on religion'. This thoroughly decent, honest man had never been to a regular Sunday service in any church and had always thought the whole religion thing was a scam. The funeral took place within two months and was attended by about 500 of the man's friends and relatives.

How did I bring God into this family gathering? What did the familiar funeral words sound like to those who associate them with gloom and sorrow, certainly not the blessings of faith?

Well, the familiar words were spoken, and the committal was according to the traditional format. Nobody complained, a close friend of his had mentioned some humorous and homely reflections about the man concerned, and we had heard some of his favourite modern jazz. Many said it was a 'lovely service'. Frankly, God would have been an embarrassing intrusion.

Nothing more could have been done or said. Once we had focused on the deceased's family, work and interests, who was I to pronounce any kind of judgment or make a valuation of what it had all been worth?



Ian Gregory led the Stoke on Trent group for 12 years, and was a Congregational minister for 20 years after 30 as a journalist. He founded the Campaign for Courtesy in 1984.

I was in prison ...

I have just spent three days in prison, training 'mini-Samaritans' to listen to their fellow prisoners who are in distress. It was a beautiful experience.

You probably know that middle-aged men have the highest suicide rate of any group and that the rate in prison is fifty times higher than in the general population – so it is a real problem. And for every person who commits suicide, there are many more suffering great distress at, or near, a life or death level.

There were eleven trainees and they were a self-selected group who chose to undertake the training. I have in the past led seventy-two training workshops for doctors and medical students helping them to learn how to really listen to people facing death (and other losses) and to respond to the feelings often hidden behind apparently bland words. This group of prisoners was as sensitive and responsive as any group I have ever worked with. We even explored the differences between fear of being dead and fear of the dying process. Although this training was not designed to build on their own experiences, many of them talked about their life experiences relevant to the learning.

To see eleven people leaning forward in their chairs with eyes totally engaged after three days was a powerful indication of their eagerness to understand, and to learn how to support their fellow men.

Unexpectedly for me I was reminded of my years working in a hospice. When people are dying, most cease pretending – the bullshit stops and people share who they really are. In short they become beautifully human (if allowed by those around them). These prisoners had stopped trying to appear brave, strong, capable, sensible or good, as so many people try to appear during life. They have become honest and vulnerable, and allow their weaknesses to show. Dare I say they are humble?

I felt I was with human beings who were being real. They were also beginning to understand how to allow their fellow prisoners in distress to be their real selves. Once we acknowledge our vulnerability – become as little children (Matthew 18: 3) - we can begin to change and live more fully.

We asked ourselves why we 'enjoy' sad films/stories. I suggested it is about seeing people in their vulnerable humanity, often triggering memories of our own life experiences and our compassion. Only in the last few days I read about humans being 'hard-wired' for compassion. We are also, evidently, hard-wired genetically for survival of self and tribe, and the balance as to whether compassion or self-survival dominates will depend on many factors, some cultural and many circumstantial. A lesson for us all is that if we treat prisoners as fully human beings, they respond as such.



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Paul banged on about prisons and I am sure all the prisoners he referred to were not brave Christian martyrs. Christ said "... I was in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25: 36)

It can be an unexpectedly rewarding experience.



Hugh McMichael is a member of the Malvern PCN group, was a hospice doctor, humanistic psychologist, and finds humanism and Christianity compatible.

Heaven Lies About Us

My child unbidden

Puts her hand in mine,

To cross the road.

A grandchild summons me

To share her treasures.

My wife catches my eye

And smiles,

Across a crowded room;

My mother asks me,

Just before she dies,

"Son, are you happy?"

The sun comes out.

Brian Wilson



**A Day in the Fountain
with Mark Oakley, Canon Chancellor of
St Paul's Cathedral**

Mark Oakley loves poetry and at the PCN 2015 Spring Conference in Bloomsbury Baptist Church in London he emphasised the intertwined nature of poetry and religion in thought provoking, entertaining talks laced with humour and emotion.

The day ended with members reciting poems discussed earlier in groups and then commenting on them - a memorable conclusion to a great day. Later feedback from many of those present indicated that for them this was one of the best PCN events ever.

The edited and indexed set of 2 DVDs is now available for £10 inc p&p (see below).



**Thursday, 1 October - Friday, 2 October 2015
Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury, Shropshire**

This workshop will be held in the birthplace of Charles Darwin to offer the opportunity and forums to share ideas and learning around compassion, to debate and build bridges, to identify questions that require exploration and to form new alliances with leading experts and thinkers in the field of compassion.

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Tickets: One day = £175.00 / Two days = £300.00

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Molly Scott-Cato is Member of the European Parliament for South West England, and speaks for the Green Party on finance. Previously a professor of economics at Roehampton University, she is the author of *Green Economics* (2009) and *Environment and Economy* (2011).

Jonathan Rowson is Director of the Social Brain Centre at the Royal Society of Arts, where he is conducting research on spirituality, neurology, social change and the environment. With the RSA he has just published *Spiritualise: revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges*.

Tickets: £18 for Green Christian members (£20 after 31 August 2015). £20 for non-members. £5 with student card.
For booking forms and more information on the Joy in Enough project visit www.greenchristian.org.uk/joy.

I am part of all creation;
my words, my actions, my thoughts,
my hopes and dreams
are shared with all that is.

This knowledge is beyond my imagination, for now,
but I am called to share its knowing,
to be a conscious part of all that is..

The Knowing

Psalm 139 for today's world

There is no hiding in the knowing
for we are all one.
There is no escaping,
except through denial and rejection,
the creation of my own reality apart from oneness.

Creation has formed me;
the atoms that give me form are a part of all that is,
all that has been and all that will be.
I share them with everything and everyone
within this world and beyond.
I am wonderfully and fearfully made
as is everyone and everything
in the sphere of creative energy.
We are what has always been
the source of all being
the past, present and future;
a reality beyond our humble imagination
but we are called into this other reality,
into the knowing.

The knowing calls everyone
but some are afraid,
fearing that which they see as unknown
when there is nothing unknown in oneness;
this fear opposes the love that is oneness,
this fear creates divisions and hurt and anger,
but love can drive out fear
and in the oneness, the knowing,
love is all there is.
A different way of living,
a different way of seeing,
a different way of being;
we are known
and we are called in to oneness.
To be is to be one.

Heather Whyte is a minister of the URC in the
South West. She combines writing with artistic
reflections to offer meditations for everyday use.