

# Progressive Voices



Mar 2021, PV36



# I Am

I am the kiss between two lovers' lips,  
My voice the urgent cry of each new-born;  
I am the cup which each believer sips,  
My eyes take colour from the sky at dawn.  
I am the mystery of the book of life,  
The door through which all come and all must go,  
The cord which binds together man and wife,  
The faith that sends the sower forth to sow.

**My name is Love and I am God.**

I am present in the mirth of children playing;  
To loving generous hearts I hold the keys.  
I am the mantra which the world is praying;  
My song is carried forth across the seas.  
You may trace my certain promise in a rainbow,  
Hear my whisper in the dying of a storm.  
I am with you and will evermore remain so,  
And lead you through life's night to heaven's dawn.

**My name is Joy and I am God.**

I am the hope dispelling sin's depression,  
The courage which can conquer all your fears.  
I am the absolution at confession  
Still present with the passing of the years.  
Mine the power to ease away all earthly sorrow,  
Love that through this life will ever seek and guide.  
I am the open challenge of tomorrow,  
My hand outstretched to bring you to my side.

**My name is Peace and I am God.**

Elaine Stevenson

# Contents

- 2 Poem: I Am
- 3 Welcome; Membership; Staff & Trustees;
- 4 Chair's Letter
- 5 Faith After Doubt
- 6 Making Peace with ...
- 7 The Apostate's Creed; Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture; Tax Justice
- 8 Whence such Wisdom?
- 9 Poem: Crucifixion?
- 10 Elijah Interfaith Institute
- 11 New land, church and horizons
- 12 Dark Angelic Mills
- 14 Outside of the bubble
- 15 Cross or Glory - you choose?
- 16 News from local groups
- 17 The Galilee Course
- 18 Reviews: Ineffable Love, The Gospel of Eve, Mandala, Keeping Alive the Rumor of God, A Future that's bigger than the past, Closing Ranks, Christmas, But Where Are You Really From?, Taking Heart, Traidcraft, The Godless Gospel, The Black Church, Love Mercy, Christianity Expanding, The Gathering, Always a Guest
- 23 Poem: Colston's Fall
- 24 Made of Stories



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

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## Progressive Voices

is the magazine of  
Progressive Christianity Network Britain  
[Registered Charity No. 1102164]  
We are part of an international network of  
progressive Christian organisations.

## Cover Image:

Miriam Subirana, 'Genesis of Flourishing together'  
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# Welcome

In the midst of winter, lockdown, home schooling, Covid, and all the other pressures on us - peace be with you.

In the midst of worry, absence, frustration and confinement - peace be with you.

In the midst of renewed friendships, hobbies and interests - peace be with you.

In the midst of it all - peace be with you.

Welcome to the 36<sup>th</sup> edition of PV.

Enjoy!

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## Copy Deadlines:

**June: Friday 30th April**

Sept: Friday 9th July 2021

Dec: Friday 5th Nov 2021

Mar: Friday 21st Jan 2022

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# Chair's Letter

The pandemic continues to make life difficult for all places of worship. Cathedrals, churches, mosques and gurdwaras report large financial losses during extensive periods of lockdown. The Bishop of Manchester has said he fears for the viability of rural churches with small, elderly congregations. Covid-19 has to date cost the CofE about £40 million in lost income, according to The Church Times. Westminster Abbey relies for 90% of its income on paying visitors, which means a projected loss of over £12 million to date.

The other side of this picture is more encouraging. Religious organisations have been quick to support their communities – through foodbanks, doorstep visits to lonely people and now some cathedrals are hosting vaccination centres. Many have turned to online worship and report record numbers watching services on YouTube or Zooming in. But what will the future hold for the Christian Church, here and indeed across the world? What changes will the pandemic have made on church attendance? Will online worship continue to be part of the Sunday offering? I have no better idea than anyone else but I was intrigued this week to read an edited extract from a recent Grove booklet, entitled: *'Leaving Church. What can we learn from those who are done with church?'.* Irrespective of this pandemic, we know that churches here, as elsewhere in Europe and in the USA, have been haemorrhaging members. What are the reasons behind the statistics? You will no doubt wish to give your reasons which would be fascinating to hear. The authors offer some insights: First they suggest, having interviewed many 'Donewiths', that some people cease to want to commit their time, money and effort into projects, priorities and values of a church community which have ceased to resonate with them. Furthermore, if some people in the church are abrasive, unpleasant, or see the world or 'God' very differently, why spend time belonging? Secondly, they recognise the deep human need to belong and that 'church' has offered that, both to those in the pews and to the locality. However – possibly encouraged by the pandemic - some people have found that belonging to a more dispersed community, such as the Iona community or indeed to networks like PCN, has offered a form of community which makes less demands but still offers a sense of identity. Others may attend a cathedral, slipping in and out without commitment.

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Thirdly, and I think more significantly, churches often seem busy places: jobs to do, tea rotas to fill, children to be 'taught', choirs to rehearse, the poor to be fed, a petition to be signed. All good, but this can give the impression that the life of faith is one long list of things to do. I can think of many people in my past congregations who have valued the chance to make the coffee, to look after toddlers, to arrange the flowers; such tasks have enhanced their week. Equally, and this is what the booklet is saying, there are many who come to our churches with deep questions about themselves, their identity, questions about God and meaning. The booklet, coming from an evangelical stable, does not press questions such as rejecting bad theology, and most churches' unquestioning attitude to doctrines and dogma. Could it be that many "Donewiths" feel they have 'done altogether with' the claims of religion and are content in seeing Jesus as a moral teacher? Some members, I know, have given up on church, and are 'post-church' for many different reasons. Most members though do still belong, and some are ministers or are in other leadership roles. Some cling on because of attachment to friendships and to the community served. Others are in churches which are progressive, open-hearted and inclusive. All of this reflection leads me to seek **YOUR** views on why you left church, why you go to church, what are the challenges for a progressive Christian minister, and where are the progressive churches? Will this time have given food for thought about – the nature of 'God' and a world of suffering, what people have experienced through being a dispersed online congregation, will church communities 'build back better' and what might this mean?

**Do please send into us at PCN your experiences and thoughts about church and the way forward.** I shall be having Zoom conversations with those PCN members who are clergy and lay leaders. I do hope you will let our web editor know of churches you long to reconnect with because of their progressive vitality. And if your Sunday morning gives you spiritual refreshment, let us know that as well!  
**Go well, stay safe.**

# Faith After Doubt

## An introduction by Brian McLaren

For 24 years I was a pastor in whom thousands of people confided. And in the 14 years since leaving the ministry, thousands more people who have heard me speak or read my books have reached out to me. They write long and anguished letters or emails, full of apologies for taking so much of my time, or they approach me after speaking engagements, daring to trust me with their secret, often in tears.

I understand, because I too am a doubter. And I am a believer. And a doubter. Sometimes, I flip back and forth five times in one day, and sometimes, I'm both at exactly the same time.

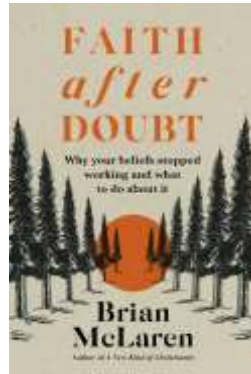
My first sustained spell of doubt came over me like a fever when I was in secondary school. I thought I could fight doubt and vanquish it, and it would never return. Some years later, when wave after wave of doubt kept rolling in, I thought that doubt would vanquish me and my faith would never return.

I felt that I was peeling an onion, layer, by layer, by layer, and feared that when I was done there would be nothing left but the burn and the sting of tears. Eventually, I came to realise that doubt was a companion, every bit as resilient and persistent as faith, and she wasn't going away. I realised that she had some things to teach me, and I decided that since I couldn't shut her up or drive her away, I might as well learn from her. She has turned out to be a tough but effective teacher, and a difficult but faithful friend. In this book I share some of what I've learned from doubt, starting with this: you and I don't have to keep our doubts a secret any longer.

Some people tell me they never have doubts. Faith comes easy for them, they say, at least it has so far. But many, many, many of us do have doubts, and sometimes our doubts seem far more powerful than our beliefs. It's hard enough having doubts; it's impossibly hard to have them and feel you must pretend that you don't. Right now, let's grant one another permission to doubt. And let's see the doubt in ourselves and each other, not as a fault or failure to be ashamed of, but as an inescapable dimension of having faith and being human, and more: as an opportunity for honesty, courage, virtue and growth, including growth in faith itself.

I promise you: there is faith after doubt, and life after doubt, and life with doubt. If you thought life before doubt was good, wait until you see where doubt can lead you and what doubt can teach you.

You don't have to feel ashamed or be afraid.



## Review: Faith After Doubt by Brian McLaren, Hodder & Stoughton

Brian's greatest gift is communication. As the reader it almost feels as if you are having an intimate conversation with a mentor. Here it results in the realisation that it is perfectly normal and healthy to hold doubts within our faith.

There have been various books exploring "Stages of Faith", which can be dry and academic with obscure categories like *intuitive-reflective* which can be hard to remember, even if we do understand them. Brian brings the subject to life in a far more readable manner, with interesting chapters describing real conversations on doubts with a variety of people, from well-known authors to unknown fundamentalist pastors.

Each chapter is followed by suggested questions for reflection and action. In *Part One: Your Descent into Doubt* – he highlights the feelings brought on by doubt when our beliefs stop working and classifies our doubt as loss, loneliness, crisis, doorway and growth. In *Part Two: All in Doubt* – the chapter begins "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – If Christ can burst out these words from the cross then surely we are permitted to doubt too (*paraphrasing Yann Martel – Life of Pi*). Here Brian discusses experiences within earlier stages of faith and, in contrast to other authors, his four categories are easy to understand and remember: simplicity, complexity, perplexity and harmony. When we reach *Part three: Life after (and with) Doubt* he considers living in "Harmony" by probing communities, theologies and spiritualities of "Harmony". I do find the trouble with labelling stages is that it can lead to a feeling of superiority over others who we perceive to be in an earlier stage. Brian helps in this area by highlighting "*a spirituality of harmony is letting people be where they are and not trying to convince them to be where I am*".

A highly recommended book.

Paul Onslow

## Faith After Doubt Brian McLaren Online event

We are delighted to host, in partnership with Hodder & Stoughton, this event to introduce Brian's latest book.

Further details to follow.

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# Making Peace with ...

## Making Peace with Time and with Ourselves: The Joy of Caring

We have probably never had so much and yet been so dissatisfied. What kind of society have we built whereby, despite having so much, we continue to be so unsatisfied? It is a huge question. One key to answering it may be in the fact that many people shape their life around what they believe they should be, and not who they really are. Often, someone realises that they only exist insofar as they answer to external expectations. They discover that they are trying to think, feel and behave in the way that others believe they should. It is as if we want to be someone that we aren't.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard, S. (1941) *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton University Press) points out that the most common despair is to be in despair at not choosing, or willing, to be oneself; but that the deepest form of despair is to choose 'to be another than himself'. Actually as Carl R. Rogers (Rogers, C.R. (1961) *On Becoming a Person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company) writes: "to will to be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite to despair"; and this choice is the deepest responsibility of man."

The best decision one can make is to choose and wish to be what one really is. I experience wholeness in being myself and allowing others to be themselves. It helps me to inquire into the essential questions: How can I get in contact with the real self that lies underneath my superficial behaviour? How can I become myself? Stripping off armour, discovering and realizing ourselves to our full potential makes it easier for us to flourish from our healthy and vital core.

Sometimes we need to deal with our own confusion, our lack of trust or clarity, to work out how to manage our fear of pain. Finding inner clarity is also a part of taking care of ourselves. Writing, painting, drawing or talking to someone helps you to become clearer. Sometimes we need someone else to help us out of the hole we are in. Someone to help us to be, and to flourish. If you need this, don't hesitate to ask for it. Sharing with others is one of the activities that allows you to discover yourself and to realise your full potential.

To bring out the desire and drive to fulfil myself, I need to learn to accept myself.

Acceptance allows me to get close to my authentic self. How do I know that I am closer to myself? When I am aligned and present to myself, I flow better, I feel able to change, recognise and accept my feelings and experiences. I am more creative and establish authentic and close relationships. I allow myself to be myself, perceiving and



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discovering the existing wholeness and harmony in my true feelings and reactions. I do not try to mask my experience, or give it a form that distorts its true meaning. Trying to pretend that I feel something that I don't feel. I am transparent. I flourish.

When human beings flourish, they express the best of themselves. They are creative, intuitive and generate life. They promote innovation and renewal from the centre of their being, connecting to others with joy and positivity. Barbara Fredrickson, proponent of positive psychology, defines flourishing as feeling fully alive, being creative and resilient (capable of overcoming adversity), feeling that we are growing and having a positive impact on our environment. When we live and flourish, we are connected to our vital core, that is, with what gives us life and drives us to grow and fulfil ourselves.

Another aspect to consider in order to realise our full potential is the need to be at peace with time. We can also give ourselves permission to not always be hyper-responsible, with our schedules weighed down with obligations. To know how to let go of the "to do" lists and be able to enjoy the landscape, the streets, the birds, the clouds, looking around us and living in the moment.

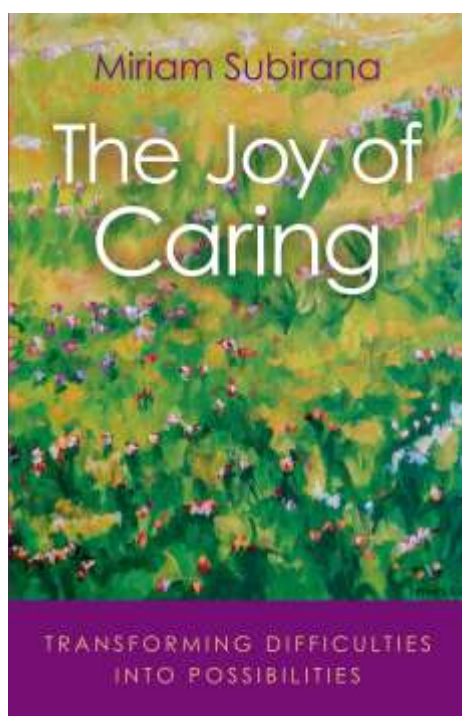
To take care of yourself means to keep periods of time free of obligations, leaving them available for yourself. It means dedicating a space to yourself, to be alone, quiet, in silence or with inspiring music. Not always being in a hurry. Having space and time to enjoy sacred spaces of creative emptiness; calming

down,  
listening to  
and feeling  
oneself;  
eating in  
peace, eating  
well and  
healthily; to  
not be  
constantly  
doing; tidying  
up and  
cleaning; to  
be perceiving  
and breathing  
consciously;  
stretching  
and flexing



Miriam Subirana,  
'Genesis of Flourishing together' used with permission





our muscles. It means knowing how to *be* without doing anything. Something new can arise out of the nothing, an inspiration or a refreshing thought. It is a space that allows us to see a relationship we hadn't seen or become aware of how we are and what is going on for us.

To make peace with time is to make peace with ourselves. It is not about managing time. Time is always full of abundance and potential. The clock ticks – it doesn't ask us to manage it. What we need to manage are our minds and our actions. Let's be present to what we do and think. If you are brushing your teeth, brush them consciously, not thinking about other things. If you are walking, do it being present, with attention. That way, you won't trip, the walk will revitalise you, and your mind will open to new possibilities.

The aim lies in getting the action to take place without forced effort. Doing things out of enjoyment, not obligation. To balance doing, with ease and enjoyment at work. Enjoying what we do and keeping the mind happy, allows us to work well and without stress. To achieve this, we need to live connected to what moves us and provides us with life and vitality, giving us passion and motivating us. Often anxiety and tensions suck vitality from us and exhaust us, which leads to doing more, and achieving less.

To make peace with time, trust is fundamental. There are people who find it difficult to stay with the uncertainty of not knowing and not having answers. They want everything to be clear, under control and planned. They find it hard to be here and now. To live in peace with time we need to be present in each moment, to let go of the previous moment, not hang on to prior events and be available to the new that is seeking to be born.

[www.miriamsubirana.com](http://www.miriamsubirana.com)

# The Apostate's Creed

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**Please get in touch if you'd like to invite me to a Zoom group for a discussion?**

## Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture Sat 9th October, 2021

The Church at Carrs Lane, Birmingham

We are pleased to confirm that **Deshna Shine**, the former Executive Director of ProgressiveChristianity.org has agreed to give the fifth Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture.

We will provide further details as they become available.



[www.catj.org.uk](http://www.catj.org.uk)

Church Action for Tax Justice is a programme of Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (a Body in Association with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland).

It stands for a fairer, greener tax system where taxes are set to reflect the Common Good and individuals and corporations pay their fair share.

# Whence such Wisdom?

As well as the shock, fear, loss and uncertainty which the Covid-19 crisis sprang upon the world, it set off an explosion of empathy, kindness, courage and self-sacrifice – in a word, *goodness*. But there was also a surge of its partner *wisdom* – principles, values and judgments which help goodness to be applied in the complex web of human life. The surge was so strong and evident – here I offer four examples that made we wonder what was ultimately behind it: *whence such wisdom*?

## Four Aspirational Statements

Flicking through a construction company's annual report I paused to check out its 'mission statement'. One paragraph which caught my attention was:

"We are committed to ensuring that our workplaces are free from discrimination and that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. We strive to ensure that our policies and practices provide equal opportunities in respect of training, career development and promotion for all existing and potential employees irrespective of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, nationality, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation".

In mid October, the Premier League took out adverts in various newspapers announcing in huge font 'NO ROOM FOR RACISM ANYWHERE – *not online, not in the stands, not at home and not on the streets*'. The declaration was backed up with the launch of a series of new diversity and inclusion educational materials. The League pledged to tackle hate and injustice, support players and their families who suffer abuse, and increase diversity in all areas of the game.

The autumn National Trust magazine contained a major statement of intent headed 'Everyone Welcome'. Tiger de Souza, Inclusion Director, affirmed the Trust has 'a duty to play a part in creating a fairer, more equitable society' and has two key responsibilities: to make sure everyone feels welcome, and to present colonial history in a thoughtful way to promote debate and reflection.

Meanwhile, in its efforts to tackle the race crisis engulfing Scotland Yard and to improve public trust, the Metropolitan Police has resolved to raise the percentage of BAME recruits, from the present 15%, to 40% by as soon as 2022 thereby reflecting the demographic of the population it serves. What's more, officers will have to justify stop and search to community panels.

## What has prompted them?

So, what are the recent and historic stories behind these and other visionary declarations of intent? What conscious and subconscious influences are involved? *Whence such wisdom*?

An obvious prompt is the manifest inequity of our



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society which the coronavirus crisis has thrown into sharp relief. Another is the Black Lives Matter movement, given global publicity by the shocking spate of murders by police in the United States, most notably that of George Floyd.

## The deeper question

The deeper, more searching question, is why should so many people – individually and collectively – find such things as injustice and racism repugnant and want a society that is fairer and kinder? Why in 2020 did people of every age and walk of life show such self-denying compassion? How is it, for instance, that footballer Marcus Rashford's plea for hungry families met with such broad approval? What are the root causes of such enlightenment? *Whence such wisdom*?

A cynic would say 'The institutions are just polishing their image'. Publishing their ambitions may well enhance their reputation, but their aspirations ooze too much passion to be merely image polishing. The actions they have already taken suggest there's no need to doubt their sincerity.

Some observers would claim this burgeoning goodness is no more than 'common sense'. This, I believe, is simplistic thinking. Because, too often, what might appear to be wise and prudent and worthy of general approval does not win anything like universal support: you and I may think Climate Change is horribly real or that everyone should welcome an effective Covid-19 vaccine but, in Trumpland for instance, millions of people assert global warming is nonsense and coronavirus vaccines a socialist plot.

Is the answer to be found in our genes? It seems plausible that groups of genes rather than single ones may influence our attitudes and conduct, predisposing us in one direction or another. Does social context provide the answer? There's abundant evidence that family upbringing and communal pressures shape our values and behaviour, contributing to the kind of people we become. After centuries of debate, there seems significant consensus in both science and philosophy communities, that both nature and nurture strongly influence our personal and collective values and behaviour.

Perhaps the ideals of justice and inclusion are the result of evolution. It's been argued that the survival





instinct driving the evolutionary process is actually tilted in favour of advantageous co-operation rather than destructive competition. In his book 'The Age of Empathy', Franz de Waal makes a strong case that this is so in the animal world and, as *Homo sapiens* is part of this, mutual support (embracing compassion, justice and inclusion) is fundamental to our existence, let alone our flourishing.

*Whence such wisdom?* A range of influences shape our world view and conduct generating, amongst much else, good and wise aspirations and actions.

#### **The influence of religion – bad and good**

Surely, one such positive, if not supreme, influence *must* be religion! But hold on a moment ... Religion, at both the institutional and personal levels, has anything but clean record. Hindus once cremated living widows and still widely cling to the dehumanizing caste system. Some ultra-orthodox Jews still deem it their duty to kill one of their number who works on the Sabbath. Some Islamists terrorize in the name of Allah.

Think of the bloodshed of the Crusades in the name of Christ. Or the persecution and torture of the Inquisition. Or slave ownership and trading that was once blessed by the Church. Or the Evangelical churches that passionately back gun-ownership in the United States. Or the appalling level of clerical sexual abuse, and its cover-up, in the UK.

No, religion surely has no right to claim the lion's share of credit for either past or current bursts of goodness and wisdom!

*And yet...* in spite of its historic failures and enduring flaws, religion has also offered the world much of incomparable worth: Hinduism, its rituals celebrating the gift of light and stories testifying that goodness is stronger than evil; Judaism, its time-honoured Ten Commandments and many other laws still shaping life and legislation today; Buddhism, its profound insights on suffering and well-trodden paths to moral enlightenment; Islam, its five pillars of faith extolling beneficial practices like generous sharing, regular spiritual nurture and abstinence from alcohol.

#### **The Way of Jesus**

Christianity or, echoing the earliest disciples, The Way of Jesus has surely offered humanity profound insights and wisdom; values and principles of solid and permanent worth; examples of human behaviour at its finest; truths and insights that have stood the test of time; sublime beauty expressed in art, music and architecture; memorable stories and word pictures like 'going the extra mile' or 'turning the other cheek' that are part of everyday speech; actions that have improved or transformed the lives of countless millions; a quality of love and forgiveness that has broken down impossible barriers and given joy and hope to multitudes.

#### **The rubble of religion and the Water of Life**

In spite of the rubble of religion – shamefully much of it Christian detritus – the Water of Life has percolated through it, consistently ennobling the human scene in a myriad ways. In fact, I dare to suggest, consciously or more likely subconsciously, Jesus of Nazareth remains a significant source of goodness and wisdom.

*Whence such wisdom?* Jesus, surely, can take at least some of the credit. If so, our mission to promote his Way is surely as vital as ever.

Christians of a progressive persuasion, with our emphasis on his life and teaching, need to play a crucial role in this endeavour.

## Crucifixion?

Was the crucifixion of Jesus  
something like the shattering  
into countless fragments  
of his Spirit-filled life?  
Transformed by God  
and scattered far and wide  
by the wind of the Spirit  
those fragments  
became myriads of tiny seeds of faith  
which grew and continue to grow  
into the world-wide movement  
we call the Church,  
as indestructible through human wickedness  
as that God-filled life  
which continues to inspire us?

It is so true  
that God's apparent foolishness and weakness  
are infinitely stronger  
than human wisdom and strength.  
Thanks be to God!

# Elijah Interfaith Institute

## Working together in a time of coronavirus

At the recent meeting of the Elijah Institute Board of World Religious Leaders, Frank Griswold, retired presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA gave an interesting interpretation of Paul's Body of Christ. In keeping with interfaith acceptance of all religions, he thinks that the Body must encompass those of all faiths.

Elijah Interfaith began when Rabbi Dr Alon Goshen Gottstein was driving past some of the sites associated with Elijah in northern Israel. He had a moment of clarity that would change his life. Alon realised it was his calling to create the framework - an organisation or a movement - that would bring together scholar-practitioners, those deeply connected to a religious tradition and deeply knowledgeable about it, to share their wisdom. So in 1996 the Elijah Interfaith Institute came into being.

Alon's enthusiasm and ability to enthuse others for the cause of interfaith dialogue has persuaded faith leaders from across the religious spectrum to join him. Many are present and past members of the Board of World Religious Leaders, while others contribute their scholarship to Elijah's work.

For those of us who are based within the UK, the array of Christians is fascinating in itself: Bishop Lennart Koskinen from Sweden, Bishop Domenico Sorrentino, Roman Catholic Bishop of Assisi, Sahak II Mashalian, Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul) are just three. From Judaism, Dutch rabbi Awraham Soetendorp and Israeli David Rosen, past Chief Rabbi of Ireland are members. Islam is represented by, among many others, the American Imam Plemon El Amin. Buddhist leaders include Ven. Prof. Jinwol Sunim from Korea and Hindus include, Swami Rameshwarananda Giri from Spain and Acharya Shri Shrivatsa Goswami from India. There are also representatives from the Sikh and Baha'i faiths, but the list of individuals I have given are those who formed the group I had the huge privilege of facilitating at the Board meeting in late November and early December 2020.

In better days we would have met in Jerusalem, where Elijah is based, but this time we went online via Zoom. The small breakout groups had the task of considering the effect that coronavirus had on each leader personally and in terms of leadership. Bishop Koskinen described the moral stress he felt - responsible for so many people and unable to be there for them in the way he would normally expect. How could he comfort those who mourned? How could he support his clergy? On top of this he is an ethical adviser to politicians - what a responsibility.

Rabbi Soetendorp reflected on the 75 years that have passed since the Second World War and



## Heather Smith-Serjeant

is an Anglican Priest working in Salisbury Diocese, and a chaplain for a supported housing charity for young people.

wondered how people would reflect on this pandemic in 75 years' time? He found the idea sustained him, together with the comfort he had found by starting every day with a song!

Jinwol Sunim lives 3000 feet up a mountain - a rather solitary life. He took to social media, writing encouraging and reflective pieces every morning.

Domenico Sorrentino talked about the questions people asked. What's the sense of life? Where is hope? He pointed out that we are weak. No scientist can be our God. But like the Rabbi, he found strength in song. 'We opened our windows and sang', he said. For him, crisis was a kind of grace.

On that last point, Swami Rameshwarananda Giri agreed, at least in some ways. It was a grace because it allowed him, and the monks he lives with, to practice meditation without interruption but nobody else could come and practice with them. He believed, however that their meditation would bring good things to others - rather as Christian monastics who see their vocation to prayer as being something that affects the world around them, even though they have retreated from it. He also commented that the experience reveals something about our social conscience and our ability to live together. 'Nobody' he said 'can be safe alone'.

A common thread running through everyone's contributions was a reflection on community. Did it draw us closer together? How would it be when all this is over? Was it a good thing because it drew families closer together? Where would it all lead?

What are we to make of all this as progressive Christians? My overwhelming sense was of the sheer humanity, goodwill and common experience in a time of unprecedented (at least for this generation) crisis. It brought into focus, as interfaith discussions always do, the importance of religion as a way of encouraging us to take care of one another, to look after one another and to be kind. Differences in belief didn't feature in the conversations, just the need to support those who come to us and for whom we bear responsibility. I think the Jesus we read of in the NT would approve.

The three-day meeting ended in prayer and finally with a song from Bishop Sorrentino of Assisi. He sang, in Italian, the Canticle of the Sun. We had created a community in the time we were together and it was an emotional end. It moved me to tears.

[www.elijah-interfaith.org](http://www.elijah-interfaith.org)



# New land, church and horizons

After twenty years of ministry in the Church of England my family (wife Sue, our sons Fergus and Patrick (19 & 20) and the two dogs) left our vicarage of nine years and moved to a post in the Church of Ireland, on the west coast of County Clare.

We left the town centre parish of an established church, where the assumption was that most people in the community were nominally C of E, and where I had an accepted and prominent role as 'vicar'. We moved to a much smaller town centre church, of a tiny minority community of Irish but also English, Welsh, Scottish, South African and American Anglicans. As most Anglicans are on the East Coast or the midlands, we are smaller still located in the extreme west coast. Fortunately, we were familiar with the area, having holidayed here since our boys were small, so we generally thought we knew how things would be, notwithstanding the culture shift of moving from the C of E to the Church of Ireland.

Of course, we had not reckoned on moving into the Rectory three weeks before the country went into a Covid-19 lockdown that was to last for most of the year, save for a brief reopening in the summer, and which now looks set to continue past March. At times, as now, we have not been able to move further than 5km from our home, despite the fact that my 'parish' spans the entire county.

As is my wont (as an ex-television and advertising executive) I arrived with to-do lists, pre-prepared strategy documents and a list of short, medium and long-term objectives. Naturally, I expected to adjust them as I went along - I did not expect to drop them almost entirely. What is the old joke - How do you make God laugh - share your plans?

And so I found myself having to learn video and audio recording and editing techniques and software, the nuances of camera technology and making a DIY teleprompter - such is Covid ministry. We set up our own YouTube channel, which now has around 200 videos comprising services (including Tenebrae and a one-man Easter Vigil) plus talks, sermons and prayer meditations that we send out via email and Facebook. We have a new website with a selection of videos from the 'greats' including Marcus Borg, Bishop Spong, Karen Armstrong, Dom Crossan, Richard Rohr, Mathew Fox, Walter Bruggemann, Tex Sample, Yvette Flunder and Robin Meyers. We have blogs and vlogs, podcasts and resources, plus links to theologians and organisations such as PCN Britain.

Religion in Ireland today might surprise you; the past is so filled with stories of abuse and exploitation, the recent Mother and Baby Homes report not least among them, that those outside this island could feel that Ireland still treads that



**Kevin O'Brien** is Rector of St Columba's Church, Ennis with Kilnasoolagh and Christ Church, Spanish Point.

traditional and superstitious path. But things have been rapidly changing. Repeated shocks and scandals mean that the old 'theocracy' is largely a thing of the past and, whilst there is still respect for clergy and religious who are selfless and loving, the people have learned to distinguish the wheat from the chaff - with little sympathy for the latter.

In the Church of Ireland, certainly in my brief experience, the ministry of women clergy is such an established fact as to rarely be a topic for comment, compared to the CofE diocese I left where the issue was still fraught and divisive. The majority of my fellow local clergy have also expressed support for same-sex marriage blessings and I suspect that this would also hold true in large part for weddings too.

Whilst certain parts of the country still have a reputation for discord between traditions, I have to say that in County Clare the ecumenical situation is welcoming, genuinely respectful and mutually supportive. I share in morning prayers every two weeks (when restrictions allow) with the local Catholic Bishop, and my Bishop and he work well together, including on video. Indeed, I have been asked to video more of their 'double-acts' for future videos and services with joint blessings etc. Certainly, I am not so dewy-eyed as to deny that many unresolved issues remain between us, but to address them there must be good will, and I have encountered that to a heartening degree.

All in all, I feel that the time is ripe to start a group for progressive Christians here, although we may be widely dispersed and will need to be more online based than meeting regularly. I very much hope that you will one day have PCN Ireland as a partner.

Please do visit our website: [www.clareanglicans.ie](http://www.clareanglicans.ie) and YouTube channel, search under: **St Columba's Church, Ennis** and subscribe if you would like, comments and constructive criticism would be welcome. We are slowly building a presence and there is great potential for the progressive Christian voice to be heard in Ireland.

People in Ireland are clearly 'done' with authoritarian religion, but thankfully they are not done with faith.



# Dark Angelic Mills

## A Poetry Residency at Bradford Cathedral

Huge disused mills. Ornate Victorian buildings, some falling into disrepair. The gold dome of a mosque dominating one vantage-point. The green presence of hills surrounding the city. A cathedral faced on one side by a South Asian arts centre. This was the cityscape that confronted me when I became Poet in Residence during Bradford Cathedral's centenary.

St. Peter's church gained cathedral status in 1919, an elevation fuelled by a desire to recognise the new industrial cities and in particular Bradford's status as wool capital of the world. A century later, with the collapse of that industry, there are areas of poverty and high unemployment. The population is diverse. The strong Muslim presence, as well as the growth of secularism, means that the Christian faith has lost the dominance it exerted in 1919. So what is the role of a cathedral in this changed landscape? Or to put it another way, where can we find Christ in this inspiring but challenging city?

Of course, the Victorian glory-days were deeply compromised. One of my poems gives voice to a fish choking to death on industrial dyes, and to a teenage millworker whose life is a round of drudgery. My poem-sequence starts, not with humankind, but with the geological Genesis which created the dales, introducing the presence of rock and water that will recur as the narrative unfolds. It tries to create a 'Godscape' which is destroyed by a version of the Fall, the Norman Conquest which laid waste in an act of revenge and reduced land to ownership and monetary value. As I examine key moments in Bradford's history, these themes of imperialism and power will recur.

Bradford was granted cathedral status on 25 November 1919. When I made a poem out of the contents of that day's local paper, I found a jumble of moving, parochial and sometimes bizarre items, but no recognition of the significance of that year in India, where the appalling Amritsar massacre had sparked a movement of non-violent resistance, which in time would change the city-scape and population of Bradford. This demographic change caused strains and some conflicts, particularly the 2001 riots which traumatised the city and for a while made Bradford a byword for racial and religious tension. And yet, as I chart in my poem **A Divided Place?** stories of hope and creative collaboration have emerged out of that darkness. When the English Defence League tried to incite racial hatred, the city took charge of its own identity through an inclusive 'We are Bradford' movement. Women for Peace twinned Muslim and Christian women and handed out green ribbons which, flown from taxis, turned each driver into 'a roving ambassador for the



**Diane Pacitti** is currently contributing poems to two ecological projects based at St. James' Piccadilly.

republic of peace'. When the angry demonstrators burst out of the station, they were met by women singing a peace song.

Bradford's bishop, Toby Howarth, who has a doctorate in Islamic preaching, is used to outsiders murmuring sympathetically how difficult his role must be. He replies, 'No. It's easy.' It's easy because Muslims speak the language of faith, share scriptural figures with Judaism and Christianity, and in Bradford many are eager to learn how others conceive God. This is clear in the acclaimed Bradford Literature Festival which, under Syima Aslam's Directorship, presents events which draw on the insights of many faiths. It closes with **Sacred Poetry** in Bradford Cathedral, a venue valued by other faiths who see their own contribution take its place within a centuries-long tradition of worship. In this spirit, some of my poems explore concepts and people common to Christianity and Islam. **Mary / Maryam** seeks to draw out the spiritual riches embodied in the mother of Jesus in both the Gospels and the Quran, and ends:

One woman  
through whom two faiths that have vilified and fought  
can exchange gifts.

Like most cathedrals, Bradford's offers a sense of being held in deep time through 'a hospitality that includes the dead and the living'. Even as it gathers today's Bradfordians for communal events and worship, concerts and exhibitions, it surrounds them with the city's history, recalling its origins in a fragment of Saxon cross, remembering its grief in the stained glass depicting First World War soldiers, or in a plaque commemorating the fire at Valley Parade football ground. Polly Meynell's superb textiles, one of which appears on my book cover, are crafted from Yorkshire worsted and Asian silks, and in their semi-abstract design balances the dark verticals which suggest disused mills and 'the gravity of history' against sweeps of silver-white which evoke the dynamic presence of hope. And, surrounded by representations of Christ and the saints, held in a faithful rhythm of prayer, there is a flow of faithful worshippers and brief tourists, culture-seekers, school groups and vulnerable people sitting down to sandwiches and companionship. As I say in another poem, we are all 'unwilling pilgrims', impelled to engage in a spiritual journey, weighted with heavy baggage and misled by our chosen



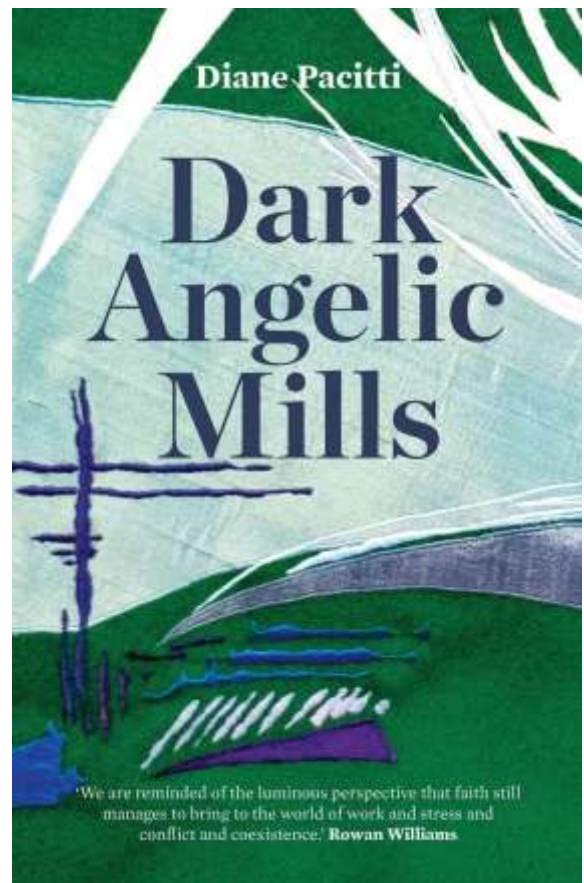
maps, and yet capable of moments of transcendent joy.

There are many stories and people in **Dark Angelic Mills**. A presence of strong women, including Mary Magdalen, Emily Bronte and Hilda, who is truly a saint for our divided times. Well-known figures, like the philanthropic mill-owner Titus Salt, as well as the fictional Billy Liar. A stress on the importance of hidden stories, unknown people, such as the young Muslim couple who sat with a terrified elderly woman through the night of the riot. An interweaving of the great northern saints and Biblical figures with people associated with Bradford, such as the preceding of the Passiontide sequence with a poem devoted to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who travelled to the city to issue the Bradford Declaration, a challenge to the church of the Reich, years before his martyrdom in a concentration camp. And a question for me: how would I present Christ in this challenging landscape?

The poem **Northerner** presents Jesus as a citizen of the unfashionable north, earthy and direct, yet giving out 'a silence that belonged to the rocky heights and the deep dales', scorned by the 'braying elite' of the capital, putting the stuff of ordinary life into his stories unlike the 'big literary noises' of the Empire. In another poem which came in a terrifying flash, Jesus is forced to wear the purple robe of Rome as Pilate foretells how his Church will assume the form of imperialism, greed and violence. There is a process of double-take between the Gospel accounts and this new meaning, as the 'innocent blood' which stains the robe belongs to both Jesus and future victims killed in his name. As another poem about the cathedral's origins makes clear, the Church is bitterly compromised and yet there is always the promise of renewal. Rowan Williams writes in his foreword, 'We are reminded of the luminous perspective that faith still manages to bring to the world of work and stress and conflict and coexistence.'

In this context, we need to re-think the images through which we envisage God. I replace the cathedral's schematic, all-male icon of the Holy Spirit with a woman weighed down with items shopped for others, struggling to envisage God after the death of her son, struggling to explain and translate the ecological zeal of a tattooed daughter to a husband of rigid religious faith. (I am convinced that a major task of the Spirit in our fast-moving and diverse world is one of translation: between different generations and faith traditions, between religious and secular descriptions of experience.) The 'slow-descending blossoms of fire' which briefly surround this woman are snowflakes lit red by a curry-house front.

When I present the changes in both the city and its cathedral during that centenary-span, certain events and landmarks act as metaphors. The line of stone



monarchs outside the Victorian City Hall presents one version of English history: rigid, set in stone, linked to traditional power. In contrast, the nearby Mirror Pool, a place of pleasure, attracts a flow of diverse people: 'Bradford reflected as fluid presence, made and re-made.'

Turning to the Cathedral, I describe the service which celebrated the restoration of the bells, in which the guides around the building were Muslim schoolchildren. This service reflected the Cathedral's role as a gathering place for the city in all its diversity, speaking to the 'Godself' in all. In this city of 'crossed continents, thrown-together faiths,' its task is:

To site a crossing;  
To sight hope.

**Dark Angelic Mills.** The Blakean title encapsulates a paradox at the heart of this remarkable city. Bradford is all too familiar with the darkness of industrial decline, yet it is also a city of faiths, a place with a burning passion for social justice, a City of Sanctuary and a hub of neighbourliness. The loss of empire-powered wealth has opened out new creative possibilities through people once subject to that empire, now claiming Bradford as home. A Church which no longer claims automatic dominance can more faithfully live the presence of Christ. I am convinced that if Jesus was born today he would choose Bradford rather than an ancient and wealthier cathedral city.

Sets of theme-grouped questions based on the poems are available on request.  
[commsandevents@bradfordcathedral.org](mailto:commsandevents@bradfordcathedral.org)

# Outside of the bubble

Do you recognise these three people? What is your impression of them? Have you ever met them? How have you formed your impression?



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I have never met Donald Trump. My very negative feel towards him comes from quotes and one-sided reports that I have heard, particularly after the Washington riots. All of my friends feel much the same as I do. We all appear to be in the same attitude bubble. Yet many people in the USA still have a very positive view of him, often gleaned from equally entrenched media bubbles that seem to come from alternative universes to mine.

Having lived in India, and seen the film Gandhi several times, I am very positive towards Mohandas Gandhi. But others see him differently. Churchill, his contemporary, once called him a “malignant subversive fanatic.” Now others have negative attitudes towards Gandhi for various reasons.

Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize laureate, is widely admired for her courage and vision. Yet she nearly died at the hands of the Pakistani Taliban. Their Muslim passion leads to different allegiances to hers.

It is so easy to develop conscious or unconscious biases. This is so in all areas of life, and includes religious belief systems, which can quickly become augmented into worldviews.

In terms of belief bubbles, a Christian may be assured in their belief, drawing on history, wisdom and evidence of their ‘truth’ foundation. But a Muslim will have an equally impressive foundation, as may a Buddhist, or an atheistic worldview like Richard Dawkins. They can’t all be right. But, perhaps all are reaching for a reality beyond comprehension. How can so many people become so entrenched in such diverse ‘certainties’?

I have been part of a diverse local group with a common heart for community building. When the Charlie Hebdo killings happened in France in 2015, we became aware of our different reactions. Apart from the disquiet we all felt about the killings, most of us principally valued free speech, while some Muslim friends were more concerned about the blaspheming of the Prophet Muhammad. We held a public meeting on the theme *Social Unconditioning*.



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

Each of us were to consider how we had become socially conditioned, focusing on our own conditioning rather than on that of others.

Another factor to consider, is that some Christians seem to have more in common with interfaith colleagues than fellow Christians. What kind of intersecting bubbles are at play in this case? How have we moved into the standpoints that we have?

I also ask myself why, in my 20s, I stopped drinking alcohol, became a Christian, or the other steps which have led me to here. There is logical reasoning behind the decisions but a fundamental factor in my case was that I encountered a fellowship of people whose philosophy and welcoming atmosphere I really resonated with. So I gradually conformed to their norms and beliefs.

Helpful to me was pondering the ubiquitous but inaccurate anecdote of the ‘boiling frog’. If a frog hops into a pan of boiling water it immediately jumps out. But if placed in a pan of cold water that is brought to the boil, it just stays there. Some beliefs, which we gradually grow to accept, we wouldn’t dream of associating with under more objective circumstances. We would immediately leap out.

Many people though are primarily moulded by the beliefs and culture that they are born into and grow up with as children. Research shows that we are all deeply subject to the resulting unconscious bias.

A primary hallmark of a new inclusive narrative would be that, while maintaining our faith, we would question our beliefs. We would accept that, like the anecdotal frog, had we been nurtured in a different culture we would probably - equally sincerely and intelligently - have identified with its beliefs and norms. If we would acknowledge this within ourselves we would be able to walk in the shoes of, and to stop demonising, ‘the other’.

This certainly doesn’t mean that we have to accept the beliefs of others. But, at a time when many are retreating into identity groups and ceasing to talk to the ‘other’, how do we build trust with those on other sides of the fault lines and make this a priority in our daily commitment? Whether for Americans following their political upheaval, us British following Brexit, or people trapped in their / our religious narratives, this is a challenge facing all of us who have conviction that our shared humanity overrides all other group allegiances.



# Cross or Glory - you choose?

Recently someone asked me about the difference between a theology of the cross and one of glory.

The theology of the cross has its roots in Paul who, in 1 Corinthians, spoke about the cross of Christ as foolishness to the philosophers and an affront to religion. But it really started with Martin Luther, who, opposing the scholastic theology of his day with its mastery of the known universe and philosophical analysis of the being of God, developed the theology of the cross as that which renders human reason mute (when self-confident) while at the same time creating space for the real presence of God in Christ. For Luther, God is the hidden God, who reveals Godself under God's opposite: suffering, human flesh, sickness, torture, death. God is known as Christ on the cross. The Christian life, too, is marked by this hiddenness. God often feels absent from every day affairs. Suffering comes to all, especially, or so it often seems, to those who belong to Christ. This is how Luther made sense of revelation, the Christian life, but also justification by faith. Grace is not something earned or something that is reasonable. Its operation is beyond human grasp. That's what grace means. The righteous are justified by grace through faith.

Calvin, on the other hand, was much more focused on God's glory. Calvin's (and especially the Calvinists') emphasis on the predestining God is an attempt to penetrate behind the mystery of God. There is an implicit claim that it is possible for the human mind to think through the nature and works of God. God is glorious, sovereign, Lord of all, etc. for Calvin, whereas Luther was content to speak of God as the One who is present in the suffering Jesus. Speaking of God as glorious is one thing, of course, but thinking you'll be able to analyse what this means is another matter altogether.

The theology of the cross and the theology of glory are two ways of approaching revelation, God, and the Christian life. Throughout history and even in our day, you can observe this difference. Karl Barth, for instance, in his attempt to thwart the self-sufficiency of modernist reason in the form of 19th-century theological liberalism, used a philosophical model in which the glorious God is so wholly other that there is no way we can ever fathom who God is or grasp revelation. God reveals only indirectly. Behind everything that we label revelation or an act of God, God turns out to be gone, vanished. Indirect for Barth means that God is never tangibly present in our reality. It is ironic that Barth attempts to go against reason by means of a glorious God (hidden behind a hidden One). The presentation of God as Wholly Other doesn't sit easily with his insistence that God really reveals. Hence, his theology is marked by a certain irrationalism.



## Juan Manuel Arias Perea

holds Bachelors of Education, of Theology, and is a Master's student at The Theological Community of Mexico.

Bonhoeffer revived a true theology of the cross. He too resisted liberalism's attempt to reduce revelation to a human possibility but did so by making Christ the centre of the tangible and real presence of God among humanity. He gave priority to revelation, not by making an irrational move ("you just gotta believe it, there is no reasonable way to get there") but by making Christ the centre of an encounter that needs to be accepted on its own terms. There is reason involved, but it is chastised reason. As for Luther, for Bonhoeffer God is simply present in Christ and Christ is simply present in the Church. In Christ, God is tangibly present. We cannot and should not say more about God than is given to us in Christ. You get to God by participating in the community of faith through which you encounter the living Christ. In Christ, God is "have-able" and graspable. He also gave a new twist saying it did not merely indicate the hiddenness of God or of the Christian life. For him it also meant joining with Christ in existing for the other, especially, when this entails suffering. We express God's hiddenness as expressed in Christ through our own lives and bodies.

The theology of the cross continues to captivate people's imagination, as it does mine. But the theology of glory is never far away. Think of evangelicalism in North America with its self-sufficient knowledge concerning all things doctrinal. Biblical inerrancy is the trick that is performed to gain access and dominion to absolute divine truth. One can also think of Christian Apologetics that considers itself able to prove the existence of God. For all its good intentions, its approach is just that of human reason against human reason. It uses the supposed "think-ability" of God to think God after human thought. It usually doesn't convince people of the truth in Christ and always falls short of that truth without recognizing this.

The theology of the cross continues to be relevant today as it shows an affinity with the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment project and modernity. Only, it doesn't stop where postmodernity stops. The theology of the cross is also consonant with the honest existential experience of many people in our society today who experience the absence rather than the presence of God. A theologian of the cross will say that this experience of absence might well be an indication of the hidden presence of God, for after all God is hidden in God's opposite.

# Local groups

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

## **Birmingham** Richard Tetlow

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Probably, like most people, we've found an interesting difference in atmosphere and intensity with Zoom groups. That has meant we have lost the presence of a few members but we've tried to keep in touch. We now meet monthly on the first Mon each month, alternating evenings and afternoons. We admired the quality of the five films, with their artistry and content, though would have liked more direct connection made with PCN. Gareth Davies led us with his reflections on R.S. Thomas with all 12 of us bringing along our choice of Thomas' poetry. It worked especially well aided by the introduction by our art enthusiast, Brian Parr, of a Paul Cezanne painting, 'The Card Players' about which Thomas had written a poem. This was a very appealing approach. In Feb we shall each bring along a religious painting to speak on its attraction to us.

## **Cardiff**

Andy Long

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Like many groups we have been unable to meet together since last Feb. At the beginning of lockdown we were hopeful that we would be able to reconvene, but that was not to be and with no plans to meet we took the decision to formally close the group. Those members who are members of PCN will remain so, and if there is a demand for another Cardiff-based group then the door is open for anyone to pull it together. We all wish to say that PCN as a whole, and the group itself, have been a great source of support, encouragement and relief over the years that we have been together.

## **Newcastle**

Liz Temple

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Our meetings continue on Zoom. In Nov we enjoyed an interesting time with Muhammad, local leader of a Muslim youth association which has the motto, 'Love for all, hatred for none'. Lively discussion followed. We learned much from Joyce in Dec about our Christmas traditions.

Carols were originally dances, which were then banned by the Puritans, and re-introduced by the Victorians (often set in our chilly wintertime). We can thank Charles Wesley for much of the theology in our carols. In Jan we turned to the "Made of Stories" films, choosing to watch and discuss Holly's and Nathaniel's, both of which were powerful and thought-provoking in different ways. Though the films are short they portray real dilemmas and personal journeys. We found that the films stimulated the sharing of our own stories, and in the discussions we were encouraged to ask ourselves challenging questions, - much food for thought.

## **Oakham**

Peter Stribblehill

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We look forward to returning to the remaining films in Apr. We completed our discussions of the Made of Stories films in Dec. To take us to Easter we'll have meetings based on the Mark Oakley PCN event from Oct 2019. In between we'll be having less formal ones on issues we decide as we go along. So we will meet about every other Tue. After Easter we usually take a lengthy break until Sept. We hope to have our away-day at nearby Launde Abbey in Jun or Jul, but that will depend on any covid restrictions.

## **Rugby**

Nicola Phelan

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We now have two Zoom invites so we can resume after a short break. A member who moved has been able to join us, which is brilliant. We have continued discussing the Made of Stories films. In Dec Greg's stimulated discussion about the nature of communities, how they change, and the importance of local leadership. The idea of a gym allowed the church building to again become a place where people could have all kinds of fellowship. Churches with cafes are great places for many types of nourishment, companionship, and conversations where faith is often explored without being forced. Could other buildings similarly be resurrected? Jan brought us to Patrick and Davy's and the Northern Irish experience of communities which have rarely mixed and a telling that focussed more on culture and traumatic

history than religious belief. The development of the Ice Hockey team was inspired, and a member said this was built into the Good Friday agreement. We talked of other divided communities and how a common interest that leads to friendship is often the way forward and should be encouraged.

## **Tavistock**

Mike Dennis

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After a break, we recommenced meetings on Zoom. We continue to view the Made in Stories films. On the first occasion we watched Gemma and Holly together, but are now sharing the clips in order to allow more time for discussion and socialising. The response is positive. The availability and content of the films is being shared with a wider potential audience and I await feedback in the hope that others may be encouraged to join us.

## **E. Shropshire** Ben Whitney

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David Wood, our previous Convenor, moved away last year. Many thanks to David for his sterling work in supporting our group. We have now renamed ourselves 'East Shropshire and Wolverhampton' to reflect our membership and hopefully widen our appeal. We have not been meeting during the Covid crisis but plan to resume in Apr, probably by Zoom, to discuss Richard Holloway's excellent new book: 'Stories we tell ourselves'. (See my review on the PCN blog in Dec). To join in the discussion at 7.15pm on 12 Apr, email and I'll send you the link. I have also recently joined with Abingdon to discuss my book, 'The Apostate's Creed: Rethinking Christianity for the C21st'.

## **West Yorks**

Michael Burn

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We had a fascinating and stimulating evening together so my thanks to them for arranging that. Other groups may like to do the same. "Thinking Faith" continues to meet regularly over Zoom. At our first meeting of the New Year on 11 Jan we watched another of the PCN short films, "Holly's Story", followed by an interesting discussion on Climate Change and Protest. Our next meeting on 1 Mar will consider "Greg's Story", about life on an inner city estate. The following meeting will be on 19 Apr with the subject still to be confirmed.



# The Galilee Course

## An alternative to Alpha

"You write one." That was the challenge given to me by my Team Rector, when I complained that I hadn't been able to find an introductory course to Christianity to my liking - one that was a clear and progressive alternative to the Alpha Course.

I had shopped around, looking for something that somebody else had written, and I bought a few of them. But they missed what I consider to be the tap root of the gospel, that is, the struggle for peace and justice. What I wanted was a study course for people who didn't know Jesus or Christianity. How do we share the gospel with new folks without loading them up with a bunch of mythology which they will eventually need to discard?

So, although I was a bit taken aback by the Team Rector's suggestion, after some reflection, I decided to take up the challenge.

I almost named it the "Alfie" Course, inspired by the song, "What's it all about, Alfie?", from the 1962 film. I thought it would be a clever, and slightly mischievous, twist on the Alpha Course. Heard with ears of faith, there's some good theology in it:

'As sure as I believe there's a heaven above, Alfie,  
I know there's something much more  
Something even non-believers can believe in...  
I believe in Love, Alfie.'

But in the final analysis, I came up with a different name. Not as funny, but more related to the content of the course.

I had the idea that we would metaphorically return to 1st Century Galilee to see where it all began, to view the person and the teachings of Jesus through the lens of historical, social and economic context. And hopefully, borrowing the words of John Dominic Crossan, by "getting the 1st Century right, 21st Century faith might follow."

So I named it The Galilee Course, and found a lovely image of a lone fisherman in a boat pushing



**Tim Yeager** is a US immigrant and newly retired (but active) Church of England priest living in St Albans

out from shore into the misty twilight of the Sea of Galilee at sunrise, not sure of what the day would bring. But with heart and mind open to possibilities.

I haven't been to seminary. For most of my life I was a lawyer and a trade union organiser. But I knew what got my interest and brought me back to church after years in exile, and I tried to bring some of that to the Galilee Course.

It was originally designed as a live study group, structured along the lines of Alpha but with different content: a meal, a presentation with visual aids, small group discussion and Q&A. The response was quite positive, not just from new people, but also from parishioners for whom the conventional teaching was unsatisfying.

The presentation uses lots of images, an occasional bit of music, some quotations to contemplate, and discussion starters. We use only one book, the Bible. I recommend the Oxford Annotated Study Bible (NRSV).

There are eight sessions, starting with "surprising" facts about Jesus and life in 1st Century Galilee:

- 1: Jesus – a 1st Century Jew in Galilee
- 2: The Bible Jesus Knew (Old Testament)
- 3: The New Testament
- 4: Teaching of Jesus: Abba, Love and Forgiveness
- 5: Teaching of Jesus: Kingdom of God
- 6: Easter and more
- 7: How do we respond?
- 8: The Christian life

With the pandemic, I have taken the Galilee Course online via Zoom. It's the same format as the in-person course, but sadly, without the fellowship of a meal. It was advertised on the PCN website and in PV, and by posting on my own Facebook page.

The response has been overwhelming! More than 120 people wanted to enrol, from several different countries and time zones. At this point we have just under 90 participants divided over three nights per week, and 35 on a waiting list for another running of the course after Easter.

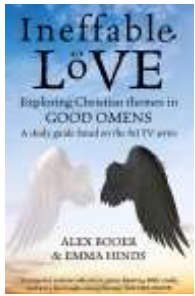
It seems that there is a need for something like this!

To find out about future courses please contact:

**07804 614245** [ryeager@gmail.com](mailto:ryeager@gmail.com)

# Reviews

**Ineffable Love by Alex Booyer and Emma Hinds, DLT**



I was quite surprised to see someone had written a Christian devotional based on Good Omens, considering the show's initial release in 2019 sparked a petition

of 20,000 American evangelicals calling for it to be cancelled due to 'blasphemous content'. Based on the novel by Pratchett and Gaiman, Good Omens is a parody of Christian end times theology in which an angel and a demon form an unlikely friendship and conspire to prevent the end of the world.

The authors have selected six key themes from the show, and dedicate a chapter to each: justice, body and matter, power, beliefs, hope and love. Each begins with a relevant Bible reading and prayer, followed by a five-minute clip to watch. After the clip, there is a theological reflection with questions for discussion. It is possible to go through the book on your own, but it would be much more interesting to do it as a group.

This is a refreshingly original and relevant devotional, with a progressive theological outlook. I finish quoting from the introductory chapter: "In substance, the story is about the frustrations of longing for justice in an unjust world and what it means to be Good or Bad, Right or Wrong. It's about the choices we all have to make to move through this world, and it asks of us the question: What is it that saves us?"

**Erin Burnett**

**The Gospel of Eve by Rachel Mann, DLT**

As an Anglican priest, feminist theologian and broadcaster, Rachel is an insightful and incisive contemporary voice. This is her first full-length novel, and is an exquisite

work that will pull you into its world and will not let go. A quiet theological college near Oxford may not seem the obvious setting for a thriller, but it is here we are introduced to a young ordinand,



Dr. Kitty Bolton and the circle of fellows. Within the chambers of Littlemore we are invited to explore this group, the conflicts they experience and the dark path that they are irresistibly pulled towards. The book is set in the 1990s, against an elaborate background of medieval scholarship. Contrasts of culture and humanity are woven intricately through the thread; Kitty's modest background is apparent compared to the privilege of her associates, their close companionship is marred by jealousy and anger, their spiritual path as ordinands clashes and jars with their human emotions. Their fascination with medieval practices and traditions reveals both a glorious richness and a hideous darkness. Most of all this is a book about passions. The spiritual desires of the characters conflict with their humanity and are expressed in irresistible covetousness, unenviable social manoeuvring and, to be frank, quite a lot of sex. It is this open and genuine depiction of the ordinands that brings this beautiful novel to life, darkness and light pulling against each other. In a recent book launch Rachel supposed that what she wanted her readers to take away was a sense of the mysterious motivations that can affect us all, but particularly religious people, we want to pursue the good but somehow end up doing wicked things, we are messy people. A thrilling and evocative tale, I heartily recommend it for lovers of great fiction, you will lose yourself in the story completely.

**Andy Long**

**Mandala by Steve Regis**

[www.harwoodpublishing.co.uk](http://www.harwoodpublishing.co.uk)



Steve, at one time, as a dustman and, because his love of books was known to colleagues, they passed on to him any that were thrown out, including old family Bibles and John

Bunyan's "Pilgrim Progress".

Years later, when going through a period of questioning about his self-understanding and future life, he dug out his well-worn copy of Bunyan's book and looked through it. He laughed at some of the old-fashioned ways of expression, but realised that many of the issues Bunyan's Pilgrim faced were still relevant centuries later. So he started a present-day

pilgrimage through the fantasy land to see where it led him. This is the result – a mythical and allegorical piece with some poetry added for good measure, and a final personal letter written to John Bunyan.

Tom is the pilgrim character making his way through the fantasy land. It takes him to places almost beyond his imagination – from Van City with every pleasure you could want, to the Back of Beyond, where he is mentally and physically challenged to the point of desperation. On the journey Tom meets a range of characters who make him question almost every idea and belief he has ever held. It takes in issues relating to the environment, genetics, evolution, politics, religion, cosmology and the existence of God in the age of quantum mechanics. Steve was for some years a minister of the United Reformed Church, then a social worker and counsellor. His thoughtful and imaginative writing has produced a story for our time. This is not a book to read through quickly. It benefits from pondering over a section at a time.

**Jim Hollyman**

**Keeping Alive the Rumor of God by Martin Camroux, WIPF & Stock**



Martin is a founder of the network Free to Believe, which has been a great help to liberal-minded people within the United Reformed Church and beyond.

Through its

conferences and reading parties it has heard from many liberal and progressive Christian thinkers. Martin rightly regards himself as being in the great liberal tradition of scholarship and freedom, such as the repudiation of fundamentalism by people like H. E. Fosdick. In these times of loss of membership and the attacks by the newer atheists such as Richard Dawkins, which group all Christians as literalists, more are questioning traditional ideas about God. Some progressive thinkers also use words like non-theism. This is an honest searching by people who may nevertheless struggle with the feeling that there is something more. Events such as wars, genocides, pandemics, and natural disasters, raise doubts about concepts like an almighty God. Indeed, "almighty" is an unfortunate word. It is an attempt



to translate the OT Hebrew normally rendered “Shaddai”- a word that has been argued about constantly. This doesn’t solve the problem of a loving Creator who seems choosy about where to intervene and save the day. On the other hand, Jack Spong, Richard Holloway and others, are often entranced by the loving nature of Jesus and still need the Church. Martin has written a helpful survey and has expressed his own love for great liturgical occasions that help to keep him needing the God concept, while avoiding treating these matters in a literalist fashion. Yet the liturgical words may also be a barrier when we try to give them meaning. Many of us may have similar feelings that may be nostalgia – or they may point to that something other. I am not sure where that leaves us, but I’m sure it is important for us all, whether we are nearer to the idea of God – or to some aspect of “loving spirit.”

**Ron Lewis**

#### **A Future that’s bigger than the past by Sam Wells, Canterbury Press**



The focus here is the theology and business methods of the HeartEdge network, based on ‘commerce, compassion, culture, and congregation’ and centred on St

Martin-in-the-Fields.

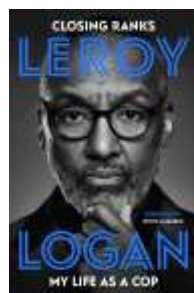
The background chapters make it of wider interest. Oscar Wilde’s critique of top-down charity is the start point for the compassion chapter. Wells compares this to the benefactor and steward models of financial management which should be replaced by more adventurous partnerships and enterprises, with beneficiaries on the charity boards. However, his attempt to put music at St Martin’s under in-house management has led to disquiet, expressed in the Observer’s 20 September headline: ‘unholy row as leading London church axes musicians.’ After 30 years and 800 concerts, one of the ensembles describes this as an ‘act of callous and unchristian behaviour’ which ended a ‘flourishing community effort’ by email and without consultation. The comment suggests this book’s approach to management has not worked perfectly. The chapter on nurturing cultural creativity sees culture as both social construct and artistic activity.

A congregation that enjoys its diversity becomes a sign of blessing to others. He gives the example of a Norwich church which developed its ‘sharing God’s gift of abundant life’ through the arts; but which is now part of the Holy Trinity Brompton network, with a rather different focus. Some passages are bewildering. Wells suggests ‘smartphones’ should not become ‘transitional objects’; does he mean the opposite as he has earlier suggested ‘the human problem is isolation’ and ‘the fragility of relationships’?

The book concludes with a template for evaluating a church which makes health rather than success a criterion. He writes from his position of leading a large congregation with immense cultural capital; it is not clear this book will help smaller churches. His focus on management rather than individual faith and living has not produced his best writing.

**Peter Varney**

#### **Closing Ranks by Leroy Logan, SPCK**



Leroy Logan liked to describe himself as “a senior cop doing work of prominence around race, equality and justice.” If that sounds a little unlike what the police usually do, that is precisely the point of this book. Logan’s career choice was always more than a job; as a committed Christian, it was also a mission. But it was an unusual choice for a black man to make in the early 1980s: his father opposed it, many of his peers thought he was selling out and the response of many of his white colleagues ranged from simply shutting him out to being abusive or deliberately trying to undermine him. His faith strengthened and sustained him as he struggled on two fronts – against crime and against the racism he encountered in the Metropolitan Police. To that end he helped to set up the Black Police Association within the force to be the voice of its minority members. Because of his postings, particularly two terms in the troubled precinct of Hackney, Logan also became something of a voice for the disadvantaged communities he served. We hear that voice in the Stephen Lawrence and Damilola Taylor cases; we hear that voice in

church, community, school and even police projects designed to uplift, protect and nurture young people. We hear that voice telling the politicians and the police that their approach to social problems is heavy-handed and misjudged - the answer lies in community upliftment and a multi-agency approach – but those in authority fail to listen. This is an important book; it is a pity that it seems to have been written very much “as told to” and makes for rather dull reading.

**Alastair Smurthwaite**

#### **Christmas by Nick Page, Hodder & Stoughton**



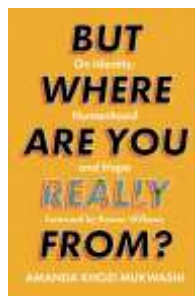
Page describes himself as an ‘unlicensed historian’ and he writes with a lightness of touch that may look, at first sight, flippant. In practice, rather than debunking,

Page demythologises our Christmas stories. He does it with a gentle touch that looks at the ways in which, and the reasons why, the Christmas stories and practices have become part of our culture, both for the church and for society at large. His logic is persuasive. The story and traditions have emanated from the church over the centuries. Western society, dominated by secularism and capitalism, has increasingly named these as ‘pagan’ and has thereby given itself permission to celebrate and enjoy them free from any religious association. There are many widely believed myths. Coca-Cola did not, contrary to popular belief, invent Santa Claus, and mistletoe was simply one of the many seasonal green plants brought in to decorate the church during winter months. The practice of a kiss under the mistletoe comes not from remnants of an ancient fertility rite but a cartoon of 1784. 25th Dec was a date chosen for unknown reasons by the western church in the mid-fourth century, and there is no evidence that it was the date of a Roman festival colonised by the Christians. Nick Page deals with the biblical birth story and how and why it has been embellished over the centuries. Santa in his many appearances has his own chapter as do the ‘trimmings’ of Christmas like crackers, presents, turkeys and all the rest. This is a

great read and it allows reflection on what Christmas might mean beneath all the stories and all the baubles.

**Christine King**

**But Where Are You Really From? by Amanda Khozi Mukwashi, SPCK**



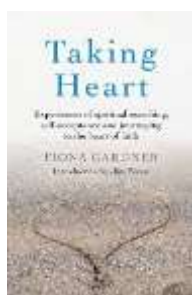
This short, thought-provoking book provides a new perspective on identity. Its heart is autobiography, its conclusion an unapologetic challenge to the ways people of

colour are evaluated and excluded. Now the CEO of Christian Aid, Amanda's story starts in Zimbabwe and Zambia. Attention is given to post-colonial and economic change, but most significant is the loss of the tradition of living in harmony with the environment, described in the chapter 'The trees know my name', where the impact of devastation and deforestation is shown. The next chapter 'Then the singing stopped' movingly describes the courage and wisdom of her ancestors and the loss of much of their culture. She writes 'We were indoctrinated into believing that everything that was traditional was bad and evil. The question ... is meant to rob you of your values and your identity ... and [leads you] to the belief that nothing good can come out of blackness.' Readers will find the concluding chapters demand both attention and a reconsideration of our attitudes to these themes. Asking the question in the book's title, places her on a scale so others can know where she is in relation to them. But 'single narratives are not who we are, we have multifaceted stories to share'. Her journey has been 'about allowing identity to emerge from within me, celebrating without guilt, shame or arrogance'. 'God shaped me and spoke me into being. He created me to be a manifestation of his love.' She concludes: 'I hope you are inspired to ask "who are you" rather than "where are you really from?"' Using powerful language, the author has successfully replaced polarising perceptions with the celebration of universal connections.

**Peter Varney**

**Taking Heart by Fiona Gardner, Christian Alternative**

Life in general, and the spiritual life in particular, is often described as a journey. For Fiona, psychotherapist



and spiritual director, it is a search for a purified heart, where the heart represents the intuitive core of our identity and compassion, expanding into a search for

authenticity, courage, and goodness. Many of us regard ourselves as seekers, and, faith-based or secular, aspire to reach a state of confident wholeness and self-acceptance. It means facing up to dark or shadow sides of the self – letting ourselves down when we get angry, being complacent about others, feeling empty, switching off from life. Jung's idea of individuation weaves its way through the book, but the dominant theme is that of seeing and having God in our way of living. Fiona draws on the work and example of Thomas Merton to highlight how the search for God shapes our inner lives and promises transformation.

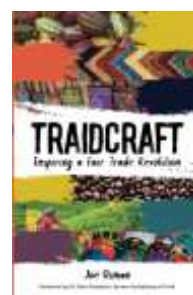
As a result, the search for God is a search for authenticity. All this may sound abstract, so Fiona bases what she says in four plausible case studies – two men and two women, all going through change and crisis. You will find them realistic: all of them grow emotionally and reflectively, deal with their 'demons', become wiser fuller human beings, and in different ways closer to God. Her final point on the central role of prayer is not made dogmatically or exclusively. Her case studies find various solutions or epiphanies, opening up to the possibility of self-transcendence in many ways, including meditation and fuller social engagement.

Space is allowed for in Gardner's interpretation of this journey, while making it clear that the purification of the heart depends on the grace of God. Theology and psychotherapy with a light grounded touch, then, for thoughtful believers. Space, too, to reflect the important distinctions between empathetic counselling, spiritual direction, and proselytizing.

**Stuart Hannabuss**

**Traidcraft by Joe Osman, Lion Books**

As Traidcraft reached its 40th anniversary of creating an alternative business model for trading with developing countries, it is fitting that this should be published. Joe has been there from the beginning, a

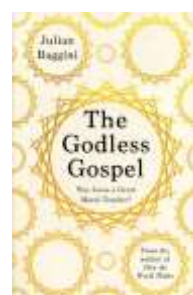


witness to the developments and changing economic environment that have shaped this journey. He takes us from the earliest days of very modest ambitions to

improve the lot of some developing world producers, through the ever-expanding range of products and services, the creation of an education charity developing the principles and wider understanding of Fair Trade, and finally to the pressures of the economic crises of the past few years which have challenged the organisation and created the need for radical change. Osman's historical account gives a clear insight into the founding principles of justice and fairness for small and marginalised producers, but also recounts how the combination of Christian values with some very astute and alternative business practices took Traidcraft from a few jute bags imported into a tiny office in Tyneside to an international movement for the certification of products and production methods which is the Fairtrade mark. But he is also clear about the difficulties of huge expansion, about the vulnerability of the organisation in times of global financial crisis, and about the struggle to maintain core values when survival is at stake. At a moment when world trade is very much in focus again, thanks to Covid, Brexit and the current Government's approach to overseas aid, this book is an important reminder of the principles which underlay the Fairtrade movement, the sense that trade isn't simply about profit or 'what's best for Britain' but is a vital signifier of our moral and ethical stance towards the world.

**Andrew Lancaster**

**The Godless Gospel by Julian Baggini, Granta**



Many of you will recall the excellent talks given by Julian Baggini and Richard Holloway at our 2019 London conference. Many more will know of Baggini's books, including 'How the

World Thinks', his Guardian articles,

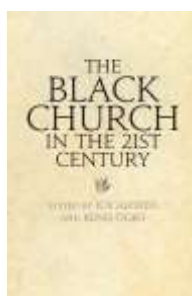


and now this very important contribution to the Christian – Atheist debate in this latest book. Baggini is a lapsed Catholic and failed Methodist (his description), a patron of Humanists UK, founder of 'The Philosopher's Magazine', and a scholar well-versed in the world's religions and philosophies. Above all, from a progressive Christian point of view, he is positively disposed to seeing the virtues of the teachings of Jesus and is genuinely keen to dialogue with open-minded Christians so that together we might seek the summum bonum, the Common Good, for our world. In the first part he attempts to root out what he considers to be the moral philosophy of Jesus, who in short he sees as a virtue ethicist. Through attention to the gospel texts, which he uses without critical exploration (he says at the outset he is not attempting to do historical research into Jesus) he examines Jesus' attitude to the law, the virtues of humility, non-judgmentalism, the place of family values and much more. For so many progressive voices, this portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth as a great moral teacher accords with so much contemporary thinking. He writes: 'His (Jesus') focus is on our becoming the best versions of ourselves that we can be.' This is not far from Bishop Jack Spong's mantra – 'to live fully, to love wastefully and to have the courage to be all that I can be'. He dialogues with four contemporary Christian thinkers – Keith Ward, Lucy Winkett, Elizabeth Oldfield and Nick Spencer – and in doing so allows a balance of argument to consider the reality of a theistic God, who he acknowledges was a reality for Jesus. There are frequent references to philosophers. In quoting from Plato's Euthyphro, he underscores the point that the gods command what is good because it is good, which in turn means that goodness or badness does not depend on any gods, that in fact the Good, not God, is the ground of morality. In the second part of the book, we go through the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, life, teachings and death, stripped away of any religious elements, not as an attempt to reconstruct a historically authentic version of Jesus' teachings, but to see what moral insights are to be found in the pages of the gospels. This is a Jefferson Bible 'in extremis.'

Overall this book is an important contribution to the dialogue which must be had between people of faith and those who see in the person of Jesus a moral exemplar. Inevitably he creates a Jesus in his own philosopher's image, and there are important issues about the whole exercise of divorcing Jesus from the religious context of his day. I would take odds with him over neglecting the political Jesus in favour of a rather detached wisdom teacher, and I think this is a result of not attending to the whole political, socio-economic matrix of the world of Jesus in the way that Crossan does. But the Godless Gospel is a must read, and should engage groups and others in a lively and hopefully, constructive debate. My hope also is that we might invite Julian to lead a day of such discussion.

**Adrian Alker**

**The Black Church in the Twenty-first Century edited by Joe Aldred & Keno Ogbo, DLT**



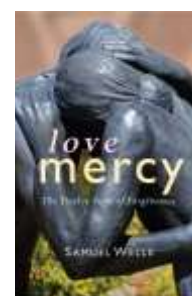
The immigration after WW2 into Britain, first from the Caribbean and later from sub-Saharan, mainly West Africa, led to the founding and growth of black churches. Many

grew from house groups, which provided mutual support for the new arrivals. Moreover, the mainstream churches, including white Pentecostals, were unashamedly racist. They also lacked an emotional style of worship, a literal reading of scripture, open expressions of the Holy Spirit and exuberant preaching. The new black churches, whose members had different histories and cultures, tended to be predominantly either Caribbean or African. These churches are expanding, diversifying and becoming richer, so that refurbished disused buildings are being replaced with purpose-built new community centres. More recently the founding elders are being replaced by younger, British-born pastors. This volume of 13 essays describes the development and contribution of black churches in the 20th century and address the challenges for them in the 21st. The 13 topics are: theology; ecumenism; the work of the Holy Spirit; gospel music; conflict resolution; politics; social issues;

elders; youth; education; health; economic; and climate change. Finally, in the light of the state of the churches described, the challenges facing black church leadership are radical in their scope. Although some social justice work is being undertaken e.g. the Pentecostal Credit Union and street pastors, black churches have tended to look inwards. The pressing need is to agree to disagree on differences of doctrine, and to co-operate with each other, different faiths, local councils and central government to combine resources to meet social needs. The strength of this analysis is that all contributors are "insiders" bringing their knowledge and experience, but on the other hand it weakens their objectivity somewhat. The copious references are useful and, for white congregations linking with black churches, this is required reading.

**Robin Story**

**Love Mercy by Samuel Wells, Canterbury Press**



This is one of a trilogy of short thoughtful meditations from Samuel Wells, the vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields and a well-known religious author and broadcaster.

He explores the ways in which we can face the hurts we feel, and those we inflict, in our dealings with each other, as individuals and communities. From family feuds to social prejudice, we often let resentment and revenge, guilt and shame, shape our responses to tensions about difference, and at worst they lead to wars. Wells provides a twelve-step programme to help us break free of what usually seems an unavoidable trap, one that reduces us in our own eyes, those of others, and to escape we ultimately need God's help. As much a book for spiritual counselling as pastoral church development, this is realistic and practical. Tensions arise in everyday life and we have to face them: this is painful and needs courage and resolution. Bad things don't go away, so how can facing the facts, the truth, help us start the process of change and reconciliation? Do we want justice or vengeance, and can we say sorry despite the pain, shame and guilt on both / all

sides? What happens where there is malice or unequal power (as in exploitation)? Can we draw trust out of fear? These form the first six steps, and readers and pastors alike can add case studies of their own. The final six take things in a theological and Christian direction. At the heart of any conflict resolution lies the search for truth, trust, and repentance. This means living differently, looking for healing like the prodigal son when he realised the need for mercy. This is the challenge of loving your enemies – not to make a creature of your hatred. Jesus is the model of what peace looks like. The last three steps are – be reconciled, healed, and raised. Wells is a first-class guide.

**Stuart Hannabuss**

### Christianity Expanding by Don MacGregor, Christian Alternative

Don MacGregor

**Christianity Expanding**  
— Into Universal Spirituality



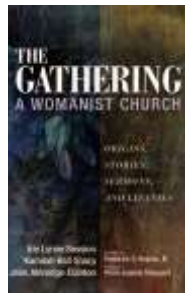
If you are grappling to articulate why Christianity has to evolve, what are the changing and forming worldviews, the scientific and ecological ones that demand it does so, and what are the seeds of hope for its future buried under centuries of medieval doctrine; then this is a must read. It won't waste your time as it is tightly, yet profoundly, written containing within only 98 pages text, questions for reflection and suggestions for practice, websites and further reading in each of its six chapters. It gifts its readers, in the words of one reviewer, 'with a revitalisation of Jesus's call to love one another and affirms that we have now reached the stage in our collective evolution where we can begin to do so at a global level'. Yes, it is bold, whilst also grounded, in its vision of an emerging possibility.

MacGregor draws on a deep understanding of Christianity, the perennial wisdom teachings, science, and the world today. In chapter 1, answers to 'Why Should Christianity Change?' are offered, looking at concepts that are not life-affirming, what was quashed in the creation of the Church, and what needs to be added. In chapter 2 he identifies changes, both global and local, showing the extent of inter-connectedness, and the way that humanity is evolving in its level of consciousness. Chapters 3-4 focus

on the evolving scientific worldview and the ecological imperatives. This brings him, in Chapter 5, to a glimpse of Christianity Expanding to play its part in a universal spirituality. The chapter is too rich and inspiring to summarise but fortunately three further books are planned.

**Fred Pink**

### The Gathering by I.L. Session, K.H. Sharp, J. Aldredge-Clanton, WIPF & Stock



The big dream of The Gathering is, 'a world of loving-kindness, peace and equity, a world where people of all races, genders and cultures are free to become all we are created to be in the divine image'. This vision is from African-American Womanist theologians, who analyse faith and scripture through the lens of Black women's experiences of racism, classism and sexism.

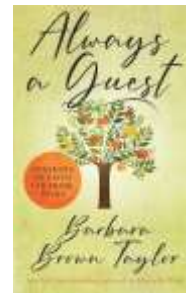
It charts the start of the first Womanist Church. It was founded to give a space for preachers to speak and be heard. 'Church' was not the original intention but the book reveals how people hungered for a church that was relevant to them. The book includes: testimonies of founding partners, a selection of Womanist sermons and litanies, with a framework and guidance on starting a similar church. As a white English woman I wondered if this book and was for me. The authors are clear; the Gathering welcomes all whilst challenging everyone to hear the voice of the marginalised and work for their liberation. It challenged me to be more aware of cultural, institutional privilege and bias and, following Jesus' example, to do something about it.

For anyone looking for new ways of doing and being church here is a potential model, starting from listening to needs, developing a framework and establishing a partnership of co-workers. Interesting features include: 'Tag-Team' preaching; 'Talk-Back-to-the-Text' where attendees can interrogate text or sermon; egalitarian partnership structure; use of social media for advertising and live streaming; liberating transformative worship. It offers a pattern for emerging

church and will challenge readers to confront bias and prejudice. It encourages a model of radical discipleship. It could herald a community where people are free to become all they are created to be.

**Meryl White**

### Always a Guest by Barbara Brown Taylor, Canterbury Press.



I never thought I would enjoy reading a book of sermons! This is a collection of 31 which were delivered between 2006 - 2020. Apart from being a well-respected author, Taylor is also a

priest in the American Episcopal church. She left parish ministry some years ago and now teaches. She still preaches as a guest in other churches, hence the book's title. These are as much essays as sermons, each based on a passage from scripture which Taylor then expands upon in her own unique way. Her sermons are not simple exegesis, they are much more, and bring a refreshing perspective to some of the passages we may have heard many times and perhaps are too familiar with, both the words and the interpretations. So, for example, there is a sermon on the Good Samaritan, except it's called the Good Heretic for the obvious point which may have passed us by that the listeners to Jesus' story would all have been Jews and who would have regarded Samaritans as heretics. Reading the story from that perspective provides a different understanding. Her understanding and development of Biblical passages may be different to one's own, but we will be all the wiser for it. It is a book that gives one much to think about and will provide new insights; dispensing its wisdom in manageable chunks - a good addition to your book shelf which you may return to on many occasions.

**John Hamilton**





# Colston's Fall

Not 'a baying mob'  
But the cry of the ancestors,  
The overspill of generational pain,  
Demanding to know – when?  
When will humanity be valued above profit?  
When will truth be more powerful than spin?  
When will justice be honoured above might?  
When will the silenced be given a voice?  
When will we be seen?  
When will we be heard?  
When?  
And a voice echoes through time –  
'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the  
least of these my brethren,  
ye have done it unto me.'  
And the hammer blow resounds.  
Is it finished?

Meryl White



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*This is gentle and engaging film-making*  
**Paul Northup, Creative Director, Greenbelt**

*I highly recommend the beautiful new short films from PCN*  
**Brian McLaren**

*These films invite and inspire us to engage in the holy complexity of Christianity*  
**Naomi Nixon, CEO, Student Christian Movement**

*A powerful and moving film (Holly's story)*  
**Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford**

*Spiritually generous and heart-warming, Gemma's film shows that only love can prove a faith*  
**Richard Holloway**



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