

Signs of the Times

The newsletter of Modern Church

July 2016 Issue 62

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Editorial: Passionate intensity?

Anthony Woollard

One aspect of the church growth movement, to which Guy Elsmore refers in his current series of articles, is the promotion of the 'eight essential qualities' of Natural Church Development (ncd-uk.com). These have captivated my own Diocese of Coventry, and some others, to an extent which can border on the idolatrous. But in themselves they can be useful tools for analysis, provided we remember they are not quite as neutral between different Christian traditions as they claim. They originally came out of a US Protestant tradition which tends to the conservative and the charismatic. For the rest of us, they require some translation.

Some, such as 'inspiring worship' and 'loving relationships', are blindingly obvious (or are they?) The most controversial in my locality has been 'passionate spirituality'. Does 'passionate' necessarily imply, for example, developing the feelings that lead some to wave their arms in the air during worship? In that case, some would feel deeply uneasy, and have said so at Diocesan Synod and elsewhere.

We British (or at least we white Anglo-Saxons) are not keen on what Yeats called 'passionate intensity' of any kind, except perhaps on the football field or at pop concerts. Unease with any kind of charismatic, emotional approach to faith goes back a long way. Thus, famously, Dr Johnson on John Wesley:

'Sir, the pretending to special gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing'.

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Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology.

Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England,

we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

Signs of the Times

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Signs of the Times is published in January, April, July and October.

It provides news and information about Modern Church and offers members an opportunity to communicate with each other in print. We welcome articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying graphics. Articles published do not necessarily reflect a Modern Church perspective - in keeping with our commitment to liberal theology we believe that other views should be heard.

Send material to the editor by 8th December, 8th March, 8th June or 8th September. Articles should not normally exceed 1,000 words.

Yet Johnson's own spirituality, classically Calvinist, was pretty intense in its own way. And there is a whole tradition of 'passionate' mediaeval and post-mediaeval Catholic spirituality, from the *devotio moderna* through the Counter-Reformation, perhaps culminating in Bernini's notorious sculpture of St Teresa of Avila pierced by the spear: not just passionate but positively erotic. Classical Protestantism, not to be outdone, focused on the emotions stirred by music, and gave us the *St Matthew Passion*. Closer to our own time, poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and R S Thomas have exerted influences on spirituality which are by no means devoid of passion.

In the first of his articles, in the last issue, Guy suggested that one of the gifts liberals have for the Church of England might be our general 'laid-backness', at a time when anxiety about the future is running so high and the powers that be are behaving like headless chickens. On the whole (he implies) we Modern Church folk don't do passionate - we are hyper-rational, and therefore useful antidotes to the intensity of others. I identify with a lot of that. Perhaps many of the 2000-plus readers who accessed that article on our blog do so too.

But there are dangers in our sometimes very cerebral, objective and laid-back approach. We can fail to connect with many other people, and Linda Woodhead challenged Council last year to appreciate that, for some, the intellect might not be the principal point of encounter with Truth. We can also fail to connect with aspects of ourselves, and that in turn makes more difficult the sort of outreach to which Guy calls us.

During Lent this year, as I often do, I re-read portions of the works of Harry Williams, that theological icon for so many of us in the 1960s. I was struck afresh by how 'religious' this allegedly godless heretic actually was. God was an intense reality to him, initially as a sadistic idol but later as a true mystery of infinite and life-changing depth. Passionate spirituality? I should say so. He makes me feel like the shallowest of agnostics by comparison. Of course, through his engagement with psychoanalysis, he dug far below the depths of the conscious and rational at which most of us operate most of the time. I wonder how many of us are able, or dare, to operate at that level?

Guy himself, and before him Martyn Percy (at our 2014 annual conference), have made it clear that we

as liberals simply cannot allow passionate spirituality to be the preserve of others. We do have a Gospel to proclaim, and Guy's second article below - also making waves on our blog - reflects a passion for church growth, with integrity, that might surprise some non-liberals. As he recognises, some of his views will raise important theological issues for many Modern Church members - do please give us your responses in future articles or letters! His recent and very welcome appointment as Archdeacon of Buckingham, taking him that little bit closer to the heart of the C of E establishment and offering new possibilities for the influence of Modern Church on that establishment, makes his arguments all the more important, and we need to engage with them.

Yet many of us are uneasy about the current shibboleths of church growth. We belong to Modern Church precisely because we have intensely questioning minds, about the precise nature of the church's mission and much else, even to the point of an innate scepticism. We may believe that scepticism is itself a gift from God, one which is not listed in 1 Corinthians 12 but is still a valid contribution to the Body of Christ. (I am reminded of Bonhoeffer's 'Before God and with God we live without God'.) But how do we translate that into a passionate spirituality for ourselves, let alone something communicable to others?

Our Vice-Chair Tim Stead is something of an apostle of mindfulness, which some would say is an old spirituality (both Christian and non-Christian, not least Buddhist) now converted into a secular methodology of wellbeing. His book, reviewed below, makes a case for seeing mindfulness and Christian spirituality as being not identical but on a continuum. Is a spirituality that builds on mindfulness, then, one possible answer? Not all of us will engage with particular meditation techniques, but perhaps more of us can learn other ways of living in the present moment, and relating that to the Christian message and tradition (I recommend dog-walking).

What we cannot promise, to ourselves or to others, is some sort of blinding revelation, the 'blessed assurance' of the hymn, or even the sort of trust-enabling knowledge of which Peter Enns writes (see book review in our last edition) and which is profoundly reflected in John Hall-Matthews' review of Tim's book. I have encountered many people to whom, it seems, such experiences are simply not accessible. Like the Russian poet Yevtushenko in

King's College Chapel, quoted by John Robinson, they point at the architectural or other evidences of spiritual exaltation and say 'Me – means nothing'. Furthermore, those who **do** lay claim to experiences of personal relationship with the Divine, and proclaim them as being at the heart of the Gospel, rarely acknowledge the extent to which those experiences are processed through our own personalities, so that the God/Jesus/Spirit whom they claim to know so intimately may be, in some measure at least, an idol of their own subconscious construction - just like Harry Williams' initial perception of God.

Now, all that is a pity, because in a consumer age, notwithstanding our British phlegm, it is the dramatic 'personal' knowledge of Jesus (and maybe even the arms-in-the-air response) which might seem to be most saleable, if any form of spirituality is. The quiet 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action' commended by T S Eliot, unpassionate as it may seem, may be very meaningful to some of us, and not least Martyn Percy in his constant commendation of classical Anglicanism; but the immediate attraction sought by so many, especially younger, modern consumers simply is not there. The research Guy quotes suggests *distinctiveness* is a major 'selling point' for churches, and, whilst there are certainly distinctive liberal and catholic churches which are growing, it seems to be those in the broadly charismatic/evangelical tradition who 'have the best tunes' (literally so, if you are a Matt Redman enthusiast). Many mainstream churches lack that 'unique selling point', and may find it hard to develop a different one, perhaps especially in rural areas where they simply have to be all things to all people.

I recently encountered a case-study on this very topic. As the co-ordinator in my Deanery for Parish Share matters, I went with my Area Dean to discuss such issues with a group of very rural parishes which are in some trouble in terms of finance and numbers. It had become clear that most of the trouble arose from the appointment to these rather traditional parishes of an incumbent who had a somewhat charismatic background and a great dedication to Natural Church Development. That incumbent has now, rather suddenly, moved on. The resulting release of energy amongst those we talked to was breathtakingly palpable. To be sure, the incumbent may have served as 'grit in the oyster' and stimulated some innovation which opened up long-term potential in new areas – but the grit had left the oyster very sore indeed, and in serious numerical and financial decline. Freed at

last from that grit, the people were now prepared to take their time to exercise more local leadership and consider quite new patterns of ministry – which may well be undramatic, and too 'conventionally Anglican' for some of our growth enthusiasts, but could well result in growth nevertheless: growth with integrity in their situation.

Or perhaps not – or not yet. As was hinted in the *Church Times* during the 'Thy Kingdom Come' week of national prayer before Pentecost, we may need to bite the bullet and accept that in the current climate our 'product' really is hard to 'sell' – that the Church may simply not experience significant growth in our time, and possibly ought not even to try too hard, if it risks losing its own soul in the process, as those rural parishes had, perhaps, very nearly done.

Do we, then, as part of our service to the wider community, need to help develop a passionate spirituality for the unspiritual (or at least firmly unchurched)? If so, we should surely begin by questioning any assumption that those who cannot access conventional religious experience (prayer, meditation and the like, church-based or otherwise) are thereby 'unspiritual'. I have given some instances from the arts, from architecture through music to poetry, which may resonate deeply with those who would not see themselves as religious. And the message in Brenda Watson's article below seems to confirm that Shakespeare, in particular, might be able to channel a spirituality which may not fit any conventional Christian categories but is, somehow, Christian at its deepest level.

There is in this, as (if we are honest) in much of what Modern Church does, a certain danger of cultural elitism. Names such as Manley Hopkins do not trip off everybody's tongue, and it is precisely the difficulty of his poetry which communicates its riches. Likewise the divine music of Bach is 'caviar to the general', and even sixteenth-century fan vaulting is not to everyone's taste. Nor, indeed, is Shakespeare, despite the exposure he has received in this 400th anniversary year. Yet I am struck constantly by the popularity of arts programmes on TV; we should not assume that only we over-educated types are cultured! For that matter, the growth of 'prayer and painting' retreats, and other religious events which make use of the arts in spirituality, appears to be successful and popular also, even if so far to a more limited clientele. So, is this an area where we should somehow do more? If so, how?

Some of us may be no better at painting than we are at praying, but we may (as I suggested above) respond most powerfully to other arts – music being perhaps the most emotionally and spiritually potent, but also poetry, literature, or drama. Who knows whether, out of this year’s conference on Shakespeare and faith, something new may emerge. And, just as in the last issue I foreshadowed our 2017 conference on the nature of God, so now I foreshadow the plans for the 2018 conference on liturgy, religious and secular – which may also open up new paths for knowledge and celebration of a less individualistic or cerebral kind. Perhaps at some stage, too, we could take a tip (pun intended) from Bernini and focus more on the erotic dimension of spirituality as well? Harry Williams did that in various ways – and, by crooked paths, it not only brought him to life abundant, but through his writings must have brought many others as well.

And while I think about those who have inspired others, directly or indirectly, I must here pay tribute to Alan Wolfe, who has for quite a few years acted as book reviews editor for this newsletter, and has brought to our attention many publications that are at least interesting and often inspiring. He now feels the need to step down. Whilst I will be seeking to recruit a replacement for him through other means, perhaps some reader may feel moved to offer? A passionate intensity about the best kind of liberal religious writing (there is more of it about than we sometimes imagine), such as Alan himself has demonstrated, is the first qualification, though it helps also to have some knowledge of those in our membership (or indeed others) who are best equipped to review such writing. I look forward to hearing from volunteers!

That is by no means the only post in Modern Church to be filled. If you receive this before the AGM, please consider whether you could stand for Council this year; we always welcome new blood. Council members serve for three years, in order to provide continuity; they have one annual residential meeting, an invariably rewarding affair at which key issues of Modern Church strategy are discussed, plus a short meeting after each AGM at which Trustees for the coming year (who have rather more to do!) are elected. It is generally from Council members that key activists are drawn, from Annual Conference secretaries - whose role includes the practical and also the creative tasks of putting together this flagship event - to contributors to the exciting ‘Modern Church course’ (aka ‘alternative to Alpha’) which Guy and others are developing, and which could be a

crucial means of taking forward some of the ideas which I have set out above.

And please also read Rosalind Lund’s appeal at the end of this edition. The tasks of treasurers may seem a world apart from passionate (let alone erotic) spirituality, but as a PCC treasurer myself I would argue that such roles are not just necessary backroom jobs to keep the show on the road – though they certainly are that – but responsibilities with real theological and spiritual challenge.

Where are you being called? ■

Religion, Society and Shakespeare

Brenda Watson

Christopher Hallpike and Maria Barry, in their article *Do we need God to be good?* [*Signs* April 2016] noted that ‘a Christian civilization that is abandoning its religion is being hollowed out in fundamental ways’. This is certainly happening today in our society. Typical of the embarrassment felt at the least mention of religious commitment is the reticence concerning the Queen’s Christian belief in the celebrations for her 90th birthday. Jesus, she said in her 2014 Christmas broadcast, is ‘her inspiration and anchor’. Mark Greene notes: ‘Rightly the world marvels at the Queen’s magnificent achievement. Might we not all benefit from hearing who she thinks has helped her do it?’¹

Most of her subjects however find any mention of Christian faith odd and irrelevant. The prestigious RSA, for example, advertises itself as ‘21st century enlightenment’ (rsa.org). In it the atheist presumption is complete. The only mention of religion in the current *RSA Journal* is as an example of student ideas for positive change - the creation of a multi-faith museum as a remedy for discrimination.² Religion is a problem to be solved, not part of any solution in helping to create a better world. The word *museum* is well suited to this kind of understanding of religion.

May this secularization be seen as in some way beneficial? Religion and power do not cohere well together. Perhaps Christianity was never meant to be a ruling institution, but rather, faith in Jesus should operate quietly like salt or as a light. If the many accretions of misunderstanding and corruption gathered round it during its long history have served to obscure what Jesus was and did, perhaps

abandoning Christianity altogether becomes a necessary evil?

I say *evil* because it carries some unfortunate consequences for ordinary people in lack of the consolation provided by religious faith. More seriously, if the God-ward feelings that people have are not directed towards religion they will focus on something else such as consumerism.

Even worse is the gradual pull of moral relativism - a devastatingly dangerous phenomenon which can end up denuding the concepts of *good* and *evil* of any inherent transcendent meaning; they become in effect what A. J. Ayer famously argued - a 'hurrah/boo' reaction to what happens. The failure of Darwinian rationalism to combat this threat effectively is illustrated in Richard Dawkins' revealing response recorded in *Third Way*. Nick Pollard asked him: 'Suppose some lads break into an old man's house and kill him... How would you show them that what they had done was wrong?' Dawkins replied: 'I couldn't ultimately argue intellectually against somebody who did something I found obnoxious. I think I could finally only say, 'Well, in this society you can't get away with it' and call the police'.³

A civilized society in fact depends on certain values being widely accepted as ideals even if not widely practiced. These values are especially necessary for societies that claim to be democratic. If the moral boat capsizes, they offer a way of getting it afloat.

The most fundamental of these foundational values are the search for truth and integrity, justice and goodness, and respect for all. At the heart of Christianity these three virtues are not only acknowledged but infinitely extended, especially clearly regarding respect for all to become compassion even for enemies and outcasts of society.

It is interesting to note that these three virtues are fundamental in Shakespeare's writing. What he says seems to be true to life. Both the complexity and variety of outward life and the questionings and doubts of inner life are reflected. Truth, not understood as something static and possessable but as requiring constant search, is the silent companion throughout. Regarding goodness, Shakespeare does not embody a narrow view of morality encoded in legal do's and don'ts, but one which invites deep questioning as to the real meaning of goodness and evil. Some transcendence is assumed. There would

have been no discourse on the merits of *mercy* over *justice* in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure* unless both words resonated with the concepts of good and evil, not just utilitarian benefit or emotional likes and dislikes.

Shakespeare especially exemplified the virtue of compassion for the whole of humanity, including those frequently excluded or despised - for women, the poor, the down-and-out on the fringes of society, criminals etc. Caliban in *The Tempest* has one of the finest lyrical speeches. As A.G. Nuttall notes, Shakespeare 'is famous for being able to sympathize with anyone'.⁴ He had internalised an approach to all other people as persons which sought to be fair to them and allow them their share of the limelight, even as they performed and said strange, stupid, mistaken, even evil things. Shakespeare's world certainly 'contained multitudes'.

Shakespeare appeared at the cusp of a civilisation impregnated by Christianity, but a Christianity whose real kernel had become easily obscured. The institutionalism that surrounded it like prison walls was deeply challenged in the sixteenth century. Shakespeare himself appears to have moved on from reliance on institutionalism. Scholars cannot say whether he was Catholic, Protestant or atheist. Yet his work does reflect in a special way what is at the heart of Christianity - something of the vision of Jesus concerning truth, goodness and compassion.

Gary Taylor made an interesting comment: 'If Shakespeare has been the god of our idolatry for four centuries, it is because he created the scripture for an emerging secular world'.⁵ At this point we may reflect on the importance of Shakespeare's popularity with all manner of people including extreme secularists and cynics. Indeed, it may be that Shakespeare unwittingly performed a feat such as that of St. Paul who broke open and made available for gentiles the inmost treasure of Judaism. Has Shakespeare similarly made available the essence of Christianity for all, including those who cannot believe in God?

1. Letter to the *Times* April 22, 2016.

2. Issue 1, 2016

3. April 2016, p.11, from interview Feb 1995

4. *Shakespeare the Thinker* (Yale U.P. 2007 p.276) .

5. 'The cultural politics of Maybe' in R. Dutton, A. Findlay and R. Wilson eds, *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare* (Manchester 2003). ■

Can liberals embrace the Growth

Agenda? Part 2 of 3

Guy Elsmore

In the first article in this series [*Signs* April 2016], I outlined the dire attendance scenario the Church of England is facing in the coming years. I made a pragmatic case for the liberal wing of the church to move from a general attitude of scepticism to one of constructive engagement with church growth, then offered suggestions as to some areas of strength which liberals might bring to bear to the work of growing churches.

In this second article I shall look at some recent research on church growth, what it may have to tell us about the ways in which liberal churches might approach the task of seeking growth, and reflect back as I do so on some of the liberal strengths identified in the first article.

The Church Growth Research Programme

I remember precious little from my mathematical physics classes but a phrase that has stayed with me was 'non-trivial problem'. This modest sounding phrase meant a problem whose solution was so complex that it would require a breakthrough in mathematics or computing. With so many variable factors and with so many odds stacked against the church, we might think of church growth as a 'non-trivial problem'. In recent years, however, the church has worked hard to commission robust research work to identify 'what works' in the arena of church growth, church planting, fresh expressions etc. In particular, the work of the Church Growth Research Programme (CGRP) has been applauded by many as offering reasonably reliable and robust conclusions to work with. You can find presentations and reflections on the ongoing work of the groups involved in CGRP at churchgrowthresearch.org.uk.

In one of the first reports commissioned by the CGRP, *From Anecdote to Evidence*, Professor David Voas and his team identified a number of important factors associated with growing churches. The strength of *From Anecdote to Evidence* is that it began without any *a priori* assumptions to test. Rather, those who filled in the research questionnaire were asked to feed back on a plethora of factors about church life. These were then correlated against the data offered by each church about their recent rates of growth or decline. Only where there were obvious

commonalities and trends did the team draw conclusions. The weakness, of course, is that it is difficult to separate cause and effect. For instance, is it that churches with strong youth work are likely to grow, or is it that growing churches will tend to have a large number of young people around and hence generate strong youth work? Be that as it may, the conclusions of *From Anecdote to Evidence* seem useful and are convergent with another recent and robust examination of growth in Anglican churches in the USA which I will also refer to in this article.

Growth is not limited by tradition – Liberal churches CAN grow

The first thing to say here - and perhaps to the surprise of everyone, not least liberals – is that the CGRP is clear (once the demographics are evened out) that church tradition is NOT a predictor of growth. This is good news indeed for liberals. Contrary to what we may have heard from others, or thought about ourselves, we are not inevitably doomed to decline. There are stories to be told of liberal churches around the country which are growing strongly. The *Faith Communities Today* report in 2010 from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research drew exactly the same conclusion in the US context.

Churches that have a clear mission tend to grow

Having established that liberal churches are capable of growing, and just as likely to grow as churches of any other tradition, the CGRP also discovered that what is crucial is having clarity about the mission and calling of a local church. A clear sense of the identity of a church will draw people, whereas a general, diffuse or non-specific identity will tend not to lead to growth. This is common ground in both *From Anecdote to Evidence* and in the Hartford report. Churches which 'go with the flow', which do not clearly identify their uniqueness, are less likely to grow than those who are able to express their identity with focus and clarity. This is both about self-understanding within the church and the way the church communicates itself to the outside world.

For liberals, this creates a paradox which needs some resolution. The liberal strengths I wrote about in the first article in this series included an appreciation of the openness and ability to listen which is a hallmark of the liberal tradition. Liberals take pride in being responsive rather than pro-active, and in listening before speaking (when we're on our best behaviour!)

How, then, do we present a clear mission statement to the world when our mission is contingent on an encounter with the world and when that encounter might even change us as much as it changes the world? Perhaps the answer is in pointing clearly to those liberal values (listening, openness, inclusivity, flexibility etc) and being very clear about them. There is a real and creative challenge for liberal churches and PCCs to work on here in beginning to articulate flexibility and humility with real clarity. For instance, how about a strapline like 'St Blog's, the listening church'? There are ways of being clear about liberal identity and I believe this is a key challenge for us all.

Churches that are intentional about growth tend to grow

Linked to this, the reports from both sides of the Atlantic show that churches which are intentional about growth tend to grow. This is probably quite a challenge to liberals as we have, in the past, been relaxed about growth – but the research evidence is clear that being intentional about growing actually helps in the process of growing and hence needs to become a part of that clear church identity. This will be a real challenge to a movement whose theology has embraced thinking of the crucified God and which has reacted strongly against a gospel of success and prosperity. We will need to do some deep and creative thinking to find within a language to help liberal churches gain some comfort around the language of growth – another key area of challenges to the theologians amongst us. Many of Jesus' parables of the Kingdom are agricultural and domestic stories of growth and abundance – perhaps we should begin to find ways to embrace such motifs as the mustard seed which spreads like wildfire and provides shelter for the birds of the air? Or again, the Luke-Acts account of the early church living in basic ecclesial community, with the Lord adding to their number day by day. There are, I hope, authentic ways of speaking of the growth the Spirit brings to the church, without selling our soul either to the market or ways of being church which violate our integrity.

Another linked finding from the Hartford research is that while CGRP is correct in that there is no correlation between theological identity and growth, there is a concentration of growing churches at the extreme ends of all theological traditions. i.e. for liberals, those churches which adopt a very clear 'progressive' agenda are more likely to grow than those at the milder end of liberalism. However, in my

experience this effect may be linked more strongly to the issue of clear identity, rather than the attraction of the extreme. Those at the extreme ends of all traditions automatically have a very clear position. This makes it all the more urgent that those who don't find themselves comfortable on the extreme become comfortable with the uncomfortable task of being clear about their identity.

Churches whose leaders and congregations adopt change tend to grow

'How many PCC members does it take to change a lightbulb?'

'Change? Over my dead body! My grandfather donated that bulb!'

CGRP has shown us that Liberal Churches can grow and are just as likely to be able to grow as other traditions. It has shown us that clarity about our mission and purpose is a very important factor in growth and that naming growth as part of that identity helps the process of growing. Another significant marker among churches which are more likely to grow is the capacity of leaders and people to be open to change and to continue reflecting on experience such that change becomes part of their continuing life together. The Hartford report from the USA confirms this finding too. This is something that liberals, in theory, ought to be really good at, an openness to change being one of the core identities within liberalism as a philosophical or political concept.

Another linked finding is that churches which innovate, creating new opportunities for people to join through Fresh Expressions, will tend to grow. There are some excellent examples of liberal Fresh Expressions to be seen around the country, for instance groups offering experimental spirituality, Christian approaches to mindfulness, LGBTI worship communities and many more. I'll return to this theme more fully in a future article devoted to this topic. I believe we are now starting to see the emergence of the natural fit between the flexible and responsive liberal praxis which I wrote about last time and Fresh Expressions.

Alongside innovation is also the sharing of leadership beyond the professional clergy and into a much wider group of people. Again, not being tied in to a single way of doing things and not feeling duty bound to continue handing on a long line of tradition is a liberal strength here, as is the inclusive approach to

leadership and the hermeneutic of suspicion which we bring to existing ways of doing things.

Churches which welcome and nurture disciples, young and old, are more likely to grow

Again the evidence from CGRP and Hartford say the same thing here. Adult Christian education and providing a pathway for young people to grow in faith are vital factors in enabling church growth. Perhaps there are equal and opposite forces at work in liberalism here. On the one hand liberal theology has a great track record in engaging with people's lived experience and bringing it alongside the gospel. On the other hand, so often liberal churches have seen the Sunday congregation as the main place of belonging for their people, rather than the home group/nurture group etc. The message from the research is that people will grow in faith and stay with their churches and hence their churches will grow, if there is more on offer for them than Sunday alone. Perhaps such groups will be an excellent place to explore some of the liberal creativity, flexibility and openness to the presence and work of God in the world, which I wrote of in the first article.

Every church thinks of itself as friendly and good with newcomers. According to CGRP we need to do more than that. Welcome as a concept and a thought through process for integrating new members into the life of the church is another key difference between growing and declining churches. Being intentional about the experience newcomers get when they come along, follow up, recent arrivals gatherings, invitations to events, all these things really make a difference. In the end, church growth is simply the difference between the numbers joining and the numbers leaving church. If we can do more to make those who join us feel welcome and included, then there will be a big impact. Looking back to the liberal strengths I wrote about last time, perhaps a peculiarly liberal insight on this is that we should expect our welcome process to include an element by which the newcomer, their talents/needs/identity will have some real impact on the rest of us, rather than their simply being absorbed by the existing group.

Conclusion

There are huge challenges liberal churches will need to face if they are to have a future. I hope in a small way this article has fleshed some of these out. In the third and final article in this series, I shall look more

widely at what sociologists of and commentators on religion are saying about the future shape of the church and, in the light of the liberal strengths identified in the first article and of the growth factors identified in this second article, I will look at what lines of strategic development liberal churches and organisations might fruitfully pursue in the fast changing religious context of modern Britain.

Meanwhile, a prayer from the Society of St Francis:

**Give to your church, O God,
a bold vision and a daring charity,
a refreshed wisdom and a courteous
understanding,
that the eternal message of your Son
may be acclaimed as the good news of the age;
through him who makes all things new,
even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. ■**

BOOK REVIEW

***Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality: Making Space for God* by Tim Stead (SPCK 2016)**

John Hall-Matthews

Whenever I have a prayer time, I prepare myself by doing some stilling exercises. I sit usually on a chair with a straight back, and then focus on different parts of my body relaxing my muscles, so that the whole of me becomes loose and relaxed. I then spend some time concentrating on my breathing, noticing the air as I breathe in and out. I pay attention to any noises either in the room or outside, and tell myself not to be distracted by them during my time of prayer. And finally I try to still my mind, laying aside any things I have brought with me from the past or any anxiety I may have for the future, so that I become more aware of being in the present moment. Imagine my surprise when I discovered in this book that what I have been doing for years was very similar to mindfulness, so quite naturally I found it a fascinating read.

What is mindfulness? Tim Stead suggests it can be described as being 'more fully aware of your own experience in the present moment in a non-judgemental way'. The four vital strands to this definition are: awareness, experience, the present moment and non-judgement. He suggests that each of these four aspects is counter-intuitive, against the grain of much of our brain activity, and therefore needs a lot of practice to achieve; and that each aspect plays a significant role in reducing anxiety and

living more freely. There are throughout the book many different exercises in mindfulness, which are worth spending time exploring. So it is not so much a book to read to find out more about mindfulness, but rather a book to use and take to heart.

The story of mindfulness goes back to the 1970s when Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biology professor in the USA, began to develop a meditation based programme to help people suffering from chronic pain. He had been influenced by the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn, though he does not identify as a Buddhist. The course he developed and taught significantly reduced stress and anxiety in his patients, enabling them to find an alternative way of managing their pain. Later, a group of cognitive behaviour therapists, led by Professor Mark Williams of Oxford, incorporated mindfulness in their programme for treating patients with depression, with dramatic results including a reduction in episodes of relapse. Thus it was discovered that mindfulness could be of value for all of us, whether we were struggling with milder forms of stress or anxiety, or simply wanting to live a fuller, healthier life. Mark Williams published *Mindfulness; a Practical Guide to finding Peace in a Frantic World*, an eight week course designed to respond to a wide set of aspirations of people living everyday lives. The course which author Tim Stead (Vicar of Holy Trinity Oxford and Vice Chair of Modern Church) teaches is based on this book.

In outlining how he sets about teaching his course, he gives us three practices which show us how to become more mindful in daily life.

The first is the **Focus Practice**: Sitting with a straight back in a relaxed way, as I did in my stilling exercise, bring your attention to noticing your breathing. If your mind wanders off, just take note of this and return to your breathing focus. Simply notice what happens.

The second is the **Awareness Practice**: Begin your focus practice, and continue this process for a longer period of time. This is awareness. It can be very simple to start with but it can reveal profound things to us. Do not judge or analyse what is going on.

The third is the **Kindness Practice**: Sit in a chair, close your eyes and say this phrase: 'May I be kept safe, and may I know kindness.' Say this several times. What did you notice? In doing this you have begun an attitude of kindness towards yourself. Tim always starts a session on his mindfulness course by

dedicating it to God, then inviting people to trust God to look after them in whatever happens during the session, and he always ends with a blessing. He describes that the real joy for him has been finding in the feedback how mindfulness is making such a difference to the lives of his course participants.

Tim points out that something akin to mindfulness has been around in the Christian tradition since the beginning. It has been called contemplative prayer, silent prayer, the desert tradition or mystical theology. In the twentieth century, writers like Bede Griffiths, Thomas Merton, Anthony de Mello and John Main have shown how important it is to engage with Eastern spirituality. So mindfulness overlaps with Christian tradition and writers, and he points out three insights which mindfulness seeks to address. In the Western tradition there has been a great emphasis on the intellectual, with a mistrust of experience. We have thought a lot about God in our heads and not taken notice of the importance of experiencing God in our hearts, bodies and daily lives. Secondly there has been a history of negative attitudes to the body as well as the material world in general. A mindful focus on the body makes space for us to encounter God in the experiential rather than the intellectual way. Thirdly we need to consider the consequences of the Western teaching on sin and judgement. These have led in many cases to a harmful repression and rejection of those parts of ourselves that have been associated with shame. Mindfulness, on the other hand, helps us to become more aware of ourselves, our thoughts and our body impulses in a non-judgemental way. He also gives examples of how mindfulness teachings are implicit in the Gospels, and illustrates this by three practical exercises, on the Prodigal Son, Mary and Martha, and John the Baptist.

In part two of the book, which he calls: 'From Believing to Knowing', Tim says belief is not about reciting a set of words, but about knowing something to be true in our experience. In the light of this, he has chapters showing how mindfulness had helped him to reflect on God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and he shows how it might enrich our faith as we move from simply believing in something in our heads to knowing something in our lives. He experienced God in all things, as One, as Love and as a Living Presence. He had a felt experience of Jesus, through his resurrection, as the awakened one, who beckons us to follow him - to dare to wake up to all of life. And the Holy Spirit is all about how all this can become real for us in our lives; how we too can live the embodied,

liberated and awakened life that Jesus showed was possible for human beings. I found these chapters to be clearly written and very insightful.

Part three he calls: 'From Doing to Being'. Mindfulness suggests we need to distinguish between a 'doing' mode and a 'being' mode. When a mind is 'doing' it is concerned with analysing situations, getting tasks done, planning for the future and organizing. There is a feeling of 'should', 'ought,' and 'must' in the mind. The 'being' mode is marked by a greater and wider awareness of the present moment and a sense of opening up space to see more clearly the true nature of what is before us. There is less of a drive to do, to fix, or to plan, and much more of a sense of a curious interest of the various possibilities of a situation becoming apparent. With this in mind, Tim explores in subsequent chapters 'Knowing God's presence', 'Trusting God' and 'Knowing God's will', which again I found were clearly written and true to my own experience. Knowing God's will, for example, begins with my being more fully aware of my own will in the form of desires and aversions. Mindfulness helps this discerning process - once we have becoming more fully aware of our own will, we have a greater chance of discerning God's will.

The book concludes with more practical applications of mindfulness in our daily living, with chapters on 'Finding peace', 'Inner healing' and 'Prayer and worship'. Prayer is sitting before God in loving attention. This is what leads the Christian from understanding God to knowing or being at one with God. That is at the heart of all Christian prayer, and why mindfulness practice can have a central role in achieving this. More helpful exercises are in a chapter on 'Practicing love', which begins with an extended Kindness Practice, focusing on ourselves first, next someone we know well, then a neutral person and finally on someone we really dislike.

He also reminds us of the importance of reconnecting with nature, by going on an awareness walk, or even choosing a single plant or flower and noticing this unique experience using all our senses as we do so. Tim ends by saying that mindfulness has enabled him to open up to life, people, friends, music and pleasure, and that it made him realise that life is more than just one task after another. The word of Jesus in John Chapter 10 verse 10 sums it up for him:

'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

I am reminded of the words of St Irenaeus:

'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.'

In the foreword, Professor Mark Williams says: 'Tim Stead's book is addressed to his own Christian tradition, but people of other faiths or none will find it offers enormous potential, for it points towards a universal source of healing. You can read this book in a day, but take it to heart, and it will last a lifetime.' I found this book informative, stimulating and true to my own experience, especially of prayer and stillness. And I recommend it not only as a good read but also as a book to use and treasure. ■

Letter to the editor

Dr John Quenby

Jean Mayland and Robert Baldwin have both written articles ending: 'What do the rest of MC think?' [Signs, January & April 2016].

First re: language. As an attendee with my wife of the St Hilda's Community after it left Queen Mary College and accepted hospitality from the Methodist Bow Mission, I very much regret the disappearance of the feminist liturgies and prayers developed at that time. The current concentration on prayers to Jesus can be countered by the biblical statistics to be found in James Dunn's *Did The Early Christians Worship Jesus?* where it is shown that the most common form is addressing God through Jesus.

Coming on to the Divinity of Jesus, I agree with Robert Baldwin that God does not intervene to break the laws of science. Thus as a still practicing astrophysicist I find extreme difficulty in the concept of God in human form and the nature 'miracles'. As Baldwin puts it: 'attesting to the Spirit of Christ gives strength to enable de-centering from the natural (evolved) selfishness... and re-centering by attunement with him' is a sufficient basis of life for me. Of course, biological evolution makes nonsense of 'The Fall'.

I set great store by Process Theology as modelling God's interaction with the universe and have written about it in *Intelligent Faith* (eds. Quenby and MacDonald-Smith, O Books 2009). I think my views are not too far away from what you report about the ideas of John Haught. Thanks to both authors for their articles - such efforts keep my hope alive. ■

Modern Church's new Communications Officer

Kieran Bohan, Modern Church's website editor, has now formally been appointed our Communications Officer.



Originally from London, he moved to Liverpool in 2003 to study journalism and web design. He trained for the Roman Catholic priesthood in his twenties, but chose not to be ordained, and is now a member of the leadership team at St Bride's Church in Toxteth.

In March 2016 the Archdeacon of Liverpool commissioned him as a Local Missional Leader with responsibility for outreach and pastoral care for the city's LGBT community, and training around LGBT awareness issues for faith communities. He co-facilitates Open Table, a monthly communion service for the LGBT community, family and friends and all who are seeking a more inclusive church, with his husband Warren – they were the first couple to register a civil partnership in a UK place of worship in May 2012.

His background is in education, youth work, and support work with vulnerable adults, including people experiencing homelessness, mental distress and substance dependency. He has also trained in media and marketing, and have worked freelance alongside his support work roles since 2001.

When Modern Church needed a new website in October 2013, he was delighted to take on the project, and succeeded in relaunching the site in time for the annual conference in July 2014. Following the relaunch, the trustees asked him to take on the role of freelance website editor with a view to supporting colleagues to add content to the website. As the organization's needs changed, it became clear that there was more work to do, such as assisting with

social media and press releases, printed publicity and advertising. In recognition of this the trustees offered him a three-year part-time contract to support Modern Church in developing these areas.

He also currently works part-time for the Diocese of Liverpool Communications Team and as chaplain to YMCA Liverpool, which provides high quality accommodation across the city to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

We wish Kieran happiness and fulfilment in his new role. ■

Wanted: Assistant treasurer

Rosalind Lund, Treasurer

Our previous Treasurer, Richard Hall, was in post for five years. It is very likely that I will want to stand down after a similar period - I have served nearly three years now.

The Trustees and I would very much appreciate it if someone is willing to act as Assistant Treasurer, with the possibility of taking over from me in due course.

The advantage of this is that it would provide for business continuity and enable a potential treasurer to understand the extent of the role. I use a software program called Money Manager which is a very simple accounting program. I probably devote about half a day a week on average to the work.

The changes involving the production of Modern Believing and the transfer of the membership list and subscription management to Turpin Distribution have now settled down and will make life much easier for the Treasurer in future, especially now that there is a Direct Debit facility.

Please email treasurer@modernchurch.org.uk if you would like more information and are interested in taking on the role of Assistant Treasurer. ■

Our next edition – Call for contributions

- **Conference reports** – our Annual Conference, and the memorial one-day conference for Marcus Borg with Diana Butler Bass – **volunteer reporters please!**
- More on church growth from our General Secretary Guy Elsmore – **and your responses please!**
- A robust defence of traditional liberal theology from Alan Race
- And all your other contributions! See page 1 for details of how to contribute.

Transfiguration

Tracy Reynolds

In the beginning the rolling slopes of green and brown
shine majestically in afternoon sun. Warm and welcoming
arrayed in the splendour of autumn jewelled trees.

A gentle stroll along century worn tracks,
safe with knowledge that many feet have gone before
a myriad of footprints marking out the way.

then the first unsettling shivers of a change in temperature.
The clarity of path becomes more impressionistic,
gone the imprint of previous pilgrims, their comfort blown away.
Sunlight struggles through cataracts of cloud and mist.
The ruby reds and amber golds of autumn jewels cease to shine
and the first fingers of foreboding brush the mind and heart.

Ahead the mist, a cold damp smear across the skyline.
A whispering of heavy spiders webs across bare hands and faces.
Obliterated now the welcome of an autumn afternoon.
Muted now the colours of autumn warmth,
dulled the dappled sparkles of sun on rocks - all is gone.
Oppression weighs heavy and heads and backs begin to bow

It's harder walking now. Eyes focussed on the feet in front,
arms clasped across the chest to hold in meagre warmth.
the free form music of birds, wind creaking branches, laughter
becomes the rhythmic pace of trusting feet and chattering teeth.
The silent struggles hidden behind determined grimace
whose idea was this? why are we following again? where to?
what does He get from mountaineering anyway?

The comforting human shapes of companions solidify
into recognisable expression of familiar faces.
The silent single file of determined trudging pauses,
He smiles and they relax, He knows where they are going.
The warmth and comfort of the sun breaks over them,
the monstrous climb shrinks back to steady saunter up a hill

He stops a moment beneath a rocky outcrop
An easy climb for the man whose boyhood legs have,
all unknowing, practiced for this moment.
He bids them stay and goes ahead alone.
They settle down to wait, a familiar undertaking.
Heads begin to nod on grassy pillows.

The disorientation of sudden wakefulness intrudes.
Eyes fly open, sleep heavy limbs are slow to move.
Heavy lidded eyes struggle to focus, dilated pupils begin to close
Sunlight streaming from the Son and a someone else or two?
His smiling face is turned towards them, this Son-light,
this source of life and love reflecting heavens glory

Now common sense prevails, food and shelter
hospitality and welcome to preserve this mountainous epiphany
He laughs and shakes his head, no dusty mausoleum memory,
rich full of life laughter shouts experience! live!
Lest the preservation of a moment misses the affirmation of a lifetime
This is my son the beloved, in him I am well pleased.