

SUMMER 2020

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

FEATURES, COMMENTARY AND REVIEWS FROM MODERN CHURCH



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and Rosemary Walters

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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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EDITORIAL



Anthony Woollard
Editor

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Last summer, I quoted Eric Mascall’s complaint about the “modernist” or “liberal” theologians of the inter-war years: “They use long words, and do not think of us.” I was reminded of that by the review, later in this edition, of the biography of Bishop David Sheppard. I only heard him speak once, at a conference where he was agonising over “words.” As an evangelical he would go to preach at inner-city churches, urge people to read their Bibles as well as expecting them to use their prayer books and join in the

hymns – conscious that many worshippers were illiterate.

Modern Church may not be so exclusively focused on “the Word” as evangelicals tend to be, but we are very wordy. Words written, in publications such as this one, and on our website. Words spoken at conferences. Many years ago, there was a debate in these pages on whether we were simply too cerebral, too rational (even rationalistic) in the way we sought to get our message across. Arguably we have improved since then, for example in publications and website design; and, *continued* >

Signs of the Times is published in February, May, August and November. 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 images. 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 28th December, 28th March, 28th June or 28th September. Articles should not exceed 1,000 words. We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).



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as members may notice in this edition, that is an ongoing process. But it may be a real problem that we are so much “into” words, ideas, arguments, when many inside and outside the Churches are not.

However, the line between words, symbols/rituals, and experiences is not a rigid one. Some of us in February attended the Church Times Bloxham Festival of Faith and Literature – of which Modern Church is now an associate sponsor. That, as the name suggests, is all about words in books – all kinds of books including novels (“literary” and “non-literary”) and poetry. But it is not just about words. The inclusion of a wide variety of genres, open to collective discussion with authors in a most congenial environment, with many and varied associated activities from food to song, ensures a range of individual and collective experiences which can take participants far beyond the printed page.

And the same is true of our own events. Every Annual Conference is an experience, of fellowship and worship

as well as the sharing of ideas. If any readers have never attended one of these, why not try it? Yes, there is a cost in terms of time and money – but the fact that nearly 100 people go back year after year suggests that they place a huge value on the experience (and there are student bursaries). And this year’s scheduled conference on sexuality should be a prime example. We do not promise experiential sex (!), but, as at most conferences, the earth could move for some of us. We have the opportunity to share a great deal which may give us inner resources to face challenges in the Churches and in our personal lives. That is, of course, if our conference goes ahead this year; if not, you have a treat in store sometime in the future.

Modern Church’s Council and Trustees have been discussing how to bridge the gap between the perceived (over-)rationality of liberal theology and the experiences of real people. If, at a time when liberality in church life is so sorely needed, our own membership numbers have been trending downwards – though there has been some

...in our wider lives, words whirl around our heads, about the coronavirus threat, about our country’s post-Brexit future, about the climate emergency, and about so much else. Whole industries, including an over-inflated world of media (traditional and social), are built on those words.

upturn this year – does this mean that we are failing to scratch where people are itching? Our presence at the very “experiential” Greenbelt Festival has been ramped up, at considerable cost in terms of sponsorship, but the impact of that is as yet unclear. We are planning a “relaunch” of Modern Believing in the autumn, which could have an exciting impact, and are taking some big steps to improve our website – both of these cost money also, and we hope will prove good investments. Should we also be focusing more, for example, on building up our currently rather thin network of local groups (an established one in the south-west and a new one in west Surrey), where both ideas and experience can be shared in a more intimate way? How many readers would find that local support invaluable – even if at the moment it has to be “virtual” online – in places where perhaps their own churches give little recognition to their questionings and needs? We want to hear from you!

Yes, we can be too cerebral. We agonise much about words. Some of our

members find it hard to say Creeds when they cannot “literally believe” certain statements in them. Others are happy to say (or preferably sing) them without obsessing over the specific statements, knowing that credal development, for good or ill, is part of the Christian story to which we pledge allegiance. Words do certainly matter, and of making many theological books there is – and should be – no end. But they are not ultimate.

And meanwhile, in our wider lives, words whirl around our heads, about the coronavirus threat, about our country’s post-Brexit future, about the climate emergency, and about so much else. Whole industries, including an over-inflated world of media (traditional and social), are built on those words. A high proportion will be untrue, whether from ignorance, unconscious bias or malice. We who believe, from a liberal perspective, in that Christian story will not combat them simply by heaping up alternative words, but by demonstrating alternative lifestyles, providing alternative experiences, which commend themselves by their authenticity. Modern Church, and the Church as a whole, needs people (and, let us be blunt, money) to make that possible.

But at the moment, when physically shared experiences are largely off the agenda, words do matter. Below, I share words from several authors, of which many are particularly relevant in this time of multiple crises. The day will come when these words can again be interpreted into experience and action. For that, we need YOU. If you are not already part of our fellowship, will you join us?



Losing Loved Ones Before their Time: a Response to a Pandemic

PHOTO BY TAI'S CAPTURES

COVER FEATURE

Reflecting on the devastation of coronavirus
David Simon asks, 'When is our time?'

Boris Johnson, the UK Prime Minister warned on 12 March, of the coronavirus pandemic, that 'many more families will lose their loved ones before their time.' This statement prompts the question 'when is our time?' – meaning what is the right or intended date of our death?

In times past Christianity would have given the unequivocal answer that for each individual the time of death was decreed by God but hidden from human beings. While Christians might pray that their illness might be healed or their lives spared, the faith commands obedience to, and acceptance of, the will of God. That same faith recognises that humans do fear death, but counters that the good news of Jesus Christ is that death is not the end so need not be feared. That belief, it is maintained, enables us to accept that death is natural, inevitable and always occurs at 'the right time'.

Boris Johnson's statement seems to contradict the plain language of Christian message of confidence in and reliance on God.

However, throughout Christian history there is evidence of humans finding

reasons to attempt to avoid death and prolong life. St Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi (1:23) considers whether it is better for him to die and be with Christ or to live, and concludes that it is better for him to live to be able to help his Christian friends – a utilitarian rationale for postponing death.

Theological arguments for choosing to stay alive can be constructed on grounds such as the goodness of God's creation (building on passages such as chapters 1, 2 and 9 from the book of Genesis) and from the doctrine of the incarnation (that God took on human life in Jesus, as developed from the first chapter of the Gospel according to John, from Hebrews chapter 1, Philippians chapter 2 and Colossians chapter 1).

Scientific advances since Biblical times have increased the opportunities for human intervention to promote healing and prolong life. Some of these advances have opened the possibility of keeping a person alive beyond the point where the individual concerned would be able to, unassisted, sustain life – leading to the corollary that choosing to end that external intervention *continued >*

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effectively leads to a human choice about the timing of death.

These developments, alongside the waning of widespread belief in an intervening (or even extant) God, has raised questions about the sanctity of human life. In place of sanctity, a prevailing utilitarian ethic of human existence has led, for many people in the West, to great difficulty in discerning 'the right time' to die.

While welcomed from a humanitarian standpoint, medical advances have increased the challenges facing Christians seeking to proclaim the Christian gospel to those around them. In their life choices many Christians seem to adopt very similar humanitarian values to those among whom they live. Yet the traditional wording in the plain words of scripture of the message of trustful acceptance of God's will for human life, health and death seem to be at odds with the surrounding utilitarian secular culture. At the very least, the confident Christian claim of life after death is being compromised by the witness of many Christians (for example in the installation in churches of defibrillators to resuscitate heart attack victims).

How then can the Christian community respond with integrity to coronavirus?

One approach to a theological response would be to avoid taking illness and death as the primary issue of concern but instead to focus upon life (including Christian injunctions about how it should be lived). Associated with the gospel message of life after death is the assertion that Christ came that people might have life in all its fullness

(John 10:10). Exploring how this has been interpreted could provide a fruitful way forward in the face of the pandemic.

Christian piety has successfully drawn on Jesus' summary of the Law (Mk 12:30-31, Lk 10:27) as a prescription of how to live well. While loving God with all one's heart soul and strength may not speak much to a secular society faced with a pandemic, it can for the Christian lead to the adoption through prayer of a confidence of approach that can start to absorb or dissipate the level of fear being expressed in the community. This calmer mindset can enable the Christian community to reach out in empathy and pastoral assistance to others in the community.

Observing the communal recommendations for safeguarding others from harm is an immediate practical step that can be taken by people of faith. Beyond this it may be possible to provide physical, financial and emotional support for those who are disadvantaged not only by the pandemic itself but also by its wider consequences which may be economic hardship and social isolation.

The witness of living life in a way derived from the command to love can proclaim fullness of life, even in the face of death, asserting another gospel truth that perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:28). In the presence of this pandemic it is perhaps the Christian message of overcoming fear through love of life that will be a more powerful witness than any proclamation about what might happen after death.

David Simon is a Trustee and Treasurer of Modern Church.

What can the Church re-learn from Extinction Rebellion?

By Richard Baker

Extinction Rebellion is the movement of the moment. In little over a year it rose from nowhere to calling 30,000 onto the streets of London for two weeks of protest last October. Linked actions took place in 60 cities internationally. The rate of growth and the passion of the members can be compared with those of the early church. Attendance at traditional churches, by contrast, is waning to the point where maybe church itself is facing extinction.

All the members of XR that I have met are beautiful people, caring and compassionate. Members are united in grief for the planet but nurture a hope that things can be different. They are the sort of people who would once have been the bedrock of local churches. XR models itself around 10 "principles and values". Many of these reflect Biblical ideas that have been all but forgotten over 20 centuries of church tradition. Rediscovering these truths is clearly exciting and invigorating members of XR. Could it reinvigorate the church?

XR claims a vision of "history calling to us from the future." In theory the church looks forward to the coming of God's Kingdom when all will be made new. In practice our churches often embody stasis and continuity. Might we be more effective in mission if we advocated more whole-heartedly for change? XR challenges "ourselves and our toxic system" and maintains the prophetic voice that is embedded in both Testaments. It does so with a vigour that the Church lost long ago when it started

to consort with economic, political and military power. To be true to the prophetic and gospel tradition, surely the Church must also distance itself from "the toxic system." Within this system XR believes no one individual is to blame. Jesus also goes out of his way to avoid blaming and shaming individuals. His scorn is reserved for groups with power and authority. Should the church drop the Reformation's focus on personal redemption and be more critical of the shortcomings of the power structures in which we all live?

XR sets its mission on what is necessary. The broader Christian goals of working for the coming of the Kingdom or making disciples of all nations, by contrast, are self-evidently aspirational. Would focussing mission on metaphors such as the leaven in the dough or the salt of the earth, lead to more practical objectives that people might engage with more enthusiastically?

XR aspires to a "regenerative culture," one that places the health and wellbeing of its members at the heart *continued >*

of its mission. It understands that unless we care for each other, we will never have the strength to achieve any of our aims. Would it help our churches to similarly recognise that the health and wellbeing of our over-stretched clergy and congregations is foundational to mission?

“Through ongoing questioning, reflection and learning... [XR] will improve what we do and not get stuck in repetitive behaviour.” The church too has always valued teaching, but it has often assumed that the purpose of that teaching is to reinforce what is already known. Paul, however, stated that “now I know in part.” Perhaps the church would be more attractive if it acknowledged that its knowledge is only partial and conveyed the excitement of being able to continue to learn. XR has an incarnational approach to learning. Knowledge is assumed to be inside us. Christianity claims that God is within us, but so often looks elsewhere (scripture, tradition, reason) to find Him. Should we be looking instead to discover Him within ourselves and within others?

XR welcomes everyone “regardless of ethnicity, race, class, gender, gender identity, gender presentation, sexuality, age, income, ability, education, appearance, immigration status, belief or non-belief and activist experience.” The only difference between this and Paul’s insistence that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free man, male nor female”, is that the list is longer. Should the popularity of such intentionally inclusive movements in the modern world empower the church to live out our belief that we are all created in God’s image?

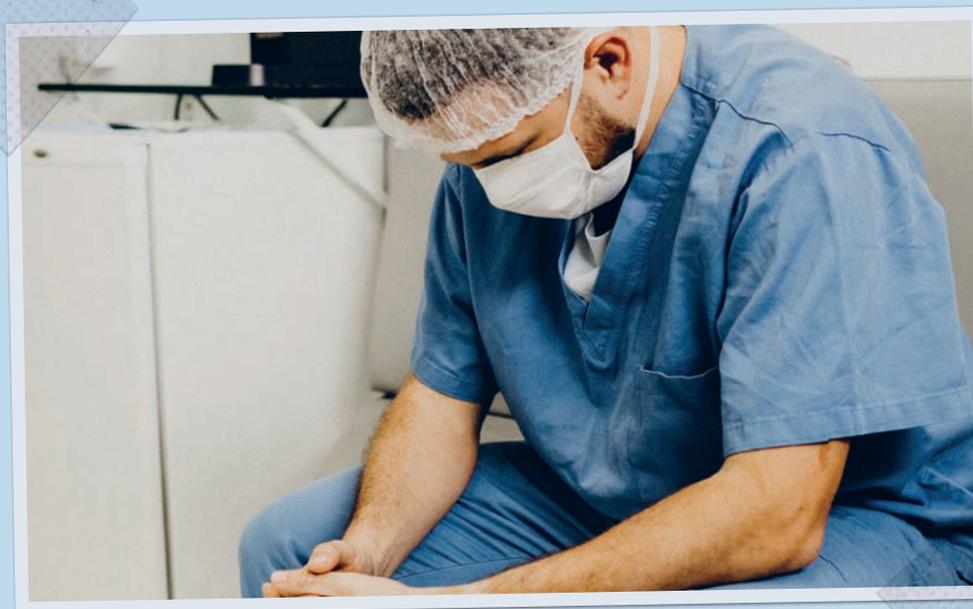
Non-violent resistance to societal laws and structures, is foundational to XR. It is also at the very heart of the gospel. Jesus taught that we should turn the other cheek and walk the extra mile. His procession into Jerusalem and disruption of the money lenders in the temple wrote the rule book for non-violent direct action as an avenue to societal and spiritual transformation – a rule book that the church lost many centuries ago.

Perhaps the most impressive characteristic of XR meetings is their lack of hierarchy. Voices of youth and age, male and female, assumed knowledge and assumed ignorance, of the novice and the elder are heard and valued equally. Meetings are facilitated rather than led and there is faith that truth will be discovered in the midst of this process rather than by imposition of some external authority. It is this commitment to autonomy and decentralisation that most invigorates XR and is most challenging to traditional churches which are often hierarchical, centralised and rule based. Perhaps a church that allowed the Spirit to move through autonomous, decentralised action could once more capture the dynamism and growth exemplified by both XR and the apostolic Christians.

This article is based on the commentary on XR’s ten principles and values which is available on their website: <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/about-us/>

Richard Baker is a lay minister at Bramhall Methodist Church, Manchester.

PHOTO BY JONATHAN BORBA



Healthy Intercessions

By Peter Howdle

This article arises out of a lecture at Bramhall Methodist Church in 2019 as part of a series exploring science and prayer. [The series was introduced by Richard Baker’s article in our last edition – Ed.]

As a clinical scientist I considered what we should pray for and expect for ourselves and others in times of illness.

I was trained in the scientific method where we expect an understanding of the body to lead to an explanation of the cause of disease and its cure. This is the

prevalent understanding of medicine in the west but perhaps not where Eastern or traditional medicine may be practised. Such alternative understandings may rely on psychological or spiritual dimensions rather than scientific method, and may perhaps have more relationship to religious belief.

Developments in health care

Health care, as we know it in developed countries, has seen major advances

For me, contemplating the structure and function of a human being, there is a feeling of awe and wonder. For example, as one begins to understand how our genes work, one is awe-struck by the design and control mechanisms.

in the last 100 years. The population overall has never been as healthy and life expectancy is still increasing. Such benefits are the result of an improved social environment, better nutrition, public health measures, control of infectious diseases, screening programmes and better treatment of long-standing illnesses.

As knowledge and technology have developed many specific diagnostic or treatment modalities are now commonplace. For example: endoscopy, joint replacement, chemotherapeutic regimens, scanners, keyhole surgery and organ transplantation.

There is the expectation of more developments as our understanding of genetics, ageing and brain function increases.

All is not good news

Many of these amazing improvements raise difficult issues. For example, the resources necessary are unevenly spread globally, many are only available in developed countries, and even then there are inequalities within countries and increasing costs with limited resources. Ethical questions arise around the beginning and end of life and about maintaining a healthy life-style.

Practically, there are still many diseases with no identifiable cause or specific cure and many patients continue with long-term illnesses.

How does all this relate to faith and worship?

For me, contemplating the structure and function of a human being, there is a feeling of awe and wonder. For example, as one begins to understand how our genes work, one is awe-struck by the design and control mechanisms. Humankind, and indeed all living things, are seen to be intimately related at the genetic level.

All this makes me wonder at creation and strengthens my belief in God the creator; I find that a very reassuring belief. So there is a natural response in worship to praise, to adore, and to give thanks for all that is.

Prayer

Prayer is an important part of our worship and our lives. Origen taught that prayer should always start with praise and end with thanksgiving, although so often our prayers desire good for ourselves and other people, our petitions and intercessions. In a sense that is natural since we want good outcomes in many circumstances as we care for others. So we rightly pray for peace, for reconciliation, for victims of injustice or natural disasters and also for people who are ill, and we pray for healing and for those who care for them.

Healthy Intercessions

The questions arise: what do we expect? How are our prayers answered?

PHOTO BY ISAAC QUESADA



In thinking about the outcomes of prayer, I prefer to differentiate between healing and curing. I believe many people can be 'healed' without being 'cured'.

From my viewpoint, I do pray for people to be healed but I don't expect an outcome which is contrary to my medical or scientific understanding. So if someone has a terminal disease, I am not expecting a cure. I realise that some may find this difficult.

This raises the question, what is a miracle? I have seen some inexplicable improvements in people's health and also people having enormous strength to cope with incredible difficulties, both in those who have a religious faith and those who do not. Are these in some sense miracles? Of course modern medicine does not have all the answers, in fact there are many things we do not understand.

Many theories have been advanced to explain miraculous or inexplicable cures. Are these direct interventions

by God in response to prayer? Are they due to changes in the psychological state of the patient? Are there physical explanations which at present we do not understand? It has been suggested that quantum theory and chaos theory mean that random events in our cells and in the universe are common and their effects are unknown, but could they be how God intervenes or answers our prayers?

Should we try to come up with an explanation in our present state of knowledge? Do we need to?

In thinking about the outcomes of prayer, I prefer to differentiate between healing and curing. I believe many people can be 'healed' without being 'cured'.

Being healed

I finish with a story. We had at our church a young woman with bowel cancer. Over four years she had chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery. But in the end she died. My wife visited her regularly. On what turned out to be her final visit my wife asked what they should pray for together. The answer was that they should give thanks.

As I said, Origen, in the third century, told us that prayer starts with praise and ends with thanks. Thanks that God is with us and that we know his love because we have seen it in Jesus. So we can know that we are healed, made whole, even when there is no cure.

So in our prayers every day we should remember to praise God and give thanks.

Peter Howdle is Emeritus Professor of Clinical Medicine at the University of Leeds.



A Timely Exploration of Fear in Church and Politics

In this courageous book, Lorraine Cavanagh takes us on a journey of exploration. Indeed, she is to be honoured for her willingness to accept the prophetic calling to name what many of us ‘fear to express’. What is fear? How does it impinge upon us as individuals, as a church and as nations? This is a book which connects at multiple levels and across a wide canvas: from our ‘original fear’ of being alone (‘Am I loved?’, ‘Am I safe?’) to the often unarticulated fears that shape the Church’s life and undermine the well-being of national and global political relationships.

The early chapters lay the



Lorraine Cavanagh
In Such Times: Reflections on Living with Fear
Cascade Books, 2018

groundwork philosophically, psychologically and theologically. We are invited to consider our fear of failure, our search for acceptance and meaning through conformity, success, achievement and an adherence to societal and religious expectations and norms, all of which reflect the longing for

that moment of truth “in which we see ourselves as God sees us and know ourselves as loved by God” (p.20). We are encouraged to reflect on the story of Jesus walking on water towards the disciples in the midst of a Galilean storm (Mark 4:35-41), and as the book unfolds, to ‘walk towards him,’ meeting our fears in him and so being delivered

Cavanagh reminds us perceptively that “there is a Donald Trump in all of us because, like him, we are all driven by our insecurities and the fears that feed them”

from them. Prayer (later expounded as ‘active dynamic waiting’) is the key tool both in managing our fears and enabling us to identify with the fear experienced by the lonely, the marginalized and the outsider.

Two key strands are examined in greater depth: the impact of fear in the life of the Church; and secondly, in the political realm. In regard to the Church, Cavanagh is (to some degree justifiably) scathing of a statistically bound and success-orientated Church whose ‘status anxiety’ has led it into anxious activism and managerialism (see Chapter 4). She makes a helpful distinction between priesthood and ministry, reminding us that good priests are ‘wise’ but not necessarily administrators; and her summons that prayer and pastoral care regain their priority in the lives of church leaders is important in an age where organization and strategy seems all. I understand her passion but would nevertheless put in a word for those many senior church leaders who (in my experience) long to retain the prayerful and pastoral heart of their vocations yet struggle with

the managerial demands placed upon them. Not all are corrupt!

In regard to the political sphere, the book offers pertinent insights from both sides of ‘The Pond’ (Brexit in the UK and the Trump administration in the US) and in respect of the media and ‘fake news’. Cavanagh reminds us perceptively that “there is a Donald Trump in all of us because, like him, we are all driven by our insecurities and the fears that feed them” (p.122).

I confess that there were things that irritated me about this book: the somewhat ‘propositional’ and un-nuanced writing style; an over self-conscious use of the feminine pronoun; and the theological idea of Christ as “indistinguishable” from us (see p.84). Surely it is his particularity as Son of God together with his identification as fully human that renders the Cross effective – not simply that he enters our alienation from God and from one another? Overall, however, I found this an interesting book and one that is indeed “a word in season” (p.xi) not least in its rallying call to the Church “to live for the world from within its life in God and to help the world to face its fear...” (p.122). A Church that is learning to do that is surely on the right track.

— Vanessa Herrick

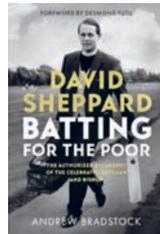
Vanessa Herrick is Archdeacon of Harlow in the Diocese of Chelmsford.



A Familiar Portrait Illustrates 'The Church in Action'

Andrew Bradstock, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, with degrees in theology, politics and church history, has written this well-named “authorised biography of the celebrated cricketer and Bishop”, David Sheppard, with the blessing of his daughter and his literary representative. Whilst a reviewer of an academic work might engage in argument about an author’s theses, one of biography, like an auditor, must report if there is “a true and fair” set of statements.

Anyone interested in such a book is likely to know the broad outline of Sheppard’s life which began “on the right side of the tracks:” private education, sport – above all county and international cricket – conversion, curacy in Islington, family man, Warden of the Mayflower Family Centre in Canning Town, Bishop of Woolwich,



Andrew Bradstock
David Sheppard
– *Batting for the Poor*
SPCK, 2019

Bishop of Liverpool and Life Peer. Bradstock sets out the story in great and well-researched detail, not masking painful family events but explaining, as the story unfolds, how

Sheppard came to learn and apply his bias to the poor. A few quotations stand out: An anonymous member of the Mayflower community: “Mr Sheppard don’t hold with going up in the world.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “His call to boycott apartheid was a major factor in its removal.”

Michael (now Lord) Heseltine to Archbishop Robert Runcie following the publication of *Faith in the City*: “Your bishops have got it all wrong. Things are much worse than they say.”

An anonymous Liverpool docker when asked to define ecumenism: “I suppose it means those bishops fighting to keep our jobs.”

England fast bowler, Fred Trueman, after Sheppard had dropped a catch off his bowling: “Kid yourself it’s Sunday, Rev, and keep your hands together.”

And finally, Jeremiah 29.7 inscribed on Sheppard’s memorial in Liverpool Cathedral: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you... and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”

No one who has not done the research (as Bradstock uniquely has done) should attempt to criticise the first 286 pages of text. Those pages paint a picture of the stature of the family man, sportsman, clergyman and campaigner that David Sheppard was. This reviewer believes that the account, to this point, is indeed true and fair, with due prominence given to high, if controversial, points such as, internationally, Sheppard’s anti-apartheid stance over the Basil D’Oliveira affair, and at home, *Faith in the City* dubbed by some on the political right as Marxist theology.

In the preface, Bradstock writes “except in the conclusion, I have avoided seeking to interpret or pontificate upon the events and opinions described”, while leaving it for “the reader to make her or his own judgement”. For that reason, this reviewer is

surprised by the number of new voices that are heard in the chapter called “Conclusion,” some involved only in the recent decade with the brutal advantage of 20/20 hindsight. Because of that, maybe a reviewer’s conclusion may be added. The anonymous member of the Mayflower community makes a point consistent with that of the prophet Jeremiah so that, if called to a city, preference to work elsewhere should be the exception and not the rule. As Fred Trueman suggests, Sheppard did drop a few catches and will have done so off the field as well. This reviewer, however, prefers to judge the man on the basis of the praise from both Desmond Tutu and Michael Heseltine as well as the anonymous docker, who surely do not all speak from the same place on the political spectrum.

This book will be rewarding for anyone seeking to understand the church in action as a matter of “applied” theology. For those grounded only in “pure” theology, it should be required reading.

—Anthony Hannay

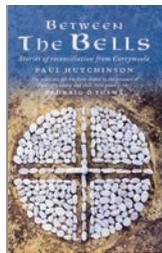
Anthony Hannay is a member of Modern Church, a mediator and a retired solicitor.



Hope Emerges from Stories of Reconciliation, Set Between the Bells of Corrymeela

Paul Hutchinson is a former director of Corrymeela. Padraig O Tuama suggests in his excellent Foreword to *Between The Bells* that community is a verb, not a noun. This emphasis on the active living out of complex issues of reconciliation runs through the book. Set within the daily rhythm of the bells which summon to worship and reflection in the building called the Croi, the heart of the community, Hutchinson has selected a range of experiences based on the often untold and unrecognised vulnerabilities of those who volunteer and visit Corrymeela.

The strength of these narratives is in their grounding in the daily struggles of everyday lives to make sense of themselves and their relationships so that



Paul Hutchinson
Between The Bells, Stories of Reconciliation from Corrymeela
Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2019

some kind of healing can take place. And these struggles are set within a wide range of places, circumstances, faiths and ages. There are visitors from primary schools, teenage youth groups, families on a respite break and individuals. Just like a diary, *Between The Bells* can be picked up and dipped into for stories which challenge us, as Hutchinson says in his account of a walk on the beach at the end of the book, to read ourselves into them.

What emerges is an honesty about the messy business of humanity in acknowledging the past and present to travel toward hope for the future. The text does not dwell on high profile, dramatic encounters or propose high profile, dramatic solutions to problems of division and failure in individual, family, social

The strength of these narratives is in their grounding in the daily struggles of everyday lives to make sense of themselves and their relationships, so that some kind of healing can take place.

or political relationships. Hope emerges through the minutiae of lives brought together to work at being together. Breathing through it is the pervasiveness of the countryside and the sea. You can imagine you are there hearing the bells signifying daily life lived often with pain but also with humour in an environment which invites refreshment and openness to new possibilities. The series of anecdotes from this life included in the section ‘*The heart translated*’ are brief yet profound enough to be used as starters in any discussion on reconciliation where, to begin with, the distancing through the experiences of others may well prompt an open and honest exploration of differences nearer home. As a complementary perspective, stories told by residential volunteers and the many and varied guests would provide a fascinating sequel.

— *Rosemary Walters*

Rosemary Walters is a Lay Canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

UPDATE



Modern Church Communications Officer, Joe Priestley

A New Look Website for Our Increasingly Virtual World

By *Joe Priestley*

Dear Modern Church members,

A warm greeting to you. I have the pleasure of being Modern Church’s Communications Officer, a post I have held since the start of this year. *continued >*



I balance my work at Modern Church with life marketing Ripon Cathedral – a role that has shifted dramatically in recent weeks. I now find myself editing home-recorded church services ready for a virtual Easter, brought to you by YouTube!

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How things have changed since joining the team! My background is in history and archaeology with a degree from the University of Sheffield, though my main preoccupation is in photographing historic churches rather than any hard graft digging.

I balance my work at Modern Church with life marketing Ripon Cathedral - a role that has shifted dramatically in recent weeks. I now find myself editing home-recorded church services ready for a virtual Easter, brought to you by YouTube! It's difficult to think that I was meeting the Modern Church Council in Leeds just a month ago, sipping coffee and sharing anecdotes.

I was at the council meeting to demonstrate a new website, which I have been busily designing since shortly after my appointment. With the nation in lock-down and life becoming increasingly virtual, the team at Modern Church have been working hard to ensure we can keep producing and curating high quality material to engage

our membership. Alongside this issue of *Signs of the Times*, I am pleased to announce the launch of the new Modern Church website at www.modernchurch.org.uk.

The site is updated each week with new blog posts from contributors, photographs and news. If you have a contribution for the website then please do let me know. At the foot of each page is the option to enter your email address and receive an email every time a new blog post is added – the best way to stay in touch.

We have designed the site to work across every major platform and device from a small smartphone screen to a large desktop computer. That said, every website will have a few teething problems so feel free to email me if you notice something amiss.

I look forward to meeting more of you in the bright new dawn of life post-Covid 19.

The new Modern Church website is updated weekly with blog posts, news and photography.

