

open

Christianity

an occasional newsletter
of hope for Christianity in Ireland

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Dublin group meetings

We met on Saturday 20th September, and we were delighted to welcome some new members. We had a lively discussion on the book *Jesus for the non-Religious* by John Shelby Spong. Those who had read the book expressed a sense of 'freedom' and a new understanding of how many myths became beliefs, most notably the resurrection.

We hope to meet again on the last Saturday in November – 29th at 2.00pm in Taney Parish Centre, when we will discuss the book *The Third Jesus* by Deepak Chopra. It is available through www.amazon.co.uk. - click on 'New and Used'. I ordered it (new) for £5.95 sterling (about 8 euro).

For those of you who have not read the Spong book, it is also available on Amazon.

Put November 29th in your diary now!

Jean Dolan

Next Belfast meeting

The book *Who on Earth was Jesus?* by David Boulton will be discussed at the next meeting of the Belfast OCN group. (This book was reviewed in OCN newsletter 6.)

The group meets on Monday November 24 at St George's Church, High Street, Belfast.

Plans for 2009

As well as a national OCN gathering with a speaker next autumn, a meeting will take place on April 4 in Dublin, bringing together members of the Belfast and Dublin OCN

groups. The following year that joint meeting will be in Belfast.

Fresh attempts are to be made to start other regional groups, by asking all those who receive this newsletter by email which towns they would be willing to travel to if meetings were set up.

These plans were the outcome of a recent meeting in Dublin of the OCN steering group.

Two members, Sean O'Conaill and Christopher Fettes, agreed to become assistant editors of the newsletter.

Sexy sermons

Desperate Housewives, Father Ted, and Sex in the City are among the subjects covered in Sunday sermons at Trinity College Dublin over the next few weeks. Darren McCallig, the Anglican/Episcopal chaplain, says 'Everyone is welcome and you won't be expected to park your brain at the door.'

The Sunday morning Sung Eucharist is at 10.45am.

Challenging words from Northern Ireland

Peter Rollins, of Ikon in Belfast, provides challenging reading on his blog site (www.peterrollins.net/blog/). Among other things, the current one asks the old question about whether, if charged with being a Christian, you would be found guilty. Here's an excerpt from a previous one:

Amidst all the claims that we need to return to an early Christianity (every new Christian movement seems to want to claim some return to the early Church, to the Church before Constantine, or before Greek thought or before the schisms ...), we have eclipsed the truly revolutionary drive of Christian faith. A drive, not to return to the early church as such, but rather to return to the Event that gave birth to the early church. ...

The main problem we face today is that the wider church has lost the belief that there can be a universal call to re-configure the basic co-ordinates (it is worth noting that all established groups will find it difficult to accept this idea as it threatens the status quo). Instead we have embraced the idea of piecemeal change. Radical groups are thus labelled 'new forms', 'fresh expressions', 'alt. worship', 'emerging' etc. and are slotted into the current structure rather than seen as containing a message that could transform the structure itself. Their *universal* message to the *whole* church is thus reduced to a *localised* message meant for some *segment* of the church.

Teaching words from the US

The American group of the Progressive Christianity Network has begun a teaching programme. They say:

This is an exciting time in the history of the progressive Christian movement. It is no longer about deconstruction, it is about reconstructing. It is one of an emerging culture. It

is a time of opening, sharing, and evolving. Over the next two months we continue to aim to provide you with many tools to understand, express and teach progressive Christianity...to your friends, to your children, to your church members. So, take a look around, stay in touch, explore our website and pass the information along.

For more information, or to be put on their mailing list, contact center@tpec.org.

Thinking words from New Zealand

OCN Ireland is affiliated to the worldwide Progressive Christianity Network. Some of the newsletters from groups in other countries can be very good. Possibly the best is the one from SMACA in New Zealand. To get on their mailing list contact clay@stmatthew.org.nz. Meanwhile, here's a sample:

Lambeth 2008 had a long-term strategy. The majority of Western societies now accept that homosexuality is not a disease, a deviance, or even an evil. Although it is not plainly talked about lest it sound patronising, there is a widespread liberal belief amongst the majority of bishops that slowly in time other societies that currently don't share this view will become more tolerant and accepting of the human rights of gay and lesbian people, which includes the right not to be discriminated against. The Church though by its nature is a conserving and conservative organisation. It is slow to change. But eventually it will. Rowan Williams' task at this point in history is to try and hold everyone together, reproving those who have embraced change too quickly, comforting those who find it repulsive, and encouraging all to pray and read the Bible together, as slowly the majority of the Anglican Communion drifts towards change. It might take decades but eventually the Church will get there. This is why so many fundamentalist Anglicans boycotted the conference: they knew that this tacit 'revisionist' agenda would be present. As Theo Hobson writing in the Guardian says, "The whole event is an incredibly delicate exercise in long-distance liberalism."

... The Church however is not intrinsically sacred. Like other institutions – marriage, democracy – much good has been done through it, but so has much harm. It is a vessel but it's the quality of its contents that matter. At its best the contents of the vessel called the Anglican Communion are the concrete manifestations of the unconditional love and justice of Jesus. By focusing on unity, a theme that Jesus said little about, the mission of the church to include the excluded, which Jesus said and did a lot about, is diminished. The longer the Church maintains its prejudicial views and policies towards gays and lesbians the more irrelevant and less credible it becomes. The priority of unity compromises our priority for mission.

While the tenor of Lambeth 2008 and its indaba [discussion groups] process is worthy of support, it was seriously and fatally compromised before it began. By excluding bishops – and here I include not only Gene Robinson but also those of an ultra-conservative hue – it sent out a clear message that this was not 'an open table'.

Only the select could commune. Gays need to wait outside and be grateful for any crumbs. Inside the bishops might have felt good about being there, feasting up large like the rich man's guests, but they were seemingly ignoring the Lazarus cost of structural exclusivity. That cost is credibility. And the hell awaiting them is irrelevance to the majority in the secular Western world.

Glynn Cardy

World news

Cardinal criticises Vatican statement

The Vatican's top official for Christian unity has criticised a Roman Catholic statement published in 2000 that described Protestant denominations as not being churches, "in the proper sense". "I took exception to it - not to the document's contents, but only to its language. In my opinion, this was inappropriate," said Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in an interview with Poland's Catholic information agency KAI.

(ENI)

Know Islam better, WCC urges

Christian communities should improve their knowledge of Islam, be good neighbours to Muslims and bear witness to their faith in an appropriate manner, according to an international group of church leaders and experts on Christian-Muslim dialogue.

These were some of the recommendations put forward at an 18 to 20 October 2008 consultation aimed at developing an ecumenical Christian theological understanding of dialogue with Islam. Convened by the World Council of Churches (WCC), it gathered some fifty church leaders and experts on Christian-Muslim dialogue in Chavannes-de-Bogis, outside Geneva, Switzerland.

(Ekklesia Daily Bulletin)

Are you with Ekklesia?

Ekklesia is a valuable information service for anyone interested in what is happening in religion worldwide.

It describes itself as 'an independent, not-for-profit think-tank which examines the role of religion in public life and advocates transformative theological ideas and solutions.'

A widely-referenced source of authoritative comment, policy ideas and news briefing on a range of contemporary issues related to religion and politics ... Ekklesia now has one of the most widely read current affairs religious websites in Britain according to Alexa/Amazon rankings.'

Ekklesia's Daily Email Bulletin is a free daily briefing service from its press office containing news and comment on contemporary issues and events.

To join the mailing list, contact office@ekkleisia.co.uk

There is also a Radical Christian Education project (see www.ekkleisia.co.uk) and a very good on-line bookshop (www.books.ekkleisia.co.uk).

Psychotherapy and Spirituality

David Buckley, author of *Where the Waters Meet*, is the key speaker on Friday November 14 at the 4th annual Slieve Croob International Conference in Co. Down.

Dr Buckley will lead a dialogue between Jarleth F. Benson, Director of the Institute of Psychosynthesis in London, and Anne M. Codd, Ph.D.

The conference is organised by the Northern Ireland Institute of Human Relations and the All Ireland Spiritual Guidance Association.. It will run from 10am to 5pm, and is open to all. The fee, including lunch, is £50 for NIIHR and AISGA members, or £60 for non-members.

Further information from Gordon Graham, on 028 4372 6175 (from UK) or gorbargrah@aol.com.

Two new books you might like to know about. The first is from England

Reshaping Christianity: Mysticism, Spirituality and Global Faith, by John G Hetherington.

£2.50 (+50p p&p per copy) from: Rev Martin Camroux, 35 Arundel Road, Cheam, Surrey, SM2 6EU, England enclosing a sterling cheque or bank draft.

The booklet draws together recent reflections on the growing significance of new forms of spirituality within Christianity as well as in other faiths. It introduces much of the new thinking about emerging forms of progressive Christianity in the UK and challenges its readers to take seriously the conclusions of the Lancaster University review of religion and spirituality in Kendal, where the author lives. That work forecasted a continuing decline in 'religion' while the search for individual non-dogmatic spiritual experience grows.

Hetherington links this to the writings of some of the well known exponents of the 'New Spirituality', such as Eckhart Tolle and Neale Donald Walsch, and also explores the resurgence of the 'Mystical Christianity' as espoused by Marcus Borg.

The author believes we are seeing a new reformation in practice and belief, and explores the potential of these changes to open up new opportunities to build a common progressive understanding across the world's faiths. He concludes with a brief survey of Sufi Islam and

the Baha'i Faith, which evidence significant common ground with progressive Christian thinking and the new forms of individualised spirituality.

The second book is from America.

Birdlike and Barnless: Meditations, Prayers and Songs for Progressive Christians, by Jim Burklo

St Johann Press, 2008. Available on Amazon

'Ready for a humble, hard-working Christian religion that is pro-justice and pro-peace? Ready for a faith that takes the Bible seriously because it doesn't take it literally? Ready for a soulful expression of progressive Christianity in meditative prose, poetry, ritual and song? If you are ready to empty the barn of dusty dogma and take wing with celebration, you will find in Jim Burklo's new book a rich devotional resource for individuals and a treasure-trove of fresh material for churches to use in worship and programming.'

(This book has been recommended by John Shelby Spong.)

Quotes

There is much talk at present about the shortage of priests. But there is seldom any talk about improving the image of priesthood, praying that all our priests will be – above all – men and women who are interested in people, especially those who are marginalised and forgotten.

'MC' ('Thinking Anew', Irish Times, 14.06.08)

Hospitality and healing between Christians must be intensified way beyond the present tepid efforts if further serious inter-religious dialogue is to succeed and if the hospitable and healing word of God is to have a wider audience.

Enda McDonagh (The Furrow, October 2008)

The contribution of the Protestant tradition to biblical scholarship has been immense. It may assist the healing of memory to affirm that the emphasis in the Reformation on improving access to the Scriptures was a good from which all Christians have benefited.

Cardinal Seán Brady, at the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops at the Vatican this month

I believe that the vocation of Anglicanism is to model a different way of being Church, a way that is relational and more concerned with respect, mutual regard, unity in diversity.

Canon Ian Ellis, Editor of the C of I Gazette, at this month's Affirming Catholicism conference in Dublin

If we do not challenge the racism and discrimination that I fear could quickly gather pace in Ireland under the present political and economic circumstances, then how can we convince others that we believe in Christ and the Kingdom he proclaimed?

*Canon Patrick Comerford
in a sermon on Racial Justice Sunday.
(C of I Gazette)*

Listening to Gay Christians

Nearly 60 people were at the public lecture and AGM held by Changing Attitude Ireland (CAI) in Belfast recently. Thirteen clergy were among those attending. The lecturer, Dr Andrew Yip, was also interviewed on BBC Radio Ulster/NI 'Sunday Sequence'.

CAI is a network of people, gay and straight, lay and ordained, working for the full affirmation of gay and lesbian Christians. It was founded in 2007, and has organised talks on 'Listening to Gay Christians' for clergy rural deaneries and other church groups. It is an all-Ireland organisation which began among members of the Church of Ireland but has now become ecumenical.

Among its patrons is Victor Griffin, the retired Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

Information on www.changingattitudeireland.org

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Subscription to this newsletter is free

News items, letters, reviews always welcomed

The *OPEN CHRISTIANITY NETWORK*

Do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God.
(Micah 6:8)

The Open Christianity Network exists to create an environment in which the search for truth in the light of contemporary understanding can take place. Its founders are practising members (including clergy) of most of the mainstream churches in Ireland, and also those who find themselves on the margins of belief or practice.

We affirm the freedom of each individual to develop their own spiritual vision, and accept that we will therefore cover a wide range of views on matters of doctrine, gender, and the use or abuse of power.

We are not seeking to become a new church, but we ask that this open, inclusive and questioning way of living and believing be recognised and accepted as an authentic Christian position.

WE SEEK ...

- to provide an environment in which beliefs and doubts can be explored and faith can grow, in the light of developments in areas such as Biblical scholarship, theology, philosophy and the sciences;
- to claim our Christian heritage, whilst being open to truths and resources present, or yet to be discovered, in other traditions;
- to draw sustenance from the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth;
- to value and practice love, inclusivity and justice as Jesus did, and to voice our concerns about abuse, discrimination, corruption and poverty.

The Open Christianity Network welcomes and will support everyone who wishes to join. Meetings are held in Dublin and Belfast and other regions of Ireland as and when possible.

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