



Thoughts and Prayers

Reflections on praying

by Free to Believe members

Prayer

Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer utters itself. So, a woman will lift her head from the sieve of her hands and stare at the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift.

Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth enters our hearts, that small familiar pain; then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his youth in the distant Latin chanting of a train.

Pray for us now. Grade I piano scales console the lodger looking out across a Midlands town. Then dusk, and someone calls a child's name as though they named their loss.

Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer – Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.

*Used with kind permission of
Carol Ann Duffy*

With the Vision4Life Prayer Year rapidly approaching, a discussion developed between Free to Believe committee members in summer 2009 about how we might best contribute from a liberal point of view. It rapidly became clear that expressing our thoughts on prayer was going to prove much more difficult than talking about the Bible had been, which has left me pondering why that should be the case.

Prayer presupposes an acknowledgement that there is more to life than meets the eye: a different perspective or dimension at the very least, something beyond our everyday experience. To pray indicates a desire to form some kind of connection with that 'otherness', that which is beyond ourselves, and connection implies relationship. All relationships require us to give something of ourselves: prayer, in order to be at all meaningful, demands a level of self-awareness and honesty which many of us would prefer to avoid. Prayer is a very personal, very emotional business, concerning all that is most dear to us, revealing our needs and desires, our fears and our failings, our joy and our despair. Whether or not we believe that we encounter another 'being' through prayer, we are definitely going to have to face up to ourselves!

For all those reasons, and doubtless many more, prayer is a difficult topic to discuss, even before one starts to reflect on such matters as the complexities of preparing prayers for corporate worship, or praying in situations of pastoral need, or how to pray when the heart is troubled and the words don't come.

Through our e-mail exchanges, a body of material began to emerge and we felt it might be useful to share it. We offer it to you now not as something definitive or comprehensive, but as a sample of ponderings and reflections, of insights gained and treasures collected along our journeys of faith. Please use it in whatever ways you find helpful.

Alison Micklem



Praying on the Mind

Some personal reflections

It seems to me that for the majority of traditional Christians, Prayer is the single most important component in the church's construction kit, and for good reasons. The life of Jesus was centred on prayer and the Bible describes a God usually responsive to human prayer, if not always favourably. The essential nature of prayer for most Christians arises from belief in the other basic tenets of Christianity, namely the Bible that promotes it, the Jesus who 'intercedes' and the God who answers it. And that's where the problems begin.

The tendency to take all these tenets 'on trust' at a superficial and often literal level leads inevitably to prayer dilemmas for many. I accept there are those who believe sincerely that God speaks to them and who derive great comfort and security as a result.

However, when the likes of George Bush could justify going to war after consulting his god, 'hearing voices' can assume sinister overtones. For me, the oft-quoted words of Mother Teresa about her prayers being mutual 'listening' exercises between herself and God, without the intrusion of words, resonate far more in tune with my thoughts.

I believe God always 'listens' to me. He listens to my confidence and my insecurity, my passion and my indifference, my unselfishness and my thoughtlessness, my successes and my failures, my realities and my fantasies. The extent of my reciprocal hearing ability depends on my relationship with my conscience. As for those familiar prayer shopping lists in church intercessory prayers, we need to remember that if we believe that the God we are addressing is indeed the 'ground of our being', then we are in effect talking to ourselves. The 'answers' to our prayers depend on our own subsequent actions, no matter how seemingly insignificant.

In my fifties I underwent major surgery for a (fortunately) benign brain tumour that was successfully removed. I did not pray or attempt to 'bargain' with God at that time – it just seemed so unnecessary – I experienced a reassuring peace and calmness, strengthened by the knowledge that friends back at my church were praying for me. There is mounting evidence of the power of mind over matter and how much recovery from ill health is influenced by attitude.

I am sure the power behind prayer has always existed and has been accessed by many for good and ill throughout human history. It is a natural part of God's creation, still little understood. Sadly, it is the attempt to hijack it as a power uniquely mediated by the Christian church that continues to create such torment for many.

Chris Avis

A personal prayer pilgrimage: the journey so far...

I have no recollections of early childhood prayers, not even of saying prayers at bedtime; and I do not remember being aware of my parents praying. Only if a visiting 'preaching with a view' candidate came to lunch did we ever say grace!

I do remember the shame and sense of disgrace experienced at school where I forgot the words of the Lord's Prayer when asked to recite them as part of the home-going ritual when aged 8 or 9.

Attending a Church of England Junior School involved going to the Parish Church once a week and reciting prayers, but these made little impression and I was completely bewildered when going to C of E church parades as a teenage Ranger, trying to keep up as we rattled through the service!

During early adulthood and middle age my 'thinking' about prayer was virtually non-existent – though Michel Quoist was something of an eye-opener. I did join in spoken prayers at church, wrote some as a 'task' at church weekends, asked for support in prayer at crucial periods in my life (though remaining unsure as to whom I was addressing these pleas), led prayer sessions and tutored on prayer at TLSLite courses....

So for me, praying is part of a wider meditative process of talking through, mainly in my head, my ideas, questions, debates – and occasionally requests. This process has been fuelled, directed and focussed by my reading for lay preaching status and onwards; by discussion in bible study groups and by attendance at a variety of courses. I can be deeply moved by reading prayers – both ancient and modern.

With relief I have moved on from addressing my conversations to a shape in the sky. I feel now that I am linking them to a power centred on the love, justice and responsibility that lies within each one of us which can effect, when pooled, transformation and change – both personally and corporately.

I still worry about the outer nature of prayer used in corporate worship and once in a while I envy those who seem so certain of a being to whom they pray. Sometimes I panic and think I am speaking into a void; and I do have an occasional sense of hypocrisy when talking about PRAYER. Also, I do adapt set prayers when I come across wording or sentiments to which I cannot in all honesty subscribe.

I think there is value in studying prayers and looking for the meaning and background contexts that called them into being – and even attempting to identify what is ‘prayer’ within them.

Sue Liddell

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Some quotes from Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi on which to reflect:

“Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.”

“Prayer is not an old woman's idle amusement. Properly understood and applied, it is the most potent instrument of action.”



Ever wondered . . .

. . . what our children are taught about religion in school these days? My daughter has chosen A Level Religious Studies as one of her options and embarked on her second year work, A2, immediately after the AS exams. They were being asked to learn some new terminology from their textbook, which I noticed included the following paragraph under a heading 'Prayer':

“Prayer is communion with God. It comes in many forms, including prayers of thanks, of asking for help and guidance, for forgiveness and for praise. Believers claim that God answers prayers and that this is a sure sign of his existence. Archbishop William Temple observed: ‘When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don’t, they don’t.’”

A2 Religious Studies (Tyler & Reid): Pearson Education Ltd, 2009

Although I was concerned by the second sentence, it was the ‘Believers claim . . .’ sentence that concerned me most. I am sure that coincidences do happen, but my gut feeling is that they seem to happen when we are mindful and watchful rather than the monochrome statement that Archbishop William Temple offers. There is no desire on my part to dwell on the ‘Believers claim . . .’, but discussion groups I attend often ponder the perceptions of the church by those outside it and prayer may be a large part of that perception. “Let’s pray about it” used in some churches or “I’ll hold you in my thoughts and prayers” used by many of us may well be perceived as the ‘ask’ that leads to the claim of believers that God answers prayer. Perhaps answers do come, in the form of coincidences that require action on our part. I might even be able to believe in that, but I also think that many of those I know who do not claim to have faith, and certainly wouldn’t acknowledge that they pray, are also open to similar coincidences. Could the most important thing be to act on them and not to dwell too much on the source? Whilst prayer may be communion with

Puzzling decision . . . a sign encountered on holiday in California.

The sign on the road side said “**Safe Soul Space**” . . . you have to find out what a ‘Safe Soul Space’ looks like, don’t you? Turning off the main road up the valley, we approached the community church, but we had to turn at a T-junction first . . .



The apparent finality straight ahead was not an alluring option of those three stark choices. On reflection I would rather the bi-directional arrows be intermingled to root prayer in all we do.



Like the word God, prayer is a concept I find impossible to bind in a word requiring definition . . . and I certainly don’t see it as **an** or **the** alternative to ‘play’!

Linda Harrison

An Open Prayer

Great God of all time and all places, how can we grasp your hand? We try to capture you in a human image, then find we have made an idol of our own reflection. We try to define you in words, but our tools of language are too blunt and clumsy to capture your form. We try to hear your true voice, but we are deafened by our own self-centred demands. We ask for favours, but still we are buffeted by the randomness of life. Sometimes you seem so indifferent and remote, and yet there are times when you seem almost too close to bear: times when you become a still, small voice deep within us.

Open our hearts to that voice. Open our hearts to see more clearly. To see into the fears and concerns of those around us with empathy and understanding. To see with an enlightened heart the landscape of life stretched out before us. Open us to the wonder, the sheer marvel of being alive in such a remarkable world. Open our hearts to amazement; open our hearts to gratitude.

Open our hearts to acceptance. Acceptance of those who are different to us, those who frighten us with their colour, their culture, their religious beliefs, their sexual orientation. Enable us to welcome them with open hearts, not on our own religious terms but with the realisation that all are loved unconditionally as your children. And open our hearts to acceptance of ourselves.

Open our hearts to compassion and a passion for justice. Urge us to feel the suffering and pain of the world so intensely that we respond to it, not by making demanding requests to you but by making costly demands on ourselves. Remind us of the example of Jesus who said "Be compassionate as God is compassionate" - and practised what he preached.

Release us from our own prison of fear and insecurity. Then, with hearts open to you, urge us out of our lay-bys and cul-de-sacs of limiting belief and on to open roads of faith and adventure. Then we will find there is no need to despair of ever grasping your hand: then we will know that our giving and receiving, our pains and pleasures, our achievements and failures, our living and our dying are all in your universal, timeless hands of love.

Chris Avis

The starting point on prayer for me . . .

. . . needs to be based on our understanding of God. Prayer begins with my present understanding of what is believable to me about the word God. This is now a consciousness of a kind of presence within and around me not easily explained but that makes me conscious of the inter-connectedness of humanity. A Jewish commentary on psalm 23 helpfully refers to the two way interdependency in which we are dependent on God and God is dependent on us. In intercessions it is no use praying for the hungry to be fed unless we act in some way to bring this about. This may be the point when we have thoughts given us to know what to do. I remember a bereaved woman who said after the service that she knew I was praying for her though no name had been used. Convinced that what we call Spirit is a power (God) within all humanity to find for ourselves, I think that when we are concerned about something our thoughts become prayer. It is for all humanity and is first seen through Jesus' baptism and later the discovery of this by the first disciples. The difficulty today is how we can reconcile a belief of this kind with Christians who think of God as a kind of super dictator who is in full control.

Hazel Day

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Liberal Prayer

Prayer seems to be a universal human activity. People have always prayed. To many people prayer is powerful. Personally I find more and more in my ministry some of the powerful moments include prayer. Praying with people is one of the great privileges of being a minister. But we need to reflect on what we're doing when we pray so that our minds and hearts can come together when we pray.

I'm afraid quite a few prayers come under the heading of "Please God, may two plus two not equal four". So people going into hospital pray "May the tumour not be malignant," as if that can possibly make any difference to what the diagnosis will be. We need to distinguish prayer from wish-fulfilment. The reality is that however often you pray "O God make me a year younger" you'll find it won't happen. If you lose a leg there's no point asking for another one to grow. I have personally found that praying for rain at cricket when England is losing is best done when they are playing at Manchester on a cloudy day! Its time we gave up on the childish idea that prayer is a way of manipulating the world in our favour.

A few years ago the news media reported on the conclusion of a scientific study that set out to investigate the question of whether prayer really works. One group of hospital patients was told that strangers would be praying for their recovery. A second group was told that strangers might or might not be praying for them. A third group was not prayed for at all. The three groups were carefully monitored over a period of time, and when the results were in, the people who were prayed for did not recover any more quickly than either of the other two groups. In fact, the people who were told they were being prayed for by strangers seemed to be a little worse off than the others. Scientific conclusion: prayer doesn't work.

I don't know quite what to make of that. How for example could you be sure no-one in the third group was being prayed for? But I do think we can be certain that there is little evidence that interventionist prayer has any observable effect.

This does not mean that prayer is not powerful. But it does mean we need an adult view of prayer. The classic liberal view of prayer is set out by Harry Emerson Fosdick in "The Meaning of Prayer". Basically he saw prayer as about communion with God and believed that prayer changes things not by getting

God to do something he wouldn't otherwise have thought of (which is incompatible with a loving God), or by making people do what otherwise they wouldn't have done (which is incompatible with human freedom), but by opening us to be channels for the power of God. This kind of prayer makes sense to me.

My definition of prayer is 'coming into the presence of God and being with him'. Prayer is finding a peace at the heart of us. One of the reasons Jesus prayed confidently was because he saw prayer as friendship with God. Someone once described prayer simply like that ... as "friendship with God". That's a pretty good definition for me. I think prayer does amazing things. It does it for me because it stills my soul and directs my will. It does it for the world because it looses the power of God.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once said:

"There are two ways to learn to pray. One is to try to argue it all out first, solve all the theoretical problems, and then, having our questions answered and our doubts resolved, say, "Now I will try to pray". That method seldom issues in profound experience. But one often sees another kind of thing happen - people who started off with the need of backing greater than their own, the desperate need of it, and who, theory or no theory, reached out for God and found him there, found some power indubitably there they could rest back upon . . .

"On the Maine coast a boy asked an old sailor, 'What is the wind?' and after a long pause the old man answered, "I don't know. I can't tell you. But I know how to hoist a sail" Try prayer will you? There are endless unanswered questions but still prayer is real. Hoist your sail and see!"

Martin Camroux



Still wondering . . .

. . . I'm still wondering though about the God to whom we pray! Lots of concerns regarding much of prayer, not least intercessions.

In his excellent book 'Worship in the Spirit of Jesus', Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer writes:

"I remember an interview with Mother Teresa in which she was asked what she said when she prayed. Her response was that she didn't say anything. She listened. She was then asked what God said when she listened. Her reply was that God doesn't say anything either. God just listens. We'd like to encourage what might be a different form of prayer from what many groups are used to. Rather than a petitional form of prayer (asking for God's intervention through a list of petitions), we're hoping to establish a listening form of prayer, a time of mindfulness leading us into compassion. The former style of prayer (petitions) implies (to us) a god that is sometimes present, sometimes not, deciding who to hear, offering limited or conditional blessings. We prefer to be silent together, to become open - perhaps through the brief details of the real world we may hear the ever-present invitation."

*Worship in the Spirit of Jesus: Theology, Liturgy, and Songs
Without Violence: Pilgrim Press, April 2005*

Does this offer us a way into an alternative? Should we be considering ideas such as tapping into the Universal Mind or Universal Consciousness?

David Parkin

I recently had a sort of epiphany . . .

. . . when a light came on (this is the literal bit). It got dark, I turned the light on and the room became much brighter.

I know almost nothing about how that process happens, about what occurs in order to bring a dark place to light at the flick of a switch – and prayer is a bit like that too.

Like many today, I struggle with prayer. I do not believe in a theistic God, so to whom am I praying? I do not believe that if I shout louder or get the ‘magic formula’ right, my prayers go to the head of the queue. I do not believe that ‘God always answers prayer and sometimes the answer is no’. To me, what on earth, or in heaven, does that say about the God believed in?

I do still believe in prayer. I don’t get a lot of it, but I think it is profoundly important that a community is able to spend time in prayer together. Not the loud caterwauling that I have experienced and particularly thinking of the apparent need for transatlantic accents to glorify God at top volume.

Didn’t St Francis say ‘pray without ceasing, use words if necessary’? I like the story of Mother Teresa and God sitting silently together. Prayer for me is about aligning ourselves with God, however defined, with the intention of God’s distributive justice for the world, as put forward by John Dominic Crossan. In the act of praying we are committing ourselves to be part of the solution to the problems, locally, nationally and internationally. To this end we commit ourselves to speak out against prejudice whether that comes for those of (any) faith or anti-faith. It roots us firmly in the world and does not remove us from it.

I reject the idea that as Christians we need to be in the world *but not of it*. If we are not of it we cannot affect it and if prayer is about the focus on what happens after this life then we squander the life we have been given. (*And if that’s not sin I don’t know what is.*)

Prayer anchors us to the needs of this world and should lead us to action. I came across a book very recently by Fred Brown called 'Living Before You Die', written in 1973. I recommend it, if you can find a copy, because its outlook sits very neatly alongside the work of John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Talking about prayer, Fred Brown says:

“When traditional teaching for whatever reason proves to be unsatisfactory, it is inevitable that the area in which the rejection of the old and the search for something new will be most apparent will be in the prayer life of the church and the private devotions of individual believers.”

He then quotes W.H.Auden from the book, 'A certain World':

“To pray is to pay attention to something other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention on a landscape, a poem, a geometrical problem, an idol, or the true God – that he completely forgets his own ego and desires, he is praying. Choice of attention – to pay attention to this and ignore that – is to the inner life what choice of action is to the outer. In both cases, a man is responsible for his choice and must accept the consequences, whatever they may be.”

'Living Before You Die': SCM Press, March 1973

Non inclusive language aside, it is interesting that the issue of what it means to pray is not new and that many have struggled with it across the years. Whilst I still struggle with so much of it, and admit that my personal prayer life has stopped in this transition phase, I repeat that I still value the idea of prayer and would not want to abandon the concept to those whose definition may take a fixed, not to say rigid, pattern.

Tim Richards

My struggle . . .

. . . is with corporate prayer. Look at any collection of prayers intended for use in public worship and you will find that many of them – even some written by the most liberal of authors – read like appeals addressed to a God who is external to our world; a God who will, if offered enough praise and flattery, condescend to intervene in the affairs of the gathered worshippers, and may be persuaded to look kindly on this fallen sinful world. Everything, indeed, that a liberal understanding of God is *not*.

But what can we do? Find new and imaginative ways of praying together? There are only so many times a congregation will happily come forward to drop pebbles in a bucket, stand in a circle around a galaxy of tea-lights, or write their thoughts on the leaves of a prayer-tree. Our tradition demands *words*. As a worship leader, I am expected to articulate the needs, hopes, fears, concerns and aspirations of the congregation in a way that affirms and nurtures faith; as a liberal Christian, I need to do so while maintaining my integrity and refusing to pander to a view of prayer that I cannot accept.

Here's a brief example of the same prayer written in *two styles* – the closing fragment of a prayer of intercession:

- a) *“Almighty God, inspire in us and all your people a spirit of generosity, a desire to serve and a commitment to care. Send us out from here into the world joyfully proclaiming the Good News of peace and justice, hope and salvation. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon our world that there may be harmony among people, tolerance and respect for those who are different, and a common desire to serve your purposes, so that your Kingdom may come and your will may be done.”*

A place for prayer

Increasingly I have to work hard to make sense of *prayer* in a universe which we know, scientifically, to be emergent 13.7 billion years ago. We have to work with a viewpoint that places planet earth as part of an unexceptional solar system on the spiral arm of an unexceptional galaxy amongst billions of others. We have to accommodate the evolutionary story of life on earth and the development of human societies as laced with endless seemingly random challenges and chances – but if we are to be theist at all we also need a sense that the story of evolution and the development of faith in its myriad forms is somehow a necessary step within that evolutionary paradigm.

As a result my approach is taking an increasingly mystical turn, with a growing panentheist (possibly pantheist) idea of God as emergent, and – in process theology terms – thus engaged in the story. This is where I start from when approaching the concept of prayer.

I see God as in all things – not as a static, distant, theist ‘being’, but emergent and thus a real “presence”: in effect a supra mind/life in which all being subsists. This ‘Life, Love and Being’ has for me a ‘Beingness’ beyond this physical Universe (however defined) that has awakened evolved life, imbuing it with a spiritual sensitivity until over aeons emergent beings (like us) have evolved self awareness and wonder. All that ‘is’, is, for me, evolving within a glorious evolutionary process – through a kind of ‘difference engine’ – which will always create the wonderful, the bizarre and the awesome. I commend the book “Thank God for Evolution” by Michael Dowd for opening up the idea that our unifying “great story” is the story of evolution complemented by a theology of God as present in its unfolding.

Though God is One, God is this ‘all’. This view radically changes prayer from supplication offered to an intervening deity to a process of deeper entry into ‘what is’ – to knowing and communication with ‘what is’ – thus awakening to the Life,

Love and Being behind it all. But, of course, the creative process of evolution develops through a painful food chain; and societies develop by warfare and evil empires – though with a growing vision of a common humanity driven by the still small voices of God’s prophets and messengers, Jesus included. Evolution proceeds in painful ways and that mix of chance and necessity must be faced in considering the role of prayer.

Wherever a freely creating and emerging universe generates beings with big brains and self awareness, I believe that there can be a new level of communication between individuals by external language, which can be ‘prayer’ in itself as it addresses injustice and challenges systems. Increasingly however, I myself want to own a ‘sixth sense’ of intuition, where the Universe/God speaks and challenges in a spiritual dimension. This is also a place for prayer as our ‘thought’ and the ‘Universal thought’ align.

And I guess that is it.

So, in Christian terms, the Jesus movement arose because the man Jesus walked in profound communion with the All – beyond imagination but yet Abba – Father/Mother/Friend. Prayer is thus conversation with and alignment to the unfolding evolution of Creation and the Life in and over ‘it’.

My theology recognises a merging of terms like ‘God’ and ‘Life’ and ‘Love’ in One unfolding purpose which enables and requires *conversation* and a ‘holy’ *purposeful life* for self-aware beings on this planet; and likely millions of others in this and countless other Universes. It has inspired on this planet great human beings to go deep into life, which also implies (requires) communication with all Life and Love and Being. Conversation also means loving challenge; and allows the possibility of change in God – “God’s Will” is not a given. So, prayer is that two way mutual cry and tenderness that characterises our way of being human in relationship and our being with the “All”.

I hope that is enough to convey my drift: that, while it is not about intercession – I do not preclude that prayer can make a difference. It is also about mutuality – a coming together just for the joy of it, when we are enraptured by creation, when we pause long enough to calm our ‘Monkey Minds’ and still our Reptilian desires and fears. If we can understand there to be One ‘mind and heart’ in the All, then we are open to the direct awareness of others – through intuition, call, etc. Just as importantly, as we re-read and rediscover the Bible and other scriptures in a post modernist way, we can see that such insights and conversations with God and ONE ANOTHER are on almost every page, leading to change making and world changing as part of the ongoing Evolution of the Universe/God/Life – as well as that of human (or other life forms’) societies. The long term future of this earth is that we all are one – while all unique and different – and that all come more and more to know the ‘Life and Love and Being’ that launched evolution and longs for us all to awaken to know the God in All things – in whom we live and love and are.

It blows my mind to get the hang of this; and makes it harder and harder to be satisfied with the constraints of church and doctrine when ‘Love is all around’, waiting to share and continue building our future with willing human beings and all the life of earth and heaven!

Let us pray!

John Hetherington



And to close . . .

Whilst preparing this booklet, a letter appeared by e-mail – one of the weekly items from Bishop John Shelby Spong through Waterfront Media (www.johnshelbyspong.com). Whilst placed in context, the main question being posed by Jody was “*What does prayer look like today?*”:

Dear Jody,

I don't like to use the word *prayer*, because it is culturally translated as one person approaching the theistic God above the sky with a request. The word itself has become bankrupt and not capable of redemption.

Instead, I think of prayer as communing with the holy, that which is transcendental, the power of life, the consciousness of the divine, the Ground of Being or perhaps the source of love. I do not commune with God in order to seek divine favour or to engage in religious flattery that people call praise. I commune to discover God within me and to be more open to that presence. I do not separate prayer from life. I do not think prayer is something I do, so much as it is something I am.

Public worship has elements of liturgical prayer in it and I engage in public worship every Sunday. I believe the purpose of liturgy is to open us to the presence of the holy in the gathered community. I resent having medieval patterns of liturgy imposed on me, as if somehow plainsong music and priestly chanting creates holiness. To me it only creates irrelevant liturgy. I have written on prayer many times. I experience more in prayer than I can describe in words. That is as far as I can go.

I hope this helps.

– John Shelby Spong



*An informal network of liberally minded Christians striving
for an open, inclusive and thinking church.*

*Visit our website @
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