

# BRIEFING

Summer 2016

## cutting edge



the conference

Free to  
Believe



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*The PDF version of this edition on the Free To Believe website contains versions which are, as far as possible, the full versions of the presentations.*

*<http://www.freetobelieve.org.uk>*

*It all seemed such a good idea. Shortcut the laborious process of commissioning and editing a mass of disparate material by simply publishing the texts of presentations from the Free To Believe conference at High Leigh in April. Then, slowly, came the horrifying realization that the presentations were so closely argued and, frankly, so good that editing was an act of brutality. So what follows is offered with apologies to Susan, Lawrence and Andrew. It is the product of much sweat but it is merely a taste of the banquet which those present at High Leigh enjoyed.*

*David Lawrence*

*A summary of the presentation by Leslie Griffiths will be included in a future edition*

# 'Just when you thought you were being radical about gender...'

*Biblical stories of creation and redemption*

*Susan Durber*



## Introduction

I am hoping in what follows to reflect as honestly as I can on what our faith has to say about gender and offer some thoughts about what a biblical Christian faith might have to contribute in order to break what feels like a particular kind of log jam. And I want to suggest some things in which, I believe, the traditions of Christianity have always witnessed about gender, from our foundations – ways which I think we consistently find it hard to hear.

## My own story

I recognize, looking back, how much my views about and understanding of gender have changed over the years, which leaves me much more timid than I would once have been about making supposedly radical or prophetic statements now.

I also increasingly have a sense that I am treading on holy ground in talking about the profound human reality of gender, and that I ought to leave my shoes at the door – whether they are stilettos or Doc Martens. Gender (and indeed sexuality) seem to me more and more profound mysteries before which we are still, properly, puzzled and awestruck, rather than realities we can easily sum up. It really is not true that the secular world has gender worked out and the church is hopelessly reactionary. We are all rather floored still by the mystery of gender, and it is important perhaps that we should be.

I grew up in a very traditional working class family with clearly defined gender roles. I can remember the deep resentment that consumed me about this, the stern determination I had that I was going to escape. At a girl's grammar school, I was recognized as one of the academic girls and was not allowed to do music, art, or sewing or learn to type. I learned to be a 'liberal Feminist' – to believe that victory would be about 'gaining entry' to the male world – and to despise my own mother who seemed happy to remain in the world of women. I abandoned the Church of England and joined the United Reformed Church where there were women ministers. I set my heart on becoming a minister.

The first woman to be awarded a place at Mansfield College as an undergraduate through the usual Oxford entrance process, I was on my way, fighting my way into the middle class and through the glass ceiling. In terms of faith I was Mary – sitting and learning, not the despised Martha, working hard and resentfully in the kitchen. I was glad to leave her behind.

It wasn't until I had a child that my views on gender began to change. Confronted with my own biology in a new way, and plunged into the different world of women, I began to ask why these worlds were so different. Why are women's lives defined by their gender, sharing wisdom

with one another, but also experiences of violence, suffering, exclusion and poverty. I became a different kind of feminist. And I began to read the Bible a different way; to notice both the stories and the absence of stories of women. I wrote a still-quoted article about the parables, arguing that the text excludes the woman reader. But then French feminism helped me discover a playfulness and subversiveness about language allowing it to rise again and tell new stories with old words. I found female friends with whom I could not only grieve, complain and weep, but could be part of a new world, in which laughter and joy are the weapons of the revolution and hope refuses to be defeated. I became, as I would have put it then, more ‘woman-identified’.

During my time at Westminster College I came to re-think my understanding and approach to the women whom I had once despised – women like my mother. I saw that the important thing is not to make all women have careers before they can be valued or recognized – but to change the whole way we divide up the world of work. The problem is not so much that women have not always had access to the things that we value – but that the world has valued the wrong things.

And then I went to work for Christian Aid and was confronted in a new way with the reality of how gender works in the world. I discovered that gender is the one thing in this world that will most strongly determine whether or not you are poor, whether you have access to food or money, the power to make decisions about your own body, or take part in political decision making or resist violence. I realized that I had never learned how to be radical enough about gender. I found myself wanting to celebrate gender as a gift from God, but finding that impossible while gender has become the most significant way for people to exploit, oppress and injure others in the world.

I found myself looking again at my faith and longing for wisdom to address what I had discovered about gender. I had found a new desire for the redeeming of God, and the coming of the kind of world which I believe Jesus proclaimed and embodied. In my writing for Christian Aid I tried to show gender justice is not some post-Enlightenment, European, colonial idea but is true to the fundamentals of the faith.

This is, in a nutshell, what I want to say. However radical you think you

are being about gender, however far ahead of others, you are unlikely to go as deep as the traditions of our faith can yet take us.

## Christianity as an apparently conservative voice on gender:

Of course it's easy to see why many would think that Christianity is a conservative force on gender matters. It often looks as though what we have is a world that is opening up about gender in all sorts of ways, or is deeply questioning about gender conventions and cultures, while the church is re-asserting a foundational and traditional sense of difference, complementarity and fixity. However, the situation is much more complex. The secular world, with all its varied cultures, has itself no clear and commonly owned understanding of what it means to be male and female or how sexual desire should be expressed and lived. These things, almost everywhere, are now highly contested.

The conversation in and among churches is understandably strained, difficult and complex, given the world (or worlds) in which we live. Gender is being lived in the world in such a way that it becomes a place of oppression and there are strong passions around about how gender should be lived and understood.

## Some contemporary theological statements from the churches

In the recent, and wonderful, encyclical from Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, there is much of importance for theological anthropology and our relationship to the rest of the created world. But there were a few lines in the encyclical about gender, such as Paragraph 155;

*'valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to 'cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.'*

Here we see an assertion of the difference of gender, along with an interesting recognition of secular culture's apparent puzzlement before gender.

In a recent document from the Anglican-Orthodox dialogue, *In the image and likeness of God: A hope-filled anthropology*, there is a similar kind of assertion of the difference of gender.

In both texts it is clear that the presumption is that the difference between male and female is fundamental to our human nature and therefore the foundation of understandings of sexuality. In both texts there is a sense of speaking out against a cultural trend in another direction on gender, and indeed sexuality. This seems to be where the consensus lies, at least among churches within the traditional ecumenical movement.

But I want to suggest that there is scope, within a theology that really takes seriously the Bible and the Tradition, to argue that our creation and redemption as gendered beings might be understood from a different place from that apparent consensus. There have been times when Judaeo-Christian faith has spoken out for an understanding of gender over against cultures in the world which had a fixed and binary sense of how we are 'made'. Another kind of Christian consensus might actually be one that emphasizes not a basic difference, but a much more basic 'sameness'.

## Some texts

The text most often cited to support the view that we are fundamentally different, created 'male and female' by God in a way that fixes two opposite and complementary genders, is Genesis 1:27: *'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'*

But the thing that makes this text stand out from its context in the ancient world, the thing that makes it really astonishing, is that 'female' is also in the image of God. To say, so long ago, that male and female were made together in the image of God and were blessed by God, was such an unusual and astonishing idea for the ancient world, and perhaps still sometimes today, that its full significance is hard to grasp. In this understanding the traditional or default binary view of gender is really radically overturned.

The second account of creation in Genesis chapter 2, the one often pre-

sented as the story of Adam and Eve, has a similarly significant message. The first creature that God made was simply an ‘earthling’ (this is what *Adam* means in Hebrew, a creature from the earth). It is only when the second creature is made, when the first one is divided to make two, that new words for ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are used. And what this story emphasizes (again viewed from its original context) is that *the man and the woman are much more the same than they are different*. The original earth creature says, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.’ What the text wants the reader to understand is that woman and man, female and male, are more like each other than they are different, or at least that the joy and wonder of their difference is in fact rooted in their being of the same flesh. A biblical theological anthropology of gender does not need to be built on a kind of fixed binary difference, but might even be ‘counter’ to such a view.

The early Christian community was not a conventional one in terms of either gender or sexual practice. There are many examples of Gospel stories that speak of Jesus as a man who does not accept, and indeed transgresses, the accepted gender norms. He was also celibate and called some of his disciples to leave family behind, stepping outside of the norms of sexual practice and partnership.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians he writes, ‘*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*’ (Galatians 3:28). The early Christians saw that in Jesus, something very new had begun to happen in the world, something that meant that the old ways of being in relation to one another were transformed. It should not be surprising that such a radical verse was and is not easy to interpret or to live by. But it is clear that the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ led the first Christians to a profound reappraisal of what it means that we are male and female.

## A tradition that has a new anthropology

Many people today, within the church and without it, assume that the story of Christianity’s understanding of gender is a straightforward one. But this is very far from the truth. There has consistently been a thread through Christian faith and practice that is profoundly radical and

transformational in its assertions about gender (and, it could be argued, sexuality). People believed that a new way of being men and women needed to be found in the light of a new and unique irruption of God into the world. The earliest Christians had women as leaders in their communities. Some communities pushed this further: people abstained from sexual relations, and gender difference was no longer considered decisive or significant. The idea that the present way of being men and women needed to change was a strong thread through the developing Tradition.

What really matters is how we live joyfully as embodied human beings, open to transformation by the love of the God who created us and who continues to create us. It could be something like this transformation that the writers of Genesis, the first disciples of Jesus, and the earliest members of the Church were seeking to describe and live. And it is this kind of transformation that our experience of the world tells us we need above all.

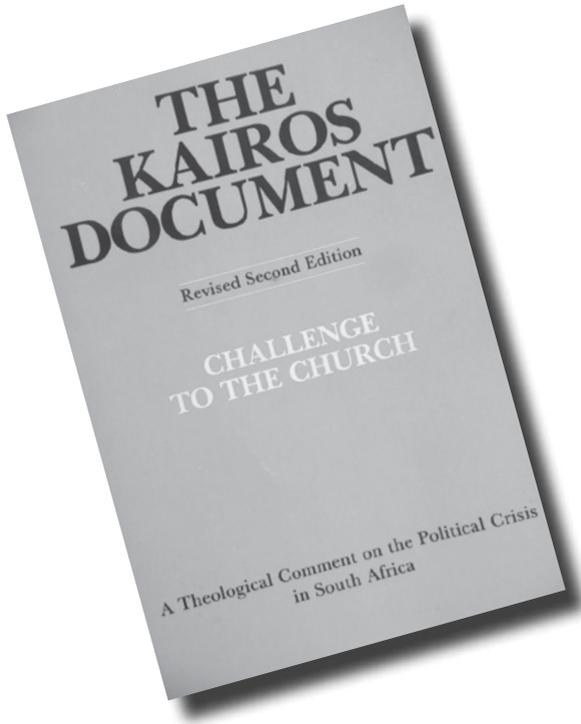
To think of gender that is not fixed in a particular and conventional way, not a way of oppression and a determinant of poverty, not the source of our most unoriginal sins but as something that may be redeemed, is a profoundly hopeful possibility. It allows us to move beyond the tired and stereotyped debates into which we sometimes fall, and it offers a new kind of vocabulary for what has become a very difficult conversation.

Could we find ways to ask one another again what our faith really does say about our being made ‘male and female’?



# Kairos, commitment and critical solidarity

*Lawrence Moore*



*What follows is an edited transcription of a session which lasted some 50 minutes*

For all its faults, Lawrence began, the Church was *intended* by God – but intended to be a foretaste of the promises of the Gospel. When so many seemed to be left with the feeling that “We were promised the Kingdom but we got the Church” it was right to ask the question of whether, at some point in its history, the Christian faith had made a fundamental mistake, a mistake so grave that it was now incapable of getting faith right or speaking truly about God.

In addressing the question, Lawrence turned first to his own history. Brought up in what was then Rhodesia during what were to be the final

years of white rule, Lawrence joined the police after leaving school and eventually became a detective in the special branch. His duties, he told his listeners bluntly, including extracting information from those who were unwilling to provide it – in other words to torture people. And it was 10 years before he realized the enormity of what he had done. A keen young Christian, he came to see with great pain how radically unlike Jesus his actions had been. And amidst the pain came the burning question: why had no-one, including the Christian community of which he was a part, told him that he was doing wrong. He, who claimed to have been saved, had become the very one from whom others prayed to be saved.

Fast forward to more recent years. Many members of the URC will be aware that a few years ago Lawrence was elected to the post of Moderator and later asked to withdraw in the interests of the peace and unity of the church, for reasons which were never made clear to the wider membership of the church. In an intensely personal account, which it would be inappropriate to repeat in any detail here, Lawrence described the devastating experience of a period in which charges (which were later dismissed) were brought against him and the structures of the Church proved to be wanting in dealing with the issues involved. In that time, it was the United Reformed Church itself which became, for Lawrence, something from which he needed to be saved.

How was it possible, he asked, for both Christians individually and the Church as an institution, both in history and still today, so often to depart from anything which resembled the life and witness of Jesus?

### 313 and all that

It was a question Lawrence had once addressed to South African theologian David Bosch. And the answer he was given was ‘313’, the year in which the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. That was the moment when, according to Bosch, ‘the church left the tents of Moses for the court of Pharaoh.’

Prior to 313 the church was defined by its opposition to empire, by being the custodian of the hope and promise of an alternative kingdom. Its whole understanding of the significance of Jesus was shaped in opposi-

tion to Caesar. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed was the transformation of empire into the kingdom of God – the root and branch recreation of the world on behalf of the least first. Christian faith was defined by its opposition to Empire and the promise it held out to those who were Empire’s victims.

All that changed when the church became the religious arm of Empire. The church’s vested interests now coincided with those of Empire. And it prosecuted those new interests with the same passionate commitment that it had always had. The emperor was no longer the antichrist but the messiah. Rome was no longer Babylon but the fulfilment of the prayer ‘your kingdom come’. Eschatology was no longer the promise of heaven coming down to earth, but an escape from the world to heaven – whose gates were patrolled by the church. The Church, which had been the community of the poor and the dispossessed, the victims of Empire, became the persecutor of Empire’s opponents. The Church became an agent of control and protector of the Empire’s interests.

And that, David Bosch told Lawrence, is why it all went wrong.

## The struggle against apartheid

Bosch made those comments in 1986 as an Afrikaner dissident and an opponent of apartheid during the height of the state of emergency which had been in place since 1985. Children throwing stones at military vehicles were being fired on with live rounds. Thousands were held without trial for indefinite periods. Children as young as 10 were held in solitary confinement without access to lawyers and tortured and beaten and burned with cigarettes. It was illegal to criticise the government’s security policies. It was illegal to pray for detainees in a church service.

The terrifying irony was that apartheid was a policy devised by Dutch Reformed ministers and theologians and explicitly justified as an expression of God’s will for the peoples of South Africa. Ninety per cent of whites in South Africa went to church twice on a Sunday. 90%.

In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches had declared that the theological and biblical defence of apartheid was heresy. It suspended the Dutch Reformed church from membership. By the mid-1980s there

was a massive upsurge in popular opposition to apartheid

This was the context in which a group of mainly black theologians met to discuss the crisis, and out of those discussions came the legendary 'Kairos document'. This was, they declared a moment of truth, a moment of judgement and a moment in which both the church and individuals would be shown up for what they really were. "There we sit in the same church while outside Christian policeman are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death, while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace. The church is divided and its day of judgement has come."

South Africans dealt with the legacy of apartheid through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Less well known are the hearings from the faith communities held in 1997, which explored the question of how the churches got their readings of the Bible so wrong under apartheid.

## A Jesus-shaped church?

It is a question explored by Richard Burridge, Dean of King's College, London, in his book *Imitating Jesus: an inclusive approach to new testament ethics*. And his answer is to make the imitation of Jesus the criterion of ethics. Acting as Jesus did would never result in apartheid or any attempt to use the Bible to justify it, or racism, or slavery, or any form of oppression.

A Jesus-shaped church would have a very different history and a very different theological tradition.

Yet if Bosch had identified the fundamental problem correctly, Lawrence suggested, the Christian Church that we know and are part of still has an almost insurmountable hurdle if it is to begin to imitate Jesus in ways that would prevent it becoming involved in great evil ever again. And that hurdle is the fact that the Church has been on the wrong side of the power divide since 313.

The significance of the power divide is that it divides people into *us* and *them* – *us*, the people who hold power over *them*. We live at their expense but are deeply defended against recognizing them as our victims. What else other than vested interest could explain the pathological

blindness and human ruthlessness the church has exhibited ever since it was able to wield institutional power rather than to live on the underside. What else would induce and enable the church to sustain such a life so at odds with that of Jesus, such a betrayal of its gospel and calling in the world. We need to listen to the Kairos theologians speak to us from the townships under the state of emergency.

The point, which Lawrence confessed to labouring, was apartheid was not some sort of inexplicable and appalling blot on the Church's historical landscape but one of the latest pieces in a long line of evidence which proves that the Church has fundamentally lost its way. The reason the Church is in the state it is today (and why we in the URC are where we are) is because people outside the Church see all this with startling clarity, while we are tragically and wilfully blind to it. His hope was that apartheid South Africa was far enough away, geographically, culturally and historically, to allow us to see clearly what nearness to our own situation blinds us.

## The kairos moment

A kairos moment is a moment of truth and the unveiling. Luke's Jesus uses the term to mean a visit from God (Luke 19.44) when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and says "*You did not recognise the hour of your visitation from God.*" It is a salvation moment, a moment either to embrace God's presence and gift or to turn away and choose to be 'god-forsaken'. Luke's gospel has Pilate say "*what do you want me to do with Jesus*". And we, humanity, represented in the square, shout "crucify him!". We choose to be god-forsaken.

Kairos moments happen when we can no longer ignore the presence and cries of victims. The Exodus, the foundational salvation event in the Bible, begins with God hearing the groans of the slaves in the brickyards of Pharaoh. And because God is driven by compassion, God is moved to act for them and against Pharaoh. God takes sides in conflicts on behalf of the victims – that is the record of the biblical stories of salvation.

That was Jesus' own message to the people on the underside. Jesus made his family among the poor, the outcasts and the disreputable. "What you do to any of these you do to me" he told his listeners. He chose them

and not because they were most deserving but because they were the most needy.

Sections of the south African church discovered that God was present in the conflict which was raging in the townships' streets, right there among apartheid's victims. That was where God was to be found. Oppressed blacks found that their suffering was God's suffering, that the Jesus of the Cross was their own brother in suffering, that the risen Jesus was their own promised future. Guilt-ridden whites discovered that it was possible to change sides. They found themselves taking up their own cross and discovering new life as a consequence.

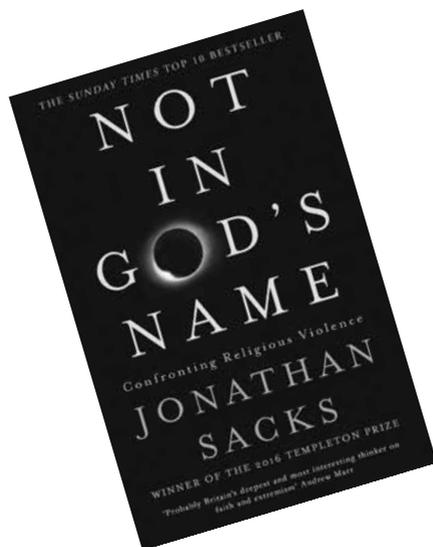
When we talk about developing a 'cutting edge faith', we are talking about rediscovering the heart of Christian faith. When we talk about renewing the Church we are talking about rediscovering what Church was always *meant* to be about. The Church was never supposed to create victims: it was to be a community *of, for and with* the victims. That is where Jesus is always to be found. The victims are those whom we justify our treating as less human than we are, less loved by God, less welcome in God's family. They are the people on the outside. To be most faithfully the Church, to be most recognizably like Jesus, is to see in every instance where people are being excluded a *kairos* moment, a moment of decision. And it is to choose the side of the victims because God does, because that's what Jesus did.

We do not choose their side because they are right but because of their need. We do not choose their side uncritically, but when we criticise we do so as those who have already committed ourselves to them, *they* are now *us*, it is *we* who talk together. We are committed to their cause, so our criticism comes from within. It is called critical solidarity.

No one needs saving from those kind of people or those kind of churches. The Church that bears Jesus' name and which lives, recognizably, as he did, has a future. It deserves a future, because it is good news.



# The 2017 Free to Believe Reading Party



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# The Common Good

*Andrew Bradstock*



I start from a premise which I assume we all share – that religion is a public, not just a private thing. Specifically, for Christians, the God we encounter in Scripture is deeply interested in human affairs.

While the Bible undoubtedly offers norms for private moral behaviour and posits a personal relationship with God, injunctions to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’, not to ‘deprive the foreigner or orphan of justice’, to care for the earth, and similar teachings demonstrate the impossibility of living an authentic Christian life detached from a ‘public concern’.

Jesus himself set out to make a difference in his society, challenging fundamental political, economic, cultural and indeed religious assumptions. He lived out the kingdom and, by his death and resurrection, vindicated the new kingdom he came to inaugurate here in our history. So I want to suggest that, as followers of Jesus, we too seek to bring something of the ‘kingdom’, of that ‘life in all its fullness’ which Jesus announced, both to

individuals and to our society.

And it's an interesting time to be doing it, because religion is back on the public radar! While much coverage is negative and reveals deep religious illiteracy – and numbers of believers are still falling – nevertheless religion is having more impact. Our public square is open to religious viewpoints provided they are offered with due regard for the marginal place of religion to public life and framed in constructive and engaged ways. And there is a profound need for the input people of faith can make.

## The context

*We have become a very individualistic society*

Post-war assumptions about the welfare state and its institutions, including generous medical and educational services, began to be seen in the 1960s as restrictions upon the self-expression and freedom of the individual. Personal goals and objectives – doing your own thing – took over from public goods, and policies of both parties have furthered that.

*The market defines all our decisions.*

We no longer choose a policy because it is a 'good thing' to do, rather because of its effect on the economy.

It is assumed that we are primarily to be defined as consumers, earners, economic units. Quality of life is measured by GDP – which shapes our aspirations and sense of who we are. We view some people as less valuable, questioning their usefulness and judging them accordingly.

*We are a very unequal society, economically*

Inequality has been rising since 1979, whereas it had been falling since the war. Nearly half of all the wealth in the UK is owned by the richest 10% of the population, with the poorest 10% holding just 1%.

*We are an increasingly politically disengaged generation*

There is a palpable alienation from and disillusionment with politics. Many estranged interests neither participate in our polity nor are represented by anyone. Many people feel powerless and ignored.

## What sort of word can ‘the religious’ speak into this situation?

While the Bible does not disparage wealth, it is also possible to find within it resources which point towards a society which better values all its members, enables all to thrive, where no one is excluded from opportunities and where all are enabled to be involved and valued. At the heart of Scripture is a sense of the intrinsic worth and dignity of each person because they are created in God’s image. This idea has secular parallels too, but saying we are ‘all children of God, members of the same family’ says a bit more than that we all have ‘basic human rights’.

And the mention of ‘family’ reminds us that Scripture also stresses our interdependence and connectedness. It stresses the importance of relationships and underlines the importance of community and solidarity. Old Testament models such as the Jubilee suggest that God’s people believed that it was important that no one should be denied the basic necessities of life or excluded from the community on account of their economic circumstances. *We are* our brother’s and our sister’s keeper.

With these two principles in mind I want to focus on one particular way in which we can all draw on our faith to make a positive difference.

### The common good

The concept of ‘the common good’ is coming back to into fashion. In truth it has never really been away: though not exclusive to any one denomination it has always been a central part of Roman Catholic teaching. The phrase is often used loosely but it has a precise definition, best expressed in the 1965 papal encyclical *Gaudium et spes*.

*...the common good... is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment...*

It also implies, according to the Catholic Bishops’ Conference:

*...that every individual, no matter how high or low, has a duty to share in promoting the welfare of the community as well as a right to benefit from that welfare.*

*...the common good cannot exclude or exempt any section of the popula-*

*tion. If any section of the population is in fact excluded from participation in the life of the community, even at a minimal level, then that is a contradiction of the concept of the common good and calls for rectification.*

The common good specifically challenges notions of well-being rooted in maximising individual freedom and happiness, or that the good life can be enjoyed irrespective of whether one's neighbour does too. So the common good is not the Big Society of the Conservatives, the Third Way of New Labour, nor is it a concrete vision of a future ideal state. Rather it is a way of 'doing politics' that moves beyond the promotion of sectional, partisan concerns in the interest of securing the wellbeing of all.

Principles at the heart of the common good include human dignity, equality, interdependence, community, solidarity, participation, subsidiarity, reciprocity, care for creation and the preferential option for the poor. Pursuit of the common good involves the application of those principles in the search for political solutions – solutions which, by definition, will be unanticipated and outside of ideological categorization.

Within the Christian tradition it might be understood as an expression of the commandment 'to love God with all one's heart and one's neighbour as oneself', described by Jesus as the greatest and upon which 'hang all the law and the prophets'. The idea of the common good runs like a golden thread through concepts such as the Jubilee, Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ, the sharing nature of the early church and repeated exhortations to serve and seek the good of one another. In Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard – in which each takes home the same wage regardless of the number of hours worked – the concern of the employer appears to be that each person receives sufficient to provide the basic necessities for themselves and their families (Mt. 20:1-16);

## **A subversive doctrine**

In an age of neo-liberal economics and emphasis on individual choices and rights, talk of the common good can appear counter-cultural, if not downright subversive. It calls for nothing less than a change of mind-set, a 'conversion' or 'moment of metanoia' from a focus on individual concerns to a consideration of how the common interest might be achieved.

As a Church of England document put it: ...*perhaps the greatest need, in relation to the church's commitment to the common good, is to remind Christian people that the small things they do out of love of neighbour are far more counter-culturally important than they may realize.*

## Five aspects of the common good

- i) the common good seeks to be a way of speaking and acting that unites rather than divides. It employs a language of kindness and inclusion rather than language which separates and stigmatizes the other. There is no room in common good solutions for concepts such as 'strivers and skivers' or the deserving versus the undeserving poor.
- ii) the common good speaks of human value rather than human function, challenging language and policies which paint people in economic or functional terms, their usefulness, their costs and benefits.
- iii) the common good restores value to intermediate institutions like housing associations and credit unions, which draw on the principle of mutuality and are good at serving the less well off.
- iv) the common good seeks to tackle the roots of problems to effect real change. It calls for structural and societal change – not just volunteering which can prop up unjust structures and keep the poor at arm's length. It attempts to address causes rather than symptoms and to create community solutions to those problems, such as community land trusts to address high housing costs and credit unions to counter the problem of debt. Such solutions often involve collaboration between churches, unions and local associations to build power locally and strengthen civil society.
- v) the common good is a *practice* rather than a utopian ideal. It is something we *do*, and create, together across our differences to establish the conditions in which all can flourish. The common good says that we can *all* be agents of change in small, incremental ways.

## The common good in practice

How might this look in practice? Think of a 'local' issue – say, a late-night drinking culture which creates noise and disturbance. There may

be many possible authoritarian ‘solutions’, but do they get to the bottom of the problem and make your area better in the long-term?

Now imagine getting people around the table for a ‘facilitated’ conversation to discuss the issue and seek a ‘common good’ solution which would benefit all, where no one side ‘wins’ and the other ‘loses’. Questions to be answered straight away would be who do you get in the room, how do you get them there and how do you keep them there?

In this case the ‘who’ would include the drinkers themselves, parents if they are young, police, affected neighbours, shopkeepers, street pastors, local authority, local councillor(s), street cleaners – everybody affected.

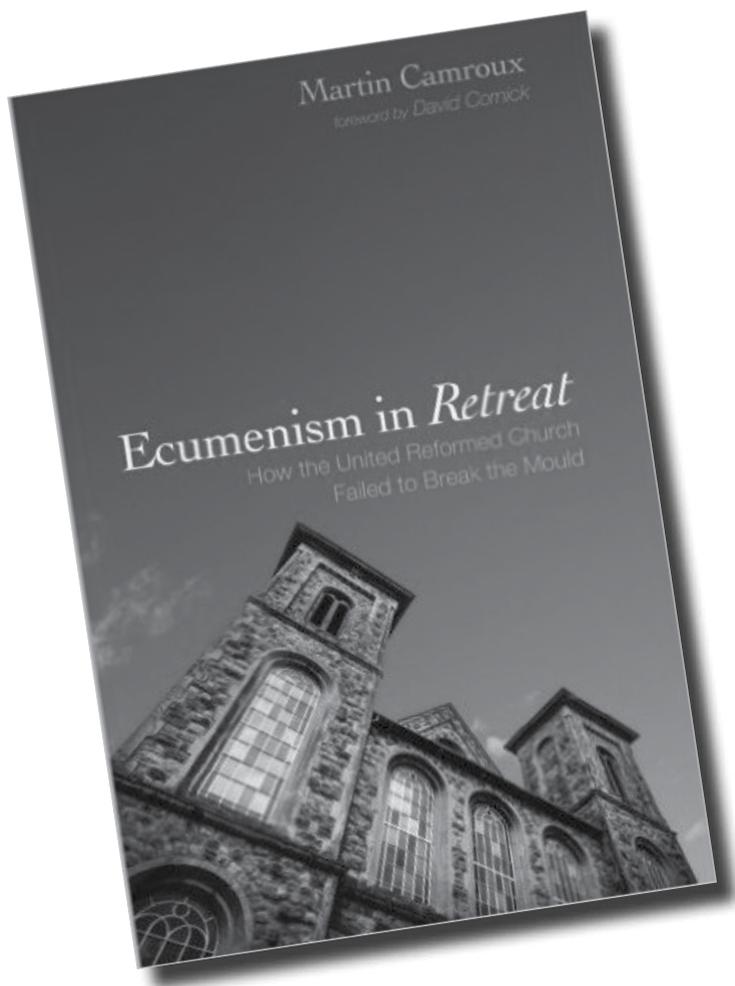
We are not talking about smoothing over differences but allowing conflict to surface within a relationship of mutual respect – in order to tackle problems together. Tension is necessary to reach the common good – we have to learn to stay in the room and represent our interests and explore how they can be reconciled with others.

On a larger scale, the more poverty campaigners argue for a stronger state, the more neo-conservatives will want to dismantle it. This polarisation isn’t helpful. A common good approach tries to break that deadlock. It suggests that we meet and negotiate. That is the only way that elite interests will not dominate the poor and it implies a permanent state of renegotiation, recognising the changing needs of all involved.

So, the common good is something we create together, a kind of alchemy that only happens when we negotiate with and work alongside people we disagree with. It is about listening and negotiating, bridging divisions: between left and right, faith and secular, different faith traditions and confessions, marginalised and powerful, educated and uneducated, urban and rural, old and young, business and unions, strong and weak. Because people bring complementary skills and without each other we are impoverished and our solutions will not be sustainable.

How might this work in your area?





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