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Free to Believe



An occasional magazine for *Free to Believe*

Spring 2022

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Welcome to our Church

In this issue of *Briefing* the question of the Church's inclusiveness is examined. What does it mean to be an inclusive Church? Is it really possible – or even desirable - to be truly inclusive?

It becomes clear that there are major issues with the whole concept. For example, a local church which may wish to offer a genuine loving welcome to anyone who comes through the doors may be constrained by the policy and doctrine of its denomination. My own denomination, the United Reformed Church, which prides itself on its ability to encompass reasonably comfortably a wide spectrum of theologies, finds itself because of this very diversity unable to have any policy of inclusivity that applies to the whole church. Consequently some local churches try to be truly inclusive, while others can choose to be deliberately exclusive, and all are in danger of being tarred with whatever brush the visitor may find locally.

Is genuine inclusiveness even attainable? Called to welcome those who are different from us, who look different, whose beliefs are different, whose life-experience is different, whose theology is different – are we also called to welcome those who are actively hostile to us, who would wish us harm?

I hope this issue of *Briefing* will give you much to ponder and pray about. I find it not just challenging but deeply disturbing, and have no idea of a way forward. Facing the issue might be a start.

Ken Forbes - Editor



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Beyond 'welcome' and 'inclusivity'

Andrew Page



We hear these words so often in our church life, but what do “all welcome” and “inclusive” actually mean?

It’s something we see outside churches, on noticeboards and especially on all those flyers going around advertising Christmas services. They reassuringly tell us, repeatedly, that “all are welcome”. Some churches will proudly call themselves “inclusive”.

But actions speak louder than even the most well-intentioned of words, and welcoming people entering the building is not the same as welcoming them into the church. What happens next is absolutely key, and for those of us who work on a membership model there are real challenges to authentic inclusion. The membership model creates a distinction between those who are “in” and those who are “out”. What opportunities are there for non-members to be active in church life? What statements do individuals have to make to be accepted into membership? What do we require of people in order for them to be welcomed to play as full a role as possible?

It’s also a challenge for those of us who are seeking to create “safe spaces” in our churches for particular groups. Can we say with any kind of honesty that all are genuinely welcome, even those who pose a threat to the safety of the spaces we are creating? What does “all welcome” mean in this context?

Carlos A Rodriguez, who writes at the Happy Non-Profit, once said this: “As soon as you draw a line to exclude people, Jesus goes to the other side of that line with them, and invites you to join him there. Every time.” This was reflected in the recent Christmas message from the outgoing Bishop of Liverpool, Paul Bayes, who said: “I am more and more convinced that if we draw a line that includes us and excludes many others, then Jesus Christ is always on the other side of the line, among the people outside. I want to be there with Him. I have become unashamedly inclusive, for Christ’s sake.”

That’s a thought-provoking idea, not least as everyone excludes to some degree. Not turning anyone away from a church service – or the communion table – is not the same as actively including everyone. What does it mean to be authentically inclusive? What exactly is an “unashamedly inclusive” approach? And does Jesus always side with those who are excluded?

I know what Bishop Paul and Carlos Rodriguez are saying and they’re absolutely correct that no-one is excluded from the gospel of Jesus. But most Christians, aside perhaps from ultra-Calvinists, would say exactly the same. A message amounting to “the gospel is available to all, but they have to become like us in order to receive it” is widely preached; the only difference between most denominations is a question of degree. Surely inclusion means something greater than an acknowledgement that everyone can become like us.

I love the idea of inclusion, but I am very suspicious of interpretations of it and especially the notion that Jesus is *always* on the side of the excluded. The very suggestion that Jesus Himself would intentionally

side with anyone who has been excluded from a certain group does not sit comfortably with me, as I'll explain in a moment.

"Jesus shared the communion meal with Judas" the argument goes. Ah yes, indeed he did. But don't build a theology on that because he also threw people out of the temple. When he asked the priests for a denarius, he was not making a point about taxation obligations but showing the Temple authorities to be collaborators with the Roman Empire rather than servants of God's people. In Luke 10 Jesus essentially condemns the three cities of Chorazin, Capernaum and Bethsaida to Hell, saying that even Sodom's judgement will be more tolerable. In Matthew 7 Jesus tells his listeners that many who identify as his followers will be excluded from the kingdom of Heaven. In Mark 10 Jesus meets the rich young ruler, who is dismayed because he is essentially told he will be excluded from the kingdom of God unless he gives away his material wealth. In Revelation 2, Jesus is presented as criticising the church at Thyatira for not excluding Jezebel. Elsewhere Jesus refers to various religious people of his day as "hypocrites", "wolves", "false prophets", "blind guides", "Satan", "serpents", "a brood of vipers", "pigs", "thieves" and "an adulterous generation". In the 21st century, this would hardly be considered appropriate language for the pulpit, let alone as the language of inclusion.

Any reading of the gospels (especially Mark) will confirm that Jesus had very clear ideas about what the kingdom of God is like, and who it was for. He was not, to use a phrase from St Paul, trying to be "all things to all people" but was reaching out to those failed and marginalised by the religious and secular domination systems of his time. These are the people he was seeking to include.

We see examples of exclusion in the Biblical accounts of the early church. 1 Corinthians 5 makes clear that Paul advocates putting a man “out of fellowship” for his sexual sins. In Acts 5 Ananias and Sapphira are not only excluded from the fellowship but are killed as punishment for withholding money. To put it mildly, they didn’t fit into that particular community because their values were different. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14 Paul states that “if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame”. This is hardly an inclusive order.

Yes, I fully understand there are several themes being explored in these narratives. However, it is quite clear that the early church was very much an exclusive club (in terms of belief and practices, at least) and that being disfellowshipped was a real possibility if believers failed to conduct themselves as their leaders expected.

What we do know about Jesus from the gospel narratives is that he sided with the marginalised and the oppressed. That’s not quite the same thing as siding with the excluded. Perhaps instead of calling ourselves “inclusive churches” we could instead rebrand ourselves as “churches who stand up for people who are marginalised and oppressed”? Or, in today’s parlance, “churches for social justice”?

Yes, I want to see many groups more fully included in church life. I want to see churches including LGBT+ people after centuries of dehumanising them. I want to see more efforts to include neurodiverse and disabled people in church life. I want to see our churches filled with socially, culturally and racially diverse congregations. I want to see churches that understand how to adapt to others’ priorities, and learn

to listen to people whose experiences are different to theirs. But would that necessarily be an “inclusive church”? And would everyone always be “welcome”?

Here’s a thought from the personal perspective of a supporter of the Open Table Network: how do we include those who are openly and actively hostile to inclusion within our inclusive services? How do we include transphobes and homophobes who authentically believe God shares their views? How do we include those who have abused members of our congregation to the point of receiving criminal convictions (and an injunction not to contact their victims or enter a defined space around their house)? Are we really saying the church needs to welcome all, even if someone’s presence may (and probably will) cause harm to another within it?

These are not hypothetical situations. Without going into all the details, it’s very difficult as an LGBT person in a supposedly “inclusive” church to be told that the views of people who believe my orientation makes me inherently sinful are as theologically valid as my own and we just have to “agree to disagree”. That’s a plurality of voices – but it’s not being authentically inclusive. In fact, it’s institutionally homophobic because the structures and policies of the church allow homophobia to be freely expressed.

It’s all good and well within the context of pastoral interactions to seek to manage difficult and sensitive situations. But that’s not always the case. It’s not always a simple black and white question of “denying” or “excluding” people, as if church attendance is a legal right that trumps all others, but of how we create authentically safe spaces for people to grow.

Of course even the most “inclusive” churches exclude – as I’ve explained, the very existence of the membership model confirms this. I don’t know too many churches who would accept atheists or professed followers of other faiths as members. All communities have, somewhere, an identity that requires some are “in” while others are “out”. “We welcome all” is generally little more than a well-intentioned theoretical attitude. How do we deal with racism, homophobia, transphobia and sexism in our churches? Ironically, any serious attempt to tackle them is inevitably going to have the effect of excluding some people, or at least making them feel excluded.

Is that exclusion? Or is it good pastoral care?

As explained, inclusion and welcome must go beyond simply attending church worship or partaking of communion. Authentic inclusion must go beyond that into all areas of church life but it rarely does. The absolutely vital point is that it always has to be balanced with “harm principles” – quite honestly, we are “our brother’s keepers” and the well-being of our congregation should matter to us sufficiently that we’re prepared to safeguard them from those who would do them harm.

There is a tendency to imagine that inclusive churches are those that are all things to all people, where theological difference matters not and we are all “one in Christ”. However, there is a very obvious problem in that there are Christians, often within such churches, who at the very least view certain types of people with suspicion (e.g. LGBT people and female clergy) and at times actively deny that they should be part of the church. What happens to an “inclusive” church when it welcomes those with “exclusive” approaches to faith?

Being open to all theologies, however destructive, is not inclusivity in action. This may create a “salad bowl” of people with competing and often conflicting views, but it is hardly inclusive to allow exclusive views to be expressed. It is not, for example, inclusive to allow a representative at a synod meeting to make a racist contribution from the lectern (as I once experienced); on the contrary, it is evidence of institutional discrimination. Allowing everyone to express themselves irrespective of the harm it does to others is not an inclusive approach.

When people hear the term “institutionally” before words such as racist, homophobic and sexist, it usually evokes a strong response – often one of denial. This is understandable, but it betrays a lack of understanding of what is meant by the term “institutional”.

“Institutional” discrimination is often unintentional and simply means that the structures, policies and practices of an organisation allow for discrimination to take place. Sadly, it is the inevitable product of the kind of “inclusion” that makes no distinction in respect to values. Why do we constantly seek false unity with those who demean and exclude, in the name of inclusion, when we could be seeking new, alternative relationships?

The inescapable fact is that all communities, both religious and secular, are built on shared values. Progressive Christians’ values may well have far more in common with progressive humanists and secularists than they do more conservative expressions of Christianity. Those who don’t share the values of a community will, inevitably, feel excluded. That is neither a healthy nor unhealthy state of affairs – it’s basic reality. Communities that share particular values will not necessarily want to “include” people whose values are diametrically opposed to theirs –

and neither should they. They may also find it difficult to “welcome” individuals or groups who are determined to do them harm. What should an “inclusive” church be inclusive of? Should it be tolerant of intolerance?

I’m not sure I subscribe to the “never exclude” version of inclusion. I want to build more than an “inclusive” church, or one that declares itself as “welcoming” without really understanding what that means. I want to be part of a church that extends hospitality to those who are outside of our communities. I want to be part of a church that reaches out to the victims of social injustice and religious prejudice. I also want to be part of a church that has a distinct set of values – call them “progressive” if you like – that will naturally attract some and repel others. But I do not want to be part of a church that includes or welcomes perspectives that demean, marginalise and damage.

The bottom line is that inclusivity is not compatible with exclusivity. The two cannot co-exist, not even on the logic that we are all “one in Christ”. It is not, therefore, possible for something that is inclusive to welcome views or values that are exclusive; the irony, of course, is that to be inclusive in the way most intend it requires the exclusion of non-inclusive behaviour. The term therefore becomes meaningless, something to be categorised alongside theological noncognitivism and agnosticism.

The church is nothing if not a spiritual community and all communities must define themselves by what they are... and also what they are not. To be inclusive of all ideas and philosophies is nihilistic and actually means you stand for nothing – and against nothing. I would not wish to be part of such a community. I am not advocating cutting ecumenical

ties with those who think differently but I am suggesting that individual denominations and indeed local churches need to define themselves by core values and by differentiating themselves from others' values.

The “we’re all Christians” line, often used to suggest we have more in common than divides us, is basically offensive when some Christians diminish and dehumanise others or question their very status as “real” Christians. The progressive Christianity I believe in will never find much relevance so long as it sits quietly and complacently by, hoping the same conservative Christians who consider us to be heretics will eventually become more tolerant. So many people alienated by churches will not come back to church if they have to sit next to hate-mongers in the pews. I want to help build a community of forgiveness and reconciliation, but that can only happen if all within that community share a vision, are willing to forgive, and treat each other as equals. I no longer have any appetite to retain membership of a church whose leaders tell me must include people who believe my orientation makes me unsuitable to even be an active member.

Comparisons and romanticised aspirations are often made, disingenuously, with the early church. As we have seen, neither Jesus nor the Gentile churches planted by St Paul would be considered “inclusive” in the purest sense of the word. Both used language that was far from “welcoming”. But what both certainly did was make a radical stand and ditch religious expressions that were unjust, caused harm, dehumanised and marginalised. I won’t use the same language that Jesus did, but I hope I share His sentiments. There is little to be gained in being nice or accepting towards religious perspectives that cause us (and others) harm. Jesus didn’t stand for it, and neither should we.

I think we need to look beyond “inclusion” (an intellectually problematic term) and “welcoming” (which doesn’t go far enough) and become a radical movement that challenges the status quo, accepts and affirms people who are different, goes the “extra mile”, shows its love for those who are hurting, values diversity, and has a vision for serving humanity. If we were able to do that, rather than being pre-occupied by arguments with the conservatives among us, more people from our local communities may begin poking their heads into church once in a while. I don’t object to churches trying to be inclusive, but I think there is a calling to something beyond that.

If we’re seeking to be inclusive, what are we seeking to be inclusive of? Who are we seeking to be inclusive for?

Yes, the radical, loving church I have a vision for will have an understanding of God that has room for those whose understanding of God has no room for me. It will not deny such people are children of God. It will not diminish their own spirituality. But it will have a responsibility to safeguard its community from harmful values and destructive intentions. The question is whether that is excluding, or simply protecting?

I know whose side Jesus is on, and it’s not a question of arbitrary lines but justice. It’s right there in the gospels.

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<https://honesttogodweb.wordpress.com/>

What is it to be an inclusive church?

Helen Garton



I am not sure an answer to this question can fit onto the back of a postcard, but I will do my best to give an answer within the word limit I have been given! Right now, those churches which we describe as ‘inclusive’ are those which make a positive statement about offering a welcome to LGBTQIA+ plus people.

One way and another, I have been working towards this kind of inclusion in churches for over half a century. I may not have been calling it ‘inclusive’ until relatively recently, but I have longed and campaigned for churches to offer full acceptance to gay men and women, initially, and now find myself representing a couple of churches which offer a welcome to people from all parts of the spectrum of letters. St Columba’s in Oxford city centre has regained its pioneering edge by becoming the first church in Europe, possibly even the world, to have appointed an outreach worker to gender non-conforming and trans people. It seems to me that in that alphabet soup, GNC and trans people’s rights and acceptance is a couple of decades behind that for those who are LGB and they have a mountain of misunderstanding and hostility to overcome.

There was a time when I would pass churches offering a welcome with a list of named ‘outsiders’ and if my sexuality did not appear, I would carry on walking muttering under my breath. Or I would sit uncomfortably in church listening to prayers of intercession in which I and those I identified with were conspicuous by our absence. But now we are not under the radar and I am equally discomfeted! For one thing, until all are equally welcome, my sexuality and others is in the

public domain and I and others are cast as pioneers, whether we seek to be so or not. Our sexuality is a private matter and one day I trust that it will not need to be broadcast.

Then there is the paradox of an ever expanding rainbow of flags and definitions of gender and sexuality, which leaves our grouping of LGBTQIA+ effectively meaning anyone who is not heterosexual. I must be feeling my age, because back in the day it all seemed so much more straight forward! But then the world appeared rather binary and very 'them and us' and I wonder if younger generations are teaching us that people are simply people and we should accept them on their own terms, however they define themselves. You are not you in relation to my definition of the world: the job is mine to understand you.

This leaves me wondering what is a church if it is not inclusive and welcoming? 'Inclusive' is such an unhelpful term because it implies including people in and, by definition, implies an accepted view of normality (notably heterosexual and cis-gendered) to which those being offered inclusion deviate. And are there not other people who are also seeking a welcome and an inclusion, who are not defined by sexuality or gender identity? Hardly fair or egalitarian and it smacks of church as holy club for insiders. And many is the church which will describe itself as 'inclusive' and yet not have registered for same sex marriage, which to my mind is not fully inclusive because it denies to one group of people that which is the right of another.

These days, on my way to worship in the city centre, I pass a church which describes itself as 'biblically inclusive', loving the sinner and hating the sin, and I circumnavigate an evangelical church which, until recently perhaps, has been equally strident in its loving and loathing.

The mystery of this is that when people begin to explore their sexuality and their gender identity, having not conformed to the heterosexual and cis-gender norm, they often seek out the more hard line churches. We find at St Columba's First Sunday group that people have often travelled this path, making the journey towards healing and wholeness harder than it needed to be. While theologically liberal churches tend to find it easier to offer full acceptance, this may not be the spirituality that each LGBTQIA+ person seeks and needs. The welcome draws them in and they bring with them differing theologies and theological language. And this busts the myth that we have to safely guard our theology, our ways of worshipping and our group identity from some kind of supposed external threat from outsiders. We have everything to learn and much to gain from the encounter. Our theology may well be challenged and our identity may change, but in the safe and holy ground of encounter the gift that we bring to each other is to open our hearts and our minds. If our theology cannot cope with challenge then it is built upon pretty shaky foundations.

'Inclusive' is just a word: a signpost to a safe place where people can find acceptance. More than that, in a church like St Columba's where the identity of the building is largely hidden from those who pass its doors on the way to The Bear pub, any newcomers have to seek us out. And they do so via internet searches for inclusive churches, most of them not on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, surprisingly. For them, 'inclusive' speaks to their theology and values. If 'inclusive' does not offer us quite the definition of full acceptance for all, does 'welcoming' do the job any better? It certainly implies a warmth, but not a blanket acceptance. 'Accepting' churches takes us on another track altogether.

At the end of the day, what we all seek from our churches is an encounter with God, a God who has made us all in his/her/their image and knows and loves us. We also seek community, a place where we are fully known, fully valued, treated equally and listened to and respected. Church as church is meant to be. None of us want to be talking about our sexuality or gender forever, nor do we want to be defined solely on the basis of our sexuality or gender. But until that time, we are stuck with the term 'inclusive' until churches stop being exclusive.

Helen Garton is minister of St Columba's and Cumnor URC and Chaplain to Reformed Students in Oxford.

Diversity – Refreshing or scary?

Anne Lewitt



Christians are all connected to each other - whether as members of a body (Paul's favoured metaphor) or branches of a vine (in the gospel of John). How often have you heard that in church? But unity doesn't necessarily imply uniformity. Look around you during worship and I guarantee there will be others present whose views you don't entirely share! This is at least as true in the United Reformed Church as any other denomination - and, in my experience, attending an unfamiliar URC is liable to show up greater differences and an unpredictable experience of both worship and welcome, despite prior perusal of websites and noticeboards. For some people this variety is fine; even refreshing. For others it makes unknown congregations impossibly scary. I find that the URC has a reputation (amongst those who know just a little about it) as a relatively liberal church, positively inclusive, comfortable with diversity,

socially and theologically progressive. I hear a hope expressed that it will provide a safe and welcoming space for everyone.... and I wince. I suppose the mere fact that most of us wish it were so, is hopeful. But to treat it as a present 'fact' is sadly, and sometimes dangerously, misleading. As Convenor of the URC's Equalities Committee I have found that issues of inclusion and diversity are taken very seriously by members of General Assembly, where our resolutions can cause long queues of potential speakers to develop. As a member of Synod meetings I've seen slightly less priority given to these issues; and within many local congregations considerably less again. Why?

We have an Equalities Policy, agreed well over a decade ago, which says that the URC 'believes that all people are created in God's image and are loved by God', and affirms a 'commitment to show the same openness to all people in today's world'. It says that we endeavour to 'build inclusive communities where all will be treated with dignity and respect and have equality of opportunity', and aim to 'take positive action to counter attitudes and practices contrary to this statement of intent'. So how does the reality measure up? Churches looking to call a new minister are still sometimes asked whether they would be willing to consider one who is a member of the LGBT community, particularly if said minister has a partner. The justification apparently being that it protects the minister from exploring a potential call to a church which would not welcome them as themselves... The racial imbalance on many national committees and in high profile URC posts is very visible; and at least one minister has found their own services boycotted by a church member on racist grounds... And when the Equalities Committee sent out to ministers a booklet about pastoral care of those with diverse gender identities, along with many positive responses there were a couple explicitly questioning its appropriateness (a booklet about personal experiences

and pastoral care...) on grounds of 'doctrine'. How can we possibly create a safe space in the church if racism is left unquestioned or if doctrine ever trumps pastoral care? And how on earth have we got to this situation, where behaviour (racism, homophobia, transphobia, attitudes to neurodiversity) which would be considered shocking in most secular organisations, is tacitly tolerated within the URC?

Clearly our demographics don't reflect that of society as a whole; and where the younger generation have very different ideas about diversity - as they do - the lack of their voice in too many congregations is a really major loss. The attitudes and opinions of an older generation predominantly inform our choice of worship music, or after-church refreshments, and that's probably fine. But if they also adversely affect our treatment of other people, created in God's image but less familiar to us, then that is not fine. Not at all.

That is, of course, a problem for most denominations. What is peculiar to the URC is something different: our emphasis on unity. This is part of our DNA from the beginning, both through our belief in the importance of ecumenism and church unity, and perhaps even more fundamentally through our tradition of taking decisions as a Church Meeting, gathered together to discern God's will. Unity is good, but... We are constantly concerned about creating splits within the church - so we avoid difficult conversations, even when they are important. Effectively, we prioritise unity over justice. We allow differences of opinion (often from a tiny minority) to prevent progress towards building inclusive communities. This is the scandal which we avoid facing; and its effect is our failure to make the church a safe and supportive space for all people, especially the most vulnerable, in which to grow in life and faith together. This must change.

Anne Lewitt is a URC minister in West Sussex and Convenor of the URC Equalities Committee.

Inclusion

Fiona Bennett



Inclusion is becoming a very familiar word in our society. In schools, hospitals, businesses, amongst statements and policies it points towards “the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or mental disabilities and members of other

minority groups.” (Oxford Languages online dictionary) So, does inclusion have anything to do Jesus’ message of good news?

If you don’t want to read on, my short answer to that questions is: Yes.

There is barely a recorded encounter of Jesus in the Gospels where he is not crossing some form of social or religious barrier in order to enable people from diverse walks of life to realized they are fully loved by God and welcome in God’s presence. From women, to people with disabilities and illnesses, to Samaritans, to people whose lives made them beyond acceptable, Jesus mixed, touched, ate and talked with all. Jesus painted a picture of God which is more generous and abundant that we have the capacity to imagine.

Paul seems to have developed this further as he came to understand that in Christ there is no Jew or gentile, woman or man, slave or free and that Salvation is not dependent on human identity, heritage or achievement, but on God’s grace alone. Paul also encouraged communities of Christians to value diversity in describing the church as one body with many parts. When we welcome new members into the church, we welcome new limbs and organs (with their gifts and needs) and the whole church community is changed – becomes a new body.

Inclusion is not just a word on a form nor a singular event. I have come to believe it is the work of the Spirit, transforming us as we open ourselves to the lives and stories of others; to be transformed and to seek transformation in and of our world, towards abundant life for all. I understand the life long process of inclusion leading to transformation, as an expression Christ's mission and ministry in our lives and world.

From mediation comes the expression "listening to be changed". Listening to be changed is when we listen to others not in order to tell our own story or to work out ways to argue back or defend ourselves, but to allow the experiences of another to change our perception and ideas. I have experienced this many times with people whose sexual orientation or gender identity is different to my own. With people whose physical and mental abilities are different to my own. With people whose culture, ethnicity, faith are different to my own. Listening to be changed nurtures and deepens our humanity, and in so doing draws us closer to the divine image within us, making us more like Jesus. The process of inclusion is very challenging and assumes that there is no end or perfection to attain, but a direction to travel in following Jesus towards wholeness for all.

Scripture is both nourishing and challenging in exploring this work of the Spirit. The Hebrew people certainly do not appear to be interested to be transformed by the Canaanites when they invaded their land. The laws in Leviticus 25:16-21 regarding disability are clear that this is not appropriate in God's presence, and a similar attitude seems to carry through to the New testament where disability is perceived as something to be cured to make people perfect. Paul's attitudes to slavery and male homosexual relationships are debatable, especially since the concepts of what slavery and homosexuality were,

are very different to ours today. And there are many passages in the scripture which call people not to mix with those of other faiths. And there are the stories where Rahab and Ruth (outsiders) are heroes in the Hebrew story. Where the visually impaired man and the Samaritan woman are the people who perceive Jesus' truth. Where in Christ it is perceived there is no slave or free. Where loving God and our neighbour as ourself, is identified as the greatest commandment. Scripture expresses diverse views around many subjects which today are issues of inclusion.

So what pushes me to understand inclusion as the work of the Spirit? I believe it is my experience. The many opportunities I have had to listen and to be changed by people whose experience is different to my own. Especially people who have suffered; who have been de-humanized, excluded and crushed by perceptions, laws and attitudes in faith communities, in society and within myself. In their suffering and struggle I have witnessed love, resilience, goodness, generosity, sacrifice and faith, such as often fails to break through amidst those with privilege and power. In listening to their stories, I have been repeatedly humbled, shown deep joy, compassion and hope, and been called to re-orientate my thinking and practice (repent) to steer closer toward God's Realm, were all are fully and completely welcome.

In hearing these stories I have become very aware that amongst LGBTQI+ Christians there are passages named "clobber passages" which are often verses used to express a view that God does not agree with homosexuality. In other times and contexts those clobber passages could have been verses about slaves, women and people of other faiths, but let us consider what the LGBTQI+ community are saying to Christianity: that Scripture is being used as a cudgel upon them. A cudgel to beat down not a view or an idea but to beat down a sense of self, of identity, of personhood, of love and hope.

How does this glorify God?

I have met many remarkable Queer Christians who have been exorcised, publicly humiliated, banned from communion, thrown out of church, violently attacked bodily and through words/ media, and despite the horror of these experiences, done in the name of Jesus, they still believe profoundly that God loves them and desire with their whole beings to follow Jesus, who is their light and truth. That does not mean all Queer Christians have un-rockable faith (Queer Christians are as diverse and varied as all Christians) but like Syrophenician woman they have something to teach the whole of Christianity to enable us all to discover more of the Gospel, the Realm, God's Salvation here today. When we fully include LGBTQI+ people into our perception of church, we are transformed and liberated to be more fully the people and the Body, God intends for us to be.

I close with some words from Jo Clifford, who is a playwright, actor, transwoman, Dad, Granny and member of the URC (Augustine United Edinburgh), from her play "Jesus Queen of Heaven:

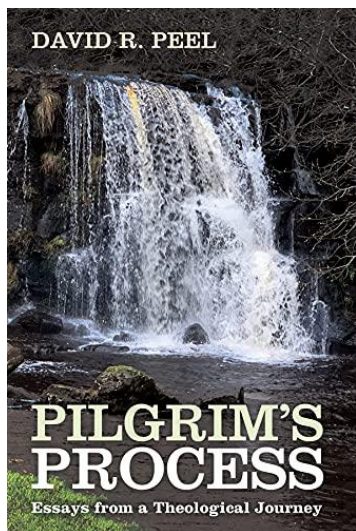
"Bless you if people abuse you or persecute you
For being who you are
Because it means you are bringing about change;
And bless those who persecute you too
Because hatred is the only talent they have
And it really doesn't amount to much."

Fiona Bennett is a URC minister in Edinburgh and Moderator-elect of the URC General Assembly.

Book Review

David R Peel - *Pilgrim's Process*

by Martin Camroux



David is the URC's foremost systematic theologian and its most powerful liberal voice, and it is a delight to recommend this introduction to his theology. He begins with a theological autobiography of his formative years in Yorkshire. It was very churchy. His parents met in Sunday school of Devonshire Congregational Church in Keighley. When he went to study Chemistry at London University he lived in New College, the Congregational theological college in London, and was soon going to WCC Youth Camps and BCC

Youth conferences, and afterwards goes straight to Manchester to train for the ministry. There he was deeply influenced by Schubert Ogden's process theology (hence the book's title), and its panentheistic model of God's relationship with the world and also read Tillich. David completed his theological education by spending a year at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas on a WCC scholarship where he took Ogden influenced his fundamental theological method. Back in the UK, after two pastoral ministries, he became a theological educator culminating in becoming Principal of Northern College Manchester. Intellectually he is questioning, ecumenically open, with a strong scientific interest and he has always kept a critical distance from the church, not always as interested as some in the minutia of URC life. But this is very much a life rooted inside the camp. He is now retired but still active.

Having introduced himself David includes seven articles he has written over the years which gave a taste of his theology, including one, “Sola Scriptura, the Achilles Heel of the Reformed Tradition?” which was originally a talk given at a Free to Believe conference. Then finally he reviews the direction of his theological travel. He notes that his theological position has not in fact changed radically over the years, though of course he now uses theological resources in a more sophisticated way. Sadly his ecumenical hopes for the URC turned out to be “idealistic and naïve.” So say we all. On the other hand he now warms to the idea of Receptive Ecumenism, in which we all seek to learn and receive from others. His hope is that churches can break free from a now redundant style of church to new adventures of Christian discipleship.

There is a lot of radical and exciting stuff here. He is significantly influenced by P. T. Forsyth, but there is a wonderful clarity to his explanation why, despite the hopes of his devotees, he wasn't the theologian for his time and won't be for ours. His slogan “Back to the Bible” was predicated on the belief that if we did, we would find a single clear authoritative account of “the gospel of our moral redemption” which we could then apply to our lives. But there is no single way of interpreting or understanding the Bible and never has been. As for his politically naïve belief that if you can change individual lives, you can solve the world's social problems, David is rightly emphatic that you must seek social and political redemption. Similarly David welcomes Leslie Newbiggin's powerful ecumenical and missionary vision but hesitates over some aspects of his legacy such as his simplistic negativity about the Enlightenment and the way he regards what he sees as the fundamentals of the Christian faith, such as a physical resurrection, the ascension, the Second Coming and the

Trinity, as simply facts to be accepted on the authority of others. David comments, “It is important that our substantive ideas and theories are based upon more than blind faith at the outset of our explorations”. He also locks horns with Alan Sell in defence of internship as part of ministerial training. As someone who never did any such training, I am less sure. Was I that much a worse minister because of it?

I am left with two final thoughts. Firstly I loved David’s willingness to be honest. For all his commitment to the URC he knows it is in terrible trouble. He accuses it of anti-intellectualism, an insufficient interest in theology, having a poor level of preaching, and getting its priorities wrong. “There is a desperate lack of theological thinking from top to bottom in the URC.” We spent our time changing structures and worrying about finance “when we all know that the real problem will remain whatever structures we have and well after the last bean has been counted”. I loved his account of his time on the Doctrine, Prayer and Worship committee where, he says, in five years the only serious theological issue considered “was whether to have an ordained diaconate... theological discussions in the United Reformed church seldom get beyond internal navel-gazing”. I have been on too many URC committees to dissent from this view.

Secondly David is undeniably a liberal, but he is a very tradition based liberal. David suggests that while people may no longer go to church “Belief in God still holds up”. I think this is simply not true. It seems to rely on Grace Davie thesis that our situation is “Believing without belonging”. But this is now a busted flush. Only about a quarter of British people (27%) now say they believe in God and the figure is declining fast. David thinks interest in spirituality is increasing – on what evidence I am not sure. He uses the old language with a

confidence that some may be uneasy with. Not only did he *feel* called to be a minister he *felt* guided back to England when offered a post-graduate opportunity in the US, and often felt God's direction in the churches he served. "Looking back on my Christian Journey I testify to having felt the hand of God in it". We must respect the integrity of his belief, but P.T. Forsyth would understand it better than most people today. In this book David's main theological interlocutors are all more conservative and theologically dated. What has David to say to the more radical views of those to whom the tradition does not speak?

Martin Camroux is a retired URC minister and Chair of Free to Believe.

Keeping Hope Alive. 14-16th July at High Leigh, Hoddeston

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Fiona Bennett, Moderator elect of URC General Assembly

Karen Campbell, URC Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries

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Keeping Hope Alive - Martin Camroux

The French have a phrase *fin de siècle* which specifically refers to an artistic movement at the end of the 19th century but more generally to a time when a creative period is coming to an end. I think this can be applied to the state of theology at the moment where, unless I am looking in the wrong bookshops, there is a distinct lack of first rate new theology being written. Even if there was, would the church be very interested in it? In the Church of England for example, there is currently a huge stress on management techniques, as if these, rather than theology are the key to the churches life. When it comes to the appointment of Bishops being a ground-breaking theologian would almost certainly make your appointment unlikely!

To be fair liberal/progressive theology looks rather *fin de siècle* too. The 1960s produced a massive wave pioneered by people like John Robinson, building on the work of Tillich, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann. In the 1980s David Jenkins built on this (was it then the Church of England got suspicious of theologians as Church leaders?). Then in America came the Jesus Seminar, Jack Spong, Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. Today Spong and Borg are dead, and that moment has passed. Nothing comparable has come in its stead. If you look at the premier US liberal churches like Riverside or 4th Presbyterian Chicago it is very noticeable that the current ministers lack the appeal (and I think the intellectual power) of their predecessors.

But the point about *fin de siècle* moments is that something new comes next. In art the end of the Victorian moment was followed by Picasso and by modernism. The same is true of theology. The question is where the new hope is going to come from? The church mainstream seeks to save the church through endless rebranding, strategizing, PR exercises and reputational-management. For liberals the way forward is utterly different - new ideas, fresh truths, authentic

change, and radical reform. It's not thinking everything is about seeking to grow the church but looking to the world and its needs and seeking to find God in them.

My hope is that already, if you listen, there are voices which are offering that hope. That is the premise of our conference this year *Keeping Hope Alive: NEW RADICAL VOICES*. We will be listening to people who many of us have not heard before, who are not the Spongs or the Borgs but people with new ideas to share. Like any Free to Believe conference it is unlikely that we shall all agree with everything we hear but we will hope to listen seriously and think seriously and to enjoy each other's company. I hope to see you there.

Keeping Hope Alive – meet the speakers

Fiona Bennett (she/her) is the minister at Augustine United Church, which aspires to be an inclusive Christian Community in the heart of Edinburgh. She has served as a URC minister in Scotland (previously Scottish Congregational Church) for 25 years in charges in the Methodist Church, Church of Scotland and URC. She is passionate about the transforming good news of Inclusion, which is at the heart of her Christian discipleship.

Karen Campbell is the URC Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries. She is Tottenham-born to Jamaican parents and served as a Church Related Community Worker in Luton. Karen says she lives and breathes family, and thinks by writing poetry.

Alex Clare-Young (they/them or just my name) is a pioneer minister in the United Reformed Church. Alex researches and writes about trans identities, neurodiversity, trauma, and faith, and ministers alongside those on the margins of, or disconnected from church and society.

Alex's first book, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, was published in 2019 and they are currently writing a grounded theology drawing on the experiences and insights of trans and non-binary Christians. To find out more about Alex, visit alexclareyoung.co.uk

Helen Garton Currently serves as minister at St Columba's Oxford and Cumnor URC, having previously been a Methodist presbyteral minister, a fundraiser at Christian Aid, an administrator in the Mission Team at URC Church House and a secretary at the World Congress of Faiths. Helen is a writer of worship resources, and has a passion for interfaith dialogue, the theology of the Holy Land, and justice in the world and the Church.

Ian McDonald (he/him) is a retired minister of the United Reformed Church, having spent eight years at Southernhay Church in Exeter. In the early 1990s, he was co-founder with Revd Janet Webber of the URC Caucus of what was then the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. He has lived with his partner Ken since 1975 and was the first openly gay candidate for ministry in the URC (note: not the first gay candidate!). He is now an itinerant preacher, leading services in Plymouth and Taunton and quite a few places between. He also works with the Devon Faith and Belief Forum, chairs an almshouse charity in Exmouth and organises an annual season of classical music concerts in Seaton, in East Devon.



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