

Foundations for Ministry

Unit Three:

Past Forward

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Unit 3: Past Forward

Aims of this Unit

- To enable group members to gain a better understanding of their own Christian experience through knowing more about the Church's story;
- To enable group members to understand today's Church in the light of its past;
- To give group members confidence in their Christian experience, and to help them relate it to the beliefs of the community of faith;
- To give people experience of wrestling with questions of faith, both as group members and individually.

Contents

In Unit 3 of the Foundations for Ministry course we shall be looking at the continuing story of the Christian community from the period of the New Testament onwards, and exploring the relationship between personal faith and theology.

"A vast and colourful story"

We are all products of our past – we've become the people we are today as a result of our upbringing and experiences. As soon as we start to think about ourselves we realise that we are made up of all sorts of assumptions, questions and expectations that we have inherited from the past. We need to study our own history if we are to understand ourselves.

And what is true of us as individuals is also true of us as members of the Christian Church – and, indeed, of the Church itself. We can't understand how things come to be as they are today – for example, in our styles of worship, our buildings, our patterns of leadership and ministry, our attitudes to mission and to social concerns, our place in the world church – without understanding something of the history of the Church.

So we need to know something about the story of the Church in order to know who we are. An even more important reason for learning about the history of the Church is that it is God's story – the story of how God has been working out his purposes in human experience.

We have already learned a lot about the story of God's relationship with his people – in Units 1 and 2, looking at the Old and New Testaments. The history of the Church is the next episode in this vast and colourful story. And we are studying history in this part of the course not simply to gain information about the past, but also to see how it affects the present and, maybe, the future. By understanding something about the lives and concerns of our ancestors in the faith, we shall seek a clearer perception of the Church

today. We shall also understand the historical background to some of the issues that the Church is still grappling with.

This vast subject has been narrowed down by concentrating on English Christianity, and by and large by focusing, from the sixteenth century onwards, on Anglican characters and concerns. The first three sessions give a brief overview, covering very broadly the story of English Christian history from about AD 597 up to today.

Each of these session starts with a brief time chart, which is not to be memorised, but which simply aims to give a general picture of some of the major events of the period that related to Christian history. The session goes on to tell the stories of one or two key Christian people, and tries to give some idea of the lives and concerns of English church and lay people during the period. We also focus on particular issues of importance during the church life of the period – and reflect on how these have contributed to today's Church, or how we might deal with similar issues today.

In the remaining sessions of this unit we shall be looking at what we believe today, and how this relates to our experience as individuals and as Christian communities.

“Jesus, ... the human face of God”

As Christians, we believe in Jesus as the human face of God, born, crucified, risen from death and present in our world today. This belief isn't just a set of facts; it's a living faith, a way of life. But from the very earliest days of Christianity, people have struggled to define in greater depth and detail what and who they believed in, and what the implications of this were for their lives. Certain beliefs have been seen as fundamental; others as open to different views or opinions. Unfortunately what some see as fundamental, others see as optional – think, for example, of the controversy surrounding the question of whether homosexual practice is allowable for Christian priests. Statements of belief, or 'creeds' (from the Latin word *credo*, 'I believe') were drawn up from early on in the Church's history, to give a framework of what it meant to be a Christian – and often to make specific points about heretics who had gone beyond what the Church at the time believed to be an acceptable understanding of faith. In other words, creeds define who's outside, as well as who's inside, the circle of believers. All the historic creeds were produced in very particular circumstances, and to answer specific questions. We still use some of them today (such as the Nicene Creed and the Apostle's Creed), even though our circumstances are very different – and many feel that they are not necessarily the best expression of the essentials of the Christian faith in the twenty-first century.

The other important point to make about Christian belief is expressed in the very first words of the creed we use most commonly in the Church of England today: 'We believe . . .'. This is a statement we make as a community; it's not something that is internal and private to each individual. This isn't to say that we don't all have individual lives of faith, but that we need to measure up our inner experiences, feelings and thoughts against the faith held by the Church.

So Sessions four to nine of this Unit can be seen as an exploration of how Christians explain what they believe, and how they relate their own story of faith to that of the wider Christian community. It doesn't mean that everyone in the group will have the same views – any more than all Christians have agreed on everything in the past. It does mean that you can together learn to ask the question, 'What do I believe?' – and to think about that in relation to the beliefs, traditions and experiences of the wider community of faith.

The pattern of work – with individual preparation followed by group sessions – is already familiar to you from the first two units of the course. In Unit 3, the preparatory work consists almost entirely of reading – indeed, it is essential that you do the reading before each session. Unless you have read the background material, you will find it very hard to get involved in the group work, because you probably won't know enough about the story,

the people or the issues. It would be a good idea, therefore, to plan your preparation more carefully than on the first two units of the course, tackling the reading in digestible slices.

Unit 3 has nine sessions, intended to be followed on a weekly basis – though your group may prefer to meet fortnightly, or to extend their study. The sessions are:

Session 1	Early Light
Session 2	Awakening!
Session 3	Mission in a Changing World
Session 4	A Question of Faith
Session 5	Jesus the Saviour: the Work of Christ
Session 6	Journeying into God
Session 7	Breath of Life
Session 8	Believing in the Church
Session 9	We Believe...

Not all the questions in each session have to be covered. You may select aspects that are of particular interest to your group, or especially relevant to your parish history. The questions are designed as a springboard for your thinking and group discussions, not as a straitjacket.

Further Reading for Unit 3

For those who want to find out more about the people, period of history or issues of faith, these reading suggestions are offered, but they are entirely optional. Don't feel you have to read any of them.

Useful background reading for most periods may be found in the relevant volumes of the *Pelican History of the Church*. Also more general, but well illustrated and good for dipping into are:

- *The History of Christianity* – A Lion Handbook (Lion Publishing);

More detailed and serious reading can be found in:

- Adrian Hastings *A World History of Christianity* Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2000
- Adrian Hastings *A History of English Christianity* SCM Press; Rev Ed edition 2001
- David L. Edwards, *Christian England*(Collins)
- J. Beeson, *The Church of England in Crisis* (Davis-Poynter).

The following books are also suggested as general background material:

- Alister E. McGrath, *Theology for Amateurs*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1999
- Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2nd edition 1997). This is a scholarly book, invaluable for those who are interested in the history of theology and doctrine. A useful reference book, rather than for reading from cover to cover.
- John Young, *Teach Yourself Christianity* (Hodder 1996). A very basic, straightforward guide for beginners into the nature of Christian belief. Clearly laid out, and packed with information, some of it at a fairly elementary level.
- Diarmid McCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, Allen Lane 2009

Session 1

Early Light

Aims

- To discover something of the lives and beliefs of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and medieval Christians;
- To learn how England became converted to Christianity, and to consider issues of identity and of mission which faced Christians at that time;
- To reflect on our understanding of identity and mission in today's Church.
- To reflect on aspects of Christian spirituality then and now.

Preparing for the Session

Look at the Time Chart for a general overview of the period, and then read 'From Paganism to Christianity', "The Power and the Glory" and the life stories of Chad and Julian of Norwich.

Time Chart, AD 50–1450

- 50?** Christianity may have been brought to Britain by Pomponia Graecina, the wife of the Roman governor of Britain.
- 250?** St Alban, the first British martyr, meets his death.
- 314** Britain has bishops by this time – three of them are present at the Council of Arles.
- 432** Patrick goes as a missionary from Britain to Ireland.

During the fifth century the Romans were gradually retreating from Britain, because of increasing threats that eventually toppled the Roman Empire. Christianity remained strongest in the North and West of Britain – Scotland, Wales, the West Country and Ireland.

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- 563** Columba goes as a missionary from Ireland to Iona, where he founds a Celtic-style monastery and begins the conversion of the Scots.
 - 590** Gregory the Great becomes pope.
 - 597** Columba dies.
Augustine arrives in Canterbury, sent by Pope Gregory to convert the southern English.
 - 634** Aidan comes from Iona to found a Celtic community on Lindisfarne.
 - 655** Hilda founds a Celtic-style monastic community in Whitby.
 - 664** Synod of Whitby – the Roman Catholic tradition is chosen in preference to the Celtic tradition.
 - 669** Chad becomes bishop of Lichfield.
 - 731** Venerable Bede writes *A History of the English Church and People*.
 - 871** Alfred becomes king of Wessex.
 - 892** The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a record of English history, is compiled.
 - 975** Edgar becomes king of a united England.
 - 1042** Edward the Confessor becomes king – a saintly man, whom people believed could perform healing miracles.
 - 1066** Norman invasion; William 1 becomes king.
 - 1090** Bernard of Clairvaux born – founder of 65 new monasteries (died 1153).
 - 1093–** Anselm is archbishop of Canterbury – wrote theological and philosophical works – for example, about the existence of God, and the meaning of Jesus' death.
 - 1109**
 - 1095–** First Crusade – to recapture Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Muslim Turks.
 - 9**
 - 1099** Building of Durham Cathedral starts – the first of many English cathedrals to be built over the next 450 years .
 - 1150?** Oxford University founded.
 - 1162–** Thomas à Becket is archbishop of Canterbury.
 - 70**
 - 1182** Francis of Assisi born (died 1226).
 - 1215** Magna Carta – a programme of political reforms imposed on the English king by his subjects.
 - 1225** Thomas Aquinas born – an important theologian and writer (died 1274).
 - 1329** John Wyclif born – he opposes certain Church doctrines and translates the Bible into English (died 1384).
 - 1337** Hundred Years War starts between England and France.

- 1348** The Black Death – about 25 million die in Britain and Europe – between a third and a half of the population.
- 1373** Julian of Norwich receives visions from God, later written down as the *Revelations of Divine Love*.
- 1387** Poet Geoffrey Chaucer begins work on *The Canterbury Tales*.
- 1408** The bishops ban the Bible in English.
- 1415** England defeats France at the battle of Agincourt.
- 1431** The English burn Joan of Arc for being a witch.
- 1445** Johann Gutenberg (in Germany) begins to experiment with printing – the first-ever printed book in the Christian world was the Bible he published in 1456.

From Paganism to Christianity

Joseph of Arimathea was the first Christian missionary to England, if we are to believe the legends of Glastonbury. He is said to have brought with him a chalice containing blood from Christ's pierced side, which he buried – this is the Holy Grail for which King Arthur's knights so earnestly sought. Whether or not the legend is true, we do know that Christianity reached England early – soon after AD 50; and historical evidence, backed up by archaeology, shows that it quickly gained ground in Roman England. But as the Roman Empire declined over the next few centuries, and pagan invaders arrived from northern Europe, British Christians became fringe people, living mainly in the Celtic kingdoms of present-day Wales.

By AD 600, pagan England consisted of several kingdoms (among them, Northumbria, Mercia, Kent, Wessex), ruled by men who were more like tribal chieftains than kings in the modern sense. Battles between the kingdoms, and skirmishes between more local tribal groupings, were frequent. Kings rarely died peacefully in their beds, but were overthrown or defeated. There was fierce competition for land and power, each king also wanting to become the most powerful ruler in England.

By this time, there were missionaries working at both ends of the land – Columba and his monks were bringing Celtic Christianity to the north, while Augustine of Canterbury and his followers brought the Roman form of Christianity to the south. The English kings gradually became Christians – a number of them by making arranged marriages with a Christian princess from a neighbouring kingdom.

For a few of these monarchs, conversion to Christianity may have involved a deep inner change of direction – for example, King Sigebert of East Anglia was murdered (in about 660) because, as a Christian, he insisted on forgiving his enemies – a sign of weakness in a ruler. More often, though, kings became Christian as a matter of political choice. One of the missionary messages of the Christian monks was that God could give victory – which was what every warlord wanted. When a king became a Christian, all his people did too – nominally, at least. It is easy

to see how, with large-scale ‘conversions’ like this, old customs lived on alongside the new Christian festivals and fasts.

It is impossible to tell how quickly or how thoroughly the Christian faith spread among the ordinary folk of England. The spread of the faith depended on bishops and others touring the countryside, often on foot – for roads were few, and of poor quality. When Cuthbert, an early bishop of Durham, travelled round to remote and mountainous areas, people came to him at appointed places to hear him preach and to be baptised, making little huts of branches for shelter. We can tell from archaeological remains that, during the early 700s, pagan burials ceased, and were fairly rapidly replaced by Christian graves, many containing crosses made of glass, silver, gold or bronze.

Celtic and Roman Christians

The Celtic and Roman traditions had different customs, rather than different beliefs. Indeed, both had grown from early Roman Christianity, though the Celts, separated from their Roman roots, adapted their traditions to suit local needs and circumstances. The Celtic tradition had no central organisational structures; instead, monasteries were the centre of spiritual life – with the abbot, rather than the bishop, being the highest authority. They had also developed different baptismal rites, and celebrated Easter on different dates.

When Augustine arrived in Canterbury, with a mandate from Pope Gregory to convert the heathen English, he discovered the existence of the British (i.e. Celtic) Church. He summoned its leaders to meet him in 602, to try and persuade them to change to the Roman ways, with their centralised authority of the pope, and the relative pomp and richness of their ceremonies. But the Celts found Augustine arrogant and overbearing, and refused point blank. Bitter hostilities grew up between the two sides. These were finally resolved by worldly rather than godly means . . .

King Oswy of Northumbria – at that time the most powerful of all the English kings – wasn’t happy. He was a ruthless and bloodthirsty king, who worshipped in the Celtic tradition as taught by the monks of Lindisfarne. He had married a Kentish princess, whose family had been converted by Augustine to the Roman ways. What really upset Oswy was that, while he was still enduring the harsh fasts of Lent (according to the Celtic calendar), his wife and her retinue were feasting and rejoicing, celebrating Easter earlier, according to the Roman calendar. He couldn’t bear to smell roasting meat and delicacies when his stomach was rumbling on meagre Lenten fare. So he decided to settle matters once and for all. He summoned a synod at Whitby in 664, and, appointing himself as judge, got experts in the two traditions – Celtic and Roman – to engage in debate in front of an audience.

It wasn’t reasoned debate which decided the matter, though – but Oswy’s terror of damnation. The Roman side clinched the argument by explaining to Oswy that Christ had given to Peter, the founder of the Roman Church, the keys of the kingdom of heaven, with authority to decide about who should be admitted. ‘Can you show that a similar authority was given to your Columba?’, Oswy demanded of the Celtic group. ‘No’, they admitted reluctantly. ‘Then I tell you’, said Oswy, ‘I shall obey Peter’s commands in everything . . . Otherwise, when I come to

the gates of heaven, there may be no one to open them, because he who holds the keys has turned away.' So, according to the Saxon historian Bede, was the course of English church history decided for many centuries to come.

The Reluctant Bishop – the Story of Chad

Education was an important part of the Celtic tradition: Aidan, sent from Iona to Lindisfarne in 634 to help convert the Northumbrians, opened a small school, and 12 English boys were recruited as the first intake. Among them were four brothers – Cedd, Cynebil, Caelin and Chad. Two of them later became priests, and the other two bishops – an impressive family record.

Chad went to Ireland to study further, while King Oswy made Cedd bishop of Essex. Cedd brought the Celtic ways to Essex, travelling frequently from there to the Northumbrian court. Oswy gave him land at Lastingham, on the bleak North York moors, to build a monastery. But when Cedd, who had won acclaim at the Synod of Whitby, translating the Roman's Latin speeches into Oswy's Northumbrian tongue, died of the plague at Lastingham in 664, his brother Chad took over as abbot of the monastery.

Chad seems to have been a very gifted man who was also full of true humility and a longing to serve God. King Oswy recognised Chad's ability and worth. He summoned him from monastic seclusion, and made him bishop of York – a questionable decision, as there was already a bishop of York called Wilfrid, who was absent in France. Easygoing Chad was consecrated by bishops of the Celtic tradition – but the archbishop of Canterbury raised a hue and cry, claiming that, since the Synod of Whitby, this was invalid. Chad responded humbly, 'If that's the case, I'll willingly resign. I never thought I was worthy. I only took the job on out of obedience.'

He was duly reconsecrated – but his problems didn't end there. While Chad was tramping throughout the wilds of northern England, bringing many to Christ by his preaching and his humble lifestyle, Wilfrid returned to claim his job back. There was an almighty row. King Oswy ruled that Chad should stay – but since the Synod of Whitby, Oswy was no longer the sole authority. The archbishop of Canterbury could now take decisions about the Northumbrian Church – and when Wilfrid appealed to the archbishop, he ruled in Wilfrid's favour.

Off Chad went, back to Lastingham. But not for long. Oswy had been asked to provide a bishop for the newly Christian kingdom of Mercia – and Chad was his man. In 669, Chad became the first bishop of Lichfield in the vast diocese of Mercia, which stretched from the Welsh border to the east coast, from the Humber to the Thames. Chad set up his humble hermitage by a spring at Stowe in Lichfield – in this pool his converts were baptised. The pool, known as St Chad's well, can still be seen not far from Lichfield Cathedral – and beside it is the site of Chad's ancient church.

Typical of the Celtic tradition in which he had been raised, Chad began to travel on foot around his huge diocese, identifying with the local poor, and preaching to them the gospel of Christ. When the archbishop of Canterbury visited Chad, he was appalled at the bishop's poverty and

lack of status. He insisted at least on giving him a horse so that he could cover greater distances. Chad was reluctant to compromise – so the archbishop picked him up bodily and hoisted him into the saddle (Chad can't have been a big or heavy man!). Chad felt he had no alternative but to accept the gift.

Chad died of the plague on 2 March 672 after barely three years at Lichfield, during which time his humility, preaching, prayer and voluntary poverty made a great impression on those he met. Before he died, he summoned his fellow monks to him, and urged them to live in love and peace, to pray and do good deeds. Bede writes: 'He was taken by the angels to the joys of heaven. Nor is it strange that he regarded death with joy as the Day of the Lord; for he had always been careful to prepare for his coming'

Chad's tomb very quickly became a place of pilgrimage, and the scene of miraculous healings. To this day, pilgrims gather in Lichfield Cathedral on 2 March for a Eucharist, to give thanks for Chad's life and example. And his chapel in the cathedral remains a place of peace, set aside for private prayer.

The Power and the Glory

During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church held sway right across Europe. The teachings of the Church were universally accepted as the unquestioned basis of life and behaviour. People didn't choose whether to belong to the Church – or which Church to belong to. There was no choice: everyone was a baptised member of the Church. And nation-states, including England, which each had their own rulers, were more like local administrative units within the European-wide Church than what we mean by 'state' today. Latin was the Europe-wide language of the Church, of education and of all official state documents.

The Church was responsible for education, for welfare (caring for the poor, the sick, widows and orphans), for sponsorship of major building projects and for the arts, for communications, for law. Such schools and hospitals as existed were run by monks and nuns.

By about 1100, the Church authorities were aware that many clergy were illiterate, immoral and bribed their way into jobs. Reforms were set in motion aimed at educating priests, monks and nuns, forbidding bribery, and stopping clergy marriages. To avoid the solitary life implied by celibacy, cathedral clergy began to live in groups (canons), and new universities were formed as communities where teachers (all priests) and students (all training to become priests, though some would work as lawyers and administrators) lived together.

A side-effect of this was to create a gulf between clergy and lay people. Villagers no longer saw their priest as 'one of us', but as a different kind of Christian. This was increased by the power of the Church: not only did it control most institutions, but it also controlled the access to eternal life or eternal damnation. The fear of hell – the subject of many medieval sermons and paintings – was considered to be a thoroughly good thing. After all, why should people obey the law, preserve moral standards and do good if it wasn't out of fear of eternal damnation for misbehaviour?

But power corrupts – and power corrupted the Church. Before long, it was making good money selling ‘indulgences’ – whereby those who could afford it bought forgiveness for their loved ones who had already died, or secured their own eternal wellbeing. The fact that much of this money was used to build churches, cathedrals and monastic buildings did not make the sale of indulgences right.

The Church was indeed rich. Pilgrims travelled long distances to famous shrines – such as the shrine of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral – and poured money into church coffers. Many glorious church buildings of this age survive – though they would have looked very different inside from how they look today. The walls were covered with paintings of Bible stories, and there were no chairs or seats – other than the benches built into the nave walls for the very infirm (hence the expression, ‘The weakest go to the wall’). Attendance at Sunday Mass was compulsory for all – but lay people did not receive communion; they simply watched as the priest said the service in Latin, and as he and his deacons and sub-deacons received communion.

As time went on, criticism of the Church became louder. An anonymous poet in the late 1300s criticised priests for being ‘high on horse’ (by contrast with St Chad!) and for changing their clothes every day and punishing the poor. In 1378 John Wyclif put forward a radical and subversive belief: that the Bible was the one sure foundation of belief, and that it should be placed, in English, in the hands of everyone, priest and laity alike. To further his aim, he produced the first English translation of the Bible – and went on to condemn the Church’s wealth, the doctrines of the Mass, the abuses of the monastic way of life, and the requirement for clergy to be unmarried. It wasn’t long before his views were condemned as heresy.

During the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, the many complaints of the people were expressed in a theological question!

When Adam delved¹ and Eve span

Who was then the gentleman?

Ordinary lay people learned about their faith not through sermons but from the paintings and carvings on church walls, and from the popular religious plays which were staged in towns on holy days (i.e. holidays). Different guilds – or local groups of craftsmen – staged different parts of the Bible story, performed on carts that processed through a town or city with accompanying musicians. Often guilds were matched to appropriate stories – so the Shipwrights presented the story of the building of Noah’s ark, while Shepherds enacted the angels’ appearance in Bethlehem’s fields at Christ’s Nativity.

The wool trade was one of England’s main sources of prosperity, offering livelihoods to shepherds, weavers and cloth-merchants – during this period, about 90 per cent of the population lived in the countryside, rather than in towns. Women worked on the land as well as men – though generally women’s position in society, in legal terms, was considerably worse than in Saxon times. Church law specifically permitted wife-beating, arising from the view that Adam sinned only

¹ Dug

because Eve persuaded him to do so, and women should therefore be 'under the rod' of their husbands.

Few ordinary lay people could read or write – and, despite the attempts at church reform, nor could many parish clergy, except those who were also monks. The monasteries were centres of learning – and monks were therefore also the king's civil servants, able to read and write, and thus keep court records and undertake correspondence. It was in Henry II's reign that the office of rural dean was established – they were the medieval equivalent of local government officers. In every area of national and local life, the Church reigned supreme.

But it was not only amongst poorer people that there was dissatisfaction with the way the Church was governed. It was also a matter of repeated aggravation to the Kings of England – so that the eventual rebellion of Henry V¹¹ against the Pope's authority can be seen as the last in a series of similar quarrels. For example Henry II, who ruled from 1154 – 89, was infuriated that the Archbishop of Canterbury continued to assert the exemption of clergy from arrest and trial in the ordinary courts. The Archbishop was Thomas a Beckett, and his murder, whether commanded by the King or not, raised the question of who had real power in the country.

When King John (who ruled from 1199 – 1216) came to choose an Archbishop the person he selected was vetoed by the Pope. The Pope chose Cardinal Stephen Langton. John declared the Pope had no right to choose and seized Church lands. The Pope served England with an interdict. So for six years during King John's reign England was excommunicated. This meant no one could be married, baptised or buried within the Church. Finally John offered to make England a fief of the Papacy and do homage to the Pope. The Pope leapt at this chance and forgave John. The English barons were outraged. Even Stephen Langton the Archbishop of Canterbury felt that the English Church would now be exploited by Rome. The intense disquiet of the barons was expressed in the document known as 'Magna Carta' which limits the powers of the English Sovereign.

So during the Middle Ages the seeds were sown for the disputes and upheaval of the 16th. Century.

Solitude and Prayer – The Story of Julian of Norwich

We know relatively little about the life of Dame Julian, who had her visions of God in 1373. We don't even know her real name – she seems to have called herself after the little church of St Julian's, about half a mile from Norwich Cathedral, on to which her cell was built.

Julian was born in about 1342. When she was 30, she fell desperately ill. Neither she, nor her mother or friends thought she would survive: 'Reason and suffering alike told me I was going to die, so I surrendered my will wholeheartedly to the will of God', she writes. Her parish priest was summoned, to be present at her death. He held a crucifix in front of her eyes and, as dawn was breaking on 8 May 1373, Julian received her remarkable visions centred on the Holy Trinity and the person and passion of Jesus.

She made a complete recovery, apparently living to a ripe old age of about 80. But as a result of her visions, she became an anchorite – that is, she chose to live a solitary life, in order to devote herself to prayer and worship, in a cell of probably about 100 square feet in size. This was not an uncommon vocation for either men or women. In about 1300, for example, about 50 solitaries are known to have been attached to churches and other buildings in Norwich alone. And after Julian died, we know the names of five anchorites who later occupied her cell successively, going well into the 1400s.

Such a calling may seem strange today, when being ‘useful’ often seems all-important. But in the Middle Ages people regarded a life dedicated to prayer and contemplation as the most important of all callings:

[Julian] was a citizen of a city which put at its centre a cathedral, not because it was thought that it would make a beautiful addition or adornment to a society which had already been constructed, but because men believed that worship and prayer were the most vital and necessary of all human activities.

(A. M. Allchin, *The Dynamic of Tradition*, p. 5)

But the solitary also performed useful tasks. Each cell had a window which looked out on to the ‘world’, and the anchorite offered a listening ear to anyone who needed it. Their role was a combination of modern-day social worker, psychiatrist, marriage counsellor and Samaritan. Fridays were kept in complete silence – as well as certain other holy days; but otherwise the anchorite might use her discretion in talking to visitors.

In her cell, Julian lived and prayed, ate her meals (in later life prepared by her two servants, Sara and Alice) and slept, meditated and wrote, and counselled many from her little window looking on to the street. Opposite was another window through which she could see into the church, hear Mass and receive communion.

Julian describes herself as ‘unlettered’ – but that may well mean that she knew no Latin. Certainly, she seems to have written her *Revelations of Divine Love* – the first book to have been written in English by a woman – in a style which indicates some knowledge. Indeed, the twentieth-century spiritual writer Thomas Merton wrote: ‘Julian is without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older . . . I think that Julian of Norwich is with Newman the greatest English theologian’.

When writing about prayer, Julian takes a disciplined prayer life for granted, and discusses delayed prayer, unanswered prayer, dryness in prayer, our longing for God in prayer and our desire to be united with God in prayer. Julian never wrote in order to be praised for her penetrating and spiritual insights. Rather, she wanted to point people beyond herself to Christ. She would probably be pleased that so little is known about her life, for she writes: ‘You shall soon forget me (and do so that I shall not hinder you) and behold Jesus who is teacher of all’.

Group Work

The mission to England

Full group

1. What struck you in particular, from the preparatory reading, about this period, the people, or the issues faced by Christians at that time?
2. The early English Christians used several mission techniques:
 - offering education;
 - training priests, monks and nuns;
 - preaching to people where they were;
 - not being wealthier or more obviously affluent than those to whom they ministered;
 - telling stories, by word of mouth and later in writing, about the local heroes and heroines of the faith
 - creating works of art – such as the Lindisfarne or Lichfield Gospels – using the finest skills of the time to worship God and spread the good news.

Consider each of these one by one:

- How far is each appropriate to us nowadays in mission?
- Is there a modern equivalent – and do you think it would work as an approach to mission?
- What other things might we be trying to do instead?

Full group

3. Think back to your work on the New Testament in Unit 2. What similarities or differences can you see between the ways in which the early church evangelised and the conversion of the English, as described in these stories?

Prayer and solitude

Small groups

4. Do you think the Church needs people whose lives are dedicated to prayer and solitude – or is it an escapist attitude?
 - Do you think today's Church has a good balance between:
 - (a) silence/stillness and activity?
 - (b) being alone and being part of a community?
 - (c) vision and practicality?

Full group

9. Before you part, spend at least five minutes in silence, meditating on these words of Julian's:

The one thing that matters is that we always say Yes to God whenever we experience him.

Full group

Session 2

Awakening!

Aims

- To understand some of the historical background from which the Reformation grew; and to learn about church developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries;
- To consider aspects of everyday Christian life at the time, particularly through the lives of George Herbert and Susanna Wesley;
- To reflect on how this period helps us to understand Christian experience today.

Preparing for the Session

Look at the Time Chart to gain an overall view of the period. Then read the two articles 'Church at the Cross-Roads' and 'Puritans, Papists and Philosophers', making a note of anything which particularly interests you about the people or the issues.

Time Chart, 1450–1789

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 1454 | The Gutenberg Bible, the first-ever printed book, is published. |
| 1476 | William Caxton sets up the first English printing press . |
| 1485 | Henry Tudor defeats Richard III, and becomes Henry VII – ending the Wars of the Roses and founding the Tudor dynasty. |
| 1492 | Christopher Columbus sails across the Atlantic and discovers the West Indies. |
| 1509 | Henry VIII becomes king of England (until 1547). |
| 1515 | Thomas Wolsey, archbishop of York, becomes lord chancellor of England and is made a cardinal. |
| 1517 | The Reformation starts – Martin Luther nails his 95 Theses, protesting against the sale of indulgences, on the church door at Wittenberg. |
| 1521 | Luther is excommunicated as a heretic. Pope gives Henry VIII title 'Defender of the Faith' for his opposition to Luther. |

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- 1525** William Tyndale makes an accurate English translation of the New Testament. Most of this is later used in the Authorised Version of the Bible.
- 1529** Henry VIII dismisses Wolsey for failing to obtain the pope's consent to his divorce. Henry summons 'Reformation Parliament' and begins to cut ties with Rome.
- 1532** John Calvin starts Protestant movement in France.
- 1533** Henry VIII marries Anne Boleyn, and is excommunicated by the pope. Thomas Cranmer becomes archbishop of Canterbury.
- 1534** Henry VIII is declared by parliament's Act of Supremacy to be the supreme head of the Church in England.
- 1535** Thomas More is executed for refusing to accept Henry as the supreme head of the Church.
- 1536** English monasteries are closed and destroyed, with their lands going to Henry or his ministers.
William Tyndale is strangled and burnt; his last words are, 'Lord, open the king of England's eyes'.
- 1541** John Knox brings the Reformation to Scotland.
- 1547** Edward VI (a Protestant) becomes king of England (until 1553).
- 1549** Introduction of a uniform Protestant service in England with Edward VI's Book of Common Prayer.
- 1553** Mary (a Roman Catholic) becomes queen of England (until 1558). She restores Roman Catholic bishops.
- 1555** England returns to Roman Catholicism. Protestants are persecuted. About 300, including Cranmer, are burnt at the stake.
- 1558** Elizabeth I (a Protestant) becomes queen of England. Repeals the Roman Catholic laws passed under Mary.
- 1562** Religious wars in France between the Huguenots (Protestants) and Roman Catholics (until 1598).
- 1563** The Thirty-Nine Articles complete the establishment of the Church of England.
The final meeting of the Council of Trent introduces much-needed reforms into the Roman Catholic Church.
- 1567** Mary, Queen of Scots (a Roman Catholic), is forced to abdicate. James VI (a Protestant) becomes king of Scotland.
- 1601** The Poor Law makes parishes responsible for providing for the needy.
- 1603** Elizabeth dies childless. James VI, king of Scotland, becomes of England (until 1625).
- 1605** Gunpowder Plot – Roman Catholics plan to blow up the English parliament.
- 1611** Authorised Version of the Bible ('the King James Bible') is completed.
- 1612** The first Baptist congregation in England founded.

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- 1620** Pilgrim Fathers sail to America, seeking greater religious freedom.
 - 1625** Charles I becomes king (until 1649).
 - 1629** Charles I dissolves parliament and rules personally until 1640.
 - 1642** Civil War breaks out in England, after two years of tussles between king and parliament. Lasts until 1646.
 - 1645** Charles I and his royalist supporters (Cavaliers) defeated by Oliver Cromwell's army (Roundheads).
 - 1649** Charles I is tried and executed. England becomes a republic (till 1660).
 - 1660** Parliament restores the monarchy – Charles II becomes king of England & Scotland (until 1685).
 - 1662** Act of Uniformity passed, excluding Dissenters (i.e. Puritans) from the Church of England.
 - 1664** Persecution of Dissenters starts.
 - 1673** Test Act excludes English Roman Catholics and Nonconformists from holding public office.
 - 1675** Sir Christopher Wren begins to rebuild St Paul's Cathedral (destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666).
 - 1678** The first part of *Pilgrim's Progress*, by Puritan John Bunyan, published.
 - 1685** Charles II becomes Roman Catholic on his deathbed; succeeded by James II (until 1688).
 - 1688** William and Mary become joint monarchs (till 1702)
 - 1689** Act of Toleration permits Dissenters to hold services – on certain conditions.
 - 1698** SPCK founded to promote Christian education in England and America.
 - 1701** Missionary Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (forerunner of today's USPG) founded.
 - 1702** Anne becomes queen (until 1714). She favours High Churchmen.
 - 1714** George I – a German Protestant – becomes king (until 1727).
 - 1738** Conversion experiences of John and Charles Wesley.
 - 1784** John Wesley claims the authority to ordain ministers – which means that Methodism's split from the Church of England is only a matter of time.
 - 1788** First English settlement in Australia.
 - 1789** The French Revolution starts.

Church at the Cross-Roads

We have already seen how dissatisfaction with the Church in England had been expressed in various ways during the Middle Ages. The Englishman John Wycliffe (died 1384), and his followers the Lollards, had already demanded that Scripture (and other religious writings) should be available to people in their mother-tongue, and had seen that other fundamental changes were needed in the Church. The poorest in society were actually gaining influence and a voice, whether expressed in revolt, or through increased wealth and educational opportunities. There was a continual, rumbling dispute between the Crown and the Pope about who had supreme authority.

This situation was repeated throughout Europe. By 1500 it had become clear that the Western Church could not go on as it was. Major contradictions in Church and society were combining to bring about the Reformation, an enormous and permanent change in European life and thought. During the next 150 years the Church was to change radically – almost as much in Catholic as in Protestant countries. These are some of the major issues which prompted these changes.

1 *Bible teachings*

The Roman Catholic Church held up the Bible as the source of truth – but it also taught various doctrines that weren't found in the Bible. It could get away with this when few people read the Bible – and in the Middle Ages few did because:

- not many people could read
- even fewer could read Latin
- even fewer owned a handwritten copy of the Bible.

But with the coming of printed books in the 1450s, and a general growth in literacy, this changed. The contradictions had become clear. The Reformers wanted to strip away all the non-biblical teachings and go back to Scripture.

In England, John Wycliffe made the first translation of the Bible into English. The first printed English Bible – a translation by Miles Coverdale – was published in Zurich in 1535 (because it would have been illegal to publish it in England), and contained an unauthorised dedication to King Henry VIII.

2 *Church wealth*

The Church was rich and powerful – but Jesus had sided with the poor and the meek. Much of the Church's wealth was in the form of buildings, land, houses, rents – and could not easily be cashed in and used to meet its obligations to feed the poor, run schools and hospitals. But people began to ask questions – such as, why should a bishop have over 100 servants while the poor at his gate were starving and in rags?

When King Henry VIII dissolved the English monasteries in 1536, he took over their lands and wealth, probably making over two million

pounds, most of which went to pay for a war against France, waged from 1542 to 1546.

3 *Church, state and welfare*

In the Middle Ages, it was the Church's duty to provide welfare – education, health-care, alms for the poor – as well as caring for people's souls. But as towns grew in size, and populations expanded, the Church couldn't cope with the demands. Increasingly, the state was needed – locally and nationally – to meet people's needs. There were many who saw this as a dereliction of the Church's primary responsibilities.

Henry's dissolution of the English monasteries (1536) nevertheless revealed how much the Church was creating work for labourers, servants and farmworkers. It is estimated that up to 80,000 people were dependent on the monasteries for their daily bread, in addition to the relatively small number of Religious (perhaps about 800, with another 1000 friars). The situation was more complex than people had realised.

Reform

Throughout northern Europe, scholars, priests and monks began to question why the Church was falling so far short of the ideals of the Church's founder. As people began to read the Bible, they discovered that Christianity was not based on fear of eternal punishment, and bribing God and the Church to open the gates of heaven – but rather was about a relationship of love and trust with God. What's more, people did not need a priest to enable them to confess in order to be in close communion with God – they could pray, and experience forgiveness themselves, and learn about God's will for them through Bible reading and prayer.

New denominations began to spring up. In many places, these new churches rejected any link with the state at all. Others worked to achieve a balance between new and old, duties to God and the state. And in Roman Catholic countries, the Church set about renewing the existing Catholic patterns of worship, belief and spirituality in a movement which is called the Counter-Reformation. No one was unaffected by the changes.

In England, the struggle between old and new went on longer than in the rest of Europe, perhaps because the Anglican settlement was a delicate compromise, rather than an extreme position that was enforced. It wasn't till 1688 that the country finally settled into a secure Anglicanism, with elements of Catholic and Protestant traditions. Henry VIII, who broke away from the pope, remained a Catholic in his beliefs and practices all his life, despite having been excommunicated. Though his children Mary and Edward were extremists, his daughter Elizabeth's greatest desire was for a peaceful harmony, in which no-one questioned her queenly authority, but where a diversity of belief was possible. The Anglican Church is an expression of her vision.

Burned for his Beliefs – the Story of Thomas Cranmer

Cranmer was largely responsible for shaping the Church of England. As the main author of the Book of Common Prayer – in general use till 1980, and still used in many churches – Cranmer profoundly affected the language and style of Anglican worship. His superb command of English, and his gifts as a liturgist, are his truest legacy to the Church.

Cranmer, born in 1489, was brought up in a middle-class family of small landowners. He studied theology at Cambridge University, and eventually became a lecturer there. By the time he'd reached his mid-thirties, he had come into contact with the ideas of the Continental Reformers, and had begun to pray daily for the abolition of papal power in England. In 1526, he began to insist for the first time that, in order to get their theology degrees, his students had to show a first-hand knowledge of the Bible.

He came into contact with King Henry VIII almost by chance. He was visiting two of his former students in a Hertfordshire town where Henry was also staying. At the time, Henry was using every trick in the book to persuade the pope to grant him a divorce from his first wife, freeing him to marry Anne Boleyn with whom he had fallen deeply in love. Cranmer overheard his former pupils debating the issues and intervened: surely the pope could make no decision that disagreed with Scripture – so why didn't English scholars read and interpret Scripture, and give Henry an answer, instead of the pope?

This was radical thinking. Cranmer had implied that the ultimate authority in Christian teaching was not the pope but the Bible – a view which was the foundation of Reformation thinking. Henry got to hear of this, and was delighted. It was Cranmer's big chance. Henry made him an archdeacon, then an ambassador to Europe where Cranmer, despite his priest's orders, married a German girl.

Cranmer the archbishop

In 1532, Henry summoned Cranmer back to England in order to make him archbishop of Canterbury. It was another 15 years before priests were permitted to marry, so he had to be discreet about his new wife. It is said that he had a specially-made laundry basket in which she could be smuggled in and out of his lodgings when he was travelling.

For Henry, the situation had become urgent – Anne Boleyn was pregnant. Archbishop Cranmer lost no time in annulling the king's first marriage and crowning Anne queen of England.

But he was a compassionate man, and he found his task increasingly hard, and the king's intolerance ever-more difficult to accept. As Henry imprisoned and executed those who would not accept his new marriage and the consequent break from Rome, Cranmer risked his own neck by pleading for the lives of Bishop John Fisher and Sir Thomas More. But both lost their heads – as did Queen Anne when she failed to provide Henry with a much-needed male heir.

Cranmer saw the break with Rome as a chance to bring about some cautious reform in the Church. He and Henry drafted the Ten Articles – doctrinal changes which rejected indulgences and transubstantiation (the belief that the eucharistic bread and wine became, at the consecration, the actual physical body and blood of Christ). And every

priest was required to provide a copy of the English Bible in church for lay people to read.

Henry's death

On 27 January 1547, Cranmer received a late-night summons from the king. Henry was dying. The king had been cruel and tyrannical, yet he also had great power and magnetism – his character had been complemented by Cranmer's simplicity, cautiousness and integrity. Cranmer sat at the bedside of his dying king, holding his hand until the end came. After Henry's death Cranmer, who had always been clean-shaven, vowed never to shave again as a mark of grief for the king.

Less than a month later, Cranmer placed the crown on the head of Edward VI – a bookish nine-year-old and Henry's only son. Edward's guardians supported the Protestant cause – and Cranmer was free to bring in more reforms. Most important, Cranmer worked to produce a single book of common forms of worship for all England, revising the Roman Catholic liturgies not merely by translating them into English, but by adapting them to reflect the essential beliefs of Protestantism.

Cranmer and the Eucharist

Cranmer and the Reformers believed that men and women were justified (i.e. brought into a right relationship with God) by faith in Jesus Christ – not through their actions, or through receiving the sacraments.

Roman Catholic theology declared that at each Eucharist the priest re-enacted Christ's sacrifice, mystically offering Christ's real body and real blood in the bread and wine. By contrast, the Protestants believed that Christ had died once for all – that his saving work on the cross could not be repeated. This difference was so profound that the 'doctrine of the Mass' came to symbolise everything the Protestants were protesting about.

What made the issue more complex was that not all Protestants believed the same about the Eucharist. In fact, there were three main schools of thought – all of which are reflected in different parts of today's Church of England:

- those who saw Christ's sacrifice as happening entirely in the past, and the Eucharist as a memorial only;
- those who believed in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, but that God was working whenever the Eucharist was celebrated, in the hearts of true believers;
- those who believed that, as well as being a means of remembering Christ's sacrifice, the actual celebration of the Eucharist brings about certain happenings so that Christ is in some way present, mystically and symbolically, in bread and wine.

Cranmer seems to have fallen into the second category, and his Book of Common Prayer reflected this. Catholic-minded English people were horrified at how profoundly the liturgical changes followed the Protestant line. Yet others felt it had not gone far enough.

Back to Rome

But in 1553, everything changed. The boy-king Edward died, and Henry's Roman Catholic daughter Mary succeeded to the throne. Cranmer saw what was coming, and sent his wife and children to Germany – but he refused to flee. Within three months he was a prisoner in the Tower of London.

Cranmer was taken to Oxford to answer a charge of heresy because of his view of the Eucharist. Personal beliefs were seen as an indication of loyalty to the Crown – or not. So what to us is a matter of personal belief was then a matter of life and death. He was subjected to tortured to persuade him to recant, to declare publicly that he had been wrong and the Catholics right.

Finally Cranmer's spirit broke. He agreed to read out a statement recanting all his Protestant beliefs before being consigned to the flames for his wicked heresies.

Standing in a rainy Oxford on 20 March 1556, on his way to the stake, Cranmer astounded and enraged his captors. Instead of recanting, he proclaimed aloud his defiance of the pope and of Catholic doctrines – and repented that he had ever wavered:

'As for the pope, I refuse him as Christ's enemy and anti-Christ, with all his false doctrine. And as for the Sacrament . . . I believe [that] . . . my book teacheth so true a doctrine of the sacrament that it shall stand at the last day before the judgement of God!'

A recent biographer of Cranmer's comments:

In him the whole of the English Reformation was put on trial . . . In the end, he found a way of keeping his integrity and reaffirming what he loved and what he hated. Precisely because of his agonising in those last months, leading up to the flames in front of Balliol College, Oxford, Cranmer deserves to stand alongside other hesitant, reluctant martyrs who have found that they must abandon the assumptions of a lifetime and resist apparently triumphant worldly powers: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda, Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador.

(Diarmid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, page 618)

The Elizabethan Church

Mary's reign was followed by the 45-year rule of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth – giving the young Church a chance to settle down and consolidate its position. It is arguable that the fate of the country depended on Elizabeth's health – there was nothing inevitable about the success of the Anglican settlement. But the queen expected churchmen to obey *her*, first and foremost – for example, when the Dean of St Paul's was preaching in her presence one Ash Wednesday, and his sermon became controversial, she screamed at him, 'Leave that alone! To your text, Mr Dean! Leave that; we have heard enough of that!'

Bishops

In Elizabeth's Church, bishops were appointed to carry out the queen's policies. They spent very little time in pastoral care, or administering

Confirmation throughout their dioceses. They differed from medieval bishops mainly in that they were expected to live and work in their dioceses, concerning themselves with local, rather than national, politics and administration – for example, they collected taxes from parish clergy. Bishops were powerful men who did not have the prestige of aristocratic birth – so important in that intensely class-conscious society. This put them in a strange position socially – for example, they issued orders and excommunications that the laity, and even the clergy, often treated with derision.

The parish church

The parish church remained the centre of social life in Elizabethan England. Almost everyone attended services – apart from the few ‘Romanists’ who remained loyal to the old religion, and the very poor. Attendance at church was meant to be compulsory – churchwardens were to fine non-attenders 12 pence for each Sunday’s absence.

In every parish church the Book of Common Prayer was used Sunday by Sunday. Morning Prayer and Litany formed the chief service, with Evening Prayer early in the afternoon, and Holy Communion perhaps once a month, at which lay people received both bread and wine – though in many parishes neither Evening Prayer nor Holy Communion would be held so often.

Very few of the services included a sermon – a clergyman needed a special license before being allowed to expound the Bible’s message in his own words. But gradually, as the years went by, the old-style priests were replaced by younger, better educated and more committed clergy, who were able to preach to the people.

In church, men and women sat separately, and the churchwardens kept order. This was before the days of popular hymns, so the only singing was of the metrical psalms.

After the Sunday morning service there would be sports in the churchyard, and the whole community’s year was given its pattern by the fasts and festivities: Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, May Day dancing to greet the spring, the autumn harvest festivities.

The allocation of pews in church was a controversial matter, because it marked a family’s social status. The humiliation of sinners was also a matter of interest, and took place in church. For example, adulterers were supposed to do penance in a white sheet in front of the whole congregation during Morning Prayer on three successive Sundays.

Churchwardens

The unpaid churchwardens, elected for the year at Easter, were responsible not only for the maintenance of the church, churchyard and any vicarage, but also for a great many other matters – giving alms to the poor, punishing rogues and the upkeep of almshouses, roads, bridges and ponds, either by themselves or in collaboration with other officials.

The church building

As well as being used for services, the church often doubled as a school where the schoolmaster, licensed by the bishop, taught. Local militia, who kept order in case of trouble, kept their arms in the church; the local magistrates often used the building as a courtroom to hear cases. In effect, the church was civic building, village hall and community centre all in one. And everyone (except for suicides) was buried in the churchyard.

The church was indeed the very heart of the Elizabethan community.

By the end of Elizabeth's reign, the Church of England prided itself on having the best of every world, being scriptural, catholic and reasonable. But from the 1560s onwards, the Puritans were driven onwards by a sense of the unfinished Reformation. They wanted the Church to move to further reform – to less centralised government, less state involvement, different church interiors (with religious texts replacing medieval wall-paintings), and an open Bible in every home, not just in every church.

Puritans, Papists, Philosophers

To the Puritans of 1603, then, the Reformation had only just begun. The pope's power in England had been removed – and with it much false teaching and practice. But they wanted to move on towards renewal, to the transformation of the hearts and minds of the ordinary people of England.

But the Church of England bishops liked the halfway house of being neither Papist nor Lutheran, being both Catholic and Reformed. They fought further changes in doctrine or worship, and wanted the Puritans to conform to the practices and teachings of the Church of England. But the Puritans refused to conform – thus becoming known as Nonconformists.

This conflict raged until 1688. There were plots and counterplots; tens of thousands of Puritans left England for the New World, seeking a place to live and worship far from religious oppression. There were running battles between parliaments, which tended to have a Puritan majority, and kings, who favoured Roman Catholicism – apart from James I who, according to a modern biographer, 'took the Church of England to his heart in a long and rapturous embrace that lasted for the rest of his life'. (This did not stop James from expecting his bishops to turn a blind eye to his increasingly blatant homosexuality, the often drunken disorder of his court, or his passion for hunting which left him little time for politics.)

Eventually, England erupted into civil war – and the war became a revolution. The king was executed, a republic was declared, and bishops and archdeacons, cathedrals and chapters, were stripped of their authority. Church lands were sold off, raising over a million pounds which went towards the civil war effort.

Civil war is deeply destructive and divisive. The memory of it lasts for many generations. Indeed, you may find that in your own locality it is known which families fought on which side, and which villages fought each other!

Lichfield Cathedral suffered more than any other in England. The cathedral and close, which were fortified with massive walls, were an ideal royalist stronghold, and were besieged three times between 1643 and 1646. When the Roundhead soldiers were finally victorious, they looted the tombs of the medieval bishops, smashed statues and monuments and defaced the carvings – legacies which are still visible today.

In 1660, the monarchy was restored – and Charles II became king. For about a year, the outcome for English religion was uncertain. Decisions weren't made by battles or riots, but by negotiations between a few men in London. Most of the country seems simply to have waited, relieved that the threat of anarchy was over, willing to accept any settlement, as long as it wasn't 'popery'. Eventually the bishops agreed to make over 600 changes to Cranmer's prayer book, to please the Puritans, and a few changes to appease the Catholic tendency in the restored Church – but most of these changes were minor. In 1662, the Book of Common Prayer was established as the only text authorised to be used.

Many clergy felt they could not in conscience go along with the restored Church of England. In all, 936 clergy left the security of their vicarages for conscience's sake – and more than 800 others were expelled, between 1660 and 1662. They were known as Dissenters – and for many years, they and their followers were banned from public office. Many turned to trade and, being mainly hard-working, abstemious and honest, they often prospered, and used their wealth for charitable causes, like founding schools, hospitals and libraries.

A Godly Parish Priest – the Story of George Herbert

George Herbert was born in 1593 into an aristocratic English family – he could have chosen a life of prestige and power. Instead, he conquered his ambition, and opted to use his considerable gifts in serving God's people humbly, as a conscientious priest in a rural parish. He wrote a treatise called *The Country Parson*, in which he described the parish priest's role – which was principally one of service to the people of God. His memory has lived on through his magnificent poetry, which describes much of his spiritual struggles. Through these, his ministry has continued to Christians down the centuries.

Before becoming a parish priest, George Herbert had enjoyed a distinguished academic career at Cambridge University, and a brief spell as member of parliament for Montgomeryshire. When he resigned from parliament, apparently disillusioned with the system, Herbert was ordained deacon. It was another five years before he was ordained priest, and took up full-time parish work. It is ironic that Herbert became famous – as a country priest and a poet – because he had chosen to renounce worldly fame.

Herbert was a parish priest for less than three years, before his death in 1633. Yet he found time to repair his church and rectory, to educate three orphaned nieces in his home, to befriend his 300 parishioners, and to struggle against his own ill-health. He wrote that 'A pastor is the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of God'. And to serve his hard-working country flock, a pastor must have temperance, humility, prayerfulness, hospitality and courtesy. And his charity must be

practical – he needed to be not only pastor, but also lawyer and physician for his people.

Herbert believed passionately that the hallmark of Christian practice was not private prayer or devotion, but the public prayer of the people of God, and he encouraged all of his flock to attend the daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer twice a day if possible. His biographer Izaak Walton tells us:

Mr Herbert's own practice . . . was to appear constantly with his Wife . . . and his whole Family, twice every day at the Church-prayers . . . and there he lifted up pure and charitable hands to God in the midst of the Congregation. And he would joy to have spent that time in that place, where the honour of his Master Jesus dwelleth.

In emphasising the importance of corporate worship, and in seeing the community of the church as being the primary place for exploring the Christian life, Herbert was resisting one of the Puritan features of post-Reformation religious life – that what is most important is the relationship of the individual soul to God.

Herbert, the highly educated aristocrat, offered a new vision of the work of a country priest – work which all through English history had not been thought fit for a gentleman. He showed it to be a high calling indeed – and one for which godly humility was essential. We still sing his words:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for thee.

The Evangelical Revival

The Church of England

During the 1700s, the Church of England settled down into becoming a denomination. It was one of three main strands of English Christianity – the others being Protestant Dissent and Roman Catholicism. The Anglicanism of the period was largely conservative, happy to be linked to the state, with bishops who were powerful politicians rather than pastors of the priests and people in their dioceses.

For example, Lancelot Blackburne, archbishop of York from 1724 to 1743, never held a single confirmation. And Nathaniel Crewe became bishop of the highly lucrative diocese of Durham by giving a large sum of money to Charles II for the upkeep of his mistress Nell Gwynne. Bishop Crewe lived like a nobleman – and left a legacy which still enables his guests at Oxford University to consume champagne and strawberries in his memory each year.

But at the other end of the scale was Thomas Wilson, bishop of the Isle of Man from 1698 to 1755 – a saintly man who gave practical help to the poor, taught farmers about new agricultural methods, fought smugglers, founded schools and a public library, and learned the Manx language in order to write the first books in it. Young men who wished to become priests were taken to live in his home for a year, and he took an active interest in missionary work in America.

The Church's complacency at this period is mocked by writer Henry Fielding, whose character Parson Thwackum, in *Tom Jones* (published in 1749), argues for the perfection of religion: 'And when I mention Religion, I mean the Christian Religion; and not only the Christian Religion, but the Protestant Religion; and not only the Protestant Religion, but the Church of England'.

Many clergy of the time, however, were conscientious and busy, acting as JPs, settling local disputes, teaching the children – and even pioneering much that has come to be known as social security

Renewal

After 1689, Dissenters were allowed to hold their own services – and attendance in parish churches dropped alarmingly. Many people closely identified the parson with the local squire – the landowner for whom they worked at fixed, and often very low, wages – and preferred to worship among people they could relate to. It has been calculated that, from 1715 to 1718, there were about 1850 Nonconformist congregations in England, with over a quarter of a million members.

These numbers were to be swelled by the eloquence, dedication and vision of a number of remarkable men, whose preaching freed the pent-up feelings of English lay people, sick of a diet of Anglican moderation and reason.

George Whitefield, one of the first revivalist preachers, has been called the greatest British evangelist. He preached off-the-cuff and with passion at a time when sermons were usually read out. He was a brilliant orator – actor David Garrick claimed that Whitefield could make people cheer or weep just by the way he pronounced the word 'Mesopotamia'. He preached the message of a new birth in Christ – and from his own conversion in 1735 onwards, he travelled and wrote, preached and taught, to save sinners.

Charles and John Wesley had known Whitefield at Oxford University in the early 1730s as fellow-members of the 'Holy Club', which cultivated personal holiness through prayer, fasting, Bible study and good works. Yet the brothers felt that something was still missing – until they experienced personal conversions.

On Pentecost Sunday 1738, Charles Wesley opened his Bible at random, and felt God's Spirit breaking through his reluctance to believe:

The Spirit of God strove with my spirit till by degrees he chased away the darkness of my unbelief. I found myself convinced, I knew not how nor when, and immediately fell to intercession.

Charles's life was transformed. And just a few days later, so was his brother John's – as his famous diary entry describes:

[I] went very unwillingly to a Society [meeting] where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.

John Wesley is said to have travelled about a quarter of a million miles on horseback as an itinerant preacher – or, when older, in a simple coach. He is thought to have preached about 40,000 times, and wrote well over 200 books and tracts. He stopped at nothing to preach the good news to people – and by 1791, the year of his death – there were 72, 476 full members of ‘societies’ he had founded throughout Britain. In 1789 he defined the four essentials of the Methodist system (despite the disapproval of bishops and parish priests):

- to preach in the open air, so that all could hear
- to pray extempore, not from set liturgies
- to form societies
- to accept the help of lay preachers.

Wesley himself stubbornly refused to separate from the Church of England, of which he was a priest – and the inevitable split only finally occurred after his death.

The Evangelical awakening, with its central vision of Christ as the believer’s Saviour, also happened within the Church of England, as well as in open-air services and among Dissenters. From the 1750s onwards, many clergymen in quiet country parishes began to experience personal conversions, and to preach to their parishioners accordingly. It took time for the movement to spread to cities, universities and bishops’ palaces. Senior churchmen weren’t very bothered about what went on in the countryside – but in 1768, four students were expelled from Oxford University for holding Evangelical views. As Lichfield-born Samuel Johnson commented: ‘A cow is a very good animal in a field, but we turn her out of a garden’. There wasn’t an Evangelical bishop until 1815.

Duty and Service – the Story of Susanna Wesley

Susanna, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, was the youngest of 25 children born, in 1669, to an outstanding Puritan preacher and scholar. Her father read 20 chapters of the Bible to his family daily, and instructed his children to examine their consciences fully at least three times a day. He was one of the Dissenters – ministers who, at the restoration of the monarchy, left the Church of England as a matter of conscience.

Susanna was determined and independent-minded. When she was nearly 13, she decided to look for herself at both sides of the dispute between the Church of England and the Dissenters. She concluded that, unlike her family, she was in favour of the Church of England – and she left her father’s church to become an Anglican.

Soon after she met Samuel Wesley – who had also returned to the Church of England from a Dissenting family background. They married when he was 26 and she 19.

But Susanna, with her clear thinking and independent views, had no idea what kind of life lay ahead of her. She had 19 children in 19 years (nine of them died in infancy), and was dogged by her husband’s constant debts. She was often ill, had to cope with wretched housing, and to defer to a husband who believed it was his Christian duty to be

master of his household – including his wife. She once wrote to one of her sons: “Tis an unhappiness almost peculiar to our family that your father and I seldom think alike.’

Yet she decided to make a virtue of necessity – she determined that her children would be her life’s work. She educated and nurtured them – for, as she herself wrote, ‘There are few, if any, that would entirely devote above 20 years of the prime of life in hopes to save the souls of their children.’ Her devotion to her demanding yet humble duties was not in vain: two of her sons John and Charles were tireless preachers, teachers, hymn-writers, and founders of Methodism.

She drew up rules for the guidance of her children from when they were tiny. One rule was that, if a child confessed to a wrongdoing, he or she would not be punished. She believed that openness and honesty mattered more than childish misdeeds. She was deeply grieved when their hot-tempered father failed to keep to her rule, and lashed out in heavy punishment.

In 1709 a crisis beset the family. Fire broke out in their vicarage in the middle of the night. Susanna, eight months’ pregnant, thought all the children had been rescued when she realised that little John was still inside, trapped in the burning nursery. He was pulled to safety on a ladder moments before the roof fell in. Susanna was convinced that God had a purpose in saving him – she was determined to take special care over John’s upbringing, praying, ‘I do intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child that thou hast so mercifully provided for, than ever I have been . . . Lord, give me grace to do it sincerely, and prudently, and bless my attempts with success.’

Susanna’s life was one of duty, devotion and service. Her aim was to nurture the souls of others – and it may be due in no little part to her faithfulness in caring for the spiritual needs of her children that we owe the preaching and organisation gifts of John, and the inspired hymns of Charles.

Her life had much struggle, frustration and sadness – yet she describes, as a 70-year-old widow, at her son John’s meeting-house in London, a moment of great joy and spiritual insight: ‘While my son [i.e. son-in-law] Hall was pronouncing these words in delivering the cup to me, “The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee”, these words struck through my heart, and I knew that God, for Christ’s sake, had forgiven me all my sins’. Duty was lit up by joy and love, freedom and forgiveness.

When she was dying, Susanna asked, ‘Children as soon as I am released, sing a psalm of praise to God.’ And they gladly did.

If possible, bring to the group session a copy of the Book of Common Prayer.

The group leader may be able to supply copies for those without them.

Group Work

The Reformation in England

Full group

1. From the background reading (and from your work on the previous session), how do you imagine an ordinary lay person might have experienced worship
 - (a) in 1500?
 - (b) in 1600?
 - What were the main differences?

Full group

2. When change is introduced into worship, how easy is it for people to accept? What do you think makes it difficult? (In your discussion, you might think of the discomfort felt by many when the sharing of the Peace was first introduced; or people's reactions to Common Worship, when it replaced the ASB in 2000.)

The legacy of the Reformation

Small groups

1. The Eucharist was one of the central focuses of disagreement between Catholics and Protestants. All agreed that Christ is present at the service, but disagreed strongly about how that is to be understood. Is he present in worshippers, as they remember His words, present in the bread and wine as it is consecrated, or present in the lives of believers, as they receive bread and wine?

Small groups

- How might different views about this affect the way in which the Eucharist is celebrated?
2. If you have copies of the Book of Common Prayer, look up and read:
 - (a) Articles 11, 22, 24, 28, 32;
 - (b) The Exhortation in the service of Holy Communion (beginning 'Dearly beloved in the Lord . . .');
 - (c) The 'rubrics' (instructions in italic print) at the end of the order for Holy Communion.
 - In what ways do these extracts show a reaction against the Roman Catholic Church of the time?
 - How many of the customs, instructions or beliefs described here are still actively promoted and carried out in your church today?

The Church in the 1600s and 1700s

For Task 1, half the small groups will do part (a) and half part (b), comparing notes afterwards.

Small groups

1. (a) George Herbert stressed the importance of corporate public prayer in Christian experience. What do you think, from the background reading and from your own experience, are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to being a Christian?

(b) The Evangelicals stressed the importance of individual and personal experience in the Christian life. What do you think, from the background reading and from your own experience, are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to being a Christian?

Small groups

Evangelism and popular culture

1. The Evangelicals – with open-air meetings, rousing hymns which expressed deep theological truths, and extempore prayers – attracted large numbers of people in the eighteenth century:
2. Do you think that it is important for the Church to offer a contrast to present-day culture, and methods of communication? Or do you think the Church should use contemporary methods in their communications? Might this offend some people (e.g. in recent years, some Christmas and Easter advertising campaigns have run into controversy)? Does this matter?
3. George Herbert and Susanna Wesley served God by working dutifully and unglamorously in what they believed to be their chosen callings. Think about your own church – past (if you know enough about its history) and present, perhaps looking at memorials to individuals and families:
 - What individuals are striking for having served God humbly?
 - What have they achieved/do they achieve?
 - What can you learn from them?

Full group

Closing thoughts

Full group

George Herbert's poems often express his struggles to believe in God's love, despite his own unworthiness. Read this poem, called 'Love' – you could try reading it aloud with two or three voices (one for 'Me', one for 'Love', and possibly one for the background, expressing 'My' inner thoughts):

Love made me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

'A guest', I answered, 'worthy to be here.'

Love said, 'You shall be he'.

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,

I cannot look on thee.'

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame

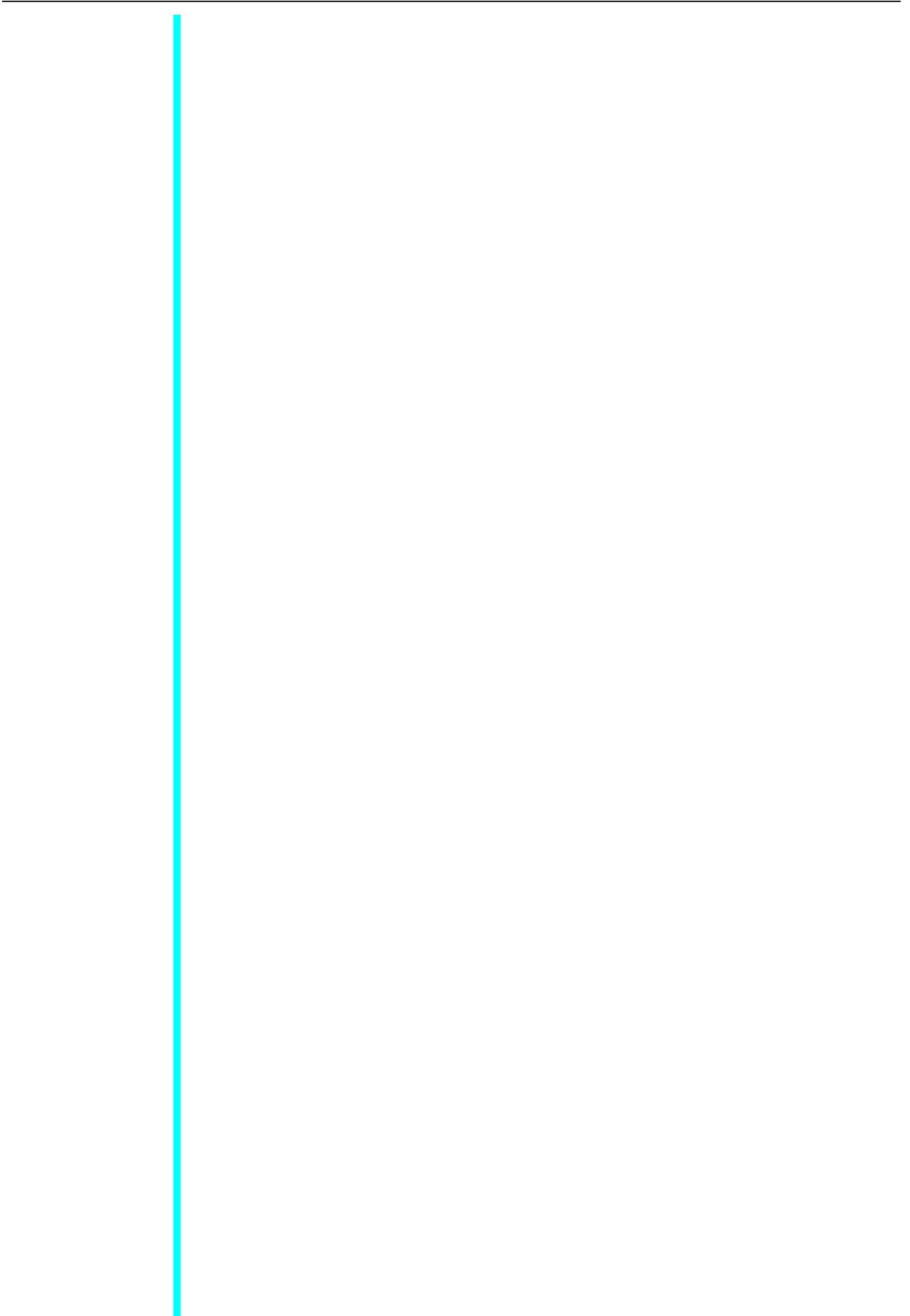
Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not', said Love, 'who bore the blame?'

'My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down', said Love, 'and taste my meat.'

So I did sit and eat.



Session 3

Mission in a Changing World

Aims

- To learn about the changes and developments in the Churches during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
- To look at mission as the Church's response to human need, both at home and abroad;
- To explore change through the lives of some key figures
- To reflect on how this period can help us understand or respond to the challenges of today's world.

Preparing for the Session

1. Look at the Time Chart, then read the articles 'The Victorian Church' and 'Changing People'.

Time Chart, 1789–2003

1780–1820 Many missionary societies founded.

1793 War with France (until 1815, and the Battle of Waterloo).

1807 Abolition of the slave trade in the British empire.

1811 The National Society begins to found church schools.

1813 British India is opened to missionaries;

Elizabeth Fry (a Quaker) begins to visit prisons and campaign for their reform.

1818 The government gives a large grant for the building of new churches in England.

1828 Repeal of acts of parliament against Dissenters.

1828 Catholic Emancipation Act passed – allowing Roman Catholics to vote, and stand for election as MPs.

1832 Major reform of parliament – despite opposition from the bishops.

1833 Emancipation of slaves;

The Oxford Movement begins.

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- 1837 Queen Victoria comes to the throne.
 - 1844 YMCA is founded.
 - 1845 J. H. Newman is received into the Roman Catholic Church.
 - 1848 *The Communist Manifesto* is published.
 - 1853 The Liberation Society forms to campaign for the Church of England to be disestablished.
 - 1854 Florence Nightingale leads nurses to the Crimean War (between Britain and Russia).
 - 1856 David Livingstone returns to England from Africa.
 - 1859 *The Origin of Species*, by Charles Darwin, is published.
 - 1861 *Hymns Ancient and Modern* is published.
 - 1863 C. H. Spurgeon, one of the most powerful preachers of the time, opens the Metropolitan Tabernacle, regularly drawing crowds of 6000 at his services.
 - 1865 William Booth starts his Christian Mission in a tent in Whitechapel, London, which eventually becomes the Salvation Army.
 - 1866 The first-ever lay readers (in Gloucester diocese).
 - 1867 First Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops.
 - 1870 Papal infallibility is defined by the Vatican Council; State schools are established.
 - 1885 Lord Shaftesbury – a great Evangelical social reformer – dies, and over 500 charitable societies are represented at his funeral.
 - 1886 Josephine Butler secures the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act (see background reading).
 - 1889 Publication of *Lux Mundi (The Light of the World)*, a collection of essays edited by Charles Gore – seen as an Anglican intellectual manifesto for the Victorian age.
 - 1896 Anglican ordinations declared void by Pope Leo XIII.
 - 1901 Queen Victoria dies.
 - 1902 Education Act subsidises church schools.
 - 1906 *The English Hymnal* published.
 - 1907 Modernism is condemned by Pope Pius X.
 - 1914 Outbreak of the First World War.
 - 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, leading in 1918 to the nationalisation of all church property, and the deaths of many Orthodox priests and bishops.
 - 1922 The Central Readers' Council founded – the first formal body for lay readers.
 - 1927 Conference at Lausanne which later led to the founding of the World Council of Churches.
 - 1929 Mother Teresa begins work in Calcutta.

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- 1931 C.S. Lewis is converted to Christianity after a long intellectual battle. He becomes the most popular defender of orthodox Christianity in the English-speaking world.
 - 1933 Hitler comes to power in Germany; schism among German churches about whether to co-operate with him results in the formation of the anti-Nazi German Confessing Church in 1934.
 - 1939 Outbreak of the Second World War (until 1945), which included the Holocaust (1941–45).
 - 1940 Taizé Community founded by Roger Schutz.
 - 1945 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German Lutheran pastor, is hanged by the Nazis.
 - 1947 Dead Sea scrolls discovered – including parts of the Old Testament and commentaries 1000 years older than texts previously known.
 - 1948 The founding of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam; Eastern European communist states begin persecution of the Church.
 - 1949 Beginning of the evangelistic work of the American Baptist Billy Graham.
 - 1958 John XXIII becomes pope (until 1963), and begins to open up the Roman Catholic Church, especially through the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), which introduces reforms (e.g. Mass is to be celebrated not in Latin, but in people's mother-tongue).
 - 1963 *Honest to God* by the Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson, becomes a best-seller, popularising radical ideas about God.
 - 1964 Dom Helder Camara becomes RC archbishop of Recife, Brazil – he is committed to defending the rights of the poor by non-violent means.
 - 1965 Pentecostal and Charismatic movement, already strong in the USA, begins to affect Latin America and parts of Europe.
 - 1968 The murder of Martin Luther King, the Baptist leader of the American Civil Rights movement.
 - 1969 The first women lay readers are licensed.
 - 1978 The election of a Polish pope, John Paul II – the first non-Italian pope since 1523.
 - 1980 The murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, while celebrating Mass;
Experiments in liturgy culminate in the publication of the ASB (Alternative Service Book).
 - 1986 Desmond Tutu becomes archbishop of Cape Town.
 - 1988 The first Anglican woman bishop is elected (in the American Episcopalian Church).
 - 1989–90 Fall of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and Russia; Church persecution ends.
 - 1992 The Church of England's General Synod votes for the ordination of women priests.

2000 ASB replaced by Common Worship

2003 First openly homosexual Bishop appointed in the United States

The Victorian Church

The 64 years of Queen Victoria's reign saw enormous changes in church and society. A thumbnail sketch of the church in the early 1800s shows thousands of rural parishes which existed without incumbents – the men who received salaries for being their parish priests had no desire to live in such out-of-the-way places. The Church's pastoral organisation had not changed since medieval times, and even after acts of parliament required priests to live in their parishes, the situation was slow to change. Revd Sydney Smith, who loved the good life of London, was outraged at having to go and live in his Yorkshire parish, 'miles from the nearest lemon', as he put it.

Nor could the people generally be described as keen churchgoers: on Easter Day 1831, out of a total population of around 13 million, only 605,000 (just over 20 per cent) received Holy Communion in the Church of England. This wasn't helped by the fact that the Church had made no provision for churches or clergy to work in the rapidly expanding industrial towns and villages. From 1818, pump-priming funds were granted by parliament – over 600 Anglican churches were erected in the next decades, though many people were still far from a Church and many of the working class never went to church.

As the century wore on, more and more people moved to the towns for work. The 1851 census showed that, for the first time ever, more people were living in the towns and cities than in the countryside. England was changing beyond recognition.

The last part of Victoria's reign saw the beginning of the rise to power of the working class, many of whom were alienated from the Church. The period also saw an expansion of scientific and technical education, which began to provide an alternative to traditional religion among the educated classes. Secularisation was well on the way.

Yet for much of Victoria's reign, religion was important to many – and its type of Christianity emphasised the link between faith and conduct. From both Evangelical and High Church perspectives, Christians felt called to good works – among the poor, the brutalised and the sick, at home and abroad. The Evangelical Earl of Shaftesbury, in his tireless role as 'the Working Man's Friend', is a remarkable example: he worked for parliamentary change (e.g. he devised the humane Lunacy Act of 1845), and fought for legislation to regulate lodging houses where many working-class people had to live; he was a mainstay of the Public Health Commission, forcing decent sanitation on one town after another; he befriended the blind, cripples, the destitute incurables; women and children in mines, factories and farm gangs, child chimney-sweeps – and many more. He probed into conditions of work in Indian factories, he fought to restrict the vivisection of animals in laboratories.

Mission to Empire

Victorian missionaries spread Christianity over the near-empty vastnesses of Canada and Australia, began to make sub-Saharan Africa a Christian continent, substituted the gospel for cannibalism in New Zealand and other Pacific islands, powerfully challenged the grip of tradition in India and reached deep into China. They fought against the slave trade, helped to stop cruel practices like infanticide, devised writing systems for hundreds of spoken languages, founded churches, schools and hospitals. In some parts of the world missionaries were nearly indistinguishable from the traders and empire builders of the age, in others they were strongly resisted by those who wished to trade without challenging the customs of those who were dominant in local society.

These missionaries strongly believed in the opportunities for progress that they were offering, as described by one of them (Sir Harry Johnston) addressing the Basoga people deep in Africa in 1900:

We were like you, going about naked . . . with our war-paint on, but when we learned Christianity from the Romans we changed and became great. We want you to learn Christianity and follow our steps and you too will be great.

At home and abroad, the Victorians lived with a sense of responsibility for the rest of the world. Nowadays we are very aware of the Victorian reputation for hypocrisy – but by no means all Victorian Christians were hypocrites (and even those who were, also achieved considerable good).

They were, though, so hugely proud of their moral technical superiority to other peoples that they came to see themselves as the explorers of a world which was somehow ‘unknown’ before their arrival, as the missionaries of a civilisation and religion which were incomparably the Best. In so doing, they changed the course of history.

This sublime confidence and sense of self-esteem came to an abrupt end in 1914, as historian David Edwards writes:

The declaration of war by the British empire against the German empire on 4 August 1914 ended many things, including the post-Reformation phase of English Christianity. Slowly, very reluctantly and often silently, the more perceptive of the church leaders found themselves compelled to acknowledge that here was the end of an England – for here was a horror to which conventional piety and morality seemed largely irrelevant.

(*Christian England*, vol. 3)

We shall now briefly look at two Victorian Christians – John Keble and Josephine Butler – each of whom gives us a glimpse into some aspects of Victorian church and society.

John Keble and the Oxford Movement

John Keble was a country Vicar, at his happiest when using his considerable gifts of scholarship and poetry among the people of his Hampshire parish. He was a man of a cheerful, humble holiness.

In 1825, he published a best-selling book, *The Christian Year* – poems to accompany the Book of Common Prayer’s lectionary for each Sunday

and other Holy Days. He was embarrassed by its success – his readers presumed him to be much holier than he thought himself to be. And it has not stood up well to the test of time, as one of his biographers writes: ‘No book was ever more to the liking of its own age and less to the taste of the present one’.

He was a High Churchman all his life, and was never the focus of public attention. Yet he was the guiding spirit of the Oxford Movement and, in 1833, preached a sermon at St Mary’s, Oxford, which was seen, with hindsight, to have been the starting-point of the movement. It was far from the heart-touching extempore sermons of the Evangelicals, delivered to congregations of thousands. Instead, it was a scholarly essay in Latin to a fairly small congregation, protesting against the reform of Anglicanism in Ireland. But the sermon was to change the lives of those who heard it – and through them, the Oxford Movement was to become a means of spiritual renewal which transformed the Church of England, and influenced both the worldwide Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church.

Keble’s 1833 sermon was prompted by the government’s attempt to abolish some Irish bishoprics – which to Keble symbolised the growing disrespect for ‘the successors of the Apostles’ (i.e. bishops). Worse still, parliamentary reform meant that MPs were no longer all Anglicans – there were also Dissenters, Roman Catholics and perhaps even atheists in parliament. Should such a body have the power to make decisions affecting the Church of Ireland? And if the Church of Ireland today, why not the Church of England tomorrow? What was the proper authority for making decisions in the Church of England?

Other leading members of the Oxford Movement were John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey. They published their views in pamphlets called *Tracts for the Times* – short, pithy, anonymous papers. They were not only concerned with the relationship between Church and state, but were also reacting against the growing Evangelical movement in the Church of England, which claimed the complete authority of the Bible without reference to the historic community of Christians.

Pusey identified six areas in which they were seeking holiness:

- 1 In relation to the two sacraments.
- 2 In accepting the importance of bishops as successors to the apostles.
- 3 In their view of the Church ‘as the body where we are made and continue to be members of Christ’.
- 4 In their regard for daily public prayers, fasts and feast-days, as part of a disciplined life of devotion.
- 5 In their regard for ‘the visible part of devotion, such as the decoration of God’s house, which acts insensibly upon the mind’.
- 6 In their reverence for the traditions of the Church – in particular, the early, pre-Reformation Church.

After Newman joined the Roman Church in 1845, Keble became the Movement’s leader. He wrote to a friend:

Now that I have thrown off Newman's yoke, things appear quite different. Pusey and Newman were full of the wonderful success of the Movement, whereas I had always been taught that truth must be unpopular and despised.

Keble's character was essentially conservative. 'Don't be original' was his regular advice to those who preached sermons. He had an equal dislike for Rome and Dissent. He was charitable towards the sins of the flesh – but had no sympathy for religious doubts. He believed that the victory of the Church – which would be 'complete, universal, eternal' – would be achieved by faithful parish ministry.

Thanks to Keble and his Oxford Movement colleagues, the Catholic tradition came to have a profound influence within Anglicanism. They put more emphasis on the sacraments, and restored a sense of reverence in worship. They also restored to Anglicanism such features as religious communities, retreats, pilgrimages, the sacrament of confession, the reading of devotional books and a pattern of disciplined prayer and regular communion for ordinary Christians.

A Joyful Reformer – the Story of Josephine Butler

Towards the end of her life Josephine Butler reflected on the message of John's gospel – 'that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full'. 'I do not believe', she said, 'that joy is ever interrupted. It flows like a mighty river. God himself, its source, . . . knows that the end will be victory'.

But this was no head-in-the-sand escapism. Through much of her life, she was haunted by the problem of suffering and cruelty. She came gradually to accept that, in every cause which is truly God's, failures and disappointments are not only familiar, but even necessary for the final success of the cause – that was the lesson of the cross. And death must be undergone before resurrection can be enjoyed.

Born in 1828, Josephine married George Butler, an Oxford lecturer and clergyman, when she was 23. They were Evangelicals – though not strict ones (they liked wine and music), and had little time for church ritual and the issues which concerned the Oxford Movement. They moved to the great port city of Liverpool with their three sons – and their adored daughter Eva, who was 'the light and joy of their lives'. When she was six, Eva rushed out her room to greet her parents as they returned from a party one evening. She fell over the banisters and was killed. Josephine was plunged into grief, and wrestled to reconcile her child's death with the existence of the daily care of a loving God.

Josephine was advised to redirect her grief, and to 'seek new daughters' by visiting the vast workhouse, where 5000 paupers lived. She took home with her Marion, who had been seduced at 15, and was dying of consumption. Before long, the Butler's spare rooms filled up with similar guests. But Josephine's attention was soon diverted by another issue, which was to make her famous – and infamous – throughout the land.

In 1864, the government had introduced Acts for the Prevention of Contagious Diseases, to try and protect soldiers from venereal disease. Prostitutes working in towns where there were many soldiers had to register and submit to regular inspections. Plain-clothes policemen could

arrest any women whom they suspected of being a prostitute – those who didn't agree to a medical examination were imprisoned.

Josephine was asked to lead a movement campaigning against the Acts. She recoiled from the task: 'Like Jonah I fled from the face of the Lord', she recalled. Yet when she saw the indignities to which women were subjected (including innocent women), the lofty or amused indifference of men – and the departure from the English tradition of justice that a person is innocent until proved guilty – she joined the cause.

Josephine toured the country, leading impassioned meetings, and encouraging men and women to work together for justice. She charmed, bullied, persuaded, or simply exhausted men into seeing the need to extend English justice to women. At a by-election in Colchester in 1870, her campaigning group ran its own candidate. Mobs organised by brothel-keepers broke up the meetings, and threatened to burn down Josephine's hotel.

The government finally took some notice, and set up an all-male Royal Commission to look into the Acts. When Josephine gave evidence before them, she described the Acts as 'a tyranny of the upper classes against the lower classes, as an injustice practised by men on women, and as an insult to the moral sense of the people'.

When, in 1883, parliament finally debated the abolition of the Acts, Josephine organised a continuous prayer meeting in a hotel across the road from the House of Commons. Women of all denominations and all classes – peeresses, shop-girls, servants and prostitutes – met and prayed. MPs voted, by a majority of 72 votes, to abolish the Acts.

Another cause for which she fought was the protection of children from under-age sex. Child prostitution was rife in London, and large numbers of young girls were abducted or purchased to supply both British and Continental markets. The scale of the trade was enormous. Thanks to Josephine, the government introduced an amendment proposing that the age of consent be raised to 16, and making it illegal for girls to be sold to foreign brothels.

Josephine – who is seen as the founder of moral welfare work in the Church – lived on until 1907. When she looked back over her life, she made two observations about her 'causes' – first, she said that in order to produce a movement of a vital spiritual nature one must suffer; secondly, a movement which is of God must be preceded by prayer. As she looked back on her campaigns, she felt that God had honoured her in making her a representative of the 'outcast woman of the city who was a sinner', and of the anger of the common people against the upper classes who had abused them and their daughters.

Changing People

As the Time Chart shows, one of the most fundamental changes of the twentieth century is that we can no longer think just about the English – or even the British – Church. Fast global communications placed us firmly in the context of a worldwide Church – and whether in its persecutions, its growth, its new approaches to theology and politics, or

simply its struggles with the daily grind of poverty and deprivation, we cannot ignore that we have one Lord, one faith, one Church.

The three Anglican Christians whose lives we shall now look at briefly illustrate some of the enormous changes of the twentieth century. They are also people who have been instrumental in bringing about change. And all of them illustrate a key emphasis of the twentieth-century understanding of God: in a century which saw the unspeakable horrors of the trenches of World War I, of the concentration camps of World War 2, and the unimaginable destructive potential of nuclear weapons, people have recognised, in theology and practice, the crucified and suffering God. Twentieth-century Christians proclaimed a God who is alongside those who suffer – and our three stories illustrate different responses to that truth.

The Church must *be* the Church – the Story of George Bell

George Bell, bishop of Chichester from 1929 to 1958, had been involved with ecumenism ever since the movement began in 1910, and from the mid-1920s he worked specially closely with German theologians and church leaders. He did not let the rise of Nazism, the apathy (or hostility) of his fellow bishops or the outbreak of war shake his conviction. As he wrote to German Christian friends in the summer of 1939, when war-clouds were gathering, 'The Church must manifestly *be* the Church . . . united as the one body of Christ, [even] though the nations wherein it is planted fight each other'.

When Hitler and his National Socialist Party (Nazis) swept to power in 1933, they merged the different Lutheran denominations together, calling them the German Church and effectively making them a department of the Nazi state. The Christians who could not go along with this formed the Confessing Church – among their number was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who got to know Bell while he was working as a pastor in London. The German Church, meanwhile, was supporting anti-Semitism, had agreed that anyone who wasn't a pure Aryan by descent should be banned from holding office in church or state, and issued an edict forbidding pastors to criticise Hitler.

Bell urged action. The House of Bishops agreed to a debate – but were clearly uninterested, feeling detached from European affairs. So Bell put the matter on the agenda of the international and ecumenical Life and Work Council (forerunner of the World Council of Churches), of which he was chairman. The Council produced a strongly worded criticism of the repressive and totalitarian regime of the German Church, and suggested that Nazism was 'a philosophy of life antagonistic to the Christian religion'. At the very least, this brought great encouragement to the Confessing Church, affirming that they were not alone.

In 1937, active persecution of the Confessing Church began. Some pastors were arrested and imprisoned, others were forbidden to speak; others had their passports confiscated. Church finances and property were confiscated. Bell was horrified at the situation, seeing an attempted destruction of Christianity in central Europe. But many in England felt that the dangers of Nazi rule were greatly exaggerated . . .

England at war

For Bell, the 1939–45 war was against Nazism and its evil ideology. But for many British people, it was simply was against the evil German nation. He preached and wrote passionately against this attitude:

I am sure that there are very many in Germany, silenced now by the Gestapo and the machine gun, who long for deliverance from a godless Nazi rule, and for the coming of Christian order in which they and we can take out part. Is no trumpet call to come from England to awaken them from despair?

Bell was also appalled when the RAF started to bomb civilian, as well as military, targets. He campaigned vigorously against this – and became very unpopular as a result. He believed that the Allies were making war in the very spirit of aggression and reprisal which had inspired Hitler. He was particularly offended by the saturation bombing attacks on Hamburg and Dresden:

To bomb cities as cities, deliberately to attack civilians, quite irrespective of whether or not they are actively contributing to the war effort, is a wrong deed, whether done by the Nazis or ourselves.

By 1943 opinion against him was so strong that he was asked to withdraw from preaching in his own cathedral church of Chichester on Battle of Britain Sunday.

In 1942, Bell visited Sweden on a preaching tour – and was amazed to see, in one of his vast congregations, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The German pastor asked Bell to seek British government support for a plot to assassinate Hitler and topple his regime. It all depended, said Bonhoeffer, on whether the Allies saw themselves as trying to defeat Nazism or the whole German people. If the latter, they would not wish to risk involvement with a coup by German opposition members.

Back in England, Bell found the government unwilling to commit itself. In 1944 came the news of the abortive attempt on Hitler's life. Some 20,000 people were executed as Hitler took revenge, including Bonhoeffer himself. Bell always believed that the British government's refusal to be involved was partly responsible for this widespread extermination of German opposition.

After the war, Bell's unpopularity continued, as he campaigned for a peace settlement to rebuild Europe on Christian principles, not to take reprisals against the German people for the sins of the Nazis. He challenged the legal basis of the Nuremberg trials – why, he asked, were no Allies being tried for war crimes such as looting, or deporting civilians? But his efforts did little to reduce the popular demands for vengeance which lay behind the trials.

World Council of Churches

Bell's long-time involvement with international ecumenical bodies culminated in his becoming the first chairman of the central council of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which met for the first time in Amsterdam in 1948. Bell inspired a statement, included in the meeting's final report, that a just war was no longer possible, because modern warfare entailed such barbarism that it could not be an act of justice.

As chairman – and later as honorary president of the WCC, Bell played a vital part in shaping the worldwide ecumenical movement in the post-war decades.

George Bell never courted popularity. He stood up for what he believed to be right in the light of faith, regardless of the consequences. He gives us a glimpse of what it means for the Church to *be church* – a community of the Holy Spirit which transcends national boundaries and offers glimpses of an alternative way of being.

Learning to Love – the Story of Dame Cicely Saunders

‘Life is above all about learning to love, and most of us have merely begun when we die’, said Cicely Saunders, to whose determination and vision we owe the hospice movement – one of the great reforms of modern times.

The hospice movement was one among many ways in which, during the 1960s, Christianity took practical and successful forms in the secular world. This is illustrated in the growth of Christian Aid: in the 1950s, Christian Aid Week had raised about £200,000 – but by the end of the 1960s it was raising £2.5 million annually. Organisations such as the Samaritans, Shelter, Amnesty International, the Cyrenians, and the hospice movement – all were started by Christians (mostly lay people) who wanted to engage with local, national or international communities in working for justice, care and peace.

Cicely Saunders, born in 1918, came from a wealthy London family. She went to Oxford University, but when the Second World War broke out, she left her studies to train as a nurse. Severe back trouble prevented her from remaining in nursing after the war, so she returned to Oxford, completed her degree and trained as a hospital almoner (medical social worker). During this time she became a devout Christian.

In her work as a hospital almoner she became friends with a dying Polish patient, David Tasma. They talked together about the idea of hospices – homes to care for the dying, enabling them (in Dame Cicely’s words) to ‘close the book neatly’, free of pain as far as possible. When Tasma died, he left Cicely Saunders £500 ‘to be a window in your home’.

It took her almost 20 years to build the rest of the home around that window. First, she realised that to run the kind of hospice she planned she would need to be a doctor. So she returned to her studies, and in 1957 qualified as a doctor at the age of 38. At once she began research on the control of pain for people dying of such illnesses as cancer.

It took her a further nine years to raise the money to open St Christopher’s Hospice in south London – the first research and teaching hospice anywhere, dedicated to the control of pain. By the late 1980s there were more than 100 hospices throughout Britain, dedicated to caring for the dying.

Dame Cicely recently wrote:

Over forty years in hospice work has left me with the conviction that the God who in Jesus travelled the way of rejection, torture and death, travels with all his children . . . It is in sharing our pain that we believe God comes to us as the 'wounded healer' .

..

Some years ago I attended evening service in Coventry Cathedral. It was already dark, and all those splendid stained-glass windows were dull and meaningless. Next morning I went back and they were transformed into beauty and design, the same windows and yet completely different. But I realised something else. Each tiny pane had its place and purpose and it was the whole sun that was shining through each one. It made no difference how many there were – it was the same concentration of light for each. So every one of us may be confident in a final fulfilment in the light of God's boundless love . . . His concern has no limits . . .

Our horizon constricts our vision, but it is only the limit of our sight, not the limit of the love and redeeming power of God.

(*Beyond the Horizon*, pages 2 and 4)

Voice of the Voiceless – the Story of Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Desmond Tutu was in the USA on 18 October 1984 when news came that he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He flew straight home to Johannesburg to be with family, friends and colleagues. People of all races were singing, dancing, laughing, crying and embracing one another in joy. He led them in an African hymn. Then he spoke to them.

He said that he was merely 'a little focus' among the many who had struggled for freedom. He thanked God for the nameless ones – those in exile, those who had been banned, imprisoned without trial, those who had died. This award, he said, was for them and for all the people who suffered under apartheid in South Africa:

This award is for you, who down the ages have said we seek to change this evil system peacefully. The world recognises that we are agents of peace, of reconciliation, of love, of justice, of caring, or compassion. I have the great honour of receiving this award on your behalf. It is our prize. It is not Desmond Tutu's prize. The world recognises that, and thank God that our God is God. Thank God that our God is in charge.

As ever, Desmond Tutu identified with the oppressed people of South Africa – giving a voice to the voiceless.

Born in 1931 in a barren black township in Transvaal, Desmond Tutu rose, against all the odds, to hold the highest Anglican office in South Africa – archbishop of Cape Town. In the early 1940s, he met the man who was to be the greatest influence on his life. Desmond was out with his mother when a white man wearing a black cassock and a huge black hat passed them. As he passed, he raised his hat to Mrs Tutu in greeting. Desmond was overwhelmed that a white man should show respect to a black labouring woman. That man was Bishop Trevor Huddleston, then a parish priest, who was to make such a huge contribution to the struggle for justice in South Africa, and who would become Desmond's friend and mentor.

Archbishop Desmond's firm faith, magnetic personality and commitment to justice did not always bring him a good press. Was he a pastor or a self-publicist? Churchman or politician? Reconciler or rabble-rouser? peace-maker or agitator? At every event he attended in apartheid South Africa, he openly prayed – to the discomfort of many a disillusioned black person who regarded Christianity and its rituals as part and parcel of the oppressive White system.

He worked tirelessly for political change – yet, though he believed that religion and politics were deeply interconnected, his goal was not merely to bring about political reform, but to inaugurate a new moral order built on the foundations of justice. In the apartheid years, he felt compelled to preach and actively promote the growth of justice in society:

I want to say that there is nothing the government can do to me that will stop me from being involved in what I believe is what God wants me to do. I do not do it because I like to do it. I do it because I am what I believe to be under the influence of God's hand . . . I cannot help it when I see injustice . . . I cannot keep quiet.

At a meeting in Johannesburg in 1981, he described his vision for South Africa:

We shall be free, about that there can be no doubt. The Black cause of liberation will triumph, must triumph because it is a just and righteous cause. God is on our side because he is always on the side of the oppressed. . . South Africa is going to be a beautiful land with beautiful people. And we will show the world what unity in diversity really is about. We will have justice and peace and love and compassion and caring and reconciliation and sharing. Won't that be just lovely?

Above all, Tutu is a man with a deep spiritual life, whose convictions stem from long hours of prayer and meditation. He demanded justice – the end of apartheid; when that came, and Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first black president, Desmond Tutu moved on to demand reconciliation by chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Reconciliation has always been part of his vision:

I would think that I had been used effectively if the Anglican Church in South Africa were to recognise ourselves as family. If we were to recognise ourselves not as black, white, 'coloured' Indian and so forth but that we were family. And that therefore we want to hold on to each other, despite all the forces that are trying to pull us apart.

Group Work

John Keble and the Oxford Movement

The Oxford Movement placed great emphasis on the role of clergy, and very little on the role of the laity.

- On a large sheet of paper, make two columns, one headed 'Clergy', the other 'Lay People'. Brainstorm by calling out activities you think are suitable to each group.

Full group

- How similar or different are they?
- What can one group do, in the Church or the community, which the other can't?

Christians and social justice

Small groups

1. Josephine Butler made two observations towards the end of her life:
 - (a) that, in order to engage with a project of a vital spiritual nature, one must suffer;
 - (b) that a project which aims to relate human justice and care to belief in a just and loving God's must be preceded by prayer.

Discuss each of these in turn:

- Do you agree? What are your reasons?

Small groups

2. What issues of social justice are you as individuals, or as a church, concerned with?
 - Discuss how you think Christians can get a balance between serving humanity and spending time in God's presence.

Serving Christ in a Changing World

Full group

1. Which of the three people whose stories you have read in the article 'Changing People' did you most warm to? Why do you think you might have been attracted to them?
 - If you had to choose a Christian whose life summed up something about the twentieth century, who would you pick, and why? (This does not have to be a famous person).

Small groups

2. The dominant image of God in the twentieth century is of God crucified and suffering alongside his people (by contrast with, for example, God as judge, or God as triumphant king):
 - How does it help you as a Christian to believe in a suffering God?
 - Does this image of God help us to make sense of pain and suffering?

Full group

3. Bishop Tutu once said that he didn't know which version of the Bible people were reading if they think that religion and politics don't mix. Do you think Christians ought to take the following actions – give reasons for your views in each case:
 - go on marches and demonstrations?
 - become a trade union official?
 - become a local councillor?
 - become a school governor?
 - write letters to MPs?
 - go on strike?

Small groups

Each small group should start with a different subject in Task 4 so that all the areas are covered without taking too long.

4. Discuss one or more of the following questions:

- (a) Do you think the Church should give its backing to war as a means of imposing international policy?
- (b) In what circumstances, if any, might Christians be justified in resorting to violence for the sake of God's kingdom?
- (c) Do you think ecumenical and international church movements should be more concerned with reuniting church structures or with taking common Christian action?
- (d) How do you think Christians can best respond to social injustices – locally, nationally and internationally?

Ending the session

If there are any people in the group over the age of about 60, ask each of them briefly to describe:

- (a) *one* change for the better that they've seen in their lifetime;
- (b) *one* change for the worse that they've seen in their lifetime.

Together, pray about the role of the Church, and of individual Christians, in this time of rapid change. Ask yourself, what will be the issues of the 21st century? Bring to God any particular issues about which this part of the course has challenged you. Pray especially for your home churches and the wider Christian community, that we may be God's faithful witnesses today.

Session 4

A Question of Faith

Aims

- To consider the Christian faith in the light of asking questions, not just looking for answers;
- To think about Scripture, tradition and reason as the basis for belief;
- To discover what people believe about Jesus the man.

Preparing for the Session

- 1 Read through the article 'What is faith?'
- 2 Imagine you had the chance to ask God three questions on any subjects you wanted. What would those questions be? Write them down and bring them to the session for further reflection.
- 3 Read 'Any Questions?', 'Any Answers?' and "Who do you say that I am?".

What is Faith?

So what is faith? We shall consider here five different ways of looking at our experience of faith. We shall be considering the importance of experience as part of the framework of our Christian faith later in the preparatory reading.

1. Faith as relationship

Using the word 'faith' in this way emphasises that it is not just about religion – it is found in many human relationships and activities. In this general sense, faith means depending on the trustworthiness of someone, or something, outside ourselves – and it usually implies that our own well-being is affected by this relationship of trust.

In this sense, faith is an aspect of any relationship in which trust and commitment are involved. Marriage is an obvious example – but it's also true of relationships as varied as those between rock-climbers, passengers and crew in an airliner or partners in a high-risk business enterprise.

Christian discipleship is just such a relationship of conscious dependence. But that doesn't mean that you can't be a disciple without *understanding* the nature of faith. The most important thing about faith is *having* it – and the next most important is actually *living by* it.

We can have faith and live by faith without necessarily being able to explain what we are doing. Faith is like life: few of us can explain life – but for all of us, the main business of life is living. The fact that we can't fully explain the meaning of life is not a major hindrance to our getting on with living it.

Unlike life, however, faith is impossible outside a relationship. Dependence on the trustworthiness of someone, or something, outside ourselves means that there is a relationship with that person or object. Faith cannot exist unless it is part of a relationship. This is why most Christians find that, when they think about the nature of their faith, it affects their discipleship. Reflecting on our faith helps us to understand more about the nature of our relationship with God, and how it may be deepened and enriched.

2. Faith as response

At the heart of Christianity lies an experience of inner change, described by Paul as, 'a new creation; the old has gone: the new has come'. This new creation is brought about when we respond to a 'message' – the good news of what God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is not a message simply containing information – it includes a deeply personal demand for response.

Responding involves a change in the hearer's whole existence. That acceptance necessarily involves three things:

- trust in the content of the message;
- commitment to the one from whom the message comes;
- action in response to the message.

Trust, commitment, action – these are the basic ingredients of faith, by which we can respond to the good news of Jesus. Faith qualifies every aspect of our relationship with God. Whatever we are as Christians, we are as believers – and therefore by faith.

So the three crucial aspects of faith (trust, commitment and action) are our response to the three aspects of Jesus' message – its content, its sender (God himself) and its implications. These are all closely interlinked. So we do not only trust the content of the message, but also the sender and the action it requires; nor should we just be committed to the sender, but also to the message and to its consequences; likewise, trust and commitment are the appropriate responses to the message and its sender, in preparation for the further acts of faith which follow from them.

3. Faith as trust

Faith involves personal trust – as we have seen when we looked at faith as relationship. The word 'faith' may be used to describe the things we

believe in: the historic creeds, or the divine inspiration of the Bible, or the infallibility of the pope.

Faith isn't only about believing something, but about trusting someone – just as our human relationships, in the end, are about trusting someone. However important beliefs in something may be, they can never be the heart of the matter.

In other words, a believer is someone who relies on the gracious God, made known to us in Jesus, as the sustaining power and security of life. Believers find their sense of worth and well-being, their mainspring of action, through trusting in him. As one author puts it:

Faith in God means an unreserved trusting of ourselves. . . to his love for us as the sole guarantee of our essential worth. . . As this trust, faith is the means by which we receive 'salvation' – a word with a number of levels of meaning. . . On the one hand salvation denotes 'safety', 'being made safe', or, to use the common modern term, 'security'. Those who entrust themselves to God know they are ultimately safe in life and death. . . The other main nuance of salvation is that of health, wholeness. . . Faith as trust in God is a confident reliance upon his gracious power which is working towards the goal of bringing us into that fullness of life which is health indeed.

(K. W. Clements, *Faith*, SCM, 1981, 28–9)

4. Faith as a decision

For some Christians, the most important thing about faith is its relationship to 'being right with God' (or 'justification'). This is often seen as the result of an act of faith (sometimes spoken of as 'saving faith') – as though this were something different from the faith by which we trust in God from day to day. This act of faith is often thought of as a decision, made at a particular moment, but with lasting consequences. People sometimes call it 'conversion', or 'being born again'.

For many people, the moment at which they decide to start trusting God is indeed important. But knowing that trust is at the heart of faith helps us to see that the importance of that decision lies not so much in the act of making it, as in the new relationship of trust to which it leads. The moment of decision passes; the trust continues – and it is the trust, not the decision, that is the heart of faith.

To think of faith as trust, then, helps us to see the continuity between the act of faith by which we first trust God, and the ongoing relationship of faith by which we continue to do so. Indeed, if someone were to decide to trust God, but if that decision were not followed by a relationship of trust, we should have to conclude that they had never really trusted him in the first place. That would be like a person agreeing to marry someone, but refusing to attend the wedding or to live with them afterwards! Living by faith is simply going on trusting, and applying that trust to the changing circumstances of everyday life.

5. Faith and doubt

One of the great mysteries of faith is its relationship with doubt. The more we trust a person, the less we doubt them – and the more reason

there is for doubt, the more important it is to trust. A trust which goes on trusting someone, despite having reasons to doubt or mistrust, is much richer and deeper than a trust which has never had to wrestle with such uncertainty.

If this is true of trust in human relationships, it is equally true of faith in God. Faith grows in many ways, but undoubtedly one of them is by being stretched. As our trust in God is tested – when we face certain circumstances, experiences, ‘facts’, or other evidence that seems to call its validity into question – it becomes stronger (though it often doesn’t feel like it at the time). So we find our faith deepening, and our experience of God becoming ever richer, even though for a time they may seem weak and vulnerable as we wrestle with doubt and unbelief. The Bible describes people wrestling with God (Jacob), or having their faith stretched almost to breaking-point (like Job). Indeed, Job’s story shows that uncertainty is an important ingredient of faith – they go hand-in-hand. Doubt leads to enquiry, which leads to greater understanding.

Strange though it may seem, faith and doubt to some extent depend on each other. In all faith there is an element of trusting God *despite* certain experiences. Behaving in a certain way because we believe it to be right, for example, is an act of faith in which we trust God by doing what we believe he wants – despite the fact that self-interest, or fear of the consequences, might make us want to do otherwise.

Prayer and worship are acts of faith through which we trust God with the meaningfulness of what we are doing – even though a sceptic might argue we have no evidence that anyone is listening! Loving our neighbour is an act of faith, partly because we trust God that care for others is more truly fulfilling than a selfish preoccupation with ourselves.

Any Questions?

‘Christ is the answer’, boldly proclaimed some graffiti on a university wall. Underneath, in smaller writing, someone had put, ‘What is the question?’ We shall be looking later in this reading at different answers people have given to Jesus’ question about who he was. For one of the challenges of Christian belief is that our tendency as human beings is to look for cut-and-dried answers around which we can plan and build our lives. But that doesn’t seem to be God’s way. Jesus was constantly stretching the faith of his disciples, moving them on, expecting them to trust him, waiting for them just around the next corner.

This is very clear in the stories of Jesus’ resurrection appearances. The two disciples in Emmaus, unknowingly celebrating the first Eucharist of Easter, recognise him as he breaks bread – and immediately he vanishes from their sight (Luke 24:31). An angel tells the women, ‘He is going ahead of you to Galilee’ (Matthew 28:7). He meets Mary in the garden, and instead of saying, ‘I’m risen!’, he tells her ‘I am going to ascend to my Father’ – and sends her with this message to the disciples (John 20:17).

Christian faith doesn’t seem to be about settling down comfortably with a set of beliefs, and growing fond of them like an old and favourite

sweater. It is about journeying forward, letting God's Holy Spirit lead us on, however uncomfortable that might be. And part of this involves us learning to ask questions, and to live with questions, instead of demanding answers.

This is how one Christian writer described a desert retreat he took – and it illustrates very well the gap between our expectations of God, and what we actually discover:

I went to the desert wanting to put a number of questions to God. The idea that God is a retailer of replies dies hard indeed. As a matter of fact, God didn't even give me a chance to dig the questions out of my pocket. And, also as a matter of fact, I returned from the desert with many more questions. But they were God's questions. What then of my questions? They had been discarded. I don't even remember them now.

You do not go to God with a platform for speeches or an agenda for discussion. It simply is not possible to channel a conversation with God the way you would like. God goes off at a tangent. He corners you by bringing out into the open the real questions which you have been studiously avoiding.

Thus God turns the tables on you. Now he asks the questions and you have to provide the answers.

(Alessandro Pronzato, quoted in Brother Ramon, *My Questions, God's Questions*)

Alan Ecclestone is another Christian writer who reflects on the importance of learning to ask the right questions, and he too links this to our ability and willingness to hear God's questions to us:

We cannot begin to answer Yes to God unless we have first heard the questions that are being put to us. . . This divine questioning of human beings has been insistent since the beginning in the story of the Garden, and it continues to press upon us, patiently awaiting our response . . .

Our Yes to God goes astray all too often because either we grow inert and ask no questions at all, which is a poor reply of those made in the image of God who asks continually, or we ask foolish and inept questions which show that we have not listened to the ones God puts to us. . .

We must sort out what questions we should ask and hear, cease asking foolish ones, and in no way flinch from those that are rightly searching; we must distinguish those that call for a solution from those that need only answers, and dwell patiently on those that await revelation.

(Quoted in Jim Cotter, *Prayer at Day's Dawning*, Cairns Publications)

So, then, one of the purposes of this part of the course is not to help you think of 'right answers' to questions of faith, but to help you explore the lifelong process of asking questions, listening for God's questions, and learning to live with uncertainty as an important part of faith.

Any Answers?

While not forgetting the importance of asking questions, it is also important to have a general framework of belief within which we live as Anglican Christians, and to which we refer in asking and answering questions. This framework is often described as being three-pronged: Scripture, tradition and reason.

Scripture, tradition and reason

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, claimed that nowhere was the Reformation accomplished with so little assertion of abstract principles as in England. He was deeply grateful that the English Reformation, at least under Henry VIII and Elizabeth, was mainly a political rather than a theological movement – this meant that the Church of England was much less tied down to dogmatic definitions of its beliefs than were other Churches.

The historical circumstances of the Reformation nevertheless played a major part in the particular emphasis on Scripture, tradition and reason as the framework of Anglican belief. You will remember from previous sessions of this unit that the Church of England was described as being both Catholic and Reformed. In the turbulent religious world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Church of England defended its position in three ways:

- **Scripture** was important as part of the Reformed character of the Church; it was the authority against which certain Roman Catholic practices were measured and found to be wrong. The Thirty-Nine Articles had affirmed that ‘Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation’ (Article VI).
- **Tradition** was important; it was used both to assert that the Church of England lacked no essential part of catholic faith and order; and to prevent the more extreme Protestants, or Puritans, from demanding more reform. Tradition is still seen, in canon law (the laws governing the Church of England), as subsidiary to Scripture: ‘The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the holy scriptures and in such teachings of the ancient fathers and councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said scriptures’ (Canon A5).
- **Reason** was important as an element of the secular culture of the post-Reformation world. Some of the first Anglican thinkers – such as Richard Hooker (died 1600), John Locke (1632–1704) and Samuel Butler (1612–80) – used sound principles of humanist learning, along with moderation in argument, to defend the Anglican position against its enemies both within and without. This appeal to ‘reason’ is very much part of the history of English thinking over the last 400 years of ‘Enlightenment’. It remains important in recent times – Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), for example, stated that ‘Faith has nothing to fear from thinking’. He goes on:

Christianity can only become the living truth for successive generations if thinkers constantly arise within it who, in the spirit of Jesus, make belief in him capable of intellectual apprehension in the thought forms of the world-view proper to their time. Paul is the patron saint of thought in Christianity.

This three-part framework is a fairly loose structure which, as we saw in previous sessions, has not prevented many different shades of emphasis and interpretation of belief over the centuries, nor much disagreement over deeply held views. As Michael Ramsey, another former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote in 1936:

While the Anglican Church is vindicated by its place in history, with a strikingly balanced witness to Gospel [i.e. Scripture] and Church [i.e. tradition] and sound learning [i.e. reason], its greater vindication lies in its pointing through its own history to something of which it is a fragment. Its credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself, as 'the best type of Christianity', but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died. (*The Gospel and the Catholic Church*)

Experience

During the twentieth century, a fourth part of the framework has been suggested. To Scripture, tradition and reason we should add 'experience', some have said. The first three can be seen to concern ideas, whereas Christianity is about the inner and subjective world of our experiences, about the transformation of a person's inner life. But it is not individualistic: the experience of others and of ourselves in community, is crucially important. Each of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience act as a corrective and check against the other.

The addition of experience to the framework of belief has had a powerful influence on the ways in which people relate their faith to the world. We are aware of the importance of relating our everyday experiences to our life as a church community, whether these experiences are first-hand – such as parenthood, work or unemployment – or second-hand – such as stories from TV news bulletins which bring into our homes people's lives and deaths, wars and celebrations, joys and sorrows, from all over the world. In addition, various 'liberation theologies', in different parts of the world and with different emphases, are based on the conviction that experience and action, seen in the light of a fresh reading of Scripture, are the yardsticks against which tradition and reason must be measured. Laurie Green writes:

Christianity is a transforming and vibrant faith, which holds the key to the deepest concerns of our experience, and yet we are beset with a constant difficulty of trying to find a way of properly integrating our faith and our life; instead, we find ourselves smothering the faith with irrelevance, long theological words and complicated explanations. (*Let's Do Theology*)

He goes on to describe a 'new style of theological activity', in which our reading of Scripture and our use of reason can combine with action to transform the world. This action is called 'praxis', which means 'the

intertwining of action and reflection, of commitment and spirituality' – which is very much what James had in mind when he wrote in his epistle that 'faith without works is dead', and that what is needed is an integration of 'faith and deeds working together' (James 2:22, 26). From this perspective, what does it mean to look at the life of Jesus?

'Who do they say I am?'

Christianity is not based on questions or ideas – but on a person. That person asked his disciples about other people's questions, statements and views about him before questioning them about their own beliefs. We will follow the same pattern by looking first at some of the 'answers' people have given to the question of the identity of Jesus, the man from Nazareth. In Session 5 we will go on to look at our own beliefs in, and responses to, Jesus.

What they said then

From one perspective, Jesus was a Mediterranean Jewish peasant – agreed by many even today to have been a 'good man', accepted by Muslims as a prophet, as he was by many Jewish people of his own day who saw him as Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets (Matthew 16:14).

As far as the Roman authorities of his time were concerned, Jesus was a small-time trouble-maker. They were forced to change their views when the movement called after him grew rapidly – after his death. His followers were accused of many things, including cannibalism – because they spoke of feeding on his body and blood in Holy Communion – and atheism, because they did not accept the Roman gods.

Most of what we read about Jesus comes from the New Testament writings, but there are a few references in other writings:

- Tacitus (a Roman historian born in AD 56) records in his *Annals* that the Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the burning of Rome:
Nero . . . punished with the utmost cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowds styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.
- Josephus (a pro-Roman Jewish historian, living towards the end of the first century AD) wrote that Jesus was 'the Christ' who rose from the dead – though gives no evidence or source for this statement.
- The Talmud (an ancient commentary on Jewish teaching) acknowledges Jesus as a Jew, referring to his miracles, his teaching and his disciples. He is described as a false teacher who was executed.

What they say now

Various eminent scholars have recently produced books depicting Jesus very differently, depending on the particular Jewish background in which they have set him. There have been books about Jesus as a political revolutionary, as a magician, as a Galilean charismatic, as a rabbi, as a sort of Pharisee, as an Essene (from the community living by the Dead Sea) and as a prophet of the end of the world.

John Dominic Crossan, an American Roman Catholic scholar, has written a book called *The Historical Jesus* (1991), some of the chapter titles of which give an idea of how people have seen Jesus: Visionary and Teacher, Peasant and Protester, Magician and Prophet, Bandit and Messiah, Rebel and Revolutionary.

Here are some other comments from non-Christians:

- H. G. Wells, a lifelong atheist and critic of the Church, nevertheless expressed great admiration for the man Jesus:

He was like some terrible moral huntsman digging mankind out of the snug burrows in which they had lived hitherto . . . Is it any wonder that men were dazzled and blinded and cried out against him? Is it any wonder that to this day this Galilean is too much for our small hearts?

- Geza Vermes, a Jewish scholar, sees Jesus as ‘an unsurpassed master of the art of laying bare the inmost core of spiritual truth’.
- Tony Benn, outspoken British Labour MP, acknowledges:

I [am] . . . a socialist whose political commitment owes much more to the teachings of Jesus – without the mysteries within which they are presented – than to the writings of Marx whose analysis seems to lack an understanding of the deeper needs of humanity.

This Jesus, a real human being, is the focus of Christian worship. The apostle Thomas first exclaimed, ‘My Lord and my God!’ (John 20:28) – and Christians have honoured Jesus in that way ever since. This is very different from the attitude of most other faiths, as *Teach Yourself Christianity* points out: Sikhs respect their gurus profoundly – but it doesn’t amount to worship; Muslims see Muhammad as the key figure, the ultimate expression of God’s word – but not to be worshipped. In that respect, Jesus is unique.

Group Work

My questions

- 1 Discuss the questions you wrote for Task 2 of your preparation.
 - How similar are questions written by different people?

- In what ways do the questions reveal aspects of your own spiritual journeys and life experiences?
- Look again at the quotations in the second section of the background reading from Alessandro Pronzato and Alan Ecclestone: does this make you feel any differently about your questions?

Framework of faith

Full Group

- 2 In this *Foundations for Ministry* course you have already studied the Bible (Scripture), and Christian history (tradition) – and you have undoubtedly been using your reason throughout the course.
- How has this helped you in your daily lives as Christians?
 - Has it changed your faith in any way?
 - What has struck you about the experience of being part of a Foundations for Ministry group?

Small Groups

- 3 What does the phrase ‘to experience God’ mean in your own Christian life? It may be very hard to define or describe – but as a small group, write down some of the ideas that come to mind.

Small Groups

- 4 Which ONE of these four parts of our faith framework is the MOST important to you as a Christian: (a) Scripture; (b) tradition; (c) reason; (d) experience?
- Do you think your emphasis is echoed in the life and worship of your church, or is there a different emphasis in the corporate life of the church?
 - What might be the implications of your answer for the life and worship of your parish?
 - If that is your main emphasis, what might be missing from your life as an individual Christian, and from the life and worship of your parish?

Full Group

- 5 Share the content of your discussions in Task 5.

Who was Jesus the man?

Small Groups

- 6 Read Mark 8:27–33, when Jesus questions the disciples about his identity.
- Thinking back to your work in Unit 1 and 2 about the prophets and John the Baptist, what do you think people saw in Jesus that caused them to give him these identities (verse 28)?
 - From this passage, what did Jesus think was important about his identity (verses 30–32)?
 - Peter’s faith (verse 29) and his experience, in anticipation (verses 32–33), seemed to him utterly at odds with each other;

have there been times in your lives when your faith seemed distant from your experiences? How have you coped with this?

Ending the session

Full Group

- 7 Jesus asked his followers many questions that are recorded in the gospels. Spend a short time in silence together reflecting on one of the great questions of the gospels, which follows the washing of the disciples' feet, when Jesus asks his followers: 'Do you know what I have done for you?'
 - This is one of the few places in the gospels where Jesus gives a direct answer to one of his own questions: 'If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet'. Spend a short time reflecting on what this might mean for you, individually and as a church, today.

Reading to Follow up the Session

Brother Ramon, *My Questions, God's Questions* (SPCK 1998).

Franciscan hermit Brother Ramon reflects prayerfully and honestly on many questions which people have put to him about the Christian faith. An enjoyable and helpful book, either for reading through or for dipping into.

John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (T & T Clarke, 1991).

A fairly academic read, but very interesting, looking at Jesus in his setting, and at the ways in which different thinkers, writers and believers have interpreted this over the centuries.

Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology* (Mowbray, 1990).

A practical, seriously written book for individuals or groups, which suggests how to combine theology with action, and looks at how our experiences can feed into our Christian thinking and beliefs.

Session 5

Jesus the Saviour: the Work of Christ

Aims

- To explore Christian belief about who Jesus was and is;
- To consider the significance of the cross, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and some of the stories of salvation and atonement;
- To reflect on some of the meanings of salvation for Christ's followers today.

Preparing for the Session

- 1 Make a list of as many different names for, or descriptions of, Jesus as you can remember from the Bible – whether these are names he used to describe himself, or used by other people, while he was alive or after his death (e.g. Master, Light of the world).
- 2 Read Philippians 2:5–11 – probably an early Christian hymn. Write down in a couple of sentences what it is saying about Jesus.
- 3 Read 'Who do YOU say that I am?' and 'We proclaim Christ crucified'.

Who Do YOU Say that I Am?

'It's not the parts of the Bible which I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I can understand', said American writer Mark Twain. We understand that Jesus was a real human being, as we saw in Session 1. We also understand that the names and words used to describe him in the New Testament stretch far beyond human possibilities: the Light of the World, the Word made Flesh, Lord and God. In the very early days after his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus' followers came to believe that he was divine as well as human.

Incarnation – the belief that in Jesus Christ, God became a human being – puts into a different context the statements about him that we considered in Session 1. His importance does not lie in his being a first-century Jewish peasant who was a good man; it lies in his nature as a human being who cuts through cultural differences, and shows us what

it means to be truly human. So African artists, for example, can depict a Black Jesus, Indians an Asian Jesus, Chinese an Oriental Jesus – everyone can interpret Jesus as a human being like themselves.

One definition of a Christian is: 'a person who takes orders from Jesus Christ as Lord'. The details of what this means may vary from place to place, and from New Testament times to today. But as we struggle to grasp the meanings of Christian discipleship in our lives, the place of Jesus is central. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor mentioned previously in this unit, knew all too well the high cost of Christian discipleship. Imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp for refusing to go along with Hitler's beliefs, he wrote:

All we may rightly expect from God, and ask him for, is to be found in Jesus Christ . . . If we are to learn what God promises . . . we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings and death of Jesus.

And commenting on Jesus' role in today's world, John Young writes:

To a world beset by problems he comes as a guide. In a world where many are lonely, he comes as a friend. To a world which often seems to lack meaning, he brings understanding. For a world tempted to despair, he provides the grounds for hope. Over a world where dying is the single certainty, he sits enthroned as the conqueror of death.

These are the basics of the Christian's faith in who Jesus is – all doubtless familiar to you. We shall go on to look briefly at the cross, the resurrection and ascension, and at their meanings for the Church and for us as individuals. As with all the other reading for Unit 3, question it, as you read, against your own beliefs and assumptions – and bring those questions to your group discussion.

'We proclaim Christ crucified'

From the earliest days of the Church the cross was central to Christians but baffling to outsiders:

Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

(1 Corinthians 1:22–24)

We can become so familiar with the idea of the cross that we forget its scandal and folly: 'The crucified God: it is either the most extraordinary and wondrous truth, or the most bizarre blasphemy', writes Kenneth Leech.

Christ dies as a fool, as a cursed criminal, as one who, though he was God, though he was pure and without sin, became sin for us. He refused to let his disciples use force to prevent his arrest; refused to call on the power of God to send 'more than twelve legions of angels' to rescue him (Matthew 26: 52–54); refused to perform 'signs' for Herod (Luke 23:8–9); refused to accept that Pilate's power over him was the ultimate judgement (John 19:10–11); refused anaesthetic wine to dull

the terrible pain of body and soul (Matthew 27:34). And as we move on to consider the meanings of the cross – the theology and doctrine which it expresses – we should not forget that:

Christian preaching and testimony . . . is not a controlled rational account of moral norms or theological propositions so much as a dangerous attempt to convey something of the experience of power and liberating grace flowing out of the heart of desolation and darkness. It is a proclamation, a lifting up, of the crucified Jesus as saviour and conqueror. Its power is inseparable from its paradoxical character. It is a mistake to try to eliminate, reduce or explain away the scandal and the offensive character of the cross.

(Kenneth Leech, p. 19)

And as Christians, we cannot escape the consequences of having the cross as the centre of our faith: 'For all the eternal, cosmic significance of Calvary, its down-to-earth cause was the clash between the love of power and the power of love. The outcome of that struggle was then, and is now, creative suffering. The world calls it failure' (Paul Oestreicher, *The Double Cross*).

For us and for our salvation

Down the ages Christian theology has linked the idea of salvation with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He is our Saviour as well as our Lord. But what do we mean by 'salvation'? The Christian understanding of salvation can be briefly summarised as:

- something that *has already happened*, on the cross and in our own lives;
- something that *is now happening*, as we struggle prayerfully to be Christ's followers in today's world;
- something that *will still happen*, both during the rest of our earthly lives and in the fullness of time when 'we will know fully', as Paul puts it (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The work of Christ on the cross, that crucial part of salvation, is called 'atonement' – which means the bringing together, or the 'at-one-ment', of God and human beings. But how has the cross achieved this atonement? New Testament writers, followed by many theologians over 2000 years, have struggled to find images which give some idea of the meanings of this great activity. None of them is wholly adequate by itself; each of them can offer a fresh sort of insight into the significance of Christ's death on the cross. We shall look very briefly at four of these images – at how they can help our understanding – and at how they can distort it if we try to take any one of them too literally:

- the cross as sacrifice;
- the cross as victory;
- the cross and liberation;
- the cross and forgiveness.

1: *The cross as sacrifice*

The idea of the cross as sacrifice draws heavily on Old Testament and Jewish thought. Christ's once-for-all offering of himself is described as an effective and perfect sacrifice, able to reconcile people to God – an achievement which the Old Testament sacrifices could only imitate in a temporary and short-term sense. This idea is expressed in the consecration prayer in the Book of Common Prayer's communion service:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the world . . .

Behind this approach to the cross is an understanding of sin as something objective, like a debt which must be paid (in the Lord's prayer, where we pray for the forgiveness of our sins or "trespasses" the Greek word in Matthew 6:12 means "debts"). Ultimately, the objective price of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Another way of saying this is that sin separates us from God's loving and saving presence (Romans 3:23).

The understanding of the cross as a blood sacrifice to take away sin is prominent in the New Testament. When Jesus is described as "the Lamb of God", the reference is to a sacrificial lamb whose death brings about forgiveness of sins (John 1:29) and is a reminder of the Passover lamb. In Romans, Paul argues at length that Jesus' death on the cross forgives sins by satisfying the righteous demands of God. The writer to the Hebrews concentrates on the Jewish rituals of sacrifice and shows how these have been completely fulfilled by Jesus' death. Finally, the writer of Revelation pictures the risen and reigning Jesus as "a Lamb that had been slain."

The picture of the cross as a sacrifice in which Jesus gave his life for us is meant to inspire us to sacrifice of a different kind. We do not have to repeat the blood sacrifices of the Jews. Already in the Old Testament, writers were looking beyond the sacrificial system. For example, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings," (Hosea 6:6); "You have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give you a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise," (Psalm 51:16-17). In Romans, Paul encourages his readers to respond to Jesus' love by presenting their bodies as a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1) and the writer to the Hebrews urges the sacrifices of praise and practical good works (Hebrews 13:15-16).

2: *The cross as victory*

The New Testament and early Church laid considerable emphasis on the decisive victory gained by Christ over sin, death and Satan through his cross and resurrection. The early Christians were on the margins of a pagan society: they did not so much imagine how they were going to change the world as how they were going to avoid being overwhelmed by the powers of darkness in the world. So they rejoiced in the

conviction that the power of evil was vanquished by Christ's victory on the cross (2 Corinthians 2:14; Colossians 2:15).

Many Christians today continue to celebrate the power of that victory in their own lives. Evil may be manifest in many ways: as fear that grips a community, or an addiction that binds an individual, for example. The liberation that the Cross brings is the assurance that they are not final; there will be a time when they are in the past, and that, therefore, their power in the present is limited and provisional. It is possible to live now in the light of that victory and know the end of their oppression in the present.

The powers of darkness are also defeated by the cross in the sense that our sin is forgiven and known to be forgiven, and its effects are overcome. Christians, who claim the truth of Christ's victory, are no longer alienated from God – though they are still affected by the long-term effects of sin on human lives and communities. Nevertheless the power of resurrection victory is present in the lives of Christian individuals and communities, through which Christ's long-term work of victorious transformation takes place.

The New Testament – and later Christian writing, especially hymns – abounds in military metaphors which carry on this idea. We are urged to put on the whole armour of God, to fight the good fight, to march onward as Christian soldiers. But if we get too caught up in the image, it can become distorted. For Christ's victory is not an expression of crude power. God's strength is made known in weakness, in the extraordinary image of the crucified God. And we know in our own lives, and in our encounters with death, that the victory is still incomplete:

The Christian sense of victory over death is not a lack of concern with the reality of death. Death is the final enemy to be conquered. But we believe that Christ has overcome the dominion of death, and so resurrection faith is rooted in confidence and hope that we too will overcome. Yet it has only happened through the encounter with death on the cross.

(Kenneth Leech, p. 96)

3: *The cross and liberation*

Images taken from the law courts have long been used to describe atonement. The New Testament speaks of Jesus 'giving his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45): a ransom being payment to a captor in return for the release, or liberation, of a person held in captivity. The idea behind it is that death is the fixed penalty for human sin. Justice requires that the penalty be paid, and God himself, on the cross, pays it on our behalf, freeing us from the sentence we deserve.

By Christ's death we are liberated from spiritual death – separation and alienation from God. Some Christians see such spiritual death as the consequence of sin; others see it as the punishment for sin. Brian Hebblethwaite is an example of the former:

Egoism, aggression, hatred and injustice lead inexorably to the fragmentation and collapse of human integrity, both individually and socially, as well as to separation from God. People get trapped in these predicaments and find themselves inevitably cut off from the sources of personal, interpersonal and communal wellbeing. What people need, if things are to be changed and this alienation overcome, is not the payment of a penalty, but forgiveness, genuine repentance and real transformation.

(*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 107)

John Stott takes the other view:

Our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross. For ultimately what sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and other sins, and Christ's resolve in love and mercy to bear their judgement and so put them away. It is impossible for us to face Christ's cross with integrity and not feel ashamed of ourselves. . . For if there was no way by which the righteous God could righteously forgive our unrighteousness, except that he should bear it himself in Christ, it must be serious indeed. It is only when we see this that, stripped of our self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, we are ready to put our trust in Jesus Christ as the Saviour we urgently need.

(*The Cross of Christ*, p. 83)

Another type of liberation suggested by Christ's action on the cross is the freeing of a slave by paying a certain price – a practice known as redemption. This must have been a very forceful image in societies where slavery was commonplace, and it remains a powerful picture even for us today. We often feel in bondage to sin, to alienation from God; we know that God paid a great price in Jesus' death, allowing our liberation and release.

4: *The cross and forgiveness*

Beneath all the metaphors lies this central idea: 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them' (2 Corinthians 5:19). God revealed himself in the Old Testament as a forgiving God. This idea is deepened and widened in the incarnate Son of God walking the way of the cross.

Again, views on forgiveness vary: some theologians (e.g. Hebblethwaite) claim that:

God's forgiveness does not depend upon the death of Christ. But God's forgiving love is enacted most effectively where God, in the person of his Son, is seen to take responsibility for the world's suffering by bearing it himself. Where people experience this costly forgiveness and accept that they are thus forgiven and accepted by the living God, they become open to the Spirit and available for transformation into members of the fellowship of the redeemed, destined to be taken into God for ever.

(*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 103)

For others such as Stott the cross is the only way whereby God can forgive our sins:

We must hold fast to the biblical revelation of the living God who hates evil, is disgusted and angered by it, and refuses ever to come to terms with it . . . If we bring God down to our level and raise ourselves to his, then of course we see no need for a radical salvation, let alone a radical atonement to secure it. When, on the other hand, we have glimpsed the blinding glory of the holiness of god, and have been so convicted of our sin by the Holy Spirit that we tremble before God and acknowledge what we are, namely hell-deserving sinners, then and only then does the necessity of the cross appear so obvious that we are astonished we never saw it before.

(The Cross of Christ, p. 109)

In order to understand the differences, you could ask yourself: was forgiveness demonstrated before the coming of Christ? Will those who do not know Christ be forgiven?

The power and the glory

We have already noted that Paul describes the cross as ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1 Corinthians 1:24). For the writer of John’s Gospel, the cross itself is glorious – the ultimate proof that Jesus is the Son of God, the Word who was with God from the beginning. John shows Jesus not as powerless victim, but as being in control, as willingly choosing to lay down his life (see, for example, John 10:17–18). The glory of the cross appears early on in the gospel, when Jesus tells Nicodemus: ‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, in order that everyone who has faith in him may have eternal life’ (John 3:14–15). Jesus is literally lifted up on the cross, but he is also, by his crucifixion in all its horror, exalted and glorified by God (see also John 12:23; 13:31).

The glory of the cross is expressed in Jesus’ final words as recorded by John: ‘It is finished!’ (John 19:30). William Temple writes:

The conflict of Light with Darkness is finished . . . The date of the triumph of love is Good Friday, not Easter Day. Yet if the story had ended there the victory would have been barren. What remains is not to win it, but to gather in its fruits. Consequently St John does not present the resurrection as a mighty act by which the hosts of evil are routed, but rather as the quiet rising of the sun which has already vanquished night.

(Readings in St John’s Gospel, page 357)

In the next part of the preparation, we shall consider the glory of resurrection.

4. Read ‘Risen, Ascended, Glorified’.

Risen, Ascended, Glorified

Much more has been written about the cross than about the resurrection – though for Christians the two are inseparable:

- if our belief is based on the cross alone then, as St Paul writes, ‘we of all people are most to be pitied’ (1 Corinthians 15:19); cross and resurrection are two parts of one saving act of God;
- the resurrection is a witness to the divinity and uniqueness of Christ;
- the resurrection establishes and undergirds Christian hope. It does this in two ways: first by revealing that God, and the forces of life, are triumphant over the forces of death; second, it gives grounds for the Christian hope in ‘the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting’.

This is summarised in Jesus’ words: ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die’ (John 11:25–26). And it is significant that the earliest Christian preachers were less interested in expounding Christ’s teaching than to declare his death and resurrection.

Yet some Christians of recent times seem very diffident and tentative about the resurrection. Pinchas Lapide, a Jewish scholar, comments that the views of some of his Christian colleagues are ‘too abstract and scholarly to explain the fact that the solid hillbillies from Galilee who, for the very real reason of the crucifixion of their master, were saddened to death, were changed within a short period of time into a jubilant company of believers’.

The evidence?

But the resurrection does present some problems for those trained in the modern way of thinking which has prevailed for the last 200 or so years. According to this, events must be provable, subject to experiment, testing and analysis, before belief is possible. And the breathtaking assertion that one man, 2000 years ago, was dead and buried, and was raised up from the grave, is not provable in these terms.

Add to this the gospel records of Jesus’ post-resurrection encounters – occasional, unexpected, often involving sudden appearance or disappearance, sometimes involving an uncertainty over his identity – and we get a picture that can cause discomfort to the modernist mind. Yet there are some important indicators for those who feel baffled:

- The first disciples struggled to believe this extraordinary truth. Jesus’ intermittent appearances gave them time and space in which to doubt, to question and to explore. The burning conviction in the resurrection which runs through the New Testament did not come to them easily.
- Hard evidence can only take us so far. Thomas demanded evidence (John 20:24–29); when he was given it, he responded not by saying, ‘OK, now I believe you’ve risen’ – but with an

even greater leap of faith: 'My Lord and my God!' Faith was, is, and will always be, the key to our view of the resurrection.

- The Church began not mainly by spreading a set of ideas, but by proclaiming a life-changing *fact*. The apostles claimed that something amazing had happened: God had raised Jesus from the dead. Their main evidence was the transformation which this event had wrought in their own lives. And however angry this made the Jewish and Roman leaders, they were not able to produce a body to disprove the apostle's certainties.
- The likelihood of the disciples inventing a story which many of them were later prepared to die for seems unlikely. Again, a Jewish scholar with no Christian axe to grind, Dr Geza Vermes of Oxford University, finds that the behaviour of the disciples indicates the factual truth of resurrection:

First, the women belonging to the entourage of Jesus discovered an empty tomb and were definite that it was the tomb. Second, the rumour that the apostles stole the body is most improbable. From the psychological point of view, it is likely that they would have been too depressed and shaken to be capable of such a dangerous undertaking. But above all, since neither they nor anyone else expected a resurrection, there would have been no purpose in faking one.

(*Jesus the Jew*, Collins)

And perhaps the final piece of 'evidence' lies in the fact that countless believers from all cultures and ages claim that they know in their lives the presence of the risen Christ. Today – when the modernist insistence on hard evidence is being replaced in many areas by a belief in the importance of individual experiences, of personal stories – this is a significant aspect of resurrection faith.

And Christians not only claim that Christ is present in their individual lives, but that he is present in worship; that in the Eucharist, those events in the long-distant past are intimately related to our lives as Christians today:

For his followers Jesus is the exact opposite of Humpty Dumpty. Not only is his broken life put together again in the resurrection, but each celebration of the Christian community is a re-membering of Christ, a putting together of the Christ who was broken and smashed. But in this re-membering, we become his members, his body, the extension of his incarnation and passion into human history. It is in this social experience that salvation is found. For salvation involves a participation in a new history, becoming members of a new community. We are not redeemed in isolation but as part of a redeemed community, a community brought into being by God's strange work. When Christians meet together to break bread and share wine in his memory, they are taking part in an act which helps them to live. Through this act the distant figure from first-century Galilee and Jerusalem becomes a living presence and source of life.

(Kenneth Leech, *We Preach Christ Crucified*, pages 5–6)

He ascended into heaven

Luke gives a colourful account of the ascension at the beginning of Acts, with clouds and angels – often shown in stained-glass windows as a pair of feet vanishing upwards. Mark is briefer: ‘After talking with them the Lord Jesus was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God’ (Mark 16:19). Matthew and John don’t record the manner of Jesus’ departure. But however the ascension actually occurred, the early Church was in total agreement in believing that Jesus was raised up and enthroned in heaven.

John’s gospel does offer us Jesus’ explanation to his disciples of the necessity of his ascension. In John 14 he tells them that he is going ahead to prepare a place for them – but more than that: he explains that his bodily absence is necessary to enable them to grow up, to mature in their faith. During his life, Jesus answered the disciples’ questions (though not necessarily in a way that they understood at the time); after his ascension, their intimacy with God deepened as they learned to live by faith, not by sight. By ascending to the Father, Jesus freed them to do even greater things than he himself had done on earth (John 14:12).

The ascension blows away any thoughts we may have that the Christian faith is a private and personal matter, a source of individual help and consolation. Theologian Angela Tilby writes:

The ascension is a cosmic gospel, a gospel to be preached in heaven and on earth; a gospel addressed to the powers, whether benign or evil. It is the ultimate assurance of the triumph of the good, and the ultimate challenge to the foolishness and violence which threaten our world. It can help us look steadily on the barbarism of our age without being overwhelmed by despair . . . The ascension gives us the distance to see that it is we who are at the edge of things, in our little and frenetic lives. But the ascended Christ has risen to the heart of all that is: the heart of the universe itself. He has opened the way to the Father.

(*Church Times*, 14 May 1999)

Theology can also be presented in story-form. Theologian Trevor Dennis expresses much the same ideas as Angela Tilby in a short story in which he imagines Mary, the mother of Jesus, describing her experience of her son’s death, resurrection and ascension:

We were as preoccupied with our new joy, as much as we had been with our pain . . . Our only thought was that we had him back, and that was all that we needed. We had been full of death, and now we were bursting with the liveliness of God and that, we thought, was enough. His resurrection had dispelled our grief and brought us the surprise of joy, but otherwise it had not yet changed us. We had not come to terms with it. Not until we went out, beyond the city walls again, outside our upper room, beyond the cramped streets of the old city, and climbed, as we had so many times with him, the low ridge of the Mount of Olives. We looked towards the Dead Sea, and saw on its shores meadows full of flowers and woods and new-leafed trees. Crowning the heights of the mountains on its far side was a great city shining gold in the sun. The colours of its precious stones made an arc that tied heaven to earth. A carnival procession was winding its way through the city’s streets, and the music of the angels’ band came to our ears. You have never heard such jazz in all your born days! And there he was! In the middle of the procession, riding on the shoulders of Adam and Eve! They set him

down in the middle of a huge square, and we watched as God was made complete again, and the Creator and the bright Spirit took his pierced hands in theirs and danced. My word, how the angels played then and how the people cheered! And we cheered with them, and threw our hats as high as heaven!

We knew then that his death and resurrection had not been small affairs at all. They did not belong to us for us to keep. They belonged to all the world, to all creation, to heaven and all eternity. We let them go, and they set us free. All was changed, and in due time, all would be well. My son was home, and I would never lose him again. And so, you see, there was no parting. Ascension means there can be no more parting. Never. Never.

(Imagining God, pages 95–96)

Preparation (continued)

5. Read the statements below: all of them are about Jesus and all are taken from creeds from different periods in history or different places and situations. Using just a few words for each of them, try to describe what emphasis each of them is giving to the Jesus story.

(a) We believe in Jesus Christ

who lived as friend and saviour to the people of the city,
who ate and laughed,
wept and celebrated
with ordinary people like us.

(Creed from the city)

(b) I believe in Jesus, and the Bible's evidence about him;
whose life, death and resurrection prove God's lasting love for the world;
who combines in himself life, love, truth, humanity, reality and God;
who saves, guides and unites all people who follow his way.

(Creed written by students of the Indian National Urban Industrial Mission course)

(c) We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day he rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is Lord.

(An African creed)

(d) We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was
made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

(*The Nicene Creed*, written in AD 381)

(e) I believe in Jesus Christ,
Born of a common woman,
Who was ridiculed, disfigured and executed,
Who on the third day rose and fought back;
He storms the highest councils of men,
Where he overturns the iron rule of injustice.
From henceforth he shall continue
To judge the hatred and arrogance of men.

(Creed written by Canaan Banana, former president of Zimbabwe)

(f) I believe in Jesus,
child of God, chosen by God,
born of a woman Mary,
who listened to women and liked them,
who stayed in their homes,
who discussed the Kingdom with them,
who was followed and financed by women disciples . . .
I believe in Jesus who appeared first to Mary Magdalene,
who sent her with the bursting message,
GO AND TELL . . .
I believe in the wholeness of the Saviour
in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free,
male nor female,
for we are all one in salvation.

(Part of *A Woman's Creed*, by Rachel C. Wahlberg)

6. Read 'Living the New Life'.

Living the New Life

Implications

The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension are great historical events – but is that all they are? What are the implications for today's Church – for us – of Christ's resurrection and ascension?

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven

For Christians, the cross, resurrection and ascension mean the opportunity of knowing God's love and forgiveness outpoured. We thought about the cross and forgiveness in Session 2; here we think more about forgiveness in the context of resurrection life and love. This is not a one-off experience, but a path of growth and change which is the essence of Christian discipleship – what the great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen describes as becoming God's beloved child. The new life of Christ becomes our new life as adopted sons and daughters, intimately loved by God and each uniquely special to God, despite the fact that we continue to live in ways that fall far short of his standards:

Life is a God-given opportunity to become who we are, to affirm our own true spiritual nature, claim our truth, appropriate and integrate the reality of our being, but most of all, to say 'Yes' to the One who calls us the Beloved.

The unfathomable mystery of God is that God is a Lover who wants to be loved. The one who created us is waiting for our response to the love that gave us our being. God not only says: 'you are my Beloved'. God also asks: 'Do you love me?' and offers us countless chances to say 'Yes'. That is the spiritual life: the chance to say 'Yes' to our inner truth.

(Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, page 106)

Our acceptance of being truly loved and forgiven must inevitably transform our own relationships past and present – though only to the extent to which we have truly accepted God's unconditional new life in Christ - the gulf is great between *knowing* the truth and *experiencing* it at the deepest levels of our lives. This is the Christian's lifelong journey and quest. It means offering to God the angers and hurt of the past, as well as the present. Something of this is captured in the moving words of John Wilson, bishop of Singapore during the Japanese occupation, who was tortured at Changi:

By the grace of God I saw these men not as they were, but as they had been. Once they were little children, playing with their brothers and sisters and happy in their parents' love, in those far-off days before they had been conditioned by their false nationalist ideals, and it is hard to hate little children. But even that was not enough. There came into my mind as I lay on the table the words of that Communion hymn:

Look Father, look on his anointed face,
And only look on us as found in him.

And so I saw them, not as they had been, but as they were
capable of becoming, redeemed by the power of Christ, and I
knew that it was only common sense to say 'Forgive'.

In the 1980s, the British nation was moved by Senator Gordon Wilson's
response of forgiveness for the death of his daughter Marie, killed in the
Enniskillen Remembrance Day bombing – described as 'a glorious
example of the power of someone handling the tragedies of life
Christianly'.

Group Work

Name above all names

Full Group

List, on a large sheet of paper, all the different names and descriptions of Jesus that you thought of for Task 1 of the preparation.

- Go through your list and see which of them relate more to Jesus as a human being, which relate more to his divinity.
- What does the list tell you about who you believe Jesus is/was?

Stories of salvation

Small Groups

1 Allocate these verses around the group. Ask each person to sum up in a word or phrase what each of them says about the death of Jesus:

- Matthew 26:27-28
- Mark 12:1–11
- Mark 10:45
- 1 Peter 1:18–19
- 1 Peter 3:18
- Ephesians 1:7
- 2 Corinthians 5:19
- Hebrews 5:8–9
- John 3:14–17
- 1 John 3 7-10
- 1 John 5 19
- Revelation 12: 11

Full Group

2 Discuss your responses to the above. Then talk together about WHY you think that the cross was a necessary part of God's forgiveness of human beings

Full Group

Crucified, risen, ascended

Small Groups

1 Make a large list of the key words and phrases you used to describe the view of Jesus presented in the different creeds (Task 5 of the preparatory work).

- Which of them best expressed your own view of Jesus?

2 In your own Christian lives, what is important for you about:

Small Groups

- (a) Jesus' life and teaching?
- (b) Jesus' death?
- (c) Jesus' resurrection?
- (d) Jesus' ascension into heaven?

Full Group

- 3 Based on your discussions on the above, try to write a few lines that express your beliefs in, and emphasis on, the person and work of Jesus.
- 4 Share the credal statements about Jesus that you have just written, looking especially at the similarities and the differences between them.

Keep these credal statements in a safe place, as you may find them useful in Session 9.

Ending the Session

Pray together, silently or out loud, about anything that has come to mind during the session, either in your individual lives or in the life of your church community.

Reading to Follow up the Session

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (SCM).

The author wrestles with questions of what the cross might mean for his own time.

Kenneth Leech, *We Preach Christ Crucified* (Darton, Longman & Todd 1994).

Originally written as a Lent book, this is a readable and challenging account of personal and corporate aspects of the cross.

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Inter-Varsity Press 1986).

A closely argued account of the significance of the cross, and the biblical teaching on the atonement.

Stephen Sykes, *The Story of Atonement* (Darton, Longman & Todd 1997).

A lucidly written book which explores various understandings of atonement as different aspects of salvation.

Paul Avis (ed.) *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993).

A collection of theological essays on different aspects of the resurrection.

Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1993).

A helpful and inspiring book on learning to claim in our daily lives that we are loved by God.

Rowan Williams, *Resurrection – Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002)

A significant book by the Archbishop of Canterbury

Session 6

Journeying into God

Aims

- To explore different images of God, and to stretch our imaginative understanding of the nature and person of God;
- To consider God as creator, and our response to the created world;
- To reflect afresh on the relationship of God to pain and suffering.

Preparing for the Session

In this session we are looking at God who we often call 'the Father' or 'the first person of the Trinity'.

- 1 Because it can be hard to describe God, and what we believe about him, try making a list of what you DON'T believe about God: what characteristics are you sure, from your own experience, which God *doesn't* have?
- 2 The preparatory reading for this session is rather different from the usual background reading. It consists of stories, readings and poems which reveal certain aspects of God. After reading each of them, jot down what you think they have shown you about God. When you have read them all, see if you think there is anything important that they have missed out. If you don't have time to read them all, just read and comment on one or two.
- 3 Read 'Stairways to Heaven'.

Stairways to Heaven

God is familiar, well-known and close – yet in other ways, God is mysterious, unfathomable, beyond our imagining. These two aspects of God are called 'immanence' and 'transcendence', and throughout history, theologians in their writings and thinking, and Churches in their liturgies and doctrines, have tended to emphasise one rather than the

other. It seems impossible for our limited minds to hold in balance two sets of such opposite characteristics.

So instead, this background reading is like a set of pictures in an album – each giving one kind of snapshot of God.

1: Ezekiel's Encounter

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God . . . As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire something gleaming like amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures . . .

Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads. Under the dome their wings were stretched out straight, one towards another; and each of the creatures had two wings covering its body. When they moved I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army; when they stopped, they let down their wings. . .

And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. Upwards from what appeared like the loins I saw something gleaming like amber, something that looked like fire, and there was a splendour all round. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all round. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

(Ezekiel 1:1, 4, 22–28)

2: Child's Play, by Trevor Dennis

One hot afternoon, Adam and Eve, unselfconsciously naked, sat on the bank of one of the rivers of Eden, dangling their feet in the water. Eve picked up a flat, round stone, stood up and flicked it in twelve graceful bounces right across to the other side.

'Who taught you to do that?' asked Adam.

'God did.'

Adam turned towards God. 'Did you really?'

'Yes.'

'Could you teach me?'

'Of course. Watch.'

God stood up, chose a stone carefully, kissed it, curled his finger round it, and, with a movement of his wrist too quick to catch, sent it spinning downstream. It went almost as far as Adam and Eve could see, then swung round in a tight circle and came speeding towards them again, till with one last bounce it skipped back into God's hand. It had hit the

water two hundred times, and had left two hundred circles spreading and entwining themselves upon the surface. From the middle of each circle a fish leaped, somersaulted and splashed back into the river.

'Now you try!' said God.

Adam pushed him into the water. God came to the surface a few yards out from the bank. 'That was level ten, by the way', he called. 'Eve's only at level two at the moment, aren't you Eve?'

'You were showing off God', said Eve. 'You'll be walking on the water next!'

'That's level twenty', laughed God, and promptly disappeared beneath the surface.

So it was once in Eden. So it can be still. So it is, on rare and precious occasions. But Adam and Eve complicated matters. They grew up to think flicking stones child's play. They turned in on themselves, and God remained out of sight, beneath the surface. They did not sit with him on the bank any more. Now and then, realising their loneliness and overcome with sudden longing, they would gaze out across the water and see the ripples he left behind. But these were soon gone, and the water would resume its customary smoothness, as if nothing had happened, as if he had never been there. The Garden had ceased to be for them a holy place.

So they went in search of one. They left Eden behind. It was, after all, too small a place, too familiar. It held no surprises for them any more. They supposed they had nothing more to learn there, except for getting to levels ten or twelve, but that was child's play, not worthy of their ambitions.

God followed them at a distance. Sometimes they could hear his footsteps behind them. Occasionally he came so close they could feel his breath on the backs of their necks. Very occasionally he sat down with them and shared their food and made the spot at once a holy place. Yet they were never satisfied for long. They would move on, hoping for more, yearning, though they did not realise it, for the days when they could sit with their feet in the waters of Eden and push God in and hear him laugh, and marvel at what he could do with a round pebble and a flick of the hand. It had all been so natural then. Perhaps it had not been child's play after all. Perhaps it had been God's play. Perhaps they were the same thing. When such thoughts as these broke the surface of their minds, then God seemed, indeed was, very close once again.

Adam and Eve did not stay just Adam and Eve for very long. They had been told to be fruitful and multiply, and so they were and so they did, until, no longer only a couple, they became a family, then a clan, then a tribe, a people.

The clan invented what they called 'religion', and the tribe and the people set about improving it. God was still following at a distance. He carried a tent on his back, with the centre pole tied across his shoulders. The clan and the tribe tried to organise him. They told him where to pitch the tent, and the times when he should be there to meet them. But a sense of direction and punctuality did not seem to be among his strengths. Too often his tent was nowhere to be seen, or

when they found it and raised the flaps to peer inside, he seemed not to be there.

The *people* said the whole idea of meeting God in a *tent* was absurd, if not an insult. They forgot it belonged to God and that he carried it himself on his back. They decided to make him a much finer place, one that could not be moved, one that was solid, predictable, fit for a king certainly, and suitable, they hoped, for a god. So they built him a temple in the heart of their capital city, next to the palace of their king, and nearly as big, overlaid its walls with ivory, painted heaven on its ceilings, filled the air between with incense and sweet song, and became very serious about it all.

God arrived there one day, when the people were so engrossed in what they were doing that they were not expecting him at all.

‘Do you have any balloons here?’ God enquired.

‘Balloons?’ they replied. ‘Balloons? Balloons are child’s play. We are serious here.’

‘Oh’, said God, and retreated out of the door. He had propped up his tent in the entrance. he picked it up again, tied the pole across his shoulders, and went back to Eden to flick some pebbles.

The first one bounced three hundred times, went round in three circles and had the fish doing triple Salchows. ‘Level twelve’, murmured God. But no one heard him.

(From *Imagining God: Stories from Creation to Heaven*, SPCK 1997)

3: Jacob’s Encounter

Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

And the Lord stood beside him and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

(From Genesis 28:10–17)

4: Mediations by R. S. Thomas

And to one God says: Come
to me by numbers and
figures; see my beauty
in the angles between
stars, in the equations
of my kingdom. Bring
your lenses to the worship
of my dimensions: far
out and far in, there
is always more of me
in proportion. And to another:
I am the bush burning
at the centre of
your existence; you must put
your knowledge off and come
to me with your mind
bare. And to this one
he says: Because of
your high stomach, the bleakness
of your emotions, I
will come to you in the simplest
things, in the body
of a man hung on a tall
tree you have converted to
timber and you shall not know me.

5: Elijah's Encounter

[The Lord] said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

(1 Kings 19:11–12)

6: The Gifts by Simon Bailey

He was cold even though the fire was lit and glowing in the hearth. He curled up more tightly in the chair, feeling sorry for himself. The house was empty and quiet. It felt to him as if it had always been like that. Empty and quiet – and lonely. He sighed and curled up more tightly still.

Suddenly there was a loud knocking at the door. He was shocked, surprised, frightened: who could it be? No one knocked on his door, no one came, who could it be? He sat still and motionless, perhaps they would go away . . . With a shiver he heard the knock again – louder, longer, more enthusiastic. Slowly he uncurled and got up and hobbled into the hall. He could see nothing through the little frosted window of the door and nothing through the keyhole. He stood still and silent

hoping they hadn't heard him. He gave a little moan as the knocking came again on the door. They were not going to go away, he would have to answer the door. He straightened up to look at the bolts and the key and the chain on the door, he knew they would be stiff . . . he sighed, he could just shout Go Away! he thought but they were knocking again – loud, insistent, demanding. He reached for the bottom bolt, muttering 'Just a minute, just a minute . . .' It took an effort but with a thud it flew back and he stood up to get his breath. He tugged at the top bolt, stiffer still, but soon it gave and he paused again for breath. They were knocking again, harder and harder: who could it be? With both hands he turned the key, took a deep breath, made sure the chain was secure and opened the door a few creaking inches.

'They're for you!' The little girl stood there, beaming, shuffling in excitement and her arms were full to overflowing with brightly coloured parcels. One hand was stuck out from beneath the tottering pile, ready to knock on the door again. 'They're for you!' she beamed again, dropping a few.

He was dazzled, shocked, frightened, peering through the crack in the door. 'Who are you?' he rasped. 'I don't know you, I don't know any children. Go away.'

'But they're for you', she insisted, pushing the glowing gifts towards him. He hid behind the door. 'They can't be for me, nobody gives me presents. I don't deserve presents, you've got the wrong man, not me . . .' He peered out again and she was still standing there, laughing and juggling all the parcels. 'No, but they're for you!' she said again. 'Go away!' he croaked, suddenly angry and frightened and he slammed the door, shuffling as fast as he could to get away as far as he could – into the kitchen. She was knocking again, as loud as ever, and he noticed that one bright red and silvery parcel had fallen over the threshold before he managed to shut the door. He shivered, puzzled, frightened. 'Nobody visits me', he said. 'Nobody gives gifts to me.'

The knocking had stopped, his breathing began to slow again. He sighed. They did look wonderful those presents . . .

He let out a cry of shock as suddenly the thunderous knocking was right beside him at the back door. He could see the little girl's shape through the glass, he could hear her laughter, he could see the huge pile of gifts, bigger than ever, he was sure. 'Go away!!' he yelled. In a burst of energy he threw open the door. 'Go away! I don't get presents!' he yelled. 'They're all for you!' she said, juggling them, dropping them on the mat, staggering under the size and weight and shape of them all. 'No!' he cried and tried to slam the door but some parcels got in the way and as he fled for the sitting room he saw her head come smiling round the door-frame.

He leaned against the wall breathing hard. He could hear her arranging the gifts in the kitchen, calling to him. 'They're all yours', she kept saying, 'I want to give them to you, please accept them, I really want you to have them all . . .'

With a long moan he looked round the door into the kitchen. Perhaps I can just get an explanation, he thought. He picked up a beautifully wrapped parcel lying at his feet as he stepped into the kitchen and held it. She was giggling and shuffling from one foot to the other. The

kitchen around her was overflowing with the shining gifts. She spread out her hands: 'They're all for you', she smiled. 'Every single one. And please can I help you open them?'

(From *The Well Within: Parables for Living and Dying*, Darton, Longman & Todd 1996)

7: Womanly God by Mary Ann Ebert

Womanly God, who are you?
The weaver of warm garments and magic tapestries;
The homemaker, welcoming and accepting;
The sister, second half – disturbingly other;
The listening, reassuring, friend, silent consolation;
The delightful daughter, discovering, dancing;
The encouraging teacher, suggesting new words, new vision;
The backbreaking planter of fields, weeding, reaping;
the treader of wine;
The nurse with full breasts and herbal remedies;
The virgin bride, the fulfilling wife, the desolate widow;
The free creative maiden; the long-lived treasury of wisdom;
The wind that makes the heart sing.

(From *Celebrating Women*, SPCK 1995)

8: The Disciples' Encounter

[Jesus said to his disciples:] 'If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied'.
Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.'

(John 14:7–11)

Group Work

Our images of God

Full Group

- 1 Pool your ideas from Task 1 of the preparatory work on how you DON'T think of God, writing them up on a large sheet of paper.
 - Go through your list trying to think of the opposite qualities or characteristics to the ones you have written down.
 - Does this give you a satisfactory description of how you DO think of God? Is there anything missing that you want to add?
- 2 Why do you think most – not all -biblical writers – and most writers ever since – have referred to God as 'he'?
 - What difference would it make if you called God 'Mother', as well as 'Father', in your private prayer and in church liturgies?

Small Groups

- 3 Which of the stories, readings or poems in the preparatory reading did you most enjoy?
 - Which did you find most surprising, or even annoying?
 - Do you have a picture of God in your imagination? If so, what is it like?
 - What name for God do you find most helpful, and do you tend to use in your own prayers?

Small Groups

- 4 Many Christians talk about 'having a personal relationship with God'. What do you think they mean by this?

God the Creator

Small Groups

- 5 Read Genesis 1:1–2:3. The creation story repeats the phrase that 'God saw that it was good':
 - If God made a 'good' world, what should we be doing as Christians to celebrate, or struggle to defend, its 'goodness'? For example, does this imply anything about:
 - (a) the food we eat?
 - (b) the pollution caused by our cars and roads?
 - (c) the way in which we pray for the world in our liturgies?
 - What do you think are the practical consequences of God giving human beings 'dominion' over other animals (verse 26)? Are there issues of conservation which Christians ought to be involved in?

Full Group

- 6 Pool your thoughts from Task 5, then consider together God's words, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness':

- What characteristics do you find in human beings which shows their 'family likeness' to God?
- How does Jesus, the Word who was with God from the beginning (John 1:1–5), help our understanding of this?

God, suffering and pain

Small Groups

- 7 The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *The Crucified God*, argues powerfully that the cross is central to a Christian understanding of God – not just of Jesus or of salvation. This approach has become widespread in the aftermath of the two terrible world wars of the twentieth century, which in different ways plumbed new depths of brokenness, misery and pain. Moltmann writes:

A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any human. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. He is also a loveless being.

- Do you agree that suffering and love go hand-in-hand?
- How easy do you find it to think of worshipping a suffering God? How does the idea of suffering love fill out the picture of God as victorious king, or righteous judge?

Small Groups

- 8 How good is the Church at living in God's image in this respect?

- What reaction do people who are suffering – physically, emotionally, spiritually – meet in your church? Do we expect people to smile and 'rejoice in the Lord', or are we willing as a church:
 - (a) to accept and love them as they are?
 - (b) to risk revealing our own hurts and needs to our fellow-Christians?

Ending the session

Full Group

- 9 In the light of your small group discussions of Tasks 7 and 8, how do you think we can get a balance in our worship and belief between the God who suffers and the God of beauty and joy, who we want to worship and celebrate despite the darkness around? How can the Church bring beauty, playfulness and celebration into people's lives?

When you have finished your discussions, pray together, thanking God for whatever aspects of God have particularly struck you, or touched chords for you, in your work in this session.

Reading to Follow up the Session

Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2nd edition 1997),

in particular Chapter 7, 'The Doctrine of God'. This thorough academic account gives a historical survey of approaches to God, and offers a good counterbalance to the narrative approach used in the preparatory reading to this session.

Paul Johnson, *The Quest for God: A Personal Pilgrimage* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1996).

A Roman Catholic Christian journalist takes a hard look at the basis of his faith.

K. Ward *God, a guide for the perplexed* One World publications 2003 (reprinted 2005)

A wryly humorous guide to the idea of God in the past and the present.

Session 7

Breath of Life

Aims

- To explore Christian belief about the Holy Spirit;
- To reflect on the meaning and nature of the Trinity;
- To think about the implications of the Trinity for the life of the Church, and our lives as individual Christians today.

Preparing for the Session

In this session we are focusing on the Holy Spirit, as well as on some of the meanings of the doctrine of the Trinity. Before you can reflect fully on the Bible passages in Task 1, you need to understand that the single Hebrew word *ruach* has a depth of meaning which is impossible to convey in English. Instead we translate it using three very different words:

- breath
- wind
- spirit.

Each of these words with their (to us) very different meanings and associations, casts some light on the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit.

- 1 Study the following Bible passages, making notes on the pictures of the Holy Spirit that emerge from them:
 - Genesis 1:2; 2:7
 - Isaiah 42:1
 - Ezekiel 37:1–10, 14
 - Joel 2:28–29
 - Luke 3:21–22
 - John 20:19–23
 - Romans 8:1–17, 26–27
 - 1 Corinthians 12:1–13
- 2 Write down a few lines on your own experience of the Holy Spirit in your Christian life.

- 3 Read 'God in Three Persons'. If you enjoyed and found helpful the stories in Session 3, you might like in addition – and as an optional extra – to read the story printed at the end of this session, called 'The Free Spirit of God'.

God in Three Persons

The Holy Spirit

'The Holy Spirit has long been the Cinderella of the Trinity. The other two sisters may have gone to the theological ball; the Holy Spirit got left behind every time. But not now.' So writes Alister McGrath in his weighty and thorough book, *Christian Theology*. We shall look briefly at five ways of understanding this most mysterious person of the Trinity:

- 1 Spirit as wind
- 2 Spirit as breath
- 3 Spirit as charism
- 4 Spirit as relationship
- 5 Spirit as gift.

1: *Spirit as wind*

In both Old and New Testaments, a parallel is drawn between the power of the wind, and the mystery of its presence, and God (e.g. the wind is a redemptive force in Exodus 14:21, where it parts the Red Sea, allowing the people of Israel to escape from Egypt; and in John 3:5–8, Jesus compares the life of the Spirit to a wind blowing).

Israel's geographical position, with the Mediterranean Sea to the east, and great deserts on the west, meant that winds were either gentle, cooling and rain-bearing, or harsh, searing and powerful. This reflected two aspects of God's character: his justice, judgement and power on one hand, and his gentle loving care on the other. (Look up Psalm 103:15–18, or Isaiah 40:7–8 for biblical examples of this.)

2: *Spirit as breath*

The Spirit is closely associated with life itself, as you will have seen in some of the Bible references you looked at in Task 1. The picture of God as Spirit thus emphasises that God is the source of life – able even to bring the dead back to life.

3: *Spirit as charism*

The term 'charism' (or 'gift') means the filling of an individual with the Spirit of God, enabling them to perform tasks which would otherwise have been impossible. The Old Testament often describes wisdom as a gift of the Spirit, as well as prophecy, and gifts of leadership of military

skills. The New Testament letters describe a range of 'charismatic' gifts which come from God's Spirit.

4: Spirit as relationship

St Augustine described the Holy Spirit as the bond of love and unity that exists between the Father and the Son. In addition, the Spirit unites believers both to God and to other believers. We see this not only in the individual lives of Christians, but also in corporate worship and devotion, where God is made real – we know his presence because the Spirit *is* the relationship between God and his people.

In this way, the Spirit leads people into God's truth, and relationship becomes a means of revelation.

5: Spirit as gift

The Spirit is given to Jesus followers as His gift to them, promised in ancient prophecy. The Book of Joel speaks of the Spirit no longer being restricted to a few chosen people, but

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." Joel 2: 28,29.

Jesus promises the Spirit will be a comforter, a teacher and the source of discernment of good and evil.

The Trinity

One God, three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Christian formula trips so easily off the tongue that we may forget to question its extraordinary meaning. Yet to Jews and Muslims, for example, this is a major objection to Christianity: their God is indeed One God, whereas Christians (they say) worship three Gods.

Our limited minds cannot grasp the meaning of the Trinity – any more than we can understand how Jesus could be fully God and fully human at the same time. But we can consider various images which help our understanding along – and, more important, we can begin to think about the implications of belief in a trinitarian God for our lives and the life of our churches.

Trinity and Bible

Alister McGrath argues that the trinitarian structure of God is discernible in both Old and New Testaments, even though the doctrine is not explicitly set out in the Bible. So in the Old Testament, we find distinct persons of God described as:

- **The Word of God** – God's speech is presented as existing separately from God, yet originating from God. The Word of God confronts people with God's will and purpose, bringing

guidance, judgement and salvation (e.g. Psalm 119:89; Psalm 147:15–20; Isaiah 55:10–11).

- **The Spirit of God** – used in the Old Testament to refer to God's presence and power within creation.
- **Wisdom** (especially in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes), a female figure, separate from God yet dependent on him (e.g. Proverbs 1:20–23; 9:1–6; Job 28:12–28), portrayed as active in creation (especially in the apocryphal book of Sirach, chapter 24).

In the New Testament, the main source of trinitarian belief was the growing recognition of the divinity of Christ. The seeds of the belief are found in gospel passages such as at the baptism of Jesus: 'And just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved"' (Mark 1:10–11).

For the first disciples, nurtured in the central Jewish belief in the oneness of God, the concept of Trinity must have been very hard to accept. But of course they did not learn about the *idea* of Trinity – instead they *experienced* its meaning as they gradually came to recognise Jesus as part of God's very nature, and as they felt the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In the New Testament, trinitarian belief stems from what was revealed about God through the coming of the divine Son and the gift of the Holy Spirit:

In each case the reality of interpersonal relation in God, love given and love received, in mutual address and response, was recognised. It was no longer possible to think of God on the model of an isolated individual person. This gave a new sense to the affirmation that God is love (1 John 4:8).

(Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity*, page 58)

Trinity and personhood

Western Christians have been helped in their thinking by the approach of the Orthodox Churches. For while we in the West think first of the unity of God, and then move on to think of Trinity, in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, it tends to be the other way around.

The Trinity, it has been said, is a community of being in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, is inseparably related to the other in what is known as 'mutual interpenetration'. God is thus seen as a society of three separate persons, so that within the one God there are three distinct centres of consciousness and will – and the relationship between these three is reciprocity, co-operation and above all, love.

To talk of 'three persons' is misleading if we think of human persons, each with a separate physical body. The three persons of God are separate, yet inseparable – and our imaginations strain to understand or visualise what this can mean or look like. But far more important than this is what it implies: which is that communion and community are utterly central to God's nature – community in which each person is enabled to become more truly themselves because of the presence and nature of the other persons. This understanding of God as three

persons has an impact on our understanding of human persons. It means that to be a person is to be who we truly are only in relationship with others. We get a glimpse of this sometimes in the best and most intimate of our human relationships. We know that with those we truly love and trust, we don't have to pretend – they free us to be the persons we truly are, warts and all. Another picture which has been used to describe the Trinity is the image of a dance: each person has their own steps, their own part to play, which can't be played without the others also doing their steps.

What is more, this understanding of the intimacy and depth of mutual love between the persons of God gives us greater insight into the true significance of incarnation and crucifixion. In Jesus' last desolate cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) we hear the breaking of a loving togetherness that had existed since before the foundation of the world. Yet the wonder is that, through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, human life is now part of that very mystery of God's person. Through Jesus, we ourselves are caught up in the potential of the life of the Trinity:

The Christian [emphasis] on the social implications of love of the neighbour, modelled on the God who is love, is not simply a matter of imitation. Human community is also a matter of *participation* in the divine life. This is true not only of the Christian Church, which . . . is called to realise in every place a fellowship of mutuality and love, united to its Lord as Christ's 'body' on earth, and indwelt by the divine Spirit of unity and peace, but it is also true of the wider human community in its many different forms, which, so Christians believe, will find their true fulfilment in the end as facets of the communion of saints, caught up for ever in the divine life and love. . . For the Christian, the world is the creation not only of a mind and heart of love, but of the triune God who is love given, love received and love shared still more.

(Hebblethwaite, page 65)

Trinity in action

What are the consequences of belief in a trinitarian God of whom it can be said: 'In the beginning is communion'?

Leonardo Boff is a Brazilian, a Franciscan priest and a Roman Catholic professor of theology. His writing expresses the radical beliefs of liberation theology, and one of his finest books is called *Trinity and Society*. The following extracts reveal just how challenging it can be to believe in a God who is perfect community:

The form of social organisation we have at present cannot be pleasing to God, since most people have no place in it. There is little sharing, less communion, and a great weight of oppression placed upon the poor. They are crying out for justice . . .

From the communion of the three divine Persons derive impulses to liberation: of each and every human person, of society, of the Church and of the poor . . .

Human beings are called to rise above all mechanisms of egoism and live their vocation of communion.

Society offends the Trinity by organising itself on a basis of inequality, and honours it the more it favours sharing and communion for all, thereby bringing about justice and equality for all.

The Church is more the sacrament of trinitarian communion the more it reduces inequalities between Christians and between the various ministries in it, and the more it understands and practises unity as co-existence in diversity.

The poor reject their impoverishment as sin against trinitarian communion and see the inter-relatedness of the divine 'Differents' as the model for a human society based on mutual collaboration – all on an equal footing – and based on individual differences; that society's structures would be humane, open, just and egalitarian.

Pairs

Belief in three persons in one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is not just a matter of fine-sounding phrases, or a wholly dark mystery, but implies a radically different way of seeing human beings as well as God.

Small Groups

Group Work

The nature and work of the Holy Spirit

Full Group

- 1 Discuss your own experiences of the Holy Spirit in your lives (for example, as shown in your gifts, such as creativity or hospitality or generosity with time and energy). Then agree together on a joint statement about the Holy Spirit in your personal experience.
- 2 Join with another pair, and share your joint statements. In what ways do your statements reflect the pictures of the Holy Spirit you noted down from the Bible passages for Task 1 of your preparatory work?

Small Groups

- Where do you see the Holy Spirit's presence and action in the world today? (You might get some ideas by looking again at the passage from Leonardo Boff at the end of the preparatory reading.)
- 3 What signs are there that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church of England today?
 - What signs are there of the Holy Spirit's work and presence in your local church?

The Trinity

- 4 Some modern liturgies use the names 'Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer', rather than the traditional 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit':
 - What do you think is gained by this new approach?
 - What is lost?
 - Which form do you prefer, and why?

Full Group

- Are there any other names or descriptions that you think would better express the essence of God's three persons?

5 In the Nicene Creed, said regularly in our churches, we express the following belief:

We believe in the Holy Spirit
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the prophets.

Full Group

- Is this an adequate statement about the person of the Holy Spirit? What would you want to add or omit?
- Is this an adequate statement about the Trinity? What would you want to add or omit?

Ending the session

6 Use this modern prayer for Trinity Sunday to end the session:

Living Love,
Beginning and end,
giver of food and drink,
clothing and warmth,
love and hope:
life in all its goodness –
We praise and adore you.

Jesus, Wisdom and Word;
lover of outcasts,
friend of the poor;
one of us yet one with God;
crucified and risen:
life in the midst of death –
We praise and adore you.

Holy Spirit, storm and breath of love;
bridge-builder, eye-opener,
waker of the oppressed,
unseen and unexpected,
untameable energy of life –
We praise and adore you.

Holy Trinity, forever one,
whose nature is community;
source of all sharing,
in whom we love, and meet, and know our neighbour:
life in all its fullness, making all things new–
We praise and adore you.

(by Brian Wren, from The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer)

Reading to Follow up the Session

'The Free Spirit of God' below is optional additional reading.

Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity* (SPCK 1996) – especially Chapters 3 and 7 on trinitarian belief and the Holy Spirit. Clearly and helpfully written.

Alistair McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Kingsway, 1997)

Myra Blyth, *Celebrating the Trinity* (Grove 2002)

Recently published – a brief, accessible introduction.

C.F.D.Moule, *The Holy Spirit* (Continuum 2000)

A reissue of a classic text

Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Burns & Oates 1988).

Not an easy read, but a fascinating account of the historical controversies and heresies surrounding the Trinity, focusing on it as the source and model for a human society based on universal collaboration and equality.

'The Free Spirit of God' by Trevor Dennis

Oh, black were the waters of the world's beginning! Black and wild, fathom-deep in fear. No gentle swell. No regular breathing of tides. No predictable currents. No Gulf Stream to bring future warmth to northern shores and let palm trees grow beside Scottish lochs. Just wild, capricious, dangerous chaos. Oh, black were the waters at the world's beginning, and black, too, jet-black the air that spanned their surface!

Through that dark flew the Spirit of God, small, with sharp, pointed wings, tilting from side to side, dipping into the troughs of the huge waves, sliding over their crests as they rose and broke apart. He flew back and forth, weaving the ocean into currents, and calming the waters' fear, till eventually their breathing became easy, and he could rest awhile.

The world had begun.

Light was born and showed a grey earth. The seas were calm now, but had no colour, and the land was but a series of shadows. The Spirit of

God spread his wings, and, with his long tail rippling behind him like a bride's train, glided down till he came to land on top of God's mountain. He puffed out his breast, and shook his tail into a huge fan. The bright feathers quivered, their many eyes holding the earth tight in their gaze. Thus God brought colour to the world's cheeks.

Light was born, the earth blushed with colour, yet still nothing could be heard. The waves of the seas broke without a sound. The wind came and went as but a silent breath upon the back of the world's neck. Neither the sea, nor the air, nor any of the creatures of the new earth had any voice.

So, in the middle of the desert, at the foot of the same mountain, the Spirit of God dressed himself in brown, crept into the middle of a thick bush, and set it ablaze with his song. Thus God let creation speak.

When all was done, when all was good, when all was very good, the Spirit of God refused to rest. Instead he bent his strong wings to his body and fell to earth. At the bottom of his fall, almost brushing the surface of the land, he swung up again towards the sun, and twisting, turning, tumbling, beating hard, then folding, falling once again, he *flew*, flying for sheer joy, etching on the sky his exuberance, and all God's grace and beauty.

Two men watched him. One raised a gun. 'No!' the other cried. 'He'll be of no use to us shot to pieces. Leave him be for now. Wait till he's finished showing off, then we'll catch him when he's still.'

'What are you going to do with him?' asked the man with the gun.

'Wait and see.'

'I haven't time to wait and see', said the first, raised the gun and fired. He hit the Spirit through the wing. The Spirit twisted one last time, and fell in agony to the ground.

'Now look what you've done!'

'It's all right. I haven't killed him. Just snicked his wing. It'll mend, I dare say, if we take him home with us.'

So they put the Spirit of God in a sack, took him off with them and locked him in a cage. Word got around, and people came from far and wide to see what they had got. They came to look and prod. They goaded him to see if he might bite. They called him 'Pretty Joey' in silly voices to make him talk. They went away disappointed, and returned to their pigeons and their budgerigars.

One day someone called to see him, who did not prod, nor goad, nor put on a silly voice. He simply stood for a long time in front of the cage gazing at him.

'How much do you want for him?' he asked the two men.

'Not for sale', said one.

'One hundred', said the other.

'Ten', replied the stranger.

'Ten! Fifty.'

'Twenty.'

'Forty.'

'Thirty.'

'Done.'

And so, for thirty pieces of silver the stranger picked up the cage and took the Spirit of God away with him in the boot of his car.

He drove straight to the new church. The people were gathered for worship. He flung open the doors and shouted, right in the middle of the prayers, 'Look what I've got!'

The cage was not good enough, of course. It was an ugly, hotchpotch affair. So they made a larger one of special beauty, with gold and silver bars, and hung it above the altar. They erected a large sign outside the building. 'We have the Spirit of God!' it proclaimed. 'Come and join us!' And people did, till the church was too small, and they had to build another, with an even more splendid cage, suspended from the ledge beneath the east window by a silver chain.

One evening, the day before the tenth anniversary of the Spirit's arrival, when a great celebration would be held, a small boy climbed carefully down the chain. He had hidden behind a pile of chairs when they were locking the doors. He eased himself on to the top of the cage, and then, locking his feet round the last few links of the chain, he leaned over till he could reach the catch on the cage's door. It was stiff. It had not been opened since first the cage was hung in the church. He stretched out a little further, his heart beating wildly. The catch suddenly gave way, and the door swung sharply open. He had almost lost his grip and fell, but somehow he managed to twist his body upright, and scrambled back up the chain and on to the ledge. He scampered along the triforium till he came to the spiral staircase. He hurled himself down it and fell out of the door at the bottom. Picking himself up, he ran as fast as he could to the west doors. He had put the huge key in the lock already. With both hands he turned it, and pushed the doors open as far as they would go. The Spirit of God touched him lightly with the tip of his wing as he flew out into the dark.

The boy watched him as he tumbled high across the moon and stars, and listened entranced as he filled all heaven with his song. Behind him, at the far end of the building, the empty cage swung on its silver chain.

(From *Imagining God: Stories from Creation to Heaven*, SPCK 1997)

Session 8

Believing in the Church

Aims

- To explore the nature of the Church;
- To think about the relationship between ideals and institutions;
- To consider our own roles as members of the Church.

Preparing for the Session

- 1 Ask some of your friends, neighbours or colleagues about their views and opinions of the Church. Try to talk to one or two people who are wholly unconnected with the Church.
- 2 When you talk about 'the Church', which of the following do you generally mean?
 - the local congregation with whom you worship?
 - local Christians of different denominations?
 - the Church of England?
 - bishops, clergy and lay ministers?
 - the Anglican Communion?
 - Christians of all denominations all over the world?
- 3 Jot down a few words or phrases which describe your own views or experiences of the Church (whatever definition you have chosen).
- 4 Read 'Holy, Catholic and Apostolic?'

One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic?

The Nicene Creed's resounding declarations about our beliefs in a trinitarian God come to an abrupt end with 'I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church'. For our belief in the Church is very different from our faith in God. It is more an acknowledgement of its importance than a statement about the credibility of its existence.

The subject follows well after our reflections on the Trinity. For just as God is a community of three persons, so we who are made in his image can only truly reflect him when our community life harmonises with our individual Christian lives. Belief in the Church means acknowledging a conviction that being a Christian means belonging to the fellowship of

those who are being conformed to Christ, fed by ministry of the word and of sacrament as members of the mystical body of Christ on earth.

Who belongs?

Until the Reformation, everyone was a church member – there was no notion of some people being ‘in’ and others ‘out’. To be a citizen meant the same as being a church member. But when the Church split into several streams at the Reformation, membership of some of the Reformed Churches depended on agreement with specific doctrines:

In a context of denominational plurality it became vital to know who belonged and who didn't; who were the insiders and who the outsiders. Whether allegiance was to credal statements (as per the historic Protestant churches) or to the magisterium (as per the Catholic church) or to the community of the truly saved (as per the Free church), group identity and boundaries took on new importance. Belonging to a particular church in distinction from others overshadowed the commonality of being followers of Jesus together.

(Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, page 148)

Nowadays different people from different traditions or churchmanship see membership of the Church in very different ways. There are those for whom ‘the Church’ means those who meet together regularly to worship their Lord and Saviour; others have a wider definition – for example:

We do not have to think of the Church as a narrow and exclusive body, consisting solely of those who are fully conscious of, and responsive to, the divine realities . . . The Spirit of God and of Christ is at work in the world in wider and more universal ways in the whole history of religion and ethics, as well as in ways opened up by explicit Christian response, although even there extending beyond the self-awareness of Christians and the Church into the permeation of society itself by Christian values.

(Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity*, pages 146–47)

In our exploration of our belief in, and understanding of, the Church, we shall use the phrase from the Nicene Creed, and briefly consider in turn the holiness, catholicity and universality of the Church. We shall then go on to consider the mission of the Church today.

A holy Church

The Church's claim to be holy seems implausible at first sight. One of the common objections to Christianity is that the Church, far from fostering the holiness and fellowship of love, has been responsible for religious wars, persecution and intolerance, as well as an abuse of power and responsibility, in the past and in the present.

Here are the views of two present-day theologians – views which are different but overlapping – on what we mean by describing the Church as holy.

1 Set apart

In ordinary English the term ['holy'] has acquired associations of 'morality', 'sanctity', or 'purity', which often seem to bear little relation to the behaviour of fallen human beings. The Hebrew term *kadad*, which underlies the new Testament concept of holiness, has the sense of 'being cut off', or 'being separated'. There are strong overtones of *dedication*: to be 'holy' is to be set apart for and dedicated to the service of God. . . People are 'holy' in that they are dedicated to God, and distinguished from the world on account of their calling by God. A number of theologians have suggested a correlation between the idea of 'the church' (the Greek word for which can bear the meaning of 'those who are called out'), and 'holy' (that is, those who have been separated from the world on account of their having been called by God . . .

The term 'holy' is theological rather than moral in its connotations, affirming the calling of the church and its members, and the hope that the church will one day share the life and glory of God.

(Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology*, page 488)

2 God's holy people

The Christian Church . . . is a divine institution. In its essence, it consists of those who are being conformed to Christ and united with him in a Spirit-inspired and energised community, whose internal fellowship and outward service and care reflect something of the eternal love of God. The Church is holy just because it is the principal vehicle and instrument of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in the world. Despite its all-too-human fallibility, the Church . . . is the people of God on earth. It is holy because the holy God is making God's people holy.

(Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity*, page 150)

A catholic Church

The word 'catholic', as used in the creed, does not mean Roman Catholic. It comes from the Greek *kath' holon*, which means 'referring to the whole', its Latin form (*catholicus*) coming to mean 'universal' or 'general'. As the Church developed, so did the way in which the word was used, so that by the fifth century, when Christianity was firmly established throughout the Mediterranean world, 'catholic' came to mean 'embracing the whole world'. So 'Roman Catholic' means that part of the Catholic Church which finds its centre in Rome.

The idea of catholicity came under the spotlight again at the Reformation. Protestant writers argued that the essence of catholicity lay not in church institutions but in matters of doctrine. And, as we saw earlier in this unit, the Church of England claims to be both catholic and reformed – i.e. maintaining continuity with the teachings of the apostolic church, while having abolished non-biblical practices and beliefs.

In recent years, since the second Vatican council, the emphasis of meaning 'catholic' has been 'totality' (the oldest usage of the term). Thus local churches, as well as particular traditions or denominations, have been seen as the embodiments of the one universal Church.

Theologian Hans Küng sees this as having important implications for church unity:

The catholicity of the church therefore consists in a notion of entirety, based on identity, and resulting in universality. From this it is clear that unity and catholicity go together; if the church is one, it must be universal; if it is universal, it must be one. Unity and catholicity are two interwoven dimensions of one and the same church.

(in *The Church*, 1968)

An apostolic Church

The basic meaning of 'apostolic' is 'originating, or having a direct link with, the apostles'. It does not so much refer to continuity in church structures as to continuity in faith and mission. According to McGrath, the use of the word 'apostle' in the New Testament has two related meanings:

- someone who has been commissioned by Christ, and charged with the task of preaching the good news of the kingdom;
- someone who was a witness to the risen Christ, or to whom Christ revealed himself as risen.

The Nicene Creed, in declaring the Church to be 'apostolic', seems to be emphasising the historical roots of the gospel, and the continuity from Christ, through the apostles, from generation to generation, to the Church today – the people of God who continue to do Christ's work in the world. The historical creeds are one way in which that continuity has been maintained:

What God did in Christ does not change. The earliest written records of that divine act remain as Scripture, providing a fixed and permanent text for constant repetition and reflection in the worship and devotions of the Church and its members. And the early creeds of the undivided Church remain as the first considered summaries of the apostolic faith, recited every day in the liturgies of the Church and forming the starting-point for Christian theological reflection. Scripture and creeds are the given threads ensuring continuity across the centuries. Notwithstanding all the necessary developments and fresh interpretations, the Christian Church remains apostolic only if its life, mission and worship keep hold of those threads.

(Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity*, page 156)

There is clearly division between denominations about what 'the apostolic faith' actually means (for example, differences remain in areas such as infant or adult baptism, the nature of priesthood, the orders of bishop, priest and deacon, the ordination of women to the priesthood, and many others). Nevertheless, what unites members of the Church is far more, and far more important, than what divides them – as we shall see.

The Church's ministry and mission today

Hebblethwaite describes the Christian Church as having four functions:

- to transmit the apostolic faith to all who are willing to hear and receive it;
- to express and perform humanity's explicit worship of the triune God;
- to shape the life of Christians at both individual and community levels in conformity with Christ and the blessed Trinity;
- to work for a better world through service of those in need and through the quest for social justice in God's world.

These four functions are echoed in the Lichfield diocesan aims of 'Growing the Kingdom', which start, interestingly enough, with a credal statement:

WE BELIEVE THAT:

God our Creator reigns as King.

God's will and purposes have been uniquely fulfilled and revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ.

God sends his Holy Spirit to call people through repentance and faith into a growing relationship with himself.

God redeems his people and acts through their daily work and witness in the Church and the world as an agent of change in the service of the Kingdom.

From the basis of this creed, four areas of growth are suggested whereby we can further God's kingdom in the world:

1: Worship and prayer

Worship and prayer are at the heart of the Christian life. Worship is our response to God for all that he is. In prayer we ask for God's purposes to be fulfilled in us and in the world. God wants us to grow in worship and prayer.

2: Teaching and nurture

Jesus Christ calls us to be his disciples. Throughout our Christian lives we are on a journey of discovery. All of us need to keep learning more about God and how to serve him more effectively.

3: Evangelism and outreach

Jesus Christ commissions his followers to declare the Good News of the Kingdom of God. All of us need to grow in confidence to speak about God to our friends, families and neighbours. We are to be a community which welcomes and embraces all people.

4: Justice and care

Jesus Christ commands us to care for all people – especially the poor, the sick, the homeless and those in any kind of need. He calls us to be a sacrificial and loving community, working for a just society.

All change?

Many thinkers and theologians today see the need for radical change in the attitudes and assumptions of the Church in its views of itself and of society. Michael Riddell, for example, sees the Western Church in crisis, and encourages the Church to make way for genuinely new acts of God – in the same way that the Jewish apostles needed to change their religious assumptions dramatically as they were transformed in Christ, so that (for example) clean and unclean foods and people became a thing of the past.

Riddell writes movingly of the type of transformation that may be needed – but adds a note of caution:

The creeping temptation of the church is to believe that it is an end in itself. Power, wealth, security and the desire for continuity dog the life of the established church as they do any other institution. The characteristics of the God made known in Jesus – love, vulnerability, redemptive suffering, service – are not nearly so attractive. So it is that theology and praxis must continually struggle against the tendency to co-opt God to the agenda of the church, rather than shape the church according to the will of God. Such is the history of the people of God, who attempt to follow the moving pillar of fire . . . If it were up to us alone I would be pessimistic. My faith is in the God who brings life to the valley of dry bones. This God is able to do that which for us is not possible.

(Threshold of the Future, pages 174 and 175)

So to close this reading and reflection on our belief in the Church, read 'The Parable of the Geese', by the Danish writer Kierkegaard (1813–55), who was acutely aware of the danger of people trying to manipulate God, and control or contain him in human systems.

The Parable of the Geese by Søren Kierkegaard

A certain flock of geese lived together in a barnyard with great high walls around it. Because the corn was so good and the barnyard was secure, these geese would never take a risk. One day a philosopher goose came among them. He was a very good philosopher and every week they listened quietly and attentively to his learned discourses. 'My fellow travellers on the way of life', he would say, 'can you seriously imagine that this barnyard, with great high walls around it, is all there is to existence?'

'I tell you, there is another and greater world outside, a world of which we are only dimly aware. Our forefathers knew of this outside world. For did they not stretch their wings and fly across trackless wastes of desert and ocean, of green valley and wooded hill? But alas, here we remain in this barnyard, our wings folded and tucked into our sides, as we are content to puddle in the mud, never lifting our eyes to the heavens which should be our home.'

The geese thought this was very fine lecturing. 'How poetical', they thought. 'How profoundly existential. What a flawless summary of the mystery of existence.' Often the philosopher spoke of the advantages of flight, calling on the geese to be what they were. After all, they had

wings, he pointed out. What were wings for, but to fly with? Often he reflected on the beauty and wonder of life outside the barnyard, and the freedom of the skies.

Full Group

And every week the geese were uplifted, inspired, moved, by the philosopher's message. They hung on his every word. They devoted hours, weeks, months to a thoroughgoing analysis and critical evaluation of his doctrines. They produced learned treatises on the ethical and spiritual implications of flight. All this they did. But one thing they never did. They did not fly! For the corn was good, and the barnyard was secure.

Small Groups

(Quoted in Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, SPCK 1998)

Small Groups

Group Work

Group leader: Make sure that, whether working in full group or small groups, members decide what definition of 'church' they are using in their responses to each task or question.

What is the Church?

Full Group

1 Discuss your responses to Tasks 1, 2 and 3 of the preparatory work:

- What did you find were the main differences between an 'outsider's' view of the Church and the views of a church member?
- What did the preparatory reading add to your understanding of what is meant by 'the Church'?

Full Group

Which of the following beliefs, activities or practices do you think are essential aspect of membership of the Church, either for an individual or for a group?

- baptism
- going to church on Sundays
- belief in the Trinity
- watching *Songs of Praise*
- confirmation
- eucharistic worship

2 St Augustine of Hippo wrote that the Christian Church is like a hospital. What do you think he might have meant?

- What other types of organisation, structure or club does the Church resemble, and in what ways?
- In what ways is the Church *unlike* any other organisation?

- What differences (if any) does it make to our attitudes and practices to think of the church as primarily local, national or international?

The Church and its members

- 3 In what ways do you feel that The Parable of the Geese relates to the Church today?
 - Make a list of practical suggestions as to how we can (in the language of the story) learn to fly over the barnyard wall.
- 4 The Church of England accepts infants, by baptism, into the membership of the Church:
 - What does this signify in your view about our understanding of church membership?
 - Ought infant baptism to be restricted to the children of practising Christians? (Give reasons for your answer)
- 5 Robert Warren, suggests that local churches and communities need to rethink their relationship to each other, so that there is a movement from:

church = *building + priest + stipend*

to

church = *community + faith + action*

- Which of these models does your church most resemble?
- Suggest some practical ways of making it more like the second model.

Small Groups

Small Groups

Group leader: divide the members into two groups, A and B. The groups will work on different questions in both the preparatory work and the group work for Session 9.

Small Groups

Reading to Follow up the Session

Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in the Post-Christian West*, SPCK, 1998.

Philip Yancey, *The Church – Why Bother?* (Zondervan, 2002)

Mission Shaped Church 2004

Session 9

We Believe...

Aims

- To consider the distinction between diversity and heresy in people's interpretations of Christian belief;
- To think about the conventional Christian understanding of heaven and hell as eternal consequences of faith or lack of faith;
- To understand something of the historical context of the Nicene Creed
- To reflect on our understanding of creeds in relation to people of other faiths.

Preparing for the Session

- 1 Read the following statements, and decide:
 - If a statement expresses a belief which fits with being a Christian;
 - If a statement expresses a belief which is inconsistent with Christianity.
 - Try to give reasons for your answers.
 - (a) Jesus was a good man, a son of God, whose teaching we should follow – but he was not THE Son of God.
 - (b) Jesus did not really rise from the dead.
 - (c) Jesus' resurrection body was not like normal human bodies.
 - (d) The virgin birth is not important, and doesn't affect who Jesus was – the word for 'virgin' can also mean 'young woman', and it was just a mistranslation and misunderstanding.
 - (e) Adam and Eve were the first human beings – it's in the Bible so it must be true.
 - (f) Only Christians go to heaven when they die.
 - (g) Jesus Christ will one day come to earth again, this time in glory.
 - (h) I'm a Christian, though I don't go to church.
 - (i) People of all faiths believe in the same God – it's just a question of how we interpret him/her.

- (j) I believe in an afterlife when we will be together with those we have loved in this life.
- 2 At the end of Session 8, you should have been put in a group – either A or B. Read the Bible passages listed for your group, making notes on the implications of these passages for a Christian’s belief in what might happen after death.

Group A

Read the following passages, and consider how well they reflect the view of the radical 1960s English theologian John A. T. Robinson, who wrote: ‘May we not imagine a love so strong that ultimately no one will be able to restrain himself from free and grateful surrender? . . . In a universe of love there can be no heaven that tolerates a chamber of horrors’:

- Isaiah 11:1–9
- John 11:25–26
- John 14:1–4
- Isaiah 55:6–11
- Romans 8:31–39
- 1 John 4:16–18
- Revelation 22:1–5

Group B

Read the following passages, and consider how well they reflect the view that belief and behaviour in this life affect a person’s eternal destiny:

- Matthew 22:1–14
- Isaiah 11:1–9
- Luke 16:19–31
- Corinthians 5:1–10
- John 3:16–21
- Revelation 21:1–8

- 3 Read ‘Heaven, Hell and Heresy’.

Heaven, Hell and Heresy

Christians have, throughout their history, seen beliefs – or lack of beliefs – as having more than immediate significance. The impetus behind all missionary movements is to reveal the truth of Jesus Christ, whether by words or deeds, to those who do not yet know him or recognise his significance as God incarnate, Saviour of the world.

Eternal life is promised to believers; and many have promised eternal punishment for those of different beliefs or those who reject belief in Jesus – sentences to be carried out on Judgement Day.

Heresy and belief

From the earliest times there were disputes in the Church about the exact nature of Christian belief, and the implications of joining together as members of Christ. For example, the early Church wrestled with the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Christ had commanded his followers to eat together in memory of him – but Jews were not allowed to share meals with non-Jews (Acts 11:3). They had to work out, prayerfully and by discussion what was essential to Christian belief and practice, and what was optional, or were matters of personal preference.

These issues crop up often in the New Testament letters, and continued to exercise church leaders and members over succeeding centuries. They led to the creation of credal statements which defined what it meant to be a Christian (Session 8 looks at the particular dispute which led to the writing of the Nicene Creed). Those who did not go along with the Church's decisions were called heretics (from the Latin word *haeresis*, meaning 'choice'). By the fifth century, Augustine could list no fewer than 88 different heresies!

In Europe in the 1100s the Church was troubled by a number of heretical movements which seemed to be gaining ground. So in 1184, a trial system was introduced for examining heretics, known as the Inquisition. Trials might last for years while the unfortunate suspect languished in prison – and torture could be used to extract confessions. What a person believed was by no means a matter of private conscience but of public debate, and the evidence of two witnesses was enough to bring a person to trial.

Nowadays the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction. A person's beliefs are their own concern and (at least in the West) people are not only free to hold those beliefs but are encouraged to respect the sincerely held beliefs of others, no matter how different (or, to use old-fashioned Christian language, 'heretical') they may be. Many people have a pick-and-mix faith, selecting the attractive parts of a variety of different beliefs, and rejecting what is uncomfortable or unappealing. As Christians we partly buck the trend, continuing to say together the Nicene Creed each Sunday, and apparently subscribing to a comprehensive framework of faith which seems to allow little room for personal variants. The Muslim faith adheres even more closely to comprehensive set of beliefs.

Judgement – and its consequences

Death, judgement, heaven and hell – the 'four last things' – have long exercised the minds of Christian theologians. When Jesus talked about hell, he had an actual place in mind – the Valley of Hinnom, south-west of Jerusalem, where pagan worshippers once sacrificed children to their gods. To Jews, it came to symbolise a place of everlasting punishment

for the wicked. By the Middle Ages this idea had become very literal and frightening – paintings show hideous demons tormenting the ungodly. And this thinking did not change much at the Reformation: for example, on 8 July 1741 Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon called ‘Sinners in the hands of an Angry God’, which includes these words:

It would be dreadful to suffer the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God for one moment; but you must suffer it for all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery . . . You will know that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance.

Few modern-day preachers would agree with him – in general theologians and preachers have moved away from such harsh ideas. Nevertheless there is a great variety of views currently held about hell and heaven, as expressed in the following statements:

- ‘I believe that the love and grace of God must ultimately conquer every human heart. In the end, *all* will be saved’ (this standpoint is known as the universalist view).
- ‘I feel that while God *desires* everyone to be saved, God’s will can be frustrated by human choice. Jesus himself was (for example) harsh on those who led "little ones" astray (Luke 17:2).’
- ‘Just because we no longer tend to see hell as a place of flames, darkness and weeping, this does not mean that hell does not exist. I believe that hell is separation from God, freely chosen.’
- ‘I believe in "conditional immortality" – in other words, hell does not involve eternal punishment; it means ceasing to exist.’
- ‘I believe that, by the choices they make in their life, many people would not *want* to be in God’s presence for eternity. For example, without a massive change of heart, Hitler would not be happy worshipping Jesus the Jew; or a bitter self-centred person would hate the loving openness which characterise the presence of the God of love. This change of heart – repentance – gives human beings a real choice whereby God limits his own power and will not overrule the decisions people make for themselves.’
- ‘I believe that those who die unrepentant will have opportunities after death to respond to God’s love.’

Heaven

Resurrection is the key to the Christian understanding of life and death. The Christian hope is grounded in the love and forgiveness of God, and is based on the resurrection of Christ himself – as we saw in Session 3. And the Christian belief in forgiveness means that all our recurring faults and selfishness, as well as our failures to act, are forgiven and forgotten:

A man lost his temper. 'Please forgive me, Lord', he prayed. The following day he lost his temper again. 'Oh Lord, I've done it again!' he wailed in anguish when he had cooled down. At that point a voice from heaven asked, 'Done what again?'

(*Teach Yourself Christianity*, page 125)

But what will heaven be like? The image of a banquet or feast is often used in the Bible – not so much clouds and harps, but good earthy enjoyment with other people. *The Mystery of Salvation*, a report commissioned by the Church of England in 1995, describes it thus:

In heaven we shall know as we are known, perfectly ourselves and perfectly related to one another. It is because heaven is such a participation in the communion of God's love that it is right to believe that we shall see and know those whom we have loved, but we shall see and know them in God . . . [In heaven] human destiny will not be the attainment of an eternal and static perfection but rather an everlasting participation in the exploration of the inexhaustible riches of the divine nature.

Moreover, our personal and communal resurrection is set in the context of cosmic renewal: 'Behold, I make all things new'. There will be a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1).

Other Faiths

'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me' (John 14:6) – a text which has fuelled the tendency among both Catholics and Protestants over the centuries to deny the possibility of salvation outside explicit faith in Christ.

As we saw above the relationship of Christianity to other faiths goes back to its beginnings as an offshoot of Judaism. These issues have come to the forefront of our thinking in recent years because of the multiculturalism in Western society – and because we are more conscious than ever of the global dimensions of Christianity and of other faiths. So how can we understand other religious traditions within the context of the Christian belief in the universal saving will of God, made known through Jesus Christ?

Christian theologians have adopted one of three broad approaches:

- **Particularism** – which holds that only those who hear and respond to the Christian gospel may be saved. This position is often criticised for condemning those who have never heard of Christ, or who, having heard of him, choose to reject him. The German theologian Karl Barth dealt with this by believing that in the fullness of God's time, everyone would come to faith in God through Christ . He balanced his particularity by his universalism (see above).
- **Inclusivism** – which argues that, although Christianity represents the most complete revelation of God to humanity, salvation is nevertheless possible for those who belong to other religious traditions. The Jesuit writer Karl Rahner refers to the faithful followers of a non-Christian religious tradition as 'anonymous Christians', meaning those who have experienced divine grace without necessarily knowing it; he believes that full

access to truth about God, as understood by the Christian tradition, is not a necessary precondition for access to the saving grace of God.

- **Pluralism** – which holds that all the religious traditions of humanity are equally valid paths to the same core of religious reality. John Hick, who holds this belief, argues that different religious traditions must be seen as complementary not contradictory – different insights into one divine reality. Many Christian theologians feel uncomfortable with this approach, wondering whether it is talking about the Christian God – i.e. as revealed in Jesus Christ, about whom Hick says little.

Brian Hebblethwaite takes an inclusivist approach:

The fact that the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ *is* the light that enlightens everyone, and the fact that the Spirit of Christ crucified and risen is the Spirit of the God of the whole Earth, active in all creativity and inspiration should help us to see that the energies of God are at work throughout the history of religions, evoking the manifold responses of humankind not only in and through the religions of the world but also through the human conscience in all spheres of ethics and morality.

Of course, there is much error, illusion and malpractice in the history of religions, but that includes Christianity, whose record, in human terms, often belies the gospel message of peace and goodwill to all . . . But just as we have to look for the essence of Christianity in what the story of Christ reveals about the nature of God and God's activity, so we have to look for the essence of religion in the positive forms of spiritual, moral and cultural life that this same God has elicited from his human creatures everywhere.

I speak of this as the *hidden* work of God, since I remain convinced that what God reveals of himself by his presence and activity here on Earth in the person of his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, goes beyond what he reveals through enlightenment and inspiration elsewhere; and I speak of this as the hidden work of *God* rather than, say, of the unknown *Christ* of other religions since, although it is the same Word and the same Spirit at work throughout the whole history of religion and ethics, it seems better to reserve the name of Jesus Christ for the unique incarnation in which God's revelation and salvific work culminate.

(*The Essence of Christianity*, page 116)

Learning from others

There is an increasing movement among many Christians to concentrate not on the theologies which divide those of different religious faiths, but on what each spiritual approach can offer in terms of enriching our prayer and following spiritual disciplines. Anthony de Mello, an Indian Jesuit whose spirituality lies in blending the riches of different religious traditions, has written a book called *One Minute Wisdom*. It consists of apparently simple, short anecdotes about the Master and his wisdom and insight (one of which is used to end the Group Work for this session). De Mello illustrates in practice the way in which divisive theology can be put aside so that the spirituality of each

can inform the others, to the mutual benefit of all. In the preface he writes:

The Master in these tales is not a single person. He is a Hindu Guru, a Zen Roshi, a Taoist Sage, a Jewish Rabbi, a Christian Monk, a Sufi Mystic. He is Lao-tzu and Socrates. Buddha and Jesus, Zarathustra and Muhammad. His teaching is found in the seventh century BC and the twentieth century AD. His wisdom belongs to East and West alike. History, after all, is the record of appearances, not Reality; of doctrines, not of Silence.

His spiritual synthesising can be profoundly helpful as a way of discovering new truths in our own religious tradition, as well as encouraging a new type of respect for those who are different. However, others would see in his approach the danger of confusing the genuine truths of Christian revelation with the attractive but possibly erroneous teachings of other faiths.

3. Read the two separate articles that follow:

- The Nicene Creed in Context
- Creeds for Today.

The Nicene Creed in Context

The Nicene Creed is the one most often used in Church of England services. Congregations all over the land use it to express their faith today. Yet it was written over 1600 years ago in response to very specific circumstances.

From the earliest days of Christianity, believers tried to define and express their faith. Inevitably they emphasised those things that were important at that particular time and in their particular cultural setting. The story of the Nicene Creed started with Arius, who lived in Egypt in the early 300s. Arius believed that Jesus was neither fully God nor fully human, but something in between – a sort of angel or demi-god. The Bishop of Alexandria was appalled at this heresy – but when Arius appealed to other bishops to back him up, the controversy looked like getting out of hand.

This conflict didn't suit the Emperor Constantine, who saw Christianity as a force to unify his empire. So in 324 he summoned a council of the Church to meet at Nicaea (in present-day Turkey) – and about 220 bishops turned up to debate the issue. The Council quickly found against Arius and his followers, and to ensure that his heresy did not gain a hold in the Church, they devised a creed specifically to refute it by including the words:

*We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made
of one Being with the Father . . .*

*he came down from heaven;
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man . . .*

But although the Council tried to quell the heresy, it did not make for a united Church. It was followed by almost fifty years of discord and disorder in the Church, during which most churchmen expressed dislike for the 'faith of Nicaea', as the Creed was called. Many preferred Arius's views, and this issue of doctrine was mixed with issues of local factions, rivalries between bishops, and a growing rift between the Latin and Greek churches.

While Constantine lived, no one dared to attack his beloved Council. But after his death, various controversies surfaced. Over the years, the Nicene Creed was modified here and there to take account of these disputes and their outcomes. It seems to have been finalised by the Council of Constantinople in 381, under the Emperor Theodosius.

The Nicene Creed is the product of its own time and setting, like every other creed. Modern theologians might question its emphases; modern church people may find parts of it obscure, or its meaning puzzling (phrases such as 'eternally begotten of the Father', or 'resurrection of the body', for example). But the Church of England still apparently finds in it the most satisfactory expression of the faith of the Church.

Creeds for Today

To show the importance of specific contexts and outlooks, you will find a variety of modern creeds printed below – excerpts of some of which have already been quoted in earlier sessions. You may find that while you are reading them, you can guess at the writer's background.

1: An African Creed

We believe in the one high God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the bible, that he would save the world and all nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptised in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce

the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.

(From Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, SCM)

2: Women's Creed

We believe in God

Maker, Redeemer and Sustainer of Life
without beginning or end,
whose life-giving love was let loose on the first Easter Sunday
and whose life-giving love we share and proclaim here today.

We believe in God

who gave up the divine life and submitted to the darkness and
terror of the grave
and who enters with us into every darkness and terror we shall
ever face.

We believe in God

who raised Christ from the death of the grave to glorious new life
and who raises our lives from sin and despair to newness and
hope again.

We believe in God

who met the grief-stricken Mary in the garden and called her into
hope by the uttering of her name,
and who meets us in our grief and gives us courage to hope
again by tenderly calling our name.

We believe in God

who sent Mary out from the garden to be a witness and apostle of
the resurrection,
and who commissions us like Mary, to be bearers of hope
and good news to the world.

We believe in God

Maker, Redeemer and Sustainer of Life,
without beginning or end,
whose life-giving love was let loose on the first Easter Sunday
and whose life-giving love we share and proclaim today
to all women and men, wherever and whoever they are,
loved, blessed and called by God,
without beginning or end.

(From the St Hilda Community, *The New Women Included*)

3: A Creed for Good Friday

We believe in God.

When there was nothing but an ocean of tears,
God sighed over the waters
and dreamed a small dream:
light in the darkness
a small planet in space.

We believe in Jesus Christ.
When hate and fear were raging,
when love was beaten down,
when hope was nailed and left to die,
Christ entered into our deep secret places
and went down into our death to find us.

We believe in the Holy Spirit
who weeps with us in our despair,
who breathes on prison doors,
never admitting it's hopeless,
always expecting the bars to bend and sway
and break forth into blossom.

4: The People's Creed

I believe in a colour-blind God,
Maker of technicolour people,
Who created the universe
And provided abundant resources
For equitable distribution among all his people.

I believe in Jesus Christ,
Born of a common woman,
Who was ridiculed, disfigured and executed,
Who on the third day rose and fought back;
He storms the highest councils of men,
Where he overturns the iron rule of injustice.
From henceforth he shall continue
To judge the hatred and arrogance of men.

I believe in the Spirit of Reconciliation,
The united body of the dispossessed;
The communion of the suffering masses,
The power that overcomes the dehumanising forces of men,
The resurrection of personhood, justice and equality,
And in the final triumph of Brotherhood.

(by Canaan Banana, former president of Zimbabwe)

5: A Worker's Creed

I believe in you, worker Christ, light of light and true only begotten of
God, who to save the world in the humble and pure womb of Mary was
incarnated.

I believe you were beaten, mocked and tortured, martyred on the cross
while Pilate was praetor, the Roman imperialist, unscrupulous and soul-
less, who by washing his hands wanted to erase the mistake.

I believe in you, friend, human Christ, worker Christ, victor over death
with the immense sacrifice, you engendered new hope for liberation.

You are risen again in each arm that is raised to defend the people from
the rule of the exploiter in the factory, in the school.

I believe in your struggle without truce. I believe in your resurrection.

(From *The Nicaraguan Campesinos Mass*)

6: Creed of Transformation

I believe in God
Who didn't create the world as something finished
as a thing which has to remain the same for ever
who doesn't rule by eternal laws
which are irrevocable
nor by natural order of poor and rich
experts and uninformed
rulers and helpless.

I believe in God
who wants the conflict among the living
and the transformation of the existing
by our work
by our politics.

I believe in Jesus Christ
who was right when he,
an individual who cannot do anything,
like ourselves,
worked on the transformation of all things in existence
and perished doing it.
Looking at him I realise
how our intelligence is crippled
our fantasy suffocated, our efforts wasted
because we don't live the way he lived.
Every day I fear that he died in vain
because he is buried in our churches
because we have betrayed his revolution
in obedience and fear of the authorities.

I believe in Jesus Christ
Who rises into our lives
in order that we may be freed
from prejudice and arrogance,
from fear and hatred,
and may carry forward his revolution
towards his kingdom.

I believe in the spirit
who came with Jesus into the world,
in the community of all nations
and in our responsibility
for what will become of the earth,
a valley of misery, starvation and violence
or the city of God.

I believe in just peace
which can be achieved
in the possibility of a meaningful life
for all men
in the future of this world of God.

(by Dorothee Sölle)

Look again at these six creeds and decide which you think best represents your own faith, and that of the Church.

Group Work

This we believe

Full Group

- 1 Discuss your views and decisions for Task 1 of the preparatory work. Were group members unanimous in their views?
 - What seemed from this task to be the most controversial areas of belief?

Full Group

- 2 Do you think it is important to have agreed statements of belief?
 - Who should decide when someone's views represent a healthy diversity of belief and when they are 'heresy' – i.e. so far from the core of Christian faith that a person can no longer fit into a Christian community?

Judgement

Small Groups

- 3 Break into your two groups, A and B (as arranged at the last session, and according to the preparatory work you have done):
 - Group A: try to find evidence – from the Bible passages you read for your preparatory work, and drawing on anything relevant from your own experience – for the following statement:

As God is a God of love, hell is empty.

- Group B: try to find evidence – from the Bible passages you read for your preparatory work, and drawing on anything relevant from your own experience – for the following statement:

As Jesus says, people will be divided into 'sheep' and 'goats' depending on how they have lived, with the righteous taking possession of the kingdom and the others going 'to the eternal fire that is ready for the devil and his angels' (Matthew 25:31–46).'

The statements might not reflect your own beliefs – but see if you can make a case out for each.

Full Group

- 4 When you are ready, have a discussion between Groups A and B, each arguing the case for the statement on which you have been working.

- Leave the roles you have been playing, and discuss what you personally feel is right or wrong about the opinions expressed by Groups A and B.

Other faiths and none

Small Groups

5 'As long as you're committed, it doesn't matter what you believe' – does this fairly commonly expressed idea fit with a Christian perspective? Give reasons for your answer.

Small Groups

6 Do you think we should play down aspects of our faith – such as belief in the resurrection and the divinity of Jesus – in order to be able to share better with people of other faiths?

- Would your answer be different in relation to people who have no religious faith at all? Why?
- Is it divisive to make the Creed such a central and regular feature of our worship? Is this a good or a bad thing?

“We believe...”

Full Group

7 The rest of this session involves you, as a group, creating your own creed – something that you feel reflects your own Christian beliefs.

You can do this in whatever way you like:

- by using words, and creating a series of statements of faith;
- by creating a collage of images – cut-outs, drawings, photos or whatever;
- by using music, drama and dance to express belief, thinking through carefully what each part of your dramatic creed signifies.

If you want to break into smaller groups, each using a different medium of expression, then go ahead – but make sure you leave time at the end to meet up as a full group and show each other your own creeds.

If possible, incorporate your creed into your main Sunday service at church, using it as part of the worship in some way.

Ending the session

Reflect on the following anecdote, called 'Holiness', from Anthony de Mello's *One Minute Wisdom*:

To a preacher who kept saying, 'We must put God in our lives', the Master said, 'He is already there. Our business is to recognise this.'

Reading to Follow up the Session

Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity*

– especially chapters 6 and 10.

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK 1989).

A challenging and closely argued exploration of how Christians can more confidently affirm their faith in a secular, humanist and pluralist society. Not an easy read, but a very good and stimulating one.

Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (SCM 1978)

A Roman Catholic missionary decides to discard all his cultural baggage in order to take the gospel to the Masai people of East Africa. A groundbreaking and revolutionary book.

C.S.Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Fount)

Does God consign people to hell, or do they take themselves there? Imaginative and thought-provoking on heaven, hell and judgement

Unit Three Reflection Form

Each group member must fill in a reflection form at the end of each unit of the Foundations for Ministry course. This can be done as part of the final group session, either in pairs or individually. The purpose of these forms is to enable each person to reflect on the previous term's work, in order both to consolidate their learning and to deepen their awareness of their personal growth in discipleship. There are NO "right" answers: it is purely a means of helping you to reflect and grow.

Name:

Unit of course which has just been completed: 1 2 3

Try to recall your thoughts and reactions to this unit of the course before you started it, and make a note of them here (e.g. I hate/love history, so I was dreading/looking forward to Unit 3):

Look back through the course material to remind yourself of the different sessions.

- What have you most enjoyed about this Unit?

- What has been hardest?

- What has been most helpful?

What have you learned from studying this unit of the course about:

- the subject?

- yourself?

How might you use what you have learned in your life as a follower of Jesus Christ?

How would you evaluate your contribution to the group?

LEADER'S COMMENTS (optional)

In discussion with the group member, comment briefly on what you have observed of him/her during the past term in terms of learning/understanding, and/or group contributions. Also include (if appropriate) comments on the group member's assignment.

Assignment for Unit 3

You should write an essay on one of the following topics, aiming to write up to 1000 words, and include sufficient examples from the unit material to demonstrate your knowledge of it.

1. Choose a person who is alive today - either someone you know personally, or a national or international figure whom you see as being visionary, holy, prophetic, or inspirational in some way which brings to others the challenge of the Christian faith in our own times.

- Why do you see this person as important?
- What important message(s) or models do they live out or reveal?
- Do you think the person you've chosen, and your reasons for choosing them, throws any light on issues that you think are important in the Church today?

(You might want to consider some of the issues raised in Unit 3: mission; power; prayer; service; social justice; worship; spiritual nurture; political action)

2. Imagine you have a non-Christian friend who says they're happy with your Christian commitment because if it feels right to you, then that's fine, though there's no reason why they should believe the same as you. Write down what you would say to them, on the basis of your work in Unit 3, explaining why for you, belief isn't merely a matter of personal preference, and setting out what you see as the basics of Christian faith today.

3. Discuss with your group leader any subject covered in Session 5 that has interested, provoked or challenged you. Read and reflect further on this subject and then write an essay about it (up to 1000 words).

Assignments should be submitted to your course tutor.











