

OneKirk Journal

working for an inclusive, affirming and progressive church

www.onekirk.org

Issue 2, Spring 2007

Presbyteries' Civil Partnership Votes

Two steps forward, one back? At last year's General Assembly, for those of us who seek to build an open, inclusive, affirming church, it seemed as though the Kirk had taken natural steps forward in its decision to accept the Legal Questions Committee's proposed Declaratory Act anent Civil Partnerships (albeit under the Barrier Act). The general understanding amongst most ministers had previously been that you would not be disciplined in some presbyteries for deciding to mark a civil partnership with a blessing ceremony, while other presbyteries were likely to take a more hard-line approach.

OneKirk strongly supported the Legal Questions Committee's proposal, because it clarified what we believe is already the situation in the church (which is the purpose of a Declaratory Act) - that ministers and deacons have freedom to choose whether or not to mark a civil partnership according to their own conscience, understanding of scripture, and prompting of the Spirit.

With the falling of the Overture anent Civil Partnerships within presbyteries (9 for, 36 against), the *status quo* remains—including the "postcode lottery" uncertainty over discipline.

While some may dismiss this freedom in order to defend the 'clear teaching of Scripture', there are others within the Church of Scotland for whom the Scripture sings a different tune.



It was with sadness that OneKirk noted that some considered the debate over the issue of civil partnerships to be one fought with "boxing

gloves" and "baseball bats". While acknowledging that this is an issue which ignites strong emotion on both sides, OneKirk affirms the reality that this is an issue that impacts real people and causes real pain. As Christ's Church, we must always remember the individuals affected by this decision.

There is a breadth of opinion and understanding on many issues within the Church of Scotland, and in many ways OneKirk wants to protect the freedom that all ministers have to debate these issues.

OneKirk remains committed to encouraging others to participate in debate to stimulate an open and free discussion. We believe that such openness, coupled with a sense of humility, is a witness to the open, compassionate, graceful life of Christ.

For our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters within the church, or looking to the church for welcome, we lament with you where any see the presbytery vote as a triumphalist "win" for their position.

ONEKIRK FORUM



If you are interested in further discussion about any of the issues in this issue of OneKirk Journal or that face the Church at the current time, we encourage you to participate in the new OneKirk Forum available via the OneKirk website:

www.onekirk.org

Take to heart that two fifths of those presbyters who voted did so in favour of the overture (1007 vs 1563). Just ten years ago that level of support would, we feel, have been unthinkable.

OneKirk Working Group

Living in Community? Celebrity Big Brother

Whether or not you watched it, it is unlikely that January's media event in the Big Brother house passed you by.



Bollywood Actress, Shilpa Shetty

The alleged racism, undoubted bullying and frightening ignorance

shown by Jade Goody (a previous housemate in the non-celebrity Big Brother 2002) and her accomplices towards the Indian Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty was a source for countless tabloid inches, TV news bulletins, internet blogs, speeches within



Jade Goody

Living in Community

parliament, and even the hijacking of Gordon Brown's message on a trip to India.

For those of us who decry any form of exclusion, racism being a particularly virulent form, the more than 40,000 complaints received by OFCOM during Celebrity Big Brother, by far their largest total, is heartening.

Nonetheless, the debate that has been stirred up by Celebrity Big Brother raises questions about what it means to live in community—and for the church this is a serious issue.

In the Big Brother house the contestants are forced into living in community (although in the case of Celebrity Big Brother, the sweetener of large fees for the contestants surely helps), the result is as predictable as it is gruesome to behold.

Why is it that living in community with others appears to be so difficult? Why do colour, race, accent, background, wealth, beliefs cause so much heartache?

It is not the intention of this issue to answer all these questions. But OneKirk would like to explore something of what it means to live in community.

While we rightly deplore the ugly and unthinking racism depicted on Celebrity Big Brother, it should be pointed out that the same Jade Goody who bullied Shilpa Shetty, was also the victim of bullying by the viewers and press during her time in the Big Brother house in 2002. Referred to as the "ugly pig" and ridiculed for her lack of knowledge, (she thought Rio de Janeiro was a footballer, and that East Angular (*sic*) was somewhere abroad, for instance) Jade has known what it is like to be the victim herself. Jade is a tragic figure in many ways; her desire for her mother to experience some of the highs of celebrity was as touching as it was desperate (her mother became the first evictee from the house).

Nonetheless, Ms Goody's ignorance cannot surely be an excuse for her behaviour. Yet if she has never been shown or has never known what is appropriate behaviour in a multicultural

setting, can blame be laid solely at her feet? We all need the support, advice and encouragement of others in order to live successfully in community.

In the same way, a young child may be ignorant of the concept of payment for goods and so simply take what they want in a shop, often to the shocked horror of parents when they get home. Children have to be shown that this is not appropriate, that it is not how we live in community with one another. The give and take, the grace (that Shilpa, to her credit, often showed to her victimisers in Big Brother), the shared understanding are vital to living in community, but are they a learned response?

So what is living in community? What role should the church be playing to show people how to live in community? Are we, in the church, a good example of living in community?

Thank you!

The OneKirk Working Group would like to thank all of those who have contributed articles on issues of sexuality for the OneKirk Website.



If you have not done so already, we encourage you to explore the depth of these resources which include studies of scripture, theological reflections, historical articles, personal testimonies and experiences.

www.onekirk.org

A community comes together naturally, or does it?

Rev John Owain Jones

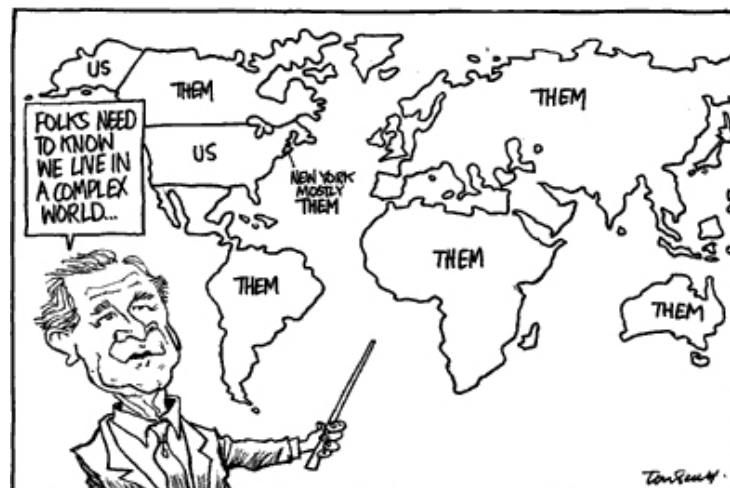
They say, don't they, that there are two sorts of people; those who divide the world into two sorts of people, and those who don't.

The social psychologist Henri Tajfel, as a Jewish intellectual working in the aftermath of the Holocaust, inevitably found his work shaped by questions of discrimination and persecution, and how such things were possible for human beings. He became preoccupied with the question "What are the minimal conditions necessary for intergroup discrimination?" He and his students devised and conducted a series of

what became known as "minimal group studies".

According to social psychologists Reicher and Hopkins, "The result is disturbing, because it seems to suggest that mere categorisation—the logically minimum condition for the existence of a group—is sufficient to produce outgroup discrimination." Unpacked crudely, all you need for an "us and them" situation is to divide human beings into two groups.

I've never really rated Big Brother. Too "Corinthian" for my tastes! (That's me putting myself into an elite group of "people who don't watch Big Brother"; needless to say, we're better than those of you who do! You, of course, will beg to differ...) But the idea of a community created just by throwing people together is an intriguing one theologically, because—again to put it a bit crudely—isn't that



how God builds the empirical Church, the Church you see and experience when you are actually there? People you would never have chosen to spend time with, but some of them are OK. Potentially “us” material. And even if we’re all “us” inside the church—what about them, outside?

It’s a warm, fuzzy word: **community**. Community is about belonging. And belonging is good. The trouble is, as Tajfel’s work demonstrates, human belonging tends to generate nonbelonging. Being *in* raises the question of who’s *out*. Ingroups are defined by outgroups. How can we be the Church without talking about “us” and “them”? Without thinking *and enacting* “us” and “them”? The theologian Anselm Min lays great stress on the concept of “solidarity” - specifically “solidarity with others”. And you say “Well, *duh!* Of course I can’t be a community by myself! I need others...”

Christian solidarity is *solidarity with those who are other*, in other words, it is solidarity with those who are *not like me*. And it means having the humility to recognise *their solidarity with me*. If you want it in a nutshell, see the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Instead of



reading it so the Samaritan is the good Christian(!) and wondering if you are enough like him, put yourself in the position of the man who fell

amongst thieves—where Jesus’ first, Jewish hearers would be. Ponder the *difference* of the Samaritan. Humanity is kaleidoscopic difference. This seems to be how God made us. Ponder the Samaritan’s unexpected love. In the end, it all comes down to love. With Jesus, it always does. A tough, radical, dry-eyed love, not the “niceness” with which liberal Christianities are often parodied. Perhaps it is something to do with this: that *God is love*. God so loved *the world...*, “Love one another...” Love is radically, painfully inclusive. Here’s the poet Edwin Markham, twee, perhaps, but oddly haunting:

*He drew a circle that shut me out;
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle that took him in.*

Can Community Care?

*Rev Blair Robertson
Chaplain at Glasgow Southern
General Hospital*

Twice in recent months I’ve had the problem of trying to help people who can’t be helped—patients with complex needs including mental health problems. I don’t work in mental health chaplaincy but I do meet patients who are living with a mental illness, a severe cognitive problem, perhaps due to a head injury, and others who seek out the chaplain hoping for help.



Montrose Asylum

Acute wards in a general hospital, or in specialist rehabilitation units, are no place for people who cannot handle a programme of care involving goal setting and cooperating with a range of staff. Likewise, people who don’t need acute psychiatric care but are unable to live in the community, even with support, have no place to fit in: their needs don’t tick the limited range of available boxes in the care system. The process known as “care in the community”, which began in the 1960’s, has closed down those safe sanctuaries called asylums which often had orchards,

golf courses, and gardens. Patients could work in the greenhouses or as upholsterers and find fulfillment in doing something productive. Yes, there were patients in asylums who should not have been there but perhaps a person with physical disabilities and a cognitive impairment who simply needs

care, patience and time to get life sorted out might have found a home there.

The gospels have the story of the demoniac called legion who lived among the tombs. Ironically, the

graveyard was probably a safe place for this man to be—he would not be bothered and no-one would bother him. He lived on the margins but there will always be people who are unable, for a while or for life, to be a part of mainstream society as they cannot function in it. There are many of them and they are lost in our communities, perhaps living homeless or in prison or in an underclass which is beyond the margins. They are not in our churches—though on occasions paths might cross. And it is hard to help: our systems of care demand too much of people who cannot fit in anywhere.

CHILDREN OF DIVISION

*An interview with Ian Barron,
an educational psychologist and
trauma therapist who has recently
moved to Jerusalem with his wife,
Rev Jane Barron.*

In a community that, from Scotland, seems so divided what are the effects of the divisions in Jerusalem on the children you have met?

There have been a number of studies from the UN and non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) documenting the impact of the separation barrier and current conflict on children and families. Although trauma is often spoken about, and this is a significant issue, anxiety and depression are also pervasive within the Palestinian

communities. Some mothers in refugee camps can spend all day huddled up in bed, shutting out the world. Children can be seen in large groups with no sign of adults—playing in the streets, no toys. I felt like the pied piper when I visited Ida Refugee camp in Bethlehem. ➔



Children at school in Dheisheh Refugee Camp outside Bethlehem

Within Gaza children have been thrown from their beds from the sonic booms of jets that at times have gone over nightly. Consider the fear, unpredictability and impact of sleeplessness on a sense of wellbeing within a developing child. In short, development slows or even stops. From a recent study in Ramallah, there are significant numbers of children with a considerable gap in their reading and writing. This can be compounded by an adult culture which believes itself to be well educated resulting in denial and a lack of response to the situation.

What forms does the trauma you see take?

From a trauma perspective some children's neurology simply gets hot wired from the traumatic events they hear, see and experience. In other words for the child who has witnessed his or her father beaten at a checkpoint, a missile land next door, their house demolished (for some more than once), or been the victim of a terrorist bombing in Jerusalem, their brain begins to function in a different way. Rather than having the capacity to talk and process the experience for some it gets hot wired in as an image (the falling building), or sound (the explosion), or smell (of burning sulphur) along with associated emotions (fear) and self-beliefs ("I am helpless" or even "I am to blame"). Further the "body keeps the score" and they can experience psychosomatic symptoms (e.g. soreness in the body)

A recent Israeli study which looked at the symptoms of post traumatic disorder (PTSD) in children found that over 45% of Palestinian children showed signs of PTSD. Roughly you might expect around 8% of the population to show these signs.

PTSD is typically characterised by firstly "avoidance" (keeping away from what traumatized you if you can. If you can not, then shutting down or "dissociating" - shutting off thoughts, memory and feelings. Children struggle to grow emotionally, socially and intellectually when part of the brain shuts down. Secondly children suffer from "hyperarousal", which is like being on alert all the time, watchful, wide eyed, looking for the next danger. Some are in searching mode, looking around constantly for the lost relative—the child who will never sit down in class. And finally "intrusion", where children experience flash backs of the



event(s) with all the fear and emotion that was experienced the first time, nightmares, some have hallucinations, and others have thoughts they can't get rid of. The trauma is as fresh today as it was when it happened.

What can you, as a trained professional, do to help, and in what ways can the church help?

There are two main therapeutic approaches which have evidence backing their effectiveness. One is Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and the other is Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing (EMDR). They are both just as effective, but the latter tends to work in fewer sessions. EMDR is a courageous therapy for children as they are asked to go to the worst of their experience for a brief exposure while the traumatic memory is processed and can be eventually spoken about again without all the PTSD symptoms being triggered. There are now group protocols to use in EMDR which helps treat classes and groups of children at a time.

St Andrew's Kirk Session in Jerusalem has initiated a trauma project through me which seeks to deliver EMDR to children, initially in Bethlehem within the Lutheran Trauma Centre. Further, I am working with the Israeli Centre for Psycho-trauma to evaluate their trauma proofing materials which they have implemented in both Israeli and Palestinian schools (CHERISH). The Ecumenical Accompaniers (those that bravely place themselves between, for example, extremist settlers and Palestinian children going to school) have asked that I deliver screening and pre-briefing training for their volunteers. A project in Ramallah, Centre for Research in Education (CARE), has approached me to be part of delivering training to teachers in the West Bank to raise their awareness

of the signs of trauma and finally for just now, an Israeli project Ashalim has asked for training on enabling children to disclose abuse (this was my doctorate topic).

Given I'm providing all these services on a voluntary basis and covering the expenses of this, I would be more than grateful if churches back home in Scotland were willing to work towards covering these expenses.

What are you learning in Jerusalem that might help congregations in Scotland in dealing with troubled children and youth in their parishes?

Trauma is not unique to the Middle East. My work as an educational psychologist enabled me to specialize in the area of child abuse and child trauma. There are many abuse survivor organisations in Scotland that are desperate for funding. One of the best I've worked with in Scotland is *Eighteen and Under* based in Dundee but there will be the equivalent in other parts of Scotland. Rape Crisis Centres often know of the survivor services offered to children.

The slant of my responses has been towards trauma in the West Bank. I know the levels of trauma in Israeli children are also high as a result of the terrorist bombings and the recent war in the North for example - trauma is no respecter of nationhood. Even the holocaust has left a mental health legacy that has ripped through generations, still impacting on children to this day. However, given there are 2500 educational psychologists employed in Israel and I've only found one so far in the West Bank, the area of greatest need is tragically obvious.

The project Ian Barron has initiated with the Kirk Session of St Andrew's in Jerusalem require initial start-up costs of US\$39,100 (~£20,000) not counting any salary.

If you or your church would like to support this work, please contact Ian at ianbarron23@hotmail.com

Rev Jane Barron's new blog on life as minister in Jerusalem: janeinraelpalestine.blogspot.com

Poverty, Dignity and City Chambers

Rev Dr Martin Johnstone
Urban Priority Areas Adviser

Picture the scene. A group of 6 people from Baula (in northern Malawi) are attending a Civic reception being given in their honour by Glasgow's Lord Provost in the summer of 2006. (In actual fact it was one of the Baillies who hosted the lunch but it was a generous offer nonetheless.) The group were there as part of *Together for a Change*—an exchange programme which has enabled people struggling against poverty across the world to come together. In this case the group from Baula were meeting with people from Ruchazie, an area of Glasgow with above average poverty and street violence. The Malawians were singing and laughing and dancing with huge energy and enthusiasm at the Civic reception.

At the end of the lunch various City officials talked about all that they were doing to help poor people in Malawi. They talked about the containers that were delivered with old books in them at the same time as our new schools were being built, about the charity which was desperately needed, and about how Glasgow was playing its part



Glasgow City Chambers

as 'the friendly city'. I don't want to sound ungrateful but I remember feeling hugely angry at what was happening. Here were a group of people who had brought life to an event by their sheer exuberance for life—from whom

“ Here were a group of people who had brought life to an event by their sheer exuberance for life... and they were being treated as objects in need of rich people's cast offs.

we have so much to learn—and they were being treated, albeit I believe unwittingly, as objects in need of rich people's cast offs.

Lots of things frustrate me about a society, and a church, that fails to be inclusive but one of the things that concerns me most is that we are all poorer as a result. If those who were in the Lord Provost's room that lunchtime (and I include myself) had done a bit less talking and a bit more listening (and dancing) then we could have moved beyond treating the poor as objects. We would also have gained some wisdom about how poverty might be more adequately addressed.

I hope for a day when those struggling against poverty will be at the heart of Church because I know that we all, rich and poor, will be much better off as a result.

Information about the Together for a Change programme is still available on the Church of Scotland website at:

www.churchofscotland.com/together/index.htm

The Holy Land and Communitarianism

Rev Scott M Rennie

With communitarianism all the rage in theological circles these days, thanks to theologians like Stanley Hauerwas and others; it was interesting to visit a part of the world in which its limitations and a model for ethical living are so clearly and publicly displayed. Israel/Palestine is a land unlike any other. It is a meeting point for three of the world's great faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is steeped in religious culture of different communities and it is a country shot through with division and violence. Wherever one roams in the Holy Land the tension is inescapable, and one feels that dispute and discord are never far away. It is a region of the world that lives on edge because of different communities that cannot get on and share space together.



Jerusalem is the place in which this is most noticeable. Communities clearly demarcate their boundaries through dress and custom and instil a feeling of either belonging or not. The unwillingness of an orthodox Jew to share a pleasantry in a shop, the failure of people to share even a glance, says a great deal about an atmosphere of distrust. Even in areas where the population is near homogenous there

is a fear or suspicion of the stranger. It is palpable in one's interactions with both Jew and Arab.

Living in diversity is a challenge far from being met.

In that sense it is a place which symbolises the challenge that the whole world community faces - how to live together peacefully, indeed joyfully. How we might live in unity but also with room for diversity. During my two week sojourn in Israel/Palestine, I had many opportunities to talk with people about the troubles—with everyone from clerics to peace workers, waiters to cleaners. Amongst them all was agreement that the thing holding back peace in their land is fear—fear of the other. It is a fear built on a history of injustice and mistrust that stretches back through the centuries, never mind recent decades. And yet people are

desperate for peace.

The interesting thing is that on both sides—Arab and Israeli—one finds the majority of people politically quite moderate. They accept that difficult compromises will have to be made, and that humiliation of one side or the other will not result in peace. Yet the sad thing is that politics, on both sides, are increasingly dominated by those on the extremes because both see the survival of their community and its interests as the main determinant in who they support politically. It is polarisation writ large.

What happens when two communities, with two very different grand narratives have to live in an extremely small space together? What is it that can bring them together to negotiate how they share that space, rather than to build walls—be they concrete or cultural? Can they find a new context for their narratives or is the idea of a grand narrative which guides all our ethical behaviour only useful as long as we stick to our own kind?



Usama Zoughbi works at Wiam, a Peace and Reconciliation Centre in Bethlehem which supports interfaith youth groups to try and promote intercommunity peace in the West Bank between Christians and Muslims. It is an open, sharing and honest environment where young men and women from different

“The challenge is for moderate minded people to claim back the initiative from the extremes—be they in the church or society at large.

backgrounds are able to discover their common heritage of humanity, as children of Abraham. Amongst the bleak stories of violence lie seeds of hope. It can be different.

It is in a meeting together in the market place in Jaffa, that Jews and Arabs have learned to sit in stalls next to each other, trading and laughing while busy shoppers peruse their wares. It is in common space that we discover that those who seem so different to us are actually quite like us. For one thing they share the same hopes and aspirations for their children—peace and prosperity.

The challenge is for moderate minded people to claim back the initiative from the extremes—be they in the church or society at large. Perhaps the work of the moderate majority is to find a voice for living together in diversity (in what ever form that takes)? Perhaps our work is in creating space where that interaction between different narratives or variations of it can safely take place? In terms of the church, there may be a grand narrative in our story of faith in the Old and New Testaments, but it has always taken a diverse form. It is nothing new. Finding common ground may be hard work at times. Much harder than sharing similarly held prejudices. But its rewards are great. Jesus called it the Kingdom of Heaven.

During his trip to the Holy Land, Scott kept a blog for his congregation to follow. It is available to read at:

<http://scottmrennie.blogspot.com>

FACING UP TO FUNDAMENTALISM

The biblical scholar, James Barr, has written:

“Fundamentalism has suddenly become a matter of concern for everyone, whether or not they are personally religious. It affects education in science and history; it affects political elections in some countries, and through this it affects international relations; it may affect the question of whether [hu]mankind survives [far] into the twenty-first century. Therefore, if people want to understand the world in which they live, they may find it necessary to understand something about fundamentalism.”

In an excellent summary article available on the *Ekklesia* website, Simon Barrow explores the relatively short history of fundamentalism, the common misconceptions that surround the use of the term, the problems it induces and how we might respond to the challenge of fundamentalism. Particularly relevant to us, perhaps, is the clear differentiation between a fundamentalist mindset and evangelical commitment.

This is highly recommended reading and includes an extensive bibliography should you wish to read more on this increasingly important topic.

www.ekkleisia.co.uk

OneKirk Working Group Members

The current Working Group for OneKirk comprises the following members:

- Rev Dr Jim Francis (Publications)
- Rev Dr Christine Goldie (Membership)
- Rev J Peter N Johnston (Convenor)
- Rev J Owain Jones
- Rev Bryan Kerr
- Rev Gillean P Maclean
- Rev Scott M Rennie (Treasurer)
- Dr David R Smith
- Rev Libby G B Spence (Secretary)

Supporting OneKirk

OneKirk is an inclusive network of ministers, deacons, elders, members and friends of the Church of Scotland.

As such, there is no dotted line to be signed to join OneKirk or statement of scriptural interpretation that must be adhered to. To join the mailing list, please email us via the website (www.onekirk.org) or by contacting our Membership Secretary, Rev Dr Christine Goldie, on 0141 589 8866.

However, if you would like to also

become a Supporting Member then your contributions would be gratefully received to enable OneKirk to provide resources to assist and encourage members and clergy of the Church of Scotland.

We suggest an annual contribution of £15 (or £5 for unwaged).

Please make cheques payable to ‘OneKirk’ and send c/o Rev Scott Rennie, Cathedral Office, 6 Church Street, Brechin, DD9 6EU.

Being "Parish" Churches

The End of the Parish?

There is a great deal of chatter around the church about whether the current territorial parish system is still viable. When, in rural communities, the distances become vast from one end of a parish to another, it seems hard to justify legitimately the concept that the minister is available for all in that parish. Similarly in a modern urban sprawl where parish sizes are increasing past 10,000 people, the concept seems tenuous.

And yet even so, in the concept of parish ministry, of the church rooted in the community, for the community there is something deeply important.

As has already been expressed in this issue of OneKirk Journal, the idea of "us" and "them", the idea of church insiders and outsiders seems to be incompatible with what church, and specifically "parish" church is about.

The Northumbria Community puts it nicely in their *Community Rule*: "We ask that those who wish to become Companions with us in Community say 'yes' to *Availability* and *Vulnerability* as their way of living." That means availability not just to God but to others, it means intentional vulnerability expressed through prayer, study of scripture, accountability to one another and friendship. It means "embracing the heretical imperative (challenging assumed truth), being receptive to constructive criticism, affirming that relationships matter more than reputation, and living openly among people as 'church without walls'."

At a recent youth group meeting in Rutherglen one of the teenagers, new to the group, was reticent to take off their jacket. Why? They had a Rangers strip on and didn't want to cause offence. One of the other teens said, "No, you don't need to worry about that here. This is a safe place. We don't care about that." Availability and vulnerability.

The Machan Trust

Some nine years ago the churches in Larkhall formed a trust that has grown into a considerable programme for children and youth in a community that has the unenviable reputation of being

divided along sectarian lines. In a given week between 350 and 400 children in Larkhall and surrounding communities are involved in the programmes of the Machan Trust.

The witness shown by the youth workers and many volunteers is having a positive effect on the community. While the trust does not have a specific objective to foster reconciliation within the community, nonetheless it is naturally having that affect simply by its presence and work.

Rev Alistair McKillop, chairperson of the Machan Trust, says, "One of the recently employed workers comes from the Catholic community and so within the staff there is a working together across the traditional divisions of the community. That, in itself, is a tremendous witness to the youngsters. This wasn't positive discrimination, it is just a wonderful knock-on effect of her appointment."

Within the schools, with which the Machan Trust has excellent relations, there is a growing desire to tackle the issues surrounding sectarianism. In the future it will become a more formal part of the work of the Machan Trust as they link in to the work of the schools in this area.

Reshaping Buildings

What's the greatest risk we can take?

We could redevelop our church building!

With that question and answer resulting from a Church Without Walls discussion at Inverurie West Church Kirk Session, there began for the congregation a six year process which has led to the contractors moving in at the beginning of February to begin a £620,000 conversion of the main church building. The aim is to provide a multi-purpose facility for the congregation and the whole of the

“ Rev Ian Groves: "We have chosen the word 'hospitality' because it seems to us to sum up what Jesus was about in his ministry."



The traditional Sanctuary of Inverurie West today... awaiting transformation

community. The main external feature of the new development being a glass porch facing the West High Street allowing people outside to see in and people inside to see out!

This congregation has been no stranger to risk over the years. It was born out of the Disruption in 1843 and by 1877 was in the current newly built church. Since then members of the congregation have always been to the fore in the community activities of this rapidly expanding north-east town.

The aim is to re-open the building in the autumn with a worship space upstairs and a "hospitality" area downstairs. "We have chosen the word hospitality", explains West Church Minister, Rev Ian Groves, "because it seems to us to sum up what Jesus was about in his ministry".

There will be space where people can share food and company, where counselling facilities can be available to a wide variety of organisations, where a credit union can be set up, where young people can meet socially in an alcohol-free bar, where people can buy fair trade goods, where local artists can display their work, where there can be held conferences and concerts - and a whole host of things the congregation have yet even to think about.

But what the congregation are looking forward to as a worshipping community, is having the freedom to change the worship space upstairs and also have it available at times other than Sunday at eleven o'clock.

Rev Ian Groves adds, "This is exciting and daunting at the same time, but thanks to amazing support from a congregation who have a real sense of the right time in all this, hopefully all the work will go smoothly."

The Gospel according to Saint Richard?

Rev Peter Johnston

Before discussing *The God Delusion*, the latest book by Richard Dawkins, the well-known evangelist for science and particularly evolution, I should confess having rather an admiration for Dawkins.

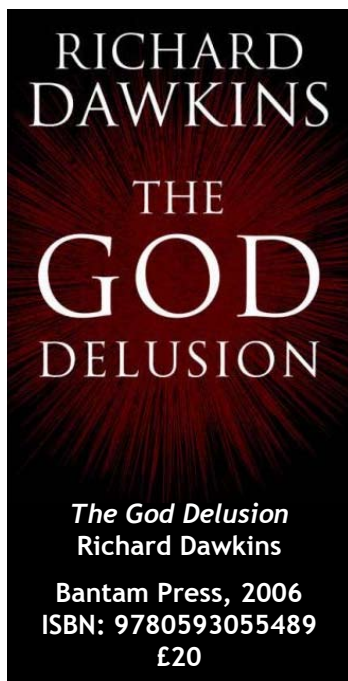
As a student of biology some twenty years ago for me Dawkins' clear, impassioned and joyful accounts of the majesty of the natural world and the extraordinary explanatory power of evolution by natural selection was like a bright light being shone on the topic. Dawkins, with the late Stephen Jay Gould, are due all credit for their ability to make biological science understandable and exciting.

Reading between the lines in his previous books has been a critique of religion. In *The God Delusion* Dawkins lets rip with a self-proclaimed desire to advocate atheism, "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."

One of my first encounters with an "atheist on a mission" was through an exchange of emails. The great frustration for me was that the "Christian" as described by my atheist correspondent was nothing like what I felt as a Christian. Indeed, I readily agreed that if I was a Christian in the intolerant, bigotted, closed-minded sense that he wanted me to be, I should quite rightly be criticised.

It was a deeply unsatisfying encounter because we were talking at different levels. That same frustration will also arise when reading *The God Delusion* for all those who consider themselves "progressive" Christians. On the other hand those who defend the literal truth of every word in the Bible and its attendant moral and ethical baggage are addressed directly by Dawkins.

There is much in this book which one can



agree with. The advancing right-wing desire for so-called Christian theocracy in the USA is truly terrifying in its desire to roll back laws to Old Testament times - a sort of American Taliban. The teaching of creationism (wrapped up as Intelligent Design) as science in some of Tony Blair's now infamous "City Academies" is equally deplorable for those who understand and cherish science.

The accusation for us, as OneKirk, that held most weight for me, was that those who are Biblical literalists within our church, those who seek to define "them" and "us", who tend to exclude rather than include those on the fringes of the church, are not challenged enough from within the church.

Dawkins attempts to deal with the accusation that he, like the fanatics he rightly criticises, is also a fundamentalist. His defense, while sound, doesn't quite take away the sneaking suspicion that in his rhetoric he has made a leap too far. There is scant mention of Jesus, though Dawkins concedes that he "was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history". And neither is there mention of all the good that has come about because of Christianity and the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount - the drive for social justice as witnessed in the life of Martin Luther King, for instance. That failure of balance in presenting his argument opens the door to accusations that Dawkins himself is being selective to suit his argument - the great accusation he has laid against creationists' use of science and those who interpret the Bible literally.

Is it worth taking time to read *The God Delusion*? Absolutely. Despite the inevitable frustrations, it is a sparkling read that will challenge and provoke in equal measure.

Community Reading

In this issue of *OneKirk Journal* we have included various thoughts around the theme of Living in Community. If you would like to explore this theme in more detail you may be interested in a couple of recent publications.

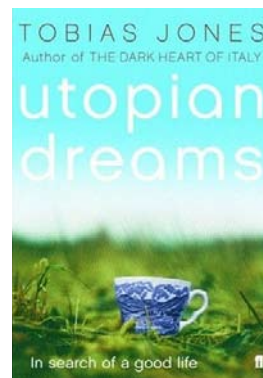
Utopian Dreams: A Search for a Better Life

Tobias Jones

Faber & Faber, 2007, £12.99

ISBN: 9780571223800

This is a travel book, an account of the year Tobias Jones spent living in communes and amongst unusual dreamers. It is his attempt to retreat from the 'real world' and seek out the



alternatives to modern manners and morality. He encounters wildly different communities, some more harmonious than others, which lead him to ask the deeply unfashionable question: do groups that place faith at their centre work better than those that don't?

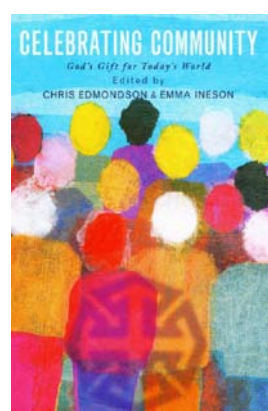
Celebrating Community: God's Gift for Today's World

Eds. Chris Edmondson & Emma Ineson

Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006, £10.95

ISBN: 9780232526592

Celebrating Community traces the history of Lee Abbey, a community founded in Devon in 1946. Now a nationwide movement, the community's mission and calling is



to share Christ through relationships, through practising community living, reaching out to others, playing a distinctive part in renewing and serving the church, and developing a deeper relationship with God.