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***Briefing* is free. However, to cover rising costs and to ensure its continuation, donations are always welcome.**

If you would like to contribute, please contact David Parkin, the Treasurer of Free to Believe, for more information: d.parkin123@btinternet.com

Cover image by Helen M Mee



What next for *Briefing*?



Following the retirement of Ken Forbes as the editor of *Briefing*, the Free to Believe Committee set up an Editorial Subgroup to ensure that *Briefing* continues to be published two or three times a year. Together we have explored our understanding of the purpose of *Briefing*, recognising that it needs to be the voice of Free to Believe (FTB), promoting our events, and filled with theological exploration and reflection, views, reviews, and reports, as well as personal stories and spiritual paths, all coming from a liberal and progressive position.

While Free to Believe originates from within a URC background, we recognise that our audience is ecumenical, and that ‘members’ are often isolated, and so *Briefing* needs to be aimed at quite a wide and varied audience. Our hope is to produce three editions annually, with one covering the Conference or Reading Party, and the other two editions focusing on other themes, and with guest editors.

These, however, are our ideas, and we would like to find out from readers what you would like, to help us develop and shape *Briefing* for the next few

years. So, we are inviting you to fill out a questionnaire to help guide us as we navigate the next few editions. Please see the information on the next page on how to respond to the survey.

This edition focuses on our recent Conference, 'Coming to Our Senses', led by Kathy Galloway and Victoria Turner, and we have included summaries of the sessions (and YouTube links of recordings of the sessions) along with the reflections of some of the participants. There are also book reviews, an article about Greenbelt, and information about the Reading Party taking place next year.

The guest editor for the spring edition is the Revd David J M Coleman, a URC minister currently serving as Environmental Chaplain to Eco-Congregation Scotland. David recently said of himself:

I suppose I am radically green-orthodox, rather than particularly 'liberal', though also green-ecumenical. I don't think there is any area of Church that has any excuse to be other than fully committed to care for creation.

David has also developed a valuable digital ministry and you can find out more about his ministry at

www.ecocongregationscotland.org
and **www.facebook.com/ecocongregationscotland**

We hope you enjoy this first edition of *Briefing*, as edited by the new Editorial Subgroup.

Liz Byrne, Nick Jones, Iain McDonald, Helen M Mee and Kevin Skippon





Survey

In order to make *Briefing* as relevant as possible to its readers, we'd be grateful if you'd answer a few questions to help the editorial team. All responses are anonymous. Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey.

The questionnaire is available online at tinyurl.com/36hns7cw, or via the QR code below.



Alternatively, please send your responses to the questions opposite to:

The Revd N Jones
6 Brimstage Close
Heswall, CH60 1YE

1. Do you receive *Briefing* by post or email? If it was only available digitally, would you still like to receive it?
2. Is *Briefing* the right length? Or is too long, or too short?
3. In terms of text and layout, is *Briefing* easy to read? Would you make any changes?
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6. Do you feel *Briefing* covers a range of theological viewpoints? Is there anything you think is missing?
7. Do *Briefing's* contributors represent the demographic diversity of progressive Christianity? Are there any voices that are missing?
8. Should *Briefing* cover political topics and viewpoints, or should we avoid these?
9. What subjects would you like to see given more coverage? Do you have any suggestions for articles?
10. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?



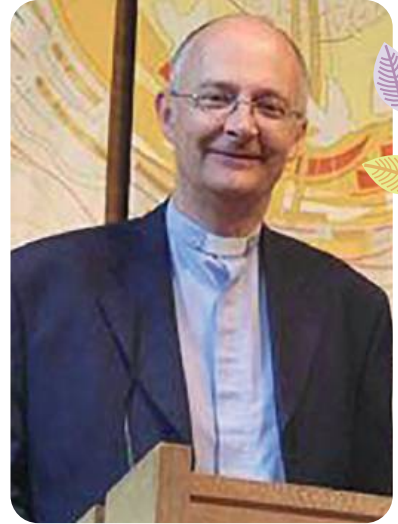
Thank you Ken

Martin Camroux

Asking Ken to take over as editor of *Briefing* after David Lawrence was one of my better ideas. He has done so promptly and efficiently, writing short, pithy editorials. One of his innovations was the use of colour, which significantly updated the presentation and helped give us the very attractive looking magazine we now have.

Ken has had a long association with Free to Believe through attending our conferences. But I have known him better as minister of Lion Walk Church in Colchester where I am a member. It has been a pleasure to listen to his always thoughtful sermons, which usually had more questions than answers. In his last editorial in *Lion Talk*, Ken writes:

Regular listeners to my sermons will no doubt have discerned a recurring theme: the presence of God's Kingdom in today's world; the



involvement of God's Spirit in even the most trivial of encounters; the opportunities for service presented by chance meetings; the surprising outcomes of serendipity and coincidence. Not that I'm thinking of a manipulative, interventionist God who moves us around like pieces on a chessboard. Rather, a God who gives us the intelligence and ingenuity to recognise where the next steps might lead us on our journey of faith, and to follow that path as the disciples followed Jesus, ready to face all the twists, turns and forks in the road.

Very Free to Believe! We wish Ken well as he retires to Dumbarton, with Glasgow on one side of him, and the Highlands on the other!

Free to Believe Conference 2024

Coming to our Senses

From 4 to 6 September, Free to Believe held a conference titled 'Coming to our Senses' at The Hayes, Swanwick. Talks were presented by Kathy Galloway, a Church of Scotland minister, feminist, social justice leader, writer, poet, and former head of Christian Aid Scotland; and Dr Victoria Turner, a lecturer in Mission and Pastoral Studies at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxford.

These condensed versions of Kathy's talks seek to capture the essence and key points of the original presentations and are printed with permission. You can watch all of the talks from the conference on the URC's YouTube channel: bit.ly/4ekL6xH.

You can read the full text of the talks on the Free to Believe website: freetobelieve.org.uk

Free to Believe is an informal network of liberally-minded Christians striving for an open, inclusive and thinking Church. Beginning in the United Reformed Church, it now

includes many members with similar aims from other denominations: freetobelieve.org.uk.

Next June, a reading party will take place at Luther King House, Manchester, on the book *Holy Anarchy*, with its author Graham Adams. Copies are available from the URC Bookshop: www.urcshop.co.uk

Session one: remembering the body

Treasured Memories

Lock of Baby Hair

Among my cherished items is a lock of my daughter's baby hair. It's softer and lighter than her hair now, forty years later. Holding it transports me back to her infancy: her soft skin, the scent of Johnson's talc, and the feeling of her small arms around my neck. I recall the yellow-walled room with paper mobiles and a sea view. I see myself then, younger and tired but fulfilled by motherhood and work, singing and rocking her to sleep.

Oyster Shell

This oyster shell, from a memorable lunch at the Loch Fyne Oyster Bar, represents a first-time experience with oysters. Its jagged edges and smooth interior bring back the taste and texture of the oysters, complemented by dry white wine. The outing, filled with relaxed conversation and friendship, took place on a cold, snowy day. The memory is vivid, tied to a sense of happiness and camaraderie.

Piece of Red Granite

A piece of red granite from the Ross of Mull symbolises a community formed during a week at the Iona Community's remote outdoor centre. The stone's hardness and glittering mica reminds me of the bond shared with others around a wood fire, the whitewashed walls, and candlelit faces. The memory includes the vulnerability, joy, respect, and humour of cleaning toilets together. It evokes a profound sense of beauty in people and place.

Power of Mementoes

Mementoes serve as reminders, triggering memories through various senses. A smell, taste, sound, sight, or touch can transport us back to a specific moment. For example, the smell of sawdust recalls men building a platform for the church summer fair in my childhood. Hearing a



familiar tune in Geneva revived memories from sixty years ago. Our sense memories are powerful, evoking emotional and physical responses stored in the body. Sometimes, these memories surface without a clear connection, like the smell of frying onions or a familiar street corner. When we do remember, these triggers recreate a whole world, bringing back not just the sensory details but also the emotions associated with them.

Daily Routine and Memory

Memory plays a crucial role in our daily routines. Morning habits, like opening curtains and boiling water, are performed almost automatically, rooted in years of repetition. Even mundane tasks, like brushing teeth or turning on a computer, involve a remembering process that becomes second nature. Each day is a collection of memories, shaping our identity and functioning.

Personal and Collective Memory

Our personal memories are mirrored in collective experiences. Families have their photographs and traditions, regiments their flags and parades, fans their chants and attire.

These shared memories constitute our identities and communities, whether as a family, a regiment, or sports fans. They provide a sense of belonging and purpose.

Importance of Memory

Memory is integral to our sense of self. Rowan Williams describes it as the presence to oneself, constituting and understanding oneself through continuous history¹. Free and full memory allows for a fuller self, a concept central to therapeutic processes like counselling. Sharing memories, especially for the elderly, enhances physical and mental health, providing social connections and a sense of identity.

Church and Memory

The Church relies on shared memory to make sense. Liturgies, rituals, and ceremonies are reminiscences that re-member us as Christians.

They evoke the past in the present, grounding our faith in collective memories. Edwin Muir's poem, *The Incarnate One*, critiques the separation of word and flesh, emphasising the importance of sensory experiences in faith.

Trauma and Memory

Understanding trauma's impact on the body highlights the need for a theology that honours our physicality. Neglect and abuse, as seen in Romanian orphanages in the Ceausescu era, underscore the importance of human contact for mental development. Churches must reject ideologies that view the body negatively, recognising its role in our overall wellbeing.



Embracing our Embodiment

Treasured items, like the ones I shared, remind us of our capacity for love, joy, and beauty. Recognising the gift of our bodies enhances our ability to live fully.

¹ Based on Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (DLT, 1982)

During our time together, I aim to explore our embodiment through different lenses, celebrating our creatureliness, physicality, and faith. Through personal remembering and sharing, we honour the significance of our embodied experiences.

Session two: the dialogue of life

***Almighty God, Creator:
The morning is yours,
rising into fullness.
The summer is yours,
dipping into autumn.
Eternity is yours,
dipping into time.
The vibrant grasses, the
scent of flowers, the lichen
on the rocks,
the tang of seaweed,
all are yours.
Gladly we live in this
garden of your creating.²***

The instinct to worship in response to the beauty and mystery of the universe is as old as humanity itself. The passionate expressions of psalmists and poets create a timeless song of praise that resonates in the hearts of those who have gazed upon

mountain ranges, countless stars, or a sparkling sea. This song celebrates the intricate delicacy of nature, from a leaf unfurling to a horse racing across a meadow, inspiring humankind to express love for our earthly home.

In the late Middle Ages, Scottish poets known as ‘makars’ embodied this creative spirit. We can envision the universe as the song of God the Makar, a joyous outpouring of energy and creativity. It is a religious instinct to respond to God’s song-making with our own praise; the earth makes worshippers of us.

In Genesis 2, we encounter a profoundly human God, who models a man from the earth’s clay and breathes life into him, planting a beautiful garden for him to inhabit. The man, Adam, is intrinsically linked to the ground (‘adamah’) of his being. This connection highlights a significant issue: our failure to acknowledge our creatureliness has led to the destruction of nature at an unprecedented rate, threatening countless species. It raises the question of how we can pray with integrity while being so careless with our habitat.

²The Revd George F Macleod, from *The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory* in *The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory: Iona Prayers* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1985)

Scottish journalist Kenneth Roy described a visit to a remote village in the Outer Hebrides, where he experienced what he called ‘the unbearable fact of God’ in a stark, colourless liturgy. The austere worship reflected the barren landscape, prompting reflection on how our environment shapes our self-understanding. Does a particular habitat create its own meaning, or do we seek to make sense of our surroundings?

Before they have language, babies perceive the world through their senses, forming a foundational relationship with their environment. This sense of place influences our feelings of belonging or alienation, affecting our responses to concepts like ‘nature’ and ‘home’. A sense of place is a profound human experience, often stronger than attachment to other people – motivating patriotism, artistic expression, and ecological concern.

In recent decades, ecological awareness has surged, highlighting issues like global warming, pollution, and biodiversity loss. We are beginning to understand that our habitat is interconnected; what affects one part ultimately impacts all. We inhabit a living earth, and our maps are changing as our understanding evolves.

Attitudes toward nature can be categorised as either extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic views see nature as a resource to be managed or exploited, while intrinsic perspectives, such as deep ecology and creation spirituality, recognise the inherent value of all life forms. These perspectives emphasise respect and reverence for the earth, acknowledging our connection as a species among species.

However, recognising our interconnectedness also means acknowledging our finiteness and limits. Western cultures often promote a sense of limitlessness, encouraging disengagement from history, geography, and relationships. This detachment can lead to a denial of reality, as Jonathan Porritt noted, where the consequences of ecological disaster are not yet severe enough to prompt change.

Our relationship with our habitat is often mediated, distancing us from the natural world. The Book of Job reminds us of our embeddedness in nature, calling us to recognise the divine hand in all living things. Despite our scientific understanding, much remains mysterious, and our response should be one of wonder and love.

In observing creatures in the wild, we discover our similarities

and differences. The Book of Job exemplifies a powerful dialogue between humanity and the Creator, challenging simplistic notions of virtue and suffering. This ongoing dialogue of life is a cause for celebration.

As we reflect on our dialogue with the universe, we must pay close attention to our surroundings, using all our senses to foster connection. Our bodies are gifts that enable us to engage deeply with the world around us.

To conclude, I want to share a song about trees by Orcadian musician Kris Drever, along with other talented artists: bit.ly/4fu5gpG
Song: Oak, from *Spell Songs II*.



Session three: the bodies of grown-ups

Many of us watched the Olympic Games in June. My love for athletics comes from having a brother who was a national athlete, although my family's passion for football didn't inspire me in the same way. Every four years, I am delighted by those who strive to go faster, higher, and stronger, both individually and as part of a team. I also enjoyed discovering lesser-known sports, such as competition bouldering.

I admire the years of dedicated training involved in all sports. With some imagination, I can envision myself learning many of them to a beginner level, as they seem within reach for my human body. However, some feats, like Simone Biles' multiple somersaults or Mondo Duplantis' pole vaulting over six meters, seem almost superhuman. The Olympic sports showcase the incredible potential of the human body.

The Paralympics further affirm this potential. It's not just those with physical perfection who achieve extraordinary things; individuals often labelled as 'disabled' demonstrate that, with the right support and opportunities, they can develop impressive abilities.

This idea extends beyond sports. I recall watching a Proms concert featuring Scottish violinist Nicola Benedetti performing Wynton Marsalis's *Violin Concerto in D*. Her performance was magnificent, and I was struck by the physical effort involved in playing music; her muscles rippled as she played, showcasing a different kind of physical potential.

Physical accomplishments

In the mystery of birth, we are reminded of fundamental truths. We are creatures, and forgetting this undermines our existence. We are co-created beings, interdependent with other forms of life, and our bodies should be cherished, not harmed, as they are holy. We are located in time and space, part of a history and geography, and we are co-creators, drawing from our relationships with the earth, others, and God.

When discussing elite sports and music, it's essential to recognize that many people worldwide lack the resources or freedom to pursue such opportunities. The countries topping the Olympic medal table are predominantly high-income nations, highlighting global inequalities.

Most of us appreciate the dedication of elite athletes and musicians, perhaps with a tinge of regret for

***This longing calls forth
our best qualities –
tenderness, kindness,
and genuine mutuality.***

not practicing harder as children. However, the catastrophic global injustices affect many, and not everyone has the same opportunities.

I am an adopted grandmother to a young Vietnamese couple studying in Glasgow. They welcomed their first child, Edwin, through IVF, which was unavailable in Vietnam. After a challenging start with breastfeeding, they eventually succeeded by following ancient wisdom – skin-to-skin contact helped Edwin latch on. This experience reminded me of our animal instincts and the health benefits they can bring.

Despite being born into the world, children experience it differently. The sheer number of people and species creates a complex environment where many are deemed less valuable. The dominant economic system often values what is scarce or exotic, leading to a devaluation of life.

Women, in particular, are often considered of lower value than men. A long history of Western theology

has portrayed women as secondary, derived from men, which has justified abuse and oppression. The plight of Afghan women at the Olympics, denied opportunities by their leaders, exemplifies this ongoing struggle.

Yet, there is a deep longing for companionship and intimacy, a desire for connection that reflects both human glory and tragedy. This longing calls forth our best qualities – tenderness, kindness, and genuine mutuality. However, trust can be easily betrayed, and belonging can turn into possession.

For the Christian church, the desire for intimacy has often played out as farce, particularly regarding homosexuality. This issue remains divisive, overshadowing more pressing global concerns. Jesus himself said nothing about homosexuality, yet biblical prohibitions are often misapplied to loving partnerships.

In a consumerist culture striving for perfection, our sexual expectations seem to diminish. True desire, characterized by tenderness and a connection to something beyond oneself, is often lost in superficial encounters.

‘The bodies of grown-ups come with stretch marks and scars’, reflecting lives lived fully. They come with bruised hearts and unforgotten wounds, each carrying memories of lost loves. Yet, there is beauty in this experience, a grace of longing that flows through bodies no longer striving for innocence but yearning for redemption.

In conclusion, our bodies, with all their imperfections and histories, are vessels of beauty and longing. They remind us of our shared humanity and the importance of connection, kindness, and love in a world often marked by division and misunderstanding.



Session four: the bodies of children

A couple of years ago, just after the pandemic had ended, I read a book that resonated deeply with that time: *The Winter Vault* by Canadian writer Anne Michaels³. Part of the story unfolds in Warsaw in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Two things struck me. First, many during the pandemic felt their loved ones were in a kind of winter vault, awaiting proper funeral rites and remembrances. Honouring the dead is crucial across generations, and we still have a vital role in this.

Second, it's challenging for us in the UK to grasp the deep trauma that the Second World War and much of the 20th century inflicted on Eastern Europe. From the Soviet famines of the 1930s, which led to the deaths of an estimated eight million peasant farmers, primarily Ukrainians, to the Holocaust and the immense suffering on the Eastern Front, where 30 million lives were lost, the scale of suffering is often overlooked in our narratives of World War II.

This reflection was particularly poignant as I read while Russian

³ Anne Michaels, *The Winter Vault* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009)

tanks rolled into Ukraine. The horror unfolding there is unspeakable. Among the many atrocities, one especially distresses me: since 2014, Russia has forcibly transferred nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children to areas under its control, assigning them Russian citizenship and creating barriers to their reunification with their families. The United Nations has labelled these deportations as war crimes.

The fear and distress inflicted on these children are unimaginable. Sadly, forced removal of children from their parents is not new and has historically occurred in colonial contexts, such as among indigenous communities in Canada and the USA, the stolen generation in Australia, and others. This serves as a stark reminder that children, the innocent victims of war, are often the most vulnerable.

Just when it seems things for children couldn't get worse, we witness the tragedy in Gaza. Perhaps you remember Hind Rajab, a six-year-old Palestinian girl trapped under fire in Gaza City, hiding in her uncle's car surrounded by the bodies of her relatives. After being told by the Israeli army to evacuate, their vehicle was shelled, killing everyone except Hind and her 15-year-old cousin, Layan. While Layan called for help, she

was killed by gunfire. Hind, the sole survivor, answered the phone, her voice barely audible with fear.

This story pierced my soul. During Holy Week, I struggled to hear the Good Friday narratives without feeling fury. How can we listen to the passion of a man two thousand years ago while remaining indifferent to the passion of a six-year-old girl today?

Incarnation

Did you not feel the soft baby skin pressed to your cheek, the small arms clinging round your neck like ivy on a post, the small weight asleep on your chest in the night, and know that this was the meaning of the Incarnation? This sweet, damp flesh, these small bones, Christ child, human, the whole universe in her eye...⁴

War is hell, everywhere and at all times. We sacrifice our children and young people, fetishising violence as entertainment and a marker of masculinity, creating generations of trauma. The long-term consequences

⁴Kathy Galloway, *Incarnation in The Dream of Learning our True Name* (Wild Goose Publications, 2004)

of such brutality on young soldiers, including child soldiers, are unimaginable.

Franciscan Richard Rohr wrote that Christianity should be a lifestyle of simplicity, non-violence and love, rather than an established religion. Many can be warlike and greedy while claiming to follow Jesus. The suffering on earth is too great for such hypocrisy.

I cannot worship a god who demands the killing of an innocent child. The story of Abraham and Isaac marks a transition, as God forbade the slaughter, signalling that human sacrifice is no longer acceptable. This prohibition against violence is a clarion call to abandon the myth of redemptive violence, which justifies oppression and abuse.

Disconnected individuals often emerge from abusive childhoods, lacking empathy for those outside their narrow circles. Right-wing nationalists claiming to uphold Christianity raise difficult questions for us. My Reformed Christian tradition emphasises citizenship as integral to faith, urging us to identify with the marginalised and dispossessed.

As a member of the Iona Community with an explicit commitment to peace-making, I recognise the ambiguous

nature of our scriptures and practices, where violence and exclusion are woven throughout. Jesus asked, 'Who do you say that I am?' This question challenges us to confront our complicity in violence and to hold on to the promise of non-violence.

God comes to me not through doctrine but through the beauty of creation, in silence, companionship, and the interconnectedness of life.

In a place of great violence, a different kind of space can emerge, where the Holy Spirit moves among us in the power of non-violence. Our communion is not merely in suffering but in the hope of transformation and new life.

How does God come to you?

Session five: the loveliness is everywhere

The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, which discusses the ruined city of Warsaw, resonates with me because it reflects the practicality of rebuilding. It also reminds me of a poem by Adrienne Rich:

⁵ Adrienne Rich *My heart is moved* from *The Dream of a Common Language* (Norton 1978)

***My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power reconstitute the world.***⁵

We are always reconstituting the world! The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, 'Faith is to walk out over 50,000 fathoms of water.' Most storms we face are not at sea; they are in our hearts and minds – anger, fear, conflict, and panic. We often feel adrift, lacking direction and support. Yet, Jesus' call to Peter, 'Come on', invites us to live out of faith, not fear.

During my time with Christian Aid, as we launched humanitarian appeals and petitioned governments, I saw this story as a metaphor for the chaos threatening many lives. In the storm of struggle, it often feels like we are battling overwhelming forces – despair, suffering, and hatred.

It is crucial to keep faith with those on the margins caught in storms that are both spiritual and material. To act despite fear, to persist in hope, and to stand for justice is a call to walk on water. We must listen, offer encouragement, and speak out for those unheard. Settling for superficial solutions would be faithless, especially when others

exercise incredible faith and hope. Jesus' call, 'Come on', is for all of us. In our struggles, Jesus, the teacher from Galilee, says, 'Do not be afraid.' These words come from someone who knew fear, loneliness, and suffering. What mattered was not what he could bind but what he had bound himself to – suffering humanity, the poor, and the outcast. He chose the way of love and peace, binding himself to the mystery of divine love.

I want to share a personal story about kayaking, something I do poorly. Growing up, I learned that 'if a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing well'. This message taught me discipline and enjoyment, but I realised it was incomplete. A colleague once told me, 'If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing badly'. This revelation was transformative. It made me reconsider my restrictive narrative about perfection. At the Iona Community's outdoor centre, I reluctantly agreed to try kayaking. Initially, I felt miserable, struggling to paddle and fearing I would capsize. However, the instructor's encouragement helped me relax and enjoy the experience. I discovered that, even without competence, I could have fun on the water.

I'm still a hopeless kayaker, but I love being on the sea. I learned that if something is worth doing, it's worth

doing for its own sake. If you carry the burden of perfection, focus on possibilities rather than performance. Give yourself permission to fail and try again. Seek help when needed; there are those who can guide you through panic and uncertainty.

I believe my best hope of being human lies in cherishing what nurtures me: music, gardening, the landscape of Scotland, solitude, and my family, especially my grandchildren. I also love poetry, as it connects me to the earth through rhythm.

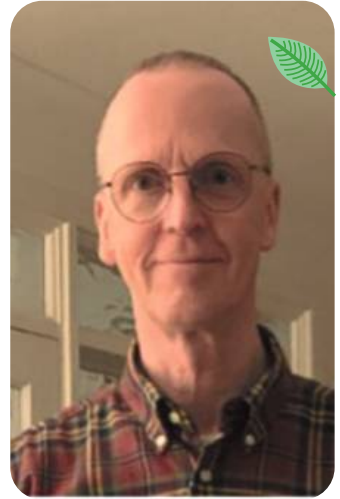
Recently, I attended the opening concert of the Edinburgh Festival, featuring Osvaldo Golijov's *La Pasión Según San Marcos*. This vibrant interpretation of the Gospel transformed Christ's suffering into a contemporary human crisis, uniting the audience in a powerful ritual. Friendship and solidarity manifest in simple acts – sharing meals, offering support, or respecting privacy. This compassion is a beautiful expression of our shared humanity.

I began with a poem by Edwin Muir, and I'll end with another, *The Place of Light and Darkness*, which speaks to the beauty and hope that exist even in darkness. Where do you see the loveliness that is everywhere?

Reflections on FTB Conference

Nick Straw

The first reflection was written by Nick immediately following the session 'The Bodies of Grown-ups', the second was written and submitted after the conference had finished. We are grateful to Nick for both reflections.



The Bodies of Grown-ups

Fascinating talk by Kathy, although I was left wondering to what extent would the part of her talk that dealt with eroticism have been different if delivered by a male. Is a man's sexual character more or less likely than a woman's to long for a deeper kind of erotic relationship than is prevalent in society today?

Alarming Signs

For a crusty old Anglo-Catholic Anglican like me, the first signs were alarming. Alongside the service sheet that had been placed on our chairs had also been placed a pot of Play-Doh. PLAY-DOH! What new form of crazy worship would this be? And for all you URC types, when Anglicans say 'new', they mean less than 500 years old. Actually, I have come to expect and even hope for a certain level of craziness at FTB conferences, although I feared that this time, without the colourful presence of Ringmaster General Martin Camroux, that element might have been missing. I should not have feared. But like previous crazinesses, this one turned out to be really rather rewarding; revelatory even. More of that in a moment.

Before Play-Doh time, we had been introduced to the main themes of the conference by the wonderfully Scottish Kathy Galloway, who, despite a hacking cough, still managed to soothe us with her whisky-coated dialect, straight from the shores of Iona. She was to present a series of talks on 'embodiment' and, in her first talk, she spoke of the power of our senses to

... our senses may offer us a way back to that creative force that was there in the beginning ...

invoke memories. 'It is the body that remembers first. Memory brings back what is already there in the body's senses ... Emotional memory follows sense memory.' Kathy explained the importance of our senses in memory, both at the individual and community level. She reflected that being Church involves at its heart a memory, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist. 'In worship, we become what the past is doing now.' Kathy's thoughts have a way of seeping into one's imagination, leaving an impression of something that feels meaningful, even if a little nebulous.

In our first worship session, which followed Kathy's talk, we were encouraged to smell, to squeeze, to look at and to listen to the ball of Play-Doh as we stretched it into strands. We were stimulating our senses and activating our memories. For me it was the smell that took me back to childhood, pressing the goo through a kind of plastic meat grinder to make different shapes. The emotion was of sheer playfulness and joy. Through this simple mindfulness exercise, we were beginning to make new connections. I need to think more about this, but it seems to me that if God is present in creation, and that we experience creation through our senses, then our senses may offer us a way back to that creative force that was there in the beginning and remains in the present and the future.

The conference continued with Kathy's presentations on different aspects of embodiment, topped and tailed each day by innovative and imaginative forms of worship, including a certain amount of hand stroking. Ken wins the prize for the softest palms I've ever stroked. You can have him back now, Ian.

I love the fact that at this conference, there were old friends to speak to, fresh questions and challenges to talk and think about, and a bunch of first-timers to get to know. I love the conversations over a drink at the bar. And there was even an opportunity for some mildly flirtatious behaviour; there was nothing about that on the booking form! Huge thanks as always to those stalwarts that do the organising. I can't tell you how grateful I am. Until next year then... can't wait.

Reflecting on the body – Conference 2024

Anne Lewitt

In our first session, Kathy Galloway brought to us the wonderful poem by Edwin Muir, *The Incarnate One*, with its powerful indictment of religion whose modus operandi involves turning away from the gift of our living senses towards the secondary, one-dimensional, evidence of language confined on a page:

‘The Word made flesh here is made word again...’

My response to the assiduous notes I made was that, to reflect theologically – as I was asked to do – on sessions which were themselves superb theological reflections, would be a futile example of precisely that – burying the living body under words, and more words. So this is a reflection on the body of Free to Believe itself, encouraged by some of Kathy’s words.

When we come together, at a Conference or Reading Party, we are linked by shared memories of places and people. For some, those go back many years, and include the Windermere Centre and the views from Orrest Head. For others this was a new experience, and conversations in the queue for the coffee machine, or over breakfast, will connect them gently to a body which grows and changes, like any living creation. Kathy reminded us of our creatureliness, the importance of being created beings among others. The question of how Free to Believe came to be is often asked. The answer involves Donald Hilton and Martin Camroux; it involves many people, and memories, and includes each one of us; but in this theological reflection I recognise that it involves calling and creation (ongoing calling and creation) beyond our own intentions. ‘God is always calling us on to regeneration’, I wrote in my notes at one point.

Over time, we are bound together by threads of conversation, one of which is the eternal search for themes and speakers for future years. For me, this highlights both our kinship and our diversity. What is it that we hold in common? Kathy reminded us of the connectedness and empathy that characterise healthy bodies and their reaction to injustice. Of course, as individuals, members of Free to Believe are committed to social action and activism. But as a body, we have sometimes failed to differentiate between theological liberalism, which has been our life blood, and social liberalism. Some suggested speakers would bring fascinating ideas and inspiration, but struggle (to put it mildly) with our theology! Does that matter? I think it might.

As Kathy said, to be human is to be a member of a species among species. So, this body of Free to Believe is a 'religious' body (however much we dislike and shy away from that concept) among others. We relate to local faith communities through our members, and to other progressive Christian groups. I would like to believe, though, that we have something distinctive to share, to help us all escape.

Prayer, inspired by the conference

*Loving God,
crafter of every atom in the
universe and every hair
on our heads,
we pray that you bring us
to our senses:
open our eyes to see you
in our beautiful creation;
open our ears to hear
our hurting earth;
open our hands to serve
our beloved communities;
open our mouths to share
your Good News.*

*Loving God,
bring us to our senses.
Shake us from our apathy
and indifference.
Move us towards justice
and peace.
And in doing so we
can help build
God's kin-dom each
and every day.
Amen.*

Nicola Robinson

Who are Free to Believers?



The Revd Martin Camroux

There is space for you too!

The first of a series of articles about Free to Believers. This is an extract from an article first published in *Progressive Voices*, the journal of Progressive Christianity Network Britain (PCN).

Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I am a United Reformed minister, a dissenter by nature and conviction, rooted in East Anglia, a region known for its wide skies and long, indented river estuaries like the Blackwater. This Nonconformist heartland, influenced by Dutch Reformed and French Huguenot refugees of whom my family was one, shaped my critical mindset and belief in the importance of the local church. For nearly forty years, I invested in such congregations, 30 of those years in local ecumenical parishes. My ministry included co-founding Free to Believe, serving on the national committee of the World Development Movement, being *The Times* Preacher of the Year, and convening the URC Church and Society Committee. I also wrote books like *Ecumenism in Retreat*

Our core is critical thinking about theological questions, encouraging diverse perspectives.

(2016) and *Keeping Alive the Rumour of God* (2020). My latest work is *A Serious House*.



Can you tell us some of the history of Free to Believe?

In 1995, Donald Hilton and I organised a conference on the future of liberal theology. Attendees requested another conference, and thus Free to Believe was born. It evolved organically without a formal structure, creed, or membership list. Our core is critical thinking about theological questions, encouraging diverse perspectives. Over 29 years of conferences,

the key factor has been the interaction and the safe, accepting atmosphere for expressing beliefs and doubts.

What does ‘progressive’ mean to you? Is it a divisive label?

Is it helpful? In what way?

I use the term ‘progressive’ sparingly. It’s a vague term that can mean many things, such as believing in progress or advocating for change. It’s often used without clear meaning and can be seen as virtue-signalling. Many churches calling themselves progressive are actually conservative in their practices. Personally, I am a Reformed Christian with an evangelical liberal heritage, committed to the catholicity of the Church. I value intellectual critique inspired by the expansive love of Jesus, believing that faith is strongest when different traditions interact. Simplifying beliefs into binaries is detrimental; we need nuance and complexity in our understanding of faith, church, and society.

Your latest book is *A Serious House* – can you explain the genesis of this particular project?

Inspired by Philip Larkin’s poem, *Church Going*, my book explores the significance of churches as sacred spaces in a secular world. As church attendance declines, many lose touch with the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Church. Churches are more than architectural landmarks; they embody community, values, and God’s presence. My book argues for the importance of these spaces, even if their religious function fades. Churches can mediate

sacred experiences, offering a unique connection to the divine. Despite their imperfections, they carry the story of Jesus and call us to love and service.

Where did the Church go so wrong in the UK? (And can anything be done to restore it?)

The decline of the Church in the UK is part of a broader phenomenon called secularisation, described by Max Weber as the ‘disenchantment of the world.’ Christianity once provided the moral and cultural foundation of European society, but now it seems alien to many. Stephen Bullivant’s report, *Europe’s Young Adults and Religion*, indicates that Christianity is no longer the default setting. Church decline began around 1880 and accelerated in the 20th century, making faith increasingly marginal.

Reversing this trend is unlikely. Hope, however, remains. It’s the belief that something good can happen even when circumstances seem bleak. This hope is sustained in community, through shared stories, worship, and service. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who faced the reality of a post-Christian world, suggested that the church must find a new language to speak to contemporary society. He envisioned a hidden but resilient Christian community committed to prayer and justice.

While the future of the church is uncertain, its role as a carrier of the Jesus story and a call to love and service remains vital. The church enriches human life by fostering community and nurturing values, even in a secular age. It continues to offer a space where people can seek something greater than themselves, making it a ‘serious house on serious earth.’

By focusing on the essence of what the church represents – love, community, and service – it can still capture the imagination and meet the spiritual needs of people, even in an increasingly secular world.

***Hope, however, remains.
It’s the belief that
something good can
happen even when
circumstances seem bleak.***



A Serious House

Why, if churches fall completely out of use, we may miss them, by Martin Camroux

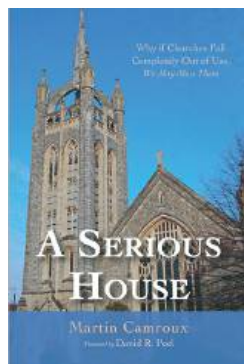
Richard Jurd (URC Elder and Lay Preacher)

‘All good religion begins with the criticism of religion’, writes the Revd Dr Martin Camroux, deliberately misquoting Karl Marx. Martin has given us a splendid third book to read and reflect upon, and to which to apply our own critical faculties. *A Serious House* is a reflection on what is so valuable about the (often flawed) Christian Church and what we would lose without it. It follows two earlier publications. *Ecumenism in Retreat* is a critique of the United Reformed Church and its failure to catalyse the moves to organic Church unity in Britain in the late 20th century, and the URC’s subsequent, perceived loss of direction. *Keeping Alive the Rumor of God* considers the not-insignificant glimmers, rumours and murmurs of transcendence in an increasingly secularised society, where the Christian Church may appear to many an irrelevant anachronism.

A Serious House develops many of the themes of *Rumor of God*. Like its predecessors, it is a searingly

honest, informed and well-argued book from a minister with a wealth of pastoral experience over many decades, who is also an outstanding preacher and who is learned (in the best sense of the word) in theology, philosophy, Church history and sociology, and who is also well-read in, and knowledgeable about, literature, art and music. All these quietly inform Martin’s writing. The book’s title is derived from a poem, *Church Going* by Philip Larkin, sometime librarian at the University of Hull where Martin read his first degree, in Sociology. The poem provides an enlightening focus for Martin’s critique.

Martin draws extensively from his own experiences in the fellowships to which he has ministered, in Southampton (where he was the much-loved and respected minister at my late parents’ church, Freemantle URC, in which I grew up) and in Birkenhead, Swindon and Sutton, as well as his early life in Essex and in Norfolk, and his



studies in Hull and Oxford. Among the memorable features of *A Serious House* are these personal experiences, some amusing but others deeply moving, even heart-breaking, all very insightful and illuminating, and helping to make the book so readable and relevant.

Themes explored include the (ir)relevance of the Church/Christianity/God, for many today 'curious and alien'; the institution of the Church (not hiding its flaws and scandals); the importance of church buildings in the physical and metaphorical landscapes of society and of life; and the life together in the Church, with the Church as a valuable moral community in an 'atomised' society. Worship, with considerations of the Christian Year and the importance of the sacraments as anchors in Church life, is a focus. A powerful chapter relates to the Church as a channel for finding a meaning for life through the teachings of the Christian Gospel.

Martin develops from *Rumor of God* his consideration of the centrality of the person of Jesus, 'remembered today because of the Church'. This important chapter has powerful insights that inform Martin's profound personal faith, which he describes

as 'evangelical liberalism'. The horror and desolation of Calvary and the reality and wonder of Resurrection are central to Martin's faith. (I did wonder if Martin could have extended his consideration of the theology of Bonhoeffer with a reference to the late Jürgen Moltmann's concept of a suffering God, which helps some of us to make sense of some of the more difficult aspects of Christian theology and Christology.)

Martin's deeply personal journey, described and expanded on in *A Serious House*, is a moving testament to his odyssey of faith. This is a plea for a living Church, not as an exemplar of an arid 'Christian-atheist' metaphor, not as a social service agency with a God-veneer stuck to it, not as a branch of the heritage industry, not as a vehicle for a flat-earth, ostrich-like sub-Christian fundamentalism. The book is disturbing and uncomfortable, but it is also suffused with hope and a positivity that the Church can and will survive, albeit in perhaps a different form to that which we know and (sometimes) love...

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bit.ly/3AoW9ba

A Virgin's Experience

Kevin Skippon

Good! Now I have your attention I'd like to share with you a little about this year's wonderful Greenbelt Festival.

I was a Greenbelt virgin but I reckon it's never too late, and I can honestly say that losing that virginity was a wonderful experience! An immersive, stimulating experience alongside over 10,000 other (mostly seasoned) festival merrymakers – intrepid and undeterred by the initial blustering challenges of Storm Lillian on the Friday followed by a very wet and soggy Saturday. But Alleluia! The sun shone brightly on Sunday as the thousands gathered in Communion to share bread just as the five thousand did by the Sea of Galilee. What an experience – even for grumpy old me, who decided to listen and observe from the edge.

It soon became clear to me that Greenbelt is very much about focusing on the really serious matters facing our world today and challenging us to face them head on with courage, compassion and caritas.

This year, quite rightly, there was much emphasis on the Israel/Palestine conflict, on Ukraine, on environmental issues, on what I shall call the fragile state of the Church and on gender identity and sexuality. The festival was served with many excellent speakers and great music for the young rappers and the old rockers like me. And the special area for activities and entertainment for children was brilliant and great fun – and not just for the kids but also for those adults who want to get in touch with their inner child – highly recommended of course by Jesus. I was surprised but delighted that Greenbelt is in partnership with a huge variety of organisations; among them are



the Iona Community, the Trussell Trust, Embrace the Middle East, the Amos Trust, the Arts Council England, the Methodist Church, the URC, Refugees at Home and Citizens UK. The Student Christian Movement was well-represented and one of them has said that Greenbelt was ‘one of the only spaces where I felt fully myself, where everyone is wonderfully different, but also really ‘gets it’.’ It was great to see a significant URC presence providing some great food – both culinary and spiritual, as well as, of course, a cheery welcome. I did wonder why Free to Believe was not represented alongside other progressive Christian thinkers and activists. It would be great for us to be there but I guess the cost is seen as prohibitive. However, it might be worth considering how we might find the means to pay to be there.

As someone who has largely given up on traditional church, the Greenbelt experience gave me so much hope for the future of intelligent, inclusive and compassionate Christianity. It spoke of the real Jesus of the Gospels whilst largely jettisoning the Jesus of our religious institutions. It spoke of God’s unconditional love rather than condemnation. It reminded me of Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s ‘Rainbow People of God’ and it was a living 21st century expression of words recorded by the early Church father, Tertullian – ‘See how they (these Christians) love one another!’ If only the spirit of Greenbelt could infuse all our churches – especially those that don’t like the ‘misfits’!

If you too are a Greenbelt virgin, then I would thoroughly recommend it as an experience not to be missed. In many ways it was a surprise and a bit of an eye-opener for a rather boring, set-in-their-ways old codger like me, but hey, even at 70 there’s still a lot to learn and new experiences to discover. So why not live adventurously, as our Quaker friends say, and enjoy and celebrate things that take you closer to the edge? I hope to see you there next year! And if you’re not quite up to the physical demands of camping, I can recommend a brilliant pub.

***If only the spirit of
Greenbelt could infuse
all our churches –
especially those that
don’t like the ‘misfits’!***

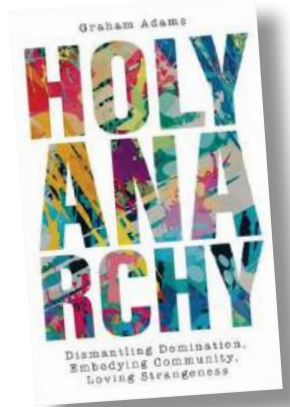
Holy Anarchy

by Graham Adams

Free to Believe Reading Party 2025

For the last 12 years, Graham has been the Tutor in Mission Studies, World Christianity, and Religious Diversity at Northern College within the Luther King Centre – with a particular interest in how questions of Empire affect each of the three parts of his teaching role. Before that, he was minister of a Congregational church in Manchester. Ecumenically, Graham has participated in several events and theological consultations organised by the Council for World Mission, and is a member of CTBI's Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group. Graham is also organises the college's annual worship conference, being interested in how worship and mission affect each other, and is a hymnwriter.

Holy Anarchy is a different way of thinking about the kingdom of God. It particularly aims to disrupt systems of Empire which dominate us, often unnoticed – both in society and in our own religious beliefs and practice.



It involves a different approach to God's power, as 'awesome weakness', and to the role of the Church, as 'awkward body of Christ'. It speaks to these times of tension and uncertainty, offering hope – but not necessarily hope as we know it. And it can shape worship in which we look to this alternative horizon, humbly but audaciously. It is an adventure – come and join the journey!

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Now you have read this edition of *Briefing*, could you take a few minutes to answer the survey on page 4. Thank you for your thoughts.



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Reading party

Holy Anarchy

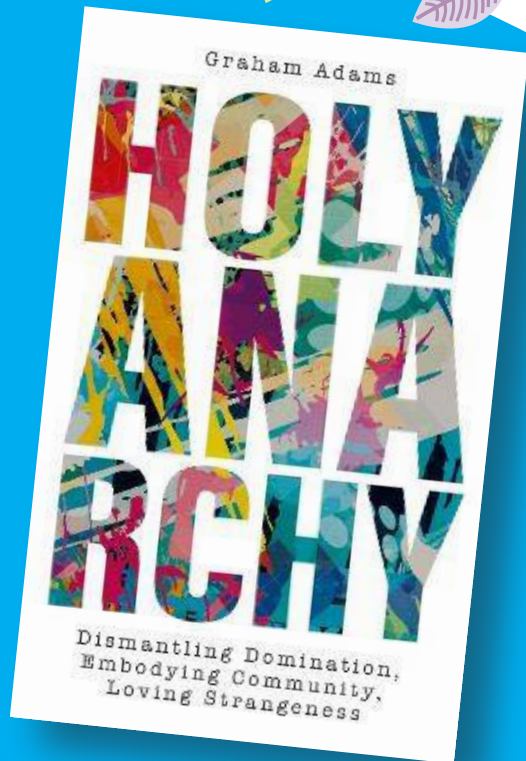


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