

Anabaptist Network News

Welcome to the new – and slightly enlarged – newsletter from the Anabaptist Network.

When we decided to cease publication of *Anabaptism Today* after the Autumn 2004 issue, this was mainly to free up time and energy to offer resources from the Anabaptist tradition to a wider audience.

We will introduce you to various developments in this issue of the newsletter, including two significant initiatives from our partners in the 'Root and Branch' network – Ekklesia, Workshop and Urban Expression.

But one expression of this attempt to engage with a wider audience is to include a short article and a book review in this newsletter, which goes out to the 1000+ people linked with the Anabaptist Network (roughly four times the number who subscribed to *Anabaptism Today*). We hope you will appreciate this extra page.

Do let us have any feedback on this redesigned and enlarged newsletter. And if you are happy to receive it by email rather than post, let us know so that we can save on costs.

After Christendom series

The second book in the *After Christendom* series published by Paternoster and written by various members of the Network is now available: ***Church after Christendom*** by Stuart Murray. The Paternoster website introduces it thus:

'How will the western church negotiate the demise of Christendom? Can it rediscover its primary calling, recover its authentic ethos and regain its nerve? If churches are to thrive – or even survive – disturbing questions need to be confronted and answered. In conversation with Christians who have left the church and those who are experimenting with fresh expressions of doing church, Stuart Murray explores both the emerging and inherited church scenes and makes proposals for the development of an ecclesiology suitable for a post-denominational, post-commitment and post-Christendom era. With chapters on mission, community and worship, this comprehensive and accessible book offers a vision of a way of being church that is healthy, sustainable, liberating, peaceful and missional.'

This book is on sale for £8.99 in Christian bookshops or it can be ordered via the Anabaptist Network website.

The new Paternoster catalogue also features the third book in the series: ***Faith and Politics after Christendom*** by Jonathan Bartley, due out later this year.

And we have recently heard that Paternoster has approved the fourth book: ***Worship and Mission after Christendom*** to be written by Alan and Eleanor Kreider. So the series is developing well, with further titles also in preparation.

Events

9 April 2005:

Cross Currents event at London Mennonite Centre: *Church after Christendom* (Stuart Murray Williams).

18-22 April 2005:

A Bridge Builders course on *Mediation and facilitation skills training* with Kirsten Zerger held at London Mennonite Centre.

24-27 May 2005:

A Bridge Builders course on *Family emotional process for church leaders* with Richard Blackburn at London Mennonite Centre.

28-30 May 2005:

How then shall we live? – the Anabaptist Network residential conference at Barnes Close, Bromsgrove.

9-10 June 2005:

Anabaptist theology forum at Offa House, Warwickshire.

25 June 2005:

An Urban Expression *Open Day* (to find out more) in East London.

29-30 October 2005:

First weekend of the new *Crucible* course (Workshop and Urban Expression): *Creating new churches*.

Events

The Network's **residential conference** on 28-30 May – *How then shall we live?* – is almost fully booked now. We are looking forward to a stimulating but relaxed time together. Please contact us as soon as possible if you are hoping to come. There are just a handful of places left.

The next **theology forum** will be on 9-10 June at the usual location – Offa House just outside Leamington Spa. Several new people joined us for the December forum. If you would like an invitation to the June forum, please contact us.

The Network will be represented at **Greenbelt** this year and we hope to share space with other groups from the 'Root and Branch' network. If you are coming to Greenbelt, look out for us; if you could help on the stall, please let us know.

Future events: as we look ahead to the autumn and early 2006 we are exploring the possibility of co-sponsored conferences with other groups we have worked with in the past, including the Northumbria Community and 'Men, Women and God'. Please let us know if you have ideas for subjects or venues for such conferences – or other suggestions for future events.

News

Moves are underway to bring closure to painful memories of the **divisions among Christians** in the 16th century. 2004 was a significant year:

- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America last spring finished a two-year series of meetings with the Mennonite Church USA.
- On June 26, the Reformed Church in Zurich held a reconciliation ceremony with the participation of Anabaptist descendants from around the world.
- On the same day, Pope John Paul II met with Johann Christoph Arnold, an elder of the Bruderhof Communities, in Rome.
- A Vatican-appointed delegation in 2004 concluded five years of meetings with a group from Mennonite World Congress, the global Mennonite fellowship.

We reported in the previous newsletter on our conversations about setting up a **network of churches** linked with the Anabaptist Network and we anticipated having further news on this by now.

There is enthusiasm for this but discussions are continuing as we try to work out how such a network might operate as a self-sustaining and supportive community, rather than becoming an administrative burden. If you are interested in this, please join in the discussion by contacting us at the address below or by email.

Root and Branch: representatives of the eight organisations that comprise 'Root and Branch' met together again on 3 December to explore further ways of working together. The *Crucible* course (details below) represents a tangible expression of increasing partnership. We will meet again – this time in Northern Ireland – in April.

Symposium: in our November newsletter we noted the furore in evangelical circles caused by comments in Steve Chalke's book *The Lost Message of Jesus*. Reports and articles about this debate on our website have been widely read. Though less public now, discussions are ongoing and a theological symposium has been arranged to explore further the issues raised. It will take place on 6-8 July at the London School of Theology. Stuart Murray Williams will be taking part and offering Anabaptist perspectives on the issues under discussion.

www.anabaptistnetwork.com

We are continuing to develop the Network's website, which we hope will be a resource many people use. We are very encouraged by the number of 'hits' we receive already. Have you visited this recently? There may be several features on the site now that were not there last time you looked. If you are receiving this letter by email, click on www.anabaptistnetwork.com

Study groups

Study groups meet in various parts of the UK. A list of groups, a map showing their location and contact details can all be found on the Network website.

Please tell us if you are interested in joining a study group, or starting a new one in your area. We know of interest in starting a new group in **Manchester**: is anyone else interested in this?

And there is also the possibility of a new group in **South Wales** – though the distance between people in that region is problematic.

Crucible: creating church on the margins

Christians in Britain (and across Europe) are facing both profound challenges and fresh opportunities. The long era of Christendom is finally coming to an end. We now live in a plural society, with multiple religious options alongside secular assumptions, in which Christianity has largely lost its previous position of dominance and privilege. Although we seem to be declining in numbers and influence, this new environment offers many new possibilities – if we have the courage and imagination to grasp them.

What is a *crucible*?

- A turbulent time characterised by the convergence of powerful intellectual, social, economic or political forces.
- A place in which different cultures or styles can mix together to produce something new and exciting.
- A melting pot, where old structures are made pliable and reshaped for more effective purposes.

Crucible is a training programme for Christians with courage and imagination. It assumes:

- We live in a mission context and need to think like missionaries.
- We need to think more creatively about church in diverse and changing cultures.
- We serve the God who constantly does new things on the margins:
 - on the margins of society among the poor and disenfranchised
 - at the margins of culture, where creative thinking explores new possibilities
 - within the margins of the familiar, those spaces all around ignored or neglected but full of potential

Crucible will run each year over three intensive training weekends to equip Christians to create church on the margins:

- **Weekend 1: *Creating new churches*** explores the principles and practicalities of starting new culturally-attuned and mission-oriented churches.
- **Weekend 2: *The urban challenge*** presents the special opportunities and challenges of starting new churches on the margins in urban communities.

- **Weekend 3: *Emerging church*** investigates the fresh expressions of church emerging on the margins of church and society.

Crucible is the result of a partnership between two groups that work closely with the Anabaptist Network – Workshop and Urban Expression – and the NEO initiative of The Salvation Army.

Workshop (www.workshop.org.uk) has offered leadership and discipleship training with fresh insights on faith, church and mission since 1983 to thousands of Christians. Its partnership in this course means that, while participants may choose simply to do one or more of the three 'creating churches' weekends offered, they also have the opportunity to combine these with the full Workshop course, at a special price, and so deepen and expand their learning experience in preparation for the future.

Urban Expression has been pioneering new churches in urban communities and networking pioneers in different urban contexts for the past eight years (see www.urbanexpression.org.uk). Seven church planting teams are deployed in East London and new teams are being recruited this year to work in Glasgow and Manchester. Participants will benefit from opportunities for practical placements, if they have the courage and imagination to be personally involved in 'creating church on the margins'.

Dates for 2005/06

Weekend 1: 29-30 October 2005
Weekend 2: 25-26 February 2006
Weekend 3: 8-9 April 2006

Times

10.00am – 5.00pm

Venue

International Mission Centre, 24 Weoley Park Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6QX

Cost

£50 per weekend or £130 for all three; and for those wanting to combine the **Crucible** course with Workshop, there is a reduced joint cost.

Trainers

The **Crucible** course will be taught by a team of experienced trainers, all of whom will have had practical experience of creating new churches on the margins. These trainers also have the ability to reflect theologically on the implications of mission in a changing culture. Trainers will include Stuart Murray Williams and Juliet Kilpin.

Forum on Fatherhood and Christianity

Anabaptist think-tank *Ekklesia* is teaming up with a leading agency on fatherhood, *Fathers Direct*, to hold a major forum on fatherhood and Christianity. The forum is part of the largest conference on fatherhood in Europe, and is sponsored by the Department for Education and Skills, headed by new Secretary of State, Ruth Kelly.

Fatherhood has been in the public spotlight with the controversial actions of certain protestors. The Christian community, however, has been discussing fatherhood for two millennia. The new forum will provide an opportunity to explore how fatherhood has been represented and discussed in Christian theology, scripture, art, tradition and history.

The forum will also feature presentations, panel discussions and workshops exploring fathering and masculinity in contemporary society, the implications for the work of churches in support of family life and an exploration of how secular social care agencies can work in partnership with churches and Christian agencies.

There will be a focus on the churches' practical work to support father-child relationships, with an exhibition of resources. The forum has been designed for church leaders, youth, children's, family and community workers, theologians, parachurch organisations, and those working within family, health, education and other public services interested in Christian perspectives on fatherhood issues.

There will be 15 three-hour forums, all run in partnership with leading organisations in each field, on fatherhood issues in different contexts.

A full conference brochure can be downloaded from www.fathersdirect.com Hard copies of the conference brochure, and further information, can be obtained by calling 0208 832 7311 or emailing info@profileproductions.co.uk *Working with Fathers: the National Conference* will be held on Tuesday 5 April 2005 at the Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL

Resources

There is another **new course** available on the Network's website – the fourth such course that can be downloaded free of charge. *The Practice of Church Discipline* offers guidelines and case studies on a much neglected but crucial aspect of building healthy and attractive churches. Try it out in your church or study group and let us know how it goes.

The **Fit4Life** course, mentioned in the previous newsletter, is selling quickly. In CD-ROM format and costing only £10 for a wealth of resources, this health course for churches is proving very popular, especially with church leaders and those with regional responsibilities for churches. The Anabaptist Network is currently the sole UK distributor of this course, and more details can be found on our website.

Do you receive the **monthly email** from 'Root and Branch'? With articles and news from the eight groups that constitute this Anabaptist-oriented network, this is a way of keeping in touch with radical thinking and activities across the UK. You can subscribe on our website.

Did you notice the excellent **article** by Giles Fraser in The Guardian on Christmas Eve? For his Anabaptist take on the Christmas story, see www.ekklesia.co.uk/content/fraser/article_041224.shtml

Resource houses

We have resource houses in different parts of the UK, from which you can borrow Anabaptist books and other resources. If you want to make use of these, please contact the hosts directly.

A full list of resource houses and a map of the location of each house can be found on the Network website.

One of our resource house hosts has recently moved from Northampton to Yorkshire. Duncan Johnstone's new address is: 14 Springfields, off Otley Road, Skipton, North Yorks BD23 1HF (01756 709680) jhnst2@aol.com.

Anabaptist Network Trust (registered charity 10217)
Website: www.anabaptistnetwork.com
Email: admin@anabaptistnetwork.com
14 Shepherds Hill, London N6 5AQ, England

Article and Review

‘After the earthquake...’

Anabaptists are biblical Christians: we take the Bible and the teachings of Jesus seriously. We should know through biblical precedent that our God has spoken after the earthquake (Matthew 27:50-54), the flood (Genesis 6–9) and the storm (1 Kings 19). Yet our shock, hurt and questions are profound in the wake of the Asian tsunami.

Each succeeding week, our discipleship is reshaped by such world events. Early on 26 December, I watched the early morning satellite news to help prepare our congregation’s intercessions; many arrived for worship unaware of the tsunami’s toll.

The following Saturday, like many others, I was helped by (the chief rabbi) Jonathan Sacks’ article in *The Times*, reminding us all that good Hebrew/Jewish teaching helps us to frame the right questions in times of chaos and crisis.

Another week on, and I found myself as faith’s pundit on a live two-hour radio debate; sandwiched between the concerns about *Jerry Springer: the Opera* were those searing questions about Christian hope in the face of such human suffering.

Our answers cannot be quick or slick but must be rooted in our discipleship to Jesus. We live in a natural and physical world which God has made. Parts of that ongoing creation are the tectonic forces which lead to earthquake and tsunami; what happened was part of a natural and physical order.

Our faith is rooted in the God we know in Jesus who was born the Bethlehem child – birth is a natural and physical occurrence, too. God’s love is supremely guaranteed in the gift and life as well as the death and resurrection of Jesus, which still plumbs the depths of human suffering.

Yet each of those 300,000 tsunami deaths involves individual suffering and grief. To

know how much two of my closest friends grieve, at the tsunami’s taking of their 33-year-old son from Ko Phi Phi beach, brings its cost to bear. It is only a Jesus-centred faith that can assist all our responses.

Several Anabaptist groups and many other Christian groups are involved in relief and rebuilding efforts. In our giving, we need to be responsible, by supporting agencies that work co-operatively and also initiatives, such as those of groups like *Transparency International*, which will fight corruption in the face of many ‘fast buck’ opportunities.

We also need to speak out and protest when other prophetic voices are maligned; did you protest about the *Sunday Telegraph’s* belittling of Rowan Williams faith-full views?

Remember: the ‘cash is king’ maxim in disaster relief www.dec.org.uk. Not all of us can (or should, because we lack the requisite skills) volunteer to go out to work in the disaster-afflicted areas. We can do other things: a regular volunteer slot in an Oxfam shop, collecting during Christian Aid week, becoming a Traidcraft agent or Tearfund supporter; each such response is ‘life-bringing’.

These things we can do as congregations, home-groups and Network study groups. We can also learn about the principles involved, study/pray together and seek to influence others, as our discipleship also is enriched.

For many of us, our initial commitment to the *Make Poverty History* campaign now has a deeper resolve. Listening to Nelson Mandela, in Trafalgar Square in early February, made one aware that new coalitions will be forged if we are to be involved in helping to change global perspectives: another Anabaptist vision.

Most of all, we too need to be ‘faith-full’. In our caring and our sharing, as well as in our explaining and praying. Christians (and Anabaptists among them) need to live as a sign of God’s new age. John Howard Yoder (Mennonite theologian and educator) once

wrote: 'The meaning of history is carried first of all, and on behalf of all others, by the believing community.'

After the storm, it was the Lord who sent Elijah back into the world to prophetically 'anoint the king' and combat the prophets of doom, so that nations might again prosper.

Jesus, the focus of our discipleship, was accused of being Elijah-come-again, but he instead chose a path which, despite its suffering and death, led to life. After the earthquake...who will others recognise in the response of our shared discipleship?

Andrew Francis (Swindon)

A Theology of the Dark Side

Nigel Wright (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), £8.99

This is the most helpful book on the subject of evil that I know. It is a response to Walter Wink's pressing question 'How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?' Getting our ways of thinking and believing right is part of the process of getting our ways of living and acting right.

Wright guides us along the border between two opposite errors: rejecting the powers of darkness or obsessing over them. He offers us ways to think and speak about evil that also deprive evil of any respect or glory. For example, he outlines a careful and cautious approach to the controversial subject of 'deliverance ministry' and is highly critical of popular charismatic approaches to this. He argues that 'demonophilia' is offensive to God and bad for the soul.

The book engages with scripture frequently and rigorously in a spirit of what Wright calls 'thoughtful acceptance' which is also critical and reflective. Wright also dialogues with several theologians and those who reject 'devil' language yet offer their own analysis of evil's power in history and psychology. He appropriates the work of Walter Wink, who understands the powers as manifesting

in the realities of human life and society and drawing their negative energy from there.

Rather than battling with 'territorial spirits', true spiritual warfare must take account of the political, social and cultural context in which we live, for this is where the powers afflict humanity. The powers can to some degree be humanised and helped to see that they too have a Lord. Spiritual warfare is all about prayer and persuasive action, using power to 'influence with' rather than 'have power over'. But our actions must imitate Jesus in his cruciformity; coercive power betrays the gospel.

There is a fascinating, speculative chapter on the origins of evil and helpful practical chapters on the problem of evil and the response of the church. Wright does not try and avoid difficult questions, yet he is able to leave questions unanswered but with a clear outline of the issues and firm grasp of the cross. There is a substantial section on the problem of physical evil, where Wright makes a distinction between evil and the 'shadow in creation'. Not all pain or conflict is evil, but evil and the shadow are hard to distinguish because evil uses pain as an alibi to hide behind. But creation has a threatening side, which is not in itself evil. Death, decay and conflict are features of created human existence by which we grow into maturity.

Wright concludes that there is no sufficient answer to the problem of evil. We can trust in a God who is both almighty and loving, but words reach their limit in the face of mindless and meaningless evil. The God who has created us and is revealed in Jesus is not removed from suffering and the effects of evil. The defeat of evil by Jesus undergirds Wright's entire analysis: the powers of darkness have been overcome in Jesus Christ.

Tim Foley (Portadown)