Continuing the Journey

Editor’s note

The past year for the new planning group has been a busy but exciting one, as we have put together a programme for the 2014 conference, ‘Flow and Ebb... playing in the shallows...diving in the depths’ The theme will explore the watching, waiting, distance and rhythm of life. We will journey together, to find riches in the shallows as well as in the depths.

We are delighted to introduce our speakers, Canon Trevor Dennis, Ruth Layzell, Sr. Elizabeth Obbard and Roy Searle, who each bring a richness of experience and knowledge to the conference. Our speakers will approach the theme from a variety of perspectives looking at the theological/ biblical, spiritual, psychological/therapeutic and social/pastoral.

We are also very pleased to announce that Pádraig Ó Tuama will join us on Thursday for an evening of performance poetry. I saw Padraig, recently, at the Bloxham Festival of Faith and Literature and found his performance most enjoyable but also moving and thought provoking.

We look forward to welcoming you at the next conference, a great opportunity to retreat from the busyness of life, with space for reflection, challenge, nourishment and fun. Be sure to put 28th April to 2nd May 2014 in your diary today!

More details can be found at www.continuingthejourney.com and on the back page of the newsletter.

An open temporary community, exploring continuity and tension between the world and church, nature and grace, psychology and theology.
Introducing our speakers for 2014........

Canon Trevor Dennis retired in 2010 from the post of Vice Dean at Chester Cathedral. During his many years at the cathedral he was responsible for the education work there, and most of his working life before then had been spent in education, with spells as a school chaplain and then as tutor in Old Testament studies and Vice Principal at Salisbury and Wells Theological College. In retirement he has continued to lead retreats or speak at conferences in many parts of the country. He has published 13 books, six of them close readings of biblical narratives, six collections of stories or poems written for preaching, and a children’s Bible. He has a passion for telling it straight. He is married to Caroline and they have four children and three grandchildren.

Ruth Layzell has a portfolio existence as Director of Training at the Sherwood Psychotherapy Training Institute, co-Director of the Institute of Pastoral Counselling and a BACP accredited counsellor in independent practice. Over the past 20 years, her interest in the interface between Christian spirituality and counselling practice has been expressed variously through her work as a lecturer at St John’s College, Nottingham, and her training of both clergy and counsellors in different settings. She is married to a clergyman and - perhaps as a result - has a particular interest in working with those in ministry in a mentoring, supervisory or counselling capacity. She is currently developing her interest in making links between theology and psychology by undertaking a Doctorate in Practical Theology at the University of Chester where she is exploring a pastoral theology for accompanying people through personal and spiritual darkness.

Sr Elizabeth Obbard lives as a solitary (or hermit) at Aylesford Priory in Kent. Before that she was a religious sister for thirty five years, twenty four of them as an enclosed nun in Norfolk, where she was involved in, among other things, the formation of young sisters. Elizabeth has an MA in Personal, Moral & Spiritual Development, a Certificate in Counselling and a Diploma in Spiritual Accompaniment. She has a special interest in the Old Testament, Jewish studies and the Women Mystics, including Julian of Norwich. Elizabeth works as a Spiritual Director, speaker, writer and retreat giver. At present she writes and illustrates the simplified Spiritual Classics for New City Press; a series of books designed to make the Spiritual Classics accessible to a wider readership.

Roy Searle lives in the Cheviot Hills of Northumberland with his wife and their rescued Irish greyhound. He is one of the founders of Northumbria Community, one of the new monastic communities with Companions and Friends across the world. A former President of the Baptist Union and an Associate of the Baobab Centre, Roy speaks and writes on issues of life and faith, leadership, spirituality and building communities. A creative missional pioneer, Roy works across all church traditions and in secular contexts. He loves sailing, tennis, curling and being with his wife and children, grandchildren and friends and being a Middlesbrough football supporter, has come to believe in the notion of purgatory!

and our poet Pádraig Ó Tuama ...............

Pádraig Ó Tuama is a poet and peacemaker who lives in Belfast. He uses poetry to bring people together to have difficult conversations - often people who have been bereaved by the troubles in the north of Ireland, as well as bringing people from other areas of conflict (Israel/Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka) together for discussion and mutual understanding.

Pádraig has trained both as a conflict mediator and a theologian. As a gay man he is keen to bring tools of mediative dialogue into group discussions on LGBT people and Religion and has been working with clergy from traditionalist viewpoints over the past number of years. He directed the project “LGBT experiences of faith and church in Northern Ireland” in 2011 and convenes the recently formed Belfast LGBT Faith Forum.

Pádraig’s poetry is distinct in its interest in human encounter. It is accessible and best enjoyed as a performance. His first book “Readings from the Book of Exile” was published by Canterbury Press in 2012, and there is a second volume, “Sorry for your Troubles” being released in August 2013. As well as poetry, he writes theology, essays and advocacy material and, very occasionally, he releases music. “Hymns to swear By” a collection of spoken word and music is available through proost.co.uk

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Nikki Sweatman recently met with Sr. Elizabeth Obbard O.D.C

Sr. Elizabeth lives as a Carmelite solitary (or consecrated hermit) at Aylesford Priory in Kent. She became a nun at eighteen and spent some time as Novice Mother at the Langham Carmelite convent near Walsingham. Some years later, she returned to Aylesford in order to live as a solitary and found being the only woman in the Priory difficult because others in the community didn’t quite know what to ‘do’ with her. At first, she worked in the shop but after two years felt she needed to challenge other’s perception of her role and abilities, as a woman. She chuckled when telling me that she had received the response “so you think you could run a retreat?” Now she lives a life of prayer and solitude, but is also much in demand as a writer, speaker, spiritual advisor and retreat giver. She will bring a richness of experience and wisdom to our conference.

We met just after the installations of the Anglican Archbishop Justin and Pope Francis. Sr. Elizabeth commented on the different levels of women’s participation in the two services. She was pleased to see so many of them in Canterbury Cathedral. Later in our talk she made the comment, “In the real world, people are used to working women” and wondered “how it would be at conference, being a woman?” I was delighted to be able to reassure her that women are valued at conference. When asked about her thoughts on our journey.

I then asked Sr. Elizabeth what she thought about the focus for the 2014 conference theme of ‘flow and ebb’. She said that “we flow, we move forward in our lives, and sometimes we go deep”, adding: “alternatively you might be in one place for a while and at another time there will be a journey towards the centre but then keep ebbing because it’s a bit scary. Most of it happens and when you look back you have changed. We all have. I’m not a little girl any more. When it’s actually in the process you don’t always notice it, especially when we think of ourselves. It takes another.”

At the conference, she is thinking of using art to show our responses to situations. We all have different places of safety and different attitudes and reactions to the same scenario. I don’t want to commit her to using the particular piece she spoke about, as we are still a year away from the conference but I immediately understood the scene as she described it; how we might sit at the edge, dive in and engage deeply, or avoid and sit on the sidelines, either asleep or perhaps watchful?

When we talked about what she would like both participants and herself to take away from the conference, Sr. Elizabeth said she was pleased to be asked and was looking forward to having space within the conference to meet and to get to know others over meals and coffee. She hoped that participants would find something to help them move forward in their own journey.

As I left Sr. Elizabeth, I felt I had been ‘met’ at a very deep and personal level. I certainly look forward to meeting with her again and hearing more from her.

Pam Cram reviews Trevor Dennis’s book: The Three Faces of Christ

This is one of a series of books of imaginative writing by Trevor Dennis and perhaps representative of his work. Many of his pieces were prepared for use in worship at Chester Cathedral, picking up Biblical themes and approaching them from unusual angles.

In this book are seventeen such pieces, ranging from material for the Christmas season, through some reflections on aspects of the Crucifixion, and then pieces on the theme of Eden and the heavenly city.

Characteristics of Trevor Dennis’ storytelling are playfulness, a frequently feminine God, a down to earth approach to familiar stories, vivid, sometimes poetic language and surprising twists and connections.

As an example the title piece begins with the baby Jesus who “has no hair yet. His milk teeth are not yet showing beneath his gums. His lungs are well developed, Mary and Joseph and the animals have already discovered…….”. It moves then to a more adult Jesus, who likes good company, and lives life to the full, not like the Christ ‘pickled in piety’ or ‘stern as a schoolmaster, in Dickens, on a bad day…..’. The third section turns to the face of the Crucified Jesus, and invites the reader / listener to “stand on very tip-toe” and “soothe the very face of God”. The art of the story-teller is to get the listener to enter into the story, not just intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually. As the back-cover introduction to this book states, Trevor Dennis opens our eyes “to the possibility of rediscovering Eden for ourselves, as we explore who we truly are in God”. SPCK 2009.
What does CTJ conference mean to me?

Where do I start? My first experience of conference was in 2006. I was brought along by a Trustee of the Counselling Service, where I was Director. She told me I should go and that she would take me.

I had little idea of what the conference involved but relished the opportunity of time away from husband and family. Me time. It was so much more than I could have imagined. More thought provoking, enjoyable, supportive, spacious, comfortable and challenging (personally, emotionally, spiritually, relationally)… than I could have believed. I had an amazing time. The highlight was the experience in the small group. I still find it hard to believe that being part of a group which met on only five occasions, could impact so significantly on my life.

I went to Hayes weighed down with concerns about my family, worried about one of my children. I experienced such support and understanding, compassion and encouragement that I came away trusting that all would be well. Even though I couldn’t see or feel it, I knew deep down that my children would be okay.

I had no idea that my life would shortly be hit by a tsunami that would continue to sweep over me for years to come but the teaching and inspiration that I took home sustained me through the next two years.

I returned in 2008, a different person, shaped and broken by the waves and conference met me in a new and different way but no less significantly. I caught up with old friends from the previous conference and met new friends. I was afraid I would be disappointed, since 2006 had been so important for me. How could this live up to my expectations? A new small group was again central in my experience of the week. I found myself looking at my spirituality in a different way, questioning what was important to me, what had I taken on without question or consideration? What did I believe? What did I not believe? Was it okay even to ask those questions? And it was. I didn’t come away with lots of answers, rather more space to explore and reflect. I began to realise that God was and is so much bigger than I had ever imagined.

In 2010, I brought a friend. Initially I felt responsible for her and anxious that she had a good time. I needn’t have worried, neither did I need to look after her. I could trust that she would be welcomed into the temporary community that is CTJ. The teaching, the worship, the mealtimes, the space, the beautiful Derbyshire setting, sitting in the bar in the evening; all these things are an integral part of life at conference.

Last year, 2012 was different again. I now felt like an ‘old timer’, a seasoned traveller and yet it was new and fresh. There were less tears and more laughter. And somehow I found myself expressing an interest in being a part of the planning group for 2014. I felt and still feel unsure what I have to offer, but I bring myself and I will bring my ‘self’ to conference in 2014. If you are able to be there it would be great to see you, and to welcome you. I am confident that it will be special. Again!

Julie Nevitt, Planning group

Narrative theology  # 1
(for Pete Saunders)
Are there answers to all of this?
And he said
The answer is in the story
and the story is being told
And I said
But there is so much pain
And she answered, plainly,
Pain will happen.
Then I said
Will I ever find meaning?
And they said
You will find meaning
Where you give meaning.
The answer is in the story
And the story isn’t finished.

Pádraig Ó Tuama
readings from the book of exile,
Canterbury Press Norwich, 2012
(used with permission)