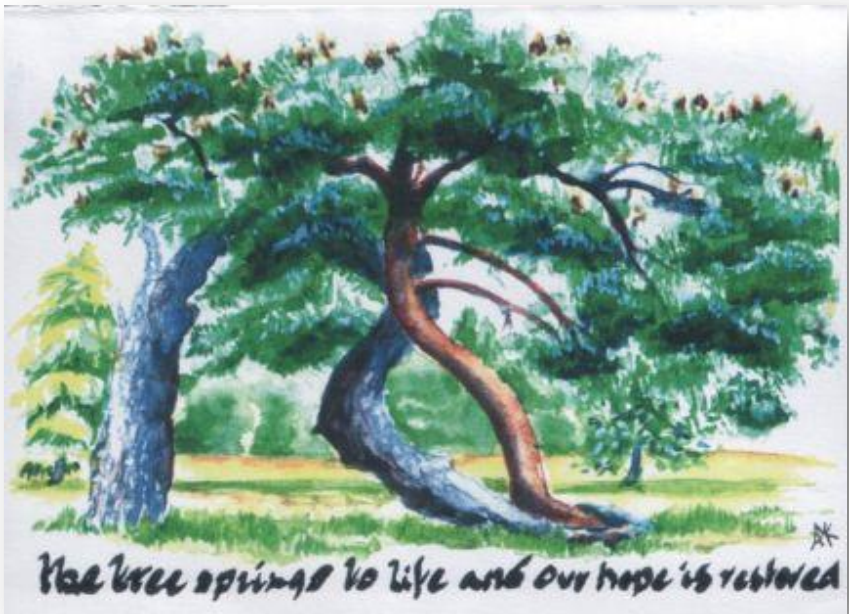


FIFTEEN AMAZING YEARS

A celebration of Free to Believe



“Rooted in the United Reformed Church
but open to all”

15 AMAZING YEARS

Oliver Cromwell once said “No one travels so high as he who knows not where he’s going.” Free to Believe comes into that kind of category because no-one planned or intended it and I was clear in my mind that I was not going to organise any such group. However, there was a growing sense of what seemed to be a choice between a church increasingly influenced by a strident fundamentalism and an equally strident new atheism. What seemed more and more excluded was the kind of open minded, critical, thoughtful religion which didn’t want people to leave their brains at the church door; but equally was confident that the deep truths of the Christian gospel were not to be written off, in the manner of Richard Dawkins, as a result of insufficient oxygen reaching the brain.

In short, there was the great tradition of Liberal Christianity which began with the Reformation’s concentration on the text of Scripture; with John Milton’s advocacy of toleration and freedom; with Schleiermacher’s recognition that the truths of the gospel must be expressed anew in every generation; with Kant’s philosophy and with the great 19th century questions about the historical Jesus and the social gospel. It had come to me mediated through the theology of Paul Tillich and John Robinson, the social activism of Martin Luther King and the preaching of Leslie Weatherhead and Harry Emerson Fosdick.

My own definition of liberal theology is:

a contextual relating of the gospel to contemporary culture and knowledge which reflects intellectual criticality and the liberal values of tolerance, openness and inclusion.

But I am also happy with Gary Dorrien’s definition: **“Liberal theology seeks to reinterpret the symbols of traditional Christianity in a way that creates a progressive religious alternative to atheistic rationalism and to theologies based on external authority”**

(Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, p xxiii).

If you want to see this visually, the place to go is New York's Riverside Church, built for Harry Emerson Fosdick. There in stone you will find religious leaders like Mohammed, Buddha and Confucius and scientists including Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein. Nothing could say more clearly that all truth is of God and Christian faith welcomes it wherever and whoever it comes from.

This was the tradition, certainly the mainstream tradition in the United Reformed Church, which seemed in danger of being drowned out – and indeed some ministers were finding that putting it on their CVs was a good way of not getting called to a church!

So I decided it might be good to organise a one-off conference with the title "Taking Our Liberal Past into the Future". Since I knew Donald Hilton had used his Moderator's Address to General Assembly to advocate the URC's liberal heritage, I contacted him and we decided to hold a conference at Windermere. Donald's influence was decisive at this point because he had a great range of contacts and gave the meeting a visibility which, without him, it would not have had.

We arranged the conference quite uncertain of whether anyone at all would come and when 20 or so did we were delighted (and more than a little relieved). That was of course going to be it. But those who came didn't want to leave it there, so we agreed to organise another, led by John Saxbee on his recent book "Liberal Evangelism".

This time Windermere was full and in order to accommodate more people, we moved to Queen's College Birmingham for conferences on "Taking the Bible Seriously" and "Is Christ the Only Way?" by Roberta Rominger and John Parry.



This was where Stanley and Dorothy Dean came into the story and without them Free to Believe really wouldn't have happened. They agreed to organise the growing conferences and to begin a newsletter. I agreed to edit and produce some little booklets setting out a liberal agenda, of which "Coming out as a Liberal" was the first. Without planning it, we had created something that was going somewhere. The name Free to Believe came from the title of a book by David Jenkins, then the Bishop of Durham.

We never took a conscious decision as to what Free to Believe was going to be and its rather peculiar nature confused some people and still does. One Moderator of Assembly raised his concerns with Mission Council as to whether we were an undesirable sectarian organization and quizzed me about it forensically at my home! I had to explain that we were not intended to be *Reverse GEAR* or anything of that sort. We were not a caucus, had no programme or policies, did not lobby General Assembly and had no membership list or statement of beliefs. We are simply a network trying to think through what we believe and encourage liberal theological thought. Our committee do no more than simply organise the conferences and magazine.

For some time Free to Believe flat-lined, with 30-40 at conferences and about 100 on our mailing list. The breakthrough was the decision to invite Bishop Jack Spong to lead our conference in October 2002. Spong is a compelling, charismatic speaker and to our amazement we went through the 100 barrier. What is more, at that conference several people came on the committee, most notably Linda Harrison who now does most of the work organizing conferences.



Today **Free To Believe** has come of age:

- The network now consists of over 500 people – including many from other denominations.
- Every year there is a national conference or a theological reading party.
- A 24-page magazine three times yearly - *Briefing* - goes out to all supporters.
- There is an ever-expanding series of booklets analysing contemporary theological issues from a progressive viewpoint (currently 11 are in print).

The important thing is that it happened not because it was planned but because so many people wanted it. Religion is not, as some supposed, a vanishing relic of the past. Great numbers of people are still on a spiritual journey. The world that we once knew has changed. And we are called by God, I deeply believe, not to resist and resent and try to recapture an era that is over, but to prayerfully and creatively discern what God has in mind for us now. Free to Believe is a good place to do that.

Martin Camroux, Chair



Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda:
the church reformed and always to be reformed

WHAT HAS FREE TO BELIEVE MEANT?

We begin this section with a few words of encouragement from Donald Hilton:

Martin and I never dreamt that the small seed we sowed could grow into such a powerful and useful plant – or rather now, a growing network of influence and support. I'm glad to have been a part of it.

My early years in a Congregational Church (Penarth) led by an open-minded minister (Rev Idris Evans) encouraged a liberal attitude in me. The influence of Fred Kaan's ministry in Barry deepened that approach. The Welsh Moderator, interviewing me before my application for ministerial training, asked me "You haven't let your mind be closed, have you boy?"

Free to Believe refreshed and renewed that approach for me - and continues to do so.

Jim Hollyman, URC Minister

What has Free to Believe come to mean to me? Well, it has come to mean a lot. When as a fledgling local preacher in the Methodist Church, I despaired about what we were feeding the congregation in the pews, my then Superintendent Minister Derryck Evans (now sadly gone) lent me a copy of Jack Spong's book '*Living in Sin*'. I devoured it from cover to cover and then went on to read most of his other books. Through him the Gospels were indeed liberated for me.

The Minister then went on to say there was a group called Free to Believe that I may be interested in joining. He said they were a bunch of like-minded people who were open, critically engaged Christians, intelligent and unbiased in their approach to scripture; and an inclusive community, welcoming and accepting those on the margins of the Church.

I believe these were the very things that Jesus stood for, that the church seemed to have forgotten about, and so I was hooked.

I look forward with eagerness for Briefing to drop through my letterbox and I devour it from cover to cover. I have been to some conferences and felt affirmed in my faith journey every time.



Jenny Ashcroft

Britain's United Reformed Church, made up primarily of Congregationalists and English Presbyterians, has had an enormous influence in a nation where Anglicanism is the established church and secularity is the majority religion. This small church produced both Fred Kaan, arguably the best progressive Christian hymn writer in the 20th century, and a movement called "Free to Believe," which encouraged people to step outside traditional and dated theological concepts and to explore Christianity in a radically new way. It began as a conference in the Lake District with the title "Free to Believe – Taking our Literal Past into the Future" and then it grew into a movement. It provided community for those who could no longer live comfortably inside theological concepts of dated creeds and the patterns of worship they found in their churches, rooted as they were in a pre-modern consciousness. This movement encouraged people to push the boundaries of faith, to explore frontiers of contemporary spirituality and to stretch the meaning of Christianity into new dimensions.

It was my privilege to participate in these conferences and to be part of this movement. In that context I met some spectacular Christian leaders and found my own life and faith enriched and renewed.

I salute this church and this movement with gratitude and appreciation.

John Shelby Spong

The extent of my indebtedness to Free to Believe is, I hope, clear from the fact that it is one of the four oases of liberalism to which I dedicate my latest book, *Grace, Order, Openness and Diversity: Reclaiming Liberal Theology* (the others being the Iona Community, St Deiniol's Library and Christians Aware).

My first contact with Free to Believe was in October 2008 when I was invited to be co-speaker with Brian Wren at the 'Liberal Voices' gathering at the Hayes Conference Centre. I found this an immensely stimulating, invigorating and encouraging gathering, so much so, I may say, that it has spawned an academic article on the theology of the Victorian hymn tune in a forthcoming volume on nineteenth century theology and music. My starting point is the fact that the liberal hymns by Brian Wren, Fred Kaan and others that we sang at the conference seemed to go much better to Victorian tunes than the more recent melodies to which they are often set.

I was delighted to be invited back as a speaker at the May 2010 gathering in Swanwick on 'Interfaith: The New Ecumenism' where I launched my book on liberal theology and also celebrated my sixtieth birthday with a truly magnificent cake arranged by Linda Harrison.

For me, as a half-English, half-Scottish Presbyterian with Anglican roots, Free to Believe epitomises the best of the great English liberal Nonconformist tradition, and especially the Congregationalist legacy. I find deeply moving the way that an

open, questing, radical, liberal faith is affirmed and lived out in the pages of its publications, the speeches and conversations in and around its conferences and in the lives of its members. I am only sorry that commitments and distance make it difficult for me to get to many meetings.

Happy birthday - and I trust the cake which will be cut to celebrate it is as good as that wonderful one that I still savour from May 28 2010!!

Ian Bradley, Reader in Practical Theology and Church history, the University of St Andrews

The 'Free to Believe' movement seems to me one of the most hopeful expressions of serious critical thinking in the modern Christian world. All traditional ways of thinking are in question, and this must apply to Christian faith as well as to the sciences and the arts. 'Free to Believe' encourages such questioning, but in a positive way which continues the truly radical nature of the early Christian movement, and will enable it to grow into the new world of thought that is emerging today.

Keith Ward, formerly Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford and now Professorial Research Fellow, Heythrop College, London

. . . and so to the Who, What, Where and Why!

What is Free to Believe?

FTB is a network of people who seek to express the Christian Gospel anew in the light of contemporary life and scholarship. There is no membership subscription (though donations are welcomed) and everyone receives the '*Briefing*' magazine three times a year. There is a major conference organised every two years, for example with Bishop Gene Robinson and the Revd Dr David Peel at High Leigh in April 2012.

Who belongs to Free To Believe?

People who believe that a healthy faith should remain open to new insights, however challenging those may be; and that thinking critically about the Christian faith is the way to strengthen rather than weaken that faith.

Why does Free To Believe exist?

FTB provides resources and renewal for those who are left unfulfilled by their church experience and who aspire to deeper understandings. It encourages living with questions, believing that the Bible is not beyond criticism and that exclusive Christianity can never be a faith worthy of Jesus.

Where is Free To Believe?

Rooted in the United Reformed Church but open to all, Free To Believe is supported by a growing number of people through informal networking and fellowship.

. . . and how do I get in touch?

For more information write to Martin Camroux, 35 Arundel Road, Cheam, Surrey SM2 6EU. Of if you wish to receive our mailings direct to your e-mail address, please e-mail Martin: m.camroux.t21@btinternet.com.

Please note: Contact details will only be given out with the permission of the person concerned. If you are happy for your address, telephone number or email address to be given out, please include this information in your email message so that the database can be marked accordingly. Otherwise you may be contacted if the occasion arises.

There is no membership fee as such, but donations towards the inevitable costs of maintaining Free To Believe are always very welcome (please make cheques payable to 'Free To Believe' and send to Mr Alun Thomas, 41 Merchant Way, Hellesdon, Norwich NR6 5HS).

Each of those on the committee has joined out of a deep conviction to share all that FTB has offered to their faith journey in fellowship. They work willingly to offer that to those who may also benefit in future – and hope that others will join us to take FTB through to whatever the future may hold for the church and the expression of our faith in our individual communities.



Chris
Avis



Martin
Camroux



Hazel
Day



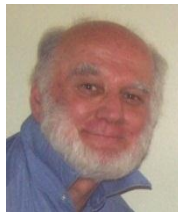
Linda
Harrison



John
Hetherington



Sue
Liddell



David
Parkin



Tim
Richards



Alun
Thomas

Although these people serve on the committee today, we give our grateful thanks to all those who have served over the fifteen years to inspire each one of us: Dorothy and Stan Dean; Donald Hilton; Alison Micklem and John Simmonds

along with all those who attend and speak at our conferences and reading parties; read and contribute to Briefing; and read the e-mailings sent out by Martin.

The image on our front cover is a drawing by Dr Anthea Kaan and reminds us of the inspiration given through Fred's words. The tree exists in the grounds of High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Herts, venue for several of our conferences and reading parties. Out of the main trunk, brought down by a storm, the new tree is free to flourish.

