

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Autumn 2012 No. 126

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CHURCH SOCIETY: WHY BOTHER?

By Pete Myers

Pete Myers. Under 30. Trained actor. That's me, and many people would be surprised to discover that this summer I joined the council of Church Society. Certainly many of my friends raised their eyebrows.

And why? Because being young, not an Oxbridge graduate, and an *artiste*, I am what you might call one of the 'post-postmodern' generation. A fact that doesn't fit most people's perception (sadly) of Church Society as a fossilized, fuddy-duddy, dead-as-a-doornail duck. Or as some may put it: "Of UCCF I have heard, and Reform I recognise, but as for Church Society—Why bother?"

Well the simple answer is: because *I care about Jesus and I care about people*.

When God's Spirit first enlivened my heart, I saw my sin for what it really was, and was convicted of my lack of love both for God and for others. Like the woman in Luke 7, I fell on my face and kissed Jesus' feet. At drama school I became obsessed with telling people the gospel, and so set up a Christian Union. But apathy was everywhere. Undeterred and zealous, I gave away my CD collection to attract people's attention to the message of grace, and in God's mercy, we saw some fruit.

Yet like many others, as the Spirit continued his work in me, the grip of the gospel widened my vision. I became concerned not just for the conversion of my friends, but for their pastoral needs: their discouragements, failures, lack of a sense of identity, and the materialistic hedonism that made them so unhappy that many were using cocaine, regularly drunk, and sleeping around. Such big problems require more than a shallow bare-bones evangelicalism, and I found myself drawn to the Reformed writings of John Calvin to provide the stability and depth I needed.

After drama school I worked for several churches, and was struck by the sheer number of people here and abroad who desperately need the gospel. Sadly, I also heard that the CU I had set up eventually died off. The Spirit had taught me a further lesson: to be truly gospel hearted means to be concerned for the gospel every *where*, and in every *time*. It is this concern that drew me to the thought of Thomas Cranmer. His historic Anglicanism united the depth of the Reformed gospel with judicious and wise church structures, to disseminate that gospel throughout the country and protect it down the ages.

This *love for Jesus* and *love for people* that led me to be zealous for evangelical conversions, thirsty for the depth of Reformed theology, and recognise the judiciousness of Anglican practice and structures is the reason I think Church Society is worth bothering about.

But don't take my word for it—let me show you. The two most attractive traits of Church Society are *who we are*, and *what we do*.

Who Are We?

'Post-postmoderns' such as myself are desperate for a sense of identity. A hole that we tend to try and fill with sex and iPads. But instead, there are three ways that Church Society has all the ingredients of a more effective God-honouring, Christ-centred, and Spirit-empowered alternative.

A Principled Identity

Church Society takes the 39 Articles as its theological definition. Unlike the UCCF Doctrinal Basis, the Articles define more than just gospel essentials. The Anglican *Catechism* is where the Prayer Book defines the basics of the gospel and Christian life. Instead, the Articles go further and define the necessary basics for *a network of churches to function together interdependently*. They deliberately define the *boundaries* of acceptable belief, and leave right space for individual conscience. Compare the Westminster Confession which prescribes doctrinal agreement in exacting detail.

Furthermore, while many conservative evangelicals get frustrated at the way liberal Catholics read scripture with a hermeneutical fudginess, some evangelicals (including conservatives!) do exercise hermeneutical fudginess when reading the Articles! It's never straightforward listening to an evangelical brother justify that while he "assents" to the Articles, he actually believes—or teaches—that some things they say are wrong.

In my experience 'post-postmoderns' are actually attracted to straightforward truth-claims, if held with integrity and humility. For people like me, the **principled** identity of Church Society is attractive: assent simply means "yes, I agree with what the Articles say."

A **Partnership** in our Identity

Church Society is a *society*. It is more than a conference. It is more than a network. A conference is what the EMA (Evangelical Ministry Assembly) *is*, whereas a conference is merely something that Church Society *does*. For more info read on, but the point is, this is also attractive to post-postmoderns like me. I don't just want to *meet* people, I don't just want to *hear* people. I want to *do things* with people, isn't that what **partnership** really is?

A **Precedent** for our Identity

The baby-boomer generation have rejected history in favour of 'the new'. Think of New Labour, and neo-Conservatism. In evangelical circles this trend can be seen in the creation of new bodies and organisations: *new churches, new groups, new journals*, etc. Reform of older churches and structures, and the use of tools like the *English Prayer Book* (Church's Society's modern English translation of the BCP) have perhaps been looked down upon, or simply ignored.

Like myself, many post-postmoderns have moved around the country, have a complicated relationship with their parents, and no real sense of connection to the past. In contrast to the baby-boomers, we are hungry for some sense of historical rootedness. The use of candles, crosses, icons and other Catholic paraphernalia in 'Emerging church' services is testament to this. Church Society has been around for about two centuries and offers a much more healthy connection with history. Such a **precedent** for understanding my identity is precisely what post-postmoderns want.

What Do We Do?

The Society exists to promote the Reformed gospel in the UK, and the renewal of the Church of England according to her historical formularies. Whereas other organisations tend to focus on one aspect of changing the church (an approach with pluses and problems) the Society brings together three crucial tools for church renewal.

Publishing

The *Churchman* journal, *Cross†Way* magazine, *EVNews*, *REAL* republishing series and more complement the publishing work of organisations like the Latimer Trust and Fellowship of Word and Spirit. But hopefully the Society could partner more closely with groups such as these in the future.

Check out: churchsociety.org/publications

Politics

Church Society members, trustees, and councillors have been active at every level of Synod for years. The Director has also sat on the council of groups such as Reform and the Church of England Evangelical Council. Both to encourage evangelical team-work, but also to promote classical Protestantism in the way evangelicals contend.

Check out: churchsociety.org/news

Patronage

Through its Trust the Society has, enshrined in law by covenants and contracts, degrees of influence over the appointment of ministers in well over a hundred parishes, and also the use of money locked up in Trusts. In a very direct and practical way the Trustees can support, and work to protect, the evangelical identity of ministries up and down the country.

The Society is looking to extend its patronage, in order to create further legal safeguards for the future of ministries that are presently evangelical and want to do their utmost to protect their gospel witness into the future.

Check out: churchsociety.org/cstrust

Church Society: *who we are* and *what we do*. This is why I, an under-30 post-postmodern with an artistic bent, thinks that Church Society is worth bothering with. *A love for Jesus* and a *love for people* draws me to their Reformed message, and a passion for the gospel throughout the country and down through time makes me long to see the Church of England renewed. Church Society is uniquely gifted with the tools to do that: combining publishing, politics and patronage, all the ingredients are there to make classical Protestantism in the CofE a force to be reckoned with.

But no matter how good the resources and structures of Church Society are, they are lost opportunities if we don't take hold of them. We need contributors for *Churchman* and *Cross†Way*, and networkers at conferences working tactically with Synod reps. As we extend Church Society's patronage program we'll need more evangelicals on the Trust to work with PCCs and churches to protect evangelical ministry. Interested? Or just want more info?

Check out: churchsociety.org/membership

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