

A Conversation with Bishop Laurie Green

The following podcast was recorded on 21 November 2023. It has been edited for length and clarity. You can listen to the entire podcast at <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2038362/episodes/140188>

Robert Hoch: Welcome to this podcast.

I'm joined today by Bishop Laurie Green, author of numerous books, including *Let's Do Theology* and, more recently, *Jesus and Jellied Eels: Making Sense of My Life*. Thank you for being with us, Laurie.

Bishop Laurie Green: It's a great joy to be here with you, Rob.

Rob: Let's just start off with that title: it seems there's a lot packed into that strange correlation: what does Jesus have to do with jellied eels?

Laurie: Jesus has a lot to do with jellied eels! I was born right at the end of the war. My birth registration was on a wartime ID card. We lived in a pretty poor neighbourhood, magnified by the fact that the whole of Britain was in a mess financially. And my parents, of course being East Enders, were very, very working-class cockneys and my mum worked in a jellied eels factory. When I was looking for a job, my mum said I'll get you a job in the jellied eels factory. So jellied eels it was.

So, why the eel and Jesus? Well, the eel is,



at one level, very familiar, especially for an East Ender. But the story of the life of the eel is extraordinarily mysterious and I think it's something of that mystery which I try and allude to constantly through the book, because that's part of what I've found out God to be, this great, phenomenal mystery which overwhelms in all sorts of ways. So, it drives me to Jesus in a

way. And it drives me back to the real world, even doubt.

Rob: The *mysterium tremendum*, "awe inspiring mystery" of God and the kind of the practicality involved with working at a jellied eel factory?

Laurie: Exactly, so of course you know that's Rudolph Otto who coined that phrase, kind of looking at the whole experience of God. But I think the thing that he missed out is that holiness sort of comes at you, and it's not something which just sort of sits up there abstractly.

(Continued on p. 3)



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("Conversation with Laurie Green" continued from page 1)

Following a year of study in New York Theological Seminary, Laurie describes how he came to know John Vincent, founder of UTU . . .

I was in the middle of New York City doing that work and they said, "There's a guy called John Vincent who was out here last year doing this, look him up." When I got back I looked up John and he said, "Oh, great stuff! I've got something for you to do."

I came when John was thinking about the implications of trying to do your theology that isn't just what anyone can do but rather has a specific theologically Christian intention. Someone might say, "Oh, there's a lot of unemployment in this town. That's not what a Christian says. A Christian says, "Why is there a lot of unemployment in this town?" To ask the question where is the power? Where's the historical happening which made this happen? And I think that John is almost sort of wound up like a clockwork with that, that he needs to see what's gonna go, what's gonna happen, what are you gonna do.

Someone might say, "Oh, there's a lot of unemployment in this town." That's not what a Christian says. A Christian says, "Why is there a lot of unemployment in this town?"

That's such an important piece because you get clergy and others running around doing, doing, doing, doing. You think, oh, for God's sake, stop and *rework* what you're doing!

Rob: What else would you tell us as you think about the person out there in a struggling ministry situation?

Laurie: I think I'd say don't look for or feed others with happiness. That's a superficial thing and very often it's the easy thing. What we're after is to find that joy. Joy is a deep, deep sense of being loved and cherished by the almighty mystery, which is around and in everything. And to have that experience is overwhelmingly the heart of joy. Joy is to be found in meeting Jesus.

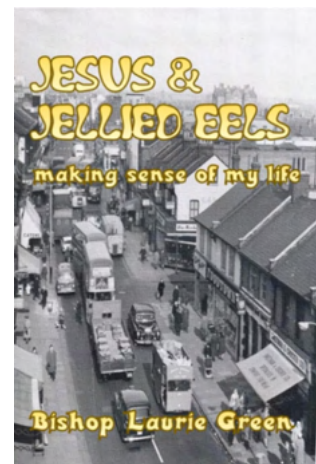
And where do you meet Jesus? You meet Jesus where there is need, and there's need in everybody. But particularly there's a societal need which almost empowers the individual's need, so it's working at that societal level. It doesn't have to be at a grand scale. You know, it can be very, very small. You can even start with 12. I'm told you don't have to have any more. You know, if there's 12, you're okay, you're on a roll!

Rob: Thank you, Laurie, for the gift of your experience. I look forward to meeting you again, hopefully in person!

Laurie: Yeah, I hope so, Rob. It's been a delight to see you on screen, but it'll be good to see you in person — I'll give you a hug!

Rob: Yeah, that'll be all right!

Laurie: God bless you!



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Report from Erica Dunmow

Chair of the UTU Board

The AGM on 18 November felt as if it had marked a turning point from UTU being an organisation battling to retain its library function and space, whilst being a tenant of a bigger organisation and having to pare back activities to suit our budget, to truly moving into a time of new possibility. Our work at

UTU reflects the lives of many people in our country — tenants facing rent increases, and an uncertain financial future — but we prayed, and continue to pray that if God still wants us to be urban grit for the churches, equipping people in tough ministry situations with knowledge and space to reflect on their experiences, then we would find a way through.

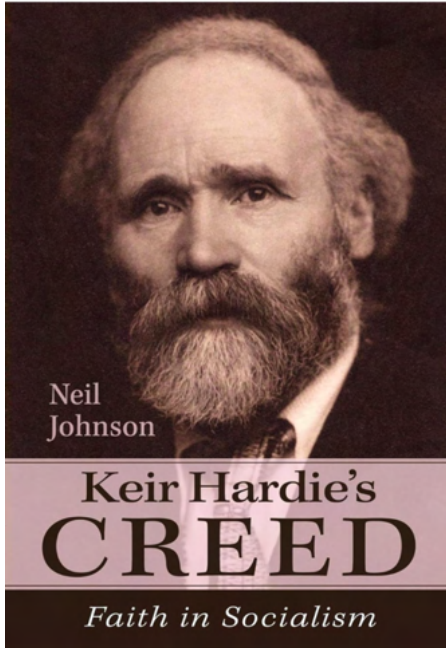


Firstly, we were blessed with Dr Rob Hoch as someone with the skills and experience to help us partner effectively with the wider Luther King Centre to secure continued PhD level validation. Then we were blessed with a financial gift from the US to enable us to give bursaries for the Certificate Course. This year, Lesley Thompson responded to an appeal for a researcher to work with Sheffield Diocese on a study of its social action footprint, We also welcome Rev Dr Common Chan and Dr Louise Lau, both of whom have taught PhD in Seminary in Hong Kong and we look forward to getting to know them and bringing our vocations together as a community. And, finally, we have had a remarkable number of people step up to the plate of being new Trustees.

So it is that we say thank you to Rev Jonathan Haigh and "hello" to Deacon Jackie Wright as representatives of the Victoria Hall Church; goodbye to Rev. Dr Kevin Ellis as student rep, with many thanks for his work on social media for us, and we welcome Ruth Weston to take up that media brief; Greg Smith joins us with a wealth of urban mission experience and connections to William Temple Foundation. And with continuing gratitude for Christine Gagan, our longest standing library volunteer, with well over 20 years of service, and more recently, thanks to Rev Maurice Stafford who, with Wayne Walton, has done a magnificent catch up on the library reclassification to Dewey; Maurice Serrell, a long-time member and lawyer with wide human rights experience; Rev Tim Scott who comes with experience of urban ministry in London to help develop closer links with other national bodies. That remarkable list of people will we trust, enable us to continue to focus and deliver our unique blend of Biblical and prophetic teaching. We were then also blessed by the challenges given to us by Dr Graham Adams in his presentation on his take on Jesus' Kin'dom (a more inclusive term for the traditional, "kingdom" language) as one of Holy Anarchy. His mix of deep theology, poetry and spirituality made for a very engaging presentation, which led to a rich range of questions from almost all folks present on line and on Zoom. Thank you again Graham for setting us up well for the year ahead.

We look forward to seeing more of you accessing our Book Writing Group and Courses and other events during the coming year and joining us in November 2024 to see what has developed. Erica Dunmow, Chair of the Board

P.S. If you haven't already looked at the Kin'dom Evangelism resources produced by a range of members and supporters several years back, please give that a read too.



**Congratulations to UTU's
Rev. Dr Neil Johnson for the publication of
his book,
*Keir Hardie's Creed: Faith in Socialism***

From the Back Cover

"For James Keir Hardie, founding father of the British Labour Party, Socialism was the Christianity of his day. Keir Hardie realized that the abject poverty of his early years was economic, social, and political oppression, so he dedicated his life to fighting for justice. He found inspiration in the visions, insights, and concepts of figures from Jesus of Nazareth to Robert Burns and Karl Marx. At the heart of Keir Hardie's creed was the belief that human solidarity is sacred. What underpins this study is the understanding that labour history is religious history."

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Urban Poverty Pilgrimage: Towards a Theological Practice

by

Dr Joseph Forde, Chair of Church Action on Poverty, Sheffield.

Revd Dr Ian K. Duffield, Director of Research at the Urban Theology Union.

For the past several years, usually on a Saturday in October, Church Action on Poverty, Sheffield, has embarked on what it describes as an Urban Poverty Pilgrimage. About forty or so of our members — often dressed in parkas and wearing walking boots — turn out to tread the streets of Sheffield. On our journey, we visit foodbanks and other church-based poverty alleviation initiatives, to learn more about their work and how best we can help to promote and support it in our church communities and wider afield.

Consequently, there is often a practical focus to the talks that we get to listen to, and to the discussions that follow.

Yet, our members are aware that a pilgrimage needs to be more than practical in its focus if it is to embody its traditional meaning, which, for Christians, we suggest can loosely be described as a journey in search of moral and spiritual significance. As such, our walk is peppered with prayer points at which members offer prayers to God for spiritual guidance to help us better understand the causes of poverty in urban contexts, as well as to discern possible solutions to it.

A community theologian who was well versed in the challenges that stem from urban poverty — as well as in ways of alleviating it — was Fr Kenneth Leech. Ken was an Anglo-Catholic priest who spent a large part of his working life in the East End of London, working with those living in poverty and/or experiencing social exclusion. He chose that path for his ministry, believing:



"In all that I have written there are two central Christological truths. The first is the truth that Christ is found, now as then, among the poor and lowly, on the edge, at the margins. The second truth is that to be en Christo, to be icons of Christ, we need to follow his way of lowly servanthood, and because Christ is found among the poor, our response to the poor becomes both a diagnostic test of our Christological orthodoxy, and a sign of judgment"
(Bunch and Richie (eds), *Prayer and Prophecy: The Essential Kenneth Leech*, 13)

Ken's contribution to urban mission was thus centred on a belief that when the poor speak, it is God's voice that we hear. In our urban pilgrimages we always strive to place a primacy on hearing the views of those who are experiencing poverty, and those who work on a day-to-day basis in supporting them. For Leech, 'the Christian way', was to follow Christ's way of lowly servanthood — which is to say, to be among the poor, and to make their cause for justice, a cause for everyone, and that is our aim, too.

Urban Poverty Pilgrimage is one way of doing that, by linking prayer with protest. In some respects, it is a form of protest — a way of raising concerns about urban poverty and its causes simply by being on the streets, waving banners, making a noise, sharing a moment with kindred spirits, sparking some interest from well-meaning onlookers, and following it up with press releases, social media campaigns, and sometimes with political lobbying. As such, Urban Poverty Pilgrimage fits with an approach to

Christian discipleship that places much weight on Jesus's statements: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven", and: "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

Poverty runs antithetically to human flourishing, being an impediment to human creativity and fulfilment. From a Christian perspective, it is hard to see how it could ever be consistent with advancing the Christian concept of the 'common good'— that is, a sense of moral obligation which members of a community share that impels them to want to look after the common interests of all members, and not just the interests of some members at the expense of others.

Pilgrimage involves travelling, often treading where you've not trod before, or seeing it afresh as if for the first time. Certain disciplines, both spiritual and theological, are involved for a pilgrimage to be a pilgrimage and not a sight-seeing tour or a mere confirmation of conviction. As a journey into moral and spiritual significance, pilgrimage must always be open to new revelation to personal challenge and conversion.

Among the helpful disciplines are:

1. Being Attentive: being awake to the vibes, the smell, the look, the feel of a particular urban locale and what is going on there — this can lead to intercession and to lamenting prior to any desire for solutions, but this is only the beginning of urban pilgrimage and not its fulfilment.
2. Being Silent: being reduced to silence in the face of poverty and the tragedy of the urban, with such silence leaning towards the strange presence of the holy and the sacred in the most unlikely places, which induces humility in the pilgrim and protects them from false

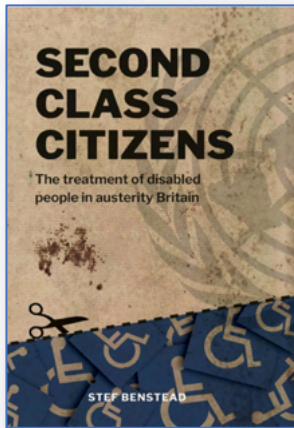
understanding, false protest, and false solutions.

3. Being Open: against all the odds, spotting the signs of the Kingdom, the triumphs of the Spirit, the resilience of the 'faithful ones' and the generosity of the 'impoverished ones', which leads to a wider perspective and a challenge to previously perceived stances.
4. And thus, and only thus: Offering the urban situations visited to God with thankfulness for what has been revealed and how it has been a converting ordinance for the pilgrims.
5. And also: Celebrating the creativity and resilience and solidarity in the midst of toil and struggle, of oppression and disenchantment.

So, if our pilgrimage does not reveal the sacred in the midst of the urban and Christ's presence among the poor (Leech) how are we to discern the signs of the times let alone the signs of the Kingdom; and if our pilgrimage does not bring us to "lowly servanthood" (Leech) how are we to develop responses that do not impose abstract (ready-made) solutions but are truly responsive to this particular urban locale, respecting its actual residents as having their own agency and their own God-given perspective that may illuminate our own?

In a true pilgrimage, it is we who are changed, converted, reconciled, and made new. And this is no less true for a pilgrimage into the urban, amongst the poor. Protest and action need to be rooted in the pilgrimage itself, not as add-ons or unwanted gifts but as integral divine-gifted outpourings and outworkings of the unpoor-faithful among and alongside the oppressed poor.

This article first appeared on the Church Action on Poverty, Sheffield, website prior to their Urban Poverty Pilgrimage in Sheffield on 21st October 2023.



Robert Hoch (Yidokodiltona) "A Review of Stef Benstead, *Second Class Citizens: The Treatment of Disabled People in Austerity Britain*, Centre for Welfare Reform, Sheffield, 2019."

I had the pleasure of hearing Stef Benstead, author of *Second Class Citizens: The Treatment of Disabled People in Austerity Britain*, in Lancaster during a meeting of the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church. She spoke on themes of agency, power, and dignity in the context of poverty in the UK. Her calm, measured analysis of how society (and the church) often treats people who live with poverty was impressive for its clarity and incisiveness. When I thanked her

for speaking, I asked if she would sign my copy of her book, adding that more people should buy it. "I hope so," she said. "I want to stop being poor." There was a plaintiveness in her voice, as a person that society has "made" poor through its adoption of unfair policies to the disabled — and it also revealed an inescapable humanness in her dedication to exposing what has happened to disabled peoples' lives since the election of 2010 cemented the government's commitment to austerity and reducing the role of the government in public life (11). Part unmasking and part visioning, *Second Class Citizens* makes a case to change our conception of the human community so that people who live with disabilities are not arbitrarily and inhumanely impoverished, shamed, and marginalised by an ableist construction of society.

Benstead begins her work with the UN's indictment of austerity Britain: "In 2016 the United Nations made an extraordinary announcement: that the United Kingdom, a rich and developed country, was violating basic human rights" (9) —specifically that austerity measures aimed at people living with disabilities were "retrogressive", rolling back meaningful progress in welfare provision for disabled people and producing the very poverty it would, on its face, oppose. Predictably, the UK government "strongly disagreed" with the findings of the UN and other watchdog groups. Benstead calls the UK's assessment of its policies "exceptional" in comparison to that of other bodies, including the reports of user-led disabled people's organisations, charities, and monitoring groups, among others (11).

She cites Article 25 of the UN *Declaration of Human Rights* as foundational to the legal obligation of government to provide for the social welfare of its citizens: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care, and necessary social services" (12). "Generally speaking," she writes, "people achieve much of their economic, social and cultural rights through their right to decent work with just and favourable pay" — but that alone cannot be taken as foundational for basic human rights, as stated in Article 25: "[Everyone has . . .] the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control" (12) These statements supply the legal and moral framework for her work — and she expertly marshals the evidence to show that austerity is at best unfair and at worst a violation of basic human rights.

Chapter titles often tell the story of a book better than overarching arguments. Here are a few from this book: "Who are the disabled? (Chapter Two); "Disabled people in history" (Chapter Three); "The dawn of welfare" (Chapter 4); "The austerity programme" (Chapter 8), "Disability and Access" (Chapter 14). While some parts of Benstead's work make for difficult

reading (she is granular in her analysis of different welfare programs, the way they have been reshaped, misrepresented as growing, or just plain gutted), she never loses sight of the people who are at the heart of her work.

In this spirit, Benstead introduces her readers to Gemma, who is deaf, and Fiona, who is blind, representing two of the 774,000 people who live with a widely recognised form of disability (26-7). Later, in Chapter Five, "The campaign for inclusion" we meet Gemma and Fiona again. According to Benstead, in the prevailing medical model of disability, Gemma and Fiona are the problems to be "solved" — but in the social model of disability, the problem is with society: "It is because society tries to sell substandard goods alongside high quality ones that Fiona is unable to make an informed choice. It is because society doesn't provide braille writing on accurately stocked supermarket shelves that Fiona can't identify which box has the cereal she wants. It is because society doesn't teach British Sign Language as part of the curriculum that Gemma can't easily communicate with hearing people, and it is because society failed to give her a good education that she is having to catch up now, as an adult" (61).

Others are not traditionally recognised as disabled but are nevertheless part of the 12 million people who are legally defined as such in the UK. In this group, we meet Colin, formerly a nurse. He and his wife, a GP, had two children. Colin served on the Parish Church Council. Together they looked like Exhibit A of the "hard-working family" — that is, until Colin became ill. We learn that Colin was initially assessed under Incapacity Benefit and received benefits for six years. Then, in 2008 under Labour, a new sickness benefit was created that was "tougher" to access. In 2010, under austerity government, the Incapacity Benefit was transferred to the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) — along with a heavy dose of shaming by the political and bureaucratic culture of disability benefits: "Scared of being labelled a fraud, Colin felt unable to give an accurate account of his illness and its impact on him. Even so, he had been ill and unable to work for six years. Colin's ESA assessor decided that he would experience a recovery that would see him able to return to work in three months' time. Some six years later, Colin has still not recovered" (124).

As Benstead brings her work to a close, she sets before her readers two scenarios: "One [scenario] is to continue as we are, as a country that values private profit over individual need. In this scenario, the welfare state continues to be grossly underfunded. People who are too sick to work are forced to try to work because the alternative is starvation. The support that disabled people need to access decent, sustainable work isn't there. The effort required to work takes everything else away from them. They won't be able to sustain a relationship, bring up children, care for elderly parents, attend religious observances, or take part in community activity because they will have put everything they have into paid work. . . . They won't have energy to greet their partner with a smile and a kiss; to hug the child who has failed her exam; to be there for the friend who has been diagnosed with cancer. . . . They won't be able to take pride in plaiting their daughter's hair each morning or in repairing her football kit" (283-4).

The other scenario envisions a society that values all people and their contributions, even outside of work. "In the other scenario, the state commits to giving sick and disabled people their right to a decent life. . . [As a result] they can love their partners and bring up their children without the arguments and stress caused by not having enough" (284-5).

Two scenarios. Two ways. Which will we choose? *Second Class Citizens* gives us eyes to see, ears to hear, and a will to act.

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