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Editorial

Unlike the laws of thermonuclear dynamics, the laws which govern the practice of our faith seemingly need to be rediscovered by each generation. We are increasingly reluctant to base our knowledge of such matters on what has been handed down to us – on tradition. As this year's Conference lectures and Colloquium demonstrate, change is in the air – not for the sake of change, but in order that what has been precious and fundamental to generations of Christians before can be recognized and reclaimed as important and formative for this generation too.

Thus Clive Marsh in the Fernley Hartley Lecture, explores and seeks a redefinition of piety and the practice of piety. Having examined the relationship between meaning-making and disciplined practices, Marsh concludes his lecture by exploring four consequences of his thesis for faith communities. He suggests that one of the tasks facing this generation of Christians is to discover how they might 'foster piety without being pious'. Piety, Marsh believes, can be understood as 'an individual practice with socio-political consequences'. He is at pains to stress however, that in practising piety, 'one is not acting in isolation but has also always to consider the well-being of others.'

Prison visiting has often been considered an act of piety, but in the Beckly Lecture by Dame Anne Owers we are challenged to recognize the way in which the walls of a prison function both ways. Walls are, she suggests, as informative of the life and mindset of those on the outside of the walls, as they are of those on the inside. Her lecture is a challenge to reconsider how and why prisons function as they do. 'People are not like a sort of chemical experiment where you put in one literacy certificate, one offending behaviour programme and a house in a hard-to-let estate, and suddenly out of the other end will pour a perfectly formed different individual.' Before either the individual or the institution can be transformed a new way of thinking has to develop. She argues for attention to be given to the problems that can lead to offending behaviour, for society to act earlier and find alternatives to prison where possible. Her insistence on the possibility of redemption as proven by Christ challenges us all to consider the importance of remaining open to people and to change rather than be defensive and protective of what we believe we have.

The same challenge underpins this year's A.S. Peake Memorial Lecture which explores the transformation of the Bible from the written word to the virtual word. It asks whether or not the Church should act to defend or

safeguard the authority of Scripture from the potential for change, and perhaps even abuse, that the internet affords. One consequence of the change, for example, is that new ‘unauthorized’ versions of the Bible are being created, some much less reverent than others. Those who have created serious online biblical studies sites, however, would insist that they are a valuable form of mission and outreach to a new generation, and, as such, the risk that they pose to the traditional understanding and authority of Scripture is more than warranted.

David Clark made a similar argument with regard to the mission of the Church in the keynote address to the Conference Colloquium this year. He insists that recent initiatives, such as ‘fresh expressions of church’ and *Mapping a Way Forward* are nothing like radical, coherent or comprehensive enough to enable British Methodism to make a new and distinctive contribution to the daunting challenges currently facing world and church.’ Only a radical rethinking of the mission of the Church will do. Some will, of course, dispute whether or not his three strands of mission really are ‘radical’ or are merely reappropriated missional models from an earlier age. Nonetheless, Clark wants to add his own voice to those throughout the Connexion calling for change, redefinition and revision.

As Conference illustrates, year upon year, each generation must discover and claim for itself, the laws which govern the practice of its piety and the imperatives of social justice, its ownership and study of the word of God and the way it engages in the mission of the Church. It might not be rocket science – but change does seem to be the way of faith.