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Christian Today Website Articles

Unless otherwise stated, articles in this magazine are transcriptions of material selected by the editor at Christian Today and were first published recently on www.christiantoday.com.

Why the archbishop of Canterbury doesn't pray for his daughter's disability to be healed

The Archbishop of Canterbury and his daughters Katharine and Ellie have spoken of how they have wrestled with issues around healing, disability and mental health

Interviewed for the BBC by Kate Monaghan and Simon Minty in

connection with a forthcoming Lambeth Palace event on disability, Justin Welby said his family's personal experience gave an 'emotional edge' to his commitment to inclusivity. Katharine Welby-Roberts has written about her experience of depression in her book **I THOUGHT THERE WOULD BE CAKE**, while Ellie has dyspraxia.

Asked about Christian healing, Welby said that 'for me the problem with healing is not that God never heals or that God always heals, it's just that God just seems sometimes to heal' – but not, he added, in 'any of the things that have affected me or the family most deeply'.

He said: 'What I notice about Jesus is he never treats people other than with perfect respect and love and affection. So he never manipulates, he never puts pressure on them, he never treats them in any way other than you or I would want to be treated. And obviously it's

right to pray, praying is simply about bringing what's in your heart before God, letting him change what's in your heart. And sometimes he changes the situation you've brought as well.'

He said that while he prayed for Katharine's mental health, he had not prayed for Ellie's healing. The family had discussed it, he said, but Ellie's younger sister had said that 'if God changed Ellie she wouldn't be Ellie, and we love Ellie'.

Asked for her reaction, Ellie said: 'It's a difficult one because sometimes when it comes down to the topic of healing and stuff. Especially the last few weeks I would say, I have felt a bit like, well if God heals why am I still dyspraxic, why do I still find it really difficult to do things? But at the same time it doesn't change the way I trust God, the way I believe in God, it's just something . . .

healing is a topic that I find quite difficult really to get my head around.'

Katharine spoke of her 'dark times' and her reaction to being offered prayer for healing. 'I think with mental health, as with any disability, if your first response is, 'Can I pray for your healing?' then you're not listening. Because actually: A, you don't need to say to someone you're praying for their healing for God to be able to work; God's bigger than that; and B, it really shuts down the conversation.

'I now actually only let a very few people pray for my healing because I've had so many really awful experiences of things that people have said and the way that they've behaved. They don't do it on purpose, they're trying to help, they're trying to be helpful, but they're not listening.'

They spoke of the need for the church to be sensitive to the different needs of people with physical and other disabilities, with Katharine saying: ‘It’s culture and attitudes and understanding that everyone’s needs and capabilities are different and that everyone’s style of church or way of connecting with God is different as well.’

Archbishop Welby commented it was ‘extraordinary’ than in ancient buildings such as churches, heritage preservation overrides disabled access. ‘That’s one way of saying we don’t care about you, isn’t it?’ he said.

Rob Bell’s Holy Shift: It’s preaching, but not as we know it

There are a few names which, if you mention them to Christians on either

side of the Atlantic, are guaranteed to prompt a reaction. Rob Bell is one of them.

Known to a generation from his early 2000s NOOMA video series, Bell became a staple of evangelical youth groups. His early books cemented that reputation, with Time Magazine naming him one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

A series of deviations from the list of evangelical shibboleths culminated in him famously being bade ‘farewell’ in a tweet by the doyen of conservative Calvinist faith, John Piper.

After LOVE WINS, his 2011 book which explored themes of universal salvation, Bell was deemed beyond the pale by conservative churches. Audiences at his live events, previously in the thousands, dwindled. He left Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Slowly, Bell began to reach a different crowd. Appearances with the likes of Oprah Winfrey and Elizabeth Gilbert (EAT, PRAY, LOVE) began to give his work a fresh audience. He started to appear at more inclusive events, such as the Greenbelt Festival in the UK. A podcast, called the Robcast, began in 2015 and has since gone on to be lauded by iTunes.

The last couple years have seen a slew of books from Bell: a lifestyle book, HOW TO BE HERE, a tome on Bell's biblical theology, WHAT IS THE BIBLE? and even a novel, MILLONES CAJONES.

The live audiences have come back too. In many ways that takes Bell back to what he says is his first love – delivering sermons. Though he may not be preaching in churches so much these days, he's certainly still preaching. From a regular residence in an LA comedy club to tours as far afield as

Australia and Brazil, Bell's energetic style hasn't changed, even as his content has evolved. Bell is about to embark on his first tour in the UK and Ireland in eight years, in association with Greenbelt.

He spoke to Christian Today as he prepares to visit and began by describing what drives his work:

'The Genesis 1 poem which begins the Bible is what shapes my thinking on all of this . . . an unfolding and evolving universe in which keeps moving forward. The engine of creation isn't violence and conflict but overflowing joy!'

Q. What about those people who think the Bible hasn't got anything to say any more?

A. Think about the height of modern arrogance – that there is no accumulated wisdom, that nobody before us ever had anything of use to

say about how to forgive somebody who has wronged you, how to have boundaries with somebody who's toxic, how to worry less, how to practise non-violence in a culture that only knows 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'.

There are certain truths about the human condition that people have been wrestling with for thousands of years. Wouldn't the most open-minded thing be to at least do a brief survey to see if there's anything there? Ultimately, it isn't an intellectual head game. It's a flesh and blood taste and sight and sound and feel – that's what it is.

Q. Your critics would say that you don't pin things down enough, though.

A. The moment you have perfectly defended and argued for something is the moment you have killed it. The butterfly has been pinned down. When

you're talking about the infinite, the absolute, the meaning of life, part of the art as a person of faith is to enter into discussion with conviction and a buoyant hope and intellectual rigour, but without killing the subject of the discussion.

As a citizen of the Western World, it's astonishing how many ideas are just basic givens about how we see the world that actually come from the Bible.

Some people would argue that the Hebrew prophets are the very first articulate vision of social justice in history. Other people argue that the Apostle Paul and the Gospels was the first coherent argument for the equality of sexes.

When you read the Gospels, this is the fundamental tension. Jesus says things like, 'Spirit is like the wind'. Of all the metaphors! Build your doctrine on that!

If it's true then there will be some polarity, some paradox at the heart of it. The known and the unknown, the revealed and the hidden, the answer and the question . . .

Q. You're about to tour the UK and Ireland. What have you got in store for us?

A. I'm going to come to your country, I'm going to talk for an hour and 45 minutes about 'the Holy' and I'm making a case for the reclaiming of this word to explain a dimension of the human experience that Google simply has zero algorithms for.

I do a thing from the Book of Joshua, a thing from Isaiah. On paper that should not work. It's half theological reflection and half stand-up comedy and guerrilla theatre. It's such joy to do and to watch people experience it. As things go more virtual, the live event will be

more radical, flesh and blood in a room, elbow to elbow. It hasn't been edited or pre-recorded. That's never going to go out.

Q. The UK feels almost post-post Christian now. Do you think we're ready to rethink Jesus, as a country?

A. I think so. It's fascinating to me how many people will say to me, 'I am so compelled by Jesus!' They're not saying it in reaction to something or coming from a specific place. That happens to me all the time.

Q. What brings you joy?

A. Anything with my kids. Premier League football, one boy is obsessed. He loves Manchester United, so I rooted a little for City just because you have to. And obviously we all love Liverpool – or we all feel a kinship with [Egyptian football player and Premier League

leading goal scorer] Mo Salah – we all love that story.

[Rob Bell is on tour in the UK and Ireland in July. The event in London's Union Chapel on July 2 is sold out, but tickets are still available for Cheltenham, Doncaster, St Helens, Dublin, Ipswich, Cardiff, and Edinburgh. Find out more and book tickets at www.greenbelt.org.uk/rob-bell/Tickets will not be available on the door.

Church of England goes for growth with more than 100 new churches planned

The Church of England is to plant more than 100 new churches in coastal areas, market towns and outer urban housing estates.

The scheme will see new Christian communities in areas including the Kent coast, housing estates in Plymouth and market towns in Cambridgeshire at a cost of £27 million.

The plans have been backed by the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby as a ‘wonderful example’ of how churches are seeking to be faithful to God and to serve their communities.

He said: ‘The Church of England exists to share the good news of Jesus through our words and our actions. Across the country, churches are bursting with life – which in part is shown through how they love and serve their communities. I’m especially pleased about these grants because they demonstrate our commitment to following Jesus to the places of greatest need in our society.

‘These projects are wonderful examples of how churches are seeking to be

faithful to God – and faithful to their communities in love and mission. Through their innovation, they signal a growing determination in the Church to share the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that make sense for those in our most deprived communities.'

In Canterbury diocese, a pioneering café-style church called 'Ignite' in Margate, Kent, is to be used as a blueprint for nine new worshipping communities in the coastal towns of Herne Bay, Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey and St Peter Port in Guernsey as well as Sittingbourne, Maidstone and Ashford.

The Ignite project was founded at St Paul's Church in Margate 10 years ago, aiming to reach marginalised and deprived communities in the town.

Other dioceses to receive funding are Bristol, Ely, Exeter, Leicester,

Manchester, Newcastle, Peterborough, Southwell and Nottingham and Worcester.

The grants from the Church of England's Strategic Development Fund have been awarded to the dioceses as part of the Renewal and Reform programme aimed at creating a growing church in all places for all people.

In many cases the projects are intended to kick-start further growth. In Leicester money will go to supporting a network of six existing churches in key city centre and market town locations that will provide clergy and help support more new churches in the area. The aim is to see an increase in the size of the worshipping communities within the six churches by 1400 people, to establish 20–50 worshipping communities and to see around one new 'fresh expression' of church, or new form of church gathering, every two

years alongside strategic church ‘plants’ every four years.

Southwell and Nottingham plans to develop 75 new worshipping communities by 2023 along with a School of Discipleship to focus on the spiritual formation and training of lay disciples and leaders in mission.

In Newcastle the diocese aims to promote church life in the city centre by creating a church there that will provide clergy and support to other churches in the area. The church is targeting 17 to 45-year olds who study, live and work in the city centre. This includes around 67,000 students, as well as city workers and their families.

Gen Z is most open to faith, says new survey

Post-millennials are more open and positive about faith than older generations, according to a ComRes survey about perceptions of religion in the UK.

More than half of people in the 18–24 age group say they have had a positive experience of Christians and Christianity, with 62 per cent also saying they felt comfortable discussing their religious beliefs with people at work – also higher than any other age group. A third of them – 33 per cent – also say they attend church services.

British adults between the ages of 25–34 are most likely to report that they go to church regularly (11 per cent), compared with 10 per cent of those aged over 65.

The survey found only 10 per cent of the public agreed with the statement that ‘religion is a negative influence on society’ and 44 per cent agreed that they have had a positive experience of Christians and Christianity.

Half of British adults (51 per cent) disagree that Christians are a negative force in society.

The survey was released to coincidence with the launch of FAITHISM by Dr Krish Kandiah, which explores how mutual cooperation between Christians and atheists is possible.

He told Christian Today: ‘There are real opportunities for us to think positively and creatively about engaging the rising generation.’

He said the older ‘New Atheists’ such as Richard Dawkins were still a presence in public discourse. However, he said: ‘I’m

trying to shift the debate and show how we can build some common ground.’

FAITHEISM is published by Hodder, price £14.99.

‘God is stupid’ jibe hits Philippines president’s ratings

Satisfaction in Philippine leader Rodrigo Duterte fell to the lowest of his presidency since coming into office in 2016, an independent survey has shown.

Net satisfaction, used by pollster Social Weather Stations (SWS) as a rating of the president’s performance, was down 11 points from the first quarter to 45 in the survey of 1,200 Filipinos conducted in the last week of June.

It was the president's lowest rating in eight surveys taken since 2016. In the first quarter of this year, Duterte's rating slipped to 56 per cent from 58 per cent in December 2017.

The president was unfazed by the drop in his ratings.

'I don't care, it does not interest me at all,' Duterte told a news conference north of Manila.

The survey was taken during the week when Duterte attacked the Catholic Church and called God 'stupid' after bishops and priests criticised the killing of drug suspects in the government's anti-narcotics campaign.

'It was an unnecessary remark, it really affected his ratings,' said analyst Earl Parreno of the Institute of Political and Electoral Reforms.

‘The rising prices and unemployment also had an impact, but this is only temporary. He has to repair his relations with the bishops and rebuild his image,’ Parreno said.

Duterte met with the head of the Catholic Bishops group on Monday, promising to refrain from attacking the Church.

The SWS survey did not ask respondents to explain their rating for Duterte, who took office in June 2016. Duterte had enjoyed high satisfaction ratings since coming to office, peaking at 66 in June 2017.

Based on the SWS methodology for satisfaction ratings, a score of 70 and above is considered excellent, 50 to 69 is very good, 30–49 good and 10–29 moderate.