

**A Theological Report to the  
Bishop of Down and Dromore  
April 2016**



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## **SECTION 1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

**1/1** Bishop Miller,

Following problems which arose in St Matthias, Knocknamuckley, you appointed a theological working group to examine the theology of the Royal Black Institution and the theology of Bethel Church, Redding, California. Our membership was:

- Canon Dr Christina Baxter, formerly Chair of the House of Laity in the Church of England, and sometime Principal of St John's Theological College, Nottingham.
- Dr David Shepherd, Assistant Professor in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Trinity College Dublin. Formerly Principal of Belfast Bible College. Member of Kill O' the Grange Parish.
- Canon Dr Heather Morris, Home Missions Secretary, Methodist Church in Ireland, and former President of the Methodist Church.
- The Revd John Dinnen, formerly Dean of Down.

The group was served by Mrs Jan Peach as secretary and it owes a debt of gratitude to her for the many hours of work which she has undertaken on its behalf.

**1/2** In this report we have abbreviated as follows:

BCRC	Bethel Church, Redding, California
BSSM	Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry
CofI	Church of Ireland
TWG	The Working Group
RBI	Royal Black Institution

**1/3** TWG has met on four occasions to conduct its work, as well as working individually to research both the RBI and BCRC. It has studied published material about the organisations from a theological perspective, as well as meeting with individuals and groups who were able to help it. One member of the commission was able to attend a London conference in July 2015 to hear both the Revd Bill Johnson and Kris Vallotton of BCRC speak, and another has listened to sermons and talks available on the web. An invitation by email to BCRC to help us in our work resulted in our access to some documents. The working group sought a meeting with the RBI; a group led by the Sovereign Grand Master Sir Knight Millar Farr brought substantial printed material, which is chiefly to be found on their website, and which we have therefore not needed to reproduce. We were grateful for the opportunity to meet with representatives of St Matthias Church and Hope Community Church (Craigavon Missional Congregation) as well as with individuals who responded to your press

release. Between meetings dialogue continued between members through modern media.

**1/4** As well as looking at the two groups, the RBI and BCRC, TWG thought it important to set out in brief the theology of the CofI as the 'measure' by which we should work, and also to consider somewhat briefly the ways in which that church relates to other groups and churches as a comparator.

**1/5** TWG wishes to express its gratitude to all of those who have supplied material, directed us to significant sources of information, or who have met with us.

**1/6** TWG recognised that in the time frame you set us it would only be able to offer a limited reflection, but our aim throughout was to be as accurate as possible. For that reason and other reasons, at some points we have had to limit the nature of the evidence we were able to consider, though we do not believe that that has invalidated our conclusions.

**1/7** In ecumenical discussions it has become customary to consider relationships between churches or Christian groups using a range of vocabulary. This sometimes enables churches to recognise one another as so close in doctrine and practice that they are able to say that there is every reason to recognise one another as churches and to enter into full communion. At the other extreme, there are sometimes such substantial disagreements (with few similarities) that whilst there may be friendly dialogue and discussion, there cannot be any close collaboration. Between these two poles there are churches or Christian groups whose teaching is similar but there remain real differences. In some such cases it is customary to talk about 'consonance' between them, where there are themes which are agreeable to one another, even if expressed differently; in such cases we recognise a consistency which allows us to see that the differences are harmonious with the other, even though the harmonies are made up of different notes. In these cases, there may well be overlapping foundations, so both churches are travelling in the same direction with many similarities but there are still practices and doctrines which are not able to be reconciled at this time. Some of these may be the result of differing cultural contexts, but others will be more substantive. In our explorations we have tried to discover where, in the framework described above, to set each group in its relation to the CofI. While neither organisation is identical to the CofI the question remains, if there is not identity, as to whether there is consonance, or outright disagreement.

**1/8** Of course, the two groups, the RBI and BCRC, are not claiming the same things. RBI is an organisation which espouses some Christian teaching, but does not claim to be a church. It seeks the ministry of those Protestant churches which operate in the same geographical areas in which it exists, for example by asking an ordained minister to act as chaplain to its local preceptory, or the parish minister to take a service for it. BCRC does understand itself to be a church, albeit in another part of

the world, and one which has encouraged many other Christian communities around the world to partner with it in a particular way of being Christian. These churches typically learn from BCRC, for example by attending their conferences and training courses, or by inviting a team from BCRC to come to their church to lead a weekend. Neither the RBI nor BCRC claim to have authority over any other Christian group or church.

**1/9** With these preliminaries in mind we have set out a simple overview of the CofI doctrine and relationships with other Christian groups. We have then given some background information about each group in turn, and in accordance with best ecumenical practice we have taken the official statements of the groups concerned as the intention of that group, although sometimes we have had to note differences between official statements and other evidence submitted to us. In the light of this we are then able to consider how far there is consonance and/or disagreement between the CofI and either the RBI or BCRC. Finally we raise some general questions which we hope may assist you in your ongoing task at Knocknamuckley.





## SECTION 2 THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

### 2/1 What the Church of Ireland believes

When the CofI was disestablished from the Church of England in 1869, it reaffirmed the faith which it had held since its foundation and reshaped in the Reformation, in this way:

- ‘1. The Church of Ireland doth, as heretofore, accept and unfeignedly believe all the Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as given by inspiration of God, and containing all things necessary to salvation; and doth continue to profess the faith of Christ as professed by the Primitive Church.
- ‘2. The Church of Ireland will continue to minister the doctrine, and sacraments, and the discipline of Christ, as the Lord hath commanded; and will maintain inviolate the three orders of bishops, priests or presbyters, and deacons in the sacred ministry.
- ‘3. The Church of Ireland, as a reformed and Protestant Church, doth hereby reaffirm its constant witness against all those innovations in doctrine and worship, whereby the Primitive Faith hath been from time to time defaced or overlaid, and which at the Reformation this Church did disown and reject.’<sup>1</sup>

This faith the Church of Ireland received in:

‘The Book of the Articles of Religion, commonly called the Thirty-nine Articles ... The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments, and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the use of the Church of Ireland; and the Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons...’<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the CofI remained in full communion with the Church of England, but set up its own pattern of governance through a General Synod of the Church of Ireland. This has authority under Christ to create canonical law, which also indicates the practices and beliefs of the church as it evolves in obedience to Christ, and in accordance with Scripture and its foundation documents listed above. Whilst it has moderated the tone of its foundation documents a little in response to the concerns of other Christian churches, the substance remains the same. So the 1999 Declaration about the historic

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/23>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

formularies explains:

‘Historic documents often stem from periods of deep separation between Christian Churches. Whilst, in spite of a real degree of convergence, distinct differences remain, negative statements towards other Christians should not be seen as representing the spirit of this Church today.

‘The Church of Ireland affirms all in its tradition that witnesses to the truth of the Gospel. It regrets that words written in another age and in a different context should be used in a manner hurtful to or antagonistic towards other Christians.

‘The Church of Ireland seeks the visible unity of the Church. In working towards that goal this Church is committed to reaching out towards other Churches in a spirit of humility and love, that together all Christians may grow towards unity in life and mission to the glory of God.’<sup>3</sup>

The Standing Committee Report of 1999 (p.184) underlines this:

‘Today, in the Church of Ireland, differences with our fellow Christian churches are handled through dialogue recognising that the common faith that we share is more than our differences.’<sup>4</sup>

Some further CofI convictions will be significant for our discussions below, so we highlight them here.

First, it is the duty of the Bishop (as set out in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer service of The Consecration of Bishops) ‘to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God’s Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to the same’. Moreover, the Bishop is to ‘restrain and prohibit in the conduct of public worship any practice not enjoined in the Book of Common Prayer, or in any rubric or canon enacted by lawful authority of the Church of Ireland’.<sup>5</sup> Hence the Bishop’s decision to make an inquiry into the theology of both groups involved in this case was in accordance with canon law, so as to be sure how to respond to anxieties from different people about the Christian faith explicit and implicit in each group.

Secondly, it is the duty of ‘clergy to endeavour to banish error’, so that ‘clergy having within their cures any persons holding any erroneous and strange doctrines, contrary

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<sup>3</sup> <http://ireland.anglican.org/worship/13>

<sup>4</sup> <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/49>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ireland.anglican.org/information/32> Part 1.2

to the word of God, shall endeavour to reclaim them from their errors' so that a parish minister who believes that there are those whose beliefs or practices may be contrary to the teaching of the CofI faith, must make inquiry and then make a theological and pastoral decision as to how best to reclaim people from any errors they may hold.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, whilst liturgy and hymns/songs may be mostly drawn from authorised sources, some discretion is allowed to the local minister and the Diocesan Bishop (see Canon 6 and Canon 5 to which it refers)<sup>7</sup>.

Fourthly, since the Canons and other normal sources are silent on the matter of which groups may have a service in a CofI church, we are advised legally that in the first instance, it would be the rector's decision whether or not an organisation such as a "loyal order" would be permitted to hold a service in a CofI Church as s/he is responsible for the cure of souls (as per the Act of Institution) which is the spiritual wellbeing of the parish. If a problem arises in relation to a service the bishop of the diocese may become involved and it would be at the bishop's discretion whether s/he upholds the rector's decision or requests that the service go ahead with or without the attendance of the rector. It is therefore, custom and practice for clergy to make such decisions. They cannot prevent anyone from attending public worship but if any group requests a special service it is the rector's responsibility to grant or deny the request.

## **2/2 Where the Church of Ireland has not yet made pronouncements on matters of doctrine or practice**

The CofI, in common with all Anglican churches, does not make pronouncements about everything. This is characteristic of Anglicanism, according to Professor Oliver O'Donovan.<sup>8</sup> This cautious and modest way of living allows for good contextualisation and enables the church to hold fast to the essentials of the Christian faith. So, as we compare other groups with the CofI, there may be areas where we have frankly to say that the CofI has not made a statement about that matter, and perhaps it is unlikely so to do in the near future, preferring to take its bearings from the Scriptures, the creeds, the articles and its liturgy as the need arises.

For instance, it is clear from the foundation documents and the authorised books of prayer that the CofI has not made statements as to the nature of its understanding of the ministry of healing, in particular whether this arises from a doctrine of the Cross

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> O'Donovan, O. *Sermon preached before the General Synod of the Church of England in Westminster Abbey, London (1994, November 28).*

(in which case it is often argued that healing has already been achieved and has only to be claimed), or from the gifts of the Holy Spirit (which must be sought from our gracious God). The CofI is simply clear that it is not cessationist<sup>9</sup>. This is clear from the CofI website which records:

‘The Reverend Noel Waring first established the Church’s Ministry of Healing in the Church of Ireland in 1932. In this, he received strong support and encouragement from the then Archbishop of Dublin, Archbishop Gregg.’<sup>10</sup>

and from the liturgies for prayer for healing which are part of its Book of Common Prayer (2004). A church does not pray for healing if it does not believe it could happen, by miracle, by normal medical intervention, or by natural processes of healing. A CofI report on the Church’s Ministry Of Healing (2005) makes clear that there is active healing ministry in most dioceses. The Diocese of Down and Dromore refers to such ministry on its website.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the Church of Ireland does not have an official teaching as to its precise beliefs in the area of eschatology – premillennialism, postmillennialism, or amillennialism. Moreover there is no general articulated agreement as to whether eschatology is realised, (i.e the end time is already here) not yet realised, (i.e the end time has not yet begun) or a dialectical combination of both (the end time has begun to break in, but it will only be completed at the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ). If a dialectical view is held, there is no clarity as to the relative weight to be given to the two poles – now and not yet. With many other churches, the CofI preaches with Jesus, ‘the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news’<sup>12</sup> but continues to pray as he taught us, ‘your kingdom come’<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, the CofI does not have a detailed statement as to the compatibility of Freemasonry with its teachings. ‘The Standing Committee in 2005 considered a report from the honorary secretaries on meetings with representatives of the Masonic Order. The Standing Committee in April 2005 generally accepted the following view expressed by the Honorary Secretaries:

‘The Honorary Secretaries recognise that the religious aspect of Freemasonry, as far as we can tell, does not equate with the fullness of the Christian teaching of the Church of Ireland. Notwithstanding this recognition, the

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<sup>9</sup> i.e. it does NOT believe that the era of miracles ended at the end of the apostolic period; it does believe that the church properly prays for and expects miracles now, especially in relation to healing.

<sup>10</sup> <http://ireland.anglican.org/about/11>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.downanddromore.org/news/2008/11/churchs-ministry-of-healing#.VpY4mhWLSM8>

<sup>12</sup> Mark 1.1

<sup>13</sup> Luke 11.2

Honorary Secretaries believe that membership of and participation in Freemasonry is a matter of free choice and conscience for the members of the Church of Ireland.<sup>14</sup>

The reason that the working group researched this is because it was alleged that many of the practices of Freemasonry have passed over into the Royal Arch Purple – which is normally a stepping stone into the Royal Black institution.

The most recent statement of the CofI in relation to any of the Protestant orders, Orange, Royal Arch Purple, and the RBI is to be found in a factual report on sectarianism (1999) which is referred to below in section 6, where it will be discussed in more detail.

In setting out the areas where there is no CofI agreed statement, we do not intend to suggest that this is negligence. Whilst some churches make clear statements about all manner of things at every opportunity, the Anglican tradition tends to think deeply and slowly around the issues before coming to a conclusion. Such conclusions are often minimal to allow for further pastoral and theological development, but simplicity may be very significant.<sup>15</sup>

### **2/3 Observations about how C of I relates to other organisations leading to consonance as criteria**

The CofI has a range of differing relationships with other Christian churches or groups. First, it has a formal relationship to the Porvoo (Lutheran) churches. The CofI website makes it clear that:

‘The Porvoo Declaration means that signatory churches:

- regard baptised members of each other’s churches as members of their own
- welcome overseas congregation into the life of the receiving churches;
- welcome those who are ordained as bishops, priests and deacons in any of the ten churches to minister in accordance with the receiving churches’ regulations;
- and consult on significant matters of faith and order, life and work.

This makes the Porvoo Communion an integral part of the day to day life of our own church. It is like our membership of the Anglican Communion. Porvoo Communion matters are dealt with by the Standing Committee of the General Synod.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <http://ireland.anglican.org/news/846>

<sup>15</sup> O’Donovan, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> <http://ireland.anglican.org/about/46>

The CofI also has a covenant with the Methodist church in Ireland. In this it acknowledges that the Methodist church belongs 'to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and as truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God' which is spelt out in such a way both churches have committed themselves to 'share a common life and mission and to grow together so that unity may be visibly realized.' This growing together has issued in 2014 in 'historic legislation to provide for interchangeability in ministries between the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland, the two Churches being in a Covenant relationship'.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to these full and clear relationships of mutual recognition and increasing integration, there are other relationships which do not yet approach full communion. For instance, although there have been many Anglican/Roman Catholic International Conversations, and ARCIC has produced a number of reports, as yet there has not been a full agreement which has been accepted on both sides on any topic so far explored. Robust exchanges, as for instance the response of the Archbishop Eames to the Roman Catholic *Dominus Jesu*<sup>18</sup> indicate both the importance of these relationships and also how far they have yet to go.

As well as bilateral relationships, through the Irish Council of Churches, the CofI has relationships with many churches such as the Orthodox, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Society of Friends, and Salvation Army as well as Independent and Migrant led churches, (even though some hold beliefs which are not identical or consonant with the CofI). Committed to working together the website notes that they are 'willing to join in united efforts to promote the spiritual, physical, moral and social welfare of the people and the extension of the rule of Christ among all nations and over every region of human life'<sup>19</sup>.

As well as formal provincial relationships such as those detailed above, dioceses and parishes have a range of essential relationships. For instance, dioceses and parishes work with a range of organisations and agencies. The association of mission societies of the CofI represents some fourteen groups which seek to relate mission work, local and global, to the church at home. These are only some of the mission partnerships to be found as many more exist through personal links and support networks. There is also widespread involvement with a variety of aid organisations who deal with the plight of people facing hunger, homelessness and the humanitarian crises which are seldom far from the news headlines. The church is a major contributor to these organisations in both gifts and practical support.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://ireland.anglican.org/news/5119>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ireland.anglican.org/Archives/pressreleases/prarchive2001/abpdomies.html>

<sup>19</sup> 'Origins' <http://www.irishchurches.org/about/who-we-are>

Youth organisations, large and small, continue to have an active place in parishes and there is generous voluntary leadership given, in spite of time and other pressures and commitments. Uniformed groups, while not as popular as in the past, still bring to young people much appreciated Christian standards and challenges.

In many churches, Bible reading notes, produced by a range of organisations bring encouragement, fellowship, and ongoing blessing to people in their walk with Jesus. Here again great changes are taking place because of the internet revolution in publishing, but the service provided by those who write and print cannot be overestimated.

Those detailed here are only a sample of the agencies to which CofI churches relate. But it is worth noting why they are essential to church life. Firstly, there is normally a mutual understanding of purpose and objectives whereby one serves the other with clear goals. Secondly, the net result is to build, strengthen and unite the wider church community, be it as mission partners, young people, or Bible readers. Thirdly, the direction and decisions about such links and their leadership normally rests with the parish church, so for instance, the Boys/Girls Brigade leaders are appointed within the parish church. So, the CofI has strong ecumenical relationships with a broad range of other Christian churches and para-church groups.

We draw attention to this healthy pattern of mutual influence and resource sharing, which has been much increased by electronic media, so that it does not seem as if it is a strange thing for a parish to have relationships with perhaps a handful of other Christian groups perhaps geographically removed, as well as with other Christian churches in their geographic area. Usually parishes 'sift' materials provided for their use, since it may not be pastorally appropriate to deal with a topic which a mission agency, for instance, is currently promoting, or it may be that another church denomination has produced an excellent Lent course which a CofI parish has used, while their Advent course may include material which is denominationally specific, (an example might be advocacy of adult only baptism) and this would clearly not be consistent with CofI teaching.

There is much to be gained when there is clarity and transparency in inter-church relations, or in relationships with other Christian organisations. Such clarity and transparency will be a theme for further reflection later in our report.

We conclude that while the CofI's central tenets are clear and well known, it exists in a network of relationships with other churches and Christian organisations both at home and abroad. These relationships have increased as electronic communications have multiplied.

Using the outline of CofI beliefs described in the earlier part of this section, we therefore outline in similar order, how the other two organisations present their faith.





## **SECTION 3 BETHEL CHURCH, REDDING, CALIFORNIA (BCRC)**

In section 1/2 we recorded the sources of our information. BCRC offers a plethora of material: printed or video/sound of talks on its website, published books and other material. The working group were faced with an immense task in sifting and assessing such a wide range of resources.

### **3/1 Historical overview**

BCRC was founded in 1954 in Redding, California. It was at that time an Assemblies of God congregation. Initially it was a house church, but it grew into a church building and in 1968 Earl Johnson (the present pastor's father) was called to be in charge. He left in 1982 to become the Assistant Superintendent of the Northern California/Nevada district of the Assemblies of God. Shortly afterwards the church of nearly 2,000 persons moved to its present 71 acre site. The current leader, Bill Johnson, moved from another California church and his emphasis on revival caused about 1,000 people to leave as what was described as a supernatural revival began. In January 2006 the church voted to withdraw from the Assemblies of God. A letter about that was kindly supplied to the members of TWG by BCRC. There are currently about 8,000 persons worshipping on a Sunday and there are major plans for expansion over the next 10 years described in a video of Bill Johnson and Kris Vallotton<sup>1</sup>. Although the website does not use this term, it is clearly congregational in governance – for instance, the membership voted in a meeting to withdraw from the Assemblies of God by a vote of over 90%, in accordance with the legal framework of BCRC which was kindly provided to TWG.

In addition to a normal pattern of Sunday worship the website refers to the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM) which draws 2,000 students from 64 countries around the world. There is also Bethel Mission, Alabaster Prayer House, Awakening Youth, Band of Brothers, Bethel Christian School, Bethel Christian Coaches, and Children's Ministry.

Bill Johnson and others travel the world in response to invitations to speak and minister in order to influence other Christian communities to seek revival. A schedule of their travels may be found online<sup>2</sup>. Bill Johnson makes clear that although he was brought up in a pastor's family he was significantly impacted by the ministry of John Wimber, the founding pastor of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship and sometime tutor at Fuller Seminary USA.

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<sup>1</sup> [bjm.org/vision-2022-overview/](http://bjm.org/vision-2022-overview/)

<sup>2</sup> eg. <http://bjm.org/schedule/>

‘My greatest breakthrough in ministry came after attending two conferences in 1987 put on by John Wimber. I realized I needed to “put a demand” on what I believed – my risk factor had to line up with the boldness of my beliefs. As I did this there was an immediate change in my ministry and we began to see healing and miracles increase’<sup>3</sup>.

Bill Johnson also appears to be close to the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, best known as the home of the ‘Toronto Blessing’<sup>4</sup>. A video online shows Bill Johnson speaking at the Toronto anniversary service appreciatively<sup>5</sup>.

### **3/2 The Bible**

Bethel church’s statement of faith affirms:

‘We believe ... The Bible to be the inspired and only infallible and authoritative Word of God’<sup>6</sup>.

It was clear from the addresses given at the London conference and also from videos on the website that the Bible is taken seriously by BCRC. Whilst its hermeneutics may be different from those of other churches<sup>7</sup> and the manner of communicating to the listening congregations may vary from that more commonly found in the CofI, it is undoubtedly the case that the intention is that everything which BCRC does or stands for is based on Scripture.

Indeed, one of the explicit aims of the BSSM is that ‘BSSM believes that each verse of the Bible is an invitation into an experience with the Lord and students are challenged to live the New Testament. This produces a class environment where disciples practice the things they are being taught while instructors coach the process and all this takes place in a setting of passionate worship’<sup>8</sup>.

Not all attenders at BCRC are members, but those who seek membership are assured that:

‘As your leaders, we will foster a trustworthy leadership team that submits

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<sup>3</sup> <http://bjm.org/bill/>

<sup>4</sup> See a Church of England Report, *The Toronto Experience*, London, 1997, which offers critical appreciation

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QomPt2twjE>

<sup>6</sup> Statement of Faith section 1.02, kindly provided to TWG

<sup>7</sup> ‘For purposes of Church doctrine, practice, policy, and discipline, our Council of Elders is the Church’s final interpretive authority on the Bible’s meaning and application’. Statement of Faith 1.04

<sup>8</sup> <http://bssm.net/discover/overview> Academic Life

to the authority of the Word of God (I Tim. 3:1-13 & Titus 1:6-9, I Peter 5:1-7). We commit to prepare you “for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13). We will seek to set an example in speech, life, love, faith and purity (1Tim. 4:12) and accurately teach the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15). We are willing shepherds of “God’s flock” (1 Peter 5:2) holding one another to the expectations written below. We will be approachable and teachable and create a church family full of faith, hope, love and joy!’<sup>9</sup>

There is much other indication that the Bible plays a key role in the life of this church. Those who seek to become members, for instance, have to attend a ‘deeper life course’, the syllabus of which includes the teaching of the Scriptures.

### **3/3 The Creeds**

As with many Pentecostal churches, Bethel Church does not adhere formally to the historic creeds, preferring to draw up their own statement of faith which is much influenced by biblical quotations.

### **3/4 Confession of faith**

Their Statement of Faith<sup>10</sup> affirms:

**‘WE BELIEVE...**There is only one true God who is the eternal King, Creator and Redeemer of all that is. He is perfectly holy, just, loving and truthful. He has revealed Himself to be eternally self-existent – one being in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit’<sup>11</sup>.

They are therefore Trinitarian in their belief, as is the CofI.

**‘WE BELIEVE...** The Lord Jesus Christ, the one and only Son of God, was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin, Mary, and is God’s Anointed One, empowered by the Holy Spirit to inaugurate God’s Kingdom on earth. He was crucified for our sins, died, was buried, resurrected and ascended into heaven, and is now alive today, in the presence of God the Father and in His people. He is “true God” and “true man.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <http://bethelredding.com/membership>

<sup>10</sup> Section 1.02

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ibethel.org/about/>

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

This represents classic Christian teaching on Christology and equates to the Creeds confessed by the CofI.

**'WE BELIEVE...**We are saved by God's grace, through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Anyone can be restored to fellowship with God through repenting, believing and receiving Jesus as their Savior and Lord. The Holy Spirit, convicts, regenerates, justifies, and adopts us as we enter the Kingdom of God as His sons and daughters'<sup>13</sup>.

Whilst this is more explicit than the Creeds confessed by the CofI, all of it can be paralleled by the CofI's teaching embodied in its faith and liturgy, as it is all based on Scripture.

**'WE BELIEVE...**In the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a holy life and minister super-naturally. The baptism of the Holy Spirit according to Acts 1:4-8 and 2:4 is poured out on believers that they might have power to be witnesses'<sup>14</sup>.

The CofI shares the belief in the sanctifying Holy Spirit who empowers for ministry and mission. In the latter part of this statement, much hangs on how the different terms (such as baptism in the Holy Spirit) are understood.

**'WE BELIEVE...**The victorious redemptive work of Christ on the cross provides freedom from the power of the enemy - sin, lies, sickness and torment'<sup>15</sup>.

Whilst much of this statement echoes the CofI liturgies in confessing the 'one, perfect sacrifice and oblation for the sins of the whole world' it extends the definition of 'sins' beyond what might be normally expressed by the CofI liturgy although it would be a common belief that at the yet-to-come end times, Christ will free his church from all the ills named here. This is the statement which begins to hint at a realised eschatology which is characteristic of BCRC and which is discussed below in section 5.

**'WE BELIEVE...**The Church consists of all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. He gave His church the ordinances of Baptism and Communion. The Church exists to carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ and further advance His kingdom by undoing the works of the enemy, preaching and living the good news of God's love, discipling the nations, baptizing and teaching them to love and obey God'<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

This also mirrors the creeds and liturgies of the CofI.

In two places the Bethel initial statement is more detailed than the CofI creeds and liturgies. These are:

**‘WE BELIEVE...**Humankind was created in the image of God to know and enjoy Him yet we wilfully rejected the Lordship and glory of God for which we were intended. Because of this, sickness, death and judgment entered the world and now creation experiences the effects and consequences of sin<sup>17</sup>.

And **‘WE BELIEVE...**In the ever increasing government of God and in the Blessed Hope, which is the glorious visible return of our Lord Jesus Christ for His overcoming bride – the church. Heaven and hell are real places. There will be a resurrection of the saved and the lost, the one to everlasting life and the other to everlasting death<sup>18</sup>.

By pointing out that this goes beyond the creeds and liturgies of the CofI, we recognise that these are statements which members of the CofI could agree with; but it is important to point out that the historic creeds have a far less developed anthropology and eschatology.

In conclusion, we think that the BCRC confession of faith clearly follows the shape of the historic Creeds: Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Church, End Times. It is expressed in terms which are intended to be contemporary, but it is also far more detailed in later sections of the statement of faith, so how it differs from the CofI and its historic creeds is chiefly by expansion on these agreed basics. These will be discussed in a later section.

### **3/5 The Sacraments and Holy Orders**

The statement of faith quoted above makes clear that BCRC adheres to the two sacraments of Baptism and Communion. In common with many Protestant churches, it does not adhere to the threefold order of bishop, priest/presbyter and deacon, but it does have a very clear pattern of Christian ministry, for which it uses the term ‘elder’, and for which selection procedures are rigorous<sup>19</sup>. Far more explicit than most Anglican statements, they are committed to every member ministry:

“God didn’t design ministry for just a few – he made each one of us a minister. All believers are called to serve and impact the lives of others

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Statement of Faith, Section 15, Rites of Ordination, kindly provided to TWG*

through ministry. Jesus washed the feet of the disciples and said, “You also should wash one another’s feet. I have set an example that you should do as I have done for you,” John 13:14.’<sup>20</sup>

### **3/6 How Bethel maps themselves in the Christian world**

The letter supplied to the members of TWG by BCRC explaining why they withdrew from the Assemblies of God shows that Bethel understands itself to be a church which has a wider mission than its local area, and a wider affiliation than the original Assemblies of God from which it emerged, and that this is something to which it believes it has been called by the Lord. It is therefore not affiliated to any denomination or association. However, it is also clear from the London conference, from the BSSM, and also from various sermons on the web that there is no spirit of competition with others, but rather an intention to work alongside other Christians wherever that is possible. This is happening in Redding, according to their own accounts. Bethel’s statement of faith<sup>21</sup> confesses,

‘The local and/or universal expression of the church might not yet be glorious, but the Lord has promised she will get there. Whatever church we are planted in, we seek to love and serve our church into becoming the glorious bride she was created to be. Eph. 5:25–27; Matt. 16:18, Rev. 19:7–9; Gal. 6:1–2, 10’.

Recent Christian scholarship recounting the last 150 years of church history has become accustomed to speaking of ‘three waves’ of renewal: the first wave is generally regarded as beginning with the Azusa Street revival in 1906 which gave rise to a range of Pentecostal churches usually characterised by second blessing teaching, which suggests that ‘water baptised’ Christians should expect a second blessing of the Holy Spirit, usually marked by speaking in tongues. The second wave of renewal is identified as the charismatic movement which spread into most mainstream denominations, including many Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic churches. This movement was open to many features of the Pentecostal movement, but acted to revive mainstream liturgies, preaching, serving, and mission focus in differing ways. The second wave was characterised by Christians becoming much more willing to meet and work with Christians of whom they had hitherto been suspicious or condemnatory. The third wave is identified by Peter Wagner as the Holy Spirit’s work being welcomed overtly by evangelical and other churches who were initially suspicious of Pentecostalism, but also including others like the Vineyard who believe in the power of the Holy Spirit without espousing a rigid second blessing theology. Ed Stezer<sup>22</sup> suggests that this dates from the 1980s signs and wonders movement. Peter

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<sup>20</sup> <http://bethelredding.com/calendar/servant-life>

<sup>21</sup> *Supplied to TWG*

<sup>22</sup> ‘Overview’ in <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/november/third-wave-of-holy-spirit.html>

Hocken affirms that ‘the Holy Spirit makes the church more eschatological’<sup>23</sup>. It is clear that BCRC was birthed in the first wave, through the Assemblies of God, but has perhaps moved beyond that into the third wave. Hence, their emphasis on the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God and ‘signs following’.

### **3/7 Their stated aims**

The website of BCRC indicates that...

‘Bethel Redding’s mission is to create a vibrant family of hope-filled believers who deeply experience the love and presence of God and partner with Jesus to express the joy and power of His kingdom in every area of life.

‘We have a passion for people, our city and our world. Our culture is characterized by worship, the presence of God, family, revival, miracles and healings, and honor. These core values have been shaped by our rich history and leadership of multiple generations.

‘We are a local church body who worship together at several weekend services across multiple campuses in Redding, California. However, we are not your typical church because of our global impact as a revival resource and equipping center. People from around the world attend Bethel conferences, trainings or our full time ministry school to experience more of God and the ways of His kingdom’<sup>24</sup>.

So it goes on to make clear:

**‘Bethel’s mission is Revival...**the personal, regional, and global expansion of God’s kingdom through His manifest presence...

**1. Our first ministry is to God, therefore we worship with extravagant joy and gratitude.**

– Our personal relationship with Him is our number one priority.

**2. Salvation frees us from the power of the devil – sin, lies, sickness and torment.**

**3. Every believer is a supernatural minister of the gospel of power whom signs and wonders should follow.**

– All ministry flows from the prayer, “Thy kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven.”

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<sup>23</sup> Hocken, Peter, *Holy Spirit*, pp. 43f.

<sup>24</sup> <http://bethelredding.com/about/our-mission>

- We equip and send the church to carry on the works of Jesus.

**4. We demonstrate God's grace, His unconditional love and transforming power, to everyone.**

- We impact every socioeconomic group and cultural realm that mercy and justice would reign because we pastor a city, not just a church.

**5. Christ is returning for a glorious overcoming bride - His Church**

- We are more than "sinners saved by grace", we are saints - sons and daughters of the King.
- So we expect to successfully fulfill the Great Commission - passing on revival from one generation to the next - even if the world grows darker in the last days.
- We embrace the biblical government of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers'.

This spells out and builds on the overarching faith statement.

**3/8 How their theology is worked out in practice**

In the time available, we have not been able to study this in great detail, but it is important to mention this here, as it is such a key part of the conviction and manner of Christian life which BCRC espouses.

**3/8a** On the website, in the presentations at the London conference of 2015, and in reports of those who have visited Bethel, who described it to us, it is clear that BCRC is committed to helping their town live in ways which enable justice for the poor. To this end, they are willing to work with those responsible for secular government and also in church initiated relief and improvement projects. As one might expect from a church of their size, this is a considerable and admirable undertaking.

**3/8b** The Sozo course is described as 'a unique inner healing and deliverance ministry' which began at BCRC, but has now spread to many places - see further description in Section 5/2d below.

**3/8c** In church life, and in all that the church undertakes in the local area or in mission around the world, there is a high expectation of the miraculous work of God in everyday and in special events for which they pray and which they record on their website. BSSM affirms that 'Jesus promised signs would follow believers and they would do even greater works than He, Mark 16:15-18; John 14:12-14; Acts 2:17-18'<sup>25</sup>,

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<sup>25</sup> <http://bssm.net/about/corevalues> Supernatural Ministry



and so they teach people to believe that this will happen and to act accordingly.

We have tried to give a fair overview of the convictions and shape of life of BCRC and if we have misunderstood or missed out important things out we have not done so in order to distort, but rather so as to make this section a manageable size.



## **SECTION 4 THE ROYAL BLACK INSTITUTION (RBI)**

In section 1/2 we recorded the sources of our information. The RBI offers a little information about itself. It has a website and some printed material was given to us by the official delegation led by the Sovereign Grand Master Sir Knight Millar Farr with kind permission to quote, but all the ceremonies or rituals or dramatised Bible Readings in the preceptory meetings are secret. They are held in oral tradition by people who are specially trained to memorise them and are not printed or published. They are checked on a regular basis by the Grand Lecturer, who has oversight of accuracy worldwide. We understand that only those who are specially trained have committed them to memory in their entirety, but members will be familiar with them from hearing them rehearsed regularly at meetings. The working group was faced with an immense task trying to discover what might be accurate in reports given to us by those who were not in the official delegation. We have decided for the purposes of this report to make clear that some things are certain, but to describe and discuss others in terms which make it clear that 'it is alleged that this happens' and all of our comments in those areas will be in terms of 'if x or y occurs then ...' Whilst this may be far from satisfactory, it is important that we do not omit what former members have disclosed to us. But we have no way of verifying them, or of assessing what the truth may be when different people have affirmed opposite things to be the case. All the unattributed material below is taken from the documents which were given to us by the official delegation.

### **4/1 Historical overview**

The RBI began in 1797, evolving only two years after the founding of the Orange order. Like other societies at the time, their traditions, rituals, and symbols could be found in the older orders of chivalry or other groups, including the Irish Freemasons founded in 1725. Edward Rogers, the first Registrar of the Grand Black Chapter, stated that when the Grand Black Chapter was formed on 14th September 1846 its purpose was 'to instruct and inform those who are desirous of obtaining knowledge of Divine Truth and Sublime mysteries'<sup>1</sup>. Today, we were told, a Lecturer's certificate records '...N....by zealous labour, acquired great skill in the ceremonies, secrets, and mysteries of the order of Royal Black Knights'.

Those rites and ceremonies caused deep concern in the Orange Order of the 19th century and in 1811 the Grand Lodge of Ireland disowned these new developments. They were scorned in the strongest possible terms.<sup>2</sup> Sir Knight Rev John Brown in his account of the foundation of the RBI, records that the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland

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<sup>1</sup> Rodgers, E., 'History of the RBI' cited Malcolmson, W. P., p. 307

<sup>2</sup> See Brown, William, *An Army with Banners*, p. ix; cf. p. 26, 141

threatened Orangemen who presumed to 'meet in any such Black or other similar lodges' with expulsion<sup>3</sup>. He also notes how despite these differences of the 19th century, the language, symbols, degrees and ceremonies in the 1860s under William Johnston's reconstitution are 'not so very different in essence from that which survives to day in the modern Royal Black Institution'<sup>4</sup>. As for the degrees themselves, Brown states, '...this is not the place to say much of them. "The things of the temple must be learned in the temple". Who shall say from what far and strange sources they have come?'<sup>5</sup>

The official delegation made clear that there were no plans for a detailed history of the RBI. It would certainly not include any information on the ceremonies/rituals/dramatised Bible Readings but to produce a reliable history of other aspects of the Institution would prove difficult as so much depends on the oral tradition and there was very little written record of the early years. Illiteracy would have been a problem in the 19th century.

#### **4/1a Title**

The title of the order is significant. It is claimed that the use of the word 'Royal' is biblical following 1 Peter 2.9 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...' where royal refers to the Christian community not a separate organization. This title makes no political or other claims, and Lord Molyneux was assured when he was the Grand Master that the British monarch had no objection to this title being used in this way. 'Black' is a reminder of mortality, and a symbol of mourning. This is a theme of the teachings of the RBI.

#### **4/1b Reach**

The RBI defines itself as:

'a unitary worldwide organisation with membership in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ghana, Togo and the Republic of Ireland as well as throughout the UK'.

Its international headquarters is at Brownlow House, Lurgan. The official delegation was unanimous that there was consistency worldwide on the

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<sup>3</sup> See 'A short account of the foundation of the Royal Black Institution in Ireland' <http://www.markethillblack.co.uk/imperial/imperial-history/>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

practices and teachings of the RBI.

Whilst some preceptories have their own halls, they sometimes shares premises nowadays with other groups.

Each lodge has a chaplain, who may be an ordained minister, or if the membership does not include anyone who is ordained, a lay person can be appointed to the role of chaplain. This is happening increasingly. The RBI is trying to provide training for chaplains – providing them with literature on the Scriptures.

#### **4/1c Membership**

Membership is open to all Protestant men. Many members of the RBI believe that it ‘demands that its members shall be Orangemen and Royal Arch Purplemen in good standing’<sup>6</sup>. However TWG was assured by the official delegation that members of the RBI are normally members of both the Orange Institution and (in Ireland) of the Royal Arch Purple Chapter. TWG was assured by the official delegation that exemptions could be granted from such membership. Most preceptories are mixed in their membership, including CofI, Methodist, Presbyterian, Salvationist, Quaker etc. The membership consists of lay and ordained persons. Members are asked to consent to a faith statement, and would be expected to subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity and to believe in the death and resurrection of Christ. There is no requirement for the person to be baptised, only for them to have a personal faith in Christ confessed. We believe that the only Protestant churches to forbid membership of the RBI are the Reformed Presbyterians and The Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland. Some of their reasons are to be found in section 6 below.

Membership is usually by invitation and may be linked to family connections. Members are initiated into the RBI through a series of rituals or degrees. The CofI Standing Committee Report 1999 (p.197) makes clear that there are ‘eleven “degrees” – nine from the Old Testament, two from the New Testament’ which a person normally passes through nowadays one each month over the period of a year. At each ceremony, regalia marks the new stage.

The RBI is very concerned to protect its reputation, so it does not invite people whom it considers to be disreputable. We were informed that the current membership totals approximately 17,000 in over 550 local preceptories, of whom some 16,000 reside within the British Isles. A preceptory is a local group

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.markethillblack.co.uk/imperial/imperial-history/>

or lodge, so-called because part of their purpose is to help people to learn Protestant Christian precepts, rules or manner of life.

Members testified that this was an organisation of friendship and fellowship and that they found that their participation helped them in their discipleship and service to their church.

#### **4/1d Meetings**

The RBI is divided into Districts made up of local groups named preceptories. 'This unit elects officers who represent their membership at the next tier, namely a District Chapter. The District Chapter Officers form a County or Provincial Grand Chapter. The officers of these units constitute the membership of the governing body known as the Imperial Grand Council. This Council is recognised by all the members of the Imperial Black Commonwealth; which is the Title of the Institution; as being the supreme authority with the Sovereign Grand Master as the head of this International organization'<sup>7</sup>.

The official delegation stated that all meetings within the RBI commence with an act of worship, consisting of prayer, a Bible reading and sometimes the singing of a hymn or psalm. Meetings also always conclude with prayer. There are also dramatised Bible instruction, fellowship and business to transact. The exact nature of this was not disclosed by the official delegation. The position of the RBI is that its meetings are ordered and orderly but not ceremonial.

The RBI in Ireland arranges a number of public demonstrations including processions each summer. These are usually about 10 or 12 in total. It is customary to process from their normal meeting hall to the place of worship (The RBI does not call these processions marches or parades.) This is seen as an act of witness to their faith. Their banners and the red cross on their badges make clear what they believe, and they see their processions in the same light as Salvation Army processions. These processions draw on the tradition of pilgrims going to or from the city of Jerusalem.

There is worship at RBI events. Religious services in the open air or in public places of worship are open to anyone to attend. The minister conducting worship for the RBI in a church has sole control of the content and manner of the service; nothing is requested or mandated by the RBI.

#### **4/1e Privacy**

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.portadownrbdcno5.co.uk/cf.RoyalBlack.org/mission-statement/our-history/>

Secrecy is an important part of the organisation but not everything is private or secret – in this way RBI varies from some other groups, inasmuch as those who belong are publically identified by their public processions to and from church at regular intervals. They let the police know about their planned processions and they hold religious services which anyone can attend alongside their members. So their membership is in the public domain. They also have some publications which are available, and they have a website with some information displayed. They have produced videos and calendars. Nevertheless the proceedings at their preceptory meetings are private, as any organisation might keep their affairs confidential and are regarded as a benefit of membership. They are minuted, as a recent find from a house clearance, a minute book from 1924 to 1957, is noted in the October 2013 RBI magazine. And their rituals or degrees of initiation are closely guarded secrets, though it has recently been the case that a former member, W. P. Malcolmson, has published a book *The Royal Black Institution*, in which he claims to disclose their traditions. There is dispute as to the accuracy of these, but as the officials of the RBI have decided not to refute all or part of the publication, we cannot be sure what they know to be accurate and what they regard as false.

Whilst the current leadership maintain the secrecy, not all members believe that this is essential. However they seem to follow the current policy loyally.

#### **4/2 The Bible**

The RBI clearly states that the Bible is their rule and guide for faith and conduct. The study of scripture and its relevance for daily living is part of the mission statement. Scripture seems to be the subject of much of the activity, stories and vocabulary of the order. Many of the banners carried in parades depict scenes from the Old Testament and some symbols, such as the ladder, are related by members of the RBI to OT stories, in this case Jacob's ladder of Genesis 28.10ff. The interpretation of the history of Israel is very specific to the organisation and there is limited reference to the prophets, psalms, and wisdom literature. There seems to be agreement that there is more OT than NT material in the degrees. One current member of the RBI explained that the degrees were dramatised Bible Stories with readings taken from the OT and NT illustrating faith and hope, although he acknowledged that the traditions may be quaint or old fashioned but he believed that participating accentuated the message. He suggested that there were no ceremonies or rites, just dramatised Bible readings, and that 'taking part' brought God's word to life.

A recent innovation was outlined to us by the official delegation. The Chaplains' Committee had prepared a short explanatory Bible study series for preceptory meetings and prayer breakfasts. At one prayer breakfast between 80–90 men had met together and it had been a beneficial time with many praying out loud. The Senior

Chaplain added that the RBI was taking this area of Bible study seriously and were working hard to raise the profile. They indicated that they were also in the process of preparing material for the 500th year anniversary of Martin Luther. As examples, in one district, there had been a Bible study evening and another had organised a week of evangelistic outreach. The delegation pointed out that the RBI could reach into sections of the population which were difficult for the mainstream churches to tap into.

#### **4/3 The Creeds**

As the RBI does not claim to be a church, it does not have a creed, and has not published material as to its relationship with the historic creeds. However, it does require profession of Christian faith from its members, who may be drawn from a variety of Christian churches (see above) and it is assumed that they will adhere to the creedal formulations of their own denomination, where they have any. There are no references to the creeds of the church in any documents we have seen. That may be an assumption, taken as 'read' for members of the CofI. Faith affirmations of another kind are indicated in the next section.

#### **4/4 Confession of Faith: What does the RBI stand for?**

##### **4/4a Mission Statement**

On the RBI website, and on other literature such as its 2015 calendar this is set out as follows:

'THE BIBLE...the rule and guide of our faith and practice.'

'RBI exists to give its members the opportunity to:

STUDY Holy Scripture in order to understand the Christian faith and demonstrate its relevance for today's society.

INCREASE knowledge of the Reformed Faith in order to extend its influence and development throughout the world.

ENGAGE in Christian and Charitable outreach in order to demonstrate personal faith in Jesus Christ, their commitment to regular Christian worship and all aspects of charitable living.

CONTINUE and further develop social and responsible citizenship in order to maintain, and enhance greater and higher standards of Justice,



Truth, Honesty, and Integrity in both private and public life.<sup>8</sup>

They publish a short leaflet which affirms the five Reformation principles, called 'Solas' (the Latin for 'alone'). These are Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, God's glory alone. Their elaboration of these five principles are given with Scriptural warrants, and any member of the CofI might agree with them, though they affirm more than the CofI does, including, for instance, the infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture.

The RBI stresses loyalty to God, Queen and Membership in that order. They emphasize that their primary allegiance is to Jesus Christ.

#### **4/4b The Ideals of a Sir Knight**

The term "Sir Knight" is the traditional name for members, which appears on earliest documents. In order to attain membership a man:

'Must testify to being a believer in the one living and true God as his Heavenly Father, His only Son Jesus Christ as the sole Mediator between God and man, and the Holy Spirit as the Comforter.  
Must uphold the Christian Faith  
Should study Holy Scripture, which is the inspired Word of God and therefore as such contains all things necessary for salvation, making it the guide of his faith and practice  
Should regularly attend Church for Divine Worship  
Should reject and oppose the erroneous doctrines of other faiths and practices that do not conform to Holy Scripture  
Should avoid all things that are indecent, irreligious, false and profane  
Should live his life so that he brings honour to God through devotion, faithfulness, honesty, justice and temperance.'<sup>9</sup>

The Ideals are given as:

'Be true and faithful to the Order at all times.  
Spread the Gospel of his Christian Knighthood.  
Uphold the honour and virtue of every Sir Knight.  
Assist those who are less fortunate than himself.  
Support his Preceptory and elected Officers.  
Live up to high principles of the Order

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<sup>8</sup> <http://royalblack.org/mission-statement/>

<sup>9</sup> Membership Rule 1 (supplied to TWG by the official delegation)

Be faithful to God, Church, Queen and Commonwealth.<sup>10</sup>

These are high ideals to which members aspire.

#### **4/5 The Sacraments, holy orders and other signs**

##### **4/5a Sacraments and holy orders**

We have seen no published view on the sacraments or holy ministerial orders, but since the RBI is not a church this is not surprising – many Christian organisations which are ecumenical would not include anything about either topic, since some of their members, such as the Salvationists or Quakers might find such statements to be in conflict with their convictions.

##### **4/5b Public Insignia**

The RBI is well known for their regalia worn in processions and in public services of worship. The blue Apron is a prominent part of regalia and has obvious roots in Freemasonry. The compass and square, also taken from Freemasonry is the main symbol on many halls and badges. The skull and crossed bones is widely recognised as part of the tradition on flags and arches. A coffin is frequently included on arches and it was reported to be part of the ceremonial. The Red Cross surmounting a crown is seen as emphasising their core message of salvation by Christ alone, whose blood stained the cross, but we were unable to discover why it was set at an angle. We were told that the crown came from Joshua 22 (Rulers of the Tribes of the Children of Israel) and that it was the same symbol as that of the Faith Mission.

The Ladder refers to Jacob's ladder, but no-one has explained to TWG why that should be celebrated above other things. The Crimson arrow may be related to the death of Jehu.

#### **4/6 How RBI maps itself in the Christian world**

The RBI publically defines itself as Protestant and Reformed.

#### **4/7 How the RBI's theology is worked out in practice**

The intention of the RBI is that members of the RBI endeavour to live out their

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.portadownrbdcno5.co.uk/ideals\\_of\\_a\\_sir\\_knight.htm](http://www.portadownrbdcno5.co.uk/ideals_of_a_sir_knight.htm)

faith. Some members play an active and effective part in their local churches. Their courtesy, support, and leadership is widely appreciated. Their participation in church and community life is well known. There is also a real concern to share with others their personal faith in Christ, which is often the inspiration for their contribution to church life. However, one person we met acknowledged that although all RBI members had to be church members and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, it was patently the case that not everyone was a regular worshipper.

The RBI's charitable giving is either to Christian outreach or to medical work, and they tried to make the spread as wide as possible. They have given generous financial support to home work, for instance a minibus had been bought for the Church Army, and each year a bursary is available for those going forward for ordination. They also donate to witness overseas. It is currently backing, among other work, the Bible Society and the Missionary Aviation Fellowship. Sometimes members themselves volunteer to help, for instance a team has been sent from the RBI to Kiwoko Hospital to help with a building project.<sup>11</sup>

There is also real concern to share with others the meaning of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is often the inspiration for the example and service of their life in the church. The conduct and character of individual members of the RBI is, in some people's minds, admirable and beyond reproach.

We have tried to give a fair overview of the convictions and shape of the life of the RBI and if we have misunderstood or missed out important things we have not done so in order to distort, but rather so as to make this section a manageable size.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://royalblack.org/royal-black-raise-half-a-million-pounds-for-charity/>



## **SECTION 5 BETHEL CHURCH EVALUATED**

### **5/1 Theological concerns which have been expressed about Bethel Church and its influence**

We begin here, since it is clear that some people have significant concerns which we have investigated in order to offer TWG's reflection. These have mostly been expressed by people in the parish of Knocknamuckley, but some have been expressed elsewhere, which were brought to our attention. If there are matters which are not dealt with here, then that will be because there was no way of attributing them to the influence of BCRC.

#### **5/1a Receiving exceptional gifts or ministries as an inheritance of Christians in previous ages who have manifested them**

There are two ways in which this needs to be approached. First, some people have accused Bethel Church of practising what has been called 'grave sucking' by which is meant that Christians are encouraged to make pilgrimage to the grave of Christian heroes in renewal, so that they may pray that God will give them an increase of whatever gifts that person had. So, the grave of an evangelist may be visited in order to seek increased gifts of evangelism. Bethel Church denies that it has ever taught or practised such a thing, and responded to our inquiries with a document which makes clear that a person who promotes this practice has nothing to do with Bethel.

However, Bethel Church does believe that what God has done in the past, he can do again, (which is a common belief among Christians) but specifically, they are creating 'a library and the museum of the Generals' which is described in a video in which Bill Johnson is interviewed on their website<sup>1</sup>. This aims to inspire the current generation by gathering the sermons and other artefacts from those who have been leaders in revival, so as to encourage prayer for God to send similar gifts today. Such admiration for past Christian leaders and prayer to God for similar gifts today may be found in churches which have a strong emphasis on the company of saints: for instance the English Bishop of St Albans recently produced a book in which one saint or an outstanding Christian from every generation who has a strong link with that diocese is described for every day of the calendar year<sup>2</sup>. It is also found in Roman Catholicism, for instance in the experience and tradition of Ignatius Loyola, though it is also found elsewhere. So in encouraging learning about

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bjm.org/vision-2022-overview/>

<sup>2</sup> Smith, A., *Saints and Pilgrims, St Albans*, 2013

outstanding Christian people and in encouraging Christians to aspire to desire God to work again in that way today, Bethel Church is not innovating. Some Christians may think it is over-emphasized at Bethel, but that is a matter of fine judgement. Many in Ireland would continue to hold St Patrick in high regard and long that people with such evangelistic gifts might be at work in Ireland today. With many protestant denominations, Bethel does not think that there is any need for a process of canonisation in order to mark someone out as a 'saint', since they believe all Christians are sanctified by God's Holy Spirit. It is important to record that no-one in Knocknamuckley Church had been encouraged to practice 'grave sucking'.

### 5/1b **'Fire Tunnels'**

Mention was made to us of these, though no-one seemed certain what they were. Bethel Church has kindly explained that this is a 'nickname' for a way of praying for hundreds of people at one service.

In many Christian churches, either when there is an offer of the ministry of healing, or when people are encouraged to come forward for prayer for other needs, a team of people is appointed to meet with people, usually two people praying for each person who comes forward. They customarily lay hands on the needy folk as they pray for them.

Bethel Church has a membership of thousands and many people come from all around the world, as they did to Holy Trinity Brompton, England, and to the Toronto Vineyard church, when it was reported in those places that God was moving in an amazing way. When people are invited to go forward for prayer, if there are hundreds of people lining up and waiting, then this can take hours – unless there are hundreds of prayer team members to meet them individually. In order to avoid these long waits, Bethel Church began the custom of having the pairs of prayers stand opposite one another and have people pass between them, as if they were walking through an archway or 'tunnel' of prayer. As they walk, the people on either side pray for God's blessing on them. Since they believe that the Holy Spirit comes as fire and wind, as it is described in Acts 2, they have been nicknamed 'fire tunnels'. We can see no reason for this to be regarded as a problem. We do not believe that this is an issue for the parish of Knocknamuckley, but should it happen, we do not think there is any reason for anyone to be worried about it.

### 5/1c **The coming of the Holy Spirit**

There was a perception that in services in Knocknamuckley, the Holy Spirit was commanded to come. We have not been able to trace this in Bethel (so we

do not know whether this is the practice there) but we note the following:

- First, the Holy Spirit is divine and sovereign, and we rightly request and cannot command his presence.
- Secondly, it is customary for the church to invoke the Holy Spirit. The chief example of that is in the ordination services, where a very ancient hymn is always sung: ‘Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire...’ We understand that to say, ‘Come Holy Ghost’ may sound like a command, but is in fact a request. Language does not allow for precision between those two modes of address at this point.

Another concern expressed was that at prayer meetings in St Matthias church and in small groups, people had been prostrate and had also been laughing, and perhaps speaking in tongues. The group notes that sometimes when there has been a period of renewal in the life of the Church, the felt presence of God has been overwhelming. There are many accounts of this, but suffice to mention two from differing places. The first recounted by Ian R K Paisley in *The 1859 Revival* describes controversy over the ‘prostrations’ of notorious sinners and lifelong Christians alike during this period, which ‘were often decried but could not be denied’<sup>3</sup> and were often accompanied by ‘penitence, humiliation, reformation, and love for the Scriptures...’<sup>4</sup>. The second comes from John Wesley’s ministry cited by Henry H Knight III in *Anticipating Heaven Below: Optimism of Grace from Wesley to the Pentecostals*:

‘In 1784 (Wesley) records that “after preaching to an earnest congregation at Coleford I met the Society. They contained themselves pretty well during the exhortation, but when I began to pray the flame broke out; many cried aloud; many sunk to the ground; many trembled exceedingly; but all seemed quite athirst for God and penetrated by the presence of his power”’<sup>5</sup>

Good work on the criteria for assessing such experiences is widely available, not least in the Church of England Doctrine Commission’s work, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit* chapter 2,

‘Charismatics ...challenge the church with ... a deep and impressive commitment to the adventure of prayer ... That it is indeed possible to enter into this divine relationship with willing and excited cooperation...Bernard of Clairvaux has well said, “there is no proof of

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<sup>3</sup> Paisley, Ian, R. K., *The 1859 Revival*, 2009, p. 251

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* p. 255

<sup>5</sup> *John Wesley Journal September 8th, 1784, Wesley’s Works*, 23:331 cited Knight p. 128

the presence of the Spirit which is more certain than a desire for ever greater grace”...’<sup>6</sup>

### 5/1d **Testimonies**

It was reported that testimonies from visitors from Bethel were not about initial salvation but about recent experience of God in people’s lives. This is an interesting observation. Whilst some evangelical churches have characteristically thought of testimonies as concerned with conversion, as in the narratives in Acts of Paul’s conversion, other churches, and especially but not only Pentecostal Churches, have regarded testimonies of conversion which may be 10, 20, 40 years in the past as not being as up–building of the community as testimony to the way that the Lord has been at work in people’s lives in the last week or so. The testifier’s conversion is assumed and may be well known to a congregation. Recent converts may well speak of initial conversion, but long term disciples will have prayers answered, or stories of God’s provision to share. This is also biblical. Peter went to Jerusalem to report what God had done at the home of Cornelius, and did not begin by testifying to his own conversion to Christ<sup>7</sup>.

### 5/1e **Prophecy**

The CofI has not made a pronouncement as to whether it believes that God still gives Christian people the gift of prophecy or whether this is a gift which ceased after the end of the apostolic period. But what it believes about healing and other spiritual gifts suggest that the CofI does not rule out that possibility. Indeed, at CofI confirmation there is a prayer which asks God to send his gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit to the candidates. Many Anglicans would regard Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa as having engaged in prophetic ministry. Such an example indicates that there is a wide range of understanding as to what prophecy might be – and this is discussed at length in Anthony Thiselton’s comprehensive work *The Holy Spirit*<sup>8</sup>. Some regard it as referring to the teaching ministry in New Testament times, and clearly if that is what is meant, then learning will be an important component of preparation for exercising such a ministry<sup>9</sup>. But others regard it as a gift in which the Lord applies something from a passage of Scripture to the life of an individual or community now; it is about contextualisation, often spontaneous. In this case, a double discernment is needed – first of what is currently happening in a

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid* p. 33

<sup>7</sup> Acts 11

<sup>8</sup> Thiselton, Anthony, *The Holy Spirit*, 2013, pp. 108–114 and elsewhere

<sup>9</sup> People from St Matthias expressed concern that it had been suggested that Christians should learn how to receive and give prophecy.



given situation, and then which of the many words of Scripture applies here, or what the Lord would say. And obviously such a 'prophecy' must always be 'tested'. We were told that most St Matthias people believe that prophetic words are possible today, but they did not think that training people to give such words could be based in Scripture. This is an interesting debate, since it implies that much as some people think that the Scriptures, being God-breathed, are inerrant, prophecy, being God-inspired is always correctly heard and spoken. But the very fact that the spirits have to be tested, suggests that that is not necessarily the case. Perhaps our reception of the prophetic books where the classic Old Testament prophets seem so certain of 'the word of the Lord' are over influential when we discuss contemporary Christian prophecy which never in the Christian tradition claims to be the normative word of God, to be written and used by all future generations. Contemporary prophecy perhaps does need to be more modest, more like Samuel who has to learn to recognise the word of God when it comes to him in the temple, (Eli: 'if he calls, say speak')<sup>10</sup>; and how to deliver it, (Eli, 'Do not hide it from me')<sup>11</sup>.

In that more modest way of thinking about contemporary prophecy, those who offer what they believe the Lord is saying for today are perhaps emphasising the need for discernment if they suggest that if it is weighed and not found to be Christian, that it should be 'cast to the ground', another phrase which was of concern to the parishioners, and which we take to mean, 'ignore'.

Knocknamuckley was concerned that they were taught only to offer encouraging prophetic words, whereas biblical prophetic words often warned people. G. Fee, writing about the teaching of Paul about the Holy Spirit, suggests that,

'in the case of believers the Spirit speaks encouragement and edification, and in the case of unbelievers he lays bare their hearts in such a way as to lead to repentance'<sup>12</sup>.

Such a prophet 'speaks a different kind of word from the predominant word of judgment on ancient Israel'<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps this lies behind the emphasis on encouragement in the parish. Certainly, BSSM affirms that 'the gift of prophecy ... is speaking on God's behalf to strengthen, encourage and comfort people'<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Samuel 3

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Fee, Gordon, D., *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, 1994 p. 891

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 892

<sup>14</sup> 'God Still Speaking' <http://bssm.net/about/corevalues>

Concern was expressed about the way in which prophecy was given – that sometimes there seemed to be an arbitrary choice of people asked to offer prophecy; that ‘words’ were offered to individuals in a public setting; that it seemed as if it was made possible for people to make an appointment to go to see someone ‘to get a prophecy’. The NT makes it clear that worship needs to be orderly, but it has little or nothing to say about these concerns. Some prophecy in Paul’s churches was obviously in the congregation ‘those who prophesy build up the church...’<sup>15</sup> but there is a long tradition of Christians meeting together privately to seek the Lord’s will on a matter.

## 5/1f **Understanding of God’s relationship with Christian people**

Some alarm had been caused in the parish of Knocknamuckley at the different way in which the church seemed to be invited to relate to God. Whereas they had been accustomed to be reverent in the presence of God, in its place there seemed to be a less formal attitude, especially at the Holy Communion service. Some people perceived this as worship giving way to entertainment. Despite assurances that God was present in a wonderful way, some congregational members did not feel that that was the case. For some people the change in style was so great that they had ceased to attend. People were alarmed when the rector had said, ‘God is in a good mood’ as if he sometimes was not. And they felt that the assurance that the Christian person was full of the Holy Spirit and therefore in some sense able to engage in ‘supernatural’ living, was perceived as man being exalted whilst God was being demoted. Perhaps this was an emphasis from BCRC. TWG found that a prayer on the BCRC Facebook page outlined these ideas:

### **‘OFFERING OF THANKS’**

*“I am powerful, and what I believe changes the world! So today I declare:*

*God is in a good mood.*

*He loves me all the time.*

*Nothing can separate me from His love.*

*Jesus’ blood paid for everything.*

*I will tell nations of what He has done.*

*I am important.*

*How He made me is amazing.*

*I was designed for worship.*

*My mouth establishes praise to silence the enemy.*

*Everywhere I go becomes a perfect health zone.*

*And...with God*

*Nothing is impossible!”<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 14.4

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bethel.church.redding/posts/10150407622936824>

Much of the style of this prayer may be disconcerting because the culture of the USA is so different from Ireland. But the theology is not so alarming.

*'I am powerful'* could be taken in two ways; first self-aggrandisement, second, as an affirmation that the same power, the Holy Spirit, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, also is in the Christian. 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you?'<sup>17</sup> In the second sense this is thoroughly biblical.

*'God is in a good mood'* may grate on Irish ears, but it sums up the Gospel, which assures us that,

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'<sup>18</sup>

or as Paul puts it,

'As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been "Yes and No". For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, ..., was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes"<sup>19</sup>.

*'I am important'* may again be startling, but it is a way of recognising that the Lord calls us (even us!) to collaborate with him in making the gospel known. What higher honour could a person have than to serve the living God?

*'Everywhere I go becomes a perfect health zone.'* This is more controversial; comments in section 5/2c are relevant here. But understood in a sympathetic light, it may be taken to mean that 'since Christ dwells in me',<sup>20</sup> wherever I go, all the reconciliation and healing and forgiveness which Christ gives are available by his presence within me.

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<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor. 3.16

<sup>18</sup> John 3.16

<sup>19</sup> 2 Cor. 1.18ff

<sup>20</sup> Col. 1.27

## 5/2 **Theological concerns which the working group wish to register about the teaching of BCRC**

### 5/2a **Christology**

Whilst we have reported above that the statement of faith expresses traditional Christology, there are some places in Bill Johnson's books where his discussion of kenotic Christology could be taken to imply that at the Incarnation, the Son of God emptied himself of his divinity. Based on Philippians 2, kenosis is an idea which is used in a number of different ways by theologians. Johnson is keen to emphasize that Jesus Christ is really and fully human and for that reason depends on the Holy Spirit and as such is an exemplar of the way in which Christians also need to depend on the Holy Spirit. He is reluctant to attribute the miraculous in the Gospel narratives to the divinity of the Son, rather he attributes it to Jesus' Spirit dependence, which the Gospels undoubtedly record. So, for instance he writes:

‘Jesus lived His earthly life with human limitations, He laid his divinity aside as He sought to fulfil the assignment given to Him by the Father to live life as a man without sin and then die in the place of mankind for sin. ... The anointing (of the Holy Spirit) Jesus received was the equipment necessary, given by the Father to make it possible for Him to live beyond human limitations. ... The anointing was what linked Jesus the man to the divine, enabling him to destroy the works of the devil.’<sup>21</sup>

There has been a significant body of literature in recent decades exploring whether kenotic Christology is biblical, coherent and consistent with the classic Christian creeds, especially with Chalcedon which enshrined the confession of Jesus Christ as truly God and truly human. It is a complex area of theology. However, it is also crucial for faith that our description of Jesus Christ is as truthful as possible. If he ceased to be God at Incarnation in what way does he reveal God, or die for anyone other than himself? Chalcedonian Christology seeks to guard both revelation and salvation.

T. F. Torrance explains:

‘The verb *ekenosen* can mean: (a) ...”made himself of no reputation” that is, robbed himself of his glory. ... (b) It may mean quite literally, “emptied”...But if so, the Greek does not say that he who was in the form of God emptied anything out of himself, but he emptied *himself*

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson, Bill, *When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles*, 2003, p. 79

out of a heavenly and glorious *morphe* into an earthly and inglorious *morphe*, that is, he made himself of no reputation, and humbled ... himself.’<sup>22</sup> (*morphe means form*)

C.S. Evans explores some possible ways in which the reality of Jesus Christ as fully the Son of God may be understood so as not to be incompatible with the Incarnation in a real human life. One such way is in ‘a continuous act of self-limitation’<sup>23</sup>, so that, for instance, omnipotence which Jesus Christ possesses as the Son of God, is limited in order for him to be fully human. Because this is such a complex area of theology it is hard to know whether Johnson’s way of expressing kenotic Christology is intended to contradict the Chalcedonian confession of faith in Jesus Christ as truly God and truly man, from conception to all eternity, which would clearly be contrary to the teaching of the CofI, or whether it is the kind of unguarded comment which can sometimes be found in popular theology, and which, if elaborated would reassert traditional Chalcedonian Christology. As currently expressed it is inconsistent with the teaching of the CofI, although we recognise that this may not be the intention.

## 5/2b Eschatology

In his book *Anticipating Heaven Below: Optimism of Grace from Wesley to the Pentecostals*, Henry H Knight III describes how the idea of ‘the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven’ may be traced back to John Wesley and from him to the Pentecostal church leaders who were influenced by his theology. “‘Heaven below’” was a term used by Charles Wesley to describe knowing Jesus and his love as well as its salvific effects.’<sup>24</sup> In different ways, Knight traces how John Wesley had an ‘optimism of grace’ which sometimes emphasized the ‘already’ of God’s work at the expense of the ‘not yet’. For John Wesley it is shown, ‘the work of the Holy Spirit is at its heart eschatological – the present beginning of the new creation’<sup>25</sup>.

‘In the redemptive work of the triune God, it is the Holy Spirit who brings ‘heaven below’; it is Jesus Christ who reveals to us the content of heaven, both now and yet to come’<sup>26</sup>.

So the adoption of the phrase ‘on earth as in heaven’ as the verse which heads

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<sup>22</sup> Torrance T.F., *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, 2008, p. 74f.

<sup>23</sup> Evans, C.S., “The Self Emptying of Love” in *The Incarnation*, 2002 p. 256

<sup>24</sup> *Anticipating Heaven Below*, 2014, p. 10

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 44

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 51

up and summarises all else on the Bethel website is not strange or unexpected. It is part of the Wesleyan inheritance common in Pentecostal or Assemblies of God churches. Knight traces a dialectic in Wesley between God's faithfulness and God's sovereign freedom, where faithfulness 'describes what is entailed in God being faithful to divine promises, and "freedom" refers to the manner and timing of how God fulfils those promises.'<sup>27</sup>

Those who emphasize God's faithfulness (his promises), Knight suggests, have a tendency to a more realised eschatology and a higher expectation of seeing on earth what they believe is in heaven. Those who emphasize God's freedom tend to a less realised eschatology, not because they do not believe God's promises, but because they recognise that it is in the sovereign gift of God as to how and when God will fulfil them. For Wesley this was more about being perfected in love than speaking in tongues or performing miracles, but the underlying theology is the same.

Johnson writes: "The kingdom of God is at hand." That means that heaven is not just our eternal destination, but also a present reality, and it's within arm's reach'<sup>28</sup>. This view is one which has been argued by a number of scholars recently, notably by Bishop Tom Wright, now Professor of New Testament at St Andrew's.

'The sovereign rule of God (i.e. the rule of heaven, that is of the one who lives in heaven) ... according to Jesus was and is breaking into the present world, to 'earth'. That is what Jesus taught us to pray for. We have no right to omit that clause from the Lord's Prayer or to suppose that it does not mean what it says'<sup>29</sup>.

He continues to explain that the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus

'...is the story of God's kingdom being launched on earth as in heaven, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has been decisively defeated, the new creation decisively launched, and Jesus' followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory and that inaugurated new world into practice'<sup>30</sup>.

One of the people who spoke to the working party identified the realised eschatology of Bethel as the most dangerous feature of their theology, because

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 69

<sup>28</sup> *When Heaven Invades Earth* p. 80

<sup>29</sup> Wright, Tom, *Surprised by Hope*, 2007, p. 213

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 217

it can lead people to an unrealistic expectation. This in turn can lead to over-claiming the miraculous, in order to bolster the expectations. Or unfulfilled, it can shipwreck faith, when hope for healing, for instance is not realised. BCRC sees it differently. Their confession of faith affirms:

‘We celebrate and steward the testimonies of God’s goodness so the same sorts of things happen again. Josh. 4:1–9; Rev. 19:10; Rev. 12:11.’

On the other hand, Bill Johnson explains that he does not think that the Church should be content with less than God intends for his church. John Wimber, the Toronto Church, and Bethel all challenge the traditional denominations as to how much they believe the promises of God, pray for their fulfilment and expect to see God act. But the traditional churches rightly ask BCRC how they pastor people who are not healed, or who find that in praying for the world, their experience of the presence of God is of great sorrow for the wars or refugee crises for which they cry to him.

However, it should also be noted that Bill Johnson does not refuse to face the fact that sometimes prayers are not answered as we hope, that healing does not come.<sup>31</sup> In this he differs from some early Pentecostals described in Kimberley Alexander’s *Pentecostal Healing*, who did not discuss cases where healing did not occur, or record deaths<sup>32</sup>, preferring to cover them up.

TWG, noting the significant way in which N.T. Wright and other scholars’ work has reshaped some traditional eschatology, think that the Chalcedonian confession about Christology can be helpfully applied here. Speaking of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, Chalcedon affirmed among other things, that our conversation about Jesus Christ must be without *confusion*, without *change*, without *division*, without *separation* of the two natures. As we wait for the glorious coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, we believe that it is essential that we do not *confuse* his coming with the present age, as if he has already come; that we do not *change* his coming into something else, for instance his presence in the sacraments; that we do not *divide* his second coming from his presence with us now, as if we could be content now with a lower level of expectation of what the Lord might do among us; and that we do not *separate* these ‘in-between times’ from his final appearance, as if he were impotent to answer prayer until his final appearing. Indeed, in Knight’s terms, we think we should not *confuse, change, divide, or separate* God’s faithfulness with God’s freedom; God is free to be faithful in whatever way he knows is best for the Kingdom, for the human community, for the cosmos and for each individual.

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<sup>31</sup> See for instance, Johnson, Bill, *The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind*, 2014, chapter 8

<sup>32</sup> *Pentecostal Healing*, 2006 p. 223f.

The very fact that we long for his faithfulness now, for instance, in Advent by praying, ‘Maranatha, Our Lord, Come’<sup>33</sup> indicates to us that his freedom and his faithfulness should not be confused but cannot be separated. As long as we hold this distinction *and* closeness, we will be able to juxtapose expectation with humility.

## 5/2c **Healing and expectation of miracles**

Bill Johnson says in his website,

‘We moved back to Bethel Church in Redding in 1996 after the leadership there unanimously supported my one condition: I was born for revival and would pursue revival – this was not negotiable.

‘The outpouring when we started to minister at Bethel began almost immediately, although in seed form, yet grew rapidly and we began to see many healings including multiple cases of cancer healed.

‘Healings and miracles have become normal today and I rejoice in this.

‘Many visit Redding weekly, hoping that God will touch them. I am happy to report that many leave well and whole. But many others leave in the same condition in which they came. I refuse to blame God for this, as though He has a purpose in their disease. While Jesus did not heal everyone alive in His time, He did heal everyone who came to Him. His is the only standard worth following’<sup>34</sup>.

**‘We live from the premise that God wants to save and heal everyone.**

2 Pet. 3:9; Eph. 1:4-6; Rom. 1:18-21, Matt. 4:23-24, 8:1-3, 8:16-17, 9:35, 14:34-36; Mark 6:56; Luke 9:11; Acts 10:38; 1 John 3:8’<sup>35</sup>

It is not possible for the working party to comment as to whether the healings to which people give testimony on the website, or described in the books we have read have really happened, but we have no reason to doubt the integrity of those who record them. Our concern here is with the theology which lies behind these statements. Perhaps the greatest miracle of all in our day is when the Holy Spirit removes the blindness from a person’s spiritual sight such that they are converted and become a disciple of Jesus. That is something which we know still happens all around the world and for which the church can pray and

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<sup>33</sup> 1 Cor. 16:22

<sup>34</sup> <http://bjm.org/bill/>

<sup>35</sup> <http://bssm.net/about/corevalues> ‘God is Good’



work tirelessly.

The parishioners of St Matthias were worried that BCRC teaches that it is God's will for everyone to be healed. This is referred to by the Revd Greg Downes in an article profiling Bill Johnson's response to a question at a Harrogate meeting:

“What is your theology of suffering?” Johnson's response was as articulate as it was provocative: “I don't have one. I refuse to have a theology for something that shouldn't exist”.<sup>36</sup>

Reportedly this caused a good deal of consternation amongst pastors who deal daily with people who have prayed for God's healing and who yet are disappointed as they have not been healed. Greg Downes explains that Johnson's reply:

‘was to get people to think, and was in fact shorthand for saying: “I'm not going to have a more sophisticated theology for why God doesn't heal than for why he does”.<sup>37</sup>

Bill Johnson indicates that he heard John Wimber preach, and that he was significantly influenced by his theology of healing and also his practice of ministering personally to people and not just in the ‘big meeting’. Kris Vallotton, Senior Associate Leader of BCRC and co-founder of BSSM makes clear that they do pray for healing miracles, but they also encourage people to seek medical assistance if they do not get well after prayer. They also encourage people to seek medical confirmation if they believe that they have been healed after prayer.<sup>38</sup> TWG notes that the CofI prays for and expects God to answer prayer in relation for healing and other matters; it encourages testimony to God's goodness, for instance in the services of Baptism or Confirmation.<sup>39</sup> The substantive difference here between BCRC and much of the CofI seems to be the level of expectation of what God may do.

## 5/2d **The SOZO course**

Concerns about the Sozo course were raised with TWG by members of St

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2015/January-2015/Profile-Bill-Johnson>

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/1490-online-exclusives/march/14956-bethel-church-god-the-bad-and-the-ugl>

<sup>39</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer Dublin 2004 p. 372 & p. 385*

Matthias congregation. They reported that there had been two Sozo courses in St Matthias. Specifically their concerns centred on reported risks to the mental health of those who attended Sozo although no actual cases were reported to have followed its use in Knocknamuckley.

The sources for the information on Sozo used in this section are the bethelsozo website<sup>40</sup> and the Sozo Course Training Manual.

### **Introduction**

Sozo describes itself as ‘a unique inner healing and deliverance ministry aimed to get to the root of things hindering your personal connection with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’<sup>41</sup> The description continues: ‘With a healed connection you can walk in the destiny to which you have been called.’<sup>42</sup>

In a video on the site, Teresa Liebscher, who along with Dawna DeSilva co-leads Sozo ministries, points out that the Greek word sozo is variously translated as saved, delivered and healed, and that the aim of Sozo is to ‘find the wounds and lies’ and ‘find develop and heal’ the past events or experiences which have given rise to the poor relationship with each of the persons of the Godhead.

Liebscher emphasises that Sozo is not prayer ministry, nor is it counselling, rather, she claims that it does facilitate connection with the Godhead and is a deliverance ministry.<sup>43</sup> This is reflected in the Sozo material, for example, in response to the question ‘When is a sozo/deliverance finished?’ the answer is ‘When you discern that the “strong man” has been defeated or when you or the sozoe feel that you are finished.’<sup>44</sup>

### **History, roots and development**

‘The Sozo Ministry is a ministry birthed out of Bethel Church’<sup>45</sup>. Sozo traces its beginning to 1997 when Randy Clark, a healing evangelist, held meetings at Bethel Church in Redding. One of the tools for deliverance which he used developed into Sozo’s “The Four Doors”. This method is based on the claim that ‘all strongholds or issues stem from opening one or more of the four

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<sup>40</sup> [www.bethelsozo.com](http://www.bethelsozo.com)

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Overview ‘What is Sozo’ [www.bethelsozo.com](http://www.bethelsozo.com)

<sup>44</sup> ‘FAQ’ [www.bethelsozo.com](http://www.bethelsozo.com)

<sup>45</sup> *Training Manual (TM) p. 8*

doors of fear, hatred, sexual sin and, or occult.’<sup>46</sup> Using this method Sozo team members establish, by way of interview questions, if the sozoee has opened any of these doors and ‘asks Jesus to close the doors’<sup>47</sup>.

Dawna DeSilva attended Clark’s training and began to use “The Four Doors” as part of prayer ministry and saw ‘a miraculous difference in people’s level of freedom’<sup>48</sup>. Thus Sozo ministry began and developed. An eclectic approach appears to have been used in the development of Sozo. The Training Manual introduces ‘tools from Dr Ed Smith, Pablo Botari, Aiko Hormann as well as our own revelations from our times of deliverance with people in need’<sup>49</sup>.

The core ‘Tools’ are the Four Doors; The Father Ladder, which teaches a connection between how an individual connects to their earthly family and how they connect to God; The Wall, in which the structures erected to protect individuals and others from pain are described and Presenting Jesus; which is described as an ‘experience ...when we go back to specific situations and pictures in order to identify the lie and then receive the truth in its place’<sup>50</sup>. Bethel Sozo began training others in Sozo ministry in 1998 in response to requests for equipping and in 2005 the International Bethel Sozo Organisation was created ‘to aid and support all the Bethel Sozo Ministry Teams around the world’<sup>51</sup>. Sozo sessions can be accessed across the world through the Sozo Network which includes Sozo UK and Sozo Ireland. Training of ‘released trainers’ is also offered world-wide.

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46 *ibid.* p. 46

47 *ibid.* p. 47

48 ‘History’ [www.bethelsozo.com](http://www.bethelsozo.com)

49 TM p. 8

50 *ibid.* p. 36

51 ‘History’ [www.bethelsozo.com](http://www.bethelsozo.com)

## **Sozo – A Theological Reflection**

### **Aim**

The goal of Sozo is ‘to help people receive the package of salvation, deliverance, healing’<sup>52</sup>. The language and tone of this statement may grate in British and Irish ears, however God’s desire for human beings is the wholeness which is only possible through relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit which the cross of Jesus makes possible.

Among the many Biblical passages which make this invitation to abundant life and wholeness clear, Colossians 1.19–22 states:

‘For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. For once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.’

This invitation to fullness of life is reflected in CofI liturgy. In the service of ‘Celebration of Wholeness and Healing’ the Prayers of Intercession begin ‘God the Father, your will for all people is health and salvation’ and then ‘God the Son, you came that we might have life, and might have it more abundantly.’ Through the love of the Father, in relationship with Jesus and in the power of the Spirit, human beings are called and designed to live lives which glorify God.<sup>53</sup> Christians are instructed to ‘throw off everything that hinders and the sin which so easily entangles’<sup>54</sup>.

The stated aim of Sozo ministry therefore appears to be consistent with Scripture and consonant with Church of Ireland teaching.

### **Method**

*(a) Theological issues:*

Alongside the call to wholeness, the core, potentially contentious, theological emphases which are evident in the Sozo material are a focus on spiritual warfare and the use of prophetic words in a Sozo session.

The place of prophecy and prophetic words are covered elsewhere in this document, so the focus here is on spiritual warfare.

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<sup>52</sup> TM p. 8

<sup>53</sup> Eph. 2: 4–10

<sup>54</sup> Heb. 12: 1

In His earthly ministry Jesus engages with Satan<sup>55</sup> and discerns the presence of and casts out demons.<sup>56</sup> In his death and resurrection Jesus breaks the power of evil. Christians are clearly instructed to,

‘put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.’<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, the CofI recognises the ministry of deliverance. The report from the Church’s Ministry of Healing in 2000 notes,

‘Through many years the CMH Centres have made provision for the deliverance ministry and have maintained a small highly-trained, spiritually discerning, consecrated team who...deal with the needs in this area’.<sup>58</sup>

While care, spiritual maturity and wisdom are clearly needed in each of these areas, engagement with principalities and powers has a clear biblical basis and is part of the ministry of the church.

That being said, this material raises significant theological concerns.

1. The material opens itself up to the danger of an over-simplistic assumption that it is easy to discern what is from God and what isn’t. Ignatius of Loyola emphasises the complexity of discerning those forces which lead us to God and those which threaten to pull us away from God. The absence of questioning, of nuance, of the complexity of recognising our own internal and external influences in this material is a serious omission.
2. In ‘The Father Ladder’ the mirroring of the Trinity to body, soul and spirit is arbitrary.
3. While the reality of spiritual warfare has been recognised, the Four Doors tool runs the risk of diagnosing psychological problems as spiritual ones. While both spiritual and psychological must be taken into account, there is a danger in over-spiritualising psychological problems. This may be unhelpful, especially for sincere Christian people.

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<sup>55</sup> Matt. 4:1-11

<sup>56</sup> Mark 1:21-26

<sup>57</sup> Eph. 6: 11-1

<sup>58</sup> <http://synod.ireland.anglican.org/2000/reports/reports.htm>

4. The Wall<sup>59</sup>: In the light of Romans 8 it is difficult to see any basis on which the claim ‘the wall doesn’t allow the Godhead to come close to us’<sup>60</sup> can be made.

Furthermore if a longing for wholeness spills into an over-realised theology of the Kingdom of God in which blame is placed on an individual when barriers do not come down (TM p.45 ‘if they cannot hear/sense the truth or believe it, there are more wounds and lies to find’); if a theology of spiritual warfare spills into an over-emphasis on Satan, which leads to fear, which is a danger with the Four Doors tool, then this is not in accordance with the Christian Gospel. In common with many courses of this kind while the Sozo organisation may do all it can to guard against these dangers, abuses could occur.

*(b) Psychological Issues*

1. Is this counselling? While Sozo maintains that it is not counselling and the Training Manual (p. 16) clearly instructs ‘Do not counsel!’ the assertion that Sozo is not counselling is difficult to maintain. The “sozoe” is called a client, contracts are made, impact is made on the psyche. Undoubtedly Sozo is concerned about adequate training. In addition to the training sessions, there is a structure akin to mentoring in which Sozo practitioners work their way from a position of observer (number 3 in a team) through helper (number 2) and then lead (number 1). However despite this, the claim could well be made that a Sozo session is counselling without external accreditation. There are huge dangers in this. Sozo addresses profound psychological issues and the material reviewed does not provide evidence that Sozo practitioners are adequately trained in discerning, for example, when an issue needs specialist psychological input, alongside spiritual support.
2. While God may choose to act in a moment, in places there is an over-simplistic approach to human change in this material. The ‘Colored (sic) Lenses’ tool, for example, aims to address the mindsets through which the sozoe interprets experience. When this approach is described<sup>61</sup> the suggestion is made that simply by accepting or saying Scripture, distorted schemas in human thinking can be changed. Normally the process of changing schemas is a much longer and more complex one which involves more than simply convincing a person of an alternative thought. An obvious danger is that the sozoe, if unable to simply and quickly address the issues in the ways presented through the ‘Tools’ begins to feel guilty or inadequate.

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<sup>59</sup> TM p. 52

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p. 28-29

3. The material on repressed memory runs the danger of re-traumatising people who are trying to forgive abuse or other serious hurts, especially when practitioners are not trained to deal with major psychological issues.
4. The Four Doors material is potentially damaging since there is no apparent sensitivity to the person's need for appropriate control, for safety and security. There is a danger that the emphasis on praying to take down walls and open doors could be experienced, not as surrender to the will of God, but as violation. Jesus never forced his way. While he did confront that which was evil, generally his approach, especially where people were vulnerable was invitational and gentle. We think there is some real reflection to be done on the question as to whether Jesus' ministry is in any way unique because of his unique relationship with his heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit.
5. The Four Doors Tool teaches that the sozoe has opened doors of fear, hatred, sexual sin or occult which then give the enemy a legal right to access their life<sup>62</sup>. This could lead to an individual feeling doubly burdened; already struggling with anxiety they now wonder if that anxiety is opening them up to Satan.
6. There is little recognition of human complexity, or of the complexity of the issues which people face in being hurt and in forgiving. The stark understanding of truth and lie, what is God and what is not, which is contained in this material, does not adequately reflect the need to reintegrate human experience rather than expel or separate and while it speaks of the strength of Jesus it does not resound with his gentleness.

TWG must draw attention to these potential problems.

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid* p. 3

## 5/2e **Prosperity gospel**

There are some hints that BCRC teaches a subtle form of prosperity gospel. Put starkly, there have been some churches which have taught that God's intention is to bless people not only spiritually, as for instance with forgiveness and his grace to enable a holy life, but that God is also interested in the physical conditions of our lives. Whilst this is true, it is expressed in a conditional theology which suggests that if we are converted and dedicated to God, sacrificing our possessions to his cause, that he will bless us with a good job, family, money possessions etc. Mainstream Christians have criticised this approach since it is often used to deceive people into giving money to TV evangelists and takes no account of the manner of life of Jesus himself whose commitment and self-offering is supreme, but who said of himself that 'the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'<sup>63</sup>.

BCRC's way of expressing its beliefs in this area may be illustrated in two 'Offering Readings' to be found on their website:

### **Offering Reading #1**

'As we receive today's offering we are believing the Lord for:

Jobs and better jobs  
Raises and bonuses  
Benefits  
Sales and commissions  
Favorable settlements  
Estates and inheritances

Interests and income  
Rebates and returns  
Checks in the mail  
Gifts and surprises  
Finding money  
Debts paid off  
Expenses decrease  
Blessing and increase

Thank You, Lord,  
for meeting all of my financial needs  
that I may have more than enough  
to give into the Kingdom of God

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<sup>63</sup> Matt. 8.20



and promote the Gospel of  
Jesus Christ.

Hallelujah!!!<sup>64</sup>

**Offering Reading #2**

'As we receive today's offering  
We are believing You for:

Heaven opened  
Earth Invaded  
Storehouses unlocked  
And miracles created  
Dreams and Visions  
Angelic Visitations  
Declarations  
Impartations  
And Divine Manifestations

Anointings, giftings and calls  
Positions and promotions  
Provisions and resources  
To go to the nations  
Souls and more souls  
From every generation  
Saved and set free  
Carrying Kingdom revelation!

Thank You, Father,  
That as I join my value system to Yours,  
You will show FAVOR, BLESSINGS  
And INCREASE upon me  
So I have more than enough  
To co-labor with Heaven  
And see JESUS get his FULL REWARD.

Hallelujah!!!<sup>65</sup>

There are two ways of reading this: first it may be another way of expressing

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<sup>64</sup> <https://www.ibethel.org/offering-readings/>

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

what David articulated, after the people had made extraordinary, generous free will offerings for the work of God: ‘For all things come from you and of your own have we given you’<sup>66</sup>. So as the people of BCRC give generously to the work God today, they commit themselves to ‘living by faith’ since they believe that God will continue to supply all their needs so that they may continue to give generously to the work of making the Lord Jesus Christ known. Many great missionaries of the past ‘lived by faith’, such as Hudson Taylor. Secondly it could be taken in the way the prosperity gospel is described above. In their confession of faith, BCRC says:

**‘God’s desire is to prosper us in every area of our lives: physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally and vocationally.**

Isaiah 26:3; John 10:10; Luke 9:6 & 56; Rom. 5:8; Rom. 8:1; 3 John 1:2; Gen. 12:1–3; Jer. 29:11’<sup>67</sup>

**‘Experiencing God’s generosity in grace breaks the mentality that “There won’t be enough” and moves us to be generous with all our resources just like our Father.**

Rom. 8:31–32; Matt. 7:11; Jer. 29:11; 2 Cor. 9:6–11; Acts 2:44–45, 4:32–35’<sup>68</sup>

However BCRC does not teach that God’s generosity is conditional on our response; rather it reverses the order and makes clear that God’s generous grace always precedes our generous response. This is clearly found in the gospel, not least in the Lord’s prayer ‘give us this day our daily bread’ prayed trusting that the Lord will indeed answer this. However, this prayer is a great deal more modest in what it requests from the Lord than those quoted above.

## 5/2f Sources of BCRC teaching

There was anxiety that BCRC may be influenced by New Age teaching, though it was clear that no Tarot or tattoo reading (about which particular concern had been expressed) had happened in St Matthias. Church members did not think that being tattooed or having piercings was consistent with being a Christian, and was more redolent of New Age. We have found no evidence that Bethel has been influenced by New Age teaching, and indeed its emphasis on Scripture as the source and measure of all it believes suggests that it would renounce any such teaching should it be brought to its attention. The group could find no evidence that BCRC encouraged people to have tattoos.

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<sup>66</sup> 1 Chronicles 29:14

<sup>67</sup> <http://bssm.net/about/corevalues> – ‘God is Good’

<sup>68</sup> *ibid* – ‘Responsive to Grace’

Others were concerned that BCRC may have strong links with the 'Toronto Blessing'. It is clear from an address given by Bill Johnson at an anniversary service at Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, now known as 'Catch the Fire', that he has been influenced by that church<sup>69</sup>. The group did not have the time to explore that church, but it noted that shortly after it came to public notice, the Church of England published *The Toronto Experience: An Exploration of the Issues* which helpfully suggests that 'those who are either excited or alarmed by the occurrence ... (of ecstatic religious experiences) should not take the view that this is something new in the Church'<sup>70</sup>. It continues to explore the experiences carefully and to offer some criteria to assess them in terms of the effects in people's lives, and how it influences the mission of the church. TWG has taken the view that all churches have been or are being influenced by other Christian traditions and that in a study of this size, the sources may be noted but cannot be assessed.

Some have suggested that BCRC belongs to the tradition called Restorationism. S.L. Ware defines this as a belief that 'something went very wrong very early in the history of the Christian church... The other side of the equation is the belief that the restoration of the Church to NT standards began with the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century and proceeded in successive waves up to the present, in preparation for the return of Christ to earth'<sup>71</sup>. There is a clear sense in the documents and teaching of BCRC that they are aspiring to live as the early Christians did, and so there are echoes of Restorationism, although they express this in terms of revival. They do exhibit the twin poles of Restorationism which Ware describes<sup>72</sup> which are 'primitivist and pragmatic'. Ware suggests that the pragmatic impulse to do whatever is necessary to share the Gospel, tempers the ecstatic impulse of enthusiastic primitivism. That seems to us to be a good summary of BCRC.

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<sup>69</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Obx\\_RGHvQOw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Obx_RGHvQOw)

<sup>70</sup> Richards, Anne, *The Toronto Experience: An Exploration of the Issues*, 1997, p. 3

<sup>71</sup> Ware, S.L., 'Restorationism', 2002, p. 1019

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.* p. 1021



## **SECTION 6 THE ROYAL BLACK INSTITUTION EVALUATED**

### **6/1 Theological concerns which have been expressed about the RBI and its influence**

#### **6/1a Use of the Bible and especially the Old Testament**

A number of former members of the RBI who spoke to us expressed their concern about the RBI's use of Scripture, in particular the mixture of Bible with unbiblical traditions. The official delegation confirmed that the RBI is committed to reviewing and, where required, amending its practices to accord with the teachings of Scripture. As an example, they told us that some twenty five years ago concerns were raised that a part of one dramatized Bible reading contained an element which had some historical justification but was not mentioned in Scripture. On the advice of the Senior Chaplains the part which was 'extra Biblical' was removed. As TWG did not have access to the rites/rituals/enacted Bible stories, it has not been possible to comment on this.

The following discussion of the RBI's engagement with Scripture draws upon the verbal and published testimony of current members of the RBI as well as those outside the Institution (some of whom have been associated with it in the past). The reticence amongst current members to disclose detailed descriptions of the rites and practices and the use of biblical traditions within them means that the discussion here must be, of necessity, focused on principles which are applicable to the extent that the approach to Scripture described below continues to be reflected in current RBI rites and practices.

Testimony from within and beyond the RBI confirms that its teaching and rituals are heavily dependent on biblical traditions, especially those of the Old Testament. Various aspects of the RBI's claimed and alleged use of biblical traditions and the Old Testament in particular, are noteworthy.

First it is clear that biblical traditions have been and continue to be embedded within RBI rituals in which members are involved performatively, whether by acting out particular stories (and playing particular roles within them) or by identifying with biblical characters in the course of catechismal dialogues. An example might be found in extracts from a history of the Royal Black Knights of the British Commonwealth in Canada. The author records some claims to their links to ancient Israel.

'We therefore, being of the House of Israel, were undoubtedly ordained of God to play an active part in bringing about the fulfilment of the

Divine plan for mankind. Knowing and realising the significance of these facts not only offers a challenge to the members of this great Priestly Order, but must surely inspire them to fulfil to the best of their ability, the duties evolving upon them in their high and noble calling...'

He continues:

'The whole fabric of our Order very definitely indicates that we are tied in with the old Levite Order, and as such, we are playing a part in bringing about the fulfilment of God's plan for mankind.'<sup>1</sup>

Given the long history and current practice of biblically inflected catechesis and dramatic enactment of Scriptural traditions (often for didactic purposes amongst young people) within the Anglican and other orthodox Christian traditions, there seems no grounds for objecting to such practices per se, so long as they remain clearly framed as such and do not encourage or require members to meaningfully and actually self-identify in ways which are clearly non-biblical (i.e. claiming to be a priest of the order of Melchizedek or of the tribe of Levi) , nor encourage the confusion of biblical traditions with non-biblical ones (for which see below).

In common with some other organizations, the RBI's preference for using particular traditions from the Old Testament is clearly attested. However, concerns have been raised regarding the extent to which the rites and teachings of the RBI also include traditions relating to but not derived from Scripture. While it is neither possible nor necessary to provide an exhaustive and authoritative list of such traditions here, the following examples may be taken as representative of such concerns.

While some within the RBI acknowledge that the figure of Hiram features within the Institution's teaching, it has been suggested by those outside the RBI that the Apron and Royal Blue (Royal Mark) degree's teaching about Hiram includes details which are not known from Scripture<sup>2</sup>, nor from any other ancient source. If, as has been suggested, such teachings elaborate in non-biblical ways on a character known from the Bible without clearly demarcating these elaborations as non-biblical, the potential for confusing biblical and non-biblical traditions would appear to be real and unhelpful.

It has also been suggested by those outside the RBI that the teaching of the Institution includes the notion of a lost Word in which biblical and non-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.evangelicaltruth.com/royal-black-knights>

<sup>2</sup> 2 Sam. 5; 1 Kings 5, 7, 9, 10; 1 Chron. 14

biblical traditions are unhelpfully intermingled. Both 2 Kings 22:6ff. and 2 Chron. 34:8ff. offer accounts of the finding of *sefer ha-torah* ('The Book of the Law') which associate its discovery with the repair of the Temple by workmen (including 'stone-cutters' 2 Kings 22:6) under the supervision of Shaphan. Both accounts report Hilkiah the Priest's claim to have found the book<sup>3</sup> and thus any claim that masons were involved in its discovery remains speculative. There is no further indication within the Hebrew Bible of when this rediscovered 'Book of the Law' was lost, nor by whom, nor precisely what it contained (though there is widespread scholarly agreement that Josiah's reforms find numerous parallels in the legal traditions found in Deuteronomy). Therefore if the teaching of the RBI claims (as has been suggested) that a divine word/name was revealed on a roll of fine linen found by digging in the ruins of Solomon's household, under a marble slab beneath a Jewish arch on which the sun shone once each day, then this represents the kind of unfounded speculation which seems likely to contribute to the unhelpful confusion of biblical and non-biblical traditions amongst members of the RBI.

A final example may be gleaned from allegations regarding the 5th Royal White degree in which the candidate is invited to respond to questions as if he were the biblical 'David'. It is claimed that the catechist is required to recognize that a password is required for him/David to proceed to the valley of Elah (where Goliath awaits) and that the candidate/David received a white robe on account of his innocence as an honour for slaying Goliath. While Job does claim his innocence<sup>4</sup> and David does eventually receive a robe from Jonathan<sup>5</sup> this is not represented as white, nor as a token of innocence or honour, but rather as a token of (along with his armour, sword, bow and belt) the covenant between Jonathan and David.

While some Christian traditions incorporate speculative traditions not found within the pages of the Bible into their authorized understanding of the Scriptural tradition, (e.g. the Roman Catholic elaboration of the tradition of St. Veronica) the disavowing of speculative additions which is characteristic of the Reformed tradition—with which the RBI self-identifies—is reflected in the Church of Ireland's own profession of biblical authority and 'constant witness against all those innovations in doctrine and worship, whereby the Primitive Faith hath been from time to time defaced or overlaid' (1871). While homiletical interpretations of Scripture within the Reformed tradition may occasionally lapse into (often psychological) interpretive speculations regarding particular personages and passages, such speculations are not

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3 2 Kings 22:8; 2 Chron. 34:15

4 Job 31

5 1 Sam. 18:4

embedded within the liturgical/pedagogical/doctrinal tradition (as has been suggested in the above examples).

Given the RBI's strong identification with the Reformed tradition—with its historic emphasis on *Sola Scriptura* and resistance to elaborating and revering the 'tradition of men'<sup>6</sup>—and given the primacy of the Black Institution's claims to 'Study Holy Scripture' and 'Increase knowledge of the Reformed Faith' within its own statement of its mission<sup>7</sup>, this would appear to leave open at least two alternatives with regard to dealing with such speculative interpretations: either they should be clearly distinguished from the biblical tradition within the Institution's rituals and teaching (and their non-biblical sources identified) or they should simply be eliminated from the RBI's rituals and teaching.

While the RBI's reticence to disclose details of its teaching has frustrated outsiders' attempts to determine the concordance of the Institution's teachings with Scripture, there seems no reason why such a reticence should not prevent the RBI from disclosing non-biblical elements which it no longer chooses to teach, as it continues to review the biblical content of its teaching. A willingness to do so on the part of the RBI might allow it to become better known for its laudable commitment to the study of Scripture rather than being open to criticism for its alleged misuse of it.

We want to reiterate the report of the Standing Committee Report 1999, which observes:

'that much of the representation of Holy Scripture in the Loyal Orders is of the Old Testament, with an emphasis on such things as battle, righteousness, the defeat of evil, obedience to the law. This is reflected in the bible teaching and representation of bible scenes on Orange Order and especially the Royal Black Preceptory banners.

'While we affirm fully the centrality of Holy Scripture in all of life, we submit that in the Loyal Orders, insufficient emphasis is ostensibly given to the New Testament, in particular to those teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ who manifested in his earthly ministry, and in his redeeming work on the cross, God's love for all people; and who called us to the love of God and our neighbour (St Mark 12,30,31), to love our enemies (St Matthew 5.44), and who gave us the Golden Rule, to treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 7:8

<sup>7</sup> <http://royalblack.org/mission-statement/>

<sup>8</sup> Standing Committee report 1999, page 182 section A3.2.1.3 'The Place of Scripture'



TWG's chief concerns are therefore with the apparent lack of attention to the whole of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament; the probable continued use of extra-biblical material without differentiation from Scripture, and the possibility that RBI members may erroneously identify themselves with people or groups in the Scriptures as a way to claim preference over or separation from other people.

## 6/1b **Rituals and Ceremonies**

A number of former members of the RBI told us about the ceremonies that they had participated in. We were concerned to hear the following:

- i) That in one of the 'degree' ceremonies a person entering the RBI who is blindfolded is invited to drink water from a cup which can be:
  - a. an actual human skull,
  - b. a plastic replica of a human skull
  - c. half a coconut
  - d. a sea shell.

This was referred to as a 'Mystic Cup'.

- ii) That the skull and crossbones are used in a degree ceremony, and that actual bones may be used.

It was put to the official delegation that the working party had been told that actual human remains which may have been used over centuries were incinerated within living memory. The response of the official delegation was that no such remains were used by the RBI. They deplored anything which was disrespectful of human remains and they said that they had not seen any human remains being incinerated.

While rituals which use bones or other legally acquired means as a *memento mori* in relation to the Old Testament patriarch Joseph may be offensive to some, the Old Testament itself testifies to the Christian tradition's accommodation of a considerable range of pedagogical innovations and peculiarities (not least in the ministry of Ezekiel). Nevertheless, regardless of what the law of the land may indicate as to such practices, there are two theological concerns which a Christian may have about this: first, the question as to how a Christian may be said to love his deceased neighbour and the neighbour's family if his/her remains are being used in this fashion; secondly, why a Christian would want to drink of this 'cup of death' when at the Lord's Supper, the cup of life is offered for eternal life? We do well to consider Paul's strong warning, 'You cannot drink of the cup of the Lord and the cup of

demons.<sup>9</sup> TWG did not have the means to investigate these allegations, and could only record them and offer comments.

We were told by a variety of persons that the term 'Black' was connected to mourning, and that the RBI emphasises the need to face one's own mortality as a way of inviting people to faith in Christ alone. However, we were also told that the RBI are 'mourning for brother Joseph' from the narratives in Genesis, which forms no part of any mainstream Christian tradition. There is also a laboured interpretation of symbols that are said to signify death, the coffin, (which some former members alleged was actually part of a rite) the skull and crossbones (widely displayed on flags), and even the term Black. This pre-occupation with death can be partly understood since the organisation arose in a time when death was far less removed from everyday life than it is now. But it contrasts strongly with the emphasis of Jesus, 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly'<sup>10</sup>. We recognise that some Christians are 'ashed' on Ash Wednesday with the words,

'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ'.<sup>11</sup>

but an annual recollection is more minimal than the major theme that this seems to have become in the life of RBI and of course the symbol of ashes does not cause the same questions to be raised.

Several former members mentioned a ceremony where the initiate is blindfolded and made to 'ride the Goat' (the GOAT, we were told, was The Ark Of God backwards). In this, a person is tossed in some way, and it was said to be the worst of the ceremonies as people doing the tossing were sometimes over keen. It is difficult to offer theological reflection on such activities, and we could see no biblical warrant for using a biblical phrase backwards if that is what is done. Another suggested that they were put into a coffin and that it was implied that the Grand Master of the Lodge saved them from this fate whilst participants are told that 'the Worshipful Master is the only one who rescues you and the participant is asked to pledge allegiance by kissing the Bible'. This is clearly unchristian, since Christ alone saves, which the official statement of the RBI acknowledges.

One former member of the RBI was of the view that the degrees involved 'travel' which was justified by using Scripture; but that the outcome for

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 10.21

<sup>10</sup> John 10.10

<sup>11</sup> p. 22, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/41155/tslent.pdf>

the initiate was humiliation and obligation to the RBI. This contrasts with the Gospel message which requires of a disciple, humility before God and neighbour and submission to the Cross of Christ. This alone brings us to the glorious freedom of the children of God, as Paul indicates: 'for freedom Christ has set us free'<sup>12</sup>.

## 6/2 **Theological concerns which the working group wish to register about the teaching of RBI**

### 6/2a **Transparency and Endorsement**

Some people whom we met were concerned that offering a service specifically for the RBI implies that the CofI endorses the RBI in some way. TWG in reflecting on this believes that it must begin with its serious theological concerns about the lack of transparency in the ceremonies of the RBI. There are a number of reasons for our concerns.

First, it is reported that people who are initiated into the RBI are not made aware prior to the initiation what oaths, promises and activities they are about to participate in; nevertheless they make solemn 'blind' promises or oaths to keep secret what is revealed.<sup>13</sup> Making open ended promises can lead to serious consequences. King Herod promised up to half of his kingdom, and when the promise was 'cashed in' the beheading of an innocent man was demanded *and delivered*<sup>14</sup>. There is a double problem with this: the persons encouraging fellow Christians to enter into blind commitments are themselves acting improperly, and the person entering into a commitment unaware is also acting foolishly. The Revd Norris Wilson of the Reformed Presbyterians holds that 'such extra-judicial oath-taking to be contrary to Scripture' because 'No Master of a self-appointed Lodge has any God-given right to administer such an oath, for such oath-taking we believe is only valid within the framework of God appointed government'.<sup>15</sup>

Whilst no suggestion was made to us that this was the case, the 'secret' might be against the law, or it might be against the Christian faith (some did think this) and that leaves a person with a hard choice to make: should they break

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<sup>12</sup> Gal. 5:1

<sup>13</sup> We were told that one of the oaths was that if the secrets were told that 'his tongue was to be cut out and his throat cut', and that part of one of the degrees involved putting a dagger to the participant's chest.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 6.14-29

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.evangelicaltruth.com/covenanters-and-the-orange-order> 'Unlawful Oaths'

their promise which was foolishly made, or should they keep their promise and engage in activities which they may think turn out to be against their faith, or at least not consonant with their faith. This is a dilemma caused by a promise or vow which they should not have entered into in the first place. The Revd Norris Wilson believes that ‘No man is at liberty to bind his conscience by oath without a knowledge of the nature and extent of his obligation.’<sup>16</sup> And the Baptist Church has also expressed concerns about this.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, Christians are to be people of the light.<sup>18</sup> This gives a picture of the kind of mutual accountability which Christians are to have to one another. However, how can members of a parish or congregation hold one another to account, if some of them engage in activities which are secret?

This brings us to ‘endorsement’. The CofI lives alongside all kinds of secular and religious groups. With some it may have close relationships, with others it may have no relationships at all. Individual persons from every kind of background may come as worshippers into its services. But when a group asks to hold a service for its organisation, a degree of endorsement is implied to people outside of the church, even if not to the group attending the service. That is why a church might refuse to hold a service for a group which espouses a lawless or anti-Christian policy, such as a racist group. But in order for the church to make such a decision, that group must be open about not only what it stands for, but also what activities it engages in. The Church cannot implicitly or explicitly endorse a group whose mission or practice is contrary to the common good or Christian teaching. The way to combat error is not to imply endorsement and then use the pulpit to berate them, but to engage in open dialogue with them in a context more suitable to argument and persuasion.

In the case of RBI asking for church services in the CofI the questions which ministers need to ask themselves, are:

Do we know exactly what they do and believe? –  
if yes a decision may be made on the basis of consonance  
if no, then can we endorse this organisation whose practices may be contrary to the Christian faith?

Christian churches will always want to think through with whom they can partner, but also to be aware that whilst it may think it is offering an

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.baptistsinireland.org/documents/79/oordera4.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> 1 John 1.6f

opportunity for the RBI to worship as a group and to hear the gospel without condoning all that the RBI stands for, others may not be able to make such a fine distinction. They may mistakenly think that the RBI's attitude to Roman Catholicism is also that of the CofI. As the Standing Committee report of 1999 said:

‘An act of Public worship cannot be entirely divorced from the actions, attitudes and intentions of the worshippers before and after the act of worship.’<sup>19</sup>

## 6/2b **Secrecy**

In Section 4 we outlined the privacy and secrecy of the RBI. This has been defended theologically by a member of the RBI who argues that there has always been an esoteric or mystery aspect to Christianity which is not understood so much in the modern church. He pointed to the so-called ‘Messianic Secret’ in Mark’s gospel which he attributed to Jesus’ reluctance to say who he was. Moreover, the parables have an esoteric nature; the disciples are allowed to know the truths explicitly but not everyone else. He also suggested that in the history of the early church, on Easter Eve vigil, baptisms would take place at night in secret and that the Eucharist would often be given in secret. He suggested that even in the creeds some words would be secret. So it is not entirely unprecedented for the RBI to keep secrets.<sup>20</sup> However, TWG considers that inasmuch as there is any secrecy in these situations, it is warranted by the need to invite faith, not compel it, or by the pressures of persecution.

In the current situation, where the church has been mandated to spread the gospel<sup>21</sup>, and where there is no imminent persecution, the impulse must be to share ‘the immeasurable riches of God’s grace’<sup>22</sup>. Whilst we were told that any literate Bible believing Christian would not find anything new in what is done in the RBI, we were also told that there were rites and disclosures which were beneficial to the members. We consider that secrecy is at variance with any definition of the terms messenger or ambassador, which Christians must be<sup>23</sup>. Either the RBI is helping its membership to be better Christians, in which case they should share what they have learned with all Christians, or

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<sup>19</sup> <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/49> Section 7.1

<sup>20</sup> cf. Meredith I. and Kennaway, B., *The Orange Order, An Evangelical Perspective*, 1993

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 28.16–20

<sup>22</sup> Eph. 2.7

<sup>23</sup> 2 Cor. 5

they are not, in which case there are questions as to why they engage in it. Truth understood as revelation of God is surely his gift for all and not for an exclusive group.

But the secrecy is also accompanied by an implication that something is gained which is advantageous and which makes God known. As mentioned in p. 20 above, the RBI lecturer's certificate says '....N....by zealous labour, acquired great skill in the ceremonies, secrets, and mysteries of the order of Royal Black Knights'.

The idea of progression was highlighted by a former member, who spoke of the 'revelation of God through progressing through the degrees'. This seems close to Gnosticism, which suggested that special knowledge was needed for salvation. Another suggested that he was left with the impression that 'if you get the Red Cross you are a Christian', which is clearly contrary to the 'Sola Fide' of the Reformation, although two former members agreed that there was no mention of the Five 'Solos' in their preceptories, which makes us ask how far they are the basic commitment of the RBI adhered to by all preceptories and districts.

## 6/2c **Sectarianism**

We note that the CofI Standing Committee report of 1999 adopted the definition of sectarianism from the Clegg and Leichty's 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism' project, that,

'Sectarianism is a complex of attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures ... which arises as a distortion of natural, positive human needs for belonging, identity and the free expression of difference and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating...'<sup>24</sup>

It highlighted the way that the CofI 'may be deemed to be accommodating to sectarianism by association...'<sup>25</sup>. A good deal of previous work has been done on this topic, but it is our conviction that this is a theological issue which we cannot ignore. The theological reflection of the Standing Committee Report of 1999 on sectarianism makes sober reading, as it explores the dangers inherent in any organisation whose definition and *raison d'être* is to promote the rightness of their cause by demonstrating the wrongness of another group. Having explored the nature of the Love of God and its revelation in the life of Jesus Christ, it concludes among other things:

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<sup>24</sup> Section 4.0, <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/49>

<sup>25</sup> Section A3.2, <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/49>

‘Where God would unite, sectarianism would divide. Sectarianism gains its identity precisely through its lack of openness: my rightness is diametrically opposed to, and defined by your wrongness; and therefore, indeed, my rightness is diminished if it can ever be shown that you may not be entirely wrong. This translates very often into an individual’s identity being bound up with that of a community/ church/ party or nationality whose “rightness” is thus identified.’

‘This applies, unlikely though it may seem, even to what may be called “unintentional sectarianism...”<sup>26</sup>

Whilst we must understand the rise of the RBI in its historical context, as a combination of history, theology, politics and sociology, it cannot be regarded simply as a quaint relic of history which has no significance today. What is obviously a matter of concern is that an RBI procession can appear to have an adverse effect on a local community, so the recent apology issued by the RBI was widely welcomed.<sup>27</sup> The apology issued to a Belfast priest after one of these parades was more in keeping with a Christian profession than the conduct that provoked it.

All that said, if there is to be meaningful evangelistic witness in our communities, then some serious thought should be given to parades and their impact on many sections of society including Roman Catholic Families, PSNI families, people who work in business and tourism.

Any negative public image could damage any possible opportunity for a truly gracious witness to our Lord Jesus Christ.

What Earl Storey says about the Orange Order also applies, we believe, to the RBI:

‘The Church of Ireland and the Orange Order are two separate organisations with no formal or official links between them. Any relationship that does exist has two strands.’ He identifies these as ‘informal parish relationships’ and ‘interweaving of interests in the past’.<sup>28</sup>

The overlap of membership – the fact that sometimes men are office holders in

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* (Standing Committee Report 1999 pp.174ff section 8.2.10 and 8.2.11)

<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-19499049>

<sup>28</sup> Storey, E., *Traditional Roots*, p. 53

both church and RBI – leads to confusion in some people’s mind as to whether the CofI identifies with the beliefs of the RBI. He also asks how a minister can be a chaplain to the RBI preceptory without others thinking that that minister is in some way partisan.<sup>29</sup>

Storey argues that the Church needs to live in such a way that it is not ‘owned’ by anyone except by Jesus Christ her Lord. And she also needs to live in a way which others can see indicates that she owns Christ alone as Lord.<sup>30</sup> Many parish churches have been (and may still be) dominantly white, male, female, young, old, middle class, working class, etc. Whilst the parish system will often mean that a local church will reflect the social setting in which it lives, its values are to be seen in the ways it welcomes and embraces those of difference, who may come to live, find faith, and enjoy discipleship in this context. No church should be giving signals overtly or covertly, that poor or rich, old or young, are not welcome here. And no church should be giving signals that someone from another cultural grouping is not welcome here. Churches need to live in the security which a relationship with God their Father through his Son, our Lord enables to flourish by the power of the Spirit, such that some people coming to faith and joining the church who are from another grouping are not perceived as a threat, and indeed an influx of such a group to the majority would not be a threat, since they would so learn Christ that no-one would ever imagine that other kinds of Christians could be a threat.<sup>31</sup>

## 6/2d **Division and separation**

The NT clearly teaches that the purpose of God is to draw all things together in Christ<sup>32</sup>. It also teaches that we are to love our neighbours and our enemies<sup>33</sup>. Our preaching of the gospel will always be hindered by our neglect of its teachings since we cannot preach reconciliation, if we are not people of reconciliation<sup>34</sup>. We are concerned, as is the Baptist Church statement on this matter, that the RBI exists by separation: men from women, male members from male non-members, Reformed from Roman Catholic. Of course the churches themselves will be found to have similar problems, but through the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century they have made significant changes in relationships between the churches, including apologising to one

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p. 101

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 100

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 104-120

<sup>32</sup> *John 17.21, Eph. 1.10ff.*

<sup>33</sup> *Matt. 5.44*

<sup>34</sup> *2 Cor. 5.18f.*



another for past attitudes and statements. We wonder if the time has come for the RBI to consider this as a major theme which it needs to address so that its self-definition is not by opposition to something else, but by charitable and gracious statement of its own basic purpose.

A working party set up by the Cofi General Synod in 1997 made a report to the Standing Committee in 1999 in which it said the following:

‘Furthermore, the Church [of Ireland] regards the theological, doctrinal and liturgical convergences achieved in this century between the various Christian traditions as significant, substantial and congenial. It may therefore be fair to say that in certain respects the Church of Ireland and the Orange Order have parted company, and that the Church has failed to draw this parting of the ways formally to the attention of the Orange Order. In certain respects the ministry of the Church to the Order is seen to have fallen short, for the Church has not sought to inform or lead the Order into the new era of rapprochement and mutual respect between the denominations, and particularly between the Churches of the Anglican communion and the Roman Catholic Church.’<sup>35</sup>

We wonder if what is written here about the Orange order applies also to the RBI, inasmuch as their existence is still defined in terms of defending the faith against the RC church.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the Diocese of Down and Dromore needs to consider how it may help the RBI preceptories in its areas to understand these new ecclesial modalities. Perhaps this may also be applied to the RBI:

‘It has been said to us that the Church owes the Orange Order an apology for having moved on and changed without telling them, in order not to disturb or disrupt the long established, albeit informal, links between the Church and the Order. ... We commend to the church an attitude of constructive engagement encouraging the Orders to move as the Church has moved.’<sup>37</sup>

## 6/2e **Symbolism**

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<sup>35</sup> Section 7.0, <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/49>

<sup>36</sup> It is alleged that the RBI oath includes these words: ‘I will have such a sense of my duty as a Protestant that I will not marry a member of the Romanish Church or Papist, nor stand sponsor for the child of a Roman Catholic when receiving baptism by a Priest of Rome, nor permit a Papist to stand sponsor for my child at its baptism.’ <http://www.evangelicaltruth.com/the-black-oath>

<sup>37</sup> Section 7.0, <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/49>

Although the RBI denies any links between Freemasonry and its own ceremonies, many of the symbols are shared, as Canon Brian Blacoe makes clear,

‘there is interpolation of non-biblical material largely dependent on the teaching of Freemasonry and other sources associated with e.g the Knights Templar.’<sup>38</sup>

Both the Baptist report and the Reformed Presbyterians are concerned because the Royal Arch Purple, which RBI members normally pass through, allegedly uses Freemasonry rituals. The Revd Norris Wilson asserts, ‘In its rituals Orangemen would admit the Royal Arch Purple most closely resembles Masonry.’<sup>39</sup>

The Baptist report ‘‘The Loyal Orders’’, A Biblical Examination’ comments in this way:

‘Where did all this ritual come from? Although many attempts have been made to circumvent this question the answer is straightforward. All the original founders of the Orange Order were Freemasons and they simply adapted much of the ritual with which they were familiar for the new Order. In this they were assisted by the noted Mason, John Templeton. Orange writers, though somewhat reluctantly, do admit Masonic background with words such as; “because some of the founders had been masons they used the Masonic system which they knew worked”<sup>40</sup>. The same writers also acknowledge that the Royal Arch Purple degree “is the most Masonic-like part of our ceremony”<sup>41</sup>. This is remarkable given that this is looked upon as the “sublime degree”<sup>42</sup>.

If it is indeed true that there are Freemasonry origins and parallels in both the Royal Arch Purple and the RBI then we need to note that the CofI has already stated that Freemasonry ‘does not have the fullness of the Christian Gospel’ and many Christians would agree with the General Synod of the Church of England conclusion that ‘there are clear difficulties to be faced by Christians who are Freemasons’ if not, ‘a number of very fundamental reasons

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<sup>38</sup> Malcomson, W.P., *The Royal Black Institution*, 2009, p. 9

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.evangelicaltruth.com/covenanters-and-the-orange-order>

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Mitchel, Patrick, *Evangelicalism and National Identity in Ulster, 1921-1998*, Oxford, 2003 p. 142

<sup>41</sup> Cited from *The Rosstown Twelfth 314 Boyne Anniversary Service publication* (no page numbers)

<sup>42</sup> P. 5, <http://www.baptistsinireland.org/documents/79/oordera4.pdf>

to question the compatibility of Freemasonry and Christianity'<sup>43</sup>. Unless RBI members are asked to renounce the Royal Arch Purple, their assurances about their own ceremonies being free of freemasonry influences are insufficient, although some former members do not think these assurances that the RBI owes nothing to Freemasonry are accurate. Lacking detailed knowledge of the RBI procedures we can only highlight this. One former member of the RBI told us that he resigned from the RBI when he realised how close it was to Freemasonry.

## 6/2f **Other concerns**

There are a number of other concerns which we should mention. What we have been able to glean about the RBI suggests that there is much missing from Christian faith and teaching since the emphasis falls on the stories of Israel's history. This leaves room for much ambiguity, as to how and when the great doctrines of the faith are taught. It is especially difficult, for example, to think of church, mission, evangelism without teaching on Christology, Ascension and Pentecost, but maybe that happens and it has not been disclosed. We heard of no mention of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit which brings us into that new life in Christ, so clearly stated in the Gospel. This may reflect the western church's historical comparative neglect of Pneumatology, but again, there have been significant developments in this area during the twentieth century. We realise that the RBI does not claim to be a church, but for some their main learning of 'faith' seems to be from the RBI, and given the Institution's public corporate commitment to the Christian faith, this is a question worth exploring.

We note that the RBI itself engages in evangelism on occasion. We believe that mission needs to arise from the living of the Gospel in such a way as to attract people to the faith even without preaching. Sometimes the way Christians live can undermine their very right to preach to others. The Baptist statement draws attention to 'the effect on Christian witness and evangelism that the Orders have exercised' which it believes is detrimental.

The Baptist church is concerned about:

- 'The fellowship and brotherhood which is said to exist within the Orders' because they think that believers are being joined together in fellowship with people who are not practising Christians.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/home-affairs-policy/freemasonry.aspx>

- ‘The role that the Orders claim for themselves as defenders of the reformed faith’ because they think that that is to claim something which the churches properly undertake, but they will do so in different ways from that of the RBI.
- ‘The relation between church and state that the Orders perpetuate’ because there have been so many problems in Ireland between differing groups.<sup>44</sup>

### 6/3 **Conclusion**

TWG has expressed some major reservations about the RBI which were voiced to it, or have already been published, or which TWG itself wishes to underline. It recognises that these concerns are based on differing kinds of evidence, some oral, some documented. Since the RBI inhabits the same geographic space as the Diocese of Down and Dromore, TWG believes that the kind of dialogue, as suggested by Canon Ian Ellis (and others) could be helpful: “While the churches in recent times have had occasional meetings with the loyal orders, a more sustained and in-depth dialogue is now required.”<sup>45</sup> Such an idea was drawn to our attention by the RBI official delegation who expressed their willingness to participate. It might well be helpful as the RBI has already indicated that it listens and changes its practices in the light of critiques.

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<sup>44</sup> P.3 Section 3 <http://www.baptistsinireland.org/documents/79/oordera4.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/northern-ireland-news/canon-ian-ellis-calls-for-church-loyal-order-forum-1-6408506>





## SECTION 7 CONCLUDING QUESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7/1 Culture

All organisations are embedded in human culture and are influenced by it as well as influencing it themselves. Contemporary missiologists are accustomed to asserting that all mission is a cross-cultural activity. Mark Cartledge argues that, 'Every church service has its own culture and each culture gives clear signals about proper and improper behaviour'.<sup>1</sup>

The theological issues with which we have been dealing are themselves influenced by several cultures, which people may not always have recognised. In the first instance, the CofI has its own culture, or cultures, which are well known to its members though perhaps not often articulated. This culture is likely to be slightly behind the prevailing contemporary culture of Irish societies, since it is anchored in Scripture, which itself reflects several ancient cultures. Christian churches are often conservative in relation to their settings. Secondly, the RBI has a culture, also expressed in its rituals, insignia, processions, and meetings. Because of its history and its oral tradition the RBI seems also to be more conservative than the prevailing contemporary culture, since it attempts to hand on the teaching of the Reformation in the 15th and 16th Centuries and to hold fast to traditional practices which date to that period. Thirdly the BCRC has a culture which is manifestly North American, Californian, and which has also been shaped by its Assemblies of God origins. Whilst it too is anchored in Scripture, it is also intentionally forward looking and seeking to influence both the society in which it exists and also other Christian communities around the world. Fourthly, a rector was appointed who came from another culture – originally Scottish, he had lived and worked in both the USA and also South Africa. Anglicans in those places whilst sharing much in common with the CofI also have significantly different church cultures. Undoubtedly, some of the problems which have been experienced by the different groups and people involved in this case, are predominantly those which arise when there is a clash of cultures. At such times, people begin to recognise what they instinctively believe to be true, or feel is important, or are accustomed to doing, but usually in response to an alternate being offered which feels strange, even alien. At such times they also begin to question on what grounds those strong and unexamined beliefs and their presuppositions have been or are held. We have seen much evidence of this.

*We recommend that the Diocese continues to work with both St Matthias and the Missional Community, so that they are each helped to see how they are expressing their churchly culture, not only so that they are able to understand one another more deeply, but also so they can reflect on the ways in which their culture makes it either hard or easy for people who have no*

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<sup>1</sup> *Practical Theology* p.180

*Christian background and may come from several different cultures or subcultures to explore the Christian faith.*

## 7/2 **Illumination**

Donald McKim<sup>2</sup> traces how the church in succeeding generations came to see new things in the Christian gospel which had passed unnoticed in previous generations. This has been magnified since the twentieth century as global Christianity has been exploring different features of its faith from the differing perspectives of cultures around the world, and making those discoveries known through increasingly easy access to the electronic media. One of the blessings which can come from a denomination such as the CofI having contact with the Methodist, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal or other churches is that whilst it remains rooted in the tradition in which its people's faith has been nurtured and to which it still owes loyalty today, the denomination can come to see new things which their own tradition may have overlooked or ignored. When Christians begin to come alongside those of different denominations there is a good deal of patient learning and imaginative consideration which needs to happen before it is possible for complete covenantal communion to emerge as with the Methodists. Sometimes, as with the Roman Catholic Church, exploration of the traditions reveals mutual misunderstanding, which needs to be corrected. In other cases it remains the case that there are substantial differences which cannot be reconciled at this time. But in all this work, people find that in explaining and exploring their own tradition they discover new things which they had not appreciated before. Sometimes what another group holds as an essential part of their faith may be entirely consistent or at least consonant with their own. For instance some Christians believe that the command of Jesus to wash one another's feet is as solemn and essential as his command to baptise in the name of the Trinity or his command to break bread in remembrance of him.<sup>3</sup> So, the 1998 Lambeth Conference saw all the Bishops of the Anglican Communion doing just that, even though their liturgies made no provision for it.

Of course it is important that the interchange is considered in the light of the faith confessed by the CofI so that error does not creep in but TWG believes that this could be an important part of reflecting on the mission of the Church. We wonder if the Diocese might have a group which occasionally reflects with Christian leaders, lay and ordained, about their use of material or emphases from groups other than the CofI.

*We recommend that the diocese continues to encourage inter-church explorations which will strengthen people's appreciation of their own tradition and may illuminate or enrich it with*

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<sup>2</sup> McKim, Donald, *Theological Turning Points: Major Issues in Christian Thought*

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas, John Christopher, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*



*ways of being Christian found in others, providing that they are helped to reflect on difference as well as consonance and consistency.*

### **7/3 Dialogue with other Christian groups**

TWG noted that there had recently been a letter calling for dialogue between the Loyal Orders and the Churches. We were encouraged to hear that the RBI stands ready for such conversation with the churches. We wonder whether that might be started in your diocese, perhaps beginning with recommendations of the Standing Committee's report of 1999, which suggests some theological issues to explore, in particular the nature of Christian love and how that might be outworked in northern Ireland for the good of all.<sup>4</sup> But we believe that it would be also be good to clear up any misunderstandings which may arise from time to time.

*We recommend that consideration be given as to whether it might be constructive to meet with the RBI to discuss theological and other matters of mutual concern.*

### **7/4 Mutual Support**

TWG notes that the challenges which arise when a parish church encounters enquiries from the Loyal Orders or other groups for services or other partnership are ones which are best not dealt with alone. We agree with Earl Storey that it may be too complex for an individual clergy person or church vestry to work through on their own.<sup>5</sup> 'The temptation to leave well alone'<sup>6</sup> is thus not a neutral act.

*We wonder if there might be a diocesan group which considers these matters on a case by case basis, since our conviction is that to draw up a policy or set of rules might be over-rigid and not take account of differing contexts. Such a group would only meet when the minister or the vestry triggers a meeting by a request for assistance. Over time some guidelines might be created for this kind of situation, but keeping in mind the advice of Professor O'Donovan, this should not be rushed, and may not be necessary. Any policy should be applicable to all.*

### **7/5 Counselling and other pastoral ministry**

In the light of our consideration of the Sozo course, and the possibility that other similar courses may exist elsewhere, TWG thinks that:

*The Diocese of Down and Dromore may wish to reflect on how it monitors and supports*

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<sup>4</sup> Section 8.2 <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/49>

<sup>5</sup> Storey, E. *Traditional Roots* p. 109

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* p. 110

*parishes who offer prayer ministry, counselling, or deliverance ministry, in order to ensure that good practice is followed by all who work in the name of the Church, so that vulnerable people can be assured that they are receiving the best possible help.*

## **7/6 Use of Scripture**

We are not surprised to find that in relation to BCRC and RBI there are substantial questions which arise out of the differing ways in which the Bible is interpreted. Your own commitment to the exposition of the Bible is well known, and we wonder if there might be value in making a deepening of lay understanding and use of Scripture a key theme in the next stage of the dioceses's life.

*We recommend that the diocese considers focusing on helping everyone know and understand their Bibles thoroughly and deeply.*

## **Concluding remarks**

Bishop Harold, we are aware that there may be some who think we have said too little because they were hoping for a list of regulations, whereas others may think we have said too much. We have tried to help you understand both groups by contextualising them historically and theologically. We believed that we could help you most if we observed Prof O'Donovan's wisdom as to the characteristically Anglican way of offering modest conclusions. We remain ready to assist you further should that be necessary.

We continue to pray for you and the Diocese of Down and Dromore in this prayer from The Church of Ireland Book of Common Prayer:

God of mercy,  
by whose grace alone we are accepted  
and equipped for your service:  
stir up in us the gifts of your Holy Spirit  
and make us worthy of our calling;  
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit  
in love and joy and peace;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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*Christina Baxter  
John Dinnen  
Heather Morris  
David Shepherd  
Assisted by Jan Peach*

**April 2016**





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