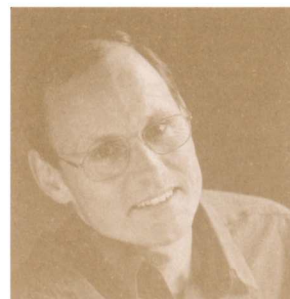


# EDITORIAL

CHRIS SUNDERLAND

The Revd Dr Chris Sunderland is Co-ordinator of Agora, with whom Bible Society is in partnership. Agora aims to increase the quality of public conversation, rebuild trust and encourage the search for vision in our society. His book entitled *In a Glass Darkly – seeking vision for public life* has been published by Paternoster Press.



IN 1990 ANTHONY GIDDENS PREDICTED THAT CONDITIONS OF WHAT HE CALLED “HIGH MODERNITY” WOULD GENERATE A CRISIS OF TRUST. He foresaw a new highly mobile social scene, where most of those we meet are strangers, where organisations are continually adapting in order to keep pace with change, where families are in flux and people feel less attached to place. All these would make for a new and anxious way of living.<sup>1</sup>

The truth of this prediction has become more and more obvious in the years that have followed. As our politicians limber up for a general election they have all put the issue of trust high on their agendas. And perhaps they are right to do so. Democracy is much more than a simple decision-making system. The present struggles in Iraq and the public cynicism about spin and manipulation in this country both testify to the need to build a convincing trust between politicians and the people.

In such a context it is appropriate that *TransMission* dedicate this issue to an exploration of trust and its relationship to biblical faith. The biblical communities may have been the first people on earth self-consciously to understand life as a trust. The concept of living in a covenant relationship with God meant that every aspect of human life came to be seen as part of this trust and was scrutinised in relationship to it. Core commandments were upheld, such as “do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness”, whose subtext was the call to be trustworthy people. Prophets arose that would rail against corrupt practice, forcing it into the open and demanding that leadership behave accountably.

The concept of life as a trust also had other important outcomes for biblical communities. To understand life as covenant was to see it in essentially relational terms. This would resist all automatic and mechanical views of the world. For example, in his famous temple sermon Jeremiah was effectively saying “No, the simple rehearsal of Temple sacrifice will not guarantee your safety, amend your ways then God will let you dwell in the land”.<sup>2</sup> Such thinking admitted the whole range of inspiring human motivations, the development of personal and community story, moral sensitivity and vision. It meant that the whole gamut of social disciplines would find a place in the society, including customs and manners, morals and law. Whereas in today’s mobile world we find ourselves amid a sea of strangers where relationships are increasingly dominated by economic exchange, regulated by an ever-growing burden of law and depleted of true moral discourse. Our “compensation culture” is now so

constrained by health and safety regulation that all sorts of good and proper activities are proscribed out of the fear of litigation. Likewise crude and dominant mores such as rights and political correctness act like trump cards to stifle all sensitive and subtle debate.

Developments in technology also shift the landscape of trust. The phenomenal potential for cooperation offered through the internet allows instant worldwide communication. The new online informal trading initiative, eBay, has enjoyed phenomenal growth as it has learnt how to build adequate trust in that new environment. Yet there is also the darker side of internet economics, the world of card fraud, identity theft and online bank robbery, each of which presents continuing challenges. There is a similar case with relationships. Chat forums spring up everywhere. Hundreds of single people, who find themselves alone in an anonymous society, are now meeting others through dating services and finding long-term partners and friends. Yet we also hear of paedophiles who play out their hideous grooming tactics on unsuspecting children. These technological advances present us with the age-old challenge of how to foster cooperation among the trustworthy majority, while adequately disciplining the rogues.

It also demonstrates the importance of trustworthiness as a core virtue in any healthy society. Police forces and a legal system may be able to deal with a few subversive individuals, but once the majority loses an ethic of trustworthiness, the society cannot function. Cultures where corruption is endemic, laws are flouted and disloyalty accepted simply fail to thrive. Similar considerations apply at a personal level. When we decide whether or not to work with someone, one of the most crucial internal decisions that we make is “Can I trust this person?” And if the answer is no, we will withdraw, or proceed only with great care.

Mobile lifestyles are also having a major impact on community life. Readers of *TransMission* will be well aware of how communities struggle today to keep up their affirming rituals or find committed leadership. Many people now graze across the surface of society, choosing from a vast range of leisure pursuits, but with little interest in collective projects. Some commentators point out that we have become aware of the importance of social capital just at the time when it is most under threat. It can be argued that the groups, which traditionally have comprised the local community, are actually the place where most of us learn the art of

## NOTES

1. A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).
2. This is a summary of the message of Jeremiah 7.1–7.

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► cooperation with those who see life differently from ourselves. They are the heartland of realistic trust.

Finally, the subject of trust requires some consideration of the psychological dimension. In his acclaimed BBC 2 documentary *The Power of Nightmares*, Adam Curtis suggested that we are now living in a climate of politically induced fear and threat. Paranoia sees enemies everywhere, conceives the world in terms of great plots and makes for violence. So where do we get a proper confidence with which to approach life? Many commentators point to the importance of our relationship with our parents as the foundation of an appropriately trusting attitude about the world. Relationships in general surely nurture this basic trust through our lives. But perhaps most of all such a trust is the outcome of a wholesome faith rooted in love. The Christian answers the “Who can you trust?” question at its heart by speaking of God, of one who made us and who loves us.

This is the ground we survey in this issue. You will find within:

Anne Balfour surveys trust at the basic psychological level.

Joan Lockwood O’Donovan takes a hard look at the subject of rights from a Christian theological perspective and concludes that the notion is fundamentally flawed.

John Atherton has some encouraging news for us with regard to social capital. He notices that churches today are the one organisation that is truly committed on the ground to the building of community life.

Jonathan Bartley, an experienced political commentator, offers us his views of political life today. He is suspicious about simple calls to trust, calls on politicians to give less one-sided versions of life and the media to bring truth into the public square.

Albert Borgmann reviews the development of new technologies and is concerned about how new devices generally deplete something about the quality of relationships.

Finally, David Shenk explores the area of personal integrity in inter-faith relationships and tells of some of his own experience in this area. Our society may prize what it calls tolerance but David’s points to the importance of mutual respect based on integrity and the pursuit of truth.

So there we have it. Enjoy! – as they say. It is a great thing when the society begins to talk language that makes real connections with faith. Such is the case with trust. ■