

Together

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in Sussex

THE DAY THE FRACKERS MOVED IN called for a Ministry of Healing and Pastoral Care

In all the preparatory work undertaken by Cuadrilla and those who gave them permission, how much thought was given to unintended consequences in the local community on the day the frackers moved in? One group which did was the local church. Knowing that fracking was politically a hot potato likely to divide the community, with committed worshippers on both sides of the fence, the church decided to remain neutral.

Their only direct involvement was to host a meeting at the request of the Council, attended by representatives of the Environment Agency simply to secure facts and disseminate information.

Well aware that people on both sides of the fence were going to need a lot of pastoral help, Fr Desmond Burton, the parish priest, decided that a strong line from him either way would not be helpful and would threaten his pastoral relationship with everybody.

One of the unintended consequences was the extent to which the issue not only split the village but also the way in which it threatened personal friendships of many years almost to the point of extinction, leaving an enormous healing ministry in which the church is now engaged. Slowly there are signs of success. People have learned how to handle conflict and how to express forcefully held opinions without causing unnecessary offence, as time heals wounds, restores some of the personal relationships, and people begin to work together to restore the settled and peaceful village they loved.

Writing in his parish magazine, Fr Desmond said, 'We are all human beings and we all need ethical standards by which we live and renew our ourselves, and because we don't always manage to achieve those standards we have to find ways of

putting things right when they go wrong'. He then encouraged his parishioners to embody the message of Christmas, perhaps beginning with a Christmas Card to their neighbours, so as to begin the New Year with a better spirit.

Another unintended consequence was a difficult and unpleasant job for the police, who according to Fr Desmond, behaved in exemplary fashion. They too recognise their role in the healing ministry.



Courtesy, Sussex Police

Superintendent Lawrence Hobbs, paying tribute to the community for their support, enabling them to carry out their lawful and legitimate activities in safety and ensuring fair treatment all round, described it as 'a difficult balancing act throughout', caught as they were between those who charged them with 'caving in' to protesters and others who accused them of 'overkill' in the number of

officers deployed.

From the outset, the police priority was safety — for the general public, protesters and Cuadrilla employees, as well as for their own officers and staff — and they worked with all sides to enable them all to meet their peaceful and lawful objectives, whether residents, day-to-day commercial activities or protesters.

Asked how they saw the future, the Superintendent said, 'We are now supporting our partners in the local authorities to ensure that things return to some degree of normality although the legacy will remain with the local community for a long time. If we can assist in any way then I would encourage residents to talk to our officers in the area or contact the local neighbourhood police team if they have any concerns or issues that they would like us to address. If we can, we will.

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Ian
says . . .

If the unity we are all committed to has no answers for linking together these experiences and points of view within the Christian community, then our right to be heard outside is undermined. We will be as united as the German soldiers and English soldiers who used Christmas Day to play a peaceful game of football together and then on Boxing Day resumed their shelling, gassing and bayoneting.

This year marks the centenary of World War One, a world so different from that of 1914 but our ability to find peace and understanding still needs a great deal of investment, as events in Balcombe have shown.

Last time the Bat provided a challenge on the issue of human sexuality, and we appreciate the response we had from one of our readers. Perhaps others were provoked but did not have the opportunity to put pen to paper at the time. Do please consider responding to what we write, even if it is to tell us that we are not providing sufficient stories from Hastings as one correspondent did recently. Clive Barrett (page 7) urges us to tell ecumenical stories. That is just what we want to do, but we need your help to do it.

Ian Chisnall
Mission and Unity Co-ordinator

This edition of *Together* impeccably illustrates how important it is to dismantle the many walls or silos we can so easily take for granted in our lives together. The stories from Balcombe and the fracking debate represent a really complex set of ideas and values, each of which can easily be understood and tolerated in isolation, but put together they reflect a deeper conflict, seemingly so intractable that it might never be resolved unless we can handle our relationships with one another, both as individuals and churches, and with Jesus at its heart.

The TV scenes from earlier this year included images of at least one Christian environmentalist being arrested by Police Officers, some of whom were men and women of faith. A few feet down the road in the village of Balcombe, residents included Christians on both sides of the debate about the value of fracking, alongside scientists and engineers similarly divided. Much of the debate is about technology and science, but the science is of little use unless we can find ways of communicating on a human level above 'the battle for Balcombe'.

Nor should we forget the many silos within the church as we attempt to link the creative work of those involved in Café Church settings and those whose worship depends on the right vestments and sacraments along with issues of faith and order.

Neil Macdonald Responds to The Bat



THE BAT concludes his article on Gay Marriage and Civil Partnership in the last edition of *Together* by encouraging more debate on same sex relationships having due regard to the pastoral impact on those involved. To achieve that it is important to acknowledge that scripture itself is fundamentally about dialogue — between God and humankind. Abraham pleads with God for Sodom. The Magnificat is Mary in dialogue with God, echoing Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, and the gospels show Jesus in almost constant conversation with those around him.

Appeals to the few passages in scripture that might be related to consensual same-sex activity are unlikely to solve the debate over Gay Marriage but there are many gay people who have had a personal encounter with Jesus and found that this powerful experience has fundamentally changed their lives, while leaving their sexual orientation both harmonious and intact. Not apparently a problem for them, but clearly one for some of their fellow Christians.

A more positive line might be to turn to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) where he sets out at length the procedure for making an irrevocable decision such as marriage. Such a close relationship may become a genuinely shared experience of the Holy Spirit for both husband and

wife. Of course it may not always work out that way, but since the decision once made cannot be undone Ignatius takes the line that where it fails both parties are required to live a better life within the state or condition in which they find themselves. Cannot the same advice apply to heterosexual and homosexual couples alike? The spiritual element in marriage has to be more important than the biology, otherwise the institution amounts to no more than social Darwinism.

The risen Jesus enters into dialogue with the disciples on their journey to Emmaus. He listens to them. They listen to him, and his words are effective even before they reach their destination and discover who he really is. He is continuing in conversation with them as he had done before his crucifixion, and then, as now, he remains, firmly grounded in the world around him. He has already told them to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16), and made them aware that the failure to receive the peace of his Spirit in hospitality is worse than all the behaviour in Sodom and Gomorrah (10:15). Through his continuing to live within us, we as Christians are enabled to enter into sensitive but prophetic listening and dialogue with all those around us, seeking to hold them in loving, dynamic and truly right relationships, and to encourage them to make good choices in the power of his Spirit.

A CAFECHURCH IN HEATHFIELD

'Church but not as you know it'

Susan Mumford Explains

Heathfield opens its first Cafechurch — but is it a Cafe or is it Church? The short answer is that it is both, provided that by 'cafe' you mean a simple, warm and welcoming place where people drop in for a coffee and snack, pay for what they get and expect to get what they pay for, without any sense of belonging, loyalty or continuing commitment; and by 'church' you mean a place where a group of Christians meet together without the usual trappings of the church to explore basic Christian, human and community issues of interest to all and open to all. And in Heathfield it is truly ecumenical, a product of Churches Together and with the support of twelve member churches.

So how did it happen, why, and what do they do? About this time last year, three people saw an advert for a Cafechurch Training Day, organised by Fresh Expressions. They decided to give it a go and returned full of enthusiasm.

The purpose was to reach out to people in their community unlikely to warm to the traditional church programme. Some would not even enter a church building. So Cafechurch takes place in a coffee shop.

In Heathfield it's Costa, already a familiar and popular venue for people of all ages and particularly popular with local young people. It is also large enough to accommodate some 50-60 people, around the number needed to make the project viable. 'Events' are on Friday evening, after the shop has closed.

Churches depute leaders to organise the programmes. Costa staff deal with the drinks and a Co-ordinator develops prayer partners in the link churches, with their leaders in the café prior to opening, and in a small prayer group in a nearby home.

Programmes focus on a theme or topic of interest which can be looked at from a variety of different angles, including a Christian perspective, and which is of interest to those who are leading it and has relevance to a wider audience. Events bear the mark of informality. Their loose structure enables new friendships to be formed and a deeper understanding of the issues to develop through a combination of whole group activities, small group discussions and conversation. A mixture of serious thought and fun, with musical interludes and lots of coffee. The whole evening lasts about one and a half to two hours.

Three topics of note to date are 'Stress Busting' (judiciously placed in June just before school exams), 'How Rich are You?', with very wide implications, and one on the film musical *Les Miserables*, which raised a variety of issues such as justice and mercy, fresh starts and difficult choices. Attendance is currently around 40.

The underlying concept is that so much of Christian living is about building good relationships between

people and gradually encouraging them to consider God's perspective on their thinking and to include a relationship with God in their lives.

Cafechurch, sometimes called 'church but not as you know it,' has put its hand to the plough and has considerable potential for doing just that. As one person aptly commented, 'Christian witness, gently done'.

Sue Mumford is a keen enthusiast for Christians serving their communities by working together. Pictures courtesy Karen Carter/Fresh Expressions.



FRESH EXPRESSIONS

is an ecumenical movement, involved in planting new congregations, different in ethos and style from the church which planted them, primarily for the benefit of people who have either stopped going to church or never started. Some meet in unfamiliar settings, such as cafés, pubs or schools, but all seek to complement the ministry of traditional churches. There is no single model to copy. The emphasis is on 'planting' something appropriate to its context rather than 'cloning' something which works elsewhere.

For more details, see www.freshexpressions.org.uk.

'Isn't it going to be any more churchy than this? I'll definitely bring my friends next time'. (Teenager after the first session.)



POLITICS, HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

In 1998 the WCC 8th Assembly (in China) celebrated its 50th Anniversary by widening its beam when it gave birth to the Global Christian Forum to make room for churches and organisations not structurally part of the WCC but engaged in councils of churches at local, regional or national level. Today that Forum represents a much wider and diverse body of churches and Christian organisations, promoting encounters among churches and traditions previously not in conversation with each other.

Prior to the recent 10th Assembly (in Korea) the two bodies held a joint consultation in Geneva on **The Politicisation of Religion and the Rights of Religious Minorities**, at which sixty participants (religious leaders, politicians, scholars and activists from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North America) affirmed their distinctive and complementary roles in the quest for Christian unity. Their conclusions were fully discussed in Korea and a Statement, with 14 recommendations for all the churches, was passed by consensus.

From its inception in 1948 the WCC has always fought for religious freedom and human rights, not only for Christians but for all. Today, however, the challenge is worldwide and from a wider base than ever before. More churches are involved and religious minorities exist in all faiths. In a world with a growing tendency to politicise religion and a rise in religious intolerance and discrimination against religious minorities the message bites at all levels and requires all levels to respond to it.

Of the 14 'causes to fight for' here are six.

- ❑ resist the misuse of blasphemy laws, apostasy laws or anti-conversion laws to punish or discriminate against religious minorities.
- ❑ resist state interference in the decision-making processes of religious groups, and the imposition of religious law and jurisprudence through state sanction.
- ❑ mediate with governments to develop policies to protect persons and communities belonging to minority religions against threats or acts of violence from non-state actors.
- ❑ strengthen existing mechanisms, enact legislation to protect members of religious minorities and apply universal normative status regarding freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, including the right to change religion.
- ❑ implement anti-discrimination legislation to protect persons and communities belonging to different religions.
- ❑ treat freedom of religion as an inherent human right and political virtue which is a fundamental prerequisite for the democratic and peaceful progress of human society.



UNITY IN PROCESS

but how are we to escape from our past?

Think of the movement for unity as a spotlight whose light intensifies as it focuses more and more on the local and the immediate, but at the same time widens its range of vision to reach out to the periphery where more features come into view and the nature of the light gradually changes for all.

Until the end of the 19th century most western churches were content to live in their own 'houses' with the occasional nod to their neighbour over the fence. Change came, largely from the mission field, with Edinburgh 1910, leading the search for Christian Unity but always held back by the weight of traditions and institutions. Change by the end of the century was quite marked but by then the Ecumenical Movement itself had become an institution in danger of strangling its own process. The 21st century offers the chance for a new beginning and there are signs that it is happening. Clive Barrett's book (page 7) focuses on the local and what he says about developments in the north-east are being replicated in Sussex. Traditional structures are still there and serve as a reminder of where we have come from and where ultimately we hope to arrive but new life is breaking out. The flame is being handed on but, like all new flames and the rata tree seeds in New Zealand, needs nurture and care not only to survive but to take shape and maintain direction. This is the new focus.

So the beam widens its range. The WCC extends its horizons to include churches not involved in the 'Ecumenical Movement' half-a-century ago and extends its bid for religious freedom (which was there from the beginning) as it broadens to include a wide range of human rights and with other faiths in view. Somewhere along the beam David Moxon reminds us of a constant dripping suggesting a slow thaw in Anglican and Roman relationships.

TWO NEW SUSSEX CHURCH LEADERS

Welcome to Geoffrey Johnson and Nicola Furley-Smith who have joined our team of Church leaders, representing the Quakers and the United Reformed Church respectively.



Geoffrey Johnson comes with almost fifty years of experience as an ordained Anglican, working first in SE Asia with the Church Missionary Society and next as a UK NHS hospital chaplain for over twenty years. He now describes himself as a 'Qu-Anglican', having

joined the Quakers twenty years ago, and is enjoying what is called 'dual membership'. He is presently an elder in Eastbourne Quaker Meeting and closely involved in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.



After six years as a member of the Team Stuart Davison (Baptist) welcomes increasing cooperation between churches, as in The Mission Shaped Ministry Course, links with Sussex Police and mutual concern for Fair Trade and People Trafficking. 'At grass-roots there is a lot going on.' he says, 'though regrettably some streams and some churches still view others with suspicion or disregard'.



Martin Warner, after one year as Bishop of Chichester, says visiting priests and people in every benefice as part of his Episcopal Visitation is providing an invaluable opportunity to get to know the strengths and weaknesses of our life together as a diocese serving the people of Sussex. Evangelisation is the greatest challenge and the need to rebuild confidence to meet it.



Nicola Furley-Smith, Moderator of the URC Southern Synod since March 2011, was ordained in 1987 and after ministries in Merseyside and Leeds came to Oxted in 1997. She is fully committed in ecumenical relationships and meets regularly with church leaders in three other areas (inevitably limiting her time for Sussex) to monitor ways in which denominations can work more closely together and so demonstrate our unity to the local communities.



John Hellyer (URC) says widespread talk of a new ecumenism is a sign that if our churches are to be effective we have to work together. Apart, none of us has all the resources we need to meet the physical and spiritual hunger in our society. By working together, things like Foodbanks, Street Pastors and Fresh Expressions are making a difference and God is touching people's lives. The next question is what more is required for Jesus' prayer to be answered?



Kieran Conry (RC Bishop) says that with theological issues still obstacles to greater formal unity, people at a local level are increasingly committed to joint action to face local needs focused on those basic Christian values which unite us, thereby preaching a shared gospel of compassion and love as they come to the aid of people for whom life is often not so much a time of joy as a frightening burden.

NO WAY BACK

David Moxon identifies the first sign of a thaw in RC/CofE relationships since the 16th century with the first meeting between the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury (Geoffrey Fisher) in 1960. The Pope began by reading a passage with a reference 'to the time when our separated brethren should return to the Mother Church', at which point Fisher interjected, 'Your holiness. Not return.' 'Why not?' said the Pope, to which Fisher replied, 'None of us can go backwards. We are each now running on parallel courses; we are looking until, in God's good time, our two courses approximate and meet'. After a brief pause, 'You are right', said the Pope.

Ecumenism is looking forwards not backwards and, like climate change, can be very slow, does not always move in a straight line and can take for ever, but David Moxon reminds us of significant points between Rome and Canterbury going back to 1054.

- 1054 The Great Schism between East (Orthodox) and West (Roman) followed in the 14th to 17th centuries by the Reformation (Catholic and Protestant).
- 1910 The Edinburgh Missionary Conference seeks to heal the wounds.
- 1966 Michael Ramsey visits Pope Paul VI shortly after the closure of Vatican II.
- 1977 Donald Coggan visits Pope Paul VI in a service of prayer for unity.
- 1982 John Paul II pays a pastoral visit to the UK, the first by a reigning Pope, and he and Robert Runcie jointly renew baptismal vows.
- 2010 Benedict XVI makes the first State Visit to the UK, visits Lambeth Palace and he and Rowan Williams pray together in Westminster Abbey.
- 2013 Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin continue the tradition soon after assuming office and when they met recently in Rome the Pope said,

'WE MUST WALK TOGETHER'

Small steps indeed, but one more example of changing church relationships in the wider ecumenical movement.

THE RATA TREE

The New Zealand Rata tree has a height of thirty feet and a two-metre trunk. It begins as a windblown seed, lodged in decaying humus in the branch of an older tree. In a world of churches, some old established, some newly emerging, Moxon sees the life cycle of the Rata Tree as a symbol. One hazard is that rata trees may grow old and die with nothing to replace them. The other is that a lone seed with no opportunity to start life in an older tree faces difficult odds and may not even grow at all. *Verbum sap sapienti.*

[A Summary of David Moxon, Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome, writing in Centro.]



FRACKING FACTS

'To frack or not to frack. That is the question'. But on what basis do we make the decision?

David Hughes leads us into new territory

Earthquakes, groundwater pollution, methane gas emissions from the earth — sounds like a vision of Dante's Inferno — so it is no surprise that people are worried about fracking. On the other hand, and equally palatable, is the prospect of the lights going out, oil becoming so expensive that we cannot afford to run our cars, and gas becoming unobtainable from war torn and hostile areas of the world. Which way to turn? Does our faith have anything to offer?

The Facts

Lets take a look at the facts. 'Fracking' is short for 'hydraulic fracturing'. It is a way of extracting gas trapped in shale formations which cannot be released by conventional drilling. It involves pumping a mixture of water and chemicals under high pressure into a drill hole. The chemicals are needed to lubricate the well and liberate the gas and are largely recovered from what comes out of the well.

According to Mike Stephenson of the British Geological Survey (BGS) earthquakes are not really a problem. Despite alarmist reports of earthquakes in the Blackpool area, when the prospecting company Cuadrilla were test drilling for shale gas reserves, earthquakes are tiny and less of a problem than the subsidence resulting from coal mining. The BGS also maintains that groundwater pollution is not a problem because the shale gas is found at depths well below the groundwater aquifers we use for our water supplies. Underground deposits of drinking water often contain methane anyway, and there is little reason to believe that gas liberated by fracking two to three kilometres beneath the surface could work its way up into drinking water deposits that are usually less than fifty metres deep. The same is true for fracking chemicals. Stories of people being able to set light to the water coming out of their taps may tell a different story but do not appear to be linked to fracking.

But . . .

All this is fine 'providing extraction is properly monitored and managed'. This same caveat applies to the possibility of methane leaking into the atmosphere. The UN Environment Programme is concerned that with current levels of leakage fracked gas is no better than coal when it comes to carbon emissions. Pictures of the well heads where the drill pipes come to the surface show the possibilities for leaks in a complex plumbing setup, but again we are assured that properly managed drilling operations will minimise the risk of leaks. In the UK the legislative framework is in place and our environmental agencies are effective but that is by no means true everywhere.

If fracking is properly managed there is no doubt it could be part of the answer to energy security and rising energy prices but that depends on the results of prospecting work by companies like Cuadrilla. It is possible that the shale gas being targeted does not yield up its gas in an economically viable way, in which case it ceases to be an issue here in the UK. However that does not mean we can ignore the issue. There is a bigger issue here. According to the IPCC we must not allow global warming to take us beyond 2 deg C or we risk significant adverse effects. That means more than 60% of the fossil fuel reserves we have already identified must remain in the ground, and there's the rub.

The Prior Question

Should the churches therefore be asking another question? The theology is pretty simple and Jesus summed it up in one verse: 'Love God as much as you can and your neighbour like yourself'. So what has that got to do with fracking? God gave us dominion over the whole of the planet but the model of kingship employed in that dominion is that of Christ, the servant king. How can we say we love God if we trash his creation by causing so much global warming that the planet ceases to be a home to all of his creatures?

And how can we claim to love our neighbour if we are busy destroying her environment? We are called to be good stewards of our planetary resources — to use them for our benefit, but in such a way that our neighbours (and future generations) are not disadvantaged — to use them in a way that is honouring to God and respecting his creative spirit.

Starting from there the prior question may be how to ensure that global average temperatures do not rise by more than 2 degrees C above preindustrial levels. In other words, we must not burn more fossil fuels than we already know about while at the same time not being oblivious to the need for energy security, lest we become dependent on potentially hostile parts of the world for our essential fuel needs.

If fracking is a cost effective and carefully managed means of extracting fuel in more stable countries then maybe we can live with that but only if we also agree to leave some of the other known reserves in the ground. In biblical terms this may count as responsible stewardship of the earth's resources, loyal to our duty to care (Jesus) and aware that we will be held to account if we damage the planet (Rev 11). The bigger issue, therefore, is not fracking *versus* other unsustainable fossil fuel sources but responsibility (frugality?) in our use of fossil fuels.

David Hughes is Churches Director of A Rocha UK.

EASTBOURNE CHURCHES CHALLENGE THE COALITION

Martyn Relf Reports

At a meeting arranged by CT Eastbourne and the Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF) inviting people to 'Tell us what you Think', 70 members of Eastbourne churches dismissed the 'charity begins at home' mantra and gave a general thumbs up to the government's principled lead to the rest of the world over issues of foreign aid. They also urged the government to address the tax evasion of multi-nationals robbing poor countries of their fair share of profits from raw materials. At home they gave a big thumbs down to the current welfare reforms, described as 'not fit for purpose', resulting in severe hardship for the most vulnerable members of our society.

The meeting, held at St John's Church, Meads, took the form of a 'Question Time' and after the panel's response each topic was opened to the floor. Panel members (left to right) were Vic Lawrence (St John's ministry team), Sandy Medway (local Christian active in social engagement), Colin Bloom (CCF) and Caroline Ansell (local Conservative parliamentary candidate).



The government's record was subjected to thorough scrutiny, with a wide spectrum of views on 'gay marriage', the dominant theme of which was a serious betrayal of trust by the Conservatives who pushed the legislation through when it was not in their manifesto and against the express wishes of most of their core supporters.

Abortion and euthanasia were also given a thorough airing, most participants seemingly happy with Caroline Ansell's pro-life stance who in turn agreed with the call for compassion and support for women with crisis pregnancies.

'Did the panel believe the church was one generation away from extinction?' 'No', said the panel emphatically and the audience agreed, encouraged by many growing churches in spite of decline elsewhere.

So what did it tell us about 2015? A show of hands suggested the jury is still out on the government's overall record with many people still undecided as to how they will vote.

CCF is an independent body within the Conservative fold.

The Second Phase of Ecumenism

Clive Barrett (ed), *Unity in Process. Reflections on Ecumenism*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2012, 234pp, £18.99.

This is a book for those who see themselves as ecumenists, for those who have given up on ecumenism and for those who know nothing about ecumenism. Twenty contributors, half of them from Yorkshire and the north-east, with varied experience of ecumenism, from Mary Tanner (member of WCC Faith and Order since 1974) to many more recent arrivals on the scene, both clerical and lay, local, national and international. Five church leaders set the scene with the familiar idea that 'only through becoming one with you (God) can we become one with one another' and believe that because our problems are more spiritual than theological 'we need to feed ourselves with the spiritual lessons we have learned together over the last thirty years'.

By the end it is a clear message that today there is much more ecumenical activity than we ever admit, and many new expressions of ecumenism, some of which are set out in detail. **We need to tell these ecumenical stories**, listen to ecumenical stories, and open our eyes 'to see the Other in the other'.

We are not going to achieve the kind of unity we were looking for in the latter half of the 20th century. Unity today is a process of coming together. The focus is on fluid communities rather than fixed institutions, and evidence of this can be found in the CTE groups where localism and laity are working together for what

needs to be done, relating to the local community (and not only the church community), by-passing some of the obstacles that stood in the way, without losing sight of the challenge to make the transition from personal to institutional ecumenical relations. Local and global need each other. They feed on each other. Success will not come top-down (from Councils) but bottom-up, with people working together and nurturing trust.

Three chapters summarise ecumenism in the 20th century, mostly covering well-trodden territory. The 21st century is the beginning of a second phase, less national and more local, less emphasis on the ultimate goal and more attention to interim questions, and how to make the most of living and working together where we are. A marked change of emphasis from John 17: 21 to 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27. Then come the stories. Durham University's Centre for Catholic Studies gives us Receptive Ecumenism, facing the traditional Faith and Order concerns for unity but without the sweat, if only as a means of breaking the log jam. Next comes the breadth and depth of work already initiated or undertaken by CT groups up and down the country, from Street Angels and Street Pastors to chaplaincies in schools, hospitals, industry and the Forces, LEPs and Church Leaders' groups, all ecumenical but not always recognised as such. Other chapters deal with inter-faith relations, racism and healing in terms of both challenge and opportunity.

Ideal to revive the faint-hearted, energise the disappointed and stimulate the new girls and boys on the block. (ed).

The Bat
in
the Belfry



WHAT PRICE FOR RE in Tomorrow's Schools?

From my belfry I am remotely aware of vast changes beyond my ken in the world of education but with a lifetime in religious education (though not in schools) and as a former member of SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education) I find myself wondering what sort of issues are likely to dominate a SACRE agenda in the coming months.

Sussex has three SACREs (East, West and Brighton & Hove) and since SACREs are a good example of ecumenism, with all churches represented, it seems a fair topic for CT Sussex to reflect on. What do we know of RE in our schools? When did we last try to find out or discuss their work in our Councils or with our SACRE representatives?

A recent Ofsted report (*Religious Education: Realising the Potential*) may be a useful place to begin lest we sleepwalk into a new world with far-reaching changes in education, littered with unknown and untested consequences for pupils, families, teachers, local communities, jobs and social mobility. Education in general, and RE in particular, is germane to them all.

Not surprisingly, the Report has a touch of 'the Bat' about it. Before it gets down to earth with the nitty-gritty of RE it stoutly affirms that the structures which underpin RE in the schools have failed to keep pace with changes in the wider educational world. This has led to changes to education policy and, in some cases, to a decline in RE provision. **This is key to the problems.**

One crucial issue is the decline of the Local Authorities (the bodies responsible for RE in England and Wales) which due to budgetary cuts have made many RE advisers redundant, and this, coupled with the arrival of Academies not under their control, has made the statutory nature of RE difficult to monitor. How they handle this will take time to discover but reading the Ofsted Report highlights two issues likely to figure in their discussions. Both are matters of concern to the churches.

RE in the Classroom

The Report leaves no doubt that recent changes in education policy have had a negative impact on support for RE, not helped by reductions in local government spending to the point where some schools have little or no support to implement the agreed syllabus. The inability to develop teachers' subject knowledge and improve the quality of teaching are further casualties, all at a time when there is also a reduction in teacher training places.

With all the emphasis on parent choice and the three Rs it is not surprising that RE has been sidelined in some schools almost to the point of non-existence. More surprising is that it is happening when religion and human relationships are at the heart of so many issues in an increasingly unsettled society. This Report is

a call for SACREs 'to ensure that the overall curriculum provision for RE is challenging and has greater coherence and continuity'.

Low standards, weak teaching and leadership, curriculum and examination problems are all acknowledged as part of the problem. More serious concerns are the failure to deepen 'pupils' understanding of the nature, diversity and impact of religion and belief in the contemporary world', especially Christianity, when secondary school pupils in particular need opportunities 'to discuss and reflect on their learning, and extend and deepen their knowledge and understanding of religion and belief'.

Inter-faith Issues

Less personal but no less pressing are the inter-faith questions. Fifty years ago World Religions was all the rage. Had it been more successful we might have had fewer headaches today but there was always reluctance in some quarters. Today the climate is different. Gone are the days when RE was limited to Christianity. Ease of travel and communication mean that young people now go out to work in a world market with confused if not negative images of issues related to religion. Many would regard such teaching as essential.

The latest Review of RE defines the purpose of RE as to

'... equip pupils with systematic knowledge and understanding of a range of religions and world views . . . (enable) them to develop their ideas, values and identities . . . develop . . . an aptitude for dialogue so that they can participate positively in our society with its diverse religions . . . gain and deploy the skills needed to understand, interpret and evaluate texts, sources of wisdom and authority . . . (and) . . . learn to articulate clearly and coherently their personal beliefs, ideas, values and experiences while respecting the right of others to differ'.

Academies not designated with a religious character are also required to reflect that while the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, they are to take account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions.

Many may feel such issues are peripheral. They are not. In recent years many Sussex churches are to be commended for their resilience in addressing social and (to a lesser extent) political issues once thought to lie outside their provenance. It would be a pity if our preoccupation with current problems of society enabled far-reaching changes resulting in the fracture of that society, such as education which has been a deep concern of the churches from time immemorial, to creep in by the back door. Quality RE is not a million miles away from what is needed. This may be just the time to consider how we can best support our local SACRE and help our local schools and teachers ?

Together is the Newsletter of Churches Together in Sussex though views expressed are not necessarily those of Churches Together in Sussex, its leaders or its officers

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