

AIF Swanwick 2010 Report

Interchurch Families as Prophets

Arriving at Swanwick for our Annual Conference is like coming home; as you enter the gates you start to look for old friends and as you see them you drop immediately into conversations you were having the previous year. This year we couldn't get straight into our rooms so the conversation was even better! We heard from friends who were awaiting the imminent arrival of their third grandchild. Then there was a mad rush to drop our bags, get in for lunch and then start the conference proper in the Derbyshire Hall.

Session 1: After a brief introduction from Paul Docherty (Co-Chair), Helen Connell, the Conference Leader, got us all on our feet in a fun activity to get us into the feel of the conference, walking, meeting people, and communicating. She then led us in prayer, as she and husband Richard continued to do throughout the weekend. There was a special welcome for two families visiting Swanwick for the first time. They received the usual warm appreciation from the old hands.

Paul introduced the theme with a Wikipedia definition of a prophet, "someone who has encountered the divine and acts as an intermediary". He posed the question "How do Interchurch Families fulfil this role?" He then welcomed our keynote speakers for the weekend: Revd Dr Keith Clements, a Baptist minister who has held posts with CTBI and the Council of European Churches, with a special interest in Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Rt Revd Bill Ind, retired Bishop of Truro, 'star' of the TV series, An Island Parish, and former co-chair of ARCIC; and Canon John Udris, Dean of Northampton RC Cathedral, whose special interest is St Therese of Lisieux. They were each given 10 minutes to tell us about their favourite prophet.

Keith Clements started the ball rolling with Jeremiah, whom he likened to Eeyore! But he said that everyone had got Jeremiah wrong as he wasn't pessimistic, merely sad and sorry for the state that Israel had fallen into. He was a realist who saw the ship heading inexorably towards the rocks. However, his message was ultimately one of hope. The immediate disaster would not be the end of everything but the start of a new future. A prophet is not a fortune teller, rather a seer, who sees things in a different way; Jeremiah looked forward to the New Covenant.

Bishop Bill's favourite prophet was Nehemiah. He described him as the "best after dinner speaker in the Old Testament". He said the Book of Nehemiah is fascinating but much underrated, chronicling the rebuilding of the walls and Temple of Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians when the Israelites had been forced into exile. Nehemiah was a bit of a "Captain Mainwaring", pompous and boastful, but he got the job done.

Canon John introduced himself as having been named for John the Baptist, who was the true successor of his favourite prophet, Elijah. He was "Spirit filled"; telling the truth even when it hurt, not courting popularity; obedient to the call of God, even when he felt abandoned. He was a prophet of purification, calling down fire from heaven to expose the prophets of Baal.

We then split into our groups to talk about our own favourite prophets. In our group these were wide-ranging from Jeremiah to James Lovelock and Cassandra to AIF founder, Fr John Coventry. This led us on to talk about the prophets of AIF.

Session 2 saw us back in the 'Derbyshire' after tea and buns. Our guests were asked to address the questions "What is the need for a prophetic message?" and "What is this message?"

Canon John resumed his musings on Elijah. Our favourite prophet is not random. We are drawn to him or her because we recognise in them the voice of God, making our hearts burn. He quoted Gerald Manley-Hopkins: "Feeling the finger of God on the vein of one's personality", being the person God is calling us to be. The Hebrew word for prophet means to be called by God by name. Elijah, or Eli-JAH-hu, means "JAHWEH is the Lord" and he lived out his name. Canon John then turned to Therese of Lisieux and the "Science of love". Writing of 1 Corinthians 13 she said "The words resounded in my ear. At last I have found my vocation. My vocation is love". This was a prophetic vision.

He then posed the question "What is the prophetic voice for each couple?" For him the words "Into your hands" are hugely important.

Bishop Bill asked "Why does the Lectionary ignore chunks of the Bible?" These omissions often form vital links in our understanding. Neither Nehemiah nor his contemporary Ezra feature in our Sunday readings and they can tell us such a lot about the relationship between the Word of God and our everyday lives. He also considered the way we give names to Bible stories, like "The Good Samaritan" or "The Prodigal Son". This can prevent us from looking at them from different points of view. There was another, more controversial side to Nehemiah, namely his absolute exclusivity. For example he wouldn't countenance racial or religious inter-marriage. How does that resound with us in AIF?

Keith Clements addressed the question "What is the need for prophecy?" Are we going in the right direction? The Hebrew view of history was linear and dynamic, fulfilling God's purpose. Life is about growth and cannot be static. Isaiah's message was that whatever happens, God is in charge. Prophets are always relevant to their time, relating what is happening to the purpose of God. In Hitler's Germany even many churchmen thought he was "a good thing". A small number, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, saw him for what he really was. The message is always more important than the messenger, so prophets are often lonely and unpopular, needing a like-minded community to sustain them. It is not always certain why things happen as they do, but God knows! As "prophetic families" we understand about growth. Can we be a prophetic sign in our culture? How can we be signs of hope?

There was time for comment and questions of which, as always we came up with many! Two in particular were "How do we recognise false prophets?" Answers included that they are often "crowd pleasers" courting easy popularity. True prophets are those whose prophecies are eventually fulfilled, sometimes many years later. And "What about women's voices in prophecy?" Answer, Biblical culture was male dominated but the church largely depends on the faithfulness of women. We must pay more attention to the voice of women. We then returned to our groups to continue our discussions.

After supper it was time for the Roman Catholic Mass celebrated in the Chapel by Canon John, followed immediately by Night Prayers led by our Young Adults Group (YAG). This took the form of a series of candlelit readings about Jesus interspersed with periods of silence.

It was then time to repair to the Main Lounge for a glass of wine or beer to celebrate a forthcoming Ruby Wedding.

And so to bed at the end of Day 1.

Day 2 (Sunday):

News on the expected baby is that the mother has gone into hospital.

Instead of the usual Sunday morning Eucharist we have Bible and historical study groups, choosing two from five. These were well received, but it didn't seem like Sunday! After coffee we were treated to a session run by Ryan and Janet Smith, the children's co-ordinators, on "How to deliver the message" They told us that the children had been using Mr Potato Head as a visual aid to explore how we can use our bodies to worship God. Our body part was feet. Coloured numbered lolly sticks got us into groups and we were given a folder containing various activities relating to feet. A jigsaw gave us the text "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of them who bring the good news of peace" linking in with the prophetic theme of the Conference. We wrote on cardboard feet ways of bringing Jesus to people by helping them, then wrote our names on tiny feet and put them on a "mountain" on the stage. Finally the children gave out little baskets of sweets which they had filled to illustrate the text "Taste and see that the Lord is good". This was a "feel-good" session, which gave us real food for thought.

It was now time for our picnic lunch, eaten by most in the dining room as it was pouring with rain, followed by a couple of hours when we could refresh ourselves in whatever way we chose.

After an afternoon of 'Free Time', we celebrated the Anglican Eucharist presided over by Bishop Bill! In his sermon he picked up on the theme of senses, all of which Jesus used to help people in need, particularly those on the outside.

Then children had returned to their own programme and the adults settled down for the AGM preceded by an EGM. This was called to consider some changes to the Constitution and Standing Orders proposed by the Executive Committee to address the problems caused by the difficulties in getting people to stand for Co-chair and other positions required by the existing governance arrangements.

The main proposal was that we would elect an enlarged board of trustees (committee), chosen to reflect the denominational mix of the membership, and they would then elect a chair and vice-chair from among their number rather than the current practice of directly elected co-chairs from the three main church groupings. A vote was taken which mandated the Executive Committee to decide on the best solution, considering opinions put forward by the membership. Another proposal requiring the abolition of the so-called 'areas of work', replacing them with the 'three strands of the Mission Statement', was accepted readily. The proposal to replace the role of Presidents with Patrons induced much discussion and was not accepted. Instead we shall continue to have Presidents, but also appoint Patrons and Honorary Life Members.

The Conference Dinner, with a specially 'enhanced menu', was followed by what is generally held to be the highlight of the weekend, the Concert compered by Mark Powell. Acts ranged from a silly song to a family sketch, from "camp-fire" community singing to operatic singing, and from real musicianship to Mark himself on the hosepipe! But the high spot of the evening was provided by Canon John with his guitar and irreverent contribution about a transvestite nun! A good time was had by all.

Then it was back to the lounge to imbibe in another celebratory drink and a special cake for a Silver Wedding *and* a 60th birthday. AIF needs no second invitation to hold a party!

Day 3 (Monday) dawned bright and clear and we heard about the arrival of a third grandson.

The first session of the day was a time of reflection for our guests. In her introduction, Lucy Docherty spoke of the need for AIF to have a prophetic vision to move forward. Our own prophets, Martin and Ruth Reardon, and Fr John Coventry, would have supported this wholeheartedly. As interchurch couples we stand outside the orthodoxy of our churches as the prophets of old did. Our prophetic witness is in ourselves, our marriages and our family life.

Canon John confessed his discomfort at coming into unfamiliar territory, both literally and figuratively. He had heard things he wasn't used to hearing and didn't really want to hear. Like the prophets we stand on border territory, and perhaps are rejected by our own communities. Prophets cross borders as Jesus did when he entered Samaria. Was this just a geographical event or a deliberate message? Canon John believed the latter. We have made such a choice in our marriages, and the crossover can be a growing point for the body of Christ. He reminded us of the story of Ruth who left her own land, embraced Judaism and thus became an ancestor of Christ. He likened us to Ezekiel's two sticks, representing Judah and Israel. Where they rub together, the two shall become one. This is our prophetic sign.

Bishop Bill said he represented the voice of the Establishment and privilege. What he had heard had disturbed him, and he confessed that he had not paid enough attention to our situation in the past. He admired our patience and togetherness despite our divisions. The hierarchies had failed us, he said, but it is difficult for the bishops to meet us en masse. He recommended that he and Canon John should report to their respective superiors and that we should be represented officially on the two churches' joint consultative body. We need to engage with patience, humour and exasperation! Prophets are loyal rebels. He committed himself to promote this work so that our gifts can be recognised by the whole church. His words were greeted with prolonged applause!

Dr Clements likened coming to our conference to attending one in Esperanto. He came in as a stranger, hearing familiar words in a new context, and his eyes had been opened. We don't decide who is a

prophet, God does. We need to value ourselves and our role in the churches through our marriages. Big stories are made up from lots of little stories, like colonies of ants and bees. We need to take risks to cross the next border. Free Church bureaucracies need to be challenged as do theologians on issues such as inter-communion. We should keep pressing them to solve the problem, not sit back and wait for time to sort it out. This is an urgent pastoral issue for our young people. It is the frontier of mission. Rules and theology must be adjusted to meet the situation.

The final act of worship was a Free Church All-age service led by Keith Clements. This was a very lively service with contributions from all the children's groups and lusty singing and delegates received a decorated bar of soap from the children illustrating the text from Ephesians 5 "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice."

And so it was time for handing in our evaluation forms, keys and badges, and a last meal together before driving off with many a call of "See you next year!"

Ian & Adrienne Gordon