

## ***Going Forward Together in Faith, Hope & Love –***

Eighty-seven members and guests gathered at Swanwick on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> August, ready to discuss “What keeps us going after 40 years and gives us a sense of a way forward?”.

Paul Docherty set the scene and extended a warm welcome particularly to our two guest speakers, Dr David Cornick and Fr Daniel O’Leary. Helen Connell led us in prayer. Then Helena Mayles got us busy running round asking each other questions as part of an All-Age Ice-Breaker. This introductory session ended with AIF’s own rousing version of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*, complete with a fine trumpet solo.

The first Plenary Session - on Faith - was introduced by Conference Chairman, Philip Mayles. As part of the Faith, Hope and Love theme of the conference this involved two couples explaining the challenges they had met during their inter-church marriages.

Dr Cornick gave his own reflections, explaining that he had never doubted the significance of ecumenism since his ordination 30 years ago. Faith is not about believing irrational things but of being convinced that God yearns for us and is on our side, accepting the frailty of men and women who only have to acknowledge God in an act of loving assent. Faith is not a lonely, isolated experience but about being a part of a community of those who realise God is for us and Jesus is Lord. The power of love to defeat everything life can throw at us is related to discovery of self through the love of one’s partner.

This mystery of love is linked to the mystery of God’s love for the world. Our love is then an expression of God’s love. Interchurch families also have a vocation through their love and pain to signal the sinfulness and divisions of the church, and to express a love which is not just a love expressed in marriage but also through patient efforts to overcome ecumenical difficulties. There has never been, even in the medieval church, nor will there ever be only one way of worshipping in the future. Ecumenism is about celebrating the diversity of God’s love for the world. A great responsibility and a gift have been laid upon interchurch families to celebrate this diversity.

Fr O’Leary asserted that couples’ sacred space is not to be interfered with. If ever we find our compulsion for the Faith damaging our love we should drop the compulsion as misleading and wrong. The purpose of God and the church is for couples to love and live more intimately together. It is a wonderful reflection of humanity and Christianity to be living out a loving Christian marriage. He said that he is very aware of the two faces of the church – the hard, disciplined face, and the human-centred face of Jesus Christ. Couples are now finding another access to grace through their hearts and lives together, as lives of worship.

After a little time for discussion in groups, Helen Mayles facilitated the second Plenary Session on Hope. Another two couples spoke in turn about their continued hopes, despite in one case a major set-back when moving to another part of England.

Fr O'Leary reflected that what makes AIF so different is that couples can speak in this heartfelt way but with trust and discretion. More love is needed to enable us to act as reconcilers, reflecting the love in our own hearts to overcome narrowness of vision in parts of the church. Churches never are an end in themselves and fall into idolatry when faith rests in church but not in Christ. *One Bread One Body* is a real disappointment amongst RC priests who want to deal with special circumstances including interchurch families, recognising AIF couples do not want to come in through back doors or go to different churches. AIF is one real sign of hope; AIF couples need to feel that they are becoming more loving and growing together to achieve a brighter, more beautiful ecumenical role.

Dr Cornick paid tribute to the couples' very honest testimonies – the Kingdom of God is built from such determination and patience. The relationship between the church and salvation needs further exploration. He emphasised, as points of Hope, the steadfastness of our AIF witness and commitment to the ecumenical journey, and the way the spirituality of ecumenism comes from inter-denominational thinking. Because we live in an age of great religious mobility, with so many discovering so many new ways of being “church”, there could be signs of real hope in “post-denominationalism” not depending on inherited structures.

Following further discussion in groups and the conference dinner, the day ended with Evening Worship in the reflective Free Church tradition, led by Dr Cornick, then time for socialising.

The third Plenary Session, on Love, began after breakfast on Sunday with Fr O'Leary looking at the presence of God within the family - the glue that holds it together. God comes to us disguised as human love, the love between spouses; we discover what we know in our hearts all along that we can experience God in our ordinary lives, not just in church as if there is a dividing line. Grace happens to us in our ordinary lives at home in the domestic church, God being totally present in Jesus Christ's humanity. God's grace is revealed nowhere more than in the human family which is already God's prime dwelling space. Every moment of our life is open to grace.

Two couples then spoke about the Love that had kept them going. Reflecting on their testimonies Fr O'Leary talked of the huge sacrament of God's presence in our lives; God's love is unconditional and enables the blossoming of our lives, the sacraments being a regular reminder of God's grace. “I love you” are the most redeeming words, meaning you will live for ever in heaven. The power of forgiveness is for us all, not for the church and priests alone.

Dr Cornick then spoke of the God that says “yes” to us and affirms our humanness, of the dynamic of the grace of God in the development of humanity - the theatre of God’s glory. God has an amazing habit of not just being in church. There is a real opportunity in AIF marriages to do the work of translation much better. The power of forgiveness by all people, each having a ministry to each other, means that we are blessed by having this power. Each couple’s testimony had reflected the strength of this practical experience.

Following Mass (with a retiring collection for the Anglican Centre in Rome) we heard a good deal of positive feedback from discussion groups and our guest speakers’ eloquent reflections on the weekend. They were then given a vote of thanks, and AIF mugs, for their fantastic insights, the remarkable synergy of their words, and the great encouragement they had given us to renew our efforts.

After supper Mark Powell hosted an entertaining concert performed by some well known AIF stars. YAG then led us all serenely in night prayers under the stars. The next morning, following the AGM, the All-Age Closing Worship was in the Anglican tradition and led by Bishop Gregory Cameron and Canon Malcolm Bowers. It brought the Conference to a joyous conclusion, with all of us lining up for a farewell handshake in traditional African style.

*Martyn Baker*