

# Celebration LINK

May 2002

## Making Connections

The ministry which the Community does in the church these days is not necessarily spectacular - the big meeting or the major conference. Much of it is hidden, extending its mission in the process of dialogue or making connections. There has been a good deal of that in recent months.

The Partners in Ministry project (of which more overleaf) is one example. A good deal of preparation took place in the first three months of the year for a gathering planned to take place in London in April, at the home of the Rev. Maggie Durran. Some 14 people, Community members, ex-members and close friends, met to share a meal together and to plan for an event in October when the whole Community will be together for a day of celebration and sharing. In the past, when Community members moved on, there was a feeling that our journeys were leading in different directions. Today, the sense is that we have a common pilgrimage, which has a common thread that we need to articulate and proclaim.

Another element in the theme of dialogue concerns the sermons and articles that we offer. In the UK, sermons are generating calls for copies, not just out of interest but because there is a genuine concern to seek for authenticity in Christian belief and practice today, refusing the temptation to seek refuge in the variety of 'labels' available. Such a demand is not by any means insignificant. For example, in our local (UK) parish church there is a real desire to discover what it is that unites us in the face of a large spectrum of beliefs. Here, our contribution is welcomed and acknowledged.

Our web site is proving to be another source of outreach. Hits of 4000 to 5000 per month increased to over 7000 in April. Responses are being received from all over the world - USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, eastern Europe, the Middle East - seeking a variety of things ranging from CDs and tapes to help with personal issues. In some ways we have been surprised by the effectiveness of this medium.

Looking forward, there is a lot to be excited about. In June there will be the annual conference, this year entitled "Loving our Enemies". Phil Bradshaw has been invited to preach at the final communion service. In August there will be the chapel dedication, and in October the Community will be together in the UK for a ministry in London. UK members will be involved in all these events, which we hope will enhance our outreach.

### In this issue

#### Making Connections



'Partners' gathering in London

#### News and pictures

#### Article 'The Defeat of God'

## "Partners in Ministry" and other news

Some 14 people gathered in London in April to plan a visit by the Community in October. They included UK members Phil & Margaret Bradshaw, USA members Bill & Mimi Farra and a number of former Community members and friends who have related closely to us over the years (see photos).

The project is part of the Partners in Ministry (PIM) scheme which was launched in 2001. US Community members will join UK members and others at a day long event on 12th October, to be entitled 'A Day in the Life of Prayer'. To be held at St. Michael's church, Camden, it will be a time of celebration and worship, with an opportunity to share experiences from our journeys of faith. It is hoped to make a CD of the music.

We also hope that a number of friends from the UK will be able to attend the inaugural Partners in Ministry conference, to be held at the Community centre in Aliquippa on the last weekend in August, coinciding with the dedication of the Community's chapel on Saturday 31st August.

### UK Developments

The visit of Bill & Mimi was a good opportunity to discuss a number of other matters of concern to the UK members and to the Trust - for example, the future of our publications and the website. The latter is currently achieving some 7,000 hits per month and is proving a very useful tool both for making new contacts and for connecting with people who had lost touch. But it is very demanding, both in terms of time and (for the less youthful among us!) mastery of the technology.

The Community's status as a religious order within the Anglican Church had been provisional for so long that we had almost forgotten our application for rec-

ognition. Formal notification of recognition was received recently, the one outstanding matter being a decision about the source of authority for the Society. Due to Celebration's long history in the UK, it was decided to specify the See of Canterbury.

One consequence of this is that our UK address now becomes the official UK office of the SCC. It is a small point, but an important one in the continuing evolution of who we are as a Society.

An increase in Community activity on both sides of the Atlantic inevitably gives rise to increased costs - this year, particularly, in travel. Phil Bradshaw will be attending the Community's Annual Conference in June, at which he has been invited to preach during the final communion service. He and Margaret will also attend the Partners conference and chapel dedication in August, and a later event will be the Community's Fall retreat. In the other direction, US members will be coming to Britain in October for the ministry in London and for a meeting of the Trust.

In addition to the renewal of spiritual life, both individually and corporately, one of the Community's concerns is to connect with traditional patterns of thinking in church life in such a way that people can be empowered to look at their faith in a fresh, yet still authentic, way. We take these opportunities where we can. Recently there has been a significant increase in the number of requests for copies of sermons and talks. One result of open ended debate and discussion is that Phil Bradshaw has recently been asked to address his local PCC on the subject of how the church understands its mission.

The way in which God works in a church is often not the way we would prefer! Over the years Margaret Bradshaw has consist-



Judy Powell and Sue King



Margaret Bradshaw and Mimi Farra



Above: Jane Porter, Bill Farra. Below: Dave Porter, Robert King





*Martin Burch, Howard Page-Clark and Roger Orr*



*Maggie Durran prepares lunch at the gathering*

ently supported a music group in her local church which has gradually developed into proficiency through practice and encouragement. People have been helped to believe that they could play and had gifts to offer, and for some young people it was a significant factor in bringing them to church.

However, it was not all plain sailing! As the group progressed, tensions arose between its needs or vision and those of the choir, culminating in the resignation of both organist and music group leader, to the chagrin of everyone. Yet the effect was to open up the whole subject of music in worship, and with the appointment of a new music director, the way seems open to a more integrated style of worship. It is in such ways that God works, in the long haul, in conflict and even in seeming defeat.

#### **Other news**

Steven and May McKeown became grandparents on 6th April when their daughter Stephanie Tubman gave birth to a baby

daughter, Fiona Ainsley. Stephanie joined the Community with the rest of her family in Scotland originally, later emigrating to the USA when the Community moved to Aliquippa. Following her marriage she now lives in Canada.

Building work on the Community's chapel was delayed more than once through bureaucratic red tape in recent weeks. However, permits finally came through in April, and work has started on clearing the site. Despite a tight timetable, contractors are confident of completing construction in time for the dedication ceremony on 31st August.

#### **Susan Abbott**

Susan has been unwell for some time, due to a degenerative disease which affects her sense of balance. She has been awaiting tests to determine the extent and possible future progress of the condition. In the meantime, the Trust is looking to rehouse her in accommodation more suited to her needs, and we seek your prayers for her in this process.

## **The Defeat of God**

Christians all look for 'victory' and reject defeat. Yet to befriend defeat is to be a friend of God.

This is the season of the year when our thoughts are very much focused around the themes of death, resurrection and new life. Christian events and symbols are held to mean that death in all its various forms is not the end, and that God will bring victory out of death and defeat.

But in reality, in our actual experience, is that always the case or is it rather that our experience is much more banal, amounting perhaps to little more than a cliché that we are down but not out, or that there will always be a tomorrow? (And there usually is, for those who are moderately well motivated.)

The language of victory and defeat is fairly pervasive in our Christian dis-

course. We acknowledge the reality of defeat, but claim that victory is our birthright. If our failure is in achievement, or in our particular project, perhaps God will do a 'new thing'. If it is in our relationships, victory means reconciliation perhaps through letting bygones be bygones, or by a consensus that we all have our legitimate point of view.

We ourselves, of course, have known the reality of defeat many times. Sometimes that has been on a personal level, as we grappled with issues in our lives in relationship with others. Sometimes it has been on the corporate level, as community itself has come under fire or has failed to sustain itself. We are our own worst critics, yet we have also known the pain of head shaking on the

part of bystanders, of the 'he saved others; he cannot save himself' variety.

The question is, how do we relate to all of this? Is it just a matter of learning from our mistakes, wishfully thinking that if we just do that then the best is yet to be? Is it better to just accept defeat and retire from the fray? Or is there a way in which apparent defeat can be used to draw closer to God?

Part of the difficulty here is that victory and defeat normally have an ideological significance. This may become clearer as we consider in what way the cross of Christ makes any difference. It is, says Paul, the means by which we are all reconciled to God, Jews and Gentiles, law keepers and law breakers. But

that implies that everything we know and understand by 'victory' is a sham.

The essence of law keeping is that it defines the group which submits itself to the law. For that group, the law constitutes what is right, and therefore 'rightness' consists in performance. In the Protestant tradition we are well aware of this, yet we are still trapped by it because for us, as for everyone else, victory is an ideological concept. The doctrine of 'law and grace' itself is one whose rightness must be established. To the extent that we achieve this, we secure victory. Inasmuch as we don't, we are defeated.

In other words, it matters little what the 'law' is. Whether it is the right way of doing business, right theology or the right way of living in community, by defining ourselves as those who do what is 'right' we automatically set ourselves over against those who do what is 'wrong' (the law breakers), and therefore our 'victory' requires the existence of law breakers in order to legitimate our own self identity. Conversely, our defeat is the defeat of an idea, which, for us, defines our identity.

Law, then, in however subtle a form, cannot be the basis for understanding who we are in Christ, because it requires an adversary. But what about the other parties in the equation, those outside the law? Are they in any better condition?

Again, we are talking here about a concept that is very broad. They might simply be those who have a different religious outlook than we do. In terms of community living, they might be those who rejected it, for whatever reason. They are those who are not, or have ceased to be, 'one of us'.

The condition of being a law breaker (and of course we are all law keepers and law breakers in some respect at the same time) is one in which we assert the autonomy of our own interior 'will' to do what we please. But there is more to it than simply 'doing our own thing'. We define our identity by the assumption

that there is such a thing as an independent self, a kind of essence whose legitimate autonomy is violated by patterns or limits or order. At some level there is a denial of life that is to be shared, or that is corporate as opposed to individual. There is resistance to the very idea of that which is given.

Both modes of being work with each other and need each other. Victory and defeat are the only status quo that they know, and are assumed to be part of the fabric of human society per se. Both maintain our human identity is entirely ours to direct, either through control or through desire.

What Jesus revealed, by his life and death, was that it is not religion that connects us to God but trust in his compassion and mercy. That trust is not a mental exercise but a very painful letting go of our obsession with performance on the one hand and self fulfilment on the other. It is those who accept their inner contradictions and failures, the bankruptcy of performance and the emptiness of achieving personal agendas, who will respond to Jesus' invitation to trust.

What is then clear, and unbearably hard to deal with (except with the benefit of hindsight, for those who already know the end of the play) is that Jesus himself fails and is defeated. The disciples are scattered. Despair reigns. The great visionary is discredited. In the aftermath his followers have neither the comfort or security of being right (being successful within the terms of the law), nor the enjoyment of power that is outside the law. It is as if only by his failure can Jesus demonstrate that neither of these ways of achieving selfhood can succeed.

Resurrection is not guaranteed. It is the sovereign act of God, pure gift which cannot be extracted from him by appeal to performance or desire. Yet in Jesus it also reveals that defeat is not the last word; it does not close off the possibility of God speaking and acting. The life of God is like this; it is revealed in the extreme vulnerability of trusting

entirely to God's compassion and mercy, which in turn triggers an endless series of Calvaries, none of which succeed in speaking the last word.

Of course, the temptation is to imagine that for Jesus defeat was illusory, a mere dramatic prelude to victory, because it was brought about by the projections of others rather than his own failure. But it matters little whether the projections are our own or those of others. To imagine that we would not have been defeated had we been as 'perfect' as Jesus is to return to the ideological (and self promoting) picture of victory and defeat. The defeat is the defeat of God's life, and it was always so. The question is whether we wish to accept Jesus' costly invitation to join him in trusting God's compassion and mercy - even when we ourselves are the agents of that defeat - or whether we turn our backs on it by refusing to face our own dilemmas and self justifying strategies.

Resurrection, then, is not simply the sunshine after the rain. It is not a guarantee of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. It *is* an assurance that God will have the last word, and that word is in his gift. We may do the same with that gift as the Jews did with his gift of the law, and if so he will be defeated again. But if, like Jesus, we *befriend* defeat, we may find that, paradoxically, structures, beliefs, relationships and desires no longer imprison us. The old cycle of victory and defeat will have been broken.

**Phil Bradshaw**

## Events

Jun 13-16	Annual Conference 'Loving our Enemies'
Aug 30-Sep 1	Partners in Ministry Conference
Aug 31	Dedication of chapel
Oct 12	'A Day in the Life of Prayer' (London)

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