

Celebration LINK

November 2005

On knowing our identity

When I first had an awakening to Christian faith, I remember thinking that I wanted it to be real, not airy-fairy. I wanted it to have some tangible benefit in human life. As the years went by, however, it seemed as if it was more to do with obeying the rules.

Faith could certainly make a difference to the way you felt about yourself and about life. But beyond that, it seemed as if any good that it did was entirely secondary, even incidental. What was *really* important was believing the right things, belonging to the right group of people and behaving in the approved manner.

Community life, of course, provided a completely different perspective, one that has often been reflected in these pages. Although controversies continued to rage in the church about what constituted 'right' religion, that was less important in community than seeing and hearing God in the other.

This had both personal and global dimensions. For decades the really big issues had less to do with religious belief than with justice and peace in the world. Yet today it seems almost as if the wheel has come full circle. Once again, the question of 'right' religion is the big talking point, the issue that threatens to tear the church apart.

The main presenting issue at present is homosexuality, but behind that is the question of authority for matters

of belief and behaviour. There is an anxiety almost to codify orthodox Christianity, lest the 'faith once delivered to the saints' be watered down or dissipated in a series of compromises with 'the world' and modern relativist thinking.

Thus we read that Anglican Mainstream, for example, want to assert the rejection of homosexuality as a 'first order' issue, up there along with the divinity of Jesus, while women's ordination is a 'second order' issue, allowing for some disagreement among Christians. 'First order' issues are those that define Christian orthodoxy.

Shortly before going to press, my wife and I attended the 2005 Faithworks conference at Eastbourne. Founded by the Baptist minister Steve Chalke, Faithworks is seeking to bring Christian faith from the private sphere into the public arena. Mr. Chalke has the ear of Government officials and politicians including Tony Blair, and has received the MBE for his efforts. But one of his books, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, attracted severe criticism from the Evangelical Alliance.

The issue was the doctrine of 'penal' atonement, and Mr. Chalke's view that it creates a distorted view of God to the world and judgemental attitudes in those who promote it. He was accused of ignoring 'key' texts, and in regard to judgementalism, the reply in effect was 'we may be censorious but we are right'.

These are the kinds of things that seem to dominate Christian discourse these days. It is hard to imagine that anyone seriously believes the church would be better served if those of a certain persuasion split off, while others were demonised as unorthodox. In years to come the same problems would simply arise again.

And where is God in all of that? The heart of God, surely, is in the process of bringing in the kingdom of God on earth, not in bickering about religious purity. In fact, if we take our cue from Jesus, who was himself God according to our theology, the anger of God is directed not at gays, liberals, tax collectors and other assorted 'sinners', but at the religious purists who outlaw them in the name of God.

Some interesting questions are raised by the drive to bring faith into the public arena. In Britain, a society with a post-Christian culture has given way, in the last 10 years, to a multi-faith society. Christians who want public funding for community projects now have to compete with other groups, of various faiths and none. Local authorities, however, tend not to see Christians as a faith community. They are simply part of the furniture, as it were.

This is the legacy of state religion. But a raft of new legislation now puts Christians on the same footing as

End of an era for CCCT

We passed a milestone in October, with the retirement of Dr. Desmond Orr as Chairman of the Community of Celebration Christian Trust. Desmond had served as a trustee for 32 years - since its beginning. He and Rosemary (front row, centre, in photo at right) were part of the Community at Yeldall Manor, and Desmond later became a familiar figure at business board meetings over the years. He will be greatly missed as our principal financial adviser.

To mark the occasion, we held a special meal after Desmond's final AGM, prepared by Val Humby and Margaret Bradshaw. Rosemary and Eleanor Orr joined us, and later there was a presentation at which Desmond was showered with gifts: a digital camera, an ice cream maker, a set of Fisherfolk CDs, a plaque with a text of special significance to Desmond, some digitally produced photos - memorabilia from very early days.

Desmond's place as Chairman will be taken by Ray Humby, another of our trustees. Ray has also been a friend of the Community from earliest days, particularly through the connection with Post Green. He brings a wealth of experience to the job.

The Community's UK Council also met. We discussed plans for 2006, and the possibilities for web development. One aim is to tap the experience of former members in understanding the relevance of community for the church.



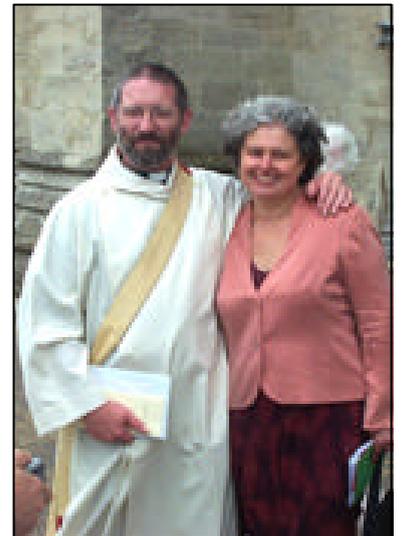
Above: the group at Desmond's retirement celebration. Back row: Judy Powell, Roger & Eleanor Orr, Ray & Val Humby. Front row: Phil & Margaret Bradshaw, Desmond & Rosemary Orr, Bill Farra.



Ray Humby is the new Chair of CCCT

People

We were delighted to attend the ordination of Stephen Ball this summer, at Salisbury Cathedral. Stephen and Lorna, old friends from Bletchingley days, are now ministering at Hilperton, near Trowbridge. We also said farewell to Gerry O'Meara and Carolyn Reinhart, who returned to Canada. They joined the Community at Yeldall Manor and were at Post Green for many years. It was good to meet up again with Daphne Grimes, on her way back from Jerusalem, which she visits frequently, and to talk about some of the issues facing the church in that area. We also enjoyed catching up with Ric and Penny Foxley, on a visit from New Zealand.



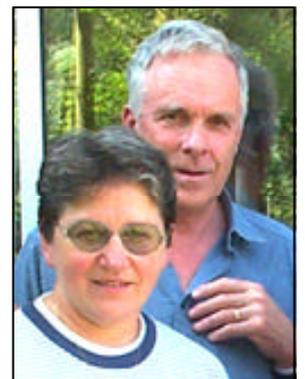
Stephen & Lorna Ball, after Stephen's ordination at Salisbury Cathedral, July 2005



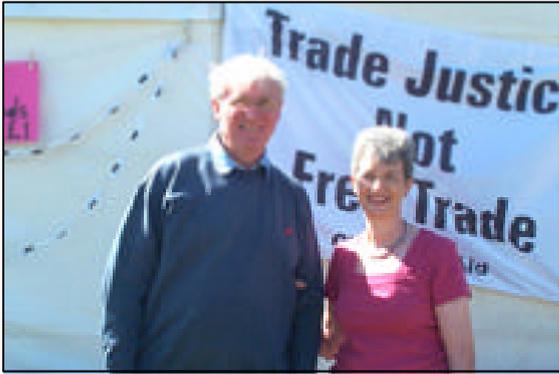
Gerry O'Meara and Carolyn Reinhart (front row, centre) with Margaret Bradshaw and Lollo Lusby-Taylor. At rear: Valerie & Ken Ramsay.



The Rev. Daphne Grimes



Ric & Penny Foxley

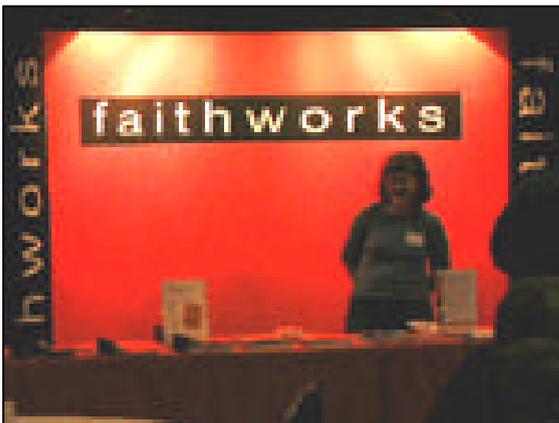


Impressions of Greenbelt

The scale of Greenbelt is mesmerising. Up to 20 activities happen at once, all through the day: music, visual arts, talks, performing arts, comedy, worship, literature, new media and workshops. This year's speakers included Richard Rohr, speaking on the spirituality of the two halves of life, James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool, speaking on the environment, and John Bell of the Iona Community, who spoke on worship and also addressed the issue of Iraq. Sunday morning communion was a 'bring your own bread and wine'

affair. Our prayers were written on red labels, which became thousands of leaves hanging on a 'tree of life' made for the occasion.

We were glad to reconnect with our roots, in a variety of ways, and to find ourselves bumping into several old friends.



Faithworks 2005

Jim Wallis, Steve Chalke and Tim Costello were among the line up of speakers at the second Faithworks conference in November. The theme was 'iChurch' - intelligent church. In the words of the brochure, it is about 'examining how we connect with people in our communities and our society in an accessible and authentic way without losing our own passion and commitment to Jesus and his claims on our lives'.

We explored the theme intensively through plenary sessions and seminars, accompanied by lively worship. Some seminars were a little technical, dealing with specific issues, while others were more general but always dealing with the ques-

tions facing churches as they interface with society. Topics ranged from dealing with the media or making business plans to issues of respect and living our faith without imposing it on others. As at Greenbelt, far more was on offer than any individual could possibly take advantage of.

Plenary sessions were on the theme of Jesus - the radical, the activist, the politician, the servant. They were intended as inspirational, and they certainly were. We left feeling that here was a support network for Christians involved in the community. Anyone wishing to know more should visit the website at www.faithworks.info.

other faith groups when it comes to public funding. It sets out criteria which require the applicant to state what is their distinctive ethos.

Some churches or groups might find themselves in difficulty here. It is not enough, for example, to say that one has a concern for the poor. Many other groups would say the same. On the other hand, merely listing religious beliefs, such as the resurrection of Jesus, will not do either. To a secular local official, one might as well say that we believe in Father Christmas. The important point is what *flows* from that belief, in terms of the public good.

So, for example, we might say that we believe in the incarnation of God in Jesus. As a consequence, the ethos of all our activities is relational. Approaching things in this way forces us to think through not only what we believe but also who we are, in ordinary human terms. And then we have to have the confidence that we can deliver.

We explored these themes at the Faithworks conference. I could not help reflecting that such a process puts all our religious disputes into perspective. If we were to say to a local authority that an article of faith for us is that God condemns homosexuality, and in consequence our ethos forbids any gay person from participation in leading our project, that is hardly likely to attract public funding. On the other hand, vagueness in belief that does not translate into a distinctive ethos might well suffer the same fate.

I find it ironic that a combination of other faiths and the Blair government is starting to force Christians to identify who they are and what they stand for, at least so far as the public arena is concerned. In general, other faiths want the church to do that, of course; it is in their own interest. No one wants a 'mashed potatoes' approach to religious faith.

So it seems as if others may do for the church what it cannot do for itself:

discover its own distinctive identity. That, of course, is what community does too. When you have a bunch of people living together of all shades of religious opinion, what you discover is not a common doctrine but the living reality of the body of Christ. It is not an airy-fairy idea, but a genuine human phenomenon.

'Who we are' then becomes much easier to relate back to basic Christian concepts. We *know* what it is; we just need the verbal tools that give it objective meaning. We could imagine God saying to the church, 'why don't you leave your issues on the shelf and get on with the job of living the gospel in the world? Then you'll know who you are and what you are.'

The church has always needed the world to give it its true identity. For two or three generations now, the church in Britain has largely withdrawn from the world, doing its religious thing behind closed doors and slowly sinking deeper into the mire of religious dispute. As a result, it doesn't know who it is. It is defensive, on the back foot, lacking in confidence and worried about its boundaries.

The world is the church's salvation, if it would but open itself to it, especially at the local level. That's a fundamental truth which goes all the way back to Jesus himself. The 'good news' is good news for the poor. How does anyone else benefit from it? They do so by serving the needs of the disadvantaged, the lowly, the powerless, the discriminated against. That *is* eternal life, and eternal life cannot be experienced in isolation from it.

So the church exists to serve the needs of the society to which it belongs, needs which are legion. In a sense, of course, we all know this; it's a truth so commonplace in our religious discourse as to be almost banal. But as we saw above, there is more to it than being concerned about famine relief or the victims of disasters. Everyone else has a concern about those things too.

For the church, the vision is nothing less than the kingdom of God. Through being salt and light, we seek to transform society itself. In real terms, that means generating the climate in which political change can take place. Despite appearances, politicians by and large respond to public opinion; they don't lead it.

But vision is useless if it remains at the level of theological concepts and ideas. That is one of the reasons for the church's crisis of identity. Vision acquires its meaning through engagement.

Jim Wallis, the American social activist, commented at Eastbourne that protest is good but alternatives are better. He was reflecting after a lifetime in which costly protest often seemed the only way to confront institutionalised violence. But times have changed. The direction in which society is going is uncertain, and politicians are looking to faith groups for answers. The 'usual suspects' who protested in the past have become much more mainstream today. Consequently a consensus is emerging about faith in society, which is wider than protest or even local faith based initiatives. In Jim's words, 'movement is where it's at now'.

Those of us who have lived in community always had a sense of connectedness to others around the world, but it always felt a bit unfocused, underground even. We met many fellow travellers, but networks did not always link up with each other effectively or speak with a voice that resonated beyond their own special interests.

Today, the focus is becoming a little sharper, and it has to do with the church rediscovering, and finding new confidence in, its true identity. It is not to do with right religion, for in that way lies division and spiritual death. It is to do with being Christ in the world, and for that we need more than isolated kindred spirits. We need a movement.

Phil Bradshaw