

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: A Christian Challenge to our Current Lifestyle. How can we all flourish fairly on a finite planet?

A Day Conference at St.Thomas More School, Crewe, 9 April 2011

Commission Member Bryan Halson reflects on the event

After the welcome from Tony Walsh, Chairperson of the Shrewsbury Diocesan Justice & Peace Commission, we listened to a spirited performance by a choir from St.Mary's Catholic Primary School, Crewe. "Peace Will Come" (Tom Paxton), followed by a version of the Magnificat for the Feast of the Annunciation, and closing with "Honour the Children" – the last two composed by the choir's director, Matthew Plant.

There followed an introduction to the day from Commission member Bryan Halson. He referred to the inspiration for the event, Tim Jackson's *Prosperity Without Growth*, emphasising the failure of an economy based exclusively on material growth, and the impossibility of continuing such an economy on a finite planet. "We simply cannot go on using up the earth's resources as if there were no tomorrow." The Commission planned the event as a day when the issues could be considered in the light of Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching. The conference was not intended to be a single event, but the beginning of an on-going process of reflection and action.

We then viewed a cartoon, *The Story of Stuff*, a stark commentary on consumerism run riot, and the harm it does to the earth. This gave rise to a 'buzz' session with participants in small groups sitting round tables. How did what we had just viewed fit our own experience?

The response followed, given by Ellen Teague, editor of the Columban *Vocation for Justice*. She began by pointing out that there were good stories to tell as well as bad, and illustrated this from her own experience in Nigeria.

Nevertheless we must face the fact of a way of life which was "trashing the planet". Take, for example, what is happening to so much of the rain forest. We ask, is it a rich home for life or simply a source of commodities? Is

the environment to be linked only with production? Note the issues over mining in the Philippines; this is not development, and the local people do not benefit – only big business.

Why are we, in the minority world, hooked on this path of consumerism? Ellen suggested a number of reasons; we are so tied to modern comforts and gadgets, we are still being sold the 'trickle-down' theory of development, we neglect the question of justice for future generations, we tolerate conflict and weapons, we are widely urbanised and so detached from the natural world, we despair too easily over the scale of problems, there is a lack of inspirational leadership, patriarchy and gender discrimination still function, and finally there has been a failure of the main faiths to engage with the issues.

She expanded on this last point saying western Christianity has been lacking – characterised by ignorance of the issues, patriarchy, a focus on the human, lack of formation on liberation theology and creation-centred theology.

Nevertheless there are signs of hope. We see these in Papal statements (for example *Centesimus Annus, 1991*; *Caritas in veritate, 2009*), the ecumenical church leaders' call for action on climate change, the 'greening of the parishes'. Inspiration comes from such individuals as Chico Mendez, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Sr.Dorothy Stang, and from the many examples of non-violent direct action. In just these last few weeks we have seen nuclear power being more widely questioned, discussion on the 'Tobin Tax', the Jubilee Debt petition on \$3 million of IMF gold, and challenges at Rio Tinto's AGM.

Further encouragement is to be found on such websites as those of the New Economics Foundation, the Gaia Foundation, the Schumacher Society, and Christian Ecology Link. Note also

CAFOD's coming Live Simply Award for parishes, the work of the NJPN network, and the School Gardens movement.

Ellen closed with an appeal for a vision for the future, "Another world is possible – let us build it."

After coffee break we reassembled in our groups for an exercise introduced by Maura Garside, member of our 'Enough' Working Party. Here we were each given brief extracts from Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, and Rowan Williams – first to meditate on, then to share our own impressions with each other.



Photo: Tom Ormiston

There followed a talk given by Linda Jones, CAFOD Theology Project Leader. She began by taking us back to *The Story of Stuff* with its message of how we are sold with the idea that consumption gives us meaning. But it doesn't work! There is nothing intrinsically evil about shopping but it is the exclusive emphasis and the insistent message that it will make us happy that is so dangerous; there is no real happiness in the consumerist principle.

Our sense of self, our value as persons, is much more than monetary value. We are made in the image of God but our self-image is so often poor and so needs to be fed by shopping.

There is a question of trust and security here. The poor have to trust in each other, while the rich are afraid to lose what they 'own', hence their possessiveness. Note also consumerism as an escape from the fear of being 'uncool'.

How can growth be 'progress' when it trashes the planet? The person is more important than any system, yet our politics has been overtaken by economics. CAFOD sees poverty alleviation as more important than economic growth. In everything

human dignity is vital – which takes us to the significance of ‘the common good’. We cannot flourish if others can’t; this is the basis of human community. So we have to show the world pictures of what it is to flourish, which is the Kingdom of God as Jesus shows it. We have to be the good news in order to proclaim good news.

Linda encouraged us to the practice of resistance to the consumerist model. Catholic Social Teaching is a resource and much of it is counter-cultural. It confirms the value of the earth as God’s creation. We must make common cause, connecting with others. For “we are created to be fully alive, shining with God’s glory.”

The afternoon session began with ‘Three Witnesses’ to practical action. The first was given by Roy Alexander who described the Ashton Hayes Project. Ashton Hayes is a zero-carbon village. This project began in 2005, with the support of the Parish Council. The first local public meeting brought together 400 people on a cold night! Early funding came from local businessmen.

A baseline survey was made in 2006 assessing the carbon footprint of all the houses in the village. As the project developed the BBC made a programme (2009) and government interest was aroused. By 2010 a fifth survey showed that a 20% cut in energy use established over the years was still maintained.

Roy emphasised that the key to success was strong community involvement. This developed a ‘can do’ attitude in the village. Further developments continue – a community electric car, a low-carbon pavilion for the recreation field, solar panels on the village school.

Our second Witness was Steve Atherton, Liverpool Justice & Peace Co-ordinator, who described the Live Simply parish of St. Theresa’s. This was a pilot project. It began with an audit, leading to a parish plan. A leadership team was formed with the aim of “helping the parish to live the Kingdom of God”. Two questions were uppermost – first, how can the church building become a community resource? and secondly how can the project help people in their own

homes? One development was the parish buying a field adjacent to the church and turning it into allotments.

The third witness was Martin Peck, an organic farmer. Martin has a hill farm in N.Wales. He is a member of the Soil Association. He described how, in the beginning he wanted to avoid toxic food, but discovered that this was all of a piece with environmental issues. He had to work for himself, often against ‘agribusiness’ interests. He said that the importance of food is undervalued, and that the question he was always asking himself was “how do I prosper without it being at the expense of others?”

Consider the ecological consequences of agriculture. Buying land means financial debt, but it can be farmed with no ecological debt. Martin spoke of seed saving, and of growing vegetables in poly-tunnels. He keeps sheep and beef cattle, grows clover (used instead of nitrogen fertilisers), and has planted one acre of woodland. The care of hedges is important for wild-life. He reminded us that most of our food comes from the soil, and so its health is vital – particularly important are measures to avoid soil erosion. Organic farming produces 20% higher carbon soil levels. It has been calculated that African yields have improved 116% where organic farming has been established.

The Witness programme was followed by a small group exercise led by Joan Sharples, Shrewsbury Diocesan Justice & Peace Co-ordinator. This was the opportunity for us all to write our own (or our parish’s) Mandate for Change. Joan led us through a threefold exercise – ‘I/we are aware that . . .’; ‘I/we believe . . .’; ‘I/we commit ourselves to . . .’ She emphasised that this day’s conference was the beginning of a

process, and that the Commission was already planning for a follow-up meeting in the autumn when we could assess the effectiveness of our mandates.

The day closed with a Liturgy/Drama given by the Pilgrim Troupe, a liturgical theatre group which has presented reflections in venues throughout the diocese. Our liturgy included prayers, readings, dramatised incidents from the Gospels, and the hymns “For the healing of the nations”, and “O day of peace that dimly shines”.

Evaluation

The Commission working party met on 19/04/2011 and made the following observations.

Evaluation from ‘post-it’ notes, e-mails, telephone calls and personal conversations was very positive overall. No fewer than 50 participants left comments on notes – a 63% (approx.) response. A good summary, expressing many participants’ comments, came from one e-mail: “[you] got together a very imaginative set of ingredients; music, talk, cartoon, reflection, drama, and you gave us a good balance of analysis, practical ways forward, and spirituality. All the contributions were excellent. And I was impressed with the fact that you made it clear that yesterday is a start and that there will be an opportunity to review progress in October.”

A significant number of comments endorsed the ‘follow-up’ day in October, and there was clearly a desire to push forward the issues in the parishes.

The working party agreed that newsletters (posted/e-mailed) be produced and circulated in May and September.

Useful Websites

Ashton Hayes Project

www.goingcarbonneutral.co.uk

CAFOD

www.cafod.org.uk

Foundation for the Economics of Stability

www.capandshare.org

The Gaia Foundation

www.gaiafoundation.org

Live Simply Award

www.livesimplyaward.org.uk

New Economics Foundation

www.neweconomics.org

Operation Noah

www.operationnoah.org

Shrewsbury Diocese J&P Commission

www.jp-shrewsburydiocese.org.uk

The Schumacher Society

www.schumacher.org.uk

Vocation for Justice

www.columbans.co.uk