

*Diocesan Bulletin for Christian Unity
Archdiocese of Southwark*

February 2007

Vol 25, No 77
80p



TOGETHER IN CHRIST



For 25 years TIC has been published in Southwark to promote and publish the efforts of ordinary people working towards unity in the Christian church.

In the early days some degree of 'official unity' seemed possible, even for some, likely to happen. In this time, great progress has been made removing barriers and obstacles, which kept congregations apart. Now co-operation, communication, sharing and collaboration have replaced suspicion, fear and hatred. The dialogue required for continued change needs fresh ways to bring knowledge and understanding about each other's church to the fore.

What do we have in common? Why is that different? How can I change? Across the churches there is a wealth of faithful practice, based on an appreciation of the scriptures, tradition and Gospels. Each of us has something valuable to bring to the table. TIC exists to provide room for this great dialogue to happen, so ideas may flourish and local initiatives are born. The small, insignificant voice may be heard above the boom of committees, organisations and powers.

This month our contributors have visited France, a park in South London, the Shrine(s) at Walsingham and a 24/7 prayer event at Eltham. There is an important discussion on the role of Mary in the Church, and a new understanding of Justification, the last part of David Carter's report from the Methodist Forum in Seoul this summer. A timely description of the custom of the 'hijab' in Muslim dress may help us to learn its true purpose.

Michael

Ecumenical Journey – Summer 2006

France has excellent, uncrowded auto-routes for people who want to get to a certain place by a certain time. But that's not us, at least when we're on holiday. We prefer to take small back-roads into those rural areas which are such a joy to wander around – even get lost in.

We didn't get lost. There was no pre-plotted route and certainly no hurry, but we'd read in our guide book about the fortified churches of La Thierache and when we found ourselves near the Picardy-Champagne border we decided to take a look at them.

The map showed about a dozen of these churches within a few kilometres of each other, in villages clustered around the town of Vervins. It's a beautiful area – now. But between 1300 and 1700 this had been a war-zone (just as parts of the Middle East are today) where brutal conflicts dragged on for decades, even centuries. It was here, on the contested frontier of France and Flanders, that some of the most unpleasant business of the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of Religion was transacted. There's no space here – or need, thank goodness – to go into the historical details, except to say that things often got very nasty indeed. The local population was frequently at the mercy of hostile soldiery – often, but not always, foreign – and precious little mercy was shown. The Christian tradition of church sanctuary went by the board. When frightened people crowded into the village church for shelter, their enemies – sometimes out of simple brutality, sometimes out of religious fanaticism – battered down the doors, plundered the church and put every man, woman and child inside to the sword.

These churches – at Morgny, Plomion, Parfondeval, Dohis, Jeantes, etc – had mostly been built in the 12th and 13th centuries. They were simple, comely buildings which had served their

spiritual purpose for centuries before there was any thought of fortifying them. Their honey-coloured local sandstone didn't wear particularly well, but it was cheap and there was always plenty of it available for repairs. But then, when the invading armies arrived, emergency measures were called for to protect the population. It was too late to start building new fortresses and ramparts. The churches were the only buildings big enough to take in all the villagers, but bitter experience showed that they were no use as they were. In some cases the sandstone walls were knocked down completely and rebuilt with tougher but more expensive red bricks, re-using a little of the original sandstone here and there to save on the cost, giving a patchwork effect. In other cases the existing walls were left standing but covered with a thick brickwork cladding. Watch-towers were attached to the corners of the church. Windows were bricked up, leaving only arrow-slits. Store-rooms were built in steeples, to provide for sieges. Keeps with massive doors were erected at the entrances.

By the time the wars finally ended people had grown accustomed to all these extraordinary features and, because they weren't sure that peace would last (but were sure that it would cost them a lot of money to dismantle them) they left them in place. And there they still are for us to see today. Our Michelin Green Guide speaks of the results as 'an uncomfortable architectural mix.' Well, there's certainly an unusual mix of styles and materials, and the military 'ethos' of fortification is a lion that never sits down very comfortably with the 'ethos' of ecclesiastical lamb. But give it enough time and even bizarre combinations like this do finally achieve some measure of reconciliation. Partly it's because the people looking at them day after day, year after year, simply get used to seeing them together. And although centuries of weathering can't exactly unify disparate styles they can help to blend very different building materials: even sandstone and red brick eventually

come into quite pleasing harmony. Of course, these churches can never look to us as they did to the villagers who saw them as shelters in times of danger. The experiences and understandings we bring to them are quite different. The villagers saw the fortifications as massive; they gazed at them with anxious eyes, needing them to be massive. But they don't look especially massive to us. We're used to much bigger buildings than these, and to our modern eyes the less massive they are the more room remains for character and charm. So we immediately notice the clever brick-patterning and other design details which skilled craftsmen brought to the job, and that indefinable 'right shape' that seems almost to invent itself in buildings put up with a clear (e.g. military) sense of purpose and function. We probably don't bother ourselves much about that military purpose and function, though. We don't need to. Our lives aren't on the line and the terrors of that time and place have faded into 'history', of which we know blessedly little. Standing in a beautiful place in the midst of a peaceful, sunny landscape we can afford to take an aesthetic, appreciative view. There are no enemy armies marching towards us.

Our journey continued southwards into Burgundy. Not hurrying or bee-lining, but not going entirely by chance either, we found ourselves near the village of Taizé. Before the assassination of Brother Roger in October 2005 we'd vaguely supposed that Taizé was some sort of oriental cult, or perhaps a missionary centre in Africa, which had given its name to a style of church singing. We knew (a bit) better now, and decided to go there.

No doubt France, like Europe generally, was much more 'Christian' in the 16th and 17th centuries than it is today. Since then secularism has made huge inroads into our civilisation, and it looks set to make even more. But from an ecumenical point of view – and perhaps that is now the key Christian point of view –

Europe in those days was nothing short of a disaster. There were the hideous Catholic-Protestant wars in France and the truly frightful Thirty Years War in Germany, not to mention our own little side-show, the relentless persecution of Catholics in Britain. Only Poland seems to have known how to deal with religious differences in a now recognisably Christian way. Today Christianity has its enemies, and they are pretty daunting, but at least it isn't its own worst enemy.

Our few hours in Taizé helped us to see things in this more positive light. As we arrived the morning service was coming to an end. We crept into the back of a cavernous church crammed with hundreds of people, sitting, lying or kneeling on a vast carpeted floor. There was blazing sunshine outside, but none of it penetrated here, and it took a while for our eyes to adjust to the dimness. When the service ended people continued for a while in their prayers, or broke into song together – different hymns in different parts of the church: it was easily big enough for that – or simply sat in meditation. As the church gradually cleared we took a look around. To be frank, there wasn't much of architectural interest, either inside or – as we saw later – outside. But what a remarkable and powerful place it is! The floor follows the slope of the hill it's built on, down, down towards a deep, distant, red-draped altar where hundreds of candles burn. The ceiling is low and dark. The force of gravity seems to draw you in and push you down a sort of spiritual chute. It's much easier to get in than to get out!

Outside, the scene was rather like a holiday resort, with its own camping site. The original village seems to have been engulfed by the utilitarian buildings that have been put up to provide for the huge numbers of pilgrims. There was one exception, the old village church, a few hundred metres away from the centre. We found it almost deserted. One young man prostrate in prayer in front of the altar. And just by the church

door we found Brother Roger's fresh grave, covered with flowers.

On the day we were there the place was very crowded. We were told it usually is. The pilgrims were mostly young, a third or a quarter of our age. They came from all over the world and they represented – if that's the right word – all the different denominations of contemporary Christianity.

It was lunch-time. The youngsters stood in long but steadily moving lines to collect a simple meal, which they sat and ate either in the shade of large, shed-like buildings or in the hot sunshine, helping themselves to water from the many taps placed around the site. They looked like young people all over the world – casually, even sloppily, dressed – sitting in groups numbering from two to twenty. Unconsciously we expected to see the restless attention-seeking and social edginess that we've come to associate with young people at home. But it simply wasn't there. It seemed odd. It wasn't that they were in the least subdued. There was plenty of 'buzz'. But it was a peaceful 'buzz'. I noticed one hefty young man in black motorbike leathers spiked with steel studs, with a strip of mauve hair running from nape to brow. Surely he at least was posing some sort of challenge to others? But no, there he sat cross-legged on the ground, chatting amiably with his friends. It was the same wherever we looked. No boisterousness, no immoderate mirth, no silliness. It wasn't something we were used to seeing, and it took us a moment to be sure what it was. But then we realised. These young people – at least for the moment – were happy!

Nietzsche said: 'Whatever we recognise in another we encourage in him.' Brother Roger may or may not have read Nietzsche, but he obviously knew this. He recognised qualities in the young that others, including ourselves, had missed – dignity, love and peace.

Thinking about all this later I found words coming into my head that fell into metre, and found rhymes. The expression, as usual, isn't equal to the feeling, but here is what I wrote.

*Disapproval, apprehension, even dread.
Our fear of uncowed Youth
 runs deep in heart and head,
And fear – that faithless faith
 and self-fulfilling curse –
Asserts the world's gone bad,
 and Youth will make it worse.*

*'The young should be like us!'
 Yes, that's our settled view,
Though God, at Taizé,
 shows the converse to be true.
Here they're our example – gentle, wise, serene,
 and our misgivings silly, sad and mean.*

*Here Brother Roger's happy confidence in Youth
Brings failing hearts like ours
 new Hope, new Love, new Truth.*

Paul Clark

ESBVM CONFERENCE AYLESFORD 2006

The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary held its annual conference at The Friars, Aylesford, in August this year.

This Marian Shrine dedicated to Our Lady of the Glorious Assumption was a most suitable venue. The chosen topic was the ARCIC agreed statement: *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*. The Conference lasted from Friday afternoon through to Sunday with a balanced programme of talks, prayer and relaxation. The seven speakers gave a varied and most interesting series of talks.

First to speak was Michael Evans, Catholic Bishop of East Anglia, who has been, together with David Carter, an active member of the Roman Catholic-Methodist International Commission on Mary. Bishop Evans asks: How can we as Roman Catholics enrich our understanding of Mary by these documents? And proceeded to give us an over view of Marian doctrine.

All presentations of Mary must be seen in relation to Christ. In Mary we see the wonder of God's grace and the gift of hope. Mary demonstrates a total dependence on God's grace. She is above all, God's work of art (Eph 2:10) and our model.

Mary's immaculate conception is '*sola gratia*', the supreme example of the Reformers claim that all depends on God's grace. In Mary's case it is prevenient grace. The virginal conception of Jesus is also entirely the work of God. We were reminded of Paul's statement in Romans 8:28-30:

... God works with those who love him, those who have been called in accordance with his purpose, and turns everything to their good. He decided beforehand who were the ones destined to be moulded to the pattern of his Son, so that he should be the eldest of many brothers; it was those so destined that he called; those that he called, he justified, and those that he has justified he has brought into glory.

Mary was indeed 'predestined, called, justified, glorified'.

The Rev. Dr Judith Gentle, an Anglo-Catholic minister who teaches theology at Duquesne University, gave a more critical and challenging view of the ARCIC document. She took issue with

para 44: ‘One powerful impulse for Reformation in the early sixteenth century was a widespread reaction against devotional practices which approached Mary as a mediatrix alongside Christ . . . Such exaggerated devotions . . . [were] decisively rejected by the Reformers.’ Quoting Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of The Altars* she sought to show that the devotional practice of the time was in general not exaggerated and the notion of Mary as Mediatrix is a legitimate one. This is still a controversial subject and aroused strong feelings in her audience.

Canon Donald Allchin regretted the absence of any mention of marian apparitions in the Statement. He gave his personal impression of a visit to La Salette in his youth and recounted the beneficial effects of the apparitions at Zeitun 1968 on the relations between the Copts and Muslims of Egypt. He found the document to be well written though somewhat theoretical.

Dr Sarah Boss spoke on *Mary’s Virginité: The Hard Question*. Her presentation was scholarly and precise covering the development of Catholic thought from early times. The virginal conception of Jesus is fundamental to our understanding of the divinity of Christ. The virginité of Mary ‘*in partu*’ has its foundations in the Protoevangelium of James though it is challenged by some modern theologians who fear the the idea of a miraculous birth may detract from the humanity of Christ. How does one define ‘virginité’? In early times an intact hymen was important. Nicholas of Chusa, d. 1464, equated virginité with fertility. Mary is perpetually open to receive God’s grace and so always capable of bringing forth Jesus to the world – this capacity would be undiminished by a natural birth. Virginité remains a supreme virtue rather than a gynecological detail.

Sister Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, a consecrated Carmelite who lives a solitary life at Aylesford spoke on *Mary: A Carmelite Perspective*. Carmel has two archetypes: Elijah, and Mary who is both Patron and Sister. Mary is a Jewish woman, a real woman of her time, but also ‘the highest honour of her race.’ She is ‘truly our sister’. Mary ‘pondered all these things in her heart’ – she is the model contemplative.

Fr Ephrem Lash, a priest of the Greek Orthodox Church, a scripture scholar with a detailed knowledge of Greek and Hebrew delighted us in showing some deeper meanings of the Greek texts quoted by ARCIC. He holds strongly to a typological interpretation of Scripture – the Old Testament always refers forward to Christ and the New Testament is to be interpreted in the light of the Old. Everything written in the bible has meaning. He considered that though there was much to be appreciated in this statement it lacked scholarly depth, and a specific Orthodox input.

The last speaker David Carter, a Methodist, gave us a clear and informative talk. He noted the starting position that there is but one mediator Jesus Christ and the difficulties created for the Reformed Churches by the definitions of 1854 and 1950, and the growth in understanding created by the dialogues that have taken place between Lutherans and Catholics, Anglicans and Catholics, and Methodists and Catholics and the French Groupes des Dombes between Evangelicals and Catholics. Prayer and dialogue have taken place together. May be spiritual sharing is more important than theological discussion for advancing understanding.

It has been said that it is impossible to be faithful to the scriptures and not pay attention to Mary. She has a unique place in the mystery of salvation. She was open to God, she agreed to cooperate with God and was faithful to the end. She was blessed with wisdom and humility. She is the one nearest to God while reminding one of us. She is a model of discipleship – the one who heard the word of God and responded to it.

All the participants were agreed that this had been a fruitful and stimulating conference – the quality of the presentations was outstanding. We look forward to the International Conference which is planned for next year when we hope to be received at Lambeth Palace.

Desmond Miller

METHODISTS AFFIRM *Joint Declaration on Justification*

The World Methodist Council met in Seoul, South Korea, at the end of July. At it the Council affirmed the *Joint Declaration on Justification*, originally signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999.

This means that Methodists accept the significance of the statement as an expression of the ‘shared biblical faith of the Universal Church’. It means that Methodists, along with Lutherans and Catholics no longer see the understanding of justification as a ‘church-dividing issue’. In the eighteenth century, Wesley said that few had understood justification as well as Luther but that he had also failed to understand the importance of sanctification. Conversely, Wesley believed that Catholics well understood the need for sanctification, ‘pressing on to full salvation’ as he was fond of putting it, but that they also failed to understand the biblical teaching on justification.

Methodists now accept that the issues that worried Wesley in regard to the teaching of these two communions have now been laid to rest. The Methodist affirmation sets an important ecumenical precedent for the possible future reception by ‘third party’ churches as it were of fruitful dialogues between other partners.

A moving tribute to the way in which the teaching and practice of the Wesleys has helped to enrich his own life and ministry as a Catholic bishop was given at the recent Durham conference on *Receptive Ecumenism* by the Catholic co-chair of the Commission, Bishop Michael Putney.

David Carter.

'ENGLAND'S NAZARETH' SPIRITUALITY, CULTURE AND DISUNITY

In 2003 Radio 4 listeners awarded the accolade of 'The Nation's Favourite Spiritual Place' to 'England's Nazareth', the pretty little Norfolk village of Walsingham. But I came away from my last visit there, in November 2006, feeling uneasy and indeed rather sad. I had become increasingly conscious of the wound which lies beneath that 'spirituality', the wound of Christian disunity.

My personal background is relevant here. I have been making pilgrimages to Walsingham for over thirty years, both as an Anglican and, since 1995, as a Roman Catholic. On the last few occasions this has been as the only Roman Catholic member of a weekend pilgrimage from my wife's Anglican parish, staying overnight in the Anglican shrine complex.

For Christians disunity is of course a wound at the very deepest 'spiritual' level, because it is an insult to Our Lord. But to me – and this is what this very personal piece is about – Walsingham also symbolizes, in a vivid and dramatic way, something which does not go quite so deep, but of which, as an ex-Anglican, I have always been extremely conscious: the fragmentation of the historic Catholic culture and tradition of England.

There are three places which seem in different ways to compete for the title of the centre of that culture and tradition in Walsingham. All have been at some time dedicated in honour of the Mother of God and consecrated for the worship of her Son. Although each politely acknowledges the existence of the others, they present themselves to visitors on their own terms. The problem for the pilgrim, this one at least, is how to think positively and constructively about the relationship between them.

In the main street of Walsingham stands the gatehouse of the medieval priory, where Kings of England came on pilgrimage. It was dissolved in 1538. The building was torn down and the materials sold off for a total of £55 15s 11d. The 'image of Our Ladye of Walsingham' was taken to London 'because people should use no more idolatry unto [it], and [was] burnt at Chelsea by my Lord Privy Seal', Thomas Cromwell.

The priory site was sold for £90 in the following year to Sir Thomas Sydney. Today, by paying £3 (concessions £2) to his successors, I can visit the grounds. I pass through the gift shop on to a beautiful lawn. The grand house of 'Walsingham Abbey', with big cars parked on the gravel, stands to the right, but 'No visitors beyond this point' notices prevent closer access.

In front the soaring east window of the priory church still stands in lonely splendour. To the left, because I know where to look, I find a tiny wooden board in the grass, with no inscription of any sort. This marks the place where, in the eleventh century, it is said, the Lady Richeldis, acting on the instructions of the Blessed Virgin who had appeared to her, caused a replica of the Holy House at Nazareth to be built. This unlikely and almost unmarked spot, hidden in the grounds of a stately home, is Walsingham's Grotto of Massabielle, the historic centre of 'England's Nazareth.' A hundred yards or so away one can see the steeple of the Anglican shrine church, which seem to be looking on, sadly, reproachfully or defiantly, from the other side of the Abbey wall.

So is this where I can find a focus for my cultural identity as a Catholic and an Englishman? I feel it ought to be, but it clearly can't be. It's an ancient monument, a tourist attraction, torn violently away from the spiritual roots which once fed it. Catholicism must obviously have been transplanted elsewhere.

I walk out into the main street, dissatisfied and uneasy, and look for the Catholic shrine. A helpful signpost puts me in my place. One arm, pointing to the centre of the village and the Anglican shrine, says 'To the Shrine'. The other, pointing out of the village, says 'To the RC Shrine.'

The National Shrine of Our Lady stands among fields a mile south of Walsingham, at Houghton St Giles. What a bleak, windswept and unpopulated spot it feels on this November Saturday! It seems to me somehow remote and peripheral, as if it's been plonked down in the middle of nowhere by aliens. The great pilgrimage church seems stark and functional, and appears to sideline the little medieval chapel of St Catherine of Alexandria, the original core of the modern shrine, the 'Slipper Chapel' where medieval pilgrims took off their shoes to walk the 'Holy Mile' into Walsingham barefoot. The beautiful 1980s

mosaic of the day of Pentecost, in the Holy Ghost Chapel which has been built on to the Slipper Chapel, seems somehow exotic. Everything feels modern – the fracture with Walsingham’s Catholic past seems so painfully apparent and so poignant

And how depressing it is, yet again, to find the café closed, as it seems to have been on most of my previous visits! But at least there is a priest in the shrine church who will hear my confession. Afterwards, I take off my shoes, take out my rosary, and walk back to the village, to the Anglican shrine.

Here is the third claimant to the title of the cultural centre of English Catholicism in Walsingham. It nestles organically in the centre of the village, cosy and womb-like. The shrine church, built in the 1930’s under the auspices of the charismatic Fr Hope Patten, vicar of Walsingham, is mysterious and shadowy, with long aisles, a vaulted ceiling and fifteen ornate little chapels tucked away in corners, each dedicated to a mystery of the rosary.

The rather camp baroque, so much a mark of the ‘papalist’ strand in Anglo-Catholicism of the first half of last century, is still much in evidence here – thrillingly ‘over the top’ to the typical Anglican cultural sensibility. You can see the soles of Our Lord’s feet disappearing through the ceiling in the Chapel of the Ascension. The suspiciously well-grown naked *putti* on the front of the altar in the reconstructed Holy House would surely cause modern child protection officers to raise their eyebrows. The Holy House is ablaze with votive candles. There is a Holy Well (discovered by Fr Patten), with ceremonial Sprinkling every afternoon.

But there is still a rich Englishness here. The link between Church and nation manifests itself even here, in a way that would be unthinkable in a Roman Catholic church. Of the large votive candles in the sanctuary of the Holy House, the one closest to the altar is prominently labelled ‘The Queen’ (of England, it must be, rather than of heaven) and on the stairs up to the Blessed Sacrament chapel is a prominent icon of her saintly ancestor, St Charles, King and Martyr. The liturgy of the main services is now according to the Church of England’s ‘Common Worship’, even though the early Mass in the Holy House still follows the Roman Missal. (But even here there is a yet another wound beneath the surface. Women priests are not allowed

to exercise their ministry here, something which causes so much pain to many progressive Anglo-Catholics that they in effect boycott the place.)

And I do not sense that this is a conservative backwater. It seems spiritually alive, relevant to today's concerns. The liturgy is dignified and moving, with concelebrated Solemn Mass, and a wonderful and theatrical Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The homilies are well prepared and well delivered, earnest, direct and relevant, with that well-bred, jokey, faintly mystical, faintly ironic, faintly academic tone which I always associate with Anglo-Catholicism. The pilgrims are numerous, prayerful and attentive. One senses real holiness here.

But where is wholeness to be found? As a Catholic, I know the answer is in the Holy Roman Church, as manifested at Houghton St Giles. But as a rather old-fashioned Englishman, I don't feel it's the complete answer. Are such feelings just a sign of a distracting cultural nostalgia and a lack of spiritual seriousness? Will cradle Catholics robustly dismiss them or find them just puzzling or irrelevant?

Or is there a genuine issue here about the relationship between English Catholicism and both its past and the society in which it currently finds itself? Is there a cultural as well a spiritual or ecclesiological fragmentation between us and our fellow Christians in England which needs to be properly recognized and addressed as a necessary element in ecumenical dialogue?

Robin Orton



**The Anglican Shrine
Walsingham**

Evangelisation in the Park

As secretary to the *Churches Together in Welling* I feel somewhat privileged to be present at meetings where ideas are put forward for acting together to bring the message of Christ to our local community. Over the past few years I have attended a number of talks at Catholic conferences where the theme has been to share our faith with others, and more and more this message is given to us in sermons. True, we can to some extent share our faith by the way we live our lives – setting a good example to others – but perhaps if the opportunity arises we should try to do more.

For many years the churches in Welling have worshipped together fairly regularly. The Lenten house groups work well (though it can be difficult to get many Catholics to participate!) and the Good Friday *Walk of Witness* has been growing steadily over the last few years after a decline in numbers. In recent years the more evangelical churches in Welling decided there should be some kind of outreach in the summer as so many people have little or no experience of church these days. For the last three summers there has been a united service on the main stage as part of Danson Festival held in Danson Park. Several local churches close for the morning and direct their congregations to the park. Of course the Catholic churches can't do that, but there's nothing to stop the ecumenically minded attending an evening Mass and joining in the act of worship.

Admittedly the style of service wouldn't suit everyone – the “happy clappy” singing accompanied by a lively band is perhaps aimed at those on the younger side. This year we had a brave young man who talked about how he had come to know the Lord and his life had been changed dramatically for the better. Unfortunately this year's service was held on one of the hottest, sunniest Sundays of the summer which kept a lot of people away. Those of us who attended mostly sought shade in one of the three stands, leaving the area nearest to the stage relatively bare. The previous two years at least 1000 people had attended whereas the number was almost

halved this year. However, the organisers did a good job and I feel they will not be deterred from trying again next year.

The driving force behind this joint service is St John's Anglican Church, which stands right next to Danson Park. Another event that has become part of the Welling Churches' calendar is *Spark in the Park*, which this year took place the first week in August. This takes months of planning by the organisers and is entirely funded by the churches most involved. Again the Catholics seem to be watching from the sidelines whilst the evangelical churches get on with the job of doing what they believe they should be doing – sharing their faith. The afternoons consisted of sports and creative activities to attract children of primary school age, with a break in the middle for a time of worship and bible stories done in an entertaining way. Hundreds of children attended with their parents each day. In the evening there were sessions aimed at teenagers.

Volunteers came from a number of local churches. I personally didn't have time to help, but suggested to my seventeen year-old daughter that she might like to assist with the creative side. Despite being the only Catholic among around forty helpers dressed in bright yellow T-shirts, she had a wonderfully inspiring week. Around half of the volunteers were teenagers, and what Juliet noticed was how willing to talk about their faith the other young people were. Having attended a Catholic secondary school for five years where the majority of the girls no longer attended Mass or had any interest in their faith, she found it refreshing to find a group of young people so genuinely keen to give up a week of their summer holiday to do something for God.

Perhaps there is a message to be learnt somewhere by we Catholics from some of our fellow Christians. Should we be finding a way to involve ourselves more in such joint ventures?

Gwen Chioso

Eltham Praying 24/7 – September 2006

During the week beginning Monday 11 September all the Christian denominations in Eltham joined to pray round the clock for their local community. Eltham is in the London Borough of Greenwich noted for its multi-cultural population, and notorious for the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence.

During the past few years members of the local clergy and lay people from the churches in Eltham had been meeting regularly for lunch and informal discussion. Eighteen months ago it was proposed that an ecumenical prayer event be organized to include all the local churches with the intention of praying for the community. The slogan *because prayer connects* was adopted because: “We want people to get reconnected with God.”

A coordinating committee was formed to plan the event. The project was backed by the Greenwich Multi-Faith Forum. St Mary’s Community Centre was chosen as the prayer station and a local interior design company with the help of some talented parishioners transformed the centre making it an inviting place to meet and pray.

Six prayer themes were chosen: In the Home; At Work; On the Edge; In Times of Stress; Learning for Life; Growing Stronger, one for each day of the week with its action team who were free to use their creativity and initiative. Prayer was to be continuous day and night for seven days with events during the day, evening services and night vigils focusing on the prayer theme for the particular day and held at various churches.

I joined the action team *In the Home*. We invited Veronica Williams, a founder member of *Mothers Prayers*, (an international prayer movement) to address us. Mothers from a cross section of the churches showed a keen interest in setting up groups of ‘Mothers Prayers’ in their own churches. We are hoping that *Children of Faith* groups may follow.

The *At Work* team focused on prayer requests from local businesses, shops, residential care homes, schools, and local hospital. Prayer points had been set up throughout the town. Local staff and public were enthusiastic about this venture, and hundreds of prayer requests filled the boxes. These were collected and prayed for throughout the night vigils.

The *On the Edge* team posed the question: *who are the marginalised?* Christchurch was the venue for the evening prayer vigil

that day and the Rev. Jules Gomes gave a Biblical reflection on that theme. We were drawn into the history of the Jewish people, and how exile became a catalyst for their faith. We focused on the Book of Lamentations describing communities who were honest in naming their losses, despair, and sadness. We will never ascend the mountain-top of praise, unless we first plumb the depths of lament. We were challenged to face the fact that as Church, we are likely to be increasingly confronted with the awareness that we are marginal to the life of society. What therefore will our response be to these challenges in our own day?

In Times of Stress: People were given the opportunity to suggest ways of coping and praying in times of crisis. Personal testimonies have a tremendous power to touch people deeply as they listen to how God can reach out to the broken hearted and bring transformation and healing into people's lives. A talk was given on the work of the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

Learning for Life: The team held story-telling sessions for both children and adults which opened the way to much animated discussion.

Growing Stronger: A talk was given on how to strengthen community. The Greenwich Multi-Faith Forum also took part.

The grand finale on Sunday afternoon was a prayer and share fayre, featuring praise music from the Greenwich Concert Band held at Well Hall Pleasaunce. There were stalls representing the different prayer themes of the week.

Throughout the week a common theme emerged during prayer, "May they be completely one, so that the world may know that you sent me." (Jn: 17-23)

It was very moving to witness so many of the local community willing to take time out to come together in a unique opportunity to celebrate God's love and presence. The different faith communities formed close bonds of friendship. We hope and pray that the success of this week of prayer in Eltham will encourage others to do the same. We certainly need bold initiatives to bring the church into the marketplace, to be seen as interested, relevant, and committed to our local communities.

Denise Curtis

THE HIJÂB

Jack Straw opened a debate on the suitability of Muslim women

wearing a facial veil in this country at this time. I expect that most share my ignorance as to the true symbolism of *hijâb*. I set out to learn what I could from the internet.

Hijâb is the means by which Muslim women obey the precepts of the Qur'an to maintain modesty in dress and behaviour.

They are directed to restrain their eyes, to cover their bosoms, to guard their private parts, to be careful in the display of ornaments, and not to speak in a way likely to inflame a man's desire. Men too must be modest, restraining their eyes and covering them-selves from navel to knee.

The term *hijâb* in the Qur'an indicates *a screen* used to provide privacy for the wives of the Prophet when talking to men who were not family. This was not required of ordinary women. Segregation of the sexes was adopted from Persia in some countries at a much later date. In metaphysics *Al-hijâb* refers to the veil between God and mankind i.e. the transcendence of God.

The practice of *hijâb* required a woman to cover her head, neck and bosom with a **khimaar**, or a simple **hijâb**, i.e. a scarf, and wear a cloak, a **jilbab**, when out doors so that only her face, hands and feet are visible in order to distinguish her from slaves and avoid harassment. The Qur'an does not require the covering of the face, but a more fundamental interpretation called for the veiling of the face by wearing a **niqâb**, a garment to cover the head and face with a horizontal slot for the eyes, or a **burqa** which covers the whole body and obscures the eyes with a net. Pakistani women wear the **pak-chadar**, a triangular headscarf with attached veil to cover the lower face. The veiling of the face is primarily cultural though some women adopt the practice out of piety.

This call to be modest applies to ones gaze, speech and behaviour as well as dress. The object is to refrain from anything that might arouse a man's sexual desire. This too is Christian teaching. The sacrament of reconciliation requires of us a commitment to avoid all occasions of sin. In today's secular ethos misuse of sexuality is widespread. Revealing modes of dress are

common place. Muslim women are a great witness – may all women follow their example. Men too have a duty to ‘restrain their eyes’. Jesus said: ‘But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’ (Matt 5:28).

Isaiah had this to say: (Is 3:16-17)

The Lord said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet; the Lord will smite with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts.

In ancient Rome a veil was worn by married women. From the earliest times Christ was represented to the Christian virgin as a husband so it was natural that the bride of Christ should adopt the veil as a symbol of her fidelity to Christ. In later times nuns wore a ‘habit’ which in effect covered them entirely except for hands, feet and face, and hid their feminine form. Following the Second Vatican Council, religious orders were obliged to review their constitutions and practice. Many congregations abandoned their traditional mode of dress and adopted something more suitable to modern conditions. The ‘veil’, however, retains its symbolism and it is a shame that some orders have abandoned it.

Fifty years ago it was the custom for women to cover their heads in church to fulfil the injunction of St Paul: (1 Cor 11:4-6)

Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonours her head – it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil.

How times have changed!

Desmond Miller

