

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

24th-28th August 2018

Visit to Newcastle

After the sung Eucharist in Durham Cathedral, and having enjoyed lunch in The Prior's Hall, we all made our way down to the Students' Union building where we were to meet our double-decker bus for the journey from Durham to Newcastle. It was very wet, and when we got there the bus was nowhere to be found. However, just as we were beginning to wonder if we would ever get to enjoy the programme laid on for us that afternoon, the bus appeared and there was a rush to try to find seats on top! It was hard to appreciate the views in the mist and rain, but there was great excitement at seeing Angel of the North. There was more excitement when we found ourselves to be lost in the city, but thanks to some directions from local people we arrived at St Ann's Church just 15 minutes late.

A word of welcome and an introduction to the churches

We were welcomed by the Curate, Fr Anthony O'Grady, who told us a little about the Georgian Church in which we were meeting, which is celebrating its 250th anniversary and where worship takes place every day.

He introduced Fr Colin Carr from St Dominic's Roman Catholic Church and Pastor Thomas Jantzen, our host from the Martin Luther Kirche German congregation. Fr Colin then explained a little about the cooperation between the various congregations in Churches Together in Shieldfield and Battlefield (CTSB). He had lived in the area for 34 years and was in at the very beginning of CTSB. To start with he had been invited to preach at the Martin Luther Kirche, then the Methodist Church joined in, which later became 'The Holy Biscuit' (based on a biscuit factory converted into an arts centre and place of worship), and now there are two Anglican churches all working together as one, and until recently the Salvation Army was involved. Together they hold Lent Lunches, they have produced a local newspaper, but most importantly they have developed real love for each other.

Pastor Thomas then welcomed us. He and his wife, Verena, are Pastors of the German congregation, and he promised we would learn more about that later in the day when we visited the Martin Luther Kirche for Evening Worship. He explained how important it is for the German congregation to belong to this group of churches, to join in their activities and even, occasionally, to have services in English!

Dick Lewis, after thanking Pastor Thomas for arranging the event, introduced representatives from two local organisations; The West End Refugee Service (WERS) and the Justice and Peace Coordinating Council of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle.

West End Refugee Service

The first to speak was Lindsey Cross from WERS. She took us back to a Sunday afternoon in February 1988. There was a knock on her door and there on the doorstep stood a lady. She was a private landlord who owned considerable property in the West End of Newcastle. She had come to Lindsey because she knew her to be a churchgoer. A group of African asylum seekers had arrived in the city and they had no warm clothing. That evening at church Lindsey appealed for clothing. The response was extraordinary, and soon her garage was full of bin bags containing warm clothing of all kinds and shoes.

Until that moment, she told us, she had never met an asylum seeker or heard their stories. She quickly realised that people were coming to Newcastle and receiving very little by way of a welcome, and the city lacked the infrastructure to deal with them properly. So things started in the United Reformed Church to which Lindsey belonged, and then spread rapidly. People didn't just send clothing, they started sending money. It was a moment of crisis: either she had to stop right then or she had to go forward in some kind of organised way.

Lindsey told us how fortunate she had been to meet the then Bishop of Newcastle, Martin Wharton. He encouraged her to go ahead and, with assistance from his Adviser for Social Responsibility who knew how to set up charities, gradually WERS came into being. To begin with there were about 25 clients, but today there are well over 1000 people on the books, and every year support is given to over 500 men and women.

The clients fall into three groups, she explained. The first are asylum seekers waiting to hear if their application to stay has been approved; the second are those whose applications have been successful; the third are those whose applications have been refused. This third group will have lost the small amount of money they had been receiving and will have been turned out of their accommodation. She commented, 'I think it is one of the greatest faults in our country that people are put out onto the streets. When I am out and about giving talks, people are so shocked to hear that it happens. Up to now it has been only the adults who are made destitute, but a new immigration bill is under discussion in the UK parliament. If it becomes law it will make children, who at the moment are cared for under the Children Act, homeless too.'

Lindsey then showed a short animated film which clearly describes the asylum process. You can find the film on the WERS website at <http://www.wers.org.uk/videos>. The one we saw is the first one. The audience found it very powerful and informative.

The first thing WERS does is to make new clients feel very welcome and that they are in a safe place where people are ready to give them time and listen carefully to them. The ultimate aim of the Service is to empower these people. They are at a low ebb in their lives but they bring with them an enormous range of qualifications, abilities and life skills, and what always impresses Lindsey is their courage and determination.

At the moment WERS is dealing with people from 60 different countries, but the big five are Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Sudan. Meeting these people makes Lindsey aware that we are only told a fraction of the world's news, and they tell her of situations that she would otherwise never know about.

People generally arrive alone, or with just one or two family members. Rarely do whole families complete the journey. There are so many stories of people being killed, disappearing or being put in prison. The press in this country often portrays asylum seekers as people in search of a better life. But when you sit in a shabby flat, listening to someone's story, the picture you get is very different. What you are hearing, Lindsey told us, is how a person has had to make the hardest decision they will ever make, to leave the country they love, their family and their friends and to undertake a very perilous journey into the unknown. Some are fleeing from political persecution, many have been tortured or suffered sexual violence. They are all bereaved having lost not just family members but everything they've known and loved – their country, their job, their house.

Over the years WERS has developed a range of services. Some are very practical – clothing and household items, information about the locality and the agencies that are there to help. One of the team is a former asylum seeker from Rwanda who came to Newcastle in 2002. He had what Lindsey

described as 'prodigious language skills' and he now works fulltime in WERS supporting people seeking asylum, and who better to do it, because he knows at first-hand what the clients he meets have been through.

But as well as the practical help, Lindsey went on, there is the emotional support. WERS has a befriending scheme to help people deal with loneliness and isolation, 25 people willing to visit a person or a family regularly to build up a relationship of friendship and trust. That can be a long process because often a person's faith in other people has been severely damaged. However, the benefits are two-way, and often the visitor is as blessed through the process as the client.

WERS cannot usually change a person's situation. 'We can't give them a house, we can't change the decision if they've been refused asylum,' Lindsey told us, 'but it's all about having someone to go on the journey with them. When any of us is going through a rough patch the worst thing is to feel that we're going through it on our own.'

Education is also a significant part of WERS work. There is often a great deal of antipathy towards asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. Twenty years ago there were many areas of Newcastle with no people of colour living or working in them. It was quite unlike Bradford, Birmingham or London. That led to problems including a high rate of racially motivated attacks. 'Now, while Newcastle has changed for the better as the years have gone by, there is still a lot of work to be done,' Lindsey continued. 'So WERS visits schools and university groups, and our Rwandan refugee tells them stories. The aim is to stop people lumping asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants into one amorphous mass, and to see them as individual human beings with their own individual lives. Often that's all it takes to change someone's view.'

Lindsey concluded by reminding us that WERS is not a Church organisation. But churches have given amazing support over the years with money, prayers and encouragement. 'It would be impossible for us to be where we are today without the churches,' she said. But to begin with the statutory bodies had been very suspicious over the church link. 'WERS had to prove during the first few years that we knew what we were doing, that we could do it well, and that we weren't just a bunch of weird people! The result has been a shift in attitudes towards the faith communities in the city, not just about refugees but about all the areas of social action that take place across the city.' WERS did not decide to do something and ignore whatever else was already going on in the city. It plugged itself into the existing services and complemented them. 'I believe that that's where the Church needs to be – not separate but right in there, working with other agencies and groups, supporting people and, above all, trying to make a difference.' She handed out some 'Myth-Busters', little leaflets produced by another agency, providing answers to some commonly held beliefs about refugees. She suggested that individual Christians have a duty to combat prejudice of every kind wherever they find it.

Hexham and Newcastle Diocesan Justice and Peace Coordinating Council

Next it was the turn of Liz Archibald to address us. With her colleague Veronica Whitty she had come to tell us about the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle's Justice and Peace Coordinating Council ('the Council'). Liz began with a confession. 'As a Christian,' she said, 'Justice and Peace is what has always driven me.' She quoted the prophet Micah: 'This is what the Lord asks of you, to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6.8) Every person has equal value and dignity, she said, and so we all have a responsibility to care for one another and work for a fair society.

In 1960 Pope Paul VI had encouraged all dioceses to actively promote justice and peace. 'If you want peace,' he said, 'then work for justice!' But, said Liz, it was all summed up for her in our Lord's command, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

The Council has been in existence since the 1970s and is made up of ordinary people from across the diocese. Liz provoked much laughter when she said that one unusual thing about the Council, bearing in mind that it is part of the Catholic Church, is that the members are **elected** every year at the AGM. There is a constitution that guides the Council's work.

The Council does NOT tell people how to work for Justice and Peace! Different groups in different parts of the diocese will be responding to the different needs of their area. What the Council DOES is to coordinate support, and put groups in touch with the kinds of resources that might be of use to them.

Hexham and Newcastle Diocese is quite diverse, with industrial Teesside to the south and the rural areas towards the Scottish border to the north. Alnwick, to the north, was recently named in the Sunday Times newspaper as one of the best places to live in Britain. But, while there are wealthy areas, there are also deprived areas. The diocese includes cities like Durham, Newcastle and Sunderland. A recent television programme reported that in Stockton-on-Tees there is an 18 year difference in life expectancy between the wealthy and the deprived areas of that city. Newcastle, where we were meeting, has the largest Food Bank in the UK.

Faced with this diversity the Council should not try to tell people how to tackle Justice and Peace work in their areas. What it should do is promote Justice and Peace with such passion that people across the diocese will catch the vision. So the Council runs study days, holds an annual Mass in the cathedral to raise the profile of Justice and Peace and produces a quarterly newsletter, distributed by email to reduce costs, which also appears on their webpage. People can publicise their events and activities through the newsletter and the webpage. At present 105 individuals and groups across the diocese are in regular contact with the Council. It also publicises things being organised by the national Justice and Peace Network, which holds a conference in Derbyshire every summer and which is the high spot of many people's year.

Like WERS the Council encourages work among refugees and asylum seekers, and supports two projects, one in Newcastle and the other in Stockton assisting 1000 refugees at the two centres. Liz endorsed everything that Lindsey had said about raising awareness and countering prejudice. Both projects offer a drop-in centre, provide English classes, clothes, food, information and advice, and give a small cash payment to those whose asylum applications have been refused, and who are destitute. They are given £10 per week in cash and at present there are about 130 in that situation.

The great thing about projects like these, Liz told us, is that they provide an opportunity for people to practise their faith, and across the diocese 80 parishes are involved. The projects are led by volunteers, and a part-time Project Manager forges links with other groups such as the Red Cross and WERS.

The Council has other projects too. Last year a pilgrimage was made to Flodden Field, the scene of the bloodiest battle between the English and the Scots, where James IV was killed, the last monarch in the British Isles to die in battle. There prayers were offered for peace in the world. Another exciting project is the development of on-line material for use in parish youth groups which should be ready in the autumn.

Liz then mentioned 'Laudato Si', the second encyclical of Pope Francis which urges everyone to work for the common good, to care for individuals and to care for the environment. The diocese has produced a policy based on 'Laudato Si' and, unlike many policies that simply gather dust, this one is being put into practice.

Veronica then came to the front. She spoke of the importance of little things. For example, in their diocesan office they now use bio-degradable coffee cups and are reviewing their use of paper – can they cut down? If milk is delivered in bottles the bottles can be recycled, whereas milk cartons cannot. Exploring ideas like these is ongoing.

Another project focuses on the relationships between Christian and Muslim women. The bridge here, she said, is the Virgin Mary. There is more about Mary in the Koran than we have in the New Testament. Meetings are arranged, sometimes just one-to-one, where women pray for peace together and learn so much from each other. Each year Christian and Muslim women, and women of no religion, are invited to meet in a ruined church where there are no images, and they each pray their own prayers. Afterwards they have tea and cakes.

Using Citizens UK as a model, Tyne and Wear Citizens was established by the Roman Catholic and Anglican Diocese, the Quakers, the Islamic Diversity Centre and many others, and at the moment, Veronica told us, they are working on issues surrounding mental health, Islamophobia, the living wage and Child Poverty.

Refreshments and a wet walk

There was a time of lively discussion and questioning until we had to stop and pray before enjoying the refreshments supplied by St Ann's Church before making our way in the rain to the Martin Luther Kirche for our time of worship together.