Welcome to the Footsteps Newsletter

By Dave Herbert

Dear Friends

The articles in this issue bring to mind verses from Paul’s Letter to the Romans, chapter 12 – “Extend hospitality to strangers … rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly … do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:13-19.

Read on, and be prepared to be challenged, encouraged, heartened, educated and inspired as you turn the following pages.

As ever and in Christ

David

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From the Editor

This month’s edition of Footsteps features two very successful community projects, both in Sunderland.

Roker URC has joined with Forget Me Knot Community Interest Company and a social chef to provide shared meals and a meeting place for isolated members of the community including refugees and asylum seekers.

Grindon with the help of volunteers from various groups at the project has built a garden which provides a space for quiet meditation and relaxation amidst the busyness of a local housing estate.

Both groups are to be commended on their hard work and perseverance at forging relationships with their local communities and for providing space and friendship to those who might otherwise feel isolated.

Two churches in the synod have recently celebrated significant anniversaries - St Andrew’s Mission, Thornaby (125th) and St John’s, Kingston Park (40th) – both held events over a weekend of celebrations and both are looking forward to the future.

If your church has a significant anniversary coming up, please share news of your celebrations with Footsteps!

The Budget and Universal Credit

Following the budget on Monday, 29 October, JPIT states that the budget delivered two tranches of extra money for Universal Credit (UC) - £1.7 billion to improve Work Allowances and £1bn to help people moving onto UC from the old system.

While the numbers are large they are not sufficient to reverse even the 2015 cuts – never mind the much larger cuts imposed since 2012. The net result is positive but a long way from providing the opportunity for the huge transformative change that Universal Credit needs.

For JPIT’s 2-minute-briefing – Does Money Fix Universal Credit – please click on the link below:

http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/2-minute-briefing-does-money-fix-universal-credit/
Roker URC New Kitchen –
Decisions and Visions

By David Dick

Background

Due in large part to the initiatives set in place by our former CRCW Helen Stephenson, we at Roker have been fortunate to have worked for 3 years with local partners in an increasingly close relationship. In particular David Robinson (Social Chef) and Deb Doyle and Linda Morton of Forget-me-Knot CIC (Community Interest Company) have become integral to the outreach into our local community pursued by the Roker elders.

Gradually our vision for the mission of the church, where the objectives and ethos are shared by our partners, has evolved through engagement with several voluntary bodies, the council and local folk to serving three distinct sections of our community namely: Isolated people of all ages, but most prominently those aged over 50; Refugee and asylum seeker families; Young people from toddlers to teens.

At the same time, we collectively began to see the potential good that could be delivered to each of these groups of people by an emphasis on healthy eating and shared meals; addressing genuine food poverty in many cases as well as a desire for fellowship through the sharing of food.

Decisions

The major drawback to our plans to ramp up outreach in this way was the poor state of our kitchen which had seen no upgrades for decades. After much work and discussion, we decided to commit our own funds rather than seek grants (to speed up the process) and completely refurbish the kitchen to make it fit for purpose for the church, our local community and our partner the Social Chef. At the time of writing work is almost complete at a cost of £14500 of which all but £22000 (council grant) and £1000 raised by Forget-me-Knot through a community panto has come from church funds and donations from members. The finished product is widely accepted as excellent.

Whilst depleting our reserves was a tough call, we understood that we had to invest in order to support our community outreach and mission and, in financial terms, create a kitchen capable of generating income through much more regular use than previously.

Forward

We are drawing up plans for priorities for 2019, which haven’t changed in terms of the key sections of society we look to support and work with. If we are successful with grant applications (with the help of FIC), we will establish a weekly lunch club for the isolated and for asylum seekers and refugees; we will hold holiday clubs each school break aimed at tackling holiday hunger; and will have refurbished a large room for hire to complement our wonderful modern kitchen. In each case we will have the huge advantage of professional input from our partners who will also deliver many of the volunteers we need to make these initiatives happen and sustain them. Faith in Action will be real and alive at Roker.
Simeon’s presentation began with two challenging questions:

Do our encounters change us?

Can our encounters bring about change in society?

Simeon drew on some research into attitudes to Poverty in our society, beginning with the controversial statement that “clergy are a bit strange – and we should try to learn from them!”

What do you think the General Public said about Poverty in our society? The slide below illustrates their views.

So that’s a snapshot of the national attitudes of the general public. And we probably see all of these attitudes reflected in – and perhaps shaped by – our media and in people we meet.

But what about churchgoers? After all, poverty is a recurring theme in scripture. We’re told of God’s bias to the poor, the prophets rage against injustice that causes poverty and suffering. Jesus taught that the poor are blessed, and that communities have a particular duty of care to the vulnerable.

On other questions in the British Social Attitudes Survey on marriage, sex, alcohol, gambling there are huge differences between the general public and churchgoers. But on poverty – nothing!

We might ponder why the first words of Jesus’s ministry, about being sent to bring good news to the poor – have had so little effect on Christians attitudes towards poverty.

However, one group does give very different answers to the question, and that is the clergy. There is a massive rise in the proportion who think poverty is due to injustice.

Why the difference?

Simeon suggested that one reason is because they spend time with people. And encounters change us.
Encounters change us
Tabloid stories deal in a single fact, eg. ‘a lazy family receiving benefits’. The reality might be that the husband is on disability benefits because of chronic ill health and the wife has given up work to care for him, but still finds time to volunteer at the church’s foodbank.
Sitting and talking, hopefully something which ministers do, enables the family’s full story to come out; they are known as full people rather than a tabloid headline.

Rise in Foodbanks

Those who are involved in foodbanks have encountered a new phenomenon in modern British society: food poverty. Or to put it more simply, hunger.

In the past year 1 in 4 parents in the UK has skipped a meal in order to afford to feed their children.

Why? In part, it is the result of Universal Credit which is replacing most means tested benefits for families and children.

It is intended to motivate people into work and being rolled out across the UK so it will be coming to a job centre near you already or soon. It is a massive change to the benefits system.

In areas where Universal Credit has been rolled out, there has been a particular increase in foodbank use – by 52% last year.

Why?

One Encounter
Here is an account of one encounter, reported by a church minister.
A man knocked on the door of the minister. He had been to a Food Bank and asked if he could have money for nappies, but the Food Bank could not provide this.

He had applied for Universal Credit but the verifying process hadn’t worked and he was back at the beginning making a new application.

With Universal Credit, all your benefits are rolled into one – so it includes your housing benefit. So not only are your – already meagre – living expenses reduced by 12% but also the money for your rent.

What happens is that people get into debt – borrowing money to make up the 12% lost so that they can pay the rent.

This family was hanging on waiting for Universal Credit using the Food Bank, begging for nappies, facing a choice between even greater debt – and going hungry.

There are many more stories like this. The way that Universal Credit is designed – with delays, loans, payment in arrears, bureaucracy, conditionality, sanctions, targets – work together to mean that families in all sorts of situations are ending up hungry.

Simeon’s presentation went on to consider how other encounters can change us and society, including challenging the hostile environment to immigrants, getting people in your church to sign the petition to end hunger in the UK www.endhungeruk.org and inviting your MP to visit a church project or come along to an event or take them on a walk of your local area to highlight issues that church members feel need to be addressed. It’s about going deeper than just sending an occasional letter or email, but really trying to get to know your representative in Westminster and giving your MP an opportunity to better understand the activities and concerns of local churches. Simeon pointed out that you are far more likely to be able to influence an MP over a particular issue in the future like Universal Credit or the Hostile Environment – if you already have a relationship with them.

I came away from this Synod significantly more
informed about the injustices in our society, how our encounters can change us and with practical examples of how each of us can listen, speak and act for social justice.

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25: 37-40)

The St Andrew’s Mission, Thornaby on Tees, held a celebratory weekend on Saturday, 13th – Sunday 14th October. This began with a historical exhibition where the story of the Mission was shown in pictures, documents, history booklet and a one act play illustrating the events at the time when the building was opened. The exhibition was attended by people of the local community, members from other United Reformed Churches, in the Teesside area, and the Mayor and Mayoress of Thornaby, Councillors Steve and Sylvia Walmisley. The following day a service of celebration led by the Revd Sue Fender, minister for the Teesdale and Hartlepool Group of URC Churches, and supported by our Moderator, the Revd David Herbert, offered thanksgiving for the service and commitment given by all Mission people past and present. After which all were able to enjoy a piece of a large birthday cake.
The island of JeJu is described in the tourist brochures as the Hawaii of Korea and its beaches, golf resorts and tea plantations give substance to the claim. It is a place of great natural beauty and welcomes many visitors from mainland Korea and beyond. But for many years this idyllic spot hid a terrible secret. At the end of World War II the people of Korea looked forward to a future free from the brutality and exploitation of Japanese occupation. Korea had always been one nation, even during the worst of the years of oppression, and the people of JeJu held to that conviction as the superpowers of Russia and the USA pursued their own regional ambitions.

It was this refusal to be cowed into accepting the outcomes imposed by others that led to what is known as the 4:4 uprising and massacre. A peaceful protest to register opposition to the division of the Korean Peninsula along the 38th parallel escalated into acts of brutality that resulted in a death toll in excess of 40,000 before the unrest was quelled. The title refers to 3rd April 1948 when, in resistance to the election of a South Korean Government only and thus the division of the country, some islanders took their protest to police stations across the island. Many islanders distrusted the police because the American Military Government had recruited law enforcement personnel who had previously collaborated with the Japanese occupation. The people of JeJu feared that the division of the country would lead to war between north and south, a fear that would be realised two years later. Whole villages were burnt to the ground as the regime sought to suppress what they interpreted as an anti-government movement and islanders retaliated with attacks on police. The killing did not stop until 1954 by which time an estimated 40,000 people were dead. The figure may continue to rise as mass graves are uncovered. In many cases the number of dead cannot be assessed because in some villages there was no one left alive to report the death of relatives or neighbours.

The death toll is tragedy enough but what makes the 4:4 JeJu uprising and massacre even more sorrowful is that it took until 2003 for an official investigation to call for an apology to the people of JeJu. For all the years in between the island had been branded as sympathetic to the communist north because of its opposition to the division of the peninsula. Unable to openly grieve their loss of family and home and forced to bear a cruel injustice in a culture where shame is an intolerable burden, the people of JeJu can only now begin to navigate the path to health and well-being.

The tragedy of JeJu is a reminder that it is too easy for the ambitions of the powerful to ignore and to trample upon the rights of the less powerful. When history is only told by the powerful then truth is the greatest casualty of all. It is to be hoped that as negotiations stumble their way towards a peace settlement to finally end the Korean War, the desire of the people of Korea to live in peace will overcome the fragile egos of those who claim centre stage. We continue to pray for a peace that is built upon the solid rock of justice rather than the shifting sands of political expedience.

David Grosch-Miller, former Moderator of General Assembly, participated in a ‘Global Partnership Dialogue and Asia-Pacific Peace Zone Consultation’, on JeJu Island 14 – 18 September 2018. At the invitation of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) David took part in a conversation with other partner churches and preached in a local church as well as attending the General Assembly of the PROK. He also represents the United Reformed Church on the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Forum on Korea.
A celebratory weekend was held from 20th – 21st October when the members and friends of St John’s Church, Kingston Park acknowledged 40 years of worship and witness in the area of Kingston Park. As this new residential area on the west side of Newcastle developed it was felt that there ought to be a place for Christian worship and so some people began to meet in each other’s homes to being with. Eventually in 1978 the church officially became an LEP (Local Ecumenical Partnership) and looked to the Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists and the URC. Over the years the congregation has grown and, of course, now has a building. This is a vibrant church which worships regularly and also serves its community.

During the weekend of its Ruby Anniversary, a supper was held on the Saturday evening with a ‘This is your Life’ session following as various people, from way back right to the present, shared many good stories. On the Sunday morning the first vicar, the Revd Chris Andrews preached at a celebratory service and there was an afternoon tea followed by informal worship. Celebrations not only looked to the past for there was also a looking to the future and talk of seeking a vision from God for what he requires of church members into the future as they continue to worship Christ and to follow in his way for many more years to come.
Readers’ comments and social media posts

We are looking forward to receiving your comments and feedback for the December / January edition of the newsletter.

The copy deadline for the December / January edition of the Footsteps newsletter will be 23rd November 2018.

Readers can contact The Editor with comments and views at:

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