

Called to be Peacemakers – NJPN Conference 2007

On a wet Friday evening over 360 adults and children set out on a journey to Swanwick willing and prepared to be challenged and inspired as each one accepted the call to be a peacemaker.

For one family the journey ended in a sports hall in Worcester where they were obliged to spend the night, having been stranded for a number of hours. Another hopeful traveller spent eight hours travelling from Fishguard to Newport and finding that there was no passable road out of that area of Wales very reluctantly had to return home. The prize for perseverance, however, must surely go to the couple from Southampton who were obliged to turn back, arriving home after 11pm only to leave again early the following morning, finally arriving in Swanwick at 8am having missed breakfast yet raring to go.

Following registration on Friday afternoon there was an opportunity to meet and greet friends old and new and conversation continued through dinner.

During the welcoming session we were invited to journey the way to peace, encouraged by music, word and visual image. The scene for Conference was set as we listened to a short history of the work of The Fellowship of Reconciliation from Chris Cole and from Pat Gaffney of Pax Christi who, together with the National Justice and Peace Network, were the conference organisers. The formal session ended with prayer as we were urged to 'recognise in those with whom we sit, eat and drink the divine presence of Christ'

We were then invited to share a glass of wine as the Peace Market was opened where a wide range of stalls offered opportunity to buy fairly traded goods, to support small projects, to find information and to sign up to specific campaigns.

On Saturday we gathered in smaller groups to listen to the word of God and to take time to reflect and share our thoughts. The Scripture reading reminded each of us: 'after you have done everything, to stand'

We then gathered together to listen to one of our keynote speakers; Fr. John Dear, S.J. peace activist, lecturer and author, currently coordinator of Pax Christi New Mexico, who shared something of his own journey, which led to the Church of the Beatitudes and from there on to the path of 'continuous, non-violent resistance' to the 'culture of perpetual war' We were urged to recognise and learn from the gift of many prophets of peace and justice – Martin Luther King, Ghandi, Dorothy Day – and to spread the message that violence doesn't work and that war sows the seeds of future wars. John believes strongly that war cannot be the will of God and indeed is the very definition of mortal sin. We were challenged to fulfil our initial calling to be peacemakers and to be faithful to our calling.

Our second keynote speaker; Zoughbi Zoughbi founder and Director of Wi'am, The Palestinian Centre for Conflict Resolution brought greetings from the Holy land and thanks for support given to the beleaguered people of that troubled land. Zoughbi shared with us something of the painful reality of living under occupation. His journey to Swanwick was not constrained by rain and floods but rather by checkpoints and closed borders.

His journey towards social activism began at the age of thirteen with an experience of being held and abused at a checkpoint when attempting to travel to celebrate Good Friday in Jerusalem. This experience left him full of anger but he was able to turn this anger into action, working as a social activist, developing an understanding of others and struggling to overcome hate and learning to respond in a non violent way to situations of injustice. The situation remains complicated with more

checkpoints, the separating wall and displaced people becoming more angry and desperate. Bethlehem has changed 'from grotto to ghetto' There is no freedom of movement and it is easier to travel to Swanwick than to Jerusalem. The Stations of the Cross are being walked daily in Bethlehem, there is no need to go to the Via Dolorosa.

Zoughbi continues to journey in hope, with the image of the empty tomb and the inevitability of resurrection remaining strong. He believes that the solution lies in learning to live together, recognising that dwelling on 'victimhood' will increase the cycle of violence and that the people of that holy place have become indirect victims of the holocaust.

He believes that restorative justice based on forgiveness is the only possible way of breaking this cycle of violence. Zoughbi feels that we need to 'change our glasses'

Wi'am addresses problems in a non confrontational way, working with children to channel anger and frustration in a positive direction, offering the possibility of hope. Desperate people without hope have nothing further to lose. Women suffer greatly witnessing the plight of their children and Wi'am seeks to use a holistic approach to empower women and extend their influence.

The sharing of personal stories can be both powerful and enabling experiences and over the weekend we heard testimonies from three committed activists who have been led by their own life experience into working for social justice. Maya Evans from Justice Not Vengeance, Ihtisham Hibatullah, a member of the Muslim Association of Great Britain and Roula Marrouf a third generation Palestinian from Lebanon shared part of their journey with us, each one demonstrating the effect of conflict on the lives of individuals.

A wide variety of workshops was available so each of us was able to explore in more detail a specific area of concern.

The opportunity to enjoy the company of friends old and new is fundamental to personal development and so the importance of coffee and meal breaks, time for dancing and sharing conversation over drinks must not be underestimated.

A fundamental belief in the spirituality of peace and social justice is what draws us to gather together in an atmosphere of mutual support to learn from each other and to celebrate with words and music. During the weekend we were refreshed and encouraged by our Liturgies whilst at the same time challenged and made to feel uncomfortable and saddened by the reality of being a worshipping community united yet still divided. We must also continue to journey in hope.

Anne Peacey