

County Ecumenical Development Officer's Report 2010-2011

I have been in post since October 2010 and it has been a steep learning curve. I have been learning about Bedfordshire, I am learning about Ecumenical structures, constitutions and practices. I am learning about the organisation of different denominations, their relationships to their headquarters, the way they appoint ministers and order worship. I have been grateful to those churches who have invited me to speak and I have been aware that different churches expect different things from the preacher. Some don't feel they have had their money's worth if the preacher doesn't speak for 40 minutes, others feel that 10 minutes is enough and others fit somewhere between the two. I don't think I have yet confused the first two; I'm not sure which would be most damaging, preaching for 10 minutes when 40 were expected or the other way round. There is a serious point here; I have always known that there were wide variations between practices and beliefs within the Christian Church and to try to force everyone into a one size fits all grouping is destined to fail and is not what I am seeking to develop. Instead, I have approached this role intending to help churches understand where they can work together, what can be done better together than separately, when is there no purpose to meeting in two buildings when the differences between us are so small. However, there are times when we acknowledge the gulf between is too great to allow us all to participate together, at such times I seek to encourage respect for each other's conscience.

For this report I am keen simply to highlight some of the very good practices and examples of churches working together across our area, since I want to end positively. Before then, I will speak of some of my disappointments; I am disappointed to find that in our two largest towns there are different groupings of churches with different agendas and sometimes duplicating work. I have also been saddened when churches have not celebrated each other's mission but have been jealous and obstructive because the work is not under their banner or control.

However, there is much more to celebrate. I have chosen a few, you will know of others, but these are my highlights:

Wixams: The establishment of the Church in Wixams and the ministry of Tim Jackson is a highlight, the 'hands off' approach of senior church leaders will allow Tim to develop something organic and unique to Wixams. I think we have to manage expectations and perhaps set some realistic measures of the success for this project but it is a wonderful opportunity to establish something of the Kingdom in the new village

Biggleswade church pack: Churches Together in Biggleswade have created a pack to give to new residents; it is high quality and gives details of all of the churches in the town.

Get in the Picture: There were a number of Get in the Picture events across the county, this low key evangelism left a good taste in the mouths of people but gave an effective opportunity to tell the Christmas story.

Luton in Harmony: The week before the BNP marched in Luton, Luton in Harmony celebrated their work, and Church leaders were represented along with other faith group leaders. This was a practical statement against hatred and for peace.

Woburn Sands Lent Debates: Churches Together in 'Woburn and District' held a series of public debates through the period of Lent, looking at issues such as the environment and youth, asking in one debate, "Is religion a force for good or evil?" These were well attended and interesting evenings, sharing in mission together.

Oakley: I was very impressed by the amount of work and energy of this Group, they are a great example of achieving much more together than they could apart

AV and Mayoral Hustings: In Bedford, a hustings was held in the Salvation Army Hall, it was by far the largest meeting of the election campaign and showed the church offering a platform for public debate.

In conclusion: I am massively encouraged by most of what I have found in Bedfordshire and look forward to building on these foundations in the time the Lord allows me to work in this post.

Andrew Gale

May 2011