

30 YEARS OF THE RYEDALE CHRISTIAN COUNCIL

Way back in the swinging sixties, John Stewart, then Rural Dean and Vicar of Lavington, wrote to Abbot Byrne of Ampleforth, and suggested that perhaps the local churches could work more closely together. The immediate result was an invitation to lunch, the outcome was the creation of the Ryedale Christian Council in February 1963. The aim was to bring the churches of the area together in Dialogue, Bible study and Christian Action. We became a Christian Council, as a group of fellow pilgrims in a secular world, rather than a Council of Churches and this device, together with fortunate combination of personalities, made it possible for the Roman Catholic tradition to play a full part from the start.

At first we were not all able to join in worship and prayer together, as some felt that it required a degree of unity that was not yet achieved. That still left wide areas of common ground for study, discussion and action. Today we do worship together and support many local initiatives set up by churches in the area. We have a flourishing prayer group, led in turn by each of our four traditions: Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Quaker. We have not made formal links with the House Church Movement and similar bodies in the area, but some of our members have valuable links with them.

After a period of rapid growth and widespread recognition in the 60s, there was much debate along the lines "Who - if anyone - does the Christian Council represent ?" and "Is it just a talking shop for ecumaniacs ?". The constitution and membership were clarified to ensure a balanced executive of lay and ordained representatives appointed by our constituent traditions. The original aim was developed "To promote co-operation between all Christians in Ryedale in service to our common Lord, praying and planning as a group open to God's guidance, discovering what Christians can and should do together and encouraging them in doing it". This is still our aim, put more succinctly as "Not to do things separately that we can do together".

Various prophetic flashes have illuminated our path. One, in 1979, from Fr Alban Rimmer, that we should concentrate together on our mission to those outside the church. A Local Ecumenical Project has grown in our midst, helped by the understanding that already existed between the clergy and congregations involved, and in which the Christian Council played a part.

The 1970's were distinguished by a series of day conferences at Ampleforth, with titles like "The path of prayer" and , "Are churches really necessary ?" In that period also we were enriched by an Eastern Orthodox community who lived at Oswaldkirk, worshipping in a caravan with onion dome and icons. In 1992 we continued the tradition with an examination of the "Faith in the Countryside" report, which has sparked off a number of initiatives within and between our traditions. This year we plan a day on "Youth" with sessions for both young people and concerned older people. Each autumn about twenty of us spend 24 hours together at the moorland village of Goathland, to pray and worship together, to review what we have done and to explore in prayer what God has for us to do in the coming year, and beyond.

We started the Decade of Evangelism with a year of mission supported by all our constituent churches. Started by Bishop Bates, sustained by Bishop O'Brien and concluded by Donald English. One lasting achievement was about 35 Study Groups involving around 300 people in our rather thinly populated area. We produced our own leader friendly study notes on "What We Believe" and "Living as Christians Today", with the help of Canon John Young and others. Many of the groups still flourish; some have propagated.

A follow-up was led by a team from Lee Abbey in 1991 which had its own successes, not least the young man who was surprised to find that his local church did not always have a fir tree beside the pulpit.

A final thought, from the first issue of the Christian Council journal:

“Our aim is not compromise for the sake of peace
but comprehension for the sake of truth.”

D R Goodman April 1992

Since I wrote this we have held three conferences at Ampleforth:

“Faith in the Countryside” led by Jeremy Martineau, Secretary to the panel which produced it

“What makes churches grow?”, led by Stephen Cotterill, Evangelist for Wakefield Diocese & Anne Hibbert of the CPAS

“Why Pray?” led by June Holloway of the Evangelical Alliance, Sister Alison Mary of the Community of the Resurrection in Leeds and the Rev Malcolm Worsley, ex-convict

Around half of the groups have continued, some as Lent Groups, others on a year round basis. Each Lent we choose one of the various Lent courses to use over the whole area, which gives a wider fellowship.

We have had a number of joint youth events, last year this formed part of “One World Week”. The Joint Songs of Praise in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has remained one of the high points in our year, together with our refreshment and display tent at the Ryedale Show in July. Some of your brethren have proved to be very good at washing up.

We have also held a number of bus pilgrimages to Christian centres - this year to Wakefield Cathedral. Other destinations included Jarrow, Hexham, Lincoln and Lindesfarne.