

Opening for the Songs of Praise 40th Anniversary Celebration 19th January 2003

Jesus prayed to the Father for the disciples who were with him, and their successors

I ask not only on behalf of these

But also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word

That they may all be one.

As you Father, are in me and I in you, may they also be in us,

So that the world may believe that you have sent me.

This passage from the Gospel of St John lay at the heart of John Stewart's ecumenical vision, long before the Christian Council first took shape.

The vision that the disciples, throughout all ages should be united in their mission to the world

It is good to have Mary Stewart with us this evening and I would like to thank her for letting me see some of the notes that John made at the time

John was the Vicar of Lasingham and became Rural Dean in 1958.

In the summer of 1961, John wrote to the Abbot of Ampleforth and suggested that the Christians in the area could draw closer together in friendship and cooperation. The immediate response was an invitation to lunch from Abbot Herbert Byrne.

Later that year a monthly meeting began at Lasingham Vicarage, for six ministers: two Anglican, two Roman Catholic and two Methodists.

As we join in our worship and celebration this evening, it is extraordinary to realise that in the early 60s, there was no question of the group praying together. The group developed a time of Silent Prayer to start the meetings, and eventually agreed to say the Lord's Prayer together

One of the Bishops concerned suggested that this kind of meeting was OK so long no one else knew it was happening.

The meetings were designed to discover and rejoice in the huge areas of common ground which were shared by all Christian Traditions, and to think of how best the world outside could come to know the Gospel of Christ as they worked together

In 1963 there was a national campaign called "Freedom from Hunger" - a problem which is sadly still with us. It was a largely secular movement, led by levels of local government.

The Ryedale Christian Council was formed in February 1963 so that Christians of all traditions could join in the campaign together. The original group was extended to include eight lay people from each tradition and a group from the Society of Friends.

Cooperation between the Christian traditions was found to work and to enrich the ministry of all.

It was agreed that the Council should continue in business and discover other activities that we could be shared.

A number of activities developed in the 1960s

A Brains Trust --- Any Questions with a panel to answer questions from the floor on matters of Faith and Custom

A Christian Upbringing Group, which began a series of Day Conferences at Ampleforth Abbey, initially for teachers, but which became much wider in scope. 13 such conferences were held in those early days.

Local Good Neighbour schemes, giving help to those in need and a Social Advice Centre at Helmsley on Market Day

A journal - the Ryedale Record -- price 1d --- edited by Donald McKirdy, whose tombstone records that he was "a Lawyer and Ecumenist"

The constitution and membership were clarified to ensure a balanced leadership of lay and ordained representatives from our various traditions

Our aim was basically "Not to do things separately that we can do together".

Various prophetic flashes have illuminated our path.

One from Cardinal Basil Hume that

“Our divisions must not hinder any longer the urgent need for Christians to preach together the Gospel of Jesus Christ”

A view which lay at the heart of John Stewart’s vision for the Council.

The first issue of the Ryedale Record quoted from an ecumenical conference in India held in 1919

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

Bishop Gordon Bates encouraged us at the Songs of Praise held at the beginning of the Decade of Evangelism to be

‘United in our mission to bring the love of Christ to the heathen world around us’

It takes time, but we are making progress

Growing in mutual understanding, enrichment, and action

We are still working at unifying our mission to the world, there is still some way to go,

and we pray that as we work together more closely, we can continue the work of Christ in order

That all might have life, and have it more abundantly