

‘...stumbling blocks into stepping stones...’ Ampleforth 29th April 2006

Around 60 people from as far afield as Bridlington and Middlesbrough met at Ampleforth Abbey to attend a day conference organised by Ryedale Christian Council. The event entitled ‘...stumbling blocks into stepping stones...’ aimed to offer a gentle exploration of relationship with neighbour, God and self. It began and ended with acts of worship lead by representatives of different denominations. The main programme was lead by Father Bede Leach OSB, a monk of Ampleforth who gave the addresses which were followed up by group discussions and feedback.

Ryedale Christian Council conferences in recent years have focused on specific issues such as aspects of dying and moral dilemmas. Feedback after those events indicated concerns over a wide spectrum of social and spiritual issues and showed the confusion and vulnerability many feel faced with the pressures of life today.

This day conference was intended to allow Christians to be aware of both positive and negatives aspects in themselves and in their relationship with others (particularly in their churches) and with God. It began by focussing on the individual, encouraging openness and honesty with oneself and others. The fear and vulnerability we all feel in doing this was recognised.

Exploration of aspects of relationship with others was done through an imaginative group study of the parable of the prodigal son. This involved more creative and lateral thinking than is often usual in Bible studies. The final question in this was :- If you were to introduce a fourth person into the story, who would it be and what kind of personality would they have? Group feedbacks expressed the need for an understanding reconciliatory personality and overwhelmingly this was seen as a woman though Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela were mentioned.

The afternoon sessions looked at the strengths of church communities and what they can offer to the world as well as realistically recognising their weaknesses. Hopefully this will allow attenders to feel more confidence in committing themselves to organisations which are so often viewed negatively by the general population.

The whole spectrum of church traditions was represented. The warm and friendly atmosphere was conducive to sharing ideas and responding in a creative way to the searching issues raised. It left those attending with much to reflect and build upon.

Ann Gray