



Reflections on CGMC in Scotland - Spring Conference 2012

A place for everyone

Welcomes are important and welcoming everybody should surely be a hallmark of the Christian community whenever and wherever it gathers. This call to inclusivity was the theme of this year's CGMC Spring conference in Scotland. Whether this is about welcoming the differently-able or those whose lives had been affected by deep trauma; whether it is about welcoming children with social and emotional needs or those damaged by the commercialisation of childhood; whether it is about the elderly with dementia or the very young with learning difficulties; or whether it be a child or adult – the obligation to be inclusive is an imperative not an option if we say we meet in the name of the one and who turned no one away. However creating this sort of church gathering is never going to be easy; but, as so many of us know in CGMC – a group made up of those who act as advocates for children within their denominations and organisations – there is a high price to pay if people do not find that welcome, because it endangers and hurts not only those individuals who are excluded but all of us. So, to set the tone for our three days together



we began with a traditional Scottish welcome of oatcakes and whisky, as we gathered at the Gillis Centre in Edinburgh, and before we began our busy and very rich programme of visits and talks organised for the 19 of us who were welcomed that first afternoon.



At the end of our time together, in our final session in fact, we were urged to take away from this conference a vision – the sort of vision 'without which the people perish', as the writer of Proverbs tells us; a vision of the richness of a church community which is determined to embrace difference and which is always asking the question, 'who isn't here?' Only with this big vision of inclusivity, even though it means that we are often teetering on the edge of incompetence, can we truly grow, either individually or as faith communities.





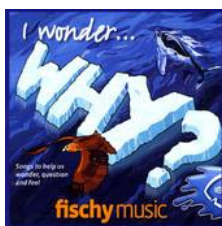
We first encountered the power of such a big vision on our afternoon visit to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, which was designed by an architect with just such a vision; a vision of an organic building that was like a tree with leaves, expressing both the energies and aspirations of the Scottish people. And indeed on our tour of the building, we did catch that sense of life, not only in the discussion groups gathered here and there throughout the light open spaces but in the main chamber itself with its people-shaped seats for every member – a deliberate expression of inclusivity. While here, we were also all very impressed by the Scottish MSP, Kezia Dugdale, who holds a cross-party brief for children and youth, and who answered our questions refreshingly and honestly, as she acknowledged that she still had much to learn from other parts of the UK and in particular with regard to children’s rights and children’s inclusion within the decision-making processes of Scottish society.

We were to encounter leaves again the following day when we spent time hearing of the work of Richmond’s Hope – a local project offering bereavement support for children. It touched many of us as we heard how the team here, led by Donna, has pioneered a programme that gives time to children who have experienced the death of friends or within their family – an experience which pushes them (and all of us) into a lonely and frightening place. At Craigmillar Church – in an area of Edinburgh with a history of deprivation – these children have found a welcome; a safe place to explore their feelings of sadness, anger and pain. Over twelve sessions they are helped to unpack their memories, manage their emotions and develop appropriate coping strategies; and at the end they also have the opportunity to add an inscribed leaf on to the special prayer tree set up in a corner of the church. This project is welcoming over 230 children every year through its doors and is clearly touching so many children and families who (in answer to that key question earlier), in many churches could well be among those who ‘are not there’.



We were certainly out and about quite a lot on this conference thanks to the kindness of local members who drove us and this gave us all time to talk and reflect, which is always an important part of our meeting together. Our visit to South Queensferry on the Firth of Forth, right next to the great road and rail bridges, included a time to sing with Suzanne and Mark from Fischy Music. Their distinctive songs are very popular in Scottish schools, helping

children to explore and express their feelings with easy-to-learn tunes and catchy lyrics rooted in Christian values.



And that same visit even included an ice-cream stop – yes, in February – after a walk through the old town. While later that day we were out and about again on an evening guided tour of the upper part of Princes Street, hearing among other things of the story of Thomas Guthrie, who recognised how many poor children were being excluded from receiving education and so was moved to found Ragged Schools; and of William Smith who set up clubs for street boys that led to the founding of the Boys’ Brigade. And some of us ended that day, after a drink (or two) in Deacon Brodie’s Pub, with a taste of deep-fried Mars Bar and thus were welcomed into the experience of one of the ‘delicacies’ of local popular cuisine!

But it wasn’t all fresh air, food and being ferried about! We did spend time indoors tackling some big questions. Iain White, chair of the Church of Scotland Guild and one time member of CGMC, opened up the whole debate around the sexualisation and commercialisation of children. Drawing on his own and also recent research by the Mothers’ Union, he helped us explore the implications for Children’s Ministry of the way childhood is being insidiously eroded for many by the influence of the advertisers and the media; and to think through what churches might do in response. How might parents be empowered to be more confident in the face of the commoditisation and monetarisation of children? How can those of us in churches find a voice to challenge all this without sounding prudish and old fashioned? And indeed what might CGMC contribute to this debate? Children are always in a context of course and the context of family is a growing concern for all of us in our work on the ground, as evidenced in particular by the rise of in the number of those appointed by churches as family workers /ministers, as well as the growing interest in faith in the home. This is already earmarked as an area for some targeted research by CGMC, to which we have committed ourselves for a future conference.



On that same morning, it was especially good to hear the challenging and forthright contribution from Sally Hyder. Herself in a wheelchair with multiple sclerosis and with a daughter who has learning difficulties, she asked us to ‘think differently’. What does it mean to have a disability and to have faith? What does Church feel like when you live on a different level? And just how inclusive is church.... really? She also had some wise words for us about parents of disabled children, who could equally be aggressive, over-protective or

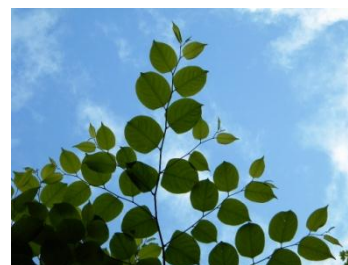
simply silently hurting. And when it came to communion – as indeed to all aspects of our belief and practice – the presence of those who are different remind us so strongly that grace is a gift not a reward; and that it is simply about being ready to receive, not necessarily to understand. At the end of her session, Sally introduced us to her youngest daughter Melissa. Many of us thought it was very brave of her to come into such a big adult gathering but it also challenged us to think how ready we were to receive her. Maybe in the



end it was Melissa who taught us most about being inclusive! One final thought that Sally left with many of us was of children's spirituality being like bubbles that float by and in which we were simply called to delight rather than to analyse and thereby risk bursting them.

Returning to where this reflection began, it was Professor Donnie McLeod from the Centre for Inclusivity and Equality, who helped us all reflect on the theme biblically. He began by telling us his own story as a Gaelic speaker from Lewis who always felt excluded; and then as a teacher, who felt called to include those children who our traditional education system failed and marginalized. He reminded us that the Great Commission was a command to go to.... everyone and to make sure 'all are welcome in this place'. However, being inclusive is not the same as being integrated – a mistake often made for example when creating the so-called 'all age service'. Inclusivity is an issue for the whole church to address and is far bigger than just disability and access. Becoming an inclusive church is a lifelong process and it should be a regular part of our reflective practice as individuals and as churches to go on asking those key questions: 'who isn't here?' and 'why?' In society much is built around exclusivity and this has unhelpfully shaped our vision of church. But Christian communities need to be counter-cultural and keep asking awkward questions.... and indeed encouraging children themselves to ask such questions. *God-with-us* in Christ is the expression of his great, inclusive love for each one of us; and our *us-with-all-others* is a key witness of that love to the world. Paradoxically, the call to inclusivity is the narrow way to life that is hard to find but which is at the heart of what it means to be the Body of Christ.

There was, as you can read, much to think about here, explored in theory and practice. As we were reminded in our worship on the last day, Jesus himself modelled inclusivity. He went out of his way both to touch and to be touched by the outsider, the stranger and social outcast. Following his example and drawing on earlier images, maybe we as Christians are each one of us called to be leaves on the tree of faith and who together can bring health and healing to the world (i.e. the healing to the nations as is cited in Revelation). And as we truly seek to welcome *everybody*, reaching out to the ones on the edge and including them, they will find shelter under the leafy canopy of God's inclusive church.



March 2012 Martyn Payne on behalf of CGMC