

## **A Persistent Fragrance**

### ***Reflections from the March 2011 CGMC conference in Yorkshire***

‘What do you think of when you are asked to imagine a rural setting?’ That was the question put to us as CGMC members as we began our 48 hour conference in Scarborough in the east riding of Yorkshire. ‘And what is it about ministry among children in rural settings that is different – if anything?’ It didn’t take much to get the 17 delegates on this conference talking, particularly as many of us worked with others in our teams in just these circumstances.

Some of the distinguishing features of rural ministry began to emerge, facilitated by Cathy Westby, who used to be a rural children’s work adviser for the Diocese of York, namely: isolation: poor transport links: wealth and deprivation existing side by side; and tensions between tight-knit communities and dispersed schooling for its children.

This part of Yorkshire offered the conference many different insights into what rural means: from coastal isolation to chocolate box villages; from semi-rural parishes on the edge of town to remote churches now far removed from people; from bigger churches filled with commuter Christians to ancient churches who quite deliberately chose to be child-free. Cathy led us into this conference very skilfully using 3-D objects, a quiz, group work and live case studies. And of course, as with the challenge of children’s ministry anywhere, there were as many opportunities as obstacles.

Despite the demands of multi-church benefices or circuits, despite the lack of basic facilities, and despite the unsocial hours of farm work, nevertheless the rural scene does offer some unique possibilities, such as: engagement with a whole community; reaching a higher percentage of all the children in the locality; closer links with the *one* village school; a strong sense of loyalty to ‘our church’ and the chance to make a greater impact as a key provider of special events in village life. All this gave us a really good foundation for the rest of the conference which was a series of visits to nearby churches and projects where we heard stories from local people and ministers.

Stories such as how God was at work in the four churches looked after by Rev Claire Stainsby around Burniston, which lies north along the coast from Scarborough. What struck most of us was the way in which each church had its own distinctive children's and family work – sometimes with the children of church families and sometimes for the children on an estate, whose families did not come to church; sometimes in age related groups and sometimes all ages together; sometimes on a Sunday and sometimes midweek.....and in one case not in a building but down on the beach! As in most places there is not a 'one size fits all' solution to children's ministry.

We admired both Claire's ability to enable others to get on with this work as well as her energy in keeping such a diverse show on the road. One thread however did emerge from more than one church and that was the commitment and loyalty of just one family who resisted the temptation to move to the 'greener pastures' of nearby bigger churches but stayed where they were to grow God's kingdom.

It was this sort of faith and vision that had turned the field which had been where we were sitting into the new building opened only a year ago: the old church had built a connected new hall but had had the courage to let the traditional chapel become the hall and the new hall, the church. Again here was vision and sacrifice at work for the sake of reaching new children and families.

Later that first morning, Rev. Sam Foster ('the vicar without a church'), a fresh expressions pioneer minister for Scarborough, shared some of her ideas for reaching out to new families. Again they were not top-down ideas from somewhere else, but ones that made use of what was available and local, and in particular Scarborough beach! Saturday Night Sacred Space, for example, had really taken off in the summer months alongside Summer Soul - a holiday club for all ages. In all that Sam shared, building relationships was key to the success of the ventures, and this released people to take risks and by trial and error sift the God ideas from the good ideas for the sake of the Gospel.

In the afternoon our 'luxury coach' took us inland to the village of Pickering. As we stepped into the parish church, we were greeted by a huge image of St. Christopher – one of the many splendid restored medieval paintings, which are among the oldest and finest in the country. We had fun puzzling out the stories from the images painted long ago but whose communication style is in many ways as relevant to

children and families today in our image-dominated culture as it was for the people of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Father Anthony Pritchard, the parish priest, introduced us formally to these visual aids before leading a discussion session about the children and family work of his three parishes and four churches. Here again we heard about many living examples of what we had met in theory during our first presentation. And once again we recognised that there are as many possible solutions to effective children's work rurally as there are places and people to try and attempt them.

Father Pritchard was fairly new in post and was just beginning to make connections with children and families in the parish, in particular by giving up a whole morning to be a classroom assistant at the nearby school, which we thought admirable. Baptism contacts were also very important in this traditional church as well as special events around the village such as the 'Posada-type' journey of the baby Jesus from shop window to shop window during Advent. We did however all smile when we heard what happened when he was displayed in a local charity shop. When it was time to collect Jesus and move him on, Father Pritchard discovered that they had sold him by mistake!

Once again it is all about trying different approaches and taking risks. But it is also about being there consistently! This was something we observed when Rachel Prest from the Methodist Church in Slingsby told us of her Adventurers Club. This has been running for years and is now part of the fabric of village life. Here the closeness and intimacy of the rural setting was being used to the advantage of the Gospel and it was bearing fruit. To borrow a phrase from the wine-tasting social that the group enjoyed back at the hotel that evening, it was the 'persistent fragrance' of our good news that was making an impact. During the day we had indeed 'tasted' a variety of different sorts of children's work, each shaped appropriately for its setting, and just as wines are distinguished by their different countries of origin, their vintage and types of grape, so the good wine of the gospel needs a range of different wineskins!

Our final morning found the group at The Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough. It opened in 1996 in a building that had been the Odeon Cinema built in the 1930s and which retains much of its original décor. However its massive auditorium has now been transformed into a theatre in the round as well as a further stage and screen on top of that!

From the enthusiastic Denise, the theatre's outreach worker, and the informative Gary, the stage manager, we discovered how the theatre worked, were allowed into backstage secrets and even walked among the lighting rigs, balancing precariously on a wire mesh! The theatre has a full programme of activities for children and young people and like the churches takes its 'message' out to local villages as well as to the estates on the edge of town. Drama and dance provide many opportunities for growing self-esteem and developing character for all ages. It was a good local example of how an arts-based enterprise sought to connect with a rural and semi-rural constituency and we reflected on what this had to say to the church and how the church might work alongside such secular projects to reach out and nurture faith. The theatre's extended school programme in holiday time enabled groups of children to put on plays, which was a tremendous boost to them as individuals. This challenges us in the churches to think of similar ways to engage with children and families and help them become the best they can be.

So what does distinguish children's ministry in rural settings? Over the conference we certainly did appreciate many features of rural life that were very different from those in the city and we came away with new ideas to pass on in our work with our various constituencies. On the other hand it was also clear that when it comes to ministry with children and families, whether in inner-city Leeds, in the suburbs of York or in a village near Filey down the coast, what matters most is listening to what children and young people need, working with what is already there, being open to trying something new and being in it for the long term. These 'gold standards' in ministry apply anywhere and are the pre-requisites to producing that 'persistent fragrance' that best commends our faith, both in urban or in rural settings.

*'God thinks of us as a perfume that brings Christ to everyone.'* 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 (CEV)

Martyn Payne on behalf of CGMC

March 2011

