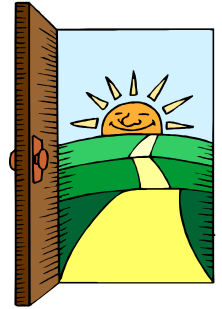


ELY DIOCESAN BOARD FOR CHURCH IN SOCIETY

SUMMER NEWSLETTER 2009



'AUTISM, THE CHURCH AND THE COMMUNITY - OPENING THE DOORS WIDER'

Some 70 people from around the Diocese and from further afield, attended the day conference on Autism at St Andrew's Church, Histon on 6 June. Jointly chaired by James Blandford Baker, Vicar of St Andrew's, and Owen Spencer-Thomas, Trustee East Anglian Autism Support Trust, the day proved insightful, informative and very moving.

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen from Cambridge gave the keynote address. As Director of the Autism Research Centre he presented the very latest findings on Autism and Asperger syndrome. There are half a million people in the UK affected by this neurological and genetic disability which affects the functioning of the brain. Typically an autistic person will have a different learning style and an underactive 'social brain'. They may be exceptionally talented, particularly with systems and abstract numbers, but present challenging behaviour which leads to educational difficulties in childhood. Adults with Asperger syndrome are often diagnosed at a late stage having suffered because of their lack of social and management skills. Depression is common. He stressed the need for understanding, clarity, structure and repetition in education plus social support to combat loneliness and isolation.

Bishop David Thomson urged us to open up to those with disability or different behaviour. This was echoed by Dr Jeremy Morris, Dean of Trinity Hall, Cambridge who spoke of his family's experience of ASD, and of the need to remember that we are all made in the image of God, and all equally objects of God's love.

The most poignant session of the day was the frank and courageous accounts by parents and their children of everyday life with Autism and Asperger's. We learned of struggles to get the right educational support, the social isolation and lack of friends, the problems for siblings, the sheer exhaustion and frustration of the parents who often had to give up careers or move to better supported locations. And yet in all of this an understanding and inclusive Church and community can offer respite and love.

Practical measures were introduced by Ann Memmott, author of the Diocese of Oxford Guidelines on Welcoming People with Autism and Asperger syndrome see www.oxford.anglican.org/.../welcoming-those-with-autism-and-asperger-syndrome-in-our-churches-and-communities. These include checking flickering lights, ensuring instructions are clear and accurate, avoiding unwanted physical contact etc. Yvonne Quirk, Diocesan Child Protection Officer, highlighted the risks for special needs children and vulnerable adults. The importance of supportive networks became a clear message throughout the day. The Church must be a champion of diversity and offer flexible support. It seems timely for the Diocese to review the support it offers to all who have some type of disability.

NB. Since our conference General Synod has also debated a paper GS 1725 'Opening Doors – Ministry with people with learning disabilities and people on the autistic spectrum' which has examples of good practice. Available from Church House Bookshop, price £11.

‘DO NOT TRY AND STOP THEM’

A big ‘thank you’ to Hilary, Owen, James and all who organised the Autism conference. It clearly touched a nerve and met a need for a lot of people. The challenge, of course, is not just for it to inspire those who are already involved with this issue. It is for it to affect the theology and practice of all of us.

Jesus’ ministry is characterised by his acceptance of those who were ‘beyond the pale’ for the religious authorities and worshipping communities of his day. According to John 4 Jesus disciples were shocked to find him speaking with a woman – and a foreign woman at that! He eats in the houses of tax collectors, the traitors and collaborators of his day. He sees faith in a Roman Centurion – a pagan and officer of the occupying power. He touches and heals those who are unclean, including lepers and a woman with a ‘flow of blood’. He allows a woman who is probably a prostitute to anoint and kiss his feet. He welcomes children into the adult meeting and blesses them. All these, and others we could cite, are people excluded from the worshipping community – women, children those considered unclean, foreigners etc.. And yet Jesus’ message is clear. No one is beyond the pale. Everyone is welcome. The doors of the Kingdom have been thrown open for **all** people. Much of the writing of St Paul and other New Testament authors is at pains to underline this. ‘There is no longer Jew nor Greek, Male nor Female, Slave nor Free. All are one in Christ Jesus’ says St Paul in his letter to the Galatians. James is more practical in his approach: ‘My brothers and sisters, can you really say you believe in our glorious Lord Jesus and continue with acts of favouritism? And he goes on to illustrate this with an example of how we give the best seats to the well off, ‘important’ people and put the poor person with the dirty clothes into a corner where they won’t embarrass us.

Of course, in 21st century Britain, we do not have exactly the same situation as that which faced Jesus. There are no lepers and, for the most part, we no longer discriminate against women. We are not under occupation and we tend to think tax collecting is OK, within limits! But how do we get on with those children who make a noise? What about people whose first language is not English? How about those young people who have baggy jeans which scarcely cover their bottoms and wear caps in church? What about the woman in the wheelchair who is blocking the central aisle? How about the person who smells or is incontinent? I am sure you can complete the list with your own examples.

‘No caps in church please.’ ‘Shhhhhhh!!!!’ ‘Put her over there, out of the way.’ ‘We do have a dress code you know.’ ‘Shouldn’t they be in Sunday School?’ I have heard many such comments all too recently.

The gospel imperative, Christ’s own example & teaching and the whole thrust of the New Testament tell us, without a doubt, that the Church is the place of acceptance for **ALL** people, whoever they are. The challenge for us is not just to talk the talk, but to walk the walk. And it’s not just about waiting until there is a problem but, using Jesus’ own words, to: ‘go out into the highways & byways and insist that they come in, so that my house may be filled.’



Alan Hargrave
Chairman, Board for Church in Society



CHURCH URBAN FUND MUSTARD SEED GRANTS

Could your faith based social action qualify for a Church Urban Fund Mustard Seed Grant? Grants of £5000 are available to enable new ideas to be put into practice. Thanks to a generous donation from the John Paul Getty Foundation, the CUF is able to offer these start up grants to many more projects than before. However the usual criteria for eligibility remain. The CUF's mission is to relieve poverty. To qualify the project must therefore be based in an area whose scores on the national social deprivation register fall within the lowest 10%. Or it must be aimed at a specific marginalised and impoverished group such as the homeless. The statistics can be checked online, visit www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk and enter the post code for your project area. For further information on CUF applications check their website www.cuf.org.uk and/or contact Hilary Lavis who is the Diocesan Link Officer.

SUCCESSFUL APPLICATION FROM ST AUGUSTINE'S, WISBECH !

The latest applicant to qualify for a Mustard Seed Grant is St Augustine's Breakout Outreach choir in Wisbech. Through the medium of music, children and young people in a very deprived area, are encouraged to find new meaning and direction in their lives in association with the church. Since the pilot project began in June 2008 up to 50 children have been attending the choir on a regular basis. Their parents have become involved in a parents' committee. It is directed by Mrs Charlotte Hill, a professional music teacher, and jointly managed by the Revd. Dr Neil Gardner, vicar of St Augustine's. The £5000 grant from the Church Urban Fund will enable the project to continue and expand, and will cover the purchase of additional music, robes, and other resources.

We wish them every success with the future of the Choir.





NOTICEBOARD

FUTURE JOBS FUND

We have been notified by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) of details of the £1 billion fund announced in the Budget which will support the creation of jobs for long term unemployed young people and others facing disadvantage in the job market. It is to be run by the Department for Work and Pensions in partnership with the Department for Communities and Local Government. The aim is to create 150,000 jobs primarily for 18-24 years old who have been unemployed for 12 months. The Government is keen to work with charities. See www.dwp.gov.uk/futurejobsfund for further information.

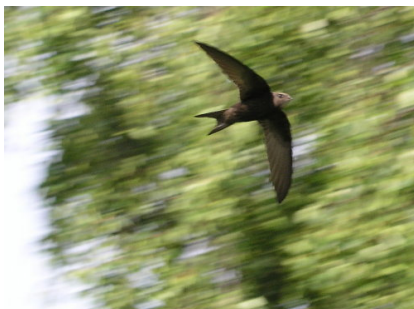
VISIT OF MICHELE GUINNESS – AUTHOR, BROADCASTER AND SPEAKER

The Mothers Union have arranged for Michele Guinness, the well known writer and broadcaster, to speak in Ely on Wednesday 4 November 2009 at Needhams Hall, City of Ely college at 7.30 pm. This will be part of the Ely 900 celebrations.

Michele is known to many for her interesting background and career. Brought up in a Jewish family, she became a Christian and is married to a vicar in Lancaster.

For further details of the evening contact the MU office in Bishop Woodford House, 01353 652718.

ELY SWIFTS !



There have been record numbers of swifts flying round Ely this summer ! The local support group continues to be very active in monitoring and protecting these summer visitors by the installation of nesting boxes in churches round the Diocese. . For the latest news of their activities see www.elyswifts.org.uk