

# *An Occasional Newsletter*

## **CTiW All Night Vigil of Solidarity & Prayer with Christians in Crisis in Syria and Iraq held at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church on 16/17 October 2015**

In the last session of our vigil in prayer and solidarity with the people of Syria and Iraq, we were led in prayer and reflection around rejoicing in community of diversity. It was in itself a powerful two hours, and it was also a very effective summary of the whole event; *community* as we learned and prayed together – *diversity* as we did it in all sorts of ways.

We heard powerful testimony – of the history of what is happening in that region, of the current situation, to the power of prayer and the strong continuity of hope, and the desire to maintain a Christian witness in the region.

We were led in vocal prayer and guided into silent prayer; we used words, silence, candles, visualisation, water, elastic bands.

We heard voices from the area - present in the room, reported through story, meeting us through skype conversation.

We sang and we knelt. We gazed on a statue of a violinist made from decommissioned weapons, and on pictures of camps, and people trying to find a place

We shared prayer in English, Arabic, Syriac.

Some of us were able to be present for the first couple of hours, hearing the speakers, and grateful to understand better; some of us were able to stay longer, some of us came in the middle of the night to join in, some of us did the whole thing!

We were a diverse bunch of people; from a variety of churches, and from none. Some of us were uncomfortable staying up all night, giving up our beds; some of us were more comfortable than usual, gaining a roof and a seat in place of the street sleeping that is the norm. Some of us are safe and secure normally – some of us are the refugees of this society, living on the very margins.

We drank coffee, ate biscuits, walked around and sang hymns.

We were privileged to hear significant speakers from the region, who could help us understand, and invited to think carefully, seriously about what we can actually do.

Together, in all our difference, in all our different ways, we pleaded for peace and justice. And the prayers do not stop when the vigil ends. Please pray with us and with the people of Syria and Iraq for peace, justice and a renewal of hope.

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### Contact us

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## The Vigil for Syria and Iraq, 16/17 October 2015: A Personal Reflection

*Stay with me, remain with me. Watch and pray.*

I had never been to an all-night vigil before. I had not even stayed up all night before! It was, therefore with a degree of trepidation that I made my way to Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church to join with others from CTiW to pray, meditate and sing the night away in solidarity with those suffering because of the Syria and Iraq Crisis.

*Ubi caritas et amor. Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est.*

Guided by inputs by four of CTiW's churches, I was able to forget what the clock might be saying and bodily considerations and enter into prayer more strongly than I have for a very long time. The carefully considered and timely contributions enriched my thinking and brought me to a much greater understanding of the needs of our brothers and sisters in those two countries and of those dispersed by the occurrences there.

*Those who do justice will live in the presence of God (Psalm 15)*

The Skype link with Fr Hillal SJ, who lives and works in Homs, Syria and the guided visualisations/meditations were particularly useful in building up my sense of empathy and quest for justice for those people. The many chants, hymns and pieces of music helped to bring me closer to the face of God and to bring before Him/Her the plight of these beleaguered, oppressed and suffering people.

### Themes explored:

**Exodus, Migration and Refugees:** led by St George's, Hanover Square and The Grosvenor Chapel. (10pm-midnight)

**Persecution and the Cross:** led by Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church. (Midnight-2am)

**Inter-religious Dialogue and Reconciliation:** led by St James's, Piccadilly. (2am-4am)

**The Communities, of Ourselves, Working Together:** led by The Church of the Immaculate Conception, Farm Street. (4am-6am)

Ray Crocker

### Dates for your diary

#### 2015

**15-22 November—Prisons Week**

**29 November—CTiW Advent Service at St James' Piccadilly at 6pm All welcome**

#### 2016

**18 January—CTiW AGM and Panel discussion (details and venue to be confirmed)**

**18-25 January—Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

**Note: Venues and dates may be subject to change**

*If your church would like to host a future "Meet the Neighbours" or other CTiW event, or you have an event of your own to which you would like to invite members of other churches, please do contact us on [ctiw.net@gmail.com](mailto:ctiw.net@gmail.com)*

## How to respond to those begging

At the "Meet the Neighbours" at Hinde Street Methodist Church, reported on elsewhere in this newsletter, at Question Time, the oft-asked question of how we, as Christians, should respond to begging in the street or at the church door, was asked. John Kuhrt, Executive Director of Social Work at The West London Mission, a man of twenty years of experience in dealing with poverty, homelessness and social justice, answered the question and also pointed us to an article he has written on the subject.

This article, written as a response to the huge confusion felt and expressed frequently, sets out helpful guidelines for us as caring and concerned Christians. He has given us permission to include a link to it on our website or [find it here](#). Please read it if you would like helpful and informed advice.

## 2015 ASWA Remembrance Service for Animals, Animal War Memorial, Park Lane, London on Sunday 8th November 2015

Come and join the Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals to remember the animals who have died in wartime and continue to suffer as a result of present day conflicts at the Animals in War Memorial in Park Lane, London at 3:00pm on Remembrance Sunday for a short service. Pen Farthing of Nowzad dogs will talk about his work in Afghanistan. [See this link](#)

## New Church Members

The ecumenical Prisons Mission developed by Churches Together in Westminster is continuing to make progress and provide support and services needed by Prison Chaplaincy Teams. The three founding churches were St James's Piccadilly, St George's Hanover Square and Farm Street Jesuit Centre. Potential or new participants have recently joined to make introductory visits to prisons and St Martin in the Fields and St Columba's in Knightsbridge are expected to formally engage quite soon. Another six churches, of different denominations are presently considering engagement and decisions will be made this autumn or winter. Further information is available on the website and from [johnplummer.audax@gmail.com](mailto:johnplummer.audax@gmail.com)

## HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs

A group of new and potential participants recently made an introductory visit to Wormwood Scrubs prison in West London. This is another of London's huge prisons with some 1250 men and youths both remanded and serving custodial sentences. The Managing Chaplain, Imam Zahid Bhatti explained his enthusiasm for developing the multi-faith Chaplaincy Team and the valuable role our participants can play in supporting his full and part time colleagues. He is full of ideas and welcomes ours. In addition to beginning to work with our participants, he is doing his best to encourage a new cadre of volunteers from Mosques, Temple, Gurudwaras and other places of worship. He wants our participants to work with volunteers of different faiths, so that together they try to reach out to inmates of different faiths within the prison.

One new participant described his introductory visit to another prison as "a bit sobering. The environment was somewhat alien to me. I presupposed what a prison would look like from the inside through media images, but I wasn't prepared for the noise and smell of the place and the desolate look on the faces of some of the inmates we walked past. Prison appears to me a curious juxtaposition of punishment and care; the removal of an individual's liberties and yet, at the same time, trying to rebuild and introduce civil values". Another new participant said that she "can't imagine being confined to a cell 12 feet by 7 feet for up to 23 hours a day", but she "looked forward to being able to serve in some way as this is often a group of people who are forgotten about. Out of sight and out of mind, but they deserve every chance we can give them to reform and avoid reoffending".

## Baptism in Prison

A prison chaplain recently told me a little about the life of a young man he had got to know in recent years as

he had served several custodial sentences at the same prison.

Jimmy had had a troubled childhood with many absences from school and little formal learning. Petty crime and a broken home were two regular features of his early years. His mother was addicted to drugs and during each prison sentence Jimmy determined to go straight. Each time he failed and met the chaplain again in prison a few months after the previous discharge. During his current sentence Jimmy attended several courses and regularly took part in Bible studies and Christian worship. He was so strongly committed to a different future that he chose to be baptised in the prison chapel. This time he was even more convinced that he needed to change and lead a very different life. The Chaplaincy Team and others gave him all the support they could within the limits of their human resources. Quite soon Jimmy will be released and be confronted again with all the pressures, risks and temptations which have led him to crime so often before. Will he survive and become an independent, crime-free member of society? What help will he find outside prison?

## Prisons Week 2015 15th-22nd November

The new leaflet containing material for Prisons Week 2015 is now available on our website. This is intended to provide such a variety of draft prayers, meditations, intercessions and sermons, that churches of different denominations will be able to find something which suits their individual style and culture.

We have included a group of prayers by Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian, opponent of Hitler and martyr, who was executed in a Nazi prison camp in 1945. (Pastor Bonhoeffer served at the Lutheran church in Knightsbridge from 1932-35. They hosted a Meet the Neighbours event there in June this year.) There are also prayers by Revd William Noblett, the former Chaplain General and Jonathan Aitken the ex MP and Cabinet Member who served a custodial sentence following conviction and is now President of Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

Many churches will focus attention not only on the largest ever British prison population of 86,000 men, women and children, but on all those concerned with or affected by the whole criminal justice system – prisoners' families, prison officers, chaplaincy teams and of course victims of crimes. We need to know how CTiW member churches mark Prisons Week this year so that good practice can be shared. Please let us know what works with your church.

*John Plummer*

## “Meet the Neighbours” at Hinde Street Methodist Church, 6th October 2015

An eager and interested group of us gathered in “The handsomest chapel in Westminster” to hear a great deal of fascinating and inspiring detail about Methodism (“What has it done for me?”), the history of this particular place of worship and about the social justice thrust of the West London Mission.

After a short act of worship in which we pondered on the holding together of people with differences, we were treated to a romp through the history of Christian worship and witness, through Methodism, on this site. The present elegant and impressive building appeared in 1810, replacing an older, less beautiful building. Its Classical frontage with a spire on the corner of Hinde and Thayer Street provides a local landmark and has remained largely unchanged in over two hundred years. We felt momentarily insecure when we learned that it is built on marshy land as the Tyburn River runs underneath us! The intense evangelism of the 1840s led to huge congregations, making good use of the gallery and to a Sunday School of around five hundred children on any Sunday. We admired the high pulpit, positioned centrally and accentuating the centrality of The Word and of preaching God’s never-ending and fathomless love.



The congregation’s make-up has shifted over the years from families to mainly single people working locally as shop assistants, in domestic service and as ostlers. It is now made up of a gathered congregation with attendees travelling in and with a high proportion of students and young people. With our varied faith backgrounds it was enlightening to hear about the beginnings of Methodism and the work of the Wesleys and other heroes of the movement. John Wesley’s personality was well drawn and we heard of his days at Oxford where he was active in the “Holy Club” and where his precise and painstaking approach to all activities earned him the nickname of “methodist”, a description which, of course, has stuck and has been applied more widely. From small beginnings the movement grew rapidly, catching the spirit of the time, The Age of Reason, the growth of industrialization and the increase of personal responsibility through involvement in

parliamentary democracy. An important factor in the growth was the use of open air meetings in carefully chosen places, as encouraged by another hero of the movement, George Whitfield.

Certain principles were set in the early days and have remained constant. A main one is “Social holiness” asserting that it is difficult to develop one’s faith and practice solo. Thus gathering in groups to read the Scriptures, discuss and learn has been a cornerstone all through. Christian faith, social work and social justice are paramount and interact dynamically to create the inclusive church Hinde Street now is.

John Wesley, in his mission to serve others, said, “Go to those who need you most”. The West London Mission, (founded by Hugh Price Hughes in 1887 operated from The Kingsway Hall for many years before being brought to Hinde Street upon the retirement of Donald Soper), has held this tenet centrally in its vision. Most of us in the churches of Westminster are involved in reaching out and supporting the marginalized, and we were inspired, even awe-struck by the scope and complexity of the services of the West London Mission.

The evening ended in the commodious hall under the chapel with time to greet and meet fortified by a beautifully prepared buffet. We went away refreshed, inspired, informed and very appreciative of the efforts made by our hosts.

*Ray Crocker*

