

## CHURCH AND SOCIETY COUNCIL

Saturday 12 September 2009

### Annual Conference for Presbytery Representatives

As befits the Council which includes the Eco-Congregation movement in its remit, the organisers had encouraged us to travel to Aviemore by train, arriving conveniently in time for coffee and scones.

Refreshed in body, we gathered to be refreshed in mind and soul. The Rev. Ian Galloway, Convener of the Council, welcomed everyone briefly, and the Rev. Ewan Aitken led opening worship - responsive prayer brought us together and a thought-provoking series of images set the theme for the day:

**“Coping with the Credit Crunch”** - Ian introduced the main speaker of the morning, Alan McFarlane, Managing Director of Walter Scott & Partners Ltd. Alan really raised my hopes when he explained disarmingly that he was not a banker, had actually studied politics and history, and would try to present his subject in verbal, not numerical, terms – I hope what follows does some justice to the most lucid explanation I have yet heard, even if I still felt lost after about page 2.

In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century pension schemes in the developed world had created a vast pool of savings, invested for the most part in bonds, property and equity shares. Alan's first heading was “So how did we get where we are today?” with four brief answers.

- the (successful) anti-inflation journey from the 70s
- the “marketisation” of finance
- naïve deregulation
- globalisation of capital flows.

The next heading was “Economic Wreckage”. Figures crept in, expressed in trillions of US dollars, and my mind unfocussed again, but I understood the image of a plane entering an air pocket and suddenly plummeting 10,000 feet.

Further headings were

- the Wrecks' League Table
- Global Current Account Balances
- US Housing indebtedness
- UK housing equity withdrawal
- Public debt and stabilisation costs

In very basic terms, the story is of people lending, borrowing, promising, exchanging, shifting vast sums of money they did not actually have. My Granny could have told them it would end in tears, but nobody seemed to notice, or want to notice, what was happening, until the bubble burst.

Finally, “How do we get away from here?”

- the socialisation of risk
- how to encourage good (or just less risky) behaviour
- financial markets that serve us, not the reverse
- Credit – to whom is it due?

Alan's presentation was very well received, and the really interested folk could attend his workshop for a deeper discussion.

**Lunchtime**, a chance to meet other participants and renew or make acquaintances, is an integral and much appreciated part of the day. Although people do travel quite long distances, there is always an incentive for more local people to attend, so the mix is always different.

For the afternoon session there was a choice of **workshops** - we had each signed up to two –

- Credit Crunch – continuing the morning theme
- Carbon footprint reduction - how to implement the General Assembly instruction
- Parish Development Fund – learn about projects and funding
- C&S resources going digital – how to use them
- Lobbying, Poverty and the “Get Fair” Campaign

**Carbon Footprint Reduction** – for technical reasons the room intended for this group was not available, so we found ourselves basking in solar warmth on the veranda... Rob Whiteman invited us to share what was happening in our congregations and parishes – these represented a good cross-section of areas, urban, suburban, rural, islands, with buildings ancient and modern.

Manses were on the whole easier to improve than churches – and more efficient when improved, if only because they are in use every day.

Ideas (in no particular order)

- more use of church buildings – worth heating for 7 days
- double-glazing
- central heating/multi-fuel stove/underfloor heating
- insulation
- use local firms/tradesmen/materials
- volunteer labour
- Green Church group
- green travel – encourage car-sharing, use of public transport
- look outward to community – wind turbines etc
- sign up to Eco-Congregation – make use of resources – Module 13 to be launched soon

Take the whole matter seriously – this is not just about buildings but about individual people and their lifestyles - minds can be changed, everyone can do something and “every little helps”.

**Parish Development Fund** – had its origins in the Church Without Walls movement – focussing on needs in the community and encouraging local people to answer their own problems. PDF is meant to provide a listening ear, help groups with applications, walk with people. Grants can be for research, for a pilot project or for a full project up to 3 years.

Every project is different, so the approach is flexible – what will make the most/best difference in a given place. Projects are carefully monitored, there is continuing support and advice readily available to encourage local people, who know their own community and its needs.

**Two projects** were highlighted:

Helen works for “**New Opportunities**” in **N. Motherwell** where a “rather battered” hall church, sited next to a pub and a bookie’s, works as a Community Church, making connections with local people through parenting, cookery and relaxation groups, activities for children, and other responses to local need, doing as much as possible in partnership with the neighbouring Roman Catholic congregation. An Art Exhibition and a concert have involved the wider community. Young people have gone on holiday, have taken responsibility for a pot-plant project and have helped to make immigrant families welcome. Friendships have developed, trust has been built up and the spirit of community has flourished, as the church has been enabled to make a difference in people’s lives.

The Rev. Bill Hunter and friends from **Ruchazie Community Church** told us about their work and vision. A project to redevelop the building, a typical 1950s Church Extension, has involved the whole congregation, and given employment to local people. Donna described the Café, which has become a focus for the community, with child-friendly hours and activities. The emphasis, again, is on local people knowing what their own community needs, and being empowered to provide it for themselves. Perceptions of “church” have changed - it is not so much an “institution” and a “Sunday place” as a centre where folk are welcome every day, and where people “faithful for love” work together for the good of all. Following a Guild Project of some years ago, a connection has been built up with a community in Malawi, and groups from each community have visited each other, horizons have been widened and new respect encouraged.

Of course there are still many problems in both places, but the projects helped by the PDF have made a huge difference to many lives.

**An Information Update Session** gave Virginia an opportunity to highlight some of the many resources the Council provides – leaflets, newsletters, short films, information about the Eco-Congregation movement, the Science, Religion & Technology Project, prison-related issues, the “end of life” debate – the web-site is the place to start, and the council staff are always happy to advise.

**Closing worship**, conducted by the Convener, sent us out singing after a friendly and informative day.

Norah Summers (Falkirk Presbytery)