

Scotland District LP & WL Weekend Conference

1-2 February 2014

Speakers: Rev Chris Foxon (District Tutor) and Rev David Easton (District Chair)

Facilitators: Margaret Brown and Hilary Henderson (LPs & District Joint LP/WL Secretary)

Attendance: there were 17 LPs and 3 WLs, equating to a mere 28% of the 140 active LPs & WLs. [LPs: Anne Baird, Donnie Caldwell, Hilary Copland, Heather Coutts, Beryl Cowling, Emma Haggis, Phil Haggis, Margaret Law, Jenny Lee, Anne Lochhead, Kenneth MacKinnon, James McKerley, Jane Peers, Clare Purfit, Isobel Riddet, Julia Walsh, Jenni Whittle. WLs: Amanda Bishop, Angela Dobbins, Allan Henderson]

Costs: Owing to the change of venue it had been necessary to increase individual overnight contributions from £30 to £40 and the daily charge. These costs are of course subsidised with the balance, together with travel expenses claimed, paid from grants received from the District Advance Fund.

The Conforti Institute in Coatbridge was a new venue for our conference. 'Offering comfortable and welcoming residential accommodation for up to 70 people' it turned out to be a first-rate facility ably providing for all our requirements. The centre staff were cheerful and welcoming and very willing to help in any way. There was a choice of different sized conference rooms and even a chapel room for our Sunday morning communion and the catering was excellent, covering all our dietary needs. The twin-bedded rooms offered single occupancy at no extra charge and all had tea/coffee facilities, telephone & internet access. There was also the benefit of off-street parking.

Welcome: We arrived at midday on Saturday to a welcome cup of tea/coffee and sandwiches provided by the Centre. Before we began our programme, the centre manager, **Jim Aitken**, related all the housekeeping information such as fire drill etc.

Introduction: Hilary Henderson welcomed all present and asked for prayers for all those who were unable to be with us - especially Julia Reid, David Cowling, Carol Reeves and Brian Curtis who had to cancel their bookings at the last minute. Everyone was given attendance packs with agenda, travel expense forms and a couple of quizzes for their own enjoyment. There was also a Feedback form in order to gauge everyone's assessment on the venue and the contents of the presentations - comments were very positive.

Opening Worship: was led by Margaret Brown, ably assisted on the piano by Allan Henderson.

Children & Worship: the Saturday afternoon programme was led by **Rev Chris Foxon**. Part time minister at Partick & Woodlands Methodist and our District Tutor, Chris is a regular contributor on the BBC radio's 'Thought for the Day'. Having a background in education, as a teacher and lecturer, Chris was well equipped to help us think about children in relation to God and worship and what we can do to extend our children's spiritual experience.

In Session One we began to explore '**how children's minds work**' and how adults understand [or misunderstand] this. Taking us through the various age groupings, Chris explained the developing stages of a child's understanding of God. We came to understand that children begin with seeing God in human terms, then as superhuman, then supernatural, before grasping God's divine nature for themselves. Looking also at their moral development we were helped to see how children view the world around them and what motivates them and draws them towards specific behaviours.

In Session Two we looked at '**what children do know**' through learning and experience. In school, under the new 5-14 Curriculum for Excellence, children are taught Religious & Moral Education (RME) for roughly 2½hrs a week. In this programme children explore the big issues of religious and non-religious views and

evaluate their beliefs and values. In church or Sunday school, the Christian faith is passed on through a preacher's own evaluation and reasoning on religious values and beliefs worked out through access to learning. Teaching is better effected through the telling of stories (as Jesus taught his disciples), asking children what they think the story is about.

In Session Three we explored '**what we can do**' as preachers/leaders in worship with children present or conversely '**what shouldn't we try**'. Children have much to offer and it is important that they are valued and involved more in worship. We should try to affect children's feelings in our worship stories. Chris encouraged us to discern what our aim is when we conduct worship with children. Is it to entertain; to teach; to make them think? Is it to engage them in worship, and how do we help children to that? Chris offered a definition of worship as 'celebrating our worth in front of God' and children have something valuable to offer. We were encouraged to think how easy we find it relating to children in worship.

A Short Business Meeting: Future speakers/facilitators were discussed and suggestions made. 2015 has already been arranged for Claire Benton-Evans to give some of her expertise on All Age Worship - looking at creative prayer, dramatic/interactive storytelling, children's spirituality, and theology of all-age worship. Phil Haggis spoke of church groups with no church premises continuing to meet and the need to place information on a google map showing where they meet.

New District Chair: Saturday evening was an opportunity to meet and get to know **Rev David Easton**, our new District Chair. A native of Cornwall, David is no stranger to Scotland having begun his ministry in Motherwell. His ministry continued with a return to Cornwall then on to the Isle of Scilly (some viewers of "An Island Parish" which aired on BBC2 in 2008 may remember the Methodist minister in a couple of episodes). Before returning to Scotland, David ministered in Wales in Aberystwyth. On his own admission he is a lapsed climber of Munros and a keen cyclist!

Christians at the interface: After thanking us for what we do as local preachers and worship leaders, David drew us into discussion on 'how we shape our ministry while living our lives as Christians at the interface'. In the first session, we were encouraged to think about 'how we can help people to make sense of the Christian Church'. Individually, we examined our own interests and how far they overlap; how they conflict with one another; and how they help one another; before looking at what tensions of 'living at the interface' there were between the various parts of our life. In groups, we then reflected on our findings to see if there were any common threads/themes. Again on our own, we used this same process for our church and community, again checking for common threads/themes in groups. Continuing in our groups we explored what practical steps our churches could take to bridge the gap between it and the community and then discussed how we could begin to explore the faith with someone who had no experience of church.

Saturday Fellowship & Sunday Communion: Saturday evening was the opportunity to enjoy a time of relaxation, getting to know each other either for the first time or catching up and sharing the food we had each brought with us. Those who were not staying overnight left later in the evening and returned before 8am on Sunday morning, when we all gathered in the small chapel for **Holy Communion** presided over by David.

Christians at the Interface revisited: After breakfast, David brought us back to thinking about being Christians at the Interface, this time encouraging us to explore 'how we can help our congregations make sense of our community and the world'. On our own, we reflected on congregations where we lead worship and preach. In groups we discussed how far our preaching and leading of worship should be influenced by the type of congregation we have. Would we lead worship and preach in a different way if

the congregation was made up of people new to Church? We acknowledged that most of our congregations are made up of people who have been attending church for many years so how do we bridge the gap for them, helping them relate to the needs and concerns of their local community and the wider world? We looked at what our preaching is really about. Is it about *telling* people what they know already or *telling* them what they don't know? Or, is it about encouraging people to *think about* what they know already or *think about* what they don't know (or don't want to know)? What's the difference between *telling* and encouraging people to *think about*? In preparing for preaching, how do we reflect on the world/society/community around us and how does that reflection affect our preaching? Apart from the sermon, in what other ways could we bring 'the world out their' into the worship we lead and how far should/could others be part of this? What examples of things that have happened, or the way our society is, could we suggest to our congregation as an opportunity for the Church to engage with a wider world?

Closing Worship: We separated into groups to work on the various elements which make up an act of worship. Projection and musical requirements were provided by Allan Henderson and he assisted all the groups to bring together an order of service. The end result was a very moving, visual, interactive and expressive worship experience worthy of our God.

Margaret Brown & Hilary Henderson
Scotland District Joint LP/WL Secretary