

Methodist City Centre Network

Conference 2007

Faithful People

Our first session was opened by Peter Willis, the Network Coordinator, who after a short introduction, in which he suggested that the conference was about networking and about sharing experiences, invited contributions from everyone.

Influencing decisions

The first topic raised pointed out the need to be in with ‘the movers and shakers’, at the tables where the decisions are made, so that the church’s viewpoint might influence the decisions taken in our towns and cities. Getting involved in some kinds of meetings (such as the Media Conference to be organised by the *Guardian* newspaper with a fee of £700 per day) required money to be spent, though it was argued that there are free ways into some forums, particularly where a government initiative is involved as there is often a requirement to consult with faith communities. Minorities are often recognised in legislation or regulation, Christianity is a minority. Often, however, the directive to consult only resulted in the token presence of a faith representative who might not only be representing more than one denomination or faith but might also have little expertise in the matters being debated. Inability to respond quickly or not finding out soon enough often meant that decisions were made before any influence could be brought to bear. Yet faith communities have a place in these processes; people are often surprised that Christians do get involved, do have views. One way to provide flexibility is to have people who are almost waiting to respond, who are not so busy that they cannot find out and take action. This requires a culture change within the church. The expected move towards larger circuits might allow this to happen as we might have teams of people rather than separate individuals all trying to do the same thing.

On most decision-making bodies they will be Christians who are there because they have qualifications required by the group, or because they have a right to be there. Can such Christians be expected to strive for the decisions that accord with their beliefs? This may not be easy as often the person concerned will be representing some specific organisation and would have to follow the ‘company line’ arguing for decisions that would be to the benefit, perhaps commercial benefit, of the organisation. It might not be helpful for such people to declare their faith in such situations, but rather we should accept that their Christian commitment will shape their contribution to the decision-making process. Their discipleship should be subversive as it was more important that they get in on the act than come out as a Christian. We need to create more Christians by getting people to engage in church activities with a low cringe-factor, where they come or something different, where they encounter something – the love of God, or ‘spirituality’. Such people may just take. Or they may give something, they may serve the city centre.

There are doors to be opened and we must keep knocking, sometimes pushing, and sometimes we do not push hard enough. The offer of pastoral care, through chaplaincy, for example, may have already opened a door.

The night-time economy

This was a topic that kept coming up throughout the conference, a shorthand for all the activities, mainly entertainment and leisure, that occur in our town and city centres from early evening through to early morning. In Nottingham, *The Malt Cross* – a restored Victorian music hall – is a venue set up by the local churches as a place for young people to gather and enjoy themselves while

providing outreach opportunities through chaplains and pastors. *The Malt Cross* aims to be a place of reference and a focus of good practice as a 'Fresh Expressions' community. In Birmingham the biggest Christian Christmas event in the city was held in a nightclub before the start of the regular evening entertainment. In Bolt the churches have provided a 'safe-haven bus' where anyone who feels threatened or is uncomfortable in the town centre can find refuge. In Leicester walks through the streets have been organised to help people understand what goes on in the city. In Nottingham 'prayer walking' by groups of eight or ten have attracted positive responses from passers by. In Birmingham the URC provide free accommodation in order to create a Christian community that can engage with the night-time economy.

A number of city and town centre churches were involved with or had links to *Street Pastors*. This organisation provides a structure for encountering the night-time economy, a specific identity and training. They can establish credible links with community policing and can deal with such issues as drugs and the carrying and use of weapons.

More General Discussion

Here are some of the sound-bites of the discussion:

- the reluctance of many people to come into the city centre in the evening – specific reasons being the cost and the 'negativity' of car-parking
- within a single building there may be many 'congregations' each coming in for their own activities – people from different such congregations may only meet at the Church Council (some of these buildings may be almost open 24/7)
- the town or city centre church as a 'conference centre', a place where people come in providing opportunities for 'threshold evangelism
- we should not be just concerned with Sunday worshippers, but pastoring to other people who are part of the community but not necessarily people of faith
- believing rather belonging
- professional rather than confessional
- providing hospitality
- being in the centre of a city or town means passing boundaries, having flexibility and being at risk

Things that go on

These are some events or activities that were mentioned:

- Saturday morning club for kids
- do-it-yourself bible study
- 'God Talks' – presentations of theology
- if we are fishers of people what is our net?
- a 'cell church' where the members of each cell look out for each other and draw in new members until the cell is too big and divides

Ken Tait, 22 March 2007