

In November, the Methodist City Centre Network (MCCN) held its 2012 Conference. The Network links around 200 people who work in or have links with over 120 churches and projects in the centres of our cities or large towns. The network hosts the conference every two years and the theme in 2012 was *Are we afraid of success? Effective Ministry in the City Centre*. There were almost 60 participants.

Sean Stillman told us about Zac's Place in Swansea – named after Zacchaeus and 'offering a faith for ragamuffins?' Zac's is open to all, a place where the 'marginalised', those on the fringe of society, the chaotic, the addicted, can come together and feel safe, and be themselves in a 'a cross between an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and an Accident and Emergency department'. In the evening meetings there is always Bible study and time to talk together, but there are also baptisms and services of Holy Communion. Is Zac's Place alternative? Only as alternative as Jesus. The Gospel is radical, otherwise we are missing something.

Mark Wakelin (in two separate sessions) gave us an insight into some of his thinking. To catch the inspiration that Mark offered, you had to be there. I can, in these few words, only give you a taste....

Churches see themselves as *for* others. 'I am challenged by the phrase *of others* instead of *for others* – being *of the world* is being Christ.' 'If the church was *of* the world rather than *for* the world, how would the church be different?' Mark asked us to imagine that while we were sleeping a miracle occurred and 'the church becomes the people God wants it to be ... you notice things...' But how would we *know*?

Mark suggested that we feel that the church is in winter, but 'what if' – and he encouraged us to ask more *what if* questions – 'what if ... we are in the early part of spring ... in the space before the not-yet ... the space of the just-after ... where the sea is the future and we are just paddling ...'. He quoted from the Song of Solomon (2:10-12) 'The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth ...' 'God never says you've done your best ... the best is yet to come ... love shall reign over the universe.'

Billy Kennedy of the New Community Church in Southampton spoke about the work of the Pioneer Network that works with and alongside Methodist Churches in Southampton and other cities. He explained the need for a vision for the city, not just for the church – the city as 'a great place to grow up in and a great place to grow old'. In places they are invited into partnerships it is important to go 'with honour and sensitivity' recognising diversity and different traditions, and to 'build up trust and acceptance' creating relationships that will last longer than a lifetime.

Barry Naylor, acting Dean of Leicester Cathedral, recounted the developments at the cathedral in recent years from a time when most people in the city did not know they had a cathedral to one where the cathedral is owned by faith leaders of the city. An adjacent building (St Martin's House) accommodates the diocesan offices, is open to all, for food and meetings and networking. He mentioned links formed with the city council, between the police and a project for the homeless, and the role of the cathedral in the multi-faith response to the visits from the English Defence League. Barry now feels that the city wears its multiculturalism more openly, a fact recognised by the Queen's visit in her Jubilee Year.

The speaker-led sessions are only part of the conference. We had sessions where we had short reports of stories of success from a number of places, many opportunities to share and learn from each other, to laugh, to eat, and to pray, to join in Holy Communion with a sermon from Paul Smith of Plymouth on '... therefore do not lose heart' (Corinthians 4:1). As Paul said in a later email 'I think it was a great conference, maybe the best that I have ever attended.'

[704 words]

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More information about MCCN can be found on its web site www.methodistcitycentrenetwork.org.uk where a much fuller report the conference will become available.