

Parishes of Bearsted and Harrietsham
ANNUAL REPORT OF THE JUSTICE AND PEACE GROUP
2007/2008

The Justice and Peace group meets on the first Tuesday of every month bar August. We are now made up of 3 Catholics, 2 Anglicans from Holy Cross and 2 from the Methodist Church. Father Tim gives us his support and has encouraged people from the Parish to join us. Larry Mulheirn spoke from the altar after all three Masses recently about the work of the group. Some interest in joining the group is being shown. Late in 2007, Joan Brown, Chairman of the group, had to spend 7 weeks in hospital after a fall. Larry took over the Chairmanship at short notice and maintained the group's programme, with support from its members, for the next 3 months.

Homeless People

Maidstone Day Centre

At St Peter's/Good Shepherd, the month of September was devoted to an appeal for food, clothing and other goods for the Maidstone Day Centre. This is open 6 days a week. It provides for 30-40 rough sleepers, offering breakfast, showers, a hot lunch and access to clothes and other items, as well as advice services on benefits and other needs. It also offers care to people recently re-housed who come to the Centre for support and guidance from people they have learned to trust. The Day Centre also reaches out to people in need more widely through its Food For Thought programme which distributes food to pensioners and families in need in Maidstone. The in-date food is donated by supermarkets and other stores, plus any surplus food donated to the Centre which might otherwise be wasted. The St Peter's/Good Shepherd appeal collected a large quantity (three car loads) of food, clothing and other useful goods, plus £674.08 in cash (including £185 from the charity stall). The goods were stored during September in Kathleen Byrne's garage (a former member of our group) and delivered by Larry Mulheirn and Sean Hayden. There were also Harvest collections of food and other goods at the Methodist Church and Holy Cross which were given to the Day Centre. In January, all our churches observed Homelessness Sunday.

Shelter clothing.

At St Peter's and Good Shepherd good used clothing is donated all year round. It has been going to the Shelter Shop in Chatham to be sold in aid of homeless people helped by Shelter. Since September, any of the donated goods that could be used by the Maidstone Day Centre are taken there and the rest goes to Shelter. In each case, Larry Mulheirn takes responsibility.

Homelessness Policy

The Justice and Peace group is represented on the Maidstone Housing Sounding Board, made up of officials and voluntary agencies. This discusses Maidstone housing policies, including policies to tackle homelessness. Larry is our main representative, but when he cannot attend, Daphne Bower or Joan Brown takes his place. During the past year we have seen a more active policy developing to tackle homelessness. The particular problem presented by rough sleepers who have to sleep out on cold winter nights has proved difficult to deal with because of the cost involved. It was hoped this year to have a double decker bus at night in the Chequers Centre car park, working with the Day Centre to cover those most in need. In the end this did not prove

possible, again because of the costs involved.

Peace Issues

Cluster Bombs

A continuing issue this year has been Government policy on cluster bombs, many of which fail to explode on use and remain a serious danger to civilians when the conflict is over. Early in the year the group promoted a petition and post cards (put out by Landmine Action) in all our churches, supporting an international ban on cluster bombs. The UK attended a meeting in February where 46 countries (including the UK) signed a declaration calling for an international ban on cluster bombs and there will be further meetings on this goal. The UK Government took steps to destroy those of its own cluster bombs which were of the kind that often failed to explode on impact, but proposed to keep other 'more reliable' cluster bombs. The group wrote to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) backing the decision to get rid of the worst type of cluster bombs but calling on it to get rid of all our cluster bombs and to work for an international ban, but the MoD continued to defend its position. The group then wrote to the Foreign Secretary – with similar results. Larry had also written to the Israeli Embassy about their use of cluster bombs in the Lebanon with large civilian casualties.

The Trident issue.

We wrote to the government last year, on this issue. Despite widespread opposition to the proposed additional nuclear weapons, government policy has not changed.

Shut DESO.

This is a government organization which offered strong support to the arms trade. The Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) ran a campaign to shut DESO which we supported. In September it was announced that DESO was to be shut and we wrote to the Prime Minister offering strong support for this move (and added a call to end all support for cluster bombs).

Clean Investment Campaign.

This is a project of the Campaign Against the Arms Trade which seeks to persuade public organizations not to invest in companies that sell arms to countries with a poor human rights record or who are involved in conflict within or between poor countries. Our group has continued to write letters to Christian organizations but just recently, CAAT has decided that the list of churches and charities involved has become 'reassuringly short' and involved only minor groups. We can claim to have contributed to this favorable development. CAAT is now focusing on the pension schemes of local councils and Larry has been writing to Kent County Council which invests heavily in the arms industry.

Hiroshima/Nagasaki Service.

Every year, the Kent Justice and Peace groups organize a service at Aylesford Priory to commemorate the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – a lovely service, always worth attending. Two of our group and others from our churches went to this year's service.

Action for powerless people.

Prisoners of Conscience.

Innocent men and women are held in prison in many countries for defending human rights or simply practicing their religion. They spend many years in prison, often under appalling conditions. Lists of these were compiled by Larry Mulheirn and in late November sheets containing 2-4 names and details of each case were distributed in St Peter's, Good Shepherd, Holy Cross, St Mary's and the Methodist Church. Pat Blake was sent a copy for her parish in Devon. The lists were emailed by Larry to 20 other Kent RC parishes and to the Southwark Justice and Peace office. Joan wrote short articles for the local parish magazines. We hope that many parishioners from all of these churches – local and otherwise – sent cards to the prisoners on the sheet they received, and so brought great comfort to them and to their families. .

Asylum Seekers.

The group has continued to express its concern about the treatment of asylum seekers, especially those whose application has been rejected. (In 2005 only 7% of asylum seekers were granted full refugee status). In April 2007 we wrote to the Home Office on the policies being developed on children and young people aimed at reducing the number accepted as genuine refugees. The reply received defended the policy. But in July it was reported that the Home Office had been reviewing the policy on children and recommended improvements in the policies that we (and many others) had criticized. We wrote to the Home Office expressing our pleasure at the good news about improved policies. But we also urged improvements in Section 4 housing and cash support policies to avoid destitution among failed asylum seekers who feared to return home to their own country. We also called for failed asylum seekers to be allowed to work to support themselves and their families. The Home Office denied any policy to render failed asylum seekers destitute – but reports from many respected sources continue to report the destitution of many of this group. The Home Office also rejected the call for the right to work as inappropriate. A report from Parliament's Human Rights Committee in late 2007 was critical of many of the policies and practices we had written to the Home Office about. As part of our concern with this issue the group has promoted in our churches Refugee Week, Racial Justice Sunday and Human Rights Day with exhibits and prayers in our churches. .

Human Trafficking

We first got involved in this issue late last year when reports were made of trafficking into this country of women, children and some men for sexual purposes. In early 2007 we took part in a post card campaign which commemorated the abolition of the slave trade by calling for the end of trafficking today. On May 20th we promoted Not For Sale Sunday in our churches, in cooperation with the organization Chaste. More recently, as trafficking has continued, the government was planning legislation to ban payment for sex. It wanted first to review the progress of this type of legislation in Sweden and when the report on this was available, suitable legislation would be introduced. The legislation is likely to be controversial in that it would involve fining men for paying for sex. Our group decided that we should write to Harriet Harman Deputy Prime Minister, supporting legislation on this issue. Mairin Holland wrote the letter for us.

Guantanamo Bay

It was learned in mid 2007 that a number of UK long term residents, who were not UK citizens, were being detained in the US facility Guantanamo Bay. – a much criticized centre. These were men who had been granted refugee status or had been given indefinite leave to remain in the UK, had settled, built up families, but on travelling abroad had been detained by the USA. Later they were found to be innocent of the US charges, but the UK refused to readmit them because they were not UK citizens. Larry wrote to the Foreign Office calling on the government to readmit them and re-unite them with their families, and in the case of those with refugee status, not risk their being returned by the US to the country they had fled. In August, the Foreign Office wrote to say that five of the men concerned would be readmitted to the UK when the US released them. Three of the men are now back in the UK but we are still pressing for all to be brought home.

Supporting families and children in developing countries

Traidcraft

Traidcraft was founded in 1979 as a Christian response to poverty and exploitation in developing countries and it aims to fight poverty through trade. It buys goods in developing countries through Traidcraft Exchange. It also supports the Fair Trade Foundation, which promotes Fair Trade Fortnight, observed in all our churches. Both these organizations whose Fair Trade goods are sold on the Traidcraft stall ensure that their producers are paid a fair price, pay their workers a decent wage and offer decent working conditions. A premium is also paid to improve conditions in the local community. Our Traidcraft stalls can be found every Saturday and Sunday at St Peter's, once a month at Good Shepherd, the Methodist Church and Holy Cross (and some other occasions there) and three times a term in Roseacre School. At St Peter's/Good Shepherd this year, sales amounted to £2413.84 including £768.20 for Christmas cards. The Craft stall this year had to be cancelled because of Joan Brown's admission to hospital. She and Samantha Anandappa run the Saturday stall, helped sometimes by Joanna Anandappa, Joan takes the stall to Good Shepherd. though this has been missed for a few months because Joan has not been able to manage it. Brenda Tipper, Mary Smith, Liz Taylor and Chris Dyke run the Sunday stall. They are not group members so we are especially grateful to them. The Methodist stall is run by Daphne Bower and the Holy Cross and Roseacre stalls by Pauline Johnson and Wendy Stephens.

The Charity stall – St Peter's and Good Shepherd.

This stands by the Traidcraft stall and sells a variety of goods given by parishioners – plants, books, videos, DVDs, CDs, fancy goods and many other items – and bought by other parishioners. This year we raised a total of £1,199. We used it as follows: £140 added to the Nicaragua appeal; £185 added to the Maidstone Day Centre appeal; £164 towards the £180 needed for our sponsored child in Kenya, £200 for the work of the Bishop Simeon Trust for AIDS orphans in South Africa, £390 to aid refugees in Darfur (including £130 added to the Red Bucket collection for CAFOD and £260 to the International Refugee Trust) and £100 for the Jesuit Refugee Service. The generosity of parishioners who give goods for sale and who buy goods, often over the asking price, is clear. We receive warm letters of thanks from all those to whom we send the money.

Used stamps for the Medical Mission sisters – St Peter’s and Good Shepherd.

Our collection of used stamps supports the Medical Mission Sisters (MMS), who work in Africa, India, East Asia, Latin America and Europe, concentrating their efforts on very poor and disadvantaged families, helping AIDS orphans, the homeless, young people in difficulties. Brenda Tipper posts off the stamps and receives the warm thanks of MMS to all who are thoughtful enough to save and give their stamps.

Ascension to Pentecost Novena.

Our prayers this year were for the people of Darfur, driven from their homes and crowded into refugee camps in neighbouring countries and living under appalling conditions. Our prayers, as always, were greatly needed.

Unearth Justice – CAFOD campaign.

The Unearth Justice campaign relates to gold mining in Honduras and the Congo. Gold mining ought to produce more prosperity, but the way it is run means it does not. The wishes of local people are usually ignored, their land is taken from them, water, air and soil are polluted and the influx of miners often leads to rising rates of HIV/AIDS. The only people to profit are the big companies. Action on this problem in the UK is directed to jewellers selling gold products (rings etc) and to the big gold companies. The campaign was in two stages, with post cards being sent off by all our churches. (In this first stage, 45,000 postcards were sent off by groups like ours around the country.) The second stage was more modest as CAFOD had insufficient copies of the second stage postcard, so members of the group each sent off a card. .

Appeals at St Peter’s and Good Shepherd

Lent Appeal – Our Sister Parish in Nicaragua.

In Lent 2007 we had our annual appeal for our sister parish of Cristo Redentor in Nicaragua. This is a huge parish covering a fair sized town and dozens of small villages with poor and sometimes no connecting roads. Our donations have helped with the spiritual care of this Parish, with health needs and with the education of older children. The total collected was £880.30 including £140 from the Charity stall and a donation from the 2007 Christmas Fayre. Larry Mulheim organises this appeal. We have been supporting this parish for over 20 years, since the days of the civil war. Three years ago we decided we needed to switch some of our efforts towards Africa, where the need is arguably greater. So this was our last Lenten collection for the Parish of Cristo Redentor, though we hope to maintain the Nicaragua link with future support from our parish. A project to support a parish in Kenya is being organised during Lent this year.

CAFOD Advent Appeal.

The CAFOD Appeal was again for its Focus Africa programme. It covers a number of African countries and aims to raise £1 million to help poor people caught in the worst natural and man made disasters – drought, locust invasions, failed crops, military conflicts, gold mining, AIDS and unfair trade rules. Both emergency help and training to improve earning ability are offered. Our appeal raised £812.26.

Maidstone Day Centre Appeal for Homeless people

This was reported earlier – under Homeless People. In our Parish it raised £674.08, and a large quantity of goods.

Lesotho Appeal

There was no appeal for Lesotho this year because we have lost touch with Father Ramakatsa who we got to know when he came to our Parish. He is no longer working in the Seminary but is up in the mountains where the email – our means of contact – does not reach. We have tried other means of contacting him (via Fr Peter, for example) without success.

Finally

This year has been busy but not without some difficulties due to Joan's absence. These were overcome by Larry and by the cooperation of all our group members whose commitment to working for human rights and justice and against poverty in our world remains strong. Post card and other campaigns in which we want to involve our parishioners are carried out by Helen Judges and Bernard Mee in Holy Cross and St Mary's, by Daphne Bower and Ann Smith in the Methodist Church and by Mairin Holland, Larry Mulheirn and Joan Brown in St Peter's and Good Shepherd. Other parishioners in all these churches give a willing hand. As a group we enjoy our meetings, with plenty of discussion to decide on our course of action. We need more members and hope that reading this report will attract them.

Joan Brown Chairman

List of current members

Holy Cross – Helen Judges and Bernard Mee
Methodist Church – Daphne Bower and Ann Smith
St Peter's – Larry Mulheirn, Mairin Holland and Joan Brown.