Community Routes

A Future with Hope:
General Chapter, 11-15 September 2006

Like the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops, the General Chapter of SSF makes no decisions - but is nonetheless of great significance in the life of our Province. We gather, we pray together, we worship together, together we listen to the invited speakers and to each other as we respond to them, we share delicious meals and the accompanying conversation, we share information about our houses and our work, we relax and laugh together, we seek out old friends and make new ones. Finally, we disperse to our various destinations and tasks knowing that it's up to us to make full use of all that was offered to us in those three short days. (We were at St Gabriel's Conference Centre, Ditchingham, Norfolk).

The Bishop Protector, on the first morning, took us straight to Assisi and to Francis' encounter with the Lord in the tumbledown church of San Damiano - 'Go, build my church...' This was not just about conservation. What sort of church was Francis to build, are we to build? Bishop Michael faced us with the great divide which exists about biblical authority - the divide which is behind all the controversy on gender and sexuality. He also spoke about love for the church, so evident in the life of Francis, so forgotten in life today. He very tentatively offered his suggestions about directions we might take in our search for a Franciscan identity in the twenty-first century.

Bishop Gordon Mursell (Bishop of Stafford) was passionate on Jeremiah as a prophet of hope in a time of crisis.

Sister Jane Bertelsen, Provincial of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood, described the process of renewal among her own sisters, who are gathering for their General Chapter in May, 2007. They are looking for authentic Franciscan living and find (as we do) that it's easier to found than to refound an order. There's an ongoing struggle between tradition and reality. We love activity, but we need the gospel.

Yes, we did have small groups which met for morning prayer, and to consider questions posed by the speakers. And yes, there was fun on the last evening in the form of a party with entertaining contributions from sisters and brothers who prefer to remain anonymous.

An old friend of ours, the Revd John Austen, acted as facilitator of the Chapter and was very unobtrusive until the final (and crucial) plenary session when he leapt into prominence as a chairman who inspired confidence in him, and in ourselves. So, thank you John, and thank you speakers, and thank you all who worked hard to plan and lead.

We pray & worship together; we relax & laugh together ; we share delicious meals & conversation

Beverley to York in Six Days
Mark Edmund continues to enjoy the annual pilgrimage of the Pilgrims of St Francis. Kathleen Holford’s article on page 16 tells more of what is involved for those who belong the ‘the Pilgrims’. Here, Mark Edmund writes of his most recent pilgrimage:
The Pilgrims of St Francis walked the Minster Way from Beverley to York in August 2006, over a period of six days sleeping in church and village halls en route. The weather was kind and rain when it did happen seemed to be mostly at night once we had arrived at our destination for the day or very brief showers that didn’t last long during the day.

The group of pilgrims this year was a mixed bunch of people from pre-teens to people in their eighties, so there is no excuse not to join in on the grounds of age. I was very surprised at how flat the walk was generally, there were only a couple of days that had hills and only one day that had a very steep hill.

The walks on average were 8 - 10 miles per day and were taken at the pace of the average walkers with frequent stops for those who were slower to catch up. There was a great sense of fellowship over the week with people doing things together and living very simply alongside each other and helping each other to share the journey and many friendships were formed that will carry on long after the pilgrimage finished.

Prayer was an important and frequent part of each day and although there was somebody in overall control of organising the prayers, they were shared out so that those who wished to could lead the group in praying together. The pilgrimage began with a Eucharist in Beverley Minster and finished with a Eucharist in York, unfortunately not in the Minster although there was a guided tour of York Minster for those who wished to look round that wonderful building.

One of my memories of this walk was trying to get across an area of deep mud caused by rain and a herd of cows drinking from their water trough and churning up the ground around it, this being the only way we could exit the field to get where we needed to be. But once again that great sense of togetherness came to the fore with people helping each other across, the front people finding foot-holds for those following and people offering arms and hands to help each other cross over until everybody was safely back onto firm ground without anybody having an unwanted mud bath!

I look forward to next year’s pilgrimage from Sherborne to Glastonbury and picking up the friendships made on previous pilgrimages, and once again being part of that wonderful fellowship that is the Pilgrims of St Francis.

Justice, Peace and the Environment - a London view
Hugh, resident in the East End of London, is involved in a variety of events and networks. Here, he writes of some recent activities.

Our parishioners come from many countries, especially in Africa. When relatives visit they often experience bureaucratic problems. Our parish belongs to London Citizens - churches, mosques, trade unions and schools working together for the common good. I joined a Citizens team at Lunar House, the Home Office Immigration Directorate in Croydon, to investigate stories of lost passports and long queues. We offered Home Office clients refreshments in a caravan parked nearby and invited them to complete a questionnaire. The enquiry led, via a meeting in the House of Lords, to the publishing of our recommendations, which the Home Office itself agrees are necessary, e.g. Halal food in the canteen is simple; whereas a reliable system to track documents will be costly. I’m on a monitoring group holding the Home Office to account. One day when a parishioner was threatened with deportation, we had the contacts and confidence to get him released from detention.

London Citizens supports low paid, migrant cleaning staff in their demand for the London Living Wage, rather more than the National Minimum Wage. ‘Low paid cleaners are an essential part of every University…. They are poorly paid, receive no holiday or sick pay. Contracted cleaners are academia’s dirty secret. But last Thursday, Queen Mary, part of the University of London, voted to
abolish poverty pay.’ (The Guardian). London Citizens hopes other colleges and businesses will follow suit.

I joined the campaign against next year’s International Arms Fair at the nearby Excel Exhibition Centre. I have prayed with members of other faiths at St Ethelburga’s, the city church that became a centre of reconciliation after an IRA bomb. I attended public events calling for Norman Kember’s release and for a cease-fire in Lebanon.

Climate change steadily rises up our agenda. I have been privileged to hear Professor James Lovelock - of the Gaia theory - controversially calling for an immediate increase in nuclear power. I have also heard Clare Foster, the Church of England environment advisor, inviting us to measure and then cut our fuel usage in each of our church buildings in the Shrinking the Footprint campaign. In working for justice, peace and the environment, there is much happening in London.

St Deiniol’s
Colin Wilfred writes about a recent visit:
St Deiniol’s Residential Library is at Hawarden in North Wales, about ten miles from Chester. It contains the Bishop Moorman Franciscan collection, which has about two thousand items in it. The library has slowly been building up a modern Franciscan section and SSF is making suggestions as to how it can be strengthened, particularly as this province is giving a modest amount each year to help with this. The Library has a quarter of a million books (mainly theology and history) and a similar number of manuscripts. It was founded by Gladstone in the nineteenth century and there is a number of scholarships and bursaries to help with costs. The atmosphere is a combination of an academic (but not heavy) community and a country house hotel. I would strongly recommend it for anyone wanting to do some serious reading and/or writing. The address is:
St Deiniol’s Library, Hawarden, Flintshire CH5 3DF www.st-deiniols.org

Round up
In East London, the brothers have moved from St Martin’s to St Matthias' vicarage, where Mark Edmund and Hugh are now resident. Martin John was admitted as a novice on 24 October, following which he moved to Glasshampton. Oswin Paul moved to Hilfield in November. Noel Nikki and Patteson Kwa’ai from the Pacific Islands Province are spending time in the U.K. Martin Philip has been released from vows and from membership of SSF.

In the Second Order, three of the sisters at Freeland have died recently: Elsie Felicity on 7 September, Gillian Clare on 8 November and Patricia on 12 November. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.