

The Hilfield Project - A Peaceful Revolution?

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Hilfield Friary has long been valued as a place of peace; the quiet and beauty of the countryside, the rolling Dorset downland and the magnificent views across the Blackmore Vale have drawn people over the years to come for prayer, for retreat and for sanctuary. The Hilfield Project is a new initiative to build on this tradition and to work for harmony with the environment and a peaceful relationship between people of different faiths. Both of these are urgent issues of our time and for both of them St Francis offers a profound wisdom - of living humbly before God with all people and every created being, and of recognizing the intimate connectedness of all things; we all come from the same source of immeasurable, creative love and we belong together in one family as brothers and sisters.

At Hilfield there are some wonderful resources for exploring and growing in this Franciscan tradition - nineteen acres of meadow and woodland unaffected by commercial farming methods and thus rich in both flora and fauna. Assisted by the Dorset Wildlife Trust a conservation plan has been drawn up which involves the monitoring of plant and animal species and the establishment of a programme of grazing the meadows and coppicing the woodlands. There's new planting too, of hedgerows and of three acres of broadleaf trees which have replaced a blanket of conifers felled three years ago, at the same time leaving space for areas of natural regeneration which will encourage diversity. It's hoped that people will come not only to enjoy this richness, but also to work as volunteers and to reflect on how to live gently and kindly with the world around us.

Another resource is the buildings; three houses dating from the days of The Little Commonwealth, the school at Flowers Farm before the brothers arrived in 1921, have been set aside for the use of the Project. In addition, Douglas House, the Friary Guest House built in the 1960s, will be converted to provide comfortable and flexible self-catering accommodation for individuals, groups and families who come to use the place and to learn something of the Franciscan tradition of seeing all people and all things as sacraments of the glory of God. Seeing God in All Things, Becoming Instruments of Peace, Praying for Africa and Light-Footprint Families are some of the courses arranged for this year; groups may also organize their own programmes and speakers. Day groups from schools, churches and other organisations are also welcome so that Franciscan wisdom may be shared more widely.

The buildings, with separate catering facilities, are well suited for use by members of different faiths visiting the Project, and the Friary Recreation Room, without overt religious symbols, can be used for worship by non-Christians. Rural West Dorset is not exactly the heart of multi-faith Britain but already there are inter-faith groups from around the country showing an interest in coming to stay. An important need in our increasingly diverse

society is to find values which can reach beyond cultural differences and can hold communities together; a growing awareness of responsibility for our threatened natural environment among people of all faiths and of none may well be one such 'common value'. By being a place where people from different faith traditions can work and reflect together on their relationship with the natural world the Hilfield Project seeks to encourage that peaceful and respectful dialogue which is at the heart of Franciscan mission.

The Friary has always counted on people - residents, wayfarers and guests - working to care for the place and to support the common life, and the Project too relies on volunteers. At present there are six men (though women also are welcome) living at Hilfield for a year and helping to establish and develop the vision; the Friary provides board and lodging and they receive £25 per week pocket money. They undertake much of the work on the land, the fields, the woods and the gardens. Already, after less than a year, a difference can be seen; the organic vegetable garden has been renewed, a programme of recycling has been introduced, composting rules are being learnt, an art-and-craft room is set up, and the possibilities of renewable energy are being thought through.



But above all the volunteers bring a sense of enthusiasm and fun to the Project and to the community life of the Friary. The expectation is that when they leave they will not only have given but will also have received something important from their time at Hilfield, including, maybe, a future direction in conservation or reconciliation work. The possibility is being explored of linking with a local college to give a vocational qualification. Local helpers who offer perhaps just one day a month to assist with various aspects of the project, not least with the administration and communication, are also very much valued.

All this of course needs direction and leadership, and funding has been received from an outside trust for a Development Officer to take the Project forward: to establish a network of people and organizations who share the broad aims of living peaceably with the environment and with people of different faiths, to see that the Project is financially viable and look for the necessary funding, and to organise the recruitment and care of volunteers - in short to prepare and see through a Development Plan. A steering committee of friends, including members of the SSF Third Order, together with four brothers, holds the vision and gives longer term direction.

And what of the life of the Friary within which the Hilfield Project has been set up? The brothers, though reduced in number, remain at the heart of the place; the Project has by no means 'taken over' the Friary nor sidelined the particular Franciscan ethos, rather it gives fresh expression to it. The commitment to prayer and community living - learning to live peaceably, in tune with God and with each other - is essential to the vision. The welcoming of guests to share meals and stay on retreat (in a new Guest House, created in the rooms over the Friary Library), the celebration of the Eucharist, the fourfold daily office and the ministry by the brothers in schools and parishes in

the local area, keep both Friary and Project rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, 'The Word made flesh'.

In the face of two great threats facing the world today - the fragmentation of society under the pressure of religious extremism and the destruction of the environment leading to catastrophic climate change - the temptation can be either denial by living in a well-defended ghetto or trying to patch things up so that life can carry on as before. The Franciscan spirituality on which the Project is based offers a much more radical way forward - a reorientation of the heart to be in tune with God's abundant goodness in all creation, and a revolution in the way we think of ourselves and each other as brothers and sisters. *f*

Find out more about the Hilfield Project: www.HilfieldPROJECT.co.uk