

Chair's Report Justice and Peace AGM Saturday February 8th 2025

I would first of all like to thank you for taking the time to read this brief report. More detailed reports about specific areas of the Council's work are contained in greater depth in the reports provided by other members of the Council. I am very grateful for all that they do and have done over the course of the year.

The Co-ordinating Council has continued to meet monthly since the last inspiring AGM and we believe it is important to maintain this regular commitment. We were very pleased to have new members joining the Council last year - new people always bring new ideas and energy. We usually meet on Saturday mornings but we have also experimented with evening meetings this year. Meetings are usually well attended. As a Council, we meet online for most of our meetings but we have been making an effort to have in person meetings more frequently in different parts of the Diocese. We are fundamentally a Co-ordinating Council and information sharing and encouraging others is a key part of what the Council is about. I am grateful for the work of Liz Archibald in her work as communications officer for ensuring there are regular newsletters and that information is also given to the Diocesan website. I would also like to thank others who have contributed articles for the newsletters.

As a Council, I think that we recognise that we need to be continually reflecting on what we are about and to continually seek renewal. I am standing down as Chair this year as I do believe this needs to be a role that rotates. We always begin our monthly meeting with a prayer. This reminds us that God is our guide and the work is not all down to our own efforts. Whilst we continue to follow a standard agenda, we strive to allow at least some space in the meetings for Council members to reflect together, to evaluate the work that is going on, and to consider new areas for involvement. As I said last year, fresh ideas from outside the Council are very much welcome, and would be listened to. As I also said last year, it would be great if we could also find ways to attract younger people on to the Council.

Justice and Peace Refugee Project

The Justice and Peace Refugee Project, based in Newcastle, continues to be a beacon of hope for hundreds of people seeking asylum. People come to the project seeking support in the form of food, money, and clothing and practical help is also given to parents with babies. Support has also been given in the form of English classes. The people who come for support have come from different nations and new people, often people who have experienced so much distress and pain, continue to seek help from the project every week. The project is well supported by parishes in the Diocese and we are grateful for all the donations that come into the project from parishes and schools across the Diocese. The Report by Azad Hasan, our Project Worker, demonstrates how the project works in partnership with other agencies, signposting people to the support and services they need. The project also has an important role in raising consciousness about the issues that people seeking asylum face and as a network we are aware of the need to raise awareness to a wider audience and the project has a very good relationship with Asylum Matters.

As the current Chair of the Co-ordinating Council, I want to thank the Steering Group for all of the work that they do, for David Archibald who is the Chair and to Marjory Knowles for so capably looking after the financial side of the project. This includes work she on funding applications for the project and which this year had been especially difficult. Azad has been a blessing for us and has done such wonderful work during his time in the project, building links and promoting the project much more widely. His commitment to the people who come to the centre is very evident. The volunteers, the backbone of the project, also deserve thanks for the time, skills, knowledge and commitment they bring.

Prayer Vigils

The prayer vigils at the Medomsley Detention Centre continue. These came out of an idea from one of the members of the Council. Last year, I said that these vigils have become ecumenical, attracting people from other churches and that they now also include people from the Jewish faith. The vigils, again held monthly on Sunday afternoons, are a powerful witness, drawing attention to the plight of the women who are detained and showing the solidarity with them that the gospel demands.

Diocesan Network

The Justice and Peace network in the Diocese remains active. We are grateful for the work of Liz Archibald who is the Communications Officer and who, as highlighted earlier, helps ensure information and updates go into the diocesan newsletter and website. It is very heartening to see local groups of people coming together and taking actions for justice and peace. Some Council members are part of local Justice and Peace groups in their own geographical communities where they are active. Examples of initiatives around the Diocese have included vigils and services to commemorate Hiroshima and also pilgrimage walks to remember the people of Gaza and local environmental initiatives.

Beyond the Diocese

As a Council, we also recognise that we need to work with other and that we are part of a regional and national network of activists. Council members try to attend justice and peace events organised by the regional networks. In recent months Sara Byson from Tyne and Wear Citizens led one of these events and this was well attended by representatives from the Council. There was also a very active attendance and involvement from members of the Council at the NJPN national conference in July 2024. I was also asked to lead a workshop that looked at the impact of neoliberalism and its implications and this was well attended and it was heartening to see so many people taking part. Liz Archibald continues to be an active member of the National Executive Council. As a council we hope again to be well represented at the next National Conference between July 2025 and July 27th which is entitled 'Towards a Just Peace'.

Environment

We have been blessed to have active involvement in the Council from Chris and Claire Myers and Lya Voller for all of the work that they do around environmental issues. This includes their active membership of the Diocesan Environment Group which Chris's report will detail at the AGM but also much more. In the light of international developments, there is clearly so much to concern us but we also need to celebrate, encourage and build upon the grassroots work taking place in the Diocese which gives a much-needed cause for hope. Lya is now no longer living in the Diocese but I would like to thank her for all she has done. It is also wonderful to have Rachel from Cafod on the Co-ordinating Council and I want to thank her for the wisdom she brings.

We continue to work closely with Fr Adrian who continues to attend the Council monthly on behalf of CARITAS and we are grateful for all of his support. We are sorry that one of our Council members, Karen Thompson has felt unable to continue and I want to take this opportunity to thank her for her contribution this year and we have all been inspired by the work that is being undertaken at Esh and Esh Winning.