AGM of the Justice & Peace Co-ordinating Council held on 8 February 2025,

at St Mary's Cathedral Conference Room, 10.30am to 3.00pm

Theme: Living in Hope, Working for Peace

34 members and guests present

The chair, Phil Watson, welcomed participants and led with a prayer. He introduced Pat Devlin, well known to us in Hexham & Newcastle J&P, and Rev Jonathan Adams. They led a discussion on ways to promote peace between communities in conflict, here the Israeli Palestinian conflict. The material was prepared by a group called Parents Group - Families Forum (PG - FF), whose members are Palestinians and Israelis who have lost a child or close family member to inter-communal violence.

Their goal is to reduce and eventually eradicate this violence by bringing members of both groups together to promote dialogue, tolerance, reconciliation and finally peace.

Their guiding principles are:

- challenge binary thinking, move from 'us vs them' to 'us'
- humanise 'the other', break down stereotypes and encourage respectful engagement, honesty and, importantly, truth telling
- allow, embrace multiple narratives and find common ground
- encourage personal dialogue narratives, accept that reconciliation is a process not an event, always 'listen from the heart'

Participants then role played in pairs using materials designed to be mutually provocative, listening without interrupting the other. Afterwards, we discussed as a group our feelings, how we dealt with the challenges and in its broadest sense what our reactions taught us about ourselves.

The 'real world' goal/hope would be that following further such conversations, having realised that the initial reactions on both sides are the same there would be a gradual change in tone and a softening in both positions.

Following this participants watched a very moving video of a conversation between two members of PG - FF, a Palestinian man whose 14 year old daughter had been shot dead outside her school some years before and an Israeli woman whose 20 year old son was killed in a rocket attack in southern Israel on the 23rd of October 2023 while doing his national service as part of a search and rescue unit within the Israeli army. They told each other (and us) about their background, their feelings about the deaths of their children, their evolving feelings about the other community and why they chose to belong to this group: essentially, they thought that reconciliation was the only way to break the cycle of violence and prevent deaths of even more children.

They, like other members of the organisation, currently 700 families, lead discussions in schools, community centres and with other groups. The organisation holds summer camps and a well-attended yearly Joint Memorial Day Ceremony in Tel Aviv.

The session finished with a discussion on next steps. Our thoughts inevitably turned to the peace process in Northern Ireland and the hope that something similar would happen in Israel - Palestine and that the PG - FF would grow and be able to assert a more powerful influence.

Pat has sent us further guidance on how we could use this material in parishes, schools etc., Caritas in the Diocese has bought access (click here for more information).

A list of relevant internet sites, also provided by Pat, can be found here – no doubt practical ways to help will be suggested in those sites.

As a group we shall most certainly return to this issue.

Pat and the Rev Adams were thanked for their most inspiring presentation.

Business Meeting
Jubilee reflection - Fr Adrian

- Jubilee theme – hope for all, let hope to infuse our J&P activities & experience
- let us all be pilgrims of hope as we go through the holy door of hope, which will not close
- good news already apparent, at times in unexpected places – Fr Adrian mentioned the bookshop in his parish neighbourhood which had set aside a space for quiet and reflection – Caritas H&N would like to hear from all of us stories of hope in our own lives and parishes
- let us all be more open to each other and the stranger
- if each one of us did a little more the cumulative effect could be dramatic

Environment – Chris Myers

Chris had already circulated his usual detailed and cogent report for 2024 – unhappily, there is not a lot to be happy about:

- rapid rise in atmospheric carbon content – 420ppm, a 25% rise in 40 years
- 16 tipping points predicted, currently none will be avoided if our current fossil fuel use continues unchanged
- UK has only 50% of biodiversity it had not so long ago
- Political will lacking
- But all not necessarily doom and gloom as we look forward to a world free of poverty on a liveable planet
- COP30 in Brazil likely to concentrate on the Amazon and financial levers, a tax on financial transactions (Tobin tax) could raise a lot of money as could a wealth tax

Some hopeful, local and personal initiatives among quite a few:

- the Rothbury Estate has been bought by Wildlife Trusts for rewilding 'return to nature' – this is hugely important
- plans for a Laudato Si' centre at the Diocesan youth village
- plans to promote CAFOD's 'Living Simply' in parishes
- encourage work already being done in the Diocese e.g. Esh and Esh Winning
- we can now all now easily calculate our own personal carbon footprint using a WWF app suggested by Chris – it certainly concentrates the mind!

Phil thanked Chris for his comprehensive presentation. Please click here to see a copy of Chris' presentation.

JPRP Report – Azad Hasan

The annual report for 2024 was previously circulated and Azad presented a summary (read here) at the AGM.

- overall, a successful year
- number of clients increased
- support from the SVP
- increasing contact with other refugee supporting organisations
- number of supermarket and voluntary sector donors has increased compared to 2023

Azad was thanked for all his efforts by David Archibald - who himself contributes greatly to the project.

Finance Report – Marjory Knowles

Finance summary for 23/24 previously circulated

- overall, finances slightly improved on 22/23, but we are dependent on grants which are increasingly difficult to attract

Marjory was thanked for all her hard work in attracting funds over the years and keeping an expert eye on our finances

Chair's Report for 2024 – Phil Watson

A comprehensive report already circulated by Phil highlighted a great deal of activity and achievement including:

- the local and national J&P work of Liz Archibald, Communications Officer
- our strong links with other like-minded groups e.g. Tyne & Wear Citizens via Sara Bryson and Fr Chris Hughes
- the continuing development of the prayer vigils
- our contribution to the National J&P conference at Swanwick, where in 2024 Phil led a successful workshop on Neoliberalism
- the work of Chris and Clare Myers' environment work
- and our fruitful collaboration with Caritas through the ever-helpful Fr Adrian

Phil, who is standing down as Chair, was warmly thanked for all his efforts by the incoming Chair. We were delighted to hear that he wishes to continue as a member of the co-ordinating council.

Election of Officers

Paddy Harrigan, nominated by Marjory and seconded by Liz, accepted the post of Chair for the coming year.

Ann Maughan, nominated by Paddy and seconded by Marjory, accepted the new post of Deputy Finance Officer.

Clare Myers will continue as Vice Chair, Marjory Knowles will continue as Treasurer, Liz Archibald will continue as communications officer and Chris Myers will continue as Environment Lead.

Steve Willows, lay chaplain to Stella Maris and new to our region, was elected to the council. Kath Wade expressed an interest in joining the council and has now agreed to join us.

The meeting closed at 2.50. PH.