

E-READ

General Conference of the New Church **Articles and Letters**

Contributions

If you would like to contribute a letter or article to future issues of e-Read, please send it via email to :

gemma.mclean@gcnc.org.uk

Please note that publication is at the discretion of our Spiritual Leadership.

Donations

E-News and E-Read are provided completely free of charge. If you would like to make a donation to help the General Conference of the New Church maintain these services, please visit:

<http://gcnc.org.uk/donations>

RE-Inspired: a Field Report - Christians Visit Primary Schools

by Richard Cunningham

“As Christians visiting a mixed-faith school, we are there to tell the children what we believe, but NOT to try to convince them that our faith is correct.”

Some of you will know that I live near Reading, and I'm a long way from any New Church society and so can't attend regular Sunday worship. Instead, I've been attending a Church of England (CoE) parish near to my home, where I join in many of the activities – for example, I'm a member of the PCC (Parochial Church Council) which is the main organising committee. You could find St. Barnabas, Emmer Green on the map if you wish.

One of the initiatives that has reached our parish church is a called RE-Inspired. It is organised and run by Churches Together in Caversham – CTC, entirely by volunteers. Its main

activity is to organise a group of adults who go along to a local school and give a Religious Education (RE) lesson. Hence the name – RE Inspired (REi). The teaching staff are required to follow the national curriculum which includes RE, but many teachers now have no background of attendance at church services, and so are grateful for some help.

I've been a RE-Inspired volunteer since this summer, and have now been along to four sessions. At the first I was an observer, but the following three I seem to have been a full team member. What happens in a session? I am sure you want to know. We arrive with typically 15 minutes before the lesson start time – often the first lesson in the morning or first in the afternoon. When we've got our visitor's badges there is just time for the leader to hand out resources, normally pages for the children to write or colour-in. We are then taken to the class room, and the class teacher introduces us, and then the REi leader introduces the subject. So far, all the schools I've

been to are primary schools – three different ones in Caversham. The children are then split up into groups and three activities are held at the same time, so each child does each activity once, with the groups taking the activities in rotation. So far I have been leading a group of about 10 children in ‘thinking and writing’ activities: so I have ten children for 15 minutes, then another ten, then a third set. Colouring-in the paperwork is popular, especially with the younger children. Finally, the REi leader has all the children together, and sums up the session. We leave, having had between one and two hours with the children.

Other REi group members carry out other kinds of activities with the children: I have seen singing, role-play, and folding paper to make a pyramid gift-box.

As Christians visiting a mixed-faith school, we are there to tell the children what we believe, but NOT to try to convince them that our faith is correct. With the most class-room walls also showing aspects of Judaism, Hinduism and Islam right next to Christian displays, it’s clear that we must remain in “information only” mode.

The subjects taught are interesting, and these have been the session titles: “Should Christians look after the world?” (that was about conservation and ethical use of resources) “Creation” (as in Genesis 1) and “Christmas” (what did Mary think?)

Our two REi team leaders clearly have experience in school teaching. But for the rest of us, it’s not clear to me who has and hasn’t. For me, this my first time in a school since parents’ evenings, and before that my own school days. Anyway, we typically number five to seven adults to visit during one session. We all have a DBS/CRB clearance, and the school seems keen to check that. I would love to include a photo with this report, but it clearly would not be allowed for a visitor to take a photo of the children at their work.

During the session I can get to know a little of the children’s knowledge and attitudes. The year 6 class I worked with this month (November 2018) were interested in the bible story of Christmas. They were asked to imagine ‘what did Mary think’ about the annunciation, giving birth to Jesus, the visit of the Magi, and the flight to Egypt. They were asked to fill in a speech bubble and draw a picture of the scene as they imagined it. It was noticeable how much more the girls responded to this, perhaps being more empathic or because they might one day be mothers themselves. On other subjects, such as ‘Creation’ the boys were equally interested.

I have enjoyed my visits so far with REi and think our efforts are valued by the teacher and the class: certainly the children welcome having visitors. I think it’s a valuable witness of Christianity, and the children have enjoyed all the sessions I have been in so far.

Christmas: A Mixed Blessing?

by Stephen Russell-Lacy

“Sadly, at times we may be lured away from this spiritual focus which gets relegated to the background.”

In my local village Christmas is a festival. The very word evokes a spirit of goodwill and cheer. During the week leading up to the day itself, a big evergreen tree is illuminated together with hundreds of coloured lights hung in the main street. Most shops open their doors until late. Outside there are food, drink and gift stalls, choirs singing carols, plus other live music later on. Santa arrives on a sleigh. In addition, there are displays at the parish church together with extra worship services. Various charities and societies hold special events such as a floral demonstration, wreath making, crafts display, etc. The idea seems to create a special atmosphere around a common tradition. People are encouraged to have a good time sharing a sense of local community.

Religious event

People go into our parish church sometime over the Christmas period even if they are not regular attenders. It could be midnight mass, or the service of readings and carols or perhaps a concert in the church.

The reason why people do this may be mixed. Perhaps feeling honour bound to do what used to be expected. Or show respect to the spirit of goodwill. Perhaps feeling a sense of reverence for the Christ of one's childhood. Wanting to share the message of peace and hope. Whatever the reason the occasion hopefully will inspire us all to feel gratitude for the spirit of love which creates what is good in our lives.

For those leading a Christ-centred life, Christmas, among other things, is a time of giving thanks and feeling joy for a wonderful thing. Remembering the God of love coming into the world as a human baby, and also being born into our own individual lives transforming us with compassion and guidance.

False notions and temptations

Sadly, at times we may be lured away from this spiritual focus which gets relegated to the background. Enticed by the shopping spree, the eating of lots of great food, the entertainment available, the overdoing of decorations - the commercialisation and sentimentality of Christmas. Also, who hasn't found the whole thing a bit too stressful and costly? Finding the time to do all what is planned and being able to afford it.

Many worry about finding gifts that will actually be liked. While presents used to be simpler, today, people are more choosy about what they give and receive, particularly among younger people. In the past, children were contented when given some cash, sweets, fruits, a new pair of shoes or new clothes. Now there is social pressure from their friends to have a mobile phone and high-tech toys and the latest video game.

Parties have become a big part of Christmas celebrations. There are parties in the office, community organisations, among friends and business associates. Social obligation means it is difficult to turn down invitations. There is also the worry about organising one's own family and social get togethers so as not offend anyone. How to prevent family tensions and make peace if a quarrel erupts.

Other distractions from Christmas as a religious event come to mind. Frantically putting up the decorations so they look attractive. Choosing the right shaped and sized Christmas tree. Preparing the family Christmas day dinner without burning anything.

There might be the thought in the back of our minds. Oh heck – Christmas is just an inconvenience for me. Falling in with what others expect.

Positive encouragement

In the New Church we especially celebrate the immensity of love and wisdom born with a natural human mind and body so as to fight against false notions in human beings. We thank and praise our Lord for the power of his presence in our lives today counterbalancing the influence of selfishness and - if we let him - rescuing us from the folly of our own hands.

Let us be like the shepherds at Bethlehem watching the sheep at night. On guard against any natural pleasures getting out of proportion at Christmas. Not blindly following their ways. It is good to fall back on the basic meaning. To reflect on what's truly important in life.

Is this not time for family? The chance to witness the true excitement and enchantment of the season through the eyes of children. Time for not thinking about oneself, what one wants, what one expects. Rather what others need. How I can contribute to their happiness. To doing something good for them. Our Lord came into the world and suffered for our sakes. Time to remember his message

“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:34)