Unusually good traffic conditions led all but one family/couple to have reached Swanwick in Derbyshire in time for lunch at 12.45 on the Saturday of the August Bank Holiday Weekend, to settle down for a three days of fellowship and worship around a theme of “Standing in the Gap”.

After announcements and welcomes from Hayes Conference Centre staff, Keith Lander and Paul Docherty, Katherine Powell and young helpers led an icebreaker for the 80 something members who had come plus facilitators and children’s leaders, in which teams of mixed adults and children were to create two lines of adults with a gap between and then, however they saw fit, achieve the result of the children being in ‘the gap’ in the middle and off the floor. A winning team of kneeling adults with children sat, stood or lying on their knees bridging the gap was announced. A crèche run by Sandra Parsons and Judith Sheppard had already started as the main doors to the Derbyshire Hall opened.

The children were joined with their leaders (the trusted team of Ryan and Janet Smith, again ably supported by Hannah and Mike, agreed to lead the two younger children’s groups, and Brenden Thompson was to facilitate the Young Adults Group (YAG) parallel conference this year, before he starts training for the Roman Catholic priesthood at Wonnersh) and then they left to go to their appointed zones of the Conference Centre.

Session 1 was entitled “Finding God in Everyday Life”. Lucy Docherty introduced the facilitators for the weekend and pointed out that, unlike many previous conferences this would not follow a pattern of talks by various speakers and reflections to and from those speakers, but rather three people, Marion Syms, Stefan and Susie Smart, who are used to leading discussions and workshops, would walk with us through a conference which had
less formality and more space. Lucy invited those with specific issues they hoped to address to raise these early on so that ways to offer support and love appropriate to the situation could be found.

Lucy handed out stars on which prayer suggestions were invited to be written by the adults and then handed to Marian Judd; she would pass those on to the children as they wished to link in their programme in with what the adults were exploring. As happened for all the sessions an opening chant was led by Clare Cameron accompanied by Katherine Powell.

Stefan Smart led the facilitators’ introductions with a shared story as to why he felt he wanted in this weekend to “live his dream” and explained a dream from decades ago which challenged his ecumenical thought – in it he knew he had been in a multisided basilica and in a group of Roman Catholics; near by was what he knew to be an Evangelical grouping where he felt he “belonged” but no-one around him seemed to be looking anywhere other than to the middle in which it was clear that the Presence of God could be found – bright light filling the central space. He had been conscious that this Presence is what unites all Christians but they were choosing to live in ignorance of the unity they share. (You could tell it was a dream as all the Evangelicals were males with beards, he said!)

Susie Smart followed, explaining some of the resources that were available from the book table and then circulated a sheet with a picture of a packing case into which each adult was to write on one side “what am I bringing with me” and on the other “what am I taking away with me”.

Marion Syms concluded the facilitators’ introductions with a 20 minute trip to the ‘monastery’. In a part of the hall she had laid out images representing the Benedictine way of life showing the balance of worship, study, recreation and work. These were placed around four sides of a central garden area which had running water and a well, with walkways in which to pause, sit, reflect, and pray as the monks moved from one part of their life to another. She asked how we obtain a balance in our lives and what we have to squeeze out.

Group sessions followed, which everyone prepared for by completing a nine point questionnaire on prayer life. Those groups fed back one by one simply a single sentence of interest from their discussion and this was written on a post-it and stuck on a part of the “wall” to be open to all to read and for the conference to come back to later.
Tea break (with lovely cakes) then ACTION:

Session 2 (Workshops) gave a choice of ways in which to explore aspects of prayer – certain stations around the hall, some facilities of The Hayes, and workshops led by Marion, Stefan, Susie, and also Helen Connell.

The Stations were set up with ideas for imaginative prayer, prayer in stillness, prayer and relaxation, and others. There was the Labyrinth outside with its guide to a contemplative walk into a central area, pausing there, and then a structured contemplative walk out again. The Workshops included imagination and prayer on a gospel passage, lectio divina looking at the coming Sunday’s gospel passage with input from the Scripture Union, the Examen as promoted by St Ignatius, a walk of wonder outside to take time to take in the great works of nature.

The First Liturgical Celebration of the Weekend

Father Gerard Murray kindly joined us to celebrate Mass in the Roman Catholic tradition preaching on the gospel passage of Jesus’ rebuke of Peter for trying to protect Jesus from his path to the cross.

After Mass Fr Gerard had to return to his parish duties, so he was warmly thanked by Lucy Docherty and given an AIF mug as a memento of the event. Music was led by Mark Powell and a group of instrumentalists and the words were wonderfully displayed courtesy of Laurie Miles’ AV skills.

As in many decades of “rising to the challenge” by AIF musicians it was impressive to see the skills in playing and leadership in this key part of liturgy, with so little time to prepare together:

Guide me oh thou great Redeemer … feed me till I want no more  (Perhaps a sub-theme of the Conference – spiritually and at a basic level in terms of the temptation to take each and every opportunity for dietary sustenance on offer over the long weekend!)
**A Ruby Wedding Celebration**

Later, in the Main Lounge, Pat and Keith kindly invited everyone to share in their celebration of the joy of 40 years of married life together which they would reach in November. This happy occasion with a glass of wine, or two, presented chances to continue the conversations begun at meal times or in group sessions, or even from previous years. The celebration of one interchurch couple reaching a significant milestone in Christian marriage was a fitting reason to be celebrating the richness of interchurch marriage more widely. They spoke of the key influence AIF has been in their married life from their first anniversary 39 years earlier!

A pleasant night’s sleep was followed by a filling and sustaining breakfast to commence **DAY TWO IN THE HOUSE**...

We re-gathered for **Session 3** called *Pray as you can, not as you can’t.*

**What kind of person are you?** Marion led wonderfully (with expert role play acting from Stefan and Susie) an exploration of how personality traits affect prayer strengths and weaknesses for the introvert or extrovert, the decisive or perceptive, the sensing or intuitive and the thinking or feeling ways people tend to be.

**Tools for our use:** After this, Stefan stepped in with some prayer exercises and insights to help us “Be still and know that [God] is God”; to make time - not wait for time to offer itself, to focus on the now in order to experience God in us, in others and in nature and to find words to hold in our semiconscious as unceasing prayer.

All these ideas were rooted in scripture and offered not as obligations but as suggestions with due humility as to how those who offer such suggestions are also beginners in prayer and are aware of their failings in this crucial part of their lives.

Coffee and more cake ‘Bridged the Gap’ into **Session 4 - Part I: Workshops – Creative Prayer**

At this point four different options were open – Prayer Ropes (making a simple prayer rope with three beads and some cord, with associated prayers offered), Praying with Collage – Picture Scripture (putting together a picture with cut-outs from magazines, sugar paper and glue), Eyes to See (looking deeply and reflectively at images of nature, buildings, landscapes, worship, and/or simple reflective drawing with charcoals), and Music with Prayer (introducing the use of melody to enhance simple prayer chants).
Session 4 - Part II: We returned from the workshops to the main hall for a half hour commentary from Ruth Reardon on the AIF Triptych – its history and imagery, with specific historical references to the path of AIF and peoples' life stages - falling in love; discerning wanting to make a marriage commitment; getting married; having children, if they come to the couple; making mistakes; realising the niggling points in your partner as well as the wonderful things you saw before; raising those children and seeing them make their mistakes and supporting them in love; recognising how we too made our own mistakes but trusting in our “good enough” parenting… All this Ruth tied into the three distinct sections of the Triptych, representing as they do: Marriage, Domestic Church, and the Eucharist as the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, celebrated by the Trinity.

Ruth suggested many ways in which people might wish to reflect further on the AIF Triptych – by discussion (Lucy suggested people picnic with Ruth if they want to question her further on it), by contemplation (Keith pointed out there are a lot of poster versions of it freely available from the resources table), by reading one or more of the leaflets covering aspects of it – again freely available on the resources table.

A picnic lunch was collected by all and eaten as people chose – out on a trip to see the sights of Derbyshire, in the garden, in the Garden Room, or quietly and privately. Perhaps that choice of lunch and activity by people this year was affected in part by a better self awareness as to the make up of our various personalities; something on which Ruth reflected in terms of her married life with Martin and the tensions they had on decision making (she wanting to make it and he wanting to keep it open!).

A free afternoon was afforded to all in which there was music preparation for the later liturgy, continuing talks in the gardens and elsewhere, revisiting of the prayer stations, preparation of acts for the concert later that day, and some even went offsite to visit the Midland steam railway or the Outlet Shopping Park nearby! But perhaps the most memorable activity was the Hayes History tour led by two of the Centre Managers it included a peep into the escape tunnel dug by German prisoners of war during WW2 and for some reason Keith tried to demonstrate how this might have been achieved!
TEA followed – with a special GOLDEN WEDDING cake to share with Elaine & Les, and Jill & Anton in celebration of the massive achievement of fifty years of married life together in each case.

**Second Liturgical Celebration – Methodist Communion Service led by Rev Gill Walsh**

Woven into this service was not only a celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the Methodist tradition but also ecumenical hymns, a series of responses, a meditation and a long and wholehearted sharing of the Peace.

It ended with a prayer of dedication written by Gill a few years earlier and still very pertinent today:

> Lord we commit ourselves afresh today  
> to the work of our Associations of Interchurch Families,  
> to our Christian denominations and the leaders whom you have chosen and called.  
> Bless us and anoint us with the gift of your Holy Spirit as we look to the future  
> and seek to deepen our commitment to this vocation  
> which You have called us to. Amen

**followed by the ASSOCIATION OF INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AGM 2011**

It is appropriate at the occasion when the most members of a membership association gather together to have the formal opportunity for feedback from trustees and office holders, to receive the accounts and discuss the financial affairs of AIF and to hold elections to fill those positions for the time ahead. It also gave Keith and Paul and Leon the opportunity to talk of things looking ahead longer term.

**CONFERENCE DINNER – Silver Celebration**

Liz and Rufus Ballaster said a few words, including the grace:  
*For food, for family, for friends, for fellowship, for faith, for fidelity, and for fun, we praise and thank you Lord. Amen. They then invited everyone to join in the celebration of their Silver Wedding Anniversary with a glass of wine or juice during the meal.*
Although a written report of a meal might be expected to detail the food enjoyed or the variety or choice, it seems fitting to comment on the part which communal eating plays in an AIF conference. Over meals people can sit with the same set of friends and deepen friendships or might aim to widen those whom they can not only call friends from being fellow members of the Association but also grow to know better and share with in the setting of a family meal table – one of 15 or so occupied by the total compliment. As children grow, they frequently reject the company of their parents to fill a whole table of young people and then interact in those groupings – establishing and exploring a degree of independence in a very safe environment.

THE CONCERT

We returned to the Derbyshire Suite to experience a selection of acts and performances, volunteered by those attending, young or old, in a group or solo – ranging from the musically tuneful through to the comically engaging, with varying forms of participation and activity required and excellently compéred by Mark Powell. Look out for Anton’s Croatian bag-pipes, which got many on their feet to join the dance. A final act with words on the screen to enable us all to join in a sports stadium style rendition of the Lord’s Prayer was a fitting way to bring to a close a good time of sharing gifts and grinning ear to ear.

NIGHT PRAYERS were sensitively and movingly led by YAG in a room lit only by candles around a central area with a large cross in it as a focus of attention. Free prayer gave many people the opportunity to ask for God’s loving support for many persons, known or unknown individually to us, for whom we wished to pray. Taizé chanting to gentle guitar music and well read scripture readings completed a good gathering for prayer at the end of an extremely enjoyable day.
A time for sleep led to a damp morning tinged with the realisation as rooms were cleared that this was the final part of the weekend together, but we threw ourselves into another filling and sustaining breakfast to give us bodily strength for: **DAY THREE IN THE HOUSE...**

**Session 5 - What have we learned and where do we go from here?:**
Still with chairs in the round, we got together to review the graffiti wall questions, with observations from Marion, Susie and Stefan, as well as a “roving mike” input from many different voices. We then reviewed our “suitcases” of what we had packed or brought with us and what we had expected to take away.

Varied comments came from the groups of three to six discussing this; it was good to have talked about spirituality and it is important to come back to this regularly; it was good to have fellowship and support and prayer and we ought to look for ways to keep contact and fellowship between conferences. If we thought we were poor prayerers, we left with many ideas and supporting suggestions for prayer, whether together, alone, in quiet, in noise, and in all things, “standing in the gap”, as a conference theme begged the question whether the gap is closing or – as the commentator feared – actually widening at the moment.

**Third Liturgical Celebration – Final Worship:**
*Anglican Eucharist led by Rev Malcolm Bowers with Rt Rev Gregory Cameron preaching*

During this service the children’s programmes fed back sharing the gifts of their enjoyment of the weekend together.

Gregory preached - reflecting on the conference with particular emphasis on issues of the Now, of time, of eternity, even of Dr Who and the TARDIS!

One hymn during this service was inspired by Cornish Saints – Piran, Petrock, Paul Aurelian, Euny, Samson, and Winwalloe - on which Malcolm is full of knowledge from which he can offer helpful insights to our Christian lives.
After the service many THANK YOUS were said and gifts given to facilitators of the various groups.

As always we were late for lunch and ready for a rush to fill cars and set off on journeys home but having been welcomed to the last service in Cornish we were blessed on our way in Welsh and so immersed in God’s love in languages of richness and variety, echoing the variety of our Christian experiences we brought to the Conference and the unity of that Christian Body we represent.

Rufus Ballaster,
August 2011

Photos by
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- for high resolution copies of photos please email Keith at: info@interchurchfamilies.org.uk