

'Ruthless Anthropocentrism' of Churches Challenged

Ellen Teague reports on CEL's recent conference: *The Age of Thorns*

The 'ruthless anthropocentrism' of the churches has been blamed for their failure to make a significant challenge to human destruction of the natural world. Speaking at a CEL day conference in London on 5 March, Peter Owen Jones, the Anglican vicar from Sussex who presents the BBC's *How to Live a Simple Life*, said that 'we need to jump the fence we have built between ourselves and the natural world'. In his view, Britain's churches have offered no more than an 'inaudible whisper' against damage to life systems and biodiversity. Further, he placed blame at the door of 'the damaging and outmoded model of authority' in the churches, making it difficult to 'put new wine into old wineskins'. He felt rich creation-centred theology material is available 'but it has not reached the pews or the bishops'. The notion that Christians are stewards of the natural world came in for criticism too. 'Placing ourselves above the natural world is madness', he said, 'but it is in communion with our brothers and sisters in the natural world that we will realise a dazzling future.'

Church festivals such as Lent could better 'synchronise our lives with the life of the planet' he felt and be used to raise awareness of environmental issues. Owen Jones described Lent as 'one of the most counter-cultural festivals we have, where abstinence stands against consumerism', and he supported moves towards vegetarianism and growing vegetables. He does both himself, and also founded the Arbory Trust, the first Christian charity to offer woodland burial.

Owen Jones affirmed an ecumenical audience of 150 people from around Britain, by saying that CEL is 'a community living out of deep ecological respect' and 'I admire each and every one of you'. He described CEL as being a seed for almost

30 years, but the time had come to 'truly grow and bear fruit'. CEL's current chair, Paul Bodenham, called for more individuals and parishes to become CEL members. He said that CEL – with around 900 members – is a movement which has 'a sense that the Christian gospel has something important to say about the state of the world' and this 'has not really been articulated by the churches'. During question time, a CEL member from the floor suggested that the 'tree of life' might be a better representation of the Christian faith than the image of a dead Christ on the cross, provoking spirited discussion.

It was appropriate that prominent at the venue – St John's Anglican church, opposite Waterloo Station – were two huge murals which contextualised the concern Jesus had for the vulnerable and his close relationship with the natural world. One mural depicted the parable of the Good Samaritan set on Waterloo Bridge. The second was Jesus walking by a river, but rather than the River Jordan it was the River Thames with modern-day passers-by engaging with him and feeding birds. There were plenty of pigeons in the parish garden outside St

John's, where the trees and grasses provided a haven for creatures in a very busy part of London where heavy traffic encircled the church.

In the afternoon, workshops led by Tim Cooper, a former Chair of CEL and Professor of Sustainable Design and Consumption at Nottingham Trent University, explored green economics. He felt that Christian ethics challenge the assumptions of traditional economics 'that more is better' and that existing market structures are adequate to dealing with environmental problems and social injustices. At grassroots level, he pushed for more initiatives such as Fairtrade churches and Christian alternatives to consumerism at Christmas. He challenged the churches to consider why members so readily succumb to high street temptations despite clear biblical warnings about materialism. 'We cannot expect Christians to be immune from the psychological and socio-cultural pressures that lead to excessive consumption,' he warned. Green campaigners Ashley Ralston and Ruth Jarman ran interactive workshops, on 'Shopping as if the Planet Mattered' and 'Greening the Church'. Another workshop studied *ecocell* – a 'journey in carbon-free discipleship' – which is being followed by several small groups attempting to significantly lower their carbon footprints. CAFOD ran a stall at the day, introducing its new parish eco-congregation scheme which will be launched in May in Catholic parishes, and Columban Justice and Peace displayed its resources, such as a DVD *Stations of the Rainforest*.

Paul Bodenham emphasised that CEL is a movement rather than an organisation, and one that offers 'honest hope'. I certainly felt privileged to spend a day in the company of so many like-minded Christians and enjoyed the beautiful liturgies to start and end the day, which placed God's creation at the forefront of our worship. ■

More details and photos available at www.christian-ecology.org.uk.

