

Churches Together in England at the Hayes, September 19-21 2023.

I am grateful for the Methodist District's paying for me to attend the recent conference of Churches Together in England – I was one of only 2 representatives from Derbyshire (see below) and sole rep, I think, of the Sheffield area (whether Methodist or other). In a meeting of the several Methodists, led by Leao Neto, I referred to the long service of Chris Sissons in Sheffield, and it was noted that our N.Nottinghamshire representative had been Chris Sheasby who had been present on a previous occasion.

I had taken the audacious step of offering a contribution to the programme from Christians Together for Chesterfield, (which was accepted) sensing that we might have something worthwhile to contribute, and was surprised and pleased to see in the previously circulated list of attenders Pastor Toyin Taiwo, of the Redeemed Church of Christ in Chesterfield, one of the national delegation from that church. So we presented about 3 minutes each about our Chesterfield experience, (I prefaced what we said by announcing that Churches Together in Derbyshire was 'dead', and this did elicit some constructive suggestions in the chat later). I was disappointed that the chairperson of our session did not allow any Q and A to follow, (he had taken up a slice of time himself) and we did not manage to get projected the 'Walking Men' images from Markham Pit that I thought would be provocative, but our informative Roller Banner was displayed.

There were several occasions of 'plenary' worship – one led by the chief guest speaker, John Bell, and others by the Pentecostal contingent, a Quaker (30 minutes silence) and a version of Morning Prayer by an Anglican. Among the company were a priest from the RC bishops' conference and a Benedictine monk from Worth Abbey in Sussex. But there was no eucharist.

A group of mostly student-age younger people led a session – disappointingly, in my view, in that they did not have anything to say about finding the churches populated largely by pensioners.

The team from CTE HQ in London played various parts, including an emergency call to prayer for Nagorno Karabakh from the general Secretary, Mike Royal. It was interesting that most of them work substantially working from home (WFH). The conference was intended to be 'paper-free' and much was done on laptops and by projection. My Chesterfield colleague Toyin Taiwo is very 'au fait' with it all – and I am not.

Apart from the truly charismatic contributions of John Bell, I was most impressed by a sophisticated, high-tech report from Greater Manchester by Methodist Ian Rutherford. Thanks in part to a friendly environment in which the Anglican Bishop and the Mayor Andy Burnham play significant parts, they have a fine model of inter-relating circles of interest and concern. This presented, on a much grander scale, something which we are attempting in Chesterfield – namely to be not just 'in' our area, but 'for' it.

This was, I feel, a corrective to a prevailing delight in inter-denominational togetherness as an end in itself. CTE has achieved much by embracing Pentecostal, Quaker and BME Christians. Alleluya. But arguably, the conference was not as 'applied' as it could have been. Manchester seemed to demonstrate serious engagement with everyone and everything.

I have disgraced and inconvenienced myself by failing to bring home my 'hearing aid charger' but hope it can be retrieved..... 'The Hayes' ansaphone needs to work for me....

Paul King, September 22nd 2023