

"Christians and the World the Spring of 2009"

Report of a Listening Post
held in London in June



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post, participants were invited for the first hour to identify, contribute and explore their experiences in their various social roles (work, unemployment, retirement, religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary, leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities). This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part Two, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part One. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following two interrelated themes:

1. Bridges – Connection and Disconnection

I just returned from a family holiday to Turkey and when we got back mother in law was diagnosed with lung cancer.

I am aware of dislocation. I am in a post congregational position, having an active faith but finding it difficult to find a place to worship. I wonder about Gordon Brown coming from a similar Presbyterian background to myself with core values which came from childhood and how disconnected he feels.

I am aware of the difference between impressions and presentations in the media and reality. I work with vulnerable migrants some of whom are starving and sleeping on night buses. Children are at risk if parents are destitute, Social Services threaten to take the children into care if the parents say they cannot look after them. I also work with migrants who are offenders. Asylum seekers who are waiting for a response from the Home Office are not allowed to work or claim benefits. They have little option but to offend. Some have mental health problems. They are overlooked. People don't see what is going on. I also have two small children and I wonder how dangerous this society will be for them.

As a parish priest the most difficult problems I face are with immigration. I have had three problems this week with Home Office letters. My niece is working with an MP on placement and she is aware of immigration staff cutting and pasting letters which have the facts all wrong. One of the families I work with is a good family but there is anger growing because the parents cannot work and the Home Office are holding their

passports. I cannot explain this to my relatives on holiday. They are from the suburbs and do not understand our reality.

Police recently came to our PCT to tell us of an illegal doctors' practice which had been set up to serve illegal immigrants. They had no medical training or qualifications but have been offering medical services to the community. We suspect that a child's death happened because she was taken there and did not get proper treatment.

Undocumented migrants are afraid of using public services — health service included — because the government is using the services to ask about immigration status. There is a creeping enforcement through public services. I read Steve Cohen's obituary recently. He had spent his life working on issues of justice for migrants and it makes me question whether I can be doing more, contacting more people.

I was on holiday with a small group led by a tour manager. An 80 year old white man joined our party in Germany having mislaid his passport and so travelled out with another tour group. At dinner he remarked that there had been an African woman on the other tour group. He turned to the tour manager and asked: "How would you manage if you had an African in your group?"

I had a conversation with someone who is two years off retirement and worried about their pension. Their anxiety was connected to their blaming of immigrants.

I am engaged in inter faith dialogue particularly with Muslim groups. I wonder about the difference between what we say about our faiths to each other and what we really believe. What are our motives? We asked a respected Muslim leader if he would lead a conversation on Mission and Dialogue. He consulted some colleagues and then decided that he could not accept the invitation. There is suspicion and it is not always easy to build trust.

I had a similar experience of working with groups of white and black women who were unsure of each other. Their anxieties were allayed by inviting a mutually trusted GP to meet with them.

I think there is a tension between our own roles and that of the public institutions. Does your church for instance support you in your work with migrants? Is there a fear or a message about the group you were going to meet? Does bridge building require a relationship? I was following a family of American tourists who were going slowly and I was getting annoyed about tourists blocking the pavement. Then one turned round and I saw his T shirt with the slogan "Hope won with Obama".

My husband took in a friend's dog to look after. Husband then was sick and went to bed, so that evening I had to take the dog for a walk. The dog then became a talking point with a group of young men on the street, who I would not normally have talked to. I was fascinated going back to Turkey after several visits with my father many years ago. I was struck by the number of mosques which have sprung up in what is a rural part of Turkey. I see Turkey as an important bridge between East and West and am glad that Obama is keen for Turkey to join the EU. But my relatives only saw Turkey as a holiday destination and did not see the importance of the country and the role it could play.

2. Public Service, integrity and inequality

I work in the health service and have just had to deal with a manager of a practice who has got the service into a debt of £100,000 – it links in my mind with corruption in MPs expenses – and how public money is used. This is in the context of a service with declining money.

We have just had to go into a Mosque and a School with Tamiflu antiviral injections because of swine flu cases.

A friend of mine has just come back from a holiday in the USA. He related how he passed a lot of very expensive large homes in one city and then a short distance later cycled through what he described as a shanty town with people living in small shacks.

I've just finished reading 'The Spirit Level'. The authors are academics in public health research and they show that societies like Sweden and Japan which are more equal in their income distribution have much better social outcomes, including health, for everyone. More unequal societies like UK and USA have very poor social outcomes – from obesity to prison populations.

Polly Toynbee's book 'Just Rewards' has a similar theme. She looked at the earnings of highly paid bankers which makes the MPs expenses saga pale into insignificance by comparison.

Our values have changed over time. Bankers once would be trusted. I noticed the change taking place when I was training some years ago as a solicitor. Banks and other businesses were all looking at the bottom line, not so much at the service they provided.

The Reith lecture which I heard this week is 'A New Citizenship'. Professor Michael Sandel of Harvard talks about the prospects of a new politics of the common good. He has been teaching a course on Justice. His proposition is that for us to be able to regain confidence in democracy we need to bring moral and spiritual values back into the public discourse.

What is our role as people of faith in bringing hope into our work with other people? How much is guilt part of this? Fred the banker seems not to have had any guilt about the large pension he has received following his banking disaster. People in Edinburgh put his windows in – very un-Edinburgh behaviour. Are people made to feel guilty for having money? How can we not be crippled by guilt?

The film Schindler's List grappled with the issue of how much you can do and where you have to say no to something.

The Church in East London in my experience does have a really earthy spirituality. They may not have much money, but their faith is important to them. Although when we got some SRB money to do up the Churchyard and make it nice, the churchwarden was not happy about having three Eastern Europeans sleeping rough there at night.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the

members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. There are two interrelated hypotheses which followed from a lively and stimulating discussion.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: Lack of control is threatening. Although there is no threat of nuclear catastrophe as in the cold war period, there are other threats from globalisation, information overload, terrorism. Lack of community, sense of loneliness and fear of the loss of God contribute to this sense of threat. We have a need to differentiate ourselves from others and are inclined to 'stick together' in the face of a common 'other'. Perhaps that accounts for some of the interest in Christian/Muslim dialogue, which seems more attractive than ecumenical dialogue between different Christian denominations. There is a communication overload in which technological changes are having an unprecedented impact on the way we "do life". If thought patterns of childhood do not mature emotionally, our judgements can be immature and we can easily be exploited. There are large numbers of young people now accessing higher education with great emphasis on testing and improving schools. There is a healthy questioning of malpractice on the part of public figures like MPs or bankers doing what we see as unacceptable. But there is also an unhealthy fascination with celebrity and a gullibility which sits alongside scepticism. People are fragmented and it is too difficult to deal with other people who are even more fragmented. If you are running on empty what energy do you have to give to others? Do we have a psychological need for war or excitement which leads us as individuals or as wider society doing things which are damaging?

Hypothesis: Because of the complexity of our lives members of society have developed an ability to be critical of some aspects of public performance but get overwhelmed by the enormity of the issues, with the result that they retreat into the familiar and shut out the unfamiliar, the strange and the other.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The outrage at MPs expenses indicates that there is a value system which is intact somewhere in our unconscious which exerts itself in the face of perceived corruption. The sense of fairness and the expectation of integrity in public servants appear to remain robust in an open society. The lack of trust in various institutions such as Parliament, the Press and the Banks is also potential evidence of an expectation that these institutions have a higher calling than they currently portray. This perhaps relates to an historic sense of what constitutes high standards. This may be a sentimental view of the golden age of the past. Or it could be grounded in some historic reality. Does the colonial past of the English make them less conscious of their own history compared say with the Irish and the Scots who have a very clear sense of their history and of the injustice which often accompanied it? Or is there a guilt somewhere about the Crusades and other aspects of colonialism? If we are disconnected from our own history, then the context of empire is removed from the public narrative concerning asylum and immigration. The role of the Church in remembering the past and calling for justice is muted in an age of rapid change in which instant messages are expected to be conveyed. The process of gaining maturity is a slow one with no quick fix. The Church often remains silent in the face of questions about homosexuality or Islam which it cannot easily reconcile with its own historic narrative.

Hypothesis: Because there is a lack of trust in most of our institutions, from Parliament to Banking, members of society are demanding reformation of those institutions so that they properly represent the values we expect of them with the result that there is a search for those values which are largely unconscious and unspoken.

Convener: Paul Regan