



## REGIONAL ITEMS

# ACT:UK Conference in Bunyan's Bedfordshire 1–3 OCTOBER 2004

### Together again

In 2004 it was the turn of ACT England to host the biennial ACT:UK conference. The last one was hosted by ACT Scotland in 2002, and the one before that by ACTW in 2000. In 2006 it will be the turn of NIACT to bring together representatives of the four 'home nation' Associations to share with, and learn from, one another.

This time around eight delegates represented the four ACTs. ACT England was represented by Nicole Ishmael (Treasurer, ACT), Rupert Kaye (Chief Executive, ACT & Editor of *ACT Now* magazine) and Andrew Marfleet (Chair, ACT). ACT Scotland was represented by Bernard Bowers (Chair, ACT Scotland), Ann Fleming (Committee Member, ACT Scotland) and Ken Fotheringham (Committee Member, ACT Scotland & Editor of *InterACT* magazine). ACTW was represented by Matt Lewis (Schools Worker, ACTW). NIACT was represented by Fred Corscadden (Chair, NIACT).

We were accommodated at the Old Lodge Hotel in Dunstable. The hotel, originally a hunting lodge for Henry I, overlooks the Priory Church of Saint Peter. Today, the church is all that remains of the Augustinian Priory which was founded by Henry I in 1131 and destroyed by Henry VIII in 1540



during the English Reformation. Seven years before its dissolution, Dunstable Priory was the place where Henry VIII's marriage to Katherine of Aragon was annulled.

Given the town's Tudor ties, it seemed appropriate that we met for a time of worship on the Friday evening in the Jane Seymour room of the hotel. (The Henry VIII room was unavailable!)

Over dinner on the Friday evening, as we introduced ourselves and shared our stories, we were reminded that, as Christian teachers, we had similar causes for concern and reasons to praise.

### European perspectives

Although the event was based in Dunstable, our Saturday deliberations were spent in the uplifting surroundings of the John Bunyan Museum and Bunyan Meeting Free Church in Bedford. Here we were joined by John Shortt, Travelling Secretary for EurECA (the European Christian Educators' Association). John (pictured, left) outlined the work of Christian teachers in six countries.

We discovered that in Germany government funding is available to new Christian schools once they have been going for three years. One such school in the south of the country has grown to



1,200 pupils in just a few years, mainly due to increasing parental demand for places.

We heard that in Portugal, an Evangelical Alliance project enables 200 Christian teachers to provide evangelical moral and religious education in state schools.

We also learnt more about the ministries of Christian teacher groups in Bulgaria, Norway, Poland and Ukraine; each one keeping a faithful witness to God's grace in the schools in their countries.

John reflected on what it means to be European or to live in Europe, inviting us to consider these people's experiences under four headings: post-Christian, post-Communist, post-modern and post-migrant. John asked: 'Who or what will shape education across Europe?' Finally, John left us with some ideas about how we (as English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh educators) need to shape tomorrow's Europe through Christian education which is:

- for the whole person... not just the intellect
- for the whole of life... not just the world of paid employment
- for all aspects of reality... not just specialist 'subject disciplines'
- for knowing that is engaged (the Hebrew concept of knowing)... not detached (the Greek concept)
- for relationships with God, with others and with His created world



We were left to ponder how these priorities might affect each one of us in our own educational setting. We were also inspired to pray for one another and for our Christian brothers and sisters in Bulgaria, Germany, Norway, Poland, Portugal and Ukraine, asking God to guide us as we seek to increase a Christian influence in Europe's schools.

## Bunyan and Huddleston

After lunch, our party were given a guided tour of the John Bunyan Museum and Bunyan Meeting Free Church.

John Bunyan was a Christian preacher who was persecuted for his dissenting beliefs in 1660 and served 12 years in prison, where he wrote the bulk of the Pilgrim's Progress. While sitting in the Bunyan Museum, Bedford, we could not help but be struck by the fact that John Bunyan was a man who took a very difficult situation and used it to glorify his Master. The museum guide told us that the Dissenters had wonderful times of worship together in prison and probably influenced their fellow prisoners in much the same way that Peter would have done centuries earlier.

We also had the chance to walk into Bedford town centre to see a bronze bust commemorating the righteous struggles of another of Bedford's Christian sons, Archbishop Sir Trevor Huddleston. It was Huddleston's protégé, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who once said, 'If you could say that



anybody single-handedly made apartheid a world issue then that person was Trevor Huddleston.'

Appropriately enough, the statue of the anti-apartheid leader was unveiled on 7 April 2000 by Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa. Mandela said of Huddleston, 'He brought hope, sunshine and comfort to the poorest of the poor. He was not only a leader in the fight against oppression. He was also father and mentor to many leaders of the liberation movement, most of whom now occupy leading positions in all spheres of public life in our country.'

## Curry and conversation

On the Saturday afternoon we returned to Dunstable. Free time meant that some delegates could see the Priory Church of Saint Peter whilst others explored Dunstable's shops, watched TV or grabbed a couple of hours of sleep!

At 6:30pm we reconvened for an hour to discuss ways in which our Associations could support and encourage one another in the future. We accepted that although there were times when our organisations needed to work alone there were also times when collaborating might be more effective.

Then it was time to head out for a curry. The following morning we attended worship at Dunstable Methodist Church before returning home, resolved to redouble our efforts to be faithful to Christ and supportive of one another's ministries.

■ Fred Corscadden & Rupert Kaye

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## Ken Fotheringham (ACT Scotland) reflects:

For me the ACT:UK Conference was very enjoyable. The travel went smoothly and the venue, which was very comfortable, was conveniently close to Luton airport. I enjoyed the opportunity to talk about matters at the heart of our work among Christian teachers, and to have time to reflect and pray together. Not surprisingly, we found that the problems we face in Scotland are similar to those experienced by colleagues elsewhere.

Apart from the times together and John Shortt's encouraging presentation about the efforts of key people in Europe to fly the flag for Christ, I personally enjoyed the visit to the John Bunyan Museum and Bunyan Meeting Free Church in Bedford where the guide gave a fascinating account of Bunyan's life and

times. The time he spent in prison would have destroyed a lesser man. For all the strains of modern living, most of us do not languish in a damp and dark prison with minimal food, and no certainty that our earthly condition will improve.

We could not help but reflect on the fact that the problems we face as Christians living and working in the UK today are so very different from those of Bunyan. Given the choice, I know whose problems I would choose to endure!

Worship on the Sunday morning at Dunstable Methodist Church very pleasantly rounded off a weekend which inspired and united us – we felt bound together in the love and work of the Master whom we serve. It was a pleasure to be a delegate.