

Redbridge Faith Forum Women's Workshop 28th February 2017

Thirty three women from different backgrounds and faiths met together at the Parish Church of St Alban, Albert Road, Ilford on Tuesday afternoon for a very informative and friendly workshop addressing the questions 'Praying: How? Why? When? To Whom?' This was the third of a series of workshops on the topic of prayer and featured presentations from different Christian denominations. The first workshop in June had featured the Buddhist and Hindu faiths, and the second in November featuring Sikh and Bahai faiths. A further workshop will take place in May featuring the Jewish and Muslim faiths.

As 28th February was Shrove Tuesday the women started the afternoon's proceedings by helping themselves to hot pancakes with their choice of toppings. Shrove Tuesday is the last day before the period of



Lent begins which is the 40 days leading up to Easter and was traditionally a time of fasting for Christians in recognition of the 40 days Jesus spent in the Wilderness being tempted by Satan. Christians would therefore use up their stock of "rich" food on that day and in some countries the day is called "Fat Tuesday" and Mardi Gras festivals are held.

Jacque Grieve, Chair of Redbridge Faith Forum welcomed all the women and explained that she would be giving the Roman Catholic perspective on prayer and worship. Jacquie explained about the tradition of fasting during Lent and also that the first day of Lent is known as Ash Wednesday. On this day Roman Catholic churches will use the ash from the burning of the palm crosses which had been made last Easter to mark Palm Sunday – the ashes would be mixed with olive oil and used to make the mark of a cross on the forehead of Roman Catholic worshippers at Ash Wednesday services. This is a symbol to remind mankind of mortality –that mankind is formed from the dust and one day their bodies will return to dust but their souls will live on into the next life. The head of the Roman Catholic

Church is the Pope (currently Pope Francis) who resides in the Vatican in Rome.



Christians believe in the tri-une God – Father, Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. The Bible records that Jesus prayed whilst he was on earth and one example is known as the "Lord's Prayer" which Jesus used to teach his

disciples how to pray. This prayer is universal across all Christian denominations as it gives a structure for prayer including adoration (giving God the honour due to him), supplication

(for God's kingdom and personal daily needs), forgiveness (for self, including repentance and for help to forgive others) and to seek God's help in avoiding sin.

Prayer for Christians is communicating with God – to share our feelings and listen for guidance and prayers are made through the name of Jesus and is the means by which Christians offer themselves to God for his honour and glory.

Prayer can take different forms it can be vocal (said out loud) as an individual, it can form part of a church service such as in Holy Communion/Mass when the sacrifice of the crucifixion of Jesus is remembered, Prayer can take the form of meditation – talking and listening to God and/or contemplation – just resting in God's presence.

Jacque explained that the central service in the Roman Catholic Church is that of Holy Mass and Catholics are required to go to Mass every Sabbath (this starts at dusk on Saturday and ends at dusk on Sunday) but many Catholics go to Mass more frequently.

The service includes readings from the Bible (the Book of Psalms and readings from the New Testament) and the Sacrament which is a re-enactment of the Last Supper when Jesus on the night before he was betrayed and arrested broke bread and shared wine with his disciples and told them to do this in remembrance of him. Roman Catholics use wafers of unleavened bread and wine for this service and these are consecrated by the priest – they believe that the words of consecration actually transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. These are therefore held in great awe and left over bread and wine is kept in a decorated box called a tabernacle and a light is kept burning there. The only time when the light does not burn and the box is empty is Good Friday which marks the day Jesus Christ was crucified. The sacraments are taken to the housebound so that they do not miss out on this important act of worship.



Gill Leonard then gave some additional information from the Anglican perspective (Church of England). Gill explained that there is a large range of variations within the Anglican Church as to the way worship is conducted and that some are known as “high church” such as the venue of today's workshop as St Albans which practices Anglo-Catholic traditions and others that are much more informal. There are currently 35 variations worldwide of the Anglican Church. The Queen is the head of the Church of England and appoints bishops and archbishops, the spiritual leader of the Church of England is the Archbishop of Canterbury (currently Justin Welby who resides at Lambeth Palace in London),

The Book of Common Prayer gives details of the Orders of Service to be used at Morning & Evening Prayer and Holy Communion and on other occasions. These community prayers are common to all Anglican churches but private personal prayer is often the most important to believers. This communication with God enables believers to become more like Jesus and to share His love with others. Gill explained that she believes that God hears every prayer but He many not always answer them in the way we wish – this can led to people getting angry believing God does not listen to them but in fact it is necessary to acknowledge that God does know best and prayers should be offered in the concept of God's will being done.

The digits of the hand can be used as a aid to prayer – the thumb being linked to prayers of thanks for home, family, relationships, the first finger (pointer) to pray for those that guide or care for us eg teachers, NHS staff, tallest finger – for those in authority – our MPs, political

leaders, those in government, ring finger which is the weakest finger this can help us remember that we are weak and need God's help to have compassion and love for the weak and vulnerable in our society, and finally the last and smallest finger to pray for our own needs.

Gill explained that in her experience prayer can take place at any time in any location and does not require a certain position eg standing, sitting but can be practised whilst commuting on public transport! Also using visual aids such as music, flowers, candles can help the mind to focus on prayer.

Dulcie Thomson of Vine Church then made some further comments from the perspective of the United Reform denomination. The Reform movement came about in the 1500s when the Protestant church broke away from the Catholic church when Martin Luther became very angry about the taxes imposed on people to build magnificent cathedrals. Worship focuses very much on intercessory prayer with a strong emphasis on Bible teaching and that God is Love and can work through Christians whose duty it is to love others and be anchored in love. There are currently several congregations who worship at Vine Church.

Following these presentations there was the opportunity for questions to be asked and the answers discussed and those present were invited to add personal perspectives from their own Christian denominations.

Women spoke from Methodist, Baptist and Salvation Army backgrounds which all have less richly decorated premises and less ceremony and ritual (churches usually have just a plain table but not a decorated altar, don't usually have stained windows, statues, icons or use incense or bells during worship). Also bread and wine used in Holy Communion (or Breaking of Bread service) is viewed as being purely symbolic which differs from the Catholic perspective. Accordingly ordinary bread or rolls are used and a non-alcoholic wine or fruit juice are usually used

Time was given for the women to discuss the presentations and ask questions which were gladly answered. All present, felt they had learnt something new and had gained more understanding from the workshop. Many identified some common strands with their own faith teachings and practice. The overall evaluation was that it was an excellent workshop and very worthwhile as it gave the opportunity to ask questions in a friendly and non-threatening environment where people were prepared to listen to each other's views.