

# Westcott House Mission to the Benefice of Hardington Vale, Somerset

1<sup>st</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> April, 2007

## Introduction

Following the success of the mission to St Clement's, Chorlton-cum-Hardy that took place in September, 2006, Westcott House received an invitation to undertake a mission to six country parishes in the Benefice of Hardington Vale, Somerset, during Holy Week 2007. (The parishes are Norton St Philip, Rode, Laverton, Tellesford, Hemingford and Farleigh Hungerford). We received the invitation with enthusiasm, eager to see how the lessons we had learned in urban Manchester would apply in a rural setting. A mission was subsequently undertaken by six Westcott students, the wife of one of the students and the chaplain.



## Preparation

As in Manchester, a considerable amount of time was devoted to the preparation of the mission. In January, the chaplain held an initial meeting with the Rector and members of the parishes to talk about what they hoped to achieve through a mission. In February, the Westcott team travelled to Somerset to discuss further with the parishes what the aims of the mission should be and what activities should be undertaken in pursuit of those objectives. At this time it became clear that:

- The parishes wanted the mission to be as much about listening to those "outside the church" as to speaking to them.
- The parishes wanted to increase opportunities to invite those who would not normally have much contact with church life to engage more with the local church.

As well as increasing contact with those on the fringe of church life or beyond it, the mission also sought to increase the commitment and activity of existing church members. In pursuit of this, the rector of the parish had recruited a benefice mission planning team that included people who had only recently joined the churches or whose interaction with church life had previously been quite limited. In addition (and remarkably!) he had also recruited a number of non church goers to the team. These members acted as a powerful and refreshing check on any assumptions of the team based in church culture. Their most regular question was "Why do you have to do it that way?"

## The Mission

During the week, the Westcott team took part in a wide range of different activities:



### *Innovative and outward looking liturgy*

The team played a leading role in a number of the liturgies of Holy Week. These included a dynamic and unusual celebration of Palm Sunday, meditative and moving services for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, a 6.35am first fire of Easter and preaching at churches of the benefice on Easter Sunday. The liturgies provided a refreshing experience on church for those that might not ordinarily go there – one that was engaging, surprising, numinous and appealing.

### *Sports Coaching and Values Education*

An established feature of life in the Hardington Vale is the work each school holiday of "World Sports Ministries", a local group of evangelists (comprised of ex-professional players) who provide sports coaching, values, education and Bible study to children in the area. The Westcott team were invited to provide support to their Holy Week camp and with some trepidation joined in. The camp we helped at was attended for three hours each day by 60 children (mostly boys) who received coaching in rugby, football and cricket. We learnt a great deal from the World Sports Ministries team. They said they wanted to "be Jesus" to the children who came and this was clearly demonstrated by their behaviour; during four days there were no raised voices, no arguments and children were clearly on task.



More difficult for Westcott was engaging with the team's hard line conservative evangelical theology. We were challenged by the camp; challenged by the way it clearly met the needs of children in the area and challenged too by the complexity of working in partnership with others of radically different view point in the church in which we live.



### **Eating and Conversing**

When we wanted to speak to those who never came to church in Manchester, we simply went and spoke with people on the street. It quickly became clear that if we used the same plan in the villages of the Hardington Vale, we might see a tractor pass by that day, but also might not. It became apparent that if we wanted to enter into dialogue with those who didn't come to church in the area, a more intentional strategy would be needed. We fell back on eating. During the week, members of the churches invited their non church-going friends and neighbours to have dinner with members of the Westcott team. This resulted in many memorable and moving evenings where experience was shared, faith was discussed

and difficult questions addressed. On one evening of the week, we took over the top floor of a local restaurant to host an evening of "Hard Questions". Those who came were invited to share "hard questions" about faith such as issues surrounding suffering, ethics, the Bible Christology and many others. Facilitated by members of the mission team and the churches' leadership, the fifty people who came to the evening then broke into groups of eight or so to discuss the different questions raised. Attended by people of great faith and none, the evening was outstanding, an experience that will long be remembered by all who took part.

### **Conclusions**

The Westcott team finished the week in Somerset exhausted but delighted to have taken part in such an extraordinary experience. We had been tested in our faith, stretched in our prayer and taken out of ourselves and our expectations by God's guidance and presence. Undertaking mission provided the team with vibrant and authentic opportunities to learn and to grow in their vocations to ordained ministry. It has helped us all grow in confidence and faith for future challenges that lie before us.



We hope too that the mission helped the parishes of the Hardington Vale achieve their objectives. In addition to enabling dialogue between the local church and those who might not ordinarily go there, the mission too helped forge links between the different parishes and between Christians who had previously had little to do with one another. At some point during the next few months, our aim is to enable some of the people of Hardington Vale to visit us at Westcott to tell us what has happened to them since Holy Week. Our hope is that the short time we spent with them has helped God's Kingdom grow in that beautiful place.