

WEBA 3 in 1 Event: 'Making a Difference'



For the second year running, the West of England Baptist Association combined seminars, their AGM, and an evening celebration service to create an event designed to challenge and encourage everyone in the region's churches to make a difference in their local community.

Despite the hot weather, at least 160 people attended the three afternoon seminars, and over 300 gathered for the evening celebration service at Milton Baptist Church in Weston-super-Mare. This represented an increased interest in the event, which encouraged Senior Regional Minister Revd Nigel Coles:

"I didn't sense people were at Weston because they felt somebody 'ought' to come to represent their church. That could sound like a small thing, but it actually represents a sea change in attitude towards any gathering with the word 'association' attached to it. People had come because there was a greater sense of identification with what we're trying to achieve."

During the afternoon the WEBA regional ministry team led a seminar entitled 'Making a Difference through your local church', asking the question 'Why has God put us here?'

WEBA Evangelist Paul Griffiths investigated 'Making a Difference through personal networks', looking at what it really takes to communicate Christ's love with our friends at the beginning of the 21st Century.

Helen Harrison of World Mission Services, which helps churches organise mission trips, held a seminar on 'Making a Difference when going abroad'. Helen has helped organise mission trips to places such as Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, South Africa, Nepal, and Thailand, and offers support 'all the way from planning through to debrief'.

This was followed by the WEBA AGM, at which Moderator, the Revd. John Rackley, and Honorary Finance Director, Trevor Bryant, were appointed to serve another year in those posts, and a new church, 3C Community Church, in

Gloucestershire, was welcomed into the Association. Regional Minister Gordon Hindmarch also drew attention to the ways in which Home Mission and the New Churches Fund are enabling God's work in the region.

After a very welcome cream tea, with an abundance of homemade scones donated by many churches, the evening Celebration began. Worship was led by Ruth Smith and the worship team from Milton Baptist Church, who set the tone for an open, honest, and challenging service.

Ruth is married to the Revd John Smith, Minister of Milton Baptist Church, who found himself in the public spotlight just a few months ago, as Caroline Petrie, the nurse suspended for offering to pray for a patient, also attends that church. Regional Minister Alisdair Longwill interviewed John about his role as a pastor in that situation. "She got into trouble for being a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ" he reminded us, and said he had been overwhelmed by the number of supportive emails he had received from people of all faiths and none.

Several ministers and church youth workers, either newly accredited or new to WEBA churches, were then welcomed to the platform and prayed for.

Alisdair Longwill also interviewed Alison Boulton and two of her daughters, who have moved into a new housing development south of Swindon in order to build community and develop incarnational mission there. During 2009 WEBA is raising money to support this project through its New Churches Fund, and a collection was taken for this fund during the service.

After a dramatic presentation of the feeding of the five thousand by the Revd Var Smallwood of St Marks Baptist Church in Bristol, Senior Regional Minister Revd Nigel Coles focused on Jesus' words from that story: "You give them something to eat." His message focussed on four aspects of this command: our ability to do this is Absolutely down to God, Potentially in our hands, Primarily for the benefit of others, and Possibly dependent on what we are willing to put into the hands of God. The congregation were encouraged to indicate which of these aspects they found challenging, and prayed for one another with these challenges in mind.

Afterwards, Nigel Coles commented that as people left, "there was an enthusiasm in their comments that wasn't just saying 'thanks for the day'. God is at work in local churches, and through local churches, and there's a growing willingness and awareness to gather around a shared sense of purpose."