

West Swindon Partnership Meeting Tuesday 4th December 2012

A Reflection from Chris Dobson and Michael Johnson for the West Swindon Partnership and the Swindon Churches Together Sponsoring Body

- 1 We are grateful to the West Swindon Partnership for meeting with us on 4th December and for sharing the minutes of the previous meeting held on 8th October 2012.
- 2 We were pleased to be able to check out and have confirmed the major issues which we identified from the minutes of the October meeting and are grateful to those who were present for expressing their views clearly. The meeting confirmed our thoughts and gave further breadth and depth to our understanding of where the Partnership is now. We recognise that there are both positive and negative aspects of the Partnership and the dedicated contribution that many have made to its life.
- 3 We were also able to listen to the approach that individual churches are making.

Our reflections so far on the key issues

Toll on Ministers

It is clear both from the evidence provided by the Partnership and from our own experience that ministers find it stressful to work in the Partnership. Some of the reasons for this are to do with the complex structures, different denominational cultures, unfulfilled and perhaps unfulfillable expectations. It was clear that a number of lay people felt that this cannot continue, and that they are not prepared to see any more ministers broken

We believe that it is essential that any new ministers are appointed on a realistic job description and that realistic expectations of ministers are held by members of the Partnership.

Partnership Structure and Vision

It is clear that many people in the Partnership value working in partnership with others and rejoice in the creative mix of denominations that has resulted. However where some people have an idea about what the Partnership is about it seems that many people in the congregations are unaware of the meaning and purpose of the Partnership. Our reflection is that currently the Partnership is held together by a constitution, but that a clear vision for the Partnership needs to be sought and shared, and owned by all.

There are clearly very real questions about the nature of the structures within the partnership that need to be answered before decisions about the future are made.

Finance

Finance appears to be source of tension within the Partnership with a sense of unfairness over the contributions that are given to the denominations towards the cost of providing ministry. We note too that the Partnership share has reduced from £105k in 2010 to £88k in 2011. It is important to be realistic about the cost of providing (stipendiary) ministry and to make a realistic contribution towards it. This could be helped through conversations with the sponsoring denominations.

A way forward Issues

1. Vision: currently the Partnership seems to be based more on obligation than on vision; we believe that it needs to seek its vision for the churches and their mission in West Swindon and the Lydiards. (We note that this process has already been put in place by Dick Gray.)
2. Lighter Structures might be devised: clearly the current structures are seen as complex and for some, onerous. A new way of engaging in the mission of the Gospel needs to be found that allows the diversity and enthusiasm of the church in the Partnership to flourish. However within the discussions a range of options should be considered ranging from staying as it is with more support for ministers through to dissolving the current structure and creating new patterns of working together.
3. Toll on ministers: if the previous two matters are addressed we believe that the toll on ministers may be lessened. We think also that the matter needs to be addressed both within the Partnership and by the appointing denominations.
4. Finance: a shared understanding of the purpose and level of contributions needs to be sought with input from denominations if needed or desired.

In order to achieve these outcomes we recommend that outside reviewers, possibly from ISR are engaged to work with the member churches of the Partnership to seek to achieve a way forward that all can embrace.

Costs: we propose that the costs are shared between the churches of the Partnership. Requests for assistance may be made to Swindon Churches Together and the sponsoring denominations.

(Whilst All Saints statement presented to the meeting seems to lean towards a dissolution of the partnership we believe that this would be premature before the process outlined above addresses the issues identified. Indeed, we would invite the leadership team of ASLM, indeed, all the leadership teams, to engage wholeheartedly in the review we propose.)

*Chris Dobson and Michael Johnson
December 2012*