

# Happy Pride!! Sunday 13th July 2008

Quote from Friedrich Niemöller - When they came for the Communists

Luke 1:46 – 55 The Magnificat

Well, what a fantastic day we had yesterday!! The first ever Pride parade through Central Newcastle and then the Pink Picnic in Leazes Park. The rain held off all day and we gave out stickers, leaflets and lollipops galore. People used our labyrinth and wrote prayers. We spoke to lots of people, some already involved in church, some not. MCC Newcastle was an active, vibrant, fun participant in Pride!!

There were many people who represented MCC and more importantly, represented God's inclusive love for all people, at Pride. Particular thanks go to Claire and to John for all their hard work in preparing materials, setting up the stall and the labyrinth and co-ordinating our presence.

Sex between consenting male adults had been illegal in this country since 1885, it was only made legal, in private and between men over 21 years of age in 1967. MCC was founded in Los Angeles in 1968. The Stonewall riot in New York was in 1969. Police raided a gay bar, The Stonewall Inn and, instead of trying to escape arrest or being frightened into co-operating with the police, the people in the bar, many of them drag queens, fought back and the riots continued for more than 24 hrs.

The following year, a march was organised to commemorate this act of protest, and over the years, it has spread around the world. Now MCC Newcastle has become part of this story. We are a part of LGBT history in the NE and in the world.

But some will say "Why do we need to march, to parade, to gather together?"

Some say "We have all the freedoms we need, we don't feel prejudiced against"

Others say "The drag queens and dykes on bikes give us a bad name. People think we are all like that!"

Two of the people who worked the hardest to tell people about God's love for all people and the ministry of MCC Newcastle were Eric and Ernie. Our very own Ernie was the guest speaker after the Lord Mayor, at the official opening of Northern Pride.

He was specifically asked to speak about what it was like in the days before 1967, when you could be arrested, blackmailed, lose everything if it was found out that you were gay.

Eric staffed the stall all day, from 11 in the morning to when we dragged him off home at 5pm. Both he and Ernie chatted with folk, gave out leaflets and sweets. Eric's hot chat up line was "Have you got a fridge?" to which the answer was invariably "Yes" He then gave the unsuspecting stall visitor one of our fridge magnets!

Eric, Ernie and others here have memories of what it feels like to be oppressed because of who they are. For me, and others in their 40s and 30s, it was Clause 28 in the Local Government Act, which effectively banned mention of homosexuality in schools from 1986 until it was repealed in 2003, that gave out the unmistakable message that gay was not good. Prejudice enshrined in law makes a powerful weapon.

Even now, same sex couples may have their relationships recognised in law, but it is also enshrined in law that no religious ceremony to join them as a couple will be recognised as legal, in the way that church weddings are recognised for non-same sex couples.

Around the world, at this moment, there are people struggling to stay alive, because of their sexuality. State sponsored violence and prejudice enshrined in law impacts our LGBT sisters and brothers in many African countries, in Eastern Europe and in Jamaica. Even in South Africa, where same sex marriage is legal and LGBT people are protected within the country's constitution, there is violence towards our community, which is escalating in some places. In some places around the world, this violence and prejudice is fuelled by the loud voices of those professing their faith, including some Christian leaders.

At the stall, we heard many people's stories. We heard from people who were happy and fully accepted in their own church, even though that church was in a denomination that struggles with issues around sexuality.

We heard from people, some with tears in their eyes, who had been denounced in their church, even though they had been faithful members for years.

We heard from those who were just curious and wondered if we were a “real church.”

In the midst of the rainbow flags, rainbow willy warmers, free condoms, rock music, chip pan fire demonstrations by the Fire Brigade, mixed in with the Youth Bus, the Parents Enquiry tombola and a clown on stilts,

we were offering the ancient message of Christ’s Good News. Just like Mary, we were able to sing a song of freedom, a song of liberation, a song of people who believe in a God with a strong arm who can do miracles. We were able to say “Yes, you are loved by God, you are special in God’s sight.” We were able to give people leaflets that helped them to better understand the parts of scripture used by others to condemn them. We were able to reassure and to offer prayer support. We were able to BE the face of Christ to the people at Pride. For a few people, I believe we offered a way out of hopelessness and fear.

We personally might not think that we experience prejudice, we may feel fully integrated in our sexuality and spirituality. We may not feel the need to shout about who we are, as sexual beings. Being a visible presence at Pride honours all those who have struggled to get us to this place. I bet neither Eric nor Ernie ever thought that this day would come! It also reminds us that there are millions of people who still have yet to experience the freedom we have in this country.

Best of all, we showed that there is an exciting, vibrant, lively Christian community in the NE, where God is praised and people can worship with their whole self. I think that is a good enough reason to celebrate. Amen Happy Pride!!!