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Counting

This year the theme for poverty & homelessness action week was 'Who Counts?' As with any good theme there were a number of interconnected resonances to work with. One is the whole idea of counting and value or worth. We say something counts because it matters. This leads to consideration of who counts in the eyes of the world vs. who counts in the eyes of God; and for Housing Justice it raises the issue of how homeless and other marginalised people are valued in our churches and in our society. So by choosing 'Who Counts?' as our theme we wanted to encourage people in churches to recognise that homeless people count and should be treated as people of worth.

Another strand is the contested issue of the number of homeless people. One of the first acts of the Coalition Government, and one that I think is to be commended, was to change the way in which the number of people sleeping rough is measured. The government knew that the change would mean that the number would go up, but they were prepared to take the risk of being criticised for rising homelessness figures in order to have a better idea of the true figure. And the number did rise dramatically. It went up from just under 500 to around 1,200 and the latest figure, collected entirely under the new system, is just over 1,700. So we wanted to use the theme 'Who Counts?' to alert people to the change and to encourage them to count or estimate rough sleepers in their area to act as a check on the official figure.

A third strand is the upcoming UK census. This is taking place on Sunday 27th March and we wanted to use 'Who Counts?' to enlist churches to make sure that homeless and marginalised people, together with migrants and refugees, are able to be included in the census and be counted along with the rest of us. But there is more to the census than counting. In 2001 the last national census was mirrored by a church census (or at least a very large scale survey). Churches Information for Mission organised the distribution of survey forms to samples of churches from the Church of England, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, United Reformed Church, Salvation Army, and to self selected Pentecostal, independent evangelical and house churches. The churches then distributed forms to everyone (adults and children) who attended services at their churches during census week. In total 1,700 churches returned batches of forms and about 120,000 individuals took part.

As with the national census, the point is not that the counting took place so much as what the information was used for. The reason why it is important for homeless, marginalised and migrant people to be included in the national census is that the information collected will be the basis for planning and providing schools and hospitals and houses and all the other public services we need. My hope is that providing as complete a picture as possible will give organisations like Housing Justice better ammunition as we argue for the homes and services people need. In the same way the reason for collecting the information in the Church Life Profile, for that is what the 2001 church survey was called, was to enable churches, nationally and locally, to plan for their future life and mission. So did it make a difference? It is not really for me to comment, but I do encourage the local churches and denominations who took part to look back over the development of their life and mission over the last ten years and to reflect on the impact, if any, of the Church Life Profile.

And don't forget to fill out your census forms...

Alison Gelder is now Director of Housing Justice but from 1999 to 2002 she was chief executive of Churches Information for Mission.

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Experiencing Unity Globally¹

Justice and peace provided a framework for planning and assessment of programmes as the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) met in Geneva from 16 to 22 February 2011. The Central Committee looked forward in particular to upcoming global gatherings that will focus on "just peace": the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation at Kingston, Jamaica in May of this year, and the next WCC Assembly at Busan, South Korea in October 2013. Justice, peace and Christian unity were central topics in opening addresses by the general secretary of the WCC and the moderator of the Central Committee. The WCC Central Committee is a governing body representing 349 member churches that convenes approximately once every eighteen months.

Highlights and directions on the journey

An Assembly "theme" in the form of a prayer was adopted for Busan: "God of life, lead us to justice and peace." Among the highlights in the life of the Central Committee were common prayer and Bible study, calls for renewed and

¹ by Revd Theodore A. Gill, senior editor of WCC Publications.

creative efforts in the quest for Christian unity, the relationship of women and men within church structures, statements on public issues, as well as the practical details of approving the WCC budget.

A network of relationships

In a chapel meditation on the opening day, Revd Dr Ofelia Ortega, the WCC president for Latin American and the Caribbean, told her congregation: "Our whole existence is a network of relationships in which we need reciprocity, connectivity and interdependence in order for peace to be achieved."

Another WCC president, Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana and Durres, the Orthodox primate of Albania, reflected that "Peace is not something a human being can acquire through its own powers alone. It remains a divine gift." He added, "It is a gift that, in order to be given, requires the desire of each person to receive it."

Later, in a discussion on "the community of women and men", it was recognized that women have always been outnumbered in WCC governing body relationships. Prof. Dr Magali do Nascimento Cunha of the Brazilian Methodist Church argued, "Full participation of women through numbers has to be achieved and also has to mean women being able to speak, being able to do, to lead, women being respected as partners being seen, being heard, their gifts recognized and valued."

The Central Committee recommended that 50 percent of assembly representatives be women, but this has been an unachieved goal since 1981. Minimum percentages were also suggested in regard to young people, laity and Orthodox delegates.

Revd Jennifer Leath of ECHOS, the WCC youth commission, observed that "there is a delicate dance that is going on" because it is seen as important that the WCC speak with "authority", yet the leaders of the churches whose voices are best recognized tend to be older and male. The WCC, she continued, is attempting to find a means of "maintaining a prophetic and youthful voice."

Father Gosbert Byamungu, an observer from the Roman Catholic Church and co-moderator of the Joint Working Group with the WCC, stressed that there has been ecumenical progress over the decades. Fifty years after the Second Vatican Council, he said, "distrust and animosity" among different traditions of Christianity "have been replaced by trust and friendship." Today, progress is being made in relations among ecumenical bodies, world evangelical organizations and Pentecostal associations.

Consultation with Christian leaders from Iraq

Key leaders from several Iraqi churches, including a patriarch and four archbishops, held a consultation in Geneva at the time of Central Committee. Speaking to Central Committee participants at a public hearing, Archbishop Mar Georgis Sliwa of the Holy Apostolic Assyrian Church of the East reported that the most urgent needs in Iraq were "investigating the real reasons" behind violence and working "to empower the role of the state" in ensuring security for Iraqis regardless of religion or ethnicity.

Statements on public issues

The Central Committee adopted several statements, memoranda and resolutions on Iraq and the Middle East, Libya, Colombia and Australia, as well as taking positions on the topics of migration and the human right to water and sanitation. It sharply criticized a veto by the USA in the United Nations Security Council blocking UN condemnation of settlement-building in Palestine. The group also celebrated the 25th anniversary of WCC ministries to help churches in Africa achieve competence in dealing with the HIV-AIDS pandemic; this work was enthusiastically reaffirmed.

Approval of the budget and an application for membership

Amid fluctuating currency markets, the Central Committee acted to adopt a draft budget for 2011 with total income of 30.5 million Swiss francs, total expenditure of 32.9 million francs and a net reduction in funds and reserves of 2.4 million francs.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) took a step toward membership as the Central Committee accepted its application to join the WCC fellowship. While other WCC member churches are consulted to assure consensus regarding the application, the ELCJHL will participate in the life of the WCC both regionally and globally. A determination regarding full membership will be made at the Central Committee meeting in September 2012.

See a report by Revd Dr Donald Norwood on the [CTE website](#).

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WCC 2013 Assembly theme

"God of life, lead us to justice and peace" will provide the theme for the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The Assembly is to be convened in October 2013 at Busan, South Korea. The theme was

determined by the WCC Central Committee on Tuesday 22 February following periods of discussion spread over several days. A "theme" is not merely a slogan or motto for a WCC assembly but provides a focus for theological reflection, worship and meditation surrounding the assembly, as well as for planning of programmatic activities before, during and after the event. The theme of the 9th Assembly, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in February 2006, was "God, in your grace, transform the world." The theme for the 10th Assembly is also phrased in the form of a prayer.

The proposal of the 2013 theme was accompanied by the citation of a biblical text: Isaiah 42:1-4, depicting the servant of the Lord who neither breaks a bruised reed nor quenches a dimly burning wick (verse 3) and who will not be crushed "until he has established justice in the earth" (verse 4). The 10th Assembly theme as adopted was one of two suggestions from the Assembly Planning Committee. The other possibility presented early in the meeting was: "In God's world, called to be one". During the course of deliberations, several attempts were made by Central Committee members to combine the emphases of justice, peace and life, on the one hand, and of unity on the other hand. Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the WCC, in the final moments before the decision, asserted that "seeking justice and peace is a call to unity – and may be clearly interpreted as such".

Carmencita Karagdag from the Philippine Independent Church reminded the Central Committee that neither the word "justice" nor "peace" has appeared in any "theme" of the previous nine WCC assemblies since the council was founded in 1948. In the end, "God of life, lead us to justice and peace" was adopted by consensus. The wording was adopted in its English-language formulation. Official translations of the theme into many languages, including Korean, will be coordinated by the WCC and announced in the coming days and weeks. "We are addressing the whole world," said Metropolitan Mor Eustathius Matta Roham in regard to the theme. A member of both the Central Committee and the Assembly Planning Committee, he represents the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, located near the other end of the Asian landmass from South Korea. "This will be read in many different places, by Christians and non-Christians. We must be sure that the theme will be clearly stated in all languages." [Back to top](#)

Letter from Birmingham, Alabama

Participants at the annual meeting of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. (CCT) have issued a response to the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

The CCT church leaders, who were in Birmingham, Alabama, from January 11 to 14 to examine the issue of domestic poverty through the lens of racism, noted that apparently no one has ever issued a clergy response to Dr. King's famous letter. Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter was an answer to a message from a group of clergy in Birmingham in 1963. In their "Call for Unity," the clergy appealed for restraint and "common sense," and a withdrawal of support for the civil rights demonstrations.

In their one-page letter, the church leaders remember with gratitude the sacrifices of the leaders of the civil rights movement, who demonstrated the power of Christian, nonviolent action. They also express repentance that "some of us have not progressed far enough beyond the initial message from the Birmingham clergy. Too often our follow-through has been far less than our spoken commitments. Too often we have chosen to be comfortable rather than prophetic. Too often we have chosen not to see the evidence of a racism that is less overt but still permeates our national life in corrosive ways."

In their experiences at the Civil Rights Institute and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the church leaders, who were of multiple races and represented a wide range of church backgrounds, found inspiration and renewed commitment. They describe two windows at the church – one where the face of Jesus had been blown out from the bombing in 1963 that killed four girls, and the other that depicts a Christ figure who with one hand rejects the injustice of the world and with the other extends forgiveness. "In the spirit of this loving Jesus, and in the spirit of those who committed their very lives to that love, we renew our commitment to ending racism in all forms. We begin by taking time on Monday, January 17, to reread the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"--along with the message from the Birmingham clergy that prompted King's letter--and to reflect on its meaning for us today. We urge all within our churches to do the same."

Formed in 2007, CCT is the broadest Christian fellowship in the country, with members from the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Historic Black, and Evangelical/Pentecostal families. In addition to 36 national communions, its membership includes six national organizations--the American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, and World Vision. For the full letter and a list of the member communions, go to www.christianchurchestogether.org [Back to top](#)

Inter-Orthodox consultation begins discussion on the nature of the church

A week-long inter-Orthodox consultation with the aim of studying the Faith and Order document "The Nature and Mission of the Church" began its work on Thursday 3 March in Ayia Napa, Cyprus. The aim of the consultation is to

offer distinctly Orthodox insights as part of a world-wide discussion of the doctrine of the Church, or "ecclesiology". The gathering is hosted by the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. Nearly forty participants from Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, church leaders, university professors, theologians, men and women as well as youth, most of whom are members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Commission on Faith and Order, will discuss the document and produce a common Orthodox response to this important theological text.

After a Te Deum celebrated by Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus in the historic monastery of Ayia Napa, Metropolitan Prof. Dr Gennadios of Sassima, co-moderator of the consultation, expressed gratitude to the archbishop for his generous hospitality, extended regularly to inter-Orthodox and ecumenical gatherings, and highlighted the archbishop's life-long struggle to overcome dividing lines, in his own country and elsewhere in the world. Unfortunately, Metropolitan Gennadios added, "walls of separation and division still exist in the world and one of our priorities as Orthodox is to continue our struggle for peace, reconciliation and friendship among peoples and nations." Archbishop Chrysostomos underlined the importance of the theme. "Orthodox theology is primarily ecclesiological," he said. "Christianity cannot be understood except as the church". By his incarnation, the archbishop continued, Christ made all human beings part of his own body. Orthodox contributions to ecumenical theological reflection consist in the fact that Orthodoxy, rather than defending a "confessional" interpretation of ecclesiology, shares the existential experience of the church.

Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the WCC general secretary, expressed appreciation both to Archbishop Chrysostomos for his hospitality, which is a tangible sign of his ecumenical commitment, and to Metropolitan Dr Vasilios of Constantia-Ammochostos, moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, for hosting the consultation in his diocese and for his many contributions to the work of Faith and Order. The general secretary referred to the work of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC a decade ago and stressed the Orthodox contribution to both ecclesiological reflection in general and to the ecclesial character of the fellowship of the World Council of Churches in particular. The general secretary concluded by reminding participants of the forthcoming peace convocation in Kingston, Jamaica. "Our task will be to affirm that we aim at being one, so that the world may believe that a just peace is possible. We know that in this island there is a struggle for justice and peace. It is as part of our journey towards unity and common witness that we participate in this struggle." [Back to top](#)

Churches rally support after Japan earthquake

Churches and church leaders have sent messages of support for the people of Japan after a devastating 8.9-magnitude earthquake and ensuing tsunami rocked the country on 11 March.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, sent a message of condolence to the Anglican Archbishop of Japan, Nathaniel Makoto Uematsu, offering sympathy, support and prayers for the Japanese people. "The news of the horrific earthquake in Japan has shocked us all," wrote Archbishop Williams. "We await further and more detailed news with apprehension, but I want to say immediately that our hearts and our prayers go out to all who have been affected and that we as a church will do what we can to offer practical as well as spiritual support at this time of great suffering and great anxiety for so many."

USPG also pledged its prayers for those affected by the disaster. Rachel Parry, regional manager for USPG in Asia, said on the agency's website, "We keep all the affected people in Japan, and in particular our fellow Anglicans, especially those who have not yet been able to be reached in Tohoku Diocese, in our thoughts and prayers."

Meanwhile, religious relief organizations were mobilizing in the hours following the quake. The Christian Reformed World Relief Committee announced it would be working with other agencies, including the Geneva-based Action by Churches Together (ACT) Alliance, in its response to survivors in affected countries. The Catholic News Agency reported that Caritas Japan, a Roman Catholic aid organization, would be working to assist victims of the disaster. A partner aid group, Catholic Relief Services, was preparing to provide support in other countries in the Pacific, as a tsunami warning was issued for much of the Pacific Rim, including New Zealand, the entire U.S. western coast, Hawaii, Mexico and Central and South America.

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London Meeting of Inter-Church Families

The London Meeting of the Association of Inter-Church Families heard from Professor Antoine Arjakovsky, Director of the Institute of Ecumenical Studies at the Catholic University of Lviv, Ukraine, and Commissioner Betty Matear, Moderator of the Free Churches and one of the Presidents of AIF.

Professor Arjakovsky is a lay Orthodox and his wife is Catholic so he is himself in an Inter-Church family. He explained the background of his upbringing in France where there was a renewal of Orthodox faith amongst the Russian community and ecumenical links developed such as the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius which brings together the Anglican and Orthodox communions.

He spoke of his personal journey and his ecumenical vision. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church defines itself as being Orthodox, Catholic and Reformed! The Council of Florence in 1539 allowed the One Church to be both Orthodox and Catholic. The Ukrainians also took a lot from the Reformers.

Commissioner Betty Matear, who completes her term as Moderator of the Free Churches in April, is the first Salvationist to hold that post. She spoke of her experience of the Papal Visit to the United Kingdom which she called 'a faith lift'. She said it was a historical moment and she was glad to be part of it. She said her vision was a Church which sees the world with the eyes of Christ. [Back to top](#)

England Forum Day of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women

All are welcome at this event at Central Methodist Church, Saltergate, Chesterfield. It is for any women interested beyond the bounds of their own church and nation. The keynote speaker is Bishop Jana Jeruma-Grinberga who is the Bishop of the Lutheran Church UK. She began her work as European Officer for Churches Together in England at Easter 2010, bringing extensive experience and knowledge of Europe into the work of CTE. She is one of the four Presidents of CTE alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Archbishop of Westminster and the Free Church Moderator. There will be ecumenical worship during the day and opportunities for you to share your news about Christian women in England and in other parts of Europe.

The day takes place from 11am to 4pm and the cost is £10. Coffee and tea will be provided but please bring a sandwich lunch. There is very limited parking at the church but two big pay car parks across the road and a five minutes walk from the bus station.

For further information or to book a place contact Ingrid Chestnutt, Ashmores Farm, Norton, Evesham, Worcs WR11 4TL, ☎ 01386 870397. [Back to top](#)

Britain poised for a period of protest and unrest

Over a third (36%) of Britons would consider taking direct action to influence rules, laws or policies, new research from the public theology think tank Theos reveals. The study, conducted by the polling agency ComRes, asked people what kind of public action they had taken over the last twelve months or would consider taking in the future. It found that although traditional forms of public action (e.g. signing a petition) remain most popular, people expressed a marked willingness to take more direct action in the future.

For example,

- only 2% said they had taken part in a public demonstration in the last year, but 29% said they would now consider doing so;
- only 1% of people had taken part in a strike in the last year, but 19% would now consider doing so;
- less than 1% of people had posted confidential or sensitive material to a website (e.g. Wikileaks) in the last year, but 5% said they would now consider doing so;
- less than 0.5% of people had participated in illegal protest activities in the last year, but 5% said they would now consider it.

Young people are the key drivers of this trend. One in eight 18-24s said they would consider posting confidential or sensitive material to a website (compared with under 5% of anyone aged over 35). Overall, nearly half (46%) of 18-24s would consider taking some form of direct action. Importantly, the way in which Britons are taking action is changing. Although traditional forms of public action, such as donating money, remain popular, newer forms of 'protest' are growing fast. In the last 12 months, as many people have started, followed or supported a campaign using social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, in order to influence rules, laws or policies as have contacted a politician. Young people are also leading this 'hashtag' revolution. Nearly a quarter of 18-24 year olds have used social media as a means of 'influence' in the last twelve months, compared with 8% of over 55s.

In spite of these trends, more traditional means of public action are still considered more effective. Whereas only a fifth of people think use of social media is effective, nearly a half (46%) think that contacting a politician works, and 45% think contacting the media is effective. When asked what issues they would take action about, most people said fuel prices (52%), closely followed by public service cuts (47%). These issues clearly motivated the public much more than others, such as global poverty (19%) or climate change (17%).

Commenting on the research, Research Director of Theos, Nick Spencer, said: "The number of people saying they would consider some form of public action is always higher than the number that actually does it. Nevertheless this research reveals some important trends in the way we relate to one another and to government. New media seems to be offering the potential to reconnect citizens with one another and help them to work together towards common goals, countering the trends towards individualised or 'chequebook' participation we have seen over recent years. At the same time, people seem to be shifting away from traditional forms of public engagement towards direct action, including by digital means. What we take action about is just as important as how we do it, though. 'Hashtag' politics and direct action can become a positive force if people collaborate over issues of the common good." [Back to top](#)

Plan to Ban Free Food and Homelessness in Victoria, London

Westminster Council have opened a four week consultation on a new byelaw which will fine people in the Victoria area if they "lie down or sleep in any public place", "deposit bedding" and distribute free food and drink. This byelaw will affect the 1,600 people it is estimated sleep rough in Westminster each year, many of whom bed down in the Victoria area. Voluntary groups hand out food in the Victoria area, especially at Howick Place behind the House of Fraser. These groups will be facing the possibility of moving or being fined for their charity if the ban goes ahead.

Alison Gelder, Director of Housing Justice says: "While we completely understand the problems experienced by residents in this area, this byelaw, which is an attack on civil and religious freedoms, is a completely over the top response. It also cuts across the successful work that Housing Justice and others are doing to reduce both rough sleeping and the need for food distribution on the streets."

The consultation period is running until the 25th of March. The London Soup Run Forum, convened by Housing Justice, will be releasing further information when it becomes available.

Revd Alison Tomlin, President of the Methodist Conference, said: "Westminster Council's proposals are nothing short of disgusting. This by-law punishes people solely for their misfortune and belongs in a Victorian statute book, not in the laws of a decent 21st century community. In the 18th Century John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, described those who would punish and blame the poor for their misfortune as 'foolish and wicked'. These words seem appropriate for such an appalling piece of legislation."

Westminster has an active well informed community of volunteers and agencies who work with local and national government to help ease the homelessness problem in the area. But the Church fears that all this good work, and the many invaluable relationships between different groups and street sleepers will be torn up if these proposals go ahead.

Alison added: "These proposals rob people of their dignity. We cannot simply shuffle homeless people off our streets like an embarrassing relative that we don't want 'important' people to meet. Where are they expected to go? Will Westminster Council be offering accommodation in hotels and empty houses? To remove essential support such as soup kitchens without offering alternatives is simply absurd." [Back to top](#)

Lenten Day of Reflection

A Lenten Day of Reflection will be held at Hinde Street Methodist Church, West London. This will be an opportunity for people of all denominations for guided reflection, prayer and discussion on themes related to homelessness and Lent, providing a space to pause and reflect in your Lenten journey.

COST £15 per person or £5 per person low/unwaged

DATE Saturday 19 March 2011 10.00am – 4.00pm

VENUE Hinde Street Methodist Church, 19 Thayer Street, London W1U 2QJ

Tea and coffee will be made available. Please bring your own picnic lunch.

For further information, please contact:

Alison Gelder at Housing Justice a.gelder@housingjustice.org.uk ☎ 020 7920 6441

Alastair Murray at Housing Justice a.murray@housingjustice.org.uk ☎ 020 7920 6440

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Fairtrade Fortnight

It's been a Fairtrade cotton roll out. Over the last two weeks Britain has been Bunting for Justice. Campaigners in Fairtrade Towns, Universities, and Schools throughout the UK organised thousands of separate events throughout the land as part of a national record-breaking attempt to create the world's longest - and fairest - string of bunting for Fairtrade Fortnight 2011 (28 February – 13 March) 'Show Off Your Label' campaign.

To secure the world bunting record, 12,500 individual decorated bunting flags, made out of Fairtrade cotton triangles, are expected to be decorated by groups across the whole of the UK and sent back to the Foundation. Sewn together, they will make a two and a half mile statement about the importance of Fairtrade and trade justice for World Fair Trade Day 2011 (14 May) and will be used throughout the year to highlight the cotton campaign message.

Residents of towns including Warrington, Wendover, Lincoln, Northampton, Tameside, Canterbury, Preston, St Alcester, Beckenham, Leeds, Cardiff and many more besides have decorated the bunting with paint, fabric, glitter, sequins, embroidery, or fabric paints, letting their imaginations run riot. School children in Gateshead strung their bunting flags across the Millennium Bridge. In Bexhill on Sea residents displayed their bunting along the seafront and in Chester the bunting encircled the city's ancient walls.

Support for Fairtrade in local communities continues to surge in the UK, where the FAIRTRADE Mark is recognised by 74% of the public. Vibrant community campaigns in more than 500 Fairtrade Towns across the country, along with thousands of schools and universities, faith groups (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu), are helping the public make a personal and local connection to Fairtrade. The theme of this year's Fairtrade Fortnight, Show Off Your Label, encouraged people to have fun as they discussed the serious values of sustainability, fairness, opportunity and empowerment that lie behind the FAIRTRADE Mark, and this was reflected in the broad array of different events across the nation. In schools, on high streets, in work canteens, and faith groups, Fairtrade supporters got loud and proud in support of a fair deal for producers and the stories behind the Fairtrade products they buy. Everything from coffee breaks to debates, suppers, quizzes and fashion shows. Laugharne School in Carmarthenshire, Wales, celebrated its status as the 500th Fairtrade School in the UK.

The bunting record attempt focussed attention on the shameful poverty facing more than 10 million West African people – many of whom earn less than \$400 a year - who rely on cotton for a living. A recent Fairtrade Foundation report, *The Great Cotton Stitch-Up* (www.fairtrade.org.uk/cotton) revealed that a \$31 billion wall of subsidies paid by the United States and the EU locks West Africa into poverty. The Great Cotton Stitch-Up outlines how US and EU subsidies have had a devastating effect on cotton farmers in West Africa and how some of the least developed nations in the world brought this issue to the World Trade Organisation but have yet to reach an agreement, under a system where some countries continue to be more equal than others. It explains that cotton subsidy reform hinges on the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the US Farm Bill, both of which are under review over the next two years.

Kwame Banson, Fairtrade Africa's West African co-ordinator who visited the UK to witness the launch of the Fairtrade Fortnight campaign, says: 'Cotton is one of the most important sources of income in West Africa but the truth is cotton farmers are hardly able to cover their living costs. They've got a lot of debts and so people are walking away from cotton. That makes me really angry. If it was you, what would you think? The economy of the country suffers. It's the main export for countries like Mali and the state does not have funds to pay for healthcare and education.'

Politicians have also been invited to participate in this event and were asked to sign or decorate a piece of bunting to show their support for trade reform.

Veronica Pasteur, Head of Campaigns at the Fairtrade Foundation says: 'As well as being record-breaking because of its length we are confident that our bunting will bring attention to the plight of West African cotton farmers. We hope that by shining a spotlight on this issue, our MEPs will take action on this in the European Parliament and also that more people will look for Fairtrade cotton when they shop.' At the beginning of the Fortnight, the Fairtrade Foundation announced estimated retail sales of £1.17bn for 2010, a 40% increase on 2009. [Back to top](#)

Church meeting challenges banks on ethics

Searching questions were raised about banks' role in society at a packed public meeting organised by the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR), the UK-wide church-based research and advocacy group, in Birmingham yesterday evening. Chaired by Rt Revd David Urquhart, Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, the panel discussion marked the launch of ECCR's new report *The Banks and Society: Rebuilding Trust*. Introducing the panel, Bishop David Urquhart told the meeting that as a society we need to ask the right questions about our financial system in order to make economic life as good as possible.

Presenting the new report, Suzanne Ismail of ECCR highlighted financial exclusion, the financing of environmentally destructive projects, and lack of transparency as key challenges – and opportunities – facing the banks. 'ECCR's report helps show what a more socially responsible banking sector would look like,' Ms Ismail said.

Also on the panel were Damon Gibbons of the Centre for Responsible Credit and the Better Banking Campaign and Professor Andy Mullineux of University of Birmingham Business School and its Centre on Household and Savings Management. Damon Gibbons highlighted responsibility in lending, financial exclusion, financial education and help with debt as key banking-related issues in the UK context. Professor Mullineux said he thought that current agreements between the banks and the government were not sufficiently in the long-term interests of taxpayers and consumers. Revd John Paxton of ECCR West Midlands, speaking in place of Revd Dr Giles Fraser of St Paul's Cathedral, who was unable to attend due to train service disruptions, urged the meeting to consider the values and principles that society should look for in its banks. 'What is a bank for, and who should it serve in society?' he asked.

A wide-ranging discussion followed, with people in the audience – including many members of the West Midlands business and academic communities, churches and the voluntary sector – raising concerns about the impacts of the banking crisis on local and regional economies and ordinary people. As the event drew to a close, there was broad agreement that society can and should expect considerably more from the banks in reciprocating the huge taxpayer support that they have benefited from not only during the recent crisis but before and since.

ECCR's report, *The Banks and Society: Rebuilding Trust*, is sponsored by London-based CCLA Investment Management, published in association with a Better Banking Campaign and available for download at www.eccr.org.uk ECCR has submitted the report to the UK Government's Independent Commission on Banking, whose second round of consultation is due to begin following publication of its interim report in April. [Back to top](#)

From Market Place to Sacred Space

Churches Together in Greater Bristol held an event in Bristol Cathedral on March 5th where 50 Christian churches, charities and organisations showcased the work they are doing in the country. During the afternoon, many conversations reflected the growing network of mission initiatives around the city. In a closing service to celebrate all that Christians serving the community in and around Bristol hold in common, Bishop Lee Rayfield, Bishop of Swindon, and Rob Scott-Cook of Celebration Churches had a conversation about how Christians are responding together to the changing challenges of the city. Jon Doble, Acting Chair of Churches Together in Greater Bristol, expressed the hope that this might become an annual event. [Back to top](#)

Church Leaders pray in solidarity with victims of cuts

Senior Church Leaders in West Yorkshire have issued a joint Prayer for the most vulnerable people in society who will suffer in the cutbacks in public spending. They are urging churches across West Yorkshire to use it in their church services. At Leeds Civic Hall, at 12 noon, Wednesday 9 March – 'Ash Wednesday' – Church of England, Methodist and Roman Catholic leaders handed a copy of the prayer to Tom Riordan, Chief Executive of Leeds City Council. [Leeds has to save £150m, and up to one in six employees risks losing their jobs]

The Church Leaders taking this action were Revd. Dr. Liz Smith, Chair of the Leeds Methodist District, Rt. Revd. John Packer, Bishop of Ripon and Leeds and Revd. Mgr. Michael McQuinn, Vicar General of the Catholic Diocese of Leeds. For the text of the prayer, and for a photograph of these three Church Leaders together, see www.wyec.co.uk

Speaking on behalf of the organisers, West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council, the Revd Dr Clive Barrett said, "The churches share a concern for the most vulnerable people in our society. Children and elderly people will lose essential services, including from faith and voluntary sector charities reliant on public grants. This Ash Wednesday prayer is for the people who will lose vital services, people who will lose their jobs, and those who have the difficult task of deciding which cuts to make. In prayer and practice, the Church Leaders are showing we must take responsibility for people in greatest need, for these are the people who are being hit the hardest."

Following this there was a special joint service in St Anne's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Leeds, bringing together senior West Yorkshire Church Leaders from ten major Christian traditions. They asked forgiveness for the part we have all had in causing the financial crisis. They said this prayer for victims of the cuts, showing united Christian responsibility and solidarity for people in greatest need. [Back to top](#)

One World Week Handbook Launch in London

The official launch event for "*Piecing Together One World - A handbook for taking local action for global justice*" will be on the 7th April 2011. It will be at 5:30pm at Christian Aid's Head Office, just around the corner from Waterloo Station.

The handbook brings together the learning and ethos from our three-year DFID-funded Ubuntu project, in a simple to use guide. It has, of course, a One World Week flavour but can be used by any individuals or groups wishing to take local action for global justice. It presents simple ways to take action and to work with like-minded people from different backgrounds, cultures, faiths and experiences.

Join our patron, Lord Griffiths of Burry Port, the trustees and staff of One World Week for the launch event. There will be light refreshments and musical accompaniment by Baluji Shrivastav, the internationally acclaimed North Indian classical musician, composer and educationalist. We expect that the formal activities will start about 6:00pm, this will be followed by plenty of opportunities for browsing resources and networking until 7:30pm.

To assist our planning, it would be helpful if you could let Mina know whether you will be able to join us by calling her on 0118 939 4933 or by [email](#). [Back to top](#)

Magnet Resources

Magnet started in 1987 as the magazine of the Women's Network of the Methodist Church and built a strong and loyal subscription base amongst Methodist women. However, planned changes at Methodist headquarters meant that Women's Network and thence Magnet would no longer be staffed centrally. As a result of this, the volunteer management group and editors of Magnet took the decision in October 2008 to set up as an independent company and charity.

Though daunting to contemplate, they realised that this was a positive move that could open up new opportunities to promote Magnet to a wider ecumenical market of men and women. A team of eight trustees was recruited by March 2009 and they formed themselves into a company limited by guarantee and charity by July 2009. The Methodist Church of Great Britain gave transitional funding over this period and signed a transfer agreement with the new charity in December 2009. We were able to announce our new independent status from January 2010.

Magnet is a quarterly Christian magazine for men and women, with a wealth of interesting and challenging features both for individual reflection and also as a resource for preachers, leaders of worship and house group leaders. Each issue is themed and carries worship and other material related to the season and church season, as well as a Prayer Focus, Talking Justice and colourful meditation pages.

Subscribe now for only £10 per year for 4 issues:

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Preparing for Local Elections

Could Churches in your area arrange a meeting with the candidates for your local Council election?

A meeting of regional representatives from the West Midlands Region Churches Forum met on 15 February to identify questions that can be asked prospective candidates in the run up to the May Local Elections. Last year, churches were highly successful in providing space for General Election Hustings. The WM Region Churches Forum encourages local Churches across the region to consider organising a Husting for the Council Elections in May. The questions below are offered as a framework.

Briefing

The range of questions appropriate for a local election will be different from those for a general election. As the responsibility of local authorities are more localised and community orientated than that of Westminster Government, questions should focus on a) locally based issues, b) candidate's knowledge of the community they wish to serve, and c) their willingness to listen and build trust with people if they are elected.

A husting is an ideal opportunity to observe the way in which candidates listen and dialogue with their audience and for them to show they are interested in building mutual accountability and trust. The following questions are offered as starters for a debate with candidates and are aimed at revealing their ability to listen and engage with an audience.

Partnership between Council and local community

What is your vision and understanding of a local community?

How will you go about consulting with the people of this community and listen to their voices?

What will you do to build trust and develop partnership between the Council and the people of this community?

In what ways will you help this community to develop its corporate voice?

In what ways will you help the Council to listen to the voice of our community?

How will you balance views of the majority when they conflict with legitimate concerns of minority groups?

Voluntary and Community Life

What do you know about the voluntary and community sector in this community?

What value do you place on the contribution of voluntary and community groups?

What support for the voluntary and community sector will you fight for, if you are elected?

Local response to national policy

Cuts

What areas will you prioritise for cuts and further efficiencies in the next 2 year's local authority budgets of 2012 and 2013? (Although reductions for 2011/12 are set, further reductions will be required in 2012 and 2013).

Do you think that further efficiencies can be gained through improved working methods, and if so in what ways?

What do you think about sharing services with neighbouring councils as a way of reducing costs and improving services?

How will you be sensitive to the human cost of reorganisation that involve staff redundancies, relocation and establishing new offices?

Big Society and community organising

How will you assist and enable our local community to organise itself?

What do you understand by the term, Big Society?

How will you support the initiative for community organising?

Good communication across levels of Government

How will you help to inform national government and local MPs of our issues?

How will you go about learning of best practice in neighbouring councils?

How will you liaise between the different strands and departments of Council and manage your relationship with the employed staff of the Council?

To what extent do you feel bound by the national policies of your party?

Questions specific to the needs of your locality

These are your local questions relevant to the needs of your local community

General Questions

What world-view informs your politics?

What issue would lead you to defy your party on a vote in the Council chamber?

What social action projects will you assist or put into place?

What do you understand to be the limits of your powers if you are elected?

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