

ACTS OF LOVE

FIVE WAYS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

SMALL
GROUP
GUIDE

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OXFORD DIOCESAN COUNCIL FOR PARTNERSHIP IN WORLD MISSION

INTRODUCTION

This course has been produced by the Oxford Diocesan Council for Partnership in World Mission to support small groups of Christians as they attempt to prayerfully engage with the enormous challenges that face human beings in today's world - challenges that can often leave us feeling powerless.

The course is an attempt to help us think about the world we live in and to offer five small acts of love that all of us can offer to our communities, by listening to others, by looking at others, by recognising others, by seeing opportunities to perform the smallest service to others and finally by being open to the crosses that others have to bear, so that we can walk beside them and help.

There are no simple answers to the issues that are raised and each issue will affect each participant differently. But in the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ we can travel together in faith and hope and love.

USING THIS GUIDE

'Acts of Love' is designed to be used by small groups, perhaps meeting in someone's home. Each session requires a facilitator to read through the material before the group gathers and familiarise themselves with the content. The facilitator could be the same person for each of the 5 sessions or a different person each time. Throughout the guide you will see the following symbols used:



PRAY

Individually, in pairs, or in groups - there will be suggestions for different ways to pray about the issues raised and our response to them



READ

You might decide to read as a group (it's a good idea to hear different voices) or the group facilitator might suggest reading in silence



DISCUSS

In pairs or a bigger group, suggestions for conversation - in our talking and listening wisdom emerges.



THINK/ REFLECT

There will be times to ponder and reflect on the issues raised - and to consider what is being asked of us as people of faith.



ACT

Our reading, praying, discussing and pondering will lead us to act for the sake of a better world - there will be suggestions as to how we might best do that.

1

LISTEN TO ME



Spirit of God, enlighten our minds, enkindle our hearts, encourage our wills
for Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Father, one God world without end. Amen



If a word in the English language is onomatopoeic – in other words sounds like its meaning - then most often the word 'listen' will have something of exasperation about it: parents to their children, children to their parents, spouses to each other, either the shrill imperative 'listen!' or the plaintive 'don't you ever listen' or the despairing 'nobody ever listens to me.' In fact, apart from 'Listen with Mother' and 'The Listening Project', both programmes on the BBC, and the notice 'Stop, look and listen' at unmanned railway crossings, listen can be quite an aggressive word.



Split into twos. One of you asks the other what sort of day they have had. Then they exchange roles, and the first person listens to the second while they talk about their day. [10 minutes]
Then join with another two and let each tell the group what they have heard from the person who was talking to them. [10 minutes]



Reflect, individually, on how accurate the information was in the second group and what you have learnt about your own powers of listening and the others in your group. [5 minutes]



The world is changing very fast around us. In many places in our Diocese, houses are going up everywhere. It is the sign of deep changes in our Society, not least that we are all living longer. These developments can

put pressure on schools and roads and GP surgeries – they can also mean that new life will come into our communities, new blood, new ideas, hopefully new insight and excitement. Maybe it will energise us, challenge us and set us seeking new goals.

Choose a development - it could be something larger scale like a new area of housing, or a new road or a supermarket, or the closure of local shops around you, or it could be something very small and local like a change to a right of way. On a flip chart write down the ways that it will affect you personally, then the ways you think that it will affect your present community. Finally think about who this development will benefit, other than the developers or the builders or the engineers or those with commercial interests. [15 minutes]



In what ways could we make our community better? Suggest some ways that would be both practical and achievable, for example:

- Ask businesses in your community to work with the local schools to clear litter from around the area.
- Ask the Council to turn foot paths in town into green corridors or see if there might be space for a community garden. Explore funding sources.
- Resolve to take local elections seriously – and ensure that you communicate your concerns to councillors and candidates.
- If your community is going to have newcomers, work on some plan, if you don't already have one, to welcome them to the church as well as to the area.

[15 minutes]



Ask one person to read aloud: Matthew chapter 25, verses 31- 46

Discuss how this might be relevant to you and your parish. Are there some practical steps you could begin to take? [15 minutes]

Take some time for open prayer.

To ponder :

"The greatest compliment that was every paid to me was when someone asked me what I thought and attended to my answer." - Thoreau

For next week could you please bring in some pictures from the papers of what is going on in the world.

2

LOOK AT ME



Spirit of God, enlighten our minds, enkindle our hearts, encourage our wills for Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Father, one God world without end. Amen



Giles Duley is a photojournalist well known for his powerful photographs of war and other humanitarian disasters. In 2011 he was himself blown up by an Improvised Explosive Device whilst on an assignment in Afghanistan. He lost both legs and an arm. When he could eventually take photographs again the first photograph that he took was a self-portrait. It said 'Look at me' in a thousand different ways, from the very simple, 'I am still a human being, I am still beautiful, just as the fragment of a Greek statue is beautiful,' to the searing, complex statement 'This is what we do to each other in war.'

We are not very good at looking at people who are not as we are; we often look away, or we stare at them. Attitudes may be gradually changing. But still we find it difficult to look in the same way as we would look at those we know and love. It may be fear, it may be ignorance, it may be that we never seem to meet people who are different. But it is only when we look that we can get to know and learn to love.



In pairs, discuss what it is that makes it difficult for you to look at others. Can you make any generalisations and can you do anything about them? [5 minutes]

Share the pictures that you have brought with you. Are they pictures that you normally shy away from? Do they show people or things that you would not normally look at? [10 minutes]



In the departure lounge of an airport there were television monitors everywhere pouring out the latest news. One item of news showed pictures of a refugee boat wrecked on the rocky coast of Lampedusa, packed with refugees. An untidy bundle was being manhandled ashore. The bundle was in fact a makeshift stretcher and on it there was a woman in the very process of giving birth, the news-reader told us. A woman, watching, turned

to her neighbour and said 'served her right, she shouldn't have been travelling in that condition'.



In the group unpack that statement. What does it say about the woman on the stretcher that she felt driven to travel? Do you think she was running from or running to? What does it say about the woman who made the comment? [20 minutes]

In the group write on the flip chart the names of all the countries that she might have come from and why she might have left or been driven to leave them in the first place. [10 minutes]

Do we look at pictures like this, or do we look away? And is there a difference between pictures of those whom we know or pictures that have a purpose [the futility of war, the horror of starvation] or pictures that seem to be there seemingly merely to fill up space and time?

Is there anything more that we can do apart from pray more knowledgeably and fervently?



Read aloud in the Group: Luke chapter 7, verses 11-17

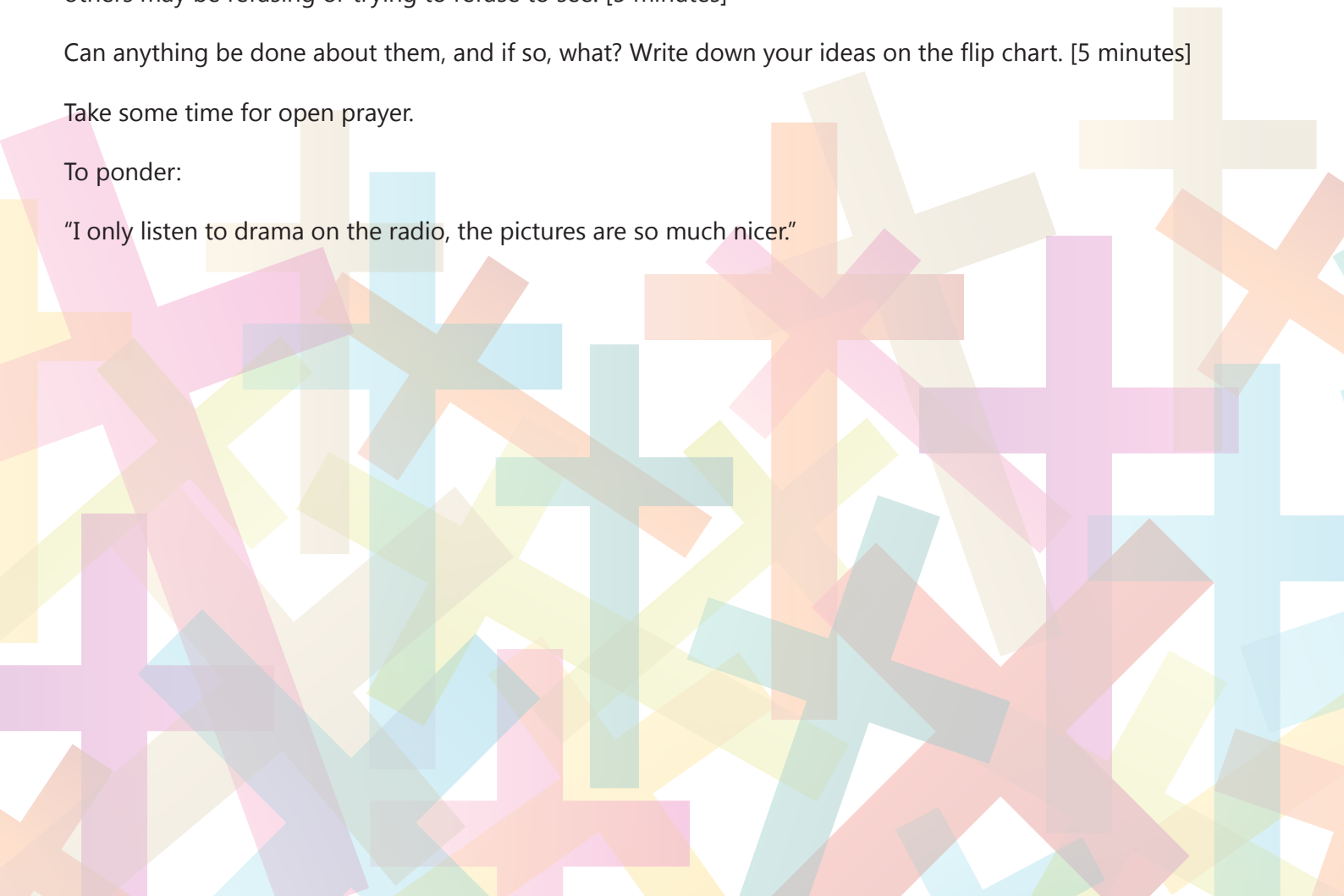
Jesus looked at the sad little funeral procession and in an instant saw what it was all about and responded. Discuss in twos and then share together any things in your community and in the wider world that you or others may be refusing or trying to refuse to see. [5 minutes]

Can anything be done about them, and if so, what? Write down your ideas on the flip chart. [5 minutes]

Take some time for open prayer.

To ponder:

"I only listen to drama on the radio, the pictures are so much nicer."



3

RECOGNISE ME



Spirit of God, enlighten our minds, enkindle our hearts, encourage our wills
for Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Father, one God world without end. Amen



Read aloud Genesis chapter 9, verses 7-17

A couple of years ago there were two fascinating documentaries on television about the temple complex at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. It has been known for years that it was the largest religious complex in the world, far bigger, for instance, than the Vatican. It started its life as a Hindu shrine, but gradually changed to become a Theravada, or small wheel, Buddhist shrine. It was surrounded by the largest medieval city yet discovered, indeed, at its height, in the twelfth century it was almost certainly the largest city in the world both in surface area, something over 250 square kilometres and in population – far bigger than London was at that time. One of the marks of the city was that it was crossed by enormous man-made canals, and there were several large artificial lakes. Apart from the very obvious need for water for so many people, archaeologists now understand that the way these waterways were constructed was to cope with the monsoon. It was only by having the capacity to store large quantities of water that crops could be grown and thirsts assuaged in the dry times and, even more important, that floods could be avoided in the wet times.

Until very recently the same archaeologists were totally baffled as to why, apparently quite suddenly, this temple and city were abandoned. From what they knew of the history, it wasn't war - nor was it soon replaced with a new temple and city, as, for instance, frequently happened in nearby Myanmar, the last time only ten years ago when Naypyidaw, 225 miles north of Yangon, replaced Yangon as the capital. Now, it is thought that the city of Angkor Wat was abandoned because for seven consecutive years, the monsoon failed. The city ran out of water, crops withered, and the populace died or managed to escape.

It is a paradox that at our harvest festivals, although we load our churches with gorgeous flowers, enormous marrows, tins for the food bank, and all the fruits of the earth and the work of human hands we can find, we seldom, if ever, put a glass of water among these gifts and yet without water we would have nothing to show and nothing else to offer. It is as though in our genuine thanksgiving we still find it hard to recognise just what is so vitally important.



In silence reflect on what you use water for. [5 minutes]



Together: on a flip chart, write down where your water comes from and where it goes. What happens to the dirty water from your houses, sewage and rain water. [10 minutes]

Write down, too, where your local streams are. Who manages them? Who pollutes them? What are they polluted with? Does it matter? [10 minutes]

Would it be appropriate to make more of water in the Liturgy? If so, how? [5 minutes]



There was an orphanage in Naples. The boys went to Mass every Sunday, but reluctantly. The parish priest tried to find out why they were so reluctant, because apart from Sundays, they seemed most open. It transpired that their problem was that they felt embarrassed when the collection was taken as they had nothing to give. The priest said that apart from the bread and the wine, they needed water, for the Mass, most importantly, to mix with the wine but also to wash the sacred vessels and the priest's hands. So the boys agreed that they would bring the water and they walked proudly in procession to the church each Sunday carrying, in procession, their flask of water.

We know that without water life would end. It is one of the great problems of space travel, how to conserve and recycle water. But what is an essentially intellectual problem for a space craft is a matter of life and death for the Earth. It is as though humankind is endlessly inventive as to how to pollute or waste or destroy water. Deforestation; mining and the use of poisons, such as cyanide, to extract the minerals from the mined ore; and chemicals used in agriculture contaminate rivers and underground reserves. The impact in some places can be so great that in the Philippines, for example, 67 per cent of rivers are now unsafe and 57 per cent of wells and underground cisterns are polluted.

At the same time climate change means that some areas of the world are suffering severe drought: South Africa, California and parts of Australia, for instance. Other are suffering because rains that used to be reliable to the day are no longer reliable and can now come with such ferocity that it is impossible to catch the water. Vital soils are eroded, and land slips destroy communities and the roads connecting them. And in places like the Philippines the warming of the oceans has increased the ferocity of tropical storms.

The problem is that the destruction that is brought about by mining and the extraction of oil is to bring minerals and oil to us in the developed world. Deforestation is to grow crops such as palm oil for us in the developed world. Clearing the mangrove swamps in the mouths of rivers, and thus taking away the natural barrier that breaks up tidal surges and incidentally desalinates water, is so that prawns may be farmed for us in the developed world. Our little expedition in the car to the supermarket appears not to cost us very much, but the reality is that it costs people who can least afford it a very great deal.



How can we help others to recognise what we as individuals are doing to exacerbate global warming? Individually spend time in silence reflecting on this. [10 minutes]



How can we work for any sort of justice for the developing world? The reality is that there are things that all of us can do. We can make greater use of public transport, even for long distance travel. We can make sure that we try to buy as much Fair Trade merchandise as possible, so at least the people who produced it will get a proper reward. We can grow our own vegetables and ask the Council for more allotments. Saving 'food miles' is rather more complicated, partly because of labelling laws that enable a Thai chicken to be labelled 'British' and partly because a tomato grown in the open air in Spain may use less carbon than one grown in a greenhouse down the road. But if we all ate less meat that would be an excellent start.



Sit in silence. [5 minutes]

Say or sing together:

All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voices, let us sing:
Alleluia, alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beams,
thou silver moon that gently gleams,

Refrain:

**O praise him, O praise him,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!**

Thou rushing wind that art so strong,
ye clouds that sail in heaven along,
O praise him, Alleluia!
Thou rising morn, in praise rejoice,
ye lights of evening, find a voice, **(R)**

Thou flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for thy Lord to hear,
Alleluia, alleluia!
Thou fire so masterful and bright,
that givest man both warmth and light, **(R)**

Dear mother earth, who day by day
unfoldest blessings on our way,
O praise him, Alleluia!
The flowers and fruits that in thee grow,
let them his glory also show: **(R)**

Let all things their Creator bless,
and worship him in humbleness,
O praise him, Alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
and praise the Spirit, Three in One: **(R)**

(William Draper based on St Francis of Assisi)

4

WIPE MY FACE



Spirit of God, enlighten our minds, enkindle our hearts, encourage our wills for Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Father, one God world without end. Amen



Read aloud: John chapter 13, verses 1-11

Peter speaks for many of us. We find it very difficult to let people do things for us. It might be just all right if we are temporarily helpless, or in a hospital or a care home, but then there is a further difficulty - we are only touched by those who are paid to touch us. There are no longer any of the little intimacies of family life, whether it is now that we are too old and have outlived everyone, or whether we live by ourselves, or whether we no longer trust anyone. I wish someone would sit beside me and hold my hand. Nothing more, I just want to feel the warmth of another person.

Anyone who has had to organise people to have their feet washed at a Maundy Thursday service will know that it is quite difficult. People become curiously shy and reluctant, partly because feet show age in the same way as hands. But also it's because crooked feet and their bunions are usually hidden from the world, not revealed naked and visible and in church. Or perhaps the act of love is as much in wiping others' faces as in allowing others to wipe ours.



In pairs discuss this. Which would you prefer to be, the wiper or the wiped? And are there some people who you would hate to have to help or to be helped by? [10 minutes]



Leprosy was a much feared disease, because as it progressed so too did the physical disablement of its sufferers. The slow death of the nerves meant that limbs were gradually lost through repeated injury or unnoticed wounds, beginning with the digits of toes and fingers but including noses and lips. It was thought (wrongly) that it was highly contagious. Worst of all there was no known cure. Even now, if it is not caught in time the disfigurement cannot be reversed, but in the last 30 years a cocktail of drugs has been developed to

cure it and there is a vaccine against it.

There are numerous cases of leprosy in the Bible, though obviously diagnoses were haphazard and a number of skin complaints were classed as being leprosy when they were not. Both then and for centuries afterwards, those with the diseases were classed as unclean and expelled from the community. Many medieval saints, chief among them St Francis of Assisi and St Giles, had a particular love for lepers, but this served primarily to emphasise lepers were normally kept at a distance. Leper colonies, leprosaria or Lazar Houses existed and still exist throughout the world. And in many cities in Central Africa, South America, the Indian sub-continent and China there are groups of lepers still begging in and around city centres and tourists spots. The last Lazar house in England did not close until the 1920s.



But who are the people our society considers lepers today? Are they homeless people? Are they people living with AIDS? Or those of us who have no job, or are refugees or don't have that much money?

In pairs, identify, if you can, some people society can make feel like lepers. [10 minutes]

Then on your flip chart, make two columns. In one, put groups of people who are excluded whom you just 'know about'. In the other, put groups of people who have experienced exclusion and of whom you or people you know personally may be members [10 minutes]

In the groups, gently and graciously, run through the suggestions making sure that there are no suggestions that you would now want to leave out. Make sure that there is nothing you want to add. [5 minutes]



Look at the first column, We have all heard negative stories about various groups of people and our response could well be fear. Is there any knowledge in the group that might dissipate that fear? Someone might well know people who are part of the group mentioned and be able to share a few thoughts.

Is there anything that you could do locally to get to know people who are experiencing exclusion? [15 minutes]

Then look at the second group. Is there anything that you can do to help enable everyone in the groups named to feel more included and less outcast? [10 minutes]



Take some time for open prayer.

To ponder:

Abraham Lincoln met a young boy carrying an even younger one on his shoulders. Lincoln said to the boy 'That's a very heavy burden for you to be carrying.' 'No it's not,' replied the boy, 'it's my brother.'

5

HELP CARRY MY CROSS



Spirit of God, enlighten our minds, enkindle our hearts, encourage our wills for Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Father, one God world without end. Amen



Read aloud in the Group: Mark chapter 15, verses 21-22

Simon of Cyrene does not seem to have much choice about helping to carry Jesus's cross: he is seized from the crowd. In the famous Stations of the Cross carved by Mother Maribel of Wantage, Alexander and Rufus stand abandoned and bewildered with their father's panniers of vegetables between them as he is pulled out of the crowd to help. They were so obviously going about their very ordinary business of coming into town with goods to sell. It was the day before the Sabbath, an important market-day. They needed to sell all that they had, so that they could buy what they needed for the morrow. And then this happens. They bump into this sad, cruel procession. It is none of their business. Simon has no choice.

Maybe our act of love in this case is to accept what has been thrust upon us. Simon, one assumes, knew nothing of what this was all about. From what he could see it was three criminals being taken to their execution. The Roman soldiers and the method of executing would have seemed to give it all the legitimacy that it needed. And carrying goods to be sold and bringing his two young sons with him hardly suggested that he was there to start a revolution.

Simon of Cyrene does point us to one important truth, which is that we seldom have any choice about helping people carry their crosses. Whether we are being asked to look after a spouse who has just been diagnosed with dementia, or a son or daughter born handicapped, or the refugees whose photographs fill the media, we who are standing near have little choice about whether we are pulled in or not. It is the very essence of our common humanity, and confrontations on television news between those who want to help and are doing their level best by taking aid to Calais, or offering their homes to refugees and those who are saying that these islands are overcrowded and most of the refugees are scroungers anyway make the latter seem insular and ungenerous. 'I'm all right Jack' is never an adequate response.

Simon of Cyrene could see Jesus's agony. It was there in front of him. He could touch it. He did touch it. The crosses of others in our own homes we can also touch. In the world, instant communication is constantly making us aware of the pain around us.



Alone and in silence reflect on your own family and friends, your parish, the Diocese, the country and the world

and note down the pains that you are carrying in your own prayers. Allow your imagination to run riot as you try to enter the lives of others to remind yourself of the crosses that they are carrying. Note down anything you might want to share. [10 minutes]



Pray silently [10 minutes]



In the group share what you can about what you have seen and felt. Share some of the feelings of desperation that the people that you have seen or read about must have had to leave homes and possessions to risk their lives on the perilous journey away from danger. [20 minutes]



And what can we do?

First, as always, pray. For those who make the sign of the cross as they begin their prayers, it is an important reminder not only of their own Baptism but that it is with the cross we are signed. As we acclaim in the Eucharist 'When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory.' So while intercession may indeed be about thanksgiving and joy, it is also about agony: the agony of anticipation as it was in the Garden of Gethsemane, the agony of pain as it was on the cross. When we are alone in our room praying, it may well be that tears are all that we have to show for it. But as Jesus suffered for us, so now it is our privilege to suffer with him. And be consoled, the spectator usually sees more of the game than the one involved in it.

Secondly are there small practical things we can do in our homes or in our parishes. Jesus gives a great list of things in the parable of the sheep and the goats that we read in the first week. Could we, as individuals or as a group, do something from our homes for the naked or the thirsty or the sick or the imprisoned or the stranger? Spend 15 minutes in the group writing a few ideas on the clip board. And then spend 5 minutes in silence pondering how you personally could help in these things.



Take time for silent prayer.

To ponder:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out for I was not a socialist. When they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out for I was not a trade unionist. When they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out for I was not a Jew. When they came for me, there was no one left to speak for me.

Martin Niemöller

ABOUT THE OXFORD DIOCESAN COUNCIL FOR PARTNERSHIP IN WORLD MISSION

The Council for Partnership in World Mission was established in 1995 in order to:

- encourage the members of the Diocese of Oxford to recognise, use to the full, develop and increase opportunities for partnership in world mission between them and Christians, Churches and institutions outside Britain.
- promote partnership in world mission as a living reality within the Diocese as a whole and every individual within it.

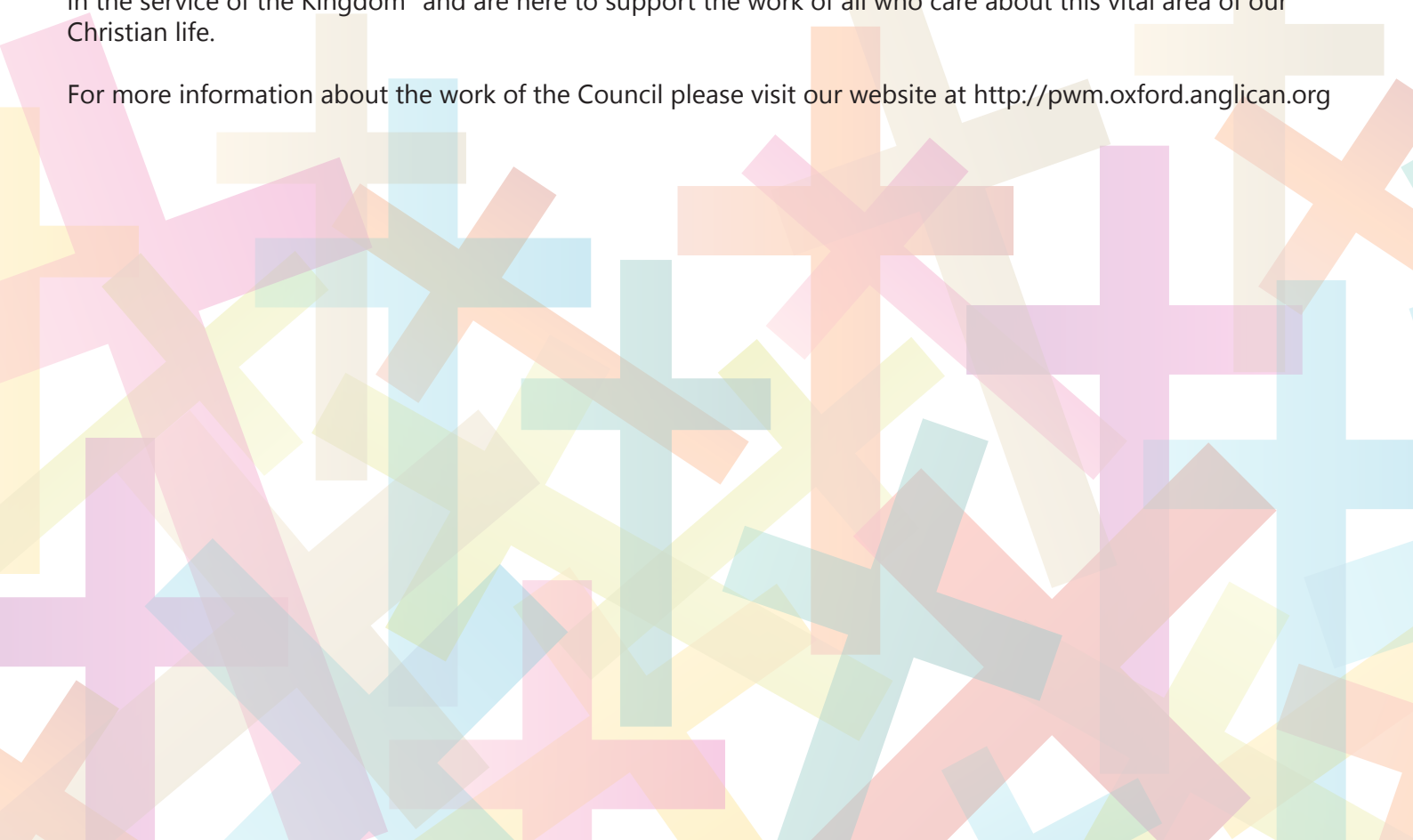
Around the world, more than 2 billion people are followers of Jesus Christ. We rejoice in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” but we also acknowledge that God gives different gifts and insights to different people. By listening to each other and learning from each other, we can learn more about the Christ we follow. We can “live faith” more fully, by “living faith worldwide.”

In the Diocese of Oxford, we share in God’s mission with partners from a huge range of countries. We have three link dioceses: the Diocese of Kimberley and Kuruman in South Africa; the Lutheran Diocese of Växjö in Sweden, and the Diocese of Nandyal in the ecumenical Church of South India. Our journey with friends from these three dioceses involves us in jointly working on diocesan programmes, thinking together about evangelism, and working together to make a difference to people in need.

But we’re not just linked with dioceses. We also work alongside mission and development agencies, and organisations like the Anglican Alliance. And parishes in our area have their own connections with the worldwide church — some through mission partners, some through the mission agencies, some through links with other churches, and some through work with people who have come from other parts of the world to share in our journey here.

As one of our members put it: “The links we have and the programmes we are engaged in are designed to help keep us all in the Diocese in touch with God’s work in all God’s world. We know and rejoice that many across the Diocese do this in their own ways, often independently of us; we love to seek closer co-operation in the service of the Kingdom” and are here to support the work of all who care about this vital area of our Christian life.

For more information about the work of the Council please visit our website at <http://pwm.oxford.anglican.org>



LIVING
worldwide



DIOCESE OF OXFORD
Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire