Remembering World War 1

A ‘Feature’ paper from www.cte.org.uk

This is a personal paper from Jim Currin at Churches Together in England.
It is written to aid discussion, prayer and planning for local groups of churches.

2014-2018 is going to be a significant time for these islands as we remember and reflect on the First World War.

The Government are encouraging schools to research their local community history, while cities, towns and villages are beginning to plan events and renovate war memorials that are in need of repair. The main media companies plan many hours coverage of all the major events as each centenary date comes around. National publishers and local history societies are producing books and booklets in readiness for the interest anticipated from the beginning of next year.

The Bible Society is committed to producing material, and has been asking for stories associated with Bibles given to soldiers in WW1. Books about ‘Woodbine Willie’, ‘Tubby Clayton’, and Padres given the Victoria Cross have been also written. National denominations and ‘Churches Together’ are writing resources for individual and groups of churches to use 2014-2018 including prayers, liturgical resources and group discussion notes.

Some significant civic churches are planning a service on the date Britain declared war (August 4th) to reflect on the phrase, ‘the lamps are going out all over Europe’. This is a date / theme many local churches may replicate.

Hope¹ is collating a network of Christian agencies planning to provide resources which speak ‘hope’ in to the forthcoming moment of national history. There will be resources for churches, schools, and community groups from a variety of sources and traditions, as well as material on www.christianity.org.uk for enquirers. It is anticipated that this time will raise questions about faith, conflict, suffering, and loss, as well as peace, reconciliation, hope and mutual respect.

This paper is intended to get local groups of churches thinking, praying and planning for what might be most appropriate locally. The resources mentioned above will be helpful later on in the in the process, but now is the time to start working on possibilities. There are many things which could be done over the 4 year period, so here is a suggested list of ten topics to stimulate discussion.

1. Raise this subject at the next meeting of churches together and compare notes about any plans already being discussed, e.g. churches, schools, Council, Royal British Legion etc.

¹ http://www.hopetogether.org.uk/
2. Contact the leader of your Local Authority to compare notes and offer help as and when plans progress. Are Civic events planned or Memorials being renovated?

3. Check with local schools if they have begun to think what they are planning – are there any visits to battlefield sites being organised yet?

4. Ask any local history society what work they might be doing to tell the story of soldiers named on graves, war memorials, bell ‘Peal’ boards etc. Are booklets being written?

5. Consider what issues are likely to arise, especially if you have a high profile presence like a military base nearby. Are there Cadets / ATC etc.? If so, discuss with the Chaplains.

6. Remember the pacifist response to World War I. The Quaker movement have produced a paper about this. Discuss various Christian traditions reflected in your own locality.

7. Become familiar with ‘Just War’ principles. Discuss these in relation to your own context, especially if you have soldiers killed recently and people asking ethical questions.

8. Consider producing your own local resource which reflects on some of the above eg Bible Study course, leaflet, series of speakers (Chaplain / Quaker), newspaper article etc.

9. Begin to pray for how the national and local community will remember World War I – especially in our own very different context. Consider how the local community might pray.


Resources to help with all of the above will be coming, but now is the time to start praying and planning at a local level. Please note, a number of church leaders have suggested we avoid using the word ‘Anniversary’ and keep to ‘Commemoration’ or ‘Remember and Reflect’ as watch words for the process.

Let me end with an observation and two comments.

First, I have been struck by the strength of feeling many Christians have to avoid any celebration of ‘heroes’ and ‘For God and Country’, remembering that soldiers did not give their lives as much as have it taken from them.

Second, there is much to engage with ‘the war to end all wars’ in our current context, and we do well to help people reflect and pray for peace everywhere as we remember 1914-1918. This is one of those times to pray with the Bible in one hand a newspaper in the other.

Third, war is a relevant topic the churches have spoken in to in many ways before, from providing Bibles and Chaplains to being pacifists and offering hospitality. We have preached, produced art, written poetry, offered prayer and given practical help. How could / should we speak in to this issue, as Christians and churches together, again as we prepare for 2014-2018 today?

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http://www.cte.org.uk/Articles/355647/Churches_Together_in/News_Events/News/Quaker_statements_re.aspx