

HISTORY OF THE ALTON DAY OF RENEWAL (By Sister Paddy)

In the 1970's the Catholic Charismatic Renewal spread from America to England. Prayer groups were beginning to spring up and followed seminars in the Holy Spirit. The aim was to convert our lives and heart, renew our spiritual life and follow Christ in the power of the Spirit of God dwelling in us from our Baptism and to fan into a flame the gifts given to us at Confirmation for the building of the Church and the spreading of the Gospel.

In November 1974 a Mill Hill Father, Fr Coogan in Basingstoke, started a prayer group in the home of Ron and Margaret Nicholls every Thursday evening. Our whole community of Sisters in Basingstoke consisting of 5 Sisters joined this prayer group from the beginning, as well as Deacon Pat and Brenda Taylor. Soon other members of the laity came along and we followed the book of Seminars of the Holy Spirit. There were only two other groups to help us understand what was happening. One was the monthly day of renewal in Battersea, which soon moved to Westminster Cathedral Hall. They prayed we would be able to have another day of renewal in the South. The other group we went to was the ecumenical community in Warminster, near Reading. From that community we were blessed with their Fisher Folk musicians and learnt all their songs, so anointed. We visited them a number of times while following our seminar in Basingstoke. They came to pray with us when we prayed for the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

After the Baptism in the Holy Spirit new things began to happen quite rapidly. Father Coogan, Ron and Margaret, Sr. Alice and myself went to the 2nd Charismatic Conference in Hopwood Hall called "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God". It was a Healing Conference to help pray for healing. During that Conference we experienced the Gospel of Jesus ministering to the crowds, healing bodies, minds, emotions, inner healings, and deliverance from evil or sinfulness. We experienced the power of the Word, of the Sacrament of forgiveness, of the sacrifice of the Mass. People's lives were being transformed as the Holy Spirit was pouring down on the people at that Conference to fulfil various callings to build up the Church.

Mary Tanner who was there said to me over breakfast: "If you never go to another Charismatic Conference in your life, you have experienced this week the work of God and outpouring of the Holy Spirit of love enough for a lifetime". I agreed, but she and Ron and Margaret were to organize another Conference in Roehampton a few years later for Religious Sisters of the South. It was again very powerful.

It was after the Hopwood Hall Conference that a day of renewal was held in Basingstoke in St Joseph's Parish, which was at that time a hall used also as Mass centre on Sundays. It was the first Day of Renewal structured around talks, workshops, with of course prayer and praise. After a talk about Charismatic Renewal, a movement of the Holy Spirit, workshops were set up to give practical experiences and answer many questions people needed to clarify. The following two months the Day was held in two different parishes in Southampton. Fr Leo Target had a flourishing prayer group there and they offered the venue twice. At the second of these, Mary Tanner and Bob Balkam, who had returned from the States, were the main speakers. Mary spoke of her childhood, how she was told by Jesus about a movement of the Spirit that would spread throughout the world. Jesus called her to help Him and gave her many details she did not understand at the time.

Bob Balkam then said:

- 1) You need a Core Group to organise the Day chosen from the existing prayer groups that have sprung up. They were brought to the front and all prayed for them and over them for this service.
- 2) You cannot have a roving Day of Renewal. We must pray for a place to hold it. Those gifted with tongues sang and then Bob said "You can stop now, the Lord has chosen the place".

He then closed the prayer time and left! Where was the place? No one knew...During the prayer in tongues I heard the Spirit say "I have a job for you to do". I thought it referred to the Core group still in the front and continued to pray for them. At the end I turned to a lady sitting next to me and said that the Alton Convent had the facilities required for the Day of Renewal. She replied that it would have to be central for access. Once home in Basingstoke I looked at the map and it was right at the centre of the Prayer groups that

existed at the time. I rang Father Coogan and Ron and told them that the job the Lord had given me to do was to reveal the place he had chosen for the day of Renewal. Father Coogan and Ron asked the Superior of Alton Convent to allow us to hold the Day of renewal there. It was granted and continued there from January 1975 till it moved to Medstead Convent of St Lucy Filipino.

The early people who contributed and served the Day of Renewal in the beginning were the following: Father Coogan, Fr Leo Target, Deacon Pat Taylor, Ron and Margaret Nicholls, Sr. Madeleine OLP, Mary Tanner, Esmond, Joy, Rev Gumble, the vicar of Blackburn village, Richard Avery, Madeleine Fowler, Chas (who helped so much with the crèche) Pat Stamp (who gave us an outreach to Albania) Sr. Monica, Sr. Elisabeth of Farnborough Hill, all the members of Basingstoke community and 2 members from Alton Community. Richard Hobbs and his gift of prophecy, Elise Hobbs, and John Edwards.

Some of the speakers we had at the beginning were: Father Ian Petit, Michael Harper, The Hallel Liturgical Dancers, Fr N. Broadbridge, Margaret Pizza, Fr John Hewitt, Michael Le Morvan...

The numbers coming to the day of renewal increased to 300 to 400 people sometimes. The Chapel in Alton Convent was getting too small. The large group that came up from Southampton and Portsmouth set up their own day in Southampton. Conferences, held every summer in the Southampton College of Higher Education, ran for 9 years .

Deacon Pat Taylor set up a healing Day of renewal every month at Christ the King in Brighton Hill in Basingstoke as the Lord gave him a ministry of healing.

Before Ron died he asked the two Johns to take over the leadership of the Day of renewal: John Edwards and John Foley who both are now Deacons.

ABOUT RON NICHOLLS

Ron was a great friend. He was a man of many talents and many gifts who gave himself wholeheartedly to Jesus Christ His Lord and who was prepared to proclaim Him "from the roof tops" if necessary. Through his love and commitment to Christ he helped innumerable people to come into closer relationship with Jesus.

He was a great encourager and no situation was a lost situation because Jesus is the Saviour and answers to everything and the Lord responded to Ron's expectations. He was constantly amazed and delighted whenever he saw or heard of what Jesus was doing in the power of His Spirit for anyone. He was steeped in the Word of God and wore several Bibles. He lived by the Word of God and taught it to all who would listen.

All the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to Him in Baptism and Confirmation and strengthened in Eucharist were operative in his life as husband, father, grandfather. For many years Ron and Margaret opened their home every week for a prayer and growth which bore abundant fruit in spreading Charismatic Renewal here in the South of England not least this Day of Renewal.

Ron was enthusiastic, a fully alive person, joy and life generated around him. He touched and provided for young and old. He would wear himself out to give the children a "Rise and Shine" and "If I were a butterfly" session. He was interested in everyone. Margaret fortunately was a steadying hand to harness this enthusiastic tireless Ron when needed. He always appreciated her wise and good counsel for himself and others. Together they were a good team. I was privileged to know them and be part of their prayer group for as long as their health and strength allowed it. The close community bond created there has always remained strong even though the Lord led us along new paths spreading outwards in all directions.

Ron and Margaret continued to pray for our community and be interested in our missions especially the link with India. It was interesting that some of the members of our community who were in India and who had been part of his

prayer group were all in England at the time of his death and therefore able to be at his funeral to remember, celebrate and thank him for what he had done for us.

A good tree bears good fruit. He had the gift of spiritual discernment and was never happy if he saw the love between brothers and sisters in the Lord being tempered with by squabbles over position or ideologies and would remind us that Christ came to serve, and we should love one another, co-operate together giving God the glory and obeying Him together. He would be looking to hear where the Spirit was moving and he would say if that person was the one being called for this or that job, talk or activity.

He had the qualities of leadership because he listened to the Spirit, and respected the gift of each person and set out to enable them to use them. He heard the Word of God and was guided by it. He listened and discerned prophecy. He was a good organizer and administrator so although freedom was given to the Spirit enough structure was there to ensure the smooth running of things,

Ron had a multitude of interests as shown by his library and the art around his home including the artistic talents of some of his children.

The Father's love for the Prodigal son always touched him. He had a great and tender love for the Father. Being a father and grand-father he understood the unconditional love of the Father and the great compassion of the heart of Christ for all mankind's wayward sons and daughters.