

16 Days of Activism and Stories

November 21st (*Anne Blight*)

When our Chaplain Anne and Jackie our F&P rep organised to do our display in our Cathedral for this year's "Rise Up campaign/ 16 Day of Activism Against Gender Based Violence" we had a wonderful morning. Verger Allan kindly offered to make hot drinks for us when we were ready and true to his word he arrived mid-morning to check how we liked our coffee.

We had only just started when Jackie was chatting with a couple of visitors who were interested in what we were doing: he then shared his story of being an abused husband! Police were involved, however and because the way the law works, his wife was seen as the best person to keep the children in their home despite him being their main carer.

Soon two women, possibly a mother and daughter, with a couple of children stopped. The little girl would have loved to be in the middle of everything and we invited her to place a few hearts in the display. Jackie gave them a "knitted heart" and we all chatted with them before they moved on.

As the display was taking shape, I noticed a young woman looking closely at what we were doing. I explained who we were and she introduced herself as Jasmine and that she was to be a speaker at the White Ribbon Service in the Cathedral. Jasmine is working with Reform NE which is based in the Education dept and part of the Lantern Initiative. They know a number of mothers and children in abusive relationships. Doesn't God work in mysterious ways? I went to the service and what a privilege - I felt truly blessed hearing the personal stories of victims. It made me appreciate what a great organisation Mothers' Union is, and how our current 'Rise Up' Campaign is so needed.

5th December (*Anne B and Anne M*)

We gathered for Midday Prayers as usual. The display had received a great deal of attention. The tray of small white paper hearts, left for visitors to write on and to place in the display, was almost empty. More than 80 hearts were laid in the display, each with a personal message – and in many different languages. Some were from people who had been victims of abuse and recovered; some were prayers for victims known personally.

A family of visitors engaged us in a searching conversation about safeguarding and the church. Having heard the recent news, they were interested to see the photograph of Peter Smyth in our display. They didn't know that Peter is the son of John Smyth and describes his boyhood as filled with physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual abuse. The visitors appreciated our willingness to speak openly and left with a greater awareness about abuse and how church groups like MU seek to highlight the issues.

We joined the Cathedral lunchtime holy communion and the MU 'Rise Up' Prayer was included in intercessions.

10th December

It was sad to dismantle the display, moving all the personal messages left by visitors. Some had left different offerings – two woollen hats, a pair of woollen gloves, even a purple velvet curtain – which must have had particular meaning for someone. It felt as if the display was a community inter-activity, where visitors felt free to lay silent words to be 'heard' by others passing by. The display featured 'butterflies' struggling to be free, as well as 'hearts' for messages. Somehow, a 'fleeting' opportunity was there, in the corner chapel, a quiet space in which human 'butterflies' were able to stop and reflect, open their hearts to prayer, and leave touched, perhaps, by the 'still, quiet voice' of God to encourage them on their journey.