

## Update on Afghanistan

*John & Fiona Earle*

An audience of two hundred people recently met in St. Stephen's Church, just off the Uxbridge Road in West London to hear Matt Waldman talk and see a film recently made by Lucy Gordon.

Matt is the economic adviser to Oxfam for Afghanistan and has been there for the past two years. Broadly speaking, Oxfam operates by helping Afghans to help themselves and supporting Afghan NGOs that are working in rural areas. Matt has advised people in villages about the type of crops that are likely to grow best and has provided low cost improvements such as better seed or a pipe line that runs from a lake to a village.

Matt referred to one particular province where he said there were 200 schools but only 10 had any school buildings. There were 1,000 teachers but only two were graduates. This gives some idea of the paucity of education on offer in the provinces and the size of the problem for government.

In Kabul, street children with just a little education can see a potential improvement in their lives, and they are really keen to learn.

In response to questions, Matt said that he was made welcome in the villages and that his advice was sought. He agreed that there is corruption in Government and that people felt bitter about this. They wanted a more honest approach. There is much less corruption in the villages and people do speak up if they do not approve of the way that money is being spent.

Matt showed some slides that demonstrated how much of the country could not be cultivated because it is too high or too dry. It is a very complex country. The population is derived from several neighbouring countries with different languages. This is similar to England in Saxon times when there were

Southern Saxons in Sussex, Eastern Saxons in Essex and so on. We had variations in our spelling such that the plural of egg could be 'egges' or 'eyren'. We still use the -en plural in oxen and children. John heard 'housen' as the plural of 'house' in Suffolk only fifty years ago.

The basic rural Afghan diet is largely bread and black tea without milk and often without sugar. Vegetables are seasonal and occasional dishes, and meat is very scarce. This is obviously a diet that is low in vitamins and proteins. Life is very hard and people tend to age rapidly. Nevertheless many Afghans are very hospitable and will share the little they have.

In Kabul about 80% of the income of a family would be spent on food. If the price of food rises, there is no spare cash to cover it and the outlook is appalling.

Matt stressed the importance of the extended family who attempted to support one another and also the importance of the local community. This is something that we have seen in Nepal, and something that we have largely lost in the U.K. The Welfare State has partly replaced the family support and the family may have been dispersed as people move to seek work.



Lucy Gordon has just made a film that demonstrates the opium culture in a remote village. The adults in a family need to work to afford food. The small children may be given opium to eat simply to keep them quiet while the women make carpets. In that way infants can become addicts and

their chances of learning anything are almost nil. There is no doctor or nurse in the area and opium is the only drug they have to relieve pain. Some of the adults smoke opium simply to pass the time away. In that small village, there is no work and even scrap metal collecting is forbidden.

**Aschiana schools.**

Both Matt and Lucy have visited the Aschiana schools in Kabul and there are other teachers working in "outreach" areas where children cannot get to the main centres. They commented on the quality of the teaching and some of the figures speak for themselves.

In 2007, 500 students took courses of vocational training, 250 got jobs related to their field of study. A further 50 set up their own business and this was only done after a student had prepared a future business plan to be approved by a teacher or teachers.

2008 has been a tough year. Aschiana was promised a considerable sum from the European Commission that is to continue for four years. For some reason, the money did not get through and Aschiana services had to be reduced for lack of funds. Fortunately, the Friends of Aschiana (U.K.) that was registered as a charity in 2002 and set up in London by a couple of friends and by ourselves in Hertford had sufficient funds to cover the shortfall. Without this, Aschiana might have closed. With the teachers and social workers dispersed and looking for other work, it would have been difficult to restart.

Once again, a big "thank you" to those of you who have supported Aschiana by buying things from us or making donations. You have helped to give some of the most disadvantaged children in the world one hot meal a day and some education that enables the children to escape from the dangerous slavery of working on the streets, collecting paper, carrying water or polishing shoes. Better still you are helping the girls to grow up, and in time they will be able to teach their children to read and write.

We heard people at the meeting who were already involved with Aschiana saying that they had never previously done anything that seemed so worthwhile, which is how we also feel about it.

**New Bishop of St Albans**

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But I've also worked for many years in urban areas. I've rubbed shoulders with people of other faiths and I've been enriched and challenged by them.

For a number of years I was a member of a lay religious community, Lee Abbey, where I learnt a great deal about how Christians live together even where they've got differences. It was there I caught the ecumenical bug, which I've never been able to shake off since.

I was nurtured in the glories of traditional Anglican worship but I've also encouraged Fresh Expressions and Church Planting as we seek to engage with a fresh generation. That's one of the areas where our Church schools have such an important role to play.

Then there's the question of how we relate our faith to our work, especially in times like these when many people are anxious about the future.

When I take up my new role in a few months time as Bishop of St Albans, my first priority will be to listen. To listen of course to those who are already working in the diocese, and who know it so much better than I do.

But I will also want to listen to those community leaders of faith or of no faith who are as passionate as I am about the communities we serve. I'll also want to listen to those who for whatever reason, feel their voices are not heard.

Above all when I come I will want to seek God's guidance. So that together as the people of the dioceses of St Albans we can move together into the future to which he has called us. God is faithful and he will do it.