Bob Warwicker's walk in spring 2003 – account of the talks with individuals and groups along the way.

Introduction

During the spring of 2003, I walked from Lands End to John O'Groats. Among other reasons, I did this because I wanted to find out something about the changes which were affecting people's lives, and do so from "ground level". The pedestrian mode of transport was one way of doing this. Another was through meetings with people along the way. I had a number of informal encounters with people I met, many of which added to my understanding of Britain's people in the early twenty-first century, and many of which I cannot report in any form because of their private nature. The diary gives a more general account of the journey, and this is reproduced in the form it originally appeared on the web – *click here* (for those who have this document in electronic form). This piece of paper, however, is about the *formal* meetings I had. Some of these meetings were unplanned, but they all used the process outlined below, in varying degrees of strictness.
I discovered that nearly everyone felt that changes in family life were important, although there was some difference in views as to the significance of these changes. Many noted the way that the care of old people had been moving away from the family to professional care providers. Information and communications technology was seen to be changing the face of their world. Note everyone agreed on the importance of economic changes, because not everyone had been affected in the same way.
People showed a willingness to think about these issues and make the changes happen that they felt were in line with God's way of living.

Method

Discussion

The basic technique was to ask a number of questions aimed at eliciting feelings about, and attitudes to change in the world, in the context of faith. Most of my meetings were with groups of fewer than half a dozen, drawn from churches along the way, mostly URC churches. Some meetings were with individuals, or with larger groups. The list of these meetings is in *Appendix A*. I would ask the questions one at a time, allowing the discussion to develop around each one. With individuals, there wasn't a discussion in the same way, but I was able to ask an occasional supplementary question if I needed to know more.

The questions

These are the questions as they appeared on my crib sheet, with supposed timings (rarely adhered to).
0:0 Get into twos and discuss;-
What are the two biggest changes you've seen in your time…
        …they could be local or national or global
        …they could be technological change (like new inventions), or economic change (like changes in work and industry), or social change (like changes in the way people live or behave), or a mixture
But whatever they are, they must be changes whose effects people are still living with.

0:10 Now talk about these changes together – explain to each other why they are important. Between all of you, come up with the three that are most important.

0:30 Now I want to introduce two more questions into the conversation as you go along…

Who has gained from these changes?

Who has suffered because of these changes or been left behind by them?

0:50 And another question…

What do you think God might have to say about these changes?

1:10 And finally…

What have churches done about these changes?

Often, especially with a group, we wouldn't get to the end.

Notes

I would take notes throughout the process, concentrating on the occasions when someone said something new to the discussion, or that appeared to me particularly significant. Much as I would like to have taken verbatim notes, my writing technique wasn't up to it. You will see later some of the things people said. Some of these statements are not sentences, lacking verbs. Such sayings are simply examples of change, answers to the question "what changes have you seen…?"

Keywords

The notes were entered into a database, one line for each "thing" someone said. For each entry, two to eight keywords were added in a separate field, to express the themes contained in what was said.

Analysis

The keywords for the whole database were counted up and ranked according to the frequency with which they appeared. For instance, the word "care" was eleventh in the rankings, with 24 occurrences, and "women" was twelfth with 22 appearances. "agriculture", at 20 appearances, was thirteenth. The same process was applied to the raw text of what people said, although this was less useful, themes being less readily apparent from the individual words said. The list of top keywords is in *Appendix B*.

Cognate words were brought together as the same word … "woman" was changed to "women" for instance. Words that featured in the questions, like "God", were struck out.

All this gave an indication of which themes were appearing often, and which weren't. When the main themes were established, the database was trawled for examples of sayings related to these themes, and the similarity / diversity of these sayings, and the attitudes and feelings revealed in them.

Caveats

Church people only

Because of the way the walk was arranged, nearly everybody whose discussion I sat (or in some cases stood) in on was from a church. Although this helped in asking the last two questions (the "God" question and the "church" question), it meant I could not (by this process anyway) get a handle on the attitudes of people outside the church. A big question for most churches today is "why don't people come to church anymore?" and asking people who *do* come to church isn't going to shed any light on that one.

I doubt whether the people I talked to were typical of churches, insofar as they were generally younger than the URC's average age, and were more often than usual in positions of leadership: I

had to make do with those who were able to co-operate. However, they did come from a wide variety of settings, Scotland, England, cities, towns and countryside, URC, Baptists, Anglicans, Methodists, the Arthur Rank Centre for rural chaplaincy, the South and the North. I heard from conservatives in Bridgwater and from liberals in Bristol, and so on.

Strictness and structure

Sometimes the setting was inimical to careful note taking, and there are variations in the strictness of the process between people sitting in a circle in a front room, in a pub restaurant, or standing on a hilltop in the Quantocks. However, I would claim that the notes taken on a Friday night in a pub near Bristol were as accurate as any, if a little full.

Leading questions

When I looked at the concerns which were emerging, it seemed possible that the themes that people had chosen were influenced by the way I had explained the first question;- "…they could be local or national or global …they could be technological change (like new inventions), or economic change (like changes in work and industry), or social change (like changes in the way people live or behave), or a mixture." While this seemed at the time to be giving people maximum scope, the neutrality of the first question is open to doubt.

Note taking

We have to acknowledge the possibility that the note-taking process is open to bias, although I wasn't aware of any. That's the nature of bias, of course, you don't know you've got it. It's a bit like being in the police. Their job is to enforce the law, which they do. But when resources are limited, they have to decide which laws to enforce and which not to enforce. So it is when you can't write everything down. You have to decide which bits to write, and which not to write.

Assignment of keywords

Similarly, having keywords devised by the person administering the questions introduces a layer of interpretation, and therefore potential bias.

Therefore

What we have here is not a polished piece of social research. Still less is it an accurate statistical survey. What it is, however, is an attempt to discover the changes in the world that are troubling and exciting the people of God at the beginning of the twenty first century. You may think you know that anyway. And indeed some of what is written here is unsurprising. But not all of it.

Issues

Work

At the end of the walk, I had the impression that the economy and employment only featured to any significant degree in the thinking of people in areas whose major employers had taken a big hit in recent decades. It played a bigger part in the conversation of the coalfield areas in County Durham than it did in some other areas.
But "work" was the top keyword in the analysis, suggesting that it was an issue for many people. Admittedly, some people may have said what they thought I, as an industrial missioner, wanted to hear, and one group of people were industrial missioners themselves. And the issues about work are not only to do with its absence, but also to do with juggling family life, the role of women, Sunday trading, safety, pay, conditions etc.. But work is a major theme in people's minds. Here are some of the things people said about work;-
    "Women are more independent - and can bid for more extensive careers"

"There's been a long transition - to a different culture – with a loss of traditional male jobs"

"What has happened in this country was going to happen with or without her [Thatcher]"

"There's a difference in women's situation - in expectations - in juggling 3 jobs and family"

"We're seeing a social change - with both husband and wife working – and a change in shopping and leisure patterns"

"Work gone from skilled manual to offices and service industry"

"[changes in home life include the advent of the] vacuum cleaner and other labour saving devices"

"Shops open on Sunday had a big effect"

"Maybe church has not been alert enough even to the local situation to help people through those difficulties [e.g. loss of mills] There were prayers around bobbins etc. about moving on. One or two people were quite affected."

Note: Although many people cited work-related issues as examples of change they had seen, this was one of the few examples of changes in working life prompting action from the churches.

"[people in power – money people – multinationals have] also gained from changes in industry - people working in bad conditions"

"There's been a post-industrial revolution, with industries invented here vanishing to other countries"

"Jobs need more capital and more skill"

"[Now more] women are working - not necessarily through choice - allowing two incomes to pay for one property"

"People don't have to live where they work because of changes in transport"

"With mechanisation, there are less jobs, certainly in farming"

"In Edinburgh there is almost no unemployment"

Note: The above give some idea of the number of work-related issues. Some that appeared a number of times were about the mechanisation of agriculture, the change from manufacturing to services as a major employer, and the role of women in the workforce, working for pay, but continuing to work in the household, working hours and "juggling".

Ageing

Equal second most common keyword was "old", reflecting concerns particularly about caring for old people. Many people noticed changes in the way old people were being cared for, in legislation and in custom, mostly from their point of view as children of those who would soon be needing care, or the church's responsibility. This walk took place at a time when the Church of Scotland had some hard thinking to do about its provision of care and whether it could afford to carry on. Here are some of the things people said;-

"In the UK, nearly all children are OK [with new technology], but as for older people? – Some are happy as they are. Many older people gain from better communications with distant relatives"

"Have such churches had to get rid of old people to do it? [i.e. make use of new technology]"

"Care of the elderly is more outside the family"

"Care of elderly is a growing issue - not really addressed yet. There is a ten year plan. Church should get involved in this"

"Public sector should do more to support / provide care. Actually the public sector is withdrawing from providing in some places."

"There are low expectations from that generation. That generation have lived through poverty and war"

"God… The issue is lack of respect for everybody - so we should love one another. People don't care, don't love each other. The Church should demonstrate love and encourage it in other people."

"'Elderly' are individual people"

"The Church should be leading by example - caring for its own elderly. There is a lunch club etc.. in Acocks Green - people are respected. Birmingham City Mission run the "Elder Link" scheme but its future sustainability needs thinking about"

"People are living longer and with a better quality of life, through medical advancement"

"There is stress caused by aging population because of the need for housing, and care, and their loneliness. Age 50-60 is the largest group of carers."

"There is a funding gap in care - especially of elderly"

"NHS is a loser [from changes in the care of elderly people] - beds are blocked – the NHS now aims to charge for blocked beds"

Themes appearing several times here are the "lack of respect", changes / inadequacies in public provision of care, and in this case, a very strong view that the church should be (and often is) doing something about this. Also there were varying views on the extent to which elderly people would be able to make use of Information Technology.

Family

Equal to "old" was "family". Family life is connected with ageing and with work. And we are beginning to see a pattern of "everything being connected to everything else". But to get a flavour of the statements people made that were particularly about family life, here are some;-

"We've failed on families - we've failed on discipline [but silence at this point from one person]"

"There's been social change - divorce and living together arrangements"

"There's a change in what you can assume about the family - a reduction in God's values."

"Changes in family have come about because people have wanted them."

"Changes in family - women can lead an independent life (financially etc.) and women can escape violent marriages."

"Families - it must break [God's] heart."

"'Family based' church is good in a way, but what do we have for single people?"

Note: the last five views above were expressed in the same group. It gives some idea of the complexity of Christians' ideas of what is going on with family life. The statement about breaking God's heart was one of a small number about "what God thinks" in the whole exercise.

"We've seen the microchip and all that's come from it. Jobs are being replaced by computers. There's the alienation of working with a computer. But you can work from home – in the family."

"It is vitally important that young children bond and are valued - it could be dad of course."

"Families – there are more single parent families – it's a different concept"

"It is not easy to see who gains, who loses. Some families might see it as loss. The employment [of people in care work], yes, good, but at low wages. It's related to the 'poverty trap'."

Note: This is actually about care of the elderly, but it also relates to family and working life.

"Commerce and government is squeezing Christian values more – it's consumer and business driven, and squeezing Biblical family values."

Note: This statement undermines the simple separation of views into left and right and could lead to a more creative debate about values.

"There is global travel – families are spreading out - the way we see travel is changing"

> "Losses [because of changes in family life] … young people, because of insecurity and lack of family identity"

Notes: Themes emerging here from several statements are…

…the change in family life to an increasing number of one parent households, more divorce and living together arrangements, and the connected greater independence of women. This is something about which varying views were expressed, sometimes within the same group.

…the pressure on family life from working life.

…the tendency for families to be more widespread geographically.

The churches' response involved work on the values behind family life, and on picking up the pieces, for instance in things like contact centres for the estranged parent to meet their children. Incidentally I visited one such centre. It was called MacDonalds.

Television

Television is part of our age. It came into widespread use in the 1950's and 60's, well in the memory of many people I spoke to. It is a broadcast technology, not a communication technology. It is a technology that keeps people at indoors and makes the streets emptier and more menacing. It is the foremost medium for advertising. So much for my unsubstantiated opinions: this is what people said;-

> "'TV - I grew up without it' – it is mostly negative"
>
> "Iraqi war – there's been manipulation on the media"
>
> "I love TV"
>
> "I'm a child of TV"
>
> "I feel there's someone [TV] in the room with me"
>
> "[TV] has been helpful with information about the Gulf War. It's not like the old propaganda campaigns"
>
> "TV and video are an indoctrination tool – 'God in the corner'. I packed up telly for a time and it was alright"
>
> "[I'm concerned about] the effect of advertising on children, early in the morning when the children are watching but not the parents. – selling kids' toys for Christmas and giving a false conception of what toy would do"
>
> "Some of [advertising] is downright sexually explicit. There's innuendo. [It gives a false atmosphere of] feelgood"
>
> "[TV advertising] feeds materialism and peer pressure"
>
> "Those with less money are left out [of the world promoted by advertising]"
>
> "Manufacturers benefit from advertising"

Note: … and therefore their employees.

> "Manchester United etc.."

Note: I was unclear about the reference here. Manchester United is an example of branding (shirts etc..) It's also an example of the big squeezing out the small (also referred to in the conversation), another feature of our society, as in supermarkets or mega-churches. These two are connected.

> "TV - for a thing to be noticed it's got to be extreme. Things need to be more racy / provocative / in your face … because people are competing. E.g. a children's programme called 'fartbeat'."
>
> "TV frightens people"
>
> "Something new is communication - broadcast media - news 24. we get news fatigue, compassion fatigue - some regard having watched TV as having done something about the issues involved"
>
> "Communications - the minute something happens you can see it"

Note: things that were said several times include…

…questioning whether television coverage of world events was fair – varying opinions about this – maybe sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn't.

…concern about the effect of advertising on values.

…television as a valued friend / television as something one can do without. Opposite views were expressed.

…the experience of news fatigue / compassion fatigue

The things said about how God saw this and how the churches should respond to these things were largely to do with challenging the values of a consumer society.

Children

Much of what was said about children has been mentioned already under the "family" heading. However the following merits logging;-

> "Because of the fear of [accusations of] paedophilia, can't help or love children in the same way."

Once or twice I heard of the need to tread carefully because of legislation designed to protect children. I met this myself when I asked if I could photograph a youth group abseiling from a railway viaduct. *A personal statement:* It seemed entirely fair to me that I should be forbidden from taking pictures, but it is interesting to note that far more children are killed by drivers who go too fast than by paedophiles, especially those previously unknown to the children, yet we treat speed limits with contempt.

Care

The care of elderly people and other vulnerable groups has already been mentioned.

Women

Once again, there are connections with themes previously mentioned. Some of the extra things heard were;-

> "Most adult women have gained from contraception"
>
> "Some men have felt threatened by the greater role of women"
>
> "Gains – there are more opportunities for women … me … I was around when people were saying 'let's have more women on this committee'"
>
> "Some churches have taken on board women in any role in the church"
>
> "The situation of women since the war – they are as large an employed group as men"

Agriculture

Unsurprisingly, since (a) I walked through a lot of countryside and (b) I sought out a meeting at the Arthur Rank Centre, agriculture was mentioned a few times;-

> "Farming's changed"
>
> "There is nowhere for retired farmers to live further up in the National Park"
>
> "[God / mechanisation of agriculture] There are poverty and unemployment in some rural communities. God can't necessarily come down on one side or the other. Whatever we say about God, there is people power, and people can raise the prophetic voice"

Note: Not all the comments came from rural areas. And much of this is about farming's interaction with the wider community – global markets, housing, etc.. There was an awareness that the state of rural life, and agriculture in particular, is an issue that is for everyone who eats, and everyone who has a choice where to live.

Communication and Information Technology

These two categories together covered quite a lot of the things people said. To summarise, there were mixed feelings about the benefits or otherwise – people of every generation could see the benefits, but people of every generation also had reservations about the social effects of some of these technologies. The answer would often be "good if used well, bad if abused". A number of people also mentioned the way poor people (especially the third World) were left out by these

technologies. When it came to the "what is the church doing" question, though, the answers were generally about whether or not the church was exploiting these technologies for its own purposes.

Housing

Housing-related themes came up a number of times: here are some examples;-

> "Property is much cheaper nearer in to Bridgwater"
>
> "We've seen the urbanisation of the countryside – with commuters, having second homes, 'The urban shadow has fallen on Rothbury'"
>
> "Urban people who can live in a pretty place have gained [from urbanisation of countryside]"

Once again, we see connections. Some of the earlier statements here are also housing-related.

Migrant and multicultural

Migration, within, into and out of the UK, is a feature of our country. Multiculturalism is connected with this. Here are some of the things people said;-

> "[Low birthrate] [Migration because of poverty] Why do people who oppose immigration not support help to people in their own countries?"
>
> "Multiculturalism. The BNP has gained politically. For both people who come and indigenous people there are gains and losses. The people who come are 'not spongers'"
>
> "Multiculturalism and urbanisation are the same – the movement of different people, mixing"
>
> "Multiculturalism – there are churches working with asylum seekers. In Birmingham there are churches working with Asian women"
>
> "Immigration in cities and elsewhere brings into question national identities"
>
> "Immigration - Gains - people who arrive have gained if coming from somewhere poor / insecure. - although may be in a relatively deprived and possibly violent area of Britain"
>
> "Gains – 'us' - we're less racist, more open minded, and better understanding of other cultures"
>
> "Loss - residents of seaside towns round Dover see it as loss"
>
> "Gains - people getting a better life"
>
> "Losses - those who have been displaced"
>
> "Loss - two or three generations later immigrant families find, despite doing well, that they are not accepted by white people – they have questions over their own identity – and sometimes an extreme response e.g. to join Al Qaida"
>
> "Some come for prosperity, others to escape"
>
> "Identity - black Britons consider selves British, but many whites consider them not so"
>
> "God - immigration – In Biblical times there were migrations – 'stranger in someone else's land' I can't see God as judgemental. Does God want diversity?"
>
> "'Church - immigration - A lot of the Christian church just stayed quite exclusive.' Churches – there is the example of church that became black-led - the white people left. Churches have tried to preserve themselves in their own identities. What churches have in common to their shame is their exclusiveness. - This is what they've done - it would be better to forget that exclusiveness - do their own things, but become more inclusive"
>
> "This is becoming a multicultural society"
>
> "Multiculturalism – all have gained but perhaps don't realise how, e.g. through diet. There are still older people who resent people with black skin. We are more careful with language"
>
> "God is pleased if people are living together harmoniously - not quite so pleased perhaps about all white and all black churches. X URC had fraternal links with the New Testament Church of God, but was two faced – they loved the gospel choir, but would not integrate"

"Churches and multiculturalism - We'd like to think we're open to anybody here – there are few black / ethnic minority people in the area anyway."

Note: This was true of most (not all) of the places I visited. But churches still felt the issues were important. There was no evidence of the view that runs – "we have no problem with racism here, because we don't have any black people."

"God – is mixing peoples, making us less insular, less intolerant of strangers, which is a good thing. God loves both Scots and Spaniards"

"There are some things which are good, some which are bad - Meetings with people of other countries can be constructive or destructive"

Note: I've included a greater proportion of the things that were said on these issues than on some others, partly because of their importance, partly because of the diversity of things that were said (although you may note some repetition), partly because there was more discussion than usual of the "God" and "church" questions. There is evidence here of both hard thinking and hard work by the churches, of difficult issues not yet resolved, but also a great deal of goodwill.

Poverty

This is what some people said;-

"Children have lost because of social change and instability of marriage, and it hits harder where people are less well off - the question is 'can you afford to live separately?'"

"Hornby toys are manufactured in China. People are working for a pittance."

"'If you're in the middle of a working class estate, some of these changes [have not so much effect]'"

"There's a bigger divide between rich and poor because of this … there's not the contentment there was. People always need more. Added to that is the compensation culture. It's connected with world economy gone wrong"

"The poverty gap ought to be closing, but I'm not so sure it is"

"Benefit traps – the system doesn't help with non standard cases"

"Health improvements are leading to a rapid population expansion, but food isn't in the same place as the population – there is a polarisation of wealth and poverty"

A number of people mentioned the widening (or at least not closing) gap between rich and poor. There is a global context to all this. And poverty / wealth can make all the difference to the effects of change on people, the first statement above being an example of this.

Other things

Much has necessarily been missed out. The full text is available to some recipients (electronic form only) in *Appendix C*.

Observations

The "God" question

This was hard for a lot of people to answer. Some people said so right out, and some simply avoided answering it. Of course, that is to be expected. We should be cautious of assuming we know exactly what God thinks about something. I've heard of people claiming the gift of prophecy in order to impose their own will.

There was more confidence and more readiness to answer when the subject was family life or something that is more easily regarded as God's / the churches' business. Stuff about the economy and technology was not so often seen as something about which God could give answers. A number of people would say that technology per se is neither good nor bad, but can be used or abused. And their answer to "what is the church doing about it?" concerned whether the church was making use of it rather than anything to do with its wider use.

The God question is indeed hard. Neither stunned silence nor quick, simple conclusions are really acceptable. What (it seems to me) is required is a process of discovering the will of God. Of course this cannot be achieved in a few minutes of discussion with a complete stranger. Most of the issues raised by people were too general to have simple answers anyway. The methods of theological reflection we use at Industrial Mission in South Yorkshire take days, weeks, a lifetime even[1]. It would have been good to see the beginnings of some such process in the meetings I had, even though it was unrealistic to see that process come to a conclusion. Generally, the point of these meetings was to hear the discussion, not to hear the answers.

Maybe my questions could have been revised to make explicit space for some kind of reflection (a question about "what does this remind you of in the Bible?" for instance). It would have been unfair to expect anyone to get into serious reflection in the limited time available without some prompting. But looking back on it, it seems to me that something else would have helped too. And that is a re-think of what we do when we preach. I became aware that nearly all the preaching I do is telling people *what* to think, not helping them with *how* to think. It's like the old dictum about fish and education; "Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day: teach them to fish and you feed them for life." If church people are confronted by questions, the answers to which have not already been preached at them, they are in difficulty: unless the church's programme also includes equipping them to investigate the unknown.

Change and passivity – work

Sometimes the group wouldn't make it to the end of the questions. It might appear that the church is doing nothing about an issue when in reality the question hasn't been asked. Although "work" was an issue for most groups, it wasn't usually the issue that was taken on to the point where we could hear what the church was doing about it. That may simply be coincidence. Or it may be that the feeling persists (implicit once or twice in these discussions, but rarely explicit) that some things just aren't the church's business.

Family life – the good, the bad and the complex

Although some people expressed views that the prevalence of divorce and people living together outside marriage was contrary to the will of God, or breaking God's heart, just about everybody had complex views about the question. Liberals and conservatives are apt to portray one another in simple ways, and from hearing some of the statements out of context we also might think people's views were simple. And there were certainly some very different views expressed. But a longer listen to any of the conversations reveals a great deal of subtlety. At the same time as God grieves over the instability of marriage, God rejoices that women don't have to live with bullies for the rest of their lives.

The churches have big strategic decisions about how to react to all these changes: the current debate (debate!) in the Anglican Communion about gay bishops is an example of this. A split may no longer be avoidable. But we do well to remember that our opponents' ideas are not as simple as we imagine.

Electricity

I was surprised that more than one person mentioned the arrival of mains electricity as a significant change. I hadn't bargained for the age of some of the people I spoke to, nor their rural background. Although some 21st century people are sceptical about technology, and there are even some that have a naïve blanket scepticism, there have been times in the recent past when some technologies were unambiguously considered a Good Thing. Many people in the third world still have no electricity. But should they be the people to bear the burden of reducing CO_2 emissions? Who would begrudge them the wonders of electricity?

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[1] We use a variant on the "pastoral cycle" of experience / analysis / reflection / action leading to further experience…

Making the changes

Encouragingly, some people were less interested in my question about what had changed than their own question about what changes they could make in the world.

Conclusions

Similarities

Much was said about changes in family life, a connected story made up of elements such as changes in working patterns, the empowerment of women, changes in the care of elderly and vulnerable people and the increase in divorce and living together outside marriage. People came at this with different views, depending partly on their theology, but there was more common ground than seemed apparent on the surface. Whatever we feel about these issues, and however much we regret the amount of the churches' energy which they take up, they are clearly important to many people, and represent a cause of human suffering and joy, over which we imagine God grieves and rejoices. Many of the themes were connected. (It would be fun one day to do a mathematical exercise to see just how every theme is connected to every other one by a chain of keywords.) For example, changes in housing and the rural economy are connected to the rise of the motor car. Changes in family life are connected with changes in working patterns, and with the role of women, and so with contraception, and so with the technology of reproduction. Changes in the nature of work are connected with global trade, which is connected with multicultural Britain. And so on. And a number of groups mentioned these connections.

Changes in the care of old (and vulnerable) people, more outside the family now, were seen fairly widely as significant. Most were talking about this from the point of view of the next generation down, who had the responsibility for looking after ageing parents, rather than people approaching old age themselves.

Information and communications technology were changing the world, a lot of people thought. Not everybody who said this had much direct personal experience, though most did have.

There was a sense from all the people I talked to that what happened on the far side of the world was important, because the effects on people are important wherever they are.

Differences

Differences in theology were on show at times when people were talking about the family, although these were not so straightforward as I had guessed they would be.

The economy was a bigger issue in some places than others, mostly in those places where the main industries had taken a "hit" in recent times.

There were other differences, some people mentioned some things and not others. But this may often have been coincidence. Nobody said of an issue "that's not important." The part of the process where you have to get down to two examples of change was hard to do, because it they were all important and it was hard to drop anything.

Surprises

Mains electricity: It was a surprise to me just how recent some of the changes are which I now take for granted.

The United States: Although there was some mention of the rise of the US to overt world domination, there wasn't much. I had supposed it would be seen as a bigger factor in our cultural world today. Those who mentioned the questioning of our national identity didn't say anything about the US.

Attitude: Overall, there was a much more positive and hopeful attitude to change than I had expected. Some of the consequences of changes in family life were welcomed by many people.

Hope

- Generally speaking, people felt that God called them to live in the world as it was, not as they dreamed it ought to be.
- At the same time, there was a concern, expressed in respect of many of the changes in the world, to see God's justice done.
- And people would look to Christian sources and the Bible for guidance (although few attempted it on the spot). For instance, one person spoke of "Biblical values".

This seems to me a healthy combination.

The complexity of what I heard is partly a reflection of the complexity of the world we were talking about. We cannot expect Christians to have pat answers for every eventuality. What we could do, those of us who have some say in how the church thinks, is to devise ways of equipping people more to understand the situations they face and the demands of their neighbours. It's not the preacher's job to think, but the congregation's.

I'll end with two quotations from an ecumenical Lent group in Somerset;-

"I feel very positive about this country."

"Why can't we talk about the changes that we want to happen?"

Change is not just something that happens to other people, nor even something that happens to us: it is something that we, as Christians, can influence.

Appendix A: List of groups

Two South Molton Baptists, Devon	… with whom I stayed
Uk.religion.Christian member and his parish priest	… Anglican contacts from an internet newsgroup, whom I met on the Quantocks
Westfield URC, Bridgwater	… a sizeable housegroup
Ecumenical group in Winscombe	… a Lent group
Cotham Parish Church near Bristol University	… I gatecrashed the post-Friday-morning-communion coffee session
ISR members from the Bristol end	… Industrial Mission staff, met in a pub
Pauline Barnes, URC minister	… we chatted while walking
travelling people near Stow-on-the-Wold	… most of this chat was unrecorded
Two church officers, Lillington	… suburb of Leamington Spa
Free church officer at the Arthur Rank Centre	… the ARC is the churches' rural centre
Digbeth-in-the-Field URC	… a sizeable group, meeting on Good Friday
Three from C of E in Stretton, Burton on Trent	… meeting where I stayed
Keighley URC - minister and husband	… where I stayed
Minister and member, Durham	… meeting in a former pit village
Members of Bethel URC, Chester-le-Street	… in a former coalfield area – meeting for dinner in a pub
Church worker, Horsley, village near Newcastle	… in commuting range
Four from Ponteland URC, Darras Hall	… in an exclusive housing estate
Church leaders from Thropton and Rothbury	… rural Northumberland
Two generations of one family	… based in Kelso and Sheffield
Church leaders and spouses, Morningside, Edinburgh	… meeting in a city centre apartment

Appendix B: keywords listed by frequency

frequency	keyword
80	church
43	work
41	God
36	gain
36	old
36	family
34	loss
32	TV
25	technology
25	children
24	care
22	women
20	agriculture
19	communication
18	IT
17	housing
17	migrant
17	industry
17	poverty
15	urban
15	multicultural
15	mechanisation
15	global
14	advertising
14	money
13	transport
13	justice
12	consumerism
12	individualism
12	war
11	medicine
10	contraception
10	love
10	young
9	reproduction
9	community
9	wealth
9	left out
9	devolution
8	culture

frequency	keyword
8	marriage
8	time
8	identity
8	shop
8	economy
8	nuclear
8	computer
8	congregation
8	health
7	media
7	respect
7	unemployment
7	information
7	power
7	value
7	parent
6	race
6	gap
6	discipline
5	country
5	gender
5	men
5	expectation
5	Thatcherism
5	skill
5	humanity
5	leisure
5	security
5	education
5	mobility
5	internet
5	neighbour
5	crime
5	benefit
5	rural