

## **General Assembly Meetings – March 2008**

Any apprehension Joan and I felt before going to the meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (GA of U & FCC) soon vanished in the warm welcome and loving environment we found there, even though it rained on the way down.

Our journey was considerably easier than one of my friends who set out for Hatfield, drove a few miles, whereupon the clutch on her car gave out. The only solution was to ring the AA and her husband who was at work – the former to tow her to a garage, and the latter to lend her his car so she could get herself and one daughter to the meetings in Hatfield – his thanks, a lift to the bus stop so he could go back to work. That wasn't the end of her problems – daughter number two rang up to say that the dishwasher had broken down.

One of the first events we went to was the Youth Panel where a panel of young people shared their vision Unitarianism and beyond led by the Youth Officer and the chair of the Youth Panel. The session ended with an interesting water ceremony which involved the mixing of water from various parts of the county in a bowl (guess who forgot to take their bottle). The people there were then invited to perform a ritual of their own devising – some people wet their a finger and placed it on their forehead – some others sprinkled water on the young people there – some people sprinkled the mixture of waters on the audience – some sprinkled water on the Youth Officer who incidentally is coming to an East Midland Unitarians quarterly meeting in Hinckley in September.

The NUF reception provided a welcome glass of wine.

I collected the chapel copy of “Help is at Hand”; a guide to the tasks involved in running a chapel or fellowship.

The catering at the University of Hertfordshire where the meetings were held was as good as ever. After dinner there was opening worship followed by a celebration of Unitarian women devised by the Unitarian Women's League which I found outstanding. We had Womens' League members speaking about the achievements of Unitarian women; Womens' League members playing and singing music, some of which was written by Womens' League members. I found it a lovely end to the first half day following which I did my good deed for the day and set up a friend's computer so she could access the Internet.

We were up early the next day to go to morning worship lead by Andy Pakula who is lay leader at two congregations in North London.

After breakfast it was down to business – adoption of standing orders for conduct of the Business Meetings followed by the Annual Report, the Executive Committee report, the General Assembly annual accounts, and the Nightingale Holiday Centre annual report. Following this we had an emergency motion which said: *“That this General Assembly expresses its dismay and concern at the wanton attack on the Gellionnen Chapel and offers its heartfelt support to the congregation of Gellionnen Chapel and its student lay-pastor Lewis Rees”*. The motion of course was unanimously passed.

Following a cup of coffee we heard some more reports presented, congratulated the Unitarian Women's League on its centenary, voted to make the Ministerial Fellowship an affiliated society, called upon Her Majesty's Government to focus on crime prevention and rehabilitation rather than ineffective punishments like imprisonment, and accepted the recommendations of the Stipend Review Committee.

After lunch we debated the revised constitution, which was overwhelmingly passed with a few minor revisions to the text. The Hibbert Trust are producing a DVD course in liberal Spirituality which has no mention of Unitarianism, and they wanted to launch the project. We viewed the first DVD in the set and I volunteered Hinckley Great Meeting to field-test the first DVD in the set.

The International Association for Religious Freedom hosted a time of music, silence and prayer from the world's religious traditions which was called “Pointing at the Moon” which provided a welcome chill-out. The Communications Commission hosted a session called “Getting Noticed”, which started with an update on their various projects, which was followed by a presentation by Michael Dadson, minister at Macclesfield, on the publicity project that his congregation had undertaken, funded by the Communications Commission to create their own customised publicity material. They had taken a picture of a the chapel through a wrought iron gate and used this as an emblem; they had also taken a picture of a begonia leaf, or similar, and reproduced it in four different colours on their publicity material which I found very striking.

The next day we unanimously elected Michael Tomblin as an Honorary Member, before embarking on Growth Day. Growth Day was designed to help individual Unitarians find ways to grow and renew their denomination. Before starting work eight Unitarians were given their chance to share their 3 minute vision of growth with us including Reverends Jane Barraclough, Lindy Latham and Ant Howe. In a moment of mental aberration I had responded to an email asking for help with running the day before I went to Hatfield – I was one of a team of facilitators/scribes allocated

to room N101. We had to feed the growth and renewal themes generated by our group back to the organizers. After lunch we re-assembled in the auditorium and the participants decided which of the eleven identified common themes, they wanted to work on. Room N101 got the large group tasked with investigating "Spirituality" as a growth and renewal item with accompanying Actions, Time Scales, and Measurements.

After tea I opted for the Worship Panel where Linda Hart, Joy Croft, and Martin Gienke expounded their models of "Worship - what works for you" followed by the Unitarian Renewal Group which offered Cliff Reed, Lindy Latham, and Jo Rogers explaining why, despite their different standpoints they could say "Count me in - I'm a Unitarian too" based on the denominational leaflet "The Principles that Unite Us".

Dinner was followed by the "jewel in the crown", the Anniversary Service which was entitled "Let's Go Down to the River and Pray" and was conducted by Rev. Jane Barraclough. The highlights for me were the new hymn by Cliff Reed, The Flame of Truth is Kindled, the youth contributions, the reading from the book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard, and the Anniversary Sermon by Rev. Art Lester entitled "Reasonless Hope and Joy" which as with all Art Lester sermons was enthralling and is a "must read" on the General Assembly or National Unitarian Fellowship web pages.

Onto Saturday morning and only half a day to go. We had three motions to debate, the first of which related to non-mainstream Christian representation on the Churches Main Committee, the body that Her Majesty's Government consults regarding legislation with a religious aspect. The second demanded equal treatment for Same Sex and Opposite Sex Marriages and Civil Partnership; both motions were passed overwhelmingly. The last motion was to confer honorary membership on Roy Smith, past General Secretary of the General Assembly. Then we were down to the procedural motions including voting in Joyce Ashworth as the new president and Rev. Bob Wightman as the new vice-president. Then it was lunch, which was as good as ever, and head home.

Scattered throughout the business meetings were little 3 minute spots celebrating our various differing congregations, one from each of the districts bar two. We had short films, Powerpoint presentations, and simple verbal reports celebrating the following congregations.

- York
- Dundee
- Derby
- Bury (Lancs)

- Salisbury Fellowship
- London Newington Green/Islington
- Macclesfield
- Bury St Edmunds
- Great Hucklow
- Birmingham Hollywood
- Ashton-in-Makerfield
- Cardiff
- Bristol Brunswick Square/Frenchay

What did I bring back from Hatfield? Well, apart from a sense of “Reasonless Hope and Joy” to quote Art Lester, the Anniversary Service preacher, my thanks to you, the congregation for sending me as your delegate (whose turn is it next year?) I also got delight out of the celebration of Unitarian women on the opening evening and sorrow at the desecration of Gellionnen Chapel by a group of mindless hooligans. I definitely need to buy that copy of “Pilgrim at Tinker Creek” that I promised myself several years ago.