

**Report of the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches (GA meetings)  
13<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> April 2014  
Whittlebury Hall, Northamptonshire**



This year I attended the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches as the delegate from Shrewsbury. The meetings were held at Whittlebury Hall in Northamptonshire (a venue rather out of my league(!) but apparently the cost is no more, even less, than our usual University accommodation!)

These were a busy few days of business meetings, society meetings and talks, services and worship, and social time to meet friends and make new ones. I thoroughly enjoyed the meetings; not having been for a few years it was interesting to see what has changed and I noticed an increase in energy, motivation, professionalism and skills – things are moving forwards.

### Evenings

On the first evening we had the Anniversary Service, led by Rev David Usher on 'Looking at things'. Faith is how we look at the world. We all see different things and this helps form our faith. Do we see beauty or misery, for example - they are both there. One person sees something that is of vital importance to them, someone else might not see it at all. But it is there to that person and is therefore important and part of the whole.



During the service Rev Winnie Gordon was accepted onto the General Assembly Roll of Ministers.

The second evening was a Celebration of Community, led by our own Midland Unitarian Association – and a great evening it was! The young people contributed, we sang Bronwen Taylor's new hymn 'Nurturing Faith, Embracing Life, Celebrating

Difference' (the new Unitarian 'strapline'), we heard about the Simple Gifts project in Bethnal Green and Unitarians in the Khasi Hills, India, and we finished by singing Blue Boat Home with flags and hooters and then the Unitarian song 'Spirit of Life'. The banners were paraded in during this evening – it will be nice when we have ours there too!



The last evening was a stand-up comedy show by Robin Ince of Radio 4 'The Infinite Monkey Cage' fame and many other things. What a great evening!

### **Business meetings ('Plenaries')**

These keep us all up to date with what is going on at a national level and how this can assist at a local level.

The Executive Committee gave an update on their work.

We heard about the amazing work that the Youth group is doing - residential weekends and roadshows, for age 6 upwards, and a future project 'Moments of Magic' - encouraging people to share their moments and then creating a programme to facilitate these types of experiences for other people. One session, first thing in the morning, started with the Juniors and the audience creating a 'thunderstorm' - that woke us up!



We heard about the energetic work of the Visibility Group - working to increase our profile through new posters (which you should see here in Shrewsbury soon), the website, social media, our new strapline, media skills training and more.

We heard the report from the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire - our Unitarian conference and retreat centre - which goes from strength to strength. And the work of 'Send a Child to Hucklow' - funding holidays for children

from disadvantaged backgrounds. This has funded 14 weeks of holidays in the past year - an amazing achievement! Keep the pennies coming in the pot!

The Stipend Review Committee put to vote whether to have the same rate for taking services for ministers and lay preachers or not (£45 for both, or £45/£40). It was voted to have the same rate.

### **Motions**

#### **1. FROM STAND UNITARIAN CHAPEL, WHITEFIELD**

That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches elects the Rev. Dr. Vernon Marshall as Vice President of the General Assembly for the year 2014-15.

*Not carried*

#### **2. FROM WESTGATE CHAPEL, WAKEFIELD**

That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches calls upon the BBC Religion and Ethics advisers to broaden the BBC Radio 4 Thought for the Day by including secular speakers.

*Carried*

#### **3. FROM THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches add a new paragraph to the Constitution regarding Dissolution. (See documents at the church for full text)

*Carried*

#### **4. FROM TWELVE FULL MEMBERS**

The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches expresses its support for the campaign being undertaken by our Unitarian co-religionists, the Hungarian Unitarian Church, along with other church groups and environmental protection groups, against extensive mining operations in the Roşia Montană area of Transylvania, Romania. We are appalled at (i) the possible uprooting of the residents of this community from their homes, livelihoods, places of worship and their burial grounds and (ii) the known risk of major environmental damage from the use of cyanide in the mining operations. We call upon the Romanian government to discontinue permanently all consideration and negotiations regarding this mining development by the Roşia Montană Gold Corporation in this area.

*Carried*



#### 5. FROM THE YORKSHIRE UNITARIAN UNION

That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches asks the Executive Committee to make their recommendation for GA Vice-President on the basis of appropriateness for the post, and without reference to the present convention of alternating lay person and minister. We would hope that the Executive Committee would still be mindful of the need for some balance, over time, between lay persons, ministers and other variables such as gender and geography.

*Carried*

#### 6. FROM TWELVE FULL MEMBERS

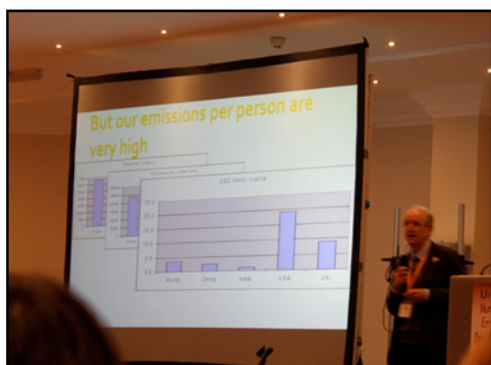
This General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, reaffirming our commitment to the Charter for Compassion and its message of empathy and universal compassion and our respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part: acclaims the vital work of the British Red Cross in helping save the lives of millions of people in Syria and the Philippines and commends fellow Unitarians and all people of goodwill who have contributed to the Clara Barton Disasters Emergency Appeal in response to recent appeals issued on behalf of the General Assembly; and, should the General Assembly, through the Executive Committee, decide to issue further appeals in response to major international disasters, encourages Unitarians everywhere to support them generously and wholeheartedly. *Carried*

A member of staff from the Red Cross, who works in logistics and was in the Philippines for over a month, spoke to us about the work there.

#### EMERGENCY MOTION 1

This motion was to support the campaign by the Howard League for Penal Reform in urging the Government to reconsider the Prison Service Instruction that limits books for prisoners.

*Carried*



#### EMERGENCY MOTION 2

This motion was regarding climate change, in relation to the recent IPCC report. (To pledge our support for legislation, and to explore ways, to reduce harmful emissions).

This motion was *delayed* until next year as it was felt that there wasn't sufficient time to explore it and in fact a more substantial motion was required that provides practical support, for example worship materials.

There were a number of PROCEDURAL MOTIONS – see documents in the church for further information.

#### Keynote Speaker

Our keynote speaker this year was Rabbi Danny Rich, Chief Executive of the Liberal Jews (with whom the Unitarians have worked in bringing about the legalisation of same-sex marriage, along with the Quakers). An energetic, intelligent man and a great communicator.

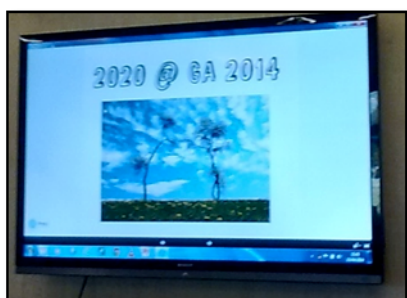
## Unitarian Societies and other sessions



There are many Unitarian societies which are represented at the meetings with stalls and sometimes talks or workshops - Music, Historical, Christian, Peace, Psychical and Earth Spirit to name a few.

I attended the Peace Fellowship session which included a talk by Rosemary Sturge, a Quaker from Northampton, who talked about their Peace Testimony, developed when the Quakers began in the 1600s, and their (and other groups') involvement in, for example, conscientious objection during WW1 and 11. The Peace Fellowship has a Facebook page so have a look if you can.

The Psychical Society speaker was Dr Fiona Bowie from Kings College London who spoke about research into the afterlife. There are many cross-cultural similarities in experiences, suggesting there are real shared experiences. A take home message was to trust your instincts and intuitions and not bury them, as we are often taught to do in our society.



I attended a session by the 2020 Group, set up to support and fund new and rekindled congregations. Derby Unitarians have been awarded the first grant to support the rekindling of their congregation. This group has amazing energy and vision.

Another session by the Local Leadership Strategy Group looked at ways in which congregations have used any of the services and facilities that this group offer – What can the LLSG do for you? For example, various types of training and courses, facilitation services, worship materials, buildings advisory group, and more.



The final part of the last morning was devoted to the outgoing (Rev Bill Darlison) and the incoming (Marion Baker) presidents of the General Assembly. The President heads the Unitarian movement here in Britain for a year and visits numerous churches, represents us at a range of events and conferences. and visits partner churches abroad. In the last year, Bill has visited 38 churches and travelled 40,000 miles!

We all went back home full of inspiration and ideas to put into action in our local areas.  
A great few days of inspiration, thought, sharing and celebrating.

There is a great range of documents from the GA, posters about upcoming events, and more detailed information about the above at the back of Shrewsbury Unitarian Church – have a look.