



Northampton Unitarian News

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CONGREGATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS WEEKEND: 21ST AND 22ND APRIL 2007

Bright and early on the morning of Saturday 21st April, seven members of the congregation, including the entire Management Committee and part-time pastor Maud Robinson, met with our facilitators Rev. John Clifford and Martin Gienke. It was a slightly nostalgic visit for John – he had been our minister from 1970 to 1973, and remembered Martin Weiss very well.

After a brief explanation of the process, we were off. The idea is to carry out a thorough assessment of all aspects of the congregation, from membership and governance through building and finance to publicity and outreach. By skilful questioning, John and Martin led us through an analysis which clearly established our strengths and weaknesses, as well as identifying areas of opportunity.

As soon as we have received the full report from John and Martin, we will be sharing it with the congregation, after a Sunday service. Watch this space!



CONFESSIONS OF A GA VIRGIN

(this article will be appearing in the June 2007 issue of *The Unitarian*, and appears here with the blessing of editor Frank Hytch)

Six months ago, I had no idea of attending the 2007 GA annual meetings. Then at the beginning of November 2006, I went to my first UALL (Unitarian Association of Lay Leaders) conference at Great Hucklow, and someone said to me “Wouldn’t it be good if you could get your Worship Studies Course certificate presented at the GA next April?” “Yes,” I thought, “that would be great.” The Midland Union very kindly agreed to fund me, so I was all set.

The first thing to hit me when I arrived was the intensity of the programme – if you chose to attend morning worship (on Wednesday or Thursday) your day could start at 7.30 am, and go on until 9.00 or 9.30 pm – quite a long time later! And that didn’t include social time! Old hands tell me that the trick is to decide what you really *must* go to, and build in some time off each day. But being a first timer (or a GA Virgin, as I understand we’re known), I wanted to experience as much as I could, so I came home on the Friday evening totally shattered!

One thing I really liked was the mix of activities: workshops and business meetings were interspersed with worship. The worship sessions were of a very high quality, from Rev. Celia Cartwright’s inspiring Opening Celebrations followed by Peace Vespers on the Tuesday evening, through morning worship sessions led by Rev. Alex Bradley and Rev. Gillian Peel and afternoon worship by Ray and Sheila Seal, to the great occasion of the Anniversary Service on the Thursday evening.

I soon got into the way of things – some events, such as the John Relly Beard Lecture, the Essex Hall Lecture, the Anniversary Service and the Business Sessions – were attended by everybody. But the bulk of each day was taken up by a huge variety of seminars and workshops, often entailing infuriating choices when I wanted to go to two things at the same time.

Which sessions did I find especially fascinating or memorable or just plain useful? Let me share a few of my personal highlights with you ...

- Jeff Teagle's John Relly Beard Lecture on the future of Unitarian ministry contained much food for thought.
- The Outreach & Communications Commission used its slot to launch the new "corporate image", created by Mark Howard of Twenty-Five International. The message was clear: we need to pay attention to our image and its consistency if we are to come across as an organisation people can trust. The new website is to be launched on 1st May, and the sneak preview we were treated to certainly looked more exciting than the present one. But the proof of the pudding will be in the eating – the best looking website in the world is no use unless it's user-friendly and kept up to date.
- Rev. Celia Cartwright's Opening Celebrations – I found this service particularly moving and inspiring.
- The District Connections presentation on Support for Organisational Leadership, led by Executive Committee member Dawn Buckle. There is a new looseleaf book coming out in the Autumn, entitled *Help is at Hand*. It will also be available online, and promises to be a mine of information for congregational and district officers and committee members, covering lots of useful areas including trustees, premises, risk management, the roles of officers and a directory of further information and contacts. It sounds really useful and practical – and all congregations and districts will be sent a printed copy.
- And of course, my especial personal highlight, being presented with my Worship Studies Course certificate by President David Dawson.

Apart from these, it was both inspiring and stimulating to be surrounded by so many Unitarians and Free Christians and to have the opportunity of making new friends, greeting old ones, and meeting some of the most prominent people in the British & Irish Unitarian movement. The warmth and friendliness were wonderful to experience.

The weather was warm and sunny; the campus facilities – both accommodation and conference facilities – were very good; and the food was smashing! I browsed to my heart's content around the stalls, including the GA bookshop, and spent loads of money on a variety of useful things.

The only thing I will *not* remember with pleasure is the banging of doors by people arriving late for sessions in the main Weston Auditorium. I know that they were heavy doors, and hence difficult to close quietly, but it got a bit distracting after a while! Someone in *GA Zette* suggested an extra workshop on door management skills ...!

Would I go to another GA annual meetings – you bet! I really enjoyed myself and got a lot out of them, both in terms of new knowledge and spiritual uplift. I would recommend them to anyone wanting to learn and experience more of our unusual, amazing denomination.

Sue Woolley