

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches  
Established 1945

# Viewpoint



## Diary of a GA President

by Neville Kenyon,  
Unitarian GA President 2010 – 2011

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## **Background.**

The General Assembly President is elected for two years – the first year as Vice President and the second as President. The Executive Committee (EC) consisting of eight elected members plus the National Treasurer elects their preferred candidate of Vice President to the Annual Meetings by a simple majority. The candidates are initially put forward by individual members, via congregations and in turn via District Associations through to the EC. The actual role of the President is currently quite difficult to accurately identify but a constitutional review panel is being set up to try to define the role.

Five years ago, the change in governance from the GA Council consisting of about 26 members to the 8 member EC system has made the role of President and Vice President more difficult to comprehend. The EC since its inauguration has experimented informally with inviting the President to attend occasional meetings, to all its meetings and latterly to none at all apart from an hour or two to discuss the Annual Meetings and a joint one with chairs of commissions. The President has no involvement with the governance of the movement a situation which is fully compliant with the current GA constitution.

Of course, the problem arises that the President is travelling the country representing the movement with little knowledge of what's actually happening at the centre other than that which is made available on the national web site. I was totally happy with this and looked upon the job as a kind of non-political mayor, complete with chain of office and untainted by any EC shenanigans. However as a life-long Unitarian who had been involved in the movement nationally for many years I knew my way around. The role certainly may need defining

more clearly for the less experienced.

At the beginning of my presidential year I was invited by Rev Tony McNeile, Chairman of the National Unitarian Fellowship, to create a log of my year in office. This is not intended to be an official report but a factual record. This contains some personal views which developed from visiting over 70 different Unitarian groups in the two years involved. My views are not intended to represent any Unitarian consensus (if there is such a thing) but are expressly my own. I have not included my visits as Vice President. During that year (2009 – 2010), as time allowed, I alternated my attendance at Sunday service at Bury, where I was at the time, chairman of the congregation, with visits to other Unitarian churches mainly in the north of England.

### **What Congregations and Districts Expect of the President.**

Some groups routinely invite the President to their anniversary services, their District Annual Meetings and induction services for new ministers. I was asked to conduct harvest festivals and attended funerals of ministers and lay Unitarians.

I have led discussions, opened new premises, unveiled wall plaques and presented Chalice Awards to junior members. There were also invitations to attend events beyond our Unitarian community. Details of these will be found later in this document. It was a busy year with over 40 weekends booked. There was a misapprehension in some quarters that the President was paid an honorarium. The truth is that he or she is expected to claim pulpit fees at the going rate and reasonable expenses. There is no other form of remuneration.

## The Programme

**Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2010** - I attended the Induction of Rev Chris Goacher at **Hinckley**. Well attended by an enthusiastic congregation including the mayor and mayoress of Hinckley and the local parliamentary candidate for the Liberal Democrats. It was interesting that the latter should have chosen a Unitarian induction service as the best place to be for networking on a Saturday afternoon so close to a General Election.

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2010** - I conducted the service at my local church, **Bury**, as the Minister was on holiday. Socked it to them! And every hymn from the Purple Book – first time ever at Bury!

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> April 2010**. I attended a Farewell Lunch for Rev Celia Midgley at **Altrincham** and proposed a toast to her after the meal. This was a lovely, crowded occasion culminating in the presentation to the congregation by Rev John and Celia of an impressive board depicting a list of past ministers since the foundation of the chapel.

**Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> May 2010** – To **Kendal** Unitarians to cut the ribbon unveiling a beautiful new mural – over 3 metres long - on the wall of the entrance way leading to the garden of this breathtaking chapel on Market Place in this bustling Lakeland town. The mural has been accomplished by talented chapel member Katie Hall and is entitled “Spirit of Life”. There are postcards available depicting the images of the mural. In creating this unique artwork, Katie has sought to reflect the quiet beauty of Cumbria’s Lake District and the vast expanse of sky above us, and also to encapsulate the thoughts and fellowship valued by our chapel members. Part of the relating

text reads: "Above the painting, our chalice symbolically links other images representing the diversity of religious experience. The white light of the chalice flame reminds us of the One Light which links us all. Within the mural you will find a multitude of visual imagery which reflects the joys of living, the mystery and wonder of life, Unitarian principles and values, and our wider cosmic environment within which all are fundamentally connected in the miracle of life. In her use of circular symbolism Katie sought to draw our minds towards the concept of an inclusive circle that embraces rather than excludes; affirming the value and importance of Unitarian principles for the future of humanity's spiritual quest." The project was initiated by the chapel's Growth and Renewal Group.

This was a truly wonderful experience complete with brass band, local press, mayor, loads of Unitarians and lots of razz-matazz. Just my kind of day out!

**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2010 - Rochdale** Anniversary Service during which individual members gave accounts of how they came to Unitarianism and what it means to them. There were eight of these in total from new and older members well chosen by minister, Rev Gillian Peel for their contrasting standpoints. One of the eight was me having been asked to extol the virtues of becoming involved in the wider Unitarian movement. A most moving service that really "worked" well with the participants each expressing a very personal view of the meaning of Unitarianism. The service was followed by an excellent lunch of true Rochdale style and quality.

**Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> May 2010.** Attended Communication Commission at Sheffield.

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2010.** I led the evening service for **Ainsworth** Unitarians. It was their 295<sup>th</sup> anniversary. 40+ congregation many from Bury but including about 10 from Bolton **Walmsley** chapel who are forming a good working relationship with Ainsworth. A celebratory tea was served prior to the service.

**Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2010.** I attended the Asparagus Lunch at **Evesham** where I led the service and later proposed the toast “Civil and religious liberty the world over”. There were 40 taking lunch and the spirit was very festive.

**Friday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2010.** Spoke at the annual dinner of the Memorial Hall Trustees in Manchester. Theme – comparing Sir John Bowring with Rev Leonard Mason!

**Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2010.** I led the service at Cairo Street, **Warrington** for the annual event of the Merseyside District. Most member churches were represented and there were about 40 in the congregation. A wide age range took part in the service.

**Monday 24<sup>th</sup> May – Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> May** – Partnership Support Panel seminar at Gt. Hucklow. The potential is very promising if we keep our nerve.

**Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> May.** I led the service at John Pounds **Portsmouth**. 50+ attended. This is a very vibrant and flourishing community with excellent leadership and important connections with the independent Grammar School across the road. The school has recently published a book on the history of Unitarianism in Portsmouth. This place is very popular for weddings and naming. This was my third visit and each time there has been a queue for rites of passage following the ser-

vice! Including the grammar school pupils, this Unitarian church probably has more people crossing its threshold in a year than any other in the UK.

**Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2010.** I attended the Annual General Meeting of the Western Union at **Bridgwater**. I conducted the service in the afternoon followed by a discussion and questionnaire on supporting identifiable Unitarian worship. Very well received and intense discussions ensued. About 35 at the AGM but another 10 or so turned up for the service and discussion. Rev Lindy Latham led a universally appreciated and very moving flower communion earlier in the day. The officers are worried that their EC link protocol is about to be terminated and have written to Essex Hall voicing their concern. This District, and its congregations, is crying out for proactive support from the GA.

**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2010.** I led the service at **Taunton**. This small group of a dozen or so are determined to succeed and their press releases and general publicity are excellent. They seem to have done a good deal by selling a 150 year lease on their school hall. The tenants have smartened up the exterior and converted the upstairs room into three luxury apartments. Very tasteful. The deal has released funds for some interior decoration of the beautiful chapel. They have recently acquired a lot of lovely bright red and tasteful carpet for the aisles, the staircases and the front platform. It is of special quality and is the remains of a major carpeting contract for Blenheim Palace. There was a communal lunch following the service.

**Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2010.** I attended the Valedictory Day at Unitarian College Manchester. I was invited as a Governor and not as GA President although I did wear my badge of of-

fice. It is obviously up to the college whether or not to invite the GA President.

**Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2010.** I conducted the service at **Newcastle under Lyme**. This was a truly exciting visit! There were between 30 - 40 in attendance and not a single one of their members has been there for more than 20 years. There is an ideal age range and a wonderfully hospitable atmosphere. Their secret for growth comes from creating a loving, caring community and they certainly seem to be on an upward curve. Folk attend from all over Staffordshire as it is the only Unitarian congregation in the county. There was a friendly communal lunch following the service and most of the congregation stayed for it. This group wins my award as 'Our Most Joyful Congregation'.

**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010.** I led the 365<sup>th</sup> anniversary service at **Chowbent**, Atherton. There was an attendance in excess of 50 and a choir of 14. This beautiful chapel is immaculate and a credit to the caring community. They have close ties with a local authority (Wigan MBC) primary school which the chapel founded but which has now moved a little way down the road. The school children's uniform features the Unitarian chalice badge (Consistent Identity version). The original school adjacent to the chapel is now used as private pre-school nursery. There was a tasty communal lunch following the service. Again, a friendly, hospitable atmosphere pervaded all the proceedings and the minister, Rev Brenda Catherall is universally popular.

**Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2010.** Attended and spoke at the annual **Hibbert Trust** Dinner in London. Kate Taylor was thanked for all the work she had put into publishing school assembly material on the internet and presented with a huge, two-volume

edition of the entire series. Martin West, retiring Treasurer was thanked and a presentation made to him. Kate Whyman reported on the inter Faith Parliament she had attended in Australia where she had been sponsored by the Hibbert Trust. See The Inquirer 26<sup>th</sup> June 2010.

**27<sup>th</sup> June 2010 – Cambridge.** Attended morning service led by Rev Andrew Brown. It was a particularly refreshing, innovative Unitarian service universally acceptable to all religious liberals.

The Eastern Union met in the afternoon at 3pm – exactly the same as the kick off time of the World Cup match between England and Germany. Nevertheless, about sixty had turned up to hear me speak about Coalition! The service was followed by lunch and a tour of Emmanuel College led by Rev Frank Walker. It was encouraging to be a part of a District annual event where everyone was so keen to be there! Very similar, in fact, to my earlier experience at the Western Union.

**3<sup>rd</sup> July 2010 – Knutsford.** This was day of great celebration for Brook Street Chapel. A new extension costing circa £250,000 was officially opened by the Lord Lieutenant of Cheshire. The extension of the school buildings includes a lift and new toilets. The chapel is on a hillside above street level and the lift is designed to allow people easy access. Also present was George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer in whose parliamentary constituency lies Knutsford. His wife and two children also attended and he made a short speech recalling with affection the first speech he ever made which was to an audience within this chapel when he was about 14 years old. He did not elaborate on the circumstances of that speech which left one wondering. The opening ceremony was followed by a short service led by Revs Jean and Alex

Bradley.

**11<sup>th</sup> July 2010 – Wakefield.** This was a regular 3pm service. Interestingly, at the service I conducted here last year there were seven in the congregation. This time there were over twenty.

**21<sup>st</sup> July 2010 – Essex Hall.** Sustentation Fund meeting.

**22<sup>nd</sup> July 2010 – London.** Buckingham Palace garden party. Enjoyable day for Betty and me in the company of Lis Dyson Jones and her daughter, Samantha. Thanks to James Barry for his chaperoning and photographic expertise.

**1<sup>st</sup> August 2010 – Norwich.** This was my 9<sup>th</sup> annual visit to the Octagon and what a great experience it is year after year. There are always newcomers and this year was no exception. I even had the unusual experience of chatting with a woman over lunch who actually signed up for membership before my very eyes! There is so much excitement in this congregation and the children's programme is particularly brilliant!

**1<sup>st</sup> August 2010 – Great Yarmouth.** I had agreed to take the 3pm service here at the invitation of Rod Voegeli who as well as being a member at Norwich is treasurer at Great Yarmouth and Sophia Hankinson a trustee here. We drove over via the site of the old Unitarian chapel at Filby in darkest Norfolk. This is a well-signed and well tended Unitarian heritage site where the Eastern Union holds an annual open air service.

The congregation at Great Yarmouth is very small – maybe seven or eight people. The chair of the congregation, Don

McAllister is the lay person in charge.

**8<sup>th</sup> August 2010 – Birmingham Kingswood.** I had a wonderful welcome here from a most friendly congregation. It was estimated to be over 10 years since a GA president had visited and they made the most of this occasion! The chapel was almost full – 60 or 70 I would guess. Betty and I were hosted by Rev Keith and Jenny Hill, friends from our teenage years and previous minister here. Rev Ant Howe who became minister following Keith's retirement is greatly loved and is manifestly a really hard working, self motivated minister. This congregation has a manifestly Christian ethic and is proving (in my view against the odds) that, in the right location, with the appropriate leadership, the liberal Christian tradition may still have an appeal in this day and age.

**8<sup>th</sup> August 2010 – Warwick.** The afternoon service celebrated Warwick chapel's 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary – the oldest establishment I visited. It was led by Ant Howe and there was a large gathering. I gave greetings from the GA, Peter Hewis from the Midland Unitarian Association and the mayor from the Town. Interestingly, he had visited our web pages (as they always do) and had latched on to the word "liberal". He asked in his speech whether we were "all followers of Vince Cable and Nick Clegg". It was apparent that the use of the word "liberal" in other than a political context was foreign to him. Food for thought. Following the service there was a garden party on the well tended lawn behind the chapel. The outside caterers provided a large open sided marquee and we partook of truly excellent refreshments.

A sad note on this otherwise celebratory occasion was that Malcolm Sadler who had kept the congregation alive during the bad times and is currently the organist was in hospital.

After his multiple heart by-pass operation in the spring, he experienced problems of infected wounds followed by several falls at home. After falling downstairs he was readmitted to hospital and has remained there for the past twelve weeks. Betty and I were able to visit him in hospital after the Warwick service and he was glad that I had arrived wearing the president's jewel! He was quite perky but unable to lift himself into a sitting position. He will need weeks of physiotherapy on his discharge.

**14<sup>th</sup> August 2010. – Newcastle on Tyne.** This is the second time I have led a service here and the congregation remains small – no more than a dozen in a church built to hold maybe 500. The colossal buildings are in need of considerable repair. They have received a legacy which offers some breathing space.

**1<sup>st</sup> September 2010 – Chorley.** I addressed a general meeting of the congregation. About 20 people turned up.

**4<sup>th</sup> September 2010 – Manchester Cross Street** for a meeting of the Communication Commission.

**12<sup>th</sup> September 2010 – Manchester Monton.** I attended morning service to give greetings on RNLI Sunday which is celebrated here every year. Rev Charles VanDenBroeder conducted the service in true Unitarian style and the local president of RNLI gave the address. 30-40 present.

**17<sup>th</sup> September 2010 – Palace of Westminster, London.** This was a grand occasion during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Britain. It was good that the Unitarian President was invited. Loads of politicians were there including surviving past prime ministers. Margaret Thatcher shook hands with

me on her way out and asked how I was – I guess she mistook me for someone else. I did not get similar treatment from the Pope.

**20<sup>th</sup> September 2010 – Liverpool.** I appeared at a Liberal Democrat Conference fringe meeting representing Unitarians in a debate on faith schools. On the platform with me were a prominent Jewish rabbi, an Anglican priest and the chief executive of the British Humanist Association. This was organised by the Humanists and the Accord Coalition - an organisation campaigning to open up state-run faith secondary schools to wider constituencies – of both students and staff. I understand that the GA has recently become a member. It was good that Joy Winder of Cross Street Chapel attended the meeting which attracted over seventy people. It was refreshing to share a discussion with true liberals – hardly a dinosaur in sight!

**25<sup>th</sup> September 2010 – Sheffield Fulwood.** Here they have had a lot of renovations done, very professionally, including new toilets, a refurbished hall and a wonderful “den” for the junior church. I was asked to make a little speech and declare the facilities open by cutting a ribbon. This was a happy, celebratory day. It was also an object lesson in creative fund raising. You don’t raise £80K without pain and effort.

**26<sup>th</sup> September 2010 – Padiham near Burnley, Lancashire.** Conducted the harvest festival. A friendly, very traditional group.

**3<sup>rd</sup> October 2010 – Sheffield Stannington.** I led worship for a cheerful congregation in this rural chapel. The lead had been stolen from the roof and there was scaffolding up and temporary sheeting. The rain had not ceased for two days

and was pouring into the chapel down the light fittings throughout the service. The congregation remained attentive but wary expecting the roof to cave in at any minute. Not much different, then, from most services I conduct. The toilets are in the school across the road and they have recently launched a flush fund to install new ones in the vestry area of this beautiful old chapel.

**9<sup>th</sup> October 2010 – Stalybridge.** This was the annual service and get-together for the East Cheshire Union. It started with a canal trip on a narrow boat along the Ashton Canal. This was followed by a service conducted by Rev Andrew Parker and a talk by me as president. Then there was tea. Maybe 30 people in total and some ECU churches were not represented.

**10<sup>th</sup> October 2010 –** Conducted the morning service at **Mossley**. This is a converted shop on the main street of Upper Mossley and seats 30 people. There were over 20 present and it seemed full. There was a lovely atmosphere of fellowship and Rev Pat Shaw obviously leads a very happy congregation.

**10<sup>th</sup> October 2010 –** Conducted evening service at **Dukinfield**. Fantastic Victorian chapel newly re-decorated, wonderful organ recently restored and the highest pulpit I have as yet ventured into. This place is very well organised and has lots of talented members. There were at least 40 at this evening service.

**16<sup>th</sup> October 2010 – South Wales.** We were taken on a grand tour of the 13 Chapels in the Black Spot of West Wales by Rev Cen LLwyd followed by a formal lunch at Talgarreg where I addressed the assembly. We were entertained by a

Welsh choir of young women and enjoyed very generous hospitality.

**17<sup>th</sup> October 2010** – Led the service at **Nottage Chapel**. A truly inspirational event for the S.E Wales District. 50 or so present who gave me a most friendly reception followed by a tasty lunch.

**24<sup>th</sup> October 2010** – Led the anniversary service at **Harris Manchester College Chapel**. An excellent attendance of all age groups including two past GA presidents!

**31<sup>st</sup> October 2010** – Led the anniversary service for the **Banbury Fellowship**. A lovely group of 15 or so stalwarts who are soldiering on in the absence through prolonged illness of their lay leader, Malcolm Sadler. This fellowship meets in a room in the town hall and for each service they take with them hymn books (Pink), chalice, flowers, table cloth, kettle and keyboard! Visited Malcolm over the weekend where he is now back home but with severely restricted movement.

**7<sup>th</sup> November 2010** – Conducted the anniversary service for **Stand Chapel, Whitefield**. This is a very active congregation in need of a new minister. This is where Betty and I were married by Rev Sydney Knight on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1961. Who would have thought then that I would return 50 years later as GA President!

**14<sup>th</sup> November 2010** – Attended the Remembrance Sunday Service and Parade at the Cenotaph in London's Whitehall.

**21<sup>st</sup> November 2010** – Gave the address and readings at **Richmond Unitarians**. A really lovely service conducted by

Rev Linda Hart with humour and sensitivity. Plenty of new members and four on the day joined and gave reasons for becoming Unitarian. I was reunited with two members who had been in the UYPL with me at that church in the mid 1950s. We'd all changed a bit.

**28<sup>th</sup> November 2010 – Hastings** - One of the most atmospheric services I have ever attended. The congregation entered into a really worshipful spirit of a very rare kind. It was electric and inexplicable. Wendy Adams had to break the spell with the notices and remarked what a pity it was to have to intrude on the pervading atmosphere of the occasion. All was back to normal later when 16 of the congregation joined together for lunch in the quirky pub next door but one to the chapel. This congregation earns my award for "The Most Atmospheric Service".

**19<sup>th</sup> December 2010** – all booked in for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary service of **Aberdare** Unitarians, only to be thwarted by snow. The service has now been postponed until March, we think.

**16<sup>th</sup> January 2011 – Urmston** - Induction service for Danny Crosby. I gave greetings from the GA. This was my second visit here. A most enthusiastic group.

**22<sup>nd</sup> January 2011** – To **Wakefield** for the quarterly meeting of the YUU where I conducted a service on the theme "Unitarianism – Why Bother?" followed by an afternoon discussion in groups. There were over 40 present. Earlier in the day Rev Bill Darlison enthralled us with his ideas of what 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarian service leaders should be preaching about.

**25<sup>th</sup> January 2011** – To **Great Hucklow** for the memorial service to Rev Trevor Jones. A packed chapel heard moving

eulogies from his two daughters, Kathy and Ruth and son Daniel whilst Sheila Jones played the organ and Rev David Shaw conducted the service. This was followed by refreshments and fellowship at the Nightingale Centre.

**29<sup>th</sup> January 2011** – To John Pounds Memorial Unitarian Church in **Portsmouth** for the service of affirmation of Rev Martin Whitell. Martin had choreographed the service to include some simple ceremonies which were moving, typically Unitarian and without a trace of pomp and ceremony. Rev Peter Hewis led the service and his style perfectly reflected the mood of enthusiasm and joy of the congregation. I gave the greetings from our wider Unitarian community.

**30<sup>th</sup> January 2011** – Betty and I attended morning service at **John Pounds**. As always, a lovely atmosphere, lots of people, lots of humour and lots of support for their new minister. I presented President's Awards to four young members of the congregation. Martin's energy and personality are a great asset to this group.

**31<sup>st</sup> January 2011** – Attended NELUM meeting at Ainsworth.

**6<sup>th</sup> February 2011** – Led the service at **Birmingham New Meeting**. Perhaps the most diverse congregation I have visited. About one third were from ethnic minorities and there were many children and younger people. Over 40 stayed for an excellent meal in the hall. It was a pleasant change to discuss iPods and Blu-ray after service instead of replacement knees and rheumatism.

**13<sup>th</sup> February 2011** – Led the service at **Bolton Bank Street**. This congregation is so go-ahead with Stephen Lingwood pushing the barriers of innovation. They have one of

the best organists I have heard – great music. They have started a “sponsor the postlude” scheme where members can pick a piece to be played as a postlude and make a donation to the organ fund. Stephen has some brilliant ideas and takes full advantage of Twitter and Facebook to further the local Unitarian cause. He also has a regular broadcast slot on local radio. He works very hard and effectively!

**19<sup>th</sup> February 2011** – Attended and spoke at the quarterly meeting of the SUA at **Southampton**. We debated in groups the question – “Unitarianism – What’s the Point?” There was great enthusiasm from the 30 or so present and we had a good day. Representatives from Southampton, Newport and Portsmouth.

**20<sup>th</sup> February 2011 A.M.** – Led morning service at **Southampton**. An encouraging turn out of about 30 including 2 newcomers. A very well-kept building and the organist, as is usual, played a piece on their huge new grand piano.

**20<sup>th</sup> February 2011 P.M.** – Led the evening service at **Salisbury** Fellowship. Lovely group of 20 with a CD player and an age range from 30 to 102. Two newcomers attended thanks to the excellent local publicity given to the meeting. The Fellowship rents a room within the city centre URC. It is a very atmospheric space for which the Unitarians pay the princely sum of £14 for their monthly service.

**24<sup>th</sup> February 2011** – To York for a meeting of the Steering Committee at St Saviourgate Unitarian Chapel.

**25<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> February 2011** – Weekend at UCCN Great Hucklow.

**27<sup>th</sup> February 2011** – Led morning worship at Old Chapel **Great Hucklow**. Local congregation well-augmented by UCCN delegates. The locals are thrilled to have Liz Shaw as their new lay person in charge starting 1<sup>st</sup> March 2011.

**5<sup>th</sup> March 2011** – Attended part of morning at GA Executive Committee meeting in Manchester.

**6<sup>th</sup> March 2011** – Led the service at **Shrewsbury**. 30 - 40 present in this lively congregation. We were made very welcome here. They are having to spend thousands on the fabric of the building and still have some way to go before getting the tidying up done. A frustrating period for the trustees – dealing with architects and builders.

**12<sup>th</sup> March 2011** – Spoke at the NELUM AGM at **Todmorden**. An action packed day including a service with a brass band and a guided tour of the beautiful, huge church led by Rev John Allerton. About 40 present.

**15<sup>th</sup> March** – Inquirer board meeting at **Essex Hall**.

**20<sup>th</sup> March 2011** – Led the afternoon service at **Belper** chapel. Very good turn out with a contingent from Derby and a choir from Mansfield. They are in good heart here with the advent of some new, younger members.

**27<sup>th</sup> March 2011** – I gave a short address at the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Service at **Aberdare**. A nice sunny afternoon with about 60 present. Some impressive Welsh musical contributions. A very good buffet tea followed the service which had been postponed from 19<sup>th</sup> December 2010 due to the snow. Very impressively organised - thanks to Rev Eric Jones.

**29<sup>th</sup> March 2011** – Addressed a meeting of the MDA at Cross Street Chapel **Manchester**. Cheerful group!

And then to the Annual Meetings at Swansea proceedings of which have been well documented in The Inquirer, the Unitarian and elsewhere.

## **Personal Observations**

All Unitarians hold their own personal views, both organisational and spiritual. I am no exception and my ideas of a progressive brand of Unitarianism became clearer as the year progressed. We are quite a fragile movement but there are some very strong congregations which have successfully engaged with their local communities. They do not pretend to be like other denominations but emphasise that they relate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and tailor their services accordingly. Rituals such as biblical readings, the Lord's Prayer and the conduct of Holy Communion are practiced less, particularly in the South of England.

There is a significant minority campaigning to preserve the Unitarian denomination as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. This regressive movement clings to the idea that the closer we are to the established Church the more attractive we become to "falling Christians" whereas the progressives prefer a clear distinction between what we offer and what is available from other denominations. This is focussed more towards people who are searching for a religious affinity for the first time many of whom are finding Unitarianism through the internet. My impression is that most of our congregations and ministers are welcoming towards new inquirers and are keen to offer a different approach to religious worship.

The conservatives in our midst have adopted an affiliated GA Society – the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) - as the vehicle for promoting their cause. I find this sad because its ‘founder’, the late and universally respected Rev Arthur Long, had no intention of forming a reactionary group which opposed progressive liberal religious development. The introduction of highly orthodox Taizé services is an example of the fervour with which some members of the UCA promote their rejection of modernisation. I actually experienced positive hostility to Unitarianism by members of the UCA in two separate churches which I visited. The people concerned insisted on being termed Free Christians. To them the Lord Jesus Christ is the focus of their faith. I am certain that for the vast majority of Unitarians this is not the case. Unitarians mostly view Jesus as a great prophet – and human. The Arians in our midst put him on a higher plane.

The Unitarian Renewal Group which is a worthy organisation, but not officially recognised by the GA, could become a vehicle for promoting progressive Unitarianism as an antidote to the UCA. But like most liberal groups they are naturally reluctant to engage in (overt) confrontation.

We are not alone as a religious organisation in having to cope with opposing factions. It has been going on for centuries. The Anglican reactionaries are flocking to Rome as I type!

Our Unitarian ethos suggests that we are tolerant of all shades of opinion within our ranks. So be it. But as one who is passionate to see our movement grow I am convinced that if we simply offer the same as all the other churches (the model which some UCA members seem to wish to promote) it is difficult to see the point of our existence.

These sentiments were overwhelmingly endorsed at three separate discussion groups which were held during my presidential year in Bridgwater, Southampton and Wakefield. Perhaps we are all so busy being nice to each other that we refuse to openly discuss the potential threats to our existence. If we were truly more open, perhaps we could all begin to understand the others' points of view?

Neville Kenyon

June 2011.

**Comments -**

*We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.*

*Please send your comments to the editor,*

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**National Unitarian Fellowship**  
Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches  
Essex Hall, London

## Application for Membership

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Are you already a member of a Unitarian Church or Fellowship?      YES/NO

Do you wish to know of your nearest:-  
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Full subscription £12.00 (£9.00 if retired or unwaged).    Students £5.00)  
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# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches  
Established 1945



Articles for the Viewpoint to:

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Seeking information about the  
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