

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2010 REFLECTIONS

General Assembly 2010 Reflections – Terry Oakley

As Moderator of the host Synod I was very proud of the work of the Stewards and our Clerk, who brought the Bible into Assembly each day as well as attending early morning meetings of the Assembly Arrangements Committee.

Two moments I thought were very important and yet dogged by debate about detail were the adoption of the Vision2020 Mission framework for the whole of our church and the approval of the Guidelines for Conduct of Ministers, CRCWs and Elders.

The most intriguing moment was the report about the Identity and Marketing campaign which will be launched later next year. I so much wanted to see what the ideas are, but I, like everyone else, will have to wait. There should be presentations at the March 2011 Synods – so watch this space.

The most enjoyable moments were when the Children's Assembly visited. They contributed about the Nestle boycott and Vision 2020 and the final song chosen and rehearsed by the Children and the music band was the liveliest of the whole assembly!

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Synod Clerk – Duncan Smith

Towards the date of the GA some of us seemed to visit Loughborough a great deal to liaise with the various organising groups! Whenever help was needed at the GA, a cheerful steward appeared and sorted out the difficulties and this was very much appreciated by all those representatives I spoke to.

Once initial difficulties were ironed out, I felt the cafe church approach with a maximum of eight around each table facing the platform and having access to a microphone, worked well. It became so much easier to discuss issues immediately rather than go to break-out rooms. You also found that people changed tables during the four days and so you met others and discussed the issues.

I thought the bible study each day was inspiring, thought-provoking and relevant. I also liked the Vision 20/20 presentation and I hope and pray that the Synod can play its role in encouraging churches to consider Mission Pledges based on the Vision 20/20 document. It really focuses on the purpose of church.

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Revd Jane Campbell

A new style General Assembly - seating around tables; two co-moderators; fewer resolutions; 'themed' committee presentations. Yet some familiar aspects too – the passion of non-conformists; the opportunity to lift our eyes up from the day-to-day issues of church life to hear views and opinions from across our denomination on subjects such as ending the detention of children for immigration purposes; an ambitious plan to develop Westminster College; Vision 2020, and of course the Nestle boycott.

Personal highlights? The opportunity to hear an inspiring presentation from Loretta Minghella, the new Director of Christian Aid and a moving speech from Sughra Ahmed, on behalf of our inter-faith guests, encouraging members to work together with each other and other religions towards "a peaceful and more cohesive society"; the input from FURY representatives and the Children's Assembly; the way our Treasurer, John Ellis, can make a Finance report interesting and understandable!

Disappointments? I felt that the ecumenical dimension to our business was a little lacking – it was for the General Synod representative, speaking on behalf of our ecumenical guests, to remind us that our search for unity is not so that we can get to know each other better or to be nice to each other but 'so that the world may believe' (John 17: 21)! We also spent a lot of time navel-gazing - where were the discussions on Israel/Palestine or Trident?

All that being said, attending General Assembly is a privilege for which I am always grateful. Thank you.

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Allan Tinnie, Gainsborough URC

My views and impressions as a first time attendee: The agenda for business was of necessity long especially it's now being held biennially. Participation/ventilation was optimal. In all sincerity I think our Moderators Val and Kirsty did very well. Kirsty's later approach to consider a specific page saved time and minimised diversion from the subject area. I am confident that things went well for the vast majority of the attendees, cordial and sometimes enjoyable interactions took place among the participants during the entire period. Our children presented themselves well and we should take very seriously their concerns "What would it be like for me the next (10) years in the URC?" I have enjoyed the Worship experience from our URC presenters as well as our BIBLE STUDY presenter Gerald Kelly in his exhortation that we should remember how, when and where Christianity started in Europe. (Acts 16: 11--15;) Cardinality it should not be forgotten where and how the HUMAN RACE began and more important its present composition/constitution and our reactions in our time.

Gen. 2: 7 and 21;

I have been touched about the concerns expressed about world poverty, injustice, wars, climate change unfair trading practices. Relations with Ministers Elders and Church Related Community Workers and also CRB for those in contact with

children.(What I would have liked to hear/see is WE had agreed on an acceptable Bench Mark of Moral Behaviour not only for those mentioned but all Church Members.)

CONCLUSION: "There will always be logistical and other problems to cater for and accommodate in excess of 500 souls, on a scale of 1-5, I will grant you 4+, well done all URC ites who worked tirelessly and way beyond the call of duty, truly if you were asked to do one mile, you certainly did as Jesus would have asked of you, you did 2 miles. God bless you all in HIS name.

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Revd Richard Turnbull

I easily made my weekly target for basic exercise during assembly. The distances between parts of the venue were so large that it took a slice out of break times and I felt sorry for those who couldn't quite consider themselves disabled but nevertheless struggled to get about. The accommodation was basically comfortable and the food very good.

The meeting hall was spacious and included stalls at the back. The platform and display at the front were clearly visible and it was easy to follow the platform speakers. However the hall lighting could not be on all the time and it was difficult to follow input from members on the floor. We were seated around tables of eight and this worked well when assembly broke up into group discussion; this was enhanced when members of children's' assembly joined us on occasion. During assembly the camera began to pick up on speakers from tables and business was easier to follow, but I was not convinced that it was better than the old method of queuing for microphones. However as time went on there was less time for consideration and business was pressed rather urgently.

Significant time was allocated for Vision2020 and it was clear that there was broad agreement from the start. Treating it as a framework enabled the minor difficulties and differences of approach to be accommodated. Too much time was spent on presentations from the front, however the round table discussions went well and sufficient time was spent in consensus to arrive at a slightly amended resolution. Similar progress was made on Nestle: this time the resolution was taken away for revision by a group which brought back revised motions which were agreed by consensus in a very productive manner.

Following the Sunday morning worship, conduct of business seemed to go rapidly downhill. Consensus procedures were spoilt by repeated asking for permission to move from information to discussion and then to decision. Advice seemed to be lacking and I felt sure that if Elizabeth Nash had been allowed/encouraged to advise then progress would have been much better. This particularly seemed to affect discussion on guidelines for ministers, CRCWs and elders and this was passed towards the end of a very long day; any guideline which technically calls for me never to be alone with my grandson leaves me feeling very uncomfortable about how serious we are about this subject. Finance and the Westminster appeal were an exception to the downward trend with very clear and at times humorous presentations.

The technical changes to procedures for Section O and Incapacity, and changes to structure were well handled. However the fact that some errors made at previous assemblies had to be corrected made me wonder at the time pressure on those who have to deal with these matters; they need more consideration.

The Bible Studies with Gerard Kelly were excellent and the moderators of Assembly are to be congratulated for taking the risk of going outside the URC. Worship was encouraging and the loyal address to the throne was an unexpected pleasure.

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Mrs Una Hubbard, Loughborough URC

I am very grateful for having been given the opportunity to be a representative. I was there, at my first General Assembly, simply as a long serving Elder (in the same Church) and Synod representative of my Church but not as a member of any other committee in the denomination. As such, I seemed to be in the minority so I was at the beginning of a very steep learning curve. Technicalities of wording and principles in some resolutions were beyond my limited powers of comprehension and understanding!

As it was the first G.A. that I had attended I cannot compare the new format etc with previous arrangements but I did find the days very informative and enlightening and it was interesting to experience the way in which the sessions were conducted. I gained a clearer insight into the interrelationships and workings of the National Officers and Committees and of their responsibilities. I found it helpful to get to know something of the personalities behind the familiar names. Efforts were obviously made to lighten the atmosphere of the proceedings whilst avoiding irrelevant and irreverent frivolity.

All the Assembly arrangements on the Campus were efficiently executed as far as I could tell. I was not residential.

I wish our pre- Assembly meeting at Nottingham had taken place after we had received our Assembly Papers so that we could have discussed some of the issues that were being brought to Assembly although the opportunities for in depth input were restricted during the sessions. I thought the Consensus voting was very protracted at times and when it was small details in a resolution that were under discussion the more important thrust of that resolution was blurred and confused and almost got lost.

Sitting informally in small groups around tables in the Sports Hall during the sessions it was possible to talk to and discuss with many people from around the various Synods. I tried to sit on a different table each session so that I could meet more people. It

was difficult to see the Platform party from some parts of the room because there was no tiering in the Sports Hall and the platform was not very high but the Projections on the screens helped to overcome that Problem. It was inevitable that difficulties with the microphones around the hall and visibility would be met on Friday but efforts were made to rectify most of the problems by Saturday.

The refreshing expositions of passages from the Acts of the Apostles by Gerard Kelly each morning and the meaningful and inspiring Worship surrounding them were the highlights of each day. They stimulated thinking about the Challenges to The Christian Church in the 21st century and reminding us of how God is supporting and encouraging us in our struggles. All this was a great contrast to the formality of the business sessions.

I have questions in my mind about the function of the pre-session music and worship provided by the Music group. They were talking and playing whilst people were gathering and chatting and moving around getting themselves organised for the start of the day's proceedings. I wonder how the Group felt about trying to conduct worship against all the noise and activity that was taking place.

Whilst the presentations were informative and good marketing exercises for the Denomination, for the Visitors, it did mean that the business was often conducted under pressure of time constraints and when people were tired.

In fact it was such a full programme over the four days that although it was varied it was extremely tiring. Long periods of concentration and long journeys to the Dining Hall meant that the dinner hour was the only time for relaxation.

As is perhaps inevitable in such a large gathering, we seemed so often just to be the means to fulfil the legal requirements of passing formal resolutions.

What an excellent Speech to the throne delivered by Rev. John Marsh. It would indeed be good if the Queen could also receive it, recorded by John, on a CD.

It is always a problem for representatives to know how to report back from any business meeting to the local Church Meeting in such a way as to enable the ordinary Church member to feel informed, inspired and challenged.

I feel guilty that, as usual, the main benefit of being a representative has been so personal for me and wonder how I can transmit to others what I have gained.

The Record of Assembly will give the facts about the events that took place and the decisions made. As an interim account, this is already in the Assembly News round up sheet for all to read. I hope that will happen.

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Revd Nick Adlem

In a word Assembly was an enigma as it struggled to come to terms with its new position in the brave new world of URC structures being biannual and reduced numbers.

The weekend started with presentations by our new 'Super ministry' departments. There were fun elements and some instructive moments. But if this is now what Assembly is about then does it not need to be for the wider audience of the whole church and not the reduced number of the slimmed down assembly?

Some members of assembly began to wonder when we would get down to the nitty gritty of decision making and how would we fit it all in to the last couple of days. But on the other hand where was the heavy business itinerary? Assembly as the focus of URC policy and direction and now only meeting every two years it could have been expected there would be a wide range of deep and meaningful debates and resolutions but apart from some very important work one could be left wondering whether this was really the extent of what had been shaped in the last two years and our preparation for the next two.

Underneath all this was that by necessity a lot of hard work has happened elsewhere and decisions made so in the event Assembly seemed left with relatively little to do. Getting things done meant that effectively decisions had already been made and if we were to get anything done in the next two years delegation of what was left had to be agreed; including a premature farewell to our own moderator who sensibly seemed to make himself scarce whenever the farewell was proposed! Another less frivolous example was arriving in a hall where 'Vision 2020' was already blazoned across the front before any resolution that this is to be the direction for the URC. It seemed a fait accompli.

The enigma deepened when Vision4life was simply one aspect of Vision2020. I know why it is that way round but I still find it odd that we fit 'life' into ten years - or does someone know something we don't?

The biggest or most passionate debate in the end seemed to be over conduct guidelines for ministers, CRCWs and Elders. They seemed very specific for guidelines! But how will these be 'enforced' or monitored? Are they absolutes? Who judges? Will there be a flood of discipline investigations? But here is the enigma - the guidelines are probably to be welcomed as reminders but will they really help an understanding of 'holy' life? Is this modern casuistry?

And then there was the new 48 hour week for ministers. Any guidelines on what is in and what is out?

Despite the enigmas, being at Assembly was a privilege and joy (even though late arrivals wandered the campus with no apparent direction on where the reception was; no room allocated; swipe keys not working). In the hall, despite microphone technical hitches, meeting around tables meant more sharing with people from other areas of the country. There were also key moments and some quotes that made me think:

The URC is the largest single donor to Christian Aid

'I do not have dignity until they have dignity' - living conditions some people face

'If only they knew, they would journey with us' - Roberta on people outside the church (Advertising)

"The attitude 'I'm pure' is very close to 'impure'" - bible study Gerard Kelly who was excellent.

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Tamara Oates

I thought I'd share my experience of visiting the Children's Assembly.

I went and helped with the worship, they need a bit of encouragement to join in with actions. During their worship sessions they were following the story of Abraham and Sarah. I joined them in the second session where they were looking at the part where Sarah finds out she's going to become a mother and she laughs, but denies laughing to God. We all got into pairs and had to make each other laugh. We were then all given a smiley face and wrote what makes us happy on it.

After worship the children split into small groups to discuss the 'Nestle Boycott'. They came up with some brilliant thoughts. Some thought Nestle should be give a second chance and some didn't. Some thought all companies should be treated the same, as it isn't just Nestle that are providing milk to poorer countries. Everyone thought that the companies should also be giving out free water purification systems or water tablets with all milk powder.

On the third and final worship session we were looking at the part of the story where God tells Abraham to look at the stars and that he will one day have millions of children, just like there are millions of stars in the sky. We were each given a glow in the dark star and encouraged to find 5 people and tell them they are a star to remind them of how amazing they are.

While I was over I had been asked a lot of questions about FURY and FURY events. So we had an impromptu section on FURY & FURY Events. I told them all about what FURY is and what events are available; they were then given the chance to ask some questions. Most of the questions were about costs, times and venues. But one of the lads asked me how I managed to stay looking so young, as he thought I was 14. This made us all laugh and ask you can imagine made me very happy!

I really enjoyed my time over at the Children's Assembly and feel privileged to have been able to spend some time (even though it was only short) with them. We mustn't forget how amazing children and young people are.

One of the songs we sang really stuck in my head. This was the last song at General Assembly.

To finish this off, I thought I'd share it with you:-

I'm not here to just use up air
One more butt sat on a chair
There is more to life than that
I will guarantee that fact!

I'm not here to just use up air
One more butt sat on a chair
There is more to life than that
I will guarantee that fact!

I'm not here simply for the food
That would really be so rude
Not here to baby-sit my fish
There is more to life than this

I'm not just a place to drape a
shirt
Somewhere convenient for dirt
I'm not a place to point TV
I'm here 'cause God created me

I'm more than decoration
God's great communication
Yes, I have a destination, yeah!

I'm here (I'm here)
You're here (You're here)
We're here (We're here)
For the God in heaven

I'm here for the God of heaven
Chosen, loved and so forgiven
I'm here for the God of heaven
Here to worship him

**Doug Horley/Mark Read © 2005
Thankyou Music**

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Denis Russell

1. Location – Good, central, easy to reach. Rooms were okay. Meals more than adequate. However, I did miss the hot drinks – tea/coffee – in the Sports Hall, and this affected my concentration in the long sessions. I was completely whacked at the end of the first evening and lacked the time and energy to return for the Saturday evening session prayer periods. On the final day it was pot-luck that enabled me to move our suitcases from the sports hall. No information or guidance came from above. What if it had been wet & windy?

2. Arrangements in the Sports Hall – I liked the flexibility provided by the tables. I suspect the speaker on stage may have found it more difficult to engage their audience. The gesticulation of the woman commentating for the hard of hearing were both diverting and irritating. It was sometimes difficult to see who was speaking from the platform – it was too cluttered and the lighting did not help. I could rarely see who was speaking from the tables, so tended to be slow to pick up what was being said, let alone who was speaking. In general we were given too few opportunities and too little time to come to a point of view at the tables.

3. Procedure – The two Moderators appeared to work well together, but might have carried more authority if there had been just one. The concerns approach worked quite well for the most part, but required more time than was available. This lack of time led both to the postponement of the item on the guidelines on the conduct of ministers, elders etc, and to a fractiousness and guillotining of the debate preventing many (including myself) from speaking forcing a majority vote. I felt the whole process was fatally flawed and the final outcome invalid. I suspect we shall see more said about this in the future issue of Reform.

4. The Young People (that is people of student age) seemed to play a much less prominent role than they did at the Manchester General Assembly 2007 (my only other experience of Assembly). I did on the first day receive 2 of FURYS GAG Saturday newsletter. Thereafter, nothing – where were they? Younger children appeared from time to time, apparently enjoying themselves but rather heavily programmed to act and speak as they did. Twice they sat at a table with us and participated in the communion service. Sadly there was no real encounter or meeting of minds between old and young. A social event Saturday evening might have achieved just that.

5. Good Moments – The Bible Sessions. The speeches/ John Marsh (as Moderator), Loretta Minghella on her life and work with Christian Aid. The moving words of the two Moderators-elect on Monday. Also inspiring were the presentation on film of those who were the winners of the Community Awards. I was in two minds about the Westminster College appeal. Should we be spending so much of our limited resources on providing our future ministers will a Rolls Royce theological education? In 1960s Congo, the Baptists did in on a shoe string and the pastors remained a part of the people. The Catholic worker priests might serve as better examples. As John Marsh himself said: 'Are we ourselves and our churches over-resourced?' Churches and College are somewhat out of kilter.

6. Some omissions – Statistics of church members. It would be nice to know where there is decline and where growth. Too complex, or too alarming? I think it makes us more accountable, and perhaps sharper. It would also be good to know more of our sister churches in Europe & elsewhere. Also, where we stand on such ethical issues as: social and economic inequality; family; education in schools, and in our churches; militarism, and the arms trade. To go beyond the well-worn gender inequality; environment and green issues; and Christian Aid. (All of which of course concern me).

7. As a small and declining church, are we not overburdened with welcoming a vast array of guests and long retired ministers? Am I right in thinking the media ignored us? If so that must tell us something about ourselves.

8. Are biennial assemblies often enough? My answer, for all sorts of reasons is no! I am glutton for punishment!