

Party Conferences

Leaders from the Baptist Union, Methodist and United Reformed Churches have been part of a Free Church delegation, with the Salvation Army and the Quakers, to the recent Party Conferences. Each visit started with a breakfast with the Christian grouping from that particular Party and continued with meetings with MPs, visits to the exhibitions and opportunity to hear the debates. At the Labour Conference, Revd Martyn Atkins, President of the Methodist Conference, Revd Stephen Orchard, Moderator of the URC General Assembly and Revd John Weaver, Vice President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, attended the Christian Socialist Movement breakfast with the rest of the delegation. Jack Straw was the main speaker and the delegation was encouraged by his evident commitment to work to reduce income inequality in the UK. They had useful meetings with a number of MPs, including Douglas Alexander, Secretary of State for International Development, and Stephen Timms, who is Minister for Competitiveness, but wanted to talk about his role as Vice Chair of the Party with responsibility for faith issues.

The importance of tackling poverty and supporting families were key themes when Church leaders met with Conservative politicians in Blackpool. Over 60 people attended the breakfast meeting hosted jointly with the Conservative Christian Fellowship, and heard David Liddington MP and Commissioner Elizabeth Mattear, Moderator of the Free Churches Council, talk about poverty. Both emphasised the role of the voluntary sector, including churches, in supporting people in poverty.

The Conservative Policy Group on Social Justice, set up by David Cameron and chaired by Iain Duncan Smith, has recommended supporting couples, and particularly married couples, as a way of preventing poverty. The delegation heard more about these proposals from Mr Duncan Smith's think tank, the Centre for Social Justice, and discussed the Churches' concern for people in poverty with the Party Chairman, Caroline Spelman MP, and Shadow Regeneration Spokesman, Alastair Burt MP.

The President of the Methodist Conference, Revd Dr Martyn Atkins, was one of three speakers from the faith communities at the Conservative Conference fringe event organised by Christian Aid on climate change. The Revd Graham Sparkes, from the Baptist Union of Great Britain, spoke at a similar event at the Labour Conference.

At the Liberal Democrat Conference in Brighton, Methodist MPs Alan Beith and Andrew Stunnell were among politicians who discussed current concerns with Free Church leaders. The delegation attended a keynote immigration debate and, with the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum, hosted a breakfast fringe meeting on the theme of poverty in the UK with the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum.

New staff member of the Joint Public Issues Team

Frank Kantor has succeeded Stuart Dew as Secretary for Church and Society in the United Reformed Church (Stuart has moved to a new post as Press Officer for the URC).

Frank writes: 'Greetings! It is a pleasure for me to introduce myself to you as the new Secretary for Church and Society. I am married to Valerie who is a midwife and we recently relocated to London from South Africa related to family concerns. I have a long background in Church and Society work in both the pre and post apartheid era in South Africa and more recently have been involved in running an advocacy programme on the on-going human rights abuses in Zimbabwe.

I am looking forward to the challenges of my new position and to engaging with you on the issues of concern for Church and Society in the context of our rapidly changing world, country and local communities'.

Gambling

Responding to the results of the Gambling Commission's Prevalence Study published on 19 September, the Methodist Church expressed relief that there has been no change in the number of problem gamblers compared with the previous study in 1999 and the number of people gambling is, if

anything, slightly lower. Methodists have led the Churches in Britain in a campaign against liberalising gambling opportunities and, together with The Salvation Army and other partners, continue to keep the pressure on the Government to ensure that this industry is closely regulated to minimise the risk and harm it can pose to vulnerable people.

A new comprehensive briefing paper, *Against the odds ... ?*, has been prepared by the Joint Public Issues Team in conjunction with the Salvation Army

http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/pi_againsttheodds_0807.pdf

Cluster bombs

On the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Mine Ban Treaty, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Baptist Union of Great Britain called upon the UK Government to end the use of cluster bombs by UK forces. The Churches are also asking the Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, actively to support an international treaty to ban such weapons. Earlier this year, the Government committed to the Oslo Process, a new international process to agree a treaty on cluster bombs, and has withdrawn two types of cluster bombs from its stockpiles.

The Churches have also published campaign information online at

www.jointpublicissues.org/clustermunitions with advice on how you can take action, from emailing the Foreign Secretary, writing to your MP, and encouraging others to be involved.

Report on Assisted Dying

A version of the United Reformed Church report on Assisted Dying, in a form easily usable by house groups and for private study, is now available - free. The report to General Assembly has been edited, put into a booklet, and includes a study guide in seven sessions. Copies can be obtained from the Church and Society office, United Reformed Church, Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT (020 7916 8632; church.society@urc.org.uk).

'Home: an epic journey from slavery to promise' - a new play based on the book of Exodus, performed in support of Stop the Traffik by Christian professional theatre company, Rhema (www.rhematheatre.org). 'Home' is touring nationally until 9 December. If you are interested in booking a performance for your church, please contact Rhema for further details: admin@rhematheatre.org; 0870 421 4565. Performances cost £420 plus travel expenses; Rhema provides publicity material and a guide on how to make the most of the event.

One World Week - 'All Together Now', 21-28 October Climate change is a key focus of this year's theme and the website (www.oneworldweek.org) is packed with a variety of resources, including a worship anthology prepared by Jo Rathbone of Eco-Congregation, links to related sites and ideas to help plan your events. Flexibility is encouraged so don't be constrained by these dates! All One World Week's resources are now web-based.

United Reformed Church Peace Fellowship Annual Conference, 17 November, 11.00 am - 4.00 pm at URC House, 86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT. Speaker: **Dr Karen Abi-Ezzi**, from Lebanon, Co-Director of the MA Peace Studies Course at Bradford University and regular contributor to the Inter-Cultural Leadership School which promotes greater understanding between young people from different ethnic backgrounds in and around Bradford. For further details/to book, contact Wendy Cooper (wendy.cooper@urc.org.uk; 020 7916 8632).

Promise! - multi-faith service for World AIDS Day, 25 November, 6.30 pm at Southwark Cathedral, London. Further details from Steve Penrose (steve@leat.org.uk; 020 7793 0338). *(Please let us know if you are planning resources/events for World AIDS Day; we will publicise details in the next Newsletter).*

Poverty and Homelessness Action Week - 'Opening Doors, Opening Hearts', 23 January - 3 February 2008 Details of resources to order or download will be available at: www.housingjustice.org.uk/homelessness-sunday/index.htm. The United Reformed Church is distributing the flier in a mailing to all URC churches in November.

Contact *If you would like to receive the Joint Public Issues Team Newsletter, or would like to publicise an event or project, please contact Wendy Cooper: wendy.cooper@urc.org.uk ; 020 7916 8632; 86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT*