

## **General Assembly: Special interest groups**

A number of special interest groups met during lunchtime on the Saturday and Sunday of the United Reformed Church General Assembly. The following reports cover some of those sessions.

### **Brexit, borders and belonging**

Simeon Mitchell, the United Reformed Church's Secretary for Church and Society, chaired a panel discussion on Brexit in St Barnabas' Cathedral, Nottingham. Members of the panel included: the Revd Dr Mario Fischer, General Secretary of the Council of Protestant Churches in Europe; the Revd Martin Henninger, from the Church of the Palatinate in Germany; the Revd Davide Ollearo, from the Waldensian Church in Italy; Ms Francis Brienen, the URC's Deputy General Secretary (Mission); and the Revd Sarah Moore, the URC's Cumbria Area President.

Mr Mitchell noted that the last General Assembly took place two years ago in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum, and it feels as if we are still dealing with that aftermath, with continued uncertainty about the terms of Britain's exit from the European Union. At the same time, questions about refugees and immigration have been causing political upheaval across continental Europe.

Setting the scene, he asked: 'As people of faith, how do we respond to this apparent trend to insularity, to retreat behind national boundaries? We are citizens not only of nation states but of the commonwealth of the Kingdom of God, with an identity in Christ as well as in our passports.'

Mr Henninger said: 'When the Brexit vote came, I think we were simply stunned. We didn't expect it ... We felt very stunned because the Europe we had known, for two generations, was no longer.'

Ms Brienen, herself an EU national living in the UK, said she was one of the 3.5 million EU nationals who now felt as if they were living in limbo.

Ms Moore explained how her ministry focuses on drawing people together, but said: 'It feels like, as a country, we are more divided than I have ever known us to be.'

Mr Ollearo said he grew up in an era with many barriers, such as the Berlin wall.

'We are the first, completely free generation, to travel freely around Europe, so the first question was why [vote to leave the EU]?'

'There was a lack of understanding,' said Dr Mario Fischer. 'People didn't understand why the people of Britain threw their future in the bin.'

The panel discussed how the refugee crisis was shaping politics across Europe, what the word 'foreigner' means in different countries, and the role of the church in bringing people together, practically responding to refugees, and challenging narratives about 'other' people.

As the session ended, the audience was left with points to reflect on. 'Stay at the table [of discussion],' Ms Moore said: 'I've noticed that there's a real tendency, when there's a disagreement, for people to step away – when actually people need to step closer together and to learn more about our neighbours.'

Mr Ollearo added: 'Borders are important, because they are where we meet others. But as churches, we must beware that borders don't become barriers.'

### **Beacon**

Beacon, the United Reformed Church's LGBT+ group, held its inaugural AGM at Assembly. The group hopes to be a resource for LGBT+ members and their friends in the URC.

The secretary of Beacon, the Revd Sal Bateman, talked about the background behind the group and its vision for the future. She mentioned the news from members in the north of England of the first pride march in Alnwick in June, as an example of the kind of good news stories she hoped the group would share.

Beacon will hold its first conference on 22 September in Lumen URC in central London, focusing on trans issues, with keynote speakers the Revd Dr Tina Beardsley and the Revd Dr Chris Dowd.

Matters discussed in the meeting included responding as a group and individually to the UK government's consultation on the Gender Recognition Act, and raising the profile of Beacon in the denomination. Another question was how to respond to recent changes by the Presbyterian Church of Ireland in its policy towards LGBT people and its relationship with the URC. One response was to reach out to those effected. The Revd John Scott spoke of his own background in the PCI and said the Church was an early ordainer of women, but there is now growing marginalisation. 'The lesson for us', he said, 'is that history does not travel in one direction.' This was taken by the groups as confirmation of the need for a group such as Beacon in URC.

### **Greening your church**

Andy Lester, Conservation Director of the Christian environmental charity A Rocha, gave a talk updating members of Assembly on the UK's environmental crisis.

Starting with the bad news, Mr Lester said that wildlife in the UK is changing at the fastest pace in recorded history. Brexit brings the prospect of bilateral free trade deals undermining environmental commitments. A number of species are facing extinction including turtle dove and nightingale.

However there is progress, Mr Lester said. The environmental minister Michael Gove has been on a remarkable journey in his attitude and has appointed a radical team. The rewilding movement is doing well. There is a shift among farmers towards making Brexit work for nature. A number of species which had been declining are increasing, including pine marten and dormouse.

Mr Lester highlighted some of A Rocha's initiatives. Target Ten is a campaign to increase the numbers of ten declining species. Wild Christian is a community exploring the connections between faith and nature. Ecochurch is an online questionnaire-based awards scheme, on which 1,000 churches have registered with in four years. The URC accounts for 121 of those churches, with nearly 30 of them having won awards so far.

'My encouragement to you all,' Mr Lester concluded, 'is to be prepared to think differently and to be surprised by hope.'