

FIFTH BIENNIAL COUNCIL MEETING PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

Once again representatives of Unitarian and Universalist groups from many parts of the world gathered to affirm their commitment to a world-wide religious community, and to develop practical ways of strengthening and developing that community.

This was a larger meeting than some previous ones. Nineteen delegates from thirteen member groups, four representatives of provisional member groups and emerging groups, and members of the Executive Committee and staff attended. In addition there were a number of guests and observers. Two groups interested on joining ICUU sent observers: Bituen Pablo represented the Independent Church of Filipino Christians, and Ellen Christiani Nugroho and Tjahjade Nugroho Damaris came from Jemaat Allah Global Indonesia. Then there were the members of two task forces charged with developing a stronger Unitarian/Universalist presence in Africa and Latin America, and a curriculum task force. Thandeka, a theologian from Meadville-Lombard Theological School in Chicago, came to take the group through the process of developing "Covenant Groups." The chair of the nominating committee attended, and several other observers came from member groups. The delegate from Pakistan was not able to get a visa, the delegate from the UU church of the Philippines was not able to come because of the SARS epidemic, and the delegate from Poland was starting a new job. No one attended from Russia or Nigeria. The invited guest from Burundi Fulgence Ndagijimana did not get visa.

A major purpose for the biennial meeting is to carry out the business of ICUU, and this will be reported later in the paper. But the meetings also enlarge and enrich our vision of our faith community, and the most meaningful activities for the participants often take place outside the business sessions. As noted above, Thandeka attended the first few days of the meeting. She was representing the Center for Community Values, a group that is developing the program of "Covenant Groups," or Small Group Ministry, as a way of deepening the spiritual experience of Unitarians and Universalists. The approach has some potential for use in small or newly developing member or emerging groups. She organized the Council participants into covenant groups, trained leaders, and took the whole group through several sessions of meditation experience. For many participants, this was a deeply involving experience. At the end of the meeting, the Council agreed that ICUU would continue to explore the process of small group ministry and how we might implement it in our communities.

In every ICUU meeting, worshipping together is always a meaningful and memorable experience. "Multi-national" groups plan services: Canada, Argentina and South Africa, for example, or the United Kingdom and India. Each group builds a service that brings together elements of their own cultures and of our collective experience. A small booklet of worship materials, *I See You Too*, put together by Cliff Reed and Jill McAllister, and a songbook compiled by Kathleen Rolenz, were helpful resources, and will continue to be used in member groups. On Sunday, the Council joined with the Prague congregation to celebrate the Flower Communion. Sharing in that service in the place where Norbert Capek developed it eighty years ago was a deeply moving experience.

One purpose of the biennial meeting is to review the activities of the previous two-year period. Jill McAllister, the president, reported that a major focus for the Executive Committee was the

establishment of a permanent office in Prague, and the hiring of our Administrator, Iva Fiserova. There were fewer study tours or other gatherings during this period, partly because several tours of interest to Unitarians and Universalists were scheduled following the Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom. The major event was the very successful Theological Symposium held in Oxford, England, and attended by about 60 people. The proceedings of the symposium were compiled into the book *A Global Conversation*, self-published by the ICUU. Two other publications were completed during this period. One and Universal, the book of worship materials edited by John Midgley, was published by Skinner Press, and an American layman, Don McEvoy, developed and published the book of biographies called *Credo*. All profits from the book will go to ICUU.

The Executive Committee undertook several tasks that have bearing on our future work. They continued the process of developing policies to ensure that actions of the Council or Executive Committee would be equitable and consistent. Some time was spent in assessing past leadership training to provide guidelines for future development. Funding was received to undertake some curriculum development, and task forces to focus on development and response in Africa and Latin America were recruited. The EC also brought to the meeting a proposed logo, designed professionally by Ondrej Smerda, which was adopted by the Council.

During the meeting regional groups, task forces and working groups met and formulated proposals for the coming two-year period. The Finance Committee took a hard look at our financial position, so that there would be funds to carry out the plans adopted by the Council. To free up funds for program, some hard decisions were taken to reduce administrative costs. The office in Prague will be retained, but the administrator's position has been reduced to half time. The Executive Committee will meet twice instead of three times during the period, and travel funds for EC members have been reduced. At the same time, member groups are urged to make regular contributions to ICUU at the highest level they can, and \$17,500 of donations over the two-year period has been budgeted in. Raising these funds is seen as primarily (but not exclusively) a North American responsibility.

What programs are underway? The Curriculum Task Force, including Meg Roberts from Canada, Melinda Sayavedra from the United States, and Derrick Pariat from the Khasi Hills, will be developing a program, initially in English, to help member groups learn about one another and about our unity across the world. It will include a video, and member groups are encouraged to send pictures and other visual and audio material to Derrick for incorporation in the video.

The Africa and Latin American Task Forces and the Australasian Regional Group will be working on connecting with the small groups or individuals who have been in touch with ICUU or with other member groups in those large regions. The group working on Africa will be working on developing a regional meeting for 2005, and the Latin American group is looking forward to a leadership development program, to be conducted in Spanish and Portuguese, in February 2004. The Australasia group is focusing on ministry—developing ways of training and accrediting ministers within their own context.

The European group is planning a Hungarian Language program for the summer of 2004, and looking forward to much more co-ordination of databases and calendars, in order to encourage

more interaction between groups. The North American group is planning activities to encourage North Americans to see themselves as part of a larger religious movement, and to support that movement generously.

A consultation team left from the ICUU meeting to go to Poland, where they will work intensively with the members there to assist them to implement their own strategic plan. A model of consultation and needs assessment is under development, to meet the more complex needs of groups.

Look for "Chalice Lightings of the Month," coming from the Publications Committee, as well as a more complete songbook and an ICUU News Service.

One other significant activity at the Council meeting is the election of new officers. The new Executive Council is made up of Gordon Oliver, South Africa, President, John Slattery, Canada, Vice President, Pearl Green Marbaniang, India, Secretary, Barbara Beach, United States, Treasurer, and Christine Hayhurst, United Kingdom, Istvan Kovacs, Romania, and Antje Paul, Germany, Members-at-Large. Old and new officers met at the end of the Council meeting, to bring the past two years to a close and embark on the next two.

The Council expressed its very deep gratitude and love to Jill McAllister, whose leadership for the eight years of ICUU's existence, four of them as President, has been exemplary. John Slattery's detailed and dedicated work as Treasurer for the past four years was also recognised. Cliff Reed has provided a thoughtful and steady presence on the EC for eight years. Thanks were also expressed for the work of Ellen Campbell and Istvan Miko, both leaving the EC after one term.

The Council acknowledged with gratitude the work of Ivanka Fiserova, our Administrator since January 2002. Iva established the office and has been developing the administrative procedures to strengthen ICUU. She planned and carried out all the logistical arrangements for the meeting, which was a splendid success. Iva will be going to Chicago this fall for a year of theological training, and she will be greatly missed.