

Minister's Letter NPURC and WEUC May 2018.

Hello- I am writing this looking out of my window over a beautiful scene with blue sky, white clouds, trees blowing in the wind, green grass, accommodation buildings and a car park full of telegraph poles! I am at the National United Reformed Church Minister's Gathering (at Yarnfield, previously the BT training centre where they climbed telegraph poles to practice repairing telephone wires!). It is an event that has never been done before, but with all the thinking going on related to Missional Discipleship (in the URC we are focusing on Walking the Way: Living the Life of Jesus Today) and the introduction of an alternative to the TLS (Training for Learning and Serving) education programme (being called Stepwise and having a wider appeal and range than previously), plus the ongoing deployment issues facing all churches, it was considered a good idea to bring as many URC ministers together in one place at one time. Instead of individual Synod Spring or Summer Schools, we would all meet in one place. The idea was to enable us to talk with one another about these issues, but also to look outwards, hear different voices, be challenged by speakers and workshops, to give us time to reflect on our ministries and also to consider where we are going. And what a time it has been!

I have encountered a variety of ministers alongside whom I have journeyed from Sunday School through to assessment for ministry, to the past 10 years in ministry. It has been lovely to meet up with people that I have shared part of my journey with and also some whom I have not met before, but with whom I share a common heritage and calling. The worship has been valuable- a lot of silence and Celtic spirituality with meaningful and challenging words, relevant texts to a group of ministers who can be prone to looking after others but neglecting self and, as many are in this 21st century world, good at overworking, taking on stress or being busy at a cost to their personal wellbeing. Dr Rowan Williams came and shared three sessions with us and looked at three strong, determined and devoted women who followed their faith and lived lives that reflected the values of God's kingdom and shared the love of God through all they did (much of it was quite 'ordinary' and some was extra-ordinary!). Dr Williams has an amazing way of gentle storytelling that engages and involves the hearer and yet has a humility and an intelligence that are astounding. The talks can be found on Youtube (URCUK) <https://www.youtube.com/user/URCUK/videos> and include those by Revd Dr Peggy Kabonde too. We also attended workshops based around a variety of subjects- I went to Sustaining Ministry (that spoke of feedback to ministers being one of the things that can make or break a minister's ability to cope!) and to Discipling Children and then Belonging Together about Intercultural ministry.

If I am honest, I was not looking forward to it and I found out I was not alone in this concern. I have to report that most of those whom I have spoken to who expressed this hesitation have also reacted as I have and found it a valuable time of blessing and refreshment, challenge and fellowship. It is hard in ministry, especially as a minister of more than one church, to find adequate time to stop and reflect on practice or worship or relationships; I have been blessed in the past few weeks of having had two such opportunities: the course I went on and now this Minister's gathering. What I need to work out is how to assimilate a lot of the thinking into what I offer the churches I serve. How do I effectively share the depth of worship and the inspiring words and liturgy in established orders of service and in settings where there are expectations and the reality of church life? Also, how can we adjust what we do in order to enable it to be more relevant to the world we live in, when actually we are often so wrapped up in what we are already doing that there is no room for such change? How do we challenge prejudice, privilege, and power?

Being church is changing. We are surrounded by more and more people who have no interest or experience of the gospel message of love brought in Christ. How can we effectively share what we believe without it being critical of where people are or irrelevant to them or pious? As churches we are considering such questions as we seek to be Christ's presence in our communities. Initially perhaps we go back to the stories- those in the Bible, those of our predecessors, those of people (such as Dr Williams spoke of) who changed their world by their actions, those of our own origins; and by sharing, telling, hearing and experiencing different stories we can be challenged to be disciples who can reach out and

effectively speak the words of God's grace and mercy into a hurting world. And then let God get on with what God does in bringing people into faith.

So I leave you with a few quotes from my time here and I look forward to continuing my journey as your minister aware of my need to grow and develop, as we all share together in the contexts where we find ourselves, and as we work together to be God's light and love to those alongside whom we journey and those we meet day by day.

Blessings, Jenny.

'We are restored by being re-storied'. Sam Richards

"The church is here to say to a world where there is injustice, pain and terror, abuse and dehumanizing, that it is not natural and does not have to be this way." Dr Rowan Williams.

"Put yourself in the shoes of the other, do not make them wear yours." Madeleine Debrel.

"To shine is not the same as to enlighten." Madeleine Debrel.

"We need to focus on community not charity." Maria Skobtsova.

"Those on the edges of the church and society are the ones who can challenge us best." Dr Rowan Williams.

"The ideal is abundant life for ALL. We need to have conversations about power and privilege in churches. And in order to live we have to step out." Revd Michael Jagessar.