



## The General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches Growth & Renewal Day held on Friday 28th March 2008

### **Introduction:**

The General Assembly Executive committee, noting the concern of many Unitarians & Free Christians on perceived dwindling numbers, made the decision to devote most of 1 day of the Annual General Meetings 2008 to exploring Growth & Renewal. Aware that there were many differing views on the meaning of growth and renewal and even more widely differing ideas on how to support growth and renewal, the purpose of the day was to offer an opportunity for all participants to express their views. From this, would emerge a clear prioritisation of the way forward. More importantly perhaps, was the hope that individuals would engage with the issues and commit to taking their enthusiasm and commitment back into their local communities.

Flyers promoting the day included these questions and information:

What do we mean by 'Growth?' What do we mean by 'Renewal?'

**Growth** is it about change? And if so, what and how can we change without losing what we must not, or cannot, change?

**Renewal** is it about renewing our own commitment to enabling all our members to pursue their individual spirituality?  
or is it about renewing our place in the wider community through social outreach? Or both?

The 'Growth & Renewal Day' on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2008 is an opportunity for you, your delegate and others to participate in a day devoted to exploring what growth means for our movement and how growth and renewal might be achieved. Presentations and discussion groups during the morning will give participants the opportunity both to listen to others and to contribute their own views. The afternoon will develop the themes from the morning and lead to a clear, collective understanding of our priorities for the future. Remember, whilst resources for growth and renewal will be provided centrally, the vital impetus for and commitment to growth must come from all of us.

The plan for the day was outlined as follows:

'I keep six honest serving men  
(They taught me all I knew);  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who.'

Rudyard Kipling

Morning Session: Why do we need to grow and renew? What do we mean by Growth?  
What do we mean by Renewal?

Afternoon session: Ok, how will we do that? And When, Where and Who?

What will **you** do to help realise the priorities which emerge from today?

**We are in this together!**

**This brief summary of the outcomes from the day was circulated through Essex Hall within a few days of the end of the meetings.**

**Statistics:**

- Over 300 people participated in the day
- 8 people spoke about their views on Growth & Renewal
- 11 groups broke off to focus on specific questions and themes
- 162 people voted with 'sticky dots' for their priorities
- Almost 200 people completed a personal priority/commitment sheet on the day. Additional ones are still being received.

**Themes from the morning sessions included:**

- Numerical growth
- Spiritual growth
- Resources
- Hospitality
- Publicity
- Buildings
- Events
- Outreach
- Knowing who we are
- New starts

**Actions from the afternoon session included:**

- Appoint a 'czar' in a congregation to take responsibility for growth
- Set up web-sites for all our UK congregations
- Experimentation with worship space & styles
- Welcoming visitors without harassing
- Service to local community (faith in action)
- Covenant
- New starts

The most popular themes were Numerical & Spiritual Growth. The general focus on achieving these was through attending to the welcome given to both new visitors and existing members of our congregations, ensuring buildings, both interior & exterior, are warm, welcoming and identifiable as Unitarian, experimenting with worship times and styles, re-igniting the passion and soul of our movement and living our faith and values through outreach into the local communities.

Perhaps Stephen Lingwood's report of the Anniversary service sums it all up. On Art Lester's moving service Stephen responds:

***"I think this was the perfect message to top off our growth day. We need all of the practical stuff, but it's all useless if we don't have at our centre an authentic spirituality. We need soul. We need prayer. We need communities that bring people to a deeper life of the spirit."***

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The day began with a presentation by Sir Peter Soulsby (Convenor of the Executive Committee) who outlined the reasons for the day and the hope that, at the end of the day, commitment and enthusiasm would ensure that real action would follow at both local and national levels.

Then followed 7 speeches by individuals who presented their feelings and views on Growth & Renewal. Four of these are printed here.

### **Rev. Lindy Latham**

You know folks, we do need practical advice about livening up our websites and financial help with buying new notice boards. Don't let's forget the basics.

But I want to talk about a different sort of growth that can be summed up by the phrase, "deepening our relationships".

It is through right relationship, I believe, that we can give each other the courage and strength of purpose to stand up for those things we believe in and discover and celebrate those things which have meaning and value.

It is through right relationship that we can also be more aware of those things we want to change be it through challenging oppression, or making simple acts of random kindness.

And this relationship stuff doesn't always come easy, it's not just a matter of tolerance and acceptance and being nice to each other.

In a religious movement that can be open, liberating and encouraging of difference, those differences can sometimes blow us apart rather than draw us together, unless, I believe, we discover what it is that holds us in community, and holds us in right relationship with each other.

Tradition, friendship and a few shared values are not always enough if we are to grow together in a meaningful way.

I believe that growth can come through our communities creating and making a covenant, a promise, an agreement amongst its members so that together they can seek their own truth and support one another as best they can.

Because, friends, if we don't do something, we could well continue to be stuck in a pincer movement between secularism on the one hand and growing fundamentalism on the other.

...and so, in these adapted words of Alice Blair Wesley:

May we continue to learn to walk together in the ways of truth and affection.

so that we may speak to the world in words and actions of peace and goodwill, freely offering an open welcome to all, knowing with confidence who we are

### **Derek McCauley**

I am a fairly new Unitarian, therefore I hope my experience can illustrate what growth means in practice. I have found my spiritual home at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester and have been welcomed and supported by the congregation.

For me growth is an outcome, not an activity. It is a result or consequence not an action. It challenges us – as individuals, congregations and the Unitarian movement – to think about what we can do that will result in growth i.e. real practical action.

When we talk about growth we are not looking for huge numbers or chapels and churches full to the doors – or are we! Our history teaches us that there have never been large numbers of Unitarians. Even in our heyday in the nineteenth century we were few in number but with an influence in excess of our numbers. Our history also teaches us that we have had times of depression and trial as well as success. Nothing really changes does it! Let us dispense with rose-tinted glasses about the past; there were good and bad times.

Across the centuries Unitarians have been open to change; theologically, culturally and in organisation. We have never been constrained by out-dated traditions or dogma written in stone. We have kept our principles but adapted our practice to changing circumstances and changing societies. This is one of our great strengths and an advantage as we look to grow in the future.

For me, growth means taking what we value and being open to change in order that we can meet the spiritual, and other, needs of people today.

What growth means in practice is therefore very different in each locality but wherever we are we should aspire to create local congregations or fellowships which can provide a rich and satisfying spiritual experience to existing and new members and attenders.

Growth should mean an unrelenting focus on building communities of free-thinking individuals – a difficult but rewarding task. Let us also combine a vision for Unitarian growth in Manchester, London, or wherever we are from; with a vision for growth around the world. Let us work to touch the lives of thousands of people the world over.

## **Peter Whitham**

Growth will be an adventure in faith.

It will be a continuous process that will become an integral part of the Denomination. It will be under the management of a newly created Panel – probably of the Denominational Support Commission. Its overall objective will be to increase the number of people that make up the Denomination.

It will be a learning process – we haven't done this before.

Its first stage – involving Congregational Discussion - will be to identify the conditions that we believe are necessary to encourage growth. All congregations will then be invited to assess how far they match up to those criteria.

Using that, and other relevant information, we shall initiate a pilot scheme, in a chosen area, and invite as many Unitarians, as feel able, to be involved.

At the close of the Pilot scheme results will be assessed and evaluated and changes made that we believe will produce a better result the next time. We shall chose other areas and repeat the process.

The process will challenge us to remove the bushel that hides our lamp and we shall become visible. We shall extend the ways in which we seek to publicise ourselves. We shall encourage each other to go out onto the streets and thoroughfares and into the market places, for we must go where people are. We can no longer rely simply on people finding us. We must seek those who we say are seeking us. When we seek them, we shall find them.

Lets go adventuring – and grow.

## Jen Hazel

When I think of growth, it makes me think of a joke I heard years ago. It goes like this:  
How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?  
The answer? One, but the light bulb has to really want to change.

This joke hits on a key point and a key ingredient of growth: change. In fact, change really fits into the very definition of growth. So as we address the issue of growth within our denomination, I ask this question: Do we really want to change? Are we ready for it?

Now, it seems that the obvious answer to these questions is a resounding "yes"! We are devoting all sorts of time and attention to growth. It's rapidly becoming a priority for us as a denomination. But I have to wonder, while we are doing lots of talk and study of how to grow, are we truly making space for growth?

Wanting growth means wanting new faces and new voices to come into the fold. Take a moment to look around this room. There are some new voices right here. Where do these voices fit in? This is an organization with a rich history, but history does not write the future. Too many times, I have seen history dictate the direction of the future. The result is a closed circle that leaves little room for change, and little room for those new voices.

It's time to open that circle.

Now take a moment to think of the people who are not here. Many (not all, but many) of our congregations have a very homogeneous demographic. We are a mostly white, mostly middle class, mostly middle-aged denomination. We are missing a lot of people-

- people from diverse cultures
- people from different economic backgrounds
- younger people, whether they be youth or young adults.

We've talked a lot about the reasons this is the case, despite our desire to be inclusive. And it seems that these reasons make it a very complex issue. But I don't think it's that complex at all.

It's a simple law of human nature that people will invest themselves into communities where they feel welcome. We stay in communities that make us feel important and listened to.

So if we're truly interested in growing as a faith, we need to start answering some hard questions. On the personal, congregational, and denominational level.

What is truly important to us? Who are we really listening to? Who are we not listening to? What are we doing that keeps certain people from feeling welcome? Are we willing to change?

Are we willing to be radically inclusive?

Can our actions match our intentions?

Because it is our actions, not our intentions, that will ultimately decide the future of our faith.

We may want to be inclusive and welcoming, yet our actions can produce the opposite effect. Youth can feel marginalized and disaffected without a direct voice to this denomination. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people may be in congregations where they do not feel safe to be out. Young adults who find it difficult to be members of a congregation struggle with maintaining their identities as Unitarians.

We are all good people here, and I truly believe that we all want to be part of a liberal faith that welcomes all these people.

In BUYAN, we have a motto: BE the change. This means let's not talk about who's not at the table, let's bring them to the table and truly listen to their voices. Let's embrace the change that these new voices will bring us.

In this day and age, Unitarians have a tremendous potential to be a beacon of light for liberal religious people. So yeah, the light bulb may really want to change, but what are we actually going to do to make sure that happens?

## Ant Howe

I'd like to read a few words by Theodore Parker, American Unitarian minister who lived from 1810-1060. He wrote:

"The church that is to lead this century will not be a church creeping on all fours, mewling and whining, its face turned down, its eyes turned back. It must be full of the brave spirit of the day, keeping also the good of times past.

It demands, as never before, freedom for itself, usefulness in its institutions, truth in its teachings, and beauty in its deeds....

Let us have a church for the whole person: truth for the mind, good works for the hands, love for the heart; and for the soul, that aspiring after perfection, that unflinching faith in God which, like lightning in the clouds, shines brightest when elsewhere it is most dark."

And although those words were written 150 years ago, I've come to believe these are extremely wise words for me to heed when considering church growth....

And I've found with the growth in my own congregation that those elements which Parker describes **need** to be blended together. We need a church for the *whole* person:

Truth for the mind – a lively, engaging and relevant message.

Good works for the hands – things for people to get involved with that truly make a difference and that people can take ownership of....

Love for the heart – probably the most important: preaching a message of love is challenging, but can be transforming....

And for the soul, that aspiring after perfection – the thing we'll never attain for we are not perfect, but the sense that, together, we are on a journey.

I want read part of an email I received on Monday. It was written by one of the 4 newest members of one of my congregations who were received into membership on Easter Sunday:

She wrote:

*“Our Membership service yesterday was as welcoming as every moment I have spent with your people so far. My life has changed, I am so happy and sure of my future with you all and feel closer to God than ever before.*

*The difference....well, I cannot believe I do not shake with fear any longer and can talk to you all, and where have the feelings of inferiority gone? There is not one person who is making me feel a stranger or anything but loved, respected and maybe useful, I trust.”*

Letters and emails like that humble me... but I shouldn't be so surprised because Unitarianism is powerful stuff. It's life transforming. But if our movement is to grow then the words of Theodore Parker must surely ring true for us:

“It demands, as never before, freedom for itself, usefulness in its institutions, truth in its teachings, and beauty in its deeds. Let our church have that freedom, usefulness, truth and beauty”

To that I say, Amen.

After the speeches, the Assembly split into 11 groups to address the questions:

What do we mean by Growth?  
What do we mean by Renewal?

The facilitators of the groups were asked to draw out the 3 most common themes from their dialogue. These were gathered and quickly clustered under headings during lunchtime. These headings are recorded below. A fuller record of the morning sessions can be found in Appendix 1.

**Summary of outcomes from the Morning session: What do we mean by Growth? What do we mean by Renewal?**

Numerical	Growth in numbers & active members, including children Widening the age range of members Broader social base.
Spiritual	Spiritual growth as individuals & communities e.g. worship style, personal growth. Right relationships. Putting God & the soul into the churches again. Renewal of energy. More use of the Bible and reclaiming its language. Transformation of individual lives, reaching out into the community.
Resources	Trained professional & lay ministry. Developing leadership, involving new & existing members Add 'How to Welcome People' to 'Help is at Hand.' Need excellent materials. Sunday schools.

Hospitality	<p>Keeping “doors” open to local community e.g. rites of passage, publicity, tolerance.          Welcoming new people, not too effusive, not pressuring. But following up new people &amp; listening to what they have to say.          Growth in TRUST &amp; inclusivity. People need to feel safe – not hurried to join immediately.          Actively avoid negativity.          Being aware of different people’s needs.</p>
Publicity	<p>All kinds, leaflets, newsletters, web-site, using the press.          Promotion. Local advertising.          Becoming known in schools &amp; colleges.          Communication is the best way of getting the message across &amp; getting known</p>
Buildings	<p>Using building more regularly for present members &amp; to attract new members.          Drop-in sessions open to the public.          Easily identifiable buildings.          Lettings.</p>
Events	<p>Needs to happen other than Sundays. Circle services.          Experimental services &amp; other activities.</p>
Outreach	<p>Community growth.</p>
Knowing who we are	<p>Definitions of Unitarianism. Learning how to express Unitarianism with confidence.          Willingness to change sensitively. Knowing what we’ve got right, building on strengths.          Out of comfort zone.          Rediscover the passion.          Shared vision and purpose.          Growing together as congregations and districts.</p>
New starts	<p>Opening Fellowships &amp; churches in areas other than where they are.</p>

During the afternoon, 11 groups met again with each group exploring the possibilities for action relating to one of the headings emerging from the morning session. Participants were able to choose which group to attend for this session.

The facilitators of the groups were asked to note real, achievable actions from their discussions. These were gathered live on screen in a full plenary session and are recorded below. A fuller record of the actions can be found in Appendix 2.

At the end of the day, participants were encouraged to use sticky dots to vote for the action most important in their eyes. The summary below includes the numbers of votes cast.

**Summary of actions from afternoon session: How do we do that? Ticks (e.g. 6 ✓) indicate sticky dot votes.**

<p>Numerical Total: 35✓</p>	<p>(13✓) Appoint a “tsar” in a congregation to take responsibility for growth  (1✓) Team up with other congregations to get critical mass for events  (7✓) Set up websites for all our UK congregations (see UCCN)  (10✓) Appoint a national spokesperson  (4✓) Create a children’s group with trained leader(s)</p>
<p>Spiritual Total: 32✓</p>	<p>(3✓) A questionnaire workshop  (2✓) Less use of the Bible  (7✓) Experimentation with worship space and styles  (12✓) Passion and enthusiasm  (8✓) Spiritual growth of congregations, engagement groups</p>
<p>Resources Total: 4✓</p>	<p>Include “how to welcome people” in Help is at Hand  People who are willing to be welcomers  (1✓) Provision of learning resources: print and web  (2✓) Leaders (minister and lay) for engagement groups etc  (1✓) Better websites with good links  Music resources for worship and meditation  People identifying skills  Money (improve fundraising skills)</p>
<p>Hospitality Total: 9✓</p>	<p>(5✓) Make the place look welcoming and warm, specific person to welcome  (3✓) Encourage people to help in church when they are ready  Open your church to groups outside the church  (1✓) Imagine how you would feel if you were a newcomer</p>
<p>(1✓)Publicity Total: 21✓</p>	<p>(20✓) Update congregational websites</p>
<p>Buildings Total: 6✓</p>	<p>(4✓) Help is at Hand for buildings and lettings  (2✓) Smarten up notice boards, gardens, and interior</p>
<p>(3✓) Events Total: 7✓</p>	<p>Encouragement, persuade congregations and districts that they’re a good thing  (4✓) Advice, support, information  Put it in the Inquirer  Calendar on GA website  Advice/information/best practice  Provision of facilitators to help congregations with events program planning  Proactive training of local events managers etc  Sharing of best practice on local level</p>

<p>Outreach</p> <p>Total: 20✓</p>	<p>(9✓) Service to local community (faith in action)</p> <p>(3✓) Profiling/understanding communities</p> <p>(2✓) Engage with other groups</p> <p>Identify ourselves</p> <p>(4✓) Ensure a national profile</p> <p>(2✓) Monitor media for Unitarian response</p> <p>Policy on emergency requests</p> <p>Reach out to schools and universities</p>
<p>Knowing who we are</p> <p>Total: 11✓</p>	<p>(10✓) Covenant (Macclesfield)</p> <p>Come back to GA next year with idea for covenant</p> <p>What we believe</p> <p>Problem with theology: we can't be defined by it</p> <p>Defining terms without straight-jacketing people</p> <p>(1✓) Meet for respectful conversation about theology</p> <p>A place to explore in safety</p> <p>Linked with values not theology</p> <p>Let our children know who we are through RE</p> <p>Need pride in Unitarianism</p>
<p>New starts</p> <p>Total: 17✓</p>	<p>(12✓) GA needs to research possibilities of new starts – study teams to look at leadership, resources, possible areas</p> <p>(5✓) Train workers, set objectives, vision, get on with it!</p>

Total number of sticky dot votes cast: 162.

Participants were also asked to complete carbonless copies of their individual preferences for action and their commitment to supporting Growth & Renewal. All but four of these included contact details. These priorities & commitments can be found in appendix 3 (without the contact details).

## **Conclusion and follow-up:**

Sir Peter summed up the day, thanked all who participated, the facilitators and the organisers. He promised that the Executive Committee would reflect on the outcomes and use them to prioritise future plans.

This process of reflection is still ongoing but the Executive Committee meeting in April agreed the following as a direct result of the day:

## **Executive Committee follow-up:**

Following analysis and reflections on the outcomes of the Growth & Renewal day, it is clear that there is a hunger for support to enable our communities to go forward at local level. Radical Hospitality was a common theme as were attractive and up to date web-sites, outreach and skilled leadership. Clear needs are good, relevant leadership (both professional Ministry and Lay) appropriate to the specific community, and skills training in all aspects of Unitarian life.

To that end, the Executive Committee agreed the following priorities at their meeting in April:

- ❖ To make ALL the material generated during the G & R Day available on the web – with hard copies as needed (it is a HUGE document).
- ❖ To encourage ALL our communities in creating and up-dating attractive web-sites.
- ❖ To value and support our Professional Ministers (an Employee Assistance Programme has been offered and a 1<sup>st</sup> meeting between members of the Executive Committee and Ministers will take place on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2008).
- ❖ To seek 'Champions' of Growth & Renewal in ALL our communities.
- ❖ To provide training and a 'tool-kit' for these Champions.
- ❖ To review progress at the Annual meetings in 2009.

