

PRESIDENT'S PROFILE - CELIA CARTWRIGHT

I was born in 1951 in Denton, Lancashire, the first of three children, the only girl. Moving house was a regular theme and apart from the above I lived in Cheshire, Yorkshire, Middlesex, Warwickshire and Hampshire, all before my 17th birthday. The constant anchor throughout those years was the Unitarian church, in Denton, Motram, Sheffield Unity, Kilburn, Coventry, Warwick and briefly, Southampton where I was married at the age of 20.

I left school with three 'O' levels, which may well have been more had I not got fed up with either catching up or waiting around as each school move meant a curriculum change! I was advised to go into nursing, which, after a bit of office work, I did. In spring 1969, I joined the Queen Alexander's Royal Army Nursing Corps. I met my husband to be a few months later, also in the forces and a nurse. We married in November 1970. Six months later I injured my back and resigned from the QAs, which was timely as I soon discovered that my first child, Sean, was on his way, and just under two years later in 1974 my daughter, Karen was born. The marriage did not survive postings to Northern Ireland and we were divorced in 1983, when I was half way through my first of two Open University foundation courses.

Single parenthood was hard work, but rewarding. We moved to Devon and settled in Exeter. Sadly, my younger brother died three months later and though I found my local Unitarian church (Torquay), it was with a confused and bitter sense of 'God'. Thankfully the congregation and minister (Pat Womersley) were patient, gentle and healing. I spent five years finding a way through grief and it led me down a path of spiritual exploration which in turn led me to want to give something back to the church which from my earliest years had nurtured and loved me. Its hard to believe now, but back then the idea of speaking to groups of people terrified me. But my path led inexorably towards ministry, feeding me in so many ways with the skills and knowledge I would need.

My working life has been varied, nursing, already mentioned, clerking, managing a clothing department, typist to personal assistant and then sick leave with a stubborn RSI which put me out of work for over a year. Thankfully my time was well used. I had begun to take modules from the lay preacher's course and on a weekend residential at Great Hucklow, I found myself in the pulpit, a position I thought I was too scared to take, and much to my amazement it was fulfilling. My lay preaching career had begun. A year or two later I found myself accepting the Lay Leadership of three small West Country churches, I accepted on the proviso that I apply for ministry training. I reasoned that if was not acceptable for training as a minister I had no business being a lay Leader. I was accepted and I went to Manchester, got a degree and my college certificate and was propelled out into the world as a potential minister. Padiham, then Rochdale and finally Kendal were the places I was invited to be minister. And last year I retired. It hardly seems possible, the last twenty plus years have flashed by.

It was at Rochdale that I found a welcome in the Women's League, the community which had been a rich part of my mother's life for many years. I enjoyed being part of the Rochdale membership for eight years. At Kendal, I was asked to be the President, a role I have gladly retained even in retirement. Last year I was called to serve as our District President. And now, it is my honour to serve as National President for this coming year and I look forward to visiting branches and meeting many of the stalwart women who serve this denomination, its congregations and the many charities we work so hard to support.

Beyond all that I have two elderly dogs, I meditate, read, walk, knit, crochet, sew, I am learning to spin wool into yarn and I serve as a volunteer counselor, having gained my diploma nearly 15 years ago, helping those who care for others, the unsung, unpaid, people who look after members of their families through extended illness. I go to Yoga classes and do a little Chi Kung, and I watch too much TV.