



# Unitarian Peace Fellowship Newsletter

*For all within our denomination who witness to the  
belief that war and preparation for war are sins  
against God and failures of humanity*

**Issue 4, Autumn 2011**

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(photos in this issue are by Joyce Ashworth)

## **Words from the Chair**

Hello again.

The time for our newsletter comes around quickly and it is my pleasure to be writing again keeping in touch with everyone.

We of the committee have a great thank you to offer to our member Carol Chilton for the work she did making our one day event in Norwich such an unbounded success. The speakers were excellent and listening to comments during the day it was appreciated by all who attended.

We need to be aware of our changing world and I have to admit that what I heard at this event made me more alert to the problems people face, that we think we know about but we really have no idea at all so I take this opportunity to suggest that maybe we should take more time in our busy lives to just listen. Perhaps there's nothing else we can do, but it's a start and often a good one.

Yours in Friendship

**Joan Norton**

### **Refugees in Norwich: Past and Present UPF Gathering October 2011**

Over 40 people, both Unitarian and others, attended this very successful awareness-raising day at the Octagon Chapel, Norwich, which had been ably organised by UPF committee member Carol Chilton. Following a very informative tour of the Chapel itself, the proceedings were opened by UPF Chair, Joan Norton, who told those present a little about the Peace Fellowship, and about our Annual Appeal.

The first speaker was Carol's husband Bruce, who gave us a fascinating insight into the early history of Norwich as a centre for refugees. At the time of the Domesday census in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Norfolk was the most populous county in England. In 1194, Norwich was granted city status.

The Middle Ages was a period of prosperity – as the many Medieval churches within the city testify. Norwich was both a regional centre and a centre for the manufacture of wool cloth. As such, it attracted large numbers of immigrants from Flanders and the Low Countries, who were skilled textile workers. There was one wave of immigration in the 1330s, and another in the 1560s and 1570s, when Huguenot refugees from the French wars of religion started to come over to England. By 1600, the population of Norwich stood at 30,000. The ‘strangers’ (which is how people from other countries were referred to) brought great prosperity to Norwich, which led to overcrowding in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. By 1700, there were 10,000 employees in the wool manufacturing business, and the refugee population was becoming integrated with the rest of the citizens.

The Martineaus were a leading Unitarian family in the city in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and were involved in much social development in the 1830s and later – the hospital, the subscription library, the theatre and in local politics. James Martineau went on to become a leading English theologian, and his sister Harriet became a leading political journalist.

Next, Gervaise Koulongou, now Refugee Project Coordinator of the British Red Cross in Norwich, shared a moving testimony of his own harrowing experiences as a political refugee who eventually found sanctuary in Norwich. He fled to England in 2003 from the Ivory Coast, having moved there a while before from his native Congo-Brazzaville. His ‘crime’ was to have been involved in the democratic government in that country in the early 1990s. When the former President launched a *coup d’etat* in 1997, the country was plunged into civil war. Gervaise had to flee from the city to his mother’s village with his wife and daughter. But then the village was attacked, and he spent eight months living in the bush, during which time members of his family died because of lack of medical help.

The new government had a wanted list, on which Gervaise’s name appeared. His uncle was arrested and his father, who had been a leading socialist politician, was killed. He was smuggled out of the country to Cameroon by a friend who was the director of an airline. Then he started a new life in the Ivory Coast, running a travel agency business. Unfortunately that country also became politically unstable in

2002, and with the help of some friends, Gervaise ended up in Luton Airport, unable to speak any English and with no documents.

Sadly, his treatment by the UK Immigration service was not good – at first he was not provided with an interpreter, and they accused him of being a liar and other things. But then Amnesty International got involved. He found the move to Norwich a good experience because the people were so friendly. His daughter, who was eight years old on their arrival in the UK, is now in sixth form, and plans to be a lawyer.



*Gervaise Kouloungou (centre) and Toni Berry (right) chat during the break*

There was then a half-hour break, during which the audience adjourned to the Martineau Hall for refreshments, and to view the displays that had been set up by the participating speakers, including the Unitarian Peace Fellowship.

The third speaker was the inspirational Isabel Ingram, who has spent the last 20 years working with asylum seekers as part of the Norwich Justice & Peace Group. She titled her talk ‘Hope in hopeless cases and places’ and shared her experiences of working with asylum seekers, both during the asylum process and afterwards. Her involvement with asylum seekers started in 1992, at a time when they were detained in prisons as well as detention centres. The Group got involved with the case of an asylum seeker from Mozambique who was in Norwich prison for several months. They managed to get him freed on bail and accommodated in the local YMCA. It was apparently much easier to

help in those days, as there were fewer rules and regulations. He was eventually given humanitarian leave to remain in Britain. Isabel had stood as his bail guarantor, and defended him in court. Initially he was transformed by hope, but had been too badly traumatised by his experiences, and later went missing, and died in London.

Isabel explained that to seek asylum is a basic human right, and that there is no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker while the process is going on. She asked the audience to imagine how it must feel to be an asylum seeker, having to overcome major setbacks and obstacles. To help these people takes energy, time and commitment. You have to have something to hold on to, for yourself and for the asylum seekers. But small things can make a huge difference – supporting them at political and doctor's surgeries, helping them with forms, taking them shopping, to the cinema, and so on. Isabel commented that lack of hope can whittle away at self-esteem, which can be a vicious circle. But the power of prayer and hope should never be under-estimated.

Norwich is Britain's first City of Refuge. Asylum seekers must be able to hope for a fair legal process. Individuals can hold out a hand in hope, friendship and support. The National Asylum Support Service provides housing and so on, while the system is in process. The asylum seekers have to report to the police regularly.

Isabel finished with a success story: in February this year, a female Iranian political activist was given leave to remain after a horrifying nine years in limbo. She can now make a new life, with some hope for the future.

The final speaker of the day was Toni Berry of Norwich Quakers. She explained that Quakers have always been concerned with the marginalised – slaves, prisoners, the mentally ill – people who fall through the gaps. She commented that Norwich is very hospitable to refugees; many are sent there by the Home Office.

Then she spoke about the work of the Norwich International Youth Project, which aims to give young refugees aged between 12 and 20 some life-skills and support, including English lessons. Those under 16 are fostered, whereas the older ones share a house between five or six of

them. But they have lost their families. Teenagers need a family and parental figures. It can be very lonely for them at college. She appealed for families to take part in a pilot project which would consist of inviting two young boys into your home once a fortnight for an evening to give them a taste of family life, human contact and English conversation. She emphasised that training would be provided.

Finally, Joyce Ashworth of the Peace Fellowship led a question and discussion session, which was the opportunity for the audience to ask the speakers any questions. She also shared about the work of Rev. Bob Pounder and the Oldham congregation helping asylum seekers there. Following a lively discussion, the afternoon ended with a reading of Benjamin Zephaniah's poem *We Refugees* by Octagon Chapel member Carol Palfrey. Our grateful thanks go to Carol Chilton and all the other members of the Octagon Chapel who helped make this inspirational day such a success. **SW**



*The interfaith roundel in the Octagon Chapel*

The weekend Peace Conference in Norwich climaxed in a moving act of worship held at Octagon Chapel on Sunday morning, led by Kate McKenna. The children took a central role in enacting an adaptation of a story by Bill Darlison, *How the colours made peace with each other*. A reading – *Pacifism*, written by Sue Woolley – was read by Peace Fellowship committee member Joyce Ashworth. In her address, Kate raised awareness of how, in our daily interactions with others, we subtract from or add to the total of peace in the world, yet leaving all present with an assurance that we are all peace makers. She finished her message by inviting worshippers to come forward to take a paper dove which she asked them to give to someone else. **JA**

## News Round-up

**White Poppies for Peace** made their first appearance on Armistice Day 1933. With the rising domestic and international tensions at the time, concern grew that the war to end all wars, in which so many had died, would now be followed by an even worse war. The white poppy was an expression of that concern, and became a symbol of our inability to settle conflicts without resorting to killing, but more importantly, a symbol of hope and commitment to work for a world where better, more peaceful answers could be found. The white poppy's aim is to promote debate and rally support for resistance to war. More information about them can be found at [www.whitepoppy.org](http://www.whitepoppy.org). [Thanks to the Peace Pledge Union [www.ppu.org.uk](http://www.ppu.org.uk) for this information]

**Womankind Worldwide** we are now half-way through our 2011 appeal year, and the total donated to date (end of October 2011) stands at £1810.25, for which the Committee are very grateful. See the Womankind Worldwide website for more information about the work they do [www.womankindworldwide.org.uk](http://www.womankindworldwide.org.uk). For every pound received, 77p goes directly to development, campaigning and policy work, 9p is spent on support and governance costs, and 14p is invested in fundraising.

**Greetings Cards request:** UPF Committee member, Carol Chilton (contact details on p.8) would be very grateful if you could save all your birthday and Christmas cards to bring to the General Assembly meetings in April, so that she can use them to make attractive cards to sell in order to raise funds for the Fellowship. If you are not planning to attend the GA meetings, please consider passing them to someone in your congregation who *is* attending, so that they can pass them on to Carol.

**Our 2012 Appeal** will be in aid of **Peace Child International**. This is a UK-based charity with the aim of empowering young people to be the change they want to see in the world. They want to help young people to inform themselves and then to take action. The Appeal will be formally launched at the 2012 GA meetings in Keele. Find out more at [www.peacechild.org](http://www.peacechild.org)

# Unitarian Peace Fellowship Vision

Founded in 1916, the Unitarian Peace Fellowship is for all those within our denomination who witness to the belief that war and preparation for war are sins against God and failures of Humanity. We believe that right relationships can only be established through understanding and love. We therefore pledge ourselves to the promotion of goodwill, justice and peace between people and nations.



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