

Meeting God on the mountaintop

It was allegedly the first day of spring when Synod gathered at Ponteland on a wet grey morning — the best kind of day to be cooped up indoors. But as moderator Rowena Francis welcomed us and called us to order we were quickly transported to a very different place as she and other synod members shared their experiences of the Sinai Pilgrimage they made last autumn.

Our opening worship consisted of reflections and images that captured the searing heat of the desert, mixed with prayers from the Orthodox description and pilgrims' stories of the challenges they met on the way.



Anyone inspired by the worship to find their own way to Sinai may like to know that Ruth Crofton, who organised the Pilgrimage, is planning another but slightly different visit this November—and she promises it will be not quite so physically taxing.

Return to Mozambique

The cold wet morning must also have contrasted for our moderator with the warmth of Maputo—for Rowena had only just returned from a five day trip there with Jane Rowell, the URC secretary for world church relations. She described the experience during the closing worship of the day, asking how we relate to their desire to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem—all that was lost in years of warfare.

A Church for young people?

Looking around, it was hard to argue with Simon White's contention that we're out of touch with young people. Where were they?



Ed Butlin, Simon White and John Brown

The three individuals who were leading the session had to be amongst the youngest in the room: Simon himself, who is vicar of Felton and one of the Anglican diocesan youth advisors; Ed Butlin, who is our minister and Simon's close colleague in that part of Northumberland; and John Brown, the URC's Youth Development Officer, who will be spending some of his time in our synod during the coming year.

A few youtube clips soon persuaded us that there is a real gulf between youth culture and where most of us are. Yet we were inclined to believe Simon that while young people cope with change so much better than us, this doesn't mean that they have no interest spirituality.

And when Ed began to tell us some of the things that he and Simon are doing together, like Club Icthus

Her visit was the first step in rebuilding our relations with our global partner, the Presbyterian Church of Mozambique. Rowena met with Ernesto Langa and José Tovela, two of the synod leaders who will be guests at our General Assembly this year, and who will first spend some time with us in Northern Synod.

(Christian nightclub in village halls) and Staying Alive (an annual week's camp for 12 pluses in Seahouses) we were thrilled both for the sake of the young people concerned, and for the good news that churches are able to work together in this kind of way.

John assured us that the Assembly Youth and Children's Committee are there to help and encourage us in this work through a new partnership with synods. And after a short time of conversation in small groups, sharing our own experience of working with children and young people, Catey Morrison closed the morning session by leading synod in prayer—informal and lively prayer, catching the ball before words could be spoken.

As the first i-phone clip had reminded us, nothing's too sure or stable when you're working with, or even praying for, young people and the Church.



Helen's payer: "Thank you God that I've caught this ball..."

Earlier synod clerk John Durell had reminded churches of plans for a visit of young people (18-30 years) to Mozambique around the end of August. He is asking for names of any who may be interested to be sent to him by the end of March: and older people, who will need to be self-financing, may apply too.

1Church: 100Uses



Donald Findley outlined the work of the Agency, which he admitted is more challenging than expected when it was first set up, just before the recession bit. However, he was able to share

some good stories about work being done in other parts of the country, and also give a progress report on a number of situations within our own synod, including Blyth, Gateshead (Brighton Road), Redcar, Ryton, and Sunderland (Stockton Road) where BBC Breakfast recently did some filming. In response to questions Donald explained that some situations were commercially sensitive, but that he was always ready to talk over the phone to people from our churches: synod office has his contact details.

Child Friendly West Denton



The moderator presented the Child Friendly Award to Anita Gillies as representative of West Denton URC—the third church in our synod to receive it.

Trust Report

Trust Secretary James Breslin began his report by pointing out that the Trust was losing a number of directors, and would be looking for replacement to provide the particular skills lacking. He then gave assurance that the Trust listens to Synod and acts only on its behalf: those who at the last meeting asked for greater detail in reporting back had been consulted, although it was clear that not all synod members had the same wishes.

Synod accepted three resolutions: the first outlined how capital sales should

be allocated, largely following procedures already agreed, but now incorporating an element to be paid to the ministers' pension fund in order to meet the requirements of the pensions regulator. The second resolution had to do with the disposal of redundant buildings, and in response to questions James made clear that this was a exceptional procedure that we hoped never to use; and the third noted approval of work being done to formulate a manse policy across the synod.

Ministries & Training

Committee Convenor David Whiting presented a resolution that seemed to take money away from people—but then like a cunning politician he gave it all back. Synod accepted the committee's proposal to end the personal learning grants that were payable to lay people, but in their place make up to £1000 pa available to each Mission Partnership to spend on education and learning. David explained that the money might be spent on small grants for individuals, or to set up courses and events for groups. But, it was emphasised, this is just for lay people—ministers have their own funds to draw on!

Mission4Life

Synod was reminded that there is still more money waiting to be asked for! Dorothy Barker and Catey Morrison shared one of those after-church and after-synod conversations: "We've got all these Mission4Life leaflets, and we've seen the DVD, but we don't really have to do anything more, do we?" Synod was forced to think about how we move from keeping the building decent to really engaging in God's mission. And one of those small mission grants could be just the way to start!



The welcoming new entrance and coffee shop at Ponteland Church — a good gathering place for synod members

Sits Vac



Would you like to be a synod clerk? Previous clerk Peter Clarke came to the microphone to enthuse in particular lay members of synod about the opportunities of service available through the synod. He had greatly enjoyed all that he had been able to do during his years as clerk, and urged everyone to consider whether they might not be able to take over when John Durell retires in a year's time. (And a period of working in tandem from October would be ideal.) There would be other posts to fill too, including communications officer, and the newly designated co-ordinator for LMMRs (local mission and ministry reviews).

Good news all round...

Ministers' ordination anniversaries: Ernest Walters (60), David Welbrock (55), Boris Anderson (65).

David Whiting has accepted a call to the Sunderland Partnership, and David Hebert to North Northumberland (fulltime). Sheelagh White is the new Anglican minister at Oxclose.

Synod looks forward to welcoming its newly appointed Mission and Development Enabler: Jo Merrygold will be moving from Birmingham, where she has been working with the Carrs Lane Project, to take up her post with us in August.