

**R E P O R T**  
**on the meeting of the**  
**INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF UNITARIANS AND UNIVERSALISTS (ICUU)**  
**Montserrat, Barcelona, 5 to 9 November 2005**

**Background**

The ICUU is the international body of *national organisations* (or associations) of Unitarians and Universalists around the world. The ICUU works to promote and develop Unitarianism in those countries where initial interest has been shown in starting a new Unitarian community or where fledgling communities exist. It offers leadership and congregational training and development programmes. It also provides worship and educational material and assists in arranging events and church partnerships that are meaningful to all national associations of Unitarian congregations around the world.

There are currently nineteen member countries (including South Africa) which are full members of the ICUU and there are some provisional and emerging members who will attain full membership in the near future. The Council, ICUU's governing body, meets once every two years and is attended by delegates from each member country. The number of Council delegates allocated to member countries is dependent on the number of individual Unitarians in a country. South Africa is entitled to one delegate.

An executive committee is elected by the Council at its biennial meeting and this committee meets approximately three times in its two-year term.

**The 2005 Council Meeting**

2005 marks the tenth anniversary of the founding of the ICUU in Essex, Massachusetts, USA. (Our late minister, Rev Robert Steyn, was present at that meeting in 1995, ..... a founding father!)

It was decided that the 2005 Council meeting should be a special tenth anniversary celebratory meeting. The venue was the village of Montserrat, in the mountains, above the city of Barcelona, Spain,. This village is primarily the home of an ancient monastery of about a hundred Benedictine monks, old and young, who hold services daily in their very beautiful old basilica. Montserrat is also a popular tourist attraction which offers shopping facilities, restaurants, a pub and a museum, as well as a cable-car ride to the summit of the mountain, where there are some easy walks.

This special celebratory council meeting was not, on this occasion, confined to official delegates but was also open to individual Unitarians who wished to attend. A variety of workshops and discussion groups was offered to delegates, observers and visitors.

**World Unitarian leaders meet to look to the future of Unitarianism - Charting the Future**

A special feature of our anniversary celebration was the holding of an all-day meeting prior to the start of the Council meeting, with the leaders (presidents/chairpersons and general secretaries) of all national member groups. (Normally the leaders do not attend Council meetings, their delegates do). In the context of the theme "**Charting our Future Together**" the leaders were asked to describe their vision of our liberal faith over the next decade and what they felt the ICUU should be doing in the future. It was encouraging to note that the leaders affirmed the three strategic priorities set by the ICUU executive committee previously, namely (1) ministerial and lay leadership training and development, (2) youth development and (3) more effective communication within the organisation and between member groups. ([www.icuu.net](http://www.icuu.net) is the address of the ICUU website and a twice-yearly newsletter is published). It was felt by all that for Unitarianism to become better known, and to become a greater influence in the world, national and congregational organisations should be strengthened through leadership and youth development and the provision of resources (personal leadership skills, educational and worship material, partnering with other congregations etc).

**Some events in 2006**

In July 2006 a theological symposium will be hosted by the Transylvanian and Hungarian Unitarians in Kolozsvár. This will undoubtedly be an event worth attending and if you wish to be there please let me know. The previous symposium of this nature was held in Oxford, UK, in 2001. I was fortunate to have been present and, based on my experience then, I can vouch

for the benefit to be gained by attending the 2006 event. (If you would like to read the report on the 2001 symposium, let me know.)

I have been invited to lead an ICUU weekend retreat in Germany in October. Other typical events that are held from time to time are youth camps, weekend family gatherings and special commemorations of historical events. (Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were to host some special South African Unitarian experience for Unitarians from abroad?? - food for thought?)

### **New members of ICUU**

At this Council meeting **Indonesia** was accorded full membership of the ICUU and **Burundi** was recognised as an emerging member. (The Burundi group has been in existence for about three years and they have a regular attendance of some 25 members at their weekly services.) We also learned of a new Unitarian group that has been formed in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**. Africa now has four Unitarian chalice candles burning: **South Africa, Nigeria, Burundi and Congo**.

### **Regional Groups**

Various members countries, regionally grouped, are now working together to plan and coordinate activities in their regions aimed at strengthening existing Unitarian communities or assisting emerging interest groups. The **Africa Group** consists of Fulgence Ndagijimana of Burundi [Do send him an e-mail just to say 'hello' – he'd love that! Write to librefulgence@yahoo.fr], Rev Jill McAllister of the USA, very dynamic UU minister, international spirit and immediate past-president of ICUU, and me. We will be collating various enquiries received over recent years from individuals in a number of African countries with a view to possibly organising a regional leadership training programme, in 2007.

### **Pilgrimage to a Unitarian "shrine"**

A special and rare feature offered at this Council meeting was a visit to the village of Villanueva. This is the birthplace of Michael Servetus, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Unitarian who was executed just over 450 years ago by John Calvin for opposing the Church's Trinitarian teachings. The home of Servetus in Villanueva is now a well maintained and managed museum, almost a shrine, one might add. There we held a service of commemoration for this brave martyr, after which we processed silently to the local Catholic church where a statue of Servetus stands in the church's garden. On that site we held an early evening candle vigil while the church's huge bells tolled solely and respectfully as we placed hundreds of lit candles at the foot of the statue Of Servetus. What a sacred time that was, very moving and uplifting!

### **Personal Highlights of this Council Meeting and of the time in Spain**

If you've not had the opportunity of spending time at Unitarian meetings abroad, you haven't really experienced Unitarianism! (Now that's a strong statement, coming from the minister of the Cape Town Unitarian Congregation!!) I make that statement confidently and earnestly, fully in the knowledge, that of course South African Unitarianism is as valid and authentic as any Unitarian community elsewhere in the world. Confident too that we have so much to learn - **and to teach** - in overseas gatherings. One always comes away from such events full to overflowing with a sense of being part of the world-wide fellowship of progressive-minded free spirits. These experiences are vital to our continued growth in South Africa for we gain so much knowledge and experience, and make valuable contacts and new friends. It's important for us to personally experience the fact that we are part of an international family!! This was a very significant experience for me in Montserrat, as was the many opportunities I took to just sit and observe, to absorb into my soul, the monks in worship..... their prayers, their singing, their sacred place, all this touched me deeply.... rare moments of divine communion!

### **Conclusion**

I am truly grateful for the experience of being part of the ICUU. I'd really like to make this experience more meaningful to you in the Congregation and to the Fellowships in South Africa so that we can all benefit from this international involvement. Please let me have your comments and suggestions in this regard. Very soon I shall display some photographs in the church of this wonderful event in Monserrat and at Villanueva, which I shall long cherish.

**Gordon Oliver**

**10 November 2005**