

**REPORT ON THE SECOND NATIONAL GATHERING
OF
SOUTH AFRICAN UNITARIANS
CAPE TOWN 11 TO 13 NOVEMBER 2005**

1.0 Background

Some two or three years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association in the USA (UUA) advised us that their president, Rev William Sinkford, intended to visit South Africa in November 2005 and would like to meet South African Unitarians. This seemed like a marvelous opportunity for a gathering of South African Unitarians, at which Bill Sinkford, a wonderful pastor, wise leader and inspiring speaker, would be our keynote speaker.

And so the second gathering of SA Unitarians was held at the beautiful centre of The Christian Community in Timour Hall Road, Plumstead, Cape Town, from Friday evening 11th to Saturday evening, 12th November, culminating in a special service of worship in the church in Hout Street, Cape Town on Sunday morning at 10h 00. This service was conducted by a combined team from the Fellowships of Durban, Johannesburg and Somerset West.

2.0 The Event

Just two weeks before the start of the event, a message was received from the UUA advising that their president was unable to visit South Africa, due to last-minute pressing priority commitments in the USA. At this last moment almost, we were fortunate in being able to secure the presence of Judge Albie Sachs of the SA Constitutional Court as our keynote speaker at our opening session, the eminent South African jurist who, as an anti-apartheid activist in the 1980s, had paid a huge price at the hands of the Nationalist Government's violent suppression of opposition, ending up seriously maimed, and losing his right arm and partial sight in a parcel bomb explosion. What a privilege, what a moving experience, to hear him speak on "The Sacred and the Secular" in the context of his own life's experience!

The opening session, attended by some twenty guests and thirty three delegates from the four centres, was launched by a light buffet supper and fellowship, followed by devotion and music, the lighting of the chalice candle, music provided by the Oxtoby family, and our singing "Gather The Spirit" and "Come Sing a Song with Me", accompanied by Erina Bezuidenhout on the piano - a enjoyable and inspiring evening.

Saturday

The morning was spent focusing on who we are as Unitarians personally, followed by reports from each of the four centres, Durban, Johannesburg, Somerset West and Cape Town. Circle dancing, taught and led by Pat Oliver, provided an enjoyable time for movement and physical expression, after a time of intense discussion. After lunch, there followed a brief presentation by Gordon Oliver on Congregational Development based on the theme "**Small is not weak - Growing from a position of Strength**" in which we looked at those aspects that make for a healthy congregation, namely worship, fellowship, education and outreach. David Mayes, on behalf of the Cape Town Congregation gave a brief outline of the vision/planning process currently underway in Cape Town and a great deal of discussion and sharing followed these presentations. Gordon also reported on the recent ICUU Council meeting held in Montserrat, Spain.

After a second round of circle dancing the afternoon session moved into a discussion on the future, and on how we can work together on a national level to promote Unitarianism in South Africa. Many suggestions and concerns were listed and it was finally agreed that there **is** a need for a national body to be established

which would have the role of focusing on and coordinating a strategy for movement and growth at a national level, and in that process strengthening each centre. Such a body will not affect the autonomy of the centres and will work in accordance with world-wide Unitarian polity of congregational independence and autonomy. The meeting agreed that each centre should appoint one person to be part of a team to take the national dream forward. Notes taken at the Gathering will be pursued by the national steering group and a copy of these will be circulated to all in the very near future. The need for ongoing effective communication and sharing between the centres was recognised and all will be kept fully informed as to developments concerning national goals.

Saturday evening was spent at the Olivers' home in Diep River where we were able to engage in some enjoyable chin-wagging in between the quaffing of wine/beer and munching of pizzas!

Sunday

The National Gathering concluded with a service of worship led by the fellowships of Johannesburg, Durban and Somerset West. This was a very inspiring occasion for all and for the Cape Town Congregation it was a delight to have our friends from the other three centres lead us in worship in our sacred space, a truly historic event in the life of South African Unitarianism!

The Overall Outcome

Over and above the decision to create a national steering group to guide the future of South African Unitarianism it is felt that the time we spent together in fellowship, fun and serious discussion was the most valuable experience of the Gathering. Such an experience can not be measured quantitatively. We were moved in spirit and in truth with a deep love underlying our experience together.

Thanks

Our sincere thanks to all who helped make this occasion meaningful, inspiring and successful.

There was no shortage of helpers at the meeting venue and many Capetonians offered home accommodation and transport to our visitors.

We thank our friends from the three fellowships who made time to journey long distances to Cape Town to be with us. The sharing, discussions and fellowship we experienced together were times of great enrichment and their presence was a blessing to us here, a gift we in Cape Town shall long cherish.

We thank the Millennium Fund at the Essex Hall Unitarian General Assembly Office in London for the financial grant of one thousand pounds that made this Gathering possible. A report on the event will be submitted to them in the near future, and this together with the final financial accounts will be circulated to all delegates at the Gathering.

Our thanks too, to the Christian Community Centre for the use of their sacred space for our Gathering. We have developed a good friendship with Rev Richard Goodall and his secretary, Maria.

Finally, and most happily, we thank our friends in **Durban** for offering to host the next **National Gathering of SA Unitarians in 2007**. We look forward to that with great enthusiasm.

Gordon Oliver