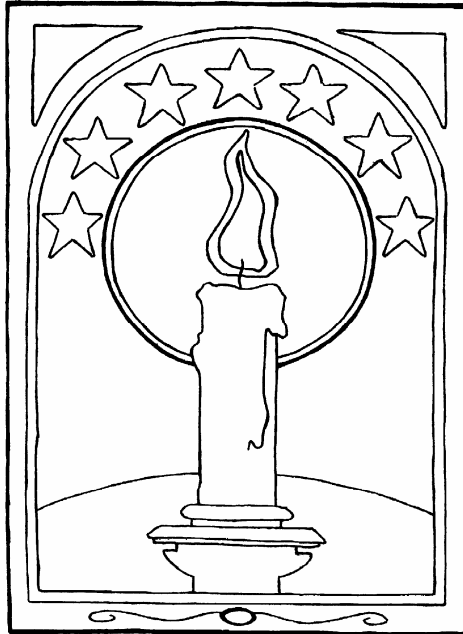


**UNITED REFORMED CHURCH
WALDENSIAN FELLOWSHIP**



Newsletter No. 65

December 2008

December 2008

Dear Friends,

This Advent time summer holidays seem long gone, yet we still have memories of our time in Italy; John Bremner brings us up to date on the *sinodo*; Giusy Bagnato challenges us to share our faith; Massimo Long tells us more of the Turin church's youth project; and we remember with sadness and hope those of our Fellowship who have died this year. There is also a taste of the concerns of the Waldensian and Methodist churches as Christmas approaches.

Wishing you all a joyful and peaceful Christmas and God's blessings in 2009.

Kate Grand

Report from Synod 2008

This year's *Sinodo* at Torre Pellice was not a particularly contentious one. Such debate as there was about "issues" tended to be continuation of previous years' discussions: for example about whether children should be allowed to participate in the communion service, and how religious education is taught in Italian schools.

However, three women were ordained during the opening service, and this, in itself, was something a bit special. Mirella and I were particularly interested in the ordination of Joylin Galapon, from the Philippines. She had been a member of the Milan Methodist Church where I ministered in 2007 and 2008, and Mirella and I got to know her during that period. So when Joylin was assigned to Cremona for her "internship" period, prior to ordination, she had immediate support from Mirella's family, as well as any help I could offer. Two carloads arrived from Cremona in time for lunch and the service afterwards and it was a great pleasure for me to spend time with old friends, as well as to see Joylin join the Corpo Pastorale.

The Monday morning session of Synod included a time set aside to remember those whose ministry or other contribution to the life of the church was of particular importance. The Moderator, Maria Bonafede, included Bill Cowhig in her list of important figures no longer with us, and referred to his lively commitment to links

between the Waldensian and United Reformed Churches over many years. This was not a mere passing reference, but she spoke for several minutes about the Fellowship and its activities and Bill's central role in all that has happened over the past twenty-five years or so. This was yet another reminder, if we needed one, that the Waldensians really do appreciate their links with other churches around the world.

The Ecumenical situation was also on peoples' minds and their thoughts were concentrated by the greeting given by the guest from the Dutch Protestant Church, which included news of ecumenical happenings in the Netherlands. Apparently the secretary of the Dutch Catholic Bishops' Conference referred recently to "the dilemma facing the Protestant churches." "The problem facing the Protestant Churches," said the secretary, "is that they have not yet worked out how to abolish themselves." You can imagine the reaction from Synod!

Business was handled with a firm hand by Alessandra Trotta in the chair, and "recuperi" (Thursday evening's catch up on all outstanding business) finished well before midnight. Friday's voting caused no surprises. Maria Bonafede is held in high regard and is doing an excellent job. All in all a "steady as she goes" Synod – and none the worse for that!

Three further points may be of interest. Firstly, (though you may already know this, of course) the Synod Moderators will be visiting Rome next spring and will meet Maria Bonafede and others involved in ecumenical dialogue. Secondly, a group from Clydebank U.R.C. visited Turin over the weekend at the end of Synod. Alex Cairns, minister at the English Language congregation was at Clydebank many years ago. Interest in the Waldensians was certainly sparked amongst several of those who went. Thirdly, the Church of Scotland ordinands at New College, Edinburgh, will probably be going out to Rome next autumn for a visit. There's a lot of encouraging activity going on!

John Bremner

Showing everyone that the Gospel is the living and active Word

Another of the three women ordained at Sinodo was Giusy Bagnato, whom we failed to meet in Ferrara last June. The Waldensian Church website carried statements from all three. Here is what she wrote in *Riforma* 1st August 2008:

‘I’ve never considered faith as something to take for granted. I grew up in a church in the South whose members attached a great deal of importance to preaching God in their own lives: preaching which would leave tangible signs among people in action and acceptance. I remember my teenage years as the most difficult yet richest time of my life. The questioning, the desire to know, never feeling given sufficient consideration, and wanting to know why in doing good one should draw on faith rather than simply talk of acting in a civil manner.

Today I look at the boys and girls of this generation which is no longer my own and I who am working in two churches without any feel we are failing in an important mission. We lack direct contact with their complex and fascinating world and I think of myself at their age and how I different I would be if the pastor and youth centre that I then went to had not given me the opportunity to express my uneasiness and my doubts sincerely: they were the only spaces where boys and girls, believers in the way you can be at that age – engaged in an honest search – and non-believers alike, were able to feel that God, if there was one, did not judge them because they were different from their parents.

Last year I took part in a seminar in Josefstal in Bavaria. The theme, based on Psalm 78:

“...things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us,
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.”

asked us the question: ***How will we pass on our faith to new generations?***

It seems to me that families no longer know how to tell their stories and that God is relegated to the sphere of 'the sacred and the catechism' of which, for many, the pastor ought 'obviously' to be both mediator and messenger. If that had been my experience I would not be here today.

On the contrary, it was the discovery of the witness that each and everyone shared with me that shaped me. Today I am more aware of my faith: great and difficult moments with this God who always defeats me at dawn at Peniel. I listen to people: many believe they know what the Church is and how it ought to function. Others just do not understand the Church as it is: they see no continuity with the Gospel and live their lives far from 'official' places of worship, seeking communion with the most disparate sorts of people. I reflect. And what if the walls were to disappear? If you were to look around and understand that people are your Church?

Recently I have been working, through discussion and mediation, trying to bring people back to that mission at whose heart the 'simple believer' is no different from the pastor. I have never believed that what we say in places of worship cannot be shared and proclaimed outside, on the contrary: it seems to me to be the meaning of what we ought to be doing. But talking about faith is a scary business these days: it seems that to talk about it there must be official theological terminology. I think not.

Giusy Bagnato

The Youth Project of the Waldensian Church in Turin

A little history

The idea goes back to 2005 when a group of girls and boys from the Waldensian Church in Turin, led by Pastor Dorothea Müller [whom some of us met in Siena in 2006] started work on a project aiming to bring the young people in the church together. The project's originality lay in the concept of working to draw young people together through participation in activities aimed at "putting down roots" in a particular part of Turin. For many years the Waldensian Church in Turin, a single church community blessed with four worship centres, had concentrated its activities associated with accompanying young people on their journey to faith (Sunday

School and catechism classes) and with groups in general providing activities aimed specifically at young people (scouts, youth groups etc.) in premises adjacent to the church in Corso Principe Oddone. Besides following institutional church activities the “Youth Project” had a number of further objectives:

1. Building a rehearsal room for young musicians
2. Organising after school clubs and a series of summer activities for infants, children and adolescents
3. Adapting the existing premises to provide hospitality for young Protestants from other towns and localities both in Italy and abroad so as to be able to organise opportunities for simply meeting together, conferences, sharing projects etc.

Once the main thrust had been defined, the project was presented to the *Assemblea di Chiesa* (church meeting), which approved it and asked the youth group to prepare definitive and detailed plans.

From “dream” to the first steps towards setting up the Project

In 2006 contacts were arranged with the local authorities, especially the Circoscrizione in question (i.e. at ward level) to assess their interest and the possibilities of collaboration for the benefit of the project. The Circoscrizione, responsible for policy in the area where the premises in Corso Oddone are situated, has shown remarkable sensitivity towards our project, so much so that we have been asked to be part of the network of religious and secular associations which are already working with their own projects in that part of the city, so that we can do more work on our own project, taking into account the real needs of the area we wish to work in and the complexities of the social, cultural and religious framework. Moreover through the Circonscrizione we have been able to contact those responsible for youth policies on the Turin council. They have not only shown a great deal of interest in our project but have begun to work with us on defining and firming up the lines the project will take.

The dream is about to become reality

It is now some years since the idea was born in 2005. In the meantime work on the fabric has begun and we are finally about to realise our dream. With the start of 2009 the final phase will begin:

furnishing and equipping the various premises for the activities, some of which will probably start up in the spring. To do this, some time ago the coordinators of the Youth Project began to raise awareness within the church. The project does not just belong to the young people but must be owned by and involve all the church. So a group of volunteers of a variety of ages has been set up, who, according to their competencies and gifts, have begun work on all the practical aspects of the activities envisaged in the plans. It seems to us very important for the young people in our church to be accompanied on a journey that sees them as playing an active role, so as to fulfil their potential through volunteering and gathering together. A church community that becomes community for those who, for various reasons, do not yet have their own community of belonging and support. At the same time we are aware that it is prudent at the beginning to undertake a limited number of activities so as not to be overloaded with work and not 'burn' (*bruciare*) our young people with negative experiences.

Massimo Long

FERRARA -- A Visit to the Jewish Synagogue and Museum

Most of us who visit Italy fairly frequently will be aware that many museums and places of interest either close or are open only briefly on Mondays. This was the case in Ferrara, which the Group visited in June this year. However we did find in this UNESCO World Heritage City that there was a choice of three places to visit that particular June Monday: the Ducal Palace, the Botanic Gardens and the Jewish Synagogue and Museum.

Donald and I chose to visit the latter and were escorted by a well-informed, non-Jewish guide who had fluent English.

The history of the Jews in Ferrara dates from around the year 1000 and continued for the next eight centuries, starting first of all with a tiny settlement, followed by a second near the city walls. From the 15th century Ferrara's Jews lived in the heart of the city, having migrated from Rome, Spain and Germany. In 1492 Duke Ercole 1 d'Este (the head of the ruling family in the area, with a splendid palazzo to match his importance – still intact and very visitable today) welcomed the Sephardic Jews from Spain, whose culture later spread to Venice and most of the Mediterranean areas.

Initially the Ferrara Jews were farmers, physicians and small shopkeepers, later becoming bankers and merchants. During the Renaissance the vast scholarship of the community gained widespread fame through their writers, doctors, scientists, engineers and printers. One such worthy was the author Isacco Lampronti (1678 – 1756) who wrote 'Pahak Izchat' ('The Fear of Isaac'), a Talmudic encyclopaedia of Judaism still known and revered throughout the Judaic world.

In 1626 the Papal government, which had taken over from the ruling Estense family because there were no heirs to continue the line, closed off the city area creating a ghetto with five lockable entrance gates. In one street today a memorial slab marks one of these entrances with a bunch of large, rusty keys on display in the museum.

The ghetto had been a self-contained community housing 1,200 people. There were schools, special bakeries, a hospice for the elderly and rooms for the brotherhoods providing carefully managed assistance for the good of all. Records from the 19th century reveal that of the 340 families present only a handful were wealthy, a dozen well-to-do and the rest had just one meal a day.

The ghetto existed until 1859 when the gates were demolished in the newly-formed Kingdom of Italy. In the 19th and 20th centuries many members of the Jewish community held leading social positions and the liberal thinkers and intellectuals explored new ideas of Zionism.

Our guide explained that within the ghetto there had been three synagogues – German, Italian and one used by Jews from Faro in the Marche area. After the destruction wrought by the Fascists in 1944 the synagogue, now the only one, was rehabilitated by the remaining Jewish community. Their present numbers are now very small, even so the centre provides space for social gatherings, study areas and houses the well laid-out *Museo Ebraico*. The synagogue is rectangular in shape with a central aisle. The men and women sit on benches on separate sides. A Rabbi comes from Turin to take the weekly services. At one time the wall facing a busy street had all the windows blocked to create a blank wall for protection.

The museum contains artefacts such as early engraved tombstones, antique furniture, Torah scrolls with large elaborate containers

engraved and embossed in silver, many Hebrew documents, an Isaac Chair used for infant circumcision, along with delicately embroidered baby boys' ceremonial garments and beautiful silver menorahs.

Altogether Donald and I found this a fascinating and interesting tour.

Pauline M. Hood

One Surprise Follows Another

Our visit to the Abbey of Pomposa was rather like those notices at continental railway crossings – Attention! One train may follow another.

Fortunately the day before we planned to visit the abbey we discovered the train we had thought of taking didn't run on weekdays -- at least that gave us an extra hour in bed. Then on the day itself a brief glance at a large scale map of Italy, before we set off, showed us that the abbey was not in the small town of Codigoro, as inferred by the guide books, but 10km further east.

Not daunted, we set off and the train meandered its way to the end of the single track line to Codigoro. On arrival, not a sign of the towering campanile, nor any directions to the abbey. Help though was at hand in the café bar opposite the station. 'There is a taxi bus – tomorrow!' Further conversation and negotiation ensued and a taxi was arranged to take and return for us. It didn't seem far but we were glad we didn't have to walk along the unshaded road in the hot midday sun.

Although a decorative example of Romanesque art, the photograph in the brochure of the abbey's nave appealed to us far more than the many heavy baroque interiors we had been visiting most days. What we hadn't anticipated were the 14th century frescoes covering the entire interior of the church walls and ceilings.

The first documents relating to the abbey are dated 874 and most of its buildings, as known today, were constructed during the next two centuries to house the community of more than 100 monks; the bell tower being among the last to be completed. Surprisingly, the frescoes were added when the abbey was already in decline, formally closing in the 17th century. A long period of decay and neglect followed, until the property fell under state jurisdiction.

The four sections of the patterned nave floor are a mixture of mosaic and marble inlays in calming, subdued colours. Three formed the floor of the monks' choir, whose perimeter was discovered in recent excavations. One of these is considered to be of 6th century origin, probably brought from Ravenna; the remainder 8th century. Though the frescoes are not attributed to any well-known artist they are of the same quality and are arranged in 3 levels around the nave walls. The upper level shows scenes from the Old Testament; the middle ones from the New Testament; the lower from the Apocalypse. In the apse the Blessing Christ and the heavenly crowds face the Last Judgement on the opposite façade. Fake marble geometric decoration fills other spaces. Sadly, mostly fragments or much deteriorated frescoes are left in the remaining buildings. Fascinated by the interior it is easy to overlook the brickwork and contrasting stone pillars, in particular the detail and construction of the bell tower and atrium.

Did you know that it was here at Pomposa, in the 11th century, that Guido d'Arezzo, a monk at the abbey, created the musical notation with which musicians are now so familiar? Yet another surprise.

Edward Sheldrake

Advent Collection for *Il Gignoro*

7th December this year was *Domenica della Diaconia*, a day when Waldensians and Methodists throughout Italy focus on aspects of their social work in worship and through their giving. This year the worship centred on mobility and helping the elderly live a fuller life and the funds are going to *il Gignoro*, the home for the elderly in Florence, which some of our membership visited two years ago, towards a new minibus complete with air conditioning and easy access for passengers and wheelchairs.

Il Gignoro has been in existence for 40 years and at present houses about 80 residents. It offers personal, medical and nursing assistance, rehabilitation therapy and leisure activities for its residents and also runs a day centre, home help services for those still in their own homes, a day centre for those with Alzheimer's, a day centre which provides respite care on Sundays and holidays, such as New Year and Easter, for elderly people who live with their families, and a lunch club which serves that area of Florence.

The new minibus will bring new life and mobility to the housebound, bringing them to the day centres and taking them out on trips.

The website (chiesavaldese.org) quotes comments and anecdotes by some of the elderly – memories of Friday morning visits to villages round Florence, enjoying a meal out and the opportunity to buy something to take home by someone who no longer dares go out alone; going out for a pizza or lunch in the open air; bad memories of a car breaking down and the difficulty of getting into the old minibus: ‘I’d rather have stayed at home.’

Three years ago a trip to a Modigliani exhibition involved a walk through the historic centre of Florence. One woman, passionate about art, was so happy she said she could now die content.

On another occasion two elderly people were getting married and a group from the day centre went to the wedding in the town hall. That day there was snow in Florence – a rare event! – and their minibus was not allowed into the piazza. ‘But who holds out wins’ and they all made it to the *Sala rossa* in the *Palazzo Vecchio*!

Mosques and Religious Freedom

This month Maria Bonafede has written about the concern felt by Protestants, ‘*laici*’ (those who support full independence of the state from ecclesiastical authority), and many Catholics too, at the recent announcement by the Lega Nord of a moratorium on the building and opening of new mosques. This is a further manifestation of the prejudice, widespread in Italy as elsewhere in the West, which sees every Muslim as a potential terrorist and every Islamic centre as an active base of fundamentalism, a prejudice that cuts across party lines and is not limited to any one party or coalition. Yet such measures, which may prevent a faith community worshipping freely according to their own rites, are openly against the letter and spirit of the Constitution.

(“All religious confessions are equally free before the state”, Art.8)

She points out that this is only true for some faith communities. The Waldensians are covered by an agreement, even if they have been waiting 8 years for a parliamentary vote on a tiny amendment to give

them access to their full entitlement to the Otto per Mille. Yet they feel that the cultural and political battle for freedom of worship for Islam is one they must share.

The new measures are proposed in the name of law and order: but the state already has powers to deal with criminal and deviant behaviour in any community without cracking down on the whole community. This is true for paedophilia, collusion with the mafia, physical violence or tax offences.

She recognises the influence of Islam for good and ill in the West. She sees these attempts to limit Islamic freedom of expression as fear of religious pluralism, born of a vision of Italy as wholly and eternally catholic, if not in conscience and behaviour, at least in the outward appearance of public symbols. "But aren't we the country of crucifixes and, if nothing else in this time of Advent, of nativity scenes?"

Waldensians must support the Muslims in their struggle, she says, and defend the values of 'laicity' and pluralism in 2008 Italy that are in danger of being sidelined. Whether it's happening to Muslims or Jehovah's witnesses today, as it happened to Jews, Pentecostals, or Waldensians and Methodists in the past, makes little difference.

Kate Grand

The Revd Arthur Macarthur 1913 – 2008

The Fellowship was honoured that Arthur Macarthur agreed to be its President. He was one of the great figures of the United Reformed Church, indeed of the wider church. Born in 1913 and ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1937, he served local churches before being called to be General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of England in 1960. He had a decisive role in the bringing together of Congregational and Presbyterian Churches in England and Wales, which led to the formation of the United Reformed Church in 1972. He was General Secretary of the new church until 1980 and played a prominent part in ecumenical activities.

Arthur was not just a distinguished figurehead for the Fellowship; he had a deep commitment to the relationship with the Waldensian Church. Here was one of the people who built the United Reformed Church, and a major figure in the churches' ecumenical life, but was willing to enjoy these simple visits to local churches in Italy. He was a President who, with Esmé, tolerated the austerities of Sicily in 1988 and inspired us with his preaching in Rome and epilogues at reunions in Barnes Close and Leeds. Others can record more fully his contribution to the life of the church, but we must record his gift to the Waldensian Fellowship

His account of three weeks at Prali in 1948, labouring in the building of Agape, was an example of his vision. How he knew about Tullio Vinay's vision is unclear, possibly through Iona or possibly through the Presbyterian Church's long-standing contact with the Waldensian Church. Whatever the reason, here was a young minister committing time and energy to an international ecumenical venture – and going from Agape to the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam.

Agape is a physical expression of Tullio Vinay's vision; Arthur recognised its development in Servizio Cristiano at Rieti and at Corrymeela in Ireland. All are initiatives which continue work of reconciliation. The Fellowship enjoyed Arthur's wise counsel and the stories from his long and productive life; we can continue to live by his example of the practical and visionary, enjoying the world in which we live.

George Morton

Hywel Evans 1930-2008

All will be sad to hear of the death of Hywel in early September. Hywel and his late wife, Gwen, had been active members of the Fellowship for many years and travelled to Italy with our group on several occasions. They had also given hospitality to an Italian group in their church at Penmaenmawr, near Conway and they had been in a small group of us who had attended an International Week at Agape in 2001.

Hywel had continued to travel with us after being widowed and we knew that if he took 'morning prayers' then it would be special and thought-provoking. Many were not aware that he was a theology graduate who had pursued a very successful career in education.

Even though he had held senior positions in Higher Education, his love of teaching resulted in him completing his career as a Head teacher in Conway. He had over the years assumed various responsibilities nationally (in Wales) and was the first Chairman of the newly established Curriculum Council for Wales; for his service to education in the principality, he was awarded the OBE.

The Fellowship was represented by Ruth Cowhig, Kate Grand and I at his funeral in Penmaenmawr. We heard of the very considerable involvement he had in his local church as an Elder and as a staunch ecumenist and of course, in his responsibility for a Youth Group that he had worked with up until this summer. He worked actively for Christian Aid locally. He will be sadly missed not only by his own church community but particularly by his family.

Our thoughts and prayers go out to the family at this time.

Yvonne Jones

Memories of Bill

It was very great sadness that the many people in the Waldensian and Methodist churches in the Valleys and various Italian towns who know the Waldensian Fellowship heard of the death of William Cowhig (for most known as Bill) in Sale in the North of England on 1st May this year.

William Cowhig constantly and actively supported his wife Ruth in the conception and development of the Waldensian Fellowship that came into being in 1980 (thanks also to their meeting with Pastor Achille Deodato) with the aim of establishing and maintaining contact between the United Reformed Church in Great Britain and the Waldensian and Methodist Church in Italy, not only between clergy and staff of those churches but especially between the members of individual churches. The bond between the two churches has been expressed these 27 years through regular exchange visits from Italy and Great Britain which have led to a deepening of awareness at the level of faith and have forged links of enduring friendship.

In passing on the sad news of William Cowhig's death I have spoken to a variety of people and, drawing inspiration from their words and the different meetings I have had with the Cowhigs, I would like to sketch some memories.

First and foremost what is remembered about William Cowhig is the kindness and affability with which he, together with his wife Ruth, welcomed each group that came from Italy. It was with the same affectionate courtesy that a welcome was extended to individual visitors or students eager to improve their English by spending some time in England. The Cowhigs went out of their way to find families who could offer them hospitality and kept in touch with them during their stay, helping them to settle in. But above all many people have very vivid memories of the great interest and attachment that William Cowhig showed towards the Waldensian Church, every aspect of which he followed by reading *Riforma* and watching *Protestantesimo*. Whenever a subject struck him as being of particular interest he had no hesitation in requesting further information.

I particularly remember two occasions. In 2005 after reading in *Riforma* a review of the play 'Il Paese delle Querce' (The Village of the Oaks) performed by 'la Compagnia delle Querce di Rorà' (the 'Rorà Oaks Company', he asked for the text to be sent him so he could read it and perhaps translate it into English. On the occasion of the bonfire of 16th February 2006, organised by the Waldensian Church in Torre Pellice with talks by various people, he asked for copies of the talks to hand out to those who were interested.

His excellent knowledge of Italian allowed him to translate into English a number of articles that had appeared in *Riforma* and especially Pastor Tullio Vinay's book 'L'Amore è più grande' (in English 'Love Never Fails')

Lastly, I remember the determination and courage with which he continued to maintain contact with various Italian friends in spite of his health problems of the last few years. Last July, when the Italian group was on a visit to the UK, he had no hesitation in facing the journey with Ruth from Sale, where he lived, to the Lake District where the group was spending a few days.

We are grateful to him for all he has given us and wish to assure Ruth that we keenly share her grief and with her we share the hope with which certainty of resurrection in Christ fills our hearts.

Lucetta Geymonat

Visit of the Italian Group in July 2009

We were pleased to hear that Massimo Long is once again to bring a group to visit us next July. We are intending to base his visit in the south and Midlands as he intends travelling through Stansted Airport. Recent visits have been to the North of England and Scotland and as some people regularly travel with the Group, a different region is an advantage. It is intended that the Group complete their visit together in a residential centre.

Further details will be available at our Biennial Gathering at Hinsley Hall.

Yvonne Jones

Membership subscriptions

The subscription rate is £5 for one year or £10 for three years. A note is enclosed for those members whose subscriptions have expired. The membership records are held by the Treasurer, George Morton, who should be informed of any change of address.

32nd German Protestant Kirchentag

Bremen 20th – 24th May 2009

“Mortal, where are you?”

2009 is a special year: 70 years since the outbreak of World War II; the Federal Republic of Germany is 60 years old and it is 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Reason enough to engage with bold questions about freedom and responsibility.

Full details from Revd Robin Blount: 01303 250 028.

39th INTERNATIONAL ECUMENICAL CONFERENCE

at Cluj-Napoca ROMANIA

27th July – 3rd August 2009

“A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH”

A chance to meet and know Christians from various churches, cultures and nations; experience daily prayers and services in different traditions and languages; take part in workshops and visits, including one of the most ancient monasteries in Romania.

Details from Revd Cynthia Hardiman,
29 Kent Place, South Shields NE34 6PU
Tel: 0191 456 1643 or Kate Grand

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