

## German Unitarians' Religious Fellowship General Meeting, Kassel, Pentecost 2011



### "Seeking the Future? Welcome to the New Land"

- A report by Rev John Clifford

The German Unitarians held their *biennial General Meeting* in Kassel over the long Pentecost weekend. 200 adults (including 64 delegates from 19 congregations) and 25 children stayed in a 4-star Ramada hotel, which provided an excellent range of facilities. As usual, they put all their formal business into the first day with programme options for the non-delegate participants; they had a theme ("Seeking the Future? Welcome to the New Land") running through the whole programme; there was an active children's programme; a social/cultural evening the last full day; a half-day outing to local sites (Kassel was one of several seats of court in the 13<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century); and a small (by our standards) exhibition area. They also have a Quiet Room. New this year was a panel podium discussion on 'Freedom of Thought' with outside experts representing non-dogmatic-religious, humanist, Unitarian and human rights movements.



*Left: The logo, with its artist*

Also new were thematic discussion circles [islands] in the same room which participants could visit briefly, listen, discuss, or write down an idea/argument (for later evaluation) and then move on. Before breakfast singing and Tai Chi were on offer and after breakfast there were daily 'Celebrations'. Their business agenda included a discussion about their formal name (German Unitarians' Religious Community) and their logo could be taken for an old Nordic rune, much like an asterisk enclosed in a circle.

As 'religion' is a word that puts some people off, especially younger people, many argued

that this word should be dropped or replaced. In the end the decision was very Unitarian: a working group was set up to look at the logo and report back at the next GA meeting. Actually the website contains four logo examples, but in the interim period to the next GA, the local groups are requested to decide whether they don't use the logo at all, or use it discreetly.



A **Kassel Declaration** about their history and organisation was issued which they hope will finally put to rest lingering Anarchistic-Anti-fascist protests about their past. Naturally, elections also took place. Their 3-person Presidency required a search for a new member, which successfully brought in a younger person.

Highlights of the meeting for me were: -

- the opening and closing theme presentations by a very talented wordsmith, with her own illustrations projected on the wall while she spoke;

- two plenary celebrations involving 30 and 15 minutes of drumming by almost everyone, led by an incredibly energetic musician/dancer;

- the main worship event led by **Eric Hausman**, a UU minister working with them for the past 2 years;

- and the children's presentation of the Jungle Book story, on which they had been working for 6 months!

In addition, there were various discussion groups and panels and during the opening (non-business) plenary the international guests were welcomed and an *ICUU Founders Award* was presented to **Wolfgang Jantz**, known to almost everyone involved in international Unitarian circles.



**Wolfgang Jantz (left) receives his award from Rev. John Clifford.**

International visitors were asked to come with a 3-minute speech describing their community as an animal that might live in this new Land, an island discovered after a very difficult and stormy journey. Descriptions ranged from birds and a yeti to cats. I described the GA as a Scottish wildcat: not easily herded, not often sighted but it still managing to mate from time to time with domestic cats, fully using its nine lives to survive, usually landing on its feet when challenged, and with its spotted and striped coat representing congregations that shared a common identity even when cooperation was difficult.

The Kassel congregation acted as local host for the Meetings. It is the largest congregation, with some 120 members and their own Meeting House, whose office also hosts the national Secretariat. German Unitarians are an entirely lay led democratic community; for the past two years Eric Hausman has been acting as "mentor" to congregation and denomination but he is now on his way back to America. The age profile of German Unitarians is similar to the British, although participation in, and leadership of, their Biennial Meeting presents a much younger profile.

The 2013 Biennial is likely to be in Hamburg, and they are hoping for a much greater international involvement, perhaps even assisted by live interpretation into English.

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