

## **Belfast Non-Subscribers host international conferences**

Two highly successful international conferences took place at the historic *First Presbyterian Church* in Rosemary Street, Belfast from 24-26 July 2008. The **European Liberal Protestant Network (ELPN)** met on 24 July with a welcome from the *Rev. Colin Campbell* and talks by the *Rev. Chris Hudson* (The Liberal Dilemma: Propaganda or Dialogue?) and *Dr. Szabolcs Czire* (Liberal spiritual capital on the religious market: Insights from the theory of religious economy). These were followed by an open meeting to consider the position of the ELPN within the IARF (see below). The conference was rounded off with an open forum led by BBC NI presenter William Crawley, and a welcoming reception in the Great Hall to which members of the Northern Ireland council of Churches and other representatives of local religious communities were invited.

The Europe and Middle East Chapter (EME) of the **International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)** met on 25 and 26 July. The *Rev William McMillan* delivered a most stirring opening address on the relevance and importance of interfaith work. Speaking as one who had lived through decades of terrorism, he was able draw upon his experiences, which included his involvement with Lagan College. Workshops considered Middle Eastern reconciliation (led by IARF Council member *Dr. Shlomo Alon* from Israel), truth and reconciliation (*Rev. Sándor Máthé*) and ELPN action plans. Conference organiser *Rev. Wytske Dijkstra* addressed the subject “Religion in the public space” and *Rev. Lena Cockroft* spoke about Lagan College (initially founded with financial help from IARF and the Remonstrant Fellowship of the Netherlands, an IARF member group). After lunch the participants were given an open-top bus tour of Belfast. This brought home some of the enduring realities of the sectarian troubles as we viewed the peace line and other reminders of the conflict.

Back at Rosemary Street the *Rev. Ivo de Jong* delivered a remarkable illustrated lecture “The Spirit beyond Theology”. Ivo demonstrated the depth of spirit in the music of Van Morrison and various artists. After dinner the conference resumed with a most able presentation from *Dr. David Stevens* of the Corrymeela Community entitled “The Land of Unlikeness: Explorations into Reconciliation”.

Day two of the IARF conference commenced with diverse workshops. I chose to attend the *Rev. Tina Geels’* group to consider the future of IARF EME. This was most productive and resulted in Wolfgang Jantz and Gudrun Hahn offering to organise a similar conference in Frankfurt next year. *Dr. Árpád Szabó*, Bishop of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, delivered a well-received paper “Our common challenge: IARF, its purpose and future”.

The final speaker was the IARF’s new President, *Thomas Mathew*, from Kerala State, India. Thomas advised of the current reforms of the IARF with its office move to Osaka, Japan, the Young Adult Conference to be held in Jordan in August, the Human Rights Education programmes in India and the Philippines and of preparations for the IARF World Congress to be held in Kerala in September 2010. Rev. Nigel Playfair, minister of the hosting congregation at 1st church, led the closing worship..

All Souls Church provided a splendid dinner and social event on the final evening. This included traditional Irish folk dancing with local participation from both sides of the religious divide. Many of the conference members attended worship at All Souls the next morning to a service led by Chris Hudson and to listen to the guest preacher Tina Geels.

These meetings marked an important revival in the IARF's European activities. Our Irish hosts gave us great warmth of hospitality and generous sustenance. The Rev. Nigel Playfair and his First Presbyterian Church members worked tirelessly to meet our needs, and many of the conference members attended worship the following morning at one of the churches of the hosting Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. The organisation by *Wytske Dijkstra* and *Adrian Moir* was most effective, and it was well supported by a diverse attendance. There was real enthusiasm for next year's conference.

*Report by Jeff Teagle*



**Thomas Mathew & Wytske Dijkstra**





**Bishop Árpád Szabó**



**Shlomo Alon**



**David Stephens**



**Tina Geels**



**Szabolcs Czire**



**William Crawley**



**Nigel Playfair**



**Lena Cockcroft**



**Bill MacMillan MBE**

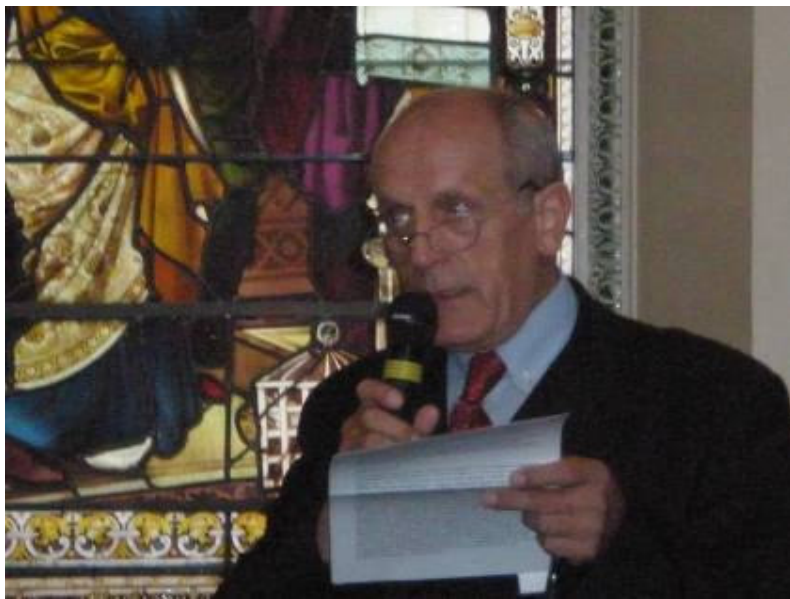


**Chris Hudson MBE**



**Wyske Dijkstra**

**Sándor Máthé**



**Ivo de Jong**





**Ye typical workshope**



***Ceilidh!***





**William Crawley, Chris Hudson & Nigel Playfair**



**On the tour bus**