

Synod Tour Brings Generations Together

In June retired minister Al Winn and his grandson, John Ellis, participated in the Mid-Atlantic Synod's first Grand Expectations tour to Great Britain. Here is their account of the experience.

When I found in my presbytery packet a flier from the Older Adult Ministries Committee of the Mid-Atlantic Synod, I was intrigued. It advertised "Grand Expectations" — a two-week trip for grandparents and grandchildren.

A grandfather, I had experienced the death of my wife a few months earlier, and was needing to reach out to my grandchildren, to channel to them some of the love and affection of which she had been the object for 55 years.

The design seemed ideal: nine grandparents, nine grandchildren, two leaders. I thought immediately of my teen-age grandson. He would be bored stiff to go with me alone, but with other kids to pal around with, it would be great. And if the proposed activities were too much for me, I could stay put and he could go with the group. Unfortunately, he had conflicting engagements.

Imagine my delight when another grandson, John Ellis, in his twenties, turned out to be eager to go. Although the planned number of grandparent-grandchild pairs did not sign up, the trip went anyway, and I feel fortunate that it did.

We spent the first week quartered at a retreat center of the United Reformed Church in the beautiful English Lake Country. We worshiped in a URC church our first Sunday, and got to know something of this church, a sister-church in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which bears its witness in a land dominated by

the Church of England.

We also did a great deal of walking: "public footpaths" are found in great numbers throughout the region, leading up mountains to gorgeous views or along the shores of beautiful lakes. We visited sites connected with William Wordsworth, John Ruskin, Beatrix Potter and George Fox, the Quaker founder.

The second week we traveled in Scotland, where even the Queen, when she visits, becomes Presbyterian. On Sunday we worshiped in Edinburgh, at St. Andrews and St. George's Church, served by the newly-elected moderator of the Church of Scotland, Andrew McLellan, and heard him preach. Then to such historic Presbyterian sites as the John Knox House and St. Giles Cathedral.

Throughout both weeks we were on the track of the Celts, who brought Christianity to Scotland. We visited Lindisfarne and Iona, two of the earliest centers of Celtic Christianity. We got acquainted with Celtic spirituality, which links a life of constant prayer to the most ordinary, routine actions of everyday life.

As John and I hiked together, rode the bus together and roomed together for two weeks, we were able to get to know each other in ways far beyond the connections we had made in Christmas-time visits and

other occasions when we were always part of a larger family group.

The other members of the tour formed a supportive matrix in which our growing friendship could blossom. And the study of Celtic Christianity prompted us to have long talks about our own faith that might never have happened otherwise. The visit to Iona was the highlight for both of us and our dream is to get back there somehow for a longer stay.

— Albert C. Winn

How grateful I am to have had the opportunity to visit Scotland and England with my grandfather, Al Winn, and the rest of the Grand Expectations crew. Many happy circumstances afforded me this chance.

First, I had been burning myself out in a whirlwind one-year teaching position in

New Orleans, and desperately needed a vacation. After repeatedly mentioning to my grandfather my intentions of taking a break, he informed me of the possibility for this trip. The loss of my grandmother in February was hard for all of us, and I needed to feel close to my family and especially my grandfather. And with amazing luck, the trip corresponded exactly with my move from New Orleans to New York.

My normally over-stuffed calendar was empty!

My expectations were actually very few. My one real hope was to get some quality time with my grandfather. His life of service is an inspiration, and he's one of my most important role models. Unfortunately, I haven't managed to spend a lot of time with him one-on-one, and this trip gave us that chance as never before.

The beautiful landscapes inspired us, and we all came alive in that way that only happens in nature. The Farne Islands were particularly inspiring for me. I've never seen so many birds in my life, and how can you not be charmed by seals? My grandfather and I really felt moved by the holiness of Iona, and praying with him there is something I'll never forget.

Things never turn out exactly as you expect them to. There weren't as many grandparent/grandkid pairs as was hoped, and we may not have accomplished all that we set out to. But it seems to me that often the real joy comes from those things you



Grand Expectations Tour 2000 participants Al Winn, his grandson John Ellis and tour leader Elaine Handley (l-r).

Our hope is in no other save in Thee

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The PC(USA) and the China Christian Council

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they have gone where they wished and talked with those that they wanted to meet. Jean and Franklin Woo have led scores of travel seminars throughout China. I have visited 11 former mission stations including Xuzhou, where I lived as a boy. Retired missionaries or their children have visited most of the centers where Presbyterians had work and have been warmly welcomed.

With such a host of encounters by so many diverse groups over the past 20 years, the scenario of an apostate public church and a true underground church simply does not make sense. But are there divisions among the Christians in China? Yes, but it would be more accurate to describe these as the registered churches and churches resisting government registration. Other divisions in the countryside are the result of not having enough trained leaders to keep up with the rapid growth of the church. Consequently, strange new sects and doctrines have emerged.

Is there persecution of Christians in China? Yes, there is. This is something we should not take lightly. Although religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitution, the implementation of this has been uneven in areas where an extreme "leftist" cadre are still in control. The China Christian Council did not deny that persecution has taken place. They did deny: (1) that the systematic persecution of Christians was a national policy and (2) that the China Christian Council had taken part in the harassment of churches which refused to register, as some critics have charged. Rather they have protested with some success incidents when Christians had been persecuted.

Problems abound for the leadership of the church in China. They walk a fine line between governmental pressures on one side and the needs of a diverse Christian constituency which has only recently emerged from the terror of the Cultural Revolution on the other. They need our prayers and encouragement more than our criticism.

Professor Diane Obenchain, visiting professor of religion at Peking University for the last 12 years, is in a unique position to serve as an objective observer of the religious scene. In her Neumann Lectures at Princeton Seminary in April, 1999 she has

the following observations to make:

*As one observer on the scene in China today . . . I think the news from China with regard to the Christian church is largely good . . . Rather than discourage with constant rounds of condemnation, especially when it is not we who face the huge task of reform and reconstruction to the extent that they do, could we not say one nice thing? . . . This is not to say that there aren't negatives. There are persecutions of innocent people, but I would insist that we on the outside do not always know all the reasons why. China is a complex culture and has a complex recent past . . . My point is this: let us not dwell only on the negatives, let us look also to the positives, which I think are potentially a larger, better part of the picture of Christian life in China than the negatives.**

Here is good advice for those of us on the outside who would like to help. □

**Diane B. Obenchain, "Revelations of the Dragon: Observations on Christianity and Ru [Confucianism] in China Today," Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Vol. XXI, No. 2, p. 194.*

G. THOMPSON BROWN and his wife, MARDIA, of Decatur, Ga., were longtime PC(USA) missionaries to Korea. This past summer they received Presbyterians for Renewal's Bell-Mackay Prize.

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can't plan — the little miracles that happen daily when a group of people are in community with each other. If the success of our trip were to be judged by these little miracles, I think it exceeded even the grandest of expectations.

— John Ellis

Grand Expectations 2001 takes place July 9-20 and is limited to 14 persons. Participants may be related by family or friendship, and must be at least 14 years old. For more information contact Jan McGilliard, associate for older adult ministries, at 540/552-3233 or by e-mail at jmcgill@bev.net or visit the Mid-Atlantic Synod Web site at www.synatlantic.org and click on "Older Adult Ministries." □

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