



BURG – Occasional Paper No 10  
**BURG - the journey**  
A personal reflection by Margaret Jarman

**Beginnings**

Prayer and Action was the theme for my Baptist Union Presidential year and since I had found retreats very fruitful in my own journey in God, it seemed a good idea to lay on a retreat towards the end of that year so that if there were those who wanted to try one there would be something to offer them. From that hesitant step things seemed to take on a momentum of their own – or rather, of God. People did indeed want to try a retreat so I kept adding another one to the programme to keep up with demand. In the end there were six retreats linked with that presidential year.

The first such retreat was in November 1987 at Holland House, a retreat centre in Worcestershire. At that time I had been on courses for retreat leaders, but had never led a retreat myself or even shared in the leadership of one - and I led it on my own. We should not dream of doing it that way now but at that time I did not know of anyone else in the denomination who did this sort of thing. At the close of that retreat, in discussion, the response was *“You can't stop now. What will happen when your year is over? You must plan for retreats to continue”*.

Among that group of retreatants were Pam Neville and John Rackley, both of whom immediately offered to share in exploring some way of continuing retreats in the denomination.

Pam worked in the Baptist Union ministry office, and when Bill Hancock, the Secretary for Ministry, heard of this initiative he offered to sponsor a meeting to carry it further.

So it was that on 17th December 1987 Pam, John, Bill and I met in his office at Baptist Church House, London to set up some means of offering an ongoing programme of retreats.

My notes of that meeting record that the purpose would be :

- a) to organise conducted retreats, and later on individually guided retreats;
- b) to share news and information about retreats through a bulletin and by circulating the annual ecumenical retreat journal *The Vision* (now *Retreats*);
- c) to provide retreat conductors by keeping a list of who was available and by encouraging possible leaders to go on the ecumenical training courses.

The title of the organisation would be the Baptist Union Retreat Group. The emphasis was to be on organising retreats (with an AGM held after one of the retreats) but not to have a highly organised structure or a lot of meetings. It would be led by a Steering



Group (comprising Pam, John and myself and three others to be invited: Ron Ayres, Barry Vendy and Michael Walker. It would be linked with the Baptist Union via the ministry office and with other denominational retreat groups via the (then) National Retreat Centre.

Ron, Michael and Barry all readily accepted the invitation to join the Steering Group. At its first meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1988, again in Bill's office, there was a wide ranging discussion in which all shared enthusiastically in the vision. Arrangements were made to launch BURG at the forthcoming Assembly, and to start a programme of retreats in 1989. The Steering Group itself would have a retreat together in September 1988 at Wantage, John Rackley became secretary, Pam Neville treasurer, and I, chairman. Two bulletins a year would be produced. Subsequently John White was invited to edit the bulletin, and then to join the Steering Group.

For the first BURG retreat in February 1989 we returned to Holland House.

It was to have been led by Michael Walker, the most experienced among us in leading retreats and in the whole field of spirituality.

I was responsible for the administrative side of the retreat so arrived early only to receive a phone call from Michael to say that he was ill and could not come. With a quick change of plans I led the retreat and Pam Neville came to help.

Sadly this was the first indication of what proved to be Michael's terminal illness, and in August he died. It was a great loss to the leadership of the fledgling BURG and we still miss his wisdom and experience.

The fund established in Michael's memory was given to BURG and provides us with a valuable financial backup. Financial support had also come from the BU who primed the pump with an annual grant for the first few years.

The first AGM was held at Holland House at the conclusion of that first retreat, and already we had 143 members and 5 retreats arranged for 1989.

## **Developments**

Of the developments of BURG's first five years, three were already seen in that preliminary meeting in 1989. Individually guided retreats (IGRs) were added to the annual programme from 1990.

The training of leaders for retreats and quiet days gradually evolved into a scheme with two prongs, using ecumenically run courses and offering experience as helpers at BURG retreats. What felt at first like something happening within our own denomination turned out to be part of a movement of God throughout the Church.



Ecumenically the National Retreat Centre was in process of rebirth to meet the widespread growth of interest in retreats. BURG thus became one of the five founder members of the National Retreat Association launched in October 1989. This enabled us to take an active part in the wider retreat scene alongside Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, United Reformed and later also the Quakers.

In the realm of spirituality we find that, as Archbishop Michael Ramsey said, "In a depth below doctrinal thought and structure, heart speaks to heart".

In 1991 the AGM was moved from its spot at the end of a retreat and developed into a Saturday day conference. This is held in various places around the country and allows for the exploration of subjects of common interest linked with retreats.

The theme of the first day conference was Spiritual Direction, and this touched off a response in many places. To advise enquirers, a list of directors was started. Training in spiritual direction was added to the training scheme, again encouraging trainees to use courses offered ecumenically and giving experience as part of a team to those who felt drawn to be spiritual directors in IGRs.

Discussion at the 1991 day conference showed interest in the idea of a Rule of Life. There was a desire to explore what it means within our own tradition, so the Steering Group were asked to do some work on this.

They met at Burford Priory, Oxfordshire and produced what came to be called the Burford Covenant. After road testing it for a year it was printed and offered for use by any who found it helpful.

Whether this is where the Burford Covenant will continue, or whether it will develop further in any direction is as yet an open question.

Over these years BURG has been led by the same Steering Group reappointed en bloc by the AGM each year, the only change being early on when Will Thompson was added after the death of Michael Walker.

The Group showed a commitment to and enthusiasm for the work which meant that there was an excellent lead given. It also welded together the seven people into a group which enjoyed working together and came to find mutual support in the open relationships which developed.

The flipside of this was that it could become an exclusive and excluding group, so plans were made to force changes in the leadership of BURG. The rules were altered to encourage new blood into the Steering Group and at the 1994 AGM this brought in Jenny



Haymes and Brian Howden. As well as withdrawing from the Steering Group in 1994 I resigned from the Chair in 1993 and was replaced by Barry Vandy.

The little barque that was pushed out tentatively and found itself caught up in the current of God's purpose has become a flotilla of little ships sailing on the tide of God in wider seas.

## **Reflections**

BURG was setup in order to provide retreats. Without retreats there would be no BURG. Retreats are occasions to journey on in God. They are God-given and God-used. In them we see His hand. They are increasingly used by Him in our time. But they are still only a means.

“Encourages the life of prayer and silence” is a phrase which appears on our notepaper and other literature. It expresses what we are about.

Silence is a way of being open to God. It is not the only way to pray but it is a way which we find God uses. And there is not enough of it in individual, church or denominational life. So we want to offer the opportunity for it in silent retreats. But it is only a means.

Prayer is at the centre of BURG's raison d'etre. We emphasise the importance of prayer. We encourage space for a variety of ways of praying, some of which are new to many Baptists. But do not let us get hooked up on methods of prayer, or even prayer itself.

Whether prayer is in silence or words, or for that matter singing or tongues or any other way, these are only the means, they are the shell which will sometimes hold a meeting with God.

What matters is that we actually do business with God; that we pick up what He is saying; that we change in response to it; that we carry on the lifetime's work of opening more and more layers of our being to Him; that we let Him mould us into His likeness; that we glorify Him in worship and life; that we move on in our trust in Him until we are abandoned to Him, until our daily lives are infused with His love.

This is the exhilarating journey in which we are engaged. It is the end to which retreats, quiet days, spiritual direction, prayer, silence and many other things are a means. And just as BURG began and developed by moving on with God, so do we journey on as individuals.



## **Journeying on**

This applies also to BURG's own continuing journey. The object of the enterprise lies beyond itself. The object is certainly not the organisation itself; nor even retreats; nor all its activities together; nor yet the sum of all the things God does in individual lives through retreats.

But we are a small part of the movement of Gael in the world. We recognise it in the way He took over in our beginnings; we recognise it in the development of the retreat movement across denominations; and there must be more we have not recognised and more to be discovered.

So BURG journeys on by setting its sails to catch the wind of God, by being a feather on His breath. It means being ready for continual development and change.

At times there will be a strong wind and we learn to go with it and let it blow through us. At other times it is a matter of tacking, of going by what seems to be an indirect route and not making speedy progress, but still with our eyes on the object of our BURG journey. And all this reflects back on the way we plan and run our retreats and organise BURG affairs.

## **The Denomination**

The same applies to how BURG relates to Baptist life. BURG was conceived in the heart of the denominational structure, in the Presidency of the Union, and it came to birth at a Baptist assembly. It has a place in the structure of the Baptist Union.

And yet in some senses we are on the fringe. Neither retreats nor silence are typical of our denominational image. We find that many people who come on retreats and day conferences, although active in the local church, are not involved in any other denominational activity.

They speak of finding space 'to be' in BURG, and express surprise that there is a Baptist group where they feel at home. We aim to offer our best standards and efficiency, and yet our style is more 'laid back' than that at most denominational groups.

So how does what we are affect our relationship to our denomination? For one thing I think we are saying that the likes of us are part of the Baptist scene too. We are part of the rich pattern of the Baptist way of being the church. Our ways of praying and of finding God do not have a high profile in Baptist life, but they are firmly rooted in the biblical tradition at the centre of our denomination.

True, some of the ways we find helpful have been better preserved among other branches of the church, but having discovered them we make them our own, not as pseudo-



Anglicans or pseudo-anything else, but as Baptists reclaiming part of the common heritage for our own. Our hearts are set on God. Jesus Christ is central in all things. Led by the same Spirit we are all on the same pilgrimage together.

And then I think we function as something like the clowns on the denomination. We may be seen as not fitting in with the typical denominational image, not always saying the correct words. There are times when we want to say *“Hang on a minute, reflect, think what you are doing and saying, listen for questions, give space for God to speak, laugh at yourself, let God surprise you, and go with Him”*.

We are not the only ones to say these things. Nevertheless when we look at BURG as part of our denomination it seems to me that this is our vocation.

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