

## Sibyls weekend at Windermere (16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014)

### THERE'S LIFE IN THE OLD GIRL YET!!

After a few years during which attendances at weekends has declined, and some of us have thought that with changing social attitudes and the ease of making connections by internet, Sibyls was a great idea whose useful lifespan was running out ..... **we have had one of the best weekends ever!** It was well attended, it was fun, it was imbued with love and mutual care, and it was highly instructive.

The credit can be laid at several doors. The new Sibyls committee appeared to have wrestled with the whole problem of 'where do we go from here?' to very good effect, and I'd like to put in my personal congratulations to them. The fact that 20 people came for the weekend meant that we had the critical mass to make it an interesting and productive social occasion, without being so large as to prevent newcomers from getting to know everyone who was there. The goodwill from all to all was, as usual with the Sibyls, joyous. The hospitality of the URC Windermere Centre was – as ever – warm and practical, with beaming welcomes and excellent food. But I think that the outstanding feature of the weekend, which made it coherent and purposeful, was that all the sessions apart from the Sunday morning business meeting were led by one deeply committed and hugely informed person.

It was a piece of great good fortune as well as inspired programming that Chris Dowd, preparing for ministry in the URC church, was able to share with us some of the work he has done over the last 5 years towards his PhD, which focuses on the transsexual experience, especially with faith and the churches. Instead of the wide-cast net, more common in social studies, which uses statistical techniques to abstract some sort of information from questionnaire-type approaches to hundreds or even thousands of respondents, Chris used an anthropological methodology to explore the life histories of 12 TS people in great depth. He made deep connection with his interviewees, - indeed, some of them told him this was the first time in their lives that they had expressed in words what they had just been talking about.

I cannot over-emphasise the impression Chris made on me, one which I think was shared by all. He is so intelligent, so insightful and so honest, so caring and considerate, and so humble in his interactions with the TS people he has worked with, as well as with us, that it was like hearing someone speak the truth after it has lain for years behind a screen.

[The details of Chris's presentations...](#)

[I will leave it to Tina ???to give more detail of these presentations, since she encouraged Chris to start the project, and has been one of the midwives.](#)

In *summary*, we had an introductory session on the Friday evening, then two sessions which occupied the whole of Saturday morning. It shows how connected we all felt to what was going on that there was an appetite to insert an extra session into the afternoon, which had been programmed as free time.

After dinner on Saturday night we had a film show. From a 'menu' circulated beforehand, the majority plumped for *Just like a Woman* – a great night out at the cinema without the hassle of moving from our home, but with all the features one associates with the cinema of our youth – the technical glitches delaying the start, the comments and laughter from the audience – but no popcorn. Wine instead for those who wished – and Julia handed round champagne - quite the best usherette yet.

[The film is reviewed separately.](#)

Night office on Friday was thoughtfully led by Susan and on Saturday by Tina. Sunday after the business meeting, [reported separately](#), we had communion, in a liturgy which Chris had created specifically for the occasion. The readings (Genesis 15:1-8, Genesis 32:22-32, and Acts 9:12-9) all focused on moments of transformation, when life changes for ever. Instead of a homily, Chris asked everyone in turn to say one good thing they would take away with them from the weekend. This seemed to tie in the communion closely with what had been happening through the weekend.

Even the obligatory photo session before Sunday lunch seemed more good-humoured than usual. We were I think on something of a 'high'. I hope we can have more such weekends. Thank you to all those who had prepared so carefully and given so much thought to making it such a success.