

Oasis in Cambridge

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue

The United Reformed Church of Great Britain has about 75,000 members in 1,600 congregations. It has been declining in membership for years. An enterprising URC minister from a London suburb, Martin Camroux, concerned not only about declining numbers but about the dearth of theological conversation in the church, persuaded one congregation that the best thing it could do for the denomination would be to fund a churchwide theology conference.

The result was "Renewing Reformed Theology," held at Westminster College, Cambridge, with presentations by theologians, minister-scholars and one American pastor. The days began and ended with prayers in the small college chapel led by principal Susan Durber, whose series of reflections on Lucan parables I will not soon forget. She observed that the woman in Luke 13:20, given the amount of flour she had to knead, was no retiring, reticent, submissive woman but a "hefty wench capable of wrestling all that dough into submission and making enough bread to feed us all for three days."

URC leaders and members are concerned about the secularism of British culture. Participants at the conference discussed the authenticity of the assumed-by-everyone secularism and wondered if it sprang from disillusionment with the church. There was agreement that the British press is thoroughly secular and dismissive of religion. Pope Benedict's visit to the United Kingdom had taken place the week before, and everyone at the conference was laughing about a moment when a BBC reporter had snidely observed that the British were simply not interested in anything religious—while in the background thousands of teenagers were cheering the pope.

The Protestant in me wondered about the nature of the event as a "state visit" and the anomaly of the Catholic Church acting as a sovereign state. Reformed scholar David Cornick said the pope's visit must be seen in the context of a 500-year history of hostility, persecution, bloodshed and martyrdom on both sides. Hostility and violence in Northern Ireland can be traced to Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church, he said. I was reminded of how much closer British people are to that

ancient conflict than we are when I visited King's College Chapel, just a short walk from Westminster College, and admired the massive, carved oak screen in the nave commissioned by Henry VIII. He left behind his initials and "A.B.," for his queen at the time, Anne Boleyn.

What struck me most about the URC event was the decision of a small, declining denomination with many struggling congregations to spend precious resources on a theology conference. Maybe our URC brothers and sisters are on to something: when things are going poorly, get together and discuss some theology.

Sitting on the inevitable closing panel, I thought about how preoccupied I am with the organizational necessities of a church and a magazine. The conference was something of an oasis for me, I said, and I thanked the URC, Westminster College and my new friends for reminding me why I went into this work in the first place.