
E-READ

The General Conference of the New Church **Articles and Letters**

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The Tools in the Box

by *David Friend*

“If we want to get anywhere we have to apply ourselves to get there”

I like browsing in tool shops - not that I get to do it very often, these days. All those gadgets and shiny implements designed to perform very specific tasks to make it easier for the tyro like me to achieve respectable results. Mind you, I have to have an instruction manual to make sure that I don't misuse the tools. And what about the machines which are designed and manufactured to produce the tools?

Moving swiftly from the tool shed to the kitchen, every time I unwrap a pack of butter, I marvel at the ingenuity of the machine which wraps the butter up in the first place. Each fold in the packaging has to be done precisely, in exactly the correct order and at the right time in the process or the butter could be spoiled. I

wonder at the inventive ability of the person who first devised a butter-wrapping machine.

I suppose that, as human beings, born into the world with no knowledge of how to do anything, we all need instructions from birth, either verbal or written, to learn to do everything. Guidance from those who know; initially parents, followed by practice - taking years to master in some cases, and continual practice to maintain a skill - is a necessity. If we want to get anywhere we have to apply ourselves to get there.

The same 'rules' apply to our spiritual life. We have to learn, practice and put them into use before we can expect to achieve a result. We have a supreme teacher in Jesus

Christ and the book written about him and his life from which we learn his instructions. As Swedenborgians, we also have other books which help to ensure that we can learn to understand the instruction manual properly. Continual practice is the clue to success. If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and try again.

How Do I Know I'm a New Church Man?

by David Friend

Tales from a spiritual journey...

What do you mean, "How do I know I'm a New Church man?" Of course I'm a New Church man. I've been 'New Church' all my life. My parents were New Church, and their parents were New Church before them. I grew up in a New Church household where Sunday School attendance was compulsory - including Sunday School exams - where I got reasonable marks on most occasions - became a Junior Member when I was allowed to, and still have the copy of "The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine", suitably inscribed, on my bookshelves.

Mind you, when I was a teenager, I didn't always let on that I was a regular church-goer to other people, particularly at school. I expect that was par for the course at that age. I did attend Easter Schools at the New Church College in Woodford Green on a number of occasions, which helped to boost my knowledge of New Church teaching - and provided me with the basis of a circle of other New Church friends. Going to university was an eye-opener, when I first realised that, although I'd read quite a lot of stories from the Old Testament, and had read much of the four gospels, I knew nothing about the epistles, which seemed to be the basis of other student's Christianity. I was an outsider, not understood and not really welcomed. What a good job there was a Society in Leicester to attend and some contact with the East Midlands Swedenborg group, under the watchful eye of Revd Clifford Harley. I even managed to give a talk at one of their meetings on Swedenborg's cosmology. (What a good job I didn't know at the time that this was one the Clifford Harley's pet subjects!)

National Service in the RAF followed, and that was a really testing time for me. There were three categories of denominational church groups allowed - CofE, RC and OD - meaning Other Denominations. It had already been demonstrated to me that I did not fit with the beliefs of either the CofE or the RC, and so I went to worship with the ODs. What a reception I was given - and a grilling - before being refused entry to their services because I could not accept their views on the Trinity - and they were too set in their ways to accept that there could be other views on the subject. Cast out, I was left to fall back on my understanding of New Church doctrine - still pretty sparse in those days - and I've been learning ever since.

Life has moved on since then: marriage and family coming hard on the heels on leaving the RAF and joining a survey company as an electronics engineer. Once again pressure was applied at work for me to travel abroad - and in this country - for months at a time or over weekends, which would deprive me of New Church input. Once more I was on my own, in terms of spiritual input or discussion. Once again I was alone with the faith I had received from my earlier days and had to force myself to examine the things which I had come to believe because other people, who I trusted in, had told me and taught me.

I suppose it was attendance at the AGM of the General Conference where other people had sufficient belief in my abilities to appoint me to the National Missionary Board, which really pushed me into working out my own beliefs so that I was able to speak from ME to interested people of any faith and none about the teachings of the New Church. That was over 50 years ago!

A simple example of teaching applied to life can be related to attendance at a funeral where, because I believe in life after death - the resurrection - I like to present the bereaved with a flowering pot-plant. The significance of continuing life, rather than that of dying cut flowers, is a strong one, and has been greatly appreciated by many people.

I suspect that my personal history is not much different from many other New Church people. The details will be all mine, but the experiences may have been encountered by many other members of the Church.

So how do I know that I'm a New Church man? I suppose that wherever I'm at just now is a result of efforts by many other people to help me but, in the end, it relies on what I'm prepared to do for myself. It's not the faith of my parents or grandparents, or anyone else, come to that. It's MY faith. So; am I a New Church man? I'm working on it!