

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY
SPECIAL HONORARY DEGREE CONGREGATION
Celebrating the achievements of the Make Poverty History campaign
8th January 2005

A personal account by Mr Harry Alton of Chester-le-Street Methodist Church

The Sage, Gateshead was the venue for this prestigious event which was a celebration of the achievements of the ***Make Poverty History Campaign of 2005***. Monday the 8th January saw Hall One, which has a seating capacity of 1,700, almost full of friends who had no doubt over the years had some association with the various campaigning groups, like the ***Jubilee Debt Campaign***, which had come together under the banner of ***Make Poverty History*** in 2005 when the G8 Summit was held at Gleneagles in the July of that year.

Appropriate for such an occasion, the procession of notables from the University was led through the Hall by the Mace Bearer and it was very colourful. Distinctive 'floppy hats' were worn by such as the Chancellor, The Right Honourable Lord Patten of Barnes CH (Chris Patten as he was formerly known), the Vice Chancellor and by the five distinguished guests who were to receive Honorary Degrees in recognition of their work over the years in the area of relieving poverty.

Once on the platform, the seating behind the notables was occupied by the many professors and tutors who wore their own distinctive gowns and evidence of their University Degrees. The Chancellor was seated in the centre of the stage and the Mace was placed in front of him. To his right and our left sat the Officers of the University, including the Vice Chancellor, and the two Public Orators who would introduce the guests due to receive awards and speak about their accomplishments. The Orators, one of whom I understand is a local man who attends St. Joseph's, spoke with considerable understanding of the person for whom they had been made responsible. There was a great deal of humour which the gathered company responded to, indicating a deep knowledge of the individuals on the part of many in the audience.

The five guests who were to receive Honorary Degrees sat to the left of the Chancellor, four of whom wore their 'floppy hats' in distinctive ways. One Guest, 'the other

Chancellor', carried his hat throughout. As each of the distinguished guests was named for the Honorary Degree, one of the two Public Orators would lead them to a position in front of the Chancellor and then proceed to speak of their accomplishments, after which Lord Patten would award the Degree with appropriate words. There was the appropriate raising of hats which accompanies such occasions and the warm applause from the audience on completion of each award as the incumbent returned to their seat.

Those receiving degrees on this occasion were, The Right Honourable Gordon Brown MP (the other Chancellor), Bob Geldof KBE, Dr Susan George, Dr David Golding and His Excellency Benjamin William Mkapa, former President of the United Republic of Tanzania. Dr David Golding, a founder member of the national board of Jubilee Debt Campaign and Development Coordinator of Make Poverty History North East, received a standing ovation. Friends who attended one of the circuit One World Week events at Chester le Street Methodist Church a few years ago will remember he was a guest speaker and showed evidence then of his considerable enthusiasm for the cause.

Responding on behalf of all those who had received their Honorary Degrees, Gordon Brown spoke with passion of the importance of all the efforts that were being made to Make Poverty History, and outlined some of the things which had been achieved. There were still major hurdles to overcome and the global community presented many challenges.

The session completed, the gathered company processed again through the Hall, after which a group of players entertained us while we waited for the hour of debate. The Chancellor, together with four of the guests (Gordon Brown having left), then took to the Platform in more normal dress (although Bob Geldof did have a suit on!) to conduct a session addressing a number of questions from the floor. The guests had been forewarned of the nature of the questions and were, therefore, in a much improved position to address the questions being posed. It was a very instructive debate and Chris Patten himself made a substantial contribution from his own background knowledge.

On occasion, the experience was very moving and Jean and I were glad we had responded to the invitation to attend.