

General Assembly of Unitarian
& Free Christian Churches

Executive Committee

Draft Minutes of EC Meeting Friday 4th & Saturday 5th January 2013

Essex Hall, London

Present: Rev John Clifford, Joan Cook, Robert Ince (Acting Treasurer),
Cathie Masztalerz, Alison Thursfield, Martin Whitell

In Attendance: Derek McAuley (Chief Officer), Andrew Mason (Minutes)

4th January

Opening Devotions were offered by Alison Thursfield and the meeting started.

1. Apologies:

Apologies for absence had been received from David Usher.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 16th & 17th November 2012

(Document **EC02/13**)

The Minutes of the previous meeting were then **AGREED** as a correct record and signed by the Convenor.

3. Matters arising for noting or to include in Agenda for later discussion

Page 4, Item 12, Risk Management. The President had issued a letter regarding Sir Cyril Smith and advice had been received from the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS).

Page 7. Item 22. A.O.B. John Harley and Vanessa Rothwell were unable to attend this meeting as the Youth Panel was meeting in a fortnight's time. It was **AGREED** that they be invited for an hour to the February meeting.

4. Reports of Strategy Groups (Document EC03/13)

4.1 Visibility

A request had been made via Facebook for views on a strapline. The group met again in December, though Minutes were not yet available. The group was focussed on practical ways to help congregations increase their visibility. Next year there would be several issues on which the Unitarian movement could comment to the national media and this would need to be prepared for and addressed.

The South Wales District had asked to see the Visibility Strategy Group minutes, which raised a wider issue about whether minutes and/or reports to the EC would be made more widely available. As the existing strategy group documents had not been written with the intention of being made public and it was not felt to be fair to the report writers to make them public in the current format without consultation. It was **AGREED** that the Chief

Officer would contact the strategy groups and ask them to produce amended reports for wider circulation, stressing the need for communication.

ACTION: Chief Officer

For other reports (such as the Chief Officer's report or report on Ministerial numbers containing sensitive data) amending the reports to remove confidential items would take considerable time and effort.

In respect of the initial South Wales request, this would be dealt with by asking the Visibility Group to provide a summary report.

ACTION: Chief Officer

5. 2020 Congregational Development

Ash James, Andrew Phillips and Sue Cooper were **APPROVED** to join the 2020 Board. It was noted that Christopher Sande had resigned from the Board for personal reasons. A conference call had been held with the three new people. It was remarked that the Board had not met in person yet and this should be prioritised, particularly with the new members joining.

This project needed to raise new money fairly independently. It was felt that the Board needed to have a presentation at this year's Annual Meetings, with a report to be provided to the next EC meeting. The Convenor would raise this with them. **ACTION: Convenor**

6. Report of EC/District meeting held 17 November 2012 (Document EC04/13)

The report of the event was received and it was felt that participants thought it had been generally positive. A list of potential actions included in the report were discussed:

- Circulate EC agendas – This had been done.
- Get replies from EC / Essex Hall to comments – This was generally done but the perception that we could be more responsive was noted.
- Share best practice in addressing failing congregations – The Local Leadership Strategy Group was looking at the congregational support section of the website and 2020 programme should be involved.
- Look at voting system for Annual Meetings (re. Ministerial voting rights) – If felt necessary, a group should bring a motion to the Annual Meetings. It was not felt that this was a matter for the EC.
- EC members to visit districts – The EC had set a policy of the link person trying to visit once a year and communicate between these visits. The new EC would have to look again at the "link" role.
- Training for ministry – Ministry Strategy Group developing proposals.
- Develop respectful relationships – This had been a feature of the gathering and must be encouraged.
- Pick a key theme for social justice – The Visibility Group did not agree with that view. It was noted that, by default, we have adopted Equal Marriage and Assisted Dying as key issues given our size and capacity to address only a very few issues at any one time.
- Make Mission Statement clear – This was in process by the work on a strap-line.
- Create regional database of skills – The Local Leadership Group had received such a list from the District Support group.
- Understand the benefits to local communities offered by churches – This issue was something that the Local Leadership and Visibility Strategy Groups needed to be aware of.
- Create ad hoc district assembly – This was a matter for the districts and it was understood that Karen Hanley was progressing this.

- Address fundraising and expenditure – More work needed would be needed after the Annual Meetings.

The list of Actions, highlighted to their specific group, would be sent out to the Strategy Groups.

ACTION: Chief Officer

7. Finance

7.1 General Assembly Annual Accounts 2011/2012 (Document EC05/13)

The General Assembly Annual Accounts were presented to the last meeting.

There had since been a technical correction which had been drawn to the attention of the Auditor on page 6, in the consolidated SOFA.

On page 21, Note 15, Creditors, it was noted that this was a historical matter, as an allowance in case we had underpaid VAT when we were registered. The item might not be required but had been allowed for.

Consolidated Accounts – Following Martin West's comments at last year's Annual Meetings, the acting Treasurer had discussed with both Martin Sarbicki and the Auditors whether consolidation of the accounts of the GA, Sustentation Fund and Nightingale Centre was required. Given the Objects of the three charities and how much they overlap (substantially), and the degree of control that the trustees of the General Assembly exert on the other charities (considerable), the Auditors agreed that there was a requirement to produce consolidated accounts.

The Annual Accounts were formally **APPROVED**.

7.2 Management Accounts to 30th Nov 2012 (Document EC06/13)

These Management accounts only covered the first eight weeks of the year and therefore there was little of significance showing. It was noted that the election costs were above the budget of £5K due to postage costs and inability to reclaim VAT. **Noted**.

7.3 Unitarian Investment Panel 30 November 2012 (Document EC07/13)

The acting Treasurer attended the meeting of the Investment Panel and reported that the financial outlook was for continuing future difficulty; that the ethical fund was performing at a similar level to other funds; performances on funds this year have been better than last year as was the Pension Fund.

7.4 Millennium Fund Application (Document EC08/13)

Ullet Road – The Chief Officer had ascertained that this information was previously provided however due to confusion with emails not presented to the last EC meeting. It was **AGREED** that a grant of £1,260 would be made, but emphasising that it was being made for the purpose of being a pilot of the value of attendance at wedding fairs – actual statistics on enquiries, bookings received etc would be requested and no similar grants made for the time being to other congregations.

ACTION: Chief Officer

7.5 Sustentation Fund

Mike Tomlin had advised that Martin West had resigned as Treasurer and Trustee of the Sustentation Fund. A replacement, Alan Eastwood, had been found and the EC were asked to appoint him as both a Trustee and Treasurer. This was **AGREED**.

Jeff Teagle and the Chief Officer had been asked to look at the Constitution in due course with a view to reducing the number of trustees from the current number of eleven.

ACTION: Chief Officer

8. Nightingale Centre

8.1 Annual Accounts 2011/2012 (Document **EC09/11**)

It was noted that dates needed to be added to Trustee appointments where Trustees had left during the year.

According to the Charity Commission, the old Objects must be used to calculate charitable activities hence page 12 income from charitable activities had been reduced to zero. The net impact on the final result was zero.

The net income of £11K was considered to be a good result bearing in mind the forecast.

The Draft Accounts were formally **APPROVED** pending the corrections as above.

8.2 Minutes of the Management Committee (Document **EC10/13**)

Robert reported that the Centre would be taking professional advice on their tax position.

The Minutes were noted.

8.3 Draft Charity Commission Scheme (Document **EC11/13**)

The Scheme had now added other items of land originally omitted. It was **AGREED** that the Scheme be approved.

9. Annual Meetings

An oral report was received from the Annual Meetings Panel who had met the previous day. A marketing leaflet had been sent out in December in the General Mailing and as an insert in 'The Inquirer', to good feedback, and the booking forms and other information went out as planned.

Speakers – The Rev Dr Teresa Cooley, Director of Congregational Life for the Unitarian Universalist Association, had been confirmed as the Keynote Speaker.

Motions Workshop – The Steering Group would be running a motions workshop in York on 14 January. Prospective motions currently known about were the revisited Assisted Dying motion and the EC motion to adopt the report on Proxy Voting.

Powerpoint Interludes – It was **AGREED** to have at least two on the GA President's role.

The Convenor would discuss this with the President.

ACTION: Convenor

Wood Green trust – This Trust funds the youth programme at the Annual Meetings and subsidies for Young Adult attendance, which are built into the budget at around £6K - £7.5K. This year's budget included these items on the basis of previous experience and conversations held with the Trust's Officers last year. Due to other demands the Trust may not in future be able to make such a large grant. This was less of a concern for this year, as there were alternative funds that could be drawn upon for one year, but could be an issue thereafter (on the basis of £7K, at 200 conference fee payers we would need to add £35 a head to the cost, before any inflationary rises).

International Guests - The Transylvanian Bishop would be coming to this year's Meetings, along with his colleague, Maria Pap, to speak at an ICUU workshop.

Events – The Anniversary Service was in hand and the Opening Celebrations were being progressed. EC items were in the programme. The Social Evening was proving problematical, due to difficulty contacting the musician.

Use of volunteers – Volunteers from the local district were being encouraged.

Marketing – There would be a follow up in mid-January in 'The Inquirer'. It was suggested that some marketing material be sent to congregations to put in their newsletters.

Website – The main Annual Meetings documents from the December mailing had been posted on the website. The online booking system was nearly ready, though we were experiencing problems with online payments, due to PayPal freezing our account. As such, we were in process of switching to HSBC Merchant Services for online payments. It was hoped to get PayPal unfrozen to take payments and this was being progressed.

EC Assisted Dying slot – This session would need to be balanced. It was **AGREED** that Robert and the Chief Officer would progress finding speakers.

ACTION: Robert and the Chief Officer

2014 – Whittlebury Hall, Northamptonshire, 13-17 April 2014

It was intended that we be able to give information at the 2013 Meetings about the 2014 Meetings. The Panel were approaching Rabbi Danny Rich of Liberal Judaism to be the Keynote Speaker. It was **AGREED** to invite Rev David Usher to preach the Anniversary Sermon in 2014. As the Meetings would be starting on a Sunday, it had been decided to have the Anniversary Service on the opening day, have an event on the Monday, and then have the Social Evening on the Tuesday. The intention was to try and build interest and excitement for the 2014 Meetings as early as possible.

2015 – This had not been looked at yet but would be progressing from now.

10. Annual Report

The acting Treasurer had been working with the Chief Officer on an alternative format for the Annual Report and presented a draft. It had been clarified that it was no longer necessary to publish a full set of accounts in print in the Annual Report - these could be placed as a separate document on the website and printed and sent on request. Instead a shorter two page financial summary of each set of Annual Accounts of the three bodies could be included in the Annual Report. The drift within the charitable sector in relationship to Annual Reporting was measuring impact, rather than traditional description of your activities. Other changes to format and order were envisaged. The 'Heritage' section (including names of Past Officers, Anniversary Service Preachers etc) should be moved to the back of the publication.

It was **AGREED** that the revised format be adopted in principle, with some room for flexibility. Robert, the Chief Officer and Andrew Mason (as the compiler of the report) would take this forward.

ACTION: Acting Treasurer, Chief Officer

Annual Report Summary – It was **AGREED** to ask Louise Rogers and Rosemary Ruston to produce a summary report again this year.

ACTION: Chief Officer

11. Monitoring Report on Ministerial numbers (Document EC12/13)

The report was presented by the Chief Officer. Due to the small numbers involved, it was noted that minor changes could have a disproportionate effect; however the assessment was that we were on course to meet the target of 50 in 2015.

It was noted that the Ministry Strategy Group were looking at significant changes in respect of students and delivery of training.

12. Raising Public Profile (Document EC13/13)

The report was presented by the Chief Officer

Equal marriage – the Chief Officer highlighted the major achievement of the change in government policy to bring forward equal religious marriage which was not in their original consultation. The 21 page document responding to the consultation referenced Unitarians four times. Our profile had been raised and we were being widely quoted by name for our

position however it remained a challenge to get directly quoted on the issue. There will further be opportunities during 2013 as the legislation process took place.

Assisted Dying – If the motion is passed and in anticipation of legislation being presented in the House of Lords, we would need the capacity to respond quickly from expert or well-briefed individuals in taking this forward and this was being progressed.

The Chief Officer was thanked for his achievement in raising the Unitarian public profile.

13. Strategic Issues – “The Road Ahead” (NCVO Document EC14/13)

The report was presented and re-scheduled for further consideration on the following day.

14. Chief Officer’s Report (Document EC15/13)

The report was presented. The Chief Officer highlighted the following:

- Attending a round table on religious charities and public benefit, it had been confirmed that Public benefit was satisfied by offering public worship.
- Finance – A Payroll calculation service was currently provided, which purely provides calculations. In April HMRC would be introducing real-time information, meaning employers will need to submit online returns on a monthly basis. In order to process payroll on their behalf, the GA would have to sign up as an Agent with HMRC with enhanced responsibilities that we would be unable to fulfil. Alternative provision was being sourced for congregations.
- IT – an experienced Consultant would work for Setpoint to develop options, explore possible suppliers, develop a project plan, timescales and costings to give to the working group to consider prior to presentation to the February EC meeting.
- Safeguarding – A small group had been assembled, with an action plan including audit of the clearance status of Ministers and Lay Pastors in 2013. Lay People in Charge would also be approached. The Safeguarding Policy was expected to be launched at the 2013 Annual Meetings. It was considering whether Youth Leaders should have a different period of re-tests due to the higher exposure levels and the Chief Officer would speak to John Harley. **ACTION: Chief Officer**
- Robert raised concerns about what action could be taken if congregations refused to adopt a Safeguarding Policy as the potential reputational risk spilled over to the GA and all Unitarian congregations and this would be considered following a compliance audit.

15. Non-responsive check out

This took place after item 17.

16. Other reports

President’s Report (Document EC16/13)

The President’s Report was received.

17. EC Induction (Document EC16b/13)

The Chief Officer would re-circulate the Register of Interests form for updating.

ACTION: Chief Officer

Induction Programme – There was a need to further develop, revise and update the folder of induction items. The code of conduct was considered to be essential. The relationship between individual EC members and members of the GA Staff (and Nightingale Centre) needed to be clearly stated in the programme.

It was **AGREED** that the Chief Officer would pull together a range of documents including further briefing information. **ACTION: Chief Officer**

Communication – The importance of initial (and continuing) social time to allow trustees to get to know each other and build relationships was stressed, along with the need to build time into the agenda to bring new trustees up to speed on on-going business.

Commitment – It was **AGREED** to include a Commitment and Promise document in the Induction pack and to have trustees sign up to it at the May meeting. This would be based on the old version, adding a commitment to work as a team.

Induction Day – It was **AGREED** to have an Induction Day before the Annual Meetings, probably in March.

Code of Conduct – Appendix Two was felt to be the best general model, with the addition in relation to the GA Staff (and the Nightingale Centre) relationships. The Chief Officer would amend the document slightly and circulate. **ACTION: Chief Officer**

EC Handover at the Annual Meetings – It was **AGREED** to thank the retiring EC members and have a short statement of promise from the new EC at the final session of the Annual Meetings.

Closing Devotions were offered by Martin Whitell and the meeting closed for the day.

5th January

Opening Devotions were offered by Robert Ince.

18. Strategic Issues – “The Road Ahead” (NCVO Document EC14/13)

A preliminary discussion took place on this structural issue which had strategic implications.

Charitable Incorporated Organisation

The Government have recently introduced the concept of the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). Were the GA to consider this model it would limit the personal liability of GA trustees and enable property to be held in its name. It would need to be investigated with professional advice (which would come at a cost).

The option of the CIO opened up other issues of rationalising charities in the network of Unitarian bodies. The B&FUA was originally formed to gain the benefits of incorporation which a CIO would now deliver. The Sustentation Fund could be integrated which could help with succession planning of Treasurers and other officers.

Congregations may also wish to do this. This model has already been introduced in Scotland and the churches at Edinburgh and Glasgow were moving to it.

For the GA to make this change would require a change to Constitution and the deadlines for 2013 have passed, meaning it would need to go to the 2014 Annual Meetings at the earliest. It was noted that rewriting the Constitution might open up other issues, such as the controversy around the GA Object.

It was **AGREED** to investigate this option further and that the Chief Officer report to the next meeting. **ACTION: Chief Officer**

The Chief Officer had circulated this strategic document along with a summary which related the issues to his knowledge of the General Assembly:

A. Rebalancing the economy

Economic Growth – There was low predicted growth for the immediate future, with a corresponding fall in incomes expected. This was likely to hit both investments and live giving. The Quota only allows for a £1 increase to £30 in this year.

Increase income – If planning for the end of the Bowland Trust funding, assuming the existing activity as a minimum, we would need to increase the quota significantly each year to replace it. As it stands the increased (unavoidable) Pension Trust contributions will cost the equivalent of a £1 quota rise. To replace Bowland funding of £100K per annum would take a capital sum of around £3M.

Numerical growth – The declared membership is also likely to fall due to demographics and the quota rise (particularly if it is increased to a realistic level) unless attempts towards numerical growth are made.

Members were concerned that the GA was thought of as wealthy and therefore congregations and individuals do not need to give. There was a need to increase both live giving and covenanting. Live giving currently only contributes 25% of income (and that includes congregational contributions).

Winter fuel allowance – It was felt we could encourage people to make a donation to the GA if they didn't feel they needed it. This would need to be done quickly.

Fundraising – To fundraise, it is necessary to demonstrate need and inspire people. It was noted that there could be a conflict between the 2020 fundraising and fundraising for core expenditure.

Essex Hall – A brief outline of the position of Essex Hall was given. The Essex Hall building is not owned by the Unitarian movement, but by the independent Essex Hall Trust. The Trust's legal obligations to Unitarian groups fell away many years ago, though the trustees have opted to continue to support the Unitarian movement as their main objective. This is done by renting space to commercial tenants. The profits from this allow the trustees to provide free office space to the General Assembly and meet utility bills and service charges (valued in the accounts as a Gift-in-Kind of £70K), make cash grants to the GA (£23K last year) and make a contribution to the staff costs for management and administration. The Essex Hall trustees are currently all Unitarians. Andrew was thanked for the presentation on the Essex Hall situation.

B. Rising costs

The Acting Treasurer remarked that it was always possible to save money but the GA was actually doing reasonably well in this respect.

Further use of technology could offer potential savings, though there was risk involved with IT projects.

Digital by default – more could be done with digital media but the demographics of our movement meant that making it the default was unlikely at the present time. There was a possibility that the transfer of cost to congregations (with printing taking place at congregational level) may mean information or posters we send do not get printed and distributed, as printing takes effort and costs money for the local congregation.

The Acting Treasurer working with Martin Sarbicki to look at the budget and the relationship with fundraising.

C. Political polarisation

It was suggested that we re-circulate Charity Commission guidance to churches on what can and cannot legitimately be done in the political sphere as the general election was approaching in 2015. **ACTION: Chief Officer**

It was noted that our Mission is external and that social responsibility is important to our movement and particularly to our congregations. There is very little capacity centrally to act on big issues but there were opportunities for both the GA and congregations to collaborate with others.

D. Charity Brand

Trust inside the GA was fairly good but a movement like ours is always open to fraud. There was an issue for the GA about the non-submission of accounts from "excepted" charity congregations which would require further consideration.

E. Accountability in a digital age

This reinforces the debates on members' growing expectations on communications, transparency, timescales of response etc. Members now expected to hold the GA to account in various forums including social media.

Additionally, with online communications and websites, individuals can make statements which may not reflect the stance of Unitarians as a whole but could be read as such and could therefore lead to a blurring of our image.

There was a strategic message of culture change. There existed a problem (aging congregations) with a slowly increasing politically and media active younger group driving demands, but aging congregations who are less technologically inclined and a cultural blockage to discussing accountability, finance etc.

General summary

The EC discussed the overall messages arising from the NCVO In summary the main areas of concern were:

- Increasing income
- Controlling our costs
- Brand and reputation (being more protective of what we have)
- Cultural shift to encapsulate a vision of where we want to be in 5-10 years with a focus on the key things that need to be done.

It was felt that the flavour of the debate on these strategic issues needed to be conveyed to the wider membership through the Annual Meetings and other means.

19. Key messages

As circulated.

20. Arrangements for future meetings

February 22nd 2.00pm to 9.00pm – 23rd 9.00am to 3.00pm Manchester

President/Vice President and strategy group chairs to be invited to the Friday session.

May 17th 2.00pm – 6.00pm – 18th 9.00am – 4.00pm - London

21. Any other business

There was no other business.

22. Confidential Items

The Minute-taker left the meeting and Andrew Mason was thanked for his attendance.

Pensions Trust

It was agreed to move to Scheme 4 for the staff pension scheme.

23. Non-responsive check out

The check-out took place.

Closing Devotions were offered by Cathie Masztalerz and the meeting ended.