

Guidance for Congregations and Districts on arranging a Presidential Visit

September 2011



General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

Guidance for Congregations and Districts on arranging a Presidential Visit

If your District Association, congregation or group is considering inviting the President or Vice-President there are a number of things to bear in mind:

The arrangements are best made in three stages:

1. Agree a date. This should be done as early as possible, especially if the invitation is for a specific date such as an anniversary or induction service. The initial invitation should make clear what the President is expected to do, the location, and the timings, and appropriate hospitality. Email is often the most convenient way to arrange this.
2. Once a date is arranged, further details should be agreed. These include:
 - a. Further details of expectations, including who else will be participating and which groups will be invited to attend.
 - b. Whether the (Vice) President will be accompanied by his/her partner, and if so, if they are expected to participate in any way.
 - c. Hospitality being offered – accommodation when required (all the visitor needs to know initially is that accommodation will be provided, details can be decided later), meals, refreshments etc.
 - d. Details of any services, including the usual format, hymn book (name not colour!), likelihood of children being there, any special features.
 - e. Confirmation of fees and expenses to be paid, and name and address of person responsible for paying them.
 - f. Travel arrangements. If the (Vice) President is planning to travel by train it is helpful to agree which trains would be appropriate so that advance bookings can be made.
 - g. Information needed for publicity both within the Unitarian movement and in the wider community. It is important that such publicity is done early enough to allow responses.
 - h. During any visit the programme needs to provide an opportunity to meet members and attenders.
3. Nearer the time:
 - a. For services, the organist's name, email address, telephone number and postal address.
 - b. Further details of hospitality arrangements.
 - c. Details of travel arrangements, eg for train travel; name and mobile phone number of the person who will meet the train; for road travel: postcode, map and details of parking arrangements.
 - d. Phone number in case of emergencies on the day.
 - e. Further details of arrangements, including who is to be present (e.g: the Mayor or clergy of other Churches and representatives of other faiths).
 - f. On the day of the visit itself sensitivity should be shown for the needs of your guest; for example s/he would probably appreciate a cup of coffee on arrival on a cold morning or after a long journey. S/he might wish to be left alone for a few minutes before a service in order to prepare or wish for further information about who is present.

The event should be well publicised to members and friends and to the wider community (see below).

Congregations and Districts need to be aware:

- I. Congregations and Districts who regularly invite the President should not assume that s/he has the date available and will keep it free.
- II. Districts and Congregations are expected to pay travel expenses and offer a fee to their guest. The amount should be negotiated between the parties concerned. This should be paid on the day direct to the guest without the need for them to ask (as this has proved embarrassing on occasion). The General Assembly does not pay the expenses of the President and Vice-President except in exceptional circumstances (e.g. a visit to a “small congregation” or fellowship with limited funds) and this must always be arranged in advance.
- III. Although it is not possible to give much notice of funerals of ministers or of lay people significant in the wider Unitarian movement, the President or Vice President will normally try to attend these. The President and Vice President are also pleased to take part in induction services for new ministers, lay pastors or lay leaders. Contact should be made as soon as possible to arrange these and payment of expenses is not expected in these circumstances.

Finally it needs to be repeated that no Congregation or group should feel that it is too small to consider a visit from the President or Vice-President. Such an occasion may be precisely the boost that the group needs to give them a greater sense of optimism and purpose for the future. If funding the expenses of a visit could be a problem the General Assembly has a small budget to support visits but this needs to be confirmed in advance.

Publicising the visit

Unitarians sometimes bemoan the fact that we do not seem to feature much in the news, either at the local level or nationally. However, an event such as the visit of the General Assembly President or Vice-President may well be of interest to the local media. Consequently the opportunity to gain some free publicity for your congregation should not be missed. Much depends on what ‘story’ you make of it and how it is presented.

Once the visit has been arranged someone in the Congregation or District needs to be given the responsibility of handling the publicity angle. Those groups which do not currently have a publicity/information officer should take this opportunity to appoint one.

The officer should know the likely outlets – local, and perhaps regional, daily, evening, and weekly newspapers, and local BBC and commercial radio stations. It can be very helpful to send your ‘copy’ to a named reporter and it may prove useful to phone the media, ask for the newsroom, and ask for suggestions and e-mail addresses. Otherwise just send your press release to the news editor, or editor, checking the contact address via the paper or radio station’s web site.

It is very unlikely that a reporter or photographer will come from the media, although there is a little more likelihood of the latter than the former.

Gaining publicity almost always depends therefore on the quality of the press release (and the pressure for space on air or in newsprint).

The press release should be sent by e-mail. It should reach its recipient in good time, at least a week before the event itself. Ten days or a fortnight is better.

Find a good angle for the story: 'first visit from the Movement's President in twenty years', 'President of the General Assembly joins congregation to celebrate special anniversary', 'Civic gathering at Unitarian chapel for visit of Movement's Vice-President'.

If you can establish in advance what your visitor is to say in her/his address, or at least to give you a telling quote, this might provide a refreshing angle.

The thought of writing a press release may seem an intimidating prospect if you do not know how to begin, but they are very easy to produce provided certain basic rules are observed. The main rules are as follows:

- 1) Aim at a compelling opening sentence: 'When the Reverend Dr Ann Peart attends Pledwick Unitarian Chapel on 10 June it will be the first time that a national president of the Movement has visited the congregation in fifteen years.....'
'Unitarian President Boris Pursglove will urge the congregation at Pledwick Unitarian Chapel to make more of their listed building when he visits them on 1 April'
- 2) Make sure that the crucial questions, WHO? WHAT? WHERE? WHEN? WHY? and HOW? are all answered in the first paragraph. This is the way to grab the attention of the journalist. Less critical details can be included further down the page. You can find helpful suggestions on the UCCN website <http://www.uccn.org.uk/>
- 3) Ensure that the press release has a clear heading, showing the name and address of your chapel, who the release is from and his/her telephone number, and the date on which it is sent. Other contact details should be given at the foot of the 'story', for example the name and phone number of your congregation's chairperson. Only give the contact details of your visiting President/Vice-President if you have her/his permission to do so.
- 4) Keep it short. Use simple natural straight forward language. But try to include some brief details of the history of your chapel and drop in a brief paragraph about Unitarianism.
- 5) It is always worth sending a good quality digital photograph of your chapel with the e-mail and/or a photograph of the visiting President/Vice-President.
- 6) Be sure to report the visit after it has happened, sending copy by e-mail the same evening, together with any good quality photograph.
- 7) News reporting should be unbiased, so do not draw your own conclusions or state opinions. It is both legitimate and good to include a direct quotation from your visitor's mouth, however provocative that may be.

- 8) Your material may not get printed. There is no point getting despondent about this. Just keep trying!

Background details about the President and Vice-President are to be found on the General Assembly website www.unitarian.org.uk Photographs are also available on demand using the website facility.

Other action:

Many congregations have websites. A visit is an opportunity to generate “news” content for the site and show an active and positive “face”. Any photographs need to be of a high quality. The site can be used in advance to promote the visit. Other social media can also be used if you already have active pages e.g. Facebook, Twitter.

Clearly your group will be hoping for a good turnout on the occasion of the visit. The visit should be announced well in advance in your newsletter and in notices at services to notify the members and friends of the Congregation. A poster could be put up on the Chapel notice board several weeks beforehand so that passers-by are made aware.

Any group or Congregation requiring further advice and help about publicity for presidential visits should not hesitate to get in touch with Essex Hall on 020 7240 2384 or email info@unitarian.org.uk

September 2011