

Minutes of the GA Executive Committee meeting held 17 January 2023 at Essex Hall

Present: Marion Baker, Celia Cartwright (by Zoom), Hilda Dumbleton, Robert Ince, Jenny Jacobs, Jo James, Rob Whiteman

In attendance: Simon Bland (Ministry & Congregational Support Officer, items 7-8, by Zoom) Rory Castle Jones (Communications Officer, Item XX, by Zoom) Andrew Mason (Minutes), Liz Slade (Chief Officer), Sue Woolley (GA President)

Apologies: David Joseph (Finance Officer)

Jenny Jacobs gave opening devotions.

1. Check-in

Everyone checked in and the meeting started.

2. Minutes from last meeting

The Minutes of the November 2022 EC Meeting were considered. A minor sentence change was made on page 4 and the Minutes were then **AGREED** as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. Action list

EC Minutes September 2021

1. Liz to put out a letter re. the CIO Consultative Group. This remained ongoing.

EC Minutes November 2021

1. Progress new types of GA Roll after creation of Ministry Matters group. The Memorandum of Understanding did not cover this, and the GA needed to consider how it would affect us collectively. Liz had discussed the process with Helen and Ant at Unitarian College but the bigger picture still needed to be considered. Progress had been made, but this item remained ongoing.

EC Minutes January 2022

1. Develop plans for Ministry Matters / MSG changes. Simon, Liz, Helen and Ant have been meeting and making progress. Claire McDonald had now started at Harris Manchester College Oxford. Capacity of volunteers during and post-Covid has been lower and this had slowed progress.

EC Minutes June 2022

1. Add Jane Blackall and Julio Torres to the GA Roll of Ministers with Probationary Status (and notify them). This has been done and the action item was cleared.

2. Feedback to the Annual Meetings Panel. This has been done and the action item was cleared.
3. James Speed Trust – The EC Finance Group would follow up with any further review as needed. This has been done and the action item was cleared.
4. Consider training for EC Members. This was ongoing.
5. Explore Congregational Support Package – Simon would cover this later on the agenda.
6. Explore practicalities and costs of hosting a workshop with Moral Imaginations to help Unitarian leaders to envision a future. Conversations were ongoing.
7. Communicate the exploration of the Congregational Support Package, Workshop, and response to feedback from the EC Workshop at the 2022 Annual Meetings. Conversations were ongoing.
8. Consider how 2020's Art of Hosting training can be built on, and how we might use open space technology to host conversations about our future. Conversations were ongoing.
9. Plan and budget for exploration of future ministry. Conversations were ongoing.
10. Plan and budget for the assessment of current spiritual practice inside the movement and in communities outside of traditional faith groups. Conversations were ongoing.
11. Respond to the East Midlands Union on the motion that they put to the General Assembly, and communicate more widely how we will be consultative in our work. This action item was cleared.
12. Invite districts to meet collectively and informally to share what issues are arising. This item was ongoing.

EC Minutes September 2022

1. Speak to Mike Tracey about the EC transferring trusteeship to the Centre Management Committee as a new CIO.

It was **AGREED** in principle that the Executive Committee would hand over the Trusteeship of the Nightingale Centre to the Management Committee in recognition that the Management Committee had demonstrated over a number of years that it was fully capable of managing the Centre independently of the General Assembly and it was therefore in the best interests of the Nightingale Centre for such a change to take place. It was further **AGREED** that the EC should retain the power to nominate a Trustee to the Nightingale Centre charity.

The change would also simplify our accounting requirements negating the necessity to consolidate the General Assembly and Nightingale Centre Accounts. In order to achieve this change, the Charity Commission would need to agree to an amendment to the current scheme governing the charity. To this end, Robert Ince, after consultation with Michael Tracey and Simon Bland, would contact the Charity Commission to seek agreement for such a change.

ACTION: Robert

4. Discuss Audit Timeline with the Auditors. This remained ongoing.
6. Add sentence to Memorandum of Understanding with Unitarian College. This sentence had been added. The action item was cleared.

7. Speak to Jane Shaw about a Memorandum of Understanding with Harris Manchester College. The College were open to this and it would be progressed.
12. Set up Communications group and define tasks. Liz and Rory had held conversations about planning for 2023 which included this. This remained ongoing.

EC Minutes November 2022

1. Engage Dan Thompson on Coastal Communities Pilot Project – This is with Simon to progress. Dan was enthused by the project. **ACTION: Simon**
2. Approve LGBT+ Project funding – This was going ahead, and the interviews would be starting this month. This action item was cleared.
3. Reappoint Shaw Gibbs as Auditors – This has been done and the action item was cleared.
4. Consider Newton Sustainable Growth and Income Investment Fund. A paper had been submitted for discussion at this meeting, and this action item was cleared.
5. Discuss Methodist Ethical Investment Fund – Rob and Jo had discussed. This was an issue where reasonable people could disagree. A tendering process for investments was due in a couple of years, with a greater focus on the sustainable and ethical, and this Fund would be included. This action item was cleared.
6. Discuss individually with EC members to see what has been useful in communicating with Districts, and then ask Districts what would help. This remained ongoing.
7. Ethics software purchase. Jo had been waiting for contact from the Ethics Team. Andrew had looked at the software, and it was unclear what the existing purchase requirement was. Jo would ask them to contact Andrew to clarify. **ACTION: Jo**
8. Book an Ethics workshop at the Annual Meetings. This had been booked and the action item was cleared.
9. Follow up formal President nomination from the MDA. This had been done and the action item was cleared.
10. Consider changing January meeting to an in-person meeting. This had been done, and the action item was cleared.
11. Produce and distribute Key Messages. This had been done and the action item was cleared.

4. President's report

The President gave a verbal report. Sue had not made any further visits since the last meeting, but would be visiting a number of congregations over the next few months, right up to the Annual Meetings. Sue was looking forward to working with the Annual Meetings Team on the Annual Meetings.

5. Staff report

A report had been received. Liz picked out some items to highlight.

The Team Get Together, held in November after August train strikes cancelled previous attempts, was very valuable. Staff members can be isolated in the way we work, so the

opportunity to get to know each other again had been really appreciated. It had also been useful for Staff to get to know the Staverton venue better, and this had produced ideas on how we might use the space. The food had been good, and the staff had been friendly.

Stipend Review Committee – Simon had received some questions after the recommendation for a one-off payment, asking whether specific amounts were recommended, as Committees seemed reluctant to decide on amounts themselves. It seemed that Congregations hadn't necessarily considered taking action before receiving the recommendation. Some districts have made payments on behalf of the congregations. The Stipend Review Committee meets in February to for the regular review.

Social Action Officer – Ann Howell was settling into the role, and was finding out more about the Penal and Social Affairs Panel. Ann was planning Zoom calls in the run-up to the Annual Meetings to discuss ways in for people to engage with Social Action.

Youth – A good meeting had been held with the Youth Officer, Helen Mason and Cathie Mastalerz, and the Nightingale Centre last week, with an open conversation about how to change the existing model of youth residential weekends to meet needs. There was an appetite to move ahead with market research on what people need and want, and a conversation would be held with the Finance Group. The Treasurer noted there were various Youth funds. It was noted that the Nightingale Centre was a passive partner, supplying accommodation and pricing to support events. The reputational importance to the entire movement of Safeguarding on youth events was highlighted.

Safeguarding – Liz will follow up with the Safeguarding Officer to check for any specific challenges. The Safeguarding Officer had been recommending that individual chapels subscribe directly to 31:8 for Safeguarding support, with some take up. We would consider signposting to this in the Congregational Support toolkit. There was a desire to help people be engaged with this, and Districts could be encouraged to be involved. **ACTION: Liz**

Torbay – Compliments were made for the progress in Torbay. Gav had been there for about a year now, and felt this was a good opportunity to reflect on the project with a wider group as part of next month's Congregations in the Community Zoom event.

Weddings – There are around 60 churches not registered, mostly those who are less active. Liz felt the primary obstacle to churches doing more weddings was confidence. Melda was trying to build more connections between Authorised Persons, Ministers and Congregations to give more confidence for those with limited experience.

6. Team

A proposal was made to convert the current Congregational Connections Lead's contract into a permanent contract in October 2023 at the end of the two-year fixed-term contract. This was **AGREED**. **ACTION: Liz**

7. Congregational Support Toolkit (CST)

Simon Bland attended this item via Zoom.

The idea for the CST was to produce a webpage as a central place to access the best resources. Using a webpage would make it easier to update information, link to other resources and search. The main sections were administrative support; governance, communications; and vision into action.

Administrative Support

This involved curating a package of external specialist support at a reasonable price. Examples were:

- 31:8 for Safeguarding.
- The Association for Church Accountants and Treasurers (ACAT) – this covered employment, tax matters, and training. Simon was currently looking at a district-based training course at a low cost of £25 per person, to upskill current Treasurers and start the process of succession planning for future Treasurers. The Treasurer was often the hardest post to fill, and it was hoped additional support would encourage people to come on as Treasurers.
- HallMaster community software – The Pilot had indicated that custom and practice changes can be hard, but this was still underway.
- Payroll: Central payroll as a service had been discussed, particularly as the costs of current payroll providers had risen sharply. There were issues we would need to look at to decide how best this could be rolled out. It was noted that a big barrier to appointment of ministers was the process of providing real-time information to HMRC and the management of payroll. Given our own limited resources, were we do this centrally, we would need to consider whether to make it available as a time-limited service, or as more of a central service for all. Simon would target congregations re-employing people and having to start from scratch on payroll and reporting.
- The Congregational Connections Lead was working on and Administrators' Support Network.

Governance

This would cover basis charity matters (such as accounting thresholds, excepted charity status and other common questions), CIO information, risk assessment templates (H&S and fire risk assessments), Guidelines and the Stipend Review.

Communications

This was still under consideration. Simon was currently seeking to work with Jim Corrigan on a press pack and sample releases to set a narrative and make the most of communicating pulpit appointments.

Vision into Action

This would be the holding library for the Congregations in the Community Resources.

Simon outlined three possible further developments: a forum for peer-to-peer sharing (opening or closed), though it was noted that were significant issues to consider; an Emerging Leaders section (this might link to Colleges or be much wider); and an option for a Districts section, where they can communicate.

Much of the material for the CST had already been produced, and the platform was needed. It was undecided whether to require registration to use the site or have it publicly available.

Comments made:

- ACAT have a system of volunteers based throughout the UK, so this covers Scottish Law as well as English & Welsh.
- Capacity was a key issue in congregations, and Treasurer and Administrative functions can be a draw on energy for trustees if they are not well supported.
- Capacity can be a function of whether there is visionary leadership in the congregation. If only addressing capacity with skills and tools, it would be unlikely to lead to more thriving congregations with energy and life.
- The new Accounting Software being proposed for the GA includes payroll functionality.
- Buildings are another big area for congregations. Simon is still working with the Churches Conservation Trust to access a full suite of support, and looking at a joint project.
- There is a similar association to ACAT for Chairs, which could provide assistance with items such as governance, managing trustee conflicts, support networks etc. Simon would look into this. **ACTION: Simon**
- There was a discussion about having more direct communications with Officers, not just the Secretary, and it was envisaged there would be a regular way to communicate about the toolkit and issues.
- Updating: with the CST being on a website it could be updated instantaneously. There would need to be a process of moderation of what's up there, a monthly check, and then using the ability for peer-sharing. We would encourage people to engage with the site, make suggestions and highlight areas which have changed. Revision numbers and page update descriptions would be used, to ensure it remained clear that the information was up-to-date and make it a living document. The more it is used, the more it will remain a live document. When a draft site with a password is available, EC members would be encouraged to look at it and email any further comments.

Timescale: There would be a hard launch at the Annual Meetings. Simon was considering inviting ACAT to attend and possibly have an exhibition stand for a day. It was then intended to have soft launches of each section as they come online. A web developer and host was being procured, and the structure of the Worship Words website could be reproduced for this type of content fairly easily with new content. There was currently a £5K item in the CST budget.

Simon was thanked for his excellent work.

8. Ministry and leadership

New students

The Interview Panel held interviews in January at Harris Manchester College, Oxford. The Panel had agreed to look at a meeting timeline and were reconsidering the whole process, including application forms. There was an intention for the Interview Panel to meet in May and come up with proposals to bring to the EC which plan the student journey all the way from interest to joining the Roll as newly-qualified minister.

It was clarified that the authority and responsibility to appoint students to the Roll needed to remain with the Executive Committee.

The recommendations for the Roll were received, and confidentiality would be maintained until the 06 February Orientation meeting, at which point a joint photo would be taken for a press release. It was **AGREED** that the three people recommended by the Interview Panel were ratified.

Proposal on 'Leading The Future' event in Czech Republic

The EC was positive to the concept of having Unitarians from all over the world getting together to discuss leadership. However there were concerns to navigate about different cultural contexts, how this would work with the Leadership Design Team (ICUU successor), the short lead-in for a complex international conference (with a proposed date of Autumn), and the environmental impact of flying people to Prague. It was **AGREED** that the Chief Officer would raise these concerns and pursue the conversation. **ACTION: Liz**

9. Finance

David Joseph was unwell and had sent his apologies.

Bank mandates – it was **AGREED** to update the bank mandates as follows:

- Add Rob Whiteman as an external signatory.
- Add Andrew Mason, Cherralyn Davies and Liz Slade as internal signatories.
- Remove Alan Ruston and Peter Hanley from the mandate.
- Retain Derek McAuley as external signatory due to proximity to Essex Hall; Derek has agreed to remain on the mandate as an external signatory.

ACTION: David Joseph & Rob Whiteman

IT software – Andrew Mason introduced the IT Briefing Paper and described the need for changes to the GA's IT provision including the Database, general IT system and telecoms. The up-front costs were around £14.5K, and the ongoing budget increase was around £2.5K on a budget of c£35K. The proposal was **AGREED**.

Accounting software

Two papers on the Accounting software had been circulated and the Treasurer reported on this in David Joseph's absence. The previous system, Aqilla, had been implemented 9 years ago, with an expected lifespan of 5-6 years and was now out of date. The papers outlined the potential benefits (including the ability to do payroll) and packages considered. The timescale was noted, though with audit issues and other commitments, this might be optimistic. The new software was **approved**.

Investments

The Treasurer presented an Investment Proposal to the Unitarian Joint Investment Panel from Newton Investment Management to move to the Newton Sustainable Income and Growth for Charities Fund, which does not have any fossil fuel investments. It was **AGREED** that the GA would move its investments, subject to a review of the list of specific investments in that fund by the Treasurer.

ACTION: Rob Whiteman

10. Our current context

The Chief Officer had circulated her reflections on the Census results on religious beliefs in England and Wales. There had been a huge change in the last twenty years from 14% to 37% of people who express their religious beliefs as 'none'. This split further from hard atheists to those who are broadly tolerant, and those who were tolerant or warm to religion.

The percentage of people identifying as Christian has decreased from 71% to 46%. This big societal change made it more difficult to be flexible in meeting people's need and could explain shrinking church memberships in terms other than failure.

The Census gave the impression that there were large numbers of people who were spiritually seeking, and this could put us in a good position to be open to those people. It was noted that there were issues with meeting the support needs of people with significant or complex needs in our small congregations, and the answer might be to signpost to other support sources for some of those issues. People in crisis when approaching us could potentially be our future leaders. The role of parents on the views and attitudes of their children later was discussed, along with the change in language overtime. Some traditional church language no longer worked, but the language of science often didn't bridge the gap.

Regional and other breakdowns were possible with the census information, at a cost. Out congregations could be very different according to region, area, theology, history, urban or rural setting etc. The Chief Officer was thanked for the analysis.

11. Managing risk: membership sustainability

The Chief Officer presented a paper on membership sustainability, including a proposal for what the EC workshop at the Annual Meetings might involve. There were already some activities in motion aiming to mitigate some of these sustainability risks, though it was too early to assess whether these were sufficient to manage the risks.

The Chief Officer discussed The Berkana Two Loops organisation transformation model where there are activities growing and dying all the time. The growth is in the 'emergent' section of the model and there is a tension between serving the needs of some existing members who may fall in the 'dominant' section, and the needs of future members in the 'emergent' section with the GA's limited resources. It was noted that the dominant can ultimately transition to the emergent and it was important not to carry negative judgements. The Chief Officer indicated the need to provide fertile soil for emerging leaders to develop, let the future create itself, and balance voices from different positions on the map.

AGM Session

There would be a brief explanation of the session, and then people would split into groups (hopefully with an EC member in each group) to discuss issues such as what membership sustainability looks like for them, what's positive, where do they need help etc, and then come back together to feedback. The sharing exercise was a helpful format, and it was important to hold the event well, as some of the realities can be painful, and still attempt to generate a positive atmosphere.

12. Governance

A letter had been received from Stalybridge indicating their intention to leave the GA. This was discussed at length, and governance issues around retained membership of other Unitarian organisations, excepted status, business rates etc were all raised. It was **AGREED** for the Chief Officer to suggest a face-to-face meeting with Staybridge, ideally with someone present from the East Cheshire District, and Jo James from the EC. **ACTION: Liz Slade**

13. GA President Nominations

It was **AGREED** that Vince McCully would be nominated as the GA President for 2023-24. A person would be approached by the Chief Officer, through their District, as a potential Vice President for 2023-24. **ACTION: Liz Slade**

14. Motions

Rory Castle Jones attended for this item by Zoom.

The current results of the Logo Consultation had been collated and circulated and were reviewed.

Key points:

- The response rate to the latest consultation had been around 20%.
- The Resolution was unclear on what it was asking us to do. It was not a Yes / No referendum. As a result, there were a range of types of responses.
- There was an underlying theme of dissatisfaction with the original consultation / communication process, which was separate to which logo people preferred.
- Reverting to the old chalice would be expensive. Some congregations had already adopted the new design, and others were already using their own design.

After significant discussion, it was **AGREED** that the EC needed to communicate the following: it was acknowledged that consultation and communication on this had not been good enough; the GA would continue with the logo for its own use; constituent congregations and groups retained the right to use the logo of their choice.

15. Annual report

An early draft had been circulated in December for trustees to comment on any key items. The structure of the Report had been changed this year to functional areas rather than on the old committee structure, with Staff now primarily producing the Reports. As a result there were a number of different tones in the individual reports in the current draft. Andrew and Liz would edit some of the reports to achieve a more consistent tone.

ACTION: Andrew Mason & Liz Slade

16. Communication

Expectations for EC District Links and communicating with Districts – This would be an item for the next EC to discuss. Possibilities on getting District Reps together on Zoom, or using Discord servers to start conversations were discussed. It was noted that different channels of communication were needed to communicate. It would be valuable to follow up over email to get members' thoughts and experiences.

ACTION: Liz Slade

Key messages from this meeting

- Nominating Vince McCully as President.
- Approved 3 new students for training.
- Made progress on Sustainable Investments, to report at the Annual Meetings.
- Taken action on Chalice Branding Consultation feedback.
- Made progress on Congregational Support toolkit (to use Simon's five headings).

17. Check-out

Check-out took place.

Closing devotions were given by Jo James and the meeting finished.