

Review of the 3-day Annual Meetings by the Annual Meetings Panel

Background

In 2018, the following Resolution was passed:

“Resolution 4

- 1) That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches accepts the changes to the length and format of the Annual Meetings [as set out in report AGM13/18]; and that a formal review is carried out in three years’ time.”

There was an additional clause around limiting the number of motions, though that was not specifically included in the Review text.

The 2020 and 2021 Meetings were, respectively, cancelled and replaced by an online meeting, due to Covid. This means the 2023 Meetings were the third year of three-day Meetings. The Review is therefore now due.

The Review is to be carried out by the Annual Meetings Panel. There were no specific criteria mentioned, and no specific reporting mechanism.

Scope

This Review will look at the effect of the 3-day changes against the old 4-day model. A wider review would be useful in the future.

Specific changes we made

In order to facilitate the 3-day meetings, paper AGM 13/18 mandated certain specific changes:

- Reduce Business time
 - Reduce Report times by taking Reports as read (but allow for questions)
 - Streamline final ceremonial session
 - Limit maximum number of motions and emergency motions.
- Merge JRB lecture and Keynote lecture
- Replace Opening Celebrations, Social Evening and 10-minute Opening Welcome with 30 Minute Opening Worship
- Shorten Anniversary Service
- Replace 40 & 90 minute slots with 60-minute slots

There have also been quality of life changes made in recent years, such as:

- Moving the Newcomer Welcome to an advance Zoom meeting.

- Changing the culture of the Business Meetings to try and be more welcoming, particularly to more explanations aimed at Newcomers.
- Establishing the Fringe evening activities

What were we trying to achieve?

Broadly, there were two main reasons why we made the changes (both to the number of days and the format):

1) Cost

The cost of in-person events had risen substantially, and the cost of 4-day Meetings, even back then, would have exceeded £400 per person. There was substantial concern this would put people off coming, and therefore have a negative effect on all our Objectives for the Meetings.

2) Quality

We wanted to make the experience of the Meetings better for those who came. A big part of this was tightening up our activities, by making business sessions and slots shorter and more focussed. We also wanted to open the Meetings up to people who hadn't been before by making them more accessible for Newcomers, rather than assuming everyone had been before and knows what happens.

What are we assessing against?

A good starting point for this would probably be the current objectives. The objectives of the Annual Meetings (in no particular order of importance) are:

- To bring us together as a Community.
- To achieve our needs at the Meetings – summarised as Business, Inspiration (including worship), Education and Socialising / Networking. Other activities include Sectional Meetings, Motions, Sales & Promotion and Training.
- To ensure sufficient attendance to allow accountability and democratic decision making.
- To get more, and younger / working age, people to attend the Annual Meetings.
- To ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the Meetings.
- To achieve value for money for attenders.

There's obviously a lot of overlap between these.

The Elephant in the Room – Covid

There's no doubt about it – Covid's had an impact on everything. As an in-person Meeting, the Annual Meetings have been particularly affected. The 2020 and 2021 Meetings couldn't take place as normal. In 2022 there was noticeable reluctance from many to attend an in-person Meeting. In December 2021 the UK government had introduced their Winter 'Plan B' measures, including face masks, as a result of the spread of the Omicron

variant. Due to the uncertainty, the GA pushed the booking process back until the start of February 2022 – the latest it's been. The attendance numbers for 2022 were down by around 20% on the last in-person Meetings (2019). 2023 numbers increased, but we're still not back to the 2019 numbers.

Additionally, the cost of residential conferences has jumped since the Pandemic, as a result of pent-up demand, and venues trying to claw back some of the revenue lost while they were closed, and often pay back borrowing incurred while they were closed.

The other smaller elephant in the room is the UK economy. Wages have fallen in real terms over the last five years, and inflation in recent years has been high.

How have we done?

Objective: To ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the Meetings.

The 3-day Meetings idea was heavily influenced by long-term (and short-term) financial sustainability. At the last 4-day Meetings, in 2018, the standard attendance cost was £399. We had been receiving anecdotal feedback that this was the equivalent cost to a week's holiday half-board somewhere like Spain or Greece. While that's not a direct cost comparison, it is a realistic alternative for what people think they could be doing with their time and money. The Annual Meetings Panel was greatly concerned that routine inflation costs would quickly bring the costing well above £400 and this would put off those attenders paying for themselves, and others.

The pricing we get with the Meetings venue is based on the number of people we can guarantee. The Budget for the meetings is also based on a certain number of people contributing towards the costs of the Meetings. If paying attendance numbers fall too far, the venue rates go up, and the other fixed costs have to be split between a smaller number of people. This then sends the costs for attenders up, which causes a downwards spiral of attendance until the Meetings are unsustainable.

In 2023, the three-day Meetings standard attendance was charged at £350. The 3-day Meetings is actually two 24-hour periods spread over three Calendar days. A 4-day Meetings is similarly three 24-hour periods spread over four Calendar days – an extra 24-hour period. For rough purposes, a 4-day Meetings would therefore represent around 50% extra on the cost. So where we charged £350 in 2023, we'd expect to have needed to charge in the order of £515 if it had been a 4-day Meetings in 2023. Please note this is a rough estimate – some aspects of the Meetings costs are not affected by the number of days we're there (e.g. Staff travel), and others might be increased (say if it stops a service provider from being able to sell their services to a commercial entity at a non-discounted rate during that period). A reasonable estimate would probably be around £500.

Objective: To achieve value for money for attenders.

Value for money is slightly more subjective. With the 3-day Meetings the aim was about bringing the total cost of the event down so people could afford to come. In the Annual Meetings survey, average value for money responses for the 3-day (81%) and 4-day (84%) Meetings were broadly similar.

Objective: To ensure sufficient attendance to allow accountability and democratic decision making.

Again, one of the primary concerns of the Annual Meetings Panel was avoiding a situation where increasing costs would prevent voting groups from sending delegates, or voting members attending (non-voting members are also important for accountability). This could lead to unrepresentative decision-making by a small number who could afford to attend / send delegates. This situation has not occurred.

The average voting figures for the 4-day meetings were 166. The following year for the 3-day meetings they were almost identical at 167. When Covid hit, the figures fell to 133 (2022) and have since recovered slightly to 144 (2023). It seems like Covid has had more of an impact than the format of the Meetings.

Objective: To get more, and younger / working age, people to attend the Annual Meetings.

Aside from cost, the 3-day Meetings were designed to make it easier for working age people to attend, as it would be less day's holiday to book from work. We do not have direct statistics on the age of attenders, but an average from the Annual Meetings Surveys gives a percentage of people aged 18-59 of 38% for the 3-day Meetings and 26% for the 4-day Meetings.

Newcomers – There has been a definite improvement in the number of Newcomers coming to the meetings since the 3-day Meetings change (3-day meetings average 71, 4-day Meetings average 47). It is hoped that culture changes introduced to make the Meetings more accessible for Newcomers have helped in this respect.

Objective: To bring us together as a Community.

Attendance has held up well (average B&B numbers 293 under the 3-day Meetings model against 301 under the 4-day model), and is actually up if you exclude the exceptional 2022 year. So in terms of physically getting people together, this can be counted as successful. In terms of the intangible aspect of the atmosphere and general spirit of togetherness engendered, it's more difficult to say. In the Surveys, the averages for people who found the Meetings experience 'Inspiring' and 'Useful' were almost identical, suggesting we had met this objective well under both systems.

Objective: To achieve our needs at the Meetings

We have no objective way of measuring most of these, so much of this will be subjective.

Business

Streamlining the business meetings took place. As an example, in 2018, the time allocated for Business Sessions (including the opening session and the ceremonial closing session) was 8 hours and 50 minutes. In the 3-day Meetings with the highest amount of business time (2022), it was 6 hour and 20 minutes, including allowing extra time for briefing Newcomers on the process. It is the Panel's view that this has improved the experience at the Meetings by conducting much of the same business in a more focused style.

Motions

The amount of time for speeches (both from proposers and attenders) has been reduced, in the hope of being able to hear more voices, and widen participation. It is the Panel's view that short speeches encourage those people speaking to make their point more clearly and succinctly, and can provide a higher-quality debate.

While not specifically part of the Review, it is worth noting that following the change to a maximum number of four motions, this number has only been exceeded once – in 2021 – when six motions were submitted. A vote on which motions to discuss was allocated five minutes. The two additional motions would likely have needed at least 20 minutes each, so at least 35 minutes of business time were saved.

Worship

The opening worship at the start of the Meetings has enabled us to start the Meetings well, by emphasising our faith, ethos and principles before we start on the business. In recent years, more worship sessions have been worked into the day to give a strong spiritual offering from the start of the day to the end.

Sessions

The change to 60-minute slots has broadly gone well. Most sessions are now more focused. There may be a potential case for very rare 90-minute sessions in future, and this will be considered for future Meetings.

Conclusion

The Annual Meetings Panel feel that the move to 3-day Meetings was the correct move to safeguard the future of the Annual Meetings as a sustainable event, and the changes made to accommodate this and offer additional quality of life improvements have been successful. As ever, there will be tweaks to make, and the bigger questions on how the Annual Meetings should continue to evolve to meet changing needs are ongoing.

Appendix 1 - Data

NUMBERS	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	Average 3-day numbers	Average 4-day numbers
<u>Actual Numbers from bookings</u>										
Average B&B numbers	287	266	N/A	N/A	327	299	305	300	293	301
Newcomers	71	71	N/A	N/A	70	49	46	46	71	47
Voting participants	144	133	N/A	N/A	167	168	146	183	148	166
			N/A	N/A						
Standard attendance price	£350.00	£290.00	N/A	N/A	£268.00	£399.00	£390.00	£390.00		
Standard attendance price per day	£175.00	£145.00	N/A	N/A	£134.00	£133.00	£130.00	£130.00		

Notes:

2020 was cancelled due to Covid, and 2021 was held online due to Covid. For simplicity, we are only counting residential numbers, as some years did not have a day delegate option. 2018 was the last four-day Meeting. 3-day Meetings are shown in green, 4-day Meetings are shown in blue

RATINGS	2023		2022		2019		2018		2017		2016		Average 3-day numbers		Average 4-day numbers	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Did you find the conference:	88%	3%	87%	2%	71%	13%	80%	6%	N/A	N/A	84%	7%	82%	6%	82%	7%
Inspiring																
Useful	93%	2%	91%	2%	93%	4%	92%	3%	N/A	N/A	96%	3%	92%	3%	94%	3%
Well organised	96%	1%	94%	2%	95%	2%	94%	3%	N/A	N/A	97%	2%	95%	2%	96%	3%
Well structured	91%	2%	87%	2%	76%	11%	92%	4%	N/A	N/A	95%	3%	85%	5%	94%	4%
Easy to book	87%	3%	84%	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	86%	2%		
Welcoming	96%	1%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A				
Good value / Value for Money	78%	2%	80%	1%	84%	2%	83%	0%	N/A	N/A	85%	1%	81%	2%	84%	1%
Other survey questions																
Age (%age 18-59)	43%		32%		38%		27%		N/A		24%		38%		26%	

Notes:

Balance are those neither agreed nor disagreed, or did not answer the question.

2020 Meetings were cancelled, 2021 Meetings were online only

2018/9 Were Yes /No, 2022 onwards asked 'strongly agree / slightly agree' and 'strongly disagree / slightly disagree'

Easy to Book - new question in 2022

Welcoming - new question in 2023

Good value - 2019 was Good Value for money . The previous

2017 - the survey was not run in 2017

Numbers from surveys are based on those who choose to fill in the survey.

3-day Annual Meetings – Report to the 2018 Annual Meetings

Introduction

The 2017 Annual Meetings passed the following Resolution:

“That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches supports changes to the length and format of the Annual Meetings [as set out in report **AGM13/17**];

and therefore, requests the Executive Committee and Annual Meetings Panel to bring forward proposals to the next Annual Meetings, including any amendments to the Constitution and By-laws, to enable such changes to take place for future Annual Meetings.”

This report is intended to try and crystallise some of the aspects that will be necessary to have the 3-day Meetings as outlined in report AGM13/17.

Why are we doing this?

The objectives of the Annual Meetings (in no particular order of importance) are:

- To bring us together as a Community.
- To achieve our needs at the Meetings – summarised as Business, Inspiration (including worship), Education and Socialising / Networking. Other activities include Sectional Meetings, Motions, Sales & Promotion and Training.
- To ensure sufficient attendance to allow accountability and democratic decision making.
- To get more, and younger / working age, people to attend the Annual Meetings.
- To ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the Meetings.
- To achieve value for money for attenders.

The Annual Meetings Panel have identified that the objectives set for the Meetings are becoming increasingly difficult to deliver due to: 1) increasing pressure on personal time for potential attenders; and b) increasing venue and other costs, which must be reflected in the attendance charges. Both act as deterrents to attendance.

How do we achieve it?

- 1) Reduce the Business Meetings time

There is scope to reduce the Business meetings, and to inject a greater sense of focus. In fact we trialled this at the 2017 Annual Meetings and it was felt to be beneficial.

Reports – Reports from GA Strategy Groups and Panels will ordinarily be taken as read, except for questions (preferably submitted in advance). The presentation of the Annual Report and Accounts will also be streamlined, and include future plans. The time allocated for questions will be increased to facilitate better accountability. Other reports from connected groups will be retained but reduced.

Final session – The final session is primarily ceremonial and will be streamlined, for example, the procedural motions of thanks etc. will be taken en bloc rather than read out individually.

Motions – The motions are the largest item of uncertainty in the time required. There is currently no limit on the number of motions which can be proposed, and very limited grounds for rejecting motions. It is almost impossible to plan for the 3-day Meetings when there is a potential for a massive time commitment to be added.

The Panel is therefore proposing a maximum of one emergency motion (except in exceptional circumstances) and four slots for ordinary motions. In the event a greater number of ordinary motions have been received, the Steering Committee would be authorised to select the four motions for debate (changes being required to the Constitution). If applicable, a fifth ordinary motion would be selected as a 'reserve motion' in the event that no emergency motion was received. In the interests of transparency, any rejected motions would be circulated to the movement along with the accepted motions. This would enable interested congregations and individuals to take action as they wished.

- 2) Redefine the purpose and profile of the John Rely Beard (JRB) lecture to incorporate the keynote speaker item.

The JRB lecture and the plenary keynote speaker items will be merged, in partnership with the Ministerial Fellowship and the GA Executive Committee. It is hoped that this might raise the profile of the activity by arranging a single high-quality speaker using our shared resources.

- 3) Cancel the Opening Celebrations and Social Evening

Instead, there will be a 30-minute Opening Worship, replacing the 10-minute Opening Welcome, to take place at the start of the Meetings. This will give a more defined start to the Meetings, emphasising our Business and time together take place in the context of a religious community.

- 4) Shorten the Anniversary Service

The Anniversary Service would take place on the second evening, for an hour of high-quality worship (plus up to 15 minutes for the Ceremony of Recognition).

- 5) Amend the slot system from 40 and 90 minute slots to just have 60 minute slots.

We appreciate this is probably the most contentious aspect of the proposal.

There are two main objectives to this. The first is timing – it will help allow us to retain contributions from the GA groups, panels and strategy groups as well as the affiliated and non-affiliated societies within the available time. However it is equally aimed at a second objective of improving the quality of the event and experience. Underlying the entire proposal is a belief that making the Meetings more focused will improve the quality of the experience for the majority of people attending. We feel that 60 minutes is the optimal timing for retaining attention and concentration, particularly in a warm meeting room. Attention drops over the course of a talk. Most University lectures are scheduled at 50 minutes.

What will it achieve financially?

In 2019, reducing the meetings from 72 to 48 hours will reduce the cost for a single participant from c£400 to c£260 – a saving of around £140.

Additionally, it will save the GA and associated funds money by reducing attendance subsidies (EC, retired ministers, students, volunteers, young adults, children etc.) by around £7,000. It will also release staff time for other projects.

For other Unitarian groups, the saving is greater. The indication from our Meetings attenders' survey is that roughly 2/3 of people have the majority of their attendance costs paid by their congregation or other Unitarian body. Taking a figure of 300 people, that's 200 X £140 = £28,000 saving to other Unitarian groups.

3-day Annual Meetings Schedule – Example for discussion

DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	
ARRIVALS	Morning Worship	Morning Worship	07:30
	Free time	Free time	08:00
	PLENARY II	PLENARY IV	08:45
	Coffee	Coffee	10:00
	PLENARY III	Slot 1 Slot 2 Slot 3 Slot 4	10:30
	Break	Break	11:30
	Slot 1 Slot 2 Slot 3 Slot 4	Closing Session	11:40
	LUNCH	LUNCH	12:40
	Slot 1 Slot 2 Slot 3 Slot 4	DEPARTURES	13:45
	Break		14:00
PLENARY I	14:30		
Slot 1 Slot 2 Slot 3 Slot 4	14:40		
Break	14:45		
Slot 1 Slot 2 Slot 3 Slot 4	14:55		
Newcomers' Welcome Tea	15:55		
Slot 1 Slot 2 Slot 3 Slot 4	16:25		
Break	17:25		
Slot 1 Slot 2 Slot 3 Slot 4	17:35		
DINNER	DINNER	18:20	
Break	Break	18:35	
JRB KEYNOTE LECTURE	ANNIVERSARY SERVICE	20:05	
SOCIAL TIME	SOCIAL TIME	20:15	
Break		21:30	
Peace Vespers		21:40	

Slots:
*There are 32 slots, all lasting one hour.
 In 2016 there were 29 slots booked (15 single, 14 double).
 In 2017 there were 33 slots booked (22 single, 11 double) due to 5 extra Next Steps workshops.*