

General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

Notes of the Meeting of the General Assembly held from 10 to 13 April 2017 at the Birmingham Hilton Metropole Hotel.

The eighty-ninth Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches were held from 10 to 13 April 2017 at Birmingham Hilton Metropole Hotel. Dorothy Hewerdine, President of the General Assembly, was in the Chair, assisted by Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of the General Assembly.

Monday 10 April

The first plenary session commenced at 15.45 with an opening welcome from the President and the lighting of the Chalice and opening hymn.

The Standing Orders for the Conduct of Business, as set out in document AGM 12/17, were adopted. The Steering Committee, consisting of Gavin Lloyd, Rev Celia Midgley and Bruce Chilton, were confirmed. It was agreed that Rev Peter Hewis would replace Gavin Lloyd for sessions 5 and 6.

Apologies for absence were received from Rev Geoffrey Usher and the Rev Robert McKee. The General Assembly Staff were introduced and the contribution of Isabella Clarke, Caretaker at Essex Hall, who had passed away during the year, was recognised. The following overseas guests were welcomed; Sara Ascher, ICUU Executive Director; Lucie Hrabankova, Kristyna Ledererova and Rev Petr Samojsky of the Religious Society of Czech Unitarians, and Rev Bridget and Paul Spain from Dublin Unitarian Church.

A report on behalf of the Youth Panel was presented by Lorna Barry. All youth leaders and volunteers were thanked for their contribution. The new inter-generational weekend event UNIfest was highlighted.

The report of the Stipend Review Committee was presented by the Honorary Treasurer. The report was adopted.

Rev Sara Ascher introduced the work of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalist (ICUU) and brought greetings from Chennai and the Khasi Hills Unitarians.

Rev John Harley introduced two videos on safeguarding which reinforced the key message that our responsibility was to keep people safe. He highlighted some key "absolute musts" - what he called the 'Golden Guidelines'.

Howard Wilkins presented the report of the Electoral Panel on the Executive Committee electoral process for 2017. Concerns were expressed at the failure to have sufficient candidates for an election to be held. It was explained that advertisements had been issued seeking individuals to be co-opted to fill the vacancies until April 2019. The Panel were thanked for their work.

Tuesday 11 April

The second plenary session commenced at 09.00 with opening reflections led by Rev Ralph Catts.

The report of the Executive Committee (EC) and the Annual Accounts 2015/2016 were introduced by Robert Ince, EC Convenor and Peter Hanley, Honorary Treasurer. The Convenor spoke on the four cornerstones that had been identified from "Vision: Next Steps"; sustainability, communication, identity and training & education. He thanked the members of the Executive Committee for their work; in particular Joan Cook and Jacqueline Woodman, who were standing down. The failure of many congregations to send representatives to the Annual Meetings was commented upon as was the need to encourage younger members to attend by increasing financial support. The need to emphasise social responsibility was highlighted.

The Honorary Treasurer presented the Annual Accounts 2015/16 and gave a presentation which highlighted how the General Assembly was managing its funds and meeting the requirements of regulators and that Unitarianism had a platform on which to survive and thrive. Five written questions had been submitted:

- What plans were in place when the Bowland Trust funds ran out in ten years? This required action to ensure this was not the case.
- Gift Aid figures did not match the breakdown? This was accepted and would be reviewed.
- Was the appointment of Auditors to be reviewed? Yes, this would be taken forward.
- What was the breakdown of 'Furtherance of GA objects' on page 41 of the Annual Report? This was shown in the full Accounts.
- Given the importance of climate change, how has this influenced our ethical investment policy? This was an issue but given the use of pooled funds our ability to influence was limited. We had taken advice from an Investment Adviser during the year on the overall investment strategy, but more work was required.

Further questions were received from the floor on the current financial year, non-payment of quota and non-delivery of Annual Accounts to Essex Hall.

Emergency Motion 2 on the bombing of two Coptic Churches in Egypt was proposed by Rev Richard Boeke on behalf of twelve full members. It was agreed to admit the emergency motion to the agenda and the motion was then passed.

The Keynote Address was delivered by Rev Dr Ralph Waller, Principal of Harris Manchester College, Oxford and followed by a short question time.

Wednesday 12 April

The third plenary session commenced at 09.00 with opening reflections led by Lizzie Smith and Lizzy Rosenberg.

Motion 2 on future Annual Meetings Arrangements was proposed on behalf of the Executive Committee by Jacqueline Woodman and seconded by Rev Martin Whitell, a member of the Annual Meetings Panel. After a full debate it was passed.

Colin Partington delivered the Anniversary Service Appeal.

Rosemary Ruston introduced the Associate Member scheme which gave an opportunity to support and stay in touch with the work of the General Assembly.

The fourth plenary session commenced at 11.00. Reports were received on progress with the following previous Resolutions:

- British Red Cross – Hugh Fenton on behalf of the British Red Cross presented a certificate to acknowledge that over £100,000 had been donated since the establishment of the Unitarian Clara Barton Fund. A further £1,000 cheque was presented from an anonymous donor.
- Gold mining in Transylvania – Rev John Midgley announced that due to active campaigning the Romanian Government had rejected the proposals.
- Animal Free Research UK (formerly Dr Hadwen's Trust) – Dr Alpesh Patel thanked the General Assembly for its support.

Thursday 13 April

The fifth plenary session commenced at 09.00 with opening reflections led by Mark Hutchinson. Greetings were conveyed to the General Assembly by Rev Bridget Spain and Kristyna Ledererova.

Simon Bland, Ministry and Congregational Support Officer spoke on his work since his appointment.

Motion 1. Rev Cliff Reed was named as an Honorary Member for his contribution to the Unitarian cause worldwide. Rev Reed responded and thanked the General Assembly for the honour.

Rev Winnie Gordon presented the report of the Worship Studies Course, which had inadvertently been omitted from the Annual Report.

Emergency Motion 1. on the deportation of Mrs Irene Clennell and deportation procedures was proposed by David Warhurst on behalf of Stockton Unitarians. It was agreed to admit the emergency motion to the agenda and the motion was then passed.

The sixth plenary session commenced at 10.45. The Nightingale Centre report was presented by Colin Partington with a video on improvements and also an update on renovations at Barleycrofts. The work of the Send a Child to Hucklow charity was highlighted.

The report of the Sustentation Fund was presented by Mike Tomlin and adopted. As this was the last report as the separate charity was to be dissolved he thanked everyone who had been associated with its work over many years.

A handover ceremony was conducted for the Executive Committee. Robert Ince, Joan Cook and Jacqueline Woodman were standing down, and were thanked for their service. Peter Hanley, Gwynn Pritchard and Marion Baker were thanked for their continuing work, as were Rev Lynne Readett and Sir Philip Colfox who had been elected following a co-opted term. Rev Matthew Smith was welcomed as a new member.

It was reported that £5,000 had been raised in the Anniversary Service Appeal.

The closing plenary session commenced at 11.20. Further motions 1-8 were passed. Dorothy Hewerdine delivered the Presidential Address. Further motion 9 to appoint Rev Charles VanDenBroeder as President of the General Assembly for the year 2017-2018 was proposed by the President, seconded by Rev Alex Bradley, and passed. The installation of the new President took place and he addressed the Meetings. Further motion 10 to thank the outgoing President was passed.

The President conducted a closing act of worship and declared the Meetings closed.

Resolutions

As circulated and published in the Annual Report.