

Annual Report of the Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians' Management Committee for the year 2021-2022

Introduction

It has been another busy and challenging 12 months since our last AGM on 25 April 2021. This report covers how the church has responded to the coronavirus lockdown including our move into online worship and the situation with the sale of our building.

Coronavirus situation

Since March 2021 we have continue to meet on Zoom and in person for our services and social occasions, with the exception of the winter months of November 2021 – February 2022, when a combination of the onset of cold weather and the spread of the very contagious Omicron variant of Covid-19 meant that it was not practical for us to meet for worship in person, and we returned to Zoom-only services, with recordings going on YouTube. Over summer 2021, we met in the main Church Hall, as its large size means it is easy to maintain social distancing.

As in 2021, information about this AGM was sent out by either post or email, and nominations for the Committee were collected by the Secretary, as we could not have our usual nominations sheet on display in the building. We arranged for this AGM to take place via Zoom. Our current plan is to move back to in-person worship from May 2021, and we will continue to have hybrid services, in which worship is livestreamed online via Zoom.

Sale of the building

Following the Special Meeting in January 2018, we agreed to sell our building to Tyneside Group Limited, owned by Robbie Kalbraier. Due to the coronavirus lockdown, they found their plans to purchase and refurbish the building as a mixed-use venue providing office space for small businesses, and performance & rehearsal space for local arts organisations were slowed down due to their being unable to have site visits from planning officers and other key partners.

We therefore agreed an extension to their exclusive option to purchase the building until April 2022, when they will purchase it from us. We are continuing to have discussions with them about our becoming an occupational tenant, and continuing to have our services in the Turner Hall on Sundays. We will need to move out whilst the building is refurbished, and either find a new physical location, or meet online. As of the date of this report, we are awaiting confirmation of the date of purchase, and this will be communicated to the congregation and membership as soon as it is confirmed.

The Secretary (Louise Reeve) and Treasurer (David Venus) have worked with our solicitors, Womble Bond Dickinson, to put in an application to the Charity Commission

Unfortunately, Storm Eunice did considerable damage to the roof, and we have had to pay for repairs, due to our unoccupancy of the building over November 2021 – February 2022 limiting our insurance cover. Happily, Tyneside Group Limited have agreed to carry out repairs to the roof; as of the date of this report, we are awaiting a final quote and timescale for this, but they have promised to minimise the cost involved.

Social Action

We have had less opportunity for social action compared to earlier years due to the challenges of coping with the pandemic, including limited opportunities for gathering in person. We note the motions for national action passed by the national General Assembly in 2021, including calls for action around supporting the Youth Programme, tackling alcohol abuse, disinvestment of funds from companies known to contribute to the climate crisis, and the proposed introduction of an Ethics Code for the national Unitarian movement.

We continued to make ongoing monthly donations of money, and also coffee, tea, dried milk, men's socks and underpants, and men's toiletries to the Joseph Cowen Centre for homeless men in Byker, named for an MP who regularly attended services at the Church of the Divine Unity.

Charities

We supported various charities in 2021-2022:

- **Barnardo's:** We were not able to donate toys for children in need in the local area as we usually do following the Toy Service in December 2021, as the service was held online. Instead, we encouraged members of the congregation to donate money to Barnardo's.
- **People's Kitchen:** Following our Harvest Service in autumn 2021, we asked those attending to donate either funds or goods to the People's Kitchen.
- **Red Cross Interfaith Appeal:** We donated the proceeds of our Flower Communion retiring collection, £30, to this appeal in June 2021, and made a further donation of £100 in March 2022, to support those affected by conflict in Ukraine.
- **War Paws:** As our Remembrance Sunday Service 2021 was held online, we asked those attending to donate to War Paws, a charity which looks after the welfare of animals caught up in conflict.

Committee

Louise Reeve continued as Secretary, and was elected Chairperson by the management committee. David Venus continued as Treasurer. Committee membership numbered five nominated members throughout 2021-2022.

Committee took action on the following:

- **Finances and Investments:** During 2021, we continued to attempt to minimise our monthly expenditure as much as possible. At the same time we increased our investment with the M&G Charifund, resulting in an increase to our income. We still, however, operated with a deficit, and it seems likely that this will continue as long as we remain in ownership of the building. We hope that this will improve in future.
- **Northern Unitarian Association (NUA):** Ben MacLeod and Brian Robson were the church's two representatives to the NUA. The NUA AGM took place at Stockton Unitarian Chapel on 9 October 2021.
- **Publicity and Outreach:** We have continued to publicise our services through our new website, and via Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, also via posters at our building and the new banner showing service times which is on display on the car park gates (funded by a grant from the NUA). Social media statistics show that in the past year we have had 21 subscribers to our YouTube Channel, an increase from 19 in 2021, with our videos being viewed 537 times between March 2021-March 2022. We have 373 followers of our Facebook page, an increase from 336 in 2021. In 2022 we will look at reaching out to local LGBTQIA+ people and communities to let them know that we welcome all who want to worship with us and be part of our congregation.
- **Herbert Barnes Award:** In 2021 this was awarded to Rev. Rory Castle-Jones.
- **Safeguarding:** Ben MacLeod and Brian Robson continued their work as our Deputy Safeguarding Officer and Safeguarding Officer, respectively.