

Ethics proposal passes

By Maud Robinson

Having agreed to write about plenary session two, I prepared myself to listen attentively to the debate about a proposed code of ethics. Just as the session was about to commence, high drama ensued. A raging inferno erupted to my left. During the opening devotions I had lit my home chalice, determined to be fully involved in proceedings, and put it down on a side table where it wouldn't drip wax on my laptop. As I settled, pen in hand to take notes, I had flung my paper copy of the agenda to one side and ... much as I despise battery operated chalice flames, they certainly have something to recommend them for those, like me, who struggle with the orderly placement of items in their vicinity.

Firefighting accomplished, I settled again.

Why pass motions?

GA President Celia Cartwright spoke briefly about the purpose of motions at our Annual Meetings. While we Unitarians fiercely defend the right of individuals to come to our own conclusions on matters of belief and ethics, we recognise that collective statements to the wider world bear more weight. The debating and voting on motions provide a democratic way to give a mandate to our national body to make statements to the world.

And so on to the Code of Ethics... I was interested to hear why the motion had emanated from the Findhorn Unitarian Network. Ralph Catts gave us a brief and enlightening introduction to the Findhorn Community's process of finding 'common ground'. I've heard accounts of the Findhorn Community ranging from those who consider it to be paradise on earth, to those who steer clear of it, having had formative experiences there. I hope to go and experience their way of doing things for myself one day, but I haven't yet managed to carve out the time and the energy.

Balance autonomy with accountability

The motion was seconded by Lesley Schipa, who posited that every community runs the risk of producing factions and bullying, and that Unitarians have no clear way to work out these problems. A code of ethics would provide a way to live our values as a movement collectively, giving us a system of accountability without impinging on the autonomy of congregations.

There were several useful spoken contributions and requests for clarification. It was suggested that we should be considering a 'code of conduct' rather than a 'code of ethics', as ethics are based on opinions. Someone else suggested that devising a code of ethics was possible, giving the example of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. He

suggested that the work should be done, as the resulting code would come back to the GA to be approved or not. A new Unitarian spoke of her experience of being a victim of conflict within another religious society, a situation that was never resolved. She suggested that there must be concrete advice. Someone pointed out the importance of having a common understanding already in place for when conflict does arise.

Ethics code should apply to all

Another speaker considered that any code should apply not just to those in paid leadership roles, but also to members of congregations. Someone with a professional background in counselling pointed out that for many professions a code of ethics is non-negotiable, but also the difficulty inherent in the fact that many of our de facto congregational leaders are not on the GA Rolls. She agreed with a previous speaker who had suggested that all congregations should be encouraged to adopt such a code, and apply it to all those in leadership positions, as well as members of congregations.

The proposer was given a right of reply, and Ralph used this to stress that the key to success lay in how widely congregations were consulted, admitting this would be a challenge. He stressed that each congregation is autonomous and that no code can be imposed on them, but that we can grow by sharing our ideals and values. He acknowledged that consideration should be given to how such a code would be applied to different groups, e.g., lay leaders, congregation members.

The vote was then taken. 115 votes were cast: 73 – For; 25 – Against; 17 – Abstained. The motion was carried. The Executive Committee will now have to begin work on consultation and the drawing up of a draft code of ethics.

Heading outdoors

I am broadly in favour of this work being done, but 12 months seems like a very short time span for a proper consultation, drafting process and obtaining a legal review as required by the motion. I am also concerned that the recommendation that such a code should apply, at least in some parts, to unpaid congregational leaders and to congregation members is not written into the motion that was passed.

During the debate I noted that a couple of the speakers were very sensibly attending the AGM outdoors and, when we broke for lunch, I followed their example and set myself up in my garden to follow the afternoon's proceedings.

The Rev Maud Robinson is minister with Stannington and Fulwood Unitarians.