

## Chairperson's Annual Report 2015

2015 has seen the Sea of Faith continue, much as before, so hopefully I can be excused for repeating the opening and closing paragraphs of last year's annual report:

By and large, 2015 has been business as usual, something that we should not take for granted, as a small voluntary organization in a world of rapid change. We have organized this Conference and planning for next year's Conference is well under way. The newsletter, now all in colour, regularly provides us with stimulating and varied content. The website continues to be a treasure-trove. Some local groups continue strongly, while others languish, and in some smaller towns have even effectively ceased to operate. Membership numbers are stable.

The AGM elects a Steering Committee to administer the organization. At the last AGM, Norm Ely was re-appointed and Bruce Tasker was elected to the committee as a new member. The former brings institutional memory and the latter new thinking. We hold monthly teleconferences and have a one-day face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the year. We now use Skype for our teleconference meetings. The money saved goes to publishing the newsletter in colour.

The Steering Committee's most important task is deciding on the Conference theme and speakers. It usually takes quite a lot of work before a consensus emerges. In addition, there are many Conference details that need organising. Having a local arrangements committee to work with us, focusing on matters at the Conference location, is invaluable. We are especially appreciative of the willingness of the Auckland group to organise this year's conference, so soon after they did it in 2012. George Dodd has had an active group of co-workers and notes on their meetings show a commendable attention to detail.

The arrow of time points forward irrevocably, so this year has seen us lose Margaret Feist, Ralph Pannett, and, unexpectedly, Nigel Leaves from Australia. Doug Sellman has needed to step down from the Steering Committee, reducing his commitments for health reasons. Laurie Chisholm and Jock Crawford both finish their 4-year terms at Conference next year.

From time to time I reflect on the Sea of Faith, its role in society and its likely future in a world that is changing ever more rapidly. The original BBC programme (now available in full on Youtube) was 1984, before the World Wide Web and of course social media. Since then, many voluntary organisations have declined and the amount of material available on the web dealing with matters of religion and spirituality has exploded exponentially.

Don Cupitt, in a much-commented-on remark, worried that we might be headed for a trash future based on technology, entertainment and fundamentalism. We certainly have technology: a hothouse of rumours precedes and breathless adulation accompanies the release of a new cellphone. Disruptive technologies like Netflix, Spotify and Uber are making long-established industries redundant. There's no shortage of entertainment either. The Listener magazine references some 9 books and 18 movies each week, as well as listing the top 10 books and movies. An estimated 300 hours of content are added to Youtube every minute. A flood of entertainment threatens to overwhelm us. About fundamentalism I'm not so sure; it could be that this wave has peaked. But views unsupported by science continue or even increase and with the departure of John Campbell from TV3, we seem to have lost one of the last vestiges of public service television. The public seems to have a shorter and shorter attention span and to be less and less interested in exploring basic convictions. Traditional religious words (God, the soul, sin, salvation, faith) are becoming emptier and emptier and the Archbishop of Canterbury talks of giving up trying to hold the Anglican communion together. Sea of Faith needs to continue focussing on the

central questions and dealing with what is important, resisting the pull of popular ideology and well-funded think tanks representing wealthy interests.

Finally, a word of thanks to all those who help to make the Sea of Faith what it is. Things only happen because some people do work and take responsibility behind the scenes. I won't name names for fear of leaving somebody out or not giving appreciation in the right proportions, but you know who you are and many of us know who you are as well.

Laurie Chisholm  
September 2015