

Chairperson's Report 2016

At this AGM, I step down as a member of the Steering Committee and as its Chairperson. It doesn't seem very long ago since Natali Allen took me aside for a quiet conversation, encouraging me to become the chairperson. I was secretary in my first year on the Steering Committee and have been chairperson for the subsequent three years. Sea of Faith continues to play a valuable role, but it is a still small voice in a very noisy world.

Looking back I'm pleased to see the way that Conferences have focussed on important and fundamental themes. Brain science (Exploring Inner Space – Can Spirit, Soul and Free-will survive the scrutiny? 2014), Climate change and our plundering of the planet (Micawber or Cassandra? Responding to an increasingly uncertain future 2015), and now God-talk itself (With or Without God: Community in a Post-theistic Age 2016).

Deciding on the Conference theme has often been a time-consuming matter. We would debate the matter over several meetings without any evident progress, when out of the blue a new suggestion would suddenly find favour. I have tried to introduce a more structured process and hope that this will survive the change of chairperson: we brainstorm possible themes, assign a committee member to each theme, decide on one theme, then try to find a catchy title that expresses the theme.

We have also changed the technology we use for our conference calls. We used to pay significant amounts for a conference call service but now use Skype, which is free and has video as well as audio. Most meetings have had one technical hitch or another, but hopefully in the future this will be less of an issue. The money saved went to upgrading our newsletter so that it is published in colour. Recent meetings have also seen a large increase in the number of email communications among committee members. Work on the Steering Committee is not arduous, but we have an active and engaged team, making the role of chairperson much easier.

From time to time, frustration emerges that the Sea of Faith talks a lot but does nothing; it is a "talkfest" not a grouping of political activists. At the 2015 Conference this seemed particularly acute. There we were, talking about an impending catastrophe but not laying a finger to avert it (at least not as Sea of Faith; members are free and indeed encouraged to become involved in other organisations that do take action). Subsequent discussion in the Steering Committee reaffirmed our talkfest stance. Sea of Faith aims to gather information, clarify the issues and deepen understanding but not itself to take action.

We are in the middle of a fundamental change in the way Conference is organised, advocating the centralising of the Conference venue, so that Conference is organised by the same people and at the same place year on year. We are fortunate in having a Conference Committee of enthusiastic and very capable people, all with many years of experience in the Sea of Faith: Norm Ely, Noel Cheer and Peter Cowley.

It would be good to organise things so that there is a gradual and steady retirement of the old and initiation of the new. Unfortunately, this year sees the retirement of four of us so there is a need to find numerous replacements. The transition from this year to next year will therefore be more marked than usual.

Laurie Chisholm
22 September 2016