

Sea of Faith Network (UK) Annual General Meeting 2023

Wednesday 26th July at 7pm

Meeting to be held via Zoom (joining details below)

The Zoom call will be open from 6.45pm, so members can join early to ensure their video and sound are working.

We encourage members to join no later than 6.55pm to allow for a prompt start.

Please click the link below to join via Zoom:

<https://zoom.us/j/3982822423>

Alternatively, you can join by opening the Zoom app on your tablet or smartphone and entering the Meeting ID below.

Meeting ID: 398 282 2423

You can also join by dialling in by telephone. This will be audio only. You can find local telephone numbers at this link: <https://zoom.us/u/atMIWzdbX>

Agenda

1. **Welcome by the Chair**
2. **Minutes of previous AGM** **(Pages 3 – 4)**
3. **Apologies for absence**
4. **Receipt of Reports; attached alongside the agenda**
 - a. The Treasurer; adoption of annual accounts and nomination of Examiner **(Pages 5 – 6)**
 - b. Membership Secretary; review of membership numbers **(Page 7)**
 - c. The Chair of Trustees **(Page 8)**
5. **Election of Trustees for the season 2022-2023**

Clem Cook has reached the end of his second 3-year term as a Trustee and is therefore not eligible for re-election until the 2024 AGM. No other trustees terms are ending at this AGM.

There are 5 vacant Trustee positions and 2 nominations have been received in advance of the AGM. Nominations can be accepted for vote during the meeting.

6. **Motions proposed by Members for vote**

- Motions 1 - 3: Constitutional amendments:** **(Full text on page 9)**
- 1: To enable the Board of elected Trustees to co-opt at least one additional Trustee in all circumstances (replacing the 'one-quarter' limit)
 - 2: To introduce an appropriate balance between the rights of elected Trustees and those of co-opted Trustees, with respect to elections and terms of service.
 - 3: To remove anomaly whereby a policy may be adopted even if some Trustees were not informed of the meeting at which the decision was made.
Proposer: Martin Spence, Seconder: Edward Nickell
- Motion 4: On the Network's future** **(Full text on pages 10 – 11)**
2024; A Celebration and a Finale. That 2024 should be the final year in which the Sea of Faith Network operate in its current form
Proposer: John Pearson, Seconder: Helen Bellamy
- Amendment Amendment to Motion 4** **(Full text on page 12)**
Replacing motion text with: that the Trustees be charged to explore new ways in which it could further the objects of the network and present their proposals to the 2024 AGM
Proposer: Stephen Mitchell, Seconder: David Boulton

7. **Any other business.**

Minutes of the 2022 AGM

Wednesday 27th July 2022

On-line meeting via Zoom

1. Welcome by the Acting Chair

John Pearson welcomed all the delegates to the AGM.

2 Attendance and Apologies

Trustees: John Pearson (Acting Chair), Stephen Williams (Treasurer), Dinah Livingstone (Sofia Editor), Clem Cook, Oliver Essame, Dave Francis, Richard Wood-Penn.

The number of members attending exceeded the quorum.

Apologies for absence: Carol Palfrey (Secretary) , Andy Kemp, Sarah O'Farrell

3 Minutes of the Reconvened AGM 2021

With no correction and no matters arising not on the agenda, the minutes were agreed as a correct record.

4 Treasurer's report and adoption of Annual Accounts

A summary of the Annual Report and Accounts for 2021 had been circulated.

The Treasurer offered to make the full document available to any member on request.

The accounts had been approved by the Examiner, Peter Stribblehill and subsequently approved by the Board of Trustees on 17th May, 2022.

Dave Francis thanked the Trustees and all the individual members for their contribution to the work of Solarity. A new website was launched in the last few days. Although some funding is still available for further work, contributions will still be welcome for the development of more exemplars by teachers and collaborators.

The proposed accounts were seconded by Marianne Mead and unanimously approved by AGM.

Appointment of Independent Examiner

The 2021 accounts had been approved by Peter Stribblehill. Stephen Williams identified that there is no need of an Examiner for the moment because of the minimum turnover. If the situation again allowed a residential conference, the need for an Examiner would again be felt. In the light of the fact that Stephen believes it is reassuring and good practice to have an Examiner, he proposed the reappointment of Peter Stribblehill in that role. This was seconded by David Lambourn and unanimously agreed.

The Chairman thanked Stephen for fulfilling his role for the last six years. In the light of the fact that his mandate as a Trustee is up, he is willing to continue to support the role providing that another Trustee is appointed as Treasurer.

5 Membership Secretary's Report

The Chair thanked Edward Nickell for his comprehensive report and invited him to summarise the main points:

- tidying up of the Excel spreadsheets
- 307 members/subscribers
 - 12 withdrawals from membership/subscribers - mostly due to death or poor health

- 2 new members and 1 re-joined
- checks will be made to update the membership list

The Chair thanked Edward Nickell for his first six months work and wished him well in the coming year.

5 Acting Chair's report

The Report by John Pearson had been circulated.

The members were reminded of the need to elect new Trustees because of the untimely death of Simon Mapp in October 2021, the decision not to prolong his role by Richard Wood-Penn and the resignation of two trustees, and the temporary incapacity of the Secretary.

The report was unanimously agreed.-

6 Election of Trustees

Clem Cook, Oliver Essam, Dave Francis and John Pearson eligible to remain as Trustees for a further three years without election.

Four nominations:

Dinah Livingstone - proposed by John Pearson, seconded by Stephen Williams

Jeanet Seargeant - proposed by Dinah Livingstone, seconded by Carol Holt

Edward Nickell - proposed by Janet Carpenter, seconded by Joy Sell

Chris Burke - proposed John Pearson; seconded by Dave Francis

7 Revision of the constitution

Two members have submitted a letter to Portholes, suggesting a review of the Constitution. The Acting Chair is proposing a working group who would propose a revised version of the Constitution.

Martin Spence, who with Andy Kemp, had made the initial suggestion, thanks the Trustees for considering this proposition and suggests that the whole membership would be informed for expression of interest in taking part in this working group. Hugo Freeman supported the proposal of inviting the whole membership in the discussion. He also asks who on the Board of Trustees is responsible for the issue of Data Protection. John suggests that this responsibility falls with the Secretary, the Chair and the Treasurer, the only three roles required by the Charity Commission, but Martin Spence suggests that the whole Board of Trustees is responsible and accountable.

David Lambourn proposes a monthly meeting on a particular day so ensure the maximum participation.

The latest version of the constitution should be sent to all members as a starting point for the discussion.

The formal part of the AGM was then concluded and an Open Forum followed.

3A: Report from The Treasurer

EXTRACT of SOF ANNUAL REPORT AND ACCOUNTS, 2022

<u>Trustees</u>	Christopher Burke (from 28 July 2022)	Edward Nickell (from 28 July 2022) Secretary
	Clem Cook	Carol Palfrey (until 19 November 2022)
	Oliver Essame	John Pearson, Chair
	David Francis	Janet Seargeant (from 28 July 2022)
	David Lambourn	Stephen Williams (until 28 July 2022)
	(from 1 November 2022), Treasurer	Richard Wood-Penn (until 17 April 2022)
	Dinah Livingstone	

Review of Activities

The network continued publication of its quarterly magazine, 'Sofia', and the membership news -letter, 'Portholes'. It held an online annual conference on "Being Human" and members continued to meet in local groups across the country. The website provided further opportunities for exploration and discussion. The 'Solarity' resource has been expanded into a whole programme of study for 5-16 year olds, and has so far produced 19 units of learning. This is funded by donations from members and supporters, with associated gift aid. The current balance of £3,787 is shown as a restricted fund.

Reserves Policy

The trustees aim to hold unrestricted reserves at least equal to six months normal expenditure. The balance of unrestricted funds as at 31 December 2021 was £21,741.

Examiner's statement

"I have completed my examination ... I have no concerns and have come across no other matters in connection with the examination to which attention should be drawn in this report in order to enable a proper understanding of the accounts to be reached."

Peter Stribblehill, 26/05/23

Summary of 2022 Accounts

[2021]

Restricted funds (Solarity)				3787	
Unrestricted funds:					
Fixed assets	at 31/12/21	18295			
Net revaluation		(2175)	16120		
Current assets	at 31/12/21	7379			
Net income		(1758)	<u>5621</u>	<u>21741</u>	
Total funds				<u>25528</u>	{ 31535}

Current income [2021]

Donations – Solarity	30	[1984]
Other	3287	[427]
Gift Aid	1061	[1398]
Investment income	615	[550]
Interest received	36	[28]
Membership income	5585	[7652]
Book sales	193	[3]
Magazine advertising	71	[-]
Magazine subscriptions	<u>375</u>	<u>[722]</u>
	11253	[12764]

Current Expenditure

Conference costs	175	[-]
Magazine Expenses	5551	[6432]
Newsletter	531	[363]
Cost of books sold	736	[-]
Website costs	625	[-]
Trustee meetings	571	[-]
Solarity	2104	[5599]
Other developments	-	[198]
Sundry expenses	42	[11]
Trustee remuneration	<u>4750</u>	<u>[4750]</u>
	<u>15085</u>	[17353]

Net current income

Restricted (Solarity)	(2074)	
Unrestricted	<u>(1758)</u>	<u>(3832)</u> [9627]

Note: Trustee remuneration above was paid to Dinah Livingstone for editing and preparing the charity's quarterly magazine, Sofia, and to Clem Cook for managing the charity's website.

6 trustees received reimbursement of expenses of £283

The report was approved by the Trustees on 17 May 2023

3B: Report from the Membership Secretary

When I last spoke and wrote to many of you – at our event in London in March and writing in June’s Sofia – I made the claim (boast?) of being the youngest member of the Network. I must now admit that I was unknowingly misleading you, as I have since discovered that one of our new members is in fact several years younger than me!

To them, and to all our other new members – of all ages – I want to again extend a welcome!

At our last AGM, I presented a partial report having only started as Membership Secretary in the March previous. Since then, I have provided regular updates on membership numbers at Trustee meetings, as shown in the table below. These numbers include full members as well as those who subscribe to Sofia but are not members. The most recent figures start on the left.

Table showing number of members over 2022 - 2023

Type	2023			2022		
	June	May	Jan	Nov	Aug	Jul
Member	218	231	230	226	226	235
Subscriber	74	77	77	77	77	80
Other	0	2	2	3	3	0
TOTAL	292	310	309	306	306	315

* ‘Other’ was for a small number of contacts whose membership type was unknown.

Change from July 2022 to July 2023:

Net change in members/subscribers: - 23
 New members/subscribers: 9
 Memberships/subscriptions ending: 32

The most notable change was between May and June 2023. This change is the result of sending out emails to check members’ details were correct and also, where applicable, offering a gentle reminder of subscriptions to be paid. This prompted several people, who had intended for their membership to lapse, to reply and let us know.

Normally, the main way we find out updates from members are by direct contact from them or their families, or returned copies of Sofia.

The main reason people gave for ending their membership was ill health or no longer being well enough to enjoy the benefits of membership. I have received many kind emails and letters writing fondly of people’s years or often decades in the Network, sharing memories of those they met, conferences and reading Sofia and Portholes. I always respond to thank all those who get in touch or reply to update us, and to pass on condolences and well wishes on behalf of the Network when appropriate.

A few other people have cited the rising cost of living as their reason for leaving. In this situation I have sought to offer discounts or alternatives where possible.

When people end their subscription or membership I normally ask if they are happy for us to retain their contact details for non-membership emails, for example, publicising our Annual Conference or events. Most people are grateful to be offered this.

On a happier note, we have had 9 new members joining the network this year. This has included several people who have found out about the Network for the first time, often through our website. A few other joiners were people who have been aware of the network for some time, for example by attending a local group, and have now decided to become members.

3C: Report from the Chair of Trustees

This report will be relatively brief for, as those writing of Christmas Letters are wont say, this past year seems to have flown by – and in this case with little to write about.

2022 saw another Zoom Conference at which we had three excellent speakers; Brian Mountford, Peter Francis and Anastasia Somerville Wong. It was good to see so many key note speakers written up in the Conference edition of Sofia ... quite like old times. Conference also saw the re-introduction of sessions analogous to Base Groups – beloved by some, less so by others. All in all, things went well I feel, and were very well received. Numbers this time were down however against those in 2021.

Last October was to have seen our first post-Covid face-to-face gathering at the Essex Church in London. Sadly, from our perspective, this event had to be cancelled due the calling of a National Rail Strike ... In the end, the abandoned Autumn event became a Spring one, for we all met successfully on March 4th of this year. Our Secretary, Edward Nickel, provided the star turn with a splendid talk based on his own religious journey and experiences (reproduced in Sofia 148). Dinah Livingstone presented some of her poems, and there was a modest launch of “As I Please”. Besides these last there was time for general discussion led by Stephen Williams as well as for informal chats which continued long after the official close of the event. It was heartening to be able to go ahead this time, although numbers were disappointingly low, (16 out of the 18 persons booked) particularly given the proportion of members who (when last surveyed) had specifically approved such a get-together. Hopefully this is not a portent of turnout at this July’s day-long Annual Conference.

Since last year’s resignations and Carol Polfrey’s retirement the Board of Trustees has been at its lowest numerically since its inception.. just seven Trustees, myself excluded. Those remaining have once again “held the fort” magnificently, the meetings being chaired not by myself in fact but by a selection of other Board members. This has worked well I feel. This past year has seen the return of Janet Seargeant, (very much instrumental in arranging this year’s Conference) a coming into his own of Edward Nickell as Secretary and a first stint as a full Trustee by David Lambourn, as our formally appointed Treasurer. Dave Francis has maintained the impetus of Solarity (its work largely completed), Dinah has Edited 4 more splendid editions of Sofia and both Oliver and Clem have kept up revisions to and the operation of our Website.. of which a new version should be up and running by the time you read this.

I wish to thank them all for their efforts on your behalf.

Hopefully you will be able to join us for our Annual Conference this July 24th again in London, at St Johns Church Waterloo, and this year’s AGM on Wednesday 26th on Zoom. In addition to notices of the AGM and associated reports you should receive a copy of a motion which I am to put to the meeting. Essentially this proposes the shutting down of the Network in its present structure at the end of 2024. This relates to vital existential issues I feel, and I urge you, even if you have done or will do nothing else this year, PLEASE ATTEND THE AGM AND VOTE if you possibly can.

As most of you will be aware now, 2024 will see the 40th year since the creation of the Network as we know it, and Don Cupitt will celebrate his own 90th birthday. To mark these milestones special events are being worked on, one at least prior to next year’s AGM, so, please keep an eye out for details and please support them if you are able.

John Pearson

Chair of Trustees

The attached document: 'Motions 1-3 SOFN Constitution amendments 2023.doc' shows the amendments proposed in Motions 1 – 3 in red as in the current constitution text.

Motion 1 – Proposer: Martin Spence, Seconder: Edward Nickell

Purpose of amendment:

To enable a Board of elected Trustees to co-opt at least one additional Trustee in all circumstances. At present, the 'one-quarter' limit would prevent a small Board of three elected Trustees from co-opting anyone – but these are precisely the circumstances where the need for co-option may be most urgent.

CLAUSE 16:

In Clause 16, delete the sentence beginning "In addition ... " and replace with a new sentence to read as follows:

"In each year the elected Trustees may co-opt one Trustee; and in addition they may co-opt further Trustees so long as the number of co-opted Trustees never exceeds one-quarter of the number of elected Trustees".

Motion 2 – Proposer: Martin Spence, Seconder: Edward Nickell

Purpose of amendment:

To introduce an appropriate balance between the rights of elected Trustees and those of co-opted Trustees. At present, elected Trustees must present themselves for re-election, and after a certain period of service must step aside. But no limit is placed on the service of co-opted Trustees, who can remain in place indefinitely despite never having been elected.

CLAUSE 16:

"After Clause 16(5) insert new clauses to read as follows:-

'(6) A co-opted Trustee shall serve for no more than one calendar year and shall not be eligible for a further period of co-option until at least one further calendar year has elapsed.

(7) A co-opted Trustee shall not be eligible to serve in any of the Officer positions specified in rule 16 (2).

(8) Service as a co-opted Trustee shall not prejudice a member's eligibility to become an elected Trustee at a General Meeting. If a co-opted Trustee becomes an elected Trustee, their co-option will automatically lapse.'

Existing clause (6) to be re-numbered (9)."

Motion 3 – Proposer: Martin Spence, Seconder: Edward Nickell

Purpose of amendment:

To remove the current anomaly whereby a policy may be adopted even if some Trustees were not informed of the meeting at which the decision was made.

CLAUSES 20 and 22:

In Clause 20(3), after " ... if requested to do so by a Trustee" insert "by informing all Trustees of the meeting."

In Clause 22(3), after " ... failure to give notice to" delete "Trustee or".

Motion 4 – Proposer: John Pearson, Seconder: Helen Bellamy

‘2024 should be the final year in which the Sea of Faith Network operates in its current form, its being dissolved by the end of that year, its funds at that time being distributed by the Trustees, if the proposal receives the majority of the membership’s consent/approval, amongst concerns as yet to be decided but representative of our fundamental legal Objects (namely, education in the understanding of Religion as a Human Creation)’

** (See Note 1, below)

**Proposer; John Pearson
Seconder; Helen Bellamy**

Background

I currently occupy the post Chair of Trustees .. It is a legal requirement of the Charity Commissioners that there be a named person. As such I am not chair of the Network and have not the power to speak on behalf of the membership as a whole. Rightly or wrongly we have no overall “supremo”.

As chair of that body I put the above motion to the Trustees (to support its presentation to yourselves, or not, as the case may be)... Of the Trustees present at the meeting (and one Email response) 1 person voted for the motion, 5 voted against and 1 abstained. So, this motion is presented to you by two long-term ordinary members, Helen Bellamy and myself.

*** See also Note 2 (below)

Whilst I put the above motion to you as an ordinary and equal member, I have been elected into and have occupied the post of Chairman of Trustees (rightly or wrongly) for many years – with breaks only for requisite spells of time off the Board or when returning newly to that body. I Feel that this gives me a long-term overview of the workings of the Network from the perspective of both the membership and of the Trustees, its effective managers.

I would defend my proposed motion as follows;

Membership of the Network has fallen since its high point some 20 years ago or more, from around 900 to between 200 and 300 currently .. Attendance at our flagship Annual Conference has fallen over this period from a maximum of something like 180(?) to as low as between 80 and 90 (immediately pre-Covid) and less than 50 this year. As to functioning Local Groups, we once had no fewer than 27 as I recall, at our height. We now have five or six. Of these, three or four are regularly active and report in Portholes. Of the other two, both advise me that they struggle sometimes to maintain interest and attendance. In some cases age, infirmity or caring commitments have hindered Conveners .. the whole machine is becoming becoming burdensome to varying degrees.

The following are the key factors, I suggest, which impact most seriously on our having an effective future;

- Lack of significant replacement or growth in membership within any age group.
- The increasing frailty / age / mobility issues and / or care commitments of a growing number of members, all limiting the style of conferences which they might attend in person, and prohibiting them from fronting smaller local events which they might otherwise engineer.
- Little or no existing or new membership amongst the under 50’s ... (or under 60’s?) and no serious prospect of expansion in the under 40’s.
- A serious decline in the number, strength and energies of the Local Groups.
- We have a wonderful magazine (one of the mainstays of the Network?) but one whose Editor can not go on literally for ever, and who will/would be extremely difficult to replace
- A failure for some years to recruit new Trustees, with one notable exception.

Perhaps you may feel that as Chair of Trustees I should have been more energetic in creating and supporting new initiatives from the “grass roots”, but these have been few and far between – the most notable exceptions being “Solarity” and, more recently, the monthly on-line Conversation series,

masterminded by Martin Spence, Andy Kemp and David Lambourn. However, some who have criticised my proposal, above, suggest that the Trustees should indeed take more of a back seat, not being expected to instigate and manage *everything*. More should be left to the “grass roots” to set up and/or manage.. leaving a reduced number of Trustees, concerning themselves merely with the legal responsibilities traditionally placed on Trustees by the Charity Commission. (that is the governance and financial probity of the Trust/ Network).

A number of persons seeking to support continuation of the Network suggest that there should indeed be a smaller Trustee body, made up of three or four persons performing the above. Henceforth conferences, magazine and other publications, local groups, Sea of Faith in Conversation and the like should each be managed by working groups, reporting as/when appropriate to the Trustees, but essentially autonomous.

As one who has worked within and for the Network for over 30 years I have to say, with regret, that in my opinion the people to comprise and do the work of groups such as the above are just not out there... Increasingly this is because of the factors listed above, but partly because for many years now far too many “out there” have been happy to participate in conferences and other gatherings and to receive Sofia etc. but unwilling to contribute in any concrete way to their production or continuation.

The Board of Trustees has shrunk over recent years from 13 or more to its current 7 not by design but by default. Despite our annual entreaties very few members have offered to serve as Trustees. Perhaps they feared having to DO something?. Perhaps they disliked the way we operated (they could have joined and effected changes). We did acquire two new Trustees more recently of whom I had great hopes as regards their possibly turning round and furthering the work of both the Trustees and the Network as a whole. Sadly, both individuals resigned of their own accord. (most precipitously, and unnecessarily in my personal opinion) leaving behind, once again, just the “Old Guard”. Indeed, I feel that their departure noticeably undermined and disturbed the work of the Board of Trustees at the time.

It has been suggested that by proposing closure of the Network at the end of 2024 I act carelessly, ignoring the significance of that year, the 40th since the formation of the Network and the year in which Don Cupitt, whose work served as the inspiration for the whole thing, reaches his 90th birthday. Can I say here that I was not careless or disrespectful of either but, rather, **sensing the inevitable (to me) further decline of the Network** I deliberately landed upon 2024 as the year in which we might make as much as possible of our individual and collective achievements before allowing a timely and graceful fading into the sunset.

I am sure I speak for Helen also when I say that neither of us are happy to be instruments of the execution of an institution which has meant an immense amount to us both. However, we both feel that there is an “elephant in the room” which needs facing up to. **If the rest of you, out there, want to see the retention of the Network in a form similar to that to which we see today (or changed even) , it is for YOU to vote against the proposal, but /and more importantly, it is also for YOU to take the positions of responsibility (whether as future Trustees or leading working groups, or whatever) which might ensure its survival.**

I myself shall be resigning permanently as a Trustee at the 2024 AGM at the latest.

John Pearson

**** Note 1.** Closure of the Network should not preclude the continuation of Local Groups (if/where desired) or discussion groups such as “Sea of Faith in Conversation” – options available to interested parties wishing to both run and participate in the same.

***** Note 2.** Before putting my proposal to the Trustees I conducted a “straw pole” amongst a number of leading and time-served members (numbering amongst their midst a number of past Chairs of Trustees, Local Group Conveners and such like). Of the 11 persons consulted for comment, 5 were in support of the motion, 4 were strongly against and 2 were neutral but with reluctant leanings towards supporting it.

Motion 4 Amendment – Proposer: Stephen Mitchell, Seconder: David Boulton

Delete all the words after

'2024 should be the final year in which the Sea of Faith operates in its current form'

and add

'and that the Trustees be charged to explore new ways in which it could further the objects of the network and present their proposals to the 2024 AGM.'

The amended motion would read:

'2024 should be the final year in which the Sea of Faith Network operates in its current form, and that the Trustees be charged to explore new ways in which it could further the objects of the network and present their proposals to the 2024 AGM'

Background notes:

While recognising the situation that John describes with regard to the membership and conference attendance, I put forward this amendment for two reasons.

As it stands, the motion is confusing. It begins by proposing that the network should not continue in its present form thereby suggesting that there are other forms in which it could continue. However it then proposes that the network be disbanded and not continue in any form whatsoever.

More importantly, I believe there is still a need for the network. There are people who face the trauma of losing the faith with which they have grown up, and are looking for ways to reconstruct it. Fundamentalist forms of religion are as powerful as they have ever been. I also think that the network has resources which could form the basis for its continuation. It has, as John says, an excellent magazine. It has a website and an online and physical archive which has connections with that of Don Cupitt. The Solarity project has developed an impressive resource for school teachers and youth leaders. It has funds and a group of Trustees, the majority of whom are not in favour of disbanding the network.