

GREATER MANCHESTER HUMANISTS

Report of the Committee for the 2007-8 Session

The Committee is pleased to submit this Report for the 2007/8 session to the members of Greater Manchester Humanists.

Membership

The paid-up membership at the end of the session stands at 33, compared with 18 at the end of the previous session. There are 82 names on the mailing list including supporters, all of whom have either been added to the distribution list during the session or have indicated continuing interest in receiving our mailings. The Newsletter is posted to 9 members and 5 non-members, the remaining copies being emailed. Those receiving our communications by email generally receive two or three additional messages each month.

We understand that the BHA has over 400 members in our catchment area. The BHA is willing to circularise its membership on our behalf and we shall be taking advantage of this help to increase our membership as soon as the new website is operational.

Finance

The Treasurer's Report is attached.

Website

The website developed by Simon Chappell has not been maintained since he withdrew from active involvement with the group. As a temporary substitute we have had a brief entry on the BHA website giving details of our forthcoming meetings and how to contact us. The new GMH website went live on 31 March 2008: it requires further development but should soon be ready for public launch. It has been developed using Google Page Creator, which is easy to use and provides free hosting, but with considerable constraints on style and layout. We understand that the BHA may offer free hosting and support for local group websites in the not too distant future, and in this event we would expect to take advantage of these facilities to upgrade our website.

Universities

In September we had stalls at Fresher's Week at Manchester University and Manchester Metropolitan University. We obtained over 160 signatures but the follow-up was disappointing. As yet, there is no student Humanist society at either university, though we shall continue our efforts to foster them. We do however have 8 students on our mailing list: they receive details of all our meetings and can attend meetings at FMH for a reduced donation of £1. Arising from this activity, we have received invitations to speak to several University student groups. Guy Otten spoke on our behalf at a packed meeting of the MU Challenging Orthodoxies Society debating 'Is There a God?' in December; John Coss has spoken on Humanist Ethics to two student groups led by members of the Chaplaincy to Higher Education in Manchester; and Robin Grinter has spoken to a group at Bolton University about 'The Humanist View of Jesus'. Further invitations to speak are expected in 2008/9.

Campaigning - Faith schools

Chris Neilson has produced a document listing the various categories of existing schools. Most new schools will be Academies and the planning process for these is described. Each Academy will have a sponsor or sponsors, and many of these sponsors are faith based organisations. A brief description of these organisations is given in the document.

To monitor future developments and to enable input into discussions about proposed Academies in Greater Manchester, we need volunteers in all the Greater Manchester Metropolitan Boroughs, to keep an eye on the local press and to make contact with local councillors. If you are interested in getting involved please contact Chris.

Promoting Humanism

We have obtained 1500 leaflets promoting Humanism on favourable terms through the Humanist Promotion and Marketing Group for use on stalls and for display in libraries and other local outlets, and anticipate participating in many other promotional initiatives through this group, which is affiliated to the BHA. We have taken an advert at a deeply discounted rate in 'Reflections' - a bereavement guide circulated in the Oldham area, which this year includes an article on Humanist funerals. We are also developing an introductory course on Humanism with a view to public presentation from autumn 2008.

SACRE developments

During the session, the Humanist units for RE in Manchester were comprehensively rewritten. Robin Grinter subsequently attended the initial meeting of the Agreed Syllabus Conference that will oversee the quinquennial review of the local syllabus. The RE teachers at this meeting agreed to completely revise the syllabus on a thematic basis on the lines of proposals for a National Framework for RE. Our units will therefore need some further rewriting. Although this approach has yet to be formally adopted, it should enable us to establish Humanist input throughout the syllabus, similar in status to any of the religious inputs as teachers will be free to choose from all the elements under each theme.

We now have members representing Humanists on Manchester and Trafford SACREs. During the coming year we hope to extend this representation to several other SACREs in Greater Manchester.

Committee

At the AGM on 11 April 2007, Bob Ellam was re-elected as Chair, Simon Chappell was elected as Secretary, Chris Neilson was re-elected as Treasurer, and Ruth Cooke, John Coss and Robin Grinter joined the Committee: Ruth Cooke subsequently stood down. The Committee has met regularly during the session, generally monthly. Richard Elson and Charlie Thomasson attended some meetings during 2007 and Guy Otten attended some meetings in 2008.

Bob Ellam resigned as Chair and from the Group in September, consequent on his moving away from the area. By that time, Simon Chappell had also withdrawn from active involvement in the Group. Derek Chatterton took over as Acting Chair and John Coss took over as Acting Secretary at the September meeting: both were confirmed in these positions until the 2008 AGM at the Special General Meeting held on 12 December.

Derek Chatterton wrote to Bob to express our thanks for his contribution to the Group. Derek is not standing for re-election as Chair for the 2008/9 session: the other Committee Members would like to record their appreciation for his able chairmanship during the second half of the session.

Constitution

The name of the group was changed and a new constitution adopted at a Special General Meeting held on 12 December. At the time, no copy of the existing constitution was available: subsequently, one came to light, and fortunately the SGM was held in accordance with its provisions. A further change, replacing 'Chairman' by 'Chair' as in the original constitution is the subject of a resolution at the AGM on 9 April. The main change from the old constitution was in the first clause - the new version is as follows:

The Group shall be called 'Greater Manchester Humanists'. Our Purpose is to further Humanism in Greater Manchester and surrounding areas. Our Objects are to:

- a) Support and represent Humanists;
- b) Foster public awareness and knowledge of Humanism;
- c) Foster and support education in Humanism, in particular through SACREs;
- d) Facilitate the provision of Humanist ceremonies;
- e) Campaign on issues of concern to Humanists;
- f) Advocate secularism;
- g) Provide opportunities for like-minded individuals to explore issues relevant to Humanism;
- h) Provide Humanist fellowship.

Meetings

During the 2007/8 session we maintained the unbroken series of regular monthly meetings held since the Group was formed in October 1992. We continued to meet at FMH on the second Wednesday of the month, at 7pm for 7.30pm. A record of these meetings is noted below. Attendances increased during the session, averaging in the low twenties during the second half of the session, thanks to an influx of new, younger members who are already making useful contributions to our activities. These meetings have to end around 9.15pm as FMH closes at 9.30pm. Since November, we have been continuing at a nearby pub - we have now settled on going to The Waterhouse opposite the Town Hall. Typically, a little over half of those attending the meeting now go on to the pub.

In February, we started a second series of meetings 'Exploring Humanism' on the fourth Tuesday of most months at The Ape and Apple in John Dalton Street. Initial meetings have focused on piloting an Introduction to Humanism course which we hope will be ready for public presentation in autumn 2008. There has been a good response to these meetings, which are also intended to provide an opportunity to discuss campaigning issues and for socialising.

Social Activities

An enjoyable Humanist lunch was held on Sunday 30 March, attended by thirteen members, supporters and guests. We envisage this becoming a regular event, perhaps quarterly at a variety of venues. Members also participated in social events arranged by other groups: a visit to Jodrell Bank with the Chester group and a tour of Darwin's associations in Shrewsbury to commemorate his birthday with members of several groups, arranged by Shropshire Humanist Group.

Secularism

The NSS has asked us to consider including 'secular' in the Group name. The Committee is not inclined to agree to this, but seeks the views of members before responding. However, we do hope to get more involved in 'advocating secularism' following an FMH talk on this topic in the autumn by Jim Nugent, the NSS Treasurer.

Future Plans

In addition to what has been noted in previous sections, plans for the 2008/9 session include:

Meetings at FMH on second Wednesdays have been arranged until December 2008, although the sequence of speakers in the autumn is still to be agreed. We expect to finalise the programme for the remainder of the 2008/9 session soon.

Provided they continue to be well supported, we shall proceed with meetings on an 'Exploring Humanism' theme on fourth Tuesdays (with the probable exception of July, August and December). We expect these meetings to continue to be held at The Ape and Apple.

We are working towards holding a major event in Manchester in Autumn 2009, possibly in conjunction with the BHA, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. 2009 is also the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth.

We are aware of interest in meeting locally as an alternative to central Manchester, in particular in Warrington/Wigan and Bolton, and will be pursuing possibilities for developing local branches.

We hope to engage more directly in supporting the provision of Humanist ceremonies in Greater Manchester and surrounding areas - funerals, baby namings, and weddings/civil partnerships.

We shall be exploring the scope for Humanist chaplaincy in hospitals, universities and prisons.

We shall be actively pursuing cooperation with other local groups in the North West.

We are developing an archive to record the history of Humanist thinking and activity in Manchester.

Record of meetings at FMH - 2007/8

- 11 April - Annual General Meeting followed by 'in-house' discussion: How do Humanists demonstrate a social conscience and be seen to do so?
- 9 May - Buddhism and Humanism - Veronica Voiles, Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University
- 13 June - Religious Education and Citizenship in Schools - Helen Jeyes, Head of RE at Manchester High School for Girls
- 10 July - Genetic Medicine in the 21st Century, Helen Middleton-Price, Director, North-West Genetics Knowledge Park
- 8 August - Coronations without God - 'in-house' debate led by Chris Neilson
- 12 September - A Sceptical Reading of the Qur'an - Guy Otten
- 10 October - The Pulpit and the Stage - Derek Slater
- 14 November - Oxfam in Cambodia - Tracy Woods, Oxfam
- 12 December - Special General Meeting followed by discussion of GMH Development Plan
- 9 January - The recent BHA Report on the contracting out of public services to religious organisations: *Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations* - discussion led by Naomi Phillips (the author)
- 13 February - Amnesty International - Anne Walker, NW Regional Representative of AI
- 12 March - Humanism and the Challenge of Faith Schools - Andrew Copson of the BHA

John Coss
Secretary
For the Committee
2 April 2008