

GREATER MANCHESTER HUMANISTS

Report of the Committee for the 2008/9 Session

The Committee is pleased to submit this Report for the 2008/9 session to the members of Greater Manchester Humanists.

Membership

The paid-up membership at the end of the session stood at 52, compared with 33 at the end of the previous session (and 18 on 31 March 2007). Of the 33 members at 31 March 2007, six did not renew: during the year, a further two withdrew and 27 new members joined the group.

In total, there were 201 names on the mailing list on 31 March 2009, mostly supporters but including also the other local groups with whom we exchange Newsletters. 11 members and 6 non-members receive the Newsletter by post, the remaining copies being emailed. Members and supporters who receive our communications by email generally receive two or three additional messages each month.

In November 2008, the BHA circulated a letter on our behalf to its members and supporters in our area. This resulted in at least seven new members joining us, and ten new supporters.

Finance

The Treasurer's Report is attached.

Committee

At the AGM on 9 April 2008, Guy Otten was elected as Chair, John Coss was re-elected as Secretary, Chris Neilson was re-elected as Treasurer, and Robin Grinter was re-elected as a member of the Committee. The Committee met every month during the session. Marge Rose and Brian Stanyer attended the final meeting of the session. We need additional committee members to enable us to respond effectively to the opportunities available to us for group development.

Constitution

The new constitution adopted at the Special General Meeting held on 12 December 2007 was amended at the AGM on 9 April 2008 to replace 'Chairman' by 'Chair' as in the original constitution. A further amendment to provide for the position of Vicechair will be the subject of a resolution at the AGM on 13 May 2009.

Website

The new website has continued to be developed during the year, within the limitations of Google Page Creator, which is easy to use and provides free hosting, but with considerable constraints on style and layout. During the coming year, we expect to move to a new website hosted by the BHA, which will also be free to us and will enable a considerable upgrade of the existing site.

Universities

We maintained contact with a number of University students during the session and again participated in Freshers' Week at Manchester Metropolitan University. In February, the BHA supported the launch of The National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS). The only affiliated group from a university in Greater Manchester listed by the BHA is Manchester University Humanist Society.

Campaigning - Faith schools

Chris Neilson has continued to lead our efforts to limit the spread of faith schools in Greater Manchester, through new schools established as Academies sponsored by faith-based organisations. A recent play encountered in Stockport, where student numbers are predicted to fall, is to concentrate the reduction in secondary school places in community schools.

A number of volunteers are now helping us to monitor future developments and enable input into discussions about proposed Academies. But we need more volunteers, 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.

SACRE developments

During the session the Humanist Units for RE in Manchester have been comprehensively rewritten. Robin Grinter attended the meetings of the Agreed Syllabus Conference that planned the quinquennial review of the local syllabus. The RE teachers at the meeting agreed to completely revise the syllabus by developing a Strand B of Units on a thematic basis on the lines of proposals for a National Framework for RE. They also agreed to add Humanist Units at each Key Stage to the existing Strand A of separate faith Units.

Full drafts of Humanist inputs to Thematic Units in Strand B have now been submitted for each Key Stage, and Humanist Units are being written for Strand A. These developments 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 in each strand.

We now have members representing Humanists on Manchester and Trafford SACREs and have established contact with Stockport and Tameside SACREs, which we expect will lead to Humanist representation during the coming session. There are six other education authorities in Greater Manchester, each with its own SACRE. We shall be approaching those where we have identified a potential Humanist representative.

Cooperation with other local groups

During the session we developed good relations with a number of other local Humanist groups, in particular Chester, Lancashire and Liverpool. A meeting of group representatives was held in January to discuss possibilities for cooperation. In particular, we plan to work with the Lancashire group to develop meetings in the Bolton area, and hope to establish annual regional conferences in the North West, the first to be organized by GMH in May or June 2010. We are also planning a joint social event in June 2009. As noted below, GMH is also a member of the Shrewsbury Coalition of local groups.

FMH Meetings

During the 2008/9 session we continued the unbroken series of regular monthly meetings 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 provided below. Attendance was generally in the low twenties (rather lower at one meeting held when central Manchester was disrupted by football supporters). These meetings have to end around 9.15pm: generally around half of those attending continue afterwards at The Waterhouse opposite the Town Hall.

Exploring Humanism Meetings

We held an 'Exploring Humanism' meeting during the session every month except December, generally on the fourth Tuesday, initially at The Ape and Apple in John Dalton Street, moving to FMH for a few months, and for the March meeting to The Waldorf, which we have now adopted as the regular venue. The numbers attending these meetings varied from six to a high of 24 at the March meeting, when we were joined by several visitors from other local groups. Initially, the meetings focused on piloting and reviewing the introductory course we have been developing for public presentation. Subsequent topics were: Humanism needs to rebrand; How we became Humanists; the Scientific Method; attracting new audiences and widening our appeal; the new Equalities Legislation; and Humanist arguments in the 'Does God Exist?' debate. These meetings usually end with a review of current campaigning issues.

Social Activities

We held three Sunday lunches during the session, with from eight to twelve participants, and envisage continuing to hold a lunch or other social event each quarter.

Exploring Humanism – an Introductory Course

Initial development of the course was completed during the session, and the first public presentation of six 1½ hour sessions is expected to take place later in 2009. As a future development, we envisage adapting the course material to other formats to meet the needs of particular audiences.

Promoting Humanism

We still have a considerable stock of leaflets promoting Humanism for use on stalls and for display in libraries and other local outlets. In August, we helped man the GALHA/BHA stand at Manchester Pride and in March, Helen Smith operated a stall at International Women's Day in Manchester town hall – a number of supporters were signed up in both cases. During the session we purchased several GMH T-shirts and a GMH banner for use at these and similar events.

Other activities

- In September, GMH members helped on the BHA stand at the Labour Party Conference in Manchester
- At a Green Party meeting in November, Robin Grinter presented 'A Humanist perspective on climate change - a catastrophe for humanity or our greatest challenge?'
- GMH is part of the Shrewsbury Coalition of local groups which organized a very successful event in Shrewsbury in February to mark the Darwin bicentenary. The highlight was a public meeting attended by over 200 people at which A C Grayling spoke on Darwin and the Darwinian Controversy.
- As a follow-up to his talk at FMH in October, a number of us participated in a focus group organized by Terry Biddington 'exploring some of the issues around spirituality'.
- In March, at very short notice, Guy Otten participated in a debate 'Does God Exist?' organized by Manchester University Islamic Society.
- John Coss, Robin Grinter and Chris Neilson have spoken on Humanism at several schools and sixth form colleges.

Holyoake lectures

George Holyoake was prominent in the 19th century freethinker movement and was one of the pioneers of Cooperation. The Group organized a Holyoake Commemorative Lecture in 1994, which was given by Sir Hermann Bondi, the then President of the BHA. At our suggestion, the BHA has now decided to hold an annual Holyoake lecture in Manchester. The first will be given in the main hall at FMH by Professor Steve Jones on Tuesday 13 October on: Is Human Evolution Over? This event will be chaired by James Randerson, science correspondent of *The Guardian*.

Future Plans

In addition to what has been noted in previous sections, plans for the 2009/10 session include:

The full programme of meetings at FMH on second Wednesdays has been arranged for the 2009/10 session and can be seen on the website.

We expect to continue with Exploring Humanism meetings on fourth Tuesdays most months. These meetings seldom involve an outside speaker, and the topics to be discussed are not determined until near the date of the meeting.

We shall be exploring possibilities for holding public meetings in Manchester, building on the experience gained from the talk given by AC Grayling in Shrewsbury in February. Professor Grayling will be coming to Manchester on 18 November 2009 for a talk and discussion on Darwin and the Darwinian Controversy, hosted by the BHA at St Peter's House in Oxford Road. We also expect to be involved in a public debate arranged by Manchester Museum in connection with its commemoration of the Darwin anniversaries, but no details are currently available.

We shall be helping again with the GALHA/BHA stand at Manchester Pride and envisage arranging much better follow up of the contacts made than in 2008, hopefully leading to the formation of a regional GALHA group.

We hope to have a GMH stand at Stockport Carnival in July and also at other similar events.

We are aware of interest in local Humanist meetings as an alternative to central Manchester meetings: we are focusing initially on developing a local branch in the Buxton/High Peak area but will also be exploring possibilities for developing local branches elsewhere, in particular in Bolton and Stockport.

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

We hope to explore possibilities for pastoral activities, including Humanist chaplaincy in hospitals, universities and prisons. (The November 2009 meeting at FMH will feature a talk by a Humanist hospital chaplain.)

In addition to ongoing campaigning about faith schools, we hope to get more involved in 'advocating secularism' following the FMH talk on this topic in September by Jim Nugent, NSS Treasurer.

Record of meetings at FMH

2008:

- 9 April AGM followed by in-house discussion of current issues in abortion and embryology
- 13 May Humanism in Public Life - Jackie Pearcey, Manchester City Councillor
- 11 June To style oneself 'Christian Humanist' is a nonsense: A Sea of Faith defence for such a label - Penny Mawdsley, member of Chester Humanists and the Sea of Faith
- 9 July Review of 'Introduction to Humanism' course being developed for public presentation, led by Anna Whitehead and Robin Grinter
- 13 Aug Topics from a Hat
- 10 Sep Advocating Secularism – Jim Nugent, Treasurer of the National Secular Society
- 8 Oct Post-modern Spirituality – Terry Biddington, Anglican Chaplain to Manchester Universities
- 12 Nov Perspectives on happiness and well-being: good lives that will not cost the earth - John Coss
- 10 Dec Review of activities in 2009 to mark Darwin 200/150 - Henry McGhie, Manchester Museum, and John Coss – followed by social

2009:

- 14 Jan Positive Humanism - who would win in a fight between Superman and Pericles? - Bob Churchill of the BHA
- 11 Feb Juvenile Justice - David Seddon
- 11 Mar Gaps in the fossil record: a problem for Darwinists? - Fred Broadhurst

John Coss
Secretary
For the Committee
10 May 2009