

Unitarian Communication Coordinators Network Conference 27th February – 1st March 2009: Report

19 of us met up at The Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow for what was to be an action-packed weekend. After Friday evening's welcome and introductory sessions, Saturday was the busy day, when no less than seven sessions were crammed into the programme.

Session 1: Building a website – case study by John Wilkinson and Stella Burney

The new Nightingale Centre website was the case study in question. www.thenightingalecentre.org.uk Reasons for the change were as follows:

- Modernised with new address
- More pro-active approach
- To use the website as a marketing tool
- To reflect the business changes and promote group use
- To be regularly maintained and updated
- To reduce the overall cost

The importance of a clear header on the home page was emphasised, with the name of the organisation being prominent. There is a new "official" photo by Jim Blair, which is beautiful.

Navigation should be clear, and visible on the original page.

A ticker line just above the header highlights news – new ventures and events. It runs across the screen.

The use of photos is essential to brighten up pages and for highlighting information.

Session 2: A Journalist's Journey by Jim Corrigan

This session was divided into three parts: writing news stories, writing press releases, and how to be interviewed.

Writing news stories

They need to grab the attention. The first sentence is very important.

Who, what, where, when, why and how – key questions that need answering.

Keep it brief, flowing and clear. Think of your target audience. Always write with no assumption of prior knowledge. Don't use internal style. If you refer to a past event, include a brief explanation.

Always explain the context and the background briefly. Don't leave unanswered questions in the reader's mind. Avoid jargon. Use clear, simple English. Avoid acronyms and initials or at least spell them out in full the first time.

Three questions to ask yourself:

- What am I trying to say?
- What words will express it?

- What image will make it clearer – use fresh ones, not clichés.

Use short words instead of long. Avoid foreign words. Use the active not the passive mode. Strip out unnecessary adjectives. Write, then re-read and edit.

Press releases:

Follow the style of news stories. Convey key facts and interesting details. Put the day of the week as well as the date.

Look at your target – if it is local news, include a photo.

Heading at the top; dates and times in bold.

At the bottom: for further information, name and contact details.

Try to keep to one side of A4.

Send to news editor (or news desk if radio).

Keep plugging away – they don't always get in. Find out about local deadlines.

National media – more difficult to get coverage.

www.communitynewswire@mediatrust.org.uk – Press Association members have access to this.

Write as article so they don't have to re-write. Also use the letters page.

How to be interviewed:

The conduct of the interview is up to the interviewer. Respond to questions in a conversational way. Don't have notes. Never read.

Responses need to be conversational, focussed and to the point. Speak clearly.

There will usually be a preliminary question requiring a quite specific answer.

Second question will typically be a probing one to elicit more information – motives etc.

Third question – looking to the future.

Always answer the question you are asked. Flow is important; avoid “and ... and”

Try to prepare yourself in advance by thinking about possible critical questions and have thoughts about possible answers.

Finish each sentence. Let your voice go down to give the interviewer the opportunity to cut in.

Session 3: Photo opportunities by James Barry

What is a good image meant to do?

- Grab the attention
- Be a story in its own right (particularly PR photos). All elements in the photo need to be telling the same story. If you need to explain an image, it's a poor image.
- Evoke a reaction from the viewer.

How to get a good image

Avoid any technical errors in the photo e.g. exposure, focus.

Digital photography should be in two stages: taking the photo, then manipulating it on the computer. It is important to calibrate your screen for brightness. Never send photos to the press without taking a print first – they will look different on the screen.

Two key factors: lighting can add interest; composition of image.

Portrait

Use a zoom or telephoto lens. You are trying to show the relationship between the viewer and the subject – expression on the sitter's face. Rule of Thirds – person should be pointing towards the centre of the photo. Outside: shoot towards direction of light to avoid squinting / screwed up eyes.

Use simple props to tell story – flowers, chalice, hymn board. Avoid empty chairs.

People shouldn't be looking dead straight into the camera.

Building

If it is an ugly building, photograph it at night with all the lights on inside..

Important to have entrance in photo. If door, have it open – gives welcoming feeling.

Have the sun shining on the building.

Sky can make or break photo – dramatic, or interesting clouds are best.

Snow can make interesting photo – not normal view.

PR

Fundamental – telling the story. Preparation is the key – set up the shot carefully in advance.

Session 4: Unitarian Reachout by David Shaw

Reachout is the active motion/passion of outreach. "Hands, touching hands, reaching out, touching me, touching you." Neil Diamond.

There should be something in your act of worship for everybody. Bear in mind "there is a broken heart in every pew". The problem with outreach is the extreme complexity going on in people's minds. The deep needs of people.

Pastoral visiting is all about connecting with people. Visiting by phone and e-mail as well as in person. Problem of ageing congregations. Need to replace with younger people as they die off. Sustainability issue with a rising age profile.

Reasons for wanting growth:

- To share the workload of running a congregation
- To maintain current numbers
- To share spiritual sustenance and moral compass of Unitarianism.

It is crucially important to consider why we want growth. There are loads of people whose lives would be enhanced by contact with Unitarianism. There is a crying need for publicity to help people to find us.

Fundamentally it is the heart and soul of people we are dealing with. Making connections.

Posters and leaflets can be impersonal. Need to make personal contact. People have strong reservations about walking into a church for the first time. Importance of welcoming – friendly, but not too effusive. Need for softly, softly approach.

Session 5: Communications Commission Update by Diane Bennett

CommComm reports to the EC. Is responsible for leaflets, publications and noticeboards. Has two panels: Lindsey Press and Web. Produces action plans:

1. Consistent identity

- Noticeboard project – 26 grants awarded
- Pilot project at Upper Chapel, Sheffield – consistent identity across every area of publicity
- Supporting local promotional activities (future)

2. Denominational Periodicals

- Regular GA page in *The Inquirer*.
- Establish similar relationship with *The Unitarian* and Welsh periodical (future)

3. External and internal communications

- Review modes of communication
- Establish targeted mailing lists
- Links with other groups e.g. UCCN, NUF
- Review internal communications (future)
- Guidance on accessible communications (future)
- Do we need an information officer?

4. Leaflet development

- A Faith Worth Thinking About
- Legacy
- Funerals & Memorial Services
- Your First Time at a Unitarian Service?
- Weddings and Blessings
- Baptism and Welcoming (future)
- Unitarians views on ... series – to be reviewed (future)
- Building Bridges – Building Communities (future)
- Review: Our Continuing Story, History of Unitarianism, Unitarians and World Religions (future)

5. National Website

- Content reviewed, updated and maintained
- Online payment, online registration
- Web Panel established January 2009 – restructure & redesign; opportunity to input to process
- New content (future)
- Links to online worship material (with NUF) (future)
- Promote consistent identity (future)
- Maintain links with UCCN, NUF

6. Promotional Activities

- National advertising

- Data collection (new members)
- Support for local initiatives e.g. Macclesfield & projects linked with consistent identity
- Merchandise – badges, car stickers, bookmarks, mugs
- New travelling display (future)
- Wayside Pulpits (future)
- Key audiences, key messages and appropriate modes of communication and promotion (future)

7. Publications – Lindsey Press Panel

- Unitarian Life – Stephen Lingwood
- Sing Your Faith – new hymn book
- Book for children on Unitarianism (future)
- Worship material – Cliff Reed (future)
- Unitarian spirituality and Unitarian perspectives on contemporary religious practice (future)

8. Websites for All

- Review one page local websites
- Liaison with UCCN / UK Unitarians web support forum
- Facilitate / promote use of consistent identity
- Provision of training for local volunteers in liaison with UCCN / UK Unitarians (future)
- What is required locally?

Session 6: The Accidental Publicist by Liz Shaw

BYOT – Blowing Your Own Trumpet. Need to introduce “Unitarian” in any appropriate sentence. Need to gain people’s interest in between 4 and 7 seconds. Reputation – word of mouth.

Importance of first impressions – website, noticeboards, building. Visual stuff.

Greeting at chapel – importance of being welcoming. Meeting and greeting. Need to take notice of new person but not overwhelm them.

Need for positive spin – what we do believe, not what we don’t.

Put information in all local tourist information centres. Send leaflet with covering letter asking to be put on local information website.

Session 7: Internet Presence by James Barry

This session was all about how to set up a (more or less) instant website. The UK Unitarians site www.ukunitarians.org.uk which is run by James Barry, John Wilkinson and Chris Granger, offers website support and this “instant” facility.

James took us through the UK Unitarians Content Management System, showing how it was possible to set up a basic website for your congregation

within minutes. The whole process is totally free, and what is more, your pages are instantly editable – very important for keeping them up to date.

Also on the UK Unitarians site is a Survey of Unitarian UK Websites 2007 – 2009, which made for fascinating viewing. It lists all congregations with and without websites, including a map.

A letter will be going out from the Communications Commission to congregations without a website. After which, John, James and Chris will approach them.

Sunday morning

A final session was held on Sunday morning to plan next steps and to sort out some details for next year's conference, which is to be held on 19th – 21st February 2010. Marion Baker is bowing out as conference organiser; her place will be taken by Valerie Walker, with James Barry assisting. We then enjoyed a good service led by David Shaw in Old Chapel.