

## The Governance Board Meeting 019: 14th September 2023 Edgehill

### MINUTES

<b>Present:</b>	<b>Apologies</b>
Mr Tony O'Connor (Chair)	Rev Nigel Mackey
General Secretary: Rev Dr Heather Morris (Convener)	Rev John Alderdice
Rev David Nixon	Mr David Best
Rev David Turtle	Mr John Clarke
Mr Tom Wilson	Mr Paul Cummings
Mr Tom Millar	Ms Gillian Kingston
Rev Harold Agnew	Ms Jackie Wright
Rev Richard Rowe	

#### **In attendance:**

Ms Clodhna Smyth (Secretary to the Board)

#### **In attendance via Teams to present particular items of business:**

Ms Nicola Robinson Finance – Item 9 and Mr Nicky Blair Safeguarding - item 14

#### **1. Opening Prayer**

The President opened the meeting in prayer from Psalm 80.

#### **2. Welcome and Apologies**

All were welcomed to the meeting in particular those for whom it was their first meeting – Jackie Wright , Rev Richard Rowe and Rev John Alderdice. There were no apologies.

#### **3. Minutes of the last meeting and matters arising**

The Minutes of May 2023 were agreed, and there were no matters arising not covered by the agenda.

#### **4. Declaration of Conflicts of Interest**

Potentially Gillian Kingston – Wesley College and John Alderdice – Belvoir.

#### **5. Past Decisions Review**

HMRC & Gift Aid –MCI has until Dec 2023 to implement the change to a single submission and it only applies to NI, not ROI.

Declaration of interest forms for local churches – to come by end 2023 **Action: TOC**

The Property Database compilation is ongoing, and report on local trustee ownership is to come in October as the Estates Manager is ill.

MCI Associated bodies – Financial accountability – ongoing to come in October 2023 meeting.

CCNI – there has been no reply to the issue on religious designation so the ball is in their court.

#### **6. PAC**

The PAC has not met since the last meeting.

#### **7. General Secretaries Report**

Rev. Dr. Morris reported that there are a mixture of good things and challenges that MCI is facing. As an overview:

Conference 2023 went very well and the feedback form is very positive. There was a desire to move Conference out of Belfast for 2024, however given potential agenda items in 2024 the flexibility in the Spires will be required and so it is proposed to be used again in 2024.

Connexional Y&C policy – 3 out of 4 new staff have started, this is an answer to prayer as all 4 posts were filled despite a lack of Youth workers across NI, and a significant statement of intent for the connexion. First time that being a single charity has affected the recruitment process, as a person in redundancy was offered alternative employment and was appointed. Paula Lough will be based in the NW and Joe Ambrose in the Southern District and Heather Bailie and Matty McCrea are based out of Edgehill. Districts are keen to get started and the GB can support by praying for them and talking about the strategy in all relevant circles.

The Districts – There is a need for strategic stationing of Circuit Superintendents to develop and oversee their circuits. Cavan and Dundalk and Donard have new buildings, Bangor has seen the amalgamation of 3 churches. It is important that word is spread of how positive all of these have been.

WDR – “Better World for everyone” exhibition — An excellent resource especially for attracting schools. The World Development & Relief development charity was acknowledged as being very effective in engaging the wider community and supporting excellent development work in the world.

Church growth group (charged with looking at how MCI will grow in next 5-10 years) is doing baseline work focusing on leadership and missional risk taking and there are good examples of growth already on the ground.

A question was asked about how many churches are still employing people locally – **Action: HM to bring the answer at October meeting.**

### **Challenges for MCI**

Morale issue - for ordained and lay people in some contexts. As said at Conference there are more resignation requests than usual, and MPPC is looking to see if there are any consistent factors but it seems to be mainly personal reasons.

The planned Re:Call retreat focusing on spiritual renewal in Jan 2024 will address this. MCI acknowledges there is a feeling of disconnection and isolation where people don't know each other well, especially as larger circuits are being developed, and in a post-Covid context.

District Superintendents (DSs) – are also addressing this issue through linking Ministers and their role in supporting both ministers and lay leaders.

Human sexuality – The Governance Board notes the anxiety about how we address this, especially with regards to the risk register. Conference conversations on this subject were good and full of grace.

However, a report in the Methodist Newsletter about the Pride parade in Belfast and some Methodists being there – 5 letters received raised concern but it's not overwhelming. The MNL is seen as an official organ of MCI, even though it is editorially completely independent. There is a sense of disconnection amongst some that it's not worth expressing a contrary view on this.

Faith & Order had an excellent meeting as to what the year ahead will look like – risks are being handled well and they are alert as to the challenges. There is a wide divergence of views across the Connexion as evidenced in the “Encounter events” and this will remain so – what are implications of living as a church with the wide range of views on an issue that has become contentious? F&O has other matters on its agenda – Human Sexuality has been on its agenda since 2014 - such as trafficking, pornography, church rentals to non-faith groups, matters related to Holy Communion, but the Connexion has narrowed the agenda to this one topic. What's required as a Connexion is engagement with all of the materials – personal story, Bible studies etc. and the processes. It is anticipated that multimedia resources will be available by end November.

F&O are refining a resolution to bring to Conference 2024. It is vitally important that the role of F&O is clear and separate from the GB. The F&O committee were commended and acknowledged for their hard work. **Regular updates/reports over the next year on this topic were requested by the chair. Action: HM**

Property processes have been drafted and agreed and are due to go to the PB – these will be piloted and reviewed across the Connexion before they go to Conference 2024. Implementation slower than would have been expected as the Estates manager has been off sick.

Safeguarding The safeguarding officer is handling 2 cases that might be an issue. Safeguarding officer was off ill and another individual entered data. A possible data breach may have occurred and the gardai were

informed– SO is chasing the conversation with the Garda but it seems they have attached a low level priority to the issue.

## 8. Administrative Items

Connexional Team (CT) - Convenor of the CT was John Alderdice. This role will now be fulfilled by Cheryl Patterson who will convene meetings, write papers and draft proposals from Sept 2023 – June 2025 while John is President of MCI.

Circuit closures - Decision of CT according to the Manual of Laws MOL 15.21 — that Skerries and Belvoir societies will close. Legislation says that the view of Circuit Executive is sought but it's the CT who has the final decision and then this decision is brought to the GB for implementation. **GB accepts the CT decision to close the societies.**

Could this process be made clear to the local societies and circuits as there is a misunderstanding. For closures in future the GB needs to see a report outlining the background and reasons for the closure.

**Action: HM**

Local Trusteeship – cautiously optimistic that a Centenary proposal will be brought to the October meeting.

Belfast CC chaplaincy is a Pioneer ministry of MCI – the leader is Rev. Andrew Irvine. The format of the new constitution of Belfast CC Chaplaincy was discussed. If MCI are the sole sponsoring body their accounts would have to be consolidated with those of MCI and this could hamper fundraising. GB is happy for BCCC to explore other options: Action HM

## 9. Finance Report

75% of Circuits & societies are up to date with their monthly returns and there are more training dates in diary for those still lagging behind.

There are 2 reports for Connexional finances up to June 2023 –a summary and a detailed report. It was noted that giving/donations are falling across the Connexion, which is having a knock-on effect on finances, but rentals are up. Staff costs are below budget as 2 members of staff have not yet been recruited.

The next stage is to look at the investments/expenditure for Home Mission. As grants don't come from Comprehensive Assessment it was decided to draw down from investments instead to cover it. It was acknowledged that the sources of all income need to be clearly identified.

Budgets were only supplied for 9% of circuits last year so very little income information is available compared to budget, a process is in place to have this for all societies next year.

It was noted that Associated Bodies signing 6 monthly financial assurance reports is very important for GB overview of said bodies. **(Action JC)**

**The Chair requested that a figure vs budget to be supplied for GB October meeting. Action: NR**

## 10. Audit Committee Report and Accounts for Year ended December 2022

Audit is ongoing – accounts went to EY auditors early September. MCI awaiting BCM draft accounts due next week, and more information is required from EBM. The timeline is to get all complete before end September.

The 2022 draft accounts will be reviewed by the Audit & Assurance Committee on 9<sup>th</sup> Oct and by 16<sup>th</sup> Oct they are anticipated to come to the GB.

Tribute was paid to Nicola Robinson for the level of work done resulting in information available to MCI 2 months earlier than last year.

Some concern was expressed over financial governance in EBM, and the Audit committee is concerned that staff seemed not to understand what information was required. The Governance Board will review this situation going forward. The risk register to be updated in regard to the above. **Action: HM**

It was noted that Skainos is scheduled to repay the loan to MCI before year end 2023. Skainos is not linked to MCI in terms of governance but they are interlinked with EBM on the ground.

## 11. Finance Committee Report

Financial reports made to Conference are in line with the current situation.

Reclamation of tax in ROI for WDR for preceding years has been put into action.

A drop from £9.5m to £8.6m in donations when adjusted for inflation is quite significant.

External audit – a tendering process was carried out and the Audit & Assurance Committee weren't satisfied with the lack of interest so various options are being considered and will be reported upon in next meeting.

**Pensions/stipends review** – agreed process and timetable for next year's budgeting with the Finance department. Review how to approach those who are not complying with the system. 3 years ago the issue was the new system now it's people not complying with the new system. Need to get to 100% visibility across all bodies – the issue is the voluntary nature of treasurers vs. governance requirements. For circuit budgeting it was noted that high level income expenditure and bank balance is all that's required.

Pensions – have appointed Andrew Little as pension adviser with closing the old pension scheme and opening a new one. Clarke (London) are giving legal advice on closing the old pension scheme. Will be a process of consultation with ministers at an individual level. Paul Cumming and Bruce Mullen will have meetings with all ministers over the transition period.

Uplift on stipends – inflation has not reduced in NI (a little in ROI) and salaries have increased. If it's increased by 5% then comprehensive assessment will increase significantly. Stipend automatically becomes 90% of comprehensive assessment, and it could be 5-7%: this is a difficult decision. PC and the committee were commended for all the work it has been doing. The committee will announce a decision in November.

A comment was made that the Re:Call retreat should include the discussion on pensions.

Communication to circuits to be made that for the basis of the budget an assumption is that stipends/salaries will increase by 5%. **Action: HM/NR**

Bring the increase for January to the GB in October for discussion. **Action: Paul Cummings**

## 12. General Assurance Committee Report

The General Assurance committee reports to the GB – it provides assurance on non-financial risk management within the church and carries out assessments on any policies, processes and controls where an element of risk has been identified for the GB.

The Associated Bodies range from colleges to sheltered housing providers and there are about 17 of them, 10 in NI and 7 in ROI. Almost all are registered charities in their own right. In 2021 ABs accounted for 55% of MCI income – mostly from city missions/sheltered housing. As well as financial risk the Governance Board is also aware of property, reputational, legal and other risks with these ABs.

GB oversight responsibilities depend on the AB constitutions which are complex and varied and as such professional help is required to manage these. MHC (Mason Hayes Curran in Dublin) and Edwards & Co. Belfast have been engaged and are required due to the nuances of charity law between ROI/NI. MHC has produced a template which will summarise the ABs to see where issues/risks lie, especially around property issues. The process is ongoing and will be for the foreseeable future.

The Governance Board commended John Clarke for his extensive work in this area.

## 13. Southern Board of Education

Dr Ken Fennelly reported that the C of I Archbishop is very keen for closer cooperation with MCI which is progress. It is proposed that MCI would have 2 observers on the board. This has to go to their General Synod for agreement. The proposals are that

- a) Daphne Woods (MCI) to transfer and take up a slot on the secondary education committee (the grant awarding body) and they need someone from the primary education sector ,and
- b) Nigel Mackey to take over secondary education subcommittee –

C of I want a more faith-centred secondary school ethos. Part of this involves writing new resources for secondary education. This is a significant missional opportunity as there are over 15k students across Protestant schools. Meeting mid-September to discuss proposals.

DW to become secretary to the Board for grants. Combining Southern & Northern B of Education – is a technical issue. All that's required is an acknowledgement in the patronage that child protection regulations are being followed. Grants are in the North and signatories are required to award grants to families who are waiting for them.

A paper is to be written on this to be submitted to the GB October 2023 and then to go to Synod in May to be formalised but practically speaking in the meantime NM will be an observer. **Action: NM**

#### 14a. **Health & Safety Policy**

A draft H&S policy document was discussed. The objective is to ask for local responsibility and implementation and GB has line of sight responsibility as it will be clear who has complied as the completed forms will be uploaded to Teams.

There was a concern that Ministers will end up being H&S officers due to the Level 2 food safety requirement. The Society steward is the obvious person to take charge however the wider issue is that of volunteers feeling overloaded, however being a single charity is good news and the Connexional communication of this will be important.

It was noted that this is a legal requirement and one person with a qualification in charge is needed, and it was recommended to be reasonable and practical about it but take the recommended steps. Once the policy is adopted it goes to the DSs for review then it will be issued.

**The GB commends the writer of this clear and well-structured policy as a good balance and the policy is adopted.**

#### 14b. **Risk Management Policy and procedures**

MCI risk register was presented and following discussion it was decided that:

- Group risks together in categories.
- Cybersecurity, church split, Human Sexuality risks to be added.
- If a number of risks align then that brings the whole risk upwards.
- Should be 8-10 key risks – reputational broad heading.
- Wording can be developed once there are fewer risks.
- Drop out lower risks altogether – key is trying to embed these within the organisation. Does it say in the connexion or out to circuits/societies.

There is a ready to go course that can be run again.

Risk register to be reviewed every 3 months and the audit/assurance committee to look at it also.

The revised risk register to be brought back in October GB meeting. **Action: HM**

#### 15. **Past Cases Review implementation**

The recommendations from the Past Cases Review were presented – there are 14 action points.

The Safeguarding Officer will be providing written reports every 2 months to the Governance and

Safeguarding Boards with the recommendation that implementation be concluding by Conference 2024.

Lindsay Conway, Chair of the Safeguarding board, will be meeting with Dr Deborah Webster chair of the Past Cases review board, and she will be invited to be a member of the Safeguarding board in January 2024.

The Safeguarding Board will be working with small groups in between Jan and March 2024.

The presentation was commended by the Governance Board.

#### 16.

The Governance Board 2022-23 Performance Review is postponed to October meeting.

There being no other business, the meeting closed with the President leading prayer.

Tony O'Connor, Chair  
14th September 2023