

Society for the Study of Christian Ethics

Annual General Meeting,
6th September 2014, 4:00 pm
Cunningham Room, Westcott House, Cambridge

MINUTES

1. Apologies

There were no apologies received.

2. Welcome

Susan Parsons opened the meeting by thanking the committee for their hard work and dedication over the past year. She also expressed her confidence in handing on the committee to the next administration. She added additional thanks to the hon. secretary, Jeremy Kidwell, for filling in on a number of special capacities over the past year. Dr Parsons noted the tragic loss of Glen Stassen, Allan Verhey, and Wolfhart Pannenberg over the past year. She handed over the meeting to Jeremy Kidwell (JK) for the secretary's report.

3. Secretary's Report

Jeremy began with a presentation, offering an overview of SSCE matters from 2012-2014. Regarding memberships, Jeremy noted that over this period:

- The society has tended to hover around 100 members
- There has been a persistent problem with members not updating standing orders to account for changes in dues which occurred in 2007 and 2011. Because secretaries over the past four years have routinely noted this issue, Jeremy noted his decision that going forward contributions received towards membership dues at the old rates will be treated as donations towards assisted places and these memberships will not be renewed.

Regarding conferences, JK noted that:

- Attendance tends to range between 50-75
- The society has stopped hosting dinners at Cambridge Colleges to reduce costs.
- Average costs per delegate have ranged from £150-230 for past conferences

JK noted that he had been working in cooperation with the incoming SSCE treasurer Hal St. John to develop a more robust reporting procedure, but given the extra work involved they had not yet been able to complete a formal financial report, so the figures provided were meant to provide a rough guide with a formal report to be distributed later in the year.

In responding to questions from the floor, Jeremy noted that:

- Journal subscriptions will be purchased in a bulk order from SAGE on an annual basis and the society will provide subscriber information to SAGE for delivery on a quarterly basis.
- He hopes to do more future work reaching out to institutions and individual benefactors for financial support to cover the cost of PG events, bursaries and assisted places at the annual conference.
- No bursaries had been paid out for 2014 because the conference secretary had stepped down shortly after the 2013 conference and JK had been fulfilling these duties until a replacement could be found.

There was a proposal from the floor by Michael Northcott that the conference secretary be given to JK as a small honorarium. Jeremy responded by noting that this was unnecessary in light of the generous honorarium he had already received in 2013 for his work on the society database and website in 2011-2012. Victor Austin took up MN's proposal (seconded by Esther Reed) in the form of a formal motion and the vote was carried unanimously. Helen Dawes asked whether the AGM has the authority to make spending decisions. JK clarified that the committee members are the formal society trustees and thus that they are best suited to make formal decisions regarding spending. MN suggested that the approved motion be treated as a formal instruction to the committee to award a bursary and there was unanimous approval of this clarified motion.

Jeremy highlighted several new ideas which he hopes to bring up in the future:

- He intends to improve the transparency of several aspects of society business, particularly the awarding of bursaries in the coming year.
- He hopes to launch an artist in residence programme for future conferences and noted that the committee had responded to this proposal with enthusiasm.

MN noted in response that previous conferences had highlighted a practitioner as one of the plenary speakers and that this practice had fallen off slightly and asked whether this might be revived. JK responded by noting that he hopes to reinstitute this process in parallel to an artist in residence programme.

4. Committee Membership

Susan parsons explained to those present that we have a full membership of the committee, but that several co-opted positions are currently empty, the treasurer and conference secretary. SP introduced the committee's choice for the co-opted position of treasurer, Hal St. John and noted by way of introduction that he is both a certified accountant and theologian.

Jeremy noted that with the departure of our conference secretary, the committee had recruited and selected a replacement to be co-opted, Kevin Hargaden (a first-year PhD student at Aberdeen).

5. Treasurer's Report

Jeremy apologised for the *ad hoc* nature of the financial report for this year, and noted his plan to work with Hal to present a more formal and precise report with a new format with more detailed description of society finances and spending. He hoped to include a formal financial report in an October 2014 newsletter.

JK also noted that in light of the various troubles that the society has had with the co-operative over the past several years, the society has opened a new bank account with Triodos (a socially responsible bank) with the intention of moving all our financial activities to that new bank and closing out our Co-Operative account.

6. Constitutional Changes

SP opened this discussion by noting that the society has begun to try to adapt its procedures to enhance transparency and more accurately represent the way in which society business is conducted and that these changes represented a small step in that direction. She handed over the presentation to JK to highlight specific details of these changes for discussion and vote.

Members discussed and unanimously approved the following changes:

- Under IV.2: changing dates of membership to run on a calendar year basis (this greatly simplifies the task of determining who has an active membership for each conference and is the practice of most other academic societies); *motion proposed by Neil Messer; seconded by David Clough; approved by unanimous vote.*
- Under VI.2: expanding the language slightly to clarify the procedure for electing a new president; *motion proposed by Guido de Graaf; Seconded by Michael Northcott; approved by unanimous vote.*
- Under XI.1: simplifying management of society finances and making financial reporting a requirement; *in discussing this final change, Victor Austin proposed that we standardise the titles of committee members in the constitution, and after some discussion those present (led by Robert Song) agreed that it would be appropriate to drop the title "honorary" before treasurer and secretary. Amended motion proposed by Rob Heimbürger; seconded by Margaret Adam; approved by unanimous vote.*

SP noted the discovery by the committee of the constitutional inclusion of agreement with the aims and objectives of the society as a prerequisite for membership and notice of the procedures of membership practice noted there. She invited discussion from the floor re: membership.

Neal Messer noted his support for a process of new member sponsorship and membership by formal application (as is practice in *societas ethica*). He suggested that a move towards more formal membership practice would be his preference, though keeping decisions regarding membership with the committee rather than the annual AGM to keep the process more nimble.

Richard Higginson noted his agreement that the society keep decision-making more efficient and that new applicants not be made to wait until the annual conference.

Helen Dawes suggested that the nomination model (as is used by SST) may work well for academics, but could also exclude those interested in membership who lie outside formal academic affiliations, or who are studying part-time. SP asked a clarifying question about whether that a letter of application might still be suitable for non-academic context and HD responded by noting concern that a process of application that required attendance at the AGM would also block access to bursaries or discounted registration.

David Clough shared that in trying to consider ways of enhancing diversity, the SST committee has noted similar concerns over “conservatism about access” in their present practice and that he might be reluctant to support that kind of move for reasons of diversity.

Additional contributions by those present mused over whether someone enrolling in a academic programme in Christian ethics might already reflect a significant enough investment in the discipline, whether having recommendations might enhance the significance of membership, and whether there might be a tension between two views, one which aims towards growing the society and that if this is the preferred route, making membership more difficult might prove counterproductive.

Susan Parsons closed discussion and noted that the committee will take up the concerns noted in future discussion of membership.

7. Election of President for 2014-2017

Susan Parsons explained that the committee had conducted a search over the past several months and introduced David Clough as the committee's nomination for the post of president. She asked whether the nomination had already been approved "by acclamation" and there was unanimous agreement by those present.

Guido de Graaf asked whether the presidency might continue to run over calendar years such that David Clough's work might involve a transition in 2017 to the new president. SP noted her understanding was that this was meant to be the case.

8. Future Initiatives (1) - SSCE Working Group on Gender and Career Progression

Margaret Adam presented to the society a recent report produced by Matthew Guest, Sonya Sharma, and Robert Song titled "Gender and Career Progression in Theology and Religious Studies." She summarised the findings of the report for those present, noting how the study indicated that there was a severe and increasing drop-off (from 60% to 16%) in Female representation at each level of progression in Theology and Religious Studies in the UK, from UG to PG students, and in faculty to Senior levels of academic staff. MA also highlighted some of the results from interviewing conducted by researchers, including the presence of bullying by male members of staff towards female members of staff. She noted that several other academic societies have already have special sessions to discuss the report. She proposed to those present the following points:

- That they read the report and digest its findings
- That the society consider its role in responding to the report (i.e. to present a formal response, or to create a space for discussion of its contents).
- That the society devote a plenary session to ethics and gender issues in some academic way, as well as a short paper session for discussing the report
- That the society consider developing a mentorship programme for those in careers (in addition to the mentorship programme already proposed for students) as one way of addressing the report's findings.
- That the society explore available resources for evaluating and adapting gender practices in our gathering contexts at SSCE (e.g. watching vocabulary used in describing/introducing papers) and evaluate available models of good practice.

She noted the committee's support of these practices and the intention of the group to meet in the intervening period before the next conference to discuss those issues and ways to make them possible in the society.

Neil Messer raised a question about mentorship - specifically whether a mentorship programme might be for women only. MA responded by noting that her proposal was intentionally vague and it was meant to operate in connection with the PG rep. proposal for a mentorship programme.

8. Future Initiatives (2)

David Clough raised the prospect of SSCE becoming an official affiliate with TRS-UK (formerly AUDTRS) and explained some of the work underway by TRS-UK and the benefits of affiliation. He explained that their plan is to approach the committee formally with an invitation to affiliate formally.

9. Future (2016) Conferences and Topics

SP shared about possible speakers for the 2015 conference on Power and Its Limits. She then opened up discussion on possible conference themes and handed over discussion to Neil Messer to open this discussion with an invitation from *Societas Ethica* to collaborate on a conference theme in 2016 towards the theme in bioethics. NM noted that there were some financial issues generated for the society by the arrangements of the last joint conference and shared that he was confident that this could be avoided. He shared that the specific theme under discussion for 2016 is around the topic of mind/brain ethics, but that *Societas Ethica* would be happy to run a joint conference on a different theme in a later year if that would be preferred.

There was some discussion of this proposal. David Clough noted that that last conference came close to bankrupting the society and expressed his reservations about the society agreeing to a collaboration without first discussing more concrete financial arrangements. NM responded by suggesting that a basic level of approval was all that was needed and that deferring the discussion on the mind/brain ethics theme might not be possible as planning would be underway.

Victor Austin proposed a motion that it would be good to have a regular joint conference, and towards this end that the committee further investigate and consider this for either 2017 or 2018. Interim discussion raised the benefits of having a wider representation present from Europe, and more widely from the discipline of philosophy (which is well represented in *SE*). Peter Harvey noted that the last collaboration, for all its logistical challenges, was good fun. The motion carried with the following votes:

Yes: 21

No: 2

Abstaining: 5

The discussion continued towards other possible conference themes.

David Clough raised the possibility of a conference on Animals with possible titles being something like "Christians and other animals" or "Creatureliness and the Creator". Michael Northcott declined to present his original proposal of "Hope and Christian Ethics." Susan Parsons noted a final proposal by Guido de Graff, "Wealth and Money." Votes for the 2016 topic were the following:

Christians and other animals: 20

Wealth and Money: 7

10. Studies in Christian Ethics

Susan Parsons noted with enthusiasm the new arrangement by which members will receive a free subscription to the journal. She also explained that the journal is doing very well and notified the society that the journal has just been accepted into the Arts and Humanities Citations Index.

Articles published in the journal will be listed as from Volume 25 of 2012.

11. Postgraduate Forum Convener's Presentation

Anna Westin provided the following report to the society:

In 2013-14, the primary focus has been organising the annual postgraduate conference at Edinburgh in April. Alongside this, secondary projects have included developing a consistent means of communication and a stronger web presence through social media, and providing a more 'practical' skills-based presentation for postgraduates at the annual September conference. April marked the annual two-day conference entitled 'Playing God? Power and Authority in Ethics' at New College, Edinburgh, with over 17 registrants and six student papers. We had the privilege of being joined by Prof. Esther Reed, who gave two plenary papers entitled 'Tax Justice: Thinking theologically about the Good(s) of Trade' and 'Augustinian Political Rhetoric and the Ethics of Targeted Killing'. The responses from Dr. Joan Lockwood O'Donovan and Prof. Michael Northcott were equally well received by the students. The Durham Gender Report and current economic changes in the academia were also discussed.

At the annual conference, we started the Friday afternoon with a postgraduate seminar held by Dr. Malcolm Brown. Dr. Brown is Director of the Mission and Public Affairs team for the Church of England, working on ethical issues including criminal justice, bio-medical research and international development. Entitled 'Christian Ethics in the Church's Civil Service', the seminar aimed to provide postgraduates with an opportunity to discuss how their postgraduate studies in ethics can be applied to roles outside of purely academic research. The session was followed by the tea reception, in which postgraduates then joined the rest of the Society for the remainder of the conference.

As the new academic year unfolds, we are hoping to continue to develop the postgraduate community of the Society through regular email contact, alongside Facebook and Twitter social media updates.

12. Other Business

Helen Dawes raised a question from the floor asking whether the society would consider adjusting the income levels used for A/B banding for memberships and conference fees in order to accommodate the level stipend received by incumbent clergy. There was general agreement from those present with this proposal and JK noted that he would make the adjustment.

The meeting closed with David Clough expressing "the strongest thanks" to Susan Parsons for her service to the SSCE in a time of transition. There was thunderous applause.

Attachments:

- Secretary's report (slides)
- "Gender and Career Progression in Theology and Religious Studies" report