

Background Papers for the 2020 Annual Meetings

Motion 1 FROM KENDAL UNITARIANS

Misuse of Alcohol

In Spring 2019 Morrison's supermarket ran a front page advert in our local Kendal newspaper promoting alcohol as a means of celebrating Easter.

This was a cynical advertisement; especially as our nation now faces the increasing social problem of alcohol addiction which detrimentally affects all races, classes and genders.

Current statistics (which you can check out online) from the government: NHS, the police, the Institute for Alcohol Studies, Change UK, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence - and other agencies, indicate that about a third of the population of the UK are heavy drinkers, alcohol dependent, have family or friends who are alcoholics, or are victims of abuse related to alcohol misuse.

Currently over 60% of NHS resources are spent on coping with alcoholism and alcohol related diseases. In the last 10 years hospital admissions due to alcoholic liver disease in England have increased by 43%. At weekends in most cities A&E departments are overwhelmed by dealing with the consequences of drunkenness. Policing alcohol related crimes: car accidents and domestic violence, costs in excess of 40 million a year.

Addiction to alcohol has put a huge strain on Mental Health services. Voluntary groups have to deal with the devastating consequences of alcohol addiction: domestic violence, broken homes, unwanted pregnancies, neglected children, suicides, debt, crime and homelessness.

According to the National Social Marketing Centre the annual cost of alcohol related problems to services and industry in England and Wales is around £55 billion. The estimated costs to individual households stand at about £22 billion. In Northern Ireland the annual cost of alcohol misuse is over £600 million and in Scotland the cost is about £7 billion. The human cost of alcohol addiction is in ruined lives, wasted potential and needless deaths. Addiction to alcohol leaves in its wake social and emotional debris affecting families for decades.

Drunkenness plays a part in at least 30% of known cases of child abuse and is the major factor in 60% of domestic violence, especially against women.

We now face a health and sociological disaster on a massive scale affecting millions. Voluntary groups trying to stem the growing tide of alcohol addiction and its devastating consequences have been fighting against the odds for years, without adequate support from governments.

There is now a desperate health and social need to implement national programs to take practical steps through education and prevention to help reduce the problems caused by alcohol addiction for future generations.

References:

- NHS – statistics and costs relating to alcoholism
- Statistics on alcohol England 2019
- Policing and the cost of alcohol related crime
- Alcohol in domestic violence and child abuse
- The Institute for Alcohol Studies
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
- Drink Aware

Motion 2 FROM GOLDERS GREEN UNITARIANS & 12 FULL MEMBERS**Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in Israel / Palestine**

The purpose of this motion is to help further the cause of peace, justice and reconciliation in Israel/Palestine and encourage urgently needed medical and other humanitarian aid for the victims of war and conflict in the region. It is inspired by the moral conviction of Martin Luther King that 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere'. It expresses moral solidarity with and urges strong support for all peace and justice campaigners in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. It focuses on three in particular: Physicians for Human Rights—Israel (PHRI), Rabbis for Human Rights (RFHR) and the Oasis of Peace.

Founded in 1988 by a group of Israeli and Palestinian doctors, PHRI works to promote a just society ensuring equal access to health facilities for all. Through its volunteer medical professionals it provides medical services free of charge to people with limited or no access to health care, primarily migrants, refugees and Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza. It is dedicated to working to change discriminatory and abusive structures and policies towards Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, prisoners, detainees, migrant workers and refugees. PHRI views the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian Territories as a root cause of multiple human rights violations and actively advocates for its end. So in all its work it refuses to accept policies that increase inequality and structural violence and seeks to establish an alternative that cultivates true equality and solidarity. PHRI states that 'principles of human rights, medical ethics, and social justice are at the core of our worldview'. In 2010 it was awarded the Right Livelihood Award for its 'indomitable spirit in working for the right to health for all people in Israel and Palestine'.

Founded in 1988 and representing over 100 Israeli rabbis and rabbinical students, Rabbis for Human Rights derives its authority from Jewish tradition and honours and acts in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its mission is to inform the Israeli public about human rights violations and pressurise State institutions to redress these injustices. It gives noble expression to the traditional Jewish responsibility for the 'safety and welfare of the stranger, the different and the weak, the widow and the orphan'.

For fifty years the community of the Oasis of Peace (Neve Shalom-Wahat al-Salam) has shone as a beacon for the peace that is possible between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. In despair at the 1967 war and the growing enmity it created between the two peoples, Bruno Hussar, a Jewish Dominican friar, had a dream of creating a place in which Jews and Palestinians could live alongside one another in equality and peace.

Although 20% of the citizens of Israel are Arab Palestinians it remains rare for mixed communities to be truly cooperative and interactive. Often a distinct separation exists which

serves to increase the suspicion and mistrust between the two peoples. Fr Bruno wanted a place where people of different nationalities and faiths would live, work in close association and build a localised peace of the kind they wanted to see in the whole country.

The pioneers began the difficult task of creating a community from nothing. They lacked resources, political support and, initially, access to basic amenities.

Armed only with only with a faith in their vision, they created what has today flourished into a thriving community of equal numbers of Jewish and Palestinian Israeli citizens. Every day the residents prove that it is possible for these two peoples to live alongside one another in true peace and friendship.

The residents decided that they must create institutions which spread their message further into Israeli society. The community's unique Primary School and pioneering conflict resolution centre, the School for Peace, are now famous throughout Israel and the region. The Primary School provides a place where children learn alongside one another, in both Hebrew and Arabic, and discover that those who they have been told are the 'other' or the 'enemy' are not so and that they can all on the contrary become lifelong friends. The School for Peace has now trained over 70,000 Jews and Palestinians—many of whom now occupy leading positions in civil society—in how they can lessen inequality and bridge the divide between the two peoples. A third institution, the Pluralistic Spiritual Centre, focuses on interfaith projects. All have the goal of increasing understanding and cooperation between people of all faiths. Today, more than ever, the Oasis of Peace and the example it sets are vital for keeping the dream of peaceful co-existence between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs alive.

The proposer of this motion, who moved a similar one in 2004 calling for Unitarian solidarity with Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers, will convey messages of goodwill from all three peacemakers. The motion calls on this General Assembly to reciprocate with messages of goodwill and solidarity with them and encourages fellow Unitarians to donate to the Bruno Hussar Interfaith Peace Appeal, set up by Golders Green Unitarians to give practical support to the peacemaking mission and witness of the Oasis of Peace, and to respond generously to humanitarian charitable appeals for the victims of war, conflict and injustice wherever they are found.

Motion 3 FROM CARDIFF UNITARIANS

Fossil Fuels

The climate crisis has been a concern for Unitarians for some time as demonstrated in General Assembly Resolutions in 2001, 2007, and 2015. "Respect for creation" is part of our Object, and a core commitment of our faith tradition. Albert Schweitzer's ethic of "reverence for life" calls on us to do all we can to protect human and non-human life whenever possible.

But human and non-human life is severely threatened by the climate crisis. The year 2019 was the second hottest year on record, and 2010-2019 was the hottest decade ever recorded¹. The climate crisis is not in the future, it is right now. Already thousands of people around the world are dying, or losing their homes through extreme weather events

¹ <https://www.noaa.gov/news/2019-was-2nd-hottest-year-on-record-for-earth-say-noaa-nasa>

and failing harvests. The human suffering is real, it is happening today, and it is getting worse. The link between human activity releasing carbon into the atmosphere and these increases in average temperature is well-established through a clear scientific consensus. We know what's happening. We know why it's happening. We know what must be done to stop it.

There is now a groundswell of voices all around the world demanding we do what must be done. This is being led by children striking for their own futures. Everyone is now paying lip service to the need for climate action. But the great obstacle to this is, and always has been, the fossil fuel industry. The largest five stock market listed oil and gas companies spend around £150m a year lobbying to delay, control or block policies to tackle climate change². Though they often talk about their investment in green technologies they are still spending billions on exploring new oil and gas sources, and their actual capital expenditure on low-carbon technologies is only about 3%. To prevent the worst of the climate crisis and be compliant with the Paris Climate Agreement the oil and gas reserves must be kept in the ground. But these companies' business plans are based on extracting and burning them.

The divestment movement is about recognising that in the light of this it is no longer ethical to invest money in the fossil fuel industry, which shows little or no sign of attempting to change its behaviour to respond to the risks of climate change. It is about recognising that one of the most effective means we have to bring about change in the world is our money, and how we invest it.

The divestment movement is growing. Currently around 1100 institutions with more than £9 trillion of assets under management have made commitments to divest from fossil fuels³. This includes many universities, local councils, pension funds, and religious group including the World Council of Churches, the Methodist Church, the Quakers, and the United Reformed Church.

On issues like same sex marriage Unitarians were ahead of the curve, but on this one we are well behind the social justice commitments of other groups. The General Assembly periodically passes a resolution of concern on climate change, but without requiring we apply our principles to our own finances. Perhaps this is because many of us feel we don't understand the financial world. We all have different levels of expertise and knowledge, and different congregations might have varying levels of understanding about investment and ethical investment. But it is important for us to realise that one of the most powerful tools to bring about change we have as an organisation is our investments. "Where your treasure is, your heart is," as Jesus said.

We are also rightly concerned about being responsible stewards of our assets. That's quite right. However there is a purely financial argument for fossil fuel divestment. There is a real risk that the "carbon bubble" will burst and companies will rapidly lose their value when we move to a low-carbon economy. This was the warning given last year by Mark Carney, the outgoing Governor of the Bank of England.⁴

² "Top oil firms spending millions lobbying to block climate change policies, says report" Guardian, 22nd March 2019 (<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/mar/22/top-oil-firms-spending-millions-lobbying-to-block-climate-change-policies-says-report>)

³ Information from Operation Noah

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/dec/30/firms-must-justify-investment-in-fossil-fuels-warns-mark-carney>

We recognise that many of our investments are held in managed funds. In such circumstances it is possible to request a conversation with your fund managers and ask if they are able to supply a “fossil-free” fund. The demand for such funds is growing. It should be possible to either be supplied with a fossil-free fund or seek out other fund managers who are able to supply such a product for their customers. Many “ethical investment funds” are now becoming “fossil free”. And so this process is becoming easier. We have found that in our experience managed “ethical funds” give just as good returns as “non-ethical” ones. It is possible to do this ethically and responsibly and rapidly.

The climate crisis is urgent, and so there is a need to do this as rapidly as possible. We consider 2025 to be the very latest date at which this should be done. It should be quite possible to do this in two or three years, but we have worded the motion to give the General Assembly some flexibility. We would be delighted if the General Assembly could do this more rapidly, and we would hope that a report would be given at each Annual Meetings describing progress.

We would like to make it clear that Cardiff Unitarians / Undodiaid Caerdydd are not proposing this motion on the basis that we've got it all sorted ourselves, or that we are experts. We are on the path to divestment but we're not there yet. Indeed, it is partly because of our feeling of needing more support and guidance from the denomination that we are proposing this motion. We need to all learn together how to do this and support each other.

Although we recognise that each congregation and fund is independent we hope that we will all be inspired to work through the process of divestment.

Motion 4 FROM STOCKTON UNITARIANS

Junior Weekend

We are raising this motion with much reluctance and sadness. Stockton Unitarians have a high regard for our Unitarian Youth Officer, Gavin Howell. We do not wish this to appear to be in any way critical of the great work that Gavin has been doing with Young Unitarians since his appointment, far from it.

Our motion arises from a sudden change in Unitarian Youth provision which came to our attention almost by accident in mid-January when we heard that the Junior Weekend, planned for March 2020, has been cancelled. Inquiries confirmed that this was indeed the case, even though the March and October Junior Weekends are clearly listed in the 2020 Nightingale Centre Brochure. Frequent attendees have not been informed of the cancellation and it has caused much disappointment to youngsters who had been looking forward to it. It transpired that **ALL** Junior Weekends have been cancelled into the future, despite the fact that the following statement still appears on the Youth Programme page of the GA website:

“JUNIORS FOR 7-11 YR OLDS

Junior weekend is filled with fun and friends.

Participants explore different themes through craft activities, outdoor trips, playing games and having a giggle together.

We love to see new faces and those who have been before. To attend the weekend, Juniors need to be accompanied by an adult from their area, though all the activities are led by experienced leaders.

Junior Weekends happen twice a year meeting in March and October. The event runs from 18:00 Friday to 14:00 on the Sunday, meeting at the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow.

Junior Weekend generally consists of the following:

- Craft activities
- Games
- Outdoor fun
- Chapel
- The 'Trough'
- Music and songs"

The first official indication of changes in the Youth Programme came as recently as 13th February in the *Uni-news* report of the EC meeting on January 20th. This referred to “*an exciting and inspiring presentation on the future of the GA’s youth work*” but gave little detail beyond confirming the end of Junior Weekends and indicating that future provision for under-12s will come via *Unifest* events. *Unifest* is an excellent event in its own right, but many people with experience of both events feel that they are quite different and that *Unifest* is **not** an acceptable replacement for Junior Weekends.

Junior Weekends have been the bedrock of the Unitarian Youth Programme for more than 50 years. As well as providing a valuable experience for young Unitarians, these weekends build strong bonds of friendship and commitment between them which feed into the Inters and Senior weekends. Many have gone on to become active adult Unitarians. We recognise that nothing is 'forever', that new strategies for growth are coming, and that resources are limited. However, we contend that abandoning something with such a successful track record requires thorough communication and consultation with interested parties and the Movement at large, together with a detailed exploration of the rationale behind the proposed change.

Accordingly, our motion:

1. Regrets the abrupt cancellation of Junior Weekends without consultation or communication.
2. Calls upon the Executive Committee to reinstate the Junior Weekend programme pending thorough communication and consultation with churches, districts, regular participants and other interested parties about any changes proposed and the rationale for them.

Stockton Unitarians