

**Report for Carole O'Toole of feedback from the 'Green Group'
at the Sunday Session, Newman Assembly at Hinsley Hall, 10/11 Oct 2015.
From Patricia Egerton, Cleveland Circle.**

On the morning of Sunday 11th October, we were given five questions to consider – which I did not manage to write down exactly, but I think the gist seemed to be:

Q1. What three most important changes would you propose for the Newman Association (NA) to fulfil its mission?

Q2. Should the NA seek to fulfil its mission chiefly through (a) its Circles (with most funding being channelled through to the circles); or (b) its central Council (with the Council managing most funds for the purposes of major events, conferences, etc); or (c) a combination of these.

Q3. How can the NA, as an independent Catholic lay organisation, work with the Bishops to achieve the ends of the Church as envisaged by the founders of the NA?

Q4. Should Council support the cancellation of 'Associate Membership', while the NA remains a Catholic organisation with good relations with the hierarchy?

Q5. Should the Application Form be redesigned? If so will someone volunteer to do this? Should the profile of the NA on the Web be improved, perhaps by employing a suitably skilled person?

Report

With the above questions in mind, the Green Group began their discussions. However we started by taking a step 'back to basics', and reminding ourselves that *much has changed* since the foundation of the NA in 1942. Society itself has changed, in particular in relation to the role of women and to the way that families are, and how they operate, today compared with 70+ years ago. People are not 'joiners' now, as maybe they used to be, and there is much less likelihood of 'family progression' – with children following in the interests and commitments of their parents. This is true in Church matters as well as in the wider society.

We took the *mission of the NA* within the Church to be that of supporting the development of an informed, educated laity – that is, providing the opportunities and environment where people can safely explore their faith and learn more at their own level among like-minded folk. (Paradoxically, where local churches and parishes have strong adult formation programmes and opportunities, it is unlikely that Newman Circles will flourish).

We believe that *the life of the NA is in its Circles*: people only meet the NA at local level; it is only by being attracted by talks at Newman Circles that people are attracted to join the NA. The NA is (or should be) a bottom-up organisation. We agreed we had wanted this weekend to provide a forum for exchanging good practice between Circles as a way of strengthening and developing the NA. So we spoke about specific aspects of our local Circles' programmes and practices, and wished we might have been able to explore these matters more widely with other delegates. Among other things, we mentioned:

- *the possible advantages of changing the location of Circle talks around to different parishes;
- *topics for talks should be accessible to 'ordinary' parishioners;
- *should prayer be an explicit part of a Circle meeting?;
- *the involvement of a parish/parish priest can sometimes be unreliable;

- *it can be a good idea not to tie a Newman programme to the academic year (so, use “Spring Programme” rather than “Spring Term Programme”)
- *we should where possible form better relationships with student chaplaincies;
- *maybe afternoon talks might be practical and popular if many members of a Circle are retired?
- *could contacts be made with the organisations which represent RE teachers, since many Newman Circle talks could well be seen as ‘continuing professional development’ for them?
- *since the number of students studying Theology at A level is large and growing, do any Circles make special contacts with their local Sixth Form Colleges to attract students to attend appropriate talks?

[re Q2 our answer was (a)] *Unanimously*, the Green group felt that the NA should seek to *fulfil its role through the Circles*, with the majority of funds channelled through the Circles. Obviously we need a central Council, for governance, legal issues, liaison, cross-fertilisation, helping to seed new circles, organising national conferences, but we don’t want Council to appear so top-heavy, and for those on Council to appear so burdened.

[re Q5] We agreed that *IT development* on behalf of the NA is essential (even if this generation of oldies does not use it, the next generation – those now in their 40s and 50s – will). But this is best done ‘in house’, as by bring in an outside consultant we might waste money and not achieve results that are acceptable and ‘in the spirit’ of the NA.

We agreed unanimously that *even if the NA is ‘resource rich’*, it is not appropriate to spend NA money to fund Alpha courses (basic evangelisation) or Café courses or similar programmes of basic catechesis. For the NA, these are ‘not our bag’. We had a vigorous debate, but no agreement, about the use of NA money to fund research projects in the future. We would like to see more solidarity between Circles, where some may be well-off and others find themselves cash-strapped. A majority of the group (2 dissensions) felt it was probably inappropriate for the NA to pay liaison fees to the NBCW and to Andante.

[re Q3] Several times over the weekend it had been asked how the NA should better ‘support the bishops’. All the People of God have their roles: the bishops’ role is for leadership, for teaching and for pastoral care; the laity have their own distinct role, working in the wider world and society. Obviously, as lay people (and as members of the NA) we do not undermine the bishops, but hopefully *we work collaboratively with them* for the Kingdom of God. Ideally, we support the bishops and the bishops support us.

[re Q1] Three changes we would propose for consideration:

- (i) Agreeing with the mood of the Assembly, we hope that the status of ‘Associate Member’ *within the NA can be cancelled, while the NA remains a Catholic-led organisation.* [see Q4]
- (ii) *Regional groupings* of Circles should be encouraged.
- (iii) As there is very little incentive for visitors attracted to Circle talks to become members of the NA, we propose that for a period of 1 or 2 years our resource-rich bank balance should be used to fund a *subscription holiday for new members*. Thus they could taste the full benefits of membership, and also perhaps be encouraged to join Circle committees, before paying any subs. *In addition* we propose that our central resources be explicitly available to those who would occur hardship in paying NA subs, and to widow(er)s who should be charged at half the ‘married rate’.