

Newman Association Strategic Plan for Growth 2017-20



The Next 75 Years

Introduction

In common with other Catholic organisations, recent years have witnessed both a reduction in the existing membership of the Newman Association (a nett 50 loss in 2015), together with an increasing difficulty in attracting new recruits into the organisation. It was, therefore, decided that steps should be taken to try and understand the background to these trends and, more importantly, to identify ways of combating them. As a result, in October 2015, a conference was held in Leeds to discuss one topic: Is the Newman Association worth saving? The unanimous outcome of those who attended was that the Association is worth saving. This poses a subsequent question: how can survival be ensured? In order to do this, the Association needs to identify a strategy to grow itself, so as to maintain and carry out its founding principles. Put another way and to quote one Council member: the challenge for the Association is to avoid “sleep walking into oblivion”

Following Leeds, four discussion groups have been set up with the aim of seeing how best this challenge might be met, covering membership, development, finance and communication. Volunteers were requested from local circles and the national Council to consider these themes, with a view to bringing together a coherent plan that would address current concerns and bring about a robust continuance of the Association into the future.

The purpose of the development group has been interpreted as taking on the task of proposing ways to ensure the continued existence and, most importantly, the growth of the Association through attracting new members. It is with this in mind that this strategic plan has been drawn up.

In preparing this document, it needs to be emphasised that it is not being carried out just for the survival of the Association itself but, more importantly, so as to adhere to the Association’s main object, as stated in its Constitution:

To further the mission to the world of the Christian religion with particular reference to the Roman Catholic Church and in the light of the life and work of the Venerable John Henry Newman, by promoting greater understanding of the Christian faith and the application of its principles to the contemporary world.

What is the Position of the Association Today?

Background

The Newman Association is a national organisation whose members meet regularly in local Circles across England, Scotland and Wales, although not represented in all dioceses, in order to discuss and develop their understanding of the Christian faith. Most members (currently approx. 750, including some 100 overseas/unattached to Circles, with an average age profile of 64) are (Roman) Catholic, but baptised Christians of other traditions are warmly welcome as Associate Members (currently approx. 30). In 2010, it was estimated that there were some 4.7m Catholics in Great Britain, of whom probably 20% are regular church-goers. The figure for regular attendance at Church of England services is somewhat similar, both being less than 1m.

The Association was founded in 1942, with a formal constitution registered in 1947. The original aim was to answer the needs of Catholic graduates, but changing circumstances have radically altered this emphasis. The Association takes its name from Cardinal John Henry Newman, who saw the need for an educated laity "...not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it. I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity...". (*The Present Position of Catholics in England*, 1851)

As well as local Circle meetings, the Association organises national conferences and events, and produces a publication, *The Newman*, three times a year. Every two years or so, a party of members goes on a "pilgrimage", which combines spiritual, cultural and social dimensions. This has included following St. Paul's journeys through Asia Minor, Greece and Italy, travelling to Santiago de Compostela and journeying to Damascus. The twelfth such pilgrimage in September 2016 will be to the Palazzola near Rome.

The Association does not seek to be a "Church within a Church" – the only qualification for membership is being a baptised Christian. The Association's talks are open to all, members and guests, and it seeks to co-operate with national and local Church organisations, and to promote ecumenical relations and partnerships. It is hoped that by promoting a reasoned expression of the Christian faith and stimulating 'action for change', an important contribution to the Church can be made.

The Association is a member of the National Council of Lay Associations and the National Board of Catholic Women and is represented on the Catholic Union – all advisory bodies to the Catholic Bishops' Conference – as well as being affiliated to CAFOD. On the wider front, the Association is a member of *Pax Romana*, the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs, which is recognised by the Vatican and as a non-Governmental organisation at the United Nations, and Andante, an alliance of European women's organisations which is a member of the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations, a body recognised as an institution of the Council of Europe. The Association also maintains strong links with universities and their research, in particular, the Centre for Catholic Studies in Durham and the Mary Beaufort Institute in Cambridge.

The Association is a company limited by guarantee, not having a share capital, and is also a registered charity. It is governed by a nationally elected Council and its twenty-four local Circles are run by elected Committees. It derives most of its regular income from annual membership fees which are paid over centrally whereby fixed amounts are then passed back to the Circles to run their local affairs. Apart from legacies and donations made to the Association, revenue can also be raised by Circles through their local talks or other fundraising activities. With a turnover of some £20k ((£18k income, £2k interest), the Association's draft financial position as of February 2016 reflects an asset base of some £132.5k, mostly in cash. However, this represents a reduction on £11.2k over the

previous year (£3.6k for the Leeds conference) which followed a deficit of £6.7k a year earlier with a similar turnover. Recent years have also seen an outflow of £30k+, including various grants/bursaries; over a similar period, reserves have been boosted by £70k+ received in legacies.

Purpose and Role of the Association in 2016

Has this changed over the years? Its original defining feature at formation was for an organisation to embrace and support the education of the laity – Christian, religious, spiritual, theological. Does the Association need to be radically changed or just “spruced up”? What, if anything, is unique or different today about the Association (which might include expressing its values, culture etc), so as to encourage new recruits to join? Put another way, what makes the Association special?

In considering this, the Association faces serious external challenges, amongst which can be identified: an ageing profile, an inability to recruit new members, a more secular society etc. Two other issues arise. Internally, is there an inherent tension between the centre and the Circles that needs addressing? Are there underdeveloped opportunities to explore/exploit?

Having reviewed the main objective of the Association, its essence can still be distilled into the strapline of its letter-heading: *promoting open discussion and greater understanding in today's Church* which, at least in part, should contribute to the goal of having an educated laity. In other words, there is no change in the founding aims of the organisation. They are valid today, just as they were seven decades ago. So, it seems there is no need to re-invent the Association's objectives. However, Circles may need to adopt additional or somewhat different approaches as to how they market themselves. This might involve some sort of rebranding in the sense of restating the Association's uniqueness and how it differs from other similar bodies, after having carried out an environmental scan of the sector in which the Association operates. The outcome of such an exercise has identified the following:

- The inspiration of the Newman Association comes uniquely from Bl. John Henry Newman, an English churchman and theologian, who is now recognised as, in some senses, a 'father' of Vatican II. Because of his background, Newman understood how Christians approach Church matters in these islands. He also had an understanding of education, wanting to promote it in both British and Irish contexts.
- Are there any other national organisations in the Church in the UK with the objective of the Newman Association? In other words, does the Association have direct competition in carrying out its objectives? In this regard, it appears to be unique by being a national, lay association, funded and managed by its members, not sponsored by any religious order/body, in addition to carrying out the aims of its patron.
- Among other lay associations in the Church, the Association is distinct, although not unique, in that it is open equally - in all its aspects - to both women and men.
- As a recognised lay organisation in the Church, the Association is noteworthy in the welcome it offers to members of other denominations, or none, who wish to explore ideas in a Christian context.
- The Circles of the Association are not parish based; they are multi-parish groups. This gives them a strength, since they draw members from a wide area, with support/sponsorship, if required, of clergy from different parishes. No single parish priest, therefore, can determine the activities of a Circle, although the involvement in/promotion of the Association by the clergy would be beneficial in them providing support.
- As the number of priests diminishes, so the responsibilities of active priests multiply. Attending a parish Mass may not be a guarantee of a good homily. As a result, the opportunity to attend a Newman talk can provide a “vital” part of growing in the faith.
- As the Circles are linked through the oversight of the Council, so their activities have a seal of approval, recognised nationally. The Circles all share in 'the Brand' of the Newman Association.

- On the negative side, probably a hang-over from when the Association was originally formed by young graduates, there is a notion that members have to be an 'intellectual' to join. This misconception needs to be extinguished.

Having identified these qualities, this, in turn, raises the question: are there aspects of the operation of the Association that need changing in terms of marketing the Association? In this, it would also be useful to establish how many circles have real trouble in attracting numbers. In the meantime, at least three areas of the *status quo* need to be considered: target audience, methods of delivery/communication and the role of a national structure.

Target Audience

It has been suggested that the way the Association presents itself is not appealing, particularly to younger people. Several questions arise. Is it realistic for an organisation with a current average age of 64 to be able to attract the young (under 25)? Should it even try to, if this means adopting some of the more recent methods of delivering its message e.g. the ever-changing array of social media? If so, that would involve a specific focus on developing/maintaining new resources which is likely to mean the employment of someone on a part/full-time basis to manage this, with a likely cost of some £15-30k p.a. Is this affordable/feasible? The group between 25 and 40 represents people who probably have childcare and similar duties, and may not be able to participate. Does this imply a prime focus on the age range from, say, 40 upwards?

Methods of Marketing/Promotion/Advertising

Whilst it is recognised that communication is the responsibility of another group, part of a development plan involves determining the way of communicating the *raison d'être* of an organisation, both internally and externally. In terms of adult formation, which today could include lectures, open learning, books, booklets, website, debate, it is strongly held that the substance of our activities do not have to change but that the methods of delivering our message, i.e. marketing/promotion/advertising, do have to change, for the Association to survive. In which case, how should the Association/Circles communicate with its target market in the future?

Role of Nationally Elected Council

First and foremost, it is essential to recognise that the life of the Association takes place in the Circles. There are many advantages in having a national body, elected from members, which is responsible for things such as finance, structure, governance, policy, organising national events etc. The management of the website and the Newman magazine would seem to be part of this responsibility. However, as with other organisations structured similarly, tensions can arise because of this type of relationship, highlighted by the ongoing discussions regarding revenue retention at the centre and the method of "refunding" lump sums to Circles.

Where Does the Association Want to be in 2020?

In essence, the specific objectives concerning the future positioning of the Association are relatively few. They need to be prioritised and, dependent on available resources, possibly spread over a timescale of, say, three years. However, first a wider aspirational objective should be formulated to embrace/summarise individual objectives. One suggestion could be: To continue to provide an effective forum for better understanding between Christians by retaining and expanding the Association's membership, as well as increasing attendance for non-members. This follows on from the over-arching aim: To continue to promote open discussion and greater understanding in today's Church, so as to achieve an informed and well-educated laity

1 Targets

Membership expansion can be achieved in different areas.

Specific Age Groups: This is a fundamental consideration in terms of resource focus and expected outcomes. Several options have been identified: u/25, 25-40, 40+, 50+.

The first category is likely to be more mobile, as it embraces secondary and tertiary education - young people likely to be less static. The cost of accessing this group will probably be more expensive and, therefore, less cost beneficial than the other groups. This does not mean, however, that they should be abandoned.

The second category comprises largely young families who may not have either the time or inclination to join, with other issues being their priority.

The probable best return for a renewed focus is likely to come from the other two categories and opinion as to which might be the better is divided. However, if the lines of communication/marketing are the same for both, there is no reason why they cannot be attempted together; in fact, the third category already includes the fourth.

More Circles: Looking at a map of Britain, there are large areas where there are no Circles e.g. East Anglia, South West England. A strategy should be devised to focus on establishing a wider Newman representation across the country. Similarly, an attempt should be made to establish Circles in or attached to universities, another underdeveloped section of the landscape. More Circles should bring in more members, important for income generation. However, increased attendance with non-members would also go towards fulfilling the Association's main object, as stated in its Constitution and referred to above.

Effective market research should be undertaken to aid in the targeting of new members.

2 Be innovative within Circles

It is agreed that the recruitment of new members will largely be the result of local Circle activity. The sharing of best practice/successes and the creation of a resource pack will assist in this. Members should be encouraged to suggest ways to bring new life into the Associations activities, so as to try to increase the influence of its members in the wider Church. Similarly, members should be invited to make proposals for practical ways in which to encourage increase in membership numbers - after all, it was they who were attracted to the organisation - so that more people can have the opportunity of learning and growing in their faith.

3 Improve communications

This is another key area for success. Again, this will mainly be driven locally and assisted by sharing best practice.

4 Ensure adequate funding/resources, both locally and nationally

The values of an organisation are often reflected in the way expenditure is incurred. The financing of the Association needs to ensure it is capable of sustaining future activity, both current and any new initiatives taken to recruit more members. Current reserves are relatively robust but recent years have seen an ongoing decline. Furthermore, this favourable position is largely the result of legacies/donations and not membership fees. If this trend continues, reserves will soon be dissipated. It seems reasonable, therefore, to maintain a neutral income/expenditure balance going

forward, but with the opportunity to make one-off investments for developmental purposes where necessary and agreed.

5 Streamline central structure/administration

Nearly every national organisation needs a central function to support its activities. Where possible, ways/methods should be sought to minimise central costs which, ideally, should be covered by membership fees and not supported by reserves.

6 Collaborate with other organisations/groups with similar aims

The Association is not the only Church body to be suffering from a drop in membership. (The Catenians, to name one, are possibly in a more difficult position where some of their local Circles have an average age profile of 69-70.) Collaboration should be seen, therefore, as an opportunity to increase membership and increase awareness of the Association.

How Will the Association Achieve our Objectives for 2020?

The “how” is the most important part of a development plan. Its foundation lies in the aims and objectives to which all action plans need to refer back to. Everyone needs to understand what they are, agree/commit to carry them out and understand the steps/milestones/resources involved. Strategy identifies action plans which incorporate the activity, the actions/targets, communication and how the actions are measured/evaluated, as well as a statement of priority and implementation procedures, where necessary. Objectives need to be the subject of a cost/benefit analysis which will help determine priority and feasibility. Not all objectives will be relevant to all Circles. Decisions about the suitability/appropriateness of specific initiatives will be made locally or nationally, as appropriate.

Objective 1. Targets

1. Sponsor talks/essay competitions/debates/public speaking opportunities for Sixth Forms, both to raise the profile of Association but, equally, to build contacts with teachers (especially RE teachers) and parents who could advise on the suitability of the various opportunities. This could be approached on both a national and local level. This should bring increased awareness of the Association in both areas. More modern/media savvy avenues could be considered, such as blogs to replace essays.

2. Create contact with Catholic groups at all universities/colleges. The recent example of engagement with York University students is one possible way forward whereby CathSoc has been offered £300 to enable them to invite speakers on the present controversies/debates within the Church and the world. Greater use of Catholic university chaplaincies should be made.

3. Access 25-40 year olds by running a 'family day' with a crèche

4. For 40+

Some of these initiatives may be subject to data protection and, therefore, unsuitable.

(a) Develop/continue with direct marketing to maintained databases

(b) Enlist the support of local clergy

(c) Develop focused plan for local pulpit presentations to congregations

(d) Develop an advertising programme for Circle activity. This might include producing cards/fliers containing the year's talks for distribution after pulpit presentations and local talks or to be placed on church/school/library notice boards, even fridge doors!

(e) Ensure coverage in church newsletters

(f) Utilise parish records for mailshots

(g) Identify the reasons why/how recent new members joined

5. More Circles. As indicated in the previous section, a determined strategy to achieve this should be drawn up. This clearly needs to be a national initiative, led by Council.

6. Market Research. Establish why attendance is not converted into membership. It has been suggested that a non-member can attend meetings and purchase the Newman Journal at a much cheaper cost overall than membership. This raises the question as to whether there is any obvious value for money in becoming a member. Similarly, identify those Circles having difficulty in attracting numbers; an initial focus on these will be easier than starting from scratch within the known areas of the Newman desert.

Objective 2. Be innovative within Circles

1. Run high-profile lectures in every diocese. This may be particularly beneficial in parts of the country not currently covered by Circles. The present arrangement of London and Manchester lectures, although possibly the result of legacies, limits the opportunity to increase awareness. National lectures could be rotated to give a better geographical spread.

2. Write/publish booklets and online materials to support study groups on Christian topics

3. Run parish discussion groups/forum meetings/workshops

4. Incorporate into the website topics of interest to current/potential members

5. Sponsor serious post-graduate research into adult formation in the post-Vatican II Church

6. Implement widespread policy of sharing good practice and utilise Circle/national successes for future successes
7. Lobby for a national Newman Association Sunday, co-ordinated with the bishops/hierarchy for the supply of ideas to improve the Association's relevance. Whilst this might appear unrealistic, increased awareness might be achieved through local Masses being offered for the intentions of the Association.
8. To introduce and/or increase a greater focus on ecumenism/ecumenical issues in Circle activities with the aim of widening the appeal of talks to non-Catholics, as well as derive a better understanding of other Christian denominations.
9. Carry out a 75-year relaunch in 2017. The importance of this initiative cannot be underestimated, both nationally and locally. This opportunity should not be missed.
10. Avoid tension between the Centre and Circles. A review of this relationship should be undertaken to ensure an effective balance. This should include a review of the structure and governance of the Association. See Objective 5.
11. Utilise diocesan newspapers/websites, university distribution lists, adult education distribution lists and the local press to increase awareness; in addition, produce reports of talks for publication in diocesan newspapers etc., possibly writing the actual copy for publication.
12. Hold talks/events in different venues, so as to encourage different groups of people to be able to attend, and subsequently be encouraged to become members.
13. Consider different event times. Retired people are more free in the daytime. Therefore, with the present demographic, some Circles might hold events on a weekday morning or afternoon. Similarly, to benefit working people, there might be advantages in having events at the weekend.
14. Produce a well-researched resource pack, based on good practice, for both existing and potentially new Circles. It has been noted that currently there are no brochures left for use in the recruitment of new members, nor are there plans for a reprint. This seems to be an area that needs addressing.

Objective 3. Improve communications

This aspect is the subject of another group. However, several suggestions to achieve this appear under Objective 2. It is also felt that improved communication should be directed to many areas, amongst which are: internal, external, within Circles, between Circles, to Council, from Council, in parishes.

Objective 4. Ensure adequate funding/resources, both locally and nationally

Adopt a national budget for Year 1, agreed by Council and available to Circles, together with an aspirational business plan (similar to the budget but probably less defined) for the remainder of the fixed time period involved, but updated annually with a new budget.

Decide on resources/governance/structure needed to achieve organisational/financial objectives. Carry out a review of current operational costs to establish benefits, such as subscription to *Andante* and the National Board for Catholic Women. This is not to suggest we should not have a relationship with these organisations; however, this may be achievable without subscription.

The Finance group has requested input as whether, in terms of achieving the aims of the Association, reserves should be used to cover annual deficits. It is felt that this is not a financial principle that should be adopted. Reserves are not there just to shore up shortcomings. An annual budget should be set which is income/expenditure neutral. The role of Council is to monitor expenditure against budget to maintain a balance. Aside from legacy requirements, reserves are not there to be diminished *per se*. However, on a case by case basis, Circles needing exceptional expenditure in order to achieve the aims of the Association and growth in membership/recruitment/attendance, should be able to make application for projects to be funded from reserves. Any grants would then be subject to evaluation in terms of the effectiveness of the particular project.

Objective 5. Streamline central structure/administration

Carry out a review of all central costs and structure, including the website and Newman magazine, in order to evaluate their cost-effectiveness.

It would appear that an organisation with only 24 Circles does not need a Council with its current size. The Constitution allows for the offices of president, secretary, treasurer, communication, immediate past president, senior vice-president, two vice-presidents and up to twelve more Council members. Should this be reviewed, both in terms of cost and operation? Is a skills audit carried out in appointing Council members? Does the Association have a governance document, separate from the Constitution? Does this need reviewing?

Objective 6. Collaborate with other organisations/groups with similar aims

In addition to CathSoc, create a list of those bodies, both locally and nationally, seeking to bring about an educated laity, such as Living Theology, the Durham CCS, the Leicester Theological Society, Diocesan Adult Formation Teams.

1. Develop partnerships with like-minded/complementary/sympathetic organisations
2. Utilise other local organisations to publicise events

Summary/Next Steps

As stated at the beginning of this section, once the development plan is agreed and/or amended by Council and the Association and, most importantly, ownership of it has been taken by all involved, a specific and detailed action plan needs to be drawn up accordingly to implement all individual elements. This will identify the various activities relevant to each objective, setting out the actions/targets necessary to achieve its aim, together with its method of communication where relevant and, most importantly, how the actions/targets are to be measured/evaluated. A decision from Council is sought as to whether the Development group or Council should cost, prioritise and implement the various objectives.