

13. Annual Report to the Methodist Conference of the Board of Directors of Westminster College Oxford Trust Ltd 2014

1. Introduction

Westminster College Oxford Trust Ltd is the body whose Board is appointed by the Conference to oversee the continuing relationship between the Methodist Church and Oxford Brookes University, following the merger between Westminster College Oxford and Oxford Brookes approved by the Conference in 1999. It is the managing trustee of the property leased to the university under that agreement.

The Board has continued to meet each term to scrutinise the operation of the merger agreements and to discharge its defined duties, and it offers below its annual report to the Conference.

2. University academic developments

Professor Anne-Marie Kilday, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, within which all Westminster-related activity takes place, has offered to the board full and helpful reports on these areas. The National Student Survey secured a 90 per cent satisfaction rate in 17 out of 19 subject areas – the best ever performance by the Faculty. The Research Excellence Framework exercise has been completed with an excellent quality of returns. Efforts continue to make the Methodist Archive more user-friendly and accessible across the university.

3. School of Education

In view of changes to government education policy, and the increasing focus on school-based initial teacher education, the board has initiated an annual report to the company from the Head of the School of Education, so that developments can be carefully monitored.

Dr Mary Wild made her first report in March, outlining the key areas of her responsibility and defining the work of her senior team. In order to respond adequately in a rapidly changing professional environment, Dr Wild holds a fortnightly senior management meeting to plan new developments. Planning is made difficult by the reduction in government-funded student numbers for teacher training, particularly in the secondary phase; in response the School has developed a matrix of different courses which enables it to respond to the needs of other Initial Teacher Education providers, including schools and FE colleges. The board was impressed by the resilience and flexibility of the School of Education, as well as its array of innovative plans for community engagement and project-based work in schools, some delivered in partnership with charities.

4. Theology and Religious Studies

Whilst the Faculty has generally recruited well at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, there have been increasing problems with under-recruitment to Religion and Theology single and combined honours undergraduate courses. Professor Kilday alerted the board members to the fact that the various factors which had been at work over a number of years had led to a situation which was now unsustainable, despite various attempts to reverse the trend. These factors have included, as to mature (usually part-time) students: the withdrawal of government funding from students with a previous undergraduate degree, and latterly the substantial increase in fee levels particularly for part-time courses (which has led to reduced distance learning recruitment across the sector); the withdrawal of ministerial training courses, initially by the Methodist Church and subsequently by Church of England dioceses as they move to the common validation process. Recruitment of full-time first degree students has been affected by other factors: changes to the A level Philosophy course which have lessened its value as a good introduction to theological study; the university's decision several years ago to reduce the range

of combined degrees on offer; direct 'competition' from leading theology departments apparently accepting students with grades comparable to those required by Oxford Brookes (grades which in the university's judgement are the minimum necessary to ensure the quality of courses offered and the ability of students to benefit from them).

Professor Kilday and the Head of the Department of Philosophy, Theology and Religion, Dr Martin Groves, outlined the range of options now being considered, and the implications were fully explored at a meeting with the board. The board has acknowledged with regret that there will be no further recruitment to the Religion and Theology undergraduate degrees, although the current students – including those studying part-time by distance learning for a number of years – will of course continue to be taught. The Philosophy of Religion strand within the current Philosophy undergraduate degree course will continue to be offered. Existing staff with theological expertise will continue to be available to offer postgraduate research supervision. There is a commitment to continuing active engagement in Theology. The department will continue to explore opportunities for postgraduate theological activity, together with cross-disciplinary possibilities and partnership with other institutions.

The Board has taken the view that this is a departure from the current expectations in the Agreed Statement of Intent between the Trust and the University, and will take steps to record this in appropriate terms.

5. **Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History**

Work has been undertaken with the Director of the Centre for Methodism and Church History on the strategy, vision and purposes of the Centre. Current activity and that envisaged by the latest Agreed Statement of Intent have led to the formulation of a strategy, which has been discussed and approved by the company during the year.

A full valuation of the Westminster College art collection has been conducted by Bonhams, their report being received in July 2013.

Board members have engaged with those within the Methodist Church charged with taking forward the *Fruitful Field* project in relation to the Centre for Methodism and Church History - specifically with regard to the scholarship, research and innovation aspect of the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network; continuing cooperation with those developing the Network has been offered.

In the course of the year Professor Gibson and Dr Peter Forsaith have contributed to many conferences and events, and published and supervised research work in the area of Methodism and Church History. The Centre continued its support (in conjunction with Wesley Memorial Church, Oxford and Lincoln College, Oxford) for the Annual Wesley Day Lecture which in 2013 was delivered by Professor Andrew Thorpe of Exeter University on *More Methodist than Marx? Methodism and the British Labour movement 1890-1939*. The seminars each semester on *History of art and religion* have continued, and joint seminars with the Manchester Wesley Research Centre were held. Four monographs on Methodist subjects are being published in 2013-14 as part of Ashgate's Methodist Studies series, for which Professor Gibson is General Editor. Three visiting Fellows were hosted at the Centre in 2013, one of whom was working on John Wesley's Medieval History.

The Methodist Collection of Modern Christian Art has been exhibited (in part) at Piano Nobile Gallery, London; Monnow Valley; Peterborough Minster; Oxford Cathedral (Oxford Institute); Salisbury Cathedral; Manchester; Reading; and Swanwick (Bath and Bristol Diocesan Retreat).

6. **Chaplain**

In the current year there are more resident students on the Harcourt Hill Campus, and the Chaplain is continuing to learn increasingly effective ways of linking in with the new accommodation halls. The main chaplaincy roles are to offer pastoral and practical support to all students and staff who live, work and study at the Harcourt Hill Campus, including the Westminster Sports Centre, and to offer a regular pattern of worship and opportunities for fellowship to any who wish to attend. He also acts as nominal secretary for the Westminster Society which sometimes holds reunion events at the campus. There is a daily pattern of Morning Prayer in the Westminster Chapel (led by a Roman Catholic colleague on Friday mornings), and the Chaplain hosts activities on Sunday evenings. In addition, regular Bible Study and Fellowship evenings are offered. Among the occasional services this year has been the mid-morning Remembrance Service in the chapel on 11 November, which attracted over 150 people. The chapel has been made available for musical performances and celebratory exhibitions of student work. Dr Bates takes a full part in the ecumenical activities of the university, and ministers to Methodist students from across the university.

The Chaplain teaches some theology undergraduate courses - including distance learning modules and residential courses. Within the School of Education he lectures on children's writing development, and the teaching of handwriting and he provides workshops (often on grammar) to the Primary PGCE English programme.

He continues to offer leadership of worship at the Cowley Road and Lime Walk Methodist churches in the Oxford Circuit, and to act as Director of Studies for the ministerial probationers within the Northampton District, serving also as a member of the District Probationers' Committee.

Mrs Ann Leck, a director of the company, offers pastoral support to the Chaplain and acts as one point of contact between Dr Bates and the Board.

7. **Estates**

Members of the Conference of 2013 will recall that a full report was brought upon possible developments, arising from the university's evolving Estates Strategy, and the appropriate response to it by the Methodist Church. The consequent discussion resulted in the Conference's resolution of consent, as required under the Declaration of Trust, to the grant of a new lease of 99 years (or an extension of the current lease) subject to stated conditions, if this were to be sought by the university, with the details of any such lease requiring the approval of the Methodist Council. The board was directed to bring a report on any further progress to this Conference (and subsequent Conferences). The university's Governing Body expressed gratitude for the Conference's willingness to engage so constructively with these developments.

The university is continuing to explore very carefully the possible options open to it, and no final decisions have yet been made. The board will continue to work collaboratively with both the university and the Methodist Church on these matters, bringing fuller consideration of the options open to the Trust Company if the university seeks to withdraw from the campus.

Meanwhile, the routine work goes on. Progress has been made, in consultation with the university, upon clarifying and putting into due legal form the normal procedures for approving new buildings and alterations. Progress has been made to resolve issues with neighbouring properties as to encroachment and drainage, again with advice from legal advisers and in consultation with the university.

8. Board

Under the company's Articles of Association, the Board consists of: the *Ex-Officio* Director, being the General Secretary of the Methodist Church or his nominee; between three and seven Foundation Directors; any Co-opted Directors appointed by the Board [none at present]. Currently, Mrs Ann Leck is the *Ex Officio* Director, and there are four Foundation Directors: Mrs Susan Howdle (Chair), Mrs Susan Barratt (Deputy Chair), Dr Clifford Marshall and the Revd Dr Martin Wellings.

The Articles provide that Foundation Directors are to be nominated by the Board, approved by the Methodist Council and appointed by the Conference. They serve for three years and are eligible for re-appointment under the provisions of the Articles for a further three years. After that period, a retiring Director is not eligible for re-appointment without a period of at least one year of non-service, but "such period of non-service shall not be required if the Conference so resolves".

The Board is requesting one re-appointment this year. Mrs Susan Howdle's term of appointment comes to an end on 31 August 2014 and, as she will at that date have served two three-year terms, her re-appointment would require the Conference's resolution to waive the requirement for a 'gap' year. The Board is proposing such a resolution. Whilst it is obviously important to have some regular turnover and renewal of such bodies, the respect in which Mrs Howdle is held at Oxford Brookes University, together with her wisdom, depth of experience and expertise in dealing with strategic and technical issues and her knowledge of Church protocol and proper procedure, are a vital part of the Board's life as it deals with a period of change at Oxford Brookes and the university's estates plans for the future. A further three year extension would mean that the end of her term of office on the Board would coincide with the end of her term as a Governor at Oxford Brookes University. The Board has sought and obtained the Methodist Council's approval to this proposal.

***RESOLUTIONS

13/1. The Conference received the Report.

13/2. The Conference resolved, pursuant to Article 37 of the Articles of Association of Westminster College Oxford Trust Ltd, that a period of one year's non-service upon the Board shall not be required of Mrs Susan Howdle, and accordingly, upon the nomination of the Board and with the approval of the Methodist Council, appointed her as a Director of Westminster College Oxford Trust Ltd, for a further three year period from 1 September 2014.