

Questions to Special General Meeting – 28th March 2019



In response to the invitation for questions ahead of the meeting, three questioners have raised queries – responses are offered below. Questions 1-5 were made through formal submission, question 6 seeks to capture questions asked through informal conversation, but has been included as it may be of interest to others.

1. Can we change the culture of general meetings from those that seek to achieve decisions in the most streamlined way to places of safety where people can question and explore and respond to what God is doing in the meeting?

ANSWER: General Meetings represent a very small part of the time that church delegates are invited to spend together at our regular Forum meetings. It has always been our practice, as with most other Baptist Associations and charities of this nature, to only use formal meetings (General Meetings) for statutory business such as the adoption of annual accounts, appointment of officers etc. The format of these meetings is prescribed by statutory regulation, so they are not used for the purposes of general deliberation and strategy setting. To do so would significantly limit the scope of people to “question and explore and respond to what God is doing” as this would then need to happen within prescribed structures, against formal resolutions etc. For this reason, we have always sought to do this in the less formal setting of the rest of the gathering, or by facilitated consultations and roadshows, translating this into formal policy and resolutions where this is required.

It is difficult to offer any further direct response to this question as it is unclear how any resolution on “change of culture” could be included and determined within the scope of a Special General Meeting. However, it may be helpful to offer an account of the current culture of our meetings. Churches are welcome to challenge and comment on this, but it has to be recognised that the context of a SGM is not the appropriate place for this.

Since its inception, NWBA has always sought to involve churches in strategy and priority setting and holding officers and staff to account. Forum meetings held at least annually have sought to do this through a variety of means including focus groups, prayer huddles, structured consultations, “market place” discussions, seminars, graffiti walls, “post-its”, straw-polls, facilitated plenary groups, roadshows to name but a few. Meetings are planned and arranged in response to the specific issues and concerns under consideration and tend not to follow any single format. We welcome any observations and suggestions where these approaches are deemed to have been unacceptable or inappropriate.

It is important to note, in considering all of these questions, that these have been submitted in respect of a Special General Meeting. This is an unusual gathering (the first since NWBA was formed in 2001) and therefore represents the most structured and formal of gatherings that we hold. The reason this meeting has been called is precisely because the kind of open discussion and discernment called for by the questioner has led to these constitutional changes. It is because our AGM in September overwhelmingly agreed the outcomes of this process, that we have moved to a formal and structured meeting as the context in which to adopt and implement a new constitution. This includes the appointment of a new trustee body.

It is therefore not typical of the culture of NWBA, but is the format required when dealing with matters of statutory regulation, such as the adoption of a charity constitution which is regulated by the Charity Commission.

2. Can we discuss how the churches speak into the trustees and hold them accountable?

See below

3. Can we discuss how the staff and trustees work together with each other and how communication will flow?

ANSWER (to questions 2 and 3): This is a Special General meeting, convened to discuss the pre-advertised items of business and as such does not include the scope to discuss additional matters. That does not mean that these are not important concerns, but they relate to the operation of the constitution not the constitution itself.

The specific issue of how churches, staff and trustees interact was raised in questions submitted to the September AGM and the response given has been reproduced in full at the end of this document. In short, this question has largely already been asked; a response has been given; the person who asked that question and the meeting as a whole indicated that they were satisfied with that response. The trustees have gone forward on that basis.

We can only repeat what has already been said. The SGM is called to simply adopt a constitution and elect a trustee body, so as to formalise and put into place a set of arrangements that churches have already supported and agreed to. This will in no way change any of the operational realities that were outlined in response to the questions raised at the September meeting.

4. Can we delay the election of the 4 new trustees because the process hasn't given churches the chance to participate in nominating potential trustees? Also the nomination process was implemented before we agreed to use it.

ANSWER: The process invites churches to make nominations for the vacant trustee positions and all churches have been contacted in this respect. It is incorrect therefore to say that the process does not give churches the chance to participate.

However, if the meeting is unhappy with the proposed process, the opportunity already exists to reject it. This provision is made by resolution (ii) in the meeting papers. Equally, participants could accept the election procedure but choose not to elect some or all of the new nominees through the ballot process. The simple answer therefore is "yes" - election of the new trustee can be delayed either by rejecting the proposed procedure or by some or all nominees not receiving sufficient votes in the ballot. This would not require any change to the existing meeting arrangements.

The questioner observes that the nomination process has been put into place before being adopted. This is clearly a provisional arrangement. In the event that the election procedure is rejected, the current nominations will clearly need to be withdrawn and no new elections can take place. The meeting can still adopt the proposed constitution and require the existing trustees to continue to serve until the scheduled AGM in September.

5. Can we have a level playing field where 3 proposers are needed for a trustee nomination either 3 churches or 2 churches and the NWBA?

ANSWER: The meeting is at liberty to reject the proposed election procedure (see above) and ask the trustees to offer an alternative to a future meeting. It is unclear what is meant by "level playing field" in that the current proposals give all churches equal access to the nomination process.

“The NWBA” is a community of churches and not an end in itself – the procedure is designed whereby Association officers and staff facilitate rather than initiating the nomination process. The proposed procedure allows any church to nominate one of its members to serve as a trustee, either by direct recommendation to the existing trustees or with the support of four other churches. This offers a simple, direct process to all churches, but also prevents names being put to the ballot without the support of either existing office holders or a reasonable number of churches. It also ensures that trustees cannot operate any form of “veto” in that they can be over-ruled by 5 (around 3.5%) member churches.

The meeting may also wish to note that the trustee body comprises members of considerably more than five churches. In reality therefore, a nomination made by a church and supported by the trustees will involve the consent of representatives of considerably more local churches than one made by churches alone.

This question seems to imply that NWBA is somehow in competition with churches to make nominations. This is simply not the case, but the trustees do have opportunity to be proactive in the event that nominations are not forthcoming from churches. If participants are unhappy with the process by which any individual is nominated, they can express this by not voting for them – in the event that insufficient votes are received, an individual will not be appointed as a trustee.

6. Why has more notice not been given of this meeting?

ANSWER: Changes to a constitution have required prior approval of the Charity Commission, so these could not have been adopted until this was obtained. This was explained and outlined to the Annual General Meeting in September 2018, and the meeting gave its approval for a Special General Meeting in “Spring 2019” once arrangements with the Charity Commission were completed. The meeting asked “if possible” that four weeks’ notice be given as a minimum.

Through conversation with the Charity Commission, we have reached the stage where a formal meeting is required to finalise this. The date of 28th March was notified to churches in December 2018, and the formal resolutions were posted online on 23rd February 2019. While these timescales are shorter than usual, the meeting in September was made aware of this likelihood and gave its approval to move forward on this basis. Notice of our AGM (usually in Autumn) is normally given in the December of the previous year through our “Key Dates” notification.

While the precise wording of resolutions etc. has only been made available at 4 weeks’ notice (as requested by the AGM), the spirit and intent of these was outlined and agreed at our AGM in September 2018. The meeting has always been arranged on the basis that it was simply formalising the wording of constitutional changes, the nature and purpose of which had already been agreed.

Appendix

Response to question submitted prior to the September 2018 AGM which was received and approved by the meeting.

Q2. Could I request that there be clear lines of how churches speak into the council and who represents them if the network minister system is being replaced.

While Network ministers have been a significant presence on NWBA council, they have served alongside a diverse group of people, and have never been envisaged or operated as the sole point of contact for churches. We hope that churches will continue to engage with the work of NWBA through the relationship and interaction that comes from working with NWBA team members, attending organised events and through effective relationship with ALL members of council. We would also have to say that while the Network Minister arrangement has worked well for some areas, this has not been the case for others. The proposed changes do not preclude a representative appointment, but nor do they require it – we believe this better serves the diverse reality of NWBA. One key point of interaction was envisaged as being the spring roadshows, which rely on local networks to arrange them – in reality, many have not. By moving this responsibility into the role of a staff member, NWBA can be more prescriptive in making sure these happen, while at the same time retaining the important “local connection” that these events require. Our expectation is that a larger staff team, more geographically spread will make it easier for churches to engage. Formal accountability will remain the same, through an annual report presented at an Annual General Meeting. Shifting the AGM back to a longer, weekend event, is one expression of how we are seeking to make that event more able to properly engage and hold people to account.