

## Christians on the Internet

### Report from the Chair, for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> December 2015

Before we move into the details of my report, can I start by expressing my thanks to Tony for making us so welcome for our visit to the North in this rather lovely and leafy part of Leeds. It always feels – for me at least – as a kind of homecoming when I travel to anywhere in Yorkshire. To use the oft-repeated adage, you can take a man out of Yorkshire, but you can't take Yorkshire out of the man!

Even though we have heard the apologies for absence that have been sent to our Secretary, can I also mention one or two that we are missing particularly – especially Peter, our Treasurer, who is laid low with a heavy cough, and Jeff & Lynne Lowndes who are each fighting their own health battles at the moment. They have each been welcome figures at many AGMs, and I know that their presence will be sorely missed by us all.

But now to the serious business of my report. It would be so tempting to run through some highlights of our year, mentioning the wide range of topics discussed and the readiness of members to share one another's burdens and to offer help and advice so willingly. But, whilst that is all very true, that would be a disservice to COIN and to the members here today.

Firstly, it would be a disservice because it would not do justice to the efforts undertaken by Chris to keep us online, the emails flowing and the website up to date. From my own observations I can say that there is a lot of activity going on under the surface to keep everything running smoothly – the easiest comparison that I can make is to the stately progress of a magnificent swan swimming along a river – and it's only when you look underneath the water that you see the powerful and determined paddling that is going on unseen! Chris was one of the earliest members of COIN and managed our technical needs from the very earliest days, and within the last few years has taken over the complete management of the webserver and mailing list server, delivering a modern and easily maintained website and mailing lists that manage to keep the real emails flowing but hold back the flood of spam (or at least that which might come via the COIN servers) from our inboxes. However, Chris is in the process of hanging up his keyboard and putting his servers out to grass, and will not be able to provide a service to COIN for much longer. And nor should we either expect him to, or place him under any pressure to continue.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that COIN is changing. The numbers of messages are falling year on year, as Chris's technical report will no doubt mention. Not many years ago I was only able to cope with the traffic on the "General" list by subscribing to the digest and so receiving one or two summary messages a day – but now some days pass when we see no traffic on General, which was always our busiest list. The membership is undoubtedly ageing – we do not see many new members each year. I think of myself as one of the younger members, and I turn 50 this summer! We are no longer at the cutting edge of technology – I was recently chatting to two clergy friends who had not heard of COIN (although both are very internet-savvy), and although they were pleased to hear of what COIN has done, could not conceive of life without the internet. In some ways for them it would be like considering clergy life without a car – possible, but hindered in many ways, and certainly would now be seen as a bit quirky. I was struck by the comments of one of our longstanding members at last year's AGM that she enjoyed and valued COIN, but if it was founded today then she wouldn't join. So in many ways we have fulfilled our aim: "To promote the use of the Internet and other electronic communication media by Churches, Christian Organisations and individuals." as most if not all churches and Christian Organisations now have a website and use email and many have branched out into more varied forms of electronic communication.

However, as we have approached this year's AGM the news that we will have to change was met with some howls of protest from certain quarters. It is clear that for some members COIN is still a very precious part of their Christian life and experience – perhaps a safe place where they can know

others and be known. For some, this may be because they are physically remote, living in a rural area with few contacts with people “on the same wavelength”, or because they lead busy lives and have many demands on their time due to the demands of ministry and few outlets where they can ask for advice and support from others who may have trod the same road before them. For each of these groups and more, I acknowledge that COIN provides something very necessary “above and beyond” its original calling. For this reason, any changes that we make must be considered carefully and the consequences for all sections of the COIN community examined.

I had hoped that the “working group” that was mooted at the last AGM would have formulated its survey of the membership and reported back by now. It might have pursued its charge to examine all options and leave nothing off the table – but for various reasons, that hasn't happened. We shouldn't engage in recriminations about it, but instead look at where we are now and what we can do next. As several members have noted, we cannot take decisions to amend the constitution now or close down COIN without further ado at this meeting. But we can set the course, and when that course is set, it will be incumbent on the Executive to move in the direction that has been indicated by the AGM.

So, you may ask, what are the options? I can point out some – but there are wiser heads than mine at this meeting, and I'm sure others have ideas that are just as worthy of consideration. So do speak up – express your ideas and your hopes and fears. You will find us all willing to listen.

1. It may be that we really want a continuation of the same sort of service we enjoy now, with a website and mailing lists. That is possible, as our mailing lists use a package called “mailman” which a number of hosting companies offer, and the website could be transferred to a new web hosting package with little disruption. It would be a commercial undertaking, but the key would be to make sure that we have confidence in the supplier and that they were willing to work with us and provide some of the level of personal hand-holding and support that we have enjoyed from Woodchip Computers.
2. Or possibly we might want to move the entire operation onto “social media” with a platform such as Facebook, or Google+ or any of a number of other platforms. For some people this is already where they do the “social” part of their internet usage, and they might welcome finding COIN in the same place. But we might find that only a proportion of our members want to use these, or feel comfortable with them.
3. Others might feel that we should host everything on a “bulletin board” type of forum, either hosted by ourselves or a specialised provider.
4. And finally, we may find that there are those who feel that COIN really has had its day and should be wound up. That may not be what some would want to hear, but we would be negligent if we were to ignore them.

I cannot tell what the membership will decide – all that I know is that to carry on as we are and hope for the best is not an option. Nor can the decision be just that of one or two keen and technically-able members. The last thing we want to do is to pursue a solution – however elegant and technically pleasing – that effectively excludes some of our members.

Can I add my own personal thanks to the Exec who have walked with me through this year and given me much wise advice. I couldn't have faced the year without you! In particular, I owe a great debt of thanks to Chris & Jill Wright – for family reasons I have been out of action for much of the early months of 2016, and they have been a great source of comfort, encouragement and practical help – often providing a bed for the night for me and at times for my whole family as we came up to Yorkshire regularly during the last weeks of my mother's life and to deal with her funeral and clearing her house. Thank you both so, so much.