

FCOCA Chairman's Statement 2021

I would like to start by thanking my fellow Executive Committee members for their support and guidance during my first year as Chairman.

Given that we are still affected by the COVID pandemic and, for the second year, the Federation has not met in the physical sense again this year, for either the annual general meeting or Festival, one might be forgiven for expecting a "nothing to report" statement from me, but that is, very much, not the case. Much has been achieved in the last 12 months and good groundwork has been laid towards the three primary long-term goals of survive, expand and diversify.

I made a commitment on taking the Chair to speak with every one of our member Associations during my first year in office. I regret that it has not been possible to complete this commitment but I am very pleased to have spoken with over half of our members. Unfortunately, not everyone that I have invited to meet with me has responded and I think some of our members have organisational issues. Over the coming months I will keep on trying to reach those with whom I have not yet made contact.

The meetings I have had with member Associations have been very interesting and instructive but, above all, thoroughly enjoyable. It has been great to meet up with friends and acquaintances who I have not seen for some time and to meet new contacts. The discussions have been wide-ranging based around a set of questions related to the Association and how it operates, the challenges it faces and what the Federation can do to help. Some of the common themes have included keeping in touch with the membership, attracting new members, maintaining data, making it relevant to today's society, what sort of event to hold, working with other Associations.

An often repeated theme was communication both from Associations to their membership and from the Federation to the Associations. Once a Chorister magazine in its printed format is sadly missed though I am very grateful to Richard Belton (Leicester) who again made available printed copies of last year's on-line version. In May I introduced a new Chairman's Update which I intend to produce three times a year and, together with the news sheet sent by our Honorary Secretary means we will be communicating with our membership six times each year to keep them informed of what the Federation is doing.

I believe that the Federation must have a purpose and it is clearly stated in our constitution from its earliest versions that we exist, not only to bring former chorister associations in closer contact with one another, but also to support the maintenance of choral music in religious worship, wherever it can. I was very grateful to my Vice-Chairman, Arnold Wills for organising through Cathedral Music Trust a meeting with their recently appointed Choral Ambassador, Alexander Armstrong. We discussed how the Federation could support his campaign to promote the importance of choral music and the benefits it brings to those who are engaged in it. We discussed the plans we have, if only in their infancy, to bring the Federation into the 21st century, expand and diversify our reach and renew our brand. Alexander was very supportive of the concept of the Federation being known as Once a Chorister, which, in his words, says exactly what we're stand for.

In July I had a Zoom meeting with Royal School of Church Music Director, Hugh Morris and the RSCM's Executive Officer, Fiona Wright. As far as I am aware, there has been little, if any contact between our organisations in the past. Certainly, Hugh was not aware of any. As with our meetings with CMT, the purpose was to explore how the two organisation can work together to our mutual benefit. The RSCM represents and supports music in Christian

worship of thousands of churches, large and small across the UK and internationally. Many of the musicians they work with are themselves former choristers, who may not have contact with their former choir associations. We represent an audience that the RSCM would like to reach and we are able to promote RSCM events such as the International Chorister Day in September this year.

I am hoping to meet with the new Chairman of the Choir Schools Association in the near future and I am grateful to my fellow committee member, Stephen Milner (Salisbury) for making the introduction. Together with CMT and the RSCM, I believe that our four organisations, collectively, can become a very strong voice in support of Choral Music and make very positive steps towards ensuring that the very highest standards of choral music in worship are maintained.

Progress has been made in bringing the Federation into the 21st century. We have created a "development" team, which includes the Development Officer and Assistant Development Officer, the Membership Officer, Honorary Treasurer and myself. This sub-committee has met once, so far when the Development Officer, Arnold Wills, presented a strategy for the next three years, which will form the basis of discussions at future Executive Committee meetings. A revised and updated constitution will be presented at the AGM for approval along with a simplified guide to organising a Federation Festival. As mentioned above, we have made progress with updating our "brand" image to move away from the somewhat "old-fashioned" image we currently project. I presented some ideas to the Executive Committee, which I also included in my May Chairman's Update, based around using Once a Chorister as our "brand" name without completely losing our full title. If further progress along this route is approved at the AGM, the concepts will be given to a graphic artist to develop into finished artwork along with suggestions for designs for outbound communications such as newsletters, website, emails and letters so that a common style is adopted throughout our activities.

I am very pleased with what we have achieved in the last 12 months but there is still much to do and many challenges ahead, not least of which is how we maintain the data we hold on our affiliated members and other contacts. At present, various spreadsheets are maintained by Officers who need to communicate on behalf of the Federation. The Secretary,, the Treasurer and I maintain mailing lists, in a variety of formats for mailing purposes, both email and postal mail. None of us has access to the others lists and ensuring and maintaining consistency and currency is problematic. The data we hold is not complex but each relationship has more than one touch-point in either direction. We need to find a cost effective and sensible solution to this challenge and I hope that we will do so in the next 12 months.

Also, in the next 12 months I hope we will make further progress on reaching out to our membership and increasing our contact with them. I hope that Associations will invite the Federation to join them in their respective gatherings at that members of the Executive Committee will attend events wherever possible. I will also make every effort to meet with those Associations I have not yet had chance to talk with and encourage Associations to talk to one another and exchange ideas. Above everything, I hope that we will continue to work with other organisations supporting choral music in worship and to encourage everyone to celebrate choristership.

Nick Hodges
Chair, FCOCA