



## Chair's Update January 2025



Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Associations

As this is my first update of 2025 and we're still in January – just - I hope that, once again, you'll allow me to wish you a peaceful, prosperous but, above all, healthy New Year.

The Executive Committee met in November with just one item on the agenda - the future of the Federation. There was no lack of enthusiasm for the continuance of the organisation at the wonderful gathering and AGM held at Llandaff in September. However, by the time the Committee came to meet, very little had changed in respect of the challenges we are facing, which I have voiced in these updates over the past 3 years. I do not wish to recite these challenges in detail here but, suffice to say, with no new volunteers stepping forward to the Executive Committee, member Associations failing or not renewing their membership and falling attendance at Once a Chorister events, the Committee was right to fully focus its attention on where we go from here.

The Committee discussed a range of subjects related to maintaining a presence in the future, the principal ones being

- What sort of organisation should it be?
- How will it be managed?
- How will contact with the membership be maintained and
- How do we ensure the longer term existence of the Federation?

Though it was not possible to provide answers to all of the issues, the Committee did make significant progress in a number of areas. First and foremost, it was agreed without dispute that we have to do everything in our power to ensure that this organisation, which has existed for nearly 115 years, continues to do so in the future. We have to accept, however, that the world has changed and what the "old guard" holds dear may no longer be relevant to the present generation. The Federation was formed, largely by choral foundations which drew its choristers from a single school, usually boarding, where the choristers "lived" together for a significant period of their childhood. I suspect it was more about community than choral tradition. Now, cathedral choirs are just as likely to draw their front rows from a selection of local schools and they are "bused in" by their parents, whose commitment is just as great as the singers.

There seems to be a much reduced appetite for hosting and attending 3 day Festivals. We have no one offering to host one at present. As reported in my last update, Llandaff was hugely successful last year but attendance was a quarter of the numbers attending in past times. However, we do feel that to hold some sort of gathering, in person, is very desirable and that we should try and hold a "physical" AGM in as accessible venue as possible. We have some feelers out for the next 3 years and hope to be able to announce a venue for this year's AGM by Easter. If your Association is able to help, please let us know. All we are looking for is a venue in which hold the meeting. Anything else - Choral Evensong, refreshments etc. - will be a bonus.

The Committee also concluded that, for the time being, we should operate with a reduced presence. We hope to be able to maintain the website and we are exploring the options of how this might be done. We also hope to continue to publish the annual Once a Chorister magazine, in e-format. However, there will be fewer newsletters. As Alastair and I will be stepping down from our current roles as Honorary Secretary and Chair respectively, it was agreed that the committee member whose Association is facilitating the next AGM would become acting Chair. This still leaves in question who will fulfil the Secretary's role. The

reality is that the Executive Committee needs more members and, as they are drawn from the Associations, the very existence of the Federation is dependent on there being strong Associations, as I reported last year.

Whilst preparing this Update, I heard that Peterborough Cathedral had launched an appeal to raise £300,000 by the end of March to enable it to meet its financial commitments. The challenges facing Peterborough can be repeated elsewhere in the Church of England. Falling visitor numbers and collection plate receipts, fewer volunteers, increased energy and employment costs added to buildings that are hugely expensive to maintain, have all contributed to the crisis being faced in many places. In my October Update, I mentioned the suggestion from a delegate at the AGM that the strength of Associations benefits from the support of Music Departments and the Deans and Chapters of the cathedrals and the clergy of other places. We know that this happens in some places but it is not universal.

The Committee believes that the existence of an active and well supported former chorister Association brings benefits to the worship place and its community. Here is a cohort of people who have given of their time and talents and in return have benefitted from the experience, which, in many cases, has had a major impact on their future lives. This should be an audience with which the permanent staff at these places would want to remain in close contact and to nurture and retain as part of their community. I said at the AGM and repeated in the Update, that I intended to contact as many Directors' of Music and clergy as I could with the objective of encouraging them to do all they could to support their own Associations. Post the AGM it was decided to hold fire until we knew what our plans were for the future of the Federation. The Committee has now agreed that we should go forward with this exercise over the next few months and I would encourage all Associations to pass on to their Directors' of Music and clergy that we are intending to do so.

There are still many unanswered questions but the Committee is fully focused on survival rather than closure and we hope, at some time in the future. Can your Association offer to host a Festival, when we can all meet, break bread and have drink together or just provide a room where we can hold our AGM?

I could not possibly leave this Update without a mention of my chums at Warwick, who delivered a superb Midnight Mass on BBC1 television on Christmas Eve. Carolyn and I decided not to attend the service but to watch on television and we were thrilled by how well the choir sang, the quality of the ceremonial and the wonderful pictures conjured up by the BBC cameramen. The setting used was by Arthur Wills, *Missa Eliensis*, which I'm not sure is performed much outside



Ely, for whom it was composed during his time there as Director of Music, and Warwick, where he had been an Assistant Organist during the late 1940s. It is a lovely setting and deserves to be heard more often. Carolyn and I did attend the Christmas Day Family Eucharist, when they repeated the Wills as the setting and one really couldn't blame them for doing so. Over the previous weekend they had delivered two packed out Carol Services, in addition to the myriad of other carol events they were part of over the month of December. They had rehearsed all afternoon on Christmas Eve and done a complete run-through during the evening, before the live broadcast, which didn't finish until just before 1am. And yet, there they were, on Christmas morning, as fresh as daisies, full of enthusiasm and in very fine collective voice. I know I shouldn't be surprised; they have done it before as have so many of our choral giants up and down the country and I have had the pleasure of being part

of that tradition also, but it is easy to forget how much time, effort and skill is behind every performance and how much love and devotion it takes to maintain this extraordinary tradition. Huge thanks to all our choristers, everywhere, young and old, who bring the joy of music to our worship at Christmas and throughout the year.

If you haven't seen the broadcast, it can be found on BBC iPlayer by typing "Midnight Mass" into the Search box or using this link -

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0026flh/midnight-mass-2024-midnight-mass-from-st-marys-church-warwick>.

And finally, if you've not already seen it, the 2024 edition of Once a Chorister Magazine was published on our website in December. It can be found at [www.fcoca.org.uk](http://www.fcoca.org.uk) and clicking the link on the Home page. Once again, my sincere thanks and those of the Executive Committee go to Alastair Pollard for editing this issue, which will be his last.

**++STOP PRESS ++ STOP PRESS ++ STOP PRESS**

**Hold the date – we have just been offered a venue for our 2025 AGM on 5<sup>th</sup> October. Once we have confirmed details, we will send a further announcement.**

**Nick Hodges**  
**Chair**



**Email: [chairman@fcoca.org.uk](mailto:chairman@fcoca.org.uk)**

You are receiving this newsletter because either we have you on our database as the contact person for your Association or we have had some contact with you. I would like to continue to write to you but if you do not wish to receive further communications from me, please reply to the email to which this newsletter was appended with REMOVE in the subject line. Contributions to any discussions mentioned in the newsletter may be sent to me, Nick Hodges, at the email address shown: or to the Honorary Secretary at [secretary@fcoca.org.uk](mailto:secretary@fcoca.org.uk).