The PIONEER

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SNUi

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020 – History of the SNUi – Angela Foster CSNU

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Special thanks to Charles Coulston for his work in sub-editing these issues – also acknowledged to Minister David Hopkins and Leslie Price for their past work in sub-editing the issues

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HISTORY OF THE SNUi

The history of the SNUi was kindly sent to Pioneer by its Secretary, Angela Foster CSNU, which is in two parts as published below; Angela informs me:

She is a podiatrist, a mum of a daughter and son with two grandchildren. She has been married to Richard for nearly 40 years. Angela joined the SNUi in 2013, having developed a love for working with the spirit world in a couple of development groups in her own area in Cambridgeshire, England. The fact that all she needed to do within the SNUi family was to find a quiet spot in the house, study what the spirit world introduced her to and strengthen her connection within a safe environment was too attractive.

Since joining, Angela has been through the PAS scheme (2016) and was awarded the Arthur Conan Doyle Prize in 2017 and, in 2018, the CSNU in Speaking and Demonstrating. She is sitting her assessment this year for the DSNU in Speaking and Demonstrating and the DSNU (Advanced) on the history of the SNUi, the first eight years from which these articles have been taken.

Angela is keen to give back to the SNUi by giving feedback to the students coming through the PAS online through the SNUi and also acting as tutor for several of the SNU courses.

In 2018 she was invited to join the SNUi Committee as Secretary. This, Angela finds, is particularly rewarding, as she is keen to be involved in the decision-making process which helps to develop the future direction of the SNUi for the benefit of its members.

The Introduction of the SNUi to the SNU family

The SNU (The Spiritualists' National Union) has not been slow to recognise that church attendance is falling and not reaching a big enough audience worldwide. It had understood that there is another way of attracting members to Spiritualism and worshipping together. In particular, a large number of people living abroad cannot access and take part in Spiritualist activities and worship, although we know that many people in this country do not have access to a local Spiritualist church either. In 2008 there was a strong move to give Spiritualism an internet presence. In response to this need the SNUi, the Spiritualists' National Union International, was born.

This second wave of missionary work matched, in many ways, the early efforts of the Pioneers in the mid-to late 19th century and the impact on the numbers of those actively declaring themselves as Spiritualists has been no less dramatic. The use of the internet to continue this work for those unable, for whatever reason, to attend a local church is so appropriate in this day and age. It is more than due to one of the founding Pioneers of the SNUi, Violet Kipling FSNU, TSNU, who has already passed to spirit, and Minister Steven Upton.

Vi Kipling had, due to her experience with the use of the Internet as a teaching medium with another on-line organisation, felt convinced that Spiritualism could be taught through the SNU. Her sister, Minister Doris Smith, recalled that one hundred people attended the on-line courses by another on-line group she had connections with, and Vi felt passionately that the SNU could offer the same to its members in the same way. She decided to take her idea to the SNU National Executive Committee. She faced much opposition until she teamed up with Minister Steven Upton. Once on the NEC, he was able to work on this idea, with Vi coming on board immediately. 2008 saw the idea formally raised at the NEC as giving the SNU an on-line presence in the form of a Branch; it was to be called the SNUi. This was to provide a route to finding out about Spiritualism without commitment. An internet presence would also be the best publicity for future students and encourage new followers to adopt Spiritualism.

Vi had meanwhile, with her sister, also set up 'Rainbow's End', a charitable organisation which enabled those from all over the world to come together to learn about Spiritualism. She had also seen that a South African student who was computer-literate had travelled all that way to attend the AFC for a course. Her sister remembers that she felt the internet was the virtual place to extend teaching to all students wherever they lived in the world, not an easy task at the time when dial-up connection was noted for its unreliability.

Minister Steven Upton recalls that he was asked by the SNU to come back with proposals as to how this might be implemented. He had created and worked on the SNU and, later, the Arthur Findlay College websites. He said that the first version was unfit for purpose and so he was given the task to create the second-generation version. At this stage it was decided to bring in a professional website designer and to this end three companies were approached, with 'Moovin on up' (now Cozy Digital) given the contract with a budget of £2,000. Minister Upton drew up the specification and it was planned to go live on 1st January 2009; it eventually went live six days later with the first on-line platform, with those involved communicating by typing only.

On a more formal note, the SNUi was to be set up as a Branch within the SNU company structure. This would put it on a par with the Lyceum Union. This also meant that the SNUi Committee would be appointed by the SNU. The requirement to appoint the Committee ensured that its members were declared Spiritualists and therefore would run the Branch in accordance with declared SNU spiritual values. In order to be as attractive to as many as possible with an interest in Spiritualism there was a deliberate decision made that members did not have to be Spiritualists. It was decided to keep membership open to all, as the idea was to attract new members. People come to Spiritualism from all religious backgrounds, so there should be no pressure to become a

Spiritualist. That decision could be made on an informed basis, with membership only necessary once formal studying took place for CSNU qualifications and above.

Members of the SNUi at that time had to be over sixteen, though this was later changed to eighteen due to protection and Safeguarding issues for the under-eighteens. It was important in the early stages to decide exactly whom the SNUi should reach. There were not the resources to be multi-lingual in delivery. It was also considered important that the quality of tutors could be assessed by the Committee to ensure that all tutors had received formal training to teach within the SNU structure and guidelines.

It was absolutely appropriate to set up the SNUi at this time. The membership pool of Spiritualists belonging to the SNU was strong but there was an overriding need to connect with Spiritualists in other countries. However, the golden age of chatrooms was over owing to the introduction of Google's ranking and those directed to the various sites due to the search engines and its dominance in the internet marketplace. This adversely affected all on-line communities. SNUi was to see a steady but well-maintained rise in membership. Its resilience and the way it was set up would see it weather the storm. It also attracted UK members who chose to work and study on-line either solely or side by side with bricks-and-mortar practice.

Minister Steven Upton was appointed Chair for the first three years of the SNUi and granted unilateral power by the SNU to establish a strong framework. Membership reached one hundred in a matter of a few days, two to three hundred within the first month, reaching eight to nine hundred within a few months. However, the magic one thousand members was not reached until March 2016.

Each of the appointed Committee members had areas of responsibility, chairing, Vice-Chair, website and conference call issues, secretariat duties, programme, newsletter, liaison with the NEC and SNU, etc. This structure continues today.

Minister Upton remembers that the decision for member interaction was to be audio only and, initially, was made because most people using the internet could only access a dial-up connection and the broadband width was not appropriate to run visual meetings. In addition, using video was too expensive at this stage, taking up too much bandwidth. The use of jack plugs made connectivity complicated when it came to personal settings. Megameeting was not to be introduced for the first two years and even then did not provide a video option. Once available, only one tutor refused to use audio, instead wanting to stay in typing-only mode. This saw a temporary decline in the number of tutors available.

Minister Upton recalls that it was decided quite early that all classes would be interactive and none would be recorded. To record the classes would not guarantee a good live attendance. A student and teacher, he felt, helped feed a great energy and allowed students to ask questions in an interactive real-time manner. To bring in speakers and then expect them to interact with a handful of people if many more were 'time-shifting' could be demoralising for the tutor. However, if a need were expressed by members it was hoped that lectures could be repeated in different time zones but still as a live feed only, in order to encourage members to take part. This would create an interactive event

in order to ask questions. In addition, SNUi had no facility for storage of recorded events in those days.

To help members get as much as possible from the SNUi, National Representatives were appointed where a country had ten or more members. They would act as liaison and familiarise new members with how to use the meeting-rooms in their own language as well as act as a first line for any queries. They were appointed on the understanding that they would stay within the framework on the SNUi and not start their own national groups, which could have fragmented membership. A newsletter would enable communication with members. This would ensure that all representatives worked together under a single banner within the SNU family and ethos.

With regard to classes offered, it was hoped that by the end of three years there would be at least one open access class available daily to SNUi members.

Minister Steven Upton stood down at this point, owing to having other work to do. The administrative duties were initially carried out by the SNU Trust; this eventually passed on to head office. He had changed his role within the SNU National Executive Committee and was assigned to deal with the development of special projects; this included the setting up of SNU Pioneer Centres. He also continued in his position as Public Relations Officer. Sian Wilson DSNU took over the chair the following year. Her strength was to bring in work study groups for many of the SNU education courses and concentrate less on practical courses. Minister Steven Upton then came back on board as Chair in January 2013, as membership had declined. Ilona Mulock Houwer CSNU worked closely with him to create an integrated learning programme. He then handed over the helm to Ilona.

The tuition programme on offer at this time covered beginner, PAS, CSNU and the on-line versions for those taking assessments (designated by 'I' after the letters). Decisions had been made by the SNU to initiate, in the near future, on-line study groups leading to PAS, PASi, CSNU and CSNUi. The levels of award were slightly different between PAS and PASi and CSNU and CSNUi because there could be no assessment of deportment and platform presence. There could also be no assurance that students would not use notes inappropriately during their address or interview. Students could upgrade to PAS and CSNU by travelling to the UK at a later date and having a face-to-face assessment on one of the many days put aside by the Training & Awards Committee of the SNU, hosted by churches all over the UK. Minister Steven Upton was responsible for writing the criteria for the courses for tutors to follow.

Ilona Mulock Houwer

An updated website was introduced at this stage, too, with additional links on how to use the website for new members; this was presented with a very visual format. Once he became Vice-President of the SNU, Minister Upton remained a further year as Chair and was not reappointed. Ilona took over the chair in August 2014; he remained as Vice-Chair to assist as appropriate. The programme evolved further, with classes continuing to be added, along with special services. On January 24th 2017 an experimental demonstration was held with Minister Steven Upton. Live College links were used, as the College had some experience with this already.

Ilona remained as Chair despite ill-health until February 2017, when she handed the helm over to her Vice-Chair, Minister Arthur Plumpton. Her health was not to improve and she returned to spirit in April 2017.

The SNUi and what it can offer you

The SNUi has been in operation now for ten years, with an increasing and loyal membership year on year. Above all there is the desire to put spirituality first in our service to Spiritualism. It can also become the point of reference on matters of Spiritualism and spiritual philosophy over the internet.

So how does the SNUi operate today? The SNUi will, in many ways, resemble any bricks-and-mortar church. The programme includes Divine Services, demonstrations of mediumship and the sharing of Spiritualist philosophy, all very familiar to regular church visitors. You will find a varied and progressive teaching programme. This can take students through a formal training scheme in speaking, demonstrating and healing. The courses follow and support the Exponents Committee's formal programme from PAS through to CSNU. There are assessments, too, on-line through the 'I' PAS and CSNU schemes. This designation shows the different requirements for working via the internet. More information for this can be sought through Redwoods or the PAS/CSNU Co-ordinator on the SNUi. There are also discussion groups, development groups, practice groups in art and other subjects, meditation opportunities and invitations for invited speakers to speak on their specialist subject. We are now also encouraging committees to hold meetings on-line to reduce travelling. Some very special events from the Arthur Findlay College and the Barbanell Centre can be recorded and shown to members using the conference platform in their time zones. There has been a charity event on-line, which was very successful! Hopefully this year, the AGM will be broadcast. Technical difficulties prevented this last year, which was a great disappointment to many. In addition, as part of the community ethos many of our members help to give back to the great experience by taking on chairing duties and, once qualified, leading discussion groups and helping with the new students coming through.

There are increasing opportunities to hold activities in the mother tongue of overseas members and not just English, as Italian and German have been introduced recently. But even more changes are coming in the future. Initially, as has been stated, there was no voice, just real-time communication by typing. The speech was incorporated and, having recently started using the video function via Megameeting, our current conference call platform, the next move is being organised. There will be a move to using Zoom, which is a popular conference call provider and should improve dramatically the user experience. All this will support a full programme to support members in all the time zones.

To support all these activities there is a dedicated Committee, who work really hard to support our members. For example, there has been a great effort to update and increase Facebook presence, as well as Twitter and, of course, email. We want to hear from you; get the chat chatting!

The internet can be used as it currently is or it can expand to meet the increasing demands of its membership by not being slow to respond to new technology and the increasing savvy of members. Although many aspects of the bricks-and-mortar religion can be imported, many of the protocols are possibly irrelevant and inappropriate, as they can stifle the emerging pioneering vanguard of modern, 21st-century Spiritualists. This is vital in an age of high expectations in every area of life. The SNUi could become as much a shop window of Spiritualism as the bricks-and-mortar churches are currently,

especially to the younger generations, whose appetite for connecting in this way covers all aspects of modern life, including worship.

No organisation should stand still and the SNUi is no different; with over 1,300 members worldwide, it now serves the needs of members in forty-one countries. Four hundred are not 'from abroad' from the UK perspective but live in the UK. The SNUi has become a community, often the only contact with other Spiritualists. It has become more than just a learning environment. It has become so much more to so many. There are many reasons why people can't or won't attend: no church nearby, health issues, personal reasons.

One question which must be asked on a regular basis is, does the SNUi offer its membership what it wants or needs? It would be arrogant, to say the least, not to ask the membership how it wants to engage with the Branch. Two-way communication is even more important in this technological age. It was noticed that if we wanted more interaction with the membership we needed to open a dialogue. So in June 2017 a major questionnaire was put together by the author and dispatched to all members. This was to better understand current members' use of the internet to connect with other like-minded Spiritualists. It also asked for feedback so that future programmes could be designed to suit the needs of the members in terms of what was on offer and in the time zones most appropriate for members to participate. Replies were compiled, evaluated and recommendations put forward. Questions from members were followed up by National Representatives and offers of help acknowledged. It is hoped that this exercise will be repeated from time to time.

Many will not just examine the growth in membership but look to see the quality of the emerging mediums from the SNUi, as education was Vi Kipling's primary focus of intent and inspiration. On-line cold reading by the mediums is minimalised, as visible clues are not possible. There is the opportunity to work in small study groups, which has been shown to be the most successful model for students to complete required elements of courses and succeed in assessments. Yet the demands of using the on-line format demand a certain skill. It is not just a matter of understanding how the conference call system works. It has idiosyncrasies – it suffers from poor, intermittent internet connection, poor sound and its own unique room protocol. This should be dramatically improved once Zoom comes on board. It is nearer to the qualities demanded to do a telephone reading than that of a platform demonstration. Mediums have to use the voice instead of relying on body language and speak clearly, with good intonation and pausing techniques. Every bad habit is magnified and there are other distractions very specific to the internet apart from the ones where the medium is broadcasting from: the author, for example, was called away while chairing a service, as her pet cat was dying downstairs.

Of course the SNUi is not just made up of mediums. There are many who are starting on their journey of personal discovery, introduced by a friend or acquaintance who hold a similar belief. It is, as was intended, a safe place to discover and grow. Whether this is a short acquaintance or a lifelong friendship, each can take as much or as little as needed. We know that the best way for any community to be sustained is if people can find some way to contribute back. But even if this isn't possible they may well go on to 'pay forward' in their local community.

All this is understood; life continues in tandem, but spirit understands the very fragile way in which this structure works. It more closely resembles the world of spirit. We have no body, just our voice. We may never know what the people look like whom we read for, share their stories, speak from inspiration, which brings emotion and connection, comfort, communication and sometimes closure. Sharing our time and ability in equal

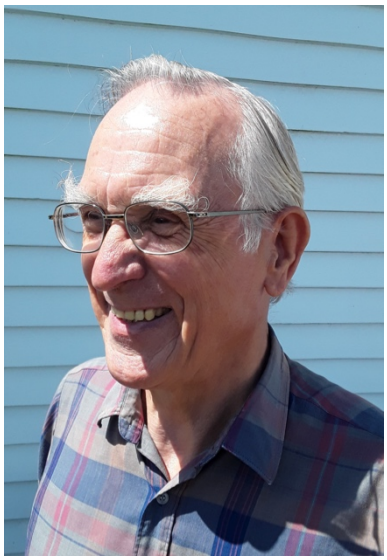
measure, we learn from each other; one minute we are tutor, the next student, one minute medium, the next recipient. The success of the SNUi has been shown to be unprecedented in the history of Spiritualism. Credible research provides the science as to why this has occurred; this will be examined in the third part. The current President of the SNU, Minister David Bruton, said in his address given to the 2017 AGM:

'While some may claim that social media is the scourge of the modern age, others will claim it is a powerful channel for expression'.

He also said:

'Through social media ideas are formed, opinions are shared and if we still claim to be the thinking person's religion is it not time for us to share our thinking on a larger platform?'

The platform used by the SNUi is another way of connecting with those engaging actively in a digital age through a virtual reality, no less powerful and no less influential.



Where does the SNUi go from here? What may the next ten years bring? Our current Chair, Minister Arthur Plumpton, is intent on having a programme which is accessible to all wherever they are in the world at appropriate times. He is keen that members leading groups and tutoring are appropriately qualified. A new website has better met the needs of its members. The SNUi Committee is forever mindful that the technology improves at a very fast rate both for the members using the latest computer systems and with conference call platforms. This will require constant monitoring. People's expectations are high these days in all areas of modern technology. The questionnaire has given the membership a real voice and that momentum should not be lost. Dialogue is important: it creates a healthy environment for the Committee to be both leader in what it puts on and receptive to what the members need. If this dialogue is not maintained, then we will lose members who, once they have their curiosity met, move on. Perhaps it is as simple that the process of living in the real world gets in the way and the internet can never replace life!

However, in support of the SNUi, as Minister Arthur Plumpton said in the newsletter in November 2011:

> 'We, the SNUi, have the ability to talk across time zones and seasons and around the world'.

Minister Steven Upton wrote in May 2013:

> 'My vision for the future of SNUi is that you, the membership, increasingly contribute and make it your local Spiritualist church or centre, a place where you can go to meet like-minded people to discuss matters spiritual and a learning centre of excellence. For as long as you have electricity and an internet connection you know that you are not alone. Almost every day, if you wish to, you can go on-line and join up with other like-minded people, attend

a class, listen to a demonstration or a lecture, but, most importantly, feel that you are part of something that circles the entire globe - the SNUi family.'

These may be mission statements by two of our Chairmen within the SNUi but this is what the members find in abundance when they join. My mission statement would be:

'As a SNUi member you need never be alone. We have our global Spiritualist friends and spirit supporting our intent.'

Angela Foster CSNU

SNUi

https://www.snui.org.uk/index.php

Monday, May 20th 2019 at 8pm (UK time)

Monday May 27th 2019 at 8pm (UK time)

Monday June 3th 2019 at 8pm (UK time)