

GOSPEL STANDARD BETHESDA FUND

Registered Charity 209376

Bethesda General Office
12(b) Roundwood Lane
Harpenden
AL5 3BZ

Monday 14 December 2021

Dear Subscriber,

[An Update on Bethesda: December 2021](#)

There is much that has happened within Bethesda and we would take this opportunity to update you on these matters. To help you find your way through this Update, we have summarised the subjects covered as follows:

1. The challenges that are facing Bethesda at the present time, to include:
 - a. maintaining Bethesda's ethos
 - b. the financial viability of the charity
 - c. providing appropriate accommodation and services for current and future beneficiaries
 - d. maintaining staffing levels in the Homes
2. An update regarding the closure of the Bethesda Studley Home
3. The possible future use of the Studley site
4. A progress update: moving Bethesda to an incorporated charity
5. An update on the Swavesey project

1) [The Challenges facing Bethesda](#)

In making the following comments/observations, we trust this is against the realisation that the Lord is sovereign, and all is subject to His will.

In recent years the trustees have identified the challenges facing Bethesda as:

- Maintaining the distinct identity and Christian ethos of Bethesda in an age of compromise and an increasing secular society
- Maintaining the financial viability of Bethesda to ensure levels of care and support are sufficient to meet the individual needs of residents together with ensuring Bethesda's physical resources are fit for purpose
- Responding to the changing needs of those in later life and seeking to provide accommodation and/or services that meet these needs, respect their independence and, where possible, allowing them to live near their place of worship.
- Recruiting staff (at all levels) who are in sympathy with the Christian ethos of Bethesda and lifestyle needs of our residents

1(a) Bethesda's Christian ethos

One of the impacts of COVID-19 has been the restrictions placed on the movement of those both coming into and going out from residential care homes. For the Bethesda Homes, this has meant that activities such as morning readings and services have been livestreamed. Whilst this has also been appreciated by those who listen externally to the broadcasts; this restriction has meant that the conversations (often on 'better things') between the residents and readers has not been possible. In addition, although it has been possible to allow visiting, this has been limited to the residents' nominated visitors. Consequently, this has precluded the conversations that used to take place when the visitor(s) 'dropped in' to see other residents whilst in the Homes. Sadly, the current arrangements have left a 'void' in the daily routine for the residents and staff.

Although the restrictions on movement are in place as part of the need to prevent and control the spread of infection, sadly the lack of Bible believing Christians coming into the Homes has inevitably had an effect on Bethesda's ethos. The trustees, General Manager and Home Managers are very aware of the situation and are conscious of the need to safely open up visiting whilst still seeking to safeguard the health and well-being of the residents and staff.

1(b) Maintaining the viability of Bethesda

The trustees took the decision, in the fear of the Lord, in 2020 to increase the residents' fees to a more sustainable level, which involved a significant one-off adjustment and now fees are adjusted annually in line with inflation. At the same time, the trustees were helped to successfully negotiate with each local authority for full funding i.e the reduced rates previously imposed by local authorities have all been negotiated to full rates. We would desire to acknowledge the Lord's help and answer to much prayer in these difficult negotiations.

The improved income has been complemented by rigorous cost control measures to include budgeting, financial accountability and monthly reporting on performance.

Essential investment has been made in the Homes to ensure the safety and well-being of the residents, yet the trustees are also conscious of the age of the Homes and the physical restrictions this brings in catering for the wide range of needs that our residents have. Mercifully, through the dedication of the staff, Bethesda continues to offer the care needed to meet the individual circumstances of each resident.

The increasing cost and funding of adult social care, and in particular the future of care provided in residential homes, has been acknowledged over recent years, by successive governments. Although attempts/proposals are being made to address the situation, there will still be sizeable costs associated with residential care. These will need to be met either through drawing on the assets of residents and/or public funding.

A key component in maintaining the viability of Bethesda is occupancy. The decline in the number of chapels, and consequently potential residents for Bethesda, over the last twenty years has impacted on the number of residents in the Homes.

As mentioned in the 2019 AGM "In June 1998 there were, in England, 135 chapels listed in the Gospel Standard; in June 2018, twenty years later, there were eighty-nine chapels (a decline of forty-six chapels). On April 1st, 2019, thirty-seven of the sixty total places across the Homes were occupied. This represents an occupation rate of 62% (compared to 80% on January 1st, 2018)"

Currently (December 2021) Bethesda's occupancy is eleven out of twenty-five places at Harpenden and twelve out of twenty-two places at Brighton, the overall occupancy rate across the two Homes is 49%.

The number of chapels listed in the *Gospel Standard Magazine* (June 2021) was 82 (a decline of seven chapels since 2018 and fifty-three since June 1998).

Sadly, COVID-19 has seen the polarisation of views within the Gospel Standard churches and congregations on the response to the pandemic; only the Lord knows what this might mean both now and for the future of Bethesda. Our prayer is that the Lord might heal the breaches.

The trustees have also reviewed the exceptional entry criteria, to provide a way for applications from those who may have been previously associated with Gospel Standard churches to be considered. Nominated trustees now meet with the individual to discuss their application and desire to come into Bethesda and affirm their agreement to the Gospel Standard Articles of Faith.

1(c) Providing appropriate accommodation and services for current and future beneficiaries

After appropriate research and consultation with our supporters, the trustees have previously shared their current thinking on the future care provision. This includes the provision of a purpose-built specialist home for those with high dependency care needs and the availability of linked accommodation.

At the Open Meetings held in November 2019, the trustees shared the concept of independent living accommodation (ILA). This would provide an environment to support those occupying this facility through to the end of life, thereby avoiding the need to move to a residential care home. Additionally, we seek to provide this accommodation nearer the individual's place of worship.

ILA is one being favoured by individuals in general and strongly encouraged by the government as the model for older person care, combined with, as needed a residential nursing/high dependency provision. Local Authorities have and are building ILA provisions and we have in recent weeks seen how they are now promoting these as an alternative to Residential Care (Care Homes) except in cases of extremity.

In the Lord's purposes, the trustees have been led to purchase a plot at Swavesey to build the first independent living accommodation facility: we report on this below (Item 5).

Another need/provision that has been identified in the recent dealings of the trustees is the provision of 'home visitors' to support and provide companionship to those who wish to remain near their place of worship and family. They may be living in their own accommodation or that supplied by the local authority. For some this has been compounded by the increased loneliness and the impact on their mental well-being that has been experienced as a result of COVID-19.

The Government recently published a White Paper "People at the Heart of Care: adult social care reform" identifying the future direction of adult social care. Many of the points made in the White Paper are those recognised by Bethesda. The White Paper provides more information on the proposed 'cap' on how much an individual in England will be required to pay towards their care costs. There is also an emphasis within the White Paper on independent supported living accommodation and the use of technology to facilitate independent and care at home.

We would be pleased to hear from anyone who has experience of 'supported living' to share, with the trustees, points that should be considered in any future development. Please feel free to let, in confidence, Adrian Topping (General Manager) know by contacting the General Office, telephoning 07498 223576 or emailing: adriantopping@gsbf.uk

The cry of the trustees is very much for the Lord to continue to direct and guide them in His purpose for Bethesda. The trustees are also conscious that the Bethesda Homes currently provided, are the dwelling places of the residents.

1 (d) Maintaining staffing levels in the Homes.

If the challenges facing Bethesda had to be 'ranked' then (i) sustaining appropriate levels of management and staff to care for the residents and (ii) respecting the Christian ethos of the Homes would be uppermost. In the wider context, staffing is probably the biggest challenge for the care home sector, and a number of providers (Local Authorities included) have recently been forced to close homes due to their inability to safely staff them, due to the lack of available staff.

Sadly, as mentioned previously, the decline in the numbers within the Gospel Standard congregations, together with career choices available, have impacted on staffing levels within Bethesda. Although, working in healthcare settings may be attractive; the skills, compassion and dedication needed in a care environment should not be underestimated and we are thankful for the dedication of our existing staff within the Homes. However, we would encourage those from Gospel Standard congregations and likeminded individuals, who respect Bethesda's ethos and have a desire to serve the Lord's elderly people to prayerfully consider serving the residents in Bethesda. (Acts 16:9). We seek to provide flexible employment terms to facilitate those only able to offer, for example one or two days per week.

COVID-19 has also had an impact on staffing within care homes nationally, as a result of the implementation of government guidance designed to protect those living and working in the residential care home sector. As some may be aware, the government put in place a legal requirement that those working in frontline roles within care homes needed to be double vaccinated by Thursday 11 November 2021 or their employment would cease as at that date. Sadly, there were those, who for conscience's sake, felt unable to comply with this requirement. This placed the Bethesda Trustees in a position where they had to comply with the law or face possible enforcement action and prosecution by the CQC and to incur potential personal liabilities. As trustees, we are obliged to fulfil our legal requirements in not damaging the reputation of the Charity in meeting its purpose and with saddened hearts (both management and trustees), the employment of three valued members of staff had to end on 11 November 2021. This matter, as can be imagined, has not been easy yet as trustees who seek to walk in the fear of the Lord we are subject to "the higher powers" Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 v 13.

The legal requirements regarding double vaccination will also apply to those coming into the Homes in a voluntary capacity such as readers, Home Support Group members and helpers. The requirements do not apply to designated visitors. More information on the current government guidelines regarding visiting care homes can be found on the [Bethesda website](#).

We would encourage anyone who feels led to assist the Bethesda care teams, in either of the Homes, to let, in confidence, Adrian Topping (General Manager) know by contacting the General Office, telephoning 07498 223576 or emailing: adriantopping@gsbf.uk

2) An update regarding the closure of the Bethesda Studley Home

Following the closure of the Studley Bethesda Home on Friday 29 October 2021 there have been a few questions raised which we will endeavour to clarify.

We have already given details (Bethesda Update - 8 October 2021 - available on the Bethesda website) on how the trustees felt led to come to this decision. There were a number of factors

surrounding the Home that raised questions regarding sustaining the provision at Studley. These factors included:

- For many years the Studley Home had not been financially viable and obviously this could not continue indefinitely.
- There were continual problems regarding recruiting - and retaining - suitable staff. Despite advertising locally, the response to recruit staff was almost negligible. We know (as mentioned above) that staffing issues for the care sector is, additionally, a national issue.
- The declining numbers in our group of churches has inevitably had an impact on the number of elderly persons who could potentially become Bethesda residents: for a number of years there had been no new applications for the Studley Bethesda.
- The Home Manager felt, following the unannounced CQC Focused Inspection in August 2021 that she could not continue in her current role beyond the end of October 2021.

These combined factors, together with the prospect of no Home Manager, brought the trustees, in the fear of the Lord, to make the decision - not taken lightly - to close the Home.

The Trustees, General Manager and Home Manager were very conscious of the decision taken, with the inevitable consequences surrounding the relocation of the seven residents, re-employing - where applicable - the existing staff and the issues with connected relatives, friends and representatives of the residents. We are thankful to report that all the residents successfully found suitable alternative local residential accommodation.

As you may be aware that the CQC having carried out, in August 2021, a Focused Inspection of the Studley Home, and whilst under the 'Caring' and 'Effective' headings we retained the 'Good' rating, we were reassigned to 'Requires Improvement' under 'Responsive' and 'Inadequate' under the 'Safe' and 'Well Led' sections. This led to an overall rating for the Home of 'Inadequate'.

The trustees and General Manager felt that the issues identified by the CQC were not insurmountable and could be remedied. However, as mentioned, the Home Manager relinquishing her role meant that it was not possible to sustain the Home and continue the provision at Studley. We responded and addressed many of the concerns that were raised by the CQC report, prior to its publication, and clarified some details which we felt were not 'evidence based'. We were unaware that this report would be made public on the same day of the 'Home closure'.

Regarding the Brighton and Harpenden Homes, the CQC has informed the General Manager that they have not found evidence that there is a need to carry out an inspection or reassess the rating at this stage for either of the Homes. This, however, is not a reason for complacency and the trustees have identified a number of aspects arising from the CQC Focused Inspection at the Studley Bethesda Home that will be used to test the readiness and resilience of the two remaining Bethesda Homes.

Covid-19 has been a challenge nationally for the care home sector, particularly in managing staffing, to ensure that there were sufficient numbers of staff to maintain the safety and well-being of residents. Additionally, this has been a continual 'drain' on management time within the Homes. Consequently, Bethesda is looking to engage an external organisation to undertake unannounced 'inspections' of the two Homes to provide a 'snapshot' of our current state of readiness for any future CQC inspections. This exercise will also be an opportunity to use a 'second pair of eyes' as an 'outside view' to help Bethesda improve/build on its current working practices and systems to ensure focussed high-quality care centred on the individual needs of the residents.

3) [The possible future use of the Studley site.](#)

The trustees, in the fear of the Lord, are prayerfully considering the future options for the Studley Bethesda Home, namely:

- i. in the short term, the safekeeping of the building and,
- ii. for the medium/long-term, the possible development of the site as independent living accommodation,
- iii. the sale for charitable purposes, or
- iv. the disposal for development.

Further details, for each of these options, is provided below:

(i) The Home is now vacant, and Bethesda is proceeding with arrangements to secure the property. One option being explored is to work with a property management company that provides a service of 'protection through occupation'. This would mean that the building was being 'lived in' and cared for. This would avoid the need and associated costs of boarding up the facility and becoming a potential 'eyesore' together with the danger of attracting squatters or similar characters.

If this option is chosen as the most appropriate way forward, it must be appreciated that it will be viewed as a 'short term' measure and the individual occupancy agreements would be arranged by the property management company, who would have sole responsibility for vetting and choosing their tenants. Bethesda would have no over-riding authority in this regard. It must be emphasised that no agreement, at this time, has been made as the trustees are making enquiries so as to help ensure that the arrangement does not impact on the future use of the site.

(ii) Trustees are aware that the question has been raised as to whether the site could be developed for independent living accommodation (ILA). Previous feedback, from those in the area, did not identify sufficient demand for the development of ILA. However, to help us verify if there is any change in 'demand' for such a venture, we would ask any interested parties to contact, in complete confidence, the General Manager providing details of the (named) potential occupants. The following information would help our understanding of the local need:

- a) whether a single person or a married couple,
- b) whether they would want a one or a two bedroom flat,
- c) what would the anticipated timescale be before they would wish (God willing) to occupy such accommodation, and
- d) the level of commitment they are prepared to make.

(iii) The trustees, via the General Manager, would be pleased to hear from anyone, in strictest confidence, who may wish to purchase the entire site for 'charitable' purposes.

(iv) Once options (ii) and (iii) above, have been fully explored, the trustees will be considering any additional/alternative options/uses of the site (e.g. sale or redevelopment) with a view to meeting their obligation to manage the charity's resources responsibly. With this in mind, we are seeking preliminary professional advice as to what, if necessary, those options might be.

If anyone is interested in and ILA or purchasing the site for 'charitable' purposes, please let, in the strictest confidence, Adrian Topping (General Manager) know by contacting the General Office, telephoning 07498 223576 or emailing: adriantopping@gsbf.uk

4) [A progress update: moving Bethesda to an incorporated charity](#)

As previously reported, the process of moving the Gospel Standard Bethesda Fund from an unincorporated charity to an incorporated one in the form of a charitable company (limited by

guarantee) is in two stages. The first is to register the GSBF with Companies House and then with the Charity Commission.

The registration with Companies House was successfully completed in September 2021 and we are thankful that prayers were answered in this matter. The submission to the Charity Commission is being progressed and, if the Lord will, due for completion in early 2022 when a new charity number will be allocated.

Following the allocation of a new charity number, the next stage will be to register the GSBF with the Care Quality Commission (CQC). Although Bethesda is currently registered with the CQC, we will need to prepare the documentation to make an application for full registration. CQC will then require fourteen weeks to complete their approval process.

During the time CQC is completing their approval process; Bethesda will be undertaking other administrative and preparatory tasks to allow the charitable company (limited by guarantee) to start operating once CQC registration is achieved.

In all the matters relating to moving to an incorporated charity, the trustees are conscious that it is: if the Lord will, and all-time events are in His hand.

5) [An update on the Swavesey project](#)

As mentioned above, the trustees have been led to purchase a plot at Swavesey to build the first independent living accommodation facility. This, as previously reported, was a result of the leadings of both the vendors and the trustees each seeking the Lord's direction in the matter.

Currently, a Pre-Application has been submitted to the Local Authority to seek a view on how this proposal would be received. The trustees are hoping, if the Lord will, in the New Year to make more information available.

The trustees were thankful for and encouraged by, in the Lord's providence, the receipt of a substantial legacy that will cover some of the costs of this project. We mentioned in our 2019 presentations that we would seek to use such legacies to provide for improved facilities for our beneficiaries, rather than expending them on 'running Bethesda' and this is in keeping with that desire.

[In Conclusion](#)

We realise that some of the observations regarding the challenges faced by Bethesda may appear to be stark however it would be disingenuous not to have been transparent in sharing with you the issues currently being faced.

Bethesda has been a provision for the Gospel Standard churches over many years, however, we each need to remember as we look back over the history of Bethesda, it is the Lord who provided the Homes and that it is the Lord who will continue, if it be His will, to make a provision, in whatever form, for those in later life and in old age amongst the Gospel Standard congregations (Isaiah 46:4)

In looking back over 2021, we trust we can testify "*hitherto hath the LORD helped us*" (1 Samuel 7:12). In looking forward, as spared, our prayer is for guidance, submission and obedience to do the will of the Lord concerning Bethesda - whatever His will might be.

We take this opportunity to thank those who continue to help Bethesda in so many ways in these solemn and trying times.

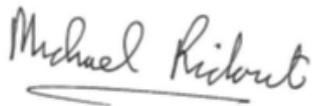
The trustees and General Manager would seek your continual prayerful support as they endeavour to serve the Lord in the responsibility and burden of Bethesda that He has placed on them.

We are reminded of a letter written in love to the trustees in December 2017:

"Having read your written comments on the situation with Bethesda we believe we have been able to give it our prayerful consideration. There is one certain thing, the Lord has a perfect will for Bethesda. May all the trustees be favoured with the revealing of his will and be able to go forward in humble dependence on him".

We trust that all of us who have a concern for Bethesda might have that desire for the Lord to reveal his perfect will as we go forward into 2022.

On behalf of the Bethesda Trustees,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael Ridout". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a thin horizontal line.

M Ridout
Chairman
14 December 2021