

FIEC Trust Board | Proposed Amendment to Clause 11.3

As explained at last year's Annual General Meeting, there will be an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) during this year's Leaders' Conference. At that meeting, delegates from our affiliated churches will be asked to consider and vote on some proposed amendments to the FIEC Constitution, including a proposed amendment to Clause 11.3.

What is the background to this proposal?

Over recent years, a growing number of church leaders have raised questions about the current wording of Clause 11.3, which states:

“Every charity trustee must be a natural person and, in accordance with the doctrinal position of the FIEC as set out in the ethos statements, must be male.”

These questions have not primarily been about whether FIEC is complementarian. Rather, they have concerned whether the current wording accurately reflects the theological convictions that underpin our complementarian ethos.

In particular, some have asked whether simply requiring trustees to be male adequately explains the biblical rationale for the role and responsibilities of the Trust Board.

At the AGM in 2022, Ian Jones, then Chair of the Trust Board, said that the Board would give careful and prayerful consideration to these questions. Over the following three years, the Trust Board returned to this issue repeatedly, giving it careful theological, legal and practical consideration across numerous Board meetings. Throughout that period, the Board sought to think carefully about whether the Constitution accurately reflects the theological principles that underpin the Fellowship's complementarian convictions.

How did the Trust Board's thinking develop?

Throughout this discussion, there was significant agreement among Trust Board members.

We all affirm the equal dignity, value and importance of men and women as those created in God's image and redeemed through Christ. We all want to see women flourish in service, leadership, discipleship, evangelism and gospel ministry in every sphere where Scripture encourages and permits such service. We are deeply grateful for the many ways women contribute to the life of our affiliated churches and to the ministry of FIEC centrally.

The question before us was not whether women are gifted for ministry, nor whether they make vital contributions to the church. Rather, the question was whether the particular responsibilities entrusted to the FIEC Trust Board are of a nature that should be exercised by those recognised as qualified for eldership within their local churches.

The Trust Board is responsible not only for governance and charity law compliance, but also for matters relating to FIEC's doctrinal standards, membership criteria and overall leadership. These responsibilities require trustees to exercise a significant degree of spiritual oversight on behalf of FIEC.

For that reason, the Board concluded unanimously that if eligibility for trustee service is to be restricted, then it should be restricted not simply to men, but specifically to those who are recognised as being qualified for eldership within their local churches. In other words, the Board concluded that the qualifications for trustee service should arise from the nature of the responsibilities entrusted to the role.

Why are we proposing this amendment?

The Trust Board believes that the current wording of Clause 11.3 of the FIEC Constitution lacks clarity, identifying who may serve as a trustee but without clearly explaining why.

Therefore, we believe the Constitution should more accurately reflect the theological rationale that lies behind the role and responsibilities of trustees of FIEC.

The Trust Board intends to propose the following revised wording:

“Every charity trustee must be a natural person. The charity trustees have overall responsibility for the leadership, doctrinal standards, and membership criteria of the CIO. Therefore, a charity trustee must be qualified to serve as an elder in their affiliated church. This is consistent with the principles in the ethos statements.”

We believe this wording provides greater clarity by directly connecting eligibility for trustee service to the responsibilities of the role. Rather than defining eligibility by biological sex alone, it identifies the theological principle that those deemed eligible to be exercising this form of oversight of FIEC should be recognised as qualified for eldership within their local church. The proposed wording therefore seeks to align the qualifications for trustee service more explicitly with the nature of the responsibilities entrusted to the Board.

We recognise that faithful complementarian Christians do not all reach the same conclusions on this question. We also recognise that churches affiliated to FIEC hold a range of views on the relationship between eldership and other forms of leadership and governance.

Nevertheless, after extensive discussion, prayer and reflection, the Trust Board believes this proposal best reflects the FIEC's complementarian ethos as underpinned by the theological principles expressed in our ethos statements. We therefore commend it to the member churches of FIEC for careful consideration.

Our desire is to clarify the Constitution of FIEC, strengthen our unity as a Fellowship around shared convictions, and honour the Lord Jesus Christ in the way we conduct our life together.

How can churches engage with this proposal?

We recognise that churches and church leaders may have questions about this proposed amendment. We warmly encourage you to engage with the Trust Board between now and the EGM.

To help facilitate that conversation, there will be an opportunity for churches and leaders to engage with Trust Board representatives during a webinar on Tuesday 22nd September at 11am. We hope this will provide a helpful opportunity to ask questions, offer feedback, and discuss the issues together in a spirit of mutual respect and gospel partnership.

Ultimately, however, the decision to amend the FIEC Constitution rests not with the Trust Board but with the delegates of our affiliated churches at the EGM. Therefore, we encourage every church to consider the proposal carefully, engage with the Board's reasoning, and prayerfully determine how it will vote.

Frequently asked questions

Here are brief answers to a variety of questions some church leaders have asked since this proposed amendment was trailed at last year's AGM:

1. Does this proposal imply that women are less gifted, less valuable or less important than men?

No.

The Trust Board wholeheartedly rejects any suggestion that women are less gifted, less valuable or less important in the life and ministry of the church. We thank God for the countless ways women serve Christ and build up his people across our affiliated churches and in the ministry of FIEC centrally.

The question under consideration is not one of value or ability, but of biblical responsibility. The proposed amendment reflects the conviction that the particular responsibilities entrusted to the Trust Board should be exercised by those who are qualified for eldership within their local churches.

2. Does the law allow us to restrict Trust Board membership to suitably qualified men?

Yes.

Just as affiliated churches are legally permitted to appoint only suitably qualified men as elders, the law permits FIEC to restrict trustee appointments allowing us to ensure that this reflects the organisation's charitable purposes and governing convictions.

3. Does this amendment require a Trust Board member to be serving as an elder in their local church at the present time?

No.

There may be various reasons why an individual is not currently serving as an elder in their local church – for example, having recently moved, recently retired, or having different views on secondary issues. The requirement is simply that a man be recognised as having the character and gifting for eldership.

4. Why is the Trust Board proposing this amendment rather than an alternative model?

Having considered this issue over an extended period, the Trust Board believes this proposal best reflects the FIEC's complementarian ethos, based on our theological principles. It also provides greater clarity than the existing wording.

5. Did no Trust Board members advocate allowing women to serve on the Trust Board?

Some Trust Board members would have no problem in principle with women serving on the Trust Board. However, they recognise that their opinion is in the minority, not only on the Trust Board but also across FIEC. They believe it to be their responsibility to support what they believe is best for the FIEC as a whole, and to lead by example in encouraging other church leaders to do the same.

6. Wasn't what is explicit in the new wording always implicit in the original Clause 11.3?

Some involved in drafting the original wording would say that their intention was that in order to be eligible to be appointed to the Board, any man would need to be recognised as qualified for eldership.

However, the existing wording does not explicitly state this. The proposed amendment seeks to remove ambiguity by making clear the principle that underlies eligibility for trustee service.

Clarity is helpful to everyone. We should seek to say what we mean and mean what we say.

7. Why is this discussion so important?

As complementarians, we want our complementarian convictions to be carefully thought through and faithfully applied.

It is right that we ask whether our structures and governing documents accurately reflect our theological convictions. It is also right that we continue to think carefully about how men and women can flourish in service of Christ according to the teaching of Scripture.

We recognise that sincere, Bible-loving Christians may reach different conclusions on this question. We are grateful for the thoughtful and gracious conversations that have already taken place, and welcome further engagement in the months ahead.

Our prayer is that, whatever conclusion the Fellowship ultimately reaches, we would continue to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of Christ, as together we seek to uphold the authority of Scripture, the unity of the Spirit, and the advance of the gospel.