

**General Assembly of Unitarian
& Free Christian Churches**

Executive Committee

Approved Minutes of meeting Friday 6th January 2012

Essex Hall, London

Present : Joan Cook, Rev David Usher, Alison Thursfield, Rev John Clifford, Robert Ince, Cathie Masztalerz, Huw Thomas (Hon Treasurer), Rev Martin Whitell (Convener)

In Attendance: Derek McAuley (Chief Officer), Mary-Jean Hennis (Minute-taker)

Session 1

Friday Opening Devotions: David Usher

David reminded the EC that in two weeks time, Martin Luther King Jnr. Day will be held. In 1963 Martin Luther King gave arguably the greatest speech of the 20th Century "I have a Dream". David invited the EC to put to one side whatever obstacles, grim realities which may be theirs today and focus on the "Dream". He asked "What is the vision for British Unitarianism, 5 years hence, 10 years hence, what inspires them, motivates them in spite of set backs, criticisms, constraints etc. What is THAT dream and in what way can they stay steadfast in seeking that dream. What will be the values and principles to which they will adhere in seeking that dream? Throughout the forthcoming discussions they should focus on the realities and practicalities that remain part of the Dream".

- 1. Apologies:** Andy Pakula
- 2. Minutes of the meeting held on 18th/19th November 2011**
After two minor adjustments, the Minutes were agreed and signed as a true record of the meeting held on the 18th & 19th November 2011
- 3. Matters arising for noting or to include in Agenda for later discussion:**
 - a) Hon Treasurer** - The Chief Officer reported that there has been no response to his appeal for volunteers for the post of GA Hon Treasurer. This has now become a matter of urgency a nomination is required for the 2012 Annual meeting. It was **agreed** that The Chief Officer and the Hon Treasurer would liaise to put together a

feature article for the Inquirer and on Uni-news. EC leads would also raise with their Districts. Should a candidate still not be forthcoming by the time of the Annual Meeting a member of the EC would have to act as interim Hon Treasurer pending a permanent appointment. The current Hon Treasurer agreed to be available to provide support..

b) Constitutional Review Group (CRG) – The Chief Officer had been in touch with the CRG regarding the EC decisions on recommendations.

c) Volunteer Committee – The Chief Officer has received one expression of interest for this Committee.

d) Safeguarding – The Rev John Harley is in touch with the CCPAS and has been appointed as lead recruiter by the GA. The need for urgent progress on the revised policy and the awareness sessions for congregations was stressed and the Chief Officer was asked to pursue with John Harley and Cathie Masztalerz.

4. Reports from Strategy Groups

a) Ministry Strategy Group

Notes of the Ministry Strategy group meeting held on 1 December 2012 were noted. The EC was supportive the draft Ministry Strategy Group Mission Statement. The Chief Officer reported on the financial implications of the likely increase in ministry student numbers and that this can be supported through the various funds at the GA's disposal. UCM has indicated that they would welcome a meeting between the EC, the Chief Officer and the Rev Linda Phillips. In relation to Item number 9 of the report – Experience from other Denominations – The EC supported maintaining links with the Interdenominational Group. Overall the EC was encouraged to see that the Ministry Strategy Group was moving forward positively.

b) Local Leadership (LLSG)

Notes of the Local Leadership Strategic Group meeting on 6 December 2011 were noted. The EC was pleased that the Group is well underway and working closely with the Ministry Strategy Group.

A discussion was held about the importance of Safeguarding which is not only a LLSG priority but falls across the spectrum of all the Strategy Groups. (See above). Dot Hewerdine to be advised of the current position. EC links were asked to highlight Safeguarding with their respective Districts who should play a supportive role with congregations who may not be fully aware of their responsibilities. The need for all congregations to have a trained safeguarding officer was stressed as raised at LLSG.

The Chief Officer had met the Chair and responded to a number of Questions asked by the LLSG to the EC.

c) Visibility - no notes or report had been received by the time of the meeting.

It was noted that the Group had placed a statement in the January 7th edition of the Inquirer which had been circulated in draft for comment. The Chief Officer will liaise with the Group to clarify expectations

The EC discussed the current leadership model which had been agreed to get the group up and running. It was felt that it was now time for greater clarity around leadership and agreed that the Chief Officer, Andy Pakula (as EC link) and the Convenor will be meet with the Group to progress this. The EC was committed to bring the Visibility Group to full working strength.

Session 2

5. Follow on from Reports from Strategy Groups

The Chief Officer had produced a Governance Structure Diagram which detailed the strategic groups and action group structure. This was revised and agreed would be widely circulated with accompanying text. The need for information over the next three months was emphasised.

Strategic Group would be asked to make a presentation to the Annual Meetings plenary session and a template would be produced for them to utilise for their presentations. A handout was also to be prepared.

The Strategic Groups were encouraged to further explore opportunities for joint working and new ways forward with the resources available.

6. Congregational Development Programme

A lengthy discussion took place on the report which the Convenor and Andy Pakula had prepared. It was **noted** that the costings in the document were estimates only.

A large sum of money (£1.8 million gross; £1.3 net) needed to be raised to fund this programme which was to grow new congregations. It will need to have a realistic target to inspire people. The programme had implications for the projections of future ministerial numbers and the schedule would need to be revised. It was also recognised that it was based on an existing congregational model. The impact on morale of new congregations being formed when others were likely to close was important. The risks inherent in the programme were also raised as it included assumptions about the financial impact of growth. District Associations had an important role to play. It was emphasised that the

time period was important in light of falling membership numbers and the ending of the Bowland Trust support and was a “window of opportunity”. The fund-raising options were discussed and required further work.

It was **agreed** the EC accepts the proposal of the 2020 Project within the cost estimates that have been produced with the target of raising funds in the sum of £1.8 million. The 2020 programme would have to cover its own costs through fund-raising. Andy was asked to look at terms of reference for the next meeting.

It was agreed that a 2020 Board will be established by the EC, this board will be accountable to the EC. The fund set up will be a restricted fund, and any literature about the fund will have to contain a disclaimer to the effect that - “Should the fund exceed the amount needed, it may allocate the excess funds to another project”

It was **agreed** that a Grant would be offered to the Congregational Development Programme to start it up. The 2020 Board will be responsible for fundraising and growing congregations.

it was **agreed** that there will be a presentation of the project at the Annual Meetings .

Session 3

7. Annual Accounts

a. General Assembly Annual Accounts to 30 September 2011

The Hon Treasurer presented the draft Accounts of the General Assembly.

He highlighted the Reserves Policy for inclusion in the Annual Report and would draft

[Subsequently provided “The General Assembly holds sufficient free reserves, not restricted by their purpose or by virtue of endowment, to ensure that it is able to service its annual budgeted expenditure and to ensure that its risks in relation to its pension fund obligations are mitigated.”]

The Accounts had been prepared on an ongoing concern basis and included all the significant issues that one would expect to be included. They were approved by the Executive Committee with delegated authority to be signed on its behalf by Rev Martin Whitell (Convenor) and Huw Thomas (Hon Treasurer) following minor corrections. Approval was also given to sign representations to the Auditors.

The Hon. Treasurer and Karen Mallik, Finance Consultant, were thanked for their work in preparing the Accounts.

b. Nightingale Centre Annual Accounts

The Accounts of the Nightingale Centre were received from the Management Committee. The different format was noted and it was hoped a consistent style could be in place for the following year across the three bodies.

The Statutory Accounts of the Nightingale Centre were approved by the Executive Committee to be signed on its behalf by Rev Martin Whitell (Convenor) and Huw Thomas (Hon Treasurer)

The Management Committee, Gordon Lowthian and Centre Manager were thanked for the solid performance.

c. Sustentation Fund Annual accounts

The Statutory Accounts of the Sustentation Fund were noted by the Executive Committee. The need for a reserves policy was noted for the following year. The Trustees were thanked for their hard work on behalf of the Denomination.

8. Management Accounts to end of December

The management accounts to the 31 December 2011 were noted. The substantial legacy was included.

9. General Assembly General Fund – Portfolio Recommendations

Correspondence was received from Newton's seeking approval of significant changes to the portfolio. The Hon Treasurer suggested that the EC follow the advice of their Investment Advisor. The need to incorporate a strategic approach to SRI was proposed as part of any change. It was **agreed** that the Chief Officer and the Hon Treasurer liaise with Newton's.

10. Re Legacy – Noted with the following;

A generous legacy has been bequeathed to the GA which would be matched by the Bowland Trust. It was **agreed** that the funds shall be allocated to the Ministerial Students Fund (£20,000) and the Congregational Development Programme (£50,000) with the remainder for GA funds (£20,000 as set out in the budget).

11. Report of Stipend Review Committee

The Convenor and David Usher declared an interest in this item.

It was recommended that that the Terms of Reference of the SRC should include a section on Rites of Passage in view of the variances with the Movement in how these were dealt with. This would also need to highlight the tax implications. John Clifford suggested that as a starting point the Ministerial Fellowship be approached for their views and this was **agreed. The report was adopted for presentation to the Annual Meeting.**

12. Annual Meetings

a) Notes of Panel Meetings on 30 November 2011 and 5 January 2012 were noted with the following:

The need to clarify the participation of young people was stressed. A lengthy discussion took place on encouraging a wider age range in participants and endeavouring to make people welcome when they do attend eg the welcome event, avoiding acronyms and in-language, introducing people by using their full names.

Details of the plenary slots agreed with focus on past in plenary 1. and strategic groups and the future in plenary 2. Plenary 3. to be finance and stipend review report. Commissions and Panels are to be thanked for their past work and the work of strategy groups commended.

The Strategy Groups will give a ten minute presentation of their priorities/projects followed by a ten minute Q&A session.

b) Report on Disability issues

Report on site visit from John Clifford was noted.

c) 2013 Arrangements

It was **agreed** to establish an Annual Meetings Action Group for 2013 comprising Alison Thursfield, Martin Whitell, Chief Officer, Andrew Mason plus two others, one of which should have marketing and sales experience.

13. Summer Annual Meetings 2014 and 2015 Proposal

A report was received outlining important issues relating to any pilot proposal to change the timing of the Annual Meetings from Easter to the Summer for 2014 and 2015.

A change would offer greater choice of venue which more universities available and a likely reduced cost. It would prevent clashes with Easter events which were growing in significance. It was thought it could encourage a broader range of people to attend which was an issue given the rising age of attendees. It was suggested that a two year pilot would not really enable a proper assessment and therefore three years was preferable. The financial year would have to be changed. An option was to keep the AGM separate from a "festival" style of gathering but this was seen a much bigger issue that simply changing the date. The clash with other Unitarian events and cultural events more generally was noted along with demands on holiday time during the summer months.

It was concluded that the case for change had not been made and that there was not a strong desire for change from the Movement and the Executive Committee would not be recommending any change at this time.

14. Millennium Fund Bid – St Mark’s Unitarian Church, Edinburgh

Joan Cook and John Clifford declared an interest in this item

It was **agreed** to award St Mark’s Unitarian Church in Edinburgh the sum of £4,350 from the Millennium Fund as the application met the criteria on "fixtures, fittings and equipment" that would support growth.

Session 4

15. Annual EC Report

The Chief Officer presented a draft report for inclusion in the GA Annual Report. Discussion took place on the use of quota as a measure of membership given the objective of increasing membership by 20%. The text indicated that this was a very imprecise measure. It was agreed that further work be carried out on defining membership more accurately. The work of the LDPA on attendance was noted as was the previous annual survey by the General Assembly to gather information on attendance and activity.

16. Other Reports

President’s Report to the Executive Committee 16 December 2011 – The Chief Officer was asked to respond to comments made by the President in her report.

17. Arrangements for Future Meetings:

Feb 24th 2-6pm – 25th 9-4pm LKH – Manchester
May 5th 9 -5 pm London

July 6th 2-6 pm (post dinner session) – 7th 9-3 pm – LKH Manchester
Sept 1st 9-5 pm – London (change – one day only; not now meet 31 August)
Nov 16th 2-6pm – 17th 9-3pm – London

Mary-Jean left the room at this point

18. Chief Officer's Report

The Chief Officer highlighted his work on ministry matters, particularly meetings related to Harris Manchester College and Unitarian College Manchester. He had met the chairs of the Ministry and Local Leadership strategy groups since the last meeting. He had devoted considerable time and energy to the visibility issue when the possible challenge to civil partnerships in religious premises in England and Wales from Baroness O'Cathain became known. The Unitarian stance was widely reported, including a quote from the Chief Officer in the print as well as the online versions of The Guardian. A joint statement was prepared with the Quakers and Liberal Judaism which has helped further build relationships. Subsequently two updates had been issued in uni-news about the possibilities and limitations of the legislation. They remain second best and are not equal marriage. The excellent work by Scottish Unitarian Association on equal marriage consultation with other partners was also welcomed. The need for congregations to keep Unitarian Headquarters informed of developments locally on this issue was stressed. Work on key risk areas was also outlined. The report was **noted**.

19. Non-responsive check out

Friday Closing Devotions: Martin Whitell

20. Key Messages prepared after the meeting

1. Safeguarding

The Executive Committee would emphasize to all congregations their responsibilities under Safeguarding legislation for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. It recognizes its own responsibilities arising from the national youth programme, for ministers and ministerial students and for the Nightingale Centre as well as in advising congregations, districts and other Unitarian bodies. Safeguarding is assessed by the EC as the top risk to the Unitarian movement in the General Assembly's risk register.

Arrangements for safeguarding need to be improved particularly as legislative requirements are changing. The General Assembly's policy framework is being revised. Funds have been set aside to provide training and awareness sessions for members of congregations and discussions initiated between the

Local Leadership Strategic Group and the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) who act as advisers for the GA and also process CRB checks. Up to date information on safeguarding issues is available from the CCPAS website

<http://www.ccpas.co.uk/Information.html#quickreferenceguides>

2. 2020 Congregational Development Programme

The 2020 Congregational Development Programme was given the go-ahead along with the establishment of a 2020 Board. It includes a range of possible models with lots of room for creativity locally; new planting, restart, side-by-side (parallel congregation in the same location to existing one), satellites and spin-offs and social responsibility starts.

The report on finances was considered which looked at the likely costs and possible funding opportunities to start and grow the programme. The financial modelling indicated that to establish a total of seventeen new congregations the net cost would be approximately £1.3million. There were several options outlined for raising this considerable sum. The programme would work alongside current initiatives such as fm pilot in Scotland.

It was also recognised that in the eleven year time period it is likely that some current congregations may close and that the support to the General Assembly from the Bowland Trust will then be at an end. This was therefore a “window of opportunity” to promote growth to arrest the serious numerical decline of the Unitarian Movement.

3. Legacy Received

A substantial legacy of £45,000 has been received which will be matched by the Bowland Trust. The Executive Committee agreed to allocate the £90,000 as follows:

Congregational Development Programme (as start-up grant)	£50,000
Ministerial Students Fund	£20,000
General Assembly Budget (as planned)	£20,000
Total	£90,000

The thanks of the General Assembly have been expressed.

4. Strategic Group Updates

The Ministry Strategic Group met in early December and considered the pressures on the Ministerial Students Fund arising from the potential increase in ministerial student numbers and the impact on the funding of training. The Executive Committee was supportive of the draft mission statement to be approved at the next group meeting. The need for close co-ordination with the Local Leadership Strategic Group was emphasised along with learning from

other denominations. Further work was undertaken on the content of ministerial training and how it is delivered in conjunction with the two colleges.

The Local Leadership Strategic Group met in early December and agreed to establish two action groups to oversee 1) modular training and 2) facilitation and support plus a pool of facilitators and trainers who could be called upon when needed. Volunteers are being sought for the groups and the pool with “new faces” encouraged. The modular training scheme was set out in detail with two new events in 2012; Conflict Resolution training and Safeguarding training (see above).

The Visibility Strategic Group had placed an article in The Inquirer on 7 January 2012 to seek the views of grassroots Unitarians.

5. Changing Annual Meetings from Easter to the Summer

At recent Annual Meetings there has been discussion about moving the event from Easter to the Summer. The Executive Committee explored the advantages and disadvantages and had listened to the various views expressed at the last Annual Meeting. They considered that there had not been a strong desire for change from the Movement and would not be recommending any change at the moment.

6. Search for Honorary Treasurer Continues

It was reported that to date there had been no volunteers for the post of Honorary Treasurer following the decision of the current post holder not to seek re-appointment. The Chief Officer and Honorary Treasurer agreed to prepare material for publication on what the role involved in practice to support the role specification. Interim arrangements were discussed in the event no one had been identified.

7. Annual Accounts Approved

The Executive Committee (as “trustees”) approved the Accounts of the General Assembly and the Nightingale Centre and noted those of the Sustentation Fund. They will be presented to the Annual Meetings. The consolidated statement for the three bodies shows a balance of £4.95million of which £3.56million is in restricted or endowment funds. The General Assembly ended the year to 30 September 2011 with a deficit of £9k in day-to-day spending.