

# **Constitution of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches**

**Registered Charity Number 250788  
as amended on 5 April 2023**

## **1. Name**

This Assembly shall be called "The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches".

## **2. Object**

### ***Preamble***

We, the constituent congregations, affiliated societies and individual members, uniting in a spirit of mutual sympathy, co-operation, tolerance and respect; and recognising the worth and dignity of all people and their freedom to believe as their consciences dictate; and believing that truth is best served where the mind and conscience are free, acknowledge that the Object of the Assembly is:

### ***Object***

To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.

To this end, the Assembly may:

Encourage and unite in fellowship bodies which uphold the religious liberty of their members, unconstrained by the imposition of creeds;

Affirm the liberal religious heritage and learn from the spiritual, cultural and intellectual insights of all humanity;

Act where necessary as the successor to the British and Foreign Unitarian Association and National Conference of Unitarian, Liberal Christian, Free Christian, Presbyterian and other Non-Subscribing or Kindred Congregations, being faithful to the spirit of their work and principles (see appendix to the constitution), providing always that this shall in no way limit the complete doctrinal freedom of the constituent churches and members of the Assembly;

Do all other such lawful things as are incidental to the attainment of the above Object.

## **3. Business of the Assembly**

The business of the Assembly, subject to directions given at any meeting thereof, shall be managed by the Executive Committee acting as Trustees.

## **4. Membership**

There shall be the following classes of membership:

- a Full Members who shall have the rights to be summoned to meetings of the Assembly, to receive Annual and other Special Reports, to speak and to vote at the said meetings.

There shall be three classes of Full membership:

- i Congregations, Regional Associations approved by the Assembly, and Societies approved by the Assembly, acting through their appointed representatives, viz: one Lay Delegate from each Congregation having less than thirty members, and two Lay Delegates from each Congregation having

- thirty or more members, who have reached the age of eighteen years, and one delegate from each Society or Regional Association.
- ii Any Minister, Lay Pastor or Lay Leader, provided that they are on the appropriate Roll of the General Assembly
  - iii All Honorary Officers and members of the Executive Committee.
- b Associate Members: All persons who have subscribed such a sum as shall be determined from time to time by the General Assembly Executive Committee to the funds of the Assembly in the financial year preceding its Annual Meeting shall be Associate Members and shall have the right to be summoned to its meetings and to speak but not to vote thereat.
- c Honorary Members: Any person elected at an Annual Meeting of the Assembly to be an Honorary Member shall be entitled to the same privileges as a Full Member.

The Executive Committee shall be responsible for keeping an up-to-date Roll which lists the membership in all the above classes above, and shall make public on request the contents of the Roll.

## **5. Admission to Membership**

Congregations applying for admission to membership of the Assembly shall do so in accordance with the procedure decided by the Executive Committee and according to the criteria contained in the By-laws. All decisions on the admission of Congregations shall be made by an Annual Meeting of the Assembly voting on a resolution proposed by the Executive Committee. When formulating such a resolution the Executive Committee must have reports on the Congregation from the appropriate local regional association.

## **6. Executive Committee**

The Executive Committee shall comprise eight persons elected by a postal ballot and an Honorary Treasurer. The Honorary Treasurer will be a voting member of the Executive Committee.

The Executive Committee elections will be held every two years with four members elected at each election to serve for a term of four years taking office at the end of the Annual Meetings following their election.

Members may serve for a maximum of two successive terms; a term includes any period as an appointed member to fill a vacancy following an election or arising from a casual vacancy.

A period of at least one year should elapse before a member is eligible to seek a further term of office by election or appointment to a vacancy.

A person who has been appointed to fill a vacancy under 7. e. ii. or 13 and who has completed their term of office will not be eligible to be appointed to fill a further vacancy until a period of one year has elapsed.

## **7. Elections**

An Electoral Panel will be appointed by the Executive Committee and will be responsible for conducting the election of the Executive Committee. The Electoral Panel will hold office until the completion of the election and will be accountable to the Annual Meetings on the basis that:

- a. Each member congregation will receive as many individual electoral votes as members paid for by the end of the financial year preceding election.

- b. A list shall be established nationally of electors who are not included in category a. who
  - i. are Full Members of the Assembly or
  - ii. individually pay the required membership contribution directly to the Assembly by the end of the financial year preceding election.
- c. No elector shall vote more than once and the Electoral Panel shall be responsible for devising rules to prevent double voting by any elector. Elections shall be based on a method to be established by the Electoral Panel.
- d. If the number of candidates remaining validly nominated for an election is equal to the number of members to be elected to the Executive Committee, those candidates shall be declared elected unopposed.
- e. If the number of candidates remaining validly nominated for an election is less than the number of members to be elected to the Executive Committee, then -
  - i. the candidates validly nominated shall be declared elected unopposed, and
  - ii. the Executive Committee shall fill any vacancy by appointment within six months from the date the declaration of valid nominations were received. Any such appointed person shall serve until the next Executive Committee election.

## **8. Honorary Officers**

The Honorary Officers of the Assembly shall be a President, a Vice-President, and a Treasurer. The Honorary Officers shall be elected annually and shall hold office until the end of the next Annual Meeting. The Office of Treasurer shall not be occupied by the same person for longer than seven years unless the General Assembly confirms, by a majority vote at an Annual Meeting, that extraordinary circumstances exist which justify re-election.

## **9. Meetings of the Assembly**

There shall be an ordinary meeting of the Assembly once in each calendar year, chaired by the President. The Executive Committee of the Assembly shall send notice of the Annual Meeting three months beforehand to all classes of membership detailed in Clause 4. The Executive Committee or not less than sixty full members on the Roll of the Assembly shall have power to requisition a Special Meeting of the Assembly and it shall be held within three months of receipt of such requisition by the Executive Committee.

## **10. Motions at Annual Meetings**

No ordinary or procedural motion shall be proposed at the Annual Meeting unless notice in writing thereof shall have been given to the Executive Committee fifty-six days at least before the first day appointed for such meeting. An emergency motion may be proposed at the Annual Meetings if two-thirds of the members present and voting at the meeting give leave for this; this vote is taken without any prior discussion. Any amendment to a motion, which the President deems in order, may be proposed and discussed without notice or leave.

Motions submitted by Congregations, Regional Associations or Affiliated Societies must be supported by a majority of the relevant governing body of the Congregation, Association or Society. Motions submitted by Full Members must be endorsed by at least twelve such individual voting members of the Assembly. The Executive Committee shall give not less than thirty days' notice of any motion to the members of the Assembly, either by circular or by advertisement, as the Executive Committee shall determine. The Executive Committee has the authority to propose motions on its own behalf.

There shall be a maximum of four ordinary motions accepted for debate by the Assembly. There shall be a maximum of one Emergency Motion (except in exceptional circumstances) accepted for debate by the Assembly.

In the event that more than four ordinary motions and/or more than one emergency motions are received a vote shall be taken at the beginning of the business meetings to determine which four ordinary and one emergency motions shall be accepted for debate.

#### **11. Meetings of the Executive Committee**

The Executive Committee shall meet at least six times each year. The quorum for any meeting of the Executive Committee shall be six.

#### **Participation in meetings by electronic means**

- a. A meeting may be held by suitable electronic means agreed by the charity trustees in which each participant may communicate with all the other participants.
- b. Any charity trustee participating at a meeting by suitable electronic means agreed by the charity trustees in which a participant or participants may communicate with all the other participants shall qualify as being present at the meeting.
- c. Meetings held by electronic means must comply with rules for meetings, including chairing and the taking of minutes.

#### **12. Business of the Executive Committee**

The Executive Committee shall appoint any subsidiary committees, a Chief Executive and approve appointment of all other paid staff. It shall raise and administer the income of the Assembly, and shall administer the Trust Funds and other property held by the Assembly. The Executive Committee shall at every Annual Meeting of the Assembly present a Report of its proceedings during the previous year, and also the Trustees' report and the audited accounts of the Assembly.

#### **13. Casual Vacancies**

In the event of any casual vacancy occurring among the Honorary Officers, the Executive Committee shall have power to appoint a successor to serve until the next Annual Meeting of the Assembly. In the event of any casual vacancy occurring among the membership of the Executive Committee, the remainder of the membership shall have the power to fill such vacancy by appointment to serve until the next election of the Executive Committee.

#### **14. Finance**

The Assembly shall have the power to acquire and accept any Devise, Legacy, Bequest, Donation or Subscription for the promotion of the objects of the Assembly.

The Assembly shall also have power to acquire and hold freehold and leasehold property in the United Kingdom (such leasehold property having not less than sixty years to run at date of purchase) where such purchase is considered necessary to enable the Assembly to carry on its work with greater efficiency.

Capital of the General Assembly falling to be invested and all other monies in the hands of the General Assembly falling to be invested shall (where such capital or other monies are not subject to any pre-existing or over-riding direction, restriction or trust as to mode of investment) be invested, at the direction of the appropriate Committee, in the names of the Trustees appointed by the Executive Committee as hereinafter provided, in or upon any stocks funds or securities for the time being authorised by law for the investment of trust funds.

Property coming into the possession of the General Assembly of a nature not specified above may (subject to any direction, restriction or trust imposed by a donor or testator) be retained, during the discretion of the Executive Committee, in the form of the investment in which it was received or (subject as aforesaid) may be converted into money at the like discretion and invested in accordance with the foregoing provisions.

The Executive Committee shall not be responsible for any loss upon any authorised investments.

The Executive Committee may in their discretion appoint one or more bodies of Trustees in whom property purchased and investments made may be vested without further reference to the Executive Committee; and the Executive Committee shall have power to remove any Trustee or Trustees and to appoint another or others in his/her or their place.

### **15. Auditor**

An Auditor or Auditors shall be appointed at the Annual Meeting; and it shall be his/her or their duty to examine the Trustees' report and accounts and to report to the Assembly at the next Annual Meeting.

### **16. By-Laws**

The Executive Committee may make, alter or rescind By-Laws which relate to the conduct of its business.

### **17. Alteration of Rules**

No addition to or alteration of this Constitution shall be made except at the Annual Meeting or a Special Meeting of the Assembly.

Alterations or additions may be proposed by the Executive Committee on giving three months' notice, or by not less than four Congregations, Societies or Regional Associations on the Roll of the Assembly on giving six months' notice. Notice of such proposals and the terms thereof, together with notice summoning the meeting, must be sent by the Executive Committee to all the Congregations, Societies and Regional Associations on the Roll not less than two months before the meeting called for their consideration. All alterations or additions must be made by resolution passed by not less than two-thirds of those present and voting, and any amendment must be fairly within the scope of the original proposals.

Provided also that no alteration or addition shall be made inconsistent with the Object of the Assembly as set forth in Clause 2.

### **18. Dissolution**

- (1) If the Members resolve to dissolve the charity the Executive Committee will remain in office as charity trustees and be responsible for winding up the affairs of the charity in accordance with this clause.
- (2) The trustees must collect in all the assets of the charity and must pay or make provision for all the liabilities of the charity.
- (3) The trustees must apply any remaining property or money:
  - (a) Directly for the objects;
  - (b) By transfer to any charity or charities for the purposes the same or similar to the charity;
  - (c) In such other manner as the Charity Commission for England and Wales ("the Commission") may approve in writing in advance.
- (4) The Members may pass a resolution before or at the same time as the resolution to dissolve the charity specifying the manner in which the trustees

are to apply the remaining property or assets of the charity and the trustees must comply with the resolution if it is consistent with paragraphs (a) – (c) inclusive in sub-clause (3) above.

- (5) In no circumstances shall the net assets of the charity be paid to or distributed among the Members of the charity (except to a Member that is itself a charity).
- (6) The trustees must notify the Commission promptly that the charity has been dissolved. If the trustees are obliged to send the charity's accounts to the Commission for the accounting period which ended before its dissolution, they must send the Commission the charity's final accounts.

## **Appendix**

In reference to Clause 2 of the foregoing, the following is a statement of the Objects of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, as set forth in Clause 2 of its Constitution [as worded at the time of adoption of this Constitution]:

*“The diffusion and support of the principles of Unitarian Christianity, including the formation and assistance of Congregations which do not require for themselves or their Ministers subscription to any doctrinal articles of belief; the publication and circulation of biblical, theological, scientific and literary knowledge related to Unitarian Christianity; the doing of all such other lawful things as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objects or any of them”*

The following is a statement of the Objects of the National Conference of Unitarian, Liberal Christian, Free Christian, Presbyterian and other Non-Subscribing or Kindred Congregations, as set forth in Clause 1 of the Constitution:

*“To consult, and when considered advisable to take action, on matters affecting the well-being and interests of the Congregations and Societies on the Roll of the Conference, as by directing attention, suggesting plans, organising expressions of opinion, raising funds to carry out the foregoing objects.”*

# **By-Laws for the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches**

## **1) The Conduct of Meetings of the Executive Committee and Commissions**

### **1.1 Notice of Meetings**

The Chief Executive shall send to every member of the Executive Committee notice of the time and place of every meeting, whether ordinary special or adjourned, at least fourteen days before the meeting, and the nature of such notice and the conduct of such meeting shall be in accordance with the procedure adopted by the Executive Committee.

### **1.2 Committees, their Membership and their powers**

a. The Executive Committee shall appoint Commissions and other bodies from its own members, together with such other persons as the Executive Committee may determine. The Commissions shall hold office until the first meeting of their successors.

b. The Executive Committee shall delegate powers to the Commissions and other bodies. These Commissions and other bodies shall be authorised to the extent of such delegated powers to initiate and carry out action without the necessity of reference to the Executive Committee, but they shall report to meetings of the Executive Committee.

### **1.3 Finance**

The Executive Committee, having received the advice of the Honorary Treasurer, shall, at the beginning of each financial year, approve a budget for each spending Commission.

### **1.4 Financial Statement**

The Honorary Treasurer shall present to each ordinary meeting of the Executive Committee a written financial report and at the appropriate Executive Committee meetings an annual budget and an end-of-year statement.

### **1.5 Members' Conflict of Interest**

Executive Committee and Commission members shall declare any potential conflict of interest and refrain from participation in consideration of such matters.

### **1.6 Minutes**

Minutes shall be taken of every meeting of the Executive Committee and of the Commissions, and these shall be read, amended if necessary, and signed by the Chair at the following meeting.

## **2) Conditions for Admission to Membership of the Assembly**

### **2.1 Congregations**

2.1.1 Applications shall be dealt with in accordance with the procedure laid down in Clause 5 of the General Assembly Constitution.

**2.1.2** A congregation must have at least 8 subscribing members over the age of 18 years, and must have existed for regular worship for not less than one year.

**2.1.3** A copy of the rules and/or constitution and by-laws must be supplied and these must be approved by the local district association and by the Executive Committee.

**2.1.4** The constitution must embody a clause specifying that, in the event of the congregation ceasing to exist, its funds and property shall be transferred to an approved, specific body. This will normally be the sponsoring district association or the General Assembly, as appropriate.

**2.1.5** Meetings for a religious purpose must be held at least once a month.

**2.1.6** An annual subscription must be paid to the Assembly and to the district association, if required.

**2.1.7** A copy of the annual report and audited/independently examined accounts as submitted to the annual meeting of members must be sent to the district association and to the Assembly.

**2.1.8** The application must have the support of the district association.

**2.1.9** Before the application is approved the congregation must be visited by a representative of the Executive Committee who shall make a report on the visit.

## **2.2 Transitional Arrangements**

Congregations admitted to membership as at 4 April 2018 under “2.2 Small Congregations” will be recognised as Members of the Assembly with Full voting rights.

## **2.3 Affiliated Societies**

**2.3.1** A society to be affiliated shall exist on an international, national (UK) or cross-regional basis.

**2.3.2** It shall have existed at least two years before seeking affiliation.

**2.3.3** Minimum membership shall be 12.

**2.3.4** Constitution and rules shall be duly stated and observed.

**2.3.5** Objects shall be clearly stated.

**2.3.6** An Annual General Meeting shall be held to appoint officers and committee and adopt reports and audited/independently examined accounts, which shall be supplied to the General Assembly.

**2.3.7** An annual subscription shall be paid to the General Assembly, as determined by the Executive Committee from time to time.

**2.3.8** Application for affiliation may be made at any time and shall be considered, along with Objects and Constitution, by the Executive Committee, for recommendation to the Annual Meeting.



### **3) Alteration of By-Laws**

**3.1** In line with Clause 16 of the Constitution the Executive Committee may make, alter or rescind Clause 1 above affecting the conduct of its business.

**3.2** Alterations and additions to Clause 2 above may be proposed by the Executive Committee, at an Annual Meeting or Special Meeting of the Assembly. All alterations or additions must be made by resolution passed by a two thirds majority of those present and voting, and any amendment must be fairly within the scope of the original proposals.