

**REPORT OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2024**

INTRODUCTION

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

(1 Peter 5.6-7, NIVUK)

It is something of a cliché to say that we are living in the midst of an anxious, challenging and confused age. These New Testament words of deep reassurance were written during times of severe persecution and acute hardship for the early church. Peter reminds his audience that they are secure under God’s sovereign hand, inviting them to respond in humility when the days seem daunting.

Ultimately the Lord’s powerful hand will lift his people up. This is a consequence of God’s loving care for his people, therefore the church is invited to unburden her cares by ‘casting’ them upon that same Lord.

Present challenges are far from unique to the United Free Church of Scotland. All denominations are struggling with decline, the sustaining of ministry within ever tighter financial constraints, as well as the key task of ensuring that measures are in place to secure effective governance across the whole church.

The Governance Committee continues to wrestle with these issues, mindful of the truth that our structures and practice must function to serve and equip the church, rather than the other way round. One of the core ways to achieve this is to focus constantly upon gospel priorities through that same lens of humility and service. The Lord does indeed care for us as his people and he will sustain us to fulfil the plan he has always had in place for his church.

As you read this Report, please remember that whether the topic is administration, finance or ecumenical working, we must always focus on Christ and the mission he has given us. It is incumbent upon us to serve Christ with humility, sure in the knowledge that we serve the loving, gracious and unerring God who will always lift us up.

FINANCE REPORT

The Report and audited Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2023 are at the back of the Assembly Reports. Detailed Fund Accounts are available from the Interim General Secretary.

This Report highlights the principal factors affecting movement in Funds in 2023, the proposed Stipends and Salaries for 2025, and explains agreed Target contribution amounts for 2023 and 2024 with the recommended level of Target for 2025.

The General Trustees of the Denomination hold funds deposited for investment on behalf of third parties. These Third Party funds have been excluded from the Balance Sheet amounts for Investments and Creditors (see Note 12 to the Accounts). They should still be accounted for in the financial statements of the third parties.

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEES' FUNDS 2023/2024

The Schedule on page 7 details the movements in Committees' resources in 2023. The Committee have sought to apply a similar allocation of Target for 2024 reflecting the differing responsibilities of the various Committees.

The funding of the denomination has not for a considerable time been met by target contributions. The Committee are grateful to the General Trustees for the considerable contribution they make to work of Committees. There is considerable pressure on the Governance Committee to ensure all committees are treated equitably in the distribution of Target income.

MOVEMENT IN FUNDS 2023

Total Funds	2023	2022
Unrestricted Funds:	£	£
General	2,115,374	1,130,951
Designated	1,494,519	1,779,309
Restricted Funds	708,052	673,927
	<hr/>	<hr/>
Funds at 31st December 2023	<u>4,317,945</u>	<u>3,584,187</u>
	£	£
Ordinary income	2,160,146	1,301,785
Ordinary expenses	<u>1,452,413</u>	<u>1,459,499</u>
Net Incoming resources	707,733	(157,714)
Net gains on investments etc. (realised & unrealised)	26,024	(200,075)
	<hr/>	<hr/>
Net Movement in Funds	<u>733,757</u>	<u>(357,789)</u>

TARGET

2023 The Target figure for 2022 was set at £200,000. The amount received was £186,187

2024 The Target figure agreed for 2024 by General Assembly was £200,000.

2025 It is the recommendation of the Committee that we seek to raise in 2025 the amount of £200,000 from target on the basis of £65 per member on the roll and an additional amount calculated equally on the basis of ordinary income and the funds held by congregations for their use. It is also recommended that the cap on the level of annual change remains at £600.

CONGREGATIONAL TREASURERS

We acknowledge the work and commitment which has been required from all treasurers in recent years to fulfil the requirements of Charity Law and of OSCR and thank treasurers and responsible committees for their efforts.

During discussion at the 2022 General Assembly with respect to the role of Congregational Treasurers, a suggestion was made that there was a need for training to be made available to assist Treasurers to fulfil what has become a more regulated and complex role.

In response to this, Treasurers were contacted and asked to provide feedback on the areas where they felt that training was required. A healthy response to this was received, with the following key areas being identified: *The Model Set of Accounts; Record Keeping; Gift Aid & Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme; External Grant Funding*

All Treasurers were invited to attend a Training Event to be held in St Ninians UF Church, Stirling on Saturday 16th September 2023. In addition to formal sessions on the above 4 topics, emphasis was placed on the benefits to be gained by informal discussion with one another on the day, and ample opportunity was provided for this during times of fellowship at lunch and tea-breaks.

22 people, covering 19 different congregations across the denomination, attended the event in person, along with another 4 joining in on Zoom. The technology worked really well and there was a lot of participation and discussion from all those attending. It was particularly gratifying to note that some Treasurers were able to bring their future successors along with them, albeit that succession planning was noted to still be an issue for many congregations.

Feedback on the event has been very positive, and all attending seemed to find the event helpful. Copies of the presentations used on the day were circulated to all Treasurers.

AUDIT OF DENOMINATIONAL ACCOUNTS

Alexander Sloan, Chartered Accountants, who are the Auditors appointed by General Assembly, have carried out their audit. It is recommended that this firm be reappointed for the 2024 audit.

STATISTICS

Presbyteries: The number of Presbyteries remains at 3.

Congregations: The number of Congregations at the end of 2023 was 47 three less than 2022.

Name of Presbytery	Number of Congregations
1. East	14
2. West	21
3. North	12

Roll of Ministers, etc.

Ministers:

	2022	2023
In Pastorate.....	21	20
Others appointments	2	2
Total	23	22
Full time Ministry Assistant	1	1
Part-time Ministers & Ministry Assistants.....	9	6
Students.....	1	1
Probationers.....	0	0
Retired Ministers.....	23	22
Widows (ers) of Ministers.....	14	14
Widows of Pastors.....	3	3

Persons and Agencies: In the table appended to this Report the analysed details of schedules received from Congregations will be found with the corresponding figures for previous years.

Communicants: The number of Communicants on the Roll at 31 December 2023 was 1782 compared with 1875 at the end of 2022.

Admissions were as follows: -

	2022	2023
By Profession	38	47
By Certificate	33	18
By Resolution	18	5

Removals were as follows: -

By Death	88	95
By Certificate	12	4
Without Certificate	53	78

Office-Bearers: There were 300 Elders and 183 Deacons, Managers or Board Members who are not Elders.

Baptisms: There were 10 Baptisms of children and 6 of adults.

Sunday Activities:

	2022	2023
Pre-school	58	52
P1 - 7	116	91
Congregations	23	23
Leaders	97	97
S 1 - 3	48	45
Congregations	15	15
S 4 - 6	21	26
Congregations	9	9

Midweek Organisations for Children & Young People:

Number	56	54
Membership	1317	1007

Adult Organisations:

Number	140	137
Membership	1,762	1,839

Roll of persons not yet Communicants: The Committee recommend to the Kirk Session the practice of keeping a careful record of all persons not yet communicants who are in any way connected with the Church either by attendance or by affiliation with any organisation of the Church.

ADMINISTRATION

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2024

Appendix 1 of this report outlines the Order of Business for our 2024 General Assembly, due to take place at The Salutation Hotel in Perth, from **Wednesday 5th until Friday 7th June**.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2025

The Committee recommends that the 2025 General Assembly again be held in The Salutation Hotel, Perth from **Wednesday 4th June until Friday 6th June**.

Both sets of dates return us to our regular pattern of days for the Assembly to meet and the Committee would ask that this information is safely stored in your diaries as soon as possible.

PRINCIPAL CLERK

It was with regret that the Committee received a letter of resignation as junior Principal Clerk from Rev Colin C Brown. Mr Brown has earned the respect both within and beyond the

United Free Church for his work as a Principal Clerk since being appointed in 2004 and the whole Church will wish him well in his retirement.

Rev. Martin Keane will continue as a Principal Clerk but with a vacancy created by Mr Browns's retiral the Committee recommends that the Rev Gordon D Mackenzie be also appointed as a Principal Clerk, Mr Mackenzie will therefore be known as Junior Principal Clerk.

GENERAL SECRETARY

The Committee is hugely grateful to Rev. Jerome O'Brien for his willingness to continue in the post of interim General Secretary until the end of 2024.

However, Mr. O'Brien has indicated to us that his intention is to conclude his tenure in this key role at the close of December. He will endeavour to assist us in a smooth transition to someone else beyond that date, but the clear and reasonable perspective he has is that an endpoint must be in view.

Mr. O'Brien has been actively evaluating the role of General Secretary whilst fulfilling the role and the Committee feels that his report based on direct experience will produce much of relevance to the process of shaping a job description for the recruitment of his successor.

We are therefore acutely aware that time must be devoted between now and then to assessing the role itself and identifying a successor, bearing in mind the current very stable working arrangements now existing in Church Office.

Ideally the Committee would hope that a successor can be in place whilst Mr. O'Brien is still in post, thereby enabling the person chosen to undertake the steep learning curve involved alongside vital support and advice from the present incumbent.

CHURCH OFFICE

Our interim General Secretary coordinates the weekly administration of Church Office with an eye for detail alongside a very diligent and thoroughly organised work ethic.

He is ably assisted by Mrs. Helena Jarvis, who has an unsurpassed and in-depth knowledge not only of working practices within the office, but also a personal connection with so many people across all our congregations nurtured over many years. The Committee would wish to note that Mrs. Jarvis will be marking 40 years of faithful service in Newton Place during July 2024.

Mr. Lawrence Renn completes the team as our go-to finance person, organising the flow of funds and ensuring that the financial records and audit trail for the denomination are kept up-to-date and in order.

The pattern of hybrid working which the office staff have utilised since COVID hasn't impeded or undermined the efficacy of our functioning as a denomination. Systems are in place to keep up with the current priority of administrative tasks. Things are up to date and our staff members are comfortable with their working environment and practices.

The office is normally open either 2 or 3 days each week, though these timings are flexible depending on the need for access to the premises being required either by Committees or Working Groups.

It should be noted that the Committee is increasingly concerned about the long-term viability of our premises at 11 Newton Place. Many groups report never holding an in-person meeting there, whereas in previous years the office always served as a working environment and social meeting point for people from across the United Free Church.

We realise that a hub or focal point for our ongoing work will always be needed. Indeed, it is an essential component of denominational identity to have an operating address for the purposes of central administration and maintaining a recognised Christian presence.

However, the question remains whether that current location still meets our expectations and needs, alongside the issue of how long the premises will either be necessary, affordable or useful to us. Many factors will contribute to this evaluation-location, size, costings, level of use etc.

This issue has been raised frequently in some responses received to the questionnaires of our Working Group on Church Ethos and Structures.

WORKING GROUP ON CHURCH ETHOS AND STRUCTURES

Last year's General Assembly approved the following Paragraph of Deliverance:

“The General Assembly instruct the Governance Committee to appoint a working group, made up of members from each Assembly Committee, to review the structures and ethos of the denomination as a matter of urgency.”

This is only an interim and summary account of an exercise that's still very much a work in progress. It will take further time, reflection and discussion across the wider church for concrete and sustainable recommendations to emerge. It is hoped that a report can be produced within a reasonable timescale.

It should be noted that the question of ethos was considered as recently as 2019 by the Review Group which reported to that year's General Assembly. Our commitment to being a Biblically-based, egalitarian and mission-centred church with all the values and perspectives flowing naturally from these core principles was re-affirmed.

It should also be noted that the question of structures has been addressed on a number of previous occasions. The extensive work of the Way Forward Group produced a series of Assembly reports between 1997 and 2003 looking in-depth at the various structural levels (congregation, Presbytery and General Assembly) within our denomination in terms of their fitness for purpose in changing times.

Following the 2023 Paragraph of Deliverance, a representative Working Group from across our Committees and Presbyteries was duly formed, and to date it has met twice. It was felt that we should begin the task with a consultation exercise.

Questionnaires were disseminated to all Assembly Commissioners, asking for opinions about our ethos and current structures. Committee Conveners and Presbytery Clerks were also approached for their views in relation to the efficacy of current arrangements for the fulfilment of their remits.

The returned questionnaires have been read and initially discussed by the Group. None of the responses indicated that any immediate or major change is required to our evangelical, Reformed, Presbyterian, egalitarian and mission-centred ethos.

Our 'new' structure of three Standing Committees dates from its approval by the Commission of Assembly which met in August 2020, only four years ago. It will naturally take time for any new system to become established and known. Time allows us to understand what is working well and what isn't, as well as pointing to things which can be changed in order to improve the ways we are seeking to serve the Lord as his church-*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*.

A number of common themes have emerged from responses in relation to reviewing our structures, which will greatly assist us. An in-person meeting of the Group will take place in Church Office on Thursday 2nd May to move things forward. It is intended that this will be reported upon and followed up during the Thursday evening of this year's General Assembly, allowing for wider participation and input to this vital, ongoing exercise.

These themes include thinking through the best ways for congregations to function effectively at local level in times of challenge for good governance, not to mention the essential need for far better and more regular communication between Presbyteries, Assembly Committees and our congregations at grassroots level. Many have also noted the imperative to improve ways of communicating better online and engaging with our wider society.

A lot has been suggested to facilitate lighter, freer and more logical operation across Committees and Working Groups. It may be that proposals will be brought forward to re-assign particular remits and responsibilities, always seeking to bear in mind the balance between good governance with accountability and the need for proactive and swift decision-making which allows for mission and revitalisation to be prioritised.

STEDFAST

The Committee would express its warm appreciation to Miss Jane Sandell, Stedfast Secretary, alongside the members of the Stedfast Group for the ongoing relevance and diverse content of our denominational magazine.

It has been particularly informative to read the current series of articles about key people in the United Free Church, a great addition to the established formula of local and national news around the churches.

The Committee would ask congregations to consider making a contribution to Stedfast, particularly if what's happening in their situation might encourage others to try something similar.

PRAYER UNION

The Committee would reiterate the warm thanks expressed in last year's Report to Mrs. Wemyss Billows as Prayer Union Convener, all members of the Prayer Union Committee and its team of writers for their faithful and diligent efforts in promoting the ministry of prayer across the denomination and beyond over many years.

Mrs. Billows has served tirelessly in her role with amazing resilience and a unique personal gift to encourage others in the essential need for prayer to underpin the church's life. The Prayer and Study Guide has become an indispensable part of our denomination's discipleship and witness.

When the Committee received news of Mrs. Billows' decision to step down, alongside all members of the Committee, it was with sadness but also a real sense of deep appreciation for the amazing work they have collectively achieved.

The Committee is delighted that Mrs. Elizabeth McDowall has agreed to take on the role of Prayer Union Convener for the next three years. She brings a very experienced skillset of organising prayer material from her Scripture Union background, which will enable her to work with the Prayer Union Committee and team of writers to continue producing what is an invaluable resource for use within the denomination.

A small, but representative, Prayer Union Committee has now been formed to work alongside our new Convener. Its members are Mrs. Cathy Steed, Miss Mhairi Dawson and Rev. Andy Ellison.

It's intended that the Committee will develop a plan of action to shape the themes and formatting of the 2025 Prayer Union Guide, drawing on past practice but also seeking to identify new ways to make the material accessible and engaging. A process of interaction between the Committee and dedicated team of writers will then gradually produce what's required.

REGISTER OF CONTROLLING INTEREST IN LAND

The Committee is grateful for the careful assistance of the Principal Clerks and the Church Solicitor in outlining ways to comply with regulations concerning the Register of Controlling Interest in Land. This became a legal requirement on 1st April 2024, and failure to comply will be treated as a criminal offence potentially attracting a substantial fine. Guidance was issued to all congregations offering help in meeting the legal requirements for registration of their property.

SAFEGUARDING

The Committee would again thank all those involved in the vital process of maintaining the operation of the PVG Scheme within our denominational life. The protection of our children and vulnerable adults from harm remains a key priority.

It should be noted that no new or updated guidelines, though long promised, have as yet been received from the Scottish Government. The Safeguarding Group will maintain a watching brief on this issue, taking the necessary steps to update our procedures and training in due course.

MODERATOR

The Committee is extremely grateful to the Moderator, Rev. Andy Downie, for his faithful work over the year. This has included visits to congregations and sharing around God's Word, contributions to a variety of Committees and Working Groups, as well as a representative presence at national events on behalf of our denomination.

The Moderator's leading in prayer was a very meaningful part of the 2023 General Assembly, commented upon and valued by many of us.

His resident status in Elgin has meant many hours of travelling in the course of a demanding schedule! The whole church is very grateful to Mr. Downie and his wife, Norma, for all that they've done to support and encourage us in these challenging times.

NOMINATIONS TO ASSEMBLY COMMITTEES AND WORKING/SUB-GROUPS

The Committee is greatly indebted to all those who participate in the life and witness of our Assembly Committees and associated Working Groups. A lot of responsibility falls to

Conveners and Vice Conveners, particularly in matters of regular administration which enable our structures to operate efficiently.

It can be seen that there will be significant changes in membership of our Committees over the coming year. The Committee is confident that those soon to be appointed to new roles will fulfil them with the gifts they are bringing to the table.

It is possible that the final outcome of the Ethos and Structures review will lead to some changes in our Committees and Working Groups, in order to facilitate more effective and smoother operation with a renewed focus upon gospel priorities.

SPECIAL AID

The work of Special Aid in supporting our retired ministers and their spouses has continued within the essential parameters of confidentiality. The issues raised with Special Aid normally relate to property or financial support.

The Committee would reassure the General Assembly that everything is dealt with very discreetly, whilst always seeking to balance the needs of those involved alongside criteria of fairness and good practice in administering the affairs of the church.

ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

Throughout the last year the Moderator, Rev A Downie, has represented the denomination on the Scottish Church Leaders Forum (SCLF) and Rev M Whitehead has continued to be our representative on the Ecumenical Officers Forum (EOF). As was advised in last year's report, much of the energy that has been expended has been directed towards the development of a concrete proposal for a new Ecumenical Instrument in Scotland to take over that role from Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) and to be called The Scottish Christian Forum (SCF). As a result, much of this report will be concerned with the progress of this proposal under the heading: Scottish Christian Forum

SCOTTISH CHURCH LEADERS FORUM (SCLF)

This Forum came into being during the challenging times of global pandemic with the felt need to have a shared call to weekly prayer across Scotland. Since then, it has grown as a voluntary, relational, and participatory body of senior church leaders representing at present 14 different churches and Christian communities within Scotland who gather together for the purpose of sharing fellowship, information, and insight. Meetings tend to be held on ZOOM.

ECUMENICAL OFFICERS FORUM (EOF)

This group is made up of the Ecumenical officers or Ecumenical representatives of various denominations in Scotland. It is a smaller group than the SCLF and meets monthly on ZOOM and, from time to time, in person. Much of its work this year has been concerned with developing the proposed SCF, it having been charged to undertake this work following the round table gathering of the ecumenical stakeholders on 16th January 2023. The EOF has also been given responsibility for overseeing the various Local Ecumenical Partnerships that have been established throughout Scotland.

SCOTTISH CHRISTIAN FORUM (SCF)

The EOF reported back to a further gathering of the ecumenical stakeholders on 24th October 2023 putting forward a proposal which would have had the SCF established as a “light touch” body, with the clear purpose of supporting and enhancing the already active ecumenical relationships between national church bodies in Scotland. To facilitate the work of the SCF an administrative secretariat would be established using the lead church model for employment related issues. This proposal was accepted at the time and the EOF was further tasked with preparing more detailed plans and reporting back with these in early February 2024.

However, during the intervening weeks one of the participating denominations decided that the agreed proposal wouldn't in fact be compatible with the way that they see themselves engaging ecumenically in Scotland and so the EOF, at its January meeting, agreed to recommend an alternative proposal which effectively ‘tightens up’ the current system without any significant changes, as follows:

That the existing bodies of the SCLF and the EOF initially form the Scottish Christian Forum, by slightly amending their current terms of reference but without significantly altering their objectives. Both bodies would continue to carry out the work they do currently but in a more collaborative way.

-That the SCF exist only in the two bodies working together, and as an umbrella term encompassing both and their shared work, whilst being open to enlarging the partnership to other bodies which concur with the aims of the Forum, as and when requested. Indeed, already the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, the World Day of Prayer Committee and Eco-Congregations Scotland have expressed an interest and are seriously considering joining the Forum.

-That the EOF undertake secretarial responsibility for the CLF by nominating two of its members to serve as co-secretaries, and that the EOF as a whole would function, effectively, as the executive arm of the CLF

-That the ‘ecumenical instrument’ sits with both bodies collegially, the EOF acting as first point of contact.

-That participating in one of the bodies wouldn't automatically mean participation and association with the other. Each church and tradition would participate in each body as it desires to.

-As the SCF will not have any employees or office accommodation, no financial contributions will be required from participating churches.

At a further round table meeting held on 6th February 2024, and attended by Rev C Brown and Rev M Whitehead, it was agreed by all who were present that this proposal should be taken through the formal approval process of the various church traditions, it being recognised that the SCF will grow and change organically as more Christian Churches and other organisations become part of its life.

ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND (ACTS)

ACTS are in the process of changing their constitution to enable them to be solely a grant making body.

BILATERAL MEETINGS

An enjoyable first meeting since Covid with representatives of the Free Church of Scotland took place on 13th March with Revs C Brown, T McWhirter, and M Whitehead representing the United Free Church of Scotland. An informal discussion took place on a variety of prepared topics over lunch ranging from church planting and revitalisation to safeguarding strategy and training. The intention is for further meetings to follow. Thanks are due to Rev J O'Brien for arranging the meeting.

LOCAL CO-OPERATION

The “BEK” (Burntisland, Erskine and Kinghorn) local covenant between the Burntisland: Erskine UF Church and two neighbouring Churches of Scotland was revised as the Church of Scotland congregations have united. It is intended that the revised covenant will be signed in the near future, by the two churches, at a joint service.

ASSEMBLIES AND SYNODS

Once more invitations have been received from a number of other denominations, requesting that a representative of the United Free Church attend their Synod or Assembly. We would express thanks to those who have given consideration to representing the United Free Church of Scotland at these Assemblies and Synods. And we also express our gratitude to the denominations concerned for their invitations.

In the name of the Committee,

ALEXANDER RITCHIE	Convener
ANNE C BRYCE	Vice-convener
J MARTIN WHITEHEAD	Vice-convener
JEROME O'BRIEN	Secretary

