**THE FUTURE OF THE WINDERMERE CENTRE**

**AND OF THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH**

The Free to Believe Committee received the news of the probable demise of the Windermere Centre with immense sadness. Members reflected on significant experiences in their personal journeys which had been associated with the Centre and were dismayed at the possibility that such opportunities would be denied to others in the future.

The fact that the Windermere Centre provokes such personal reflections is far from irrelevant. There are now very few opportunities for members of the United Reformed Church to affirm their common identity by meeting outside the confines of mundane week-by-week church life. To spend time removed from the pressures of daily life alongside others, especially when those others bring the experience of another fellowship whose circumstances are very different, is to affirm the nature of the Church as wider than a single fellowship or group pastorate. It is not without significance that Free to Believe itself emerged from a conference at Windermere and would probably never have happened without it.

While we value the contribution of Westminster College to the life of the Church, events at Westminster have a very different feeling to those at Windermere, which tend to be more about encountering other participants than the institution.

 Given the need to reverse the serious erosion which has taken place over recent years in the sense of identification by local members with the United Reformed Church nationally, we do not consider an expenditure of £3 per head of membership to be in any way excessive, especially considering the staggering imbalance between the actual number of those who now make up the Church and the cost of providing staff and facilities for its cumbersome administration and governance. A sense of identity, essential if the Church is to survive, will not be facilitated by adding another employee, no matter how talented and enthusiastic, to central staff nor by any amount on expenditure on Church House.

 To treat a focus of identity like Windermere as an optional extra, left essentially to promote itself, is a serious error. We urge that there should be no decision to finalize one more retreat along the path to the fading away of the United Reformed Church unless and until the Church nationally has put its weight, for at least three years, behind a concerted campaign to encourage local pastorates to take advantage of the Centre’s facilities, either by organizing their own event or by participating in one of the Centre’s more general offerings. No moderatorial visit or contact with synod staff, no synod or training session should be considered complete without an exhortation to make use of the Centre to broaden the local church’s horizons to include new insights and experiences. The Church’s communications staff should be tasked with aiding the Centre in raising its profile. Other central and synod staff should be active in exploring the possibility of delivering training and new experiences through the Centre. Failure to fill the Centre on a regular should be viewed not as a failure of the Centre itself but of the national Church – and a failure which will call into question the likelihood of the Church reversing its fortunes.

 We urge Mission Council to reject the temptation to retreat and to commit itself to a bold and committed strategy to use the Windermere Centre as an invaluable tool in the re-invigoration of the life of the Church.

David Lawrence on behalf of the Free to Believe Committee