



Engaging in the Public Square

**“Serving from the Margins”:  
The Free Churches and  
Further Education**

**A Working Group Report for the Directors of  
the Free Churches Group**

**July 2016**

**Chair: Dr John Wise, Chief Executive, fbfe**

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## Foreword

I welcome and commend this report by the Working Group which sets out proposals for the future engagement of the Free Churches with further education. Further education's principles of openness, of providing second chances, and of concern for the disadvantaged are very close to the Free Church principles of equality, inclusiveness, freedom of conscience and social justice. So there is much to be gained from closer working together.

Further Education is a large and key part of our education system. Further Education Colleges provide opportunities for some 3 million learners every year. They cater for young people and adults. They provide courses at every level from those for people with learning difficulties to those at degree level and above. They have a key role in helping people obtain the qualifications and skills they need for jobs. And they are big players in local communities including in community outreach.

During my career, I have served both further education and the Methodist Church at national and local level. I was Director General for Further and Higher Education in the Department for Education for eight years and I am currently Chair of the Corporation of my local further education college, London South East Colleges. In the Methodist Church I have been active at local level throughout my life and at national level was Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee of the Methodist Council for six years.

As Director General I was struck by how this key education sector did not receive the same public attention and political pressures as schools and universities. And I think this has also been true of churches. We have tended to focus on engagement with schools and universities rather than further education colleges. Perhaps that is because schools and universities and academic qualifications are much more familiar than further education colleges to many of us from our own experiences. So it is good to examine how our Free Churches at every level could increase awareness of and engagement with the sector.

Section 8 of the report sets out a number of specific recommendations for increasing the engagement of the free churches with further education. The recommendations seem to me to offer a practical way forward for the free churches to get closer to further education and make a bigger impact. I endorse them and hope that they will be pursued.

Roger Dawe

## 1. Introduction

In 2015 a Working Group was commissioned by the Directors of the Free Churches Group to produce a report on the current and potential future engagement of the Free Churches with Further Education (FE).

The brief for the report from the Directors outlined the following aims and outcomes for the Working Group's investigation and final report. The aims were to:

- undertake a scoping exercise to discern the most effective areas of engagement for the Free Churches with further education;
- explore existing projects and initiatives in which the Free Churches are involved and to identify good practice;
- reflect theologically on the issues involved for the Free Churches regarding further education;
- build capacity amongst the Free Churches to support further education
- build up the Further Education presence on the Free Church Education Committee;
- produce a report which identifies theological issues, policy considerations and proposals for the future practical engagement of the Free Churches with further education.

Details of the Working Group's membership and an outline of its activities are given in Appendix 1 and 2.

### A Challenging Context

*“The Free Church perspective is committed to what is best for all in education.”*

*“Traditionally... in the Nonconformist denominations there has been an emphasis on endorsing state education.”<sup>1</sup>*

*The imperative for the free churches to engage with further education is informed by a number of significant factors which include the great number of young people and adults engaged in further education; the distinctive nature of further education, particularly its values of inclusiveness, often reaching to the most vulnerable in society; its local community facing provision and the way in which such values and features resonate so closely to those of the Free Churches.*

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<sup>1</sup> A Free Church Voice on Education, 2010

Any attempt to promote active engagement between the Free Churches and FE has to provide responses to three major questions:

1. How can the Free Church denominations be encouraged to extend their broad commitments to the public education service to the work of further education? This core question involves consideration of how to initiate discussion of further education issues, alongside those of the other public education sectors, on denominational agendas? How can the social and economic value of the FE sector, both nationally and locally, be articulated and expressed in terms which denominations and individual church members can relate to their own activities?

### ***Lack of awareness of FE***

Whether or not we are teachers, we think we know about schools because we certainly went to school at some point in our lives, and we may well have watched while younger family members attended school with all the ups and downs that involves.

Again whether or not we are university professors, we may think we know about universities even if we did not attend university ourselves. We know that our family doctor, our pharmacist, our solicitor, our vet all attended university. We may have graduation photos of family members on the wall. We may have admired grand university buildings on holiday and listened to academics on the radio.

But it is possible to go through life with a very vague awareness of FE. There is little widespread appreciation and understanding of further education amongst the public at large, the sector is often referred to as the “invisible sector”; its range, size, purposes and contribution to society and the economy are frequently unrecognised. We may not have a family member currently studying there, or know anyone who teaches there, or ever have been there. We are unlikely to know if our car mechanic and hairdresser studied at our local college or not. While individuals may be aware of their local college, it is less likely that they also associate further education with adult and community education, work-based learning, apprenticeships, provision for special needs and education in prisons. The importance of a sector which currently educates more 16-19 full-time students than maintained school sixth forms needs to be emphasised.

2. How can denominations and congregations be encouraged to see public education, and specifically further education, as a subject for engagement and action beyond intercessory prayer and possibly the annual Education Sunday? For some denominations, regrettably, education is frequently interpreted narrowly, with the highest priority given to training for ordained and lay members of the denomination. The potential of support and engagement with public education as a theme for mission, outreach and social justice activities remains at best under-developed.

3. How can denominations and congregations be convinced that engagement with further education is a natural part of their life and work, consistent with their theology, pastoral care and mission?

### ***Not on the radar... on the margins***

The FE college might be said to be at the margins of our community. It is unlikely to be next to the village green like our local primary school, or have grand buildings like the university in a nearby city. FE teachers are not invited to speak on Radio 4 and few television documentaries chart their story. Government ministers are rarely very interested in them and their budgets are always the most vulnerable.

It is often the case, even for those who work in other sectors of education such as primary schools or universities, that many do not understand or acknowledge the diversity and agenda of the FE sector. Most people are 'woefully ill-informed about this major part of the UK's education system.'<sup>2</sup> For many, FE remains the proverbial light hidden under a bushel (Matthew 5 v14-15)

FE is often on the margins of church life too. We might well pray for school teachers, we like our minister to take assemblies in the local primary school, and we try to contact the university chaplain when a young person matriculates. Have we any idea when a young person connected with our churches begins a college course? Do we know any adults in our congregations who attend courses locally?

FE institutions may not have enough students practising a particular faith to form their own self-confident student society, but it may not be appropriate for a member of staff to take the lead. Further Education does not, with the exception of Catholic Sixth Form Colleges, have faith-based provision, or institutions based on previous religious foundations. In the past certainly, the sector has sought to present itself as "secular", a stance that is slowly being broken down as institutions increasingly recruit students and staff from a wide range of ethnic and faith backgrounds. At one level FE institutions have no statutory responsibility, and therefore no resources, to develop the whole person, but that is what Ofsted expects. However, a majority of further education colleges now have some form of chaplaincy support for students and staff. The overwhelming majority of funded college chaplains are provided through the Church of England, with a few from the Methodist Church. Despite the significant resources devoted to hospital, prison and armed forces chaplaincy by the Free Churches, their contribution through ordained ministry to FE chaplaincy remains remarkably low. There are also many opportunities for lay free church members to contribute as participants in multi-faith college chaplaincy teams, but again participation in this work is limited.

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<sup>2</sup> Foreword by Lorna Unwin, page xv, *The Coming of Age for FE? Reflections on the past and future role of further education colleges in England*. Edited by Ann Hodgson IOE Press, 2015

### ***Mission to the marginalised***

But this God of ours is a God of the margins. God calls marginal people from marginal places. To a greater or lesser extent, the churches of the Free Churches Group are on the edge too. There is something of a connection between a marginalised church and a marginalised sector of education. The college is a context in which to encounter 'the other', for there is no typical FE: the young and the old, those pressing forward with their learning and those who failed to reach their potential at secondary school, those secure in well-paying careers and those whose best hope is the living wage are all members of the FE community.

FE colleges draw students and staff from a wide geographical area. This is a context for the kind of approach behind John Wesley's famous 'The World is my Parish' quip. Circuits, Pastorates, and the 'catchment' area of the fellowship of smaller denominations are more likely to have congruity with the catchment area of the local college than with the local primary school.

### ***An easy target for cuts***

Engagement with FE is unlikely to get you any extra kudos in your local community or a seat at the high table! To engage in it at all is, in a sense, an act of dissent. At one level, it is not a rewarding place. Because it does not enjoy the same statutory protections as other education sectors, further education is frequently ignored by politicians and the media. Few ministers or politicians have attended FE or done apprenticeships. Thus they have no experience and little understanding of what FE offers. Reductions in funding are easier for politicians to implement and less likely to receive media coverage. The current, very challenging, financial circumstances faced by the sector have not received widespread publicity, despite the adverse effect of these on staff and students. Principals and Governors are convinced that further education has taken a disproportionate share of the current education funding cuts, but find it difficult to publicise this view.

Since FE lies outside the education funding 'ring fence' operated by the current government, its recent experience has been of reducing funds and shrinking activity levels, similar to other unprotected areas of the public sector. FE teachers are usually paid less than their school equivalents. But there are other, intangible rewards because: FE is the place of second chances, bringing hope and opportunity to those whose previous experience of education has been unsuccessful, to those seeking a new direction in life or career. FE is a place where people can experience and gain from high quality training and education. FE is a place of first names – there is a Quaker resonance here; FE is a place of only one canteen, a community that eats in the round.

Perhaps to the church, the FE college might seem like Nineveh: a place that's hard to go to or so challenging as to be avoided? Certainly it has to be acknowledged that developments must begin from a low base given a shortage of resources and pressing alternative priorities on both sides and the currently weak public perception of FE.

To some extent too the scope and context for this report to the Free Churches Directors is hard to quantify and illustrate as the FE sector is so diverse, difficult to quantify and hard to define. The sections which follow offer a working definition and some opportunity to support our understanding concluding in a call to action with some visionary recommendations to demystify this dynamic and complex arena.



## **2. What is FE?**

### ***Defining FE***

Further Education is a generic term which covers a broad range of provision for learners. The structures across the UK are broadly similar but there are some important differences, for example, Sixth Form Colleges are only found in England. In England colleges ceased to be controlled by their local education authority in 1992 when they were incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act. They are now independent institutions responsible to their governing bodies, subject to regular inspection by Ofsted and funded by central government

The Department for Education (DfE) funds students up to 18 years old through the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and students aged 19 and over through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA)

### ***The size and scope of FE***

Each year colleges in England educate and train 2.9 million people, who come from a wide range of backgrounds, with different needs and aspirations. The majority of full-time learners are aged between 16 and 19 but enrolled students can be both younger and older.

773,000 16-18 year olds study at a General FE or Sixth Form College. By comparison 442,000 in this age group choose to stay at school. College students include 27% of all full time 'A' level students as well as students enrolled on vocational courses. A further 71,000 are following an apprenticeship through a college. In addition, 22,000 14-15 year olds are enrolled on link programmes where they study vocational subjects at college for part of the week and are at school for the rest of the week. There are also 2,000 students aged 14 and 15 who attend college full-time with the agreement of their schools.

General Further Education (GFE) Colleges are primarily local institutions. There are GFE colleges in every city, many towns and across all the rural areas of the UK. They offer a diverse range of learning programmes and qualifications to Level 5 and beyond, some of which are also offered by schools or universities, but the majority are vocational qualifications from preparatory courses to Level 2 (which is a GCSE grades A-C equivalent) through to certificate, diploma, sub-degree, foundation degree and degree level. This range encompasses GCSE, 'A' level, certificate and diploma courses, NVQs, support for apprenticeships and staff development and training for employers. Consequently, GFE Colleges can offer progression pathways to students that take them from basic skills to degree level and beyond in a range of vocational subjects such as engineering, catering and hospitality, IT, construction and the creative arts

There are currently 93 Sixth Form Colleges in England. Most were established in the 1970's to provide a wider range of choice to post-16 students wanting to take 'A' levels. Greater student numbers allow them to offer 30+ subjects at 'A' level, usually including multiple modern foreign language and maths courses and a choice of history syllabus. Most also offer BTEC diploma courses in areas such as art and design, public services and business studies. Many also offer an adult education programme.

The FE sector also includes a significant number of specialist colleges. There are 14 Land Based Colleges in England. Originally they specialised in agriculture and horticulture, but have widened their curriculum offers to include equine care and management, small animal care, land management for recreation (green keeping, parks management, landscaping, game keeping) and a range of other land related subjects. Like GFE Colleges they offer courses from entry to degree level and beyond. Most have residential accommodation available.

A group of 10 colleges, Specialist Designated Colleges, receive government funding to provide academic and vocational education for adults. These colleges have differing profiles, ranging from The City Lit, a large adult education college in central London, to small residential colleges offering access to higher education and the professions to adults who have not previously had such opportunities.

There are also several non-maintained specialist colleges which offer bespoke provision to young people (usually in the 16 to 25 age range) with special educational needs. These include the Royal National College for the Blind, Treloar's College and the National Star College, which provides for students with physical disabilities. Students here are funded to attend these colleges on an individual basis according to their learning needs

### ***Preparation for employment***

Training for employment is offered by a network of private training providers supporting vocational learning, apprenticeships and The Work Programme (a Government scheme which assists people to find work and to be trained in the skills which their employers need). Many General FE Colleges are contracted providers to the programme along with other organisations. The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) has 750+ members, the majority of whom are independent private companies, not for profits and voluntary sector and employment services organisations. In 2015 AELP members engaged with nearly 300,000 employers and supported 117, 240 learners to complete an apprenticeship.

## ***Family and adult learning***

Despite significant reductions in spending many local authorities continue to offer Adult and Community Learning (ACL) either through direct provision or under contract to private providers or colleges. Funding for leisure and recreational learning has been significantly reduced, as has spending on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). However, activities such as Family Learning and introductory courses with progression to accredited learning continue to be offered alongside accredited programmes from Level One upwards with progression to employment or higher education. ACL remains a significant source of opportunities for adults returning to study, seeking to develop new skills or re-train, and for older learners seeking learning, pursuit of hobbies and interests and social interaction. For these older learners ACL often provides relief from personal isolation and social exclusion.

## ***Types of student***

The profile of students attending FE colleges is diverse and research shows (Frumkin *et al.*<sup>3</sup>) that the majority come from relatively low achieving backgrounds including working class learners and those from disadvantaged groups. FE students include:

- those with a wide range of learning difficulties and disabilities, developing skills for living;
- young people and adults studying numeracy, language (ESOL) and literacy;
- full or part-time students on vocational courses such as hair and beauty, engineering, business, travel and tourism, art, media, agriculture, horticulture;
- GCSE and A level students;
- those seeking to re-enter employment;<sup>4</sup>
- those who are up-skilling or changing direction;
- those seeking personal development or general interest;<sup>5</sup>
- for community regeneration and neighbourhood renewal – by adults seeking to engage their communities in self-help activities;<sup>6</sup>
- Higher Education students and those studying for professional qualifications.

Most colleges are non-selective in that they offer a broad range of study programmes including those with minimal or no entry requirements. These courses are offered alongside more advanced programmes which have specific entry criteria such as those for 'A' level and HE provision. For all these learners, and particularly those from vulnerable social groups, FE is thus the provider of a second chance for those who need it.

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<sup>3</sup> Frumkin, L., Koutsoubou, M., Vorhausm, J. (2008) Minority Ethnic Groups: Success rates in further education – a literature review, QIA (LSIS)

<sup>4</sup> The Coming of Age for FE? chapter 3, Students count, by Adrian Perry and Peter Davies, p. 47

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

At local level, colleges work in partnership with other agencies to assist young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training after leaving school, as well as those experiencing a combination of problems which often include drug abuse, homelessness and poverty. Learners can also include prisoners (through college delivered contracts) and offenders in the community.

FE undertakes progression activities that HE doesn't do as well – e.g. preparing people for the world of work. Job entry rates are not the prime driver of universities or higher education students. For apprenticeships and independent training providers, job entry rates are the driver – and not just getting people into work, but getting them into a career. Independent training providers provide for 40 year olds who are in work and offer skills that can give them tools to progress in their career, thus creating opportunities for younger entrants to trades and professions.

### ***Personal transformation***

For individuals, FE often plays a key role in personal transformation, thus making society a richer, more wholesome and integrated place. It offers young people and adults the chance to engage in academic or vocational learning. It is often a main stimulus for change at key transition points of people's lives, such as those leaving school and beginning an apprenticeship and entering the world of work, or a parent wishing to brush up on skills after a period of childcare. Further education, even more so than HE, gives those at lower levels of educational attainment and personal confidence the chance to step bravely on to the ladder of opportunity and take small steps to build their skills, esteem and competence to be more connected parents and carers, more confident citizens and employees and members of society who have increased resilience and compassion.

### 3. Why does FE matter?

#### ***A critical time for FE***

The philosopher, Alain de Botton, argues that ‘education is what makes us fully human.’<sup>7</sup> It is this act of becoming fully human that is relevant from a faith perspective, so we can feel fully whole in God, but it is relevant from a secular perspective too. Having our educational consciousness raised and our access to thinking skills, cultural values and vocational skills stimulated, we can all play a fuller role in the places we live and in society more widely.

However, we are currently at a crucial milestone where we risk losing some of the best work that enables and cherishes individuals to reach more of their potential.

The reductions in public spending since 2010 have had a disproportionate impact on FE because, unlike schools, it is not a statutory or ring-fenced education provision. Consequently, funding has fallen by over 27% overall in the past five years. This has placed many colleges at financial risk with smaller Sixth Form Colleges facing particular difficulties. The funding for adult education, including provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) has been significantly reduced.

#### ***Government review of FE***

Partly in response to the financial problems facing 30% of colleges, the government has announced a programme of reviews of FE provision (excluding school sixth forms and University Technical Colleges) in each area of England with the intent of identifying and then establishing the appropriate set of institutions to offer high quality provision based on the current and future needs of learners and employers within the local area.

The outcomes proposed are that the Area Based Reviews (ABRs) should deliver:

- Institutions which are financially viable, sustainable, resilient and efficient, and deliver maximum value for public investment. This should take account of the scale of the public finances challenge over the next few years. It should also reflect the findings of a review by BIS<sup>8</sup>, DfE and Her Majesty’s Treasury which identified wide variation in costs at FE colleges, indicating potential for greater efficiency especially in terms of administration costs.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/07/alain-de-botton-education-what-makes-us-fully-human>

<sup>8</sup> BIS is now the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy – BEIS

- The reviews will identify the scope to make efficiencies in a range of ways, including (a) removing duplication in the curriculum; (b) reducing management and administration costs; (c) making more efficient use of the land and buildings controlled by the sector and (d) enabling more efficient and effective use of technology both in terms of teaching, support and assessment and back office systems.
- An offer that meets each area's educational and economic needs. This will mean (a) assessing what these needs are; (b) considering how existing provision and delivery structures can be adapted to deliver them more effectively and efficiently and (c) understanding and, where appropriate, mitigating, any adverse impact on other parts of the wider education system including higher education. This should result in closer links between colleges and employers and provision which adapts to the current and future needs of employers and learners. There is a particular role in ensuring individuals have the relevant up to date digital skills increasingly required in the workforce, as well as the basic digital skills needed to engage in an increasingly digital world.
- Providers with strong reputations and greater specialisation. Providers should focus on what they can deliver effectively and to a high standard. An important outcome of each review will be the establishment of clearly aligned progression routes, from schools through to specialised institutions including new Institutes of Technology, and National Colleges.
- Provision which reflects changes in government funding priorities and future demand. In particular, this will mean creating the capacity to support the delivery of 3 million apprenticeships nationally over the life of this parliament.

Following pilots, the first reviews commenced in September 2015 and the process is due to be completed in 2017. Significant concerns have been raised that as a result Sixth Form College provision will be reduced, travel to study journeys will be extended as a result of curriculum re-engineering and local provision will be lost through forced mergers between colleges significantly geographically, socially and culturally different. There are also concerns about a lack of vision about the role and purpose of the proposed specialised institutions. Increasingly it appears that the priority will be for apprenticeships and vocational learning for employment, to the detriment of other aspects of socially and educationally valuable current FE provision.

It has been sadly acknowledged in the wider media and in social commentary that there are 'tough times...ahead for FE colleges in England.'<sup>9</sup> If we lose FE provision which works with the most vulnerable members of our society, then we risk losing so much. We risk burying this treasure for good if we cannot and do not campaign for more funding, gain wider local involvement and stimulate engagement with other community services such as churches and voluntary sector organisations.

### **The need to champion FE**

In response to these concerns, we wonder if there is there a role for the Free Churches Group, through its denominational leaders, to highlight the inequality of the financial reductions placed upon FE compared with other branches of the education service; to champion the benefits which FE brings to society, local communities and individuals, through second chance opportunities, Adult and Community Learning and Special Needs services, and to raise a prophetic voice of protest against the impact of current developments on provision for the most vulnerable in our society? We recognise that such a stand may be politically unrealistic, and it certainly should not be the main or only focus for Free Church engagement with the sector. It would however be a powerful statement of our commitment to all parts of the public education sector and our Free Church principles of social justice and equality.

FE needs compassionate advocates at this time of financial and social change. It has a wide base and some of the most far reaching goals of engagement and social justice of any educational sector or setting. These values and mission are at the heart of further educational establishments. An example of the Barking & Dagenham college leadership team demonstrates this fully. The leaders there wish to show 'role modelling and living the values' including respect, social justice and fairness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Key Issues for Education and Training: A report on a series of seminars organised by the UCL Institute of Education with the Education and Training Foundation in 2015*. Published by The Education and Training Foundation with UCL Institute of Education Nov 2015, page 26

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, page 12

#### **4. Why should the Free Churches Engage with FE?**

*“God’s will is not that the Church should be saved, but that the world should be saved through the work of God in the world through the Church.”* (Archbishop William Temple)

##### ***The church reaching out to where people are***

The simplest answer to this question is purely statistical, relating to the sheer volume of people in the community who attend FE. The sector in England engages with nearly 3 million learners annually, and employs 145,000 staff, just over half of whom have lecturing contracts. According to the national census that is roughly 3 times more than national church attendance. Colleges particularly are places where young people in their later teenage years from all sections of local communities are brought together. Colleges in urban settings frequently have a higher than average proportion of students from ethnic minority communities. If our denominations and congregations wish to engage with these groups then they need to be present where they are rather than wait, frequently in vain, for people to come to them.

During his ministry Christ spoke of his purpose to bring us “life in all its fullness”. (John 10.10). There is no part of life that is outside the range of God’s care and compassion. God is present in FE, just as God is in schools, hospitals and prisons. Christ spoke of a ministry to bring teaching, healing and justice to all and a ministry that came to people wherever they were in their daily lives. His ministry was conducted both inside and outside places of worship, as much on the road, on the hillside or by the lake as in the synagogue. If the Church is to follow that example then it needs not only to open its doors in welcome to all, but also to go out to be where people are. Engagement with FE provides opportunities for both these approaches, from which the churches have much to offer and much to learn.

At the heart of the Jesus’ ministry, he reached out and spoke to people from all sectors of the community. Through these means, he was an inclusive teacher who cared for many different types of people, of all ages, from all backgrounds. Followers of Jesus are called ‘disciples’. We often use this word solely to describe those who strive to follow Jesus’ model of life. The word ‘disciple’ has a wider original meaning, borrowing from the Latin word, *discipulus*. This means follower, but it also means pupil or student, which in modern parlance we might call learner too. Free Churches have had a strong focus on creating learning communities within our churches to develop and encourage one another in the wider work of building the kingdom. It is logical therefore that we should value and engage with other sectors of our wider community who seek to support learning and development. Further education, because of its goals to help people in their next steps of life, makes an excellent synergy with the mission and values of Free Churches. In our churches, we aim to offer lifelong learning, with integrity and compassion and in many ways our local FE colleges and adult learning providers are doing the same!



### ***Free Church voice speaking up for the disadvantaged***

Free Church denominations do not have a 'provider' interest in further education, unlike schools and higher education. This should not be regarded as a disincentive to engagement. Rather it should open up the potential for dialogue and collaboration based on common values and purposes shared by the churches and the sector. Without a provider interest, Free Churches can express a more impartial concern for the education and training provided, a concern for the welfare of staff and students, a recognition of the sector's contribution to the local economy and society, a willingness to contribute to the life and work of FE institutions and encourage concern for the place of faith and spirituality in the lives of young people. FE is often a forgotten sector as it is perceived as lower in social class compared to A levels and the 'proper' academic route, and forgotten or avoided due to the complexity of the sector.<sup>11</sup> Alas, this is such a pity, as the FE sector has a rich and empowering potential for those involved within it.

A free church voice, our voice, silenced in the past by discrimination and inequality, must speak for those who are disadvantaged today because of policy, difference or discrimination. Our churches are naturally interested in social justice and a philosophy that values each and every individual in society. Further Education too has a commitment to access for all: offering a second chance for those who have not been successful at school, alternative pathways to success through vocational education and training, opportunities for personal development, health and fitness through leisure and recreation classes, provision for young adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, professional qualifications for those seeking career advancement or a career change, access to higher education for adult students, English classes for speakers of other languages.

Jesus, during his ministry, worked with and taught people where they were: in their lives of turmoil, opportunity, brokenness and seeking. He taught and inspired people, regardless of their social, economic, racial or cultural backgrounds. He challenged them with new types of wisdom and offered hope to encourage men and women of all ages to try to live differently and to grow into fullness. Further education serves a wide range of the community; arguably, it serves the widest range of people of any other educational sector.

Such a range of provision demonstrates that the sector too has a commitment to people from all strands of society and to outcomes that contribute to social justice. The offer is an inclusive one, with provision for learners of all ages and abilities, valuing the achievements of all students irrespective of background.

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<sup>11</sup> The Coming of Age for FE? page xv, Lorna Unwin

## ***Encountering the multi-faceted world***

The context of FE being very much invested in vocational training reminds us about how much it is engaged with living in the real world<sup>12</sup>; similarly, in the church we aim to serve our communities in the real world, not just in theory or well-meaning intention. Jesus' ministry took him to places both familiar and unfamiliar. He offered compassion, teaching, challenges and pastoral care to people from many different individuals, from communities who often were very unlike his own. FE seeks to serve the widest possible community of students and we model our churches on compassionately serving those within our churches, as well as having a sense of mission and justice for those beyond our own church walls. Like Jesus and the early church apostles and evangelists, we too are part of a diverse planet and our aim as churches, as in FE, is to engage with this diversity with courage, relevance and vision.

Increasingly colleges are moving towards a position which acknowledges a legitimate role for faith, belief and non-belief in the development of the whole person. Recent research from the National Council of Faiths and Beliefs in FE has demonstrated the importance of strong personal and community values, frequently but not invariably based on faith convictions, in the leadership and management of successful colleges<sup>13</sup>. In these colleges spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (SMSC), which allows learners to encounter different world-views, develop understanding and respect for views and values different from their own and a willingness to learn from others, become aware of the spiritual and moral dimensions of relationships and decision-making is recognised as a significant element in the preparation of learners for life and work in contemporary society. If learners are to develop to their fullest potential, education must provide them with not only skills and knowledge but also the scope to develop spiritually, intellectually and with the inter-personal skills and qualities essential for employment.

Like any model of building a community and having a sense of enterprise, whether in a church or a college, we often find there is a tension between the complementary but competing values of social justice and business need<sup>14</sup>. This may seem like an insoluble paradox, but it is the challenge and richness that both FE and churches face and we should face it boldly and with hope.

## ***Free Church values and FE***

All of these developments are undeniably consistent with Nonconformist principles of equality, inclusiveness, openness, and freedom of conscience and belief. Like the Gospels, the language of FE frequently emphasises hope, care, encouragement, potential and aspiration, essential motivators for students who come with limited previous educational success and with ambitions to progress beyond college or training provider. Institutional mission statements often highlight equality, diversity, valuing individuals, purpose, identity and empowerment.

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<sup>12</sup> *Key Issues for Education and Training: A report on a series of seminars organised by the UCL Institute of Education with the Education and Training Foundation in 2015*, p.23

<sup>13</sup> "Talking to Leaders about spiritual leadership: seeing it through to the shadows" 157 Group and fbfe 2015

<sup>14</sup> *Key Issues for Education and Training: A report on a series of seminars organised by the UCL Institute of Education with the Education and Training Foundation in 2015*. Page 30

There is a natural synergy here with the Free Church perspective that values every individual as a unique child of God.

There is indeed much similarity between denominations on the margins of church as portrayed by the media and a sector on the margins of public understanding of education. Neither can claim a privileged role or status compared with others. In their different ways both have a clear commitment to support the disadvantaged in society. But a commitment from the Free Churches to stand alongside 'the other' in this context is not without its challenges. It will require denominations to review their theology of incarnation, their understanding of faith in the public square and perceptions of secular in contemporary society, their attitudes towards pastoral care, their willingness to commit resources beyond congregations and their concept of mission in the context of public education.

In recent policy and strategy developments within further education, there have been some key messages from their patterns of thinking and planning. These have centred around two factors - how FE needs to reflect and then secondly to look forward with a sense of honesty, hope, clear mission. FE has been urged by policy commentators to adopt an adapting not a blaming culture, harness positive leadership, set parameters then give staff space, focus on teaching and learning.<sup>15</sup> This is very much in tune with honest, clear and innovative Free Church leadership too. Churches, like FE, need to be honest about reflecting on what has gone well and not so well and looking forward with wisdom, responding to the current needs of our society, in a flexible yet informed manner.

Developing a Free Church voice, participation and support for FE may not be "mission" in the traditional or evangelical sense. But by language, presence, a determination through individuals to listen and watch for signs of God in action, a concern for relationships and pastoral care for individuals, encouragement of dialogue and discussion, the free churches have a unique opportunity to demonstrate that they care and that their message is relevant to the lives of staff and students.

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.34

## **5. The Role and Contribution of Chaplaincy in FE**

### ***What contribution can and does chaplaincy make to the FE sector?***

Around 80% of FE colleges have some form of chaplaincy provision. 80-90% of ordained ministry contribution to college chaplaincy comes from the Church of England, although even within the Anglican community chaplaincy has to compete with the pressure to deploy ordained ministry within parishes. An infinite variety of models and funding arrangements for chaplaincy exist across the sector, ranging from a few examples of full-time chaplaincy to a chaplaincy presence on site for only a few hours each week. There are also examples of college staff who identify with a particular faith or belief tradition serving as the college chaplain. Where chaplaincy teams have been established there are opportunities for both lay and ordained participation. In the majority of cases chaplaincy is linked into the college structure and supported, or directly managed, by college staff. Increasingly chaplaincies operate on a multi-faith basis, recognising the diversity within college communities of staff and students and the obligation to provide a service open to students of all faiths and those of no faith.

For the free churches, chaplaincy provides a unique opportunity to express their concern and interest in education, which goes back to long before there was any state provision and when access to education was often limited to the wealthy. Today provision is rightly the responsibility of the state, and there are risks inherent in organisations, such as churches, apparently stepping in to fill gaps left by cuts in public funding. Nevertheless, it is still appropriate for the church to demonstrate its desire for involvement in education, to express a common commitment to values of social justice, opportunities for all to develop in body, mind and spirit, and minister to its community.

At its best chaplaincy is an opportunity for encounter. The FE community is large and varied, with significant numbers of young people who have no other point of contact with the church. Chaplaincy can place the church where people are, rather than where it wishes them to be. All our denominations are understandably faced with increasing pressures on their financial and human resources, even so their relative absence from further education chaplaincy is undoubtedly an opportunity which has been neglected.

Chaplains have a unique opportunity to be part of the institution, yet at the same time to be an independent voice of conscience, reflecting the values of the organisation that sent them, commitment to truth, justice, compassion and life in all its fullness, and demonstrating that the Church cares about the college community and the individuals within it. Over time, developing a relationship based on trust, a chaplain can assist the college to make wise decisions with impartial, informed advice to college managers.

A long-serving chaplain can become the confidante of senior managers, providing a confidential, independent perspective on the college and its activities and reminding leaders that the decisions should be evaluated not only on financial grounds but also alongside the college's values and the impact on individuals.

As a member of the college community a chaplain operates within an educational context. Colleges are rightly wary of any activities which might be construed as proselytising. Ministry in this context does not involve evangelism in its more traditional sense, but accepts that many different faiths and beliefs are worthy of acceptance and respect, and recognises that education involves the exchange and growth of knowledge, understanding, skills, experiences and personal qualities, which combine to develop each learner to their fullest capacity. It is the task of education to enlarge students' horizons, enabling them to make informed choices for themselves and their futures, including decisions involving faith and belief. Inter-personal relationships are central to this process.

A chaplain's role is therefore by language and behaviour to model the values and attitudes that faith brings to relationships; to encourage awareness of the spiritual dimension in the holistic development of each learner; to listen and watch for the signs of God in action and seek to strengthen perceptions of this within the college community; to demonstrate that God is present in all aspects of life, and to model by word and action the Gospel of care and compassion for all.

Chaplains, chaplaincy teams and the activities by which they deliver their ministry are as varied as the institutions which they serve. For many the starting point is often a link with and contribution to the college student services team, providing pastoral support for students and often as well for staff. Many colleges expect that their chaplain will have skills in pastoral work and to bring a distinctive dimension to their support for students. For others the entry point can be teaching a subject or skill for which they are qualified. Often there are opportunities which arise from the willingness of young people to engage in discussion of issues with a spiritual or faith dimension.

As a chaplaincy develops there are often further opportunities to contribute to teaching and learning. As independent corporations FE colleges are not subject to the statutory duties concerning the provision of religious education (RE), or spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (SMSC), which apply to schools. Colleges are however subject to the Equalities Act, the Public Sector Equality Duty and the government's "Prevent" counter-terrorism strategy as applied to FE. Provision of SMSC education and the positive promotion of "British values" are also requirements of the current Ofsted inspection framework for further education. All of these provide opportunities for chaplains to support teaching and learning, especially for younger students.

Responding to these opportunities could involve, for example:

- Contributing to tutorial programmes and discussions, which might not be overly religious, but could equally assist the development of religious literacy amongst students;
- Hosting or facilitating discussion through which students can encounter controversial issues in a safe environment for discussion;
- Assisting the delivery of SMSC, particularly in vocational courses such as hospitality, catering, hairdressing, childcare or business studies where an understanding of faith, belief and cultural expectations are an essential element in preparing students for employment;
- Supporting initiatives to promote the value of equality, diversity and difference within the college community and the positive promotion of good relations between different cultural, ethnic and faith groups within the college;
- Assisting and advising staff with these issues;
- Organising celebration or remembrance events on major faith anniversaries or secular occasions such as Holocaust Memorial or Remembrance Day.

The opportunities are many and varied, but at the heart of them all is encounter and the opportunity to demonstrate through both ordained and lay chaplains that the church has a contribution to make, that its values of social justice and opportunity for all are consistent with those of further education and that issues of faith and belief matter to both students and staff and are relevant to college life. Surely this is an opportunity which our Free Churches would wish to seize?

## 6. Where and How Can Free Churches Engage with FE

*Engagement in further education can be anything from one to one support through to churches being recognised as official partners delivering agreed programmes and services.*

For denominations or regional groupings such as Circuits or Synods, engagement might be more productive by concentrating on cities where there are a significant number of colleges, or where colleges are being brought together through mergers, or by working through sector organisations such as the Association of Colleges, which has a regional structure.

### ***Engagement and support from local churches***

A starting point for this could be the care and support which congregations display for the interests and concerns of their members in their everyday lives. If congregations were encouraged to identify their individual members who are involved with further education, either as students, governors, teaching or support staff, or have family members working or studying at college, they might be surprised at their number. These individuals could become a catalyst for engagement with the sector, their interests a beginning for dialogue about further education and its contribution to society. Social partnerships are very much welcomed and encouraged by the further education sector as this helps to contextualise the education and vocational training they provide, as well as enriching opportunities for students as part of their wider community. A model of a 'public social partnership' approach<sup>16</sup> for FE is one of the visionary hopes outlined in recent publications and one that free churches could play an active part.

Many members of our denominations are also employers. Employers are now in the front line of the present government's flagship apprenticeship programme in further education. Apprenticeships are frequently delivered by employers and work-based learning providers in partnership with FE colleges. Some employers may even have used FE services or courses to train their staff. These are other instance where through the activities of its members, congregations have a natural link with young people, education and training and their local economy and society.

Others, who do not have immediate personal links with FE, could be encouraged to use facilities such as a college restaurant or hairdressing salon as an introduction to the sector and the opportunities it provides.

Colleges and other providers are frequently searching for off-site premises to deliver adult and community education. Many churches have premises which are adaptable for education provision. Such activities might successfully bring together the church congregation, education providers and members of the local community.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Coming of Age for FE?* Chapter 10 - The future for FE Colleges in England: the case for a new post-incorporation model by Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours, p. 200

Adult and Community Learning services often include family learning, opportunities for parents and children to learn together, classes for older people which provide a social as well as an educational function, retraining for those facing unemployment or seeking a career change. Offering learning opportunities such as these is surely consistent with a church mission to welcome and support vulnerable groups in local communities and open the church doors to them. Discussions along these lines might also identify members of staff sympathetic to the development of relationships with churches and congregations.

This report has emphasised the sheer diversity of the FE student population and the relatively high proportion coming from disadvantaged groups such as disabled learners and those who have special educational needs; learners for whom English is not their first language; learners from minority ethnic groups; Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners; lesbian, gay and bisexual learners; transgender learners; young carers; learners with medical conditions; care leavers; older learners; learners of different religions and beliefs; ex-offenders; teenage mothers and other vulnerable groups.

With such diversity it is important to establish support mechanisms designed to meet the needs of the learners. Many FE colleges find it increasingly difficult to meet these demands. Continual pressures on college budgets have led to reductions in student course hours, staffing and other resources necessary to help students break-out from a cycle of non-achievement into progression and improved employment prospects. Securing financial viability for some institutions has become an overriding priority above the needs of students, employers and the local community. Our denominations and congregations have a wealth of skills within their communities which can complement the needs and structures of colleges and other FE providers in this context.

The precise nature of support will naturally vary from congregation to congregation, depending upon the physical and human resources available and the precise needs of the FE institution. However, the following gives a flavour of the opportunities for engagement which might be available.

- Entering into partnership with a local FE institution in joint community projects;
- Supporting vulnerable learners to get to and from college;
- Aid in the recruitment of hard to reach learners;
- Providing work experience for students;
- Providing volunteers willing to participate as classroom assistants, mentors, special advisors with experience of an employment sector, or guest speakers;
- Supporting initiatives such as the National Citizens Service (NCS) – a government backed programme bringing together young people from diverse backgrounds to design and deliver community action projects with local



community partners, thereby developing skills for future life and work. In 2014 over 30,000 young people took part in NCS;

- Providing volunteers to contribute to the work of multi-faith chaplaincy teams.

Free Church congregations are community focussed. Their doors are open to all. Their outreach is underpinned by principles of social justice, equality, inclusiveness and the value of every individual in the sight of God. They possess valuable physical and human resources. Increasingly their futures depend upon using these resources to send out messages of caring, relevance, compassion and hope through engagement with others in their locality.

Colleges too are essentially community-facing organisations. Their central purpose is to respond to the needs of the local economy and society, meeting the requirements of learners of all ages, employers, apprentices and parents, for education, training, skills, progression, social cohesion and inclusion. They deliver their services in a variety of locations across communities. In their work with young people colleges, at their best, prepare their learners with essential skills, knowledge and personal qualities for their futures as citizens, employees and employers.

The similarity between these two descriptions is striking, Surely, here is a sector of education where values and priorities are aligned with those of our denominations. Engagement with FE could be the most natural way to demonstrate the free church commitment to state education. When brought together, perhaps through effective chaplaincy, FE and churches have the potential to meet the needs of learners in body, mind and spirit. It is the contention of this report that the potential of collaboration with FE to bring benefits to both parties and the communities they both seek to serve has for too long been neglected by our churches.

## 7. Conclusion

This report began by posing three fundamental questions concerning the relationship between the free churches and public education, and specifically further education.

How can the Free Church denominations be encouraged to extend their broad commitments to the public education service to the work of further education?

How can denominations and congregations be encouraged to see public education, and specifically further education, as a subject for engagement and action?

How can denominations and congregations be convinced that engagement with further education is a natural part of their life and work, consistent with their theology, pastoral care and mission?

The authors of this report have based their work on the premise that the free churches' historical commitment to public education as set out in *The Free Church Voice on Education* remains the denominations' position, whether they are providers of education or not. This commitment certainly underpins the practical work of the Free Church Education Committee, although it may be that improved publicity is needed to emphasise this commitment and its potential contribution to mission, outreach and social justice to some denominations and congregations. Undoubtedly very significant publicity and encouragement will be needed to stimulate engagement with further education given the low base of understanding and engagement which currently exists within denominations and society at large.

Nevertheless, this report has sought to demonstrate the benefits which could follow for free churches and their congregations from a concerted effort to improve collaboration with FE. There are advantages for a relationship which can focus on community benefits and concern for the welfare of staff and students unhindered by denominational concerns as the provider and statutory requirements to deliver religious education. There is potential synergy between congregations and colleges, both perceived as lying outside the mainstream, both generally ignored by the media, both open to people of all ages and backgrounds and united by a common concern for the disadvantaged, those seeking a second chance and those seeking personal development and fulfilment. In their own way colleges and adult education services are guided by principles of equality, inclusiveness, openness, freedom of conscience and personal growth, values that are undoubtedly consistent with our nonconformist heritage and recognition of every individual as a unique child of God. We hope that these considerations will indeed encourage denominations and congregations to see engagement with FE as an opportunity to reach into their local communities with love and support and meet with those who they may otherwise never encounter.

We do not pretend that implementing this will be other than challenging for our denominations. It will require denominations to review their theology of incarnation, their understanding of faith in the public square and perceptions of secular in contemporary society, their attitudes towards pastoral care, their willingness to commit resources beyond congregations and their concept of mission in the context of public education.

However, if they are to carry forward a mission of social justice beyond their church buildings, to bring life in all its fullness, congregations need to be active where people are in their everyday lives. FE with its diversity of learners and providers offers a unique opportunity to mix with learners of all ages and backgrounds. The range of opportunities for groups and individuals to contribute is as diverse as the FE sector itself, ranging through institutional collaboration, chaplaincy and personal involvement. All however share the common benefit of demonstrating that issues of faith and belief matter and that the church cares.

## 8 Recommendations

The Free Church Group Directors are invited to consider the following actions in response to the contents of this report:

1. Establish a Free Churches vision & policy statement for FE, drawing on this report and highlighting the common commitment in FE and free churches to equality, inclusiveness, social justice, personal development and concern for the disadvantaged
2. Express concerns to government and other relevant bodies about the need for FE to become a higher priority, highlighting the current inequality in the treatment of FE compared with other branches of the education service and championing FE's potential to transform society, communities and individuals
3. Raise the profile of FE within the Free Church denominations, increasing understanding of FE's unique contribution education, training, the economy and society and encouraging regional engagement with FE sector stakeholder organisations and groups of colleges at circuit, area and synod level.
4. Prepare a definitive list of Free Church FE chaplains and establish a rationale for greater free church involvement in FE chaplaincy and how chaplains will be regularly communicated with and supported. Develop more fully the opportunities for chaplaincy work in colleges outlined in this report.
5. Stimulate the collation of a series of case studies demonstrating economic, social and personal transformation for FE students from a variety of backgrounds and ages
6. Encourage local congregations to recognise the opportunities which working with and supporting their local FE college might bring for contact with people from all strands of society, and particularly young people
7. Produce practical guidance for local congregations on:
  - a. the identification individual members involved in FE and how these members might be used as a catalyst for engagement in the sector;
  - b. encouraging the engagement with FE of employers within the congregation
  - c. encouraging all members of the congregation to become familiar with and use the local FE college facilities;
  - d. encouraging, where appropriate, churches to consider providing off-site premises to deliver adult and community education;
  - e. Partnering with a local FE institution in joint community projects

- f. Identifying and encouraging volunteers to support colleges as classroom assistants, mentors, work experience providers or members of chaplaincy teams

## **Appendix 1 Membership of the Working Group**

### **Dr. John Wise, Chief Executive, fbfe (Chair)**

John Wise has worked in post-compulsory education since 1979. From 1985 to 1997 he was Vice Principal at Stanmore Further Education College in North-west London. From 1997-2005 he worked in the Corporation of London Education Department as Executive Officer for FELORS, a small education charity that provided services for local authorities and their partners in post-16 and adult education. In 2008 he became Chief Executive of The National Council of Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education (fbfe). John is an Elder and Church Secretary at St John's URC, Northwood and a member of the Free Church Education Committee.

### **Sarah Lane Cawte (Secretary)**

### **Anthony Alderman**

Tony Alderman joined the Governing Body at Barnet College in 1986 and retired in 2011 after serving as Chair of Governors for 15 years. During this time, he was Vice Chair of the Association of Colleges (AoC), London, first chair of the AoC Governors' Council and a member of AoC Board (Chair of Finance). He has been Chair of Ealing Hammersmith & West London College since October 2014. Tony is an elder and Church Secretary at St John's, URC New Barnet

### **Rev. Lester Freckleton**

Lester Freckleton is an Executive Coach and Learning Development Facilitator with over 28 years' experience of working in a large FE college, where he designed and managed a mentoring programme. In 2013 Lester left the post of Head of School to set up his own company, Targeted Performance Initiatives, and take up the pastorate of The New Testament Church of God, Cardiff. Lester is currently Chair of South West Prison Ministries and leads a team on an ex-offender's project.

### **Professor Graham Handscomb**

Graham Handscomb is Visiting Professor of University College London, Institute of Education; and Professor & Dean of The College of Teachers; from 2010 to 2015 he was external examiner for the University of Wales Masters in Leadership and Management – Further Education programme He has been a local authority adviser for FE and run a NFER programme to train FE college assessors for the national NFER Research mark award. Graham represents the URC on the Free Church education Committee

### **Rev. Sara Iles**

Sara Iles has been teaching adults in FE and HE since 1991. She is a qualified EFL teacher, holds Qualified Teacher in Learning & Skills Status, is an NVQ Assessor and Internal Verifier for vocational qualifications. She has worked as a senior manager for

learning projects for the Training and Enterprise Council and the Learning and Skills Council. She is currently a Governor at Northern College (part of Luther King House), Manchester.

Sara has a BA Hons in Applied Theology and tutors on the Congregational Institute for Practical Theology Foundation and BA programmes. Sara has been minister of a congregational church in rural Somerset for eight years.

### **Rev. Alistair Smeaton**

Alistair Smeaton has served in the chaplaincy team at Lakes College West Cumbria for 12 years, for much of that time being the only named chaplain. He currently teaches science at the college and is studying for a PGCE qualification in Lifelong learning. Alistair is minister at Cockermouth URC

### **Barbara Spittle**

Barbara has many years of experience in local authorities managing services for children and young people, latterly as a Service Director. She was an Associate Inspector working with OFSTED for 10 years inspecting local authorities, FE colleges, youth work and Connexions services. She now teaches and researches strategic management in a UK university business school.

Barbara has considerable experience as a governor in FE. She is currently Chair of East Surrey College Corporation. having previously served on the Boards of Spelthorne College (2005 to 2007) and Merton College (1998 to 2006).

## **Appendix 2: Outline of meetings and evidence gathering ...**

During the lifetime of this project the working group held three meetings at 27 Tavistock Square to review progress with the report and consider report drafts. Meetings were held on:

22 September 2015

4 February 2016

25 April 2016

At the second of these meetings members of the working group received expert testimony from three witnesses

Mr Mike Cox: Operations Manager, The Association of Employment and Learning Providers

Rev. Garry Neave: Churches National Adviser for Further Education

Mrs Mary Myatt: Education Consultant and Ofsted Inspector

The working group wishes to record their thanks to each of these witnesses for their time and expert contribution to our work



## Appendix 3: Examples of Good Practice and Vision and Mission Statements from Providers

### Example of good practice:

**1. Statement from curator of John Bunyan Museum and Library** – part of Bunyan Meeting, Bedford - on their engagement as a Free Church with communities and learning:

“Most of the specific work with education has been the more formal schools’ side, and as we have the history of John Bunyan ‘hook’ for visits, we also have a lot of general groups visiting.

We have recently worked with the local Retirement Education centre (REC), as one of their courses was on John Bunyan – so they had a visit to the museum and church. We have also sent poster and fliers to encourage them to volunteer with us.

Another local education provider is Youth Inspired, who run art courses for adults with various mental health / anxiety problems. This year we were able to offer the church foyer as venue for an exhibition of their work, and give them space for a private view. The work with Youth Inspired is something we hope to develop on further in the future. Generally, we try and act as a safe and welcoming space for anyone, and are always open to potential projects and activities. Nicola Sherhood MA, AMA”

**2. St Martin’s URC South Oxhey and Community Learning Partnership**

For the past two years the premises at St Martin’s URC have been used on weekdays and evenings by the Community Learning Partnership, an adult education charity funded by Hertfordshire Adult and Community Learning. The Partnership’s Director, Elizabeth Borg describes her work as follows.

Statistically, South Oxhey is one of the most disadvantaged areas in Hertfordshire but at CLP we see it as an area of untapped potential because the adults and families we support, many of whom have had negative experiences of formal education for a variety of reasons, are hugely talented and creative. The most important part of our work is to help local people overcome barriers to learning by engaging them on innovative projects, giving them the skills, confidence and opportunities which will empower them to lead more fulfilling lives. These include English and maths, but we theme our courses – perhaps to Dr Who, or a popular book or movie - to make them as appealing as possible. Learning how to use adjectives to make writing more powerful is great fun when you've made a model alien with your dad, and you're using a thesaurus to find as many scary synonyms as you possibly can to describe it!

Family maths and English courses really help adults with their own skills, but also enable parents to support their children so that they can succeed at school, and develop a thirst for learning. In this way, we support families to break trans-generational cycles of underachievement and worklessness.

Action research we undertook with government funding also uncovered the role that arts and crafts have in engaging non-traditional learners. The courses we run are perceived as being non-threatening and enjoyable, and both adults and children welcome the opportunity to be creative. Many of the people we teach on these courses grow in confidence, and self-identify skills they need to acquire in order to move on with their lives.

However, arts and crafts provision also addresses cross-cutting themes such as social isolation and depression, enabling people to come together with shared interests and form new friendships. In partnership with St Martin's, we transformed the lounge area into what is now known as The Heavenly Arts and Crafts Cafe. Essentially, this is a non-traditional learning environment styled to look like a vintage tea room. It is here that we meet on Tuesday mornings for coffee and crafts; on Wednesday evenings for crochet and for lots of other courses including felt-making; digital textiles and embroidery.

We have found a new lease of life here, and it's lovely to witness St Martin's becoming a hub of learning, creativity and fun within South Oxhey. It's increasingly becoming filled with chatter and laughter as local residents come together with a shared sense of purpose, and it's a real joy and privilege to see the building being used and valued in this way.

## Vision and Mission Statements

Somerset Skills and Learning: "The service seeks to provide an extensive range of high quality learning opportunities. We care about your future and success, we believe learning should be an enjoyable and fulfilling experience; meeting the needs of a diverse county is one of our main priorities."<sup>17</sup>

"Bath College is a fundamentally concerned with skills, education and training. We see our role as working with people and organisations to improve outcomes for individuals, businesses, communities and economies. As such we have defined our core purpose and mission as: talent development, career development, self-development."<sup>18</sup>

Workers' Educational Association: "We believe learning is for everyone and learning is for life. It helps people feel that anything is possible. It can be life-enhancing and life-changing – improving health, self-confidence and creating positive changes that ripple out from individuals to communities. We also have a special mission to reach those who want to improve their lives and communities. Education is a beautiful and powerful tool for tackling economic and social disadvantage because it raises aspirations and helps people create their own change."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Somerset Skills and Learning <http://www.learnsomerset.co.uk/about/>

<sup>18</sup> Bath College <https://www.bathcollege.ac.uk/college-information/vision-strategic-plans>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.wea.org.uk/about>

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