



A Future for Oaklands?

Final Report of the Feasibility Steering Group

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APPENDICES The Appendices that were attached to the Interim report are unchanged and available in the previous Interim Report.

FOREWORD

A Perspective from the National New Church

Having read through the Interim Report I can fully identify with the challenges and concerns faced at Oaklands New Church. Paisley New Church wrestle with these same issues as do many others within our organisation. However, the time and energy the Feasibility Steering Group have put into compiling this report speaks volumes about the wonderful new opportunities now emerging from Oaklands. I am certainly enthused by your plans and through working in many areas of the church including: residential youth work, community development, web site design, as well as seeking ways to maintain and support traditional forms of worship, I can clearly see our long pattern of decline being followed by a new wave of energy emerging from all areas of our organisation and I would be willing to offer any help I can.

Further, as the Governing Council are currently restructuring the way our organisation is run and as they have commissioned a new web site to help support all branches of our church, now is a good time to influence any future direction. By embracing this new initiative Oaklands will be in a good position to make a significant contribution to the organisation as a whole and inject a well needed shot of enthusiasm as we 'custodians of the heavenly doctrines' emerge into a brave new world.

May the Lord be with you all.

Revd Jack Dunion

INTRODUCTION

Context

In this final report we have set out to clarify the Steering Groups recommendations and respond to questions and some misunderstandings about what our Proposals are. We want to clarify the reasons for choosing this option above all others.

This is the context in which we now live and these are the people we wish to communicate with:

"The World Value Survey, which is the most reliable survey of beliefs across the globe, suggests that there has been a substantial cultural change in modernised and free societies where people have access to different views, up to 70% of the population has moved away from a single faith tradition. These people have not become atheistic but have adopted a more general and inclusive approach to spirituality.

Contemporary spirituality takes a holistic approach that is open-hearted and open-minded, seeking to understand all the many different aspects of existence. It honours the essence of traditional faith. It also seeks to understand and include the crucial relationships between spirituality and health, social justice, environmental issues and citizenship".

www.f4hs.org/education

Over the period of the feasibility study we have come to see more and more clearly that we can become a bridge for the whole of the New Church to meet spiritually minded people using the wonderful resource of Oaklands.

Working of the Steering Group

The members rejected an offer for Oaklands that was £200,000 less than the asking price and we formed a Feasibility Steering Group to look into other options. We presented an Interim Report to the Church Committee and a Summary Sheet that was distributed widely seeking views.

The Final Report seeks to acknowledge all views including those of the outgoing Church Committee and aims to inform the Governing Council (the trustees of Oaklands) in their discussions on 11th May as well as members and friends when they consider their vote about the future of Oaklands.

Voting slips are currently being distributed and a decision will be taken at the Church Committee AGM on 22nd May as to whether to go ahead with the Steering Group recommendations or sell the building.

THE BIRMINGHAM NEW CHURCH SOCIETY OBJECTIVES

The Society has a rich spiritual history. Rev Paul Zacharias writes: “We will NEVER forget the many wonderful lessons and blessings we received from Oaklands... those solid memories are still very much part of who we are today. That church has served a wonderful use for many decades.”

The Steering Group thank the members and friends for all the love and wisdom we have received over the years. In honour of that, we now want to preserve all that is best of Oaklands and give it new life.

The objectives of the Society, as set out in the Constitution are as follows:

- To provide its members and associates with the facility and opportunity to worship the Lord Jesus Christ as the one God in whom is the Divine Trinity
- To engage in activities that will spread the teachings of the New Church
- To be involved with the life of the surrounding community and its needs.

The Steering group believe that we can meet these objectives by welcoming Spiritual seekers into Oaklands. Trainee minister Helen Newton writes: “We are in the New Spiritual Age and my experience is that the Lord has allowed these truths to permeate in many different ways - not just through Swedenborg, although I still see in his writings the most complete, comprehensive and deep explanation of truth”.

We intend to introduce more active reflection and participation into some Sunday morning worship services. In addition we would like to run a broader type of monthly religious meeting designed to attract people associated with the Tree of Life for whom traditional worship is not their thing. We will continue to have Spiritual Growth meetings and also organise Workshops and Seminars with Visiting Ministers that are open to all. We will expand our letting of rooms for local spiritually aware groups and individuals who will provide a diverse range of activities, eg craft using recycled materials, dance, singing and music, gardening tips, conversation/film cafes so that we become part of the local community giving them access to our philosophy and theology through our displays, library and welcoming presence.

A FUTURE VISION

The Feasibility Steering group felt the need to write a Vision Statement clearly stating what the New Church is and what they hope the new Vision at Oaklands will be:

The heart of the New Church is our love for the Lord and desire to live the Lord's life together. The essence of our worship manifests in how we connect to a community spirit of love and light.

We use Swedenborg's interpretation of the Bible to enhance our understanding of the divine working through us. We believe our teachings are universal and can be inspirational to all spiritual seekers.

We hope to work collaboratively with other people using the Oaklands Centre as a base for Spiritual growth and well-being. We are committed to finding new ways to express and share our faith.

Everyone involved at Oaklands over the years and those involved in writing this Report can agree that continuing as we are is not viable. So change is inevitable and what everyone sees as necessary. But should we sell or continue with new ways of working?

The Feasibility Steering group propose that a new committee be elected that would for an initial period of two years try out the ideas contained within this report. We shall keep the building, refresh the spaces and use them for new purposes; developing collaborative trusting relationships with all users. We shall maintain regular worship and encourage participation in New Church spiritual workshops and discussion groups and create our own diverse programme developing a significant religious/spiritual resource for the community. We aim to create a friendly atmosphere as well as a busy programme where people can come and explore their spirituality - to be sociable, uplifted, inspired, and supported. This will be greatly enhanced by a new collaboration with the Tree of Life organisation (run by two individuals, Marketa and Joginder) who will rent a shared office space with us and hire rooms for their workshops as and when appropriate.

Our core values will be based on the five ways to wellbeing: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give. These five simple actions which embody the qualities of service, personal growth, integrity, respect for others, loving acceptance and non-judgement, reflection and responsibility will form the basis for all the users to maintain the New Church ethos.

The Church Committee

After very many years of wonderful and dedicated service, Gill Silk and Ken Eadie intend to retire from their positions as President and Treasurer of the Church Committee at the AGM on 22nd May 2011. Don Marshall, the Secretary, passed away in December. Marjorie Belfield is moving away from Birmingham and so will retire.

Six New Church members are standing for election on 22nd May. These are:

Carolyn Hasler
David Key
Stephen Lacy
Jane Leigh (for Secretary)
Cathy Mahmood (for Treasurer and minute taker)
Sheree Wilkinson

Catherine Lauber is also a member of the Church Committee in her position as Minister until August this year.

The Church Treasurer and one other member of the Church Committee serve as Trustees for the Emma Ball Trust. If formed, the new Committee will immediately ensure the Emma Ball Trust becomes incorporated so that the trustees are no longer financially liable (this can be done online).

Paid and in-kind support

- Barbara Bourne is the caretaker and cleaner. Since Don passed away, Barbara and Jane Leigh have taken on the diary for lettings.
- Barbara Holmes is currently employed as Project Manager/ Bookkeeper by the Emma Ball Trust, connected to Birmingham New Church Society.
- Jane Leigh has been developing a variety of new contacts, in tune with Swedenborg's teachings, who are interested in hiring spaces and developing a relationship with us should we choose to have a future. These will be presented to the Committee to make decisions on new users.

Current Users of the Building

The current regular users of the building are:

- Birmingham New Church: Sunday morning worship fortnightly, Spiritual Growth Group, monthly Tuesday evenings
- Banner Theatre: Mon - Fri office space, rehearsal rooms, storage.
- Handsworth Historical Society: Third Wednesday of the Month, evenings
- Unity: Third Saturday of the Month, 11am - 3pm
- Bridge Clubs: every Monday pm and Wednesday pm

Current User: Who are Banner Theatre?



“Banner Theatre is a community theatre company set up in the mid 70s which develops community based multi-media theatre shows with marginalised and disadvantaged communities and tours them to non-theatre audiences in Britain, Europe and Canada.

It has been based at Oaklands since 2005 and currently uses the building as follows: an office space for administration and tour organising; a meeting space for company and other meetings, a rehearsal space for new productions, a venue for community performances and a store for equipment. Since being based at Oaklands, Banner has toured its productions throughout Britain, developed work with schools eg. St John Wall in Handsworth, provided community workshops with the WEA (Workers Educational Association), worked with communities to encourage social and community cohesion, brought visiting audiences to Oaklands from Germany and Italy, premiered new productions at Oaklands, provided opportunities at Oaklands for artists and performers from migrant communities. Banner would very much like to continue to use Oaklands. We are open to collaborating with other individuals and organisations to making Oaklands a vibrant community resource. We would be happy to take a greater role in the running of the centre. We believe it is crucial to keep this space available to the community, especially in these times of austerity and fear it's sale would result in demolition of the property and the loss of a vital community and religious resource. We hope that by widening the participation in Oaklands this vital spiritual space can be saved for the future.” Dave Rogers, Director, Banner Theatre

Current User: Who are Unity?

Unity is a Christian-based movement, open to people of all faith traditions, all ways of life and to those who have no religious inclination or affiliation. Carran Stephens from Unity says, “we hope we can continue to use this wonderful facility. It serves all our needs very well as I am sure it would other groups too.”

New User: Who are Tree of Life?

Tree of Life is a non-profit making community organisation based in Birmingham. It was founded by Maggy Whitehouse in 1992 as Tree of Life Magazine and is now Birmingham's leading focal point for holistic learning. It is comprised of 2 people, Marketa and Joginder. There is no membership, just a mailing list and the support of volunteers. They are dedicated to exploring diverse ways of living and being, honouring all spiritual traditions and welcoming people of all cultures.



They produce and distribute a holistic Magazine that covers all areas of mind, body and spirit and has inspiring articles from some of the world's leading writers. The magazine is a place where local holistic practitioners, teachers, groups, classes, shops and centres can advertise what they are offering to the community. The magazine is printed on a quarterly basis with 7,000 copies of each issue being distributed across Birmingham and the surrounding areas to spiritual, holistic and healing centres, libraries, health food shops, organic cafes, therapists and many other places where there is an interest in holistic well-being (estimated readership 14,000). It is also on the internet.

In addition Tree of Life has a programme of workshops, talks and community events:

- Their weekly Monday night series of talks have been running in Birmingham for almost two years. They have had a whole variety of authors come to speak on many different holistic subjects.
- There is also a varied programme of holistic workshops and classes on weekends and some week day evenings.
- They have a weekly meditation group every Wednesday from 12.30 - 1pm
- They run monthly social evenings and community parties for all the family. People bring vegetarian food and non-alcoholic drinks to share. There is world music, dance and taster movement classes.
- They have classes and workshops on healthy eating and how to increase well-being through changing what one eats.
- They present a weekly one hour Health & Wellbeing Show every Monday afternoon on local Community Radio
- They run Mind Body & Spirit Festivals twice a year in Birmingham

Extract from a letter from Joginder Bola and Marketa Rozsypalova, Tree of Life:

"We currently do not have our own centre and so have to hire various premises across the City for our events. We have been praying for a centre where all activities can be based and from where we can grow. We would be able to bring the programme of Tree of Life Holistic Community events to Oaklands. Through the magazine, events and festivals we are already well connected with many of the spiritual & holistic groups across the City.

We would have a permanent daily presence at Oaklands. We have a team of volunteers with many skills including gardening, construction, painting & decorating and building maintenance. Together we can renew the gardens and grounds and refresh the inside of the building.

With our Tree of Life events, plus your hiring out space to other groups, we are sure that Oaklands will be able to pay for the on-going maintenance and utility bills on the building. We would liaise and work closely with the Oaklands Committee and all other users.

We are very excited about working together with you to create a truly inspiring holistic centre for Birmingham. A place for nourishment of the mind, heart and spirit. A place which welcomes everyone and uplifts the whole community."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q 1. How compatible is the holistic ethos of the Tree of Life with the religious ethos of the New Church?

The Tree of Life feel that their multi-faith ethos is in harmony with spiritual well-being and would like to form a deeper association with us because of the universal spiritual nature of our religious teachings. They seek to honour and integrate within the centre the continued use of the building as a sacred space. They would not book Tree of Life events that go against the New Church's religious ethos and will help shop window what the New Church is offering. We can submit articles to their magazine and would designate display space clearly identifying Tree of Life activities and New Church ideas.

Our impression of Marketa and Joginder is that they are professional in the way they communicate and do things and sensitive to the spiritual aspects of what is being suggested, in a way that allows us to promote our identity and teachings.

Helen Newton writes: "I know the founder of the Tree of Life, the dynamic Maggy Whitehouse, having heard her talk on my interfaith training course about Judaism and the Kabbalah - amazing truths in this! She is also a good friend of a friend of mine and I receive Maggy's monthly mailings. I am also familiar with the Tree of Life magazine and find their approach to spirituality very genuine and open... my experience of the spirituality that the Tree of Life is working with contains so many of the truths we in the New Church think are 'ours' (what illusory thinking we get caught up in!). I am sure you will find that spiritual seekers who come through the Tree of Life will find 'our' Church's teachings really helpful and enlightening if presented in a way which is accessible to them".

Q2. Is there enough space at Oaklands to accommodate Tree of Life as well as ourselves and other lessees?

Yes!

In analysing the rooms and diary, we realised just how much space is available to us. It is proposed that Joginder and Marketa share an office with us, upstairs in the Moseley Room so that we can communicate with each other and Banner easily. They do not use the building during the day, except for a weekly half hour meditation and nutrition workshop using the kitchen. This means we control all the rooms downstairs and the Wretham Room upstairs. There is an abundance of rooms which we see as a wonderful resource. We live in exciting yet changing times. We have a unique opportunity to 'make a difference' to our local community and beyond if we are willing to grasp the initiative and use this resource. We can also use the building much more economically than in the past by letting rooms to others that are already being heated.

Our needs for space in the foreseeable future are likely to be as follows:

- Fortnightly Sunday morning religious meeting
- Spiritual growth group – 3rd Tuesday in the month
- 1 day a week pastoral counselling
- Bi-monthly Church Committee meeting
- New Church Workshops and business meetings
- New Church initiated activities, such as music, dance, arts and crafts

Unity Group

- Every third Saturday from 11am to 3pm using Charleville, downstairs kitchen and occasionally Newhall.

Banner Theatre

- Use Reddings as an office all the time and need space for meetings. They would also like Newhall for occasional rehearsals.

Tree of Life

- Office needed (provisionally Moseley Room , upstairs)
- Events and activities run under Tree of Life Banner – Twice yearly large Mind, Body & Spirit festivals; weekly Monday evening talks, 2 or 3 weekly weekend holistic workshops, weekly Wednesday lunchtime half hour meditation group (free), monthly family friendly and social events (free).

Q3. Have we enough people to keep the Church going? Who is going to do everything?

A refreshed Church Committee with Chairman, Secretary, and Treasurer would take responsibility for all management tasks. They will set policies for room bookings and use of the building, health and safety, security. They will manage any rental and service agreements, organise New Church religious activities and events, publicize our spiritual teachings, provide some pastoral counselling, respond to Church correspondence, authorise all payments, and take accountability for Church financial planning and reporting.

We recommend Barbara Holmes as a Facilities Administrator to be paid 20 hours a month to organise and monitor building/utilities repairs/maintenance and make and receive payments and do the financial bookkeeping. Cleaning will be done by a paid cleaner as well as those using the spaces.

We propose to only have one room bookings diary which would be kept up to date by Jane Leigh and the Tree of Life.

There would be regular liaison between Jane Leigh and other Church representatives with Tree of Life and Banner (as the two main groups renting office space), including the working of the health and safety and building security policies.

Our religious events and activities will be organised by our present Pulpit Secretary Stephen Lacy. Stephen Lacy is willing to contribute towards pastoral counselling one day a week in the building by acting as a professional counsellor, offering confidential appointments in spiritual life coaching, using Swedenborg psychology. He would want to train others to foster sustainability.

We will ensure that members and friends are keep in touch with what is happening in the Church and in each others' lives. This will be a shared responsibility between the Committee.

Jane Leigh will be the main contact and liaison person, involved in programming, promotion and communication and will be regularly attending Oaklands, sharing the same office space as Tree of Life.

Cathy Mahmood will be the Treasurer. Cathy has worked in the arts sector for over ten years. She was the General Manager of an arts centre and theatre company managing a

budget of over £700,000 and up to 14 staff. She will confidentially ensure we have all the financial and administrative systems in place and has expertise in marketing and publicity. She is currently working part time as a freelance arts and health consultant in project management, fundraising and evaluation and is the Treasurer for a local Arts Festival Committee in Nottingham.

We will utilise the offer of support from Joginder and Marketa's volunteers eg. to help with gardening, kitchen maintenance and decoration etc.

Q4. Who on the spot would be in a position to respond to New Church telephone and visitor enquiries?

If Jane Leigh is not in the building, then Marketa and Joginder will show people rooms and signpost people - giving out the telephone number and/or email of the appropriate Committee member depending on the nature of the enquiry.

Q5. Aren't the Premises too large for us?

Not too large for us and friends.

Q6. What if we sell up and just meet in each others' homes?

Although other Evangelical Churches who began this way have thrived eventually, needing a building, our own experience is that using our homes divided the Church. Only when we returned to the Church building did we gain more Church members and other individuals for our Spiritual Growth Group. The Steering Group's view is that the Birmingham New Church would die without this experiment. The commitment by the New Committee is for a new way of doing things. Their enthusiasm and support will inevitably diminish if there is no opportunity for both personal and New Church growth.

Q7. Would the New Church, both locally and nationally benefit from such an amalgamation, either by increasing our membership or by more widely spreading Swedenborg's teachings?

The reason for the proposals is to further the universal spiritual message of our teachings that can appeal to spiritual seekers in our new age.

The Steering Group strongly believe this experiment's purpose is less to collect members as to spread Swedenborg's teachings. We believe that the New Church both nationally and locally can only gain from this 2 year experiment. We shall have the opportunity to meet with other Spiritual seekers and find common ground. We can learn from and support each other. The national Church will be able to use our premises to experiment with new workshops and ways of connecting with others. There will be ample opportunity for dialogue, sharing expertise, philosophy and theology. We shall discover spiritually and emotionally what we know intellectually, that we are all one.

The new activity in Oaklands will encourage not just those ministers who have already offered support but others who want to know what's happening. We could have ministers'

meeting there. A myriad of opportunities for the Church open up when we put our attention there. Gill, Don and Ken have been creating a place fit for use. Much maintenance work has been done; two revived kitchens and new boilers make it ready for this experiment. We are so grateful for all that hard work and the best way to show it, we believe, is to use the facilities to the best of our ability. When we go abroad we recognise our Englishness. Our experience has been that when we meet with those not of the New Church we understand the New Church and its meaning for us much better. We can only grow by engaging with others. We have nothing to lose. Our identity will become stronger as we express our differences as well as connections. We can all be more ourselves not less in an ethos of mutual respect.

Whilst continuing with monthly worship services, we hope also to run other religious events with a broader appeal. By continuing as a church society at least we give ourselves a chance to find a few new members whereas if we close then there cannot be any increase in membership. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Q8. Will the Tree of Life takeover?

There can be no takeover from the Tree of Life. They have no intention of joining the Church therefore are not members and have no official power within the Church. They are even fewer than us. Two people, a couple who are dedicating their lives for the purpose of enhancing peoples' connection with their spirituality. They are interested in our teachings as we are interested in holistic principles, spiritual feelings, and ethical path. The only way The Tree of Life would dominate Oaklands is if we do nothing; that is not our intention. At the moment we are few. Yet we wish to go forward with this vision for a two year period knowing we have the backing of many ministers from the wider New Church behind us.

They cannot take over as it will be a condition of their rental agreement that the Committee of New Church members sets all management policy.

Q9. Why should we use the money, which has been given over the years by generous church members, as proposed by the steering Group when it could be transferred to the Conference to invest or spend more usefully?

We have no intention of throwing away the family silver. Our intention is to be financially viable using just the rent from the flat, church and lettings. The £9000 given to General Conference for Ministers and approximately £700 for Pulpit supply are exceptions and will need to come from the Church funds. We will be assessing the financial situation continuously. Everything will be transparent and open to inspection at any time. We want to have a clear view throughout the entire period, not just at the end. The purpose is to learn.

“The members who have supported and funded the Birmingham New Church for the last 50 years will not wish to see the funds that have been accumulated be turned over to new people who have no link to the church as has happened in North America”. (The situation is different here given the fact that the Governing Council are our trustees.)

Q10. The church cannot keep going without any minister or prospect of a minister. Visiting ministers cannot fill the gap.

We acknowledge that it would be perfect to have a Minister yet there is no prospect of a Minister as we are. These proposals offer us more chance to gain a minister in the future, providing an exciting place to be.

Q11. Are those few remaining people willing to take on a very heavy load of responsibility and hard work at Oaklands over the coming years?

Yes

Q12. Those wanting to continue mostly don't live in the area and/or have other responsibilities. They may not be able to spend a lot of needed time and energy at the church.

We accept that 3 people of the Committee live out of the area and three live locally. Stephen Lacy has committed to be available for one day a week for spiritual counselling sessions. Jane Leigh has committed to be available when New Church workshops are happening and is offering her energy, time and commitment to make this venture a success. Her family support her fully in this. We anticipate that it will be a gradual process which will allow us to prepare the building without stress or strain. Cathy feels that this opportunity to give commitment to the Church comes at an appropriate time when she is not in full time work. Carolyn Hasler and Sheree Wilkinson are both in full time work but close at hand and David Key is committed to giving the proposals a try.

THE THREE CURRENT PROPOSALS

There are three proposals that the outgoing Church Committee have written and are seeking a vote on, either by post before the 22nd May or in person at the AGM on 22nd May 2011 by Church members and friends. (Although friends' votes cannot be officially counted, it feels right that their views will be heard).

The Proposals are:

1. That the nominations for the church committee, all received after the end of March, should be considered even though in the church rules it states that all nominations for the vacancies on the church committee must be received before the end of March of that year.
2. That the feasibility study should be allowed to put their proposals for the use of the Oaklands premises into practice, bearing in mind that the major user of the buildings will be the non-New Church group called Tree of Life.
3. That, in view of the exceedingly small number of people who now attend church services, the church premises known as Oaklands should be sold and an alternative venue for meetings should be found.

Gill Silk and Ken Eadie would prefer that the building be sold and regret the decision in February not to sell Oaklands. Following the production of the Interim Report, the Steering group have received a number of letters expressing both congratulations and concerns about the proposals which are included in the Appendices.

We are grateful to all those who have taken the time to consider the future of Oaklands and have responded to our call for comments. We have attempted to answer some of the questions and concerns expressed as well as present them to you below in an 'at a glance' fashion for easy reference.

The following tables outline the goals, outcomes and implications of a vote in favour or against each of the proposals in order to help people weigh up the consequences of these options.

Proposal One	Outcome	Goal	Implications
That late nominations be considered (6 members wish to stand for Committee; it is up to members to decide whether late nominations can be counted).	A vote in Favour	To move forward Allow outgoing committee to retire from their positions. No need for Governing Council intervention.	Allows the Society to continue.
	A vote Against	To prevent the Society moving forward in the way proposed	Effectively closes the Society

Proposal Two	Outcome	Goal	Implications
That the recommendations within this Report are put into practice.	A vote in Favour	<p>Potential for Church growth and Outreach and Church members spiritual growth</p> <p>Create new opportunities for the wider Church organisation to use Oaklands as a resource</p> <p>Develop new relationships in Birmingham and beyond</p> <p>Create a model for other Churches nationally faced with similar concerns</p> <p>Ensure a legacy for the retiring committee</p> <p>Develop marketing opportunities for New Church ideas</p> <p>Increase footfall and range of activities</p> <p>Give new Committee a chance</p> <p>Day to day running and upkeep of the building</p>	<p>Congregation ready to meet and talk with others</p> <p>Spring clean, de-clutter, Prepare rooms</p> <p>Increased demand</p> <p>National New Church Website 'case study'</p> <p>Everything they have worked for finds a use.</p> <p>Professional approach</p> <p>Regular user group meetings. New policies.</p> <p>2 year review</p> <p>Pay Facilities Administrator</p> <p>Significant support from existing Tree of Life volunteers eg gardening and decorating when needed.</p>
	A vote Against	<p>To let go of New Church responsibility</p> <p>To support significant members of the Society, who wish to sell the building and who may find it difficult to have trust and confidence in a new committee.</p> <p>To sell the building and give the money to the Governing Council.</p>	<p>More time and energy from the outgoing Committee required in selling the building.</p> <p>Governing Council intervention needed regarding sale as there would be no Church Committee in this scenario.</p> <p>Clear the building</p>

Proposal Three	Outcome	Goal	Implications
<p>In view of small numbers, to sell Oaklands premises and find an alternative venue for meetings</p>	<p>A vote in favour</p>	<p>To become a group, rather than a Society, and continue meeting with existing members at other premises.</p> <p>To raise funds for Governing Council</p> <p>To give Gill and Ken ‘peace of mind.’</p>	<p>The members who are standing for the Committee will withdraw.</p> <p>Close the Society.</p> <p>Question of sustainability and little potential for growth if meeting in each others homes or a hotel room.</p> <p>Sell building – are Governing Council responsible for the sale?</p> <p>Missed opportunity</p> <p>Unknown timescale</p>
	<p>A vote Against</p>	<p>To try something new and create new opportunities and relationships, preserving Oaklands as a ‘sacred space’ while opening it up to holistically minded people.</p> <p>Outreach, broadening involvement in the Church.</p> <p>Opportunity for national Church to see how a new model of partnership working might help other Churches.</p>	<p>New Committee able to begin on plans outlined within this report.</p> <p>Implications as above (vote in favour for proposal two)</p>

FINANCIAL FEASIBILITY

The projected budget on the next page gives an indication of the likely income and expenditure from April 2011 to the end of March 2012, if we pursue a future at Oaklands and begin booking rooms for Tree of Life activities from May 2011 and other groups from September 2011 once the rooms have been prepared.

The projected budget is an indication of what Birmingham New Church Society might expect to be working towards in the coming year in relation to the building in one column and other regular income for the Birmingham New Church Society such as Charity Investment Dividends, GCIF Dividends, Offertories and Envelopes, and bank interest in another. It is presented in this way to show that the Steering group believe it is possible for the building to pay for itself, mainly through increased usage and rent. The income generated through renting rooms can cover the cost of paying the Buildings Administrator £80 a week to do the book keeping and oversee buildings maintenance and services, and increase the caretaker and cleaner pay to £250 a month.

Notes to the budget

- The gas and electricity figures are projected as 25% higher than 2009/10.
- Income through rent could reach above £15,000 if we fully utilise the potential interest from various groups and individuals in a fully operational year.
- We expect there to be a small charge for some of the bi-monthly National New Church workshops. £5 x15 people x6 workshops = £450. For the purposes of this projected budget, we show this coming in and going out in workshop leader travel expenses.
- Rent from the flat is at it stands at £274 a month. Outgoings are £63 a month in council tax.
- Only a small marketing budget has been allocated as the majority of marketing will be via email and Tree of Life networks.

PROJECTED BUDGET

Projected Income 2011/2012	Oaklands Centre	B'ham New Church Society
Hire of Rooms (inc Banner and Tree of Life office spaces)	£11,383	
Rent Flat	£3,288	
Bourne Electricals Store	£1,044	
Income from National New Church workshops	£450	
Offertories		£500
Envelopes		£1,200
Charity Investment MGT Dividends		£4,000
GCIF		£7,000
Bank Interest		£150
Donations		£200
Grant Emma Ball		£0
TOTAL	£16,165	£13,050

Projected Expenditure 2011/2012

<i>HR</i>		
Area Ministry Pool		£9,000
Pulpit Supply		£700
Buildings Administrator, 20 hrs a month	£4,160	
Caretaking and Cleaning	£3,000	
<i>Overheads</i>		
Gas	£2,187	
Electricity	£962	
Insurance	£1,100	
Water rates	£550	
Telephone & internet connection	£335	
Outgoings Flat	£756	
Repairs and Maintenance	£1,000	
<i>Marketing</i>		
Website	£12	
Stationery and Postage	£100	
Design and Print	£200	
<i>Other Programme costs</i>		
Performing rights	£126	
Workshop leader expenses	£450	
Regular religious workshop activities	£520	
Travel Expenses, Pastoral and Counselling	£707	
TOTAL	£16,165	£9,700
<i>Surplus / deficit</i>	£0	£3,350

CONCLUSION

Despite the concerns expressed by some of the Congregation and outgoing Committee, the Steering Group feel we have found a way to continue at Oaklands whilst developing an exciting new opportunity for the local and national Church. It may be an experiment, you may feel it just prolongs the inevitable, but essentially, without trying this way of furthering our faith, we will never know. We recognise the depth of love and dedication that has gone into Oaklands over many years by those who now feel the need to sell it. The people who have been nominated to form a new Church Committee obviously regret that others feel the need to sell the building before giving this new venture an opportunity to grow.



We feel it is feasible in terms of ethos, space, human resources and finance and ask that you consider a new future for the New Church, going forward with optimism and trust.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations are:

- A. That the members of Birmingham New Church Society vote to support a New Committee, and together with the Governing Council, support an initial period of two years to work with Marketa and Joginder of the Tree of Life organisation to make best use of the resources available at Oaklands and to further the Vision of the New Church in Birmingham.
- B. To follow up the support offered by the wider New Church and others in making our vision a reality.
- C. To change the status of the Emma Ball Trust so that it is incorporated.

After the Annual General meeting

If the Steering Group's recommendations are agreed at the Annual General Meeting and there are new members elected to the Church Committee, then an Action plan will be drawn up for the Committee including:

1. To investigate fully the implications of passing on the responsibility for the Emma Ball Trust.
2. Finalise who does what for the Society including freelance contracts for cleaning, financial and buildings administration.
3. Finalise use of space, health & safety, and security policies including Banner Theatre's storage.
4. Finalise the Rent Agreement with Tree of Life

5. Re-look at rental charges for current users and finalise the rooms pricing policy.
6. Discuss the tenancy agreement for the flat.
7. Finalise the Society's budgets for 2011/2012
8. Complete the Flow Chart for Responding to New Church enquiries.
9. Audit and remove unwanted/precious books and other property, de-cluttering and spring cleaning.
10. Ensure our strong identity within the building displaying our theological teachings and New Church related materials and submitting article(s) to Tree of Life Magazine
11. Pursue planning with ministers for spiritual workshops at Oaklands.
12. Jane and Stephen to develop their presence in the building as needed, and informally monitor use of the building in liaison with Facilities Administrator and with users.
13. Audit current information and create a database of members of the Society and people attending our religious events.
14. Create the New Church programme for Year 1 and publish it widely.
15. Set up training in pastoral counselling, communication of our teachings and other needed skills.
16. Create criteria with which to have an ongoing assessment of the venture
17. Find ways to communicate with the members to support pastoral care.
18. Invite current and new users of the building to a series of Users Group meetings; the first will clarify the terms of reference and discuss Common Ground Rules.
19. Look into the option of the User group developing as a 'constituted group' that can raise funds for activities, separate from New Church finances, but furthering the shared vision.
20. Keep the General Conference aware of our wish to have a New Church minister.

LETTERS

These letters and emails are included in alphabetical order:

Alison Anderson

A letter to Jane Leigh:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your letter which I received when I returned from holiday on 17th April.

As you will be aware I have rarely visited Oaklands since I moved to Scotland in 1987, but I am kept informed about the church by my mother, Gillian Silk.

Whilst I was growing up, Oaklands played a great role in my life, from attending Church and Sunday School to 'Club' on a Tuesday night. I remember the Birmingham New Church with affection, full of life and people.

My parents and grand parents have been mainstays in the church in Birmingham for many years, giving tireless amounts of energy and time. I feel that my mother has continued this often thankless task with dedication since she moved to Shropshire some years ago. I also recognise that her responsibility and time commitment for this has increased as the elderly church population continues to get even more elderly and dwindle to the tiniest fraction of what it once was.

The difference in what it once was and how it is now is brought sharply into focus when I do occasionally visit.

The church I attend in Scotland has a fantastic minister who, I think, is mostly responsible for his large and committed congregation. I remember Oaklands' Julian Duckworth with great affection and I think he had the same affect. To my mind Oaklands needs that again, but also realise that it has reached the point of no return. For a minister to revive a failing church, such as Oaklands, now would be nigh on impossible.

As your proposals outline, the Tree of Life sound like an organisation 'on the up' and I wonder if the organisation have given any thought about raising funds to buy Oaklands from the New Church. In Scotland there is support from the Big Lottery for community organisations to purchase property and maybe this is the case in England. If this was a feasible option, I'm sure something could be drawn up to enable the New Church to continue to use the building for worship.

In their present form I feel that your proposals are around the wrong way - using a moribund organisation to, in effect, support a growing organisation.

I realise that my comments are probably not the ones you want to hear but feel that your proposals, if enacted, would probably just delay the inevitable.

Despite the good intentions of the proposition you briefly give in the paper included with your letter, I think it is better for the New Church in Birmingham to sell Oaklands.

Richard Becher, minister of Elmwood URC

This is a tremendous opportunity for shared ministry.

Cynthia Billines

From a conversation with Jane Leigh:

Cynthia's main concerns are the need for a minister, without which there is a big gap, and that we have lost contact with each other.

Helen Brown, New Church Minister

From an email sent to Jane Leigh:

Every year the workshop planning team put together a workshop which is available for use around the church. I would be able to hold this at Oaklands to be open to all who wish to come, with the support of local people who can advertise and help setup and host the day. This is suitable for those who are spiritual seekers.

Jane Elliot, piano and violin tutor: My thoughts on Oaklands Church

From an email sent to Jane Leigh:

As a possible base for those involved in spiritual type work – any kind of healing – reiki, bach flowers, aromatherapy and counselling; as a base for spiritually aware community based groups eg for people with Asperger's Syndrome; Gardening therapy workshops; Music therapy workshops (singing, string ensemble tuition – with a view to holding concerts if / when appropriate); as a venue where people can learn cookery, embroidery, crafts; as a venue for celebrations.

I feel there is a lack of available counselling services in the area. It would be wonderful if Oaklands offered reasonably priced counselling services or a "listening ear" to those in need.

Revd Dave Gaffney

From an email sent to Jane Leigh:

Unity comes from diversity. Only a few 'organs' in the Maximus Homo correspond to Christians or the New Church. The rest belong to all types of good people of numerous faiths and without all of them the heavens couldn't function.

An email to Cathy Mahmood:

I have read your feasibility report on the link you supplied. Generally, I like it and will support it, I think it is well researched and written and I think it presents Oaklands and this area with real possibilities. I think we could work with the Tree of Life organization and I think what you are proposing is in keeping with both the developing 'vision' for Conference and the way Purley seems to be going. I think there are really exciting possibilities available here.

My only observation which I feel needs comment - although this is in no way a criticism as I feel I know why it has been done, in the way it has, in regard to your 'Vision Statement.'

It talks of 'the Lord' not the 'Lord Jesus Christ', It could be talking of Lord Krishna, or Shiva, or the Lord as mentioned in the Koran etc. My view is, that as a multi-faith centre people should be able to hold on to their 'specific' faiths whilst still respecting those of other people. By being non-specific, you are implying everyone else should be the same and effectively asking them to let go of their specific faiths. Our faith (that of the Conference) is specifically Christian and this is stated in the Articles of Association as the Statement of Faith and as Conference owns the premises, these Articles override anything else. On the face of it - and I have been there and had the Tee Shirts at Purley - there is a tendency to want to come across as 'one size fits all' but as we here work through these issues here, I/We seem to be finding that all the disparate groups that come here are comfortable with each other's differences and openness becomes a bond instead of providing wedges between us. I am firmly coming to believe, that we cannot become all things to all men(people) and that in the end, openness and transparency is really appreciated. However, we did begin from a similar - if you will excuse me - vague standpoint here at Purley and are developing into what Swedenborg seems to have prophesied as developing into specific/universal 'church' distinctions. For eg. a specific Hindu sect would be specific to itself, and all the collective 'others' universal. We are specific to ourselves and the rest universal. It seems to be ironic, that once a genuine sphere of non- proselytization has been achieved true and charitable sharing of views and concepts seems to emerge. I hope this is constructive/useful comment and I offer it as something to add to your thoughts, I'm not asking you to change your Vision Statement. What I have said here has helped me to clarify some thoughts on 'Interfaith Ministry' so thanks again.

Nicola Geurink, Netherlands

A letter sent to Gill:

The New Church seems to be turning into a terrible burden for you both. As far as I can see it, you, Dad and Don Marshall have kept everything going for years and will be impossible to replace but now that Don has passed on, Dad is soon to turn 89 and you have worries of your own it is definitely time to make other arrangements. Given that there is also no minister, nor any likelihood of finding one and there are only 4 members under 70 who attend (and some not regularly) I feel strongly that the feasibility study is a complete waste of time. In addition, the members who have supported and funded the Birmingham New church for the last 50 years will not wish to see the funds that have been accumulated be turned over to new people who have no link to the Church.

I hope that everything works out for the best and that you and Dad both get the peace of mind you deserve after so many years of hard work and devotion to the New Church.

Margaret Gosling, Moseley, Birmingham

A letter sent to Gill:

I know I am not an 'active' member of Oaklands but still feel connected and I want to give you some support. So I thought you might like to know that I cannot see how the Birmingham New Church Society can keep going with no prospect of a Minister to lead and without any members (most over 70 years old) willing and able to take over the Offices, the ordinary upkeep and day to day running of the church is almost impossible.

I think the suggested feasibility study would not help to further the New Church teachings and would prolong the whole situation without good results. Perhaps it has already begun? I will try to keep in touch with you and get up to date news.

Dorothy Hack

An email sent to Jane Leigh:

I do think it is a wonderful idea to amalgamate as it would certainly keep the New Church in operation. It does seem the only way forward for the church to exist in its present form. Having the services at different peoples houses probably wouldn't work in the long run. Is it possible for me to make a vote by proxy, as I wouldn't be around then? My husband is on chemotherapy so we have to make the most of our time when he has his week free from it. I do sincerely hope this all goes to plan for you and that you get the required number of people to vote for it.

David Haseler

From a conversation with Jane Leigh:

David Haseler has expressed his continuing concern that our energies are not put into the fabric of a building rather than our spiritual growth. He agreed that using the building as a resource had enabled more people to come to the Spiritual Growth meeting.

Brenda and Bill Huggins

Summary of a letter sent to Gill Silk...

Both Brenda and I feel quite strongly that Oaklands should be sold. Brenda regrets this more even than I since she, like you, has been brought up in the New Church all her life, and most of her family filled specific roles in the Moseley Church.

In my career I had to review hundreds of applications on all sorts of personnel matters. I used to look at a case and if it was large and bulky I would feel, generally, that the case was relying on quantity rather than quality – there is an element of that here.

Many of the statements and views expressed in the Report are at best questionable. We feel that any such amalgamation as proposed will not be to the benefit of our Church at large, either in wider knowledge of our theology, not do we believe that we will have a surge of new members. We would be a minor player in our own accommodation.

Clearly the only party to benefit from such an amalgamation would be the Tree of Life organisation. They would have a desirable and permanent home, which would be most attractive to them, understandably.

The bottom line, the main question is: Would the New Church, both locally and Nationally benefit from such an amalgamation, either by increasing our membership or by more widely spreading Swedenborg's teachings. We would say most emphatically NO.

It is unfortunate that the 'dreams' of one person have so influenced others. Without this we would now be well down the road towards selling Oaklands.

Sophie James, West Sussex

A letter sent to Gill:

I am writing to you to voice my concern regarding the situation that the Birmingham New church currently finds itself in.

Yourself, Ken Eadie and Don Marshall prior to his death were the backbone of the Church and understandably you and Ken no longer wish to take an active part in running the Church.

Unfortunately with only 8 active members there is no one to take over your roles so for this reason and the following reasons in my opinion the New Church in Birmingham sadly cannot continue and needs to be sold and the assets made available to the other New Churches: -

- There is no minister and there is no likelihood of one.
- There are only about 8 active church members and only 4 of these are below 70 years of age.
- On average only 5 people attend the church service.
- The Church building and grounds are large and need upkeep.
- The Church is only used for one hour every 2 weeks.
- There is no Sunday School.
- There is no member able to undertake the running of the Church ie accounts, administration, upkeep etc as the 3 people that were able to run the Church are sadly now unable to do so as one has passed away, one is 88 years old and the other does not live locally to the church and finds it very stressful.

It is a sad state of affairs but it is totally impractical for the New Church to keep the building with all the inherent costs and with no member to run it for only 1 hour every 2 weeks so the only realistic outcome would be to sell it.

Jane Leigh, in reply to Alison Anderson's letter (above)

Thank you so much for your email. I very much appreciate your views.

I utterly agree with you about your mother, Gill; that she has been amazing, that the church would have folded but for her years ago; and yes, it has been apparently "thankless" in that we have always expressed our appreciation but with little support for getting jobs done. She has done the majority of the work herself.

It's been difficult for many reasons - one example is we had floorboards up for years while we waited for electric work to be done by our caretaker's son. It was frustrating and debilitating. Gill patiently kept going throughout it, and created two new kitchens, which had an immediate positive effect. None of us will know the extent of the weight she has carried. I could cite dozens of examples of her commitment, as could everyone else at Oaklands. We love and appreciate her, and this process we are now in must be the hardest task of all.

It seems apparent that the local New Church is dying: there are few members, a few more "friends" who attend but we do not attract newcomers because in truth we have little to offer; a service twice monthly and a monthly spiritual growth group. The obvious thing is to sell up, pack up and go home, literally using people's homes to meet until the last one "has left the building".

I cannot do it. I am led to express a different way and all I can do is express it and let go and let God.

The first question I asked Joginder and Marketa, who took over the Tree of Life magazine about 3 or 4 years ago, and work from home, arranging workshops and renting rooms for the events (at the moment the Buddhist Centre in Moseley) was : Would you consider buying the building? They are

simply not in the position to do it. This is not a growing organisation in the sense that it's a church with a growing congregation. It consists of 2 people, partners, one a former solicitor, the other a healer and nutritionist who have dedicated themselves to enabling spiritual seekers to hear and experience well known spiritual leaders in different fields. They have volunteers to help them because they are genuine, capable and they trust those who offer to help. I've been to events to "check them out" and, apart from my having significant experiences from masters of their subject (eg Kabbalah and energy work), I was struck by the professionalism of the volunteers, whose ages ranged from twenties to my age and beyond (sixties/seventies). In other words the Tree of Life consists of a couple with a vision and capability to bring spiritually minded people together, using the internet, a magazine and their contacts.

When I met them at Oaklands they told me how they had prayed the day before for a home, a base, and were thrilled at the prospect of working with us. What I'm trying to say is that I don't see Joginder and Marketa as a threat but a support. They hardly have any sessions during the day, just a weekly Monday evening, half an hour meditation every Wednesday lunchtime and a weekend workshop about fortnightly. Hardly a take over. Their presence, because they pay rent, will help pay the heating costs etc. which allows us to have other groups in. We can't afford to continue having a group here and another there, paying for the building to be heated up for a few. But with Banner and Tree of Life we have a regular income which can be supplemented by all the other individuals/groups who wish to use the building - and it will be cost effective because the heating is properly used, which we couldn't afford to do without them (and Banner). It's too expensive to put heating on for a 2 hour craft session, for instance, but if the heating is on already, it's more than ok.

We concentrated on the Tree of Life in the report because they are crucial for our vision. We share in general the same purpose. They are happy with all our terms and conditions. We gain from their daily presence, we can promote New Church and Purley Chase prominently to all who come to their events and we have a wider group to advertise our workshops. Their presence helps make it viable to have other groups in who may not be drawn to Tree of Life activities but whose more everyday activities bring people into a heavenly sphere. Art for instance - expressing ourselves. We have begun a weekly Sacred Voices workshop. A year ago I would not have appreciated it but now I see the importance of people "finding their voice". One participant was having difficulties in singing and so she sat in the middle of the circle as we made our own tones around her. She told us she felt sadness arise and leave her and she saw angels all around her. Maybe you find that peculiar; last year I would have done too. Now I see sound is another expression we have to access the Lord Jesus Christ, Life, God, Love, our true selves. I use many terms because people use many terms today, but they speak of the same thing. Our desire is to greatly enhance spiritual seekers experiences by offering them the truths residing in Swedenborg's writings. We so want to serve the needs of Oaklands members and also want to open ourselves to others so we can mutually benefit and grow spiritually. We have so much to offer, this seems a perfect opportunity to offer some of it!

A woman who came to the International Womens' Day asked to meet me in my home. She spoke about the therapeutic energy work she does and how Swedenborg kept coming up on the internet so she read about him and discovered she had had similar experiences as he had. She wanted to know more about him and said she would attend any course available about him. She comes to the Sacred Voices workshop and was thrilled last time to see the library of books about Swedenborg and asked to borrow one of them. No one in 36 years has asked me to enable them to know more about Swedenborg - and this was from a woman who talks, for most people, a different language, that of energy and quantum physics and spirituality combined! I admit I am thrilled by the possibilities for the New Church as a whole - the national New Church - if they would only grasp the opportunity given them to reach out, open up and see how Swedenborg's teachings are alive and well, just being expressed slightly differently and waiting to be grounded in his depth of understanding. Today

people listen to scientists like Bruce Lipton, a fantastic promoter of Swedenborgian thought without any inkling of him - a perfect opportunity for the New Church to take his work further - if we had the academics to do it - maybe that's what may happen in the future.

This might all seem like a "dream" but I'm not the only dreamer. Helen Brown, Helen Newton, Jack Dunion, Davis Lomax, Mary Duckworth, Chris Banks, Catherine Lauber, Rita Russell are excited and have promised their practical support. Steve Lacey has committed to doing a weekly spiritual counselling session as well as study groups and worship. I am committed to being the "face" locally and to coordinating, bringing together the different groups/users into a new way of being - ie all users will sign a common ground agreement and be committed to our shared mission. It will be a totally new way of working so that people no longer "rent a room" then disappear but are part of a "family" or gathering of spiritually minded people, aware of and respecting each other and mindful of each others and the buildings needs. Barbara Holmes, who has already proved her excellent abilities in sorting out Emma Ball finances and problems, could be the building administrator; she has already agreed to this if it is accepted. A huge thing we have to let go of is the belief we have to have a sizeable group of people - we are not trying to recreate the past but do something totally new. If Joginder and Marketa trust God and in His ability to provide the support they need for as big an event as the Mind Body Spirit festival, why can't we?

We can still serve our members, through a monthly traditional service and monthly more participatory service, our spiritual sharing group, Steve's counselling sessions, New Church workshops and study sessions and other weekly sessions eg yoga for Pam Sutton, art and craft, film/café society evenings, as well as gardening discussions, sharing of plants, dance and different therapy sessions.

I know I need only be willing, do all I can and let go of the outcome. I am not responsible for anything but what God asks me to do. He sorts out the rest. I'm only just learning this; this experiment, for two years, is not a burden. It's an opportunity to have fun, share love and laughter, all the while knowing there's much to do but the spirit in which we do it will be of the Lord, as we trust in Him.

My daughter has been the General Manager of a theatre company and was responsible for art projects in Nottinghamshire and beyond. She was also responsible for its finances and has excellent knowledge and skills to deal with all aspects of the New Church finances. We intend to be self financing, not using any New Church money for the experiment except the £9,000 to General Conference for New Church ministers we would prefer to come from New Church funds.

Where two or three are gathered together... and where there's life there's a way. This is an opportunity for Life to be rekindled and become a flame... I apologise if I have spoken too long or out of turn. My desire is to show you another way. You may make of it what you will. May I send you the final report when it is complete as I agree, the summary had little in it.

Please accept my love, respect and good wishes.

David Lomax, New Church College Principal

From an email sent to Jane Leigh:

I think some people's concerns could derive from feeling that we might be "tainted by association" as they would see it. If other groups are running activities at "our" premises, people from the community at large might think that any ideas put forward are what we believe, when that is not

necessarily the case. I think it's worth saying that if we take a "not feeling able to accommodate people whose beliefs differ from ours" approach to its (logical?) extreme, that would mean that we couldn't allow any spiritually-based activities to take place on our premises unless people believe exactly what we do... I think one of the questions in all of this is that of having a "New Church presence" in the midst of other events. This means that it might become apparent that what we believe differs from what may be being presented at another event. However, that only happens if there is this involvement and dialogue as part of what is going on, preferably spontaneously...

Helen Newton

From two emails sent to Jane:

Your vision for Oaklands sounds so exciting. I believe working with others in the area of spirituality is the way forward. We do not do our church or those who don't know about Swedenborg any favours by keeping so separate. I would be delighted to come over to Oaklands several times a year to lead workshops or groups. I would think possibly 5 times a year would fit into the workshop timing slot... Thinking about what you are proposing I am also wondering if you have thought about a coffee/bookshop? This would mean the centre was open more and used as a drop in by the community. It would also give the option of prompting Swedenborgian concepts through the written word, video, CD, cards - whatever resources we are producing. It would require more human resources but I feel this might be money well spent - perhaps the person could also link in with the bookshop at Purley which would benefit from having someone there more regularly than I am able to be. Just a suggestion if this is not already in your vision! May your visioning be blessed with what it needs to become a reality...

... I have read the Steering Group Report with interest and am very impressed by the enthusiasm, professionalism and foresight of it.

I am delighted that there are enough of you in the Birmingham area to put your energy, love and light into this project and know that you will gain as much, if not more, than you put into it.

As I think I said in my earlier response, having a spiritual centre is a wonderful way to reach people today with spiritual ideas and experiences as it does not come with the perceived baggage of a traditional Christian Church - which the New Church can seem externally whilst being very different internally.

I wonder what the main fear of the Church Members is? I hope that this will be discussed at your meeting as it is important to acknowledge and address fears.

My guess is that a key one, which you have alluded to in your report, is that the New Church will get swallowed up by the Tree of Life. I know the founder of the Tree of Life, the dynamic Maggy Whitehouse, having heard her talk on my interfaith training course about Judaism and the Kabbalah - amazing truths in this! She is also a good friend of a friend of mine and I receive Maggy's monthly mailings. I am also familiar with the Tree of Life magazine and find their approach to spirituality very genuine and open. If people's worst fears were realised and the Tree of Life organisation did come to dominate Oaklands would it matter? It would matter to me only if our special, really helpful Swedenborgian ideas were lost but I do not fear this from what you are proposing, nor from my experience of the spirituality that the Tree of Life is working with which contains so many of the truths we in the New Church think are 'ours' (what illusory thinking we get caught up in!). We are in the New Spiritual Age and my experience is that the Lord has allowed these truths to permeate in

many different ways - not just through Swedenborg, although I still see in his writings the most complete, comprehensive and deep explanation of truth.

I am sure that you will find that spiritual seekers who come through the Tree of Life will find 'our' Church's teachings really helpful and enlightening if presented in a way which is accessible to them (accessibility being the key word here I think!). I also believe that we need to be happy for people to find the style of 'worship' which best meets their needs today and not expect them to conform to some Victorian, Methodist form which we inherited. Spirit is about creativity and growth - Life - so we must allow our Church to grow and change in line with people's experience and not become fossilised otherwise it dies. I know this is what is inspiring the Steering Group and I pray that those who do not have the experience of working with others outside the Church are able to put aside their fears and trust that this is what you at Oaklands are being called to do.

Interestingly, the same week you sent me your Report I received one from North of England New Church House asking for my comments about what to do with their money when they sell their premises. Some people would like this to be used to set up a new distribution centre for New Church books etc. and perhaps also to be a place for talks, workshops etc. We could end up with another Spiritual Centre in the Manchester area which would be fantastic. This will depend on the human resources and vision of local people. If this is not forthcoming then I believe the money goes to Conference and I would hope that they will use it for the same purpose to employ someone to run a bookshop and be the distribution centre for New Church collateral. Oaklands Spiritual Centre would be the perfect place for this and would be another means of keeping Swedenborgian ideas available, as I said in my previous message. All exciting stuff - the energy is moving and growing and I look forward to hearing a positive outcome from your meeting in May.

Ruth Ogden, My Response to the Proposals for the Future of Oaklands

Having read the report of the feasibility group, and having spoken with Jane Leigh, Stephen Lacy and Gillian Silk I offer my cautious and rather hurried response to the plans. (I must stress that I have never been to Oaklands and do not personally know all the people concerned.)

There has to be a change in our (ie New Church) approach to the community and to individual 'searchers' as traditional ways have obviously failed, so any serious experiment should be given a try, with careful controls in place. This will undoubtedly alienate some traditional worshippers, and part of me feels in great sympathy with them, but it is obvious that we fail and die as an organisation if we do not provide people with the chance to hear the Lord's Word through the teachings of Swedenborg. The proposals are worth a try for the two year period suggested.

My main concern is that the plans put forward place a heavy burden on a very few people and in particular on Stephen Lacy, and that there is no (other) spiritual leader in place on a regular basis.

I think it important that a form of worship should take place once a month, which although will be different from the traditional, should still contain the important elements of worship as we know it and can still be accessed by members and friends.

There should, before this experiment be embarked upon, a decision made about what criteria will be used to assess the success or failure of the venture and that these should be adhered to at the end of the 2-year period, otherwise there will be a likelihood of 'mission creep'.

Donna Roberts, therapist

If a course /study group is started at the centre relating to the teachings of Swedenborg I would be interested in attending ... Purley Chase is too far to travel really, the deeper teachings within the scriptures is something I have great interest in.

Rita Russell, New Church Minister

I'm very happy to come and support your new venture at Oaklands New Church Centre... I would be happy to come approximately twice a year to lead a day of Sacred Circle Dance.

Gill Silk: My View of the Future for Oaklands

Over the past few months, as chairman, I have tried my best to remain impartial and to allow everyone to have their say about the future of Oaklands. My role has been made more difficult as the Church Committee ceased to be quorate following the death of Don Marshall and the resignation, because of increasing problems with sight and hearing, of Pam Sutton. This meant that no decisions could be made without recourse to the Governing Council. After the November Extraordinary General Meeting at Oaklands I duly sent off to them a synopsis for them to consider and send a report back to the committee. When there was no mention of Oaklands in the ensuing minutes, it transpired that the Governing Council had decided to make the recommendations about the future of Oaklands confidential so I was unable to speak about them at the specially convened Extraordinary General Meeting in February. This led to a most unsatisfactory state of affairs from my point of view. Michael Hindley has subsequently apologised for Council's decision about privacy.

Now I feel it is my turn to voice my own opinions. My family has been very involved with the New Church since it first began in Birmingham, first at Newhall Street, then Summer Lane, then Wretham Road and finally Oaklands. Since returning to live in Birmingham in 1971 I have put my heart, soul and energy into keeping Oaklands viable, so it is with great regret that I feel the time has come to sell the premises. It seems to me to make no sense to spend over £25,000 a year on outgoings, and premises which are far too large for us, and which are currently used for about 3 hours per month by such a small congregation (6 at the Easter day service and 4 on the previous occasion). Furthermore I do not think that the money, which has been given over the years by generous church members, should be used as proposed by the steering Group, but should instead be transferred to the Conference to invest or spend more usefully.

I feel that Oaklands would indeed make a splendid Multicultural Centre but I do not feel that the New Church should be saddled with maintaining the premises for others to use while our own use will be such a small proportion of the total use of the buildings. In my view the Tree of Life, who would be using the premises seven days a week, should buy the place, or put together a plan to get money for a Multicultural Centre from the Lottery Fund. If they are keen to share, then perhaps we and other current users could rent some of the rooms for functions as needed.

Finally, as I, Ken Eadie and Marjorie Belfield are all standing down after the Annual Meeting most of the proposed new committee have little knowledge of the workings of the committee and the church and some have attended Oaklands, at best, only very occasionally. Jane Leigh has been on the committee for some time, but last year did not once attend any committee meetings. This, in my mind, does not augur well for the successful future of the Society.

According to the Rules of Oaklands, only members can vote, but it seems to make no sense to canvass people who are still technically members of the society but who have not been to the New

Church since it left Wretham Road about 40 years ago. Others who come regularly but are only members of Conference do not get to vote.

I wish that the prospective buyers we had lined up prior to the February meeting had been allowed to proceed with purchasing the premises so that we could have continued, as they had already agreed, to use the buildings as in the past. In that way, we would have been freed from responsibility for the fabric of the place, and we would have been able to concentrate on planning more happily on our future together. Perhaps we could still find another suitable purchaser for our lovely building.

Incidentally, I was horrified to find the table in Oaklands hallway, which is usually reserved for Outlook, the Oaklands Newsletter or Lifeline, covered instead with brochures about the Tree of Life, meditations for Beltane and Solstice, for holistic diets and yoga and meditation. This is not my idea of the way to promote the New Church and its teachings. Stephen did say that he would see that this would be rectified.

These, then, are my views. I am grateful to have the chance to write about how I feel instead of listening all the time to others.

Pam Sutton

A letter to Gill:

I am impressed by the new outlook for Oaklands and I hope it will be given a try. I can understand you wish to retire. You have been wonderful and an inspiration to us all. I love Oaklands and I do hope things turn out for the best.

Paul Zacharius, Canada

Thank you for sending me the Report on the future of Oaklands which I read with much interest. It certainly represents a lot of hard work and thoughtful consideration on the part of the Committee. There was a difficult task. You asked me to respond and following are a few thoughts I'd like to share with you.

I had no knowledge of the Tree of Life, so I googled the subject and a great deal of info is readily available. In fact they are holding a major gathering in Birmingham this coming weekend, with 30 lectures, workshops, etc on the program. It is very much in keeping with other New Age groups that are presently flourishing in N. America and Europe. The TOL seems to be heavily interested in improving the environment, raw food, mystical elements, healing through music, food and natural living, building a more peaceful world ... in brief it deals in a holistic way with body, mind and spirit. All of these are very worthy, commendable objectives, and in general they are certainly in harmony with our underlying New Church teachings. And I believe that other groups, such as Unity, would also be involved, but the TOL would be the primary party.

The arrangement as described in the Report would completely change Oaklands in radical ways. I read that two Sunday services a month and one study group a month presently held in Oaklands, with possibly other religious programs offered in the future. The TOL would hold 3 or 4 activities a week, plus an ongoing presence in the office, plus maintenance work in and around the property. They would be by far the dominant party. One sentence mentions the possibility of being 'swamped', and it's pretty evident that this would happen. This isn't necessarily a negative feature,

but people need to know what to expect. The Future Vision on p5 is very good, this is the ideal picture of what could happen in a perfect world.... But as we all know, ideal visions don't always materialise, this for a host of reasons. Following are some specific questions and wonderments.

Early on we are told that Oaklands' present objectives cannot be sustained. After reading the Report several times, I'm finding it difficult to see how the new arrangement would bolster or strengthen the Church's objectives? TOL members are unlikely to attend a traditional NC service. Over the years, I've talked with many New Agers, and this isn't their thing. Same with Unity Members. Certainly the Oaklands building will be a busy useful place, but I'm not sure that the Oaklands congregation would benefit very much.

Probably my main question is: Who is going to do everything? See p 12 and partially on p 14 ... a long list of important things that would need to be looked after ... exactly who is going to take care of everything? We read that Ken and Gill are withdrawing from active service next month; Stephen lives at a distance, Bill has doubts about the new proposal. My impression is that there are 5 or 6 people left who would carry the main load forward. Are they willing to assume the many responsibilities involved? Is there someone in the group with financial expertise to carry on Ken's good work? They must be prepared to spend a lot of time and energy at the Church if the proposal is adopted. Are they fully aware of what is entailed in all of this?

The Report talks about expanding and adapting new forms of worship. Again, who will lead these new worship services? Not having a resident minister really compounds the problem. I'm aware of the shortage of clergy in Conference, so a minister might be brought in for a special service every 4 or 5 weeks, but that in itself is not likely to enhance your objectives.

The 3 Cons on p6 should be looked at very honestly. 1. Do the few remaining members left fully understand the situation? 2. Will the NS be swamped by the TOL? 3. Without congregational support the new venture cannot succeed.

I'm assuming that the Oaklands property and assets are owned or controlled by the national Conference... and that if the Birmingham New Church Society should dissolve, everything reverts to Conference. We've had several very bad experiences in Convention where outside groups moved in very gradually, became members, and eventually took over all the assets. A word of caution.

After all this, I can see the new proposal serving a use. The place would be buzzing with activities... all sorts of people would have their spiritual needs met... the small New Church group would carry on much as is, though with different personnel leading the way... a few folks would pick up NC literature and some might attend services because they were curious... altogether it could be a very interesting experiment. Maybe this is the Church of the future. The good Lord works in mysterious ways. The single biggest question is: Are those few remaining people willing to take on a very heavy load of responsibility and hard work at Oaklands over the coming years? If they are, we just might see a miracle unfolding before our eyes.