Ladies and gentlemen

As we meet for the 110th Annual General Meeting of the Spiritualists’ National Union, this annual gathering of like-minded people affords us the opportunity to meet old friends and make new ones, all in the name of Spiritualism. We are here to conduct the business of the Union and I suggest that we face an exciting time in our history; we face a time of change and innovation. Only through embracing that change will we find the growth and expansion which will potentially see Spiritualism make a full contribution to our modern society. We cannot act in isolation; the message of spirit needs to be shared. Only through sharing will we truly come to understand the true import of that which we are collectively trying to achieve. My hope for this movement is very much one of growth and progress. The foundations are well laid; now we need to build and grow. Let us not seek to limit our potential, to doubt our ability or to lose sight of the need to help each other; being part of this Union should mean something to each and every one of us. ‘One Union’, ‘Strength through Unity’, means that we must move to support the weak and allow the strong amongst us to fulfil our potential to the benefit of all.

I would like to thank the North Lancs & Cumbria District Council for agreeing to host this year’s Conference in Blackpool; two years ago we had an excellent weekend and I hope that this year’s event will be equally successful. The North Lancs & Cumbria District Council made the 2010 Conference work by involving every Church in their area and I know this has helped strengthen the district and build unity within all levels of the Union in the district and beyond.

Travelling around the country, I constantly meet people who ask, ”Where is the scientific aspect of Spiritualism today?” Albert Einstein said that “science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”
Many times we have talked about working with the scientific community, not to look back and reproduce the experimentation of the early twentieth century but, instead, to look forward to the future. I stated in last year's address that I wanted to rekindle the debate in Spiritualism, to encourage people both from within and without the movement to think seriously about what we are doing and where we are going. To this end we are in the process of organising a day's event at the Arthur Findlay Centre in Stafford on 17th November, which I hope will include a selection of excellent speakers both from within the movement and also from the academic community; the day will include a series of lectures, workshops and debates which I hope will attract interest from a wide audience. If successful, the day will be developed and could potentially see a new sub-committee established which will aim to strengthen the links with academia but also afford us the opportunity to expand our understanding within the movement. To date I have held a meeting with Coventry University and I hope also to speak shortly with a senior lecturer at Nottingham University; I hope also to re-establish the SNU’s links with the Society for Psychical Research.

Later this year we will need to re-issue the Rules for Churches in response to new policies which need to be put in place. However, delegates, the NEC has listened to the many concerns voiced both last year at this meeting and during my many visits to our Churches and District Councils.

Taking effect from the 2012 edition of the Rules for Churches, we will change the requirement for each Church member to be provided with a copy of the Rules. We have agreed that in future each member of the Committee must have a copy of the Rules for Churches; this is perhaps more important than ever before with the added legislation and bureaucracy that our Churches face. Members will also have the right to demand a copy if they require one and the 2012 edition will also be included on the SNU website so that anybody can access the Rules as and when necessary.
We have listened to your concerns and acted to remove this burden from our Churches, which we hope will act to support your work.

Those present at Warwick University last year will remember that we undertook to review the complaints procedure within the Union; the review is complete and a new format is in place within the Bye-laws, which we hope will make the whole process easier and fairer for all parties. To facilitate this we need to provide training to key people geographically spread throughout the country to help the new format function. This has proved more difficult than first anticipated; we did make a start with one training company, which has now pulled out, but I am pleased to inform you that a new provider has been identified and I hope that training will start before the end of the year. Only when this has been successfully accomplished will we bring forward the new system. I fully understand that many members will feel this is taking too long but, frankly, I want to see this delivered properly; to rush or cut corners is not an option. We have to remember that we are dealing with people's lives; the system needs to be right from the start.

As you all know, Arthur Findlay bestowed a great gift on the Union, which has certainly shaped the last forty-six years of our history; I speak, of course, of Stansted Hall. Let's reflect on the thousands of people who have travelled from around the world to learn more about Spiritualism, mediumship and the psychic sciences. The Hall's present financial position is allowing us to fund and develop the work of the Union, which is, I believe, bringing many benefits to the movement as a whole. Arthur left very detailed instructions for a memorial to his life and work but, sadly, due to lack of funds we have never fulfilled Arthur's wishes. Working with the students, course organisers and tutors at the Arthur Findlay College, I would like to commission the same stonemasons who created the memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum to create a fitting tribute to the life and works of a man whose insight and knowledge
have done much to shape the modern movement. A fund will be created and this will not be financed with Union or College funds but, instead, through a fund-raising campaign which will allow everybody that appreciates and values Arthur’s gift to contribute to finally fulfil his wish to be remembered in a fitting manner.

I am pleased to note that the Arthur Findlay Centre at Stafford is making solid progress. We have now moved to employ three members of staff at the Centre to relieve the pressure on our volunteers and it was gratifying a few weeks ago to attend the two Open Days, which coincided with the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee. We saw on both days over two hundred people attend and what excited me most was that many of them were Spiritualists from the length and breadth of our country. At the outset it was always envisaged that Stafford would be aimed at the domestic market and provide a training and support centre for Districts and Churches around the country. The programme of education is developing; we are actively involving the local community and locally based charities, which is helping to raise the profile of National Spiritualism. Also in the year to 31st December the Centre made a profit; I think this is a wonderful achievement and I salute Julia Almond and her Management Committee for their dedication and resolve to make the Arthur Findlay Centre an important part of this Union.

You will also be aware that we have fully reviewed the system of Churches under supervision, which I appreciate is a concern to many within the ranks of the Union; to date I can report that we have just fifty-one Churches under supervision, a reduction of 14 since I became President, not, however, the seventy per cent reported recently in the Spiritualist press. I really wish people would take time to get their facts right before they make statements about the Union, its Churches and members.

I have said before that our Churches are the backbone of this movement,
as the Union strengthens its position this can only be positive for our affiliated Churches and Centres. I am sure that, like me, you have been concerned about the flooding that is affecting large areas of our country in what has been a record summer for rainfall. Our Church at Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire sadly fell victim to the elements. Having heard the problems the town had faced on the news, I rang the President just to enquire if all was well at the Church. Sadly, it was not: the Church, we learnt, had been flooded, the cellar was full of water, there was three feet of water standing in the Church and the Committee was at its wits' end, not knowing how they could cope with this catastrophe. Because of flooding in this area the Church insurance company had placed a £5,000 excess on any claim and this would have wiped out all the available funds the Church had.

The damage was estimated at £30,000 and everything seemed hopeless. Ladies and gentlemen, surely if we are truly a Union of Churches we must be prepared to help when one of our number is in need. I asked Graham Hewitt to visit the Church on the following Tuesday; Graham has helped to get things moving with the insurance claim. The Church is still drying out, having been pumped out by the local fire brigade, but, sadly, further flooding has occurred and the Church is having a torrid time. Rest assured, the Union will move to support the Committee to get the Church up and running again in the shortest possible time. I would also ask that we make the closing collection this evening in aid of Hebden Bridge Church so that we can collectively demonstrate our support to one of our own in their time of need.

Moving to a happier note, I have been honoured to conduct many anniversary services and rededications throughout the year, and it has been wonderful to travel around the country and meet fellow Spiritualists and share with them their celebrations.

Many of you will remember Gordon Higginson, who holds the honour of
being the longest-serving President in the Union's history. Gordon was a remarkable man and his mediumship placed him firmly at the forefront as one of our modern pioneers. It is hard to imagine that in January next year we will mark the 20th Anniversary of Gordon’s passing. I have spoken with the President of Longton Church and my fellow members of the NEC and the Arthur Findlay College Committee and we have all agreed that we must mark this anniversary and remember a man that gave so much to Spiritualism. Gordon was a wonderful medium and I would like to announce today plans to endow a scholarship in his name to give a budding medium of today the opportunity to train and be tutored by some of the best mediums we have; let us never forget that we have in the UK a reputation for the highest standard of mediumship around the world. We already do a great deal through our Education schemes and Training and Awards and the work of the Arthur Findlay College, and now the Arthur Findlay Centre, to teach our exponents of tomorrow the gifts of the spirit. I believe that the young are our future and we need to encourage them; they will ensure Spiritualism's tomorrow. Through this scholarship we will be marking the memory of a great man and supporting the development of the workers of tomorrow, especially with a view to promoting our philosophy. The new NEC will publish details of the scholarship and I hope we will be in a position to announce the scheme as part of the events which will surround the forthcoming anniversary.

Two weeks ago today I achieved something personally which has changed my life forever; I was honoured to be ordained as a Minister of the Spiritualists’ National Union and I would like to thank the many friends and colleagues who travelled to Stansted to celebrate this day with me. As the newest appointment to the Ministry I am pleased to report that I believe the Ministry is really starting to move forward; since the last AGM we have now ordained four new Ministers and appointed seven Officiants. Our candidates are better trained than ever before and, I believe, better able to go out into our society and truly work for spirit in developing the Brotherhood of Man. What we have in this movement
should be shared; we should reach out, engage with other religions and stand tall, proud to be National Spiritualists, proud to have an understanding of life which can literally change people's lives for the better. I am honoured to be part in a small way in the work that is being done in the name of Spiritualism and I urge anyone who is thinking of taking this pathway of life to make the commitment; we need dedicated individuals who are prepared to truly serve mankind.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my fellow members of the NEC; in the last two years we have made tremendous progress and achieved a considerable amount, much of which will be reported this weekend. Sadly, the present team will not continue, as several members have decided to stand down, but I would like to thank each one personally; your contribution has been over and above the call of duty in the amount of time and effort each one has invested on behalf of the Union.

I am also very sorry to lose Chris James, who, although he has only been on the NEC for two years, in that time has worked incredibly hard to drag us into the 21st century from an IT perspective. Chris has worked tirelessly on the new database and the IT systems of the Union, which are both an essential part of our strategic vision of the future.

I would also like to thank Myrrha Hibbert, the Council Representative to the NEC, who has served as a member of the NEC for the last four years.

Each member that sits at this table represents various committees and sub-committees that reflect many volunteers who invest a great deal of time and effort for the Union; my thanks go to each and every one of you for your work, your dedication and your commitment, without which we would be truly lost.

I must also pay tribute to our paid employees who help the Union to function; my thanks go to Charles, our General Secretary, Graham
Hewitt, our Assistant General Secretary and Trust Property Co-ordinator, Claire Shores, the General Manager at Redwoods, Jane, Eileen, Sue and Sarah at Redwoods, Minister Chris Denton, Janet and Chris at the Registrations Office at Otley, Tanya Smith, our General Manager and her staff at the Arthur Findlay College, Debbie Taylor, our Centre Coordinator, and her staff at the Arthur Findlay Centre, and, of course, Anne Daultrey, Lesley, Jane and Julie at the SNU Trust office.

I would like to pay tribute to all members of the National Council, who are now proving to be a great asset in helping to develop and deliver the five-year plan, and the District Officers and Executive Committees throughout our fourteen Districts, who invest a great deal of time and energy to support our Churches and their congregations. I would like also to thank our Church Committees up and down the country who work hard as the public-facing side of Spiritualism, the Healing Leaders and healers, who have dedicated their lives to serve mankind, and the literally hundreds of award-holders, speakers and demonstrators who serve our Churches and propagate the message of Spiritualism. Whatever your contribution, large or small, I thank you each for what you have done to make the Union the organisation it is today, an organisation I am proud to be part of.

I have spoken much about change and new innovation; this, ladies and gentlemen, is not just a pipe-dream, it is starting to become a reality. Many talk to me about a positive ‘buzz’ around the Churches, a feeling that progress is underway. The movement as a whole is moving in a far more positive direction; movement might be slight but I believe a momentum is building. Let’s pull collectively together to deliver a multi-faceted organisation which can support the members and the Churches but also be outward-looking. Each person here can attest to the remarkable impact Spiritualism can make to our personal lives; may I be so bold as to suggest that the world needs the message of spirit more now than ever before. People are seeking to understand and develop their
spirituality and Spiritualism can and does play a part within that process for many thousands of people, week in, week out. In seeking to reach out to our community, in taking up our rightful place on Interfaith groups, hospital and prison chaplaincies, in encouraging local and community organisations to use our premises, in engaging with local and national government to allow the voice of Spiritualism to be heard in our town halls and also in the corridors of Westminster and Brussels, we need to be collectively proactive. We have to stop shrugging our shoulders and saying we cannot make a difference. I suggest, ladies and gentlemen, fellow Spiritualists, the difference starts with us; we must make our voice heard and perhaps even take lessons from many of our early pioneers. They had fire in their bellies, they believed fervently in what they were doing in bringing about the ways and means for Spiritualism to find a place in society; surely it is now up to us to build on their work, hoist the flag high and be proud of what we can collectively achieve together. To quote one of my predecessors, Ernest Oaten: “That growing mass of evidence which is convincing thoughtful people that this physical life is not uninfluenced from a larger and more dynamic world.” This is the vision, not only my personal vision but the vision shared from the spirit world, a vision shared by many people in this hall, a vision shared by countless people around our country and around the world. Let's grasp that inspiration and allow the message of spirit to resonate in all aspects of life on this planet, cultivating in thinking minds everywhere a new hope and insight into the true purpose of life. One Union, strength through unity.

Fellow delegates, thank you.