

## **Background Papers for the 2024 Annual Meetings**

***Note: All Background Papers are submitted by the proposers, and do not therefore necessarily reflect the views of the General Assembly.***

### **Motion 1 FROM TWELVE FULL MEMBERS**

#### **AI**

Intelligence is the ability to achieve complex goals. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a hugely complicated subject and it is impossible here to adequately perform the educational task that would be addressed by the proposed study framework. However, AI has vast potential (e.g. medical and technological innovation, leading to increased leisure and novel experiences) and also attracts substantial risks (e.g. military, intellectual property, privacy, mis/dis-information, discriminatory and employment risks). Properly understanding AI, and contributing to public discourse, is an opportunity for Unitarian service and relevancy.

The 2023 release of OpenAI's ChatGPT 4.0 (a 'large language model') coupled with the resignation of Google's AI 'godfather' Geoffrey Hinton, and a subsequent call by organisations and researchers for a development pause, brought AI fully into public awareness. Current AI can be seen as the latest in a series of increasingly sophisticated human tools, a fair perspective whilst AI is narrow in scope compared with more general human intelligence. However, 'tool' may not adequately describe the human-level artificial general intelligence expected within decades/years. Superintelligence (AI beyond human) may even develop via a speculated 'runaway AI' effect where it learns to recursively improve its own software and hardware, though both likelihood and timescale are hotly debated. Whilst offering dizzying opportunities superintelligence may pose a threat to humanity that, in more extreme estimations, could develop within a decade. However, mitigating this must be integrated with challenging the more immediate injustices that AI and other automation and algorithms may bring (with humans increasingly leaving the decision-making loop), an approach adopted by the Just Algorithms Action Group.

Safely managing potential superintelligence presents technological challenges in the form of the AI alignment problem: AI must: i) learn; ii) adopt; and iii) retain human goals. However sufficiently intelligent AI may develop subgoals prioritizing: i) self-preservation; ii) resource acquisition for self-improvement; and iii) information to improve its world view (likely causing shedding of human goals). Such technical considerations rest upon a more general issue that Unitarians are well placed to address: what are (whose are) the goals and values that we want AI to adopt? The lack of human consensus regarding values and goals implies that those adopted cannot be those of the general population but might easily be those of AI

developers/corporations. Regulation and ethical frameworks have been suggested for AI but global enforcement will be very challenging.

Society needs to be informed before challenging and wide-ranging decisions are required. The Unitarian movement is very well placed to facilitate much needed societal conversations about AI. This is because AI is philosophically and/or pragmatically related to such things as human nature, rationality, global ecological crises (which AI could accelerate if mismanaged but may offer opportunities to mitigate), identity, truth, innovation, consumerism etc. that Unitarians care about. Consciousness (human and machine) and the nature of human experience (direct or technologically mediated) are also relevant.

An ongoing process of study and discussion of AI by Unitarians, and resulting societal engagement, is a key outcome of the motion. The requested AI Response Task Group is a means for achieving this end. It should be understood that, evidenced by the divergence of opinion amongst experts regarding timescale and magnitude of AI issues, appropriate pitching of the resourcing of such a Task Group would best be done with an emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness. Initial establishment, including study framework development, should not be resource intensive but would enable the GA to respond to current AI issues and contribute to global efforts to maximize benefits for minimal risk.

#### Resources:

- Just Algorithms Action Group <https://www.jaag.org.uk/> (UK based with Quaker connections). Please read the blog post <https://www.jaag.org.uk/blog/ethical-dilemmas-posed-by-ai> by Siani Morris.
- AI and the Human <https://www.ai-and-the-human.org/> is a UU resource
- Max Tegmark, Life 3.0 (Penguin, 2018)
- Future of Life Institute <https://futureoflife.org/ai/> develops themes raised in Max Tegmark's book.
- 'Unitarians responding to AI' <https://www.facebook.com/groups/990574472378632>

## Motion 2 FROM THE FOY SOCIETY

### No More Deaths Campaign

In 2022 The Foy Society held a conference on the subject of institutional racism in Britain, led by Rev Winnie Gordon. One of the speakers, Ian Minter, presented a paper detailing his extensive research into 150 state related deaths between 1980 and 2020. Ian's findings shocked those of us present at the Conference. Many of the cases involved asphyxia brought about by inappropriate use of restraint, often on people with serious mental health issues. Particularly distressing is the fact that there were a disproportionate number of people from black and minority ethnic families who had lost their lives at the hands of the state.

Ian's research was not confined to cases involving the police. He studied tragic deaths across the entire custody estate, including young offender institutions, secure training centres for children, both men's and women's prisons, secure mental hospitals and immigration detention centres. He found that in many cases these deaths received little media attention. He studied newspaper resources, inquest reports, coroner reports, court judgments and judicial opinions, parliamentary debates and papers in order to dig out the details of these cases. Ian's paper has been printed by the GA's Social Justice Network (formerly the PSAP) and will be available on the SJN stall at the Annual Meetings. Warning – it contains distressing details of brutal and inappropriate treatment by agents of the state.

The charity *Inquest* has also published a number of reports with similar findings to Ian's. *Inquest* state that, while public and private bodies have a duty to keep us safe from harm and protect our lives, every year hundreds of people die preventable state related deaths. These include deaths of people in police and prison custody, mental health settings as in the cases studied by Ian Minter, and also those resulting from disasters such as the Grenfell Tower fire and Hillsborough Stadium. In recent times we could add the sad death of headteacher Ruth Perry and deaths arising from the Post Office Horizon scandal as further examples.

**The key point is that, as Ian found, hundreds of vital recommendations are made following inquests and inquiries. Yet there is no system in place to oversee them or ensure changes are made. Potentially life-saving recommendations are too often forgotten, dismissed or simply not implemented. This leads to yet more preventable deaths and harms.**

To remedy this, *INQUEST* is calling for a National Oversight Mechanism to be established. This would be a new independent public body responsible for collating, analysing and following-up on recommendations arising from inquests, inquiries, official reviews and investigations into state-related deaths. A National Oversight Mechanism would:

- **Collate** recommendations and public bodies' responses in a new database.
- **Analyse** responses from public bodies & issue reports.
- **Follow up** on progress, escalate concerns & share thematic findings

The Foy Society believes that this proposal, if adopted, could make a real difference leading to fewer state related deaths and injuries; and is therefore worthy of Unitarian support.

Part a) of our motion affirms the GA's support for the *Inquest* campaign.

Part b) instructs the EC to add Unitarians to the list of 58 respectable national organisations which already support the campaign.

Part c) urges Unitarians at large to do what they can to promote the campaign.

This motion is supported by the GA Social Justice Network.

Footnotes:

- 1) Further details of the *Inquest* campaign, including a list of supporting organisations, can be found on the following links:  
<https://www.inquest.org.uk/no-more-deaths-campaign>  
<https://www.inquest.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b480f898-7fbd-4c9c-a948-50dd3fad3a04>
- 2) At present the campaign applies to England and Wales only. This is because different coronial and investigative systems apply in the devolved administrations. *Inquest* hope that the proposal can be repurposed for these legislations in due course.

### Motion 3 FROM LEWISHAM UNITARIANS

#### Peace In Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

**For context:** As of February 2024, over 30,000 Palestinians killed (7,700 of which children), 70,000 injured, and 1.9 million (80%+ of the population) rendered homeless. 70% of homes are damaged or destroyed. Israel's siege since October caused food, shelter, and safety shortages. Utilities like electricity and water are scarce, contributing to health risks for millions. Health facilities struggle, with most clinics and hospitals inoperable, reducing bed capacity and worsening the humanitarian crisis. The collateral damage of this includes death and harm to international and local aid workers, UN Representatives and journalists. This is in addition to 75 years of historical evidence of actions by the Israeli state against innocent Palestinians, including illegal settlements on Palestinian land. However, this ultimately leads back to UK colonial and imperial activity with notable actions against the Palestinians dating back to 2 November 1917 with the Balfour Declaration.

Our previous actions as a denomination: In the past GAs, various resolutions were passed which speak to this issue. The 1936 GA were convinced that all war is a crime against humanity and that peace can never be secured by arms. In 1955 and 1985, condemned the Apartheid of South Africa. In 1967, 1974, and 1998 supported calls made by Amnesty International and in 1998 called that we support the Declaration of Human Rights. In 2002 and 2004, we supported a peaceful solution in the Palestinian Territories in support of a Palestinian State.

The GA and its member congregations can take the following actions to meet the Resolution (and not limited to):

- a) urge political leaders to actively pursue an immediate halt to the ongoing conflict in Gaza. Advocate for a peaceful resolution based on principles of justice, equality, and the recognition of the inherent human rights of all individuals—be they Palestinian Muslims, Jewish, or Christians—residing in Palestine, Israel and the Occupied Territories.
- b) call upon the UK Government to condemn the military violence and oppression of the Israeli state and accordingly, suspend all military cooperation with Israel throughout the conflict, including the cessation of arms sales by UK companies.
- c) describe the nature of the Israeli occupation of Palestine as "apartheid", and the current actions of the Israeli military in Gaza as "terrorism" and "war crimes".
- d) Not conflate antisemitism with critiques against the Israeli state as Israel does not speak for all of Judaism, and Judaism is not controlled by the State of Israel. Additionally, solidarity of the Palestinian people does not conflate with critiques of Hamas, as Hamas has not had a legal democratic mandate since the Palestinian elections of 2006.

- e) unequivocally oppose any attempts at ethnic cleansing within the Palestinian territories and advocate for an immediate cessation of the occupation in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. This stance aligns with the United Nations resolutions aiming to promote peace and justice in the region.
- f) condemn the actions of Hamas, as a terrorist organisation that does not possess a current mandate to represent the Palestinian people, especially the half of the population which were under voting age as of 7 October 2023.
- g) extend heartfelt sympathy and sorrow to all victims affected by the prolonged conflict, including those subjected to occupation, terrorism, and violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Particular thoughts are with the thousands who have suffered and lost their lives, sustained injuries, or been adversely impacted since October 7th. This is in addition to the Armistice Day letter sent by the Executive Community.
- h) Urge a new Israeli governance that does not continue a system of oppression, and ensures a long lasting peace.
- i) appeal for humanitarian support through organisations such as the Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and the Palestinian Red Crescent, recognizing the pressing need to assist and alleviate the suffering of affected civilians.
- j) we urge Unitarians to demonstrate by our actions, our respect for both Judaism and Islam as sources of spiritual wisdom, and to urge and support reconciliation between these faith communities based on tolerance and mutual respect.
- k) continue to dialogue as a faith group, to grow in our understanding of these issues, and use our voice as a multi-faceted faith of love to reflect on how we can continue to act until the Israeli state ceases military action.

**Motion 4 FROM STOCKTON UNITARIANS, CHORLEY UNITARIANS, FOY SOCIETY & NORTHERN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION**

**Rescind Motions Limit**

Why the '4 Motion Rule' Should Go

The proposers of this motion consider that the limits to the number of Ordinary Motions and Emergency Motions imposed in Clause 10 of the constitution are damaging our democratic procedures, and are unnecessary.

Anyone who has ever set about raising a motion for discussion at the Unitarian Annual Meetings will know how hard it can be. Let's say you have an important social issue you want to raise – such as climate change or the refugee crisis – or you might want to propose something about Unitarians – such as raising our commitment to social responsibility or voting rights for Associate Members. First you have to persuade a church, district association, affiliated society or 12 'Full' Members to support your motion as these are the only groups authorised to propose motions at GA Meetings. The precise wording has to be agreed, then your chosen organisation has to hold a meeting of its governing body to agree and minute its decision to propose the motion. Next you have to write a background paper to go with it.

The secretary or convenor of your chosen group must then submit the motion to Unitarian HQ at least fifty-six days before the start of the GA Annual Meeting. It's a fiendishly difficult process that has to be started long before the meetings. Small wonder that there are often few significant motions on the order paper – as happened in the recent 2023 Meetings.

Then, in 2018, along came a change which would make it even more difficult – namely the introduction of the '4 motion rule' into section 10 of the GA Constitution. This limits the number of Ordinary Motions that can be discussed in each Annual Meeting to a maximum of four and Emergency Motions to a maximum of one. If more than four motions are submitted delegates have to vote to decide which four will be discussed. So, if there are more than four motions, it is perfectly possible that your carefully crafted motion, into which you and your supporting group have invested so much effort, might not even get on to the agenda. Similarly, if serious matters arise after the deadline for ordinary motions which justify the raising of Emergency Motions, only one will be permitted.

The change was made in the context of the move to shorten the GA Meetings by one day, which was also brought into effect from 2018. The concern was that too many motions could be difficult to fit into a shorter meeting. However, since 2018 there has only been one occasion when more than four motions were proposed. The problem has been insufficient worthwhile motions rather than too many. In any case, motions are a vital part of our democratic procedures which should not be sacrificed to administrative convenience. In the rare occasions in the past when more motions were on the table, the organisers proved perfectly capable of managing the debates within the time available.

Since the GA's foundation in 1929 many motions have been passed which establish where Unitarians stand on a wide range of important issues, such as Equality, Drugs, Civil Liberties, Climate Change. These can be accessed on the GA's website. It's an opportunity that we have only once a year. Also, the debates are a rare chance for the voice of ordinary members to be heard. Restricting the number of motions can prevent us from making a stand on current issues and harms our democratic credentials.

As it happens, the 'four motion rule' has only been used once since it was introduced. This was in 2021 when six ordinary motions had been submitted. Delegates were forced to select four for debate so that two important and currently relevant motions were bumped off the agenda regardless of the importance of the issues and the work that had gone into preparing them. One of the motions lost would have re-affirmed the General Assembly's support for Transgender Rights at a time when this was a 'hot' topical issue. The other motion lost would have confirmed the Unitarian commitment to support the emergency humanitarian work of the Red Cross and, in particular, the newly formed interfaith Red Cross Memorial Peace Appeal. Ironically, the 2021 business meeting finished ahead of schedule - there would have been ample time to discuss these two important motions.

This is why the proposers of this motion take the view that the '4 motion rule' should go. All that is needed to make the change is the deletion of the last two paragraphs of Clause 10.



**Motion 5 FROM THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE****Become a CIO**

At the Annual Meetings in 2016, the membership passed the following resolution for the EC to look into the General Assembly becoming a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO):

“That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, recognising the benefits of Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) status, requests the Executive Committee to bring forward proposals enabling the General Assembly to convert from an Unincorporated Association to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.”

More information on CIO's can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-types-how-to-choose-a-structure>

The Executive Committee and GA Staff have been looking into this over the last couple of years, to identify the best way forward. This was led by Robert Ince in 2021-2, working with a small consultation group including Simon Bland, Rev Winnie Gordon, Natasha Stanley, and John Bates. We are grateful for their input.

Most recently, John Bates, on behalf of the EC, has worked with VWW Solicitors, who have experience of working with Unitarian CIOs, to seek advice on the steps the GA should take.

The EC are in support of the GA moving to CIO status.

This will simplify some of our governance matters, enable the GA to hold property directly, and will mean that EC members as trustees of the charity will no longer hold personal liability. We hope that this removes a potential disincentive to people standing for election to the EC.

There was consideration during the process as to whether this was the time for substantive changes to our membership structures or motions processes. It is felt that although these could come under review in the future, now was not the time to make changes. Instead, the move to CIO is simply about bringing our governance structures up to date, and bringing together the GA's existing constitution with the Charity Commission's model CIO constitution. Therefore membership under the new constitution will be formed of the same groups and rights as given in the GA's current constitution. Similarly, the existing GA Object will be unchanged.

If this motion is passed, the EC will continue the work to prepare for adopting CIO status. This will be put to the membership in a Special Meeting in late 2024, likely to be held online.

**Motion 6 FROM THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE****Develop a matched-funding scheme to invest in local leadership**

Over 80 members attended an EC workshop on 'Membership Sustainability' at the GA Annual Meetings in April 2023. While there was a great deal of anxiety and frustration about falling membership, attendees also discussed a range of positive themes and opportunities for rejuvenating their congregations and reversing the decline.

To rejuvenate the Unitarian movement in the UK into a sustainable and vital future, we must reinvigorate existing processes and build new capabilities. Collectively, we have a huge store of resources, but we are not currently using them to our best advantage.

The EC is proposing a mechanism to harness our collective reserves of skills and money to enable congregations to take action in pursuit of innovative opportunities for growth and rejuvenation. Initial plans have been shared with our membership under the working title of the 'Unitarian and Free Christian Innovation Challenge Scheme', and are available via the GA team or website.

This is not about growth for its own sake, but because we have a valuable message to offer to people: a new way of 'doing religion' that builds on a proud and historic tradition of rationalism, radicalism, truth and liberty. We live in a world that is bruised and aching, where rationalism, fairness and truth are under threat from different directions. Today's Unitarians and Free Christians have a duty as carriers of the flame to honour our ancestors and keep our flame of free faith alive for future generations.

Congregations will be able to apply to the fund for grants to invest in people – that is, to employ or contract with people who can help them innovate in the way they develop, communicate and deliver an engaging and rewarding spiritual and social experience for current and new members. Ideally, two or more congregations will collaborate in a joint project, maybe with robust and thriving congregations supporting and encouraging emerging congregations.

For example, a group of Congregations could apply for funds to recruit a new full-time Minister who has innovative plans for developing local Ministry to reach beyond the current membership. Or the scheme could pay for a full-time administrator for several Congregations, with the aim of improving revenue by innovative use of buildings, assisting the Trustees with accounting and day to day financial management, and freeing up time for Ministers or other leaders to increase community engagement.

These are just suggestions, not prescriptions. The scheme is open to all ideas for building capabilities for growing our movement, encouraging learning and reflection, and recognising that healthy church activity will activate new possibilities.

However, the scheme will not fund building work or other kinds of regular outgoings. The Unitarian and Free Christian Innovation Challenge Scheme will make grants to congregational partnerships that match District and Congregational commitments for recruitment, training, remuneration (salary or fees) and associated overheads of the people they need for up to five years.

There will be a mix of smaller short-term and larger long-term grants available, and development grants to support those who need help making an application. A Programme Manager, employed by the GA, will support congregations before, during, and after their application.