

Minutes of GA Executive Committee meeting held 25th-26th January 2025
Rosslyn Hill Chapel, 3 Pilgrim's Place, Hampstead, NW3 1NG

Present: Zac Baker, John Bates, Sarah Benfield, Laura Dobson (Zoom), Simon Hall (Zoom), Jenny Jacobs, Jo James (Convenor),

In attendance: Simon Bland (Zoom, items 5-6), Geoff Levermore (GA President), Andrew Mason (Minutes), Liz Slade (Chief Officer).

Saturday 25 January

Jo gave opening devotions with a reading from T.S. Eliot and the meeting started.

1. Check-in

The check-in took place.

2. EC leadership and ways of working

It was important to revisit the question of what the EC is, and is for. With one meeting left before the AGM, the structure and intention of the EC group needed to be considered. Challenging issues had been faced, and these could have an emotional impact on the EC members.

The following points were made:

- The EC were stewards, shepherds and servants of the movement, with decisions and actions focused on enabling Unitarianism to thrive and prosper.
- Rejuvenation was more important than managing decline. This could be a challenging process, but was ultimately rewarding.
- This required an active role of guidance, vision and creative endeavour.
- There were tensions between the responsibilities of the Object (to promote a free and enquiring religion), and as trustees to be responsible to a wider group who may not have a wider perspective, against the task of supporting congregations and districts in their current format with the existing infrastructure. People needed to be invited into the wider vision, especially congregations which do not currently have that vision. That tension could be named at the Annual Meetings.
- The EC function was strategic, and needed to be accountable to the membership, our Staff and the Charity Commission.
- The movement has changed and will continue to do so, and existing structures may not be fit for new purposes. Tweaking the existing practices may not be enough, particularly if historic practices made to honour the needs of a disparate group of congregations may have flattened differences in an unsustainable way.

- There is an ongoing tension between the EC's role as a critical friend and shepherd, and the congregational and ministerial autonomies our structures reflect, and indeed between the congregation and their minister. These tensions have never really been dealt with.
- The structure will never be perfect, but as long as we recognise the role of the EC Membership, Chief Officer, and take responsibility for the whole movement, taking advice from wherever we can, this seemed like the least bad structure.
- Changes would be needed due to the scale not being there for some activities, and some new activities were needed.
- What could be learned from the UUA was discussed, though it was noted the different religious culture in the US.
- Spiritual nourishment was always needed, and the case for living a more spiritual life was needed.
- An outward focus, operating at the societal public-narrative level, was needed, while also retaining the practical element of managing our money and activity.
- The strategic intent needed to be made clear as being the long-term health of the denomination. The EC was in a better position to look at what can be offered to people in the community, as the congregations were often survival-focused due to constraints on funds and people.

New EC / Election

The EC would be taking on almost entirely new members at the Annual Meetings. What is to be carried forward, and how the challenges in our environment needed to be clear. The issues with the election process this year were noted, and the situation with co-opted members. Conflicts of interest (including personal animosity) should be challenged. With clear vision, there should be capacity to be robust about what is and is not accepted, and to act robustly to support our Staff, for whom we have a legal duty of care).

3. Exploring the EC's role at the Annual Meetings

This item was referred to later in the meeting.

4. Checking in on the EC's election process

Nominations would close on 31 January. There were already enough candidates to have an election.

5. Launching a new organisation to hold at-risk Unitarian buildings

Simon Bland joined the meeting by Zoom for this item.

Simon had submitted a report on setting up a Buildings Community Interest Company (CIC) or Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). This related to the question of how, as

a movement, we should manage Unitarian assets across the country which were not currently required, including how the sale of properties should be managed. Buildings could sometimes be seen as a liability, and attempts made to give away or sell the property without strategic consideration.

What happens when a congregation wishes to cease owning their building? At present, this tended to fit into three main categories:

- 1) The building and congregation close, and the building is sold. This was often the easiest route, as there is generally a mechanism for dissolution of the charity and fund reuse. However it did not usually take into account any strategic benefit, and was not as well-supported for the congregation as it could be.
- 2) The building is sold, but the congregation continues its ministry with the resources from this sale. While this sounded good, in practice this was not usually the end of concerns for the congregation. There is often no strategic direction for the ministry; the congregation can become beholden to the money as they were to the building; this can become a safety blanket stifling change, or become a cloaking mechanism for activities, as the purpose becomes to safeguard the money rather than follow the mission.
- 3) There is a wish from some to cease owning the building, but have it put to a community use. While this generosity can be applauded, the mechanisms for legally giving away churches are not simple. The various trusts the buildings are held under generally don't allow them to be given away for other purposes.

Any organisation set up needed to avoid being perceived as being there simply to collect resources centrally. This was not the intention. The message of realigning property and assets needed to be communicated.

Explorations had been held with the Ethical Property Foundation (EPF), leading to the report. The proposals from the EPF were to look at setting up an organisation to hold property and enable it to be used. The EPF's focus is property and its deployment for charity use, and could provide a trusted partner for our movement. A CIC or CIO could be linked to our charitable objectives, but could also hold property to look at development potential to maximise resources. We were now entering an era where property was becoming a more fluid asset.

Trustee thoughts:

- Mismanagement of property assets were extremely bad for morale, finance and energy levels. This could help address the issue.
- This was part of a wider trend, including other denominations. The Decelerator group were keen to have a longer-term collaboration, and this could help us to look

a playing a convening role for others on a wider societal trend which would impact significantly what our neighbourhoods would look like.

- This needed to be an engagement on the potential for renewal and reinvigoration of spiritual life, not just a disposal policy. Examples of this type of renewal could be found in buildings given to the Historic Churches Trust to manage.
- The idea had a significant setup cost, and should not be funded just by the GA. The Treasurer proposed a repayable loan to the new entity, with property to be taken over coming with an upfront payment of 3 years' worth of running costs (in keeping with what other organisations such as the Churches Conservation Trust do), to ensure the GA is not taking on too much liability. The principle should be that costs live with the new entity. The GA could act as a guarantor, and loan money, but should not simply fund the project.
- Separate trustees would be needed for the standalone entity and these would need to be chosen carefully.
- The question of whether someone would need to be employed for this entity was raised, separately to existing staff time. This was a non-trivial activity with generations of life. The Treasurer offered to work with Simon Bland on this over the next few weeks to get the scope and scale of what was needed.

Simon Bland felt an agreement in principle gave enough to work on, and the exact structure would be the next stage. Safeguards could be set up to ensure that only known liabilities would be taken on. He would revert to the EPF to sharpen up the phase one details with costings for if some congregations joined. He approved of the idea of loans to the entity, as this was in keeping with ensuring commercial sensibility for the GA, and the trustees felt it met their obligations to ensure money was well spent.

It was **AGREED** that John Bates and Simon Bland would have a conversation to progress this. The details of the Churches Conservation Trust entry conditions would be useful. The timescale for the next EC meeting was accepted. The priority would be where there was existing solid lease interest, or where there was no chapel capacity and the risks were higher.

ACTION: John Bates & Simon Bland

6. Ministry

a. Ministry Matters – update from the last meeting

The group had met last week at Luther King House, with the main purpose being to look through Rory's report. They had focussed particularly on supervision, and a long discussion was held on whether this should be mandatory. Rory had been working on a supervision process and there was wide acceptance that this should go forward. In other denominations supervision had been driven by a top-down concern over safeguarding, whereas for us it was a ground-up demand. A 2-year pilot project was envisaged for a

small group of ministers, and peer-to-peer encouragement would be the main reason for take-up. Rory would draw up the pilot project plan, and look at how to do training. There were sensitivities over costs for congregations, and were it to be mandatory, a perceived 'direct tax' on supervising ministers would be unpopular. The Hibbert Trust might consider funding a pilot. With supervision, there was a positive and useful potential role for districts in enabling this at district level.

It was noted that the term 'supervision' needed to be carefully understood. This was clinical supervision (finding ways to ensure ministers are resourced properly to deal with emotional issues), not management supervision. Sue Morrison, and other experts within the movement, might be able to assist with this, and the current system of covenant groups could potentially be repurposed (with some weaknesses covered) to reduce costs and increase capacity. Training could also be used to skill up ministers to work together to supervise in groups. The Ministerial Benevolent Fund had resources which might be applicable for this. A reciprocal peer-to-peer support model for emotional and psychological harm certainly seemed of benefit.

Continued Professional Development (CPD) – The issue of whether CPD should be compulsory was debated. Again, the conclusion was that there was no real power for this to be made mandatory without the provision of funding. New cohorts of students were attuned to, and wished to do, CPD and this would therefore improve over time. A CPD diary had been drafted, which asked for congregations to put in a training budget for the minister, to reflect that ministry should be a lifelong learning activity.

Trustee training – Unitarian College were currently focusing on the ministerial training needs, and there was a perceived potential leadership crisis coming, due to weaker structures. It was suggested that we use an EC session at the Annual Meetings to address trustee training at the spiritual level to address leadership – generic trustee training was not felt to be as useful and could be obtained elsewhere.

At present, Unitarian College were not looking to provide trustee training. However, there would not be a ministerial student starting this year, and this could provide the College with more headroom to look at this issue. This was felt to be a significant opportunity for the College, and also for the GA to set the culture of trustees first before going on to legal and development issues.

It was noted that we had identified earlier in the meeting a tension between ministerial leadership, trustee leadership and congregational sovereignty, and the importance of Vision in navigating these for trustees. Simon felt that people were more willing to seek help than in the past, and this was a positive change. This was backed up by experiences in the Administrators Network and Safeguarding Network. Sarah brought forward an issue raised at the Administrators Network where someone had indicated that people with significant needs and emotional burdens came into the church, and the volunteers who

met them had no-one to offload this stress to. This was a very similar issue to the minister supervision discussed earlier.

b. Feedback on the housing consultation

A few more responses had been received. The group had not caught up collectively since the last report. There had been a broad spectrum of responses, and other issues relating to stipend, tension etc had been brought out. Some congregations had indicated that they were unable to afford this. The possibility of district provision of housing (including for retired ministers) had been raised.

As a possible result of the consultation, one congregation was looking to change their process and rent a manse directly from the congregation to avoid the minister having to pay tax. Another was looking to purchase a manse.

Housing was a major barrier to ministers relocating to some districts, particularly with part-time vacancies.

There was a great deal of confusion and misinformation on the area of ministers housing, including the 'manse allowance' name change (even though it was now three years since this had been done). There was a need to value the overall package a minister receives, not just the stipend element, and further education was needed on this. Congregations rarely understood the full cost of ministry, and it was hoped that the real costs could be clearly demonstrated in future.

Many congregations were unwilling / unable to increase their costs, and innovative thinking would be needed in how to progress this issue.

To progress this, the Housing Group would be asked to consider this further and report back to the next meeting. The report would be discussed at a plenary session at the AGM, likely in conjunction with the Stipend Report.

c. Recommendations from the Interview Panel

It was **AGREED** to change the status of Revs Michael Allured, Laura Dobson, Rory Castle Jones and Lizzie Harley from 'Newly Recognised' to 'Full' Ministers on the GA Roll of Ministers.

ACTION: Andrew & Liz

It was noted that there were two ministers still in their probationary period.

d. Active & Overseas Ministers

Active Ministers – The EC target was to have 50 active ministers, and the current total was just under this. The Importance of talent spotting was noted, which could be hard to do in small congregations. The Ministry Matters group had discussed this. The Advanced Lay

Leadership course had now started, and there was an opportunity for the wider movement to give more visible encouragement for people to look at ministry as a calling.

Overseas Ministers – This also connected with issues of overseas Ministers. Various UUA Ministers were looking at moving away from the US after the new President's inauguration. There were cultural differences between UK Unitarianism and US Unitarian Universalism, and this would need to be considered as part of our strategic vision and guidance. It had proved interesting to note that the Hungarian and Czech Church practices were closer to ours than the UUA's. Ministry Matters had discussed the issue of integration and felt there was a possibility for Adam Slate to assist as a sounding board looking at cultural issues. The group did not expect the GA to become a safe harbour for fleeing UUA Ministers. It was noted that there were significant issues with visas, Only New Unity had done this recently, where a paid member of Staff had oversight. It would be difficult to put this responsibility onto a volunteer, as the employer has significant oversight responsibility. Advice had been taken a few years ago, and the GA was too large an organisation to demonstrate control in different areas, but there was a possibility for a district to potentially do this (possibly through a district back-office role funded through the Innovation Challenge).

Simon Bland reported that the Kereki Fund will ensure a Hungarian student will study for PHD at Oxford, which meant Harris Manchester College would have a Unitarian student again.

Simon Bland was thanked and left the meeting.

7. Innovation challenge update

Programme Manager

There had been a good quality and range of candidates for the Programme Manager position, and Nick Butler-Watts had been appointed, starting on 10 March. Nick would be invited to attend the March EC meeting by Zoom. Nick will be attending District Meetings to promote the Innovation Challenge scheme. Another person had been identified as being useful to help congregations develop ideas to become applications.

Interest and potential partners

An early request had been received from the NE Lancs district, looking to recruit a Development Minister / Change Manager and an Administrator. Simon Bland would meet with them.

ACTION: Simon Bland

Unitarian Transformers – This was seen as another partnership with the potential to work with congregations to develop bids for the scheme. Most congregations (and districts) were currently at a stage where they needed help with imagining their vision.

Gellionnen – were believed to want to apply.

Annual Meetings

An Innovation Challenge workshop had been included in the planning for the Annual Meetings. It was suggested that there could be clinic spaces for people to come and chat.

8. Safeguarding

Sarah Benfield reported. Simon Hall was to finish as Deputy Safeguarding Officer. A new person would be needed from the new EC after the Annual Meetings. Safeguarding was to be included in a Plenary Session at the Annual Meetings. Sarah was thanked for her work helping Gavin Howell.

A discussion took place in respect of a safeguarding report about a congregational issue and the EC discussed what sanctions are available and what other options there might be.

9. Staff reports & GA President's Report

The Staff Reports and President's Report were received with thanks. Items had been covered elsewhere on the agenda.

10. Sessions at the GA Annual Meetings

Two sessions had been booked for the GA Meetings: a creative session, and a session reporting on what the EC is doing.

- 1) Reporting Session – This would demonstrate the partnership between the EC and GA Staff. The session would give the opportunity for the EC to demonstrate that it is working differently, with Projects and new groups such as the Administrators Network, Safeguarding Network, to connect people directly rather than working through committees.
- 2) Creative / exploratory session – This had been well-attended a few years ago when framed as membership sustainability. The exercise on virtuous behaviours and their opposites undertaken at the January EC meeting was felt to be very valuable in our context. It was important to admit that the shadow side of the virtuous behaviours existed, and it was clear to see some of the behaviours being displayed. This could be challenging for some, and it was important to hold this well.

It was **AGREED** that Liz draft some outline plans and Handbook descriptions, and check-in with everyone in March.

ACTION: Liz

Plenary Sessions

Liz would give the Chief Officer's 'State of the Nation' Report, and would present the Annual Report with the Convenor. John Bates would present the Accounts and Treasurer's Report. Jenny Jacobs would present the Ministers Stipend Report. Sarah Benfield would

assist Gavin Howell with the Safeguarding Report. At the end of the Meetings, there would be the thanks to departing EC members and welcome to new members.

Chairing – Last year's motions had been complex, and there were multiple motions relating to the CIO this year. There was therefore an argument for a person other than the President to chair the debates, with the President in a host role. This would be discussed with the President, and consideration would be given to asking the Steering Committee for one of their number to take on the Chairing Role during debates. **ACTION: Liz**

Steering Committee – It was reported that the Steering Committee had appointed Mike Tracey as their third member.

11. Motions at the Annual Meetings

a. Update on CIO

The constitutional change motions for the CIO (and quorum change) and the corresponding background papers would be sent out by 12 February. **ACTION: Andrew**

b. Honorary Members

It was **AGREED** that Marion Baker and Jeff Teagle would be proposed as Honorary members.

c. GA Presidency

Rev Jeffrey Bowes would become President at the end of the Meetings. No nominations were received for Vice President and this would be considered further.

12. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting held 23-24 November 2024 were **AGREED** as a correct record.

Sunday 26th January

13. Review of Action List

Nov 2023

Item 3. Sunday School Fund purposes – Research had been done on the Object of the Fund, and the purposes for using it were to be considered. This would be removed from the Action List. A general project was needed to dig into the purposes and documentation for all the funds. John Bates would come and speak to Andrew before the next EC meeting.

ACTION: John Bates & Andrew Mason

Jan 2024

Item 13. Risk Register – this remained on the Action List and would be looked at for the beginning of March.

June 2024

Item 3. Explore collaboration with Essex University – This would be removed from the Action List.

Item 5. Develop ideas on trustee training – The steps needed to be worked out, and an appetite for learning needed to be awakened in people for learning. An EC induction pack and session for new trustees was also needed for June, and the continuing trustees would need to consider this beforehand. Safeguarding training for trustees was now available, and the new EC trustees would undertake this, as well as GA Staff.

Item 12. Manse Allowance / Housing Paper. This would be removed from the Action List. The importance of discussing the real costs of ministry was highlighted.

Item 13. Manse Allowance Support Budget – This would be removed from the Action List.

Item 14. Motions Taskforce – Ann Howell has worked with Victor Anderson and David Zucker. The first proposal needed further explanation and the second version had not yet embraced the 'back to first principles' idea. John suggested motions broadly split to motions of conscience (which were debates) and motions of action. In the UUA these are multi-year processes, which require the proposer(s) to lead on the work. Liz needs to consider this further, and it would stay on the Action List.

August 2024

Item 1. Green Belt Festival – A stand arranged had been arranged at a cost of c£2K for the stand and ancillary costs. Liz had spoken to Kate Dean, and it was planned to use 'Soul Deep' as a sign-up call to action. This item would be removed from the Action List.

Item 7. Thank Rev Phil Silk – the President would do this.

Item 10. Thoughts on GA quota – this item would be removed from the Action List.

Nov 2024

Item 1. Seek district funding for Ministerial Students Fund – the Treasurer would do this.

Item 2. Quota increase via Stipend Report – The Treasurer would consider this further. Some congregations do not pay quota, and a more nuanced escalation process than the traditional ‘bad debtor’ approach was needed.

Item 3. Consider Leadership Training offer – This remained on the Action List.

Item 4. Oral history for elder leaders – There was £6K pending from the Hibbert Trust to pass on for this project, and it would be removed from the Action List.

Item 5. National Free Wills Network – This remained on the Action List.

Item 6. Produce and send CIO motions and papers by Constitutional deadline – This was in process, and would be removed from the Action List.

Item 7. Instruct VWV to email the Charity Commission re. excepted status – This had been done, the response had been received, and it would therefore be removed from the Action List.

Item 8. HR work re. Weddings Role – this item would be removed from the Action List.

Item 9. Consideration of Wales Role – This remained on the Action List.

Item 10. Send Housing Report and explanatory letter with meeting Comms – this item would be removed from the Action List.

Item 11. Update draft Policy Manual with agreed corrections – This would be removed from the Action List.

Item 12. Rewrite Convenor Role Description – This remained on the Action List.

Item 13. Consider better descriptor for EC Link Role section of Policy Manual – This remained on the Action List.

Item 14. Update Chief Officer’s Appraisal section of Policy Manual – This had been discussed but not yet updated, and remained on the Action List.

Geoff and Liz would discuss the suggested President’s Award.

14. Review of decisions made between meetings

There were no decisions made between meetings to record.

15. Finance Report

The Honorary Treasurer had submitted a report, which was reviewed.

Current financial year

At the end of the first financial quarter, a gap of £256K was forecast between our operating income and expenditure. An £88K legacy had been received, which would offset this. There had been / would be overspends on Legal Fees (resulting from the additional CIO work after feedback); and an additional cost of £25K for the government's increase to Employers National Insurance.

Overall, the current position was in line with the set budget, and the budget for the full year was for a small surplus after transfers from the designated and restricted funds.

Investment income was reasonable, but could be improved, and the Treasurer would be considering investment management going forward.

ACTION: John Bates

Future finances

In answer to a question, the restricted development funds from the Bowland Trust would be used up in approximately five years.

The Unrestricted Funds at 30 September 2024 were £3.278M, in line with the set ratio of 5x the annual expenditure. This was considered to be important messaging for the Annual Meetings.

Audit

The Auditors were currently on track, though still asking questions. It was hoped to have the Accounts for 24 February, and these would need to be signed off outside a meeting. If Conflicts of Interest forms as of the current date were sent, trustees were asked to complete them promptly.

Investments

The Treasurer has rebalanced the investments to higher-yield options.

Restricted Funds

James Speed Trust – The requested 4% drawdown from Edinburgh was **AGREED**. It had been suggested that some of the capital could be considered for use to re-purchase a manse. The Treasurer would circulate a note after the meeting about this.

ACTION: John Bates

Gabor Kerecki Trust – It was **AGREED** to fund Hungarian Students as part-time PhD students, with an initial cost of £20K per annum.

Other items

The Treasurer would promote legacy fundraising at the meetings. **ACTION: John Bates**

There was a need to top up the Ministerial Students Fund, and it was **AGREED** that the Collection at the Anniversary Service would be taken for the Ministerial Students Fund.

It was **AGREED** that John Bates was to be proposed as the Honorary Treasurer at the Annual Meetings.

Geoff Levermore commented on the role of the President, and how embedding with the EC and putting out an agreed message during the year would be useful.

16. Key messages:

The key messages were:

- The new Full Member Ministers
- Recruitment of the Innovation Challenge Programme Manager
- The Housing Paper had elicited responses, and was open to further feedback.
- Safeguarding – training for EC & Staff underway, congregational trustee training coming later.
- £25K employers' national insurance increase.
- The Annual Meetings activities
- Anniversary Service Collection to be for the Ministerial Students Fund

Closing devotions were held, and the meeting finished.

Approved Minutes of GA Executive Committee meeting held 15-16 March 2025 at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester

Present: Zac Baker, John Bates, Sarah Benfield, Laura Dobson (Zoom),
Jenny Jacobs, Jo James (Convenor)

Apologies: Simon Hall

In attendance: Gavin Howell (Zoom, items 2 & 5), Geoff Levermore (GA President),
Andrew Mason (Minutes), Liz Slade (Chief Officer).

Saturday 15 March

Before the meeting, EC members took part in a Memorial Service at Greengate Park.

Laura Dobson gave opening devotions with a reading and the meeting started.

1. Check-in

The check-in took place.

2. Safeguarding

Gavin Howell attended this session to report on Safeguarding. He planned to hold two self-hosted webinars from the 31:8 Safeguarding Training for Trustees. It was a budget decision for Liz as to whether to charge for attendance.

3. Finance

The Honorary Treasurer gave a Financial Report.

Annual Report and Accounts (draft 13/05/25)

Next year the Accounts would not need to be consolidated with the Nightingale Centre, which would simplify the process greatly. There had been favourable market conditions for our investment income in the last financial year, though investment values would have fallen back in the current year. Expenditure was in line with the budget. There had been some recognised legacy income during the year, and we had therefore not needed to draw down on some other reserves as planned.

The Consolidated Balance Sheet gave a value of £8M this year against £10M last year. This was because The Nightingale Centre became independent in September and therefore £2M of assets went into their new account.

The GA's Total Funds had risen from £7.5M to £8.16M due to investment gains, plus the additional legacies. Income from the GA Quota had reduced from £82.3K to £76.9K.

Note 11 – Grants to organisations. This had increased from £36.5K to £63.6K, which was primarily due to a large single payment of £30K from the India Fund.

Note 13 – Administration costs. The Treasurer would check the increased administration cost (particularly the staff aspect, as it was noted in Note 14 that the number of Staff was unchanged), along with the negative Communications line item. **ACTION: John Bates**

Note 17 – Tangible assets. The share of Retired Ministers Housing was revalued. The large item for disposal of subsidiaries was from transferring assets to the Nightingale Centre.

Note 25 – Statement of Funds. This showed an increase in unrestricted funds from £3.15M to £3.5M. It also showed that the Ministerial Students Fund would be depleted at the end of the next year at the current rate of expenditure. Fundraising was needed, and it was noted that there might be a possible injection of £500K from the Stokes Croft Fund (which was for educational purposes).

The Officer signature section on page 15 of the draft Accounts would be amended, along with a minor correction to the note and a typo change to COVID-19. The Annual Report and Accounts were **accepted** for signature, subject to any minor changes agreed with the Auditors after the meeting. The Annual Report & Accounts would be signed electronically in the middle of the week, for distribution on Friday 21st, with a request for questions in writing before the Annual Meetings. There was an opportunity to include a cover letter from the Treasurer and John would send these for Thursday 20th. **ACTION: John Bates**

Auditors – There had been issues with Shaw Gibbs. The B&FUA and Essex Hall Trust were keen to look at a joint tender for replacement Auditors. The Ministers Pensions Fund and Dr Williams's Trust were also potentially interested. It was **AGREED** to put in place a process to identify, and possibly appoint, Auditors by June. **ACTION: John Bates**

Investment Managers – The Treasurer was trying to meet with BNY Mellon (who have c£50M Unitarian Assets under management) for an Annual Review. The key contacts have left, without us being notified. The Treasurer was not satisfied with their performance taken against their charges and would speak to other Treasurers invested with them. He may consider moving to a lower-cost investment management system. Jo indicated that Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds use Epworth Investment (formerly the Methodist Finance Board).

Liz suggested that convening Treasurers and other finance people in the movement, could be an opportunity to have wider conversations. John would follow up conversations about investment management.

ACTION: John Bates

Accounts – It was **AGREED** that the decision to accept the final version of the Annual report and Accounts would be made by email. John and Jo would follow up the items covered today with the Auditors and then circulate the final version.

ACTION: John Bates & Jo James

4. Leadership in a new key

The person and role of the Chief Officer, and what Leadership means in this context

As Chair, Jo introduced this item. He and the Chief Officer had met recently to discuss this, as part of the appraisal process.

When Jo started he did not have a clear view of the role of the EC, and felt this could lead to problems. Answering the question of what the EC's role was an important step. Jo did not feel that the EC have held the appraisals process with the Chief Officer well. The Pandemic had slowed this process, and Jo and Liz had recently had a conversation about the role and person of the Chief Officer. The two had become more or less indivisible. Liz works relationally. The shadow for this style of working was that it depended on relationships, and this can be hard work, with some relationships being tricky. Jo related this to a Minister's role and offered that policy governance offered a useful model of how to work. Jo and Liz had discussed relational working; the role of the EC; shepherding and stewarding; and the role of the EC in relation to the Chief Officer.

Liz had asked for thoughts about how the Chief Officer role can be more than operational. This role was a more visible role of leadership than she had previously experienced, requiring the holding of a vision of where we are going, and balancing input from the EC, Staff and wider stakeholders. She had been through a personal process of finding a way to inhabit the role authentically. There remained issues of balancing the different demands of relational and practical working, and all the odd tasks which occur. Her experience had been that there were lots of different opinions in the movement on what the Chief Officer's role is (or should be) and these were projected onto her.

Jo felt that the denomination considers the EC to be a governing body for the denomination, and the driving force for organisational leadership, but this is now how the EC see the role. The EC is the leader for the organisation (the GA) not the movement as a whole. If the EC is not clear on its role, and the denomination sees the EC as the driving force for denominational leadership, there will also be a misunderstanding about the Chief Officer role.

It is recognised that the GA has limited levers to make changes across the denomination. Though the GA can influence and encourage, channels of connection and communication are limited, and rely on people in congregations being willing, open and wanting to be in connection with us. Attempting to move these levers could involve infinite energy from the Chief Officer but the effects are removed. Realism was needed about this, and the expectations of the wider movement on what the EC can do.

Jo felt that the GA Object, with a wide objective of 'Promoting a Free and Inquiring Religion' was a positive. It allowed for not just sustaining what congregations have been doing for a long period, but also new possibilities to look at connections outside the existing structure of Unitarianism (examples being the Fete of Britain, Hard Art etc) and have a generative place in conversations with others about the future of religion.

Points raised in the subsequent discussion were:

- Zoom meetings were good to communicate directly with individuals and questionnaires could be used to get more information about how congregations operate.
- The name 'Executive Committee' can be misleading in terms of what the trustees do. Being a charity board under the new Constitution may be helpful to clarify the role.
- Liz's Job Description would be a useful reference point. Jo summarised some of the main functions for the meeting as: strategic transformation; Ambassador; ensuring provision of effective leadership and management; ensuring the GA follows laws etc. Liz had been invited to bring transformational change. Most Unitarians will not have seen her Job Description and will therefore be presuming objectives of the role, such as preserving old structures.
- Continuity was needed between iterations of the EC to ensure that the energy and fresh ideas of a democratic election did not lead to the group reinventing itself every two years.
- Institutional inheritance (the old GA Council of delegates from districts and other bodies, with a General Secretary) had then changed into a much smaller elected body, naturally doing things differently.
- Liz felt that the EC had generally supported the work on transformational leadership, but this was not necessarily what was being demanded from all quarters of the denomination. The Chief Officer's relationship with the EC needed to be healthy and impactful.
- Building a strong operational team should free the Chief Officer up to new work. It might be necessary to strengthen the operational team to allow the Chief Officer to concentrate a leadership rather than management role. It was difficult to be a visionary and a Manager at the same time for very long.

- Continuity of vision was needed, and the Chief Officer's role should be promoted as a visionary role.
- Support for the Chief Officer was needed and Jo had discussed a leadership consultative team, with people from other bodies or academia, who could be in conversation with Liz to offer support.
- The EC has neither the capacity nor the leverage to enact operationally for the denomination, though there was potentially infinite demand for support.
- Transformation was about enabling congregations to do what they want, dealing with the low level of agency at congregational level, rather than specific deliverables. Nick Butler-Watts' new role with the Innovation Challenge was an example of this form of leadership.
- It was recognised that there was a disconnect between transformational leadership and the pragmatic congregational experience, where vision was not immediately applicable. The EC and Chief Officer needed to be the originators of a vision, which others are inheritors to if they choose.
- There should be an agenda item for the June EC meeting to make it clear to new EC members what the roles of the EC and Chief Officer are.

The Chief Officer would benefit from ongoing support and good-quality leadership coaching. This should be separate to the previously-agreed Staff support budget for general GA Staff, and at a meaningful level. It was **AGREED** that a proposal be submitted.

ACTION: Liz

Sunday 16 March

Jo gave a reading for opening devotions, and the meeting started.

5. Confidential Minute

Gavin Howell attended for this item by Zoom.

6. Review minutes of last meeting and decisions taken between meetings

The Minutes of the last meeting were **AGREED** and signed by the Chair. There were no decisions taken between meetings recorded here.

7. Arrangements for the Annual Meetings

Bookings

There were currently 302 people booked in (289 residential, 13 non-resident). There were 16 children booked in, of all age ranges. All the cheaper Newcomer and Subsidised Tickets had gone, and at the time of the meeting, 18 of the 25 under-35 tickets were still available.

Pre-night – Only Jo James had booked in for the pre-night and it was confirmed that no other EC members required this.

EC Roles at the Meetings: Liz had circulated a paper outlining the roles of the EC.

Annual Report – Liz and Jo would discuss the presentation of the Annual Report.

ACTION: Liz Slade, Jo James

Accounts – The Treasurer would present the Accounts. There had been no responses to the quota increase notification. John would report on this change when presenting.

Celebration of Lay Leaders on the new Register – Helen Mason would speak about Unitarian College's Lay leadership. A mini-ceremony would follow, with those joining signing a new Register. Jo James would speak.

Honorary Members – There were proposals for two new honorary members: Marion Baker and Jeff Teagle.

Ministry Stipend Review Report and Housing Consultation – Jenny Jacobs would present these.

Motions – John Bates would propose motions 1-6, on the move to the new Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). Sarah Benfield would propose the EC Quoracy motion.

EC Handover ceremony – This would be a low-key handover, introducing the new EC members.

EC Session 1 – Information and Projects: This workshop would try to communicate a sense of what the EC can (and can't) do. Jo and Liz would scope this.

ACTION: Jo James & Liz Slade.

EC Session 2 – Exploring Culture: This would be an extended session discussing the virtues and shadows of the denomination.

Buildings Workshop – Simon Bland would lead this session.

Associate Members' Reception – Rosemary Ruston would lead this session.

Innovation Challenge Fund – Simon Bland, Nick Butler-Watts and John Bates would lead this session, and it was hoped the session would allow those attending to be imaginative.

Money and Fundraising session – This would discuss the Free Wills Service and the advantages of leaving legacies, whether to the GA or other Unitarian bodies.

8. Staff Reports and other matters

Salesforce CRM

A paper on the new Salesforce CRM system was presented and it was **AGREED** to go ahead with the Staff training. After the report had been issued, it was clarified that the full Grants module would cost £140 per person per month (which would just be Nick Butler-Watts), if the basic functionality from the grants section of the Not For Profit license were insufficient. It was **AGREED** to go ahead with this if needed.

Staff Get-Together

The Staff had all met together at Essex Hall in-person in early February, and this had been helpful.

Staff reports

The Staff Reports were reviewed.

Melda's Report – Melda would be meeting in a few weeks with the Welsh Department. The Welsh congregations have been underpaying for the Welsh Secretary. Melda would be retiring, and it was not expected that the GA would move straight to recruitment without a review of the role, giving an opportunity to look at the Welsh Department and the Welsh Secretary. It is our practice to hold an Appeal for those leaving the GA after ten or more years of service, and the EVC endorsed an Appeal for Melda.

Jo remarked that there is a system of governance which is no longer suitable. It was again noted that the GA has few levers to affect change.

Melda and Rory have been trying to get the Welsh Ministers together. They are vision holders for Wales.

Safeguarding – It was **AGREED** to appoint Zac Baker to replace Simon Hall as Temporary Deputy Safeguarding lead trustee for the Annual Meetings.

9. Communication from this meeting

Members were asked to consider and circulate their thoughts on what should be communicated in the next 24 hours.

Items to be included:

- The EC discussed ongoing concerns about continuity and leadership.
- The EC discussed Annual Meetings activities
- The Annual Report and Accounts to be circulated, with a request for questions in advance.

The meeting closed.

Minutes of GA Executive Committee meeting held 31 May to 2 June 2025

Nightingale Centre, Hucklow

Present: Zac Baker, John Bates, Sarah Benfield, Stephanie Bisby,
Arek Malecki, Liz Slade (Chief Officer)
In attendance: Gavin Howell (item 13)

1. Sarah Benfield was appointed as Convenor

2. 2025 Annual Meetings

The EC reflected on the annual meetings, the results of the feedback survey, and the recent meeting of the Annual Meetings panel.

The EC expressed their thanks to the staff team and volunteers for their hard work in creating a successful meeting.

There was recognition that the motions process could be improved to make it a more engaging, accessible, and effective way of making collective decisions or expressing a position on matters of conscience.

The EC reflected on the process around the motion relating to moving to a CIO and the message that many people wanted more information and engagement from the EC.

There was also recognition of the need for visual timer cues for all speakers and worship leaders to help plenaries run on time.

There was support for looking into a different model of volunteer support beyond ministry students.

Overall there was support for the meetings to be more spacious, with more space for connection, social time, and spirituality.

3. Communication with the movement

There was agreement to start regular (e.g. quarterly) Zoom sessions where anyone can be in dialogue with the EC. There was recognition that there is a long-standing culture of distrust in the GA in some parts of the movement, and that open communication can help address that.

4. EC skills matrix

The EC reviewed the mix of skills identified by each member to understand where our collective strengths and skills gaps lie.

5. Finance

John Bates gave an orientation of our financial management and current picture to bring our new EC members up to speed.

There was acknowledgement of the importance of legacy giving from the movement, and for the Ministry Students' Fund to be recognised as a shared resource for the movement. This should be part of a clearer narrative about how the money works for ministry overall. It was agreed that John, together with Liz and Simon, would put together a paper for a proposal for a 4 year plan.

6. Move to CIO

John Bates gave an update on the CIO process and progress since the annual meetings when the new constitution and next steps were approved by the membership.

7. Staff reports

The EC reviewed and discussed the staff reports.

It was agreed that the success of Advance 2025 meant that the GA should support it in the future and to include the costs in this budget planning process for 2025/6.

It was recognised that many congregations are struggling with low capacity, and this can bring serious governance risks – which can be a reputational risk for the whole movement. With excepted status scheduled to be coming to an end in six years, there is time for congregations to identify a plan to bring their governance up to the required level, and the GA can provide some pointers on how they can do this.

The EC were encouraged by the number of people signing up to the GA-subsidised safeguarding training with 31:8.

8. Working together as an EC

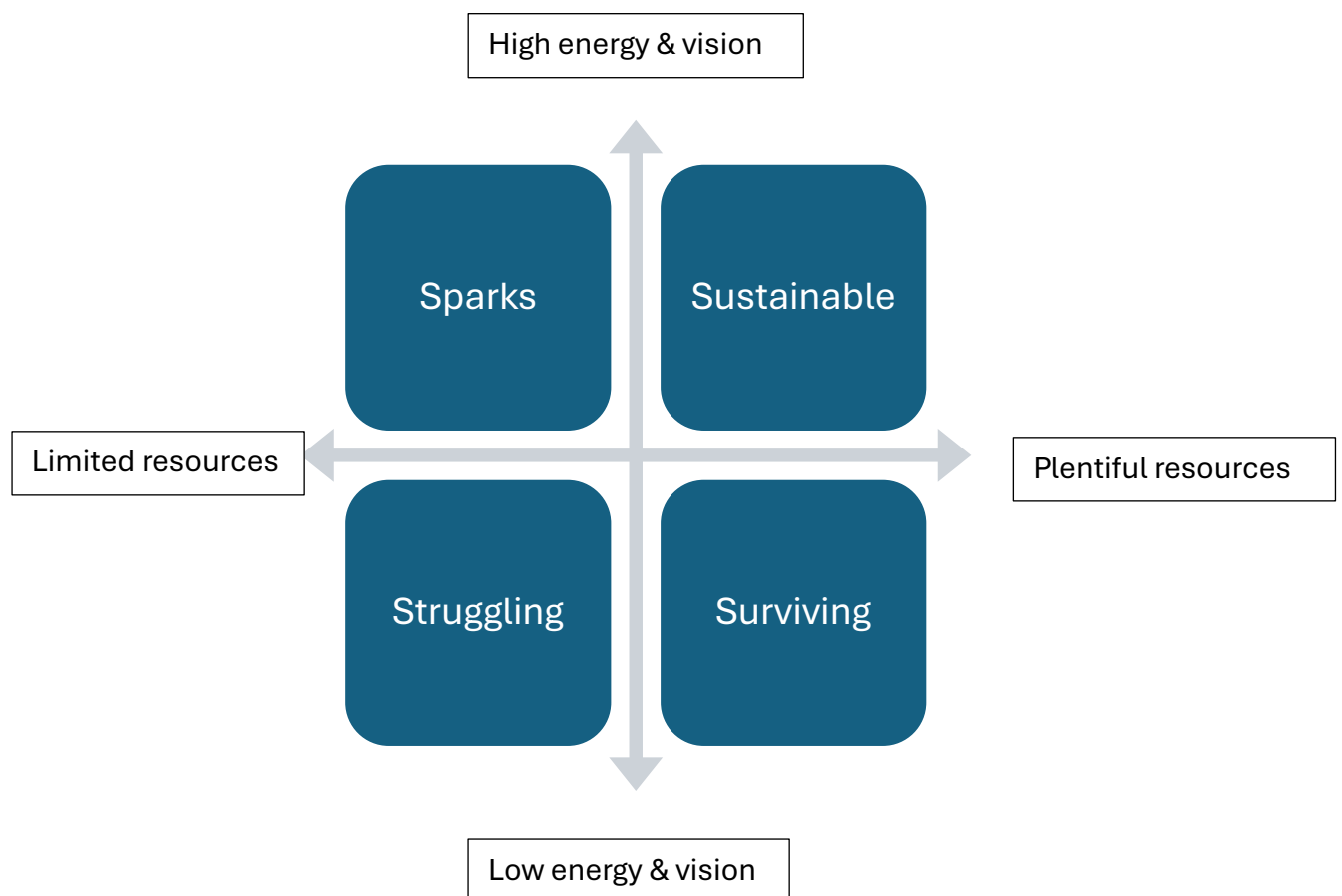
Arek led an exercise for the EC members to reflect on their skills and attributes and what each member needs from the group, and can offer to the group.

9. Exploring our collective vision and priorities

There was a wide-ranging discussion to explore and align the EC on the current status of the movement, it's challenges and opportunities, and where the GA can prioritise its focus.

We discussed the Berkana two loops model of change in a complex system, and the Three Horizons model of transformative innovation to envisage how change is happening in our movement.

We considered mapping congregations according to their resources (money, buildings etc) and their energy (vision, sense of mission etc), to identify the different ways in which the GA can best serve the different types.



For example, those that are ‘sparks’ could benefit from the innovation fund to allow them to access new resources, and the congregational support toolkit can help lighten the load day to day.

Those that are ‘sustainable’ can inspire others, and have learning to share – as well as benefiting from the toolkit, and collaborating with others via the innovation fund.

Those that are ‘surviving’ (but not thriving) need opportunities to build their confidence, reconnect with their vision, and lighten the load with the toolkit. Small development grants from the innovation fund may help them explore a future vision.

Those that are struggling are likely to need support in rethinking their governance, and a priority should be to make them safe and secure.

These priorities would all be helped by building trust in the GA, creating opportunities for connection, encouraging a culture of collegiality, and building confidence in the value of what Unitarian communities have to offer.

The EC reflected that the ‘competition’ to people taking part in Unitarian congregations is not just kids weekend activities, shopping, the gym etc, but also e.g. Andrew Tate and Reform, i.e. those who are offering hope and belonging (but with values counter to our own).

We recognised that change is very hard in a congregational setting, and that it can help when there is an outside agent that ‘has freedom to upset the system’. In the UU world, this can happen via an interim minister. Here, we have seen Unitarian Transformers play that role.

Most District Associations are not proactive in leading change in their area, as they often have limited capacity along with our congregations.

10. People and roles

The EC discussed approaches to co-option of new EC members, the need to appoint a Vice-President, and to nominate trustees for the Ministers Pension Fund.

11. Innovation Fund

Nick Butler-Watts joined by Zoom and gave an update on the innovation fund progress and recruitment of the assessment panel.

12. Confidential minute

13. Confidential minute

14. Past resolution on Artificial Intelligence

It was agreed that the EC should request that Andi Philips and Mark Hutchinson should be invited to convene a task force in line with the motion that they proposed, with Stephanie Bisby as the EC support.

15. GA team

It was agreed that the Chief Officer should work with the HR advisors to review Staff job descriptions and roles to aid with succession planning and an up-to-date appraisal process; and conduct a general organisational health check, encompassing what members of the Staff team need to flourish.