

Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting held 19 January 2024 at Friends House, London

Present: John Bates, Sarah Benfield, Celia Cartwright, Simon Hall, Jenny Jacobs, Jo James, Sue Morrison, Rob Whiteman

Apologies: Rev Wyn Thomas

In attendance: David Joseph (Finance Manager, for item 5), Andrew Mason (Minutes), Vince McCully (President), Liz Slade (Chief Officer)

Jo James gave Opening Devotions and the meeting started.

1. Check-in

Members checked in.

2. Minutes from last meeting

The Minutes of the meeting held 10 November 2023 were discussed.

Rob's dissent to be added to the Minutes:

Rob recorded his formal dissent to Item 3: Minutes of the last meeting. He stated that he had not agreed with the note added, and would register his formal dissent to the minute of 10 November 2023, on that basis.

The Minutes were **AGREED** as a correct record.

3. Action List

The Action List was reviewed. All items were covered on the agenda.

In response to a question, it was indicated that Unitarian College were most likely to be invited to the March EC Meeting.

4. Staff Reports

The Staff reports were taken.

Field owned by the GA in Birmingham – Simon Bland had reported on potential flooding issues with a field owned by the GA (held by the B&FUA). It was requested that an EC member becomes the point-person for this, and John Bates volunteered. It was **AGREED** that John Bates would liaise with Simon on this.

ACTION: John

Ministers' housing – the Stipend Group had acknowledged a need to review the manse allowance. There was not a good understanding of the congregation's responsibility to support the minister in obtaining suitable housing in the area. It was **AGREED** that Jenny Jacobs and Sarah Benfield be involved with Simon Bland in a group looking at this, working with the Ministry Matters group.

ACTION: Jenny & Sarah

Ministry changes – It was noted that Rev Stephanie Bisby had stepped down from York, and Rev Kate Whyman would be retiring at the end of the year from Plymouth. It was noted that Rev Bob Wightman had resigned from the GA Roll of Ministers. This would be mentioned in the Key Messages.

ACTION: Liz

Stewarding Loss – Liz had recently had a conversation with the Stewarding Loss group, who support civic organisations in closing well if they feel they need to. The group have just started a program called 'the Decelerator', which provides free service from philanthropic funding, including a helpline for groups to talk through where they're at, resources, guidance, a toolkit, and advice on how to have difficult conversations well. Other religious organisations were having similar issues to us with churches deciding whether or not to continue, and this could act as a counterbalance to the Innovation Challenge for those who decide it is time to close. Local leaders need support in having these conversations about purpose and whether there is energy for change. It was noted that closing does not need to be a final ending. As an example, the Gellionnen congregation had two buildings, and closed one, but then strengthened post-Covid, and have new life in the old building. It was important to emphasise that this was not about 'euthanasia', but about helping people to tune in to where they are, and where they want to go. The next step with the Stewarding Loss group would be to have an open Zoom call with them, inviting congregations and districts to attend.

ACTION: Liz

Sue indicated that she had experience of an NHS course called 'Rewiring not Retiring', where Staff who were considering retiring were encouraged to look at alternative work in the NHS to rekindle their passion, and felt there were parallels for us. There had been feedback in the Innovation Challenge responses about the need to reinvigorate people, especially recently retired ministers, back into the movement.

Unitarian Leadership Situational Analysis

This analysis had been undertaken by the GA and Unitarian College in collaboration. It looked at the shared landscape and how it affects our shared plans, taking into account the socio-cultural issues of our changing times. Local leaders needed to be attuned to these external trends and changes as well as to their direct local community. Ministers would need training for the new context. Meetings with Unitarian College were going forward, and the next meeting had been scheduled for the end of February.

Liz remarked on the importance of offering people opportunities to deepen their connection to the movement outside their congregations, as there was a risk of losing people otherwise.

Unitarian College were looking at the feasibility of an apprentice scheme, accessing government funding. The Treasurer highlighted the importance of funding the Ministerial Students' Fund.

The Staff Reports were noted, and the Staff thanked for their work.

5. Finance update

David Joseph attended for this item.

2021/22 Accounts

The Audited final version of the 2021/22 Accounts had been circulated. This showed total consolidated funds, including the Nightingale Centre, of c£10M and total GA funds of c£7M.

The Treasurer gave an overview of the GA's funds. Of the c£7M, c£4.13M of this was in Restricted or Endowment funds. These are funds which must be used for the purpose for which they were given. With Endowment funds, the capital cannot be spent, only the income. There were a number of restricted funds, with a mixture of very specific and fairly general purposes. Many of our restricted funds are for youth work. The largest restricted fund was the Growth and Sustainability fund (c£1.4M), a more general fund for support and development of congregations and the GA.

This left c£2.86M in unrestricted funds. This includes Designated funds, where the GA has decided to set aside money for a particular purpose. Examples were: the Ministerial Students fund (for maintenance grants for students in training); and the Retired Ministers Housing Fund (which part owns houses with retired ministers, generally a 15-20% equity share). It was noted that it was worth looking at any potential legal issues with this house share.

Investment property listed at £150K in the Accounts referred to the field in Birmingham discussed earlier in the meeting.

Funds schedule document and notes on draft result to Year ended 2023

David Joseph had provided a document showing the schedule of funds, and a document of notes on the year to September 2023.

The Balance brought forward at 1.10.2022 (Column D) did not quite match the Accounts and David would check this.

ACTION: David Joseph

Total reserves had risen, due to both an Increase in endowment funds, as a legacy had been allocated to endowment funds, and a good final quarter for the investments.

Ownership in Retired Ministers housing – The B&FUA was holding this property on behalf of the GA, and this value of c£128K was therefore in their Accounts.

Draft Budget 2023-4 and Notes

A breakdown on how income and transfers are put together had been provided. Most of the variances in expenditure are operational, and generally balance out. As an example, there had been unanticipated legal expenditure for two projects.

The Treasurer wished to stress that we were making an operational loss, hidden by a large legacy, which he considered unsustainable going forward, and using some restricted funds. There was not presently a legacy strategy, and there was no guarantee of income from legacies. It was noted that in the last 5 years we had received a number of legacies, including: Deacon (£100K); Cox (£40K); Bremer (£240K); James (£400K); some smaller legacies in the region of £5-6K and were expecting another reasonable-sized legacy this year.

In the Accounts, legacies are brought into income as expected by Auditors. This gave an Operating Surplus of £43K for the year, without the legacy there would be a £192K loss. The Treasurer felt that management of expenditure was important. It was generally accepted that a Legacy Campaign would be beneficial. Many of the legacies received were from people not well known to

us, and it was heartening to think that this likely reflects that the GA has had a greater impact on people than it takes credit for.

6. Looking at the Big Picture

The Chief Officer introduced a paper on the financial big picture and future perspectives. The Finance Group had received the paper, but had not reached that agenda item in their last meeting.

Current situation and costs

Liz argued that how we think about our money is dependent on what we are doing – we need to agree the context to make wise decisions about our resources. In the past, there may have been some complacency leading to us not investing in the sustainability of our movement, as the majority of our income is not directly linked to how well Unitarianism is doing.

Our primary cost is Staffing. The division between core and development costs were difficult, but an estimate had been made, and the impact of the Innovation Challenge Scheme (if it goes ahead) had also been factored in.

Developing our income

Legacies – Work had been done with a Legacies Fundraising expert, and was continuing, though we don't currently have staff capacity to move things forward quickly; this could be considered in the thinking about the Communications function.

Associate Membership – This represented c£15K, and a large proportion of Associate Members were over 80 years old. There are limited benefits currently provided to members, this was more of a way for individuals to support the work of the movement. It was worth considering reviewing this, or developing a new individual membership scheme.

Major donors – There had not been a proactive approach to locating and supporting major donors, and a new approach, and strategy on what to ask people to support, was needed.

Local assets – There would be a strong advantage to strengthening the long-term financial picture, by building endowment funds from larger chunks of capital. Sensitive engagement was needed with congregations and districts about how capital is distributed if churches decide to close.

Member bodies – We have not been asking Affiliated Societies to contribute financially, though this is permitted in the GA Constitution. As they can put motions, like congregations, this may be slightly unfair.

Courses and training – There was an option for income generation from this, potentially in partnership with Unitarian College. This would particularly apply for larger audience of the public who might be spiritually-curious and looking to explore.

Overall, with money running out there was a need to be bold, and invest in vision of something alive, as no-one was likely to invest in a 'status quo' approach. This needed to be planned for making the best use of resources we have to open up a new future, and new income streams which can support that future.

Framing decision-making.

Options articulated in the paper included: 1) Close down and move assets to smaller group of congregations; 2) Invest in transformation; 3) Core only (cut back to bare minimum). Note uncertainties about stock market as the impact of climate breakdown hits the economy.

In discussions, it was felt that there was potential in increasing the Associate Membership approach, though work was needed on publicising, and outlining the purpose. The abuse of membership schemes which gave voting rights remained a concern. A system which tapped into the Unitarian-curious as well as existing active Unitarians which give a greater return. It would be important not to confuse quota with other types of membership, and the terminology and structure might need to be considered.

In principle, members felt that the option to invest in transformation was likely to be the preferred option.

Honorary Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer had submitted a written report.

It was **AGREED** that the Nightingale Centre be approved to invest some current liquidity with CCLA Investment Managers.

Draft Budget

It was **AGREED** to accept the Draft Budget for the 2023/4 year.

7. Innovation Challenge Scheme

John Bates introduced this scheme, which was about enabling people to act collaboratively across congregations, and engaging the districts. Through conversations, the idea evolved to focus on innovation, and to use match-funding.

Papers had been circulated before December, and some verbal and written feedback had been received. These were broadly positive, with some suggestions for improvement. The document has not yet been adapted, as John did not wish to over-complicate the process.

If we wished to proceed, the next steps would be to form a small task force to refine this and then put a motion to the Annual Meetings to proceed with the Innovation Challenge Scheme.

The Chief Officer remarked on the importance of being clear when framing this – it was about finding and supporting what people want and need, and not the EC knowing the right answers. There would be a need to orient the Staff team around this to aid in supporting and encouraging congregations and leaders in discernment process.

The following points were made:

- Aside from the Programme Manager role, no expenditure would occur until grants were received and accepted, and it was likely the role would initially be focussed on information, education and facilitating pre-applications and creative thinking.
- The Motion was 'in principle' – to proactively develop the scheme - and there was a desire to avoid being too prescriptive, but preparation would be needed for likely questions.

- There was work to be done on details, such as rules on match-funding, assessment, training of assessors, a policy on conflict of interest for assessors etc
- Reporting back on approved projects was needed, to allow unsuccessful projects to be cancelled. This might be after 1-2 years for a 5-year project.
- People would engage with a clear and compelling vision. This was the context to work with, encouraging our people to show this vision and then support it.
- It was important to present this was intended to allow ideas to emerge from the ground up.
- Energy was needed, but also gentleness and relationship building should be designed, as the process of considering future transformation could require vulnerability.
- The costing was a concern to the Treasurer, but the initial costs if no requests were received would be £44K for the Programme Manager costs.
- A development group of no more than 5 (including Liz Slade and John Bates) would be needed.

Memo

John Bates had produced a memo with a draft cashflow included, with scenario planning covering running (and not running) the Innovation Challenge Scheme, with and without legacies. This had been done to check the potential outcomes. Under the most expensive scenario (running the Scheme, with our current general expenditure, but receiving no legacies) the GA would be down to 2.3 years of operating costs cover of unrestricted funds for the 2030-31 year.

The Treasurer was reserving judgment and would look at this more closely. He emphasised the need for the GA to continue to exist to serve future beneficiaries.

The Chief Officer indicated that our objectives needed to be built around capacity-building, as we could not assume that structures, processes and ways of working will still be the same in ten years.

The questions as to why we are here, to generate vision, would be explored in the EC Workshop at the Annual Meetings.

8. President's Report

The President's Report was received and the President was thanked for his work. The President also reported on the mental health and wellbeing of Ministers under particular duress since lockdown and for other reasons, and this was considered in item (9) below.

9. Supporting Ministers

It was reported that Simon Bland was finalising a meeting with Ministerial Benevolent Society (MBS). It was hoped to have a national confidential fund to support ministers in need. The GA would act as a conduit of funds to ministers in need, where that is helpful in protecting anonymity. This needed flexibility for the Ministry and Congregational Support Officer to act quickly but would still require an audit trail and agreed process for grants.

This might be expanded to other Unitarian Leaders, though this would need to be dealt with separately from money put in by the MBS, which could only support its members. The Chief Officer would discuss this with the Finance Manager to see what would be needed to meet this requirement and the audit trail.

ACTION: Liz

It was **AGREED** to progress this.

ACTION: Simon Bland

10. Safeguarding

Sarah Benfield had met with Gavin Howell. Gavin felt that a Safeguarding Lead and Deputy Lead from the EC would be valuable. There would be advantages to having different genders in these roles, to give people a choice of who to speak to, and succession planning would be needed to factor in the election cycle. It was **AGREED** that Sarah Benfield would be the Safeguarding Lead, and the Deputy Lead position would be considered.

It was **AGREED** to adopt the 31:8 model safeguarding policy, then adapt this over time to suit our needs.

Gavin would be running a Safeguarding training session at the Annual Meetings, and was also communicating via Uni-News, the website, and at district meetings. There was also consideration of having a 'Safeguarding Sunday', putting a service resource pack together for this, on the Worship Words website. It was important for Safeguarding not to be treated as a tick-box exercise – we are here to provide safe spaces for people, and this requires Safeguarding measures to be in place.

11. Governance

CIO

Legal work – Quotes were requested for advice, and VWV Solicitors were selected. The core quote was c£16K. This included £2,750 for an advice note which was commissioned, and had been circulated. This left c£13K of further costs, and some further optional costs if they deal with additional details such as land registry, transferring titles etc.

The key benefits of moving to a CIO were that: the GA would become a standalone entity in law, and could act as an entity in its own right for contracts, employment and holding property; and trustees would not be personally liable.

The intention was to keep the process simple by moving to a CIO retaining the existing Object, and using the existing rules on membership, voting rights etc. The timetable was for a draft Constitution to be drawn up for around the end of January, for discussion by a subgroup for the end of February and submission to the EC March meeting. The members would be asked to approve this at a special meeting in October.

It was noted in the Advice Note section 1.5 that there was a difference between Associate Members (who were not voting members) and Honorary members (who are Full members) and John would discuss this with VWV.

ACTION: John Bates

The above Budget for the legal work was **AGREED** and for the work to be progressed. It was **AGREED** to put a motion for the Annual Meetings to move towards becoming a CIO, and have a Special Meeting late in the year. This would be done for the 08 February motions deadline.

It would make the process easier if the Nightingale Centre changes had also happened. Jenny Jacobs reported that the Nightingale Centre had been set up around ten years ago under a Charity Commission Scheme, with the GA EC as trustees, delegating powers to the Management Committee to run the Centre. It had been proposed to vest the Management Committee as the trustees, and then for the Centre to become a CIO, but the trustee change would need to have happened then to go down the CIO route. This would need to have happened before the GA Special Meeting.

Districts

Jenny Jacobs had circulated a report on the Merseyside District, and it was clarified that she could still claim expenses to attend their meetings as needed.

Communication with districts remained a live issue. A survey, asking what Communications they wanted and how it should work, has been sent to Districts in early Autumn, with subsequent reminders, but response was still disappointing. It was **AGREED** that this should go on the agenda for the next meeting.

ACTION: Liz

Nightingale Centre Management Committee membership

The following resignations were noted: Karen & Ian Hicks; and Richard Merritt, (from 24 February). It was **AGREED** to appoint new members: Sue Catts and Phillip Horsfield.

12. Risk Register

The Risk Register was reviewed and required amendment. The terms of reference of the Finance Group needed further consideration, but the starting position, was to support the GA Finance Manager's work.

It was **AGREED** that Simon Hall review the Risk Register and draft a new version in collaboration with Liz.

ACTION: Simon Hall

13. Annual Meetings

Registration – Registration for the Meetings opened today. EC members were reminded of the need to register, using the Staff / Official Guests ticket.

EC activities – The EC workshop booked would be on the Innovation Challenge Scheme.

Schedule – The Meetings draft schedule had been created. Many of the sessions involve a GA or Unitarian College Staff member, which was a sign of low capacity.

Anniversary Preacher – Rev Ant Howe would be the 2024 Anniversary Preacher.

Plenary sessions – the agenda for the plenary sessions would be considered nearer the time, and this would be run through with the President. Unitarian College would be invited to present during a plenary session.

Motions – There were motions anticipated on: Deaths in Custody, Gaza, AI, removal of limit of four motions (received). The EC Administrative Motions were expected on CIO status and the Innovation Challenge, and there would be an Honorary Membership nomination motion for Dorothy Hewerdine. It was noted that this would require a short speech, and Jo would speak to Marion Baker about this.

ACTION: Jo James

It was **AGREED** to reappoint the Auditors for the next year.

It was **AGREED** to propose Rev Jeffrey Bowes as Vice President.

It was **AGREED** not to reappoint Rob Whiteman as Honorary Treasurer at the Annual Meetings.

14. Closing Devotions

Simon Hall gave Closing Devotions and the meeting ended.

Approved Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting held 07/03/2024 by Zoom

Present: John Bates, Sarah Benfield, Jenny Jacobs, Jo James (Convenor), Simon Hall, Rob Whiteman

In attendance: David Joseph (FA Finance Officer, item 5), Geoff Levermore (GA Vice President), Andrew Mason (Minutes), Liz Slade (Chief Officer)

Apologies: Vince McCully, (GA President), Sue Morrison,

1. Welcome

Everyone was welcomed with an opening reading, and the meeting started.

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from Vince McCully and Sue Morrison.

3. Membership

The resignations of Celia Cartwright and Wyn Thomas from the EC were recorded. Consideration of additional membership would take place.

4. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of 19 January 2024 were **AGREED**, with the amendment of the Treasurer item not being considered Confidential.

5. Finance

GA Finance Officer David Joseph attended for this item.

Reports

A Treasurer's Report, Q1 finance report vs actual, and some explanatory Q1 notes were received.

- The Reserves policy was suitable, but needed instructions for Staff on what to do with accounting and use of the money under different circumstances to link in with an Investment Management policy, for when we invest and dispose.
- Two legacies – of £40K (estimated) and £1.5K – had been included in the forecast.
- An estimated quota income had been used, and requests had been issued in January. There had been some congregations with small organic growth and others where membership was falling, and David had felt it prudent to reduce the budget quota income figure by £4K.
- Fundraising campaigns had yet to be developed, so there would be likely be a few years before any reaction to those.

- David wished to standardise how we report internal accounts.
- Transfers – these were based on assumptions until the end of year, so this did not represent a final figure. The £40K legacy figure in this year represents a very conservative estimate of the GA's legacy of 10% of the total estate, which is believed to have a current estimated value of c£1M. The main property asset is to be sold, so the figure will be reconsidered when a realistic value becomes clearer.

Update on audit process and communication with the membership

David was still working on differences in opening balances, and our Auditor had been off sick. Work on preparation of our Accounts would be starting this week and initial responses would likely be towards the end of the week commencing 18 March. Technical queries had been received and would be answered. The intention was to have a set of Accounts for the end of March, which would not have material adjustments to the final audited version (which was expected to be signed off for June). The Treasurer would check these and report back to the EC if there were any significant differences to the draft issued in January, though this was not expected. The expectation was that we would present unaudited Accounts in the SOFA format to the Annual Meetings. It was important to get the messaging around the delay right at the Meetings.

David was thanked for his help and left the meeting.

6. GA's move to Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) status

John Bates spoke to the circulated Guidance Note and Draft Constitution papers. These had been worked through with VWV Solicitors by himself, Liz Slade and Andrew Mason. The intention was to try and retain the main aspects of the current Constitution, but in a CIO form, amended to reflect current best practice or Charity Commission guidance. The current version had been circulated, and input was sought on the solicitor's comments. John was concerned the timeline might slip with the potential Nightingale Centre complications. It was intended to have a proposed submission to circulate to the Annual Meetings.

Comments and questions

Page 4, clause 7.7 (Removal of member) – Clarification on questions was needed, though removal of individual members would require approval of the EC rather than the Annual Meetings. The current process of removal of ministers was unclear, and potentially expensive in terms of legal fees, and further clarity was needed. The details of the new removal process would likely be outside the main Constitution, but a process would need to be fair and in line with principles of natural justice.

Jenny Jacobs reported on progress in respect of the Nightingale Centre, as the Centre Scheme was not mentioned in the latest advice note. She had tried to contact the Charity

Commission before the January EC meeting and had submitted a request on whether the scheme could be changed and how. The Nightingale Centre Committee wished to change the Scheme to make them the trustees before moving to CIO status. Jenny had not received a reply and had phoned the Charity Commission. The person she spoke to was only willing to speak in general terms, but indicated there was a substantial backlog and the email sent would likely only receive a response by the Summer at the earliest. It was possible to make a case to expedite a query, and Jenny would do this. It would be possible to replace the scheme, but it was likely better to move straight from the Scheme to a CIO. The Nightingale Centre Committee wished to wait for formal advice from the Charity Commission, though that now seemed to be a heavy delay, and she was concerned about forging ahead with the GA.

It was suggested by other trustees that it might be possible to have appoint new trustees be deed and have the old trustees resign by the same deed.

John thanked Jenny for her work on this and would follow up these suggestions and issues with the Solicitors.

ACTION: John

A question was raised as to whether we needed the power to borrow in clause 3.1, and it was suggested that this was a reserve power which was useful to have with property transactions, as depending on timings, we could technically be considered to be borrowing during a transaction.

In clause 10, it was felt important that we include delegation power, but recognise the important principle that all functions remained accountable to the trustees. Geoff indicated the importance of subcommittees providing all the information as well as the recommendation, in order for transparency and for the trustees to make informed decisions.

The option to have an electronic general meeting had been included following our Covid experiences.

Trustees were encouraged to look over the documents during the next few days, including the solicitor's queries, and send comments to John.

ACTION: All

Timing – The original objective had been to get this through in 2024. This timing might not be achievable if the Nightingale Centre issue cannot be resolved quickly, and John would clarify this.

ACTION: John

Comms at the Annual Meetings – The motion had been circulated and an agenda item for briefing on this had been included. John would provide the briefing documents for circulation, and would give the brief at the Meetings. **ACTION: John**

John, Liz and Andrew were thanked for their work on this.

7. Roll of Ministers

It was **AGREED** to accept Jennifer Sanders onto the Roll of Ministers as a newly-qualified Minister.

8. Update from the Colleges

Claire MacDonald (Ministry Tutor at Harris Manchester College Oxford) and Helen Mason (Director of Unitarian College) attended for this item and were invited to present.

Harris Manchester College Oxford (HMC)

Claire MacDonald, was excited to explore the future conversation we would have together. For background, she became the Ministry Tutor (0.2 FTE) In Oct 2022 and was invited to be the Chaplain (0.17 FTE). When she joined, there were no Unitarian students, but a great Unitarian presence, with the Tate library named for a Unitarian; Martineau's influence; and the Chapel's William Morris and Burne-Jones designs. Historically the Chapel was aligned with Unitarian values, ethics and principles. Since 1996 there had not been a Unitarian Principal but was now within a full Oxford College of c250 mature students, with a range of subjects and fellowships designed for education of graduate and mature students and research. It was now designed for educational use for accredited study, rather than being accessible by the whole movement.

Claire is the first Unitarian Chaplain (and female Chaplain) in a long time, and runs mid-week non-denominational services and a cross-faith sacred space. When applying for the role, she had pledged to renew and develop the Unitarian presence through founding the Carpenter Centre (named after a former Unitarian Principal). The Centre aimed to be involved in public discourse, reimagine the dissenting tradition, and bring Unitarianism back into a college of descendants of that tradition, while informing and creating a flourishing future speaking to that tradition internationally and looking outwards.

Claire was working on raising funds, creating fellowships and had been working with Helen Mason and Ant Howe at Unitarian College, and sitting on the GA Interview Panel.

Ministry training for both Unitarian and non-prescribing students are written into the college statutes in perpetuity, and were now in the College's Strategic Plan. The Unitarian presence was therefore secured, but how it functions is for us to work on.

Claire is a governing body fellow, rather than a tutor. The fellows are a community of people charged with running themselves for the purpose of flourishing the education of

others. As Unitarians founded the College, she is on the College governing body, which makes all decisions, ex officio, though the GA no longer has a structural relationship with the College. Claire also sits on the governing body of the University of Oxford as well as two major funding trusts.

There are currently no ministry students at HMC, and Claire was working on a collaboration with Unitarian College for future training.

HMC was very stable and well-run but was technically poor in Oxford College terms. The main University understands that small Colleges have trouble fundraising and has a Contributions fund to give money to fund community-based initiatives in a College's Strategic Plan, which applies to the Carpenter Centre. The Unitarian movement doesn't have any accredited post-graduate course of study, or theological presence through scholars at academic institutions. Ideally, the movement would look to create a succession plan to increase a position after her departure in a few years, this to a full-time post in the theology department, with a view to the person taking part in work between public thinking, training and the fostering of important and relevant scholarship.

Unitarian College

Helen Mason gave a presentation reflecting on the first five years since she started. She was now looking at the next 5-10 years. Helen underlined the closeness of collaboration with HMC, seeing the future of using the best of all the resources we have to improve learning and development for all Unitarians. Helen's work background was as an educator with teenagers and adults, with a personal Unitarian background.

Helen split the main initial focus of the College into six areas:

- Ministry – this had been the most urgent aspect, as students were waiting to start.
- Lay leadership – particularly congregational leadership.
- Adult Religious Education – some had been achieved.
- Children & Young People – this had been worked on
- Unitarian Worship – this was infused deeply in everything the College has done.
- International – An international conference had been organised, and contact had been made with students from other country.

Performance across the College's six strategic aims had been good, though the college was not currently entirely financially sustainable, holding about £2M from legacies and live-giving, about 10 years' worth of costs at the current scale. The College had recently taken on a match-funding benefactor for live Unitarian giving. The annual cost to train a Minister Costs was around £17K per annum.

Over the five years around 20 people had undertaken ministry training, with around 8 completed and on the roll, and 11 currently in training or on a break in learning. Lay training students who had completed a course were: 81 Foundation Step (8 x 2-hour Zoom

sessions, open to all, allowing people to produce Unitarian worship); 23 Intermediate Step (3-night residential and 4 assessed services); 8 Advanced Step (3x residential weekends and 6 assessed services).

Priorities for the Next five years

- Review of competencies – are we teaching the right things in the right balance?
- Leadership crisis – Short of good-quality leadership in congregations, both Ministry and Lay.
- Encourage more lay engagement in governance and trusteeship in a spirit-led way.
- Children, Families and Young Adults (including international). Need to increase income.

Accreditation and Validation

All full ministry students have an externally-validated Batchelor's Degree in Theology in places of their choice. There is a group studying at Luther King Centre, in Manchester and others who have studied in Universities across the UK. Their theological qualifications are considered, and a plan made accordingly. Helen noted that there had been an increase in those without higher level learning becoming ministry students.

For their Unitarian element, there were different potential options. A government apprenticeship in church ministry now existed at degree level, and which could bring in £22K per ministry student, though that involved employing ministers. This would need further investigation. UC had also had conversations with Claire and with Luther King Centre about commissioning higher-education, specific to us, that all Unitarian Ministers would undertake. This was in the embryonic stage. Paying other providers to get theological training was expensive.

Both presenters were congratulated for their presentations and thanked for attending.

9. Staff Reports

The Chief Officer reported on the Staff Get Together, and the good feedback from Staff, as well as her involvement in the Sunday Service event in Manchester as part of the 'Fete of Britain' event on community, climate and democracy.

- Recommendations from the Ministry Matters group

The Ministry Competencies, put together over ten years ago with the intent to review every five years, had been tweaked but needed reviewing.

It was **AGREED** that Ministry Matters group would review the ministry competencies and make a recommendation to the EC for how they should be revised, including a recommendation on their practical implementation among training cohorts, and a recommendation on when and how they are next reviewed.

- Lay Worship Leaders

The creation of a Register of Worship Leaders was **APPROVED**. This would recognise those who had successfully completed the Advanced Worship Course, with completion of rites of passage training and DBS checks. This would be a Register, rather than a Roll giving Full Member status, at this time. It was hoped to welcome successful people onto the Register at the 2025 Annual Meetings. Revalidation processes and expectations would be built-in.

- Recommendations on Safeguarding Policy

- Sarah Benfield had met with Simon Bland and Gavin Howell by Zoom. A request to adopt the Model Safeguarding Policy produced by 31:8 was **AGREED** and this would replace the existing policy. Amendments would be considered in due course.
- Gavin Howell would have Safeguarding session at the Annual Meetings.
- Gavin would go through the 31:8 audit with GA Staff, then consider this with Simon & Sarah, to ensure we comply with the 31:8 standards.
- Best practice would be to always include a Safeguarding Report towards the top of the EC agenda, and this was **AGREED**. **ACTION: Liz**

10. Communication with Districts

Audrey emailed all District Secs to provide a list of their meeting dates, so that we can collectively ensure an EC or Staff member can attend most meetings. Positive feedback had been received on the District Zoom meetings set up as an ongoing route of communication. Geoff thanked Liz for organising the District Zoom meetings, which have been very welcome.

11. Stipend Review Report

The Stipend Review Committee Report was received. The significant change was the change to the pulpit fee for the first time in a decade. Rob declared a potential conflict of interest as a Minister and GA Treasurer and abstained from voting. The Report was then approved to go to the Annual Meetings. Jenny remarked that it needs to be clear that the 5% recommendation needs to be shown as an actual recommendation. This was **AGREED** and Liz would feed that back. **ACTION: Liz**

12. Annual Meetings

It was **AGREED** to extend the booking deadline by a week. **ACTION: Andrew**

13. Departures and closing devotions

The Convenor thanked everyone for their attendance, and thanked Rob for his service on the EC, as this would be his last meeting.

Sarah Benfield gave closing devotions and the meeting finished.

**Minutes of GA General Assembly Executive Committee meeting
held 31/08/2024 and 01/09/2024 at Plymouth Unitarian Chapel**

Present: John Bates, Sarah Benfield (items 1-10), Laura Dobson,
Simon Hall (Zoom, items 7-10), Jenny Jacobs, Jo James (Convenor)

Apologies: Sue Morrison

In attendance: Gavin Howell (GA Youth & Safeguarding Officer, items 11-12),
Geoff Levermore (GA President), Andrew Mason (Minutes),
Liz Slade (GA Chief Officer)

Sarah Benfield gave Opening Devotions with passage "The Inheritors" from Cliff Reed's book, and the meeting started.

1. Check in

Members checked in.

This meeting would not be quorate, and therefore the decisions made would be homologated by email afterwards.

2. EC Membership

Co-option – It was **AGREED** that Zac Baker and Rev Laura Dobson would be co-opted to the EC with immediate effect. Declarations of non-disqualification and Registers of Interest forms had been completed by both.

Procedures: As Convenor, Jo felt there was an advantage to reinstituting certain protocols, such as the process of speaking through the Convenor to enable all voices to be heard in discussions, and this was **AGREED**. He had already asked the Minute-Taker to move back from summary Minutes to a more discursive style.

3. Minutes of previous meetings

The Minutes of the meeting held 02-03 June 2024 were **AGREED** and signed by the Chair.
The Minutes of the meeting held 07 March 2024 were **AGREED** and signed by the Chair.

4. Action List

November 2023

Sunday School Fund Purposes – The 1964 GA Yearbook contained the scope of the Sunday School Fund, and this would be followed up with the Treasurer.

ACTION: Liz and John Bates

January 2024

Review Risk Register – This was deferred to the next meeting.

June 2024

Trustee training – There would be a meeting held on the coming Friday to develop ideas.

Quota income review – This was on the agenda for this meeting.

Unitarian Charities – John had spoken to the Solicitor, and the Charities could become member Societies of the GA.

Nightingale Centre letter re. confirming GA is not employer – A letter would be sent.

Manse allowance – A Paper had been prepared and was on this agenda.

5. Staff Reports

The Convenor was optimistic at all the good work being reported, which he felt reflected Liz's personal connections with congregations, and expressed gratitude for this work.

Liz reported on the Green Belt Festival for non-mainstreamers. She had hosted a session on "The Religion We Need Next", with Gail Bradbrook, and David Benjamin-Blower, which had to be hastily replanned due to Brian Eno's late inability to attend. Laura had attended the session, and felt there had been a very positive reaction to the session. Liz talked about her experience encountering Unitarianism, and quoted Stephen Lingwood on the importance of the way we do things as well as what we do.

It was **AGREED** that we should try and have a stand in the exhibition area next year (estimated cost £1.2K including 4 participant tickets) and encourage Unitarians to attend, as it was not necessarily on the radar for Unitarians but there could be synergy.

Liz had also spoken at the Modern Church Conference in July, and had left with the strong feeling we should not underestimate the importance of what we're doing. There had been a number of Anglicans in attendance, and they had reported frustration with quite basic things we take for granted. This left Liz feeling that we have been leading on things they are hungry for now.

Jo remarked that both these activities came from a definite Christian perspective, feeling that our Unitarian exceptionalism had hidden us from these places. It was interesting and refreshing to think there might be points of connection possible.

Liz reflected on the wider social currents, including riots, threats of fascism, and the possibility of fundamentalist churches aligning with the far right here in the way that they have in the US. Our responsibility remained to uphold the liberal Christian tradition, and this tradition did not require a rigid form of Church. To do this, we needed to help ourselves to meet people well.

A discussion on this including the following points:

- Our name and objects could be stumbling blocks. Stating who we are more clearly is an important step, though making changes could be difficult, painful and would require collective skill to achieve.
- Riots had been followed by counter-protests. Culture war was unlikely to be productive, but a deeper theological reflection might help us become a space for nuance and good conversations to be well held.
- There were problems of democracy.
- There was a need to collaborate with other liberal religions.
- Identity and telling our story well was important, and represented a challenge. Successful congregations were those able to clearly communicate who they are and what they stand for. The Innovation Challenge Project and a reshaping of the Communications function could help with this. Congregations needed to get to the heart of their theological position collectively, and this work needed to take place at the local level to resonate, The GA could help support this process.
- External perspectives from outsiders could be useful as mirrors to help us see where we are.

Lindsey Press – Liz held a good conversation with Catherine Robinson. It was acknowledged that the Panel needed to change, and a hiatus was a good idea, with the Panel not needing to launch a book at the Annual Meetings this year. There were parallels with congregations – feeling that they have to keep going with existing activities meant energy went into this instead considering what is needed.

Progress on motions – The Convenor wanted to include information on motions progress in the latest Uni-news, to show what was being done. The Code of Ethics was excluded, as this required a deeper piece of work which would need time investing in it, and this was difficult at the present. This overlapped with the Ministerial Fellowship's proposed Code of Conduct. The Fellowship were reviewing this at their Conference in the Autumn. The President had recently been asked who made sure the EC follow motions. This led to the clarification of the position of the EC as charity trustees, who must make their own decisions on the best interest of the charity. The understanding of motions could be improved, and it was important to note that we can make good debates within motions.

Update on Interviews with Ministers Report – Congregations and Districts have had good conversations from this report. The Ministry Matters group were to meet in September and Rory would attend that meeting, which would cover continued professional development, probation etc. This felt healthy, but it needed to be reiterated that this was not something the GA would just fix, it needed a culture change.

Interview Panel – Liz intended to send a Paper clarifying the role of the Interview Panel and outlining the start-to-finish process for someone applying for ministry. When available, she would circulate this. **ACTION: Liz**

The Ministry and Congregational Support Officer's report indicated a great deal of different activity and there was discussion about the difficulties of balancing projects (such as the Congregational Support Toolkit) with responsive work. There was a tension between work dealing with individual congregations in difficulty, and work to enable groups to work better together. Facilitating individual congregations might require more engagement, and there might be an opportunity for the new Innovation Challenge Programme Manager to have some of these conversations, or for congregations to connect with Unitarian Transformers. The Unitarian Transformers group were currently undertaking a project with Doncaster on community audits. The Project was reliant on the congregations having money. There were opportunities to do that kind of work, there was a barrier where the congregation, or district did not have funds. Sometimes issues related to the congregation not having enough energy to be creative, but still having an appetite to be shown options. There was a requirement for a mixture of vision; articulating what we have to offer, empowering trustees and money.

6. Ministry support and development

Decision-making around ministry training

A Paper had been submitted outlining the current practice. The Interview Panel was set up when the EC was created, with a structure of Panels and Strategic Groups feeding into the EC. This structure had faded over time, and it was felt that the connection between the Interview Panel and the EC, and the processes, should be strengthened and reinvigorated. The EC remained responsible for oversight, with the duty to hold the Roll. Gavin Howell's Safeguarding work had highlighted best practice for volunteers including clarity on the responsibilities, terms of office, onboarding and the importance of clear role descriptions, reporting structures and terms of engagement. It was **AGREED** that Liz would discuss this further with the Interview Panel and come back with a proposal. Rev Danny Crosby, Angela Maher and Derek McAuley were appointed to join the Panel (to join Jane Couper and Rev Sarah Tinker), on terms subject to the best practice recommendations. **ACTION: Liz**

Advance 2025 (formerly 'MIMOSA')

A proposal to host a new gathering for active Ministers, with the GA part-funding £6.5K, had been received. The Treasurer indicated there were small, restricted funds which could be used. The principle was to ask attendees and congregations to part-fund attendance for their Ministers, and a poster had been designed aimed at congregations. The fact that the GA was match-funding would be added to it. The proposal was **approved** for the 2025

event, to be reviewed afterwards, as there was a larger question on the GA role longer-term in paying for ministerial development.

Minister's Housing

A draft paper had been circulated on issues with Minister's Housing, which needed further work. This would require long-term strategic planning on finances, and the Treasurer would therefore need to be involved. Another Zoom meeting was likely to be held, with the intention of a new draft paper being produced for approval at the November EC meeting, with a view to then presenting proposals to the 2025 Annual Meetings. This was **AGREED**.

ACTION: Jenny Jacobs

7. Finance

Simon Hall joined at this point by Zoom and approved the decisions made earlier in the meeting.

Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer's Report was received.

Draft Budget comments - Legacies are inherently unpredictable, but there was a reasonable probability we would receive a legacy during the financial year, as we understood there to be £120K presently in probate. Reserves from restricted and designated funds were being used and there was £185K in reserve from last year. Expenditure on programme work was going up, and support costs were essentially flat. From the Treasurer's perspective, this was a neutral budget, and all was well. The current level of expenditure was covered 4.9 times by unrestricted reserves, and the Treasurer was working to a guideline that a ratio above 2 times was acceptable; between 1-2 times we would need to consider activities, and below 1 we would need to cut costs and / or increase fundraising.

Quota income – this would require discussion, and this was an agenda item.

Audited Accounts – The Accounts for the year ending 30/09/23 had been submitted to the Charity Commission, one day after the deadline. The Treasurer had met with the Auditors about the delays. There had been issues with their capacity to deal with consolidated accounts, and a timetable had been given to them for next year's Accounts. It was noted that should the Nightingale Centre become an independent entity, the consolidation requirement would no longer exist, making the Accounts process simpler and cheaper.

Funds

The GA's funds of £7.4M were invested with Newton through BNY Mellon, yielding 2% interest before costs, which was not a great return.

The current portfolio needs were for

- a) cash for specific restricted activities, with no use of capital (e.g. Sustentation Fund). Total: £2.66M.
- b) Longer-term designated activities where some capital can be used, (e.g. Ministerial Students Fund). Total: £2.37M.
- c) Unrestricted funds where capital can be withdrawn, Total: £2.37M.

The Treasurer had approached BNY Mellon to look at rebalancing the portfolio for these needs (while retaining the oil and gas restriction), to achieve a better return, and a better outcome was anticipated. This was a narrower definition than the current ethical investment practice, and previous GA Resolutions on Ethical Investment policies would be checked. **ACTION: Andrew**

2024-25 Budget

There was no significant change from last year's budget. The largest change was the Innovation Challenge Programme Manager salary item. The Budget did not include grants anticipated to successful applicants, as these would come out of the related funds not general funds. The Communications budget was not finalised, as the shape of different roles (and therefore costs) was being considered next week as part of various staff changes, so this figure would change.

The Treasurer noted that there had been an increase in the budget cost of Operations which represented one-off costs for computer work and the legal costs for the CIO work. The budget was **approved**.

Staff Salaries

The annual increase assumed in the budget was 2.5% and this was **approved**.

International matters

India Fund grant – A decision had been made between meetings that the £30K India Fund be given to the Kharang School in the Khasi Hills, and payment was made a few weeks ago. This would be communicated.

The Leadership and Design Team have appointed a Network Facilitator, based in Kenya, to help Unitarians around the world to connect. This represented a new style of international collaboration, focussing on a bottom-up rather than top-down approach.

Nightingale Centre Accounts

The Nightingale Centre Accounts were **approved** for sign-off.

8. Governance

CIO Update

John reported on the Report and Timetable from the Solicitors which had been circulated. This was clear and positive, with achievable timetables. The consultation request had been made, and comments received were being collated before the open Zoom session being held on 02 October. It was clear that the way the CIO Constitution was being written, many things formerly in the Constitution would now be in the Standing Orders, and this might unsettle some people.

In response to questions:

- on how transparent the current Standing Orders were, it was clarified that the new Standing Orders are released on the GA website before the Annual Meetings each year with any suggested changes clearly marked with underlining or strikethroughs. Andrew was asked to send a link to the Current Standing Orders to members.

ACTION: Andrew

- on changes, there were no changes to the GA being trustee of last resort for the Ministers' Pension Fund Centre, and the advice was that the relationship for Excepting Status for congregations would remain in place.

Costs – The fixed fee quoted for the remaining essential items was £10.5K ex VAT, with optional extras of c£2.75K ex VAT. The Budget of £14K covers this. We had paid £12K (inc VAT) so far on a total estimate of £25K (inc VAT).

Membership of GA Roll

The resignation of the Rev Phil Silk from the GA Roll had been received and would be accepted, pending a check that this would not negatively affect his pension entitlement.

The President would also write to thank Phil for his service.

ACTION: Liz & President

Nightingale Centre Resolution

Jenny had been following up with the Charity Commission on the possibility of the Nightingale Centre becoming an independent entity with their own trustees. This had been delayed by a significant backlog at the Charity Commission, but she had been able to arrange a four-way Zoom discussion between herself, John Bates, Michael Tracey (Secretary of the Nightingale Centre) and a representative of the Charity Commission. It was indicated that a resolution to amend the scheme could be passed with 75% of a quorate meeting. The resolution would then be signed, saved as a pdf and uploaded to the Charity Commission website. A draft of the Resolution had been circulated, and this needed to be discussed fully with the Nightingale Centre Management Committee. The Nightingale Centre could potentially then become an Affiliated Society at the next GA Annual Meetings. The Resolution for the Nightingale Centre Management Committee to become the Nightingale Centre Trustees was **AGREED**.

9. President's Report

Geoff had sent a report and spoke verbally. He referenced his comments on the CIO Constitution, which had been added to the collated batch.

10. GA Quota

A report of the 2022-23 numbers had been given, and Liz had prepared a discussion paper. 50% of the quota income comes from the 30 largest of the 150 congregations. Various ideas could be considered, including abolishing the quota altogether; increasing it to £40 immediately; increase it gradually over time; hold the quota at the current levels but encourage additional fundraising to fund programme activity.

Simon Hall had prepared thought on this. He estimated the quota income to be about 13-15% of the GA's budgeted income presently, and likely to fall in the future. The term 'quota' had negative connotations from the Anglican church. Simon would advocate cancelling quota and replacing with other ways of funding or donating, possibilities including:

- A Patron scheme (reviewing Associate Membership).
- Having an Annual Stewardship Service on Plough Sunday (the Sunday after Epiphany), with the concept of sewing ready to reap the benefits of a future harvest. Districts could be asked to hold a shared district event, or congregations hold individual events, with a collection for joint stewardship of their own needs and ours. A framework for the Service would be developed, rather than leaving people to their own devices to create from scratch.

Comments:

- There was precedent for a service, as GA Sunday existed until 2019 (in 2020 it was not felt to be a good time to ask congregations for money, and it has not been picked back up since. The Anniversary Service collection was mostly aimed at individuals at the Meetings rather than general congregants).
- With the quota, it was likely that numbers were based on the bands for voting representatives. The quota was currently a one-way process and other ways to get feedback or consultative votes from the person in the pew would be helpful.
- At present, voting membership was tied up with quota and therefore abolishing the quota would get rid of congregational votes under the current Constitution.
- The Anglican quota was much larger than ours. Income was still needed. The Service might raise money from non-members, but was unlikely to raise as much as the current quota. £50K+ per annum was a lot of income to lose.
- £40 was in line with Associate Membership.
- Quota has to be voluntary, or VAT would be chargeable.

- Mechanical issues with abolishing quota would need to be managed, as would fallout from a likely shortfall in income. A link would need to be made to funding programme activity, and this could be a challenging message to get across.
- Valuing spiritual health should be important. There was a need for us collectively to have better conversations about money and have mature conversations about the responsibilities which go with membership. There needs to be a story about giving.
- If quota rises, congregations with the lowest membership, and therefore the lowest energy, are least likely to be engaged with the GA.
- Currently we are running optional programmes at the request of the membership, of which quota covers a third of the cost. If people want the GA to do more, then they will need to give more. This means it's their decision on how much we deliver.
- The NSPCI Synod have a presidential award to recognise nationally someone who has done good work in their local church. This was a way to link with people directly in local congregations.
- Publicising that the quota has been frozen for many years would be a good idea if raising - £40 per annum was the cost of a coffee once a month.
- If cancelling quota, there would be worries about whether the funding would be sustainable going forward.
- Communication on quota needed to be clearly tied-in with what the quota is currently helping us to do.
- Congregations needed to be helped with tools to have conversations with members locally about giving at congregational level, which was a fraction of what it is in other denominations. This felt related to the question of what we're doing.

This was not near a decision at this point. Simon was asked to put down ideas on this, and see if any clearer proposals came out of today's discussion. It was **AGREED** that this would be revisited at the November meeting. **ACTION: Simon, Liz**

The meeting adjourned for the night, and reconvened on Sunday, with a reading from Jo. Sue Morrison had been in touch to confirm the decisions made yesterday. This meant the quorate for decisions had been reached, and Laura Dobson became a voting member of the EC from Sunday.

11. Torbay

Gavin Howell attended and reported on the Torbay Project.

Gavin indicated that the Project was playing out the intention of working in an emergent way – looking at the idea of what might come when moving with things as they grow and develop, and harmonise with what's happening in the local landscape, rather than proceeding from a detailed initial plan. Some things had started to emerge:

- 'Stuff and Things': a local group meeting monthly, resulting from initial conversations on Zoom with one person, and moving to meeting in person with Gavin when he moved to Torbay. The person had been interested in a Unitarian perspective, and over time more people had been invited in. The group had then moved from an informal discussion group to more formalised chalice engagement group style of around 8 people meeting on a Friday. Initially this had been meeting in a pub. This had been a good incubator, as it was a unfrightening hospitality space, but eventually it had needed to move to a local hotel (quieter, but still a hospitality space). Meeting in a Chapel space didn't appeal, as people were spiritual refugees. The group was now producing their own content on themes and were holding space well in our tradition. This showed that free and enquiring spaces could be set up from scratch, with the engagement model working well for this due to the food structure and principles underpinning it. It was natural that some congregations and other activities would die out over time, and it was reassuring that new activities could be set up.
- Interfaith: An Interfaith Group has been set up. The Interfaith Network has closed, and there were opportunities there for us. When Gavin arrived, there was no interfaith space, but after conversations a group had been set up. The members agreed it had to be manageable and sustainable and would therefore meet 4-5 times a year. The people coming tend to be free and inquiring folk. This had been done by invitation initially to try and get the culture right. There was now a symbiotic relationship, with synergy between the two groups. It had been important to be clear about capacity, and needing to leave space for other things to grow. The main supporter had been the Spiritualists. This had put off the mainstream Christian Churches from involvement, but brought in other groups like Pagans and Quakers.
- On Thursday Gavin met with the local policing engagement officer for the second time, to facilitate a community get-together. A pilot proposal was being put forward via a community engagement group, with have links and relationships in Torbay to have a 'Great Get Together' event and see how it goes. With time, the hope was to scale out and try to populate parts of Torquay using existing infrastructure.
- People were not interested in 'Unitarian' label as this wasn't differentiated from other churches, but Interfaith gets interest, then people connect to activities from there. The concept of churches comes with baggage, but people are interested in the principles underpinning it.
- The Resurgence Trust is a Devon-based charity. Gavin had contacted them about setting up a local group. This had started but then had to close due to a lack of clarity. It had then reopened in someone's house and had now ended up in a pub. This had come from a group decision. Gavin noted that pubs were struggling, and there was a possible opportunity for pubs to be used as community meeting spaces.

Comments during the discussion:

- People do not feel the need to give themselves a label – they don't think about it.
- This relates to the conversation about our brand identity.
- Our Object refers to free and enquiring religion, and the 'free and enquiring' part could connect with people. Talking about Unitarianism and Free Christianity less so.
- There had been a spin-off with Spirit of Land and Sea, celebrating coastal congregations, with Lizzie Kingston-Harrison. This was a monthly online meeting (interchanging between day and evening) as a contemplative sharing space, allowing Unitarian groups from around the country to connect. This was very different to the traditional district style, but allowed for developing and deepening connections between congregations without the baggage of existing culture and history. Plymouth University have a department about Coastal Communities, and there might be a chance to link.
- Not having easy access to a building had given the freedom to look at what can be done without a well-run space, and how it would work if we were to drop someone into a community to start activities without a building.
- Facilitating a culture of hospitality, congregations and Interfaith could be a stepping stone for people.
- The acceptance of going slowly had been well-received. The emergent model was about relationships and meeting well together in the space. The Engagement Group tool worked well for this, as did meeting in hospitality spaces.
- This was a healthy model for growth from small groups, and the new Soul Deep book could be a powerful tool in reducing barriers to leading smaller groups. Engagement groups were an easier entry point for many people than traditional congregations, and communications should reflect this.
- There was a potential role for the centre in helping to develop these small groups through the Innovation Challenge.
- The off-putting nature of churches institutionally, religion, meeting in church spaces, and our own name were discussed with examples. Though it was also noted that religion was not considered off-putting to all people or all in all places, and in some was seen as a community resource.
- There could be advantages to buildings once something has been established, it needs somewhere to be.
- Scaling out rather than up had been a conscious choice, as scaling up required energy, and also concentrated the risk of disagreements which can cause single entities to fall apart quickly.

Gavin concluded by saying that while the emergent process meant specific objectives were not identified, and activities would shift with the landscape, he saw the desired outcome as community – a more collected, caring and collaborative Torbay. This was a deeply spiritual process.

12. Youth and Safeguarding

Safeguarding

As Safeguarding Lead, Gavin was encouraged by the steps the GA were taking. In particular, having named EC Designated Safeguarding Leads had made a huge difference, reflecting that Safeguarding is the responsibility of the trustees.

The Safeguarding Network had now been established, enabling us to share experience and knowledge with congregations, and enabling them to share back. There had been thirteen people at the first session, and all were new faces.

The Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse 2022 had caused 31:8 to update their resources in response, and improved their training. Since the pandemic, more people were comfortable with Zoom and Safeguarding training and resource sharing could therefore be done differently.

Gavin had been on pilot 31:8 courses and the 'Gateway to Safeguarding' training was excellent for people new to Safeguarding (or very rusty) at a minimal cost of £10-11 per person. It would be possible for the GA to buy a number of places, and give people a good entry for Safeguarding.

It was worth noting that there was an awareness issue that Safeguarding was not just about children. In our context there was more likely to be an issue with adults with care and support needs. The GA could help congregations to prepare for people to have own conversations with 31:8 and manage their own Safeguarding issues well. It was noted that more congregations had signed up for their own 31:8 membership. Gavin was optimistic about the preventative tools and approaches. Safeguarding was usually connected with poor governance and was about enabling us to do what we want, well. This meant that spaces needed to be safe for the hospitality needed to foster spiritual health.

There were no specific Safeguarding issues to report on.

Youth

Liz reported that there had only been 3 people sign up for the Unitarian College Youth Leader training and therefore been cancelled.

13. Wrapping up

There was a general sense that having a weekend meeting, allowing the trustees to attend the service and interact with the congregation, had worked well.

The Annual Meeting venue and dates were subject to contract finalisation, but were expected to be 12-14 April 2025 at the Birmingham Hilton Metropole Hotel.

14. Communication

The following were intended by communicated:

- The new-style meeting with, the welcome and interaction from the Plymouth congregation.
- The Co-option of Zac Baker and Laura Dobson to the EC.
- The GA Grant made from the India Fund.
- The approval of the 'Advance 2025' Ministry event.
- Gavin Howell's presence, and highlighting the 31:8 materials, and the purpose of Safeguarding being to ensure good management of hospitality spaces.
- Update on the Motions - AI: forming a working group, and Liz meeting with the Ada Lovelace Group; No more Deaths: following up with No More Deaths Campaign; Gaza: Recent fundraising email from Rev Feargus O'Connor.
- Quota, open-ended discussion, would appreciate thoughts on funding.
- Innovation Challenge, in process of recruiting programme manager.

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting would be held from 23-24 November, at Birmingham New Meeting.

Jenny Jacobs gave closing devotions and the meeting finished.

**Approved Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting
held 23 and 24 November at Birmingham New Meeting**

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

In attendance: Mark Hutchinson (item 10), Geoff Levermore (President),
Andrew Mason (Minutes), Liz Slade (Chief Officer)

Apologies: Simon Hall, Jenny Jacobs (for Saturday)

1. Check in

Everyone checked in. It was noted that to be quorate decisions would need to be ratified at the Sunday session when Jenny was due to join. Jo gave devotions and the meeting started.

2. Our Context

To give context, Jo asked everyone to consider three questions:

1. Virtues – what are the good things which regularly and intentionally happen within the denomination?
2. What are the opposite of these good things?
3. Where are these opposite things regularly showing up and apparent?

Virtue	Opposite / Shadow
Regular connection with people – people make it a priority to travel.	Irregularity of attendance and superficiality.
Care – when someone needs support, it tends to happen	Lack of concern / spiritual nurture
Open-hearted welcome	Close-minded occurrences
Educational intent – intellectual and rational	Now live in more rational world, not doing as much as we might to foster culture of faith, and lean in to uncertainty. Difficult to have faith in where to go. Overdominance of particular type of thinking, need to think in terms of faith.
Plurality / open-mindedness -	Energy spent in humanist vs Christian arguments. Fear of non-dominance or recognition. Pluralism does not recognise validity of other things than pluralism (as many do).

Stewarding material and liturgical culture (e.g. historic silverware, tapestries, cushions etc and steward liturgies and songs)	Can get stuck in a collective stewarding view, and focus on the lifeless rather than the new things emerging with energy. Harder to imagine future possibilities if focused on what has existed and currently exists).
Adaptive organisation – can operate laterally to support, focus on values rather than goals and have semi-structures. Noted that it can be uncomfortable due to history of hierarchy and power, and fear around survival goals.	Inertia, lack of structure. Potential for lack of leadership.
Comfort with ambiguity, recognition of uncertainty as part of our faith background and structure is a real virtue. Background of acknowledgment of uncertainty.	If we don't know where we're going, can't plan our way to a place we don't way. Hard to adapt to emergent situation, and can cause conflict due to change resistance, and resisting the difficult. Distrust of levels above (District, GA).

Additional thoughts:

- Need to see what we can offer to attract people.
- Values are most important, but good governance and finance are needed as part of the balance.
- The 'shadows' are often externalised, as they can be painful to bear and admit to. This can lead to intense disapproval (as external focus for this). The EC needs to be aware that approval does not equate to success and vice versa.
- Transformative not incremental change is needed. How do we encourage people to engage with conversations about the future and change?
- There is new activity which can help to bridge to future possibilities – examples: Administrator Network, Safeguarding Network, Congregational Connections, Minister Coffee House etc. These can affect practical but also cultural change with a different type of gathering.

Liz reported on a gathering she convened at Kensington with other organisational leaders sharing the experience of grappling with things ending and growing, and this being a societal issue rather than just us. The three-hour session had only scratched the surface and there was a desire to explore more. The Quakers and Sufis had attended and were having the same challenges as us. There were also leaders present who operate in the secular community side, looking at uses of buildings, and looking at practices of spiritual gathering (e.g. If you consider worship as an art practice, is it different?). It was important

to steward Unitarian infrastructure, heritage etc, but that exists in a wider culture. Exploring questions. It was suggested that Liz could do a 10-minute video TED Talk as a shareable takeaway for congregations. Liz felt that some of the people who had taken part in the gathering would be likely to be willing to record vignettes for use. This could potentially be scaled into a GA Annual Meeting activity. There was potential for future gatherings of this type, and a potential role for us as convenors in the “all faiths and none” space.

Jo James left the meeting at this point.

3. Minutes from Previous Meeting and Action List

Minutes

The Minutes of the EC meeting held 31/08/24 – 01/09/24 were discussed, and it was noted that the decision had been agreed for the Nightingale Centre Management Committee to become the Nightingale Centre Trustees. This would be added to the Minutes. With this addition, the Minutes were **AGREED** as a correct record.

Action List

Decision making around ministry – A paper had been submitted giving an overview of the GA’s current practices.

There was nothing further to pick up from the Action List at this meeting.

4. Decisions taken since the last meeting

- Sue Morrison had resigned from the Executive Committee and was thanked for her service.
- The updated GA Investment Policy had been agreed and signed.

5. Finance

A Treasurer’s Report had been submitted. The following were highlighted:

The Congregational Development Fund had now been depleted and would be closed. A longer-term solution was part of the Innovation Challenge Scheme. This was **AGREED**.

The Ministerial Students Funds (MSF) would deplete next year. It was **AGREED** that we seek funding from the Districts (£300K) and contribute from GA funds (£200K) to replenish the Fund to £500K, representing five years of planned expenditure. This was a clear benefit to Districts and there was a need to communicate transparently and positively about how much we support ministry students, and the value for congregations. In the future, funding the Ministry Students fund would have a strong link to legacy fundraising.

Quota – This meeting was not the correct time to discuss major structural changes to the quota. The quota had not been increased in a decade and had fallen behind inflation. It

was **AGREED** to put to the membership at the Annual Meetings a recommended increase to £40 with inflationary increases going forward. This would be done in conjunction with the Stipend Review Report.

6. Reports

President's Report

The President had submitted a report and was thanked. The Cenotaph Service was highlighted, and he had spoken to a number of the religious leaders including the Chief Imam for the Armed Forces, the Chief Rabbi, the Head of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Head of the Methodists, and the Head of the United Reformed Church.

NSPCI Moderators Award equivalent – This required further consideration, but in principle a mechanism for showing gratitude to individuals was welcomed.

Chief Officer's Report

Leadership training – Justine Huxley, former Director of St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, has offered free leadership training. It was **AGREED** that Liz would look at this with Laura Dobson and Rory Castle Jones to see how it fits in our eco-system and think about who we want to reach to take part and how. **ACTION: Liz**

Theology gap – Liz had been having conversations with Stephen Lingwood about the about theology gap. An idea had been created, building on the LGBT Unitarian Voices Project oral history project. The idea would be to have a similar project, with retired ministers and older members, to capture their experiences and what has changed. Liz had a conversation with Derek McAuley, and The Hibbert Trust had then offered to fund Stephen's time to interview, write up and create the project. The concept of celebrating the stories of our elder leaders, and of the GA championing this, was **AGREED**. It was noted that Harris Manchester College Oxford have started a similar project with respect to historic sermons.

Ministry and Congregational Support Officer's (MSCO) Report

Wills – It was **AGREED** to go ahead with a proposal from the National Free Wills Network. This is a free will-writing service for supporters of a charity, and a resource bank for the charity to use, templated documents and a portal for record keeping. It is charged at £450 per quarter, with a fee of £100 then paid per will. John would report on this at the Treasurer's Report to the Annual Meetings. Liz felt this needed to be with the Communications, and also relates to Associate Membership.

Interview Panel – It was **AGREED** that Rev Melda Grantham be admitted to the GA Roll as a Minister with Full Status.

7. EC Elections

The first election documents, with the Call for Nominations, had been sent out to the electorate and Churches on Thursday. The information was on the GA website. An advert had been sent to The Inquirer for the December issue. The elections would start on 21 February and close on 28 March, with results announced shortly afterwards.

8. Safeguarding

There were no specific matters to report to the trustees.

Gavin continues to do two meetings a month with the Safeguarding Network, which is growing. Info is available on the 31:8 website, with a good service pack for doing a Safeguarding Service. Gavin had discussed with Wood Green Trust trying to include Safeguarding as a pre-requisite in the warm spaces grant scheme. Our churches need to be less naïve about Safeguarding – it applies to vulnerable people as well as children.

Dementia awareness – we should try and make the churches more dementia-aware. Next week's Uni-News would raise Safeguarding.

9. Move to CIO

John Bates reported and thanked Andrew Mason for his work on this.

A Constitution, Standing Orders and By Laws had been drafted, with necessary changes to make the documents consistent. The motions to create the CIO (as well as an additional motion to ensure the next EC can be made quorate after the Annual Meetings) had also been added. These papers would go out in January to meet the Constitutional motions notice requirement. The Constitution, Standing Orders, By Laws and Motions were **AGREED**.

Draft email to Charity Commission – It was **AGREED** for the Solicitors to send the email to the Charity Commission with respect to the CIO. **ACTION: John Bates**

It was recognised that a friendly and simple overview of the CIO process and motions needs to be created and incorporated with the Communications.

The CIO timetable is as set, and the necessary actions would be taken by the Solicitors. There were still some significant costs to incur, and the total cost as per the quote would be £15K.

10. Unitarian Transformers

Mark Hutchinson attended to report on Unitarian Transformers (UT). Jo James rejoined during this item.

The Wood Green Trust project asked the UT group what they would do with £15K per year. Initial plans were to attempt to model an online ministry, and take on the youth work done

with Malvern Transformers in an online format. On acceptance, the Wood Green Trustees had requested to be kept informed, but in the case of something being unsuccessful UT could stop the activity and try a different activity without needing to stop for permission. Reporting took place regularly. Laura Dobson and Mark Hutchinson were working as Ministers; Ant Howe had overseen online ministry for 18 months including pastoral care; Andrew and Rosemary Webb had taken on the youth work, Natasha Stanley had started on the administration a year ago, and Helen Mason was looking after Finance.

Online work

This had been started over three years ago during lockdown, with online gatherings held 6/7 days of the week; Heart and Soul (x3), Meditation, Stillness at 7 and a Connections gathering. Hindu Connections ran collaboratively until around 18 months ago, then went independent and continued. Afterwards, UT ran Spiritual Not Religious, Eco Spirituality, Living Our Values and Spiritual Practice sessions on Wednesdays for two and a half years with varying success.

Spiritual Not Religious had central marketing, and there were 40 people at the first session, 30 at the second session, and there was no-one at the third. There were a core of around 12 people.

Eco Spirituality had 10-20 people, boosted by the Unitarians For Climate Justice group.

Online ministry had faded post-Covid, as the need had reduced. Mark noted that there were weekly local Unitarian online activities, but not currently coherent national online gatherings as Unitarians.

Stillness at 7 could be promoted with good internal communication.

The Meditation session was now being run by Laura via Chorlton Unitarians, but with people joining from outside. It had remained fairly constant at around 10 attenders. Laura felt the session helped people at Chorlton to feel connected to others outside just the congregation.

Reflections: Communications had been identified as a weakness. On reflection UT felt that regular communications should be set up with congregations, and there were issues with information not always appearing in Uni-News. It was noted that weekly diary on the website isn't always correct.

It was planned to use an unspent £5K social media budget to relaunch in the New Year with new content, promoting Spiritual Not Religious and Eco Spirituality to non-Unitarian audiences.

Collaborations

Chargeable collaborations were held with various organisations as the business model included raising funds through chargeable work. These were described in more detail.

Styal and Macclesfield – Spiritual Not Religious had been run as an event, and 12 scripts had been produced which could be used by other congregations.

NUF – Hindu Connections was started.

Doncaster – A six-month community audit of the immediate needs in the centre of Doncaster, and what might be possible, was done. At the end of the process, Rev Stephanie Bisby became available, and joined as Minister at Doncaster. As such, the priority had moved to finding someone to support work on keeping the building functional and oversee £100K of work on the site. Rentals and events had been improved and grants applied for.

The collaborations had been a mixture of failure and success – some activities had not succeeded, but there had also been some progress, and the group had acted as a disruptor.

Youth

Youth – The brief was a desire to get online materials available. Andrew and Rosemary Webb had run an Ethical Sunday School on Friday night. The first website did not work, and a second website was now operating. A 'Starfish' magazine was produced. An online lesson on Norway had been created, with details on how to do related crafts, so the leaders of a youth group could just run the session. Rosemary was delivering Quaker Talks at a school in Malvern, and it was hoped to do the same for Unitarian talks. This was proving difficult as there were fewer connections with schools than in the past, but they would be delivering a Key Stage 2 Talk in Kidderminster in 2025. This would be discussed at the Annual Meetings.

Money and Transformers

The UT group were given £15K per annum for three years, with the project funding finishing at the end of December 2024, and had earned £20K from the chargeable collaborations. £12.4K remained in the funding, and this was to be spent on ministry for Connections, social media to promote, and about £3K on remaining work with Doncaster.

Unitarian Transformers is now a Community Interest Company (CIC), technically owned by Mark but constituted so that no Employee or Director can earn more than a Minister's salary. If the CIC is wound up, money goes to Unitarian College. The CIC was a vehicle to continue collaborative work.

Ongoing work

A collaboration with Newcastle to look at community leadership would be taking place in the New Year, and discussions were ongoing with three other congregations. At Newcastle, in the initial stage it was likely UT would pay, supervise and provide Unitarian context to a new person in Newcastle, and then pull back and supervise.

Midland Union – The District had commissioned Sustainability Audits of 9 congregations, at £15K. These would be detailed and would be a useful snapshot of the congregations at a point in time, including their finances, Sunday activities etc. UT would then report to the District with a set of action recommendations. UT's objective was for the report to lead to action and expenditure. It was anticipated that the main issues would be Buildings Management and F&A.

It was reflected that there was a balance of practical and spiritual issues. If the practical were not deal with, this could put the spiritual leaders in a difficult position. There were pastoral support issues in dealing with history and helping people move through. Sometimes receiving difficult truths could lead to conflict. This was challenging but not necessarily negative.

To take the group forward, UT required funding, but also a structure with a clear sense of outcome, a Team, and oversight on spending the income generated. A good administrator and a commitment to communications were key going forward. The UT group wanted to connect with the cohort of Lay Leaders coming through the College to get them into paid leadership roles in a different context. UT planned to apply for Innovation Challenge funding, as well as applying for other grants elsewhere.

Transformative activity was needed and would not always involve the Sunday service. He gave the example of Evesham, where he was Community Minister. Evesham was going to close, and had a difficult tenancy situation. Connections had been made with the local community centre, and the church now hosted lettings including dance groups, four churches (Unitarian, Spiritual, Pentecostal and a Muslim Prayer Group) and lettings revenue had been improved, giving the church a good chance of survival. A grant had been received for community meals, and Mark felt this would become the focus of the church. This was an example of the kinds of change a congregation could go through to find their energy, and key factors highlighted were tenacity, the importance of relationships with trustees (including a willingness to challenge and manage conflict),

The Chief Officer identified a potential role for UT as a distribution channel for the £5K exploratory foundation-building development grants. Most congregations were not ready to put forward a five-year plan and needed help to work through to a point where they could imagine something different. There was plenty of need, and the fact that the group was independent of the GA could be helpful.

Mark was thanked for his attendance and report.

Sunday 24 November

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

In attendance: Andrew Mason (Minutes), Liz Slade (Chief Officer)

11. Homologating decisions

Jenny and Jo joined the meeting by Zoom, and the decisions made at yesterday's meeting were homologated.

12. Nightingale Centre

The comments from David Warhurst at the CIO Consultation session had been considered, and Liz had spoken to him about the concerns expressed about the links to the Nightingale Centre and the GA. David had been heavily involved in saving the Centre in the 1970's. The Solicitors had incorporated a clause in the new CIO Constitution to make the Nightingale Centre a Full Member in its own right. This made them an outlier, but reflected the reality. A new more general category of membership for other groups than Societies had been considered, but it was not felt to be the right thing to create a policy change which had not been properly thought through.

The Resolution passed at the last meeting has been uploaded to the Charity Commission, and the Management Committee were now the Nightingale Centre trustees. As a result, the next year's GA Accounts would not need to be consolidated.

13. Staff matters

Staff reports were received.

14. Housing Report

The Housing Report had been circulated and was discussed. At the last Annual Meetings we had said we would send out a consultation.

The Report indicated that Ministers would likely be considered to be in Housing Poverty if a manse was not supplied, and it was noted that patterns of ministry were changing.

The Report sought feedback from the movement, and it was **AGREED** to send this out with the Comms from this meeting, with a clear request attached. Jenny would do a covering letter to go with this and a deadline date would be added when Liz had worked it through.

ACTION: Jenny & Liz

15. Approving Policy Documents

The Draft Policy Document had been circulated.

The changes to the expenses policy were flagged up, including raising the 'Public Transport Rate' mileage expenses to 45p per mile, and updating the meal and accommodation amounts.

Further changes to be made after the meeting:

Section 1.4 – EC Code of Conduct: Appendix 1 would be removed.

Section 1.5 – Register of Interest forms: It was **AGREED** to move:

- “employment with institution receiving GA funding” under ‘Current interest’ to the left-hand column
- “of a body receiving GA funding” under ‘Other appointments’ to the left-hand column.

Section 2.4 – The EC Convenor role section would be rewritten with the Convenor. It was **AGREED** to do this in time for approval at the March EC Meeting, in order for the document to be updated before the new EC members start in April. **ACTION: Convenor**

Section 2.5 – EC Link Role: The Chief Officer would consider a better title for this section on engagement with Districts. **ACTION: Liz**

Section 3.6 – Sustentation Fund: This needed to be checked with Simon Bland and then restated as November 2024. Clauses 1.3 seemed useful. Clause 4 (Department Committee) needed to be updated. Clause 5 (Trustee) needed to be checked to see if the B&FUA is still a trustee. An additional clause saying how the Fund was now managed was needed. **ACTION: Andrew**

Section 4.2 – Expenses Policy, item 5.2: It was **AGREED** that the Policy should be reviewed annually rather than periodically.

Section 5.2 – Safeguarding Policy: It was **AGREED** to add the Safeguarding Statement, and refer to the model policy Gavin Howell is currently tweaking.

Section 5.3 – Youth Programme Safeguarding Policy: All references to ‘CCPAS’ would be changed to ‘31:8’.

Section 6.0 – Chief Officer’s Appraisal: The language would be made gender neutral. This section needed further updating and the Convenor and Chief Officer would review this.

ACTION: Convenor & Liz

Section 7.0 – Nightingale – It was **AGREED** to remove this section.

The draft Policy Manual, along with the changes above, was **AGREED**. Andrew would make the agreed additions above (except where allocated to others). **ACTION: Andrew**

Andrew was thanked for his substantial work on this, and EC members were thanked for reviewing this large manual. Liz and Andrew would share this with the Staff Team when the changes had been actioned. **ACTION: Andrew and Liz**

16. Nominations for next VP

There had not currently been any nominations for the Vice Presidency. A request for nominations was sent out originally in June 2024, and it had been mentioned in Uni-News several times since then.

17. Communication

Key messages:

- Housing Consultation
- CIO and motions
- Melda full Minister
- Quota
- Wills Service
- Unitarian Transformers Report
- Ministry Students Fund
- Policy manual update
- Remind about elections
- Birmingham welcome

18. Check out

The check out took place.

Closing devotions were offered by Laura Dobson and the meeting closed.