

CHALLENGING LEADERSHIP

UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY TODAY

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"When I was interviewed as a candidate for the Unitarian ministry at Swansea many years ago, [Rev.] Rosalind Lee had only one question for me: "Are you able to stand on your hind legs, young man?" Our church today needs men and women who are prepared to stand on their hind legs to defend the crushed and the bruised and pay the price... This minority movement of ours, this pinch of salt, has the potential power to provide that challenging leadership, worthy of the most mature mind and the most dedicated soul, and if we respond to the call, we shall give it..."

This is the challenge presented to us in our century and I ask you – are you able to face up to it? Are we able to attract young men and women into the ministry and lay-leadership of this liberating movement of ours? I say we are able, for the Unitarian ministry is the most glorious occupation a man or woman could ever desire... Let us commit ourselves to the utmost for once, not that we may fill the churches with people but that we may fill our lives with meaning."

Rev. Jacob Davies, General Assembly Anniversary Sermon, 1965

"Ministry is a massive privilege and a very challenging, very tough job which, without support and supervision, leads to burnout."

A Unitarian minister, 2024

"I had no supervision. I needed it. We should all have it."

A Unitarian minister approaching retirement, 2024

"I am fearful about what support is ahead of me – where do I go when the shit hits the fan? Am I supported? I just don't know yet..."

A newly qualified Unitarian minister, 2024

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ACRONYMS

- CPD** – Continuing Professional Development
GA – General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches
HMCO – Harris Manchester College Oxford
MF – Unitarian Ministerial Fellowship
MIM – Ministry In The Making
MIMOSA – Ministry In The Making Old Students Association
MOSA – Ministerial Old Students Association
UC – Unitarian College

1. INTRODUCTION

In Spring 2024, I conducted 40 one-to-one interviews with ministers on the GA Roll, having invited all 52 non-retired ministers to participate. In these sessions, lasting between 45-60 minutes and all-but-one conducted online via Zoom, I asked our ministers how supported they felt in their ministry – by the congregations they serve, by their districts, by the GA, and by their colleagues.

We discussed continuing professional development (CPD), sabbaticals, ministerial gatherings, and more. I asked each minister what support they had and what they lacked, what they would love to see happen in the way our denomination supports its ministers – and what they would do if given a magic wand. I ended each conversation by asking an open-ended question about what else the participant would like to share and to feed into this process. Each conversation was confidential and the information and quotations included in this report have been anonymised. Participants were informed that this report would be created and shared with the General Assembly's Executive Committee and staff, with all ministers on the Roll, with our colleges, the Ministerial Fellowship, and with the wider denomination. The ministers interviewed are from all four nations of the United Kingdom.

Although it is not the focus of this report, the importance of minister's spouses and families in supporting them is almost impossible to overstate. The lack of support for ministers' spouses and families was lamented, particularly during the period of ministry training.

Rev. Dr Rory Castle Jones

2. DO OUR MINISTERS FEEL SUPPORTED?

“Do you feel supported?”

Yes & No – 22 (55%) No – 13 (32.5%) Yes – 5 (12.5%)

Summary:

- **A third of our ministers do not feel supported**
- **Over 85% of our ministers do not feel fully supported**
- **Support for ministers is lacking at a systemic level**
- **Ministry training has greatly improved since the establishment of Unitarian College**
- **Support drops of a cliff edge after ministry training and the probation system is non-existent**
- **Ministers have to build their own support networks**

Each interview began with the question **“Do you feel supported?”** and the answers were revealing. Only 5 ministers felt supported overall, 13 said they did not feel supported, and the remaining 22 gave “yes and no” answers – feeling support in some areas but not in others. The overall sense was summed up by one minister, who said “as a denomination, we lack support at a systemic level.” Ministers are left to create their own support networks without clear guidance or help and as a result often experience serious struggles in their first years of ministry. One minister approaching retirement said “I worry for ministers training now. What will be there for them? What support?”

Many described a complete **drop off in support once their training ended**. One newly qualified minister said “after training ends, all supervision and support ends too.” One minister said “training cannot sufficiently prepare you for dealing with difficult people and situations, we need ongoing training and support throughout our careers.” A newly qualified minister said they felt “left to my own devices” with “hit and miss” support and “lots of talk about it, but very little tangible support”. Another minister said after training it was “sink or swim”. There is “a lot missing for newly qualified ministers in terms of support” said another. A crucial stage where newly

qualified ministers need support is during the negotiation process with a congregation before signing their Terms of Engagement. One minister suggested an experienced retired minister could act to support in this process.

The system of **probation** for newly qualified ministers was reported to be non-existent, with newly qualified ministers reporting that in their interview with the Interview Panel they were told someone would be in touch to explain probation – and then never hearing from anyone again. Several ministers reported that they do not know whether they are still in probationary status. As one said “there is no probation process and no communication from the Interview Panel.” Another said “no-one checked in on me – it would have helped.” Another said “it feels very disparate. I am fearful about what support is ahead of me – where do I go when the shit hits the fan? Am I supported? I just don’t know yet...”

Many reported that they **rarely asked for help** or support, that they weren’t sure what was appropriate to ask for, or where to turn. One newly qualified minister said “I don’t have enough time to reflect on what would be good for me.” Several reported that they struggled with establishing boundaries. For many, ministry is a lonely vocation. “It feels like ministers work in isolated vacuums” said one newly qualified minister. Another said “I feel overwhelmed and overworked.” Many ministers experience difficult and dark periods in their ministries, when they badly need support. In these periods they report feeling “alone”, “vulnerable”, and “precarious”. One minister felt that “some colleagues are getting worse at their ministry because they are overworked, oblivious, unsupervised, and unsupported.” Another said “most ministers are working in crisis mode and its very hard to think about the long-term future.”

The majority of our ministers are now **part-time**. Some reported benefits, such as accessing training through their other work and staying connected with “the real world”. Others felt torn, overworked and disappointed that full-time ministry was not available to them as a possibility. One ¼ time minister said “full-time ministry is my goal, but ministry just doesn’t pay enough.”

A key support for many ministers are the **mentors** who help guide them through their training. For many, these relationships continue long after training, in a less official

capacity. Whilst the mentor system is improving, for many their experience of mentors was not a particularly helpful or positive one in the past.

Many ministers have **spiritual directors**. These are highly important and useful. Sometimes congregations pay all or some of the cost of this, but others are unwilling to do so. Some ministers have also accessed counsellors, therapists, and coaches.

A number of ministers are members of the **Faith Workers Branch of Unite Union**, which has provided valuable support to some.

The majority of ministers who trained before the creation of Unitarian College felt that their **ministry training** was inadequate in key areas and many ministers expressed the view that training now was much better than “in their day”. One minister’s assertion that “my training did not at all prepare me for ministry” was far from exceptional. Ministers trained by Unitarian College had a much more positive assessment of their training – and perhaps as a result felt more keenly the abrupt drop off in support post-training.

3. MINISTERS & THEIR CONGREGATIONS

Summary:

- **Most congregations do not know how to appropriately support their ministers**
- **Ministers are working with small groups of often elderly trustees**
- **The growth of consumer culture means congregations want to receive and are reluctant to give**
- **Newly qualified ministers are especially vulnerable and in need of support, which is currently lacking**
- **Congregational leaders need training and support**

Many ministers feel supported by their congregations on a basic level, but feel a gap in understanding about what ministry is and how to support ministers. There is a lack of clarity around expectations between ministers and congregations, with differing ideas about what level and types of support congregations are appropriate. Most ministers have a strong sense that their role is to support congregations and not the other way around. As one experienced minister put it: “we can’t rely on our congregations for support and we shouldn’t be under any illusions about that”. **Most congregations do not know how to appropriately support their ministers.**

Congregations, especially congregational leaders and trustees, have **responsibilities and a duty of care** to their ministers, even if they are unclear about what exactly this means. There were many examples of congregations providing excellent compassionate and practical support to ministers in times of need, for example with physical or mental health challenges or bereavement. There were also many examples of well-run congregations with trustees who support their ministers well. However, there were also several examples of poorly run congregations and churches which failed to support their ministers adequately.

Generally, congregations are willing to **pay** ministers adequately, reflecting the GA Stipend recommendations. Similarly, they are usually willing to **financially support** their minister in attending the Annual Meetings and perhaps one ministerial gathering per year. However, this is far from uniform and most ministers report some awkwardness, wrangling and bargaining over these issues. Many are forced to pay for themselves to attend, or not to attend at all. The situation with **expenses** is

similar, with many ministers not claiming all or any expenses. Ministers' position as leader and, in effect if not in name, an employee means ministers are risk averse. Many ministers feel extremely insecure in their positions and these leads to a whole host of problems.

Some reported **bad experiences** with their congregations and several were now without a congregation, or working less than half-time ministry positions as a result. Others continue in their positions, feeling "undermined" at every step. One minister stated "my trustees don't care about my wellbeing" and "have created a hostile environment" because "they want me out". Another minister described the support from their first congregation as "non-existent". Another minister left their congregation after a dispute when attempts at mediation failed and was forced to sign a non-disclosure agreement forbidding them to discuss with congregation members the reasons for their exit.

Many, perhaps most, of our ministers are working **with a small group of often elderly trustees**. Some reported their fear that in the next few years **governance** would "fall of a cliff". Many are experiencing **challenges recruiting volunteers** to positions of responsibility. There are **serious concerns about the future** and a sense of **lack of competent leadership** at a local level. One minister said they felt like their role with their trustees was akin to "stopping a baby putting their hand in the fire" and that their congregational leaders had no ability to deal with governance, safeguarding or running a congregation. Some felt their congregations were overly reliant on them to make decisions and couldn't act without the minister.

One minister said "I feel lonely and exhausted. I have taken on the work trustees should be doing and it stops me doing the creative work to make our congregation flourish. I feel very alone in trying new things and unsupported. I feel guilty, lose motivation, become depressed and anxious." One minister with over a decade's experience said "I never felt supported by a congregation, never had a functioning committee, and at the start felt no support from anywhere as I struggled."

While some congregations adapted and even thrived during the **pandemic**, others struggled and declined. One minister reported that they lost 2/3rds of their congregation during the pandemic through death, illness and drifting away.

There is a pattern of **newly-qualified ministers** being sent out to congregations – some of which are unofficially known as being “difficult” or “minister-eaters” – and then predictably the ministry ending badly for all involved. Newly qualified ministers need support. One said “as a new minister, some in the congregation wanted to mould me. I needed compassionate support and had none.”

A small number of ministers reported that they held officer positions in their own congregations, usually because “no-one else could be found” to fill the role.

Several ministers discussed the demise of the corporate idea of a congregation and shift to a **consumer culture** – “the congregation pay the minister to do the work, but are not willing to participate in the work themselves” as one put it. Another said “they want to receive, not to give.” A third minister said “people come to church to consume, not to get involved. They might give money but not time.”

4. MINISTERS & DISTRICTS

Summary:

- **Few ministers feel supported by their district**
- **Districts are reluctant to spend money supporting ministers**
- **As the number of ministers decreases, district-level collegiality also decreases and loneliness and isolation rise**
- **Districts need help, they are not in a position to offer it**

There were wide differences in ministers' relationships and experiences with their districts. **Few ministers felt supported by their districts.** There was a sense that most district organisations lack purpose and "do not know what they are for." Some have become simply asset management groups, reluctant to spend any of the (sometimes substantial) funds at their disposal. As one minister put it "districts *need* support from ministers, they can't *offer* any support." Another put it simply "my district has never done anything helpful." A third described their district organisation as "grumpy, rude and lifeless." Only one district has formally disbanded, but many more exist only on paper and offer little or no support to congregations or ministers.

Some districts still have **district ministers' groups**, although mostly these have disappeared. Where they continue, they are generally not considered particularly helpful and some were described as "a waste of time", where people "did not feel valued". Others were more helpful and provided collegiality. Overall, there was a sense that **ministerial collegiality at district level was far less present than in the past**, mainly due to declining numbers and the declining importance of districts. One said district ministers gatherings were "superficial" and they didn't feel "brave enough to change it" and offend older colleagues.

Some districts provide **small grants** to congregations and/or ministers. However, there is a sense that these are hard to access, often given only grudgingly, and that the money is not being directed to the right places. Those larger districts with **considerable assets** tend to be more useful, but as one minister put it "my district is efficient and functional, but full of hot air." One or two districts organise some CPD for their ministers.

One newly qualified minister said simply of their district “you can’t rely on them for much”. Another minister said his district were “not at all” supportive and instead “want to dictate to ministers what to do and see us as working for them” without being willing to contribute to a minister’s stipend. In several cases, districts were seen as **actively unsupportive**. One minister said their district was “deeply unsupportive” and had “actively sabotaged and undermined my ministry at every stage of ministry, and the same for other ministers in the district.”

5. COLLEGIALITY

Summary:

- **Collegial support is essential for sustaining ministers and ministry**
- **Covenant groups provide vital peer support**
- **Informal peer relationships are vital**
- **The Ministerial Fellowship is not meeting ministers' needs**
- **The position of retired minister is unclear**

For most ministers, support from colleagues plays an important role in sustaining and supporting them in their work. As one senior minister put it, “collegiality is vital – no-one else understands.”

Many ministers are part of self-organised **covenant groups**. Those in these groups find them extremely valuable and for many they are the most important support network. However, the unofficial, secretive and haphazard organisation of these groups means that many feel unwelcome, excluded, and confused about them. This is particularly true for new ministers. One minister said “my covenant group is where I feel well supported and really listened to, where I can let my hair down.” Another said “it really helps to unload, to keep going.” Another said “I don’t know if I’d still be a minister without my covenant group.” There was some resistance to the idea of trying to organise them more centrally.

Many ministers report that they have a **small number of trusted colleagues**, often people they trained alongside, who they consider their “go to” people when they need support, advice and help. These informal relationships are absolutely key to sustaining ministry.

Many ministers find **ecumenical or interfaith support** from clergy in other denominations and faiths. A small number connect with Unitarian ministry colleagues overseas.

Many ministers feel forced to use their annual leave to attend conferences and ministerial gatherings, when these should be supported by congregations.

The **Ministerial Fellowship (MF)** provides good support in some areas and many ministers find its collegiality very important, but most felt it was not able to satisfactorily meet their needs.

Several ministers who had been or are currently involved in the leadership of the MF found themselves **extremely limited** in what the MF could offer. This was due to a lack of time and energy on the part of ministers already overstretched, a lack of resources, and the ability really only to offer support during emergencies. There was also a sense that retired ministers could slow down change, with a culture of “that’s not how we do things around here.” One said it felt like change was “moving at snail’s pace, an unhealthy pace.”

There is a sense of a **lack of clarity** about the purpose of the MF. Is it a mutual support group, a professional body, a ministers’ trade-union, a pressure group, or something else? Some felt that the MF promised more than it could deliver. There was also a sense that although lots of thought and work goes into the gatherings, they could feel “very cliquey” for “old friends” to gather and others felt “excluded” and “outsiders”. There was a lack of clarity about what MF gatherings – in-person and online – are really for. Many found that being placed in random break out groups during online gatherings could be awkward and difficult. For newly qualified ministers, the role of the MF seemed particularly unclear. One said “it wouldn’t cross my mind to contact the MF with a problem”. For many, it feels that the MF has been focussed on retired ministers. Several ministers suggested a solution might be to offer two streams at gatherings for active and retired ministers.

Some ministers have **left the MF** over the years for a range of reasons, including a perceived domination by retired ministers, a feeling of being let down by a lack of professional standards or code of conduct, poor behaviour at gatherings. One senior minister left the MF several years ago and distanced themselves from colleagues because ministers who committed acts including having sexual relations with congregation members were not disciplined, but even seemed to be rewarded within the denomination. One minister said they had “PTSD-like symptoms” from their experience at MF gatherings in the past. Another described gatherings they had attended in the past decade as “generally appalling” and another said MF gatherings were “an excuse for a change of scenery but not do not offer many tangible benefits”.

On the other hand, singled out for praise was the important moral support provided by the **MF Welfare Team**, who send cards and flowers and offer limited pastoral support when ministers are ill, bereaved, etc. As one member of the team put it “we do what we can to help, but we can’t support ministers with more serious problems.” It was also recognised that often those serving on the team are themselves in need of pastoral support – and where can they turn?

While many ministers gain great collegiality and support from the MF and its gatherings, clearly for many others it has not been able to meet their expectations. When asked about the MF today, there was a clear sense that **changes in the MF taking place currently are very welcome and supported**. One described the GA Pre-conference as “massively improved.”

MOSA (Ministerial Old Students Association) gatherings provide collegiality and some useful training for some of our ministers, particularly those who trained at HMCO.

For those who avoided getting too involved in collegial activities, the reasons included “internal politics” and “the infallible old guard”. One newly qualified minister reported “I don’t have much connection with younger ministers, I would like a group to discuss ministry and theology with.”

The question of **retired ministers** came up frequently. There is a lack of clarity about their position and status – from the lack of distinction between active and retired on the GA Roll to their voting status at the Annual Meetings, participation in ministers’ gatherings, and more. Support is needed to help ministers retire well. Many expressed the need to recognise that retired ministers have different needs and wish to talk about different things. As one minister asked, whilst retired ministers have much to offer, “why must we always include retired ministers in every event for ministers, and bend over backwards to accommodate them” at the expense of active ministers’ needs?

Another minister said that although “lovely people as individuals”, collectively retired colleagues “hold us back” and “struggle to see how the world has changed”, emphasising that we need separate spaces and gatherings for retired and active ministers. Another said they no longer attended ministerial gatherings which included retired ministers because of their poor behaviour.

6. MINISTERS & THE GA

Summary:

- **GA staff provide valuable support but the GA is limited in what it can offer**
- **Minister's Coffee House build relationships, but needs tweaking**
- **Communication between the GA and ministers need improving**
- **GA provides helpful resources like Worship Words, 31-8, Congregational Toolkit**
- **There is some unease about the GA's campaigning and activism**

Most ministers turned to the GA for **support in crises or emergencies**, or with legal, governance, financial and safeguarding matters. Many felt that individual **GA staff members were very helpful**, but our structures and culture mean that the **GA is severely limited in the support it can offer**. There was also a strong sense of comfort in “knowing the GA is there if and when I need it”, with one minister describing the GA as “an invisible wall of support”. Another said “I have always felt supported when I've needed it.” Another said “the GA do help and do whatever they can – and knowing they're there is a great help.” In disputes between ministers and congregations, the GA has to provide support to both, which can be a challenging balancing act.

Some ministers had in the past approached the GA when in **serious difficulty** and felt the response to be lacking. One described the GA as sometimes feeling “a black hole” and that several years ago when they had experienced bullying and felt very unsupported by the GA – “the response felt like a shrug and a ‘what can we do...’” Most felt the situation had improved now, but the GA was still limited in what it could offer. One said “the GA leadership speak my language and I am really thankful and hopeful for the future.”

Some ministers, particularly those outside England, reported that the cost of travel was prohibitive in accessing GA events. Other ministers described the **obstacles** they faced in engaging due to socio-economic status, class, being carers, disabilities, etc.

Some felt **communication** between the GA and ministers and congregations was insufficient. Sometimes it could feel “like no-one cares.” Others felt things had much

improved in recent years and communication had improved – and others felt there was sometimes too much communication from the GA. There could be more interaction, consultation and input from ministers. Some felt the GA didn't really understand the reality for ministers on the ground. There was a sense that in some areas, ministers and congregations "need and crave more GA guidance" and the need for this was particularly strong in times of crisis.

The main **GA staff members** ministers engage with are Simon Bland and Liz Slade and both were praised for their support. One minister felt that during their time at the GA the culture around ministry support had improved greatly. Several ministers expressed the view that Simon has his hands full supporting both ministers and congregation and is "firefighting", dealing with endless congregational and ministerial crises. Several expressed the opinion that the work Simon is expected to do is too much for one person. As one minister put it, he "does an incredible job."

The online **Ministers Coffee House** offered by Liz Slade, our Chief Officer, was much appreciated as a concept and a sign of the importance placed on engagement and relationship-building. Many ministers would like more structure and clearer topics for discussion, rather than simply a chance to chat. Many expressed the wish for a distinct session for active ministers, rather than one for active and retired ministers. Many have stopped attending due to the domination of retired ministers' concerns, with one describing it as "a retired ministers club". A summary email of what was discussed circulated afterwards for those unable to attend would also be helpful.

Some **unease** was expressed about the GA moving from "a mutual support organisation to a social justice body with a particular ideology, like the UUA [Unitarian Universalist Association]". Another minister felt uncomfortable about a new "received wisdom developing" with a "pressure to conform to ideologies" and an emphasis on campaigning and activism. Some ministers lamented "corrosive" denominational infighting and the GA motions process was described variously as "cringeworthy", "self-righteous" and "divisive".

Worship Words was praised as an extremely helpful resource, as was the **31-8 Safeguarding charity**. The new **Congregational Toolkit** was eagerly anticipated. Some gave positive feedback about receiving financial support from **Augmentation Fund** and similar funds.

7. CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Summary:

- **Most ministers would like to access professional development and training, but are not currently**
- **Many ministers would like to see CPD made mandatory in order to remain on the GA Roll**
- **We have no system of supervision and many ministers would like to see one introduced**

There is **currently no required continuing professional development (CPD)** for ministers after the completion of ministry training. While some ministers are able to discern what CPD and training they need and to have that supported by the congregations, most are struggling and CPD remains low on the priority list, as they are consumed by day-to-day ministry. As one minister in a large congregation put it “I don’t have the brain-space to think about this strategically”, or as another experienced minister said simply, “I don’t know what I don’t know!”

There was a strong appetite from ministers for **compulsory CPD** in some form in order for ministers to remain on the GA Roll. The lack of any mandatory CPD was described by our ministers variously as “outrageous”, “astonishing”, “worrying” and “concerning”. Many ministers compared our set-up unfavourably with other professions and clergy in other denominations. As one minister put it “without basics like safeguarding we are being put at risk”. A number of ministers highlighted the urgent need for regular mandatory safeguarding training for ministers. Another minister pointed out that if CPD was compulsory there would be “no excuse” – for ministers or their congregations – for it sliding down the to-do list.

There were many different suggestions about how and what should be offered and an emphasis on flexibility and meeting ministers’ and congregations’ changing needs. Several ministers suggested a GA central budget for ministers’ CPD and request that the GA invest in offering CPD to ministers and continue to signpost relevant training. One minister suggested a central GA fund for ministers’ CPD – for example £100 per minister per year, with a simple application form.

Some ministers have been able to access excellent CPD, for example a PhD at Glasgow University, funded by Dr Williams' Library. Most ministers though seem only to get CPD from the MF gatherings, MOSA, and the GA Annual Meetings - the quality and range of which is variable.

Areas which ministers requested CPD or training in included: conflict resolution; safeguarding; counselling; social media; theology; technology and Artificial Intelligence; church management; administration; anti-racism; neurodiversity; opposing anti-Semitism; diversity and inclusion; mental health; engaging people online; responding to the big issues in the world collectively; inspiring a congregation and invoking holiness. Several ministers expressed a desire for further study at postgraduate level, but most felt this was unrealistic at present.

Many ministers raised the question of **supervision**. Our denomination currently has no system of supervision for ministers after they complete their training – and many ministers deeply regret this and would like to see a compulsory system created. One minister said “supervision is crucial and sorely lacking. All other professions have it. It should be mandatory and paid for.” Another said simply “we need supervision put in place by the GA”. One minister approaching retirement said “I had no supervision. I needed it. We should all have it.” Another asked “Why is there no supervision? We need it and it should be required, with ministers trained to be supervisors.” One minister said “any other professional would have compulsory CPD and we should too.” Finally, one said simply “it would support ministers and protect congregations”.

8. SABBATICALS

Summary:

- **Sabbaticals can play a vital role in sustaining ministry**
- **Most ministers wish to take a sabbatical, but there are barriers preventing them from doing so**
- **GA guidelines would help significantly**

Most ministers feel strongly the need for a sabbatical and there is a need to refresh, revitalise, to step back and gain perspective, to rediscover one's calling. However, there are barriers preventing many ministers from taking sabbaticals.

Many ministers do not have sabbaticals written into their contracts, or were not sure. One described them as "almost like a rumour" with a lack of guidance and information available. Most felt 7 years (the standard) was too long to wait and recommended 4-5 years. **Clear GA guidelines** on sabbaticals would be extremely helpful. The different experiences and attitudes are made clear by one senior minister saying sabbaticals are "absolutely essential and should be mandatory" and another saying that after many decades of ministry they had never even considered asking their congregation for a sabbatical.

One minister described their sabbatical as "immensely valuable for my spiritual life and my ministry. Transformative, with real benefits for my congregation too." Another described their sabbatical (after almost 20 years of ministry) as "painful and liberating". Another said it "did me the world of good." One minister who did not take a sabbatical and whose ministry then ended in bad circumstances said "I felt exhausted and my health was affected. Maybe if I had taken a sabbatical my ministry wouldn't have ended."

Examples of sabbaticals have included: several months in a European capital city, including working with the local Unitarian church; respite in Europe; pilgrimages; writing a Lindsey Press book; conducting research at HMCO; visiting UUA churches; a spiritual retreat overseas; and completing an MA dissertation on contemporary Unitarianism.

Examples of what ministers would like to do with a sabbatical include: writing a book; working with Unitarian congregations abroad; taking “time for my soul”; pilgrimage; research at HMCO on global Unitarianism; and visiting UUA churches.

The main challenges which prevent ministers taking sabbaticals are: finding cover for ministry outside Sunday services; the lack of GA guidance; fear of the congregation not coping without them; finances; being part-time (it’s hard to take time off from the ‘other’ job); and that the idea of sabbaticals is not uniformly accepted in the denomination.

9. MIMOSA

Summary:

- **There is a strong desire and need for in-person ministerial gatherings for collegiality, connection, sharing and learning**
- **Ministers who have been through 'Ministry In The Making' broadly support plans for Mimosa, while others have concerns about competition between existing and new gatherings**

The proposal for a new residential gathering of ministers with the working title MIMOSA (Ministry In The Making Old Students Association) was discussed, in a wider context of ministerial gatherings and collegiality. Most ministers felt the **opportunity to gather together in-person with colleagues was of vital importance in sustaining their ministry**. The general needs expressed are for a mix of collegiality, retreat and training. As one minister put it, "we need both spiritual nourishment and intellectual stimulation." Another expressed frustration that "many Unitarian gatherings lack spirituality and are too business-focused." There is a strong desire and need for spaces where active ministers can talk to each other.

Generally, **ministers who had been through the Ministry In The Making residential themselves were supportive** and expressed a strong need for something similar. As one put it, "if it wasn't for MiM I'd have left ministry – it's where I felt love and compassion." Another was strongly supportive, saying "MiM *was* my ministry training." A third said "something similar to MiM like Mimosa would be wonderful." Another said "it is very good to know it will be there for us." Another minister said "100% yes, I don't need training in mundane things, I need inspiration and nourishment", while another said simply that Mimosa was a "brilliant idea, I don't know how we've survived so long without it." Finally, one newly qualified minister said "I need Mimosa to be a spiritual gathering of ministers, honest, with no competition, based in the reality of our situation, an opportunity to learn from each other, to give me a sense that I can carry on doing the work of ministry." Venues suggested included The Nightingale Centre, Luther King Centre and HMCO.

Those from **the pre-MiM generation were more sceptical** about the creation of another ministerial gathering alongside the Ministerial Fellowship and MOSA gatherings. There were concerns about too many competing gatherings and many ministers expressed a positive desire to work together to find solutions.

10. WHAT WOULD OUR MINISTERS LOVE TO SEE HAPPEN?

Ministers were asked what they would love to see happen if they had a “magic wand” and could put aside practicalities and finances.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF MINISTRY

Some ministers would love to see the creation of more collaborative team ministries and the possibility of different types of ministry alongside congregational – for example chaplaincy, community and pioneer ministries.

AUTONOMY AND STRUCTURES

There was a strong sense that many **old denominational structures** were no longer working. Some felt that “the denomination is starting to organise itself better and support ministers more” and that this process needed ongoing support.

Many ministers raised the subject of **congregational autonomy** and its challenges and there was a strong feeling that autonomy was “holding us back.” A number of ministers called for the end of congregational autonomy, while others felt it had “gone too far.” One felt that “all our problems are a consequence of congregational autonomy and a lack of power at the centre. If we’re going to survive we have to do things differently.” One senior minister said “the longer I serve the more I see the value of hierarchy. Congregational polity and autonomy is killing us and we need to abandon it.”

Related was the view that an excessive emphasis on **‘freedom’** was harmful for ministers, congregations and the wider movement. One minister said “Our free faith leads to ministers acting as “free agents” which doesn’t out work out well. Freedom of theology is good but freedom of ministry without supervision is bad.” Another said “too much freedom has led to chaos and stuckness and prevents new things from emerging”. One senior minister felt that “freedom in our denomination means we have nothing to refer to. Everything becomes very personal. This gives ministers lots of influence, backed up by nothing.”

A number of ministers felt a healthy counterbalance to the problems caused by congregational autonomy and excessive freedom would be to **empower the GA** more. It was felt that in particular the GA should be empowered to intervene when ministers and congregations “go rogue” and behave badly. One said “we need to take back control – the GA should take more control over congregations and step in when they run amok”. Another said “the GA needs more teeth”. Similarly, the GA could be given more power to help struggling congregations work together or amalgamate. One minister suggested “in areas with several small struggling chapels, amalgamate and have full-time ministry”. Several ministers believe that the “GA should have more influence over what ministries exist, how they are formed and supported”, could centrally fund and employ some ministers, and centrally fund a district minister for each district. Some felt we also needed to encourage the amalgamation of districts.

FINANCE AND HOUSING

Several ministers expressed wishes around **finances and housing**, including better pay for ministers, congregations sharing treasurers, and that we collectively “start spending money!” One minister suggested we give funds to congregations to convert buildings into multi-use spiritual and community spaces. Another lamented “we’re such a wealthy denomination and we pretend to be so poor.” Other suggestions were: ending guilt about claiming expenses; changing the unfair London weighting as “many parts of UK are just as expensive”; increasing the manse allowance; improving the quality of manses; and improving communication and information from the Ministers’ Pension Fund. One minister raised the fact that ministers without a stipend are often still working unpaid for congregations and/or the denomination, asking “how can we recognise their contribution?”

Some ministers expressed their thoughts about the new **Challenge Innovation Scheme**. Several thought it would be extremely helpful. Those who raised concerns included: being put off by the paperwork and bureaucracy; fear of creating a dependency culture; and the danger of “selling off the family silver”.

CULTURE

Many ministers would like to see **changes in our collective culture**. Several would like to see an end to ministerial “lone wolf” culture. As one put it, we allow ministers to act as “lone wolves on solo runs”, with unchecked egos – unaccountable, unsupervised, and acting with authority they do not possess.” Another desirable change would be a culture shift away from **workaholicism** as a badge of honour, which is “fostered in ministry training” with ministers completing training “already on our knees”. As one put it “vocation doesn’t mean workaholicism - we need boundaries.”

There was a sense that we need to foster a sense of **vocation and service** in our prospective, trainee and qualified ministers. As one senior minister put it, “encourage vocation, focus more on that, and less on practical skills. PRAY about our challenges. Find people with a real vocation, without regard to academic qualifications, and send them out to preach the soul – where people can hear them.” Another minister said “we **serve the community** through the church. Decades ago this was more widely understood but huge social and cultural changes have taken place and it’s hard for some of us to adapt.”

Some felt we had a culture of “celebrating mediocrity” and “refusing to **celebrate or learn from success**”. One minister said “successful, growing congregations are seen as an “anomaly” and are marginalised within the denomination.” One minister felt that “our most scarce resource is optimism” – a sense of doom and gloom and decline prevail, that we have nothing left to give, are exhausted.” One minister felt that “our big problem is libertarian ideology – the bastard child of liberalism – which really has nothing to do with Unitarianism.” Another felt “we’re trying to pretend we’re no longer Christian, but we are. We *do* have theology and we should recognise and encourage it.”

One minister felt in the context of climate change we are facing the “collapse of civilisation” and need to learn **how to face extinction**. Closer to home, we need to “face our own decline and possible extinction” as a movement, adding “we need God. How can God save us? What really matters?” Another minister felt “Unitarians have **little holding us together now**. We obsess over trivialities like a chalice logo because everything else is too uncomfortable to talk about. All we have left is the

ghost of something.” Another felt “we have to be prepared to **let congregations fail** and not always step in.”

One minister suggested improving the **feedback loop**, saying “when I suggest things I never know if they are used, which is disheartening.” Another said we need to “put forward **bold ideas** and don’t pull any punches”. One felt that “we are far too sectarian and obsessed with ‘Unitarianism’ – we need to start talking to each other properly, not just having grand plans.” Another expressed the feeling “I’m working very hard in my congregation and it would be nice to feel it was connected to something bigger happening at a national level”.

SUPPORTING MINISTERS

Several suggestions were made about **how we could better support ministers**, including: “a hermit-like retreat place for individual retreat, available to ministers free-of-charge – a chalet at Hucklow would do!”; psychological evaluations of students in ministry training to help them understand themselves better; retreats for ministers; better educating congregations about supporting ministers; helping congregations to prepare for a new minister; financial support for covenant groups; a compulsory Code of Conduct for ministers when they join the Roll; limiting the number of congregations a minister can serve to three; creating a map of support for ministers; inviting colleagues to observe and give feedback on services and ministry; having someone in each district trained in conflict resolution and able to step in to help resolve conflicts between ministers and congregations before they escalate; and creating a GA central team supporting ministers – including running a CPD programme, co-ordinating covenant groups and a central payment system for ministers.

One minister felt strongly that “**we need traditional ministry, not “innovation”**”. We need to focus on training and sustaining ministers. Most of our congregations don’t want a future and have an attitude of “it will see me out”.” One minister approaching retirement said “The GA is trying to keep the Unitarian movement alive, but I think that is doomed. I support the initiatives, as we may as well try, but the pressure all of this creates on ministers is immense – to somehow resuscitate congregations against prevailing winds. I’ve reached the end of the road. I feel my ministry has

failed. I have serious doubts about ministry. It is inherently unhealthy.” One minister raised the challenge of a gap between GA Roll ministers, lay leaders and interfaith ministers, asking how we can support or recognise them, as there is a danger of them “going rogue”.

Other things ministers would love to see if they had a ‘magic wand’ include: more young people joining; “less churchy spirituality”; more theology; provision for autistic children at events; more pulpit supply; trustees training & education; creating a GA Roll of Spiritual Directors; training and support for lay leaders; employing Community Workers, like the URC, properly trained and employed (perhaps at District level); to be able to experiment more and try new things; a full-time housekeeper; and to ask “how do we work together to save our denomination?”

11. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After around 40 hours of intense conversations with our active ministers, this report attempts to share with our denominational leaders, ministers, and the wider Unitarian & Free Christian movement, the realities on the ground for ministers today.

Whilst Rev. Jacob Davies' stirring message that "Unitarian ministry is the most glorious occupation a man or woman could ever desire" shared in his 1965 Anniversary Sermon is a sentiment certainly shared by many still proudly carrying the flame, now (as was true in 1965) there are significant challenges impeding our ministers – practical, structural and cultural.

Based on my conversations with 40 of my colleagues, I do not believe that any of these challenges are insurmountable if we are willing to face them directly, honestly and with determination. In 2025, as in 1965, the challenge will be to attract, train and – crucially – *sustain* our ministers, not for the sake of preserving tradition or 'keeping the denomination alive' but for something far more important - as Rev. Jacob put it in 1965, we do this work "not that we may fill the churches with people but that we may fill our lives with meaning."

From my perspective, what is presented on the following pages are the key findings of this study and some recommendations based on the sharing, ideas and wisdom provided by my esteemed colleagues.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Support for our ministers is lacking at a systemic level, with a third not feeling supported in their ministry and over 85% not feeling fully supported. Support is strong during ministry training, but then evaporates with no functioning systems of probation, continuing professional development or supervision. Newly qualified ministers are especially vulnerable and in need of support.

Most of our congregations do not know how to appropriately support their ministers and many are led by a small number of elderly trustees. Congregational leaders need training and support and we need to face the challenge of growing consumer culture.

Few ministers feel supported by their districts and the importance of district-level ministry support and collegiality is sharply declining.

Collegial support is essential for sustaining ministers and ministry. This is strongest within covenant groups and informal peer relationships. The Ministerial Fellowship is not currently meeting ministers' needs. The position of retired ministers is unclear.

The General Assembly provides valuable support and resources to ministers, but is limited in what it can offer. Communications could be improved and there is some unease about the focus on campaigning and activism.

Most ministers are not currently engaged in professional development or training, but would like to be, with the possibility of making this mandatory suggested. We have no system of supervision and many ministers would like to see one introduced.

Sabbaticals can play a vital role in sustaining ministry and most ministers wish to take a sabbatical, but there are barriers preventing them from doing so.

There is a strong desire and need for in-person ministerial gatherings for collegiality, connection, sharing and learning. Ministers who have been through 'Ministry In The Making' broadly support plans for Mimoso, while others have concerns about competition between gatherings.

Ministers have a wide range of creative, imaginative and innovative ideas for sustaining ministry and spiritually healthy communities. Often, they do not have the opportunities and channels to pursue these ideas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Mandatory CPD** - implement a system of mandatory professional development and training, required for all ministers on the GA Roll.
2. **Supervision** - create a system of supervision for all ministers.
3. **Probation** - develop a proper system of probation to support newly qualified ministers.
4. **Covenant Groups** - find ways for all ministers to be part of supportive covenant groups.
5. **Trustees Training** - provide trustees training, including how to support ministers.
6. **Retired Ministers** - start a conversation about the role of retired ministers in our movement.
7. **Communication** - work on improving communication and engagement between the GA and ministers.
8. **Sabbaticals** - provide sabbatical guidance and support.
9. **Mimosa** - support the pilot Mimosa gathering and work with the Ministerial Fellowship, MOSA and others to continue improving ministers' residential gatherings.
10. **Congregational Autonomy** – encourage open and honest conversations about congregational autonomy and its strengths and weaknesses for our movement.