

Cambridge Unitarians 一 卌

Life of the Church meeting

18-01-2026
25-01-2026

Background (1)

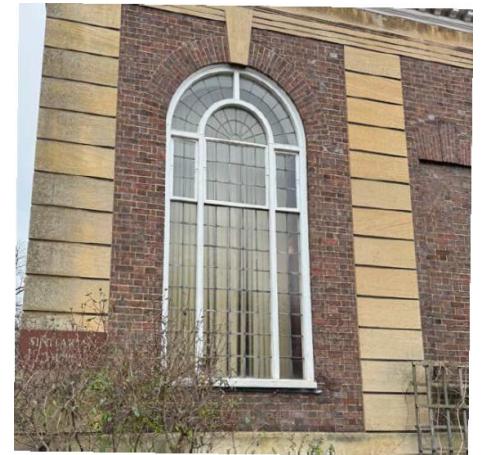
- Cambridge Unitarians is a community of like-minded people, whose interests and values are vested in living and promoting Free Religion.
- We are also a Charity, a CIO with all the legal requirements and responsibilities that entails for Governance.
- The Unitarians who brought us these buildings in the 1920s were living in a world that was in great turmoil from the effects and social consequences of the Great War, onwards.
- They were making a commitment to the future of Unitarians at a time when they could not see how the troubled decades ahead would unfold, through to the rise of Nazism and beyond.
- In the 1920s they used their assets to build these buildings, designed to serve their large congregation and the local community and the city.

Background (2)

- A hundred years later, we are living in a complicated world they could not have imagined; one which challenges us in every way possible, with the consequences of unceasing conflicts and our continuing abuse of its resources and peoples.
- Just like them, we have the chance to be creative and adventurous about how we face and portray our philosophy, in our own local setting, amidst all its fears and perils.
- We don't know the ways that the decisions and provisions we make about our material assets will unfold and be used; and nor did they, a hundred years ago.
- **We have the chance, at this time, to make the very same leap of faith that they did, because, like them, we can design our setting to be of use to our local Community, our City and our Country: as they need.**

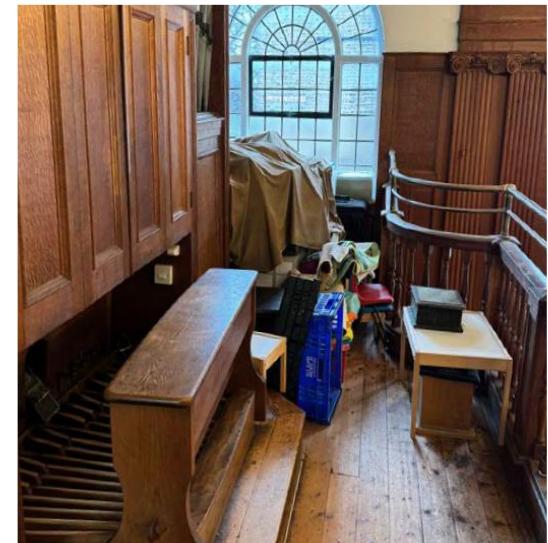
Why now? (1)

- All our buildings require **major repairs**:
 - Both the church roof and the hall roof are nearing end-of-life performance.
 - The church has a particularly poor thermal envelope (single glazed windows, no insulation), making it prohibitively expensive to heat in winter.
 - The manse suffers from damp and is uninhabitable in its present state.
 - Water ingress along the wall between the manse and the church also affects our office space.



Why now? (2)

- In addition, other aspects of our buildings are **far from ideal**:
 - There is no level access from Emmanuel Road, e.g. for wheelchair users.
 - Both the church and the hall have old heating systems which are expensive to run and maintain.
 - We have no modern IT system installed.
 - Some of our spaces are rarely used (e.g. organ loft, back-of-house areas).
 - Our kitchen/office space is dated and of poor quality.
 - We have two very similar spaces (the church and the hall), each of which is only used for a small fraction of the week.



Why now? (3)

- We are fortunate to have some funds available that could be put towards a large buildings project.
 - We would like to acknowledge the work of the previous committee; especially their **prudent investment choices, which have put us in a stronger financial position.**
- Andrew Brown will retire in 2032; we therefore have his support and guidance available to us for another ~ 6 years.
 - It seems wise to make the most of this time to set ourselves up as well as we can for the decades ahead.

We can afford to undertake a major project with our buildings – but we need to choose wisely.

Today's presentation

- **VERY IMPORTANT: We will not ask you to make any decisions at either of these Life of the Church meetings!**
- The purpose of these meetings is purely to **begin a shared conversation** about our buildings, and how we can make our free-religious community sustainable for the long-term.
- The Trustees will share with you the information we have gathered so far, and present to you some examples of the types of projects we might undertake. **These examples will be non-exhaustive, and we welcome your suggestions for alternatives!**
- At some point in the future, we will hold an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) and take a vote on what we wish to do. **It is too early in the process even to set a date for this EGM, though, let alone to vote.**

Our strengths and weaknesses

- **Strengths:**
 - **Multiple buildings:** we own three buildings (church, hall, manse) in a desirable location.
 - **Investments:** we are in a stronger financial position than most congregations, although we might need to raise some funds externally depending on the project we choose to do.
 - **Ministerial support:** provided the project is complete within the next ~ 6 years, we should have Andrew Brown's support and guidance along the way.
- **Weaknesses:**
 - **Volunteer time / energy:** our current buildings require a lot of time / energy to maintain; a large project will further increase the existing load on volunteers over a period of several years.
 - We must be sure we have sufficient capacity to complete the project we choose.
 - Others will probably need to step up as the project progresses, either to serve as Trustees or to offer specialist skills.

Outline of scenarios

- On the following slides we will present 4-6 scenarios of what we *could* do with our buildings.
 - This is not an exhaustive list – our aim here is just to place a few pins into the “**possibility space**”, to help you get your bearings!
 - We welcome alternative suggestions that fall between the gaps, or change / extend the examples we’re presenting here.
- Alongside these scenarios, we have also developed a **financial model** to assess our cashflow position for each scenario.
 - We have used this model in the following slides to give a view on the **relative financial risks** of each scenario. There is a lot of uncertainty in the model inputs, so please treat with extreme caution the absolute values that come out of the model!
 - If anyone wishes to play with the model themselves, please talk to Jacqui afterwards. You will require Microsoft Excel version 2021 or newer to use it at home.

Scenarios

- **Scenario 1:** plans as submitted to Cambridge City Council.
- **Scenario 2:** use existing funds to restore all existing buildings in current configuration, with:
 - a) manse to be inhabited by Andrew and Susanna after completion.
 - b) manse to be inhabited by a private tenant after completion.
- **Scenario 3:** sell the manse and put the proceeds towards restoring the church and hall.
- **Scenario 4:** sell all buildings, and:
 - a) own no properties (e.g. rent out a school hall for services)
 - b) buy a house in central Cambridge where we can hold our services etc.

Scenario 1

What have we actually submitted to Cambridge City Council?

- The application includes:
 - Refurbishment of the church (roof tile and window replacement, solar panels).
 - Replacement of the manse roof.
 - Change of use for the manse: from Class C3(a) [residential] to Class F1(f) [public worship].
 - Change of use for the hall: from Class F1(f) [public worship] to Class E(g)(i) [offices].

Scenario 1

- If approved, this would allow us to:
 - **Sell the hall** with planning permission in place for use as office space:
 - Selling with planning permission in place would hopefully attract a higher price.
 - We would not demolish any buildings. The buyer would hold planning permission to demolish the toilets and ancillary buildings – if they wanted to.
 - **Put the proceeds from the hall sale towards refurbishing the church and manse:**
 - Refurbished church could be used all year round, with improved spaces / facilities.
 - Refurbished and reconfigured manse would provide kitchen, toilet and office facilities, connected directly to the church.
 - Potential for new types of hiring income, e.g. meeting rooms.

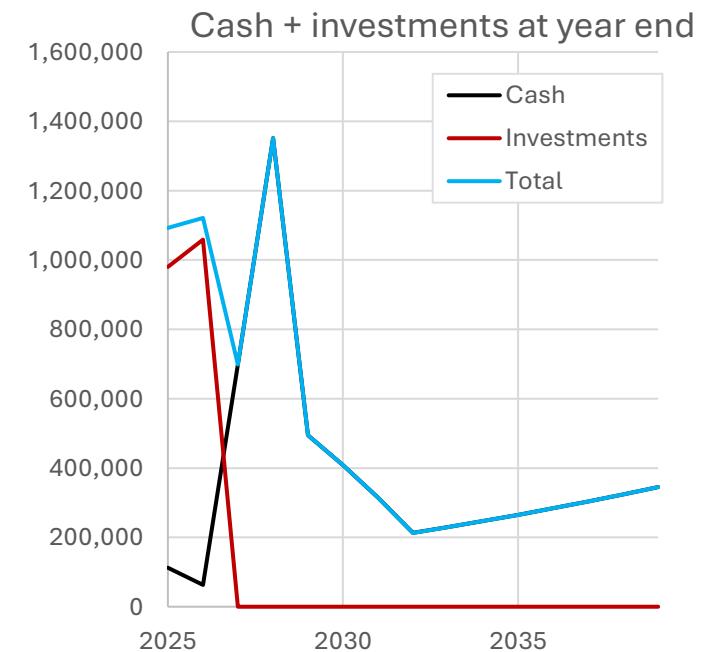
Scenario 1

- **Pros:**

- We retain our church and manse, and our central location.
- Full set of modernised facilities available for use by us and the local community, including new spaces in the manse.

- **Cons:**

- Loss of the hall, and any development on its site will be beyond our control.
- We might need to spend all or most of our financial reserves, and possibly seek some external funding.
- An extensive project will likely place a high administrative load on volunteers. Longer-term, there will be an ongoing need for facility management (e.g. bookings, maintenance).



Relative financial risk: Medium

Sale price of hall and precise scope of refurbishment could determine whether or not external funding is required.

Scenarios

- **Scenario 1:** plans as submitted to Cambridge City Council.
- **Scenario 2:** use existing funds to restore all existing buildings in current configuration, with:
 - a) manse to be inhabited by Andrew and Susanna after completion.
 - b) manse to be inhabited by a private tenant after completion.
- **Scenario 3:** sell the manse and put the proceeds towards restoring the church and hall.
- **Scenario 4:** sell all buildings, and:
 - a) own no properties (e.g. rent out a school hall for services)
 - b) buy a house in central Cambridge where we can hold our services etc.

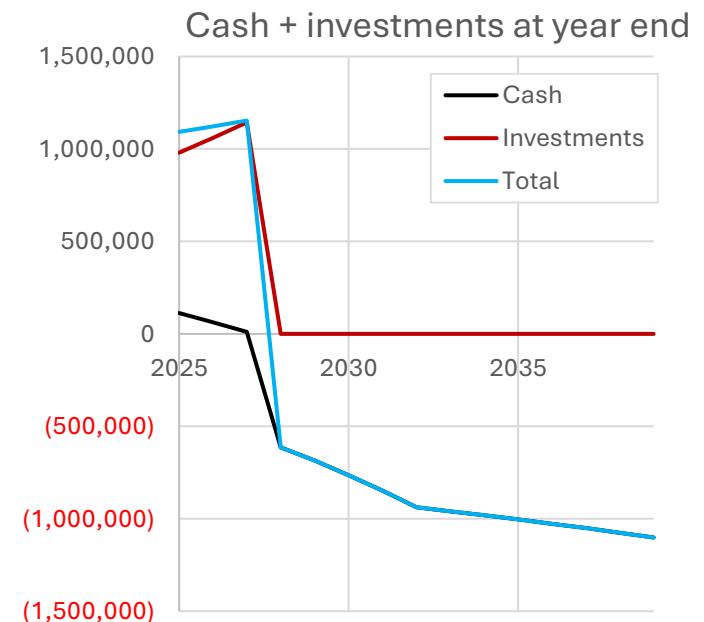
Scenario 2a

- **Pros:**

- We retain all our buildings and our central location.
- Existing facilities are refurbished.

- **Cons:**

- Highest financial risk; we will probably need to raise extensive funding (six or seven figures?) from external sources to complete this project.
- An extensive project will likely place a high administrative load on volunteers. Longer-term, there will be an ongoing need for facility management (e.g. bookings, maintenance).
- We will still own two very similar spaces (church and hall) for which hiring demand is currently low (see Appendix slides).



Relative financial risk: Very high

Our financial reserves are insufficient to complete this project without extensive external funding.

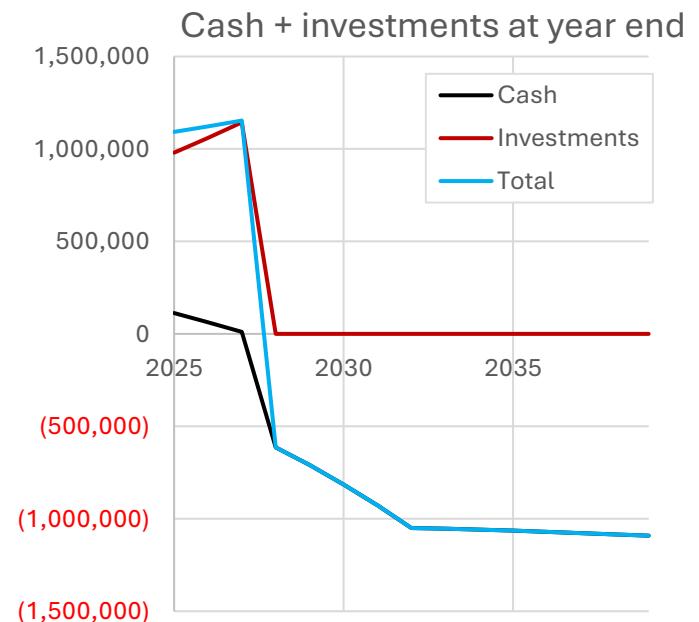
Scenario 2b (with tenant)

- **Pros:**

- We retain all our buildings and our central location.
- Existing facilities are refurbished.

- **Cons:**

- Highest financial risk; we will probably need to raise extensive funding (six or seven figures?) from external sources to complete this project.
- An extensive project will likely place a high administrative load on volunteers. Longer-term, there will be an ongoing need for facility management (e.g. bookings, maintenance).
- We will still own two very similar spaces (church and hall) for which hiring demand is currently low (see Appendix slides).



Relative financial risk: Very high

Our financial reserves are insufficient to complete this project without extensive external funding.

Scenarios

- **Scenario 1:** plans as submitted to Cambridge City Council.
- **Scenario 2:** use existing funds to restore all existing buildings in current configuration, with:
 - a) manse to be inhabited by Andrew and Susanna after completion.
 - b) manse to be inhabited by a private tenant after completion.
- **Scenario 3:** sell the manse and put the proceeds towards restoring the church and hall.
- **Scenario 4:** sell all buildings, and:
 - a) own no properties (e.g. rent out a school hall for services)
 - b) buy a house in central Cambridge where we can hold our services etc.

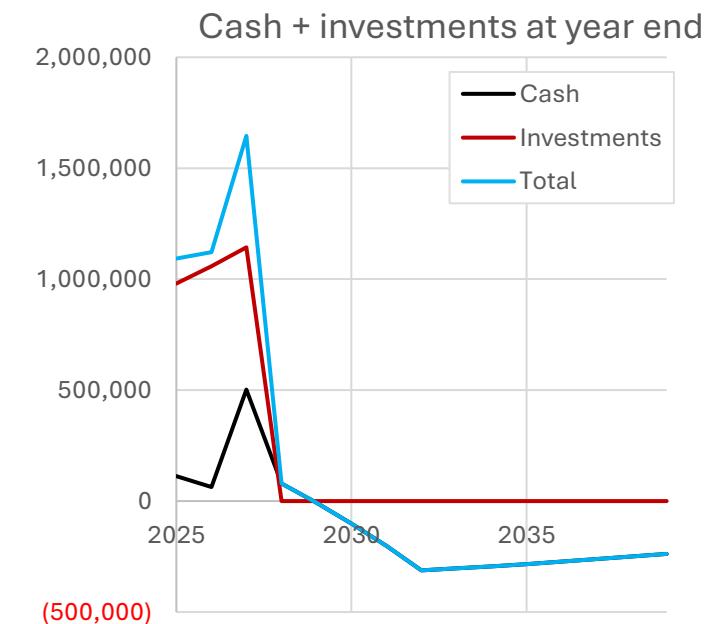
Scenario 3

- **Pros:**

- We retain our church, our hall, and our central location.
- Existing facilities are refurbished.

- **Cons:**

- Loss of the manse.
- High financial risk; we may need to raise significant funding (six figures?) from external sources to complete this project.
- An extensive project will likely place a high administrative load on volunteers. Longer-term, there will be an ongoing need for facility management (e.g. bookings, maintenance).
- We will still own two very similar spaces (church and hall) for which hiring demand is currently low.



Relative financial risk: High

Our financial reserves may be insufficient to complete this project without external funding.

Scenarios

- **Scenario 1:** plans as submitted to Cambridge City Council.
- **Scenario 2:** use existing funds to restore all existing buildings in current configuration, with:
 - a) manse to be inhabited by Andrew and Susanna after completion.
 - b) manse to be inhabited by a private tenant after completion.
- **Scenario 3:** sell the manse and put the proceeds towards restoring the church and hall.
- **Scenario 4:** sell all buildings, and:
 - a) own no properties (e.g. rent out a school hall for services)
 - b) buy a house in central Cambridge where we can hold our services etc.

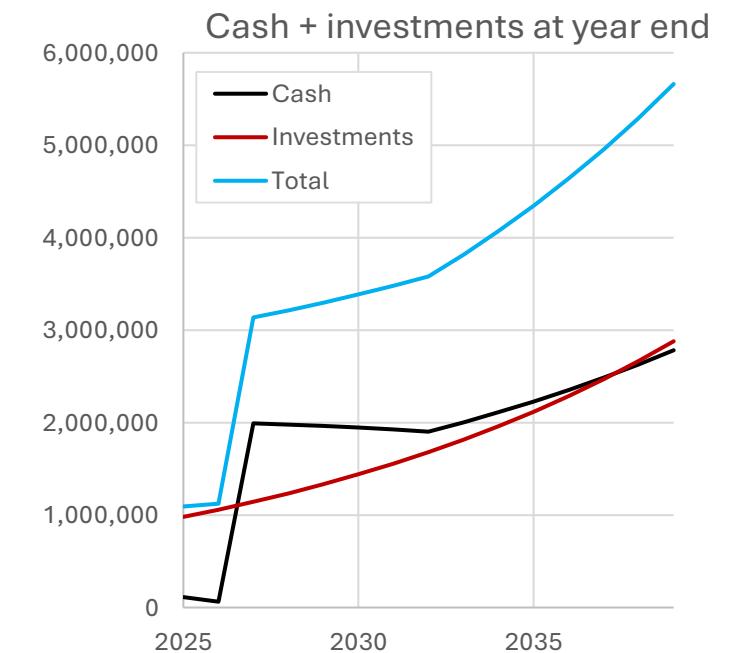
Scenario 4a (rent a venue)

- **Pros:**

- Longer-term demands on volunteer time / energy will be much lower than at present.
- Potentially gives us funds to finance other initiatives, e.g. ministerial support after Andrew Brown's retirement.

- **Cons:**

- Loss of all our current buildings.
- No spaces to offer for community use.
- The venue we rent instead might be less convenient for the congregation, especially for those who travel by bus.
- Potentially harder for new people to discover us without a dedicated, physical home.



Relative financial risk: Low

Investing proceeds of sale could give us a recurring income to finance other initiatives.

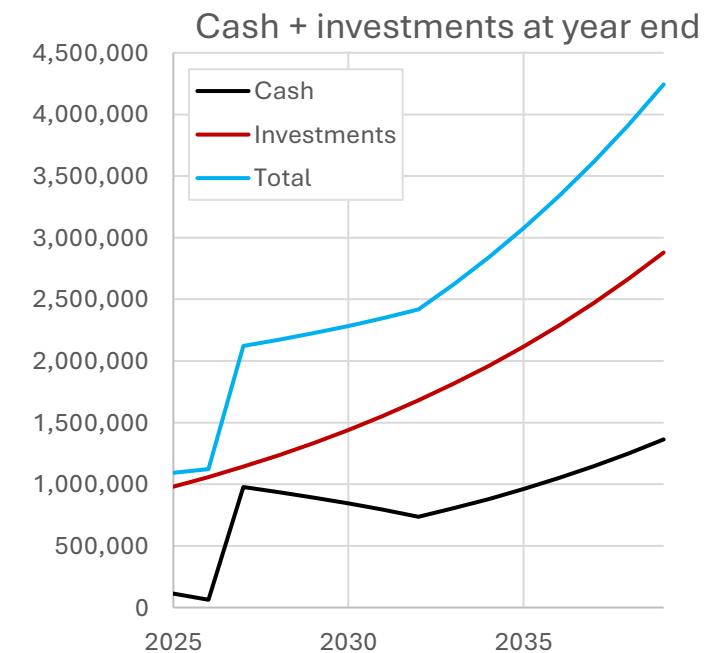
Scenario 4b (buy a house)

- **Pros:**

- Longer-term demands on volunteer time / energy should be somewhat lower than at present.
- Potentially gives us funds to finance other initiatives, e.g. ministerial support after Andrew Brown's retirement.

- **Cons:**

- Loss of all our current buildings.
- Potential difficulty in finding a suitable property - building work may be required to create a suitable meeting space (e.g. making the downstairs open-plan).
- A house might be less suitable for wider community use.
- Our new home might be less convenient for the congregation, especially for those who travel by bus.



Relative financial risk: Low

Investing proceeds of sale could give us a recurring income to finance other initiatives.

Let's discuss

- **What matters most** to us as a congregation?
- What do we want to **do** more of? Less of?
- What do we want to **have** more of? Less of?
- How can we make our community **sustainable for the long-term?**
- **How much risk** are we prepared to take?

- Which - if any - of the example scenarios might deliver the above?
- Are there any other scenarios we could consider?

Appendix slides

Change in hiring (2015 to 2025)

- Number of hirers:

Hire type	2015	2025	Change
Regular	10	7	- 30%
Semi-regular	8	6	- 25%
Irregular / one-off	21	13	- 38%
TOTAL	39	26	- 33%

- Income from hiring (2015 figures are adjusted for inflation):

Hire type	2015	2025	Change
Regular	£18,284	£14,027	- 23%
Semi-regular	£1,898	£2,619	+ 38%
Irregular / one-off	£3,190	£1,301	- 59%
TOTAL	£23,372	£17,948	- 23%

Regular hirers lost since 2015:

- LARP
- Cam Tango
- Bumps & Babies
- U3A Yoga
- Mackenzie School
- Mackenzie Society

3 Horizons workshop (1)

This workshop was held in our church in October 2025 and was facilitated by Nick Butler-Watts from the General Assembly.

Attendees identified the following signs that our current system is not fit for the future:

Small congregation

- Aging congregation
- Membership of congregation regularly changing
- Dwindling congregation
- Our practices and ways of doing things suit the retired
- Disconnect between mid-week and weekend activity
- Fewer children - competition for weekend activities and no youth leader
- Congregation is geographically spread out

Challenges of managing resources

- Relying on financial reserves, not enough income to sustain us
- We have a crumbling building
- Failure to confront reality

Ethos

- Tension between diversity of views and unifying identity
- Conflict + avoidance
- Unclear on our vision for Cambridge unitarians

Minister or ministry?

- Very dependent on our minister
- Too much asked of minister
- Volunteer (and maybe staff?) Burnout
- Balancing what we can give to our community v our personal lives
- Lots of responsibility on very few people

3 Horizons workshop (2)

This workshop was held in our church in October 2025 and was facilitated by Nick Butler-Watts from the General Assembly.

Attendees identified the following vision of how the future might look / feel:

Structure

- Ministry-led not minister-led community
- The 'Purposes and Principles of Cambridge Congregation' supports action
- Well-funded staffing
- All our activities are communicated on our website
- A good comms system to tell people what we are doing

Spiritual needs

- Wider range of creative ways to engage with spirituality
- 'Kiitsu Kyokai' enabling new modes of free liberal religion

Community needs

- A supportive network be for people coming through the door
- Our activities meet the needs of the local community
- Multi-generational congregation
- A wider range of online + offline offerings
- Communal coffees and meals
- A balance of students + longer term locals
- Our buildings are comfortable and relevant for a wide range of groups
- Our building is attractive to strangers + expresses who we are

Positive future

- Congregation is more engaged, running + participating in activities
- New ideas are supported to grow + flourish

3 Horizons workshop (3)

This workshop was held in our church in October 2025 and was facilitated by Nick Butler-Watts from the General Assembly.

Attendees identified the following innovations that might act as growth points for the future:

Infrastructure

- Fix the buildings
- Embracing technologies and innovations e.g. Heating, sound, website
- Employing someone to support trustees
- Spaces for forgiving + gracious conversations for difficult contentious topics

Communication and outreach

- Wider range of communications about what we are doing
- Inter-faith contact and engagement
- Personalised invitations for families with young children
- More paid staff e.g. Fundraiser, community worker

Congregational development

- Events like the 'Games, Recipes and Equality' workshop
- Kiitsu kyōkai and other experiments with worship formats
- "Provisionality" – having permission to give things a try

Community building

- The weekly reminder of belonging to a rich heritage – 'the tradition' – moving train metaphor
- Engagement + covenant groups
- More lay-led worship + events
- Online socials to build relationships
- A group set up to help support new ideas in the right way