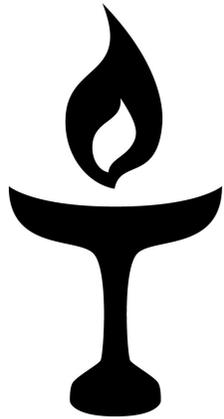


MU NOW



THE MAGAZINE OF
THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN
ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 52

WINTER 2017/18

www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk

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From the Editor

Welcome to the Winter 2017/18 issue of *MU Now*. This issue contains some very interesting contributions.

When I was speaking to Rev. Penny Johnson at the MOSA conference at Oxford in 2016, she shared some of her memories of being a minister to no less than ten congregations in the District. I implored her to write them down, and she has very kindly done so. This is the second of two articles; the first appeared in the Autumn 2017 issue.

Rev. Feargus O'Connor's speech at the MUA Lunch, about the Charter for Compassion, has been reproduced, and is well worth a read, for those who were not present on the day. There is also an interesting article by MUA stalwart, Gavin Lloyd, about his experience of attending a service to commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, at Westminster Abbey. Several congregations have also sent items of local news, for which I thank them.

Submissions to *MU Now*

We are particularly looking for stories on local activities, or with a local interest, in addition to articles on the theme. Please send your contributions to me at revsuewoolley@gmail.com or to 5, Martins Road, Piddington, Northampton NN7 2DN. THANK YOU!

The theme for the next issue is "Reflections on attending the General Assembly meetings" and the deadline for submissions will be Friday 4th May 2018.

sue woolley

President's Piece



Hello! A very Happy New Year to one and all. I wish you all a peaceful, productive and fulfilling year.

And perhaps a reflective one too. Hands up all those of you who have been given a diary of one sort or another this Christmas. I have to say I hope I managed to keep a pleasant smile on my face as I opened my sister's gift to me this time around – as I was fair blenching inside (*Merriam-Webster* definition: “to draw back or turn aside from lack of courage : flinch”). It was a copy of Dawn French's *Me * You, A Diary*, which invites the owner to share their thoughts be they deep and/or shallow.

Now I am a fan of Ms. French's comedic work, but the thought of sharing anything remotely reflective has always filled my heart with dread, and my stomach with acid. I think this initially stems from my school days when, during English Lit. classes, we had to write about what we thought of something we had just read – usually poetry, most of which I heartily disliked in my youth as they never included anything by Ogden Nash. At that stage in life I either liked something or I didn't, and having to find enough material to write an essay on anything seemed like torture. Mind you, I could discuss the merits of various favourite pop idols of the time with my friends for hours on end. I have always preferred to do my musings in my head whilst travelling on a bus, or slogging up a hillside.

Or perhaps my dislike is some form of a lack of self confidence. When putting a service together I love to spend time choosing

readings, particularly as there are several authors I believe express feelings far better than I. But when it comes to my address, self doubt starts to creep in and I wonder who on earth wants to hear me waffle on when others are so much better at it.

My cousin Simon tried for years to get me to write and on my bookshelf I have a nice collection of books about writing practices he gave me over time – and which are collecting dust nicely.

Not that I think it's a useless activity, far from it. It's more that I'm worried that I really will write down what I think. Or that I might be found wanting in serious thought. There is a reason we are all encouraged to think before we speak – or hit send when texting or e-mailing.

Back to the diary – I picked it up a week later and had a flick through it and found it really interesting. I find it appeals to me. I found myself glancing at the bookshelf and the dusty books from Simon.

And then, whilst listening to an audio book very recently, I came across *Poor Richard's Almanack* – written, printed and circulated by Benjamin Franklin in the mid 18th century. Which, in my convoluted thoughts, reminded me of the *Nice and accurate prophecies of Agnes Nutter, witch* which appears in a Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman novel. And also, the *Dairy Diary* which appears on the milkman's list every year and which I quite enjoy. All of them are collections of hints, tips, forecasts and practical advice.

I leave you to discover the contents of the aforementioned books for yourselves, but for myself I think I may have discovered a way into some reflective writing I might enjoy. A collection of my better thoughts, handicrafts, helpful hints for various activities, and my musings on the bowling green/bus/dogwalking round the

park. And perhaps by the end of the year I might just like myself, and my writing, a little bit more.

All the best, Diane.

PS For those of you who may be wondering, the Watchnight service did happen. There were only a few of us, we were a very select gathering (!) and we enjoyed ourselves. And we reflected on thoughts by people I consider much wiser than myself. (and we had a multicoloured Watchnight runway down the Chapel path which was very striking).

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### District Minister: Winter Update

Hello again. Here's a summary of what I've been doing, around the Midland Unitarian Association, and elsewhere.

I am into my seventh year as **Minister of the Banbury Unitarian Fellowship**. We are ticking along nicely, in spite of the poor health of many of our members.

**Leading worship around the Midland Unitarian Association:** My diary for **2018** is nearly full - I am leading worship somewhere near you most Sundays between now and the end of this year. I look forward to seeing you in your churches and chapels as and when.

The **Autumn Training Day**, on the important topic of *Safeguarding* was a great success – more than 20 Unitarians gathered to hear about this important topic from Rev. John Harley and Liz Hills. Our thanks to all concerned.

The **Spring Training Day** will be taking place on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> February, at Kingswood, on the topic *Building Resilient*

*Congregations*. It will be led by Simon Bland, the General Assembly's Ministry & Congregational Support Officer, with a contribution from our own Rev. Ant Howe. Secretaries of congregations & lay worship leaders have been sent a flyer. If you are interested in attending, please let me know soonest!

We are offering the national **Worship Studies Course Foundation Step** again, in May, June and July. Again, a flyer for this has been sent round – please contact me if you are interested in learning more.

I am now a fully qualified **spiritual director**. I have started to offer direction sessions, on a one-to-one basis. Please contact me if you are interested.

**Sue Woolley, District Minister, Midland Unitarian Association**

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MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages below, from our September and November meetings, have already been shared in the relevant issues of *Bits & Pieces*, the monthly news-sheet sent to all congregations. Only the messages which have not been overtaken by events are here:

1. Tamworth Chapel: the lease of this building to the Royal Naval Association will be renewed on 1st January 2019, at a much higher rental, bringing in some welcome income.
2. MUA AGM: will be taking place at Unitarian New Meeting Church in Birmingham, on Saturday 24th March 2018. Guest Speaker: Stephen Lingwood.

3. Spring Training Day: will be on the theme *Building Resilient Congregations*, at Kingswood, on Saturday 17th February 2018. Course leaders: Simon Bland and Rev. Ant Howe.

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### **West Midland Group of Unitarian Churches Part Two by Rev. Penny Johnson**

Here is the second part of Rev. Penny Johnson’s article. The first appeared in the Autumn 2017 issue of *MU Now*.

#### **Lye**

Lye church was on the main Birmingham Road. The Committee liked to keep everything just as it had been: even a table could not be moved an inch or two to the left or right, because that is how it had been when parents and generations before had worshipped there. Every matter had to be discussed by the entire committee and no change to the services, or indeed movement of church furniture, was ever permitted.

They enjoyed talking of memories of a former minister, Rev. Charles Simpson, who walked everywhere, but then he had only two churches, Stourbridge and Lye, whereas I had ten. They were unhappy that the preaching plan could not be mathematically arranged so that I preached the same number of times at Lye as at Kidderminster, and sent the Secretary down to the Parsonage to tell me so. I told her that I would redress the balance in the next quarter.

We held the Women’s League Meetings at the Parsonage and Discussion Groups also. I was delighted with that arrangement.

Our Treasurer, Dolly Gardener, was in Lye village centre when a woman she knew called across the main road into Birmingham: “Has your minister arrived yet, Dolly?” “Yes”, said Dolly. “I thought she must have done,” said the woman, “because I saw a pushchair in the Parsonage porch.” (an example of how to misinterpret what you see)

I was in the village early on in 1976 to buy a blanket. I went into an old-fashioned shop and saw one that had a dark line on a centre fold which was reduced to half price because of the mark. I bought a second, smaller one, and had two for the same price as the first, because I had paid cash. They were wrapped up in brown paper and string.

The organist at Lye had come to help the congregation out for about six weeks and stayed for twenty-eight years. At some point during that time he had had an accident, when a machine at work cut off the fingers on his right hand, so he continued to play with his knuckles and thumbs. He did his best! I suggested to the Committee that we appoint another organist. They were horrified, and told me in no uncertain terms that this was totally irreligious. They were right, but being treated to organ playing which was so detrimental to the standard or music needed, was not easy for me, notwithstanding the reason.

There was a shop opposite the Parsonage (a house with a shop downstairs) that sold dresses, blouses, ladies wear. The owner often told me that she had a dress which would just fit me, and it invariably did. So I was a regular customer.

There were two elderly sisters, one of whom was the Church Chairman. I well remember being at her bedside when she was ill, and someone threw a brick through her window breaking the glass and landing on her bed. The sisters accepted this behaviour.

This was not the first time it had happened. When the younger sister was ill I fetched the doctor, who thought that someone should be with her at night. The elder sister had already died, and none of the family who were visiting her were prepared to do it, so I slept on the settee downstairs in case of an emergency.

Two members, in the eyes of the congregation, were “living in sin” the congregation told me. One evening I went to see them. “I suppose you have come to tell us we should get married” they told me. “No” I said. “That is your choice.” “Well, you’re the first minister who hasn’t” was the reply.

### **Oldbury**

In my time the church services were held in an old house. The congregation was an elderly one.

### **Stourbridge**

My Induction Service was held at the Unitarian Church in Lower High Street in July 1976. The participants were Rev. John Mather (charge to me), Rev. Dudley Richards (charge to the West Midland congregations) and Philip Spencer, leading lay man at West Bromwich, who conducted the service. While the service was taking place the notice board outside was still being painted, and was ready when we came out of the church.

Ralph Benson always came into the church just as the service had begun, and sat in the choir stalls, despite the fact that there was no longer a choir. Ralph and I prepared and staged an exhibition of our historical material. It was a wonder that we got it up and running because Ralph was more interested in reading everything first. Norah and Ralph Benson offered me many Sunday lunches, and were very supportive, together with their children, Jane,

Anna, Julia and Richard. Later on Julia and I went to German classes together at Bilston College of Further Education. Ralph was headmaster at a school in Birmingham. One afternoon he found some young men outside his home, Kyson in Kinver Edge, and asked if he could help them. Was this Anna and Julia’s home? they wanted to know. They were obviously expecting to be sent away, instead of which Ralph said, “You had better come in and have some tea.” On occasion the organist played background music very sensitively as I read words of worship (a sort of duo). I conducted the marriage of Jane Leeson and Richard Reed in April 1977. The older people were most active. Mrs. Edith Brown (aged 90) went on very active holidays, sailing and swinging on ropes in her nineties. She, Mrs. Heaton, Mrs. Unitt and others were strong members of the Women’s League.

The United Reformed Minister, Richard Snuggs and I conducted a joint Service at a moment’s notice when the heating failed in the URC. This was reported in the local paper, so giving us publicity. Because this event was misreported in the local press, I corrected it, so we managed to have two separate reports and therefore two lots of publicity.

### **Walsall**

The congregation met in a church in Stafford Street, which was sold in 1977, and members met in each other’s homes and also Hatherton United Reformed Church up to 2004. The organist was Brenda (who played the piano) and very sadly died from motor neurone disease. Like many of the West Midlands churches, it had a small congregation. One night after the service one of the men went out to help someone who had had an accident, and he himself ended up in hospital and died. (Memories of this event is vague because I did not witness it. I only learned of it afterwards). John Mather would have offered pastoral care.

### West Bromwich

Philip Spencer was the key figure in the Church, a most conscientious and able Lay Preacher and eventually became a Minister. He was very patient and by profession was a teacher for children with special needs. Lodge Road Church Services were held at 3.00 p.m. but did not begin until two members of the congregation had arrived on their bus. Philip wrote a lot of worship material and produced the calendar. He encouraged lay preachers to wear a preaching gown. He was very modest about his achievements, particularly his musical ability. He always arrived at the church, weighed down by bags and baggage, and prepared it for worship (did everything as far as I can remember). The Church closed in the 1970s and the congregation moved to West Bromwich United Reformed Church.

### Wolverhampton

This is the church I knew from childhood. At that time the congregation was sizeable, perhaps two hundred people. Leslie Kemp was our Minister, an excellent preacher and held the congregation spellbound. He belonged to the Four Square Gospel Church, so All Souls' Church was not at the time a member of the General Assembly. Apparently when ministers in the General Assembly Ministry Committee interviewed him and asked him what he had read, he replied that he had read "some Martini" and one of the Ministers interviewing him said, "I trust you didn't find him too dry."

As a small child I drew cats and dogs during the service and handed them out to the congregation afterwards.

In 1959 when I was sixteen, Bill Wright, Vicky Bull, Denise Tavener, Anne Mohammed, Keith Stevenson and I founded a

Sunday School. The original one had disbanded during the war. Beforehand we prepared ourselves in readiness for "when the children arrived." They arrived in a group, they had been playing in the West Park opposite the Church, and Bill Wright gathered them together. We encouraged others to come by using a chart, "Bring a Friend and Score a Point." The child with the most points was given a *Golden Treasury of the Bible*. In 1961 some of us attended our first Sunday School conference, and I well remember having to tell G.A. Staff about this new Sunday School, which no one at Essex Hall knew about. All the leaders left, apart from Vicky and me.

The Sunday School became "The Sunday Group" and as the children grew older they took on responsibilities, so that when I left in 1972 for Manchester College, they managed it themselves. They gave concerts to the congregation, for which they catered. They wanted to brighten the Vestry, which had hitherto been rather dark, and the Church Committee gave them the "go ahead" to choose the colours and paint it. Their choice: mauve, white and purple! It looked rather good. John Mather and I both lent a hand.

Our children took part in the Midland Sunday School Association events and did well. On one occasion the Arts and Crafts Exhibition and Speaking Festival was held at Kingswood, and we went along, having duly prepared our set poems and bible readings. I had received letters from some of their parents asking me to hear the children recite their poems whilst en route, which I did, encouraging them to slow down where appropriate, or, in one case, not go on beyond the point where she was forgetting it. We changed to a bus in Birmingham and I re-emphasised the instructions, only to discover that I had learned my bible reading from the wrong version, a fact which I shared with them all, and as we were laughing, a lady on a seat opposite, said, "I think this

is your stop.” She also got off the bus and we all walked up to the Church together. Imagine my surprise and embarrassment when I realised that she was the adjudicator! She had heard the entire scenario of the plights of Wolverhampton, but they all received certificates, thankfully.

I received a letter from the Sunday Group just as I was finishing College in 1976 to say that the Group had disbanded.

I conducted my first wedding at Wolverhampton while I was still a student for the Ministry. Philip Thomas and Carol Russell. Carol was a family friend and former member of the Sunday School.

The following autumn I invited Barbara Russell and her family to our Harvest Thanksgiving, led by the Rev. John Mather. Barbara had baked some cakes for the Harvest Meal after the service. Having shown them to John, she took them to the hall where the meal would be served. The service commenced, when suddenly John shouted to Barbara “Where are your cakes?” “Taken to the hall” she replied. Whereupon John left the church, retrieved the cakes, put them on the Harvest Table and went on with the service as if nothing had happened. Barbara has always said it was at that moment she knew the Unitarian faith was for her. Since then Barbara has undertaken several offices in our Wolverhampton Church and the Midland Union (now the Midland Unitarian Association). Barbara, a Laboratory Technician by profession, dressed in her lab coat, and I jointly conducted a service at Coseley on Science and Religion, with special reference to Miracles from the religious and scientific perspectives. This became her introduction into Lay Preaching and her initiation into addressing a congregation.

A lady from the Spiritualist Church joined the Wolverhampton congregation and found her spiritual home with us, and whenever I conducted the service told me that a little girl dressed in rags (in the Spirit world) was learning from me. As I developed my preaching technique the child dressed in rather better clothes.

*These are just a few memories from over forty years ago. There are many more, too many to record, but these are the strongest and most significant. I have left out most members’ names (not all) on the grounds that I could not include them all. Sue Woolley encouraged me to write them down before they were forgotten altogether. I express my gratitude to Barbara Russell for reading this article and making suggestions before printing.*

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**Reflections on the Charter for Compassion and its fruits
Speech at the MUA Lunch, 28th October 2017 by Rev.
Feargus O’Connor**

‘Always treat others as you yourself wish to be treated.’ Was it not this ethic of the Golden Rule which inspired such diverse spiritual teachers as Confucius, the Venerable Buddha, Rabbi Hillel, Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer and other inspirational people of all faiths?

It is this noble ethic which inspired the monk Rahere in 1123 to found my local hospital in London, St Bartholomew’s, known to us as ‘Barts’, as a refuge for the sick and poor just as it continues to inspire what is most valuable in our Welfare State, with its ideal of care for all in need regardless of wealth or social status.

When asked which of his teachings his followers should ‘practise all day and every day’, Confucius replied ‘Shu’, translated as ‘reciprocity’ or empathic concern for others. A contemporary of Jesus, Rabbi Hillel, when interrogated by an inquirer on the essentials of his religious faith, answered: ‘What is hateful to you

do not do to others. That is the whole of the Law; the remainder is merely commentary.’

The wisdom of this spiritual ideal is asserted in all the world’s great religions and by wise teachers throughout the ages. It is this fundamental principle which inspires the Charter for Compassion, supported by the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu and other people of goodwill the world over.

It has been affirmed by, among many others, the International Association for Religious Freedom, the liberal religious international body to which British and American Unitarians belong, Religions for Peace, the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions and the Three Faiths Forum.

It is my hope that people of goodwill of all faiths the world over will join in honouring this most noble of causes. I hope that, in the spirit of the GA resolution Sue and I moved in 2011, we shall read, reflect upon and wholeheartedly embrace the Charter in our minds and hearts and so join with people of goodwill all over the globe who have already pledged their support to it. May we, each in our own way, strive to live it out in word and deed.

The Charter for Compassion affirms that spirit of universal benevolence which can alone save the world from aggressive violence and ensure a common and happy future for all people worldwide. It is an act of faith in ourselves, our potential for goodness and loving kindness and in our common future together. It surely could not be more relevant today?

It may serve to inspire us in our concern for social justice and practical actions to aid the poor of the Third World and in our hopes and strivings for global justice and universal peace.

May each of us pledge ourselves to help realise that yearned for future by doing all we can to build that ideal human commonwealth which alone can bring about the happiness and wellbeing of all, each of us and all God’s creatures on Earth.

The Charter for Compassion

“The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women—to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion—to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate—to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures—to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity—to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings, even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries.

Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.”

(<https://charterforcompassion.org/charter>)

Empathy, the Golden Rule and the Charter for Compassion

A story is told of the great 19th century American Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. It relates to an incident from his childhood which he vividly remembered all his life.

Walking home one day he saw a lovely pond with rare flowers in bloom nearby. He stopped to enjoy it and saw basking in the sun a spotted tortoise.

He later wrote: ‘I lifted the stick I had in my hand to strike the harmless reptile; for, though I had never killed any creature, yet I had seen other boys out of sport destroy birds, squirrels, and the like, and I felt a disposition to follow their wicked example. But all at once something checked my little arm, and a voice within me said, clear and loud, “It is wrong!” I held my uplifted stick in wonder at the new emotion.

I hastened home and told the tale to my mother, and asked what it was that told me it was wrong. She wiped a tear from her eye with her apron, and, taking me in her arms, said:

“Some call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul. If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you...without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice...”

I am sure that no event in my life has made so deep and lasting an impression on me.’

I am sure there must be many people who could identify with these feelings. The sincerity of Theodore Parker’s words can be clearly seen in his subsequent life as a fearless radical Unitarian preacher who spent his ministerial life in passionately denouncing the evil of slavery, engaging in political campaigns to secure its abolition and rescuing and protecting escaping slaves. Parker never let the voice of conscience be still.

That same ethic of universal love and compassion is seen in the lives and spiritual teachings of the two Buddhist monks whose teachings inspire so many people in the world today: the Dalai Lama, exiled from Tibet, and the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, also living in exile at since the time of the terrible war in his country in which millions of his compatriots were killed and injured.

Like the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh taught, following the words attributed to the Buddha in the *Dhammapada*, beautiful and inspirational Buddhist scriptures, the same vital message of peace and the unity of all creation.

‘Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased by love. This is an eternal law.’

‘Interdependence’, wrote the Dalai Lama, ‘...is a fundamental law of nature. Not only higher forms of life but also many of the smaller insects are social beings.

The insects, without any religion or law, survive by mutual co-operation based on an innate recognition of their interconnectedness. The laws of nature dictate that bees, for instance, work together in order to survive...

Human beings, on the other hand, have constitutions, vast legal systems, and police forces; we also have religion, remarkable intelligence and a heart with a great capacity for love. But despite these many extraordinary qualities, in practice we lack a sense of responsibility toward our fellow human beings. In some ways we are poorer than the bees...’

‘The well-taught philosophic mind to all compassion gives, casts round the world an equal eye and feels for all that lives.’

Such a compassionate vision of Anna Letitia Barbauld, the Eighteenth Century Unitarian writer, and shared by remarkable spiritual teachers like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Dr Albert Schweitzer, has inspired the Dalai Lama himself, Desmond Tutu and many other people of goodwill the world over to embrace the Charter for Compassion.

It is surely no exaggeration to claim that the future happiness and wellbeing of each one of us will depend on learning the vital lesson taught by Theodore Parker and Albert Schweitzer in previous generations and, in put time, by Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama.

It is enshrined in the Charter for Compassion: the need for empathy, to act in the spirit of the Golden Rule, to treat others as

we ourselves wish to be treated. Ignoring that ethic may lead to disaster for us all, indeed to a global catastrophe.

If we are to look beyond our present violent and troubled world and try to envision a better, kinder and more compassionate one nothing less than a spiritual transformation is required. It is here that the Charter for Compassion gives us grounds for reasoned hope.

Such a fundamental spiritual transformation will be wrought by the power of compassion, to feel empathy for all our fellow creatures. Nor should such compassion be confined just to our own species. It should warmly and lovingly embrace all sentient beings who live and breathe and share this precious home planet with us.

Is this not the true message of the Charter for Compassion and why it is relevant to each and every one of us in every aspect of our lives?

Compassion is hailed as a ‘clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarised world’, the key to ‘transcend selfishness...break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries’.

‘Born of a deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.’ Who can deny the truth of that assertion?

Should it not inspire those of us who aspire to be liberal minded and liberal hearted Unitarians to do likewise if our yearnings for that ideal human commonwealth which is our heart’s desire are

not to remain vain imaginings rather than a living vision to inspire us to work together to help realise that dream?

But we must also be realists as well as visionaries and who can nurse any illusions that human beings are better and more caring than they actually are? But loving kindness to all those whose lives touch ours and with whom we have ties of common humanity is vital if we are to save our divided, unhappy and violent world.

Such a vision of what might be engenders hope that love will eventually triumph over hate, peace over violence and war. It inspires us with an optimism of the will, a faith in our illimitable potential for human goodness in the face of all discouragements. It is just such a heartfelt faith which should inspire us to welcome the Charter for Compassion and the hope it offers for our troubled world.

One practical application of the spirit of the Charter was the setting up in 2012 of the Clara Barton Disasters Emergency Appeal. It was established with blessing and goodwill of the Unitarian Peace Fellowship on the centenary of the death of Clara Barton (1821-1912), the Universalist 'Angel of the Battlefields' during the American Civil War and the founder of the American Red Cross. I appropriately announced its foundation on the occasion of our Unitarian Peace Fellowship's Peace Vespers.

Clara Barton was responsible for the so-called 'American Amendment' of the rules of engagement of the Red Cross: this enables it to respond rapidly and effectively not only to succour the war wounded on the world's battlefields but to minister to all victims of earthquakes, floods, cyclones, fires and other natural disasters as well as terrorism and armed conflict of all kinds.

This was Clara's finest achievement and one for which our co-religionist deserves our ardent admiration as a great moral exemplar, a practical humanitarian who made such an impact for good on America and the world.

It was surely appropriate therefore that in 2013, the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the International Red Cross, Unitarians launched two emergency appeals for the worldwide work of mercy of the Red Cross. £4353.18 was donated in response to the 2013 Unitarian Peace Fellowship for emergency medical and other humanitarian aid for victims of the Syrian civil war and £20,525.53 was given to the GA emergency appeal for victims of the Philippines typhoon disaster. Since its launch at the GA Peace Vespers in April 2012, the centenary month of Clara's passing, the Clara Barton Appeal has raised a total of **£98,143.34**.

This generous humanitarian response by caring Unitarians has gone to several Red Cross emergency appeals: the Philippines, Hurricane Sandy, Ebola Outbreak Appeal, Syria, Iraq and Gaza Crisis Appeals as well as the more recent Hurricane Appeals. Many caring Unitarians responded generously and continue to respond.

May this spirit, that of the Charter for Compassion and of the Parable of the Good Samaritan which the Red Cross exemplifies, lead us to show the world outside that we Unitarians as concerned global citizens are inspired to act.

Like our National Health Service, does not the Clara Barton Appeal not embody the true Samaritan spirit? Its purpose is a simple one: to respond to life saving emergency appeals of the Red Cross: compassion in action, not just warm words.

‘Whoever saves one life saves all of humankind’, according to The Qur’an. A thought echoed in The Talmud: ‘If you save one life, it is as if you have saved the world’.

Unitarian reflections on compassion to our fellow creatures

‘No humane being past the thoughtless age of boyhood will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The squirrel that you kill in jest dies in earnest.’ So wrote Henry David Thoreau.

So is compassion to be limited to our own species or, as the great Eastern religious traditions proclaim, is it not extended to all God’s creatures with whom we share this planet?

Sustained by such a passionate conviction that compassion should be universal in its outreach I put forward this General Assembly motion, signed by 37 Unitarian ministers, in 2015.

That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, recognising the universal kinship of all sentient beings affirmed by the world’s great religions, philosophers and sages, encourages fellow Unitarians and all people of goodwill to support the Universal Kinship Fund of [Animal Free Research UK] the Dr Hadwen Trust and other humane research charities in order to advance non-animal medical research and in so doing help save human and animal lives.

This GA resolution motion was fully in the spirit of our 2013 General Assembly resolution urging all people of goodwill to ‘promote a greater awareness and understanding of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part and, recognising the dignity and worth of all living creatures, cultivate an ethic of compassion and mercy to the billions of sentient beings

who share this planet with us and to act in ways that promote our common welfare’.

That resolution sought to encourage all who recognise that universal kinship affirmed by the great religions and enlightened and progressive thinkers to support the what is now the Gandhi Schweitzer Universal Kinship Appeal of Animal Free Research UK. to ‘advance non-animal medical research and in so doing help save human and animal lives’. To date the Gandhi Schweitzer Universal Kinship Appeal has raised £47,432.84.

This very sense of universal kinship is perceived not only in Darwin’s theory of evolution but is emphatically proclaimed in the teachings of the world’s great religions.

‘Any religion or philosophy which is not based on respect for life’, Albert Schweitzer wrote, ‘is not a true religion or philosophy.’ These words echo the wisdom not only of Eastern religious thinkers such as Jains, Hindus and Buddhists and revered prophets of non-violence like Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy but enlightened prophets and sages of many diverse spiritual traditions, East and West: an inner conviction that reverence for life and a sense of kinship with all living beings must indeed be at the heart of all authentic living religion.

Should we therefore not carefully heed these wise words of Albert Schweitzer on the well springs of true compassion and benevolence?

‘Until we extend the circle of our compassion to all living beings, we shall not ourselves find peace. It is our sympathy with all creatures that first makes us truly human...to preserve life, to promote life, to raise to its highest value life which is capable of development...[but it is evil] to destroy life, to injure life, to repress life which is capable of development.... Compassion, in which all ethics must take root, can attain its full breadth and

depth only if it embraces all living beings'. Only in this way shall we fittingly honour what the American Quaker John Woolman called that 'Channel of Universal Love', embracing, upholding and sustaining all that lives.

It is in this conviction and in this spirit that the Animal Interfaith Alliance, of which I am chair, launched on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Dr Schweitzer's death an Albert Schweitzer Universal Kinship Appeal for the Dr Hadwen Trust for the charity's vital humane medical research into cancer and diabetes. If it is true, as William Blake declared, that 'all that lives is holy' what nobler act can there be than saving lives? We have an opportunity to do this by encouraging and advancing the ideal of humane medical research and so engaging in practical action to help save human and animal lives right now.

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### **Reformation 500<sup>th</sup> by Gavin Lloyd**

On 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517 a German Augustinian monk by name of Martin Luther is said to have nailed to the door of All Saints Church Wittenberg ninety-five theses in the Latin language outlining various grievances, and in particular attacking the sale by the German monk Tetzel of 'Indulgences' (payments for spiritual favours including remission of time spent in Purgatory). Whether or not Luther actually nailed this tome to that door is open to question. What is not open to question is that he sent his theses to Albert of Brandenburg, Archbishop of Mainz. Instead of ignoring them as the work of a stray 'ratbag' the Archbishop referred them to Rome. As a result of the ensuing Roman furore Luther published and printed a resume ('the Twenty Propositions') in the German rather than the Latin language, thus readily understood by the locals and distributed widely thanks to the advent of the printing press. Thus the German Reformation

took off, and thereafter Lutheranism spread to German and Scandinavian lands.

On 31<sup>st</sup> October last one of my friends from Bicester Hockey Club and I attended Westminster Abbey for what was grandly billed as 'A Service to mark the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 95 Theses and the Start of the Reformation'. Although we arrived some twenty-five minutes before the service, the nave was already packed with worshippers, some of whom were rather severe of countenance. Indeed I was reproved by a lady sitting in front of me for murmuring to my friend before the hour long service. We were handed informative and beautifully printed orders of service by the friendly Abbey staff, both clerical and lay. The order of service contained learned articles entitled 'Historical Note' and 'The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification', and the names of 'the great and the good' attendees were listed at length. They duly made their entrance in procession accompanied by triumphal music.

The service was largely conducted by the Dean, Dr John Hall, and the sermon was preached by Archbishop Justin Welby. A number of other clerics from different denominations (mainly from the various species of Lutheranism) read the prayers. Yet for all this variety this was very much an Anglican service, formal yet inclusive of the congregation- Anglicanism at its best. The great hymn, 'A safe stronghold', written by Luther and set to music composed by him, a paraphrase of Psalm 46, was sung by everyone with gusto. What a shame that the musical setting in Unitarian circles is so high that few can sing it.

In his sermon, Justin Welby spoke about Luther confronting the world with the need to be 'saved by grace alone'. Presciently Justin said that Luther had revealed the need for freedom not to bow unquestioningly before authority. The message of the

Gospels had been renewed by the Reformation; the Gospels spoke prophetically about the needs of the world as it was with all its injustice and inequalities. The Gospels should come alive; ‘We imprison them behind ritual and authority and self-contained bubbles of indignation’. Justin ended by affirming that people needed to appreciate the ‘radicality’ of the Gospels. But I still dread to think of Luther’s views of Unitarianism. Yet Sue Woolley has reminded me that for all his conservatism he was a great showman and ideally equipped to ask the right questions.

In true Anglican style the service was tightly controlled and lasted exactly one hour as estimated. Perhaps it was a tad too formal and lacked spontaneity. Indeed it was a relief to spot the smiles on some of the faces of the Scandinavian congregants afterwards, reminding me that Denmark for all its lack of churchgoers is said to be the happiest country in Europe!

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District Round-up

Baha'u'llah bicentenary celebrations

About 45 people (including a seven-strong contingent of Unitarians from Oat Street), joined the Baha’is at Holland House in Cropthorne on the morning of 21st October, to celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of their founder, Baha'u'llah. Baha'u'llah was born in 1817 in Tehran; he gained much inspiration from nature as God's creation, his writings (*over 100 volumes*) form the basis of the Baha’i faith, and his teachings have spread globally.

It was an approximately two-hour celebration from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. at Holland House, which provided an opportunity for some of us from Evesham Unitarian Chapel to become acquainted with local Baha’is and some of other faiths or none. The theme of the event was Baha'u'llah's life, his compassion towards nature, and earth's influence with joy and peace. It was perfect with the planting

of a tree in the garden as all present gathered around. We also appreciated the refreshments afterwards; teas, coffees and delicious sweet nibbles.

As well as the gift of a tree to Holland House, the Baha’is of Evesham celebrated the bicentenary by giving plants to Evesham Community Hospital and EDMHSS (Evesham & District Mental Health Support Services), and a ‘Peace’ rose to Oat Street Unitarians, symbolised at the ceremony by the gift of a single plant and a plaque to each group. The rose will be planted in Oat Street’s garden in due course. Thank you, Evesham Baha’is, for this lovely gift, and for inviting us to your celebrations.

Fleur Moyse & Kath Forder, Evesham
(from Cotswold Group Newsletter)

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#### Unitarian Theology Conference in Leeds

Four Cheltenham & Gloucester members – Graham, Moira, Alison and Penny (*left to right in the photo*) – attended this interesting and enjoyable two-day conference at Mill Hill Chapel on Friday 13th and Saturday 14th October.

The theme on the Friday was *On God*, and after a welcome and worship led by Rev. Jo James, Minister of the rather beautiful Mill Hill Chapel, we listened to three excellent speakers during the day. Rev. Ant Howe spoke about *Wrestling, Resisting and Resting*, about different ways of responding to the Divine voice. This was followed by a lunch break, and then Dr. Jane Blackall talked about *Models of God and the Meaning of Love*, looking at our understanding of sources of meaning and depth in our everyday lives, focusing on the theology of loving relationships. Later that afternoon Rev. Lewis Connolly spoke about *The Unchained Spirit*,

considering the personal journey of faith in a way that recovers a post-modern theology of the cross.



Saturday's theme was *On Unitarianism*, and the morning began with a short period of worship, and then Rev. Dr. Ann Peart looked at *Theology from Women's Experience*, exploring Unitarian women's engagement with issues of theology and gender. The second lecture that day was from Dr. Justin Meggit, Senior Lecturer in the Study of Religion at Cambridge University, on *Early Unitarians and Islam – radical dissent and its consequences*, exploring how Unitarian encounters with Islam in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England helped to shape Unitarian identity and belief. After our lunch break Stephen Lingwood took us through *Dialogues of Faith*,

looking at whether Unitarians can actually practice evangelism in an explicitly ethical, liberal and Unitarian way. The afternoon ended with a Panel Discussion to review the whole conference with Rev. Dr. Claire MacDonald, Lucy Harris and Robin Arthur Hanford.

We agreed that the conference had been an inspiring experience, giving us much to think about, so we hope to offer some feedback to the Bayshill congregation in the near future.

**Penny Quest, Cheltenham** (*with thanks to the anonymous photographer!*) (from Cotswold Group newsletter)

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Shrewsbury Unitarians on Unitarianism, Circle Service, September 2017

Some interesting thoughts on Unitarianism, from a circle service this weekend at Shrewsbury Unitarian Church.

'Are our churches a building, a club, a beloved community or something else?'

It is a soul place.

It also reaches out to others who do not feel the need for a religion.

It is a haven of compassion, peace and understanding that goes beyond words!!

Fellowship.

A nurturing community which allows everyone to come with their own values, beliefs, doubts, and questions which are accepted and discussed. Your 'Faith' is not prescribed for you and we are all on pathways.

No fixed idea of what God is. Your own interpretation is welcomed and accepted.

Welcoming. Open. Interesting. Diverse.

Somewhere you can feel at home.

Community.

A beautiful building – a haven in the busy town. Full of art, history and memories.

A special community – togetherness, unity, freedom.

Very different people with a thread that connects us.

Most importantly a community – welcoming, accepting, acknowledging of all people from all backgrounds and all life journeys. A place where love is preached, never hate. A place of tolerance, diversity an understanding that life is not always easy or happy, but by sharing both our joys and sorrows, we can grow together, and help each other.

All of these plus – worship, reflection, exchange of ideas – for spiritual expansion, charitable contributions, historical connections.

A faith of spiritual inclusion, equality and enquiry.

Inclusive, beloved community of spiritual seekers, experiencing the joy of fellowship. Honouring all faiths and the intrinsic goodness of humanity.

A place of spirituality.

‘What are we trying to do as Unitarians?’ and ‘What is the Unitarian message of hope?’

To share our values and beliefs even though we may not agree with all of them and each other.

To come together in loving differences.

To share more and come together in love.

Trying to provide a focus for all levels of spiritual enquiry and celebration.

Unity of various spiritual orientations and gender. A faith encouraging enquiry leading to peaceful understanding.

Encouraging people to explore what Unitarianism is all about.

Diversity of views, backgrounds, faiths – all welcome.

Offering warmth and companionship on the journey of life with exploration - personal & together.

Allowing Unitarians to be as broad as we can, reflecting back to society what society brings to it. Living your beliefs with freedom. A community in action, not words, beyond our own community. Making a practical difference within society. Making our values not just for a Sunday. To quote Sister Act:” There’s a lot more we can do for them, than pray for them sister”.

Hope – strip away all the things we can’t change. It is all very simple! At our core, within the promise of good & bad, is a simplicity. A comfort of knowing that we are all just grains of sand.

Sharing the values – as an individual, not harming the Earth, tolerance, diversity, equality acceptance of others.

Individuals matter but coming together makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

People will live the values they espouse and see the necessity of working together.

A subtle, gentle grace, a quiet confidence, a warm, intuitive feeling – a belief that the future can be better for everybody. The will for good – a passion to fight intolerance, but in a positive, constructive way through love and compassion for all. The celebration of beauty in creation, and of the miracle of life. To create a space within society where everyone can be who they truly are, and be free to believe what is right for them, so that together, we can enrich each other and grow – both within the Unitarian community – and in the wider world.

Trying to broaden/deepen our understanding of other beliefs, culture, ways of life.

Encourage wider understanding.

Live life fully as ourselves – be the best that we can be.

Do our bit to make the world a better place.

Our common humanity – if we can recognise it.

Tolerance.

By working together, by listening to one another, by taking that into our daily lives we can effect change however small. The world is a beautiful place.

We should be trying to be peacemakers advocating tolerance and understanding to counteract increasing (militant) fanaticism.

Debra Burbery, Shrewsbury



Heritage Open Day at Stourbridge

On Saturday 9th September the tiny congregation at Stourbridge Unitarian Chapel did something none of them had ever been involved with before. They decided to take part in a Heritage Open Day event.

We decided in advance that we'd open up from 11am to 4pm on one of the four available days, and following the advice on the Heritage Open Day (HOD) website we publicised it through them. But we felt we should keep it low-key as we had no idea of what would actually happen, so we had no big banners, or articles in the paper or anything like that. We requested a handful of balloons and the posters that HOD could offer, so that we could make the chapel stand out on the day.

We also thought that our organist David could play our beautiful old organ, maybe for ten minutes every hour, and have a CD of gentle music playing at other times. We were undecided about the practicality of offering refreshments, but on the day we did offer tea and fancy biscuits.

A few days before the event we received an offer from a local artist to put on an exhibition of some unusual musical instruments which he had made, and these were set up in the couple of days before we opened for business.

As some of the congregation were on holiday, our tiny congregation was tinier than ever, but as we didn't expect many people to come that was alright. Oh how wrong we were! Our first guest arrived before we were even ready, and from then on there was a continuous stream. Many of them commented "I've been past here so many times and wondered what was behind those doors".

The Oak Apple Orchestra of unusual self-playing instruments made a delightful gentle sound which was very soothing. However when accompanied by David playing the organ, and joined by a saxophonist, a violinist and a singer, it was transformed into something magical and enthralling, and clearly thoroughly enjoyed by everyone there.

We did our best to describe the interesting artefacts which were part of our historic chapel such as that it was built in 1788, but there had been gatherings in Stourbridge for many years, meeting in a building in the yard of the local well-established wine and whisky merchants – who are still trading in Stourbridge, and also in an upstairs room in the ancient Talbot hotel. We explained that the box pews were the same age as the chapel, but that the wood cladding around the walls was older, having come from an earlier



chapel that was destroyed. We pointed out the memorial plaques and the commemorative panels noting the people, many of whom made valuable contributions to Stourbridge life. who had donated money to build the chapel.

In the vestry there were pictures and portraits on the walls, each of them telling its own story, and a little booklet available for purchase. We had produced information sheets based on our own research to explain about the people we could identify. Many visitors took the leaflets about Unitarianism, curious to know more.

And throughout the day people came in and looked round, sat down to listen to the Oak Apple Orchestra and the organ and other instruments, and left nice comments in our hastily prepared

guest book. It was impossible to count them all, but some 28 or so signed the book and there were many who didn't.

It was a bit worrying, not knowing what to do or who might turn up, and it was fairly exhausting on the actual day, but on the whole it seemed to be a lovely thing to do, and who knows, it might have been the first of many such days!

David Taylor, Stourbridge

Northampton Unitarian Meeting House gets a facelift

Visitors to NUMH will know that our driveway comprised loose gravel, which attracted not only leaves, but also an unattractive amount of litter from passers-by, which has been very difficult to keep clean and tidy. It was also subject to seeds, which grew into weeds ... It was clear that something had to be done.

So the Management Committee bit the bullet, and invested in a very fine, block-paved driveway, and a number of laurel bushes for the road side of the building, which we are hoping will make our building much more attractive to passers-by, and to regular users. Photo below.



District Events

Spring Training Day: Building Resilient Congregations

Course Leaders: Simon Bland & Rev. Ant Howe

When: Saturday 17th February 2018

Where: Kingswood Meeting House, Packhorse Lane, Hollywood B47 5DQ

Times: 10.00 am – 4.15 pm (tea/coffee from 9.30 am)

Cost: Free

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### MUA Annual General Meeting

**Guest Speaker:** Stephen Lingwood, minister to Cardiff Unitarians

**When:** Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2018

**Where:** Unitarian New Meeting Church, Ryland Street, Birmingham B16 8BL

**Times:** 11.00 am – 4.00 pm (tea/coffee from 10.30 am)

**Cost:** £5.00 for lunch provided by UNM congregation

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Worship Studies Course Foundation Step

Course Leaders: Rev. Sue Woolley, Dr. Jane Russell, Rev. Ant Howe, Stephen Lingwood.

When: Saturdays 12th May, 9th June & 14th July 2018

Where: Kingswood Meeting House, Packhorse Lane, Hollywood B47 5DQ

Times: 10.00 am – 4.15 pm (tea/coffee from 9.30 am)

Cost: £39 to MUA participants / £48 to others.

Further details on all these from Sue Woolley

MUA Congregations: Times of Services

Every Sunday:

Birmingham	Unitarian New Meeting Church	11.00 am
Cheltenham & Gloucester	Bayshill Unitarian Church	11.00 am
Evesham	Oat Street Chapel	11.00 am
Kidderminster	New Meeting House	11.00 am
Kingswood	Meeting House	11.00 am
Shrewsbury	Unitarian Church	10.30 am
Warwick	High Street Chapel	4.30 pm

First Sunday of the Month:

Dudley	Old Meeting House	3.00 pm
Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	10.30 am
Oldbury	at Dudley	3.00 pm

Second Sunday of the Month:

Coventry	Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church	11 am
Cradley	Park Lane Unitarian Chapel	6.30 pm
Stourbridge	Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel	3.00 pm

Third Sunday of the Month:

Dudley	Old Meeting House	3.00 pm
Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	10.30 am
Oldbury	at Dudley	3.00 pm

Fourth Sunday of the Month:

Coventry	Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church	11 am
Stourbridge	Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel	11.00 am

Last Sunday of the Month:

Banbury	Unitarian Fellowship	11.00 am
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MUA Congregations: Contact Details

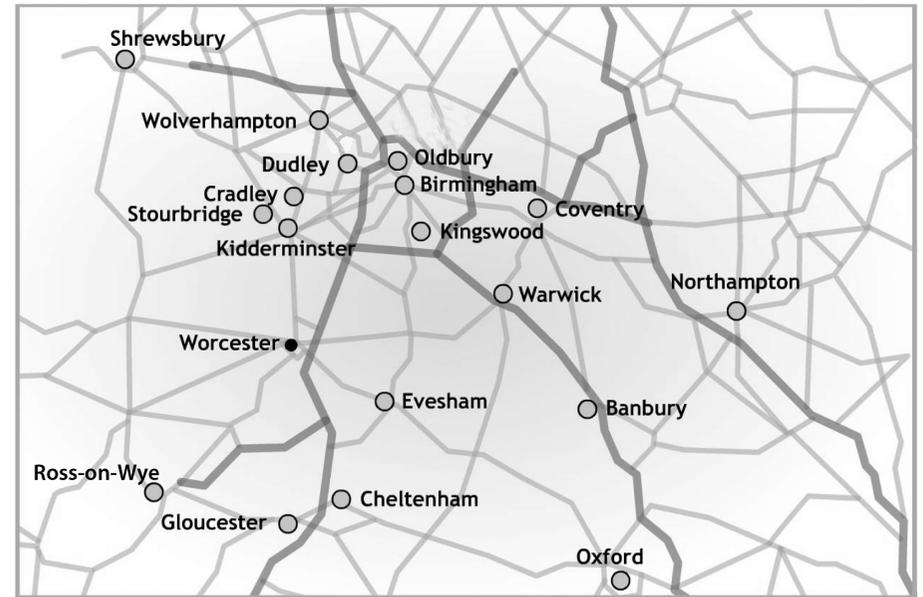
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Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

This is what we are about:
 We plant seeds that one day will grow.
 We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
 We lay foundations that will need further development.
 We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.
 We cannot do everything
 and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
 This enables us to do something,
 and to do it very well.
 It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
 an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.
 We may never see the end results,
 but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
 We are workers, not master builders,
 ministers, not messiahs.
 We are prophets of a future not our own.

~ **Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero** ~



The Spring 2018 issue will be published in May

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,
& on the theme of "Reflections on attending the GA Meetings"**

by Friday 4th May 2018

Thank you!