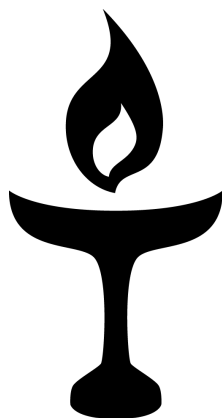


MU NOW



THE MAGAZINE OF
THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN
ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 43

WINTER 2014

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From the Editor

Welcome to the Winter 2014 issue of *MU Now*. As ever, plenty has been happening within the District since the last issue.

The Executive Committee held a special Outreach Workshop instead of their usual October meeting (reports on pages 8-11). Rev. Andy Pakula spoke about how to grow our congregations at the MUA Annual Lunch at Kingswood on 25th October, (see pages 12-16) which your Executive Committee will be following up at our November meeting and in 2015 and beyond.

You may not realise it, but 2016 is the **Sesquicentenary (150th Anniversary) of the foundation of our District Association**. We would like to celebrate it in some special way, and are starting to think about it now, as these things need a lot of advance planning. Please send any ideas to me, at the address / e-mail address below.

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 sue.woolley@virgin.net or to 5, Martins Road, Piddington, Northampton NN7 2DN. THANK YOU!

The theme for the next issue is "Growth and Springtime", and the deadline for submissions will be Monday 16th March 2015.

Wishing you all a very Merry Christmas, and a Happy and Productive New Year.

Sue Woolley

President's Piece



Reflecting upon this edition's theme, *A Time For Giving*, I can confirm I've been privileged in my two years as President to have met so very many positive, optimistic and hardworking people across the region, who give far more than we could ever reasonably expect to the cause of Unitarianism.

Every Unitarian community is driven by them, as is every working party, training activity, event and committee. They're

easy to recognise; they're the ageless ones amongst us who won't just be there spouting off about great ideas or perhaps appearing just a tad too over-eager for recognition - they'll actually be selflessly scheming and rolling up their sleeves to also make things happen. Whether it's working on their own initiatives, or driving on the talented inputs of others, it doesn't really matter; they'll quite simply be getting 'stuck in'.

They won't be put off by unnecessary distractions, such as "the way things have always been done", or the sheer "scale of the task". They'll know that even the smallest steps can lead to greater things, and that with imagination, encouragement, team work and of course loyalty, Unitarian values can be brought to the widest of audiences. These individuals are rarely celebrated, but will be at the very core of Unitarian revival in the MUA and beyond.

None of us, however wise or experienced, has a monopoly on good ideas, and there are now increasingly encouraging signs that we are prepared to embrace change. At the recent MUA Lunch, for example, those congregations represented at the talk about 2020 led by Rev Andy Pakula from New Unity in London, all declared they wanted growth, some ten-fold; even given the

implications that this might have for the existing congregants. There was little talk of "what is", but rather a determined focus on "what can be" and "what will be".

We of course have successful congregations in our region. They have much to offer us all and we have much we can learn from them. Many other congregations have practical plans for growth with encouraging early signs. There is so much going on in terms of excellent MUA training, advice and support, and of course there is a growing body of national General Assembly groupings that are making real headway with the practical task of broadening and growing our Unitarian appeal, not least 2020, Simple Gifts and BUYAN (British Unitarian Young Adult Network).

So, if you are one of those ageless 'giving ones', with a vision for our Unitarian future and a determination to see this achieved - or at the very least, to do all you can to support others with great ideas, be assured, even in the more difficult moments, that there are many out there like yourself. Intransigence is one of our greatest enemies, so it is through your positivity, energy, creativity and giving, that we can approach the future with renewed optimism.

At our next AGM in the Spring, Jane Couper from Oat Street Chapel, Evesham will become our new President. I have no doubt that she will be an outstanding holder of this post and I wish her all the very best. I would like to take this opportunity thank all of you across the region who contribute so willingly to the task of upholding and promoting Unitarian values, and I know that you will be of great support to Jane during her Presidency.

Giving our time and creative energy to a Unitarian and Free Christian faith that we know can transform lives, is indeed a most precious thing. May this 'Time For Giving' long continue.

Ash

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MUA District Minister: Autumn Update

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

My work as **Minister of the Banbury Unitarian Fellowship** continues. We have decided to change our Engagement Group to a Discussion Group, but will be continuing to meet once a month on a Thursday morning.

Leading worship around the Midland Unitarian Association:

My diary for 2015 is now full - I am leading worship somewhere near you practically every Sunday between now and the end of next year. I have also done a Silver Wedding Blessing and a funeral in recent weeks.

Our **Autumn Training Day**, on the topic *Exploring Our Own Beliefs*, took place on **Saturday 18th October**, at Kingswood. Those present had the opportunity to think about why they are Unitarians, to formulate their own ethical ten commandments, to write a couple of Haiku, and to see for themselves what a broad spectrum of beliefs there is in our congregations.

In October, I started on the **Encounter** course, which is a three-year training course, leading to a qualification in spiritual direction. It is run by the London Centre for Spirituality. Among the sixteen first-year students are two fellow Unitarians.

Sue Woolley, District Minister, Midland Unitarian Association

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**"The time for giving is when you can – be it money, time, a helping hand, comfort, encouragement, advice (rarely taken).**

**Give anything but up."**

**Barbara Russell**

## MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages below, from our July 2014 meeting has already been published in *Bits & Pieces*. So only those which have not been overtaken by events are published here. Our September meeting was a workshop (see pages 8-11) so no Key Messages were produced.

### July 2014

1. A further new portfolio of investments, to increase investment income, in order to maintain the current level of grants to congregations and others, was approved.

2. General Assembly President / Vice President 2015/16: The Committee agreed to nominate a member of an MUA congregation, subject to their agreement. (update: the person concerned declined to be nominated)

3. The Midland Unitarian Association's website has been re-developed and is looking good - please visit it at <http://www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk>

4. ALL congregations need to be in compliance with the new Safeguarding Requirements. **This is not optional.** All Congregational Secretaries should have received a letter about this in the recent GA mailing, and have also received further information from the District Minister.

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Giving away! giving away! must I be forever giving away?
An angel, as passing, said "What you can do – is just stop when the Father stops giving to you". Author unknown

Outreach Workshop instead of Meeting

Rather than holding our regular committee meeting in October, members of the Executive Committee attended a workshop on Outreach at Unitarian New Meeting Birmingham, which had been organised by our President, Ash James. Two guest speakers, Aleks Zglinska of Kidderminster, and Kate Dean of Hampstead, spoke to us about examples of outreach in their Unitarian communities. Their stories are below:

Seasons - a new way to build community

Seasons is a seed of an idea. From our website...

"An inclusive, peer led community

Open to everyone regardless of beliefs.

Here, not to provide you with answers just a space to explore the questions.

Action-orientated, diverse, welcoming and friendly!"

The group started at Kidderminster New Meeting House in May, with the intention of creating an alternative space to the main meeting which is run and led by a new group of young people (18-30+s) from a wide area around Kidderminster and the Black Country.

The aim is to provide "Seasons" of (at least 3) events with themed content which is provided by the members rather than led by a formal committee.

The meetings also aim to have hospitality at the core of what is offered with drinks and refreshments and social time to begin each meeting starting at 7.30 pm with the guided part of the meeting beginning at 8.00 pm.

The evening takes place in an informal discussion/cafe format with bright table cloths and paper and felt pens at the ready for people to be able to engage with the presented materials in a way which is accessible and allows for creativity.

This format has proved popular with participants and a small group has grown out of the humble beginnings and lasting friendships have already formed in the group.

In August, Seasons hosted a bring and share meal which was open to the congregation of New Meeting House.

In the next few months we intend to explore what else the format may become and how we can engage with the wider community.

For the most up to date information see our Facebook page! Or for more details including advice on setting up your own Seasons groups please email discoverseasons@gmail.com

Aleks Zglinska



The Seasons logo, which changes colour according to the Season.
designed by Aleks Zglinska

Winter Shelter project by Rosslyn Hill Chapel

Rosslyn Hill Chapel in Hampstead has a large congregation and has been running a shelter project for the homeless for the past six years. Although it has been a major undertaking, the lessons learned could help other congregations that are thinking about how they might reach out to their communities.

The shelter scheme was set up by C4WS (formerly known as Community of Camden Churches Cold Weather Shelter). It consists of 13 host churches over a period of four months. Each church hosts the guests for one night a week. The guests tend to be newly homeless people and have been screened for their suitability by C4WS. The scheme is funded by local councils, churches and other charitable donations. Training for all volunteers is provided by C4WS.

As a result of the scheme, 75 guests were accommodated during the 2013/14 shelter, 1,936 bed spaces were given to the homeless, 3,700 meals were served and 95% of those engaged in the service were assisted in securing accommodation.

Rosslyn Hill Chapel has a nearby hall which is where our part of the project took place. We were allocated Friday nights for 10 weeks. Last year's project included 60 volunteers from the chapel community (approx. 50% of the membership) and a further 11 non-members. The volunteers helped with preparing bedding, cooking, and then having dinner with the guests. Two volunteers stayed overnight and other volunteers arrived in the morning to help prepare breakfast.

Messages from some of the guests of the scheme:

'Just got the keys now and I'm going to the flat. Thank you very much for your help and I will not ever forget your help at all.'

'I felt like I was with my family... I would like to thank you for being my family for the duration of my stay.'

What did the volunteers think of their experience?

'We never felt overwhelmed or under-prepared – completely adore the C4WS staff and the work they do.'

'It was a truly rewarding experience, being able to connect with all the volunteers and guests. It changed my perception of homelessness.'

'It was a real joy – the guests are such a pleasure.'

What we learned...

This scheme was a great way to make connections with other organisations. It attracted new volunteers who were not connected with the chapel. It helped to support vulnerable people in society which, as Unitarians, we felt was a moral duty. On the other hand, recruiting volunteers was time-consuming but fundraising through chapel events helped to raise awareness of the project and get commitment from members – whether this was cooking for the project beforehand or offering hands-on support on Friday nights. Some volunteers were nervous about how to interact with the homeless guests but the training provided by C4WS helped to put the volunteers at their ease.

What you can do

This project has been a major commitment for Rosslyn Hill Chapel and has built up over several years. However, there are ways to start thinking about your own outreach projects which may not be quite so overwhelming:

- Start your own project in collaboration with other organisations, sharing resources, ideas and experiences
- Send your volunteers to established projects if your venue or facilities are not suitable

Kate Dean

Growth on the menu at MUA Annual Lunch

Unitarians from eleven congregations around the Midlands gathered at Kingswood Meeting House to learn about how to grow their congregations, from our Guest Speaker, Rev. Andy Pakula. Andy is minister of New Unity, two of the flourishing congregations in London, and is also the founder of 2020: Growing Unitarianism in Great Britain, an initiative which now includes no less than four Midlands Unitarians on its Board - our President, Ash James, our Vice-President, Jane Couper, Aleks Zglinska of Kidderminster, who is also President of the British Unitarian Young Adults Network (BUYAN), and Rev. Winnie Gordon, minister of Unitarian New Meeting in Birmingham.

And to enjoy a delicious lunch and fellowship with each other.

Proceedings started with some thoughtful devotions from Rev. Ant Howe, who remarked that once you've found a loving Unitarian home, the temptation is to set it in stone, and not to change. He reminded us to be thankful for what we have, but to dream of what could be. He quoted Dante: "Have you no yearning for a place more lofty, where you might make more friends, or see more widely?"

Andy started his presentation by telling us a little about 2020, which is a programme dedicated to growing Unitarianism through planting new congregations and/or rekindling dormant ones. He commented that how you grow depends on where you start, so for example, a brand new congregation will be different from one that has 20 people already. Derby Unity is the first congregation to be supported by 2020 - it will receive £100,000 over the next five years.

Andy explained that the good news is, that "all" you need for your congregation to grow is a few capable people, a strong desire, some money, and the willingness to change.

The bad news is: your congregation may actually not want to grow (much). But there is no growth without change - growth always means change. These are the sorts of change comes along with growth:

- new people with different needs, who have no understanding of "how it's always been done" (whatever "it" is)
- more noise
- more cake needed
- new people wanting to have a say in how things are done, and to have the opportunity to lead
- new hymn books (shock, horror)
- new ideas from the new people in both practical and theological matters
- time and day of the service can change
- music - may evolve from organ to piano to guitar, and from classical / traditional to popular
- different meeting place
- new people sitting in established members' seats, which ought not to matter, but which often does
- new ways of working together

And so the question has to be addressed: just how important IS growth? What changes will you and your congregation accept in order to grow? **Because you cannot both grow and stay the same.**

A series of volunteers from those present then shared why they wanted their own congregations to grow:

- it would be great if the congregation was more active in our local community.
- if the congregation doesn't grow, it will die, and the Unitarian witness will be lost.
- Unitarianism has helped me, and should be available for others. It is wonderful to have a religion that helps you without having someone sacrificed for you.
- Unitarianism gave me a connection with my community and with the world. I feel connected to the purpose of life - ethical incentive.
- Some people who could benefit are put off attending regular Christian churches by the idea of atonement - we need to get what Unitarianism stands for out there.
- the problem of not having enough people to carry out the ideas that we have. I want growth because Unitarianism has something to offer on both social and spiritual levels. But a certain critical mass of people is needed to make things happen.
- People are our greatest asset - it is important to value the people we already have. Releasing the potential in the people you have and encouraging them to move forward may be the key.
- "It takes a village to grow a child." - it is vital to connect with your local community.
- We have something so fantastic, so life-changing, so transformative, that we need to share the message. A Unitarian congregation can be transformative because it is a place where you can worship and share ideas and get in touch with the Spirit of Life in the universe, and with each other. We can relieve suffering and help people.

Those present were then asked what they would be **unwilling to change** for growth, and the answers were fascinating:

- we must have an act of worship / spiritual practice
- Unitarian principles / ethos
- caring for each other and the community
- music / singing
- time of prayer / stillness in a sacred space
- shared food and drink
- the freedom to practice our own spirituality
- freedom, reason and tolerance
- variety and freedom of belief; space for doubt
- shared group identity; shared values
- social action
- inclusivity
- openness to new ideas
- regular pattern of meetings
- social events
- traditional Christmas and Harvest services
- would prefer not to lose existing members, if possible
- Christian undercurrent of Unitarian message and respect for Unitarian roots in liberal Christianity

We need to talk together as congregations about 1) why we want to grow and 2) what we are not willing to give up in order to grow. The space between is the space where change can happen and dreams can be realised. We then adjourned to the School Room, where we enjoyed a delicious lunch provided by Jill Bowie, of Kingswood. All in all, it was a gorgeous, rich, Unitarian occasion.

The photos on the next page are by Ash James, and show the assembled at lunch, and ministers Ant Howe, Winnie Gordon & Andy Pakula.



MUA Treasurer asks: Are you one of the Wise Virgins?

Most people know that the General Assembly is deputised by the Charity Commission to act on its behalf in ensuring that those of its affiliated congregations who are not Registered Charities in their own right, nonetheless comply with the requirements of the Charities Acts. They are known as 'exempted charities' and enjoy all the benefits of a Charity, but must quote the GA's Registered Number when asked to do so by banks, stock brokers or other service providers and also send their Accounts to District Treasurer each year for submission to Essex Hall.

However, there is some doubt about how long the Charity Commission will allow the General Assembly to continue with this arrangement. The expiry date keeps being extended and the latest deferral is until 2022, but it seems highly likely that at some point, it will cease, requiring any congregation still wishing to retain its Charitable status to register in its own right. That is why, for many years past, the MUA Executive has encouraged its member congregations to take steps to register in order to avoid the rush and delays which may occur when it becomes compulsory.

To qualify for registration, you must do two things: first produce a set of Annual Report and Accounts promptly after each financial year end; and secondly adopt a modern constitution which complies with Charity Commission requirements. All of our Congregations have produced qualifying Accounts for many years past, although a few have still to comply with the quite specific requirements of the Annual Report.

The longest part of the process is obtaining the agreement of the members of the Congregation to the adoption of a modern

constitution, because it must be thoroughly discussed and understood by all concerned before proceeding. Fortunately, your District negotiated a model constitution with Charity Commission many years ago and this may be easily adapted to the needs of each Congregation. A sound Constitution is more than just a formality – it provides very positive benefits because it ensures that everyone knows the rules which govern the management of the congregation. It has been demonstrated, time and again, to avoid problems, because everyone knows where they stand.

The Midland Unitarian Association Fund and the Benton & Chidlaw Fund are individually registered. The following seven Congregations have already adopted a modern constitution and are registered as individual charities. Birmingham New Meeting, Cheltenham & Gloucester, Coventry, Cradley, Evesham, Kidderminster and Shrewsbury. Coseley still relies upon its old Governing Document. The following three have adopted a modern Constitution but have not yet registered individually: Banbury, Northampton and Warwick. Those still to take action are: Kingswood, Stourbridge, Wolverhampton & Dudley, and Oldbury – the latter three due to their membership or finances being very small.

The Registration process may now only be done online via the Charity Commission website, but there is plenty of guidance on the website. Anyone requiring help or advice – for example the Model Constitution is available in Microsoft Word format and the file can be emailed, making it very simple to adjust to individual needs – is very welcome to contact me.

Sandy Ellis Tel: 01905 391607 e-mail: sandyellis@tiscali.co.uk

District Round-up

Unitarian Discovery Holiday Recalled

Lesley Harris and I booked a four nights' break (The Unitarian Discovery Holiday), at The Nightingale Centre, Hucklow Derbyshire. It was located in the Derbyshire Peak District with the fields, meadows and stone houses, buildings and cottages. We arrived there and met about 14 other members from the national Unitarian congregation who were very welcoming. The Nightingale Centre was a National Memorial for the service people who fell ill during the First World War. It was a Florence Nightingale convalescent home for men founded 1917.

The holiday covered the spectrum of the rainbow. Every morning and evening we joined in the Unitarian service. On Monday night, we had a quiz with rainbow people and rainbow world, and scored 6 out of 14. Tuesday was about The Spiral Of Diversity, meaning different beliefs over issues, steps of nature in order for survival from trans personal basis to a whole particle (the earth).

Matthew Smith explained the character of John Goodwin Barnby who introduced Engels to French Communists. Barnby fell out with Engels and became the Unitarian Minister of Wakefield for 25 years. He invented Communitarian. He was born in Suffolk and buried in Framlingham. Some of us (excluding Lesley) strolled through the countryside/fields, and my shoes were covered in cattle's mess.

On Wednesday, Lesley and I explored the village of Bakewell, and spotted the river passing through a stone bridge. Swans and ducks glided along the water, and one of them climbed up a tree. We visited the town of Wirksworth and stepped inside St. Mary's church to discover the tombs of some of the Gell family (mainly

the brothers, Anthony and John Gell). One of the Gell brothers established a Wirksworth primary school. On that evening, Lesley suggested that some of us watch a Bollywood film of Desi Boys.

On Thursday, Alex Bradley of Unitarian College Manchester introduced us to The Spectrum of the Rainbow where sunlight reacts with million drops of water to form a rainbow. Light is a fundamental symbol for religion/spirituality. Colours of the rainbow had their own reasons and representations e.g. green = growth and nature, red = heart of spirituality, yellow = light. That afternoon, some of us took a different route walk around the countryside. Two herds of cows approached us towards a barrier (stone wall). An entertainment of songs, poetry and dance was organised on that evening. All of us jiggled to the song of *I have a dream* by ABBA. Some of us (including Lesley) took part in a minor choir singing *Water Of Babylon*, *Black And White* and *All Creatures Great And Small* (including verses and choruses of the Monty Python Version). The holiday almost came to the end with *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* from Judy Garland.

The Friday morning ended with the Annual General Meeting, which discussed The Nightingale Centre's future with its budget. The return journey was gridlocked with traffic jams on the M5 and the A38. The time taken was about 5 hours and 30 minutes.

Fleur Moyse (Evesham)

"A Sincere Communion of Souls": 125 Years of Unitarian Presence in Oxford

There was hardly an empty pew in the chapel of Harris Manchester College on Sunday 26th October, when the Chapel Society gathered to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the

foundation of the Oxford Unitarian congregation in October 1889. Marion Baker, the President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, led a cheerfully affirmative service; prayers of thanksgiving were offered, hymns of re-dedication were sung with gusto, and the organist's postlude (Bizet's *March of the Toreadors*) almost had the congregation dancing in the aisles.

After the service a celebratory bring-and-share lunch was enjoyed by members and friends, old and new, in the Old Dining Room of the College. Sipping coffee and munching cup-cakes iced with flaming chalices, benignly overseen by portraits of nineteenth-century Unitarian worthies, the congregation was entertained by two talks about the development of Unitarianism in Oxford. Catherine Robinson presented the results of her research into the composition of the congregation that was established when the College moved to Oxford from London. Unsurprisingly, many of these early Unitarians were academics and their families, but Catherine's research had also identified tradesmen such as printers and milliners, and professionals such as bankers and barristers. She ended her talk with these words: "This motley group of people are our antecedents: to them we owe the foundation of our congregation. What would they think if they attended one of our services today? I hope that they would recognise (in the words of Principal Drummond at the opening ceremony) 'a sincere communion of souls ... who worship in spirit and in truth ... and a generation free to grow, and to express in its own way its faith and aspiration'."

Robin Hanford (a student of politics and sociology at Ruskin College) then presented the results of his own research into the social composition of the current Oxford congregation, comparing his findings with his data on the wider Unitarian community in Britain and Ireland. Using two different methods

of defining social class (the conventional occupation-based method, and a new method, based on the various kinds of economic, cultural and social resources, or 'capitals', that people possess), Robin revealed that the social composition of our congregation has not changed greatly since it was founded. In fact, in terms of occupation, 88 per cent our congregation is middle class. In the Q&A session afterwards, Robin suggested that these data might be used to start discussion in our movement as a whole on the issue of class: if Oxford is typical of the wider denomination (and his research suggests that it is), how can we create more diverse and inclusive congregations?

Catherine Robinson and Robin Hanford

coincidentally, part of the answer to that question is in the article below, by Jeremy Harris of Evesham

Evesham Unitarians Go Inter-Faith

The Interfaith service at Oat Street Chapel on 5th October on parallels between progressive Islam and Unitarianism proved to be one of the most successful services we've held recently, both from the quality of the service itself and the amount of publicity it created - and continues to create - for the Chapel both locally and further afield.

The service was devised and led by Oxford-based South African Unitarian Jacqueline Woodman, who along with her husband Taj Hargey, is very active in promoting a liberal, tolerant and inclusive reinvigoration of Islam. Indeed Taj was unable to take part in Evesham's service as originally planned because he was held up in South Africa where he and his colleagues were facing death threats and other serious obstacles in their attempt to set up an "Open Mosque" in Cape Town. In Open Mosques women are

not segregated and can lead prayers and all, including gay Muslims and those of other faiths, are welcome.

The main theme of our service was *ijtihad* - independent reasoning or freedom of the mind - a concept popular in the first centuries of Islam that encouraged a totally open debate on the interpretation of the Qur'an and its teachings. Progressive Muslims argue that *ijtihad* (and therefore Islamic thought) has been effectively suspended for several centuries and that "reopening the doors to *ijtihad*" is the only way to reform Islam to make it compatible with modern society. *Ijtihad* by its nature is not prescriptive, and everyone is free to find their own personal path.

The parallels between *ijtihad* and the Unitarian approach to the world are therefore obvious – but a key aim of Jacqueline's service was also to make us think about whether Unitarianism's real free-thinking iconoclastic heyday had been in the 19th century, and consider whether we couldn't also benefit from a bit of *ijtihad* of our own to bring us back to our feistier roots.

I admit I'd never heard of *ijtihad* or its proposed revival before but once I publicised the service in the usual way (our website/Twitter/Facebook) the fact that it promptly went semi-viral in a way that few of our other services ever have done just confirmed that it was a major live issue. People picked up in particular on the #ijtihad hashtag in the promotional Tweet. Someone, for example, flagged it up to the US-based progressive Islam author and activist Irshad Manji: "*There's a Unitarian chapel deep in the English countryside preaching #ijtihad! Check it out!*" Manji gave us her blessing – "*I love them Unitarians!*" and copied the publicity to her 15,000 followers (we have 250....) as well as providing a link to further reading on *ijtihad*. At a more local

level, the Evesham town tourist information website picked up on our service and publicised it.

All of this unexpected but very welcome free advertising meant that we had a bumper congregation for the actual service. It was the first service to be held in the informal setting of our Chapel Gatehouse because of our building works this autumn, but taking us away from the pews and stained glass actually helped create the right atmosphere. I had some fears there might be some "unwelcome visitors" – either from the sort of fundamentalist Muslims opposing Taj in South Africa, or from the Britain First end of the UK Islamophobic extreme right or both – but these were unfounded.

The actual service – a scan of the beautiful order of service is in the Photos section of our Facebook page – was perfectly balanced. We lit the chalice to the *Parable of the Light* from the Qur'an and closed it with a sung *Surah al-Fatihah* – the opening words of the Qur'an. There were further Qur'anic readings half way through and a recording from a South African group who play Islamic music but have been issued with a fatwa for playing instruments not invented at the time of the Prophet (i.e. pretty much anything other than drums!) and for having a Jewish member.

This was all blended into a "traditional" Unitarian service of four hymns, prayers and readings and it all worked very well. Jacqueline meanwhile went through the nature and history of *ijtihad* much as above, and then used the troubles Taj was having in South Africa as well as the current bad publicity fundamentalist Islam is getting from things such as the rise of the Islamic State/ISIS as all too current examples of why *ijtihad* is needed today. And, yes, she issued her own challenge to Unitarians to engage in a little *ijtihad* of their own and bring ourselves up to

date. After all this, we then went our separate ways with plenty of things to ponder...

So far, since the service, four people who attended the chapel for the first time because of it have made return visits and one Baha'i lady has been particularly kind and enthusiastic. The Evesham tourism site has continued to promote some of our services and Friday Light discussion group meetings. A month after the service a Nigerian Muslim spotted the service publicity on Facebook and asked for a copy of the script. We seem to have found ourselves a bit of Zeitgeist here.

The clear lesson to be learned from all this is that if your congregation is doing something novel and of broad interest, it really is worth going the extra mile to get it promoted in these uncertain days when we all need to Go For Growth to preserve Unitarianism in the UK. Get the subject right, and it will catch on. And for our part, we will certainly consider further interfaith services and other events here "*deep in the English countryside...*"

Jeremy Harris

Cotswold Group River Trip

On 7th August, 26 members of all the Group congregations met at the Gloucester Waterways Museum at the appointed hour for a "Sunset Supper on the *King Arthur*, venturing out of Gloucester Docks through Llanthony Lock and up-river.

Once the lock had been negotiated, including the lift bridge, we were onto the mighty River Severn, although here on the East Channel it was more like going through the backwaters of the Amazon, the channel being quite narrow and the trees at the

edges spreading over the water. The weather was absolutely wonderful; bright, warm sunshine and clear skies.

Once we reached the Upper Parting, where the East and West channels meet, the river was much wider, with a magnificent flock of martins skimming over the river and roosting in a clump of riverside trees, and also views of Maismore Court, and the distant hills. This was time for the supper to be served down below, and it was very good.

The *King Arthur* continued to make its way up-river, past the Boat Inn at Ashleworth and the Red Lion at Wainlodes Hill, before turning for the return trip to Gloucester. By now the sun had set, and it was a little cooler, but the moon had risen, and its reflection on the river as we made our way downstream through the narrow East Channel was a sight to see.

Back through the lock and into the Docks at 10.00 pm brought an end to an excellent and unusual Group outing, appreciated by all.

Gordon Lowthian (from Cotswold Group newsletter)

Ministers hear about Medical Ethics

Ministers from the Midlands, London & the South East came together for their annual joint meeting at Harris Manchester College Oxford at the beginning of November. On this occasion, the guest speaker was Dr. Martyn Agass, a member of the Manchester College Oxford Chapel Society.

Dr. Agass is a retired GP. He believes that doctors and ministers have much in common, sharing great challenges and unparalleled insights into the human condition. He pointed out that "healing" and "holiness" have a shared root in "wholeness". The Unitarian

reverence for life leads to a practical compassion and social responsibility. The ministers present appreciated the many parallels he drew between their work and his own.

There are ancient links between the care of the sick and religion, both in Christianity, and in Islam. Doctors and ministers work most closely together in the areas of palliative care, the prison service, and in higher education. And both share the condition of professional isolation that can heighten ethical tensions.

General practice occupies a unique place in medicine. GPs manage 90% of patients' problems and then do referrals to the rest of the National Health Service. They see patients as people first. Every presenting problem is set in the context of the life of the patient. They're not just collections of symptoms. There is a complex social fabric into which medical issues are woven. GPs can't just treat symptoms; they need to treat the whole person.

Consultation is the centrepiece of general practice. It is based on a relationship of trust between the doctor and his/her patients. Patients need to trust that the doctor is looking after them properly. The doctor needs to trust that the patient is telling the truth, looking after themselves, taking their medication and so on. There is a need to build a therapeutic partnership between doctor and patient, which is ongoing over a period of years often, leading to mutual trust and respect.

There is an issue around setting limits to professional relationships. If one lives in the community one serves, there is a need to develop two kinds of relationship - one professional, and one social.

These days doctors spend increasing amounts of time on preventing illness. Sometimes they are paid extra money to do

things like immunisation programmes, routine tests, and so on, which can lead to a conflict of interest.

Confidentiality is an essential pre-requisite for a consultation. The doctor has to find the right balance between beneficence, which Dr. Agass described as acting in the patient's best interests, and the patient's personal autonomy. This balance should enable the patient to make an informed decision. It is difficult sometimes not to think that you "know best". He gave the example of wondering whether to share the possibility of a future diagnosis of serious disease with a patient. Does the GP have the right to withhold this information? What are the patient's best interests? Sometimes doctors feel the need to be beneficent.

Then there is the issue of patients who wilfully disregard their doctor's advice, for example by continuing to smoke or not changing their diet. There is a need to discuss the issues openly and often.

And should gifts from patients be accepted? Dr. Agass mentioned the 'Oxford Times test', which ministers might also find useful - "how would I feel if it was published in the paper that I had accepted this gift?" Legacies from patients can also be an issue.

There should always be professional behaviour. If a doctor / patient (or indeed minister / congregant) relationship strays from the professional norm (for example when one party needs help/love and the other party offers it) it is important to steer it back. The basic ethical dictum: one needs to act in the patient's best interests.

Also like ministers, doctors are chronically busy people. They spend about half their time in contact with patients, and the rest on admin, keeping up to date, management and finance of the

practice and so forth. Ministers are similarly compromised. Both face the ongoing challenge of trying to carve out some kind of work/life balance. There is a duty of care to oneself and also to one's family. A support network of one's peers is vital to bounce ideas off and for help in times of need.

Dr. Agass concluded that, like ministers, the qualities that make a good doctor include kindness, generosity, respect for others and compassion. Our personal qualities are influenced by our social and professional environment. And the mentoring / advisory role of senior doctors / ministers is also important.

The day concluded with a very pleasant lunch in the Arlosh Hall, before everyone went their separate ways.

Coventry holds an organ recital

Local organist Tim Campain is pictured below with Rev. Jeffrey Bowes in front of the Great Meeting House Unitarian Church's historic 1935 Hammond organ, prior to his recital there on 6th September.



photo by David E. Gillman

Service conducted by Rev. Kinga-Reka Szekely at UNM



On Sunday August 24th, Rev. Kinga-Reka Szekely conducted our service. She arrived with four others who were all attending the IARF (International Association for Religious Freedom) conference at Birmingham University.

Rev. Kinga gave us a history of the Church in Transylvania. She told us some history of the Unitarian church in Transylvania that the edict of Torda 1568 was an act of religious toleration. In reference to our own act of toleration, Winnie Gordon answered that the date of the UK act of religious toleration was 1689. We had to wait a further 120 years!

Rev. Kinga also said that our higher duty is more than just toleration. We should engage with others of different persuasion not just put up with them.

After agapé our guests were returning to the conference to hear the keynote speech by Karen Armstrong. Karen originates from Birmingham and a little research turned up this response that Karen made in an interview during the 9/11 twin towers horror.

"Even before 9/11, I was gripped by a sense of dread: our lack of criticism about what we were doing in the Middle East – the slagging off of a whole religious tradition. It is part of a habit of prejudice that made the death camps possible. It's as if we hadn't learned anything from the 1930s,"

I regret that little has changed in the attitude of the West to Arab nations. So Rev. Kinga's reference to toleration was highly relevant not just to the issues of the conference but also it was an urgent message to all parties in current conflicts.

Finally Rev Kinga urged us to note the anniversary of the death of the founder of the Unitarian church in Transylvania - Ferenc David -on 15 November. He died in prison in 1579 for his beliefs. He believed that salvation does not stem from the Crucifixion of Jesus but from his life and teaching.

David Jones (from UNM Newsletter)



Rev. Kinga (far L) with Rev. Winnie Gordon (far R)

New courses / groups at Oxford

Since our Outreach meeting in October, some members of the Oxford congregation, led by Student Minister Kate Dean, have set up a group called **Spirituality+**, which is a "Unitarian support and meditation group for students who are 'spiritual, but not religious.' They meet at St. John's College on odd Wednesdays during term-time. For more information, contact Kate Dean on kateboo@gmail.com 07870 322 519.

In the Spring, Oxford member Josephine Seccombe will be leading a series of Saturday workshops on **The Enneagram**, in the church room at St Michael at the Northgate, Oxford. For more information, contact georgie.simpson1@gmail.com

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**"You will never empty your purse by giving, or your heart by loving" Barbara Russell**

## **A Time for Giving**

It has always been my main gripe about Christmas: people are often artificially full of goodwill and bonhomie when, for the rest of the year they can hardly spare you a smile. It reminds me of my time as a student in Germany when we were having a party in the student hostel. I was very happy sitting at a table pleasantly chatting when a rather dour individual, who could hardly bother to talk to you usually, came up to me and said: 'Vot is the matter with you English. It is party time. You must let your hair down.' (Obviously a nice English idiom he had just acquired). I politely asked him, in German, if he wanted me to dance naked on the table!

Such behaviour has always irritated me. And so it is with Christmas, the so-called time for giving. People often spend the weeks before the festive season frantically searching for presents that they can't afford, to give to people they hardly know in some instances, and who don't want the present anyway. How ridiculous! If only they realised, a small gift at any time of the year to show one's appreciation for a service rendered, or simply to express one's consideration and love to a person desperately in need of it, it would be much better.

It is the same when we give of ourselves. My own father, who was a kind man, gave up nearly all of Christmas Day playing games with his only child (that was me), whilst for the rest of the year I was mostly left to entertain myself. Mind you he did work long hours and was often not at home for long periods, so I suppose he had a good excuse. Others, however, have no such excuse when they reserve their social commitment for special occasions and willingly shut their eyes and minds to the needs of others throughout the year. This became obvious to me when one Christmas Day my wife and I volunteered to help with the down-

and-outs at a Salvation Army hostel. Those in need of a good dinner and a bit of friendship were great company, but, oh dear, some of the helpers were clueless! It was obvious they had reserved their act of charity for this one day only and had no real empathy with those they were trying to help.

No, Christmas is not the only time for giving; every single day offers us an opportunity to extend the hand of friendship to those in need and to spread a bit of love and kindness in the world. I hope I am not hacked off this year at Christmas by all that forced joviality and artificial present giving! Call me Scrooge if you must!

### **Graham Williams (Kidderminster)**

In our complex 21st century society, we tend to buy most of our possessions from shops, which have in turn been supplied by factories, which mass-produce thousands of x and millions of y. So it is always a treat to buy something that has been made by a pair of human hands, with care and affection. This week I bought a simple wooden bowl, which had been hand-turned by a local artist. And it is beautiful. And more precious, because it was made with that care and affection.

I have also just finished crocheting an afghan blanket to give to my daughter (see overleaf), and was reminded of the quote from *The Lord Of The Rings*, when the Lothlorien Elves say to Pippin (about the elven cloaks): "We put the thought of all that we love into all that we make." I have certainly crocheted it with love, thinking about my daughter a lot as I made it.

But the same attitude can be brought to any task undertaken by humankind. It can be done carelessly, hastily, in a slipshod fashion, with no care for the outcome. Or it can be done with love

and attention, for the sake of the work itself, and for the pride of creation and the joy of creativity. And that is good.

### **Sue Woolley (MUA)**



photo by Maz Woolley

## Review: *With or Without God* by Gretta Vosper

ISBN 9780062294852, published by Harper Perennial.

Possibly through my Churches Together contacts, I received a mysterious invitation to attend a talk by Gretta Vosper at Bloomsbury Baptist Church on 24<sup>th</sup> September last. I was relieved to find a fellow infidel in attendance there, no less than the Chief Officer of the General Assembly, Derek McAuley.

Gretta Vosper is a Canadian United Church minister and chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity. Her talk was in part a launch (or possibly relaunch) of a book entitled, *With or without God*. In her book Gretta cites with approval the writings of John Robinson, John Shelby Spong and a number of others (whom parts of the Mainstream will doubtless label as "the usual suspects").

Spong himself lauds the book as "powerful and provocative", and comments, "I enormously admire this rising voice of new Christian possibilities, and I commend Gretta's penetrating insights into the new generation of spiritually aware and spiritually open people". A statement on the book's cover reads, "Envisioning a future in which the Christian church plays a viable and transformative role in shaping society, Gretta Vosper argues that if the church is to survive at all, the heart of faith must undergo a radical change. Vosper believes that what will save the church is an emphasis on just and compassionate living - a new and wholly humanistic approach to religion. Without this reform, the church as we know it faces extinction."

I approach comments of this kind with some caution. The churches which survive and thrive currently seem to be those offering a simplistic message. Whether or not this will be long

term or not only time will tell. This is also true of certain political movements whose strengths are notoriously transitory. Gretta's book is hugely readable, a paperback of some 360 pages. Like Spong, her style is refreshingly didactic and outspoken.

For those Unitarians unlike me, who bear little Christian baggage, much of what Gretta says may seem old hat, but her practical touch is a helpful one, probably of use to a minister, lay preacher or anyone leading a service. For instance there is an appendix providing "ideas, options and resources for those who wish to engage in religious practice". Gretta's forthright style can however lead to amusing inconsistencies. On page 324 she lauds a liturgical dancer entering "a worship space waving a heavy white silk flag on a long wooden stick", yet on the very next page under the heading Liturgical Garb she states, "You know this has to stop...the reasons to stop are so rock solid it doesn't matter." I am at a loss to appreciate the respective merits of silk flags on the one hand and demerits of liturgical garb on the other.

At her talk at Bloomsbury Baptist Church I asked Gretta if there was any real difference between her outlook and a Unitarian one. Although her reply was non committal it was positive and courteous. And I for one would for be the first to wave in her honour a heavy white silk flag on a long wooden stick.

Gavin Lloyd

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MUA Annual General Meeting

When: Saturday 21st March 2015

Where: venue to be confirmed

Guest Speaker: to be confirmed

THIS IS JUST AN ADVANCE NOTICE: PLEASE PUT THE
DATE IN YOUR DIARIES!

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
Oxford	Manchester College Chapel Society	11.00 am
Shrewsbury	Unitarian Church	10.30 am
Stourbridge	Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel	11.00 am
Warwick	High Street Chapel	4.30 pm

First Sunday of the Month:

Coseley	Old Meeting House	11.00 am
Dudley	Old Meeting House	3.00 pm
Oldbury	at Dudley	3.00 pm
Wolverhampton	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
Northampton	Unitarians	10.30 am

Third Sunday of the Month:

Coseley	Old Meeting House	11.00 am
Dudley	Old Meeting House	3.00 pm
Herefordshire Unitarians		3.00 pm
Oldbury	at Dudley	3.00 pm
Wolverhampton	at Dudley	3.00 pm

Fourth Sunday of the Month:

Coventry	Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church	11 am
Cradley	Park Lane Unitarian Chapel	6.30 pm
Northampton	Unitarians	10.30 am

Last Sunday of the Month:

Banbury	Unitarian Fellowship	11.00 am
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MUA Congregations: Contact Details

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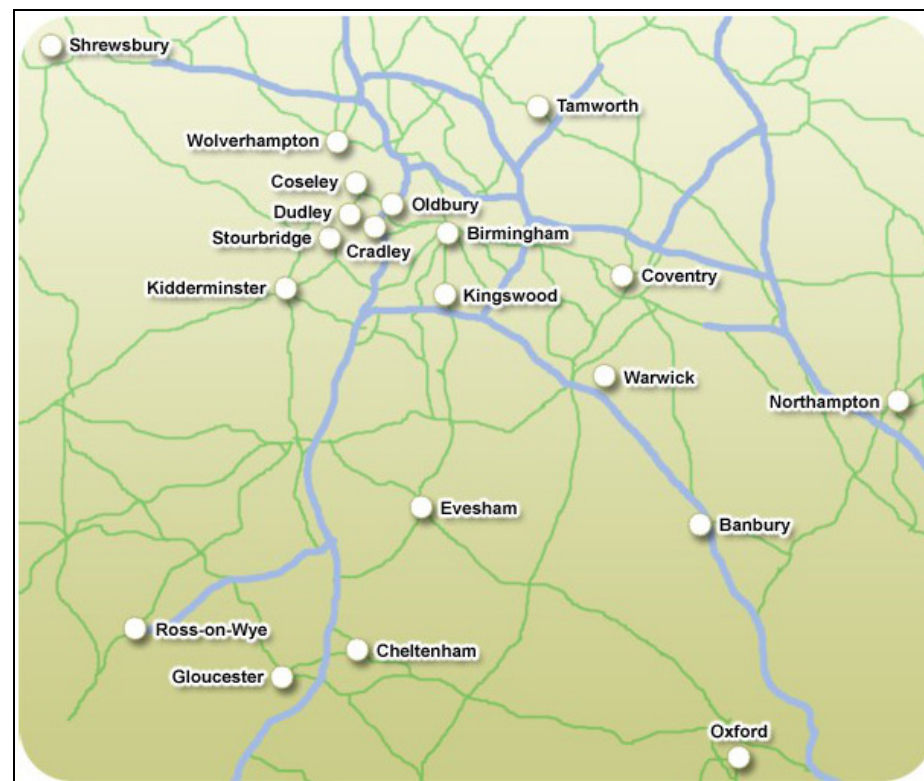
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Dreaming? by Kath Forder, then Riley, 2006

I dream of a world that's free of insanity:
No hatred or fear, no screaming in pain;
No armies colliding, but peace and serenity.
I dream of a world of freedom sustained.

I dream of a world that's free of man's vanity:
No arrogant sneers, no scheming for gain;
No heartless deriding, but caring fraternity.
I dream of a world of reason attained.

I dream of a world that's full of humanity:
Of kindness sincere and love unconstrained;
No abyss dividing, but living in unity.
I dream of a world where tolerance reigns.



The Spring 2015 issue will be published in April.

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,
& on the theme of "Growth and Springtime"**

by Monday 16th March 2015

Thank you!