

MU NOW



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From the Editor

Welcome to the Spring 2016 issue of *MU Now*.

As I mentioned in the last issue, 2016 is the **Sesquicentenary (150th Anniversary) of the foundation of our District Association**. We are now well into our time of celebration, which include a special commemorative publication, our 150th AGM on 26th March 2016 (see pages 10-27), and later on, an MUA visit to Quarry Bank Mill and Styal Chapel, on Saturday 24th September 2016. (See pages 9 and 40).

The reporting of the AGM includes the **full texts** of both our President Jane Couper's Presidential Address and Rev. Ant Howe's Guest Speaker speech. Both are a treat to read. Our congregations also have their own news - see District Round Up, which starts on page 29.

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 "Where do *you* encounter the divine?"**, and the deadline for submissions will be **Saturday 3rd September**.

Sue Woolley

President's Piece



This edition's theme, "Appreciating What We Have" has, as was doubtless intended, proved thought provoking. I daresay we could all produce individual lists of things we appreciate; moreover, I feel confident our different lists would have satisfying elements of commonality. As I write, we have just basked in a late spring burst of amazingly good weather, with high temperatures, blue skies and blossom-laden trees at their best. Who has not appreciated that boon? I could hazard a guess that included in our shared lists would be: family, friends, experiences, opportunities, words, art, travels, music, ideas, gardens – and blossom.

Then we reach the differences in appreciation which often leave others perplexed. I happen to appreciate Cocker Spaniels, especially for their enthusiastic, merry disposition, but my husband tends to the view that they are bio-hazards and sub-names ours "Captain Hygienic". Appreciation seems subjective. There are instances where we appreciate a skill, a painting, a piece of music, or a person's qualities, but that does not necessarily mean the appreciation extends to liking. Surely we have all been in the position of admiring a painting but not wanting it on our wall. Or, of being aware of another's excellence without warming to them sufficiently to say we like them, yet knowing we can work with them. Appreciating their gifts and talents may be challenging, but also important and welcome.

Consider the word "appreciate". It comes from the Latin meaning "to price", and we are familiar with it being used in a financial sense. We are used to the idea of things appreciating and

becoming more valuable, often due to the vagaries of the market: houses, shares, vintage cars, and fine wine work as examples here. Putting that calculable understanding to one side for now, there are several other aspects to appreciation, chiefly gratitude, but including understanding, appraising and valuing. Above all, I think the deeper levels of appreciation are born out of experience and knowledge. Of course children are grateful, but only to a point within the context of their understanding. As children, most of us have appreciated our parents' love and care, but probably without fully realising the depth and extent of self-giving it entailed. Now, with life experience, we look back in respectful admiration for all they accomplished for us. Quietly, it dawns on us that our achievements have often come to us by way of their foresight and sometimes sacrificial efforts. In time, it may well be that our children realise the same, and so the process continues through its endless cycle of giving, appreciating and learning to give.

Sometimes it's clearer to think oppositionally, and ask ourselves what things do we *not* appreciate. How about aggression, grasping, greed, meanness, rudeness, selfishness, self-centredness, self-satisfaction and cruelty as starters? These examples suggest we prefer and appreciate their opposites: peacefulness, generosity, sharing, politeness and compassion. Perhaps also appreciation comes when we really consider the things we tend to take for granted. We know these accepted elements of living are important but we consider them as standard in our lives (if not in everyone's.) How much do we appreciate plumbing, sanitation, drains, running hot and cold water, central heating, double glazing, street lighting and refuse collections? Of course we do, but not half so much in ordinary times as when they fail or go wrong. Then hear us, especially me, complain! I wonder whether the beautiful things in nature which we appreciate actually draw our attention to themselves when the right conditions prevail, and

that isn't necessarily very frequently. The luminous radiance of the blossoming tree in the light, the birds flying in formation, glorious sunsets, and freshly fallen snow are all periodic moments of loveliness which come as they do, beyond compelling and control. They catch us in a moment which cannot be of our choosing. Nature's moments of glory are often fleeting and catch us with their immediacy, it's now or never in that moment. We are caught unawares yet know that these need to be treasured and stored for encouragement in darker days.

In human life appreciation often builds, slowly and progressively, through experience and knowledge. Some things one can appreciate and enjoy on first contact but, with deeper acquaintance, we find they are perceived more profoundly. In the end, I find this New Testament passage sums it all up:

". . . whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

"Appreciating What We Have" excludes what we'd like to have – but don't. So for most of us some rather glamorous things have been excluded at the outset; we just have to accept reality. In the end your list and mine are likely to be reassuringly similar, Spaniels probably apart, but blossom definitely included. Honed down to some key fundamentals which enable us to keep close to the things that ultimately matter, I find that the ability to enjoy and appreciate the small things in life is vital. William Blake famously expressed it in a nutshell which cannot be bettered:

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour."

And we may also feel that, for all its shortcomings, this denomination of ours is something we appreciate for what it encourages in us without constraining us. The Midland Unitarian Association is key. This year's AGM marked its 150th anniversary, with our grateful thanks going to Kidderminster for its warm hospitality. We learned more about Ministering to Our Communities at the Spring Training Day led by Sue Woolley and Michael Dadson. Finally, the Northampton congregation's formal opening and dedication of their splendid new meeting house, coupled with the welcome extension of Sue's ministerial leadership, give us new grounds for optimism.

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## MUA District Minister: Spring Update

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

I am now well into my fifth year as **Minister of the Banbury Unitarian Fellowship**. Some members have been poorly in the last few months, but the spirit of the congregation is strong. We are grateful to Michaela Heppingstall for stepping up to the role of Secretary, following Malcolm Sadler's retirement. Elaine Nomura continues as Treasurer, and Michaela's husband David starts his second year as Chair.

**Leading worship around the Midland Unitarian Association:**  
My diary for **2016** is now full - I am leading worship somewhere

near you practically every Sunday between now and the end of this year (49 services over 46 Sundays in 2016). I look forward to seeing you in your churches and chapels as and when.

Our **Spring Training Day**, on the topic *Ministering To Our Communities Part Two*, had to be postponed from February to March, as I had an unavoidable hospital appointment. But it went very well. I covered the basics of pastoral care, and the limits of confidentiality in the morning, and Rev. Michael Dadson, our former District Minister, and now minister at Macclesfield, covered the art of listening and pastoral care of the dying and bereaved. The ten participants got a lot out of it.

Just now we are in the middle of running the **Worship Studies Course Foundation Step** for the fifth time of asking, with guest speakers Dr. Jane Russell, Rev. Winnie Gordon, Rev. Ant Howe, and Rev. Stephen Lingwood. It is a GA-recognised qualification, and really helps people to lead worship in our churches and chapels confidently and well.

I'm now within sight of the end of my second year on the **Encounter** course, which is a three-year training course, leading to a qualification in spiritual direction. I have also started to offer direction sessions, on a one-to-one basis. If anyone is interested, see page 39.

Finally, I have done my first few months as **Minister of Northampton Unitarians**, in addition to my District ministry. The highlight of which was undoubtedly our Grand Opening, on Saturday 7th May. It was good to see many MUA folk there - thank you for sharing this joyous occasion with us.

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

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MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages below, from our January meeting has already been shared in the relevant issue of *Bits & Pieces*, the monthly news-sheet sent to all congregations. Only the messages which have not been overtaken by events are included here:

Malcolm Sadler: we are sad to report that, after many years of devoted service, Malcolm Sadler has retired from the Executive Committee, due to ill health. His place as Ministers' Meeting Representative is taken by Rev. Winnie Gordon, minister of Birmingham and Kidderminster, whom we were pleased to welcome to this meeting.

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Sesquicentenary Update

As has been reported elsewhere in this issue, the Midland Unitarian Association celebrated its' 150th anniversary in March! Here are some of the ways we are planning to continue celebrating our District's anniversary - **with the help of our member congregations.**

The report about the AGM at Kidderminster on 26th March, 150 years to the day from the founding of the District Association, follows this update. We also launched a special commemorative book, with the title *Celebrating Our Community: A Short History of the Midland Unitarian Association, and Original Words by Unitarians from the Midlands*. The bulk of it consists of **original worship material, provided by our many talented writers and poets in the Midlands congregations.** I have been delighted at the variety

and quality of the contributions. Thank you to everyone who sent something in. It is available from Sue Woolley at a cost of £8.00 + £1.20 P+P (see page 40 for advert).

There will also be a **Summer Event at Kingswood** - details to be confirmed, and a **Visit to Quarry Bank Mill and Styal Chapel** has now been fixed for **Saturday 24th September 2016**. Some of the Styal congregation will be there to meet us, and Rev. Alex Bradley has kindly agreed to lead a short worship service for us. Further details will be issued nearer the time.

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## MUA 150th Annual General Meeting Kidderminster New Meeting House, 26th March 2016

On 26th March 1866, a meeting was held, at which the Unitarian Book and Tract Society and the Birmingham District Unitarian Association amalgamated to form the Midland Christian Union, later renamed the Midland Union of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches, and finally the Midland Unitarian Association. On 26th March 2016, one hundred and fifty years ago to the day, over fifty Midlands Unitarians celebrated our 150th anniversary at Kidderminster New Meeting House.



Following our usual brief and business-like AGM, we adjourned to the church hall for a delicious buffet lunch, which had been provided by the Kidderminster congregation. Then it was back into the church for the President's service. **Jane Couper** commented that we were in a liminal state, poised between remembering our past, and planning for our future.

She detailed lots of happenings from 1866, including the birth of future Unitarian Beatrix Potter. Then she turned to the future, saying that we are stepping out in gratitude to those who came before us, who have enabled us to be free in our now. She commented that we need to nurture and support welcoming, safe, hospitable communities with room for growth. She shared two metaphors about Unitarian community by Rev. Andrew Hill – that of a garden designed and tended together, where different plants need to be treated differently to thrive; and a box of chocolates – an extraordinary variety of folk, some soft-centred, some nutty – you can fill in the rest! Her full Presidential Address is reproduced on page 23, and is well worth a read.



Then came the highlight of the day, when our **Guest Speaker, Rev. Ant Howe**, gave us an inspirational talk on sacrificial giving – the need to give of ourselves, in order for our movement to survive and thrive. Here it is:

## Sacrificial Giving by Rev. Ant Howe

Opportunities like this don't come every day and I have to confess I feel a somewhat torn as I begin....

On one hand, I want to share in a sense of celebration and to give a talk which catches that mood.... And please hear me when I say that nothing I say today is designed to detract from celebrating 150 years of this District Association.

....but on the other hand I don't think I can give this talk honestly without addressing the situation which our movement and many of our churches find themselves in. If we are honest, we're struggling in some areas. In his President's Report Rev John Clifford notes that we are beginning to lose robustness as many of our Unitarian activists are getting to the point in their lives when they feel they have to do a bit less. (And we can't blame them, can we?)

It concerns me - - and I know that our District, whilst really well run, can sometimes struggle to find people to fill all its roles and offices.

Now you might say, "Well Ant, instead of lamenting that maybe you should get more involved in District life".... And you'd have a good point if you said that as, for various reasons I am not as directly involved in District life and events as many of you are... so it was quite a surprise and an honour to be asked to give this talk!

When Sue kindly reminding me of today's event she let me know that the title of this talk was 'Sacrificial Giving'. And I looked at her and said "what idiot thought up THAT as a title for a talk?"

To which she replied "You did.... It was the title you gave me when you agreed to do it!"....



Which only goes to show you shouldn't take too much notice of what I say.... Though I hope you'll indulge me with your attention for these few minutes.

As I said, I feel somewhat torn - - I want to give a talk that you will leave here glad to have heard, but on the other hand I don't know if I can resist the urge to go TOO far!

If I do, then know I do so lovingly and sincerely.

And I *do* know that I can be annoying sometimes...

You know, I've often took great comfort in that Bible verse which says "Woe unto you when all people speak well of you" – that will *never* be my problem!!

I sometimes provoke quite strong reactions in people but, even if folk don't agree with me, I hope that people at least respect my motives and what I have to say.

This is a special occasion - - 150 years of this Association. Of course, our churches here in the Midlands go back further than that – and there was probably some informal District support between those churches even before then - but this District Association has been supporting those our churches and chapels, and providing opportunities for fellowship, in a formal sense for a century and a half.

This year I will be marking an anniversary of my own - - though that anniversary does pale into insignificance against 150 years: This year marks ten years since I moved to the Midlands in order take up ministry here.

For ten years now I have been Minister at Kingswood and, for eight of those years, I had the privilege of being the Minister at Warwick – whom I am still blessed to have a friendship with.

Over the last ten years I have been blessed to be involved with a church which has grown in numbers and activities - - and it is one of the bigger congregations which we have within the Unitarian movement.

For that I thank God (and I'm one of those Unitarians who is happy to use that word)....

But we only have a Unitarian movement..... a district..... and local churches because of the sacrificial giving of our forebears - - so it is right that we honour them today. I will always be so grateful to our Unitarian forebears because Unitarianism was here for me to find.

When we look at our buildings and when we look at what our forebears went through and what they gave because they believed in Unitarianism... well, I just find it amazing.

And perhaps this Easter weekend – as many of us are considering the death of Jesus and those mysterious events of Easter – it is a good time to think about sacrificial giving.

And later in this talk I *will* explore for a minute or two what 'sacrificial giving' might mean for us today.

But first I want to reflect on my time as a Unitarian - - - As I am sure is the case for many of you, Unitarianism has been the greatest blessing I have experienced in my life.

If I hadn't found it when I had, I pray that I would've found it later - - because I honestly don't know how I would've lived without it.

Unitarianism has given me a way of relating to the Divine, being in community with others, a place to worship, friendships - - - and frames the whole way I live.

I love Unitarianism. To me it is the 'pearl of great price'.

I never get tired of talking about it or sharing it with others.

And I just love Unitarians too.

Now, when I became a Unitarian I was told there were 'about' four and a half thousand Unitarians on the books. "That's OK" I thought. There's now 4501 because I've joined!....and that number is sure to go up!"

I started to read Unitarian history - - and I read that Unitarian numbers had peaked around the start of the first world war and have been slowly declining ever since.

I pondered a lot about why this might be....obviously two world wars had a lot to do with it.... And the general downturn in church attendance.

But I wasn't too worried. 4500 wasn't a bad base for a movement to build on...and I was sure that numbers would not continue to decline.

Why, was I so sure?

Well, Unitarianism is amazing. It gives people the opportunity to together and worship together, yet still allows for individual conscience and belief - - who wouldn't want that? (I thought!). It's life changing, life transforming... and, for some us, it has been life SAVING.

I was sure that numbers would not go down further....

Yet numbers have continued to decline – despite the efforts, hard work, commitment, and prayers of our people, numbers have continued to decline and churches have closed.

I looked back at some of the figures - - in the last ten years our movement has lost 1000 members.

A quarter of our membership – gone.

I find that heartbreaking.... Don't you?

I find it heartbreaking on one hand because I knew a fair number of those people and they are no longer with us: they were members of our churches. They were our family, our tribe. We miss them.

I find it heartbreaking on the other hand because we haven't been as successful as we might in sharing such an amazing faith with others.... and how many people have lived and died without even hearing about Unitarianism? It could've changed their lives, yet they never even knew we were here.

I was chatting to one of our new members at Kingswood who asked me, quite sincerely, "How did I get to the age I did without hearing about Unitarianism before now?"....

And to be honest, I didn't have an answer.

I also find it heartbreaking because some of our beautiful buildings have been lost to Unitarianism....

Now I do know that when a church closes the assets of that church are used to help the wider Unitarian cause, but we're not growing either - - overall we are declining. And that troubles me, as I am sure it troubles you.... Many of our churches are hanging by a thread.... and if things continue as they are then the Unitarian movement will become non-viable in a few years.

And that is so painful to contemplate isn't it?

Yet we don't often talk about it....maybe because it IS so painful.

So, instead, we keep doing what we've always done - - and we might to do it well. And today we CAN give thanks that our District IS so well run.... And we give thanks for our present day officers and committee members.



We rightly celebrate this anniversary today - - but the reason our District Association exists is to support the churches within it.... and if the churches closed then there would be no District.

Now if that were to happen – and I am determined it won't – we could still gather together.... We could remember the good times, and we could still call ourselves Unitarians.

But what about everyone 'out there'?

If Unitarianism dies then the world has been robbed of such a blessing.

I am convinced there are people who NEED what we have to offer.

So as we gather today - in celebration of the past - I pray that we will hold out some hope of the future.

I believe that there is always hope - - that's one of the great themes of the Easter story!

The Bible tells us *"Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you a reason for the hope that is in you"*

That's a verse in the Bible that means a lot to me: always being ready to defend our faith and give reasons for the hope which it gives to us.

Unitarianism gave me great hope, and I want to find a way of sharing that hope with others. Not forcing them to believe what I believe, but offering them a place with us if it would enhance their lives.

To me, Unitarianism is so precious that it deserves defending, promoting and nurturing that it might bless many other people.....

Now, much as I love our Unitarian denomination, it's equally no secret that I sometimes disagree with the direction we are headed.

The thing I perhaps lament most is that we seem reluctant to give people "a reason for the hope that is in us".

All too often we talk about what we DON'T believe rather than talking about the things we do....

And we don't always feel comfortable talking about our religious convictions.

We're happy to pass resolutions at conference about all sorts of things, which often then get quickly forgotten about, yet we're often scared to talk about the essence of our faith – the spiritualness – in case we offend anybody.

But other churches and other faiths aren't worried about that. They don't hold back promoting their faith because they might offend someone. Not at all! They go for it!

Why not us? Have we not got reasons just as strong for the hope that is in us? I think we have.

I think Unitarians should have the best preaching, the best music, the most vibrant congregations. If other churches can do it, then why not us?

And if we don't know how to grow (and generally we don't) then what is stopped us buying in that expertise to help us?

What is stopping us bringing in expertise which will help us clearly and effectively communicate our wonderful religion?

Now the fundamentalist churches are great at defending their position – and they can speak loudly, coherently and theologically. I strongly disagree with what they say, but I would never say they shouldn't say it.

Instead, I believe that the Unitarians should be able to present an alternative which is just as coherent and theological.... And we

should have vibrant beloved and blessed communities which people want to join....

Of course, that might mean changing the way we do things, and that can be a scary thought. That is what 'sacrificial giving' might mean to us: having to let go of some of our familiar ways in order that Unitarianism might be made more accessible to others.

But too often, I fear, things don't change because we're scared of upsetting people within our own ranks.

We don't tell the world what we stand for as a religious faith.

"Ah well it's difficult" I sometimes hear people say "because not all Unitarians believe the same thing so we can't really speak for everyone."

Well that's very true – but I'd rather open the debate and risk someone disagreeing with me, than say nothing at all.

Time is too short and the situation is too dire to wait any longer.

We have an urgent need to grow vibrant congregations if our movement is to survive. If we wait until we all agree on everything before going all out to promote our faith, then we'll be extinct before we ever have the chance to save it – and we will rob the world of a great blessing in the process.

I think our movement is now so fragile that we have to defend it with our lives.....

So how do we defend our faith? Well here's the method that Jesus used – and it's the one I use:

If we look at the gospels, Jesus was always making a defence for his faith and he would *ground* his faith by linking it to a tradition.

He would quote sources "it is written...." And he'd challenge people "have you not read? Have you not seen?". He'd try to get others thinking too and a dialogue started.

Jesus also told stories – and we all have stories to tell about what Unitarianism has done for us.

You know, we've got much to be proud of....this District has a lot to be proud of...

As today's Unitarians we can speak with a degree of authority. We've got a great history to link to, going back hundreds of years. We've got a history of free-thought, free-religion and fighting for equality to draw on.

But we have to find a way of communicating it for today effectively....and we have to do it soon.

The key is to say what we have to say in love....

"This is my commandment, that you love one another" says Jesus.

Now people can get quite upset, even in the face of love, I won't deny that. But articulating our faith clearly and lovingly creates debate, creates thought, and helps the message get through.

The message has more integrity – WE have more integrity – if we know what we're talking about.

I don't think we should be afraid of talking about theology.....

I've had Unitarians say to me "ah, but Unitarians don't really *do* theology".

I could not disagree more strongly! Theology: the word theology means a *reasoned discourse about the divine*. If we can't honestly and passionately discuss our faith then we've got problems...

We've little to lose by articulating our faith with passion.

Occasionally people won't like us for what we stand for. That's ok. I'd rather be disliked for what I believe than liked because I didn't have the courage to state what I do.

Now you could well say to me "you seem to be saying that we should go around debating our faith and talking about it. But what about social action? What about caring? Aren't those things important?". Well I'm glad you asked! Those things are vital if our faith is to have any meaning, both to ourselves and others.

If all we do is talk about what we believe then we are just a cold, theological group. There has to be a practical application of religion: forgiveness, caring, love - - making our religion *evident*.

But if our religion is solely about caring or campaigning then how are we different to any other secular group?

It's the two things BLENDING that make us into a living religious movement: faith and action.

We need both.

And we need to be *real*. Individual Unitarians don't have to know great theological terms..... but we do need to be able to articulate what Unitarianism has done for us, why it is so precious, and how it can change lives.

I've found that people are most interested when you share your own journey. Share where you came from. Share your mistakes. I've made many of them, and am happy to talk about them.

There is no one way of doing Unitarianism. Your faith is yours. Your truth is yours. There's room for it in Unitarianism.... All I am saying is that to grow our congregations we need to be able to really articulate what we stand for and what we can offer....

I wasn't at the GA Meetings this year but a conversation was reported back to me. My name was mentioned and the growth we've experienced Kingswood. And someone then said "ah well, what Ant has done can't be repeated by others because everything Ant does depends on Ant being Ant".

Now I don't think that person meant it in a complimentary way, but in a way they were right.

Of course what I do depends on me being me. If I tried to be anything else other than me it would look false.

And your greatest asset for promoting Unitarianism is you.

We need to be real if we're to attract others.... We do well to speak from a faith which is grounded... We do even better when we can speak with passion and, if necessary, defend our faith... but all of this should be tempered by love, and if our actions do not match the faith we are proclaiming then our integrity is lost.

"Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you a reason for the hope that is in you".

Let us go forward in hope!

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Presidential Address to our 150th AGM

by Jane Couper

You might not think 1866 was a particularly memorable year, certainly it was no 1066, but it had its own dramas. Some familiar themes and connections soon emerge.

Then, as now, the monarch was female. Victoria had been on the throne for almost 30 years of a reign which was to last 63 years and 7 months, a record to be surpassed in our time by her great, great grand daughter Elizabeth.

The divisive political issue of the day was parliamentary reform. It caused such severe splits in the Liberal government of Lord John Russell that he lost a vote of “no confidence”, and, in June, was replaced by the Earl of Derby, leading a minority Conservative government. On the financial front a London Bank, Overend, Gurney & Co, collapsed precipitating a financial crisis.

There were disasters and tragedies. A cholera epidemic in London caused more than 5,000 deaths and England’s worst mining disaster, was in Yorkshire. 361 coal miners were killed, and on the following day a subsidiary explosion killed 27 rescuers. A step to avert disaster and tragedy came with the creation of what was to become the London Fire Brigade.

On a more celebratory note there were several babies born who would become household names, including authors H.G. Wells & Beatrix Potter, the car designer Herbert Austin, and the discoverer of Tutankhamen’s tomb, the 5th Earl of Carnarvon.

On the competitive front, the clipper *Taeping* won the Great Tea Race, by the very slender margin of twenty minutes in the 99 day journey between Foochow and London. Technology gained ground. Improvement on a large scale included the SS Great

Eastern laying a permanent transatlantic telegraph cable and, on a small but vital scale, the clinical thermometer was invented.

Religious news? The first stable Anglican religious order for men since the Reformation, the Cowley Fathers, was founded in Oxford. Domestically, the Post Office urged all householders to fit a letterbox and Cadbury’s first sold cocoa for drinking.

Oh, and there was a royal marriage. . . Nothing changes and everything changes.

The District “Word of the Year” (and one best said when sober) seems to be *sesquicentenary*, the celebration of a one hundred and fiftieth anniversary.

We know that, in 1866, The Midland Christian Union of Presbyterian and other Non-Subscribing Churches merged with The Unitarian Book and Tract Society, and from that came, eventually, our more snappily titled Midland Unitarian Association. For that shorter and very clear name, many thanks!

And here we are now, inheritors of all the vicissitudes of the years between 1866 and 2016. It is fitting, that today we remember those from the past who played their part in our 150 years. Some of them will be known to us in person or by name, and many more will be unknown and unnamed. For all those who worked and ministered within our churches and district, in their memory I light this candle from our chalice flame.

Once upon a time and a long time ago, when I was a student studying Rites of Passage, we read about the concept of “betwixt and between”. This refers to the state of being on the threshold of a new and altered state. Because we were students, and flippant, this became a bit of an “in” joke. As we travelled on the late night

bus back to lodgings in Morecambe after an evening in the library being “on the Morecambe bus” became a summary statement of being betwixt and between any two states. Between the leaving and the arrival, there seemed an unconscionable period during which we were neither in one place nor the other, neither here nor there, just on a rickety bus going somewhere, we hoped, albeit slowly. In some ways we were betwixt and between more than two places, we inhabited other intermediate states, between youth and adulthood, dependence and independence, minority and majority status.

We gather here on Easter Saturday (or Holy Saturday or Empty Saturday) similarly fixed betwixt and between Good Friday’s death and Easter Sunday resurrection narratives, though I’ll leave exploring that problem to those conducting worship tomorrow! Today we too are, just for a moment, in a similarly liminal state as we are poised between thinking about our past and our future. Some of us question how relevant it is to know our Unitarian history and that is a legitimate question worth discussing. There was a question on an A level Hinduism paper which went something like this, “How important is the study of the Indus valley to a contemporary Hindu? It’s a fascinating question requiring both knowledge and the ability to evaluate and relate it three and a half thousand years forward. There is no easy answer, especially under time pressure in an examination. It really is one of those questions where it does depend on. . . well, lots of things!

On a less grand sweep of time, we might pose a similar question and ask how important knowledge of our history is to contemporary Unitarians. And, we may well find we come up with an analogous answer - for rather similar reasons.

But to know something of the past gives understanding and context, it doesn’t fix or constrain us. We generally know enough of our past to honour it by working for our future, recognising

that will, indeed must, involve change if we are to contribute to *our* days.

Think back to the titles of our merged predecessors, which included the words “Christian Union” and “Tract”. Words which don’t roll off our tongues much these days, they indicate something very different from what is familiar to us now. We have come a very long way and there is still far to go, but together, and learning as we go, we can step out with gratitude to those who came before us whilst free to respond to our “now”.

In those 150 years there have been successes and losses. Losses of people and of whole church communities, but in 2016, as we’ve heard, there are also points of development and encouragements for us to celebrate. We can create welcoming, safe, open, inclusive and hospitable communities with room for growth. It’s hard work but it makes a difference, we are here because Unitarian communities matter to us.

Andrew Hill wrote that he had collected 72 (perhaps more by now) definitions of Unitarian communities. Some of these defined a community as itself – “A Unitarian community is a Unitarian community” whilst others defined a Unitarian community as what it’s not, “It’s not - historically – a Trinitarian one.”

But the third type contained the ones he really liked, definitions by metaphor because metaphors integrate, are inter-dependent and holistic. He wrote of eight and two caught my attention. You may like to think of your own congregations as I repeat them!



So first, “Unitarianism is like... A GARDEN.

A Unitarian community is like a garden designed and tended together.

People’s spiritual needs differ so they need different treatments.

Some need adequate shade, and plant trees and shrubs.

Others need colour and a succession of bright flowers or perhaps scent and sweet-smelling herbs and plants.

Yet others need useful things and cultivate vegetables.

And all the time the garden changes and the plants grow.

One plant can choke another.

Weeds must be eradicated, seeds sown and new plants introduced.

And all the time the proper balance of the garden must be preserved for the well-being of the whole garden community.

Unitarian community is like that.



Secondly, Unitarianism is like ... A BOX OF CHOCOLATES.

We are such an extraordinary variety of folk - soft centred, nutty, diamond shaped, hard toffee, wrapped in gold foil, all covered in dark chocolate and so irresistible that we really don’t know who is coming next, who the next new member will be.

Unitarian community is like that.

So, think of your own metaphor, have fun playing around with it, as you continue to create/build and sustain wonderfully eclectic Unitarian communities as we step over the threshold into our continuing story.

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## **Strong MUA presence at GA of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches Annual Meetings**

I am delighted to report that there was a strong Midland Unitarian Association presence at the General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches Annual Meetings, which were held at the Hilton Metropole in Birmingham in the last week of March. No less than ten folk attended from Birmingham UNM, four from Kingswood, three each from Shrewsbury and Warwick, two from Kidderminster, and one each from Evesham

and Cheltenham & Gloucester. Three ministers and three retired ministers were also present; and Gavin Lloyd from Oxford, one of our most popular lay preachers, was also there. A few other folk came just for the Anniversary Service, which was beautifully led by Rev. Winnie Gordon, minister of Birmingham UNM and Kidderminster. MUA folk were also prominent in the break-out workshops, speaking at the Unitarian Peace Fellowship, Worship Studies Course, 2020 Group, Unitarian Renewal Group, and Unitarian Christian Association slots. We done good!

The General Assembly meetings are a wonderful opportunity to see "Unitarians at their best" – to meet old friends, make new ones, and learn more about our beloved Uncommon Denomination. It would be great to have an even stronger representation from MUA congregations next year, which will also be at the Hilton Metropole in Birmingham, so there isn't far to travel. If you want to know more, please ask.

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District Round-up

Cotswold Group minister, Rev. Don Phillips, retires



At the end of a very successful 12-year ministry by **Rev. Don Phillips**, the *Cotswold Group Newsletter* published the following

piece by **Alison Thursfield**, Chair of the Cotswold Group Committee:

"We all know that Rev. Don Phillips is coming to the end of his time ministering to the Cotswold Group of churches, and as we reflect on his 12 years with us, everyone will have their own thoughts and memories. Here are a few.

The life of the Cotswold Group has been enhanced as Don developed the Worship Leaders' Group, helping it to take an active role. Retreat Days have challenged the worship leaders, but they have given us a wider focus than our 'local' services, and Don has encouraged us to come together and share spiritually with the whole Cotswold Group.

When Don began his ministry, it was part-time with Evesham, Gloucester, and Cheltenham. He was already involved with Cirencester, so it made sense for them to join the Cotswold Group, and eventually we were able to make Don's appointment full time. Don encouraged the late David Wright to set up a Fellowship in Herefordshire as an offshoot of the Gloucester congregation, and this continues. However, change also continued with the merging of the Gloucester and Cheltenham congregations. Services every Sunday at Bayshill and quarterly meetings at Gloucester. Don was proactive in helping us manage these changes, as he was in the positive development of each congregation.

Inevitably our congregations have changed over the years, and Don has given us a lead in integrating new members to our new Unitarian life. Most of us only see Don's work on Sundays at whichever service we attend, and we have appreciated his leadership. What we haven't all seen is the valuable work he has put in with individuals with pastoral care; and the rites of passage

he has conducted; and his contributions to the Inquirer Group and Friday Light in Evesham. Other work for which we must thank Don is his lead in making us develop safeguarding policies in each congregation, and his lead in registering Evesham and Cheltenham for same sex marriages. Don has made sure we are fit for the 21st century. And on a lighter note, the way Don masterminded our Transylvanian adventure made it a truly memorable experience for those who went.

The years have brought many changes, but as a Group we are willing to adapt to changing circumstances - encouraged by Don to be flexible and embrace change. Thank you.

I hope Don will look back on his ministry with a sense of fulfilment. We all join in giving him a big Vote of Thanks for all he has done; and we wish him and Linda a long, happy and healthy retirement."

Don himself gave his farewells in his final *The Minister's Piece* in the same issue of the Cotswold Group Newsletter:

"This is the last Minister's Piece that I shall ever write for your newsletter. It is indeed a strange feeling, after anticipating my retirement for so long, that the time has now very nearly arrived. But the time is right! ... Thank you for your support and friendship through twelve fulfilling years as your minister in times of both joy and sadness. I shall miss you all, and miss being with you, but no doubt I'll hear of you, and come across some of you from time to time on those occasions when Unitarians meet. I trust that it'll be possible to speak to most of you during the course of May's undoubtedly rapid passage, but for a written "and finally" from Linda and me, our blessings and good wishes to you all."

Don was a valued member of the MUA Executive Committee from 2007 - 2010, and was instrumental in starting the Worship Studies Course Foundation Step in the Midlands, which he and I ran jointly for the first time in 2008. He was also a guest speaker on more than one of our training courses, sharing his wisdom generously with lay worship leaders across the District. **SW**

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### **Rev. Ann Latham**



photo by Ash James

We are very sad to report that Rev. Ann Latham, who was for some years Minister Emeritus at Kidderminster New Meeting House, died on 20th April, after a long battle with cancer. Kath Forder, lately Ann's Lay Pastor at Kidderminster, wrote in the *Cotswold Group Newsletter*: "She fought this horrible disease with humour and courage, never losing her care and concern for others."

Her funeral took place at Kidderminster on Monday 9th May, and was well-attended by Unitarians from across the country. It was ably led by Rev. Winnie Gordon, who is now Kidderminster's minister, and included tributes from three members of the Kidderminster congregation - Graham Williams, Peter Markey, and Ash James, as well as from Rev. Penny Johnson and Joyce Ashworth, both of whom knew her well from her time in the Manchester and Lancashire area.

Ann was also a member of the MUA Executive Committee, serving as the Women's League representative from 2007 to 2011. She will be very much missed.

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Northampton dedicates new Meeting House

Following their move to new premises, as reported in the last issue of *MU Now*, the Northampton congregation decided to hold a Grand Opening on the afternoon of Saturday 7th May.



photo by Jeffrey Bowes

The building was looking pristine, and it was a gorgeous sunny day. People began to arrive at half-past one, and the service of dedication was led by Rev. Sue Woolley at two o'clock. After that congregation and guests were free to mingle, to look around the meeting house, and to enjoy the lovely buffet laid on by Elsie's Café. It was a joyous occasion, that the congregation will long remember. We certainly appreciate what we have, and will strive to build on it.



photos above & below by Sue Woolley

Greetings were brought from the General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches by Chief Officer Derek McAuley (pictured below), and from the Midland Unitarian Association by our President, Jane Couper.



Shrewsbury has lovely new banner

At last: we've got a banner! A beautiful, beautiful banner, that we can flourish and flaunt on all manner of appropriate occasions to let the whole world know that Unitarianism is alive and well in Shrewsbury and we are proud to publicise our faith.



This, for me is the culmination of a long-held dream: that Shrewsbury should have its own banner to display. The idea has simmered away in the background for many, many years, occasionally bubbling to the surface, before submerging once more beneath more crucial and immediate problems building repairs.

Now the long, tedious period of gestation is over and some truly wonderful midwives have safely delivered a true work of art. A

joy to behold and an acquisition of which the congregation can be proud for generations to come.

A most enormous THANK YOU to all who made my dreams a reality: to those who offered ideas and suggestions, words of encouragement and support, and most of all, the planners, designers, embroiderers, stitchers and 'construction workers' who laboured long hours to ensure a successful birth, amongst whom I should mention Kusameh, Hanni, Charley, and Simon. You have worked wonders. Well done, all of you.

Our banner has already been on parade at Kidderminster and Birmingham and I hope it will have a long and active life representing Shrewsbury Unitarians as often and as far afield as possible. We wish it well. **Joan Hughes**

And **Alison Patrick** wrote a beautiful prayer of dedication:

May our banner be a prayer of joy.

We celebrate the colours, textures and shapes of creation.

May our banner be a prayer of thankfulness.

We thank those who designed and made it for sharing their talents, for giving their time.

May our banner be a prayer of faith.

From idea to fulfilment takes time. May we keep our hearts and minds open to possibilities and opportunities.

May our banner be a prayer of hope.

We celebrate renewal of life and spirit in the stream of the river, the leaves of the trees, the light of the flames.

May our banner be a prayer of love.

May we support one another as the chalice holds the candle, and let our light shine in the world. Amen.

(from May 2016 newsletter of Shrewsbury Unitarian Church)

Appreciating What We Have

I like Facebook. I know it can be a terrible time-waster, but I log on every day to keep up with all my Unitarian friends round the country, and with my children-no-longer-children, now both away at University. And I 'like', to use the Facebook jargon, a lot of pages, which include many pithy quotes which make me reflect on how I am spending my time and living my life. Like the one below:



One of my favourite pages on Facebook is called 'becoming minimalist' and the page owner, Joshua Becker, posts a lot of inspirational tips on how to simplify your life, and on how to appreciate what you have, rather than forever going after the next thing. One post last week read: "Treasure your relationships, not your possessions."

Simplicity is also one of the five Quaker testimonies. In their *Advices and Queries*, they say: "Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle, freely chosen, is a source of strength. Do not be persuaded into buying what you do not need or cannot afford. Do you keep yourself informed about the effects your style of living is having on the global economy and environment?" On the Quakers in Britain website, they explain: "Quakers are concerned

about the excesses and unfairness of our consumer society, and the unsustainable use of natural resources. We try to live simply and to give space for the things that really matter: the people around us, the natural world, our experience of God."

And I am finding that these beliefs, these ideas, matter increasingly to me. I know that my lifestyle is currently very far from simple, and that the way I live has more of an impact on the environment than it should. But I am working on it. For example, in the last twelve months, I have given up cigarettes and alcohol, and am trying to eat more healthily too. I am still very bad at buying new books whenever I see them, but try to really consider whether I need other consumer items, such as clothes or jewellery, or gadgets. Because I do believe that "a simple lifestyle, freely chosen, is a source of strength."

Appreciating what we have is also about being aware of the sacred in the world. Sacred living is about weaving moments of attention into your everyday life, and recognising the sacred there. It is about living with a new level of awareness. It is about going through our day paying attention to what is happening in each passing moment. It is about noticing the presence of the divine, the numinous, everywhere, in the natural world, in other people, in ourselves, and in things that happen to us. Sacred living is about rediscovering our sense of wonder, and living our lives in response to that. Sacred living is about truly appreciating what we have.

Sue Woolley

Another side of Appreciating What We Have is by supporting it and nurturing it, whatever "it" may be - your family, your workplace, your religious community. So I am very grateful to Catherine Coyne, of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, for her permission to share the following article with you:

For communities and groups to survive and thrive, for these support networks to be present when we come to need them, we need to be part of nurturing them - we need to be there, we need to turn up. Communities can give back in abundance but they need consistency & commitment in order to remain healthy. If we dip in and out when we need it but leave the weight of keeping the cogs turning, the responsibility of being reliable, to a small number of members (who can quickly feel overwhelmed and under-appreciated), it weakens the glue that holds people together. Turning up is not a chore. It may require some commitment but, when people really work together, what we get back can be more enriching than any monetary or material wealth. Swap a morning of shopping or a state of hangover amnesia for some genuine time with like-minded people & show your appreciation for the hard work that keeps things afloat by simply showing up.

SEEKER SEEKING SEEKERS

You may have read that I am training to be a Spiritual Director. Unlike therapy, spiritual direction is not necessarily centred around a problem, although it could be. Often it begins with a desire to grow - to move beyond the place where one is to a deeper, richer place.

Spirituality is not a distinct area of life, but a dimension of all life. God is not present to us only when we pray; nor is spiritual growth confined to such times. Therefore, spiritual direction is not just focused on the obvious aspects of a spiritual life: prayer, religious vocation, temptations, delusions, and other such things.

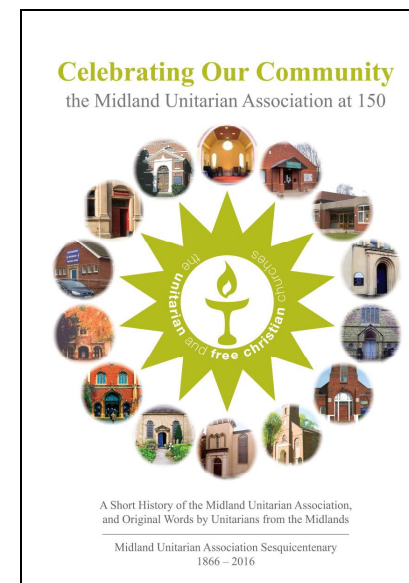
Since there is no area of human life where God is uninterested...no corner of it in which the Holy Mystery is not present...no aspect of life is inappropriate to bring to spiritual direction. **God is the deepest dimension in all areas of human life:** thus, all areas are open to spiritual direction.

At this point in the course, I need willing "directees" to practice my skills on. So if you are interested in going deeper on your spiritual journey, please get in touch. (details on page 3) Thank you.

Sue Woolley

Celebrating Our Community

This small commemorative volume is now available from Sue Woolley (details on p.3). It is a snip at £8.00 + P+P, and contains much wonderful worship material written by talented MUA folk.



Visit to Quarry Bank Mill & Styal Chapel

The final part of our 150th Anniversary celebrations will be a visit to Quarry Bank Mill and Styal Chapel in September. Congregational Secretaries will be receiving a flyer shortly. But please put the date in your diaries now!

When: Saturday 24th September

Where: Quarry Bank Mill & Styal Chapel

Times: arriving just before lunch, to include a short service in the afternoon in Styal Chapel, led by

Rev. Alex Bradley

Cost: TBC

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
Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	10.30 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

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

Last Sunday of the Month:

Banbury	Unitarian Fellowship	11.00 am
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MUA Congregations: Contact Details

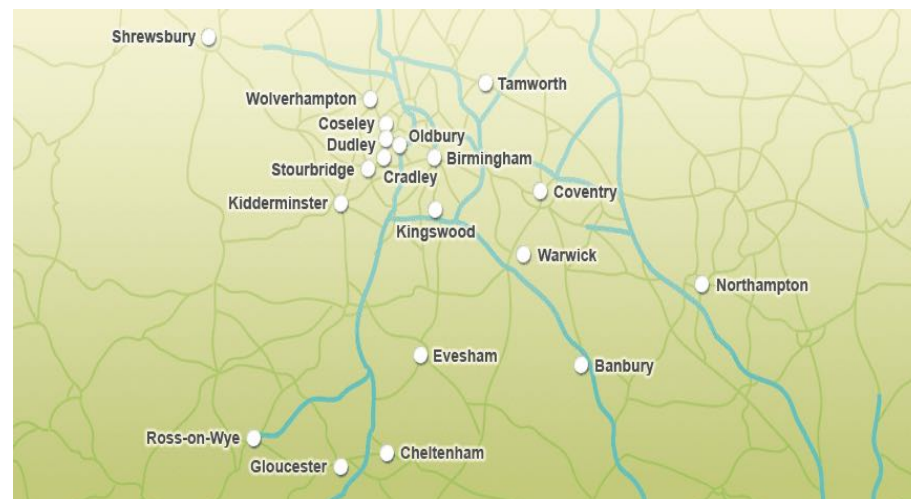
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Wolverhampton	Barbara Russell	01902 650168 barbara-russell@blueyonder.co.uk

A Prayer for Kindness

God of life and love,
 Help us to be kind to each other.
 In our daily lives where we feel sometimes overwhelmed by our
 own and others problems
 Help us to be kind to each other.
 In this world where there is conflict and suffering that we do not
 know how we can end
 Help us to be kind to each other.
 On this earth where there is so much wonder that we cannot
 always even see
 Help us to be kind to each other.
 In this life where there is so much love for us to seek and find and
 give
 Help us to be kind to each other.
 Help us to be kind to each other.
 Amen

Alison Patrick



**The Summer/Autumn 2016 issue will be published in
September**

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,
& on the theme of "Where do *you* encounter the Divine? "**

by Saturday 3rd September 2016

Thank you!