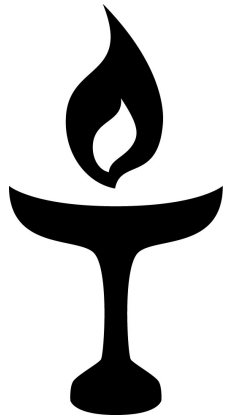


MU NOW



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From the Editor

Welcome to the Spring 2018 issue of *MU Now*. This issue contains some very interesting contributions.

There is an extract from Stephen's Lingwood's presentation to the District AGM, on the topic of 'Unitarian Evangelism' on page 9, and two thoughtful pieces, one about 'Working with Awareness and Love' by Rev Winnie Gordon, minister of our Birmingham & Kidderminster congregations, and 'Surprise!' by Kath Forder, Lay Pastor of Cirencester. (pages 13 and 14). Not to mention Rev Peter Godfrey's splendid address from his Asparagus Lunch service on 9th May (page 16).

And no less than three reflections on attending the General Assembly meetings at Staverton Park in April (page 23).

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 "Season of Mists and Mellow Fruitfulness" and the deadline for submissions will be **Friday 7th September 2018**.

Sue Woolley

President's Piece



Hello! There's a lot of talk within the groups at Chapel about cleaning out cupboards at this time of the year. I suppose it has something to do with spring. The 32nd Boys' Brigade Company (of which I am Captain) cupboards are desperately in need of sorting. I was

discussing this fact with Anne Berry, one of our Brownie leaders, and she too feels the need to blitz the 123rd Brownie cupboards. Whilst Anne will no doubt tackle the Brownie cupboards herself, I will pass on this duty to one of my leaders who has a penchant for tidiness.

This is because, as those who know me well will testify, I was missed out (let alone be at the back of the line) when the Good Fairy dished out the domestic genes in our family. My oldest sister is a paragon of domesticity, and my brother has lived in one room in various establishments for the last 30 years and can pack his worldly goods into two suitcases within an hour. My younger sister and myself accumulate stuff we might need – and just for the record she's worse than I am!!

I have, for some time had a rule, that unless I have a very specific purpose for something, if an item is older than a year and I have not used it then I find a way of using it for the benefit of others. This may result in a handicraft activity with one of the children's groups that meet at Chapel. If it's food, to donate it (where possible) to a food bank, the same with toiletries. I have even, very occasionally, been known to part with a book.

I had a lot of knitting needles accumulated from various members of my family with which I was loathe to part because of their sentimental value, but they have now gone to the Anchor (BB) charity shop, where I'm told the local Polish community are making good use of them. And the Knit and Natter group has benefitted from balls of wool I am never going to knit up (the group is still going strong one year on I'm pleased to say).

Various items will eventually find their way to Jo Chandler, a member of our congregation, who collects for the Birmingham City Mission. It started small, as these things do, and has progressed to the local community filling up Jo's good-sized garage, time after time after time. Including brand new bicycles, clothing and household goods. The BCM come with a big van every two months to collect a garage full.

It feels good to give – and I don't mean the tatty or down-at-heel things we used to give to the rag and bone man. The inner glow we get from donating to a cause or performing a useful task for someone can lift our spirits.

Jesus was someone who promulgated the idea of helping others. Another was V.P. Menon, of whom I had never heard until reading one of my favourite Unitarian authors Robert Fulghum. He tells the story of being helped out with a few rupees whilst travelling in India. The person who helped him told the story of one of the most distinguished Indian Civil Servants who was part of the Mountbatten team which engineered the plan for the partition of India. Of humble origins, he sought to better himself and so travelled to Delhi, where he was promptly robbed of everything he possessed and left destitute. A Sikh gentleman, hearing of his plight, gave him 15 rupees and told Menon he did not want him to repay the money to him, but to help any stranger

who came to him in need for the rest of his life. Menon did so, even on his deathbed. The gentleman who helped Robert many years later was the son of one of Menon's former assistants who had picked up the habit from Menon.

There are many ways to give in this life. Perhaps one of the best is to spread the news about Unitarianism. A part of another of Robert Fulghum's readings has now become widely popular, I've seen it on the wall at the local Farm Shop café – "All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten." I was delighted to be able to give a copy of the complete reading to one of the Guide helpers recently, and to tell her that it was written by a Unitarian Universalist minister.

We never know what we will start with a single act of kindness. We can only hope that like a pebble thrown into still waters, the ripples will go out into the world and make it a better place in which to live. Meanwhile, will someone pass the rubber gloves and the dusters please.....

PS One of the joys of my job in helping others is to set off the fire alarms for testing! The which I had to do sneakily for the Rainbows tonight – at the request of their leader I hasten to add. I'm not sure the congregation could have evacuated so smoothly! Maybe I ought to try it this Sunday as I am standing in for the Rev. Ant Howe. **Diane.**

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"Guard within yourself that treasure, kindness. Know how to give without hesitation, how to lose without regret, how to acquire without meanness; how to replace in your heart, by the happiness of those you love, the happiness that might by wanting in yours." **George Sands (submitted by Barbara Russell)**

## 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 into my seventh year as **Minister of the Banbury Unitarian Fellowship**. We have been greatly saddened by the passing of two members – Pamela Parrish in January, and Jack Thomas in March.

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

The **Spring Training Day**, on the topic of *Building Resilient Congregations* was a success – 13 Unitarians from eight congregations gathered to hear about this important topic from Simon Bland, the General Assembly's Ministry & Congregational Support Officer, and Rev. Ant Howe. I think that everyone went away with some ideas to implement. My thanks to both trainers.

We are offering the national **Worship Studies Course Foundation Step** again, in May, June and July. Again, a flyer for this has been sent round and the course will have started by the time you read this.

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

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

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MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

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

1. Stronger Data Protection Act: The Data Protection Act is being strengthened, which will have implications for how all congregations hold personal data. It comes into force on 25th May 2018. Our thanks to all the people who have returned their forms to the District Secretary – please could we ask any folk who haven't yet, to do so, using the stamped addressed envelope provided.
2. Unitarians Together in Diversity: following her survey in 2017, the District Minister's book was published by the Lindsey Press, and launched at the April GA meetings. All 140 copies were sold. Further copies may be ordered from Essex Hall (tel: 0207 240 2384)
3. Heritage Open Day 2018: will have a special theme 'Women in History'. For consideration by all congregations taking part.

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e-mails: dianerutter2004@yahoo.co.uk; revsuewoolley@gmail.com

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## Unitarian Evangelism

**A brief extract adapted from a talk given to the Midland Unitarian Association, 24th March 2018**

For many of us, the word "evangelism" probably has pretty negative connotations. It brings to mind conservative, even fundamentalist and aggressive forms of religion. But I don't

believe it has to be that way. I don't want to let conservatives have evangelism to themselves. I want to keep using the word. Partly I want to keep using the word because if we don't we will find ourselves talking only about "church growth" - and when we talk about church growth we tend to talk about a functional, pragmatic, mechanical approach that is all about technique and ignores questions of truth, goodness, spirituality and theology.

I want our practice to be rooted in a spiritual approach, and that's what evangelism means. Evangelism is a spiritual practice that may or may not lead to church growth. But I believe it remains important either way. So what I've been interested in for many years is developing a liberal, Unitarian, pluralistic, approach to evangelism. I've been developing the theory of this for a decade and I'm just beginning to really get into the practice of it in my current role in Cardiff.

In Cardiff I am dedicating the majority of my time to evangelism. I am employed as pastor to our small congregation but also as pioneer minister with a role to spend most of my time reaching out to the non-church populations of the city. How am I doing that? Well, that is still developing, but I'm very clear on the principles.

The first principle is a commitment to dialogue. Unitarian evangelism is a dialogue, not a monologue. We are a liberal religious movement. What that ultimately means is that we acknowledge the limits of what we know. I do have a sense of spiritual good news - the good news that we are all connected in a spiritual oneness. I believe in it passionately, and with gospel zeal. But that doesn't mean that I have all the answers or that I have found the Ultimate Truth. Being liberal means believing that revelation is not sealed, that language does not fully capture God, that there is more truth to be discovered, and ultimately that I

might be proved wrong.

Our commitment to continuous and imperfect revelation means that evangelism is not just about *giving* something to the outsider in the assumption that *I* have it and *they* don't but rather *seeking* something together by entering into *dialogue*. So evangelism may involve listening more than speaking. But what better way could there be for expressing faith in Relationship?

My good news is Relationship - that everything is connected in Oneness, and I express that good news with my actions as much as my words. I am interested not just in giving people a theoretical message. I am interested in being in relationship with people.

So my ministry in Cardiff primarily involves looking for opportunities for relationships and conversations. I am not ashamed to tell people of my religious faith, but neither do I shove it down people's throats. Indeed my first priority is to listen. I can have a whole conversation when I say almost nothing, and there is no doubt in my mind that I am doing evangelism.

And I'm still at the very early stages of this project. My ministry at the moment involves mainly just hanging about in cafes and pubs. And it's a real slow burn ministry. In three months I would say I have had three conversations that I would say involved me genuinely sharing a Unitarian spiritual message.

Our Unitarian faith is also based on the sacred worth of all people, and their freedom to make choices. Unitarians are committed to freedom and mutual consent in human relations, both in the church, and in society. Coercion has no place in Unitarian evangelism. Evangelism is an open invitation to dialogue and it is refusable. Concretely this means, for example, "evangelising" someone in a hospital bed could be unacceptable if

the person cannot escape the conversation.

So again, I'm not knocking on doors in Cardiff. I'm not even particularly starting religious conversations. I'm mainly just starting conversations, and letting the subject of faith emerge naturally if someone wants it to. And if they don't that's fine. They have the freedom to tell me to shut up.

I am dedicating a large part of my time to doing this work, but it doesn't take a specialist and all of us can do this in our lives, and I'd suggest we do all do this in our lives all the time. We can take on these practices of dialogue as a way to grow our mission of building Relationship, and overcoming Alienation.

This practice is good in in itself as it creates connection, but it may also lead people into our communities where we practice building Beloved Community and seeking a deeper oneness through practices of dialogue and worship.

I'm trying to find new ways of this working in Cardiff. But this stuff is potentially relevant to all of us. And we can all find ways of putting this into practice. All we need to do is be open to a conversation.

**Stephen Lingwood**

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"To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and to endure the betrayal of false friends; to find the best in others; to leave the world a better place – by a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have success."

Ralph Waldo Emerson (submitted by Barbara Russell)

Working with Awareness and Love

I know for me, there are tasks I do, but hate to do, that cause me stress. Be it at home, the constant washing up, sweeping of cat hairs, cooking, or in work with paperwork I never have time to complete, there are days when resentment creeps in. Yet at Findhorn people cultivate the attitude of taking time to be still, sense their divine, and approach their task with a spiritual attitude of love-in-action that tries to leave behind the impatience or resentment.

You can read many books and articles on mindfulness, intellectually understand the process, but unless you take time to practice it, all the preparation is for naught. Findhorn helped me see that my mindfulness was limited to my bias of what I saw as loving action. In the typical Western viewpoint, I saw loving action as that which gives love to another with signs of affection, or of being present, or even in the listening, holding and supporting of another. All that may be true, but at Findhorn the practice of loving action (or love-in-action) was based on doing things with love as your focus. In other words, infusing love in all action. It sounds easy, but to truly embrace this concept means that the thing you like / may not like / actually hate, you give all your loving attention, without bitterness, complaint, resentment, or reluctance. You do the tasks of everyday living in a state of mindfulness, loving mindfulness.

Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh would say that this has been done for centuries by Zen masters. He advocates taking on whatever task with slowness and ease, without the intention to rush and get it over with. Hanh advocates a relaxed, intentional attitude to each job, enjoying the work, and thereby, under the influence of awareness and love, all becomes lovelier to the mind and joyful to the heart.

And so I, who hate cooking, participated in love-in-action in the kitchen at Findhorn's Cluny House. Drawn to the task in a process known as attunement, I was encouraged to slow down and not rush to the conclusion, in the tasks I was assigned to do. ... I learned to mindfully pay attention to each task. Not just in order to prevent a slip of the knife incident, but to infuse love into the creation of the salads the community would eat for lunch. In being mindful to the task I took on, there was no space for hate or reluctance. I had no resentment because I knew my small actions were needed to benefit the community. I felt free to enjoy what I was doing, and joy in the giving of my action. How strange, and also wonderful, that I had to travel hundreds of miles to be reminded that just an adjustment of attitude, from feeling resentful, or put-upon, to love, can change all work we do in our life to fruitful creation of benefit to our community and the world.

So as you go about your task this day, take it slowly, do not rush for it to be over. Give it your loving attention and think not of the past or the future tasks you still need to do. Allow yourself to feel joy for all you do, knowing that what you do is needed, wanted, celebrated, in the quiet of your community.

Winnie Gordon, Birmingham & Kidderminster

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### Surprise!

Recently, I spent some time at Woodbrooke, the Quakers' retreat centre just south of Birmingham. While I was there, my eye was drawn to a plaque hanging on the wall of one of the meeting rooms. It said: '*Prepare to be surprised*'.

My first thought on seeing that was that it was a silly thing to say... How can you prepare for a surprise? Isn't the whole point of a surprise that you don't expect it? But it nagged at me. And I

started to think more deeply about it. And I came to understand that '*Prepare to be surprised*' is not suggesting that we can make advance preparations for specific things which are yet to happen in our lives. It is not about that sort of preparation. And '*surprise*' is all about good things; we talk of sudden, nasty happenings as '*a shock*', not '*a surprise*'...

Human beings are generally creatures of habit. It comforts us to have some sort of structure to our lives – we tend to get up, eat, go to bed at roughly the same times each day, probably eat much the same breakfast, and keep to a fairly limited set of menus for our other meals. We use the same route to work, drive the same roads, catch the same bus. (*I am aware that I am speaking in general terms here, some people don't do these things, of course!*) We tend to like routine.

But routines and habits can mean that we live much of our lives on autopilot. It's as if we wear blinkers, not seeing anything that is outside our plans for the day. We look ahead, not around or above or below us. So we see the traffic ahead, but never really take in the new green on the trees by the roadside, or the flowers in the grass verge. We walk from car to house, getting our keys out on the way, looking ahead to the cup of tea awaiting us and not focusing on the sight of the Milky Way above us. We set the alarm clock for the same time each morning, and miss the dawn chorus, and that pearlescent quality of the light in the early hours.

For many years, I have begun each day by saying '*Thank you*'. It isn't addressed to any particular being, it's just an expression of thanks to the universe for the privilege of being alive. Recently, I have added a going-to-bed routine, which starts '*Today I have been surprised by ...*' and finishes with '*Thank you*'.

Perhaps '*Prepare to be surprised*' just means to remove the blinkers, to look around us, really seeing our surroundings. Then we might

live our lives aware of the beauty around us, and open to the infinite possibilities of existence.

Then might this world truly surprise us!

**Kath Forder, Evesham & Cirencester**

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Asparagus Lunch Address, 9th May 2018

"A good thought will travel as fast and as far as a bad one if it gets th' right start'.....the wise words of Anna, the mother of Alexander Irving, quoted by him in his book about his mother - *My Lady of the Chimney Corner*.

The thoughts I am sharing with you in this service centre on the joy of reading. It is inspired by the secretary of our Midland Unitarian Ministers' Meeting. In Sue Woolley we have a most efficient secretary. If you are, or have ever been, on any committees, you will know that sometimes you might get the minutes months after the meeting. Well with Sue we almost get them before we have got home from the meeting!

Sue's efficiency is why I am where I am now – taking this service. Her e-mail just said - 'It is your turn'.

What has this got to do with reading? Two or three years ago Sue wrote a delightful book about what reading had meant to her. It was a joy to read for a multitude of reasons. One reason was that it made me - and I hope a lot of people - sit up and think about what reading has meant to me. It made me realise that I had taken reading for granted. I had thought that good books and their ideas just sank in to my general thinking and feeling. Sue made me realise – and be grateful for – the many particular things in my reading that changed me. Things that had a particular impact – they were moments of disclosure.

As I look back on over 60 years as a minister I realise that two things became of special importance to me and featured in my ministry. **These were wonder and compassion.**

The thinking prompted by Sue's writing was that my own sense of wonder and compassion had been greatly encouraged by things I had read. Reading helped to open my eyes.

I have to confess that it did not start well. During the war I was evacuated from Coventry to Lincoln and my wonderful foster parents wrote to my parents to say I was reading too many *William* books. My mother sent me a copy of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. I don't think it did much good. I recently deposited my old school reports with the school's archivist. One form master's report read: 'Mischievous is like a magnet to him'.

Compare those days to my latest reading Bryon Magee's *Ultimate Questions*. The opening chapter is about time and space. Magee writes: 'There are always some people who live to be a hundred', so, he says, 'If you put in line, end to end, without any gaps, the lives of nameable people who have lived to be a hundred.....'It comes as a shock to realise that the whole of civilisation has occurred within the successive lifetimes of sixty people – which is the number of friends I squeeze into my living room when I have a party. Twenty people take us back to Jesus...even a paltry ten take us back to 1066 and the Norman Conquest'...'history is incredibly short.'

Then he reminds us of the fact that when we look at a star we are seeing it as it was a hundred years ago. He goes on to say: 'If on the star I was talking of, there is a sentient being looking at our earth through a telescope, he sees our earth as it was nearly a hundred years ago (in our time). If his telescope is a super-powerful one which enables him to observe human movements,

he could be sitting there...watching World War 1 being fought. He is watching not a record of the events, or some sort of re-run of them, as in a film, or anything of that sort: he is watching 'them'.'

You see what I mean about reading evoking wonder.

Magee marvels at existence: 'Existence is the unbelievable thing. It is incomprehensible....the fact of there being anything at all is terminally inexplicable. What I feel about this', he says, 'is a **double sense of wonder** that the inexplicable is actual'.

I hope that you have all experienced readings that have opened your eyes, hearts, spirits to the wonder of the world in which we live. This has happened since time began. For example, we read at the end of the Book of Proverbs:

'Three things there are which are too wonderful for me,
four which are beyond my understanding:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a serpent over a rock,
the way of a ship out at sea,
and the way of a man with a woman.'

More than a thousand years ago, Sei Shonagon was a lady in waiting to a Japanese Empress. She wrote notes about her daily observations that are published as a Penguin Classic with the title *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*. Shonagon delighted in the beauty of simple everyday things - morning light creeping over hills, birds in flight, sparrows feeding their young, babies at play, a night with a clear moon. Like the writer of *Proverbs* she often wonders at the relationship between the sexes: 'Men have really strange emotions' she says, 'and behave in the most bizarre ways. Sometimes a man will leave a very pretty woman to marry an ugly one'.

One of her loveliest passages is headed 'Sympathy is the Most Splendid of All Qualities' She was very sensitive to appearances: 'A preacher', she wrote, 'ought to be good-looking. For if we are properly to understand his worthy sentiments, we must keep our eyes on him while he speaks: should we look away, we may forget to listen. Accordingly an ugly preacher may well be the source of sin'....

So – reading can make us wonder and can open our eyes to see the wonder in people and the world about us. It can do the same in awakening our **compassion and understanding**.

It is many years since I first read E.M.Forster's *A Passage to India* but I have never forgotten the incident in which an Indian went to the home of his English friend to accompany him to a party. The English friend had lost his collar stud, so the Indian took his out and gave it to him. At the party the Indian's collar began to come adrift and people were making disapproving remarks...'Typical Indian'.....

There is an up-to-date version of this in the latest novel I have read: *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman. Eleanor has got on a bus...every seat has someone sitting in it...she sat next to someone who eventually got off. Someone got on but walked past Eleanor and sat next to a man with no socks on!! Not only had he no socks on but he had oxblood leather brogues and green jogging trousers. 'A madman' thinks Eleanor. This leads Eleanor to wonder what is wrong with her. She puts her head in her hands and mutters to herself. Soon a voice says 'Are you all right' and a hand on her shoulder comforts her. The voice says 'Everyone needs a wee moment to themselves now and then'. As the speaker gets off the bus Eleanor says to herself 'He wasn't mad. He just didn't have any socks on'....

The older ones here today will remember a wonderful instance of this 'awakening of understanding' in a great monologue that Stanley Holloway used to recite of a man – Jim - who went to a funeral in brown boots:

Jim

'Rolls up to make it all a farce
In brahn boots – I ask yer – brahn boots
While all the rest
Wore decent black and mourning suits...

Then by accident we 'eard

'E'd given 'is black boots to Jim Small
A bloke what 'ad no boots at all...

He'd give 'is other boots away

But some day up at Heaven's gate
Poor Jim, all nerves, will stand and wait
Till an angel whispers 'Come in, Mate
Where's yer brahn boots'....'

All too often we forget that we were told long ago the admittedly very difficult teaching 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged'.

Years ago, the poet Keats deplored what he called 'the heat for certainty'. How it annoys me when the religious fundamentalists say such things as 'This hurricane that killed hundreds of people was sent by God as a punishment for abortion, homosexuality and so on'. I feel like saying 'No, God sent it as a punishment for electing Trump'. Of course, the fundamentalists may be right - nobody knows - but, as a character in Peter De Vries witty book,

The Mackerel Plaza, says: 'Well, if God is like that he may exist but I shan't worship Him.'

This reminds me of another book to which I owe a great deal: Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*. Edmund's father was a Plymouth brother...one of the last biologists of any repute to try to argue against Darwin. His wife died when Edmund was young and he brought Edmund up very strictly, for example, hardly letting him play at all with other children. When Edmund was about nine an awful thing happened The Brown family, local Baptists, who were a bit sorry for Edmund, invited him to 'tea and games'. Edmund's father was horrified and said they had to 'lay the matter before the Lord'.

So they knelt in prayer and the father reminded God of various objections to the life of pleasure and the snakes that lay hidden in the grass of evening parties. Eventually his father asked Edmund 'What is the answer that our Lord vouchsafes?'

'My answer came' Edmund writes, 'in the high-pitched assents of despair: 'The Lord says I may go to the Brown's party.' My father gazed at me in speechless horror. He was caught in his own trap, and though he was certain that the Lord had said nothing of the kind, there was no road open for him but just sheer retreat. Yet surely it was an error in tactics to slam the door'.

Alexander Irving's mother Anna – the Lady of the Chimney Corner - gently taught her sons the power of kindness, compassion, understanding. The book was written when Irving had moved from his home in Ireland to America and become a famous preacher. It reveals what he owed to his mother. She used to say things like 'Putting the love of God in you is not like feeding your mouth with a potato'. As the teenager Alexander argued with her and others she would say that 'the mortal pity of

it is that texts are used as pins by Christians to stick in each other's flesh'.

One of the loveliest chapters in the book is about the visit to their village of Hughie Thornton the beggar of several towns, who hadn't lived in a house for twenty-five or more years. There were lots of superstitions about beggars and Hughie was accused of blinking at a woman's cow and making its milk dry up. There was an outcry against him and boys began to throw stones at him. Mother Anna was never in the best of health, but she gathered her shawl about her and went out. Before long Hughie was safely in their pigsty - they had never been able to afford a pig - with a blanket and candle for comfort. Next day Alexander and his brother woke early and went to see how Hughie was. To their amazement he was surrounded by visitors who were giving him gifts and wishing him well. The boys were baffled: from being despised and condemned as a nuisance and fraud the beggar was now looked upon as a saint.

Years later Alexander found out what had happened. When his mother went out she had gathered a few people 'whose minds were an open book to her' and told them that the beggarman was of an ancient line wandering the earth in search of the Holy Grail, and as he wandered he was recording in a secret book the deeds of the poor.

One superstition stoned him and another canonised him. Alexander's mother said to him: **'Dear, a good thought will travel as fast and as far as a bad one if it gets the right start'....**

A reminder that it is the task of ministers to spread good thoughts - and in this matter we are all ministers.

Peter Godfrey

Reflections on Attending the GA Meetings

Each year, many Unitarians from the Midland Unitarian Association's District attend the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. Here are some reflections on their experience, from some of the participants.

This was my first attendance at the Unitarian General Assembly – kindly sent as the delegate this year on behalf of Cheltenham and Gloucester. I had been advised on arrival, at a welcome for first time attenders, to pace myself and take time out. Wise words. There was so much to listen to, to see, to learn and so many people to meet. I quickly learnt that an interesting topic to discuss with those I met in a queue, over coffee or lunch was to ask them what had led them to be a Unitarian. I received a wide variety of responses varying from those who had been born into the church to those, like myself, who had seemed to stumble upon it by 'accident' and all points in between. One factor was a common thread, whatever the route, a commitment to this being the right place for us all.

That was my overwhelming feeling whilst I was participating in the meeting – being in the right place at the right time with a large umbrella which could protect but allow for a considerable variety of beliefs, views, and people and which promoted inclusivity. A common thread was a commitment and passion for Unitarianism.

I was interested to see such a wide variety of societies within the structure of the church from Psychical Studies to the Historical Society, and the Fellowship of Youth whose membership included some more mature youths and their grandchildren. Many groups, including FOY, were studying topics of current concern such as nuclear weapons, poverty and inequality.

This was reflected in the motions for discussion within the AGM and the meeting was relevant and topical. It was also heartening to hear about the amount of work undertaken by officials within the General Assembly on behalf of us all. There was passionate debate at times. A motion about representation and voting rights engendered a lot of discussion – whether groups who may not be part of existing church congregations are disenfranchised and how this might be addressed.

I was concerned that, at one point, discussion was becoming polarised between 'youth' and 'maturity' in an unhelpful way. This issue has been referred back for further work and, hopefully will entail more thought and discussion within the membership as a whole.

The key note speaker, Dr Paul Rasor, was very interesting, he linked post-modernism with post-truth in contemporary society. His book, *'Proclaiming Prophetic Witness – Liberal Religion in the Public Square'* will be an education for me.

I am still absorbing and digesting both the experience and the wide variety of literature that I brought away with me. The experience of attending made me feel part of the much wider family of Unitarianism. I would recommend going to the next GA on 16-18th April 2019 in Birmingham. Food for thought!

Moira Gage, Cheltenham & Gloucester

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The GA this year tried to do its best and it was the usual opportunity for friends to meet and network.

Many very useful conversations took place. Some of the morning services and workshops were inspirational. The John Relly Beard lecture about "Community" by teacher Matt Carmichael was very good and wide ranging, from the finer points of the play *An*

*Inspector Calls* to the simple and uncomplicated life of the Piraha tribe in Brazil.

But by the luck of the draw some parts of the GA were contentious. It is the year immediately preceding the forthcoming shorter GAs that we will be trying out and there was some sadness about this. There were some controversial issues debated such as reducing the number of motions put forward at GA Meetings to four. This was passed but with an amendment which decided that the GA attendees and not the Executive Committee should select which motions go forward. This raises the prospect of some potentially fractious initial debate at the next GA. Another point of argument was about changing the voting arrangements in the GA itself. This revealed a Generation Gap within the movement and the motion itself was deferred.

The GA newsletter (GA-Zette) and the Opening Ceremony provided further evidence of this Generation Gap and one could almost wonder if it is not time for a parting of the ways between the Humanist and non-Humanist strands of the movement.

However, the Anniversary Service itself was like a reassuring rock. It was led by Kate Whyman and the address was preached by Danny Crosby. His message that there was no "*Another Place*" to escape to, and that we should try to make the best of this one, was a fitting message to sum up the GA Meetings as a whole.

### Lesley Harris, Evesham

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As a minister, I attend the GA meetings every year. They are a wonderful opportunity to make new Unitarian friends, to catch up with old ones, and to learn more about our beloved "uncommon denomination."

This year the meetings were held at Staverton Park in Northamptonshire, which was very convenient for me, but not so

much for most of the delegates, as it was not easily accessible by public transport. But it was a nice venue, and easy to find your way around, partly thanks to the efficient floor plan provided by the Essex Hall staff in our welcome packs.

Nevertheless, I am glad to report that next year's meetings will be at the Birmingham Hilton Metropole, which has fantastic transport links.

The conference started with a bang, with the inspirational John Relly Beard lecture, delivered this year by Matt Carmichael, on the theme of the importance of community. He also spoke of a Delta Course, which he has developed as a kind of alternative to the Alpha course, for people who want to explore spirituality in a more open-minded way. He is planning to make available to a wider audience. Watch this space!

As usual, much of the fun of the GA Meetings comes with attending some of the "breakout" sessions. This year, I enjoyed the interactive workshop on 'What makes a compassionate society?', run by the Unitarian Peace Fellowship, and also a session run by the Unitarian Renewal Group, which included a fascinating time line which covered the recent history of the movement from 1928 to date. The Unitarian Association for Lay Ministry led an interesting taster session for their Autumn conference 'More than a hymn sandwich', which suggested that worship leaders should appeal to all the congregation's senses.

A personal highlight this year was the launch of my book, *Unitarians: Together in Diversity*, which is a summary of the findings from the survey I undertook last year, which many of you completed – thank you again! I did a short presentation and was then bombarded with questions from the audience! I'm

pleased to report that all 140 copies were sold, but that it is possible to order a copy from Essex Hall (tel: 0207 240 2384).

For me, two of the annual “best bits” are the Opening Celebration on the first evening, and the Anniversary Service, on the final evening. This year’s Opening Celebration was very lively, being organised and delivered by BUYAN, the British Unitarian Young Adult Network. It was good to hear the testimonies of the young people whose lives have been changed by being Unitarian.

This year’s Anniversary Service was, as ever, superb. Rev. Kate Whyman, of Plymouth, was the service leader, and Rev. Danny Crosby, whom we were fortunate to hear at our District AGM last year, was the Anniversary Preacher. I found Danny’s address both moving and insightful – it has now been published in the 21st April issue of *The Inquirer*. It was also lovely to witness the ceremony of thanksgiving and recognition for deceased and retiring ministers, and the welcoming of new ministers. There’s life in this denomination yet!

I urge those of you who have not yet attended a “GA Meeting” to try to do so next year. It is a wonderful opportunity to see how our movement works, and to meet some of the “movers and shakers” who are behind it.

Sue Woolley

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## **District Round-up**

### **Warwick Unitarians welcome Roman Loxley-Doyle as Lay Person in Charge**

We are delighted that Roman has now joined us and ... is going to lead our worship on many Sundays and Fridays in the future.

His role as Lay Person in Charge is still developing and may differ from others with that LPiC designation in the Unitarian movement as he fits in to our distinctive community. He has many ideas, some coming from his wide range of experiences in life, and others from other areas of Unitarianism. We will be discussing possible avenues of development over the coming months. In the meantime, we will want to offer him as much support and encouragement as possible, individually, and as a community.

Thinking of community, it has to be said that our ‘go-it-alone’ period since Ant had to leave us had probably brought us close together than before. Of course during the ‘go-it-alone’ time, we were never really alone as a congregation, because we have had, and hope to continue to have, the support and friendship of the Kingswood congregation. Ant and Diana have been central to our Pulpit Rota, Roman has come to us from there and we enjoy the monthly visits of the regular bowls teams from there. On Mothering Sunday we had a generous box of daffodils and on Good Friday, Ant brought us a great tray of Hot Cross Buns, so Kingswood bring us gifts in kind as well as the people and their spirit.

But the ‘go-it-alone’ period did mean that we looked more carefully at ourselves and our beliefs. In organising and leading our own Friday services, Elaine has helped us to focus more tightly on our thoughts and contribute our own views. And we have had a wide range of speakers to lead us in our services, often generating strong opinions on all sides. All that has been very positive, but it will be good to return to a more centrally-directed by outward-looking regime as Roman gets more involved.

We welcome him most warmly and look forward to a period of growth and development in his care. **(from Warwick newsletter)**

## District Events

### Stourbridge Unitarians Service of Celebration 1698 and 1788

**When:** Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2018

**Where:** Stourbridge Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel,  
Lower High Street, Stourbridge DY8 1TG

You and your congregation are warmly invited to our shared  
service of friendship to celebrate

The 320<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary of Stourbridge Unitarians  
and the 230<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Chapel building.

The service will be conducted by Rev. Sue Woolley,  
MUA District Minister

To be followed by refreshments\* and complimentary hot & cold  
food supplied by Green's Vegan Catering.

Please let us know if you are able to attend and numbers of  
attenders from your congregation, by e-mailing:

infousps@yahoo.co.uk

\*small fee for hot drinks

## MUA Congregations: Times of Services

### Every Sunday:

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

### First Sunday of the Month:

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

### Second Sunday of the Month:

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

### Third Sunday of the Month:

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

### Fourth Sunday of the Month:

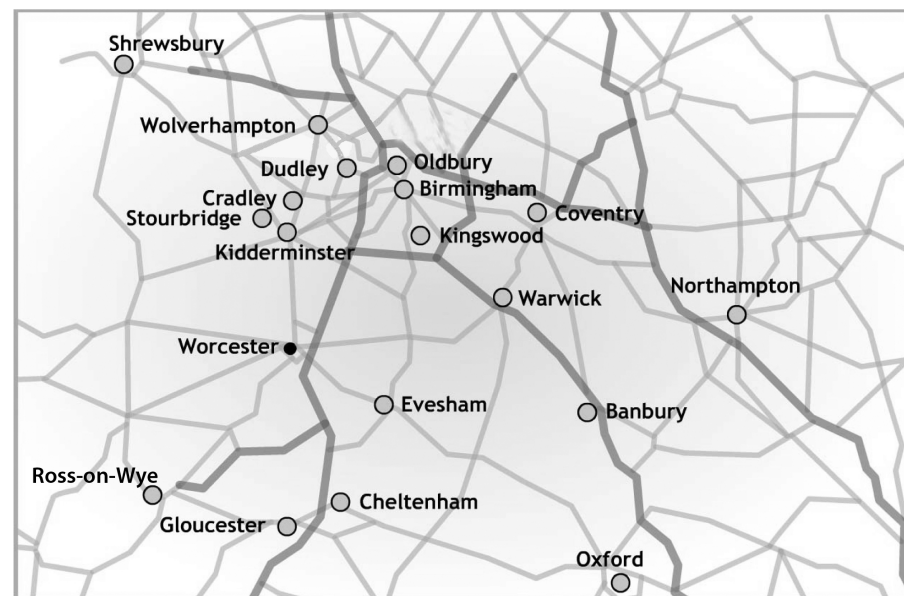
|             |                                   |          |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------|
| Coventry    | Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church | 11 am    |
| Stourbridge | Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel   | 11.00 am |

### Last Sunday of the Month:

|         |                      |          |
|---------|----------------------|----------|
| Banbury | Unitarian Fellowship | 11.00 am |
|---------|----------------------|----------|

## MUA Congregations: Contact Details

| Name                    | Contact           | Details                                          |
|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Banbury                 | Sue Woolley       | 01604 870746<br>revsuewoolley@gmail.com          |
| Birmingham              |                   | unitariannewmeeting@outlook.com                  |
| Cheltenham & Gloucester | Alison Thursfield | 01242 254825<br>ajthursfield@tiscali.co.uk       |
| Coventry                | Francesca Rogers  | 02476 605055                                     |
| Cradley                 | Sheila Powell     | 01384 838729                                     |
| Dudley                  | Barbara Russell   | 01902 650168<br>barbara-russell@blueyonder.co.uk |
| Evesham                 | Lesley Harris     | 01242 573927<br>agonoid@gmail.com                |
| Kidderminster           | Elaine James      | 01384 374007<br>elainejamesjames@gmail.com       |
| Kingswood               | Mick Bridgman     | 0121 628 1458<br>michael.bridgman@cantab.net     |
| Northampton             | Sue Woolley       | 01604 870746<br>revsuewoolley@gmail.com          |
| Oldbury                 | Pamela Rose       | 0121 422 0311                                    |
| Shrewsbury              | Fiona Checkley    | 07487 531 913<br>shrewsburyunitarians@gmail.com  |
| Stourbridge             | David Mearman     | 01384 376478<br>davidmearman@hotmail.com         |
| Warwick                 | Elaine Nomura     | 01926 611964<br>emtnomura@aol.com                |



**The Summer/Autumn 2018 issue will be published in September**

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters, & on the theme of "Season of Mists and Mellow Fruitfulness"**

**by Friday 7<sup>th</sup> September 2018**

*Thank you!*