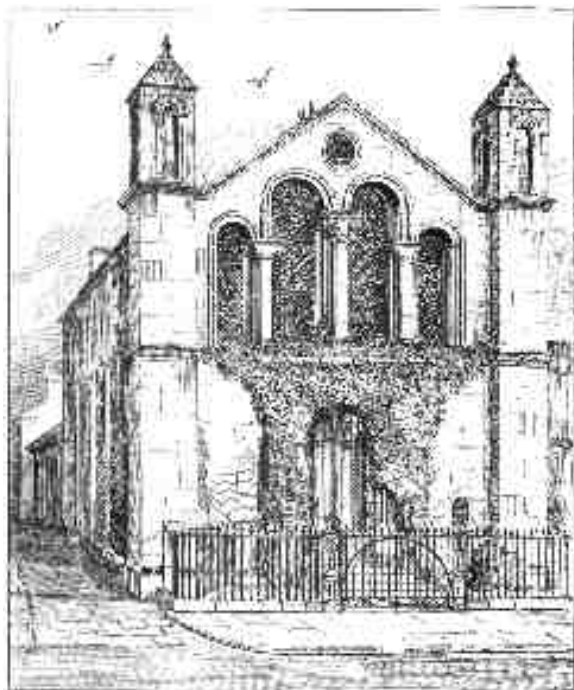


MAGAZINE OF THE MIDLAND UNION OF UNITARIAN &  
FREE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES  
**'WHAT IS A CHURCH?' issue**



**Is this a church?**  
Find out on page 36

ISSUE 24

SUMMER ISSUE

AUGUST 2008

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Thank you to everyone who supplied their newsletters and articles for us to use in compiling this edition of MU Now.

Our next edition is due for publication in December 2008. Secretaries, please send your entries for 'Around the Churches', with photos if possible. We are aware that some congregations do not produce a newsletter; for those that do, please ensure you send us a copy too. Individual contributions - in any form - would be warmly welcomed. If any members would like to send in brief profiles of themselves for publication we would be happy to include them.

Please send articles, news, letters and photos by **31 October**, to:

Jenny Buckland

Or (preferably as attachments) to our email account at:  
**[munoweditors@googlemail.com](mailto:munoweditors@googlemail.com)**

And again, we ask congregations to please tell Jenny how many copies of MU Now they require. Are we sending too many? Or not enough?



## From the Editor's Desk

"What is a Church?" has proved to be a very popular theme, and we thank all the contributors for their excellent articles, which we are sure will be thought provoking. I am concerned that "bricks and mortar" can involve our time and energy, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

We are aware that MU Now should not be just reports and facts. We hope this edition reflects our wish that there should be a balanced factual and spiritual content.

MU Now could be a wonderful opportunity to share resources. Recent practical examples of churches helping each other are Kingswood buying copies of Hymns of Faith and Freedom no longer used at Cheltenham and Gloucester, and Dudley arranging for some of their excellent upholstered chairs to go to Evesham and Coventry where they will have more use. Do you have items you don't need, or are you wondering where to go to get items you cannot afford? MU Now would be pleased to help.

I had a dream that we would share an even more valuable resource, our members talent to write beautiful hymns, prayers, readings etc which would greatly enhance our worship. I am delighted that Sue Woolley is planning to assemble a booklet for us (see page 7), and look forward to a 21st century approach to Unitarian worship.

In our Spring issue we welcomed Winnie Gordon (UNM Birmingham) and Bronwen Taylor (Shrewsbury) to the Executive Committee. Just in case you have not already read their profiles on the MU website, we have included them in this issue. We also welcome Rev. Ann Latham as the representative for the Women's League. How do you find the time and the energy Ann?

Our theme for the winter issue will be "**What three gifts would you wish for a child?**" We look forward to being swamped with ideas by Oct 31st. For our Spring issue we will be considering '**Worship**'.

With best wishes, Jenny. ☺



## Introducing our new MU Executive members

The Midland Union Executive Committee is delighted to welcome new members Winnie Gordon (UNM Birmingham) and Bronwen Taylor (Shrewsbury). In addition, the new Women's League Representative is Rev. Ann Latham. Here's what the MU website says about them ...

### Miss Winnie Gordon



Winnie is a newcomer to Unitarianism, having joined Unitarian New Meeting, Birmingham in 2007, since when she has become very actively involved. Not only does she serve as Co-ordinator of the Childrens' Services, she has taken over as Lettings Steward, and has also become the building caretaker. As a newly qualified Faith Tourist Guide, Winnie will be conducting tours of UNM and explaining its history to visitors.

### Mrs. Bronwen Taylor

Bronwen is a fourth generation Unitarian with links to non-conformism dating back to 1733. Originally from Manchester, she is still a member of Cross Street Chapel and worshipped at John Pounds Unitarian Chapel in Portsmouth during her student days. She has been a member of Shrewsbury Unitarian Church for the last 13 years and membership Secretary for the last 10 years. She plans to retire from School Teaching this Summer after 41 years in the profession. After leading Services for the last 7 years, she now intends to complete the Worship Studies Foundation Course. She enjoys Hymn writing, having written 14 so far, 2 of which have been selected for the new GA Hymn book. Bronwen has lived in Bridgnorth for nearly 35 years.



## Rev. Ann Latham



Following her retirement from the Ministry in Lancashire, Ann moved to the Midlands and was until recently part-time minister to our Kidderminster Congregation. She had previously served as Minister of the Todmorden and Oldham Group and was then appointed as Assistant District Minister of the Manchester District Association. She then became District Minister of the MDA, combining this with Ministerial responsibility for the Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Dob Lane Chapel, Failsworth

and the Oldham Unitarian congregations. In addition, she was responsible for Unitarian Outreach in the Manchester District. She was also until recently a member of the GA Social Responsibility and Penal Affairs Panels. A member of the Women's League since 1976, she is a Past National President of the League. Ann now lives in Halesowen and has just retired for the second time !

Ed: For details of the rest of the Executive, see the MU website, [www.midlandunion.org.uk](http://www.midlandunion.org.uk) or MU Now, August & December issues, 2007.



### Definitions of Church, from Hymns for Living ...

Where is our holy church?	The Church is not where altar stands
Where race and class unite	Within the hallowed walls,
As equal persons in the search	But where the strong reach out their hands
For beauty, truth and right.	To raise the one who falls.

#### Hymn 123

#### Hymn 173

A church is a living fellowship  
More than a holy shrine,  
Where people can share their hopes and fear  
Less of the yours and mine.

#### Hymn 174

## President's Musings

Greetings, Friends.

As I visit more of our churches, I really feel I am part of a community – and thank you for inviting me to share your spaces. Our church groups vary a lot, and several are showing exciting initiatives. Kingswood produced an inspiring 2 minute presentation which was shown at the GA; Warwick and Kidderminster are making good use of Town centre positions by opening during the week; UNM Birmingham uses films to draw people in; and Shrewsbury is embarking on building work to make the Church fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Besides all this, our Worship Studies course (Foundation stage) has attracted 17 people from the District (& one from East Midlands) whose interest and commitment bodes well for the future Lay Leadership of the Midland Union. Exciting times!



I am told that the theme of this edition of MU Now, "What is a Church", has brought in a varied and thoughtful response. For my part, I will reiterate some of what I said about our community at the AGM Service in April.

We see some groups powering ahead; while others look on in disbelief feeling isolated and not able to keep going *as they used to*. Is "as they used to" the problem? We all need to take stock. Some things we hold dear may need gently moving aside to make space – space for new ideas; for new friends; space where we can grow, adapt, evolve.

In the Tao Te Ching we read " We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. We hammer wood for a house, but it is the inner space that makes it liveable."

We join in groups, Churches, but it is what we put into the group's space that is important. How do we work together? Be imaginative! But whatever we do in our spaces, let it be part of building a beloved community.

“Starhawk”, a Native American, wrote:

“Community. Somewhere there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having our words catch in our throats. Somewhere, a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us when we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done ... arms to hold us when we falter ... a circle of healing ... a circle of friends ... a place where we can be ... free.”

Alison

## MU Announcements

### What's in a name?

The Executive Committee of the Midland Union of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (our full name) has decided that we (the MU) need a new name. The main reason for this is that “Midland Union” doesn't say anything about who we are or what we do. A more meaningful name is desirable, especially in these days of online searches.

So we have decided to ask you, our congregations, your views. When we discussed it at our committee meeting at the end of July, we thought of Midland Unitarians (MU) and Midland Unitarian Association (MUA). What do you think? Have you a better idea?

Please send your (serious) suggestions to Sue Woolley, District Facilitator (contact details at back of magazine), avoiding Midland Union District (or our name will be MUD!) and Midland Union Group (because we are not MUGs!!). The most popular suggestions will be published in the December edition of *MU Now*, and we will be voting on a new name at the AGM in Spring 2009.

Thank you. Sue Woolley

### Midland Union Pulpit Book

Our District Facilitator, Sue Woolley, is in the process of compiling a little book of readings, prayers, opening words and closing words to be circulated to all congregations as a Worship Resource. Please send her your contributions (either original or out of copyright) for inclusion, **by the end of September.**

## MU District Facilitator: the first three months

Your esteemed Editor has asked me to write an article for *MU Now* about my first three months in post. I would like to start with a quotation, which summarises my attitude towards my new job:

“I am only one; still I am one.  
I cannot do everything;  
Still, I can do something.  
I will not refuse to do  
The something I can do.”

In other words – I'm here to help – use me! The whole point of the District Facilitator role is that congregations have someone to turn to in the Midland Union if they need help with anything. If I can't help, I'll probably know someone who can.

So what have I been up to in my first three months? Firstly, and most importantly, I've taken quite a few services round the Midland Union, and it has been splendid to meet so many of you. But I'll probably be about 70 before I stop being known as “Sandy Ellis's daughter”! Not that I mind in the least, I'm proud to follow in my father's footsteps serving the congregations of the Midland Union.

We are very lucky in our District to have such a strong District Association. I strongly believe that the District Associations have a vital role to play in the Unitarian movement in the UK, as the link between the GA and the local congregations. MU President Alison Thursfield and I have attended two District Association meetings on your behalf; the first in February, about the *future ministry* initiative, the second in June.

Most of you will have seen the leaflet *What Your District Association Can Do For You*, which the Executive Committee asked me to produce a couple of years ago. (Ed: It was also published in *MU Now*, Issue 20, April 2007, pp 14-5) As the leaflet says:

“Running a congregation or a fellowship can be a complicated business—we know! The Midland Union Executive Committee is made up of people just like you from member congregations. Between us, we have a lot of experience of the sorts of problems that you may encounter—whether it is sorting out a new constitution,

raising money to repair your building or any other issue. Just remember: WE'RE HERE TO HELP YOU!"

My role of District Facilitator is a logical extension of this.

"Yes, that's all very nice, but what have you actually done?", I hear you ask. These are some of the things I have been busy with in the past three months:

The **Service Guidelines** for visiting worship leaders have been updated, and have been circulated to congregations. They will now be updated annually.

I have reinstated the **Midland Union-wide Preaching Plan**, starting with the May 2008 edition, with **Bits & Pieces** on the back, which contains news of past events around the Midland Union, and details of forthcoming events. Several congregations are now sending me their newsletters – Northampton, Cotswold Group, Oxford, Kidderminster, Kingswood, Warwick, Coseley, Birmingham UNM, Shrewsbury and Coventry. Thank you very much – please keep them coming! (Ed: And please send them to MU Now as well - your editorial team is based in Cheltenham, Sue's in Northampton, so it's somewhat tricky to pop round and look at her copy! Our address is inside the front cover.)

**Leading worship around the Midland Union:** By the time you read this, I will have delivered a service to all the congregations in the Midland Union. I also spoke at the Midland Union AGM about my role. I have taken nine services in Midland Union churches and chapels in my first three months, as well as a local funeral, and have several more (services not funerals!) booked for the rest of 2008. If you would like me to take a service in your church / chapel, please get in touch. As a GA-qualified lay preacher, I am also available for rites of passage, should you wish it.

**Delivering the GA's Worship Studies Course Foundation Step:** The course is being delivered by Don Phillips and myself, together with guest speakers, on June 7<sup>th</sup>, July 5<sup>th</sup> and August 2<sup>nd</sup>. Seventeen prospective or actual worship leaders are taking part, which is splendid.

**Publicity, Publicity, Publicity:** The Midland Union website has been overhauled, and now has an up-to-the-minute *News and Events* page, on which I can report any MU or wider Unitarian events, and give notice of forthcoming events. Our webmaster Julian Wright (Peter and Doreen Wright's son) has made a really good job of the whole site – do have a look if you have internet access ([www.midlandunion.org.uk](http://www.midlandunion.org.uk)). The Northampton website has also been updated. The eight congregations who don't currently have a web presence at all have been sent a letter asking them whether they would like us to set one up for them (in consultation with you, obviously). At the time of writing, I have had three positive responses. In the meantime, a Congregations Page has been set up on the MU website, giving basic details for the congregations who don't have a site of their own.

I was asked by the President's Committee to help congregations to bring their notice boards up to date & in line with GA consistent identity. The availability of money from the GA (up to £250) was publicised in the May issue of *Bits & Pieces*. I have received queries from Coseley and Cheltenham so far, whom I have managed to help. Northampton has a new notice board!

**Meetings outside Sundays:** I am very interested in how congregations get together outside of Sunday worship. Many of you hold discussion groups or meditation groups during the week, and I am going to be spending the next few months visiting them all. I believe that the more activities congregations hold, the more people we are likely to attract through our doors. I don't think it matters whether these people attend on a Sunday or not (although it would be nice if they did). The point, so far as I am concerned, is that we are meeting a spiritual need in our communities.

As you can see, I have been quite busy, and am enjoying myself enormously. I'm also doing an Open University course *Introducing Religions* in my spare time (!), which will hopefully lead to a Diploma in Religious Studies by the end of 2009.

I look forward to seeing many of you in the near future.

Sue Woolley, District Facilitator, Midland Union

## Highlights from around the Churches

From the MU Annual Report, you will know that the chapel wall at **Park Lane Unitarian Chapel, Cradley**, was damaged twice during 2007. This is a regular occurrence. As it happens so often, the company which renews the wall were happy to repair their hall roof only charging for the materials. At the MU AGM, we enjoyed their lovely chapel organ, then played by Rev. Ant Howe. The chapel is very grateful to have a regular, talented young organist, Matthew Powell. Thank you Matthew.

If you worship in a Cathedral, visitors are the norm, but for some of the Unitarian congregations, they are a delightful surprise. At **Bayshill Cheltenham**, we have been pleased to welcome a couple from the U.S.A. who even found our notices at the end of the service interesting. A young medical student, on holiday, joined us for the second church service she had ever attended, and on another Sunday, we were visited by a family of attendees from Dudley and a student who had just completed her GCSE's. Everyone has been talking about our visitors, which partially reflects how unusual it is. Let us hope by the time the next newcomers arrive we still remember how to meet and greet. It seems to me the really important thing is, did we give them the spiritual uplift they were seeking?

On 25th June, **Warwick Unitarians** welcomed visitors too - fifteen members of the Northshore Universalist Church, from Danvers, Massachusetts, USA, come for a week's stay. They were kept busy. That evening there was a barbeque in the chapel garden, though a capricious wind did not make for easy cooking! Following a visit to Warwick Castle on Thursday morning, soup and salad was provided at the chapel; later they enjoyed an entertainment at the Talisman Theatre, Kenilworth. Friday was spent in Oxford. The day included a visit to the Harris Manchester College where lunch was served. On Saturday evening there was a concert at the chapel followed by an excellent 'pot-luck' supper. Four Universalists joined the rambles on Sunday to walk from Snitterfield. Lunch at The Snitterfield Arms followed. The chapel service in the afternoon was very well attended. Monday was a free day.

And so to Tuesday and Warwick's guests' last night... fish and chips at the chapel followed by a skittles match between the UK and the US. The trophy was carried off by the US. By 10 o'clock they had departed for a good, but short night's sleep. Their National Express coach for Heathrow left Warwick Parkway at 5.45 am on Wednesday morning ...

Rev. Ann Latham, Minister at **Kidderminster** and new Women's League Representative to the Midland Union Executive, has recently been involved in two walks in Wyre Forest. One was a sponsored midnight walk for charity – the local hospice - and the other a 5 am 'Dawn Chorus' walk with Kidderminster New Meeting Ramblers.

The following lines were penned by Don Worrall (aged 88), an impressed member of the congregation:

### Our Minister

*There has been a lot of talk, about the five mile walk.  
Rev'd Ann was soon involved (so I've been told).*

*There was never a pause, because it was for a good cause,  
And there was no doubt, no-one else would be about.*

*It started at the midnight hour, not far from the River Stour,  
So Ann (being sprightly), decided to do it nightly.*

*At that time in the morning, even the sheep were yawning,  
The birds in the trees, were whistling in the breeze.*

*Even a Woodpecker chipping at the bark, you could even hear a lark,*

*Although it was still dark, you could look over the park.*

*In the dim light, you could see a kite,  
Looking for his prey, at that time of day.*

*So after the night's spree, they returned for a cup of tea,  
With a satisfied smile, portrayed with every mile.*

*So, on behalf of the committee, thanks for extra money  
in the kitty,*

*So because of your endeavour, we will be grateful for ever.*



## Dates for your diary

### MU Annual Lunch

**Where:** Unitarian New Meeting Church, Birmingham

**When:** Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2008

**Time:** 10.30 a.m. for 11.00 a.m.

**Guest Speaker:**

Rev. Penny Johnson - Unitarian Women's League President

All Secretaries of Midland Union congregations should have received a letter in mid-July, from Sue Woolley, MU Secretary, giving further details.

### Unitarian Association of Lay Leaders Conference

The UALL conference 2008 will be taking place at the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow from Friday 31st October to Sunday 2nd November 2008.

The theme is Ways of Worship, and speakers include Martin Gienke, Lay Person in Charge at Bury St. Edmunds; Rev. Linda Hart, minister at Richmond and Putney; and Sue Woolley, District Facilitator of the Midland Union.

For further details and a booking form, please contact Sue Woolley.

The world is full of beauty; we need to express our wonder, praise and thankfulness, our gratitude for the privilege of life.

The world is also full of suffering, tragedy and horror: we need courage and strength to face them.

These are both good reasons for cherishing a religious home - a CHURCH.

Frank Walker



## Midland Union events

### Kingswood's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary

On Sunday May 18<sup>th</sup> a capacity congregation gathered at Kingswood Meeting House to celebrate 300 years of continuous worship and witness in the local area. The service paid tribute to the many people who have worshipped in the chapel and cared for it over these 300 years. Mrs Alison Thursfield brought the greetings of the Midland Union.



The congregation were treated to spectacular music – including Widor's Toccata – played by organist Mr Peter Flower on the organ. In addition to the enthusiastic hymn-singing, the chapel choir sang a piece for the occasion.

After the service the congregation tucked into a wonderful buffet lunch, which included a slice of the fantastic cake baked and decorated by chapel member Marina Caddick (Cake shown being cut by current Minister Rev Ant Howe and former Minister Rev Keith Hill). Many of those present purchased a commemorative medal which was designed for the occasion by local designer Mr Hamish Bowie.

Ant Howe

The Tercentenary Service was just the start of the celebrations. On Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> July there was an Open Day and Concert at Kingswood. This was well supported, mostly by local people though a smattering of Unitarians from the Midland Union were spotted, including President Alison Thursfield. Between the showers, the crowd was treated to music and displays of Irish dancing. There were tests of skill - putting, water-divining and 'welly-wanging' - and interesting exhibits on the history of the Chapel and the locality, with cream teas to replenish dropping energy levels.

A short Service of Thanks for the tercentenary, in the flower-festooned Chapel, was followed by a musical evening. Inclement weather meant this was held in the hall instead of in the garden, but did not mar enjoyment of the event.

## Centenary of the Women's League 5<sup>th</sup> July 2008

*Visited by the Black Country Group of Churches:- Coseley, Dudley, Oldbury and Wolverhampton.*

Didn't we have a lovely time, the day we went to Sheffield to celebrate the Centenary of the British League of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women.

Pam Rose (Black Country Group Chairman) had organised a coach to pick us up from Oldbury, and there we went from Wolverhampton to join ladies from Birmingham, Dudley, and of course Oldbury.

After a pleasant journey in a really comfortable coach, with plenty of sunshine and a few showers on the way we reached Upper Chapel in plenty of time to have a coffee and meet with other members of the Women's League. I was especially pleased to be able to greet Reverend Penny Johnson, the President for the Centenary Year, who has been a dear friend for many years.

Penny's husband Ken, who was Master of Ceremonies, brought us to order, to hear Penny welcome us and to say grace, before a delicious buffet lunch prepared and served by members of the Sheffield congregation. They did a splendid job!

After lunch, Penny read out some of the many letters and cards of good wishes sent to the WL. Following this, toasts were proposed, by the President, to the Unitarian Women's League and to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, to which its President, Mrs Joyce Ashworth – a most welcome attendee - responded with thanks; she said that she was delighted to bring the best wishes of the GA to this happy occasion. Mrs. Ashworth presented badges to those Past National Presidents who had not already received them.

Then down to the splendid chapel to enjoy a Pageant arranged by Mrs. Marion Baker, the immediate Past President. Ladies, dressed in the appropriate costume, told the story of the Women's League, from its conception to the present day. The league can certainly be proud of its achievements.

Miss Ann Hughes, National Secretary, gave the Closing Devotions,- a humorous poem, the sad tale of the 'Death of Common Sense' and ending with thoughtful prayers and Benediction.

A vote of thanks to all the many people involved in this grand day was given by Mrs. Mary Wightman, President Elect, with special thanks going to Rev. Geoff Usher and the congregation of Upper Chapel for their co-

operation in hosting the event, to Marion Baker for the Pageant and to Ann Hughes for her invaluable work with the organisation.

Then, homeward, after a day to remember.

Barbara Russell

Immediate Past President BDWL.



(Ed: Readers may be interested to know that the Unitarian Women's League are this year (2008/09) supporting the charity *Sightsavers International* as their project. Details at [www.sightsavers.org](http://www.sightsavers.org), or from Ann Hughes of Coseley Congregation.

## Women's League anthology

Women's League have published an anthology entitled '*A Century of the Unitarian Women's League - 1908-2008*'. This anthology is taken from the printed newsletters of the League; it is not intended to be a history of the League. The majority of the extracts are the exact words as printed in the League Letter of the day; there are also extracts from the early minutes of the League. It is a very interesting book to read, and parts could be used in services, especially on Women's League Sunday (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in June).

The book is available from Mrs. Judy Hague, 39 Cobden View Road, Crookes, Sheffield S10 price £6.50 + £1 pp - cheques made payable to Unitarian Women's League

Ann Hughes, Birmingham District W.L. Secretary

## Bridgemakers - Connecting people across communities

At the end of April, Jon Small and I attended a meeting of the Northampton Faiths Forum at the Quaker Meeting House in Northampton. The speaker was Richard Thompson, founder of the Bridgemakers initiative, who quoted Margaret Mead: "*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.*"

The idea of Bridgemakers is a very simple one. People of different faiths meet in each other's houses and learn that their common humanity is more important than theological differences.

The way it works - to quote from [www.bridgemakers.org.uk](http://www.bridgemakers.org.uk) - is this: "*A family or two friends from one community invite a family or two friends from a different community and during the next four months pay them a return visit. The same process is repeated with a different community. Altogether they meet 3 families in a year.*"

Bridgemakers brings people together and finds that they have more in common than they have differences. Bridgemakers is building connections between people in different communities.”

The reception for the idea taking off in Northampton was enthusiastic. Between 50 and 75 people were present, and I think we all felt that although it would be hard work to set up in the first place, it would be well worth the trouble if the result was the building of bridges between our communities.

Sue Woolley



### 'No Excuse' Sunday!

*Ed: Recently, we've been enjoying ourselves looking through old copies of MU Now (with grateful thanks to Malcolm Sadler). This is from the July 1988 issue ... it made us chuckle.*

Tongue in cheek, a newspaper article proposed that the church should have a 'No Excuse' Sunday so that every member can attend.

Beds will be placed at the back of the church for those who say 'Sunday is my only day to lie in, so leave me alone'.

Eye baths will be available for those with tired eyes from watching too much late TV.

We will also have steel helmets for those who say 'The roof would fall in if I ever came to church'.

Score cards will be available for those who wish to list all the hypocrites present.

We will have hearing aids for those who say the minister speaks too softly, and cotton wool for those who complain he speaks too loudly.

There will be relatives in attendance for those who like to go visiting on Sundays.

Finally, the church will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who have never seen the church without them!

### Coffee break (Part 1)

This originally appeared in the Oxford newsletter of July/August 2008 - thanks for allowing us to reprint it here.

*'The names of 16 books of the Bible are hidden in the paragraph below (sent to the Oxford newsletter by Howard Oliver). See how many you can find. A preacher found 15 books in 20 minutes, but it took him three weeks to find the sixteenth!'*

I once made a remark about the hidden books of the Bible. It was a lulu, kept people looking so hard for facts, and for others it was a revelation. Some were in a jam, especially since the names of the books were not capitalized. But the truth finally struck home to numbers of our readers. To others it was a real job. We want it to be a most fascinating few moments for you. Yes, there will be some really easy ones to spot. Others may require judges to help find them. I will quickly admit it usually takes a minister to find one of them, and there will be loud lamentations when it is found. A little lady says she brews a cup of tea so she can concentrate better. See how well you can compete. Relax now, for there really are sixteen names of books of the Bible in this paragraph.'

### Answers on page 37.



Have you any photos of similarly 'silly' notices that you'd like to share? Please send them to us. ☺



## A Question of Unitarian Identity

[Ed: *This sermon was given by Rev Don Phillips in Evesham on May 14<sup>th</sup>, at the Asparagus Lunch. In order to include it in its entirety, the second half of the sermon by Rev Barbara Thomas, 'Things New and Old', which we began in our last issue, has been postponed till our December issue.*]

I've called this address 'a question of Unitarian identity'. And no, I'm not going to talk about our notice boards, calendars, letterheads, Web sites and other matters of image and consistent identity that we've heard so much about in the last year or so. The question of identity that I have in mind is by no means consistent across our Unitarian movement, and I'm not at all sure that it should be, or ever will be or indeed ever has been. It's the debate that's been going on for many years in our movement, and indeed outside our movement, about whether or not Unitarians are, or should be, a part of the Christian community.

In the first half of last year there was a serial correspondence in *The Inquirer* about this question. And in the spring of 2006 there was, of course, the Chester Cathedral controversy. After several years of holding our Anniversary Service in the Cathedral during the General Assembly Annual Meetings in Chester, the Cathedral had to rescind our booking (it was always a commercial hire arrangement) after a local Anglican had highlighted their own rules forbidding non-Trinitarian worship in the Cathedral.

But not even when practically everyone in Britain regarded themselves as Christian did Unitarians require any kind of statement of faith from their adherents. What's changed is that many people in this country no longer feel that Christianity, even liberal Christianity, is their faith – and Unitarianism was, perhaps uniquely, capable of responding to that change. Most British Unitarians probably do regard themselves as liberal Christians – but they're not the only kind of British Unitarian.

The early Unitarians were regarded as heretics by those belonging to what we now refer to as the 'mainstream' of Christian churches. This was because they refused to accept the idea of the Holy Trinity, and certain other church doctrines. However, those early Unitarians always believed that they were Christians, even that they were truer

Christians - truer to the simple teachings of Jesus and the Holy Scriptures, than those who'd gone down the Trinitarian route.

The debate as to whether or not Unitarians are Christians has periodically surfaced, gone round in circles, and died away many times over many years. And I believe it's a healthy debate in many ways, because it reminds us of our diversity and the common values that hold us together.

But with what, exactly, are we comparing ourselves? To find out just what the majority of Christians in Britain today, at least officially, regard as their definition of what it is to be Christian - I looked up the wording to the basis of faith document used by Churches Together in England in their criteria for membership, and it states that a Christian is:

### Definition of a Christian – Churches Together in England

Someone who acknowledges God's revelation in Christ, confesses the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures, and, in obedience to God's will and in the power of the Holy Spirit, commits themselves to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another in the Church, which is his body; and to fulfil their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world, to the glory of the one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is, of course, a prescription of faith that the Unitarians as a movement have never fully accepted – though they've always accepted that an individual among them *may* accept whole statement. It'd be unusual, but it is possible and does occur.

Also, that statement is all very well as an official definition but do all members of the mainstream of Christianity in Britain really believe everything in it? Of course they don't.

A few months ago I was in Lichfield Cathedral and there, on a notice in the entrance were the following words:

### Definition of a Christian – Lichfield Cathedral

Who is a Christian?

Anyone who believes that this is God's World

Who walks in the way of selfless love after the pattern of Jesus Christ

And who lives in the power of the Holy Spirit so that all may find fulfilment.

Now this is one that I'm quite happy with. It's not in conflict with any kind of idea of a human Jesus and it's essentially un-dogmatic. It allows room for interpretation.

Clearly there are, it seems, some parts of Liberal Anglicanism where more open interpretations of the Churches teaching are acceptable. But sadly that notice in Lichfield Cathedral has now disappeared – much to the disappointment of some of the volunteers who work there. It's been removed as part of a revamping of the Cathedral's signage they say – I wonder, why?

Many of those who call themselves Christians today would still say that Unitarianism is not a Christian movement at all – because we don't make adherence to the very core of traditional Christian doctrine a requirement for membership. Unitarians claim the right to judge for themselves what makes or does not make a Christian – while accepting among their number those who share their values but prefer to use other labels to describe their position on their own spiritual journey.

Unitarians have always emphasised that the Holy Trinity was a doctrine that was not set out in scripture but was created by the developing Christian Church in the fourth century. We have always said that - though we accept the right of other branches of Christianity to believe as they wish - we did not see this doctrine as essential to belief in the teachings of Jesus, and that we were a church that did not insist on adherence to any particular creed. But we claimed, nevertheless, to be Christian.

This would have been the position of most British Unitarians until the last twenty-five to fifty years - but what of now? I don't think we can do a very good job of working out where we are now without some understanding of where we've come from so let's look a bit deeper into the history – just for a while.

In his booklet *Current Trends in British Unitarianism* Arthur Long identified four separate historical strands within British Unitarianism. Firstly, "The mainstream strand", coming from the English Presbyterians - this one goes back to the Great Ejection from the Church of England in 1662 and the Toleration Act of 1689. Quoting Arthur Long [1];

We, no less than the other Free Church Denominations, are part of the original tradition of Puritan Dissent. Leaving aside the Quakers, who always set themselves apart from the mainstream, there were three groups among the original Dissenters: the Independents (later known as Congregationalists), a few Baptists, and the Presbyterians.

The second strand Arthur Long identifies comes from the Anglican Church of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century in the form of Theophilus Lindsey, the Vicar of Catterick who resigned his living in 1773 and set up the first avowedly Unitarian Chapel in England on the site where our London Headquarters, Essex Hall, now stands.

The third strand was the group known as the General Baptists. A number of our churches, especially in Southern England (including Trowbridge, Horsham and Newport IoW) were originally General Baptist and the General Baptist Assembly remains as part of our movement today.

The fourth strand comes from the Methodist Unitarians of East Lancashire who emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Once again quoting Arthur Long [2];

These groups - General Baptists and Methodist Unitarians - brought to a movement dominated by the English Presbyterians, most of whom had become prosperous middle class merchants and manufacturers, a welcome element of radical working class enthusiasm.

However, Arthur Long explains, to these four Christian strands we later added some broader religious thinking. So from these beginnings we developed into the movement we know today covering a spectrum from Liberal Christian Unitarianism to both Religious Humanism and Non-Theistic Humanism on the one hand and Universalism, in what Long calls the All Faiths Universalism sense, on the other[3].

The passage of time has contributed to our movement as it is today and Unitarian thinking has developed too. The tenets of freedom, reason and tolerance have, together with rational, scientific knowledge contributed to the development of our beliefs. We do, of course, allow for diversity and agree to differ even if at some times the tolerance that our unity requires, between traditional and non-traditional Unitarians seems to be stretched to the limit!

Although a majority of contemporary British Unitarians continue to think of themselves as at least broadly Christian, there are many who do not. In recent years we have seen a rising tendency to envisage a shift in Unitarianism to a point beyond Christianity.

For many years Unitarians have explored the insights and values of other World Faiths and used them in worship. But to use Buddhist writings in Unitarian worship does not mean that the Unitarians in question have come to believe all that a Buddhist might believe. Unlike other Christian groups, we have been eclectic in our approach, believing as we do that no religion holds a monopoly of truth.

So are we still Christian or not? I believe that most Unitarians hold it as their right to continue to use the title “Christian” for their system of belief – or at least for the core of their system of belief. And their system of belief must be individual and personal because, remember, no one can dictate to them of what it must consist. If we’ve lost anything it is, perhaps, a consistent sense of theology – we never did have a consistent faith.

For myself I’m fairly relaxed about letting the mainstream have their definition of Christianity and saying that I’m, quite simply, a Unitarian. I did once see myself as a liberal Christian Unitarian but no longer – not because my faith has changed, though it undoubtedly has, but because I don’t now find such labels as; ‘Christian Unitarian’, ‘Theist Unitarian’, ‘Humanist Unitarian’ all that helpful. I prefer to be simply ‘a Unitarian’ as I’ve been for the whole of my fifty-seven years in this life.

The evangelicals are having their way in the mainstream churches while the liberal majority in the Anglican Church (and yes, they are still in a majority) are remaining rather silent. And this is a pity for us and for our relationships with the mainstream.

We developed our plural approach to religion for sound reasons, without losing any of our historic liberal Christian heritage and tradition. And our occasional involvement with interfaith worship, and our frequent use of literature and scriptures from other religious traditions in worship, does not detract from the strength of our liberal Christian heritage.

Has Unitarianism become a religion in its own right or is it still just a branch of the liberal wing of Christianity that has developed a form of

plural religious practice? That’s a bigger question that’s being debated elsewhere and I haven’t time to start on that one now.

The Unitarian Christian Association, an affiliated body of the General Assembly, has recently re-organised itself and is enjoying a growth in membership and activity – according to the Rev Chris Wilson [4] writing in *The Unitarian* last August, and I warmly congratulate them. I am not a member of the Unitarian Christian Association, but I sincerely hope that they continue to prosper and play an important part in the affairs of the wider Unitarian movement both nationally and internationally. They are an integral part of our wider movement - but they are not the core of our movement – and they don’t have the sole right to represent the historic Unitarian and Free Christian tradition.

However, with the rising once again of the debate about what Unitarianism is, and should become, some of our number seem to be trying to use the debate to highlight differences and canvas for change – change that would polarise and divide rather than unite and strengthen.

That small minority; and I do believe that it is a small minority, would do better to look back to the spirit of Arthur Long – a founding member of the UCA – who gave us those brilliantly succinct trends of broad ranging Unitarian thought.

There has never been a Unitarian statement of faith to be adhered to. There have always been, potentially, as many individual statements of faith as there are individual Unitarians – and that’s the whole point!

Just to finish off aptly I’d like to quote from a letter that Rev Peter Godfrey had published in *The Inquirer* on 14<sup>th</sup> July last year. Peter’s view was that “*faith in action*”, the working Unitarian community, was “*far more important than trying to set out what we believe*”. Trying to narrow down what Unitarians believe has never been successful in Peter’s experience of more than fifty years in the Unitarian ministry.

Quoting Peter Godfrey’s letter:

Perhaps some churches can expand on the basis of liberal Christianity, but we must be quite free to let others expand on the basis of faith in the values of the common ideas of our history.[5]

Peter Godfrey, in a more recent private communication, said, and I’m sure he won’t mind me quoting him:

I think that the idea that only liberal Christianity is our 'historic tradition' is a bit of a myth... In the first Unitarian Year Book, *The British and Irish Unitarian Almanac, 1847* ... the introductory article says: 'The Unitarian congregations of Great Britain ... recognise no standard of faith, and acknowledge no individual or body of persons as authorised to act or speak in their name'. [6]

Don Phillips, Evesham, 14 May 2008.

#### Notes

- [1] Long A. *Current Trends in British Unitarianism*. Ulster Unitarian Christian Association, 1997, p.4.
- [2] Ibid., p.6.
- [3] Ibid., p.11.
- [4] Wilson C. 'The Unitarian Christian Association: A Remarkable Renaissance' *The Unitarian No 1243: August 2007*.
- [5] Godfrey P. *The Inquirer* (letters page) No 7678: 14 July 2007.
- [6] Godfrey P, in a private e-mail, 17 August 2007.



### The Asparagus Lunch made the newspapers!

Our congratulations go to Maureen Butler, Evesham member, who wrote a piece for the Cotswold and Vale Magazine. Three pages long, it gave an interesting account of the origins of the lunch, with several photos of the event.. Maureen also persuaded the editor to print this description of Unitarianism, written by Don Phillips for Evesham's 'welcome' leaflet.

#### What is Unitarianism?

It is a liberal religious movement open to insights from all the world religions as well as literature, art, music, science, philosophy and nature.

Unitarianism is rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions but has broadened to include a range of religious expression, extending from liberal Christianity to Universalism (in the sense of an all-faiths approach to religion and spiritual practice) and to Humanism.

Unitarians believe that no religion has the monopoly on truth. They encourage people to seek their own truth and explore the limits of their own belief. They endeavour to meet the spiritual needs of individuals in the context of a loving community, and encourage the fulfilment of all human potential.

Unitarianism began as a Christian heresy, emphasizing the oneness of God; it was part of post-Reformation rational dissent, but now highlights being a religious movement without a creed as its defining characteristic.

## Your thoughts on 'What is a Church?'

### What do you think a Church is?

There are two answers to this question. The more obvious is that it is a building where people go for worship. But the more important is the community which unites for worship – be it in a building or even outside.

I would include all forms of religious worship, including Jews, Christians, Moslems, Buddhists, and the myriad of others around the world. The name of the building could be a temple, mosque, church, chapel, meeting house or synagogue. This of course leaves out groups such as Spiritualists and others who might gather in any convenient place.

However for me the more important meaning of a church is not the building, but the community which meets on a regular basis for some form of religious thought, discussion, praise or whatever suits and unites them. Whatever happens during that meeting, or formal service, is far less important than how the gathering functions or 'jells' together.

An excellent example in this respect, are what are (sometimes derogatorily) called 'happy clappy' forms of worship. These are full of music – often with some younger people playing guitars, drums and possibly a piano – making a good loud noise. The words might be projected onto a screen or the wall for the congregation to join in. I find these churches usually predominantly full (and I mean full) of young people – many at a local university or with young children – who really 'jell' together.

The prayers, the address and the handshaking (or embracing your neighbour) are sincerely meant. These churches have a very supportive congregation – not just supportive of the church and its activities, but supportive of one another in times of need. This could be childbirth, baby-sitting, illness or just collection from school. These are truly active community churches. That they do not fulfil my theological requirements of a church is my problem – not theirs.

I suppose the opposite end of the spectrum are the Quakers, who 'sit in solemn silence' – and it could be a whole hour of quiet. They call it a 'Meeting for Worship'. But frankly nowadays there is very

little vocal worship as any other church or chapel attender would understand it.

In the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Quakers were a break-a-way from the Church of England. Over the following 359 years they have become quite separate, but have been admitted into 'Churches together in Britain and Ireland'. However Friends' Meetings have changed substantially over the past 50-60 years. Children used to be taught Bible stories in Sunday School. Now they are just given any activity to keep them interested and quiet. It is some time since I have heard a biblical reading during a Meeting for Worship, even though there is almost always a Bible on the central table, along with a copy of *Quaker Faith and Practice* and a small floral arrangement. Instead there is an emphasis on living a simple (or simpler) life and supporting any non-violent activity or concern for people suffering from ill treatment or in impoverished circumstances. In my opinion Quakers are now more of a pacifist organisation than a religious organisation. This is not wrong – but it is a different kind of church. Having written that, I feel that they are still a church – of sorts. What goes on in their Sunday gatherings, and what they preach, is less important than the life Quakers try to lead. In the context of this discussion, they look after one another and form a succinct local community sufficient for any Unitarian congregation to follow. Furthermore they are active in any campaign or local activity which supports those 'trodden under' by society at large.

So what makes a good Unitarian church community? I think it is one which supports its own activities – be it chapel services, or outings, or other activities outside the chapel. The 'church' must look after itself – not only the other members for the time being, but also the fabric of the chapel – so we pass on to the next generation a building fit for its purpose – not to be a millstone or liability. Unfortunately this means support from its present members – each according to his or her means.

It also means looking after the financial needs of those who work for the chapel – mainly the Minister – and the costs incurred by members. Regrettably this means us all contributing money – and usually more than we might be asked to.

Basically we are largely living on the generosity of past members of our chapels. We are not maintaining our properties (because our numbers are few) so that in time they will have to be closed down and sold, with the money probably going to the Midland Union or the General Assembly.

However, the fabric of the church can still be a worthwhile asset and should not be sold if it can be avoided. Cheltenham and Tamworth are good examples, where they still own the physical church, but it is let for the time being until the congregation has a need for it again.

Unfortunately sometimes the physical church itself does not have a long-term future. But the important congregational church could possibly continue to meet in a hired room (or a Friends Meeting house) and the 'church' will continue as a body of people – for a while – as a group of people with Unitarian views.

So in the long term, some might say that what is important is the church – in the sense of the worshipping community – rather than the building in use for the time being.

Benjamin Rowntree, Evesham

## What is a Church ?

Collins Dictionary of 1972, states that a Church is:

1. 'A building for Christian Worship'
2. 'A whole body or sect of Christians'.

A Unitarian Publication of 1973 by Alan Ruston, states that a Unitarian Church is:

'One where an individual comes to develop a faith of his own ... It will not offer repose, (although it can bring great peace of mind), because life changes with the years and his faith will evolve in the process.'

Alan's definition of a church can be read as both 'a building for worship', or 'A body of Unitarians' in a similar way to that of Collins Dictionary. However, it is more usual today, to describe a 'body of Unitarians' as a congregation, church community, or fellowship.

For me, a church has to be defined as a building dedicated to the worship of God (or call Him what you will) and sanctified over the years as a special place where people can commune with (or pray to) the Eternal Spirit, and perhaps reflect on the deeper meaning of life in a shared atmosphere of reverence and humility.

Regrettably, the Midland Union has lost many of its churches due to a lack of younger people to replace the inevitable losses in membership through age and infirmity. Of the former West Midlands Group of ten churches served by three ministers in the 1970s, five have closed and the buildings sold: West Bromwich, Wolverhampton, Oldbury, Lye and Walsall. As a consequence, it will be difficult to envisage the rekindling our Unitarian Witness in those communities, without a base from which to begin.

We should strive to retain our remaining church buildings, because they do represent a place of permanence and identity in the local community, which can be used as a focal point for the continuity, renewal and resurgence of our Unitarian Faith.

For this reason, Unitarian Fellowships should strive to acquire or build meeting houses of their own, however small and humble their beginnings.

Even when a local Unitarian Community has all but ceased to exist in numerical terms, its church should be retained and held in trust at national level, for a possible rebirth at some future date.

In an era when professional ministry is in serious decline, preservation of our buildings as foundations for the future, should become a leading priority at both district and national level.

Roger Mathews, Kidderminster



## What is a church?

There are few things that church needs to have. One is a group of people, another is some way of regularly connecting for a shared experience (usually this is in person, but there have been successful distance churches). Of course that isn't quite enough, but it's actually difficult to pinpoint exactly what else is required.

Normally you'd say that a church has to meet for worship, and subscribe to some set of beliefs. But you should struggle to find a Unitarian church which encouraged subscription to certain beliefs yet we can still accurately describe ourselves as a church or churches.

It's even arguable that the denomination as a whole and the district unions can be described as a church. This fulfils my initial thoughts – we are certainly a group of people, we connect annually at the GA meetings, and more informally through publications, visiting ministers and preachers, events at Hucklow and so on. Some people would use the term church when referring to the denomination and others find that an uncomfortable phrase.

Perhaps it's the meeting for worship that's important. Maybe we should be comfortable with requiring worship when discussing what we do at our meetings. I think most people are – although it wouldn't surprise me if at least one Unitarian (for a perfectly consistent reason) wasn't. On the other hand, members of many religions meet for worship in connected groups, and wouldn't normally describe those groups as churches – I suppose the argument there is that there must be some Christian or post-Christian connection for it to be a church.

There is a collection of post-Christian organisations with which we have some overlap and certainly much in common. These are the Ethical Culture societies – devotees of reasonable and ethical humanism, often having a focus on social action. There is only one Ethical Culture Society that I know of in the UK (South Place Ethical Society in London at Theophilus Lindsey's old church) but there are many in the US. Many of them meet regularly for uplifting thought, reflection and inspiration. Sounds like worship to me, although I'm pretty certain they don't see it as that and they don't normally describe themselves as a church.

Whenever a precise definition eludes me, I find that the best thing to do is call people what they call themselves – within reason. So, I think that if a group of people regularly connect, and describe themselves, honestly, as a church, then that is exactly what they are.

Angela Maher, UNM Birmingham



## Church? But You Don't Believe in God

I find it very hard to tell people that I go to 'church' – it catches in my throat and I have to force it out. Church is not cool. It's not fashionable. It has bad connotations for many people and for most of my life anyone who regularly went to 'church' was seen as a bit odd, one of the "God Squad".

I'm always nervous of the reaction I'm going to get from friends when the conversation comes around to weekend plans and I casually mention that I'm going to church. They usually mirror the above title – Church? But you don't believe in God. This makes me think two things: Firstly, have I really made my near-atheistic views clear to ALL of my friends and secondly, why do I actually go to church.

It's a question I've been asking myself a lot lately. I've recently moved to London and having been a regular member at Bayshill, it seemed natural to seek out a local congregation. But should I really? London's a busy place, I'm a busy person, do I really want to spend my Sunday mornings(!) in church. What do I hope to gain? As you know – I don't believe in God.

Firstly, I hope to genuinely challenge my religious and spiritual beliefs/ideas/values (pick whichever word you prefer!). Being an atheist is not as simple as might be imagined – it only answers one of the big questions, leaving you to figure out the rest for yourself. I hope my church is a place to frankly discuss the reasoning behind, and merits of, answers to all the other questions.

Secondly, I'm after a sense of community, although it's hard to define that. I have a loving family and some fantastic friends, but there is something very different about people you meet through shared values. Something different about a place where you're welcomed just for walking through the door and for however much you want to contribute in word or deed.

Thirdly, I am, as I say, a busy person in a busy city and it's good to have a moment's pause. I find it hard to still my mind, to stop thinking about the hours and days ahead, but the surroundings of a church and congregation make it easier.

Lastly, singing. I'm not a good singer but I do like to sing in a group and without the time to devote to joining a choir the occasional hymn or song is a definite bonus.

As an end note, I'd like to share an answer I received when I asked a devout Christian friend of mine why she went to church when God was "all around". She answered that our spiritual selves are like embers: alone we struggle, easy to extinguish and hard to relight. Together however, we feed off each other's heat and glow all the more brightly.

Mark Tribe, ex Cheltenham

Ed: An anonymous writer in the Kidderminster 'Record' echoes Mark's sentiments ...

*"Why belong to a church at all? Can't I be a Unitarian without belonging? Not really. Most of us are not gifted enough to achieve our full potential living as hermits. Good company helps. Amen."*

## WHAT IS A CHURCH?

What is a church? This was a frequent question asked by Dudley Richards of Harris Manchester College, Oxford. Eventually Dudley came up with the answer, 'a loving community'. In the Synoptic Gospels there are only two recorded uses of the word by Jesus. The well known passage in St Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is alleged to have told Peter, 'On this rock I shall build my church' must be dubious, for the simple reason that there was no such word as 'church' in Jesus' language, Aramaic. There was a Greek word which Jesus might have used, but I remain to be convinced.

The word 'Church' takes off in the Epistles of St Paul, but it is clear that he refers to a number of individual communities rather than a uniform monolith purporting to dictate doctrine and to possess a monopoly of truth. Indeed there were a variety of practices and views in these early communities. Some churches preserved Jewish patterns of worship and practice; others were more influenced by Greek thought and tradition.

Ninety per cent of Jesus' life is unknown, a complete mystery. Inevitably there was speculation about his nature. People developed and chose various points of view. I use the word 'chose' because the word 'heretic' is derived from the Greek word, 'hereos'

or choice. Inevitably there was uncertainty. Little by little, alas, the worst aspects of human nature triumphed. Humans are insecure creatures; they crave certainties even where reason shows that no such certainties can exist. The pressures of uniformity of structure and doctrine eventually triumphed at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD (or CE as we now have to say!) and thenceforward 'Holy Church' steadily became an unaccountable purveyor of 'truth' and 'error'. In a recent sermon by a bishop of the Church of Ireland the pithy comment was made that the Gospel (or good news) of Jesus had been besmirched by the bad news of the church - and with good reason.

To such an extent have the churches besmirched Christianity that the quest for the real Jesus has been obscured. It is worth remembering that there was no such word as 'Christian' in Jesus' earthly life. The word was coined some fifty years afterwards. What Jesus would have made of the example of the churches in practising their version of Christianity I dread to think. Inevitably what passes for Christianity as purveyed by the churches has become an Aunt Sally for writers in a secular age. In the extraordinary masterpiece, 'The God Delusion' by Richard Dawkins, the real (and just) targets of this excellently written book are the churches and not Christianity itself, however much he tries to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Some of his targets betray a lack of knowledge of the subject in question, such as Spiritualism, but the thrust of his treatment of the churches of history is unanswerable.

In the light of the history of the churches I have every sympathy with those who want to give up the name 'church' and refer to Unitarianism as a 'movement'. Nevertheless, Unitarianism for good or ill is a creature of Western Christendom. It would be misleading to pretend otherwise. A number of our places of worship are described as 'meeting houses', I know, but for all its chequered history the word 'church' preserves our link with the Jesus of history, the rule of love.

Dudley Richards' definition of 'church' as a community of love is indeed a compelling one.

Gavin Lloyd, Oxford



## What is a church?

When I was at library school in the Dark Ages (as my daughter calls it) we had to answer the question what is a library? The answer was three "B"s: Books, Brains and Buildings. I think the same kind of answer could be made to the question what is a church, but three "C"s: Contents, Community and Church/Chapel Building.

Of the three, I believe that the second, Community, is the most important. It is the society of our fellow Unitarians and the quality of our worship leaders that keep us coming back Sunday after Sunday. Without people, the rest would be an interesting archaeological exhibit. Here in the Midland Union, we are fortunate to have four very talented ministers, and lots of talented worship leaders. I think that we need to take our collective hats off to these people, who spend hours every week, making sure that when we walk into church on Sunday, there is an inspiring, uplifting service to listen to.

The reasons why people become Unitarian are as varied as the people themselves. Just have a look on the *Why I am a Unitarian* page of the Midland Union website, and you'll see some great reasons for staying in this wonderful movement of ours. For example:

- *"I am a Unitarian because this church is the only place where I am both intellectually and spiritually stretched. It is a wonderful fellowship in diversity where doubts and faith, dreams and pragmatism blend together in an utterly satisfying whole. It is somewhere to share ideas and inspirations, celebrations and crises, when I can truly be myself."*
- *"Why belong to any church at all? Can't I be a "Unitarian" without belonging? Not really. Most of us aren't resolute or gifted enough to achieve our full potential living as hermits. Good company helps."*
- *"I am a Unitarian because I believe that your faith is how you live, not what you believe. I am a Unitarian because I want to dedicate myself to creating a world where no one is persecuted because of their religious belief. I am a Unitarian because I want to belong to a community where I can commune with God unhindered by any concept of what God is. I am a Unitarian*

*because I want to belong to a community of individuals. I am a Unitarian because I believe holiness is not contained in books or theology but in the very depth of the human heart. I am a Unitarian because I believe in God and I believe In gay rights, and I don't think they're mutually exclusive."*

Each of these writers emphasises the importance of being part of a community of like-minded people, fellow pilgrims on the spiritual path. As the second writer says, "*good company helps*".

And so does how we welcome visitors to our churches and chapels. There was a very interesting slot at the recent GA meetings called Radical Hospitality. It was all about how we treat strangers who walk through our doors on a Sunday – we have to be careful that we strike the right balance between not paying them any attention at all, and overwhelming them with an over-effusive welcome. Sharing refreshments after the service is a very good way of making the newcomer feel welcome without overwhelming them, so long as someone talks to them and makes them feel included.

I have said that I believe that people are the most important of the three "C"s. But a beautiful worship space is also an important part of what makes a church. Many of the buildings in the Midland Union are wonderful worship spaces, bright and welcoming, with beautiful stained glass. But even if your congregation doesn't have a traditional church building to worship in, you can still make it a vibrant space in which to worship. Up to date leaflets at the door; a good, regularly updated noticeboard, comfortable seats and some well-chosen pictures can make all the difference. At Northampton, our worship space is a converted shop-unit, but I think everyone who attends would agree that it is a proper dedicated area for worship, not just another room. The rest of the building is important too – how is your disabled access? Are the loos nice and clean? Is there a pleasant area in which to take refreshments after the service? Is there a meeting room for committee meetings and other meetings? Does your church conform to health & safety regulations?

My third "C" is contents – which includes the comfortable seats and well-chosen pictures mentioned above. But I'm also talking about the general upkeep of the building here – is it clean and tidy? Have

you got nice mugs and plates for refreshments? Are your hymn books in reasonable condition? Is someone responsible for making sure that the stock of loo rolls hasn't run out? If you have a library, is it organised? Who is responsible? It is up to the church community to ensure that the contents are as good as they can be.

Finally, I would also say that the answer to the question "what is a church?" should include "How do we present ourselves to outsiders?" A good website can help enormously in giving a good impression, as can a good newsletter. Your noticeboard may be the vital first link that an outsider sees – make sure it's updated regularly. We need to appreciate the people who do the hard work of updating the website and the noticeboard, and producing the newsletter – it is usually done on a voluntary basis, and there is a lot of work involved.

Contents, Community and Church / Chapel – these are the three "C"s that answer the question "What is a church?"



Sue Woolley, Northampton

## **When is a church not a church?**

The photograph on our front page is of Bayshill Unitarian Church, in Cheltenham. Or it was - before the building was rented to an auction house!

In the early 1980s, the church needed expensive, yet essential repairs. However, Bayshill's finances were at full stretch and it was just not possible to fund the repairs. There was a stark choice facing the congregation: sell the church and get out; or rent it out, and worship elsewhere.

Long discussions ensued, in which Walter Hawkins begged the congregation to go with the latter option. He had watched as the Gloucester congregation sold off their building, and did not wish it to happen again in Cheltenham. His point of view prevailed. A lessee was found who would also perform the essential repairs - the auction house which is still in residence. The church organ was moved to the old church hall, immediately behind the original church, and Bayshill congregation moved down the lane.

And over twenty years later, we are still there.

## Coffee break (Part 2)

It was that time, during the Sunday morning service, for the children's sermon. All the children were invited to come forward. One little girl was wearing a particularly pretty dress and, as she sat down, the pastor leaned over and said, "That is a very pretty dress. Is it your Easter Dress?" The little girl replied, directly into the pastor's clip-on microphone, "Yes, and my Mom says it's a bi\*\*h to iron."

An exasperated mother, whose son was always getting into mischief, finally asked him "How do you expect to get into Heaven?" The boy thought it over and said, "Well, I'll run in and out and in and out and keep slamming the door until St. Peter says, 'For Heaven's sake, Dylan, come in or stay out!'".

Did you ever stop and wonder...

- Why there is a light in the fridge and not in the freezer?
- Why you never see the headline: "Psychic Wins Lottery"?
- Why sheep don't shrink when it rains?
- Why glue doesn't stick to the bottle?



### Deadline extended

In our last issue, we asked you to suggest captions for this photograph, taken at Great Hucklow by Syd Mathews of Cirencester. We've only received two so far, so we've extended the deadline till the end of October. Come on, we're sure you have some ideas ...



### Answers to the Bible quiz on page 18

Judges, Lamentations, Titus, James, Numbers, Mark, Luke, Revelation, Job, Amos, Kings, Acts, Esther, Hebrews, Peter, Ruth.

## Poets' Corner

### The Little Church (Rosedale)

*Esther M. Clark Hill*

I love a little church, a plain, old fashioned meeting-house,  
Hard by a traveled road, or on a wind-swept hill;  
Where the people stand to sing: "All hail the power,"  
And each reverent knee is bent before the heavenly will.

I love the pleasant folks, neighbor-like and friendly;  
I love the bent gray heads that crowd the narrow pews;  
Restless children bobbing up and down upon the hard seats,  
While the preacher reads aloud the foreign mission news.

There's a tuneful choir of frogs, somewhere in the hollow;  
Through the open window comes a breath of meadow-sweet.  
There's a holy stillness that is like a benediction,  
Making every little pew a perfect glory-seat.

I've no religion that the dear Lord would be thinking of,  
But I love His little church wherever it may be.  
"Alas, and did my Saviour bleed," and "All hail the power,"  
And "Holy, Holy, Holy," \_\_\_\_\_ they are fine enough for me.

### Going to church

*Author Unknown  
(possibly Charles Spurgeon)*

Some go to church to take a walk.  
Some go to church to laugh and talk.

Some go to church to meet a friend.  
Some go to church, their time to spend.

Some go to church to meet a lover.  
Some go to church, a fault to cover.

Some go to church for speculation.  
Some go to church for observation.

Some go to church to doze and nod.  
The wise go there to worship God.





### Cathedrals

*Kath Riley*

Tree trunks stretching to the sky;  
Branch links with branch,  
Springing high above the path.  
Sun filtering through dappled leaves,  
Nature's cathedral.

Pillars marching down the aisle;  
Stone meeting stone,  
Vaulting high above the nave.  
Sun shining through stained glass,  
Mankind's poor copy.

### Friday Light at Oat Street Chapel: An Appreciation

*Peter Forder*

(With apologies to William Henry Davies)

What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?

No time to see, as graves we pass,  
The Chapel fine, with ancient glass.

No time to watch the Chalice burn,  
And ponder on the things we learn.

No time for music from the Spheres,  
Or deeper tones that no-one hears.

No time to hear the Poet's verse,  
Or write your own (and read it worse)!

No time to sit and talk and think,  
Reflect on life and take a drink.

A rich life this, at Friday Light,  
When spirits soar to grander height.

(Ed: 'Friday Light' is Evesham's regular discussion group.)

## Memories

### The Hour

*Hilda Chart*

From clamour, noise and din I fled  
To spend in heaven one hour  
O'er bluebell carpets soft to tread,  
New silken fronds about my head  
And scent of dew-drenched flower.

Cool streamlets fringed with kingcups gold,  
Life-giving, gently lave  
The gnarled limbs of giants old  
Grown stiff and numb with winter cold  
Spring's glory so to serve.

My soul in mossy silence breathes  
Life pulsing from the ground,  
While high concealed in shining leaves  
Rare limpid threads of birdsong weave  
Bright canopies of sound.

From seething murk of noise and din  
This perfect hour of mine  
Must rise, a crystal sphere, and swim  
To form at last a cell within  
The intangible Divine.

*The poem and drawing on this page, reproduced by permission of Norman Chart, were the work of Hilda Chart (1909–2008).*

A member of the Oxford congregation since 1981, Hilda died on 7<sup>th</sup> March at the age of 98. At her funeral service on 19<sup>th</sup> March, Revd Peter Hewis paid tribute to Hilda as a teacher, wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, artist, poet, and carer.

A total of £385 was donated to the Send a Child to Hucklow Fund in her memory.



## Going to Church in my Youth (1890s) – by Francis Brett Young

*(adapted by Roger Mathews from the novel ‘Wistanslow’ in 2008)*

I always enjoyed going to church with my mother on Sunday.

The huge parish church at Halesowen – spoken of by the locals as ‘our little cathedral’, impressed me by both by its size and by the grandeur of the gothic arches and tall spire which pierced the sky. The air inside smelt different, being a mixture of dank crumbling stone, dust, worm-eaten wood and mouldy books of devotion. Nor was colour lacking, for when the sun shone through the 16<sup>th</sup> century glass, the dust laden air was shot through with a rainbow brilliance of ruby, topaz, sapphire and cobalt. When the organ played my ears seemed to be filled with nobler music than my mother’s piano, as huge waves of sound went echoing into the remotest corners and the pews trembled with the vibration.

There were other elements of entertainment not related to the church service; for the small community, with no cinema or concert hall, the church became a stage where the actors could be adjudged by the audience, which observed with eagerness the entrance of those lately involved in any local scandal, or budding romance, the demeanour of those newly bereaved, or the newly wed, their appearance would afterwards be discussed in a trickle or flood of gossip, be it censorious or friendly, and which enlivened the talk of the town during the following week.

In this masquerade, moments of comic relief came such as when Mr Bazely the organist, trod on every pedal within reach to represent the lions roaring in the psalms and my friend Tom Hadley who sang tenor in the choir, greeted me with a prolonged wink as they processed solemnly down the aisle in their white surplices.

These were sources of private amusement, but there were others which I shared with my mother, whose sense of the ridiculous was naturally a model for my own. We always noticed the same things and enjoyed the same jokes. When I saw something that struck me as funny in church, I had only to glance sideways and see the flicker of a smile at the corner of her eyes, which made us like conspirators in a private mischief sharpened by the surrounding atmosphere of solemnity.

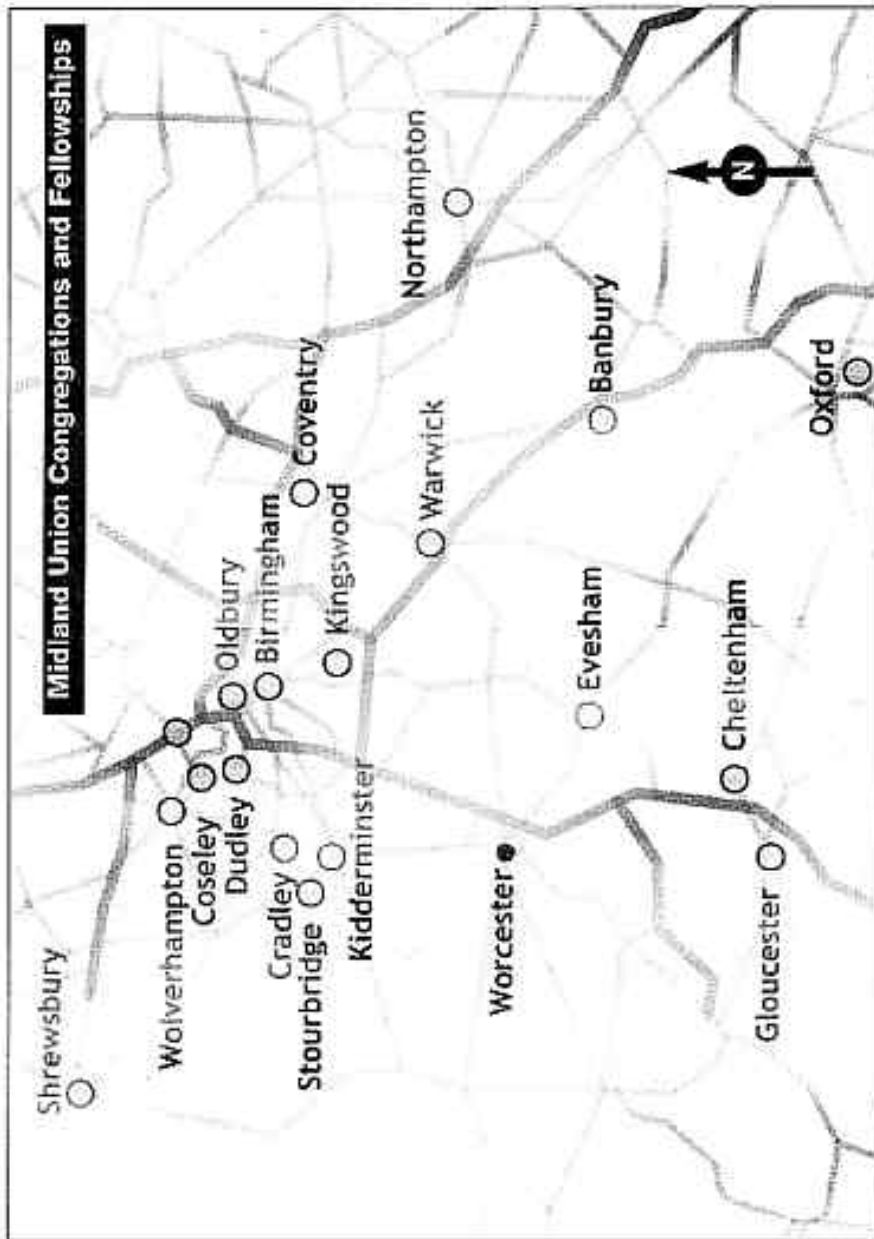
Of such things are lingering memories made.

Footnote: *Francis Brett Young (1884-1954) is Worcestershire’s foremost novelist. Born in Halesowen he wrote over thirty books, several of which were made into films including ‘My Brother Jonathan’ and ‘Portrait of Clare. Unitarians feature in several of his novels.*

## LIST of CONGREGATIONS

Name	Secretary	Contact
Banbury	Elaine Normura	
Birmingham	Jill Hudson	
Cheltenham	Jenny Buckland	
Coseley	Helen J Emery	
Coventry	Janice Ashley	
Cradley	Rhona Homer	
Dudley	Barbara Russell	
Evesham	Lesley Harris	
Gloucester	David Wright	
Kidderminster	Roger Mathews	
Kingswood	Nina Caddick	
Northampton	Sue Woolley <b>Note #1</b>	
Oldbury	Pamela Rose	
Oxford	Catherine Robinson	
Shrewsbury	Marguerite Rossell	
Stourbridge	David Mearman	
Tamworth	Sandy Ellis	
Warwick	Malcolm Sadler	
Wolverhampton	Kenneth Russell	

**Note #1:** Sue Woolley is also Secretary and District Facilitator of the Midland Union.

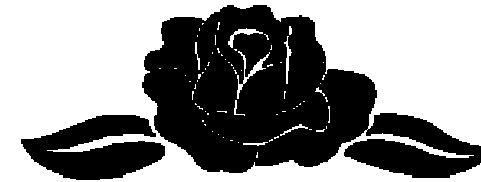


The Midland Union website can be found at  
[www.midlandunion.org.uk](http://www.midlandunion.org.uk)



**“The Church exists for Religion,  
 not Religion for the Church”**

*(Alfred Hall, The Beliefs of a Unitarian)*



Now you've reached the end of this issue, please write or email us  
 with your ideas, letters and comments.

Contact details are inside the front page.

The WINTER 2008 Issue will be published in December.

Please can we have your contributions on the theme of  
**'What three gifts would you wish for a child?'**  
 by **31<sup>st</sup> October** for inclusion in this issue.

The theme for SPRING 2009 will be **'Worship'**.

We welcome contributions from **all** our readers.