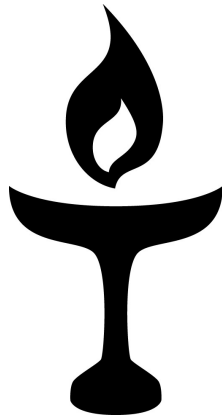


MU NOW



THE MAGAZINE OF THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

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www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk

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AIMS OF THE MUA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

- Support congregations
- Make things happen by providing leadership and initiating projects
- Find resourceful solutions
- Connect Unitarians in the Midlands.

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From the Editor

Welcome to the Winter 2021/22 issue of *MU Now*. There are some fascinating contributions, including Aleks Zglinska's article about attending Northampton Pride, two book reviews by David Taylor about the historical impact of Unitarians on the City of Birmingham and two interesting contributions on our theme, Unitarian values and mission.

But *no* congregation has sent me any local news! I hope for a bumper crop of articles for the *District Round Up* in the next issue. My thanks to everyone who contributed.

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.

The theme for the next issue, due out in May, is "Pilgrimage." The deadline for submissions is Friday 6th May 2022.

Please send your contributions to me at revsuewoolley@gmail.com or to 5, Martins Road, Piddington, Northampton NN7 2DN.

THANK YOU!

Sue Woolley

President's Piece



Some of you may know that I've recently started an art-based course at a local craft college. Something that is quite outside my comfort zone as a former scientist. However, I am somewhat and to my surprise, enjoying the whole thing... all the practical work, especially the homework, research and having to justify all my decisions.

Consequently, it made me think on the theme of this issue of **MU Now** about what are our Unitarian values and mission. Although we often quote the 'tag line' Freedom, Reason and Tolerance, I wondered if we regularly think deeply enough about what that means to us and I was reminded of Rev Sue Woolley's survey published in 2018, where we all tried to explain what our beliefs, values and practices were. It seemed to me as I read it, that to boil it all down to a few words or sentences is almost a 'Mission Impossible'. Not even Tom Cruise and all his gadgets and gizmos could manage it! It's rather like trying to say what is 'Art' and what it is you like about it to another person.

The MUA has those four sentences (see page 2) outlining what we, as a group, can do for you as congregations ... our mission if you like. Do we fulfil it for your congregation? For example, are we supportive enough in the way you'd like/want? Are we helping you to find resourceful solutions to your problems? Could we do more? Let us know.

As part of my course I have to constantly assess what I am doing using three pointed phrases...so thinking around the three words of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance, I've adapted them for you to

use, if you wish, as prompts for when you might think afresh about your Unitarian values and our mission.

- **Could you provide reasons for selecting Unitarianism? What tools did you use?**
- **Were thoughts about your spiritual health (and safety) a consideration and part of what you took into account?**
- **Did/do you evaluate the wider Unitarian ideas?**

While you have a good ponder on the those sentences over a cuppa, may I wish all of you and your families a great, wonder-filled 2022!

Debra Burbery

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## District Minister: Winter Update

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

**Leading worship around the Midland Unitarian Association:** Since the beginning of the first lockdown, I have been producing an online service for the District each week, which has been posted around by e-mail and also on the MUA website. With the new Omicron variant spreading like wildfire, I am still being asked to do a mixture of Zoom and in-person services. I look forward to seeing all of you when I am able to visit you in person again. I am also available to conduct Rites of Passage round the District, should the need arise.

The theme for the **Autumn Training Day**, Understanding our Values, Missions and Goals, was the result of a fascinating talk by

Unitarian Universalist Laura Park at the Ministerial Old Students' Association conference in June. Both Rev Winnie Gordon and I were excited by it and wanted to bring some of her ideas to congregations in the Midlands. Sadly, very few people signed up, so the Training Day did not run.

**MUA Annual Lunch:** It was a joy to meet some of you in person at the MUA Annual Lunch at Kingswood in October. Our Guest Speaker on that occasion was Andrew Webb of Transformers, who told us how he is bringing Unitarian values to a new generation of youngsters.

**Vice-President:** I spent a wonderful weekend as guest of the Northern Unitarian Association in October. I attended their AGM on the Saturday morning and led a workshop on the Saturday afternoon, before being taken out to dinner by David and Hazel Warhurst and Margaret Robinson, who may be known to some of you. On the Sunday morning, I led a hybrid Zoom / in person service. In November, I travelled to Framlingham in Suffolk to meet our new Congregational Connections lead, Lizzie Kingston-Harrison and invited her to be our Guest Speaker at the MUA AGM on 19<sup>th</sup> March.

I completed a short course on **Chaplaincy training** with Unitarian College in October and November.

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

**And if you are feeling alone and would like to hear another human voice, please feel free to give me a call on 01604 870746...**

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

## MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages from our September and November meetings, have already been shared in the relevant issues of *Bits & Pieces*, the monthly news-sheet sent to all congregations. Those which are still current are reproduced below.

1 Cotswold Group ministry: Rev Mark Hutchinson has gone down to three-quarter time and Rev Wyn Thomas, a Unitarian minister from south Wales, is leading one service a month for them.

2 MUA Annual General Meeting: it was agreed that this would take place on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> March 2022, at Kingswood Meeting House. Our Guest Speaker will be Lizzie Kingston, the new GA Congregational Connections lead.

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Northampton Unitarians are proudly LGBTQ+ inclusive by Aleks Zglinska

On Sunday September 12th 2021, Northampton Unitarians took the opportunity to join with other local, cultural, charitable, and civic organisations to celebrate Northampton Pride in the Market Square. Put together by a team of committed volunteers and supported by West Northamptonshire Council (as part of the local LGBTQ+ People's Forum previously supported by Northampton Borough Council) the event started with a Pride March along Abington Street and around the square. We had been able to set up a stall within the Market and were opposite Northants Rights

and Equality Council where a familiar face was hosting their stall (it was our very own Chris Nelson, find out more about the important work they do on their website, <https://northantsrec.org/>)

We had brand new postcards to hand out declaring “You are #QueerlyBeloved” with our contact details on the back and the fact that we are able to host the full range of weddings and other ceremonies at our Meeting House.



Thea Cochrane proudly shows off one of our #QueerlyBeloved postcards at our pride stall which is bedecked with rainbow ribbon bunting!
(photo Aleks Zglinska)

It was a great day, with lots of bright colours, and positive conversations with members of the public. Some of the young

people, particularly, were really pleased to pick up a colourful postcard and several folks thanked us for being an affirming religious and spiritual community. Several people also left prayers and messages on our prayer tree on the day which you can see in the Meeting House (Although it's currently undergoing a little makeover a coat of white paint and some glossy paper will have been applied soon!) We also took our very own non-binary dancing puppet Thay (pronouns they/them) and our big green story-loving dragon Ormebrekka, who certainly gained lots of attention and had to keep being wiped off after being repeatedly patted on the head, so they almost certainly both enjoyed the day out.

For this first time attending it was really very valuable to just be there alongside lots of other organisations and to be able to say “Whoever you are, whoever you love, you are welcome” Hopefully this is just the start of us being able to attend more events after the last eighteen months have been so empty of the usual community events in town. And also gave us an opportunity to be known about by many more people in the town who may have passed us by, and not known who we were or where they could find us!

Thank you to everyone who helped and those who did pop by during the day to support us, and to a friend of Aleks who was able to come and visit and gave us some extra help. We also deeply appreciated the messages of support from others who weren't able to be there, and from other Unitarians from elsewhere who were able to give us some tips and feedback on how best to show up to such an event. Hopefully next year with more of a lead up in terms of planning around the date we will be able to have more of us attend and be involved in the day.

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## Two Book Reviews by David Taylor

**James Whateley and the Survival of Chartism** by Stephen Roberts. 2018. 62pp.

Chartism was a movement for political reform in Britain that existed from 1838 to 1857. It took its name from the People's Charter of 1838 and was a national protest movement, with particular strongholds of support in the North and the Midlands. Its demands, embodied in a charter, were: manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, voting by ballot, annual parliaments, abolition of property qualifications for MPs and payment for MPs.

James Whateley was a Birmingham councillor and pearl button manufacturer. He continued to champion the Chartist cause even after the Chartist movement had lost its momentum. He continued to believe and champion universal suffrage – that all working people were entitled to a say in law making. He also campaigned to make it easier for working people to use their votes – for example, by extending polling hours until late evening. Influenced by the ‘civic gospel’ of George Dawson, he continued to carry this vision on for the future benefit, regardless of class, of all residents of Birmingham.

Of particular interest to MUA members will be the section on Charles Clark. Clark, a chartist from Bath and a great believer in social justice, moved to Birmingham in 1852 where he served as a Unitarian chapel minister preaching to the likes of the famous Nettlefolds.

This short book (62 pages) is part of the ‘Birmingham Biographies’ series of books that aim to educate and ensure that this important element of Birmingham history is not forgotten.

The author, Stephen Roberts, holds honorary positions as Associate Professor and Senior Fellow at, respectively, the Australian National University and the University of Birmingham. He has written extensively on the Chartist movement, and in his engaging little book he reminds us how influential Unitarians were in the development of social reform in Birmingham.

**George Dawson & his Circle: The Civic Gospel in Victorian Birmingham** edited by Andrew Reekes & Stephen Roberts. Merlin Press. 2021. 175pp. [www.merlinpress.co.uk](http://www.merlinpress.co.uk)

The novelist Charles Kingsley (author of *The Water Babies*) described George Dawson as a widely celebrated talker! Joseph Chamberlain said of him, “His name is written in the history of all our most cherished institutions.” When George Dawson came to Birmingham, it was as a Baptist minister. However, his theological views did not sit well with his congregation, and it wasn’t long before he had left to start up his own independent Church – The Church of the Saviour in Edward Street, Birmingham.

In the Church of the Saviour, Dawson developed the concept of the Civic Gospel. He called upon his congregation to join him in the struggle “to improve conditions in the town and the quality of life enjoyed by its citizens.” A call that I know all present day Unitarians would agree with and aspire to!

Dawson does not seem to have considered himself a Unitarian, but today we have claimed him as one of our own.

"True Religion", Dawson believed, was "social, unitive, and brotherly in its spirit: it produces the church as its social development." For him, Christianity was "a set of fruitful principles", not a code of laws or a theological dogma.

For all of his good works Dawson seems to have fallen out of favour. A statue of him used to stand outside the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery. It now stands gathering dust in storage in a Birmingham Museum warehouse.

As the title of this book suggests, this is an examination not just of Dawson, but of all those who were involved in promoting his civic gospel. In its seventeen chapters, various academics share their knowledge on a variety of Victorian activists – some of them Unitarian. I found the chapter on the Rev. William Henry Crosskey and his wife Hannah of particular interest.

Crosskey was minister of the Unitarian Church of the Messiah in Birmingham. He provided the driving force during the 1870s and 1880s aimed at securing the rights of women and securing their church as a centre of feminist activists. It has been argued that because Unitarians held loftier views about issues relating equality and social reform, they were more willing to support women's suffrage and give them a voice. With Crosskey this was certainly the case. He established 'Morning Lectures on Religion for Ladies'. The starting point for his feminist theology was the conviction that God displayed male and female attributes in equal parts. In 1877 he told a meeting of the Birmingham auxiliary of the Women's Suffrage Society that denying women the vote was "both injurious to the person excluded, and to the community at large." Society as a whole was in a state of unbalance without women's equal participation.

His social reform ideas didn't stop with women's suffrage. In the 1840s, along with his wife Hannah, he joined The Anti-Corn League, in protest against the unfair tax on bread, which marked the beginning of their lifelong commitments to reform in the name of social and political justice. Prior to becoming the Minister at Birmingham, Crosskey had been a Unitarian Minister in Glasgow, where he became an admirer of the radical American anti-slavery campaigner and American Unitarian, William Lloyd Garrison. He not only preached against slavery himself, but he also opened his pulpit to visiting American abolitionists. In this respect Crosskey was joined by many prominent Unitarians of the time, including the MP William Roscoe and Josiah Wedgwood.

The ideological debt which Crosskey owed to Unitarianism is apparent. One only has to look at the former Spiritualist and Unitarian minister Goodwyn Barmby, who had written in the 1840s of man-power and woman-power, two qualities which must exist in equal quantities for the perfect society.

Although both of these books are not exclusively about Unitarians, they do feature important chapters for those wishing to find out more about the important social reform work undertaken by Unitarians in Birmingham.

Both of these volumes are highly recommended.

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Unitarian Values and Mission

The immediate Unitarian Mission is to hold together during the period of restrictions on gatherings because of Covid and then to restore and build up our face-to-face gatherings. To restore what Martin Luther King Jr. challengingly called "the beloved

community". King was calling for a world-wide loving community, one that believed in all people sharing the wealth of the world, committed to and trained in the philosophy of non-violence, working together to end poverty, bigotry and militarism. This world-wide loving community has to start somewhere. Why not with each of our churches and chapels and meeting houses?

In his book *Seeking Paradise: A Unitarian Mission for our times*, Reverend Stephen Lingwood gives a description of what paradise may be like in a community: "Gentle/Radical held a meal in a community centre to thank all their volunteers. As we shared a vegetarian curry together, we enjoyed each other's company and talked about small things and big things, about music and art and our own lives and about our dreams for the future. I looked around at these people crammed into the tiny community centre and I thought to myself, 'This is what paradise looks like. This is the abundant feast that Jesus was talking about. Another world is possible and is already here among us.'" [p127] I have known this feeling in Unitarian services and gatherings and hope that you have too – perhaps at the Asparagus Lunch, for example.

What would Unitarians be talking about in, for example, their services? I hope that a big sign of what we value would be that we would be talking about what Paul called the "deep things of the spirit", or "the fruit of the Spirit" in the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* where they read as, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control".

To my mind what is so valuable about our little Unitarian communities is that we can talk about these things in a spirit of openness. Early in December I read a *Guardian* review of Michelle Orange's book *Pure Flame*. Michelle had a school teacher who said missing mass meant going straight to hell. Gradually Michelle rebelled from this point of view and came to the

conclusion that what she valued was "pursuit [for knowledge] over dominance, doubt over certainty, room for ambiguity, and inquiry as a way of life."

"A way of life." Early Christianity was called 'The Way'. I believe that Unitarianism is a way of life. Paradise is not so much what you believe, though what each of us believes is important. It is more a way of doing things: a way of creating a special atmosphere. Some people – some Unitarians even – say that this is not enough to live on, not enough to get you out of bed in the morning. I find that it is. I value those wonderful qualities that Paul praised, I value the teaching and life-example of Jesus as a sort of bedrock. Everything else is secondary (for me, not necessarily, of course, for you) – even, to give a major example, belief in God. As Jesus said, saying "Lord, Lord" is not enough. He even said it was possible to be following his teaching without knowing it. By that I take it to mean if we are loving and caring.

Sometimes there are calls to Unitarians to narrow down our beliefs to certain particular things. On the other hand I enjoy our wide differences of belief and often learn from them. I hope you do too. Believe it or not there are even occasional suggestions that our tiny denomination should split. How terrible, mistaken and very costly this would be. Many years ago the poet Keats deplored "the heat for certainty" that leads to intolerance.

One of my Christmas presents was a copy of Rev. Fergus Butler-Gallie's *A Field Guide to the English Clergy. A Compendium of Diverse Eccentricities, Pirates and Adventurers; All Anglican and Some Even Practising*. It is a sheer delight. There is a section on the Right Reverend Douglas Feaver who was a Bishop of Peterborough and died in 1997. He is recorded as saying of one of his ultra-liberal colleagues that "he'll believe anything, providing it's not in the

Bible.” Well, if the Church of England can cope with such wide differences, so can we.

Let us value diversity, welcome all inquirers and have as at least a part of our mission to be an outward looking “beloved community”.

Rev Peter Godfrey (Stroud)

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Karin E. Leiter, founder of the Austrian Hospice movement, and author of several books about dying and grief, once wrote, “To be connected without being bound – that is the art of living.”

I cannot help wondering whether she knew about Unitarianism, because for me, the ability to be connected to my Unitarian community without being bound by a doctrinal creed is what makes it special. We share the values of respecting freedom of belief, based on an individual’s reason, conscience, and lived experience, and do our level best to not only tolerate, but also accept and respect, the beliefs of others, even when we do not share them, (so long as those beliefs do not lead them to harm any person or living thing).

The majority of faith traditions require their members to sign up to a particular set of beliefs. Unitarians (and Quakers) are different.

For example, Quaker Advice number 5 says (in part): “While respecting the experiences and opinions of others, do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value. Appreciate that doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light that is in us all.”

But my favourite Advice about connection without binding is number 17: “Do you respect that of God in everyone although it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern? Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find the way to be true to it. When words are strange or disturbing to you, try to sense where they come from and what has nourished the lives of others. Listen carefully and seek the truth which other people’s opinions may contain for you. Avoid hurtful criticism and provocative language. Do not allow the strength of your convictions to betray you into making statements or allegations that are unfair or untrue. Think it possible that you may be mistaken.”

For me, this is a very civilised approach to living. It is about respect, patience and empathy. Which is how we connect with one another on a deep level.

I have a dream. I have a dream about the future of Unitarianism...

At the 2015 General Assembly meetings, all delegates were given a 48-page document entitled *Vision for Our Future*, produced by the Executive Committee, which also went out to all congregations. It was followed by another, entitled *The Next Steps*.

In the *Vision for Our Future* document, there were a series of headings, the first of which read, “We want to be a faith that matters.” Well, our faith *does* matter – it matters enormously, both to current Unitarians, and to potential Unitarians, who are out there, desperately seeking somewhere they can call home, somewhere they can find like-hearted (not necessarily like-minded) folk to accompany them on their own spiritual / religious journeys.

BUT, I strongly believe that unless those seekers (and current Unitarians) *clearly* understand who we are and what we're about (in other words, our values and mission) we aren't going to attract new people through our doors, and our national and local decline will continue.

We Unitarians have always been so hot and strong about being the "faith without a creed" and about the pre-eminence of individual freedom of belief. And that is right and good. BUT, and it is a very big but, I'm afraid it is becoming a disadvantage in some ways, as only too often we find it difficult to articulate our faith, except in negative terms. For example, there was a photo of a particular congregation's noticeboard (not an MUA one) on Facebook a while back – five sheets of paper with statements that started "We don't..."

I believe we need to find easy-to-articulate, POSITIVE answers to the questions "What do Unitarians believe?" and "What do Unitarians stand for?" Which is why I carried out my survey in 2017, which resulted in the book *Unitarians: Together in Diversity*, which is chock-full of positive statements about what Unitarians believe and how we come together in community. How we are "connected without being bound".

In recent years, I have come to believe that the statement the national Executive Committee made in *Vision for Our Future*, about needing to "re-establish an identity, a unique spiritual position" is key to our future as a denomination, as a movement. As James Barry so acutely pointed out in his contribution, "We don't have the advantage of the UUA [Unitarian Universalist Association], who have their seven principles defined."

I truly believe that the most vital task for British Unitarians today is to adopt a widely agreed statement such as the UUA's Seven

Principles (or why not just adopt them wholesale – they work for me!). I believe that one of the main reasons why the Quakers are so much more successful than we are, is that other people understand what they believe, what they stand for.

We could even produce our own versions of *Advices and Queries*, the Quaker touchstones, and of *Quaker Faith and Practice*, their comprehensive book about Quaker beliefs and practices. Why not?

Four years ago, I was invited to speak at the Worcestershire Inter Faith Forum, on the theme of what scripture meant to us as people of faith, how our sacred texts (as physical objects) are handled, and then sharing and reflecting on a piece from our own scriptures about welcoming the stranger.

But of course we Unitarians do not have a single sacred text of our own. So I had some explaining to do. I said, "This is a difficult question for a Unitarian to answer, because we do not officially \*have\* a sacred text which is unique to us. Unitarianism grew out of Christianity, and before World War II, most of our worship services would include a reading from the Christian or Hebrew Bibles. Some of our congregations, who regard themselves as Free Christians, still do this. But in the last fifty years or so, the majority of Unitarians have moved to a more pluralist viewpoint, espousing freedom of religious belief, based on individual reason and conscience. So I can only answer as an individual, with my own particular beliefs and viewpoint, rather than on behalf of the denomination as a whole.

These days, Unitarian worship leaders are able to create our own "living scripture" of readings that speak to our condition and that of our hearers. There might still be a reading from the Bible, but equally, there might be a poem by Rumi or Hafiz or Mary Oliver

or Rainer Maria Rilke, or a chapter from the *Tao Te Ching*, or one of the Quaker *Advices and Queries*, or a passage from the work of a contemporary theologian or spiritual leader, such as Richard Rohr, Karen Armstrong, the Dalai Lama or Marcus Borg, to name but a few. Or of course by other Unitarians, past and present. To quote one of our ministers, Stephen Lingwood:

“We can pay attention to a cloud of witnesses from many different countries around the world and many different times in history. We can delve deep into the traditions of our spiritual ancestors and listen to their voices. In doing so, we can create a ‘living scripture’: a loose, dynamic collection of texts which brings together essential insights from the past and present of our movement.”

And that’s great, but it would also be wonderful to have our own “sacred text” – in the broadest definition of that term.

**Rev Sue Woolley (District Minister)**

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Midland Unitarian Association AGM

Guest Speaker: Lizzie Kingston-Harrison, GA Congregational Connections Lead

When: Saturday 19th March 2022

Where: Kingswood Meeting House, B47 5DQ

Times: 11.00 am – 4.00 pm

Please come along – it promises to be a fascinating day.

MUA Congregations: Times of Services

As we start to meet in person once more, I have reinstated this list of service times. But please contact the congregation before travelling, in case they are no longer accurate.

Every Sunday:

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

First Sunday of the Month:

Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	11.00 am
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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:

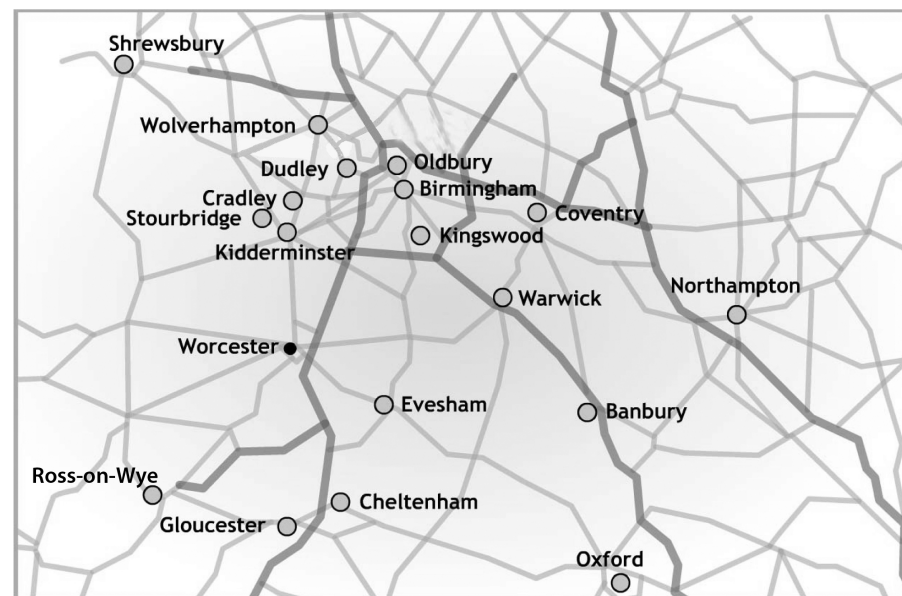
Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	11.00 am
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Fourth Sunday of the Month:

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

MUA Congregations: Contact Details

Name	Contact	Details
Birmingham		unitariannewmeetingbirmingham@yahoo.co.uk
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The Spring 2022 issue will be published in May.

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,
and on the theme of “Pilgrimage”.**

by Friday 6th May 2022

Thank you!