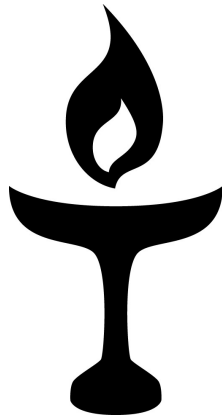


MU NOW



THE MAGAZINE OF THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 65 SPRING 2022

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 Spring 2022 issue of *MU Now*. We have a bumper issue this time, with Lizzie Kingston Harrison's wonderful talk at our recent AGM, reports from our own as well as the national Annual Meetings, a response to the *President's Piece* in issue 64, as well as some local news and a couple of thought-provoking articles on the theme of pilgrimage.

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 "Awakening"
The deadline for submissions is Friday 9th September 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



Have I made any Pilgrimages?

Before my knees needed 'attention', I had enjoyed a few holidays walking long distance footpaths in the UK. I walked on my own but was never lonely nor felt in danger. I often crossed paths with fellow wanderers who were walking faster than me or going in the opposite direction and greetings, or conversations would punctuate the day.

I really embraced the solitude and chance to become totally absorbed with the nature around me. Just taking the time to just sit still in a mossy, wooded valley in Devon and listen to the sounds around me or watch a bird of prey swoop in and out of reedbeds to catch its prey. I recall clearly my first close encounter with a hare, as I walked along a Roman road in Suffolk. We stood staring at each other, from about three metres away for several minutes in the sunshine – a wonder-filled experience. All moments to link with the awesomeness of the divine.

Perhaps you too have had such experiences as you wandered on your own? If not, I recommend you take time to have a wander/pilgrimage of your own - however short a distance, the awesomeness is there waiting for you.

Debra Burbery

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## District Minister: Spring 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, and will be continuing to do this, now that we're all back to in-person services again. I am also available to conduct Rites of Passage round the District, should the need arise.

By the time you read this, the **Spring Training Day**, on the theme 'Reaching out to the wider community', will have taken place at Kingswood Meeting House. There are twelve participants and I'm looking forward to an interesting day.

**MUA Annual General Meeting:** I was so sorry to miss the first in-person AGM for three years, but I had tested positive for Covid two days earlier. Fortunately, members of the Executive Committee rallied round (particular thanks to Jane Couper and Sandy Ellis), and I am told the event went very well. Lizzie Kingston-Harrison, the GA's Congregational Connections lead, gave a very well received talk, which is printed elsewhere in this issue (see page 11).

**GA President:** At the annual meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in April, I was installed as President. In the next four issues of *MU Now* (including this one) I'll be giving you all a summary of what I've been doing, around the UK (see page 7).

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**

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MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages from our January meeting has already been shared in the relevant issue of *Bits & Pieces*, the monthly news-sheet sent to all congregations. Those which are still current are reproduced below.

New National EC Link: Simon Hall, of Leicester Great Meeting and the National EC, attended his first meeting. He invited committee members to contact him directly if they wished to raise anything with the National EC.

Debra Burbery: tel: 01743-792722; debraburbery@yahoo.co.uk
Sue Woolley: tel: 01604-870746; revsuewoolley@gmail.com

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## GA President's Update

Becoming GA President is a huge honour and privilege. At the time of writing, I have only been in post for three weeks. But I have already undertaken four Presidential visits, three to MUA congregations (Stourbridge, Northampton and Warwick) and one to Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel in Hampstead.

For the three MUA visits, I led worship and brought the greetings of the General Assembly. But at Rosslyn Hill, I had also been asked to facilitate a two-hour workshop, in the afternoon, on choosing and establishing spiritual practices. By the time I got home, at 6.30 pm on the Sunday, I felt very tired!

I would like to reassure you all that I will be continuing with as many of my District duties as possible during this year. The Presidential visits are mainly at weekends, so my Monday to Friday week will be largely unaffected. But, once I have done a Presidential visit to your congregation (and I should have visited you all by the end of July), any further visits during the year to April 2023 will be dependent on whether I am invited elsewhere. If I do receive an invitation that clashes with a previously arranged MUA service, I will give your Pulpit Secretary as much notice as possible, so that they are able to find someone else.

When I contact Pulpit Secretaries to offer myself to lead worship in 2023, this will only be for the eight months from May to December, when normal service will be resumed!

**Sue Woolley, President of the General Assembly**



Receiving the Presidential medallion from outgoing President, Anne Mills  
(photo by Maz Woolley)

## **Midland Unitarian Association Annual General Meeting 2022: An Insight into Congregational Connections**

It was a beautiful day to welcome many of our congregations back to our first in person AGM in a couple of years. Held at Kingswood Unitarian Meeting House on Packhorse Lane, in their charming and historic village setting, the representatives of the congregation made everyone feel very welcome. It is always a lovely opportunity to gather in different places of worship as we journey around the District each year and this felt like something of a homecoming in holding this shared space.

After the formal meetings in the morning had been handled and tidied away, a relaxing lunchtime was spent with catch ups and wombles in the grounds and village. We gathered once more for a beautiful and thought-provoking service which Sue had prepared before catching Covid, which was very ably delivered by Jane Couper. This wonderfully, and with many threads of thematic connection, led into the remainder of the afternoon.

We welcomed the afternoon's speaker Lizzie Kingston-Harrison, who was appointed as Congregational Connections Lead for the General Assembly nearly six months ago. She delivered a wonderful time of reflection on her role, and how she connects others, and their ideas and actions via a basis of conversation. She explained her journey and some of her personal story – how she has found herself in her job and what it was that led her through the doors of the Unitarian Meeting House in Framlingham, Suffolk, which she now calls her spiritual home. Lizzie says her mind already knew of our existence, through her postgraduate research into Joseph Priestley several years ago, but her heart took

the intervening years to catch up. Part of her search was for the authenticity and realness and the tenderness of the care of others.

With the addition of words by authors Brené Brown, and bell hooks, she was able to draw together a complex and enriching story of both the reality of social pressures and situations but also the hope that is possible for our movement, in our district, in our congregations and our own lives.

She was able to share some examples of her current work, from input and support into the Hindu Connections group, to an administrators group within East Anglia. Also revealed was the exciting news that the Worship Words website (a project started when Bob Janis-Dillon was in post) is very near to launching, giving Unitarians across the UK a chance to share their own words and to access a repository of words for use in worship, rites of passage or for personal study and devotions.

Lots of food for thought for us all which was well received by those assembled – we had many queries about both the projects that are happening, and also excitement about contributing to the resource collation that Lizzie spoke of, both via the Worship Words project and other timely calls for resources. This was recently demonstrated by how resources were shared about how communities could respond to the situation in Ukraine.

It was great to meet again and have this wonderful development opportunity as a District, and I personally look forward to hearing more about the ongoing work of Congregational Connection, both nationally and on a local level through the work the MUA continues to facilitate.

**Aleks Zglińska (Northampton)**

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Healing is an act of communion: talk at the MUA AGM by Lizzie Kingston Harrison

It is my great pleasure to be here and to gather with you in person. This feels like a meaningful and joyful thing as we approach the second anniversary of lockdown.

Sue Woolley invited me to speak today about my vision for the role of Congregational Connections Lead and to outline some of my projects. I am here because I wanted to meet you, to find out more about how our districts work – because I know you have been carrying out the work of ‘congregational connections’ for a long time. I’d also love to hear your ideas on my role and to get feedback on what I have done during my first five months in post.

My starting point when applying for the role was simply that I care about Unitarianism. I have therefore wound some of my own reasons for being Unitarian into this talk, my own feelings about what is inspiring and exciting about our movement and how it uniquely answers some of our most pressing cultural issues. I recently completed Jane Blackall’s *How to be a Unitarian* course and one of the many takeaways from that was a deep sense that we gather in community for a sacred purpose, that we do serious things in a serious place. It is enjoyable and playful along the way of course, but ultimately, we gather in beloved community to engage with our most fundamental and transcendent concerns. It is this important work that motivates and enthuses me and has helped carry and heal me in turn.

I am here because I care about authentic connections between groups and individuals. I have a deep spiritual sense of our interconnectedness that sits congruently with the role I’ve taken on. It really is a gift of a job and I feel hugely privileged to have been given this chance to help foster new and exciting ways of

connecting our communities. I have put listening at the heart of the job in the belief that if I get the personal connections right, the rest will follow from that firm foundation.

I am working with a kind of ‘conversational’ method, nearly everything I have done has emerged from listening carefully during discussions with people across the movement – from finding exciting ideas and helping to develop and facilitate them, and from being open, flexible, and responsive as new projects emerge. My visit here is therefore as much about hearing from you as it is about communicating what I am up to.

Introducing myself and my spiritual journey

As some of you know I was, until very recently, a secondary school teacher. My background is in education. Before spending ten years wrangling teenagers, I was a tutor at the University of Sussex. There I completed a PhD on our fiercely free-thinking, radical Unitarian forebear Joseph Priestley. Clearly my head moves more quickly than my heart because it was almost ten years after finishing my PhD that I walked into Framlingham Unitarian Meeting House in Suffolk. My mind had engaged but I needed to bring the rest of me along too. If Joseph Priestley invited me into the Unitarian community, I stayed for the compassionate, liberal, loving, and radically inclusive principles I found. I also want to acknowledge that it was Rev. Matthew Smith’s ministry that inspired and engaged me and kept me coming back to services in those early days when it all seemed so new.

I really needed the inclusivity and space for healing offered at Framlingham. I didn’t know I needed this community, but it has changed my life. Growing up in an atheist family, I had no reference points for religion at all. This was twinned with a sense

of calling more deeply inward to that part of the self that sits in silent awareness, and outward in loving, scared connection with others. Finding Unitarianism answered a need in me to connect deeply with meaning beyond myself. Almost 20 years ago I took an Alpha course and felt afterwards that I had been damaged by the experience. I was not traumatised, although I can see that if I had been younger or spent longer in the church I attended, then I may have been. But the dogmatic and judgmental religion I encountered did me real harm, because it pushed me away from sacred places for a long time after.

One thing that drives me is that I recognise and celebrate the role of Unitarianism as offering a space for free enquiry in place of dogma, of open-minded inclusivity in the place of judgment and love in place of control and fear.

Alongside this, I see in Unitarianism a place for being real, open, and authentic and a place to celebrate our flaws and our vulnerabilities. I left my career in education before this job was advertised, a risk worth taking although an unsettling leap into the unknown. This was a deliberate and conscious decision to connect more gently and authentically with myself and other people. I love building real connections with people, I love creating spaces to nurture and help others grow. So, when I found out about this job, I saw the potential in the role for a huge amount of joy and creativity and it seemed to fit so perfectly with my own journey into the movement.

I confess to being more anxious about changing direction than I admitted to myself or in the interview for the role. It helped that I was reading Brene Brown's book *Daring Greatly*. Brown writes, "Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and

engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.

When we spend our lives waiting until we're perfect, or bulletproof before we walk into the arena, we ultimately sacrifice relationships and opportunities that may not be recoverable, we squander our precious time, and we turn our backs on our gifts, those unique contributions that only we can make.

Perfect and bulletproof are seductive, but they don't exist in human experience. We must walk into the arena, whatever it may be- a new relationship, an important meeting, our creative process, or a difficult family conversation- with courage and willingness to engage. Rather than sitting on the side-lines... **we must dare to show up and let ourselves be seen.** This is vulnerability, this is daring greatly."

For me, this is the heart of my role. To model being vulnerable, being real. To model the virtue in simply showing up, being real, being present – in all senses, including the spiritual. The rest flows from this core. I wonder if this resonates with you all here today. I feel like this is something we are getting right in so many spaces across the denomination and I invite you to celebrate this with me. We have, in our community, due to our history as dissenters, to our ongoing love for other, our inclusive and compassionate values, created a space where people can be real and whole and vulnerable. Unitarianism gave me the space to be more fully myself and my vision is to find new ways to give that back to other people.

Coming from this place, I have found that there is a place for lay ministry in my role too and alongside my role I've tried to develop the skills I learned on the Worship Studies courses. Everything I do is spiritually grounded; and I aim to create spaces

where people feel held and safe at a spiritual level so they can play with new ideas and connect with new people. That is why so many of my meetings and gatherings include chalice lightings and closing words, music, and time for silence. I do like creating worshipful space, alongside my Congregational Connections role I have taken time to lead worship at the Octagon, in Ipswich, Framlingham and Oxford. I hold an online Heart and Soul circle and recently set up a meditation circle for school Mums seeking some much-needed peace and tranquillity after dropping off their children at school.

We so urgently need these real, worshipful spaces of connection, love and vulnerability given our wider cultural context.

How Unitarianism speaks to our wider cultural context

When talking broadly about my own spirituality and my vision, I do think it essential to contextualise my work. The challenge that I see as a society, as a culture, is that we are increasingly dislocated from each other. I think many of us have been feeling this and it is refreshing, perhaps essential, to give voice to that. We have been forced apart by the real isolation of the pandemic, but also by the emptiness that arises from searching for meaning in a materialist, individualist culture. There is a lack of resilience in some communities, a fracturing of our links, widespread mental health problems, chronically underfunded and under-valued public services, isolation, and loneliness. Spiritual literacy is so low in some quarters that people do not even know what they are missing and what they need. Now we face a war in Europe on a scale we have not seen for many years. Old fears, ancient anxieties have been triggered, our hearts are breaking for Ukraine and our minds are exhausted by the information we are processing. We are at war with each other too, Brexit, polarised views on Covid, trying to navigate social media and fake news.

Perhaps too there is a cultural myth, the myth of neoliberalism that we should be trying to face these problems on our own and our success or failure belongs to us as individuals.

Something that has helped me understand our cultural problem and the antidote, is the work of bell hooks in *All About Love*. hooks writes, “I am disturbed by the weighty emphasis on ‘self’ in so much New Age writing on the topic, and in our culture as a whole. When I would talk about my yearning for a loving partner, people told me over and over that I did not need anyone else...That I should be complete inside myself. While it is definitely true that inner contentedness and a sense of fulfilment can be there whether or not we commune in love with others, it is equally meaningful to give voice to that longing for communion. All over the world people live in intimate daily contact with one another. They wash together, eat and sleep together, face challenges together, share joy and sorrow. The rugged individual who relies on no one else is a figure who can only exist in a culture of domination where a privileged few use more of the world’s resources than the many...worship of individualism has in part led us to the unhealthy culture of narcissism that is so all pervasive in our society... [meanwhile]... community offers to individuals...a taste of that acceptance care, knowledge, and responsibility that is love in action. Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. **Healing is an act of communion.**”

What is key for me is that my healing happened in a Unitarian community and my resilience comes from being part of something that transcends me. Perhaps this resonates with you too. When I reflect on Unitarianism as a religious antidote to a spiritually bereft culture, it is connection and community that is at the heart of that process. It is shared principles, identity, and the deeds that spring from them. If consumerism and individualism permeate our culture, then simply being together in community, showing

up, being real and connected is an act of dissent and resistance. It is counter-cultural, it does not conform to the pattern of the world.

I know that there are many wonderful, loving counter examples to the picture of isolation and individualism I have painted here. From the ways in which neighbourhoods responded to the pandemic, to the 150,000 people who have offered their homes to Ukrainian refugees. This does not mean our deep cultural ruptures are any less painful or serious, but it gives me hope. It is light in the dark. There is huge appetite in so many places, for spiritual connection, for the generosity of the heart, for *fierce grace* as we stand up to the tide of individualism and political selfishness and reassert our need for true compassionate community.

In our culture, the appetite for spiritual engagement seems to be increasing – think about the popularity of yoga, mindfulness and being together in congregations. We are a gift of a movement in this sense. We have long-standing wisdom to draw upon, our radical traditions, our history of inclusivity, our long history of engaging critically and counter-culturally with society. Perhaps we are uniquely placed to offer a genuine, alternative to secular, individualistic life. Again, this resonates with me personally, and with the job I am trying to do. At times we get lost, we lose confidence, our message does not always get out as much as it should, but I took this job because I think we have the collective energy to make a positive difference to those around us.

I see my priority in this job as nothing less than the transcendence of the isolated self, and the isolated congregation with an appeal to authenticity, principle, and purpose. I think that part of what I can do is help to bring us together, directly, and consciously

around our principles and that is the essence of my task and of your task.

I've tried to keep this talk loose, informal and from the heart. It's my articulation of why I am here and doing the job I am trying to do. But there are some important themes. Our community can be **a place of inclusivity and a place where we can be vulnerable together. It can be a counter-cultural place of healing in communion.** In different and related ways, both these are visions of connection which inform my understanding of my work.

My work is also founded upon is the increasingly radical idea that we must work hard, sincerely, and seriously to find our own truth. I was drawn to Unitarianism as a place where I can sit in liberal harmony with those who do not share my beliefs. I am a true agnostic, I come from a place of deep unknowing and I have been working on suspending my desire for control and desire to know, the consolation of easy answers. I have spent my life finding ways to understand and deal with anxiety and feelings of vulnerability. Recently, I have found ways to enjoy letting go, to sit with unknowing and draw the wisdom that comes from being in that place.

I am enjoying sitting with both/and rather than either/or and the sense of love and appreciate of others that stems from this place. When acknowledging and celebrating our ways of connecting, I therefore include the wonderful opportunity that Unitarianism gives us to work out of our beliefs together, we are part of something big here, this serious and magnificent tradition of the working out of our own truths in changing contexts – those truths may look different at different times, but the search and sincerity remain the same.

My vision is informed by the idea of a container. We, together, are the flame in the chalice, vulnerable, alive, real, allowed to be, given the freedom to flicker and burn and dance with joy. **However, our flame burns brighter and more confidently when it is held and contained.** I feel it is our shared principles that do this and hold us together, they connect us in religious community. My vision for this role also includes facilitating spaces where our principles of free-thought and enquiry, inclusivity, love, and justice are explored, refined, celebrated, and yes reconfigured to make sense of our new and unsteady cultural context.

An outline of my projects:

I recognise that I have been talking very broadly, and I am unapologetic about that as I think firm foundations and a clear vision are required. However, I have been keen from the outset, that my vision for this role is tied to tangible and recognisable outcomes. What I want is for ministers and lay leaders to have strong and joyful sense of our identity and mission so that in turn they can nurture their congregations and turn their energy outward into their communities. Therefore, I see my role as providing the space for energy, inspiration, and motivation to arise in others and for that energy to ripple outwards.

Some of my daily work is based on making small and personal connections. I feel like an old-fashioned telephone exchange operator plugging one line into another! Over the months I have shared hymn lyrics and other resources, nudged people towards training events, shared links to useful meetings and helped people track down the right expertise to solve a tricky problem. I take a lot of joy in these everyday connections and the paths they open for others.

One of my key roles is sharing resources and inspiration across the movement. I have been working with a web designer on a new website called *Worship Words*, a collection of inspiring, meaningful and diverse resources for worship. This will be a space to share and celebrate voices from across the Unitarian community, bringing together new writing alongside much-loved work from the Lindsey Press and other publications. The resources will be searchable by content type, keyword and tags and should provide a valuable resource for those putting together services and other forms of worship. Our ministers and lay leaders are also an inspiring resource for us all and have important stories to tell. Our online *Congregations in the Community* events have tapped into an appetite for new ideas and projects that help us reach out to our communities. You can catch up on some of these events on The Unitarians, YouTube channel and website.

My work also involves facilitating and nurturing projects for other people. For example, I have worked with Rev Mark Hutchinson's Transformer's Project, and have supported Indra Sikdar at the *Hindu Connections* meetings. I take no credit for this extraordinary group that celebrates our overlapping beliefs and fruitful differences with a range of people in the Hindu community. I am also helping Rev Sheena Gabriel and Rob Oulton grow their meditation group into a national meditation circle, *Together in Meditation*. Details of this new online space to sit mindfully together will be coming soon.

I have also been developing new ways to support ministers and congregations. I am collaborating with Richard Bober of The Meditational Fellowship to offer *Sacred Stillness*, a gentle and nourishing online space for worship leaders and all those who hold silence for others. Meanwhile, my Administrators' Coffee House has met twice, providing an opportunity to offload the many stresses of administering our chapels and a chance for me

to demonstrate new software provided by my colleague Simon Bland to facilitate hiring and invoicing. Working with Gavin Howell, I am now also part of an emerging *Parents' Circle* to support Unitarians with younger children. Newer ideas in this category, still currently on paper, also include an online forum for Unitarians to talk and share ideas and a spiritual buddying system to link up anyone seeking peer support and a friend for the journey.

Finally, my vision also includes new ways to imagine and celebrate our community and to strengthen our sense of national identity. For example, I am working with Rory Castle Jones on an exciting new project called LGBTQ+ Voices, an Oral History project to record, share and archive the authentic stories of marginalised communities within our movement.

Thank you for being here and for listening. I hope you can see the ways in which I am nurturing spiritual health. We may grow in numbers due to work like this, but equally meaningfully we will grow the quality and depth of the connections we share with each other. In creating these new connections, I hope to contribute to the ways in which our congregations thrive at a local level and become ever more embedded in the heart of their communities.

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## The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2022

Though GA was condensed this year into three intense days, there were as usual three major Worship Services for everyone as well as many smaller opportunities to share in worship and/or meditation. **Rev Wyn Thomas**, a minister covering much of West Wales (as well as part-time with the Cotswold Group) gave the Anniversary Address entitled *Rocks and Rollercoasters* (well written

up by Angela Maher in the April 30th edition of *The Inquirer*). He built up in our minds an image of the walls that he sees as he drives through Wales from congregation to congregation; and reminded us how we are like the stones or rocks that make up the wall, making it strong and lasting for the future, rather than being the builders, simply maintaining the walls from the past just because they are there. The full services were taken by various leaders, often those newly appointed onto the Roll of Unitarian Ministers. For example, **Mark Hutchinson** from the Cotswold Group led a reflection on a *Rose in Wintertime*, alongside Welsh-speaking **Melda Grantham**, as they ran the Anniversary Service preparing for Wyn Thomas.

I commend to you the reports on the Assembly written up so far in the current edition of *The Inquirer*. They include the excellent talk by **Liz Slade**, Chief Officer of the movement, who replaced Derek McAuley three years ago but who had not had an opportunity since then to address the GA in person, and also the valedictory reflections of **Anne Mills** after her time as President. The stimulating Keynote Lecture was given by **Indra Adnan**, talking about the *Politics of Waking Up*, and I would expect this to be featured in the next edition of *The Inquirer*.

There were four Plenary Sessions, with hymns and prayers (it is so regenerating to sing and worship together with so many other Unitarians) before we tackled the four GA Motions that had been discussed by congregations in advance. The debates were vigorous, some more passionate than others, but all in the end passed by the voting delegates. The Chalice debate recognised the need to try to hold more consultation on such questions, though with independent-minded Unitarians that is an all but impossible task! Along the way we met our Executive Committee and some of the staff at the Headquarters in Essex Hall, including the new Congregational Connections Officer **Lizzie Kingston-**

**Harrison, Simon Bland** (Ministry and Congregational Support), **Rory Castle Jones** (Communications), **Gavin Howell** (Safeguarding and Youth Coordinator) and, especially important, **Andrew Mason** (Operations Manager) who had set up the entire conference and brilliantly ensured its smooth running.

The statutory motions, largely left to the last day, then were crowned by the appointment of our own District Minister, **Rev Sue Woolley**, as the new President.

In addition, over the three days there were eight 'breakout' sessions with 32 different subjects to choose from, covering a huge range of topics from Spiritual Practice to Taizé Worship, from the Women's Group to the Peace Fellowship, from Communications to Governance and from the legacy of Slavery to the Government's Levelling-Up in Education policy to name but a few. Intensive and exhausting, but deeply inspiring!

And over all there were the two big issues of today – the Future for Unitarianism and, sadly, the war in Ukraine. The collection at the Anniversary Service raised almost £5400 for Ukraine.

Do read more in *The Inquirer* and look at the Unitarian websites (<https://unitarian.org.uk> contains lots of interesting information about people, events and initiatives in the movement, as does the National Unitarian Fellowship site <https://nufonline.org.uk> ).

And do consider attending GA next year yourself and experience the buzz of being in the company of so many like-minded (or not so like-minded!) Unitarians.

**Malcolm Burns (Warwick)**

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Response to President's Piece in *MU Now* Winter 2021/22

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?

I set myself the task of responding to Debra's three questions.

The first is easy. I am a cradle Unitarian. My mother lived in Brookfield Grove just opposite Brookfield Church in Gorton so went to it as she only had to cross the road. My father was a Baptist. All the girls went to Brookfield because they had a Rose Queen and all the boys went to Gorton Baptists because they had the Boys' Brigade. And everyone went to the dances at Brookfield because they had a good big Sunday School hall. Boy meets girl. Easy. I went to Sunday School at Brookfield but then we moved to Staffordshire where there was no local church and then on to Bury where there was. The minister was Fred Ryde. He liked teenagers and lead our Sunday School class which was more of a discussion group which I loved.

So my being in Unitarianism is firstly the result of several lucky chances. What kept me in was probably being able to go from college to Newington Green. The minister there (whose name I have forgotten but it may come back to me) attracted a wide congregation of many faiths and none. We used to joke that he and I were the only Unitarians. I walked there through Islington, in those days a working class area that was slowly transforming itself into a gentrified place where it was no longer possible for little boys to play football in the street in case the ball damaged the cars. Grrr!

I wore a silver flaming chalice pendant on a thread round my neck and gained a certain amount of respect from my fellow students for being religious but not part of the God Squad. This was dimmed when the GA was held at my college and my friends provided the lighting and sound. "A lot of old people talking" was the report. Well, Unitarianism still is to a large extent. The important things are, of course, what you are talking about and what you do when you have finished talking.

I never thought of my spiritual health and safety. Or attempted to evaluate the wider Unitarian idea. My family loved to talk but serious talk was supposed to have a serious outcome. Which is why I love the saying of UU minister Lon Ray Call, "Prayer doesn't change things. Prayer changes people. People change things."

Having suffered endless Bible readings in school assemblies, I was delighted when the Bible and *The Guardian* (Old Unitarian joke: the second reading in a Unitarian service is always from *The Guardian*) changed to readings from lots of different books. And services became educational rather than exegesis. I like a service that challenges me to see something through a different lens.

In Staffordshire I went to a Church of England Primary School. I can still say the Creed. We said it every Wednesday facing east. The C of E lost me when I asked for an explanation of one particular section and I was told that I was too young. Too young! How dared they! I went to a Methodist Sunday School because I was a Brownie. The Methodists lost me by endlessly harping on about some Welsh girl who walked barefoot over mountains to get a Bible and then asked me to save my pennies to buy Bibles for babies in other countries. My mother was relieved because the minister was a Fire and Brimstone type (for those of you who love

Cold Comfort Farm, think of the Church of the Quivering Brethren – 'There'll be no butter in hell'). And I was having nightmares.

To be received back into the bosom of Unitarianism was such a relief. It was eminently sane and also practical. I especially loved the old ladies who unwrapped three mint humbugs so they wouldn't rustle during the sermon. Heaven help any minister who went beyond the three humbugs. I'm not quite old enough yet but I intend to buy a bag of humbugs and hand them round if anyone goes on too long.

I like the fact that my local church has no minister – though there are drawbacks to this – because we get such a wide range of speakers. Learn something new every Sunday. I wish I lived closer so I could get more involved. But hey. I do the best I can. How much more can anyone expect from one life form?

Dorothy Haughton (Shrewsbury)

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## District Round-up

**Stroud Unitarian Fellowship:** at our Annual General Meeting in March, we were pleased to welcome a new Unitarian Fellowship into the MUA family.

**Stourbridge has a beautiful new chalice**

The congregation at Stourbridge have recently invested in a new bespoke handmade ceramic chalice. The beautiful chalice was designed and created by the extremely talented Lorna Morgan\* from the Kingswood congregation. Around its stem it has the name of the chapel.



(photo by Carolyn Taylor)

At our service on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> January the new chalice was used for the first time. David Mearman read a chalice blessing:

*As we light our new chalice today  
We think of what this light means.  
It represents the light within ourselves  
And the light within others,  
Threads of the universal light of love.  
We acknowledge our light as a symbol of  
Warmth against the cold,  
Brightness against the dark,  
And of hope and joy and love in friendship.  
Amen*

David Taylor led the service examining the history and symbolism of the Unitarian chalice.

\*Lorna Morgan is happy to receive enquiries for commissions:  
lmo4pjm@yahoo.co.uk

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From the Newsletter of Kingswood Unitarians:

I love this analogy! You are holding a cup of coffee when someone comes along and bumps into you or shakes your arm, making you spill your coffee everywhere.

Why did you spill the coffee? “Because someone bumped into me!”

Wrong answer... You spilled the coffee because there was coffee in your cup. Had there been tea in the cup, you would have spilled tea. *Whatever is inside the cup is what will spill out.*

Therefore, when life comes along and shakes you (which WILL happen), whatever is inside you will come out. It’s easy to fake it, until you get rattled.

So we have to ask ourselves, “What is in my cup?” “When life gets tough, what spills over?” Joy, gratefulness, peace and humility? Or anger, bitterness, harsh words and reactions?

Life provides the cup, YOU choose how to fill it. Today, let’s work towards filling our cups with gratitude, forgiveness, joy, words of affirmation, and kindness, gentleness and love for others.

Diane Rutter, Kingswood (shared from a friend whose cup is full of goodness and inspiration)

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage... just stand still

“Life is a pilgrimage. Each moment is to be lived in depth, because each moment contains God, hidden within it.”

— Banani Ray, *Glory of OM: A Journey to Self-Realization*

Faith, it is said, is a journey. It can be a spiritual, metaphorical and an actual physical journey.

I’d like to offer a few thoughts, trying to tease out what we may mean by the term ‘journey’, when applied to our Unitarian faith. Stories about journeys abound in all religions. Judaism tells the story of Abraham setting out for a new land, from which the Jewish nation was born and Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt through the wilderness, towards the ‘Promised Land’. Christians recall the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and the wise men travelling from the East to witness the birth of Jesus. Muslims recount the ‘Night Journey’ of the Prophet Muhammad, describing how he was taken up to the Heavens and shown many wondrous sights; and in Buddhism the young prince Siddhartha, leaves the comfort of the palace, wandering as a beggar in search of truth. There are countless stories of missionaries and saints from many faith traditions travelling to distant lands and people have made long pilgrimages to sacred sites for thousands of years. Myths from all cultures make use of the motif, highlighting parallels between outer journeys and the inner journey of ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’. Joseph Campbell, the famous mythologist, in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, has captured the imagination of popular culture and the journey metaphor is now abundant in literature, film and psychology.

But what about a Unitarian perspective on the spiritual journey – how does it differ from that of other faith traditions? Many faith traditions have a fixed and final destination – usually a world beyond this one. I grew up with the idea that the journey through this life was a preparation for the next and that however hard the struggles, if I kept to the right path I would be rewarded with heaven. But as Unitarians we do not identify with the idea of a fixed and final goal to which we all aspire towards. Whilst some Unitarians hold beliefs about life after death – others do not. Generally, we place more emphasis on this life – so our journey is less about a destination some place elsewhere and more about the way we travel here on earth.

Another difference – most religions use ‘maps’ that have remained unchanged for centuries – for example the Nicene Creed dating from 325 CE and recited regularly by many church-goers. Now there’s nothing wrong with creeds and scriptures being viewed as sources of ancient wisdom that provide guidance – but trouble comes when they’re used as infallible documents. On a car journey we wouldn’t find it helpful to use a road map from 50 years ago before motorways were built – we may reach our destination – eventually – but how much slower and more confusing the journey! Landmarks change, roads close and new routes are created. If you are not good at map reading and if you are to find your way to an unfamiliar destination, it’s crucial you have the most up-to-date map available (don’t get me started on ‘sat-nav’!) Again, if we are travelling in a foreign country, signs and directions need to be accurately interpreted and translated if they are to be of use.

Yet scriptures and creeds are too often treated like road maps and signs to be taken literally, rather than texts that require deciphering and interpretation if they are to be relevant in the 21st century. Religious fundamentalists take no account of the

changing landscape of society or differing cultures and that gives rise to distorted views that create divisions and wars. Unitarians don't follow a single 'map' – we recognise the wisdom in many maps or traditions and also seek to expand, update and translate this knowledge through science, psychology, literature and our own life experience. We recognise new paths and landmarks, seeking to create inclusive maps that do not prescribe a single route to a single destination.

Pilgrims through the ages have travelled together in company – we think of the millions wending their way to Jerusalem, Mecca and Varanasi. In Geoffrey Chaucer's great work, *The Canterbury Tales*, we glimpse the camaraderie of pilgrims travelling together, very different characters with varied stories, but travelling to the same destination. Not only does a shared pilgrimage offer companionship, there is also safety in numbers; ask any explorer – those who set out alone, risk more dangers on the way. But this is where it gets complicated. How can we travel together in community as Unitarians, when we may be consulting different guidebooks, when we may even be on different paths? Some of us resonate with the Christian path, some are drawn to the wisdom of other faith traditions – and for others, guidance is derived from human sources. This is where the analogy of Unitarians travelling together towards a shared destination, fails.

Maybe instead of pilgrims on a single path, it is more accurate to liken us to a company of explorers – on a journey of discovery, without a fixed goal, but open to whatever we find along the way. But whilst we set out on individual paths, we recognise the need for others as we travel. So periodically we return to base camp, to share stories of what we have found and to compare notes as to where the 'treasure' may lie. We seek shelter together through the darkness of night. We look out for each other, as our paths cross and intersect. We listen to and are guided by each other – we may

even travel some of the way together – but we recognise that ultimately each person walks his or her own path and rather than searching for one ultimate Truth, all we can lay claim to, is what we each have found to be true for us individually.

Now it could be argued that without a single goal, without heaven or salvation in mind – that our spiritual search is an aimless wandering and that without a clear map to guide us we risk getting hopelessly lost. But to say we have no goals or no unifying map would be wrong. Whilst not having a creed, Unitarians seek to journey through life based on shared values of love, kindness, peace, tolerance, justice and respect for all people and the earth. You could say we seek to align ourselves to an 'inner compass' based on these values and can hopefully recognise when we have strayed off the right path or taken a wrong turn, by listening to the voice of our conscience. Don Juan in his teachings to Carlos Castaneda puts it this way: "Look at every path closely and deliberately...Then ask... yourself alone one question... does this path have a heart? If it does - that path is good. If it doesn't, it is of no use."

A journey of open-ended exploration, guided by an inner compass, where our individual paths cross and intersect, seems an apt metaphor for the Unitarian journey. But it's important to not get too hooked on the idea of movement and progress. There is another spiritual teaching, which invites us to stop trying to get anywhere at all and to simply stand still. This reminds us that when we're not sure where we should be, or what we should be doing – we should simply look down at our feet – that where we are in that moment is the right place to be; to let go of the constant restless search, which often results in us missing what's already under our noses.

So, here's the paradox: on the one hand is the metaphor of the journey, which involves an active search for meaning and truth, in which we are called to travel to new landscapes in search of the 'Holy Grail'. On the other hand is the teaching that we need not move an inch, that there is nothing to search for - that we already possess everything we need. Lao Tzu, 2,500 years ago, wrote that: "Without going out of your room you can understand the world. Without peering out of the window you can discern the way of heaven". This concept of 'not doing', whilst most commonly associated with Taoism and Buddhism, is a thread that runs through many religions. Rumi, the 13th c. Sufi mystic asks: "Pilgrims why are you turning in circles, what are you looking for... what a pity you have not discovered the Mecca that's inside?" And Jesus is recorded as saying "The kingdom of God is within you" - not in some future, yet to be attained place - but here and now.

In reality I am not much of a traveller - quite content to stay at home - I have been an armchair pilgrim for many years, devouring books and ideas in a restless search for answers to life's complex questions. But more recently I am finding the intensity of the search is lessening - I am more content to allow answers - such as there are - to find me. Maybe I am just more settled in my life circumstances now, but I also think developing a meditation practice, which encourages me to be more attentive to the present moment, has helped. Maybe it's no coincidence that the Buddha found enlightenment, not during his wanderings after truth, but when sitting still under the Bodhi tree.

When I pack for a holiday I always take too much, prepared for every eventually (as my wife Carolyn will confirm!) But too much baggage can hamper us. On our journey through life, it can be difficult to travel in the moment, trusting that tomorrow will take care of itself. Too often we load ourselves with provisions and

plans for the future that weigh us down. I am struck by the wisdom of the scallop shell - symbol of pilgrimage and St James, whose shrine is at Santiago de Compostela in Spain. In Mediaeval times pilgrims wore a scallop shell as a sign of being on pilgrimage, but they also used it as a plate and cup to gather water and food. I have read that pilgrims would present themselves at churches and abbeys asking for food and would be given only as much as would fit into the shell - not food for tomorrow, or the next day - but only enough for the now - another reminder about the need to live in the present moment.

But perhaps we can stop travelling and let go of the search for new experiences and destinations, content to stay where we are, only after we have worn ourselves out searching. The need first to leave home and create some distance from the familiar; perhaps only then, can we return and see with new eyes the riches on our doorstep. We may already have all we need, but we don't know it - like the Prodigal son in the Gospel story who travels to strange lands intent on new experiences, until in his weariness, he returns home to the love and goodness that was there all along.

I don't know about you, but good as it is to go on holiday and see new places, I am always glad to return home. I feel a renewed sense of appreciation each time I return - glad to be back in a familiar space with my things around me, glad to sleep in my own bed and eat my own food. So, in our spiritual explorations, we set out on new paths, sometimes only to return to where we started. In the words of T.S Eliot: "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time".

So, to sum up, whilst the metaphor of the journey, the active search for meaning is an apt one, as we travel through life - we need also to keep in mind the words of Wendell Berry who says:

“And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey – a journey of one inch - Very arduous, humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground of our feet and learn to be at home.”

David Taylor (Stourbridge)

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### **Pilgrimage**

The first clue in a crossword I was attempting last week was ‘Journey to a shrine’. That rang a bell that said, ‘Didn’t our Midland Unitarian Magazine editor ask for our thoughts on the subject of pilgrimage?’

When I hear the word my thoughts immediately go to Chaucer’s *Prologue* to his *Canterbury Tales*. This was one of the texts for Higher School Certificate (as it was hundreds of years ago!) English when I was at school. I enjoyed the accounts of all the characters – what a cross section of life in those days, and perhaps not so very different from today in many ways. For obvious reasons one character has remained a special memory – the Poor Parson.

‘A good man was ther of religioun  
And was a povre Persoun of a toun;  
But riche he was of holy thought and werk.....

This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,  
That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte’

He set a wonderful standard for any minister. Chaucer used his depiction of a parson to attack priests who employed a curate to do all the work, paid the curate a pittance, and shot off to live in

London himself. Chaucer lived in the fourteenth century but, for centuries afterwards, priests in the Church of England were still doing that. When I moved from Sheffield to London a colleague humorously (I hope) reminded me of Chaucer’s reprimand for such a move. It was different, wasn’t it? I wasn’t taking the money and leaving someone else to do the work.

People still go on travels that are specifically pilgrimages. I don’t think they are as concerned to see ‘relics’ as they were in Chaucer’s time though many holy places do still claim to have such things as a piece of wood from the cross on which Jesus died, or a hair from his head. ‘Holy’ pilgrimages nowadays tend to be making the journey to remember a special person and to be encouraged by the memory and the effort of getting to the place where the person lived or worshipped.

Are pilgrimages things of the past? Could some of our outings and holidays be considered pilgrimages? Three years ago our Midland ministers went to Worcester Cathedral. We went to be inspired by the beauty of the place – and we were. I also wanted to see the things that reminded me of that wonderful priest Studdert Kennedy – ‘Woodbine Willie’ of the First World War. I was inspired by these reminders.

At one of our Reading Fellowship gatherings we were asked to speak of somewhere that had inspired us. I mentioned the absolutely extraordinary statue of the Buddha in Kamakura, Japan. It is an edifice many metres high. It had been in a temple that was destroyed in an earthquake. The building had gone leaving this amazing statue ‘out in the open’. It is a deeply moving sight. There were only six of us at the meeting but another of the group had also brought a picture of the same statue. My ‘pilgrimage’ to Kamakura had been part of an International

Association for Religious Freedom Conference. A pilgrimage to Japanese member groups.

I hope that some of you reading this will realise that you have made such pilgrimages.

Our editor has already started on what will be a year of pilgrimages to Unitarian shrines and we all extend our very best wishes to Sue for a very enjoyable year as President of our Unitarian General Assembly.

**Rev Peter Godfrey**

**From *The Paths We Take: Blogpost, August 2020***

If we look at our lives, really examine them, we can see that they are the result of all the choices we have made in the past days and months and years (and, I guess, the choices the powers that be have made on our behalf). It is a gradual, moment by moment process. In his book, *A Life of Being, Having and Doing Enough*, Wayne Muller likens it to a mountain stream. And, like the stream, “we know nothing of what is ahead, [are] not conscious of planning for the future. [We] simply follow the path of least resistance, motivated by gravity. ... The only choice we make – what is the next right thing to do – responds to a similarly vital inner gravity, an invisible thread that shapes our life, as our life meets the world.

This is the footbridge on which each one of us, moment by moment stands. The results of this process have shaped our lives. All of us are where we are now, today, because of our past choices. And where we end up, tomorrow and the next day, will depend on the choices we make today.

**Sue Woolley**

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

### First Sunday of the Month:

|             |                         |          |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------|
| Northampton | Unitarian Meeting House | 11.00 am |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------|

### 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 |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------|

### 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       |
| Cheltenham & Gloucester | Alison Thursfield | 01242 254825<br>thursfieldalison@gmail.com      |
| Coventry                | Francesca Rogers  | info@coventryunitarians.org.uk                  |
| Cradley                 | Sheila Powell     | 01384 838729                                    |
| Evesham                 | Lesley Harris     | 01242 573927<br>agonoid@gmail.com               |
| Kingswood               | Maria Govier      | 07816-159199<br>maria.heath@icloud.com          |
| Northampton             | Aleks Zglinska    | 07970-785159<br>aleks.zglinska@gmail.com        |
| Shrewsbury              | Fiona Checkley    | 07487 531 913<br>shrewsburyunitarians@gmail.com |
| Stourbridge             | David Mearman     | 01384 376478<br>davidmearman@hotmail.com        |
| Warwick                 | Elaine Nomura     | 01926 611964<br>emtnomura@aol.com               |



**The Summer/Autumn 2022 issue will be published in September.**

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

**by Friday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

**Thank you!**