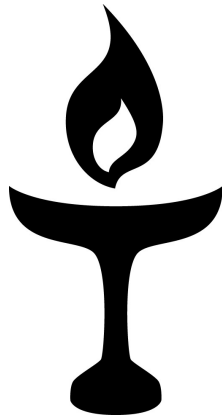


MU NOW



THE MAGAZINE OF
THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN
ASSOCIATION

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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

From the Editor

Welcome to the January 2026 issue of *MU Now*. The theme of 'Celebration and Joy' has resulted in some gorgeous pieces of writing, from our President, David Taylor, as well as from Peter Godfrey, Dorothy Haughton, Peter Hewis and me.

Nick Butler-Watts' summary piece about the thoughts of those present at the Autumn workshop is well worth a read, as is David Mearman's submission of a Black Country nativity, in dialect.

I am most grateful to all our contributors. Without your submissions, *MU Now* would not exist. So put your brains and hearts to work and send my successor something for the May issue. Please...

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.

This is my final issue as Editor of *MU Now*, a role I took on at the end of 2012. I would like to place on record my grateful thanks to all the contributors over the years, who have made it such a splendid magazine to read. I believe it has brought us closer together as a District.

I wish my successor all the very best.

THANK YOU!

Sue Woolley

President's Piece



The theme of this issue of *MU Now* is: Joy and Celebration.

On Saturday 22nd November 2025, I was fortunate to be invited to Belper Chapel for the ordination service of our very own Kieren Mardle-Moss, a truly joyous occasion.

As everyone entered the chapel from out of the cold and rain, playing subtly in the background was: *'Bi Thusa Mo*

Shuile' by Moya Brennan. It is a traditional Christian hymn of Irish origin, and means *'Be Thou my Vision'*. The tune will be more familiar to most people as the hymn *'Lord of hopefulness, Lord of all joy'*. By one of those happy synchronicities that seem to happen quite frequently to me, by coincidence I had found myself spontaneously whistling this hymn in the days to the lead up to Kieren's ordination.

As I sat in the pew at Belper, whilst for everyone was being greeted and settling themselves down, I found myself running through the words of the English hymn:

*Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
Whose trust, ever child-like, no cares can destroy,
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day*

The hymn was written in 1929 by Joyce Torrens, at the request of her London neighbour, Canon Percy Dearmer of Westminster Abbey, for his new edition of *Songs of Praise*. Dearmer was

delighted by its success, announcing in *Songs of Praise Discussed* (1933) that he was *"lately returned from a service of university students, who have speedily made it their favourite"*. Torrens, who wrote under the name Jan Struther, became famous for a newspaper column in which she presented herself in the character of "Mrs Miniver"; a briskly sensible and humorous middle-class woman, whose spirit seemed to embody a certain sort of plucky Englishness.

"Mrs Miniver" was turned into the title of a film in 1942, starting Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon. It was heavily promoted in the USA, where it won the Oscar for Best Picture. The film became crucial to the effort to woo American public opinion to support the war against Germany. The heavily upbeat feel of the film is a celebration not only of the human spirit, but the good things we are all capable of in the face of adversity.

As we celebrate the ordination of Kieren, we also celebrate the forthcoming retirement of our own Rev. Sue Woolley. Sue has been there to offer advice and support to all of us over many years. It is difficult to sum up how invaluable her guiding hand has been over those many years, and it will be virtually impossible for the MUA to repay the debt we owe her. I truly hope that as many of you can find the time to attend our AGM in Warwick this year (on Saturday 18th April) at which we can acknowledge and celebrate Sue's retirement.

This is also my last President's Page for *MU Now*. It has been my pleasure to serve as your President. Ann Matthews from Shrewsbury will take over from me at the AGM. I know Ann will bring a thoughtful and firm hand on the tiller, and I wish her all the best.

Until then, I hope you enjoy this issue of *MU Now*.

David Taylor

District Minister: Thank You and Goodbye

This will be my final column in *MU Now* as your District Minister. I began working for the District as District Facilitator in March 2008, and will be completing my 18th year in post at the end of February, when I retire.

So I just wanted to take this opportunity to say what a pleasure and a privilege it has been to serve the Unitarians of the MUA District – to lead worship for you, to get to know you all, to share in your joys and concerns.

As some of you will already have experienced by the time you read this, I am visiting every congregation during January and February, to say a proper in-person goodbye. I'd like to share some words by the composer Ludwig Van Beethoven:

“I wish you all the good and charm that life can offer. Think of me kindly and ... rest assured that no-one would more rejoice to hear of your happiness.”

Sue Woolley, District Minister, Midland Unitarian Association

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## The MUA's Story of Change by Nick Butler-Watts

This article is written from the perspective of Unitarians in the 2030s compiled from comments in the Autumn 3 Horizons workshop.

**Once upon a time**, in the Midlands, Unitarian congregations were struggling. Fewer people were willing to volunteer, key leadership roles went unfilled, congregations were ageing, and Sunday worship no longer appealed to younger generations. The wider public barely knew who Unitarians were, and newcomers often didn't return after visiting. The busyness of 21st-century life left little time for spiritual community, and the message of Unitarianism wasn't cutting through.

**Every day**, ministers, trustees, and members worked hard to keep things going. District support provided grants, communications, and training, but it wasn't enough to reverse the slow decline. Without a simple way of communicating who we are, or a clear balance between activism and spirituality, the movement risked becoming invisible and irrelevant.

**One day**, Unitarians in the Midlands gathered to imagine what a different future could look like. They saw full congregations of mixed ages, vibrant communities alive with spirit, action, and hospitality. They pictured volunteers stepping forward willingly, finances strong, and buildings or spaces that truly served their needs. They dreamed of being known and respected in the wider community, easily able to explain what Unitarianism stands for, present in public life, and engaged in interfaith work.

**Because of that**, new experiments began to take root. Chaplaincies in universities, hospitals, and the police offered visible presence. New service formats like Shrewsbury's "Circle Service" and Birmingham New Meeting's alternative gatherings brought fresh energy. Non-Sunday activities like yoga, music, and cultural events opened doors. Climate justice and social outreach connected with wider movements. Leaders like Danny Crosby launched creative ministries, from dawn meetings for alcoholics to pastoral innovation.

**Until finally**, the Midland Unitarian Association became known for vibrant, visible, and inclusive communities — places of depth and spirit, balancing activism and worship, rooted in their ethos, and welcoming to all. Unitarianism in the Midlands was no longer struggling to explain itself; it was living its values out loud, with confidence, energy, and a clear vision for the future.

**Editor’s note:** Nick also produced some wonderful graphics to go with this article, which I cannot, unfortunately, include here. If you want to see a copy, please send me an e-mail.

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The stowee ov Mary, er babby, an a bostin tale submitted by David Mearman

The Black Country Nativity, written by Michael Prescott in 1968, with additions found from other internet sources. (only Black Country folk will able to read this, but have a go).

Thee’a woz a wench nairmed Mary an er lived in a plairce called Nazreth. One day er mum went owert an er woz eft ta do the ousewerk.

All a sudden the roowam went all bright an when er turned rowund er sid somebody stondin by the winda. Er wor arf surprised an nearly fell off er cheer.

“Oom yo?” er asked, “yo day arf gie me a tern.”

“Doh be scayed,” answered the bloke. “I wo urt ya. Me name’s Gabriel, an arm a angel.”

“Yo ay, am yer?” sez Mary.

“I am,” ee replied. “An ov cum ta tell ya summat.

“What?” sez Mary, cause er woz a thinking what a carry on this woz.

Yo’m gooin ter av a babby.

That shook er, and er looked at im an sez : “Yer wha? Doh be ser saft. I ay marrid.”

“That doh mek no difference,” ee answered. “If God says yo’ll av a babby, yo’ll av a babby, yo will an that’s it. What’s mower, yo’ve godda call im Jayzus.”

Mary woz still a bit shook, so the angel said: “An arl tell yer summat else. Yo ay the only one oos gooin to ave a babby. Yer couzin Elizabeth is gooin ter ave one an all, an er’s an ode uman.”

“Well, if yow sez so, ar suppose that’s it,” sez Mary. “Me chap wo arf be surprised.”

When eed gone, Mary med up er myand to goo an see Elizabeth an went off ter Juda.

Elizabeth woz weartin at the gayert, an when er sid Mary er sez: “Ar ay arf glad to see yo, but fancy yo cummin ta see we in yowar state.”

Mary answered: “An angel cum an sid me, an arm gooin to av a babby in December.”

Elizabeth tode Mary that er old mon, Zacharias, day believe er when er tode him about the babby, an ee were speechless.

“Ee cor spake a werd now,” er sez.

The chap what Mary was engaged to woz called Joseph. When Mary tode im about the babby er woz havin, ee day know what to think.

Ee sez : “Yor mum wo arf kick up a chow row.”

Any roward, ee day get is air off, an when ee went ter bed that night, an angel cum to im in a dream. “Doh get mad at Mary about the babby,” ee tode im.

“It’s God’s son er’s avin, an is name’s Jayzus. Sumbody’s got ter av im, or ee wo get born, an yower Mary woz picked.

“So just yo marry er, me mate. There ay nuthin ter worry about.”

Soon after they woz married, Joseph cum in an tode Mary: “Arv ad a letter from the tax mon, an that Ceasar sez we’ve gotta goo to wheer we woz born ta be taxed. So we’ve gotta goo an traipse all the way to Bethlem next wick.”

Mary cut sum sandwiches an packed a few cairkes an opples.

Then er med a bottle a tay, an when they’d ad a daysent breakfast, Joseph got the donkey out, put Mary on, an away they went.

“Chee rup, arr kid. It ay far now,” Joseph tode er.

“We’ll soowan av a rest. I kips gerrin stowens, bricks an sond in me sandals.”

When they god in ta towen, Joseph knocked on the dower of an inn an asked for a double roowem.

The bloke what answered sez “I cor elp yer. There’s that mony on em eere they’m avin ter sleep in the passage.”

The next un was like it an all, but Joseph sez ta chap: “Ain’t there anyweere wi can goo? Me missus is out theer on a donkey, an er’s gooin ter av a babby soon.”

The chap scratched is yed and sez: “We clained the stable out after tay, so it ay mucky. If I shift a couple of osses an a camel, yo could kip down theer.”

“We’ll tek it,” sez Joseph, straight off.

In the noight, Mary woke Joseph up an sez: “Oi yo, the babby’s ere, cor yo eerit?”

So Jayzus woz born, an they wrapped im up tight an put im in the manger what the osses et out on. Mary an Joseph wor arf prowud. The innkeeper cum with is missus an brought Mary sum ot milk, an Joseph a baker o wairter.

They thought Jayzus was a bostin little lad, an the innkeeper sez ta Joseph: “Yo’d better cum an av a drink to wet is yed.” So ee did.

Up in the ills, there woz sum shepherds lookin after the sheerp. It woz code, so they woz sittin by the fire lettin their dogs do the werk while they ad summat to eat an a fag.

Suddenly the sky lit up loike bonfire noight, an an angel cum. They day know owt about angels. an they woz that fritt their eyes woz like organ stops, an they all fell on the growund

“Yo’m a silly lot aye yer.” sez the angel. “I shore urt yer. I got a message for yer.

“There’s a babby bin born in Bethlem. Is naeme is Jayzus an ees God’s son. Yo goo an ave a gaup at im. Ee’s in a stable lyin in a manger.”

Any roward up, they cum down the ill into Bethlem. One sez: “It’s or roight im sayin we’ll find the babby in a stable, but they’m all over the plairce. We cud be looking fir wicks.”

Then they erd their mate's whistle, an ee called : "Oi, over eer." An they fun em outside a stable built in a caerve. One on em whispered: "Sshh! Shu rup will ya! Doh mek such a row an clatter. We'm ere." One knocked on the dower an Mary called: "Come in."

They took off their ats an went in on tip toe.

The chief shepherd said: "Adoo missus. A angel tode us we ter cum an see yower babby."

Mary smiled an beckoned em in. Joseph sez: "Ere e is. Cum an av a gaup, but mind ya doh brathe on is face."

The shepherds knelt downen rowund the manger an gauped a rit. "Ay ee tiny?" said the youngest. "An ay ee got little onds?"

"Course ee's tiny, yo saft ayorth," said the leader, "ee's new, ay ee?"

"I knows that," sez the young un, "but yo cor imagine God bein sa little, can yer?"

Mary smiled an sez: "Oil spin sum wool an knit im a jumper, an is dad'll play the flute ter mek him sleep."

The shepherds turned to goo, an little Jayzus smiled. The leader sez after it med wind, thad all babbies did it, but ee wor as sure as ee med out.

While all this woz a-goo in on, three wise kings woz in a country far away a gaup in up at them stars.

Suddenly, one on em put downen is telescope an called: "Cum eer yo lot. Oi've fun a star wot wor theer afower, an it ay arf a big un."

"Yo'm roight mate," they sez, then they looked. "Oil bet ya it's that un what's to tell us a new king woz born." They checked up, an it woz an all.

One day, they cum to Jerusalem an went up to the Palace an knocked on the dower. A sentry opened it, an they sez: "Adoo, Is the King in?"

The sentry said: "Arf a mo, Oil goo an see."

The King's name woz Erod, an ee woz in.

"There's three kings ta see yo," the soldier tode im. "Oh arr" said Erod. "Weer?" Ee ad a fit when the soldier tode im "Outside."

"Yo cor bay a leavin kings a stonidin on the step," sez Erod. "Ged em in."

So they owl goz in, an Erod sez "Ow noice to see em an ow thee bist?" When the Kings tode im "Oi'll right tar", Erod asked em, wot cud ee do for em. They sez, "Whim looking fer a new king, an wondered if ee woz ere"

Erod sez: "Nah mate, ee ay ere, but when yo've fun im, drop in on yer roward back so's Oi can goo anay a look meself."

They said "Righto," an off they went.

When they'd gone, Erod sez to isselt: "Theer's ony room fer one king ere, an Oi'm it. When Oi know weer the new un is, Oi'll have im killed."

The star stopped over the ouse weer Jayzus woz, an the kings day worry coz it wor a Palace. They went in an knelt downen be babby Jayzus an gid him their preziz o gowuld, frankincense an myrhh.

Mary looked at the preziz an er sez: "Thank yo, they'm smashin, but Oi'll keep em till ee's bigger, if yo doh moind."

The kings took off their crowns and bowed.

Then they sez: "Tarrah abit," an went all the way back um.

But they day goo back past Erod's palace cos a angel ad tode em what a awful bloke Erod woz, an ow ee wanted to kill the little Jayzus, so they goz um be another roward.

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## **A Small, Welsh Community by Dorothy Houghton**

“High up in the Cambrian Mountains at over 1300 feet, you will find the sheep and cattle farming hamlet of Bwlchysarnau.”

I live in Bwlch y Sarnau (Bulsarnee – the Welsh like to shorten names if they can) which is a small hamlet in Powys. There are about 16 houses on our one main street, and a few other houses and farms in the vicinity. Despite being so small, we have the advantage of a community building, which was the primary school in living memory. There is a large room with a lavatory in an enclosed porch which can be accessed from the outside without allowing access to the main building.

By this lavatory is a shelf and a kettle. There are sachets of coffee, tea, milk, and sugar. There is also a visitors' book which is full of grateful comments from people from Britain and various foreign countries. Many of them drawn to cycle the hills, take part in the IMBA Trans-Cambrian Mountain epic, or walk Glyndwr's Way. Sometimes a cycle club organises a tour through the hills and informs us, so that we can organise a pop-up café.

Various members of the hamlet volunteer to clean the building for a month (which usually means two visits). Recently we had an 'all hands to the pump' grand cleaning following the return of our very long, red curtains from the dry-cleaners. The workers were

kept supplied with bacon sandwiches which should ensure their willingness to return next year.

On the last Saturday morning of every month, there is supposedly a book or plant swap, but it is, in fact, a chance to chat over cake and coffee. People who have lived in ByS come back to see old friends. Our small community contains a large number of enthusiastic and accomplished bakers, among whom I am not numbered. I am, however, an enthusiastic and accomplished cake eater.

The WI meets once a month, mainly to do craft work, for which most of the members are passionate and talented. I am neither. I go for the company, and the coffee and cake. There is a small Baptist chapel which holds a service every Sunday afternoon.

We have a Facebook page, the Bwlch y Sarnau Community Noticeboard, which keeps us in touch with anything that's happening.

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District Round-Up

Shrewsbury Unitarians Pride 2025 by Jenni Duffell

On Saturday 27th September Shrewsbury Unitarians were once again involved in the Shrewsbury Pride event.

The church was full of information stalls from various organisations and our upstairs room was used as the green room for performers and also as the main hub for the volunteers. Our town centre position on the main High Street and proximity to the main stage in the Square made it an ideal location and the organisers were very grateful for our involvement and support.

There was a really good energy in the town during the day, with many visitors and people taking part, and shops involved as well.

In the middle of the day there was a parade around the town centre and our Chairperson Debra took part and carried our banner.



All photos provided by Jenni Duffell

Celebration and Joy

Joy and Celebration by Peter Godfrey

When I read these words suggested by our editor as the January *MU Now* theme, two favourite quotations sprang to mind:

‘Love, joy and peace’ and kissing ‘the joy as it flies’.

The first is a quotation from Paul’s impassioned Letter to the Galatians, chapter 5, v22. Love, joy and peace are the first of what Paul calls ‘the fruits of the Spirit’. Elsewhere in his letters Paul writes of ‘Faith, hope and love’ and I have often quoted the old saying that ‘The most forgotten of these is hope’. In regard to our present theme I think it could be well said of ‘Love, joy and peace’ that the most forgotten of these is ‘joy’. For a variety of reasons (not least the horrible view that we are all sinners and there is no health in us) we have forgotten that religion should be joyful.

My second quotation is an example of how poets remind us of joy and joyfulness. It is a quotation from the work of William Blake:

‘He who bends to himself a Joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity’s sunrise.’

While this subject was at the back of my mind I had an experience that brought it right to the front. *I saw a child skipping*. This seemed and seems to me a wonderful example of pure joy. A child walking along and suddenly breaking into skipping. Nor is it just an example of joy it is an example of celebration. The child,

quite unconsciously is celebrating life, being alive. It is joy at its simplest and yet most profound form.

In the days when I was preparing two sermons a week I used to find it helpful if I had the subjects more or less prepared well ahead. That way examples and illustrations would seem to crop up from time to time from varied sources - chatting to people, reading, television. This has been the case during the months since Sue set her theme. I follow with examples of a few of them.

A young footballer who died in a car crash was described as a person who ‘played football and lived his life with joy’.

Betty Box, the producer of a film in which Bridget Bardot appeared spoke of her as ‘a joy to work with’.

Tim Smith, the co-founder of the Eden Project, is quoted in the Guardian of 1.1.26 as saying that ‘The absolute joy is that young people feel it gives them permission to dream.’ He went on to talk about the Project helping people to become more attuned to the natural world and able to believe that ‘tomorrow is going to be even better, for example as we realise that there is no life without plants’.

Someone asked in an interview ‘What is the trait you most deplore in others?’ replied - ‘Jealousy – jealousy is the thief of joy’.

Lucy Mangan, a *Guardian* writer, wrote of being by herself on New Year’s Eve, except for smoked salmon, champagne and her books. Lucy called it - JOMO. The Joy of Missing Out. It takes all sorts doesn’t it?

On the first day of the New Year I read on FaceBook a report from Unitarian College, thanking all who had supported the College during the past very successful year. It said that 'There is so much hope for the future of our beloved faith. Spreading joy, love and unity over division is the only way forward'.

Pushing a trolley round a packed supermarket a lady and I struggled to negotiate our trolleys past one another and the lady said 'Joy!' This led to smiles all round. Sometimes it saddens me that shoppers seem so gloomy. This particular day it seemed different. It was the Monday after Christmas day and just before the New Year. There was still some Christmas goodwill about and it was not difficult to get some smiles.

On the first Sunday of the New Year I was at the service at Cheltenham conducted by Cressida Pryor on the theme of Epiphany, Wisdom and Light. We all passed candles to one another lit by matches. The words on the match box? *Joy is Now* ! In the book *Proverbs*, joy comes from wisdom and I love chapter 15 v13 – 'A joyful heart makes a cheerful face'. [Some translations have merry, glad or happy. My quote is from the New American Standard Bible because it is the one that fits our theme !]

I do hope you can all find your own examples. Many Biblical ones are very familiar especially, for example, in the Psalms that often mention joy – see Psalm 16 v11 with its 'fullness of joy'. The Hebrew Bible even has a whole book celebrating the joy of sex. The Song of Solomon or Song of Songs has been described as 'a celebration of human love and joy.'

Luke writes about 'good news of great joy' (2 v10), Matthew of the Magi seeing the star 'were overwhelmed with joy' (2 v10), Luke, in Acts of the Apostles, of the disciples being filled with joy (13 v52). These are just a few instances.

It has been said that 'Biblically, joy is love experienced as delight, sustained as communion and fulfilled in self-giving'.

May our lives bear the spirit from which grows the fruit of joy, love and peace and when we are blessed with joy may we not bend it to ourselves but 'kiss it as it flies'.

Celebration by Dorothy Haughton

I'll think about celebration. I feel in a way that every service we attend together is a celebration and certainly the shared meals are. And why, of course, do we put so much emphasis on 'worship' when we are not really worshipping anything/one any longer. Just because we no longer believe in a God who sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain? It doesn't mean that our coming together to ... discuss the meaning of life and the universe? to share our views on how to live? to encourage us to look at life/the way we live a little differently? is not valuable and worthy of the time we spend doing it. I gave a talk on Unitarianism to my local PCN group and shared some hymns with them. They were bemused. 'You could sing these anywhere'. I suppose if you have previously attended a trinitarian church then you expect all hymns to be directed to a God who will presumably do something, be glad, save a place for you in his heaven. Whereas we sing hymns that have words that we like, tunes that we like, words that encourage us to be more caring, more aware of nature, etc. I don't need a deeper meaning to sing 'enter, rejoice and come in' than we should remember to welcome everyone who comes in even if it is boring old us, the people we see every week.

I think that I no longer 'Worship the King all glorious above.' I no longer see God as my shield and defender. The words are

sumptuous and the tune eminently singable and I will happily sing anything as I don't think singing is an expression of faith. But my definition of God does not involve worship but celebration. I want to say, 'I go to church to celebrate' not 'I go to church to worship'. I would like to change the word 'service' with its industrial and commercial overtones to 'celebration'.

What do you think?

Personally I don't experience joy that often. I think the nearest I get/have got is when dancing or singing by some power we do not understand we have just danced/sung the very best that we possibly could and the hairs in the back of your neck stand up.

A Joyful Christmas by Dorothy Haughton

I was assistant warden at a Toc H hostel for teenage girls who had just left children's homes and had started work. At Christmas the warden and I worked to make it as much like a family Christmas as we could for the girls who had nowhere else to go to. At dinner we laid our small presents (neither of us has much money) by every plate. The girls ignored them. Eventually we could bear it no longer. 'Don't you want to open your presents?' They looked at us glumly. 'Elaine, open your presents.' She did. Inspected them, Mumbled a possible 'thank you' and went back to her pudding. 'Don't the rest of you want to open your presents.' 'We know what we're getting. In the home everybody got the same thing.' The warden and I were outraged. "Every present was bought for you and just for you yourself and nobody else.'

They opened their presents and when they realised that they did indeed have presents that were for just for them and not like

anybody else's, then we saw joy. You would have thought it was diamond earrings not plastic ones from a market stall, a mink stole not a hand knitted scarf. They had bought the warden a pressed glass vinegar bottle that they insisted was a sherry decanter, so we drank minute quantities of sherry from the repeatedly refilled decanter and thought ourselves no end posh. And when we went into the sitting room and played silly games such as Picking the sixpenny bit out of a mound of flour with your teeth, Dressing up in a winter coat, hat, scarf and furry gloves then unwrapping a chocolate bar against the clock, Passing the orange underneath your chin had them sobbing with laughter. That was a celebration.

No Christmas since has come anywhere near it.

Celebration and Joy by Peter Hewis

During my student days at the Unitarian College, I was asked to do a pastorate at our former Reading Church, it was a small congregation but with several amazing people and at one service we had a hymn to a theme from Beethoven's 9th *Symphony*, I've loved it ever since. The last four lines of the hymn with words by Henry van Dyke read,

'Ever singing march we onward,
Victors in the midst of strife;
Joyful music lifts us sunward
In the triumph song of life.'

The amazing thing about Beethoven's 9th *Symphony* is that he composed it when he was deaf and could only hear the music in his head or through vibrations, yet despite his deafness he called the choral part of the symphony, *Ode to Joy* and set it to words of

Schiller. Whenever I hear it the chorus always brings me joy and I loved it when it was used as a theme for European unity. Years after I first heard it, the wonderful percussionist Evelyn Glennie was being interviewed and she commented that although deaf like Beethoven, she felt the music through vibrations, and that experience gave her great joy.

On to our world today, our neighbours ask us to look after their two cats when they go away and one cat is now deaf, when we go over to feed them the deaf cat is often upstairs and can't hear us, I suddenly remembered what Evelyn Glennie said and started to bang the door to the stairs, the cat obviously felt the vibrations and came rushing for her food – now that gave me real joy.

As for celebration, when our daughter was born fifty years ago, we didn't give her a name immediately but for my theme on the Sunday after her birth I used the words of William Blake,

'I have no name
I am but two days old.'
What shall I call thee?
'I happy am;
Joy is my name.'
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee.
Thou dost smile;
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

Recently Bethan had her fiftieth birthday and her own joy has remained. For her, one joy was welcoming her friend Lindsey,

they met many years ago in the Loughborough College of Art and have been friends ever since. Another joy was welcoming her brother who is just two years younger I think Beethoven and Evelyn Glennie would like that!

Celebration and Joy take many forms.

Feeling So Grateful – A Reminder to be Joyful by Sue Woolley

Recently, I came across these words: 'Some people feel the rain, others just get wet.' Which kind of sums up the huge variations in the human attitudes to joy and sorrow. How we respond to external stimuli depends on our state of mind, our state of heart. There is always more than one way of looking at anything: positively, negatively, or (as my Dear Husband would say) realistically. I'm a glass half-full person myself, so I tend to look on the bright side of life. Yet I recognise that this is a very privileged viewpoint: I am able to do this because I have a foundation of good things in my life to hold me up, to support me.

Each person's life is a rich tapestry of joys interwoven with sorrows. I do believe that they are inseparable, and that to feel one, you have to be open to feeling the other. And having the capacity to feel great joy and great sorrow also means that we have the capacity to love greatly. Which is surely a gift? We are living in difficult times, with terrible news breaking daily, whether it is Donald Trump's dangerous idiocies, people starving in Gaza (and in so many other places) or the myriad species of plants and animals dying out because of our lack of care for our beleaguered planet.

Yet I also believe that there is a deep joy which comes from within us, which is not dependent on circumstances and outside events for its existence – it is a divine gift. If I may give you a personal example: a few months ago, I went for a walk around the fields which surround our village. The weather was beautiful. Summer was showing herself everywhere, in the ditches and the hedgerows and the fields themselves. I saw a red kite wheeling overhead, riding the thermals with such grace and majesty, and heard the pure song of a skylark. It was just gorgeous, and my heart was full of joy.

Then I came home and checked my e-mails, to find that a dear friend had died in their care home. My bubble of joy burst, and I was filled with sorrow by the news of their passing.

And yet, the fact that I had been open to the joy of the surrounding natural world helped me to be able to cope with the sorrow I felt. Without the one, the other would have hit me a lot harder. I do believe that if we live our lives vulnerably, at a deep spiritual level, feeling the rain rather than simply getting wet, we become more resilient to sorrow, as we are more open to joy.

When we are in a bad or sad situation, when all the joy seems to have drained out of our lives, leaving them grey and bleak, we can easily look around and discern no hope, no prospect of ever feeling joyful again.

Which is why I believe that having some kind of daily gratitude practice is so valuable, to give us another perspective on our lives. Somewhere in her books, Brené Brown writes about gratitude, and shares a practice her family has: they go around the table during the evening meal, and each person shares something they are grateful about on that particular day. She says that this may only be gratitude that the day is over, if it has been a difficult one.

Yet, simply being alive at the end of the day is its own joy, because every day, someone (in fact, many someones) will have breathed their last.

I call my own gratitude practice ‘Small Pleasures’ and record them in my Bullet Journal each evening. I can *always* think of something – a moment of sunshine, a kind word from a family member or friend, completing (or making progress with) a particular task or creative project, noticing something beautiful in the natural world.

I think that noticing moments of beauty and kindness (and yes, joy) in our daily lives can help us to appreciate that not everything in our lives is awful. To give a current example from my own life, I was privileged to enjoy a noisy, chaotic and exhausting Boxing Day with my children and their partners and our grandsons. I had been feeling a bit down about my impending retirement and this joyous day really cheered me up.

I wish you every joy that life can bring and the power to notice them as they happen.



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MUA Congregations: Times of Services

This list shows when our Unitarian congregations in the Midlands meet for worship. But please contact the congregation before travelling, in case they are no longer accurate.

Every Sunday:

Birmingham	Unitarian New Meeting Church	11 am
Cheltenham & Gloucester	Bayshill Unitarian Church	11 am
Evesham	Oat Street Chapel	11 am ¹
Kingswood	Meeting House	11 am
Shrewsbury	Unitarian Church	11 am
Warwick	High Street Chapel	4.30 pm

First Sunday of the Month:

Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	11 am
Stroud Fellowship	The Exchange, Stroud	3 pm

Second Sunday of the Month:

Coventry	Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church	11 am
Cradley	Park Lane Unitarian Chapel	6.30 pm
Stourbridge	Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel	11 am ³

Third Sunday of the Month:

Northampton	Unitarian Meeting House	11 am
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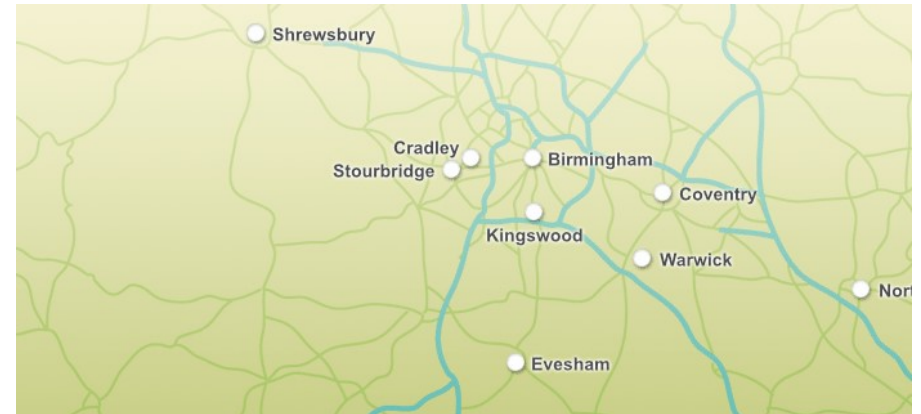
Fourth Sunday of the Month:

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

¹ No service on 5th Sundays

MUA Congregations: Contact Details

Name	Contact	Details
Birmingham		0121 455 8818 info@birminghamnewmeeting.org.uk
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**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,
and on the theme to be confirmed later.**

by early May 2026

Thank you!