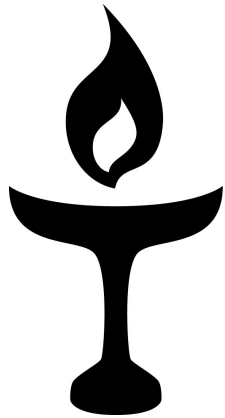


# MU NOW

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THE MAGAZINE OF  
THE MIDLAND UNITARIAN  
ASSOCIATION

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[www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk](http://www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk)

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## From the Editor

Welcome to the Spring 2019 issue of *MU Now*. It includes new MUA President Angela Maher's first *President's Piece*, as well as an article by her on the 'Awakenings' theme. Barbara Russell and I have also contributed to this theme.

There's news about a meeting with the new Chief Officer of the General Assembly, Liz Slade; a thoughtful piece by Rev Peter Godfrey; and the usual District news.

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. Please send your contributions to me at [revsuewoolley@gmail.com](mailto:revsuewoolley@gmail.com) or to 5, Martins Road, Piddington, Northampton NN7 2DN.

THANK YOU!

**The theme for the next issue** is "Integrity" and the deadline for submissions will be **Friday 6<sup>th</sup> September**.

*Sue Woolley*

## President's Piece



I guess I should tell you a little bit about myself, as your incoming MUA President.

I've been a Unitarian for about 12 years. I first encountered it online reading about the time that Unitarians were banned from Chester Cathedral and thought, somewhat wistfully, that if I could choose my own religion I would be a Unitarian. It took a friend of mine pointing out that I could, in fact, choose my own religion for me to pluck up the courage to attend a Unitarian service. So, on a sunny Palm Sunday morning I went to my nearest congregation – Unitarian New Meeting, Birmingham – and have stuck around ever since. I then made the fatal, or fortunate, mistake of mentioning that I was good at websites, which somehow translated into a place on committee. The congregation at Birmingham has changed substantially in the time that I've been there. I'm now one of the longest-serving members and Chair the congregation.

I've also served on the Executive Committee of the MUA for some years. I care particularly about the financial health of the MUA – this slightly unglamorous side is essential to ensuring that the MUA can provide congregations with the support that they need, now and in the future. I'm exceedingly grateful to the work that Sandy Ellis does for both the MUA and within the district at large to help make sure that we all have a stable financial platform on which to grow.

Outside of Unitarianism, I'm a civil servant and member of the Government Communications Service working for the water regulator, Ofwat. My working challenges include explaining to the Daily Mail how water and sewerage prices are set,

commissioning animations about help available to vulnerable customers, and tweeting tips about saving water. Clean fresh water coming out of the taps every day is one of the truly amazing and delightfully ordinary features of modern civilisation and I'm proud of the small contribution I make to ensuring that it continues to do so.

One of my great pleasures is quizzing. I'm particularly fond of the BBC quiz show 'Only Connect' and felt on top of the world when in the recent final I was able to guess a connection from only two clues\*. It's probably fitting then that I've often felt that the unintended theme of my Unitarianism, is 'connection'.

I am part of my congregation because I feel connected to the people who attend there. I joined the Executive Committee of the MUA because I think that congregations need to connect with each other and be supported at a local level. The connections I've made through district activities, and the training I have received, have led me to serve as an occasional worship leader in my home congregation and around the district where I've found even more connections. And beyond the district I am a member of The Inquirer Board, whose strapline is *Connecting Unitarians*.

Nietzsche apparently once said that 'invisible threads are the strongest ties' and I think here he was right. I truly think that it's in the connections that we make with each other and with the wider world that we can find what really matters.

So during my two years in office as MUA President, I look forward to strengthening my existing connections around the district, and building new connections with new people and new places.

**Angela Maher**

\*The first two clues were *D-Day* and *Charles and Camilla's wedding*. The third clue was *Launch of BBC2* and the fourth and final clue was *Wimbledon final between Ivanisevic and Rafter*. The connection is that they were all delayed by a day. This was my single moment of triumph in the whole episode.

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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:** My diary for **2019** is now filled. I look forward to seeing all of you as and when. I am also available to conduct Rites of Passage round the District, should the need arise.

The **Spring Training Day**, on the topic of *Music in Worship* took place on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> May, at Unitarian New Meeting Church, Birmingham. It was led by Rev. Ant Howe, Kingswood's minister, and Rev. Danny Crosby, minister of Altrincham and Urmston, who led us in a wonderful Singing Meditation.

The MUA Executive Committee have decided not to run either the national Worship Studies Course Foundation Step or the national Rites of Passage course this year. We are going to wait until there have been enough expressions of interest to make running them worthwhile. If you *are* interested in either of these courses, please contact me, and I will add your name to the list.

I am a fully qualified **spiritual director**. I offer direction sessions, on a one-to-one basis. Please contact me if you are interested. Please see advert on p. 23 for further information.

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

## MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

The Key Messages below, from our January meeting, have already been shared in the relevant issues of *Bits & Pieces*, the monthly news-sheet sent to all congregations. They all referred to events which have since taken place – the District AGM, the meeting with the General Assembly's new Chief Officer, Elizabeth Slade and the Spring Training Day. Articles about the first two events are elsewhere in this issue.

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## Should We Split?

A recent entry in one of the Facebook groups to which I belong wrote of the possibility of, or possible need for, a Unitarian Christian breakaway. This reminded me of something in last Spring's MU NOW. A report of the 2018 General Assembly meetings said 'The GA Newsletter (GAZette) and the Opening Ceremony provided further evidence of this generation gap and one could almost wonder if it is time for the parting of the ways between Humanist and non-humanist strands of the movement'.

The notion that our little Unitarian and Free Christian Movement could split, have a breakaway or parting of the ways, fills me with much sadness.

There are various reasons for this sadness. One is that I enjoy our differences. There are some Unitarians and Free Christians whose beliefs are very different from mine. Nevertheless I enjoy what they write and say and their views make me think more deeply about my own.

The Facebook writer makes the point that we must have a core belief – presumably saying something about belief in God and/or a form of Christianity. My view is that rather than being a set of

beliefs Unitarianism is about a way of believing and living. So I think a core Unitarian belief is in freedom from compulsory creeds – the right to work out one’s own faith. This is the point I always mention first when anyone asks me about Unitarianism – as one person did yesterday when I was playing bowls with him! This does mean that there are bound to be differences. We are not alone in this. There are great differences amongst Roman Catholics and – to go to the other extreme – amongst the Quakers where members are currently engrossed in the question of whether or not Quakers have to believe in God. Incidentally, isn’t the name ‘Friends’ a good one? I wish we had got there first with that. Also, an Anglican vicar has written a thoughtful book called ‘Christian Atheism’, and there are many people who call themselves ‘Religious Humanists’.

Our freedom is vital. Over the seventy plus years that I have been a Unitarian my beliefs have changed considerably. Our freedom allows for this. If we split in two I would be wanting to keep jumping from one to the other!

We cannot stand still. Our knowledge of the universe, of the human brain and of the animal world, for example, is increasing at an incredible speed. We cannot ignore new knowledge. Having said that I am fully aware that when we think of the complexity, for example, of the human brain and the immensity of the universe, we have to acknowledge that there is immensely more that we do not know compared to the little we do know.

Ultimately who knows for sure what is right? So why be so dogmatic as to talk of splitting and parting? Let us be good-humoured about our differences – and be kind to one another.

**Peter Godfrey**

## **The Midland Unitarian Association meets incoming Chief Officer of the General Assembly, Elizabeth Slade**

On 30<sup>th</sup> March, the day before the District AGM, more than a dozen Midlands Unitarians met Elizabeth Slade, who took on the role of Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches at the end of April.



Liz has been a member of New Unity Church in London for the past seven years. It helped her to understand the value of a community of belonging. She was excited about the impact that being a member of a community can have on individuals. After a chance meeting with one of the founders, she started working for Sunday Assembly.

Photo from Unitarians UK Facebook page

When she left in 2017, she worked with a colleague from Harvard Divinity School using sacred reading practices as applied to novels, for example, by using the places mentioned in novels as pilgrimage destinations. This led to running a week-long pilgrimage based around Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. She found that deep spiritual connections formed between the participants.

Liz believes it is important to have a community to ground us spiritually, in our consumerist, materialistic society. We need to

take care of our spiritual selves – and offer sacred spaces to enable more people to do this. She said that “the DNA of Unitarianism is exactly what is needed for our culture now” because we can offer open and inclusive community, which is non-hierarchical, decentralised, and active in social justice.

She commented that young people (Generation Y) may not want to connect with mainstream religions, but have a huge hunger to connect with something larger than themselves – they are looking for meaning in their lives.

She then threw the discussion open and the following thought-provoking questions were considered:

- How do we invite more people into the movement?
- How do we tell the story of what we stand for and protect the good things we’re already doing, while inviting new people in?
- How do we share our learning and principles?
- Where do we want to get talked about? How do we get our voices heard?
- What will grab people’s attention, give them hope and inspire them?
- How do we continually shine light on the positive things that are happening, and grow from these strengths?
- How would we want Unitarianism *now* to be remembered by people 200 years in the future?

It was agreed that raising the profile of Unitarianism is of vital importance. We need to be looking outwards and standing up collectively for the Unitarian ethos of doing good in the world. It is up to each person *as well as the General Assembly* to represent Unitarianism to the world. Outreach is vital, so that we can attract new people with whom our message resonates.

Some commented that the Unitarian leaflets offered by GA need updating. Our publicity needs to be up-to-date, appealing and relevant. It is also difficult to know what we, as Unitarians, stand for, for example, the text of past General Assembly meeting motions is hidden away in the depths of the GA’s website. The issue of delegates voting for something to happen and then there’s no follow-up was also raised.

Being Unitarian is about what we do – living our values. Rev Winnie Gordon commented that Unitarianism is a radical faith, different, offering something unique. We need to become more political again, through social action.

Jane Couper said she is proudest of being Unitarian when we are bold – showing backbone and moral vision, nailing our colours to the mast. For example, in campaigning for same-sex marriage. When we were radical in the past, we espoused unpopular causes and made life better. Ours is a counter-cultural movement.

Rev Mark Hutchinson remarked, and Liz agreed, that it is not possible to separate economic, environmental and spiritual issues. All of life is inter-connected.

Following a question by Glen Sparkes, what is the Unitarian sacred text? Aleks Zglinska suggested that it would be good to produce a Unitarian equivalent of *Quaker Faith and Practice*.

Part of what Unitarianism has to offer is the concept of faith as a journey – we explore what gives our lives purpose and meaning together, in community.

We have to decide where we are going to put our energies – we cannot afford to spread ourselves too thinly, or the message will

be diluted. We need to reflect together on how we as Unitarians express our care and concern with social action in the world. Liz commented that any organisational structure needs to be in service to its mission and needs to be as lean and nimble as it can. The infrastructure should not be allowed to get in the way of the mission. While the GA needs to be professionally run, and to have checks and balances in place, the organisational machinery should not be allowed to slow down the mission.

Liz's final question was: are there any exciting new things working well in our congregations that you think she and everyone else should know about? E-mail me your thoughts, and I will pass them on to her.

**Sue Woolley**

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## **MUA Annual General Meeting at Shrewsbury Unitarian Church**

Nearly 40 Unitarians from around the Midlands gathered at Shrewsbury Unitarian Church on Saturday 30th March, for the MUA's Annual General Meeting. Our new President, for the years 2019 – 21, is Angela Maher, of Unitarian New Meeting Church, Birmingham.

After the business meeting and a delicious buffet lunch (organised by the SUC congregation) we enjoyed a thought-provoking service by Angela on the theme of loving our neighbour, which was complemented by our Guest Speaker, Karen Hanley, Parliamentary liaison person for Unitarians. Karen and her husband, Peter got us all on our feet, moving into small groups to discuss past General Assembly resolutions we were passionate

about, and to decide what we wanted to do about those issues, moving forward.

It was a rich and enjoyable day.

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## **District Round-up**

### **New Pulpit Fall for Shrewsbury**

A new piece of art, a hand embroidered pulpit fall, by Shrewsbury artist Hanny Newton, has been installed in Shrewsbury Unitarian Church. Hanny is a professional embroiderer and a member of the congregation at Shrewsbury. She was commissioned by the church to make the Pulpit Fall and most of the approximately forty hours of stitching required were accomplished in church during open hours. Visitors to Shrewsbury Unitarian Church on Thursday afternoons saw textile artist Hanny stitching away at the back of the church.

The design took shape over two months. It is a simple, contemporary version of the Unitarian Chalice Flame stitched in gold thread on a green velvet back-ground. The design was inspired by the image on the front of the Unitarian hymn book *Hymns for Living*. It is worked in couching stitch. Flowing lines of gold thread are laid across the surface of the fabric then anchored in place by tiny stitches in a second thread. The green background fabric echoes the colour of an early twentieth century floral frieze behind the pulpit.





In keeping with the plainness of the interior of the church, typical of an historic dissenting meeting house, the image on the Pulpit Fall is simple, designed to be a visual focus in worship services and a reminder of the symbol of Unitarian faith – the flame within a chalice. Chair of Shrewsbury Unitarians Debra

Burbery said: “We see this as a piece of art reflecting our own time, our contribution to the visual heritage of the church, and we hope it will be enjoyed by generations to come. Hanny is a very talented artist with a growing

reputation nationally and internationally and it was exciting to see her creating this embroidery in the church.”

Hanny grew up and went to school and art college in Shrewsbury before graduating from the Royal School of Needlework at Hampton Court with a degree in Hand Embroidery. She specialises in contemporary goldwork. As well as taking commissions she teaches classes and workshops including for the

National Trust and the British Museum. At the time of writing she is planning material for a teaching trip to Australia in 2019 at the invitation of the Geelong Fibre Forum in Victoria.

The Pulpit Fall was commissioned in Shrewsbury Unitarian Church’s 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the rebuilding of the church in 1718 following its destruction in the riots of 1715.

Photo : Embroidery Artist Hanny Newton showing the almost completed Pulpit Fall in situ

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## Awakenings

### Have we awakened? by Angela Maher

Recently, the Rabbi Harry Jacobi died age 93. I mainly know this, because his daughter is the rabbi at Birmingham Progressive Synagogue, and I follow the synagogue on Facebook. Rabbi Harry Jacobi was born in Berlin in 1925 and having escaped to Amsterdam in 1939, he was one of 74 children rescued and brought to London by Geertuida Wijsmuller-Meijer the night before the Dutch surrendered in 1940. He went on to have a long and full life, serving as rabbi in liberal synagogues in North West London, and later Switzerland and receiving an MBE, before retiring to Buckinghamshire.

It seems particularly poignant five days before Yom HaShoah – Holocaust Memorial Day. In Israel, on Yom HaShoah an air raid siren sounds at 10am, and Israelis observe a two minute silence. Almost everyone stops what they are doing, including motorists who stop their cars in the middle of the road, standing beside their vehicles in silence as the siren is sounded.



The events of the 1930s that caused Rabbi Jacobi to flee his home were a long time ago. We live in a very different time and place to the one where jackbooted Nazis systematically persecuted and murdered Jews, Roma and other people they considered to be undesirable. And yet, recent events show that we haven't come as far as we might like. Attacks on religious people for being religious minorities happen in 2019 too – whether that's a shooting in a San Diego synagogue, or a Christchurch mosque, bombings in Colombo, Sri Lanka or an arson attack on black churches in Louisiana.

When atrocities like these happen, I like to comfort myself with the thought that the perpetrators are essentially the opposite of Unitarians. We are by faith and conviction liberal, open-minded people who believe that we need not think alike to love alike. We recognise the worth and dignity of all people.

And yet, there are people within our own communities who are being radicalised by online hate groups – usually they are teenagers and young adults who lack self-confidence and who need a place to belong. It is well known that Islamic terrorists use online radicalisation to attract followers who go on to support and commit acts of terrorism. I am not sure how well known it is that white supremacists do much the same – luring mainly young white men unsure of their place in the world with corrupt ideologies and twisted ideas on websites like 8chan.

I think perhaps being the liberal with the open-minded beliefs is not quite enough to be the opposite of the perpetrators of hate crimes. Rather, the true opposite of these people are the awakened ones, who see the world as it is and see where it is not good and try to change it. The ones who give hope to the downtrodden, who de-radicalise people, who call out racism and anti-semitism and Islamophobia when they see it. Who do more than just

preach to the converted about reason and freedom and tolerance, but who live that out in the wider world.

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### **Really! by Barbara Russell**

There's Nature's way - eyes open, blink, yawn, stretch, slide out of warm bed, shower, dress, breakfast – another day.. Or, there's Potato Clock – alarm 7.50 am, get up at eight o'clock – swift shower, pull on clothes, tea and toast – hi ho hi ho, it's off to work we go. Neither of these transitions from slumber to alertness seems to fit 'awakening'. 'Awakening' is a word that has crept quietly out of the dictionary and found itself a new meaning. Nothing to do with getting up! H. W. Longfellow's hymn (no. 292 in *Hymns of Faith and Freedom*) gives a clue – 'For the soul is dead that slumbers...'. It's the slumbering soul that needs awakening. Longfellow gives another clue 'Life is real', and surely the true awakening is the realisation of reality. And, again – surely, the first reality must be God, or however one thinks of the omnipotent, omnipresent Force / Power / Whatever that fills the universe. Because that Force / Power / Whatever is real every moment, every place. And that Reality can be communicated with – by prayer, formal or private, by depth of despair or by up-rush of joy and anything in between.

The world is real – and in it we find the reality of war and peace, of plenty and of starvation, of green pastures and horrifying, death-dealing hurricanes, volcanoes, storms, of unspeakable cruelty and heart-warming kindness.

The realness of life is all around, especially at this time of the year, growth, maturity and death, illness and health, striving and yielding.

And we are real – at least, we can be! Of all creation, we are unique, for we alone have the choice. And, God willing, the chance. For some, the struggle just to stay alive is so great that it takes all their will. For others, life is so smooth and comfortable, they just don't bother. They do what is asked of them quietly and efficiently, and that's it. Very useful and we should be grateful for them, they keep the machinery of life running. They are not heartless or uncaring and frequently contribute very generously to charity, without ever thinking of why that charity is necessary. God bless them.

Real people often are a nuisance – they want to Change Things. 'They' don't like war, or poverty or injustice because they have taken the trouble to look at the reality of these horrors and are all too well awake to the fact that it will take more than a tin of beans in the food bank to solve them. Real people do not believe any good cause to be hopeless; they will give time and energy to seek solutions and often risk mockery, abuse – sometimes their own safety to do what they believe to be right.

Fortunately, real people here are not too difficult to find. They are often called good neighbours, who will offer help before it's asked for, they work in charity shops and hospitals, use their cars to ferry folk back and forth to clinic appointments. You name it, some real person will do it.

Real people are very much awakened to the realities of life – Jesus would probably call them 'The Salt of the Earth – and they really are!

**Barbara Russell, Oldbury@Dudley**

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## **Aware of the Light by Sue Woolley**

Bettina von Armin, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German writer and novelist, wrote: "Anyone who longs for light is not lightless, for yearning is already light."

This quotation sent me back to Richard Rohr's wonderful book *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*. In it, he explains how we can only become aware of the presence of God in our lives by detaching from our monkey-mind, ego-driven selves, and finding Him / Her / It in the stillness. He argues that the busy, acquisitive world we live in is the antithesis of this stillness, and is the reason why it is so hard for modern people to let go and simply be.

The Buddha, Jesus, Hafiz and many other mystical teachers all stress the importance of being awake, of being aware of what is happening in the present moment. Rohr shares an amusing conversation between a Zen master and his disciple:

"Is there anything that I can do to make myself enlightened?"  
 "As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning."  
 "Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?"  
 "To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise."

Rohr writes, "We cannot *attain* the presence of God because we're already totally in the presence of God. What's absent is awareness. Little do we realise that God is maintaining us in existence with every breath we take. As we take another, it means that God is choosing us now and now and now." (emphasis mine)

Which is why I try to sit in silence for 15 minutes every morning... so that I will not be asleep when the sun begins to rise.

## MUA Congregations: Times of Services

### Every Sunday:

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

### First Sunday of the Month:

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

### Second Sunday of the Month:

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

### Third Sunday of the Month:

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

### Fourth Sunday of the Month:

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

## MUA Congregations: Contact Details

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

## SEEKER SEEKING SEEKERS

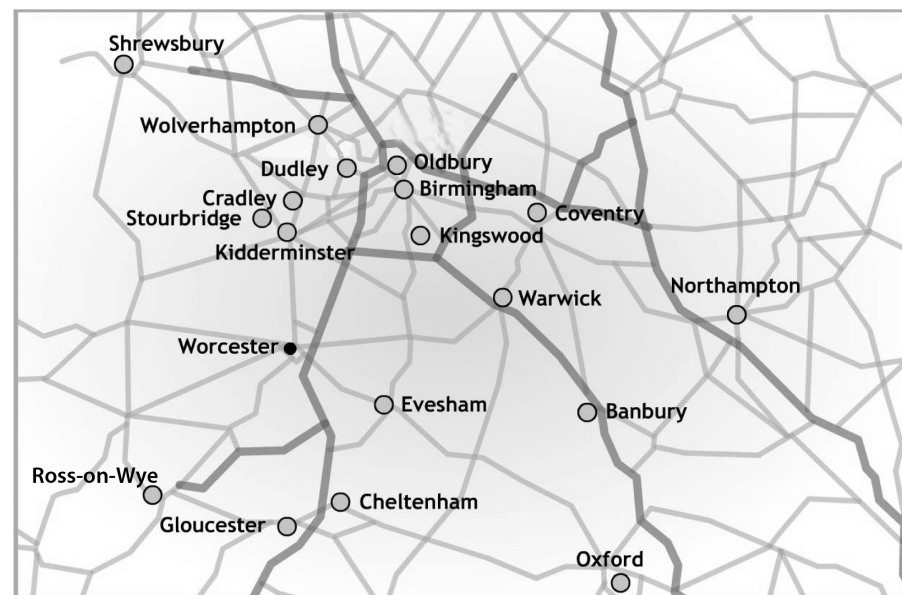
You may have read that I am a qualified Spiritual Director. Unlike therapy, spiritual direction is not necessarily centred around a problem, although it could be. Often it begins with a desire to grow - to move beyond the place where one is to a deeper, richer place.

Spirituality is not a distinct area of life, but a dimension of all life. God is not present to us only when we pray; nor is spiritual growth confined to such times. Therefore, spiritual direction is not just focused on the obvious aspects of a spiritual life: prayer, religious vocation, temptations, delusions, and other such things.

Since there is no area of human life where God is uninterested...no corner of it in which the Holy Mystery is not present...no aspect of life is inappropriate to bring to spiritual direction. **God is the deepest dimension in all areas of human life:** thus, all areas are open to spiritual direction.

So if you are interested in going deeper on your spiritual journey, please get in touch. (details on page 3).

**Sue Woolley, District Minister**



**The Summer 2019 issue will be published in September**

**Please may we have your contributions on local matters,  
& on the theme of "Integrity"**

**by Friday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2019**

*Thank you!*