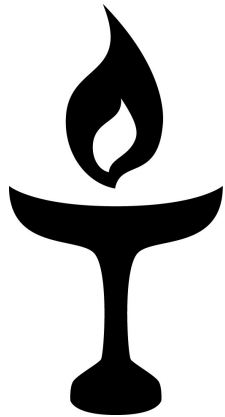


# MU NOW

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THE MAGAZINE OF  
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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 2025 issue of *MU Now*. For this bumper issue, I've had the gorgeous problem of nearly running out of space on the contents page! As well as the normal contributions, I've had some fascinating submissions, by Peter Godfrey, Dorothy Haughton, David Mearman and David Taylor, as well as some lovely contributions on the theme, by Diane Rutter and Alison Patrick, as well as David Taylor's President's Piece. And have contributed some items myself.

My heartfelt 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 2025, is, "Living our Faith."

The deadline for submissions is Friday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2025.

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!

*Sue Woolley*

## President's Piece



### New Beginnings

*"The beginning is always today"* Mary Shelley

*"For last year's words belong to last year's language.*

*And next year's words await another voice.*

*And to make an end is to make a beginning."*

from 'Little Gidding' by T. S. Eliot

Tradition has it that January is a time for new beginnings and often new year's resolutions. It is a time of new calendars and new diaries. The excitement and possibilities of a new year before us; a whole theatre of opportunities.

I have often tried to look at each day in this way. How many times has something unexpected happened to you during the day (both good and bad) and you have thought, "I could never have imagined that would happen to me today!"

The Dalai Lama said, "Every day, think as you wake up, today I am fortunate to be alive, I have a precious human life, I am not going to waste it. I am going to use all my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others; to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. I am going to have kind thoughts towards others, I am not going to get angry or think badly about others. I am going to benefit others as much as I can."

This new start to the year will also see the publication of the Sustainability Audit reports for each congregation in the MUA district. This will be a chance to take stock of where we are, and I am sure will offer up many new and exciting possibilities for

many of us. There are many challenges facing our congregations at the moment – declining attendance, building and maintenance issues and rising costs of keeping chapels open. Not to mention attracting new people who will want to return.

From my own point of view and from various conversations I have had with members of other Unitarian congregations, there is a feeling that the recent Sustainability Audit offers fresh and innovative ideas and an objective overview, which presents us all with a golden opportunity for positive change and to perhaps leave behind that which may have been holding us back, a chance to adopt new ideas and grow and develop.

I will leave the final word to the Unitarian Universalist Ralph Waldo Emerson:

“Write it on your heart that every day is the best day in the year. He is rich who owns the day, and no one owns the day who allows it to be invaded with fret and anxiety. Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities, no doubt, crept in. Forget them as soon as you can, tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely, with too high a spirit to be cumbered with your old nonsense. This new day is too dear, with its hopes and invitations, to waste a moment on the yesterdays.”

**David Taylor**

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## District Minister: January Update

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

**Leading worship around the Midland Unitarian Association:** Since March 2020, 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 am continuing to do so. It is always a joy to lead worship in person, to see all your faces and catch up with your news.

**Training Days:** The MUA Executive Committee has decided to put these in abeyance for now, and to wait until after the Sustainability Audits have been published. Then we’ll see what congregations want to learn about...

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 or 0785 325 3880...**

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

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## MUA Executive Committee Key Messages

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

Midland Unitarian Association Inc. Executive Committee: is a dedicated band of volunteers from MUA congregations. At present, due to circumstances beyond our control, we are two ordinary members short of our usual number. If you feel you would like to serve the wider Unitarian community in the West Midlands, please contact Sue Woolley for more information.

Congregational Tool Kit: the General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches launched this initiative in early September. It is an online repository of information, replacing *Help is at Hand*. The website may be found at: <https://toolkit.unitarian.org.uk/>

MUA Annual General Meeting: will be taking place on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2025, at Oat Street Chapel, Evesham. The Guest Speaker will be Rev Mark Hutchinson.

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## **Barbara Russell, MUA President 1999-2001**

Barbara was born on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1931, a much-wanted child of Gladys and Job Cooper. She always spoke of a happy childhood although times were very difficult in the war years.

Barbara's early education was cut short to look after Gladys. Despite that she studied at every opportunity and was a great believer in lifelong education.

Barbara was proud of her many and interesting jobs, some of which she applied for only using her initials to hide the fact she was a woman. When offered an interview she convinced them to employ her, paving the way for more opportunities for women. Not many people can say they climbed gasometers and went

down mines to obtain samples for analysing in the laboratory. She also tested milk samples and for a while worked at ICI.

At one point Barbara worked at Wolverhampton Polytechnic where she had a rather handsome boss called Kenneth Russell who came from Newport. His fate was sealed! Their mutual love of cycling was a big factor in their relationship and together toured much of the countryside.

They married in July 1952, six days after her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, at Holy Trinity Church, Bushbury, and lived with Gladys in Victoria Road Bushbury. Barbara and Ken – the original Barbie and Ken – left the Polytechnic as married couples were not allowed to work together.

A few years later Carol was born followed by Jon, and Barbara spent those years at home with the children until they were old enough to leave with Grandma. The family moved to Richmond Road by Bantock Park but subsequently moved to Penn as their plans to convert the top storey of the house fell through. In the interim Barbara hosted mature students from the Polytechnic to help pay the heating bills, which made for a lively, interesting household.

Barbara had many interests, particularly science based and joined societies to further her knowledge. She was a part of Wolverhampton Astronomical Society for many years becoming President at one point, coaching younger members in O level and in charge of refreshments later. She was a member of a geology society and a science fiction society in Birmingham. Later Barbara also had a keen interest in the Unitarian Church, eventually becoming a lay preacher. Her love of poetry and prose led her to writing several hymns that are published in the

Unitarian hymnbook, *Sing Your Faith*, one of which we have sung today.

She led worship in many Unitarian churches in the Midlands, having a particularly close relationship with the Stourbridge congregation. She also served as President of the Midland Unitarian Association from 1999 – 2001, and was the unofficial leader of the Black Country Group of churches, which met at Dudley until they finally closed their doors a couple of years ago. Visiting preachers to Dudley will fondly remember her lavish lunches, which she served at Skidmore Avenue before the service began at 3.00 pm.

When Barbara resumed full time work, she became a school laboratory technician, which she loved, first at Smestow then at the Girls High School.

Carol married Phil in 1975, and Jon met Jan in 1993. When Carol and Jon had left home, and Gladys had passed away, Babara and Ken moved to Bradmore to a smaller house giving them an opportunity to travel to Mexico which had been a lifelong ambition of Barbara's to see the volcano Popocatepetl. The years at Skidmore Avenue were happy years, Barbara loved hosting parties, often in the garden beautifully maintained by a family friend. Several holidays were taken with Carol and Phil, Suffolk, Northumberland and several Greek Islands being amongst them.

Ken, being a few years older than Barbara, retired first, then Barbara retired from the High School. Ken's health deteriorated and he died in 2015 following a several strokes, much missed by all the family. Barbara remained at Skidmore Avenue continuing with her many interests. Her health began to fail and eventually she needed carers and family support to remain at home. She

largely kept in good spirits and was delighted to receive visits, especially Roger and Kaye from Newport. In recent times, after a stay in hospital, it became clear that she needed nursing care and was admitted to Anville Court. She was very well looked after in her final days and died on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

Barbara will always be loved and remembered for her generosity, intelligence and indomitable spirit.

**Carol Thomas and Sue Woolley**

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### **Free Radicals: An Address to the Dudley Book Society by David Taylor**

In 1732, the Dudley Book Society was founded to distribute books to the poor. It was founded by radicals and nonconformists in Dudley, including members of Dudley Unitarian congregation.

At the Annual Dinner of the Society, a representative of the Unitarian movement is invited to attend to say the Grace before the meal, and to respond to the toast of 'Civil & Religious Liberty all the world over'.

I will admit to not only being unaware of the existence of the Dudley Book Society, but also to any previous involvement of my fellow MUA members in attending this event. So it came as a surprise when I was invited to attending this year's event in my capacity as MUA President. Below is the text of my speech which I hope will be of some small interest.

As you may know, in 1780 the scientist, rationalist and Unitarian minister, Rev. Joseph Priestley gave a lecture to the Unitarian congregation in Dudley. He was an ardent champion of civil and

religious liberty. He once said *"If we dissenters be not friends to free enquiry in its utmost extent, and if we do not give the most unbounded scope to reason in matters of religion, we shall be absolutely inexcusable"*

Dudley is probably less well known for another Joseph. Five years earlier, in 1775 the town was the birthplace of Joseph Cook. He went on to become a Methodist minister in the north of England. In 1806 he and his congregation were expelled from the Methodist church for their heretical beliefs. They had become Methodist Unitarians, and were known as Cookites. Their chief claim to fame is that at least half of the congregation went on to become the Rochdale Pioneers of Co-operation, today's modern Co-op movement and retail stores. That is something to think about the next time you find yourself in your local Co-op queueing for a pint of milk!

As I am sure you know, Unitarians have always been associated with radical ideas.

In 1884 Hubert Bland and his wife, the children's author Edith Nesbit, probably best known as the author of *The Railway Children*, along with the Spiritualists Edward Peace and Frank Podmore, founded The Fabian Society. The interest in social reform and justice propagated by the Society soon attracted the great and the good of the period, including the social reformer and women's suffrage campaigner Annie Besant and the author George Bernard Shaw. They were soon joined by the economist and Unitarian minister, Rev. Philip Wicksteed. He was assisted by a new convert to Unitarianism, John Trevor. In October 1891 they set up the first Labour Church in Chorlton Town Hall in Manchester. It must be remembered that the political Labour Party that we know today wasn't founded until February 1900. Influenced by the ideas of John Ruskin and the Christian Socialist movement, Labour Churches attempted to appeal to the working

classes with a mixture of politics and spiritual sustenance. These meetings became so popular that by the second meeting the auditorium was packed and hundreds were turned away. Although short lived and mainly active in the Midlands and North of England, the Labour Churches were an influence on the founding of the Labour Party that we know today.

This link between radical and political thought can best be seen in the London suburb of Newington Green and its Unitarian church. In 1758 Dr Richard Price arrived at the Green with his wife Sarah to become the new Unitarian minister. Soon his house became an important meeting place for progressive and radical thinkers. Americans such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were visitors, as was the philosopher David Hume, scientist and Unitarian Joseph Priestley, political agitator Thomas Paine and early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1758 Price wrote a highly influential pamphlet which argued that individual conscience and reason should be used when making moral choices, and rejected the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin and moral punishment, something I am sure modern Unitarians would not argue with.

But it wasn't just theological matters that occupied Price. In 1765 he was admitted into the Royal Society for his work on mathematics and probability. During his lifetime he established a considerable reputation as an authority on finance, economics and life insurance. His work can be considered the foundation stone on which the modern insurance market is founded. When the American War of Independence started in 1775, Price was a great supporter of its aims. So well regarded was Price that he was invited to go to America by the newly formed Congress of the United States to organise the financial administration, but he declined. This rational approach to faith is best summed up by the Unitarian Florence Nightingale, perhaps best known as the

founder of modern nursing, but less well known as a statistician (and the founder of the pie chart!), when she wrote *“To understand God’s thoughts we must study statistics, for these are the measure of his purpose”*.

In Birmingham, the Unitarian Minister, George Dawson developed the concept of the Civic Gospel. He called upon his congregation to join him in the struggle "to improve conditions in the town and the quality of life enjoyed by its citizens". His ideas influenced members of his congregation, including Joseph Chamberlain (who took Sunday School and oversaw the accounts), Robert Martineau (after whom Martineau Place in Birmingham is named) and the Kenrick family, all of whom played an important part in local affairs and took on his ideals.

Dawson strongly advocated to the worshippers in his Church and in Birmingham the idea of service in politics as a civic duty and as service to God.

Staying in Birmingham, the Rev. Henry Crosskey, minister of the Unitarian Church of the Messiah, provided the driving force during the 1870s and 1880s aimed at securing the rights of women and securing their church as a centre of feminist activists. Prior to becoming the Minister at Birmingham, Crosskey had been a Unitarian Minister in Glasgow, where he became an admirer of the radical American anti-slavery campaigner and American Unitarian, William Lloyd Garrison.

Aptly for tonight, Unitarians have often been associated with that most radical and dangerous of objects – the book!

Unitarians have always had a deep concern for education. Because they were unable to subscribe to the Church of England’s Thirty-nine Articles of faith, they were unable to attend either

Oxford or Cambridge Universities. Unitarians and other Nonconformists who wished to have a higher education had to find their own alternatives. The first of these was Warrington Academy, where Joseph Priestley was once a tutor. It eventually became the Manchester Academy and ended up in Oxford, where it was renamed Manchester College, Oxford. But it wasn’t just higher education that concerned Unitarians. They wanted education for all. To achieve this, Unitarians pioneered the ‘ragged schools’, the first of which was founded in 1818 by John Pounds. The schools were charitable organisations dedicated to the free education of destitute children. And the best way to educate the public was to give them access to knowledge in the form of books.

And let us stay with the book. In 1791 the Priestley Riots in Birmingham left a lasting mark on the city. With both the American and French Revolutions very much still in the air, Unitarians across the country were often associated with political radicalism. In June 1792, 600 copies of a letter from the radical author Thomas Paine to the government defending the cheap edition of his book, *The Rights of Man* circulated in Birmingham via local Unitarians and radicals. The Unitarian minister, Rev. William Belcher was arrested for selling *The Rights of Man* in December 1792. He defended himself by saying that the book was on sale in every bookshop in Birmingham. For me, the following quote from Paine’s book neatly sums up the Unitarian approach to life and religion: “The World is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion”.

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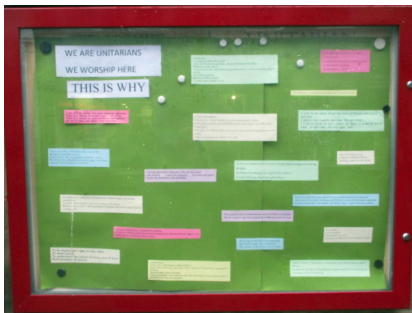
### **I Had an Idea by Dorothy Haughton**

I would lead a circle service on Outreach. (Before I go any further let me explain what we mean by a circle service. We sit at the back of the church where there is room to sit in a circle. The



theme is announced in advance so that people can bring appropriate readings if they want and are ready to contribute to the discussion. There may be a couple of introductory readings, hymns are sung and a prayer said, but the most important part of the service is the discussion.) [see also **District Round Up – Ed.**]

In mine I warned people that I wanted the answer to three questions: Why do you come to worship? What do you think about our three watch words: Freedom, Reason and Tolerance and what do you think about God? I handed out cards and pens. Then I made up four posters which I put up for a couple of weeks in turn on a noticeboard outside the church.



The first read: We are Unitarians. We Worship Here. This is How. Hymns, Readings, Prayers – with examples of two of each and then tucked on a bottom corner: and A VERY SHORT ADDRESS.

On the next three were stuck the comments of the congregation in different fonts and on different coloured paper.

It did not bring any new people but then I did not expect it to but I felt it was a useful exercise for us as a congregation. I must remember to ask them.

God and the Bible. God is a problem.

Recently, when leading a harvest festival service I realised that we were about to sing things that we did not believe and probably had not believed for a very long time. We know that God does not bring the snow in winter nor the warmth to swell the grain and that therefore it is pointless to thank the Lord, oh thank the Lord but I suggested we consider this just a part of the ritual.

I recently heard that references to God should be regarded as metaphor which I find more useful.

When a child at Sunday School we were told that if we had a problem we were to think about it carefully and come up with a possible solution. We could then, as it were, plug ourselves into God as though God was some sort of electric current from which we should get the necessary strength, courage, compassion to solve the problem. I was fascinated to read in a recent Copy of *Progressive Voices*, the Progressive Christianity Network magazine, a man describing his prayer ritual which very much resembled ours. Four stages: What is the problem, what to do about the problem, ask God for the strength/courage to do that, do that. And this all called to mind one of my favourite sayings by Lon Ray Call: Prayer doesn't change things, Prayer changes people. people change things.

So God is a force in the Universe which can be harnessed. I remember writing a service entitled, *If you build it he will come* when I said that God does not come when the church is built, God is here when we gather together to build the church or free the slave or feed the hungry.

The other problem with God is the male pronoun plus 'The Prayer of Jesus' (which I really can't bear to say anymore) 'Our

Father which art in Heaven'. I loved it when at Intergroup Keith Gilley said, 'God the Father, God the Mother, God the Sister, God the Brother.' I don't think calling on the Goddess works. May I here slip in a quick word of heartfelt thanks to all those responsible for the Green hymn book.

There was a time in church when we would be earnestly required to join in prayer for the troubled people of the world. A list would follow. Some preachers then moved onto animals nearing extinction and I would mutter to myself, 'If s/he gets down to Leach's Storm Petrel I'm out of here.' Did we think that God would send forth his mighty Word and save these poor beings? No, Take One. Let's discuss what to do. Knit blankets. Collect clothing. Give money. Hold a car boot sale. Then pray. If only we had the habit of speaking out in church someone might respond to such a prayer, 'I've got masses of baby clothes' and another might say, 'I've got a boxful of white elephant stuff. Let's go in my car to the Lower Pocklington car boot sale on Saturday'. A little old lady might ask for some help in clearing out a cupboard which might yield useful stuff. You could put a big notice up outside. **DECLUTTER. WE CAN HELP.** Don't just sit there thinking beautiful thoughts. Do something!

Unitarians rarely use the Bible for readings and equally rarely refer to Jesus though the Parable of the Good Samaritan is always a favourite. Because there is a problem and somebody does something about it? However, though the quotation starts with 'Love God' there is no mention of God rewarding or approving of the action.

I often quote the lovely story in which the reverend and learned Rabbi Akiva tells a story of the even more reverend and learned Rabbi Hillel. A man comes to Hillel and promises that he will convert to Judaism if Hillel will recite the Pentateuch standing on

one leg. With both feet firmly on the ground, Hillel says, "Love God and love your neighbour as yourself, that is the law, the rest is commentary."

I also treasure another story in which the sages discussing which books should be canonical are about to dismiss the story of Ruth because it is not true. "Ah," says the most learned and wisest of those gathered, "but it is poetry."

I have told you these stories and said these things to you before but I remember a child saying, "I love Mrs. Downing. She says everything three times." The first time you hardly hear it, the second time it sounds familiar, the third time you really listen. Perhaps we should hold every service for three weeks running, the fourth could be a Songs of Praise where we sing the hymns nominated as favourites by members of the congregation. We had one in Shrewsbury recently. Perhaps you should hold one too. If you demand some meat in your sandwich then a brief biography of St Ephrem should suffice though I doubt you would want to sing his hymns.

Go away. Talk about this over coffee.

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## **A Rich Inheritance: Report of A Visit to Harris Manchester College, Oxford by Sue Woolley**

In mid-November, I attended a joint meeting of Unitarian ministers from the Midlands, and London & the South East, at Harris Manchester College Oxford, where I did my ministerial training. It is an annual fixture and we always have a guest speaker. This year, it was Kate Alderson-Smith, HMCO's Librarian. And she talked to us about the history of the Library, from the College's foundation as Manchester Academy (for the

education of Dissenters) in 1786. It inherited four thousand books from its predecessor, Warrington Academy, which closed in 1783.

By 1790, the Academy was starting to buy books of its own. There was a printed catalogue from 1795, which shows that the book stock covered all areas of a liberal education, including mathematics, science, Greek and Latin classics as well as theological works. In the early period of its existence, lay students were in the majority, representing five out of every six students. By 1815, the four thousand books from Warrington had been augmented by the collection from the Exeter Academies, which brought the total, including new stock, up to approximately seven thousand books.

The College moved several times, from Manchester to York, back to Manchester, down to London in 1853, and then to its present home in Oxford (since 1889). And the Library moved with it, being augmented along the way. She showed us a slide of a bill of sale for all the furniture which preceded one move, but they never sold a book!

By the time it moved to London, the College was focusing exclusively on theological education, philosophy and history. From the 1880s onward much material on comparative religion was added, because of Carpenter's presence on the staff. The final move to Oxford came in 1889, when the "Free School of Theology" was set up in what is now Harris Manchester College, Oxford. The chapel was formally opened on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1893.

Lucy Toulmin was the first professional Librarian of the Tate Library (as it is now called, after a generous donation of £5,000 by ? Tate). She set up the loan system and built up the collections. The library received large numbers of donations including much early material. When L.P. Jacks became Head of the College, the

book selection was widened to include economics and the social sciences.

In the 1990s, all the older material was brought together into ground floor, temperature-controlled stacks. This collection, known as "the Archives" comprises a large collection of antiquarian books and other material, stored in chronological order up to 1900. The College also holds collections of books from congregations, including Ullet Road in Liverpool and High Pavement in Nottingham. There are more than nine thousand pamphlets in bound volumes, again arranged chronologically.

The collection includes many treasures: my inner rare books librarian was drooling over some of the items laid out on tables for our delectation: a copy of *The Racovian Catechism* (1652); A life of Faustus Socinus, founder of Socinianism who had a huge influence on the development of Unitarian theology (1653), *The Faith of One God* (1691) and many other gems of Dissenting literature. Apart from Dr Williams's Library, which has now been taken over by John Ryland's Library in Manchester, it is probably one of the best collections of such works in the UK. It was a privilege to see them.

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### **Remembrance Revisited by David Mearman**

Sunday November 10th 2024 was Remembrance Sunday this year. At our church in Stourbridge, we were to have our usual Sunday service to commemorate those that were lost in conflict, or in other ways bereaved as a result.

This year turned out to be very different for me... I had been away at my other home on the Isle of Lewis, part of the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. I had planned to return to Stourbridge on the Friday, so as to be available for our Service of Remembrance.

Events turned out differently, and provided an almost transcendent experience of this annual occasion.

On the Wednesday evening of that week, quite a severe storm came upon us. That usually means one thing, Ferry sailings will be cancelled, which continued to the Friday. That included the Thursday sailings that I had intended to use. So now I found myself storm bound on the Isle of Lewis.

Since my hopes to return to Stourbridge were suspended, I inquired of the locals what happened in our village for Remembrance Sunday. The response was not quite what I am used to.

“We hold a service at the village war memorial on the Saturday at 2:00 pm. The Sunday is the usual Lord’s Day, with Sunday worship.”

How interesting I thought, and why not? Why should Remembrance have to intrude on acts of Divine worship? After all, our petty acts of war and inhumanity form no part of Divine will.

The storm was still reverberating over the Isles until the Sunday, but on the Saturday it was dry. In the chilly winds of 30mph, a gathering of about 70 locals aged 7 to 90 turned up at the memorial. It turned out to be a Remembrance Service like no other I had encountered, and felt more like a family funeral. It was SO personal.

The individual presiding over the service gave the address, and gave an account of the sinking of the battleship *HMS Invincible* at the Battle of Jutland in 1916. A shell from the German battleship hit the front gun turret of *HMS Invincible*, but the shell failed to explode. It proceeded to go inside into the ammunition magazine

where all the shells were stored. This caused a huge explosion which blew *HMS Invincible* in two, and she sank in less than three minutes, with the loss of nearly all her 1,000 crew.

He then referred to those lost, saying there were seven boys aged between 17 and 19 taken from our village. He named each one, though sadly I don’t remember the names or the numbers.

Two (names) were brothers lived at Sea View, and pointed to the house right behind us. They were brothers of (?) who many of you will remember.

One (name) lived at No. (?) just a few doors along, brother of (?) who was father of (?) who currently lives at No. (?)

One (name) first cousin of the above lived at No. (?)

Two (names) were twins, lived at No. (?)

One (name) lived at No. (?) over there, who’s sister was the mother of Modina, who I was standing next to.

He then recalled one name recorded lived at No. (?) , who served in the trenches for the entire of the WW1 but lost his life within one mile of home, on New Year’s Eve 1918 in the *Iolaire* Disaster. The ship *HMY Iolaire* was returning troops home to Stornoway, where awaiting crowds gathered on the sea front for a New Year’s Eve celebration.

It was a dark night with a heavy sea. *HMY Iolaire* took a wrong approach into Stornoway and ran aground on the well-known rocks called the “Beasts of Holm” , 20 yards from shore, and one mile from Stornoway, in full view of the gathered crowds and loved ones. Of the approximate 280 returning troops, 200 were lost that night. The exact numbers that were lost still remains unknown, as accounts vary as to how many were aboard. The individuals arrived by train at Kyle of Lochalsh, and boarded the two awaiting ships to take them to Stornoway.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMY\\_Iolaire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMY_Iolaire)

The ceremony then proceeded by the laying of wreaths at the memorial, on behalf of :

HM King Charles III,  
 By descendants of those listed,  
 Stornoway TA,  
 Pupils of local schools,  
 The two churches,  
 The Village Crofters Association  
 The village shop and Post Office.

This was followed by a prayer by our local Minister. In conclusion we all joined in the singing of Psalm 78 vs 6 and 7 in Gaelic, in the traditional Gaelic Psalm singing.

We all left the war memorial and gathered in the village Community Hall to have tea, sandwiches, soup and cake, which was a very warm welcome, to the now biting relentless strong breeze, which had little in its way from Irish Sea and Atlantic Ocean.

There are a few references on YouTube to this unaccompanied Gaelic Psalm singing, for those wishing to acquaint themselves. For information, the Church of Scotland does not use hymns as we know them. They use what are called metrical Psalms, which are the usual Psalms found in the *Old Testament*, but have been re-written into a standard meter, usually 8.6.8.6 so that well known tunes of that meter can be used. This saves the Psalms having to be chanted, like you hear in the Church of England.

A few hundred years ago, English hymn books lost touch with these metrical Psalms, which were the original hymns. Two that remain in regular use are Psalm 23, *The Lord's My Shepherd*, and

Psalm 100, *All People That On Earth Do Dwell*. The *King James Bible* available in Scotland includes the metrical Psalms as an appendix.

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***Lower than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity.* Diarmaid MacCulloch. £35. 660 pages by Peter Godfrey**

“If prayer was thus incompatible with sex, Origen suggested that ‘perhaps the same consideration should apply, if possible, to the place’, in other words people should not pray in a place where sexual activity had taken place. It is worth speculating that if others in the third century hearkened to Origen’s squeamishness about this, it could be the origin of Christians embarking on a programme of constructing separate buildings called churches: spaces for prayer free of any possible sexual taint.”

This is an extract from Diarmaid MacCulloch’s book *Lower than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity*. [p.128] I bought the book for two particular reasons. The first is that MacCulloch is an authority on Church history having been Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford University with several award winning books to his name – *Thomas Cranmer, Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700* and *A History of Christianity*, for example.

The second reason was reading comments about MacCulloch in a prepublication interview in *The Observer* on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2024, ‘Let’s talk about sex’ with Tim Adams. Adams tells us that MacCulloch is a member of the Church of England, is one of its lay Readers and plays the organ for services. His father was an Episcopalian minister in Scotland. Adams reports that MacCulloch understood from his father “what, he says, should be obvious to any half-intelligent readers of the Bible, that the book was a kind of ‘cacophonous library’ of competing voices rather

than any strict gospel truth. ‘How anyone could have mistaken it for the word of God baffles me,’ he says, ‘and there’s obviously an intellectual dishonesty about that.’ MacCulloch explains his involvement in the church, for example as a lay reader, when he says ‘I like to do things that have been done over centuries by other people - and the practice of the liturgy is a good example of that .....because within morning and evening prayer you have chunks of the Bible – some of which are, of course, utterly mad and disgraceful.’”

My opening quotation is typical of MacCulloch’s approach. From a basic wide knowledge (I often found myself wondering how one person can know so much) he often makes observations that are fascinating and full of information, frequently offered with a delightful sense of humour.

This wide survey of Christianity and sex begins well before the birth of Jesus. MacCulloch looks at Greek and Roman – east and west Mediterranean – religion, philosophy and culture showing how these impacted on the early development of Christianity. This seems to have been particularly the case in thinking about marriage where the development of Christian thinking from Paul onwards was very complicated and often controversial.

In the *Observer* interview MacCulloch says that “Jesus doesn’t mention sexuality at all. It clearly wasn’t a big deal for him.” However in the book he does look at the question of Jesus and abortion and the story of the woman accused of adultery where Jesus says ‘Let him who is without sin among you, be the first to throw a stone at her.’ [John Chapter 8]. His comment on these words attributed to Jesus is “They will be forced to recognise that sin encompasses much more than sexual sins.” [p.80]

MacCulloch takes a close look at the two very different stories of Jesus’s birth and observes that “The Narratives are not exercises in historical research, but early Christian explorations of the meaning and significance of Jesus.”[p.66] He points out how different the stories are from Paul’s approach in that they glorify Jesus from the beginning of his life whereas Paul says glorification came at the end of Jesus’s earthly life – Romans 1, vv3-4. [p.67]

The book takes several interesting looks at the changing ideas about angels. “A long scriptural and extra-scriptural tradition led forward from Genesis, with its lustful and fruitful angelic couplings with mortal women, right up to Paul of Tarsus’s now obscure warning to Christian women (1Corinthians 11v10) to veil their hair ‘because of the angels’.” [p.150] So that is why ladies have been encouraged to wear hats in church!

There is no space to refer to MacCulloch’s insightful look at all the key figures in Christian history – Augustine, Luther, for example – nor the centuries of struggle as to which was holier, monasticism and chastity or marriage and the family. Nor to mention the depiction of the struggles between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the growth and power of the Papacy, the influence of Zoroastrianism and Islam, marriage or celibacy for the clergy and many issues throughout the centuries. Nor the very interesting and occasionally surprising illustrations.

At the very end of the book MacCulloch asks “Does it matter that marriage has not previously been available as a loving commitment to people of the same sex? The variety of what sex has meant in the past is remarkable.....interestingly ....same sex couples throughout much of Western Christianity are now in much the same position as heterosexual couples were in the second-century church: following a civil ceremony formalising their relationship, they can come along to their worship

community and receive a blessing.....There is more variety to come in marriage, sex and the family.” [p.496]

At the beginning of this excellent book MacCulloch remarks that fear is generally fear of the unknown and that knowledge is like a medicine. to soothe a fever. “Prejudice, like fear,” he writes, “generally bases itself on ignorance, and such ignorance breeds distorted perspectives that poison present-day lives. My aim for this book is to deal with some of that fear by chronicling and even celebrating the sheer complexity and creativity of past generations grappling with most profound emotions and consequent deeds. Looking at past attitudes to sexuality, we will find that over centuries they have been startlingly varied.....there is no such thing as a single Christian theology of sex. There is a plethora of Christian theologies of sex.”[p.5]

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**District Round-Up**

**Circle Services**

We (Shrewsbury Unitarians) hold a circle service on the second Sunday of every month when we have no organist. We do sing hymns but use a CD. Sometime our talented musician, Jenni, plays the tune on her sax or Jenni and Ruth play the organ or we find we can sing without music.

We have managed to get rid of some pews at the back of the church (not all, sob, I hate pews but that's another article) and so we can sit in a circle. The service is much the same in format as any other service except that the readings or mini-addresses from the leader are designed to encourage comments from the congregation. The theme of the service is announced in advance so people can bring appropriate prayers or readings if they wish.

At one circle service we were asked to bring objects of particular importance to us which proved both fascinating and deeply moving. Who can't but be moved by a drawing done in a WWI trench. Not of war and carnage but a lovely lady with a feather in her hat!

You can never tell how these services will develop. Sometimes the service leader has to call a halt as we have run out of time and people are invited to continue the discussions over coffee, sometimes the discussion runs out of steam and we set off for coffee slightly early.

Coffee, you will understand is the most important part of the service. We even have a little joke; How do you excommunicate a Unitarian? You don't ask them to stay for coffee. Coffee, tea, biscuits, cake, a chance to chat, to exchange news is vital to the health of the congregation. It also allows the service leader to become one with the congregation. Though, in fact, fewer and fewer of our ministers and service leaders use the pulpit. With modern technology everyone can hear without a declamation from on high so most things happen at the lectern. For a circle service there is no minister as this is always lead by a volunteer member of our or another congregation. There are no limits. We have had services going from the importance of prayer to the history of our three-hundred-year-old clock accompanied by music from Foo Fighters.

It's times like these you learn to live again  
 It's times like these you give and give again  
 It's times like these you learn to love again  
 It's times like these time and time again.

**Dorothy Haughton (Shrewsbury)**

**Events at Shrewsbury Unitarian Church**

I thought for this issue I would write about the events we have held at Shrewsbury Unitarian Church over the Christmas period and also the upcoming events for the Shrewsbury Darwin Festival in February 2025.

Over the Christmas period we held a number of events here, services, concerts, charity events, and times when were open to the public. As we are a town centre church it is good when we are able to open to coincide with town centre events – the Christmas Lights Switch On and Carols in the Square. We welcome people into the church during these busy Christmas events, offering a quiet and peaceful space. We also hold a quiet Saturday open day in the busy run up to Christmas. We held our Carol Service which is always a lovely occasion involving many of the congregation in different ways. It was led by Dorothy Haughton, Jenni played cello with Bill our organist (Rutter’s *Candlelight Carol*) and also led a congregation choir (Rutter’s *The Colours of Christmas*) and other members of the congregation read the readings, provided refreshments and decorated the church. We also hosted a Christmas Sing Along event for Shropshire Mental Health Support for the first time this year. Jenni also played Christmas music with a saxophone quartet in church raising money for the British Red Cross. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December we held our last Food Hub of the year, and there was a lot of food, typical of this time of year. ‘Shrewsbury Food Hub is a volunteer-powered charity that stops food waste to protect the environment and strengthen our community. We collect surplus food from shops, manufacturers and farms and share it with local groups’.

It has been a busy Christmas season, it has been good to hold a range of services and events, and to welcome people into the church.

In February 2025 we will be hosting two events for the Shrewsbury Darwin Festival, an annual event in Shrewsbury. We will be hosting a talk ‘**Discovering new species and relocating extinct plants**’ with **Dr Maarten Christenhusz on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> February at 3pm**, and a concert as part of the SYGigs Letting the Light In concert series on **Friday 28<sup>th</sup> February at 7.30pm - Voyage of the Beagle by John Biddulph + Ashia Vaughan**. ‘Multi-instrumentalist, composer, and sound designer John Biddulph is thrilled to announce his latest musical project, an exploration of sound that was inspired by Charles Darwin’s iconic text, *The Voyage of the Beagle*’. We regularly host SYGigs concerts, they are ‘Not for profit ‘alternative music events’ in historic Shrewsbury UK churches’.

Please follow this link for more information:

<https://darwin.originalshrewsbury.co.uk/>

Please contact Jenni Duffell if you would like any more information: [shrewsburyunitarians@gmail.com](mailto:shrewsburyunitarians@gmail.com)

**Jenni Duffell**



**New Year, New Beginnings**

**From: *Awakening the Soul – A Book of Daily Devotions*, edited by John C. Morgan, published by Skinner House Books 2001**

(preamble to week beginning 5<sup>th</sup> February)

Life is filled with new beginnings. There is a hope that comes with each new day and each new possibility for a new beginning. Perhaps we are all looking for Eden, the primal community, the place where everything began. But the reality is that none of us really begin anew, free of past behaviours, errors of judgement,



mistakes. If we are to be free of the past, we must first acknowledge that it remains with us if we have not come to terms with it. We need to accept our mistakes, learn from them, and be ready to move on. Only in this way can we really move on.

**Contributed by Diane Rutter (Kingswood)**

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**New Year, New Beginnings**

As I write this, I look out of the window and I see a sleet-soaked pavement, patches of half-frozen snow on the roofs and cars opposite, six puffed up pigeons sitting miserably in the tall cherry tree and a crow flapping slowly across a sky the colour of an old Tupperware lunch box. I'm not convinced right now that January is the best time for new beginnings.

Not everyone celebrates the New Year on 1<sup>st</sup> January. The Chinese New Year comes a bit later, at the end of January for 2025. For me, even though school and college are decades behind me, September still feels like a good time for new beginnings. Or the day the mornings start drawing out (today as it happens) – I walk to work quite early so this feels like a turning point. I'll miss the robin singing in the dark outside the kitchen though.

The problem for me with New Year resolutions is that when I lapse (as I inevitably do) I tend to stop trying. As though the resolution was a one-off thing rather than a process. I could, theoretically, make a new beginning at any time. Certain times seem better than others, easier, but 'Now' is probably the best time of all.

Despite the rather bleak surroundings of this morning I know that there are hellebores coming into flower in the garden; I saw a clump of snowdrops yesterday, the first white furry buds of goat

willow last week. Small hazel catkins have been hanging around since November, just biding their time. In nature something is always happening even if we can't see it, even if it's very small, slow or waiting – every moment is a new beginning.

Anyway, I have made a couple of resolutions. I have made these before of course.

- Give up mindless scrolling on social media (already broken, but note to self – it's a process)
- Give up 'saving things for best' – clothes, notebooks, the posh wine glasses etc...

Wish me luck!

**Alison Patrick (Shrewsbury)**

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**New Year, New Beginnings**

This time of year is full of new promise.

In the past year, all of us have fallen short, and been less than the best people we can be. But we have also done some things well and lived up to our potential as human beings.

Many world religions have a special time of year, during which adherents “reflect on and evaluate their thoughts, words and actions over the past year [and] acknowledge their prejudices, negative behaviours and bad habits so that they may begin the process of transforming themselves.” The Hindu festival of Diwali is one, and the ten-day period leading up to the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur is another. It is a time “to celebrate and appreciate life and to look forward to the coming year with a renewed sense of purpose and passion.” For Christians, it is the period of Lent, but for the vast majority of people in Britain, who do not follow

any particular religion, New Year is the time for reflecting on the past and making resolutions for the future.

I have made New Year's resolutions every year since I can remember. Mostly, they have lasted until about the end of January, if that long. Because my heart was not in it. I think the reason behind this is that I have a certain inner stubbornness that doesn't like being told to do something Just Because – just because it's January 1<sup>st</sup>, just because it's Dry January, just because it's Stoptober. I know that such special months do help a lot of people to start the process of giving up drinking or smoking, and I applaud them for that. But for me, they don't work. Gretchen Rubin would say that I am a Questioner – I will not stick to a resolution or a new course of action unless it makes sense to me. I have to have a reason which is relevant to my life, at this exact time, to be able to tackle any sort of major lifestyle change.

So for example, I was able to quit smoking on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2013, when I worked out that by giving up my 15 a day habit, I would be able to afford to give my two children, then just off to university, an extra £100 a month each! Deciding to quit drinking was a more long drawn-out process, during which I worked out the pros and cons, and really thought about the reasons why I wanted to stop. And the culmination of that process was that I stopped on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2013 and have not touched alcohol since. But each time, the choice was mine, at a time of my own choosing.

My generous husband has bought me a new Fitbit for Christmas, so I would like to get back into my former daily habit of a walk in Salcey Forest. I don't know why I've stopped, because whenever I do go, I really enjoy it. Perhaps it is because I have been so much busier this year, looking after my grandson one day a week as well as being District Minister.... Or maybe that's just an excuse. I

hope that the presence of the Fitbit on my wrist will spur me into walking out of my front door each day.

Each New Year's Eve for the past few years, my husband and I have completed a small booklet available as a download from Year Compass. The first part is about the year that has just gone (and what a year it has been!) and the second half is about our hopes and dreams for the year to come. It has made me go a little bit deeper, and to do some of the reflection and self-evaluation practiced by the adherents of other faiths, such as Hinduism and Judaism and Christianity. Being in spiritual direction for the past few years has taught me that this process of self-examination is a valuable one, if uncomfortable.

Its goal is both very simple and very difficult: it is to become the best person you can be, true to the principles you hold dear, that are sanctioned by your reason and conscience. Which means that you have to work out what those principles are, as a starting point, before you can think about how you are going to live your life in accordance with them. It's a challenge, but such a worthwhile one. The new year is an annual opportunity to re-evaluate where you are on the path, and to make some resolutions in order to move on in your spiritual journey. To discard what is broken, and to be hopeful about the year to come.

I hope that 2025 will be a better year for all of us – that Covid 19 will finally be defeated, and that the wars in the Ukraine and Gaza (and all other conflicts the world over) will come to an end. Another New Year has been welcomed in, full of hints and promises. We have another chance to learn new things, to make new friends, to appreciate old friends, and to recognise the Spirit everywhere.

**Sue Woolley (MUA)**

## 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<br>Cheltenham &<br>Gloucester | Unitarian New Meeting Church | 11 am              |
| Evesham                                  | Bayshill Unitarian Church    | 11 am              |
| Kingswood                                | Oat Street Chapel            | 11 am <sup>1</sup> |
| Shrewsbury                               | Meeting House                | 11 am              |
| Warwick                                  | Unitarian Church             | 11 am              |
|                                          | 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 <sup>2</sup> |
| Stourbridge | Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel   | 11 am <sup>3</sup>   |

### Third Sunday of the Month:

|             |                         |       |
|-------------|-------------------------|-------|
| Northampton | Unitarian Meeting House | 11 am |
|-------------|-------------------------|-------|

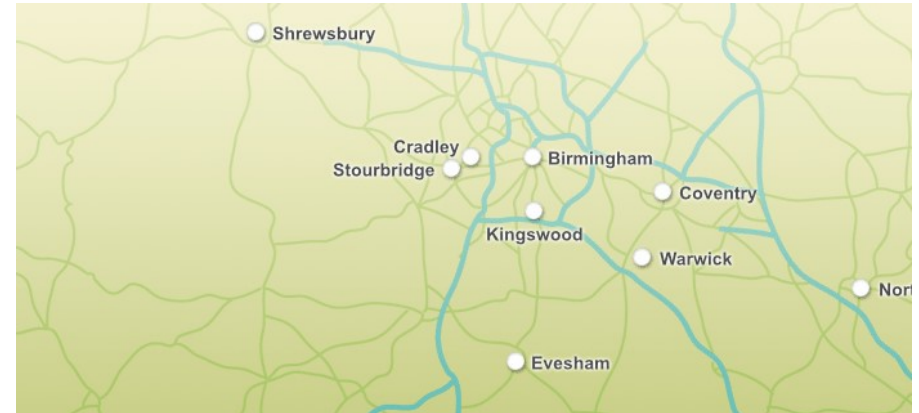
### Fourth Sunday of the Month:

|             |                                   |                    |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Coventry    | Gt Meeting House Unitarian Church | 11 am              |
| Stourbridge | Presbyterian (Unitarian) Chapel   | 11 am <sup>3</sup> |

<sup>1</sup> No service on 5<sup>th</sup> Sundays <sup>2</sup>currently in abeyance <sup>3</sup>from March

## MUA Congregations: Contact Details

| Name                    | Contact          | Details                                           |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Birmingham              |                  | 0121 455 8818<br>info@birminghamnewmeeting.org.uk |
| Cheltenham & Gloucester | Sandy Man        | ManS.CheltUnitarians@gmail.com                    |
| Coventry                | Francesca Rogers | info@coventryunitarians.org.uk                    |
| Cradley                 | Sheila Powell    | perconicous24@yahoo.co.uk<br>01384 480784         |
| Evesham                 | Jane Couper      | 01386-839458<br>janecouper@outlook.com            |
| Kingswood               | Maria Govier     | 07816-159199<br>maria.heath@icloud.com            |
| Northampton             | Sue Woolley      | 07853 253880<br>revsuewoolley@gmail.com           |
| Shrewsbury              | Jenni Duffell    | 07487 531 913<br>shrewsburyunitarians@gmail.com   |
| Stourbridge             | David Mearman    | 01384 376478<br>davidmearman@hotmail.com          |
| Stroud                  | Pam Jenkinson    | 07776 276276<br>pam.jenkinson58@gmail.com         |
| Warwick                 | Elaine Nomura    | 01926 611964<br>emtnomura@aol.com                 |



**Issue no. 74 will be published in May 2025**

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

**by Friday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2025**

**Thank you!**