

# The Liberal Christian Herald



*The Unitarian Christian Association seeks to strengthen and revitalise the liberal Christian tradition.*



**Issue 109 Christmas Edition 2023**



The Saturday Club at Rosslyn Hill Chapel with minister Kate Dean



The pole fitness school in Dundee Unitarian's Hall



Christmas at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, London, December 2022



# The Liberal Christian Herald



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## Unitarian Christian Association

The Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) was formed in 1991 to strengthen and revitalise the liberal Christian tradition within the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in Britain. We aim to be that place where this tradition can be explored, while at the same time providing a resource for the denomination as a whole.

From the object of the General Assembly:

‘To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.’

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Front Cover Picture: Our Lady of Vladimir, icon, Unknown author, commons.wikimedia.org

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## Editorial - Alex Bradley

Once again, I am grateful to all our contributors for sending such a wide range of interesting articles, including a letter in response to a previous contributor. Thank you one and all. Perhaps I should just include the occasional reminder that individual contributions do not necessarily reflect the view of the Unitarian Christian Association (not even necessarily the Editor's piece!) but, in the liberal Christian and Unitarian tradition, we believe that we can speak with loving kindness in the freedom of the truth, and the spirit of Christ. Once again, this magazine could not appear without the work of Cathy Fozard and Paul Hubbard- thank you both!

Christmas is a time of celebration, a time when people gather together to have fun, meet up with family and friends, and indulge a little (perhaps sometimes a little too much!) in special and tasty foods they wouldn't otherwise eat. Most of us enjoy giving and receiving presents, although we sometimes find it hard to think what to give to some people! Jesus certainly seems to have enjoyed celebrating life and happiness from time to time: he tells parables where he compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a feast, he defended himself against sanctimonious killjoys who criticised him for enjoying himself on special occasions (Luke 7.34), and, it is said, he turned water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana! However, Jesus also spoke about the danger of selfishness and reminded his followers that they should also care for those who did not have the means or opportunity to enjoy the good things of this life: the stories of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16.19ff) and the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25.31ff) make this point. "As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." The message of peace and joy at Christmas may ring hollow for the people of Ukraine, the Middle East, and so many other places where there is war, famine, or poverty or all of these: it may ring hollow when we see the dreadful way in which

we human beings sometimes behave to each other, the senseless cruelty and stupidity with which we sometimes treat both domestic and wild animals, and the fact that there is still a need for food banks in our own country: the list could go on. Even if we have limited financial resources of our own, we can give gifts (small and simple gifts are just as special) to our loved ones, and after that, if finances allow, we may give something to a good cause, even if only a small amount. If we cannot afford money, we can, perhaps ring someone who lives alone or, perhaps, give of our time in other ways. If we have no money or time to give, then we can think and pray. "Give what you have: to someone it may be better than you dare to think", said Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. We can all give something however small and seemingly insignificant it might seem. And when we give to those less fortunate than ourselves, we are not only giving to them but we are giving to God as well.

Rev Gabor Kereki wrote: "Christmas is a time of happiness; a time of simple joys, open hearts and laughing children: a time of colourful greeting cards and gaily wrapped presents: a time of pleasant surprises, family reunions, renewed friendships and shared sentiments".

So, to all our readers, I wish you all Merry Christmas, Nadolig Llawen, Frohe Weihnachten, Buon Natale, Joyeux Noël, or whatever form of words you may use to celebrate the birth of the Saviour. May the peace of God come to our world and our hearts and minds.

## **A Message from our Chair –*Jean Bradley***

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I have just finished reading a novel that was set in medieval England and as I was following the story of the main characters, I realised how important Christian belief was to them in those days. In fact remembering from various books I have read over time, it is clear how firmly connected the church was to all people at that time.

The church presented them with a complete belief system. The church year moved through the life of Jesus, from birth to death. Thus, people were constantly reminded of Jesus's ministry and so had a continuing reminder of the life they ought to lead. The church did not just explain the teachings from the bible but it aimed to cover both history, ethics and even science. The church as one body had all the answers to all questions. In those early days in our history, the church was like a parent, an employer, an educator and giver of charity.

In today's world, we would see such subjects as separate disciplines in their own right. We need to study them with specialist teachers and, from there, form our own opinions. Instead of turning to the Church we turn to our national health system, our schools, and our government for support.

Although I much prefer to live in our twenty-first century, when we can live longer and much more comfortable lives, I often envy the certainty of those times when strong beliefs in God were held.

Whereas in our own time, we live in a secular society where only a minority have a Christian faith. And the dreadful irony is that one of the main Christian festivals, the birth of Jesus, has been taken over by commerce.

My husband and I noticed when we went shopping the other day that all the shops are decked out for Christmas, (I am writing this in the first week of November) . We saw no Christmas cards relating to the religious aspect of the festival, although I am sure they were there tucked away somewhere. There were lots of Father Christmas's and Santa's elves and fairies, but no reference to Jesus or even 'baby Jesus'. The shops were displaying Christmas food, drinks, toys, games, clothing, and household items which included bedding with Christmas designs such as Christmas's reindeers and snowy scenes. Most of these items would only be used over the Christmas period, perhaps for two weeks at the most.

This seems wasteful when we worry about global warming and over using the natural resources of our planet. It seems so strange that all this hype in the shops is for a religious festival that the majority of people in our society do not believe in.

In comparison to those ancient times, we in our modern day, have the freedom to openly speak out about our views instead of having to keep to a fixed system of belief promulgated by the church. We have so many choices compared to the days of old. The women and men of the past had many restrictions, whereas we feel that we are the makers of our own destiny.

Yet, for all our freedom, so many people do not search for a faith, if they are not brought up with it or offered it. They do not search for a meaning to life, or look to an example of living, or seek to find a faith that can offer peace and this saddens me very much.

Yet, perhaps we who hold a faith should try to be more appreciative of the modern Christmas, for there is more charitable giving at this season than at any other time of the year, There is a greater movement of families or friends at this period, trying to gather together to share a special time together.

Whether or not we celebrated the birth of Jesus, some of our happiest memories go back to Christmas time, I am sure most of us have had wonderful memories from our childhood. Perhaps we were brought up with a religious background, perhaps not, but most of us cherish our Christmas memories as they were times when we felt that we were loved by our family, friends, and neighbours,

As adults with children of our own or even as Aunties or Uncles we can remember the love that we felt when we saw the joy on Children's faces when they opened their parcels or enjoyed the special Christmas food, and those of us who are now grandparents can still know that joy of giving and of loving.

I believe that everyone who can experience such loving memories and hopefully will start new memories this coming Christmas, whatever their beliefs or lack of them are all capable of loving and giving, all capable of being kind and living in a peaceful way. For we are all God's children.

I believe that we of faith need to share our love of Christmas to all who receive it, and to tell the story of hope of love of peace to those who will listen, so that others may be aware of the possibilities of a faith in God and in the teachings of Jesus. Catherine Pulsifer, the poet wrote:-

He came that we may know  
The love of God is so true.  
So this Christmas, let the love  
Of Jesus shine through you.

May your Christmas be filled with light and may that light shine on all you meet, regardless of how their Christmas is to be spent. Let us remember Jesus's words to love one another, even if we do not appreciate the way others spend Christmas. Let us remember that we are all God's children and that we are all capable of loving and being loved.

May God bless you all and may your Christmas be a peaceful and a happy one.

Matthew Chapter 2 verses 9 - 12

And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

## UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

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## NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING



Our AGM will take place on Saturday 9th March  
2024 at Cross St Chapel, Manchester. Further  
details will be sent out nearer the time.

We look forward to seeing you there!

## Notes from an Iconic Exhibition — Karen Eckersley, *a member of Chowbent Chapel.*

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In October I attended an exhibition of religious icons organised by the British Association of Iconographers (BAI), in Liverpool Parish Church. There were around 70 icons exhibited, by iconographers from around the UK and also from Europe and the USA and from many different denominations of Christianity. The highlight of the exhibition was a talk given by leading British iconographer Aidan Hart. An expert in the field, Hart has worked as a liturgical artist for thirty five years, founding and running the Icon Painting programme at the Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts, and famously designed the beautiful Anointing Screen used at King Charles' Coronation. Hart is a convert to Greek Orthodoxy and a devotee of the contemplative way of life, having spent two years studying at an Orthodox monastery on holy Mount Athos, Greece, and six years living as a hermit in Shropshire. He has written several good quality books on the subject of iconography. Another accomplished iconographer, Sister Esther, a Benedictine nun of Turvey Abbey, Bedfordshire, who is the founder of the BAI was present at the exhibition and exhibited two beautiful icons: New Martyr Elizabeth and St Francis of Assisi. Sr Esther has led many icon retreats and day courses on iconography from her home at Turvey Abbey. There was also an exquisitely precise icon of St Paul exhibited by fellow BAI member and local Liverpool iconographer Rev Christopher Perrins. Some readers may have seen Christopher's moving icon in memorial to the seven Melanesian Martyrs of 2003 in Chester Cathedral. As well as producing icons for churches, Christopher teaches weekly iconography classes for beginners and more experienced painters in Liverpool as well as iconography retreats at locations around England and Wales.

Icons have been painted by believers since the early days of Christianity and have remained an integral part of the Eastern Orthodox faith, ubiquitous in both the churches and the homes of believers. The purpose of icons is to be prayed before by believers. They are seen as a visual representation of the gospel, which is why icon painting is traditionally termed 'icon writing.' The person praying before them is said to be able to use them to lead to divine contemplation and as a way to encounter God. Icons are often described as providing a door between Heaven and Earth. By looking through the beauty of the icon, the viewer is said to be able to get a glimpse of the beauty of the divine. And in gazing at the beauty of the icon, the viewer can then take that divine beauty out into the world.

Both the materials used in painting an icon and the attributes of the completed icon are steeped in symbolism. Icons today are still made using traditional materials. The icon is painted on a board prepared with gesso, using powdered pigments mixed with egg tempera. In painting an icon, the iconographer is said to be creating as God created. Hart explains that the pigment represents the mineral kingdom, the wooden board represents the vegetable kingdom and the egg which binds the pigment represents the animal kingdom. The iconographer puts these together and makes them articulate in praise of God. Icon painters do not use light and shadow as if it comes from an external source like artists usually do. Instead, in an icon, the figure itself is the source of light. This is to represent the person being portrayed in their transfigured - hence radiant - state. Even inanimate objects are given a subtle radiance, reflecting how God is present in all things. The background colour is usually radiant - often gold leaf is used - to show the radiance of the Holy Spirit sustaining all things. The paint is applied to the figures in the icons in order from dark to light. The eyes and ears (if shown) of the figures in icons are depicted as large, the nose long and thin, and the mouth small. This, Hart explains, is to show that a prophet needs to be a contemplative - a seer of God's glory first before being a speaker.

Icon painting is a form of spiritual practice. To produce an icon, the painter should be living a Christian life. Icon painters begin their painting session with a series of prayers, including repeating the Jesus Prayer - a prayer central to Orthodox faith. The icon is then painted prayerfully. In creating an icon the believer, by necessity, looks at the face of Jesus or the saint(s) s/he is painting, leading to deeper spiritual contemplation. To the Orthodox Christian, to create an icon in the correct mindset (honest and humble) is to have an encounter between Heaven and Earth. Aidan Hart describes the act of painting an icon as 'praying with paint rather than words.'

Icon painting does not rely on the worldly imagination of the iconographer, but is done according to standard forms like a liturgy. The most popular (most iconic?) icon has to be the Christ Pantocrator (*see back cover*). This translates roughly to 'All powerful Christ,' 'Christ Lord of All' or 'Universal Christ.' The Christ Pantocrator is traditionally the first icon that a new iconographer paints, and was the most common icon in the exhibition. The icon is a depiction of Jesus in his glory during his second coming. It depicts Jesus from the torso or waist upwards dressed in richly coloured robes, sometimes holding a decorated closed book in his left hand. Jesus' right hand performs a characteristic hand gesture, using the fingers to form the letters IC XC (iota and lunate sigma, chi and lunate sigma), termed the Christogram: the first and last letters of 'Jesus' and 'Christ' in Greek. The Christogram is repeated in the top left (XC) and right (IC) sides of the icon. Jesus' head in the Pantocrator is surrounded by a halo done with gold leaf with a cross on it, on which the letters ó ű v are written, standing for 'He who is.' The book, when present, represents the gospels. A variation of the Pantocrator icon in which the book is instead shown open to display the words of John's gospel, "I am the Way the Truth and the Life," (in Greek or Cyrillic), is known as 'Christ the Teacher'. Sometimes the two sides of Jesus' face in the Christ Pantocrator icon, particularly the eyes, look different. This is particularly noticeable in the oldest known depiction of Christ Pantocrator, from the 6th Century, in St Katharine's monastery, Mount Sinai, Egypt, the oldest continually inhabited Christian monastery. The two sides of Jesus' face represent the human and divine aspects of Jesus.

Another common icon in the exhibition was Our Lady of Vladimir, a depiction of the Madonna and child and the most popular icon in Russia (*see front cover*). Other popular subject matter for icons are the Mandylion (a depiction of Jesus' face on a gold leaf background), the angels St Gabriel and St Michael, characters from the bible, particularly the New Testament, and saints from the Orthodox tradition. Examples in the exhibition were St Anthony, St Nicholas, St Nectorios, St Augustine, St Agnes, St George, St Nina of Georgia and St Brigid of Kildare. Some iconographers in the exhibition had painted icons of Western saints not canonised by the Orthodox Church, for example St Francis of Assisi. Another very popular icon is the Transfiguration, showing the moment Jesus appeared to the disciples speaking with Elijah and Moses and shining with an inward light. This is a festal icon: the Feast of the Transfiguration is an important feast day in the Orthodox Church.

Anyone who would like more information about iconography, icon production and symbolism, the Coronation anointing screen and icon painting courses can find lots of interesting information on the BAI website ([www.BAI.org.uk](http://www.BAI.org.uk)) and Aidan Hart's website ([www.aidanharticons.com](http://www.aidanharticons.com)).

## **Letter to the Editor** — from Peter Godfrey

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Bruce Bebbington's long article in the latest Herald about the Lindsey Press's latest book 'Cherishing the Earth – Nourishing the Spirit' edited by Maria Curtis is full of interest. I am sure it will encourage readers of the Herald to buy it and use it for discussion groups. Bruce actively encourages this when he writes that Rev. Jo James 'has an interesting development on the idea of God inside us and around us everywhere which the reader [of the Herald] is left [by Bruce] to learn by reading his contribution to the book.' [page 12] Bruce's summary of the varied parts of the book, and his view that 'There are considerable interesting ideas in the book' [page 14] will also encourage readers of the Herald to go to the book.

In view of this I was disappointed to read Bruce's final three paragraphs [page 14] and his conclusion that ultimately the book 'fails in its task of offering a full way forward to address climate change or to provide a complete reason to join our movement'. It was never the aim of the book to do either of these things. This last sentence actually contradicts what Bruce says at the beginning. In his third paragraph on page 10 Bruce writes: 'The book's objectives are to make a coherent and wide response to climate change and to show that our movement has something central to offer to aid this response.' I think the bulk of Bruce's article actually shows that the book achieves these objectives. Bruce implies adverse criticism of the book when he says on page 14 that 'The necessity for a religious depth leads most of us to a religion which springs out of the teachings and action of Jesus.' Jesus's teaching and life centre on love and compassion for people and nature and I believe that this book springs very much from the same spirit.

## Celebrations in Berlin – Jeff Gould

A group of fifteen British Unitarians travelled to the German capital city over the weekend of 14/15 October this year in order to join the congregation of the Unitarian Church in Berlin in their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. It was during the challenges of the Berlin Airlift of 1948 that the former Lutheran pastor, Hansgeorg Remus, founded a congregation of liberal Christian Unitarians in a city that had only just begun to recover from the devastation and destruction of the Second World War. The fact that the congregation still exists is testimony to the faithful ministry of its founder and that of the late Martin Schröder, who served as minister from 1977 and died in February of 2020. Since that time, Martin's widow, Gisela, and members of his extended family have sought to maintain the Unitarian witness and care for the members of the church.

The Rev Jeff Gould, minister of Hale Chapel, Hale Barns and Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow in Cheshire first formed a relationship with the Berlin congregation whilst on sabbatical in Berlin in 1997. After many years of exchange visits with the Schröder Family and opportunities to lead worship in Berlin, Jeff was able to organise a group of British Unitarians in 2018 and this year to attend the special services marking important milestones and to act as 'tour guide' around the city.

The Unitarian Church in Berlin meets in a grand Belle-Époque-style building in the southwestern neighbourhood of Zehlendorf. Originally a private home, the building was used for many years as a Quaker meetinghouse and today functions as a community centre. Its size and flexible space make it ideal for worship services and musical concerts. Meals can easily be served as well. The anniversary celebrations took advantage of all these amenities, with a formal act of worship, a buffet lunch, a concert of strings and piano, a traditional 'coffee and cake' reception, and an informal offering of contemporary songs that were accompanied by piano.

The anniversary service included a celebration of *'Erntedank'* or Harvest Thanksgiving. Jeff's sermon sought to unite the two themes by preaching from the apostle Paul's comments on sowing and reaping (II Cor. 9.6-11) and by including a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke entitled, *'Herbsttag'* (Autumn Day). A local tenor sang Rutter's setting of *'All Things Bright and Beautiful'*, which enabled the British visitors to feel included and spoke to the seasonal element of the worship service. The Berlin congregation has a motto that appears in the heading of its monthly newsletter (*Der Unitarier*): 'From belief to knowledge, from knowledge to seeing'. It was evident from the size of the congregation and the congratulatory remarks of the visitors that the Unitarian Church in Berlin can be proud of its history and hopeful for its future, as it continues to increase its knowledge and look beyond itself.



Photos by Rory Castle Jones and Britta Leupold



## Ecology and Stewardship - John Lyness

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Generally the major existential problem of Climate Change does not feature regularly in the daily media. The business of selling advertising space, clickbait metrics and the sourcing of attractive publishable images is not amenable to the ratchetting realities of invasive plants and insects, mass human migration and the shrinking diversity of species.

There is some coverage within prescriptive school syllabuses and from time-to-time UN conferences get limited coverage. But one gets the impression that “someone” somewhere in government has the remedies or mitigations for climate change “in hand”. Few are keen on relinquishing their cars, gas heating or reverting to more limited choices of consumer goods or activities. Progress is thought to entail continuous human improvement through the efficient exploitation of natural resources – which most believe are inexhaustible.

Following the now forgotten 1973 Oil Crisis some economists raised the spectre of “Peak Oil” as a futuristic scenario of crude oil availability and the importance of the economics of petrochemicals. At the time, some pointed to the availability of other energy sources such as nuclear power and the possibility of an energy “mix” of coal, oil, gas and nuclear. However, when risk analysis techniques are applied to these sources we find that there is enough historical data to assess the detrimental effects of extraction and pollution from limited fossil fuel sources but there is worryingly little knowledge on the detrimental long term effects of nuclear power generation and pollution. We do know, from limited experience and with some confidence, that the long term detrimental effects of accidental nuclear pollution and the disposal of nuclear waste products will last centuries and has the potential to blight large areas.

The boom in the use the byproducts of oil refining has led to the petrochemical industry which provides plastics, fertilisers and biocides. One of the earliest successful biocides was DDT – its indiscriminate effects on ecology in led to the seminal book “The Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson. Petrochemical production expanded rapidly during WW2 to provide explosives and weapons and today’s petrochemical products are used as “feedstock” in many industries from construction to pharmaceuticals. The decay of petrochemical derived molecules can be estimated so that the decay life of the manufactured products can also be estimated.

For some the realisation of the finite resources of the Earth and the concept of the Earth as a finite energy, chemical and biological “system” has led to the exploration of the ideas of Christian Stewardship. Constant growth, more efficient extraction, more choices and tolerance of species extinction was seen to be short term thinking – existential problems are being left to our children and succeeding generations.

Famines and plagues have existed throughout history and since before the time of the Pharoahs they have been documented and studied. In the Cy18, TR Malthus famous mathematical study sought to model food resources and population numbers and predict when population demand would outstrip available food supply.

Following the European Enlightenment scientific thinking was not bound to be consistent with dogma - leading to the emergence of Newtownian mechanics, statistics, thermodynamics, electromagnetics, nuclear technology and more recently Information Technology. Modern third level education now includes sciences and the “ologies” which make use of observations and statistics.

The effects of Climate Change are annually becoming more apparent - but for most Mr Micawber’s dictum that “something will turn up” appears to be a popular resort. Historically selective ideas about Christian stewardship promoted wealth accumulation, continuous growth, the “work ethic”, slavery, efficient

exploitation of nature and natural resources – leaving us today’s world and apparently, popular fatalism. In my opinion, it will require a huge realistic (unpleasant) “paradigm shift” in popular media tropes, local politics, national politics and international politics before we can start to say that we have left a sustainable World with improved prospects for our children. Currently the incremental international, national and local Climate Change measures are trivial and unpopular.

Why so ? My current diagnosis, in the UK and Ireland, is that although we have caught up with the Mechanical Sciences in education, through better teaching of basic Maths and visualisations of working machines, there is little popular understanding of Electromagnetics or Thermodynamics. We are used to buying things without the faintest idea how they work and what they consume (apart from money) ! This was highlighted by CP Snow over half a century ago – the route to national government and influence does not include any knowledge of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Rather, a grounding in PPE or PR and some effective “policy wonks” is the current “top down” method for Climate Change management. Electromagnetic devices, such as televisions, are considered to be unrepairable “black boxes” - but more devastatingly - there is more or less zero understanding of the four Laws of Thermodynamics. (That is, the equivalence of work, heat and energy + the direction of energy transfer over time + the minimization of internal thermal energy towards Absolute Zero temperature).

Given my diagnosis above - what other helpful ideas have been developed recently to give us a handle on Climate Change. The first idea, that I personally came across, was localised self sufficiency - “small is beautiful” - by EF Schumacher. I followed this up by comparisons beyond western ideas of Christian stewardship such as the outworkings of the cyclical model of time in Eastern religions and the consciousness and intergenerational consideration of the earth and nature present in Native American beliefs.

Today beyond these ideas, there now some very helpful emerging “paradigm shifts”. The first I commend are those of John Cobb and John Daly – John Cobb is a philosopher who proposes a thought out “panentheism” and Hermann Daly, an economist and coworker who proposes a non cash version of economics which incorporates thermodynamic principles. Their full accounting for the worth/value of Natural Resources such as sunlight, oxygen, evapotranspiration, photosynthesis, gravity, tides, geomagnetism, species diversity, ecological succession etc is supported by consistent philosophical and physical underpinnings and they have been open and receptive to critical arguments – surely a beacon in our present situation !

I have cited these two names as practical thinkers with a helpful consistent approach to Climate Change – they both started from the position of Christian stewardship and have made rigorous use of modern philosophical and economic methods to develop a new paradigm, a useful way of moving on their ideas. More information on John Cobb, Herman Daly, EF Schumacher, Rachel Carson, CP Snow and TR Malthus can be found in their WIKIPEDIA articles.

Descriptions of several other religious and non religious approaches to Climate Change can also be found in WIKIPEDIA and elsewhere.

*John Lyness is a retired civil engineering academic living in Belfast. He is involved in three charities, The Dry Stone Walling Association of Ireland, the Centre for Civic Dialogue and Development, in the Falls Road, and, Reclaim the Enlightenment Belfast. We are very pleased to include this article which had to be omitted from the last issue, owing to lack of space.*

*We are grateful to Rosslyn Hill minister, Kate Dean, and Dundee Unitarians for sending us these articles. We hope to feature other churches in future editions.*

## **Rosslyn Hill Chapel** — Kate Dean

Rosslyn Hill Chapel is an open-minded Unitarian spiritual community in Hampstead which was established in 1692. We have services on Sunday mornings and evenings which draw wisdom from different faiths and Humanist philosophy. Our Sunday morning Unitarian worship offers an open-minded take on the traditional 'hymn sandwich' with a separate children's programme. Our Sunday evening programme tends to be more 'alternative' and meditation-based. It includes a pagan Wheel of the Year ceremony eight times a year and bi-monthly sound bath meditation and labyrinth walking meditation sessions. We also host a number of other events such as weekly mindfulness and Sunday afternoon spirituality workshops.

We will gather this Christmastide, in remembrance of a birth that changed history, with a sense of hope and gratitude for spending time with friends and family. And with a sense of wonder, as the world turns, the seasons change and the miracle of the universe is there for us to see, every day.

As the wheel of the year turns again, time is passing and it's important we mark this turning, so that it doesn't speed by, unnoticed. The Unitarian Universalist minister Eileen Karpeles writes that 'it is not by accident that the religious calendar closely matches the celestial calendar, for our very bones and breath are tied into the movement of the spheres, the waxing and waning of the seasons.'

Whilst science gives us the explanation for why the days are so short and dark, our bodies feel the pull of the orbits like inner tides.

The future, with all its uncertainty and all its possibilities, is laid out ahead of us. There is so much sorrow in the world, from natural disasters and human conflict to personal health concerns. So it can be a challenge for our minds to remain open to learn the message of the Christmas story: That two thousand years ago, a family of undocumented migrants travelled to Bethlehem and later had to flee persecution, seeking asylum in Egypt, carrying with them someone with the ability to inspire the world. The timeless message of the Christmas story is one of hope amid the darkness - the message that people need each other in order to survive. And there is hope that what we learn from the past may, somehow, aid our journey in the future.

I don't know about you, but more than once this year I've written in a Christmas card, 'here's to a happier and healthier year next year' and I've had a sense of *deja vu* - didn't I write that in my cards last year, too? The trials of recent years have tested our resilience and resolve. Yet, with all that has been thrown at us, we keep going, as the world turns and the seasons change.

The writer George Eliot has a special connection to Rosslyn Hill Chapel. These days we would say that she would be on the humanist end of the spectrum of belief within our community. She attended services and her son even sat on the church committee. She had doubts about the divine but was able to find a balance between her disbelief in God and a yearning for a spirituality for herself. Her account of old Christmas is intriguing, a winter spell cast across the countryside to encourage fellowship between families.

She writes: 'But old Christmas smiled as he laid this cruel-seeming spell on the outdoor world, for he meant to light up home with new brightness, to deepen all the richness of indoor colour, and give a keener edge of delight to the warm fragrance of food; he meant to prepare a sweet imprisonment that would strengthen the primitive fellowship of kindred, and make the sunshine of familiar human faces as welcome as the hidden day-star.' My hope is that we will all get to experience some sense of 'the primitive fellowship of kindred', in whatever form that may take for us. This is the season for giving, and, when we give of ourselves at this special time, we are rewarded by something that touches the heart.

A highlight this year was collaborating with Mitzvah Day to offer a Coronation Coffee Morning which encouraged people to commit to volunteering in our borough. The Mayor of Camden attended, children of the Brent SACRE Interfaith Choir performed and it was a really joyful occasion. People found out more about the volunteering opportunities in the local area and made new friends from different faiths and backgrounds. And I have a hope for the coming year. It is that people will continue to stay curious and receptive to new ideas, open to learning from each other and enjoying the richness of what our community has to offer. I take inspiration from E.M. Forster who wrote in his novel *Howards End*: "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer."

## Williamson Memorial Unitarian Christian Church, Dundee



This is Rocky. He is the youngest attender at the Unitarian Church in Dundee. He is also the quickest over a short distance and probably sleeps for more hours in the day than any of members. When he comes along he enjoys a post service biscuit. In that regard he is like most of the members of the church. Rocky used to be a racing greyhound and went through some tough years but the last couple have been much better. In that regard he is like Williamson Memorial.

The Covid years have been mixed for Dundee. As soon as the lockdowns started we moved to postal services and were Zooming from the Minister's house within weeks. As soon as we were allowed to reopen we did. We were better prepared

for the second lockdown as we had seen it coming and had had wifi fitted in the church. The Minister led services from the church with the Chairman joining him to act as security. Our services were offered in a hybrid format as soon as we reopened, first through the generous use of a member's phone and then when the wifi was fitted. We have kept this as simple as possible so as to make it sustainable and the cost has been minimal beyond the cost of a Zoom licence and the wifi. This approach was outlined in our award submission for the NUF Dorothy Archer Prize in 2022. An ordinary laptop is used as the core of the system. The church's sound system is plugged into the computer using a 4mm jack and an html lead attaches the computer to an old TV used as a monitor. The monitor enables those in the church to see those on line. At the end of the service the screen is unplugged and the Zoom screen shown on the computer enabling those on Zoom to have a conversation with some of those in church.

A usb camera is attached to a pole opposite the lectern, giving a front row view of the service. The pole is thin and has been painted in a dark varnish so as to be unobtrusive when viewed from the congregation. The pole has drawn many compliments.

Prior to the Covid pandemic we had an organist but she has not returned so we have moved to using the Unitarian Music Society karaoke CDs and other musical resources. These are played using a playlist on the computer, as is other music used during the service. When the Minister conducts the service the words for hymns are placed in the chat box facility on Zoom. Kyle McDonald, who oversees and has masterminded the system has developed a creative approach whereby the words are placed in a Powerpoint document and the sound attached so that the words on the screen change at the appropriate time as the verses change. This is used when he runs the system but is pretty much beyond the skill set of the Minister. News of our innovation has spread worldwide and we recently had a member of the Tokyo Unitarian congregation join our service to ask how it was done as they hoped to follow in our footsteps.

We have taken several positives from the technological advances that Covid has forced upon us. Setting up this system has enabled the Church to keep in touch with new attendees who joined us for the first time during Covid, this includes the Minister's mother who lives in West London and is very unlikely ever to visit the church. During Covid some long standing members, who had been regular attenders, had to give up their cars and became unable to travel to the Church. However our Zoom offering has enabled them to continue to attend services and remain a full part of the community. During and since Covid members of the other Unitarian churches in Scotland have become regular attenders on Zoom. This has strengthened the Scottish Unitarian Association and built stronger links between the Scottish Unitarian Churches.

One of the most exciting developments brought about by our Zoom system has been the way that it has enabled some to join us without the pressure of having to enter an unknown building. We have found that some who have joined us on line have enjoyed the service and gone on to join us in person – a successful and less challenging pathway into our community. We have also found that a number of members sometimes attend in person and sometimes on Zoom. The reasons for this are varied. Some are that little bit further away and don't wish to travel every week; some have to travel and are therefore a distance from the church on a Sunday. Another example was congregational member who got married in the church at a service and immediately started chemotherapy. They were not able to travel but were able to join us on Zoom when well enough to do so.

In future we expect that some who can no longer attend for reasons of health, being moved to care facilities or other factors will still be able to participate in church live because of our system. Our hybrid Zoom innovation has allowed us to work easily on Zoom and that has made us both more accessible and inclusive.

However, as Rocky's life shows, all has not been positive. In January 2022 several of our trustees died and we found ourselves with some major administrative headaches. There was a definite possibility that we would close owing to a lack of capacity, not a lack of money. Since then the congregation and friends have come together and we are now in a stronger place than before Covid. Our hall is let out to a Pole fitness school as a sole tenant. This means that their equipment can be permanently and safely fitted. This situation suits both parties.

The car parking round the church is fully used and provides further income. The congregation and friends have had an extensive tidy up and maintenance overhaul so that we are in a better place now than we were 3 years ago, though the trustees themselves are greatly missed.

Williamson Memorial has a proud history (there are details on our website:

<https://dundeeunitarians.wordpress.com/about/history/> ) and this article could have celebrated that but we are also innovating and preparing for the future. If you are in Dundee please join us in person or join people across the globe and join us on Zoom.

### **An alternative look at Christmas by Alan Dawson-Brown**

The innkeeper's wife, was so full of strife,  
she wanted more cash in her pot;  
There were people out there with money to spare,  
but sadly, no room had they got.  
She had said to her hubby, (the one they called Tubby),  
To take any more are we able;  
But he'd said quite emphatic, we're full to the attic,  
the only place left is the stable.  
Well, this couple stood there, they were in despair,  
They felt all alone and in danger;  
But as they looked quite mild, and she was with child,  
They offered them use of the manger.  
Well the baby was born, the following morn,  
And that is how Christmas was started;  
But time soon moved on, and the angels were gone,  
and the shepherds and wise men departed.  
Two thousand years gone, and the story lives on,  
but it's meaning they're constantly bending;  
It's now a bit weird, and a man with white beard,  
encourages mass overspending.  
But still to us few, the message stays true,  
and so we are gathered today;  
To thank God for that child, so gentle and mild,  
who taught us to love and to pray.  
And after we've prayed, and after we've sung,  
then let us go out and make merry;  
May your dinner be good, and after your pud,  
Perhaps have a nice glass of sherry!  
And a Merry Christmas to you all.

Alan Dawson-Brown © 2024

*We are grateful to Alan for this 'alternative' view of Christmas. Alan is Church Secretary and a Trustee of Ansdell Unitarian Church, as well as having served as organist there for 30 years.*

## **EPIPHANY “JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME” – Judith Fantozzi**

The decision to make the trip was the hardest part. Once the Big Three had agreed on that, the whole thing started to roll. My spirit was willing but detached and dreamy, my soul raring to go, to face the challenge but the body needed a good push.

It was the light that did the trick. That inner dawning – beaming promises of better things to come; the birth of something new and fresh and exciting inside of me. The rising conflagration that persisted – wouldn't go away. So, bags packed, off we set, the Three Wise Ones – my spirit, my body and me – agreed.

First, the calculations. When had the light first appeared? What was its significance? Now and in the long term? Where would we end up if we decided to follow its beckonings? Some glorious city? Backside of the desert? That was a wild and woolly place to be! Eaten alive by wolves? As it turned out we came in for most of that – and more. But we carried on. We were agreed, you see; my spirit, my body and me!

Right from the start it was no easy ride. We never expected it to be plain sailing; a bed of roses but – we hadn't quite bargained for all that transpired. First, there was THE FAMILY! “You're doing WHAT?” “Don't be daft!” “You've gone nuts!” We've always been a churchgoing family – there's nothing new out there.

TRADITION. Stick with tradition. You'll not go far wrong with that!”

Well, that was the first miscalculation – expecting folk to understand. We'd never quite realised how hidebound they all were. All except Aunt Maud, that is. She slipped us an understanding wink when no one was looking. She KNEW. But nobody listened to Aunt Maud. She didn't have a voice. The wink was sustaining though – someone KNEW. But the others never stopped. My spirit was grieved, my body curled up, sucked its thumb and went to sleep for a bit. Then we licked the wounds, picked up the pieces and regrouped. So, wits together again the three of us shook hands, linked arms and set off into the wide blue yonder, without map or compass, just that everlasting inner light that showed the way.

Day by day by day, through happy times and sad, we journeyed. Through youth and vigour, met our loved one, built a nest, raised young. Toiled and laughed and struggled, through the good years and the bad. The light changed colour now and then. Sometimes red – for danger – don't go there. Often green – sweet pasture and refreshing streams. Come and feed. Our loved ones shared. Sometimes clouded over – that was hard. Couldn't calculate which way to take. But somehow, when we couldn't see the path, the light worked for us. When the unknowing clouds passed over and we saw our way again, we were amazed at how many miles we'd travelled in the gloom; how much we'd gained by trust.

But often, loss is gain.

In middle years, our loved one died. No more the happy laughter; no more the twinkling sunshine of his smile. No more. Our children mourned. We grieved – the three of us. My spirit pined, my body languished, I was numb. No song could penetrate, no word bring comfort, no helping hand could ease the pain – the pain of loss.

But we three – my spirit, my body and me – we journeyed on. We were agreed, you see! Amazingly, that inner light still shone. The brighter and the stronger now. A violet hue – for healing of the soul. It knew! Years passed, with many a fiery trial more. Through want and illness. Our youngest daughter gone astray. No love at hand to stem the flow of trouble. Yet, through it all, that light still burned. Burned brighter as the years rolled on. Through bending age – to now – the brightness seems to fill the three of us and shapes appear within the glow. Three caskets – and a voice addressing me. “Open the caskets, one by one and be amazed, my child.”

Our age worn fingers prize the clasp that fastens one and out spills showers of gold. “This is the product of your trials – gold of heaven, transformed by fire.”

A second casket opens as we fumble with the clasp. A cloud of incense rises from its depths. Its spicy sweetness fills the air. “The offerings of your prayers, your tears, your love for me are here.”

I add more tears.

The third casket waits – I hesitate. What's here? I will the box to open of itself – and there, inside, on folds of velvet cloth – a lump of resin with a strange perfume. “Myrrh”, comes the answer to my silent voice. “For all you suffered, faithfully, through pain and tears, trusting me, no matter what.”

The caskets vanish into light. The voice falls silent. Our journeyings complete. Light has spoken. We have found the CHRIST – within. ©Judith Fantozzi January 2023



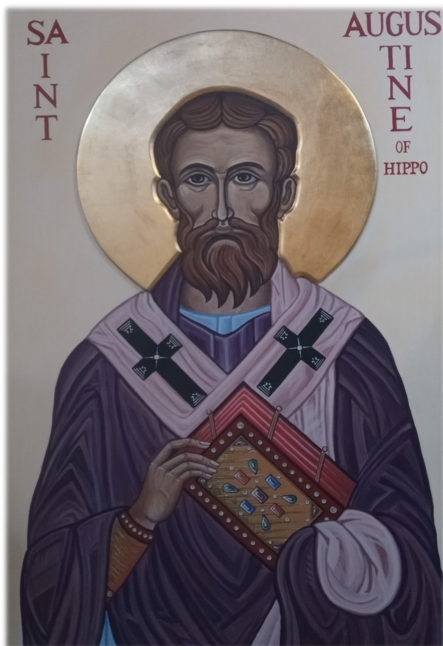
Ministry students with their books presented by the UCA

L to R: Hannah Stephenson, Robert Foreman, Shana Parvin Begun, Francis Elliot-Wright

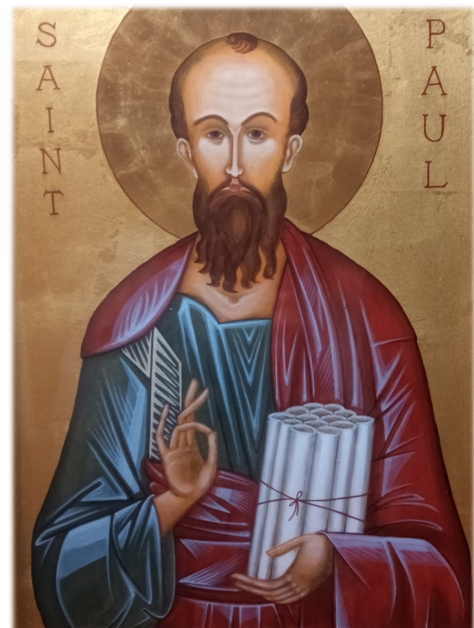
(Many apologies to the students for omitting to publish this photo in the Easter Herald 2023).

## ICONIC IMAGES

*see Article pages 6/7*



St Augustine by Ka-Yee Chan



St Paul by Christopher Perrins



The oldest known icon of Christ Pantocrator, (Saint Catherine's Monastery at Sinai— [commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org))

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