

THE HERALD

JOURNAL OF THE UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION—NO. 71

SPRING & SUMMER 2011



What future for our Ministry?

Special focus begins on p8 ...

*with contributions from: Simon Marsh, Daniel Costley, Jean Bradley, Ant Howe,
Paul Travis, Alex Bradley and Linda Phillips*

Also: Chief Officer reveals our close links with Christian Aid

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Cover Photo: *Ministers in procession at Padiham Induction (right to left):
Revs Jean Bradley, Vernon Marshall and Feergus O’Connor (partly obscured).*

(Photo: Julian Brown).

Editorial: Committing to Ministry

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Our Chief Officer rightly wonders whether our congregations are making enough of this link, and he asks all members, particularly those in the Unitarian Christian Association, to consider how best to take forward this historic connection, including during the annual Christian Aid Week. Please give thought to this question, and let Derek or ourselves know your views.

However the main focus of this edition is Ministry, and we are delighted to carry an article from the Director of Ministry about its future within our denomination, and from one of our College Principals on ministerial training. Four serving ministers give fascinating glimpses into aspects of their working lives.

But why this focus? Well, because we believe that building and sustaining ministry is the single most important challenge facing our small denomination. It is satisfying to note that this chimes with the latest thinking of the leadership of our General Assembly.

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But why this focus? Well, because we believe that building and sustaining ministry is the single most important challenge facing our small denomination. It is satisfying to note that this chimes with the latest thinking of the leadership of our General Assembly.

At its meeting in January, our governing Executive Committee identified three ‘strategic priorities’, namely: Ministry, Local Leadership and Visibility. And, in a clear signal that this is going to mean changes, the Executive said current structures would be ‘re-aligned’ to fit these priorities (by October).

We in the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) welcome this clearer commitment by the Executive to ministry and to spiritual leadership in general. Too many of our congregations lack any settled leadership, despite their best efforts, and this situation will only get worse in the coming months and years as more and more serving ministers reach retirement age.

So developing local worship leaders -- particularly through the excellent General Assembly training courses known as the Worship Studies Course and Unitarian Studies Course -- must be a key part of this drive. Our current ministers should be doing all they can to encourage suitable members of their congregations to lead worship, and to develop their skills further. (And if keen learners find it difficult to progress on the Worship Studies Course because of problems attending the required practical training, let them start with the Unitarian Studies Course which does not require this initial training!)

Of course developing a well-trained, professional ministry must remain the top focus, but where do we imagine our new ministers are going to come from? Once you ask this question, the answer becomes obvious – they will come largely from among the very worship leaders we train in our congregations! (a trend amply borne out by entrants to ministry training over the past few years). So these first two priorities – Ministry and Local Leadership – are intimately bound up with one another, and they must both be pursued with vigour.

What does this mean for the future of our ministry training, say over the next five years? We believe it must become more flexible. Why? Well, firstly because more and more congregations are only able to pay a part stipend, and secondly, because even a full stipend is getting harder to live on, particularly for ministers with families to support.

So a trend likely to increase is for our students and ministers to remain employed (part-time) in other careers – and our General Assembly needs to be as encouraging as possible to people in this position if we want to increase our pool of ministers. Without compromising standards, we need to remove as many barriers as possible to ministry training.

Another area of flexibility could be in the training of worship leaders, allowing them to attend courses offered in our two ministerial Colleges in Manchester and Oxford. But we must remain realistic here, as both our Colleges are part of wider institutions and we are not able to act unilaterally.

So what else is in this Spring edition? A new feature is ‘Journey to Faith’, with a couple from the North-West telling how they came to Unitarianism and the UCA. There are several reviews, including of prayer books and other resources for congregations. Enjoy!

Jim Corrigan is a Ministry student at Harris Manchester College in Oxford.

Moderator's Letter: Hope amid despair

The season of new life is soon to be with us, as the Earth awakens to welcome spring and Christians of all shades celebrate the festival of Easter, which is the definitive holiday of our faith. It is in this season of affirmation and rejoicing that Unitarians and Free Christians can give thanks for their connection to the Church Universal—that manifestation of the faith in different traditions, denominations and expressions of service. From the simplicity of a Quaker meeting to the complexity of an Eastern Orthodox liturgy, that sense of hopefulness in the midst of despair can be experienced once more.

Mark's Gospel alone contains that marvellous question that the women who encountered the empty tomb put to one another: "Who will roll away the stone for us?" [Mark 16.3] It is a question that reverberates within my thoughts each Easter, as I ask myself how to present the kernel of the story of the Resurrection in such a way that even the most literal and sceptical person in the pew might be able to embrace the deeper truths of the text.

Who will take responsibility for sharing the powerful message that this ancient tale conveys? We, who profess a liberal and progressive faith, are called to be a voice of optimism in the wider context of Christendom today—demonstrating that the glories of Easter are not grounded in a supernatural event, but in a continual Resurrection of body, mind and spirit.

We are the very ones who are called to roll away the stones of narrow-minded biblicalism, prejudice and anti-Christian sentiment, so that all people of faith can see the experience of the first-century Christian community as relevant to their own in the present day. May we affirm that task together, as we exercise a ministry of proclamation, aware that we are connected through the Easter faith to a Church that is far bigger than our own vital corner of it.

The Rev Jeffrey Lane Gould is Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association, and Minister at Nazareth Unitarian Chapel, Padiham, Lancashire.



TIME FOR A RETREAT?

The Rev Jean Bradley, Retreats Officer for the Unitarian Christian Association, is hoping to hold a Retreat weekend in mid-June. The proposed dates are: Friday 17th to Sunday 19th June (ending after lunch), at Hartley Woods Retreat in Staffordshire (the beautiful centre where we stayed last year). If you are interested in attending, please email Jean on: revjeanbradley@yahoo.co.uk or telephone 01565 754465.

Our 60-year link with Christian Aid

Derek McAuley considers the implications of a surprise discovery – that our General Assembly is a sponsor of Christian Aid.

One of many surprises since I took up the post of Chief Officer 16 months ago, was to find out that the General Assembly was a founder member of the British-based charity Christian Aid in the 1940s, and remains one of the organisation’s 41 sponsoring bodies. I have subsequently learned so much more about the work of Christian Aid and had opportunities to think through what this might mean for our denomination.



AT ESSEX HALL: Derek McAuley and Loretta Minghella of Christian Aid, with the new report.

I attended the annual general meeting of Christian Aid on 24 November 2010 which was followed by a consultation session with church leaders. We were addressed by Dom Sebastiao Armando Gameleira Soares, the Anglican Diocesan Bishop of Recife, hearing from the frontline about the Church’s role in supporting excluded and marginalised people and their organisations to assert and achieve their economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. These are crucial to redressing social injustice. Brazil is one of the most unequal societies in the world and Christian Aid is working through strong partnerships with ecumenical organisations, social movements and non-governmental organisations.

Like most Unitarians in Britain I am aware of Christian Aid, most notably through its annual fund-raising ‘Week’. What I did not know was that the organisation has a simple vision – an end to poverty – and a belief that that vision can become a reality. No *ifs* or *buts* there then. To quote its Annual Report, its purpose is “to expose the scandal of poverty, to help in practical ways to root it out from the world and to challenge and change the systems that favour the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalised”.

Nationally, the General Assembly has supported Christian Aid Week by circulating literature to all congregations and ministers in a mailing. Local congregations and individual Unitarians and Free Christians will -- to varying degrees -- participate in activities in their area, with some ‘shaking the cans’ or going door-to-door with envelopes. All these efforts are much appreciated.

As its very name suggests, Christian Aid’s work, indeed its very existence, is grounded in a faith stance. They see their role as to serve the churches in Britain and Ireland. When I met the new Director of Christian Aid, Loretta Minghella, at Essex Hall, she emphasised

that it is 'your' development agency, formed by and grounded in the churches. There is recognition of the need to engage more fully with all the sponsoring bodies, even the smaller ones like the us. I had never seen Christian Aid in this way.

Christian Aid has also been exploring how theology can impact on the critical issues it faces in its international development work. A report published in April 2010, *Theology and International Development* by Dr Paula Clifford, head of Theology for Christian Aid, examined understandings of both poverty and human rights -- and argued for a 'capabilities' approach to fighting poverty, and that human rights advocacy was consistent with Biblical teaching on justice.

Aspects of relational theology, derived from the work of Karl Barth, demonstrated how major issues of development could be formulated in terms of broken relationships; for example, between rich and poor, men and women. Other theologies, such as the so-called 'prosperity gospel' (wealth is an indication of God's blessing) were rejected and others such as contextual theologies reviewed. The importance of advocacy and campaigning is emphasised, with a concluding chapter on the need to challenge the structures that keep people poor.

At the consultation session, I happened to be seated next to Dr Clifford and she asked how I felt about the Trinitarian approach in the report. It states that 'relationship is modelled in the very nature of God as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. My response, to draw I might add upon a helpful comment from a UCA member some months ago, was that many Trinitarians seem to be under the misapprehension that Unitarians continue to be defined by and talk about this debate, that we have in so many ways moved beyond it and indeed that I had never heard a sermon preached against the Trinity!

I find the idea of broken relationships convincing. I see my Unitarianism as an ever-widening circle of relationships: myself as active in my local congregation, and that congregation -- individually and collectively -- as part of the local community, and then of the Denomination; and each individual involved nationally and internationally.

The Unitarian Universalist Association's seventh principle of respect 'for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part' expresses this idea well for me -- but again this is only a helpful metaphor. Broken threads in the web of life can be repaired. For others the Trinity may serve a similar purpose and as Unitarians and Free Christians we have the freedom to choose what we find most relevant. Others may find the ideas of contextual and liberation theology considered in the report as valuable.

For many Unitarians and Free Christians the exclusion of the General Assembly from formal membership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland remains theologically suspect, organisationally ineffective and painful. Thankfully, we continue to participate in certain social justice and theological activities within this umbrella, where I know our contributions are valued -- but I am conscious that we are there by invitation rather than right.

In contrast, we are members of Christian Aid -- by virtue of our status as a sponsoring

body. Such a position may cause us to reflect upon the weight of our participation and how this might be enhanced in future. Christian Aid works with a range of agencies, both faith and secular, to achieve their vision. This is certainly within the spirit of historic Unitarian views of social action and non-discrimination in provision of services.

I aim to prioritise attendance at their annual general meetings and ensure a national contribution when they seek views from sponsors. We will continue to support Christian Aid Week. Locally I would ask UCA members to think about their personal and collective contributions week, and also how they might use our national membership to build local ecumenical relationships. I know this may prove difficult in some areas where Unitarians and Free Christians are actively excluded, so perhaps our link with Christian Aid could be a lever for change here.

Unlike the Unitarian Universalist Association we do not have our own national social action agency -- and international development work has, with the notable exception of the Khasi Hills from the time of Margaret Barr, been limited and sporadic with a focus on our Unitarian brothers and sisters. Churches and individuals have of course supported projects, often over many years. We have much to learn about how a small group can have an impact, and Christian Aid could prove to be a useful partner. I would welcome views and ideas on this to: Dmcauley@unitarian.org.uk

Derek McAuley is Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.



**UCA EVENT
AT GA ANNUAL MEETINGS 2011, SWANSEA.**

The Gospel and the Zodiac

Come and hear the Rev Bill Darlison explain the thesis behind 'The Gospel and the Zodiac: the Secret Truth about Jesus' -- his recent book which contends that St Mark's Gospel is a mystical text, with the signs of the zodiac representing stages on the path to spiritual enlightenment. Time for questions and debate! The annual UCA Book Award presentation to new ministry students will also take place.

Sunday 17th April at 7.45 pm. (Room details to be announced)

(To follow Dinner, which in turn follows the Palm Sunday Anniversary Service, where the Preacher this year will be the UCA Moderator, The Rev Jeffrey Lane Gould.)

Organised by the Unitarian Christian Association

LIFE IN MINISTRY

Called to be bearers of light

About 250 people attended the Induction of the Rev Jeff Gould at Nazareth Unitarian Chapel, Padiham, in late January: local dignitaries, fellow ministers, and Unitarians from around the North-West, including a large group from his last ministry at Bury. Anglican priest *Simon Marsh* posted this blog afterwards

On 29 January, I travelled to Nazareth Unitarian Chapel in Padiham, Lancashire, for the Induction of their new minister, Jeff Gould. Absolutely freezing cold when we stepped out of the car, and a wonderfully embracing warmth of welcome as soon as we stepped over the threshold of the chapel.

Thank you, Nazareth, for your generous hospitality. Jeff's a fortunate man – I know he'll be well fed! And Nazareth is fortunate to have a new, wise and open-hearted man of God to share in ministry alongside. How very good it was to be present in company with such a large ecumenical presence and to meet friends old and new – many of us giving an account of how it seemed we'd known Jeff 'almost forever'.



THE CROSS AND THE CHALICE: The Rev Brenda Catherall (front, centre) officiated at the Padiham Induction service, while the Preacher was retired Methodist minister, the Rev Roger Stubbings. (Photo: Julian Brown).

I came away with lots of food for thought and thanksgiving, and two things in particular: the first connected me immediately with a meeting of Greater Manchester Churches Together held 15 or so years ago, in the strikingly-simple, and for that all the more beautiful, Cross Street Unitarian Chapel right in the heart of Manchester city centre. It was good to meet Jane Barraclough the present-day Minister of Cross Street at Padiham. It's a wonderful oasis.

But I recall sitting at lunch that day 15 years ago at Cross Street with Christopher Mayfield, then Bishop of Manchester, and one of the most gracious and calming bishops I've ever known – an oasis himself, I thought at the time. What I remember most clearly about that occasion was not the content of the business meeting, nor the rather splendid lunch, but the wonderfully quiet Act of Worship that preceded it. And the Unitarian chalice lighting, that poignant moment when:

*We light this candle as a symbol of our faith
By its light, may our vision be illumined;
By its warmth, may our fellowship be encouraged;
And by its flame, may our yearnings for peace, justice
And the life of the spirit be enkindled.*

I was deeply moved by the act and by the sign. And that same sign opened the January Induction Service at Padiham. How thankful I am for an image that invites me, and all who share in the act, to remember our human calling to be 'chalices', to be bearers of light. Glorious singing, including a stirring rendition of Mozart's gorgeous Exsultate, Jubilate, an inviting sermon from the retired Methodist minister Roger Stubbings, and much else besides, led us to a final prayer of dedication and to the second chief memory I brought back with me – J G Whittier's hymn:

*He whom the Master loved has truly spoken:
The holier worship, which God deigns to bless,
Restores the lost, binds up the spirit broken,
And feeds the widow and the parentless.
O loving soul, fold to thy heart thy neighbour;
Where pity dwells the peace of God is there;
To worship rightly is to love each other;
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.*

(sung to Irish – Danny Boy)

And finally to the extinguishing of the chalice:

*Though we extinguish the light of this candle,
Our faith burns on.
Our vision remains bright;
Our fellowship warm;
And our yearning for peace, justice
And the life of the spirit, constant.
So be it until we meet again.*

An evening commitment meant that I was unable to sit down with the 250 or so other guests who were to be treated to a sumptuous tea. But I'm glad to post this note to register great gratitude and thankfulness for The Reverend Jeffrey Lane Gould, and for a taste of Padiham's lovely hospitality ... until we meet again.

Father Simon Marsh is the Anglican parish priest of St Michael and All Angels, Bramhall, Stockport.



LIFE IN MINISTRY

In the footsteps of Matthias

So what's it like at the start? Last autumn, *Daniel Costley* began a new career as Unitarian Minister at Sevenoaks in Kent

And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:26).

New ministers, in a religious movement with strong roots reaching back to the mainstream Christian tradition, could be said to follow the line of Matthias, the first person to be chosen as an apostle by his peers (rather than by Jesus himself) to carry the message of Jesus to the world. The selection of ministers by other ministers (in our case now via the Interview Panel and the Ministry Commission) is thus a tradition stretching back almost 2000 years, and all those lines of choice converge with the choosing of Matthias, later known as Saint Matthias.

No pressure there then.

But what does this example really mean, and does it hold any relevance for my role as minister? This article is a short attempt to give an answer at a very early stage in my ministry. Please forgive any errors, misunderstandings and naivety; I can only speak from experience.

I arrived at the Old Meeting House, Bessels Green in Sevenoaks, in September last year fresh from my time at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, and stepping gingerly on the path of new ministry. I signed a contract with the congregation setting out my agreed tasks as minister. And then I was left to my own devices in my cavernous vestry and comfortable manse. Despite the best efforts of the college, my tutor Dr Arthur Stewart, and my ministerial colleagues, nothing can really prepare you for that first moment of freedom, terror and excitement rolled into one.

However, it soon became clear that the teachings and lessons of those early Christians, Matthias' peers, could provide guidance and support in the challenges of ministry. 1 Corinthians 12, part of Paul's letters to the early churches seeking guidance, reminds us that the church is like a body. We are many parts; we are one body with many members. Paul likens the body of the church to the human body; he tells how supposedly different skills (a foot and a hand, say), are both necessary to the perfect functioning of the whole. Appointed in the church were apostles, prophets, teachers, leaders, healers, assistants (or administrators depending on your translation), and more (1 Cor 12:28). All these are necessary to the smooth running of the church – no part is more important than another.

And this is a good thing. For the new minister, it is a helpful reminder that he or she is not expected to be good at all things. For the congregation it provides the reassurance that the minister can bluster as much as he likes; without them, he is nothing. Clergy and laity must coexist if the church is to survive. The value of trained leadership for the future of our denomination is recognised at the highest level. Ministers and working congregations both depend on the other for survival. So having accepted that I am not, in myself, the entire body of the church, but that I do have a specific role to play, what can I bring that others cannot?

In his book *A Guide to the Sacraments*, the theologian John Macquarrie questions whether a minister needs to suffer to demonstrate commitment to the church. Can a Minister who has not endured hardship, loneliness, mocking and humiliation really be the right person to lead the church in the way of Jesus? Indeed, Mark reports Jesus as saying: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up my cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34).

So, here I am, a new minister. Supposedly following in the footsteps of Saint Matthias, I know I am no more important than any other member of the congregation and, having been given an office and a roof over my head, I cannot really claim to be in the midst of suffering. Although on this final point I am only too aware of the knife edge that everyone walks, every day, between comfort and suffering.

Despite all this, I am busy. I have never really experienced such combined busyness and happiness as I have as a minister. The congregation at Bessels Green is wonderfully supportive and encouraging, and I feel both honour and privilege for my calling to them.



The Revs Daniel Costley and Tutor Dr Arthur Stewart at the valedictory service in Oxford last June.

(Photo: Non Arkaraprasertkul).

How so? To be given this opportunity to support, guide and lead worship in the evolving Unitarian tradition; to be a presence in people's happiness, sadness and moments of otherwise private contemplation; to be given time to explore the rich diversity of religious traditions, wisdom and understandings, with Christianity an important but by no means exclusive part of our worship.

Perhaps Erasmus Darwin's quip that 'Unitarianism is a feather-bed for falling Christians' could be turned on its head for our modern age. Ministry in our Unitarian tradition could view Unitarianism as a spring-board for delivering the teachings of Jesus and later Christians in a free-thinking way – to those who might otherwise resist the temptation to listen.

I am in my early days of ministry. There is much to learn and, I suspect, there will be difficulties to overcome, problems to solve and, most exciting of all, challenges to meet, all in partnership with the congregation. I have been entrusted by the Unitarian movement, and by the Bessels Green congregation. I hope to repay that trust in the most honest way I can, through worship, determination and sheer hard work.

Isn't this what following Matthias is all about? Perhaps so. Within the canon of the New Testament, Matthias is never heard of again following his election to the Twelve. From a Unitarian perspective, it is fascinating to learn that Matthias is thought to have authored a Gospel (long since lost) that was considered both heretical and apocryphal. Origen referred to it, and it is thought to have been a staple of the heretical Marcion sect. So the first minister to be selected by his peers repaid his debt by challenging the prevailing orthodoxy of that establishment. Long live the spirit of Saint Matthias!

The Rev Daniel Costley was valedicted from Harris Manchester College, Oxford, in June 2010, and was called to the Unitarian congregation at Bessels Green, Sevenoaks, Kent, last September.



A year with Elizabeth Gaskell

When *Jean Bradley* became minister of Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford, last year, she quickly found herself at the centre of bicentennials.

Last year was very special for Brook Street Unitarian Chapel in Knutsford, as it was the 200th Anniversary of the birth of the novelist and life-long Unitarian, Elizabeth Gaskell, who was brought up in this Cheshire town. By chance, it was also the year that I became the new minister of the Chapel.



Elizabeth Gaskell (from the 1864-5 portrait by Samuel Laurence).

On the day I was appointed, I noticed a comprehensive brochure on the Gaskell bicentenary celebrations, advertising all manner of events from guided walks and exhibitions to academic lectures in both Manchester and Knutsford. Glancing through the leaflet, I observed that there was a special worship service to commemorate Mrs Gaskell, scheduled for 3rd October 2010. Innocently, I asked who was to conduct this service, assuming it would be someone with extensive knowledge of her life and work. Imagine my surprise when I was told by the Chapel committee that it would be me!

In addition, we were to host a flower festival commemorating her novels. This at least did not involve too much effort on my part as long as I could find myself a Victorian outfit to wear that befitted my position as minister. The Knutsford Flower Club and members of the

Chapel worked very hard to find all sorts of artefacts, including shop window dummies so that elegant 'ladies' were positioned around the chapel in Victorian costume.

Chapel members took on the work of creating the flower arrangements, others organised the programmes, refreshments, lists of guides and endless other chores. The hard work was all worth it, as people came to Brook Street Chapel from far and wide. It was especially interesting that many local people admitted that they didn't even know that the Unitarian Chapel was here. They had never noticed it even though it was 300 years old, in the town centre, and the only Grade One listed building in Knutsford.

Amid all this activity and celebration, I received word from the founder of the Gaskell society, Joan Leach, to say she was ill and wished me to visit her. Her specialist had told her that she was terminally-ill and she wanted me to conduct her funeral at Brook Street Chapel. I visited Joan for the following eight weeks until her death. We discussed the structure of her service of celebration and the cremation service, and she told me the people she wanted to speak or read at the Chapel service. It is almost impossible to overstate the respect I had for her. She bore her illness with a courageous acceptance rarely seen.

Elizabeth Gaskell's date of birth falls on September 29th and we marked this day with a talk given by a local dignitary. It was a pleasure for me to welcome all the visitors to the Chapel on that day. The highlight of the morning, however, was the attendance of Joan Leach, who managed to make the occasion, albeit accompanied by a nurse. We gave her a standing ovation and shed tears of sadness and joy at seeing her. The Gaskell Society members attending had come from all over the world, including two ladies from Japan who gave the Chapel a copy of *Mary Barton* written in Japanese.

Afterwards we all gathered to place a wreath on the Gaskell family grave. Mrs Leach was unable physically to take it to the grave, but she passed it on to the chairperson of the Society who laid it on her behalf. The very next day we received the sad news that Joan had died in the early hours of that morning. Before she slipped away she had spoken with great pleasure of what a wonderful day it had been for her. It was a fitting end for a woman who had given most of her life to studying the life of Elizabeth Gaskell.

The final event for the year at the chapel was the Anniversary Service (the service that I thought a Gaskell expert would be conducting!). This was held on the 3rd October and the Chapel was full to bursting with Gaskell Society members, Unitarians and local people. I felt very privileged to be conducting the service in honour of Elizabeth Gaskell on such a day.

My first year at Brook Street Chapel was an amazing combination of joys and sadness, fun and hard work, new projects and well established local traditions. What a wonderful year!

The Rev Jean Bradley is Minister of Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford, and Retreats Officer for the UCA.



Sustaining the wider community

Simple ways of taking ministry to the world, from worship in nursing homes to soup lunches, provide unexpected benefits, writes *Ant Howe*.

One of the features of many Unitarian churches is that their congregation 'travels in' each week. Indeed, some people might travel many miles to get to their nearest Unitarian church. Because of this, the impact a congregation has on its local community might be limited.

When I began my ministry in the English Midlands nearly five years ago I wanted to ensure that the ministry the church offered should reach not only its members, but also that it would be a blessing to the local community. While traditionally it is the Minister who offers any such ministry, I wanted to ensure that not only did our church reach out to the local community, but that members of the church became engaged in this ministry.

And one of the ways we now do this is by visiting local nursing homes and conducting short services for their residents. You'd be surprised at how many nursing homes feel that clergy neglect them. I have heard a number of times that 'the local vicar used to come but he just stopped'. We have a small team that goes with me to nursing homes. We hold a short act of worship and sing a few hymns, and then we spend an hour talking with the

residents. Because a group of us go from the church, it means that each resident gets to spend some quality time chatting to somebody. It also means that we can spend time talking with the staff too. The residents in the nursing homes look forward to our visit, and we feel we are offering an important ministry to the wider community.

Another way we try to minister to the wider community is through our midweek activities which intentionally welcome members of the local community. Some examples of this are:

- *Weekly coffee morning.* Obviously there is a sign outside the church advertising this, but we make a point of inviting anyone we know who lives alone. We don't make a charge for coffee and cake, we simply leave a donation plate out. We invite the local police and Community Service Officers to visit -- which they do regularly -- and we try to pass on local information.
- *Midweek worship and lunch.* We do this twice a month. A short and very visitor-friendly service happens at noon and then everyone is invited to stay for a soup and bread lunch. We ask for just £1 to cover the cost of the lunch. Many people from the local community join us for this. Some have never been to church before (or haven't been for many years), whereas others are members of other churches but join us in the spirit of friendship and fellowship. Around 40 people join us for these activities.
- *Women' League.* When we started our Women's League branch two years ago, we were very clear that it wasn't just for church members, but for any woman (or indeed man!) who wanted to join. The League has been highly successful with around 50 members. It is, of course, run on Unitarian principles and is a clear outreach of our church. We have an annual Women's League Service on a Sunday and, even if members do not attend worship regularly at any other time, they make a point of joining us for this.
- *Social activities.* A monthly afternoon social activity -- meals, concerts, fairs, and other events -- are also held to include the wider community. Not only do members of the local community support these ventures by attending, but they also are very happy to lend a hand in running them.
- *Activities for young people.* Boy's Brigade, Brownies, Guides and Rainbows are all run by chapel members. We



The Rev Ant Howe at Kingswood
(Photo: Jim Corrigan).

have around 150 children passing through our doors each Monday-Friday. Such groups are easier to set up and run than you might think.

Of course, we are first and foremost a worshipping community, and we are a Unitarian community. Underpinning all that we do is worship, and our primary activity is our Sunday service which is also aimed at welcoming the newcomer.

We have also started a Sunday School for children. Starting with nothing but a very large sign outside the church, our 'Sunday Club' now has a loyal following. The children learn Bible stories, play games, and are engaged on the Chalice Award Scheme. They join us for the last 10 minutes of worship so that they feel part of the larger congregation. The children also take their turns at handing out hymnbooks and serving refreshments; we encourage them to take their place as part of our church, and that includes helping!

Another way we minister to the wider community is through Rites of Passage. Each Sunday afternoon we have between one and three baptism services, we have weddings most Saturdays throughout the summer, and I conduct funeral services each week. We love to welcome people from the locality into our church and, again, we see this as a ministry. As I officiate at a lot of funerals, we wanted to find a way to offer longer-term pastoral care. We now have a monthly bereavement group which offers bereaved people a safe place to come and talk with others who are experiencing the same thing.

I want to conclude by making two important points:

Firstly, all of this works because we are offering a liberal Christian ministry. Those in our local community know us as 'the church that isn't too heavy / where they don't Bible bash / where they don't tell you what to believe'. However, it is important for many people that we are recognisable as a church. The familiarity of some Christian rituals and symbols assures people and gives them confidence that we are a 'real' church. We model our ministry on the ministry of Jesus: preaching, teaching, welcoming, serving, healing.

Secondly, I want to combat the argument which I hear all too often: 'Of course you can do all these things. You've got a big congregation!' Where do people imagine the bigger congregation came from? If we had waited for the congregation to grow before we started these activities then we would still have a small congregation! The congregation has grown because we have aimed at reaching more people with our ministry and providing more ways for people to engage with us. The mid-week events and activities have helped our Sunday congregation to grow, however we do not think of the 'Sunday folk' as being 'the congregation'; everyone who comes through our doors each week is a part of our community in some way.

The examples I have given in this article are things that can be done by just a few people and with very little money.

Why not ring some of the local nursing homes and ask if their residents would appreciate a Service and a visit?

Why not hold a coffee morning and invite the local community?

Why not open your doors and serve a healthy lunch for just £1?

In my experience, local people are delighted to be asked.

A ministry to the local community serves people, connects them with something spiritual, dispels old ideas about 'church', creates a sense of community, makes Unitarianism more widely known ... AND it will help grow your congregation! What could be better than that?

The Rev Ant Howe is Minister at Kingswood and Warwick



Tormented by the big questions

After 27 years in ministry, Paul Travis looks back on his journey towards his calling

‘I sought for a man to stand in the gap . . .’ (*Ezekiel 22:30*)

I have no magic formula to present as the essential approach or correct attitude to ministry, based on my personal experience. Rather, like everyone else, all I have is the record of my own individual journey that culminated in me eventually offering myself up for the task of ministry – and the subsequent joy, elation, pain and sorrow of the twenty-seven years that followed, ending as it will in retirement, one year from now.

I always felt a little different from most kids at school. Nothing that caused any problems or was instantly obvious you understand. It was just that the things that were uppermost in my mind were not the nurturing of sport, recreation, job prospects and material wealth that occupied the minds and conversations of others. The focus of my attention was the answering of the immortal questions that have plagued the minds of the greatest and the good in every generation: *Why are we here? What is life all about? What is the purpose of life? Is there life after death?*

Consequently, when school finished and everyone rushed to the field to play rugby, football, netball and “nigs” (marbles to the uninitiated), I usually sought the sanctuary of quieter places to ponder anew the realities of the magnificent, natural order about me. Officially, my annual school-report commented: *not the athletic type*. In reality, I simply had ‘other fish to fry’.

Often, when nightfall came, I would climb the huge colliery muck-stacks that hovered ‘pre –Aberfan’ over the nearby junior school which I attended. There, I would survey the night-sky for hours in solitude, unaware at that point of the corroborative musings of the Psalmist (Psalm 8), who declared: *When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers,*

the moon and the stars . . . what is man, that you are mindful of him? At that time, I had never even read the Bible. Nevertheless, the dye was cast. Here was one very ordinary boy, with extraordinary aspirations. But who could I turn to in my search for answers; who would foster and guide my enthusiasm; where could I go for help?

I was born into a coal-mining family and working-class background. Mum and Dad did everything they could to raise their four children well. Dad taught me the “3 Ms” – *Music, My place, and Manners*. There were no books to hand, and no copies of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on the mantelpiece to aid the hungry intellect in those primitive, pre-internet days. So I took the only option available to me, and went to the nearby churches to consult with their leaders. And so it followed, that over the coming years of callow youth, I sat first at the authoritative feet of Anglicanism, swiftly followed by fleeting affairs with Methodism, the Salvation Army, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and ‘Uncle Tom Cobley and all’.

But the more I listened, the more confused I became. None of the preachers faced what, to my mind, were obvious facts. Were we not all members of the same human family? Was not the mystery that we call God, actually the *God of all*? If I had been born in a different country, would I not have been Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or other too? Was there such a thing as Christian cancer? Muslim heart disease? Jewish dementia? And worst of all, how could this Jewish prophet Jesus (*Matthew 21:11*) be hailed *God incarnate*? Where did this leave everyone else? What about all the wonderful people who dedicated their lives to the betterment and compassionate care of others, but who had never crossed the threshold of church or chapel? Were they really to be punished in torment for undeserved digressions? If God had allowed sin to come into the world, was he not guilty for not stopping the machine and rectifying the fault? Oh . . . the passions and complications of a youthful mind in turmoil! Surely, the best thing would be to simply forget the whole idea, and let nature take its course?

And so, for a time, I did precisely that. Into the darkness of the coal mines (apprentice electrician) I went, followed by seven most enjoyable years in the RAF, where I used my musical talents to promote better public relations with the people of Germany and Europe -- which were still, even at that time, a little raw and tentative, post-war. But still, the great



The Rev Paul Travis and his wife Jennifer at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds.

questions tormented me still, and as the years came and went, I began to feel like something or someone somewhere, had a plan for my life, and was not going to take no for an answer (*John 15:16*). But was I mad? What would people think if I revealed such personal, innermost thoughts? Would they say ‘who does he think he is?’, or would they merely dismiss them as the ramblings of a discontented soul?

Eventually, while working in Brighton in 1978, I simply gave in. I could no longer withstand the pressure. Finding a little chapel tucked away inside a bookshop, I knelt down in front of the picture of Jesus holding the lambs, and bleated: “OK, I give in, but there are - forgive me -- conditions. I am never ever, going to be able to confide in others what I truly feel inside, (*Jeremiah 15:15-21*), and – if you will forgive me again – I am not in the business of *kidding myself* and playing the *pious fool*. And so it was, that I finally accepted the *call to ministry* (*Isaiah 6:8*). But which ministry exactly; where and how?

Not long after this event, I awoke one particular morning determined to attend a special service that very night at the local Anglican Church in Lincoln (together with my loving and always-supportive wife of 44 years, Jennifer, to whom I remain eternally grateful for not having had me declared insane). Unfortunately (or fortunately as it turned out), I got the time of the service wrong, and we found ourselves in the middle of Lincoln, all dressed up with nowhere to go.

However, as we walked past a rather curious-looking little building in the high street, I espied for the very first time, the title *Unitarian Chapel*, painted on a faded and worn-out notice board that informed the onlooker there was an evening service at 6.30pm. We duly entered, picked up our hymn books, encountered a God who was universal, and all this in an atmosphere where questions were expected, welcomed and debated. Most importantly, there existed a *freedom of thought* for the individual. I was home! Here, at last was what I had been looking and searching for: the ability to hold and practice a personal faith that was not insulting to the intellect, and acceptable in the company of others who might think or see things differently.

Twenty-seven years have passed since then. How did it all work out? Well, I can honestly say that ministry for me has been a privilege, though a task not always easy on the body, mind or partner (wife). Since 1984, I have served churches in Lincolnshire, Cheshire and Yorkshire; ministries in very different situations with very different chapels; very different people with very different theologies. But what has remained the cornerstone (*Ephesians 2: 20*) for me throughout this experience, has been the challenge to *stand in the gap*, between the secular world which continues to fail and disappoint, and the reality of a mysterious God, who speaks to the hearts and minds of those willing to listen, in every generation.

The Rev Paul Travis is Minister of Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds, and a former Editor of the UCA Herald.



TRAINING FOR MINISTRY

Bringing theology into context

Alex Bradley examines the background and purposes of ministry training within our denomination

Ministry training has a long and varied history in our Unitarian tradition. It had its origins in the Dissenting Academies set up for the children of Nonconformists who were excluded from the ancient universities. The majority of our congregations had English Presbyterian foundations and looked for an educated ministry. They eschewed the more populist approach of their General Baptist cousins, who would call a person to their ministry from within the congregation, often with more limited learning.

By the end of the 18th Century and into the 19th, the strengths and weaknesses of the Presbyterian approach to ministry were evident. On the one hand, the intellectual and theological standard of their preaching was admirably high. However, many congregations found it harder and harder to sustain a ministry financially (some things do not change very much!) and part of the reason was that, in the words of Jeremy Goring, 'the average Arminian sermon ...was a pretty boring performance'(!)

Under the influence of a new generation of ministers who were assertive in expressing their Unitarian theology unlike their more reticent Presbyterian forebears, new Unitarian causes started to open. There was a missionary spirit in the air. One example of this was the accession of the Methodist Unitarian causes in Lancashire. The British and Foreign Unitarian Association was formed in 1825. There was a greater sense of denominational identity and a determination to spread the word of Unitarianism far and wide. No longer was it to be the preserve of a fortunate and well educated few.

The growth of more working-class congregations led to a call for more practical ministry and it was in this context that Unitarian College (Manchester) was founded in 1854. The very name it started with suggested its purpose: the Unitarian Home Missionary Board.

By the mid-1980s, the strain of running separate institutions for the training of future ministers in the North-West led four colleges founded in the Christian tradition, including Unitarian College, Manchester, to join together on one site. The umbrella organisation was called The Northern Federation for Training in Ministry, now named the Partnership for Theological Education. It was far more than just a sharing of one set of buildings. The far-sightedness of Arthur Long and then his successors, Len Smith and Ann Peart, ensured that the opportunity to use this rich resource of shared pastoral and theological education was fully grasped. The new buildings were called Luther King House and the Partnership uses this as a 'brand title'.

The key words used in the training of students at Luther King House are context and contextual. Our students learn about theology, church history, Unitarian thought and

practice, but they do so in the context of their placement and the community they seek to serve. Theology must be contextual. They spend at least one year shadowing an experienced minister while pursuing their academic studies. The minister also acts as their Supervisor during that first year. Subsequently, they spend at least one year as a student pastor, with responsibility for a particular congregation, with another experienced minister acting as their Supervisor.

The Supervisor's role is separate to the role of Mentor. The Mentor scheme is run by our General Assembly, and provides a confidential support structure all the way from the time a person is accepted for ministry training, through their years as a student and for the duration of their probationary period. (A good argument might be made that ministers should have a mentor for the whole of their ministry too, but our small pool of ministers would make it difficult to make this a reality).

I have stressed practical, pastoral and interpersonal skills as essential for ministry training. Students are taught about the dynamics of ministry, the practicalities of taking a service, rites of passage and speech and communication skills. They are encouraged to develop and deepen their own spirituality, and to be aware and sensitive to the great diversity to be found in our denomination. They are encouraged, and sometimes required, to attend certain conferences and courses elsewhere: the excellent Facilitation Skills in Ministry event, the Hucklow Summer School and the Ministerial Fellowship Conference are a few examples. And every effort is made to ensure they gain wide experience of leading worship in different Unitarian settings.

It may be noticed that I have referred to ministry training and not Lay Pastor training. Lay Pastor training is different in certain respects but it is still training for ministry. Lay Pastors are not called ministers, with a capital 'M', but they still perform ministry. There are many brands of ministry: as the Unitarian Universalist minister, Gordon McKeeman, writes, 'Ministry is all that we do together' – or as St Paul puts it in I Corinthians 12: 4, there are diversities of gifts but the same spirit. I have also not made reference to the excellent training received by our students who attend Harris Manchester College in Oxford. The context is very different but the commitment to excellence and integrity is the same.

Ministerial training does not end when the student is valedicted and when the probationary period is over. Continuing professional development is an essential requirement for a minister in order to grow and deepen his or her skills.

The motto of Unitarian College is, *Ubi Spiritus Domini, Ibi Libertas*: where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Many men and women have trained in our tradition and we rejoice in our diversity and our spiritual freedom.

The Rev Alex Bradley is Principal of Unitarian College, Manchester, and Minister of Norcliffe Chapel, Styal -- as well as being UCA Chaplain. He writes here in a personal capacity.



THE FUTURE OF MINISTRY

Preparing for a changed world

What kind of Unitarian ministry can we look forward to?

Linda Phillips considers the challenges

Let's begin by considering key abilities needed for successful ministry – what skills enable ministers to support the spiritual dimension to life, while dealing sensitively with people as they really are? Very practical skills are required, among them:

- the ability to keep various tasks on the go at the same time;
- the ability to operate in different ways according to the needs of the situation;
- the ability to communicate with people in their vocabulary, rather than insisting on your own.

I believe the need for these attributes will grow in future. But what other skills are likely to be needed – and how will we prepare our Unitarian ministry for the changing situation?

If you believe, as I do, that ministry should interact with society as it is, rather than as it was, then predicting the shape of spiritual leadership in the future requires that you predict the shape of the society to come. It would be easy to suggest we should simply react to changes as they occur – but that means always playing “catch-up”. We need to be ahead of the game, which is not to suggest that Unitarians should pander to every social whim -- because our responsibilities include trying to make society better.

Recognising that ministry influences, and is in turn influenced by, the society in which it operates, I attempted to find a simple way of predicting the future of religion in Britain (via a google search). It was a tempting quick fix, but ultimately not particularly successful. The most relevant predictor I found was a grid laying out attitudes to organised religion on one axis, and attitudes to spirituality on the other.

The conclusion of this graphic representation was that our future would be characterised by a population that was positive about spirituality, but negative about organised religion. The grid wasn't backed up with documented research, but reading it and thinking about it was still a useful exercise. It would be easy to take a simplistic conclusion like that and apply it to the Unitarian movement, and so derive an apparently well-organised set of predictions about what's needed for our future spiritual leadership. But society, like life, isn't easy to predict.

It is tempting to assume that society is going to be built on the traditional pattern of physical communities of about 150 people. Communities like the village you lived in, your workplace, the church you belong to. But we observe that younger people nowadays are less inclined to belong to physical communities, and that includes worshipping communities. Increasingly, contacts are virtual. When we go out, it's increasingly to

activities other people may be present at, but which aren't community activities – shopping, the cinema etc.

People increasingly work from home, so don't meet others naturally in the course of their working lives. We tend to move more often and longer distances, separating ourselves from friends and relatives. We spend more time in our cars. So it's solitary travel time, and doesn't offer the opportunity for 'train conversations'. A recent survey revealed that 20 per cent of people in Britain say they do not have a satisfactory network of relatives and friends.

I wonder whether the increasing popularity of virtual contact is an attempt to address this need. A friend went to a conference recently and came back with the statistic that 40 per cent of internet traffic in Britain is down not to social networking sites in general, but to Facebook alone. We will all have our own opinions on whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, but if the internet is the way people communicate, then those in ministry are going to have to learn to communicate using the internet. Not just by email, which is in effect a speeded up and more convenient version of old-fashioned correspondence, but in the way people are communicating with each other now.

Recent proposals within our General Assembly (the 'future ministry' project) included a vision of a high-tech ministry, which would involve a minister working in a virtual church, creating worship there, being available pastorally there, and so on. Even that vision is really just a development of current practices. I believe we are going to have to challenge ourselves even more fundamentally.

Pastorally, I believe we are going to face the challenge of helping those who have isolated themselves by working from home, shopping online, and only making friendships virtually. We may need to support them as they re-accustom themselves to being in physical communities. And that may be more than a pastoral challenge. Just as it's part of the role of ministers to communicate with internet-dominated people, so it will be part of the role of ministers to challenge the self-centredness that domination by the internet seems to encourage.

To turn now to another changing area – these days, on average, we live longer. And our longer lives are going to include longer periods of poor health or infirmity. So there will need to be more carers, and (according to the government) with a greater emphasis on the voluntary sector. This will lead to more need for pastoral support -- both for the infirm and for those under the stress of providing care. We are going to need people in ministry who are far more familiar with whatever support mechanisms are available, and who have more specialist training, so that they can provide basic counselling, and who will know how to call on appropriate help from formal networks.

So what about worship? What is called the 'hymn sandwich' (hymn, followed by reading, followed by hymn, etc) is likely to continue for a long time. Like many of my age group, it's what I'm most comfortable with. But worship is changing – as it always has. We discover new ways of worship, and rediscover old ways, like meditation. The ecumenical Alban Institute speculates that two trends will spread from the evangelical wing of



The Rev Linda Phillips

Christianity: more interactive worship, and a reclaiming of rituals like Taize chanting. If that's true, what will be the role of ministry? Will it be more making worship happen rather than leading it? Where will we Unitarians find the challenge we treasure in worship? I believe the 'what' of worship is remarkably consistent, because it responds to our spiritual needs. What's changing is the 'how'.

And what sorts of people will be involved in ministry? Will there be money to pay professional ministry in the way to which we all aspire nowadays, or will we develop part-time or non-stipendiary ministry, at least partly in response to constrained finances?

Probably even more controversially, what about our buildings? At the risk of offending those who are, quite rightly, proud of our

physical heritage, we need to be sure we need those buildings, because they use a big proportion of our resources – financially and in terms of our effort.

I wonder whether our places of worship won't become a charming historical anomaly – not in five or 10 years, but perhaps in 50 or more. Virtual meetings will have become a widespread reality. We could continue with smaller physical meetings in people's homes, and we could hire larger venues when required. And we could use the resources we free up to concentrate on people-based activity – which has to be our priority. Those buildings and the travel to them, rarely by public transport, are hardly a green way of doing business.

The need for buildings *may* change. What is clearly changing are social institutions. Days were when you got married, got a home, and started a family. People still do – but often in a different order. Marriage often isn't seen as a permanent commitment in the way it used to be. Civil partnerships have enabled the demonstration of a commitment between a man and a man or a woman and a woman.

The speculation I read is that social institutions will continue to change, and increasingly rapidly, spurred not just by social change, but also by economic necessity. How will Unitarians react? The superficial answer will be to take Andrew Hill's service-book *Celebrating Life* out and start pencilling in changes. But will we Unitarians accept the changes? If we accept these in the society around us, will we accept them in our own community, in our own ministry? Will our ministry challenge our community, and the society in which we live, to honour others' life choices?

It's predicted that the population of Britain will increase by about 15 per cent to 71 million by 2030. The increase won't be due to migration, because immigration and emigration are expected to be roughly equal. Will there be growth in our Unitarian communities to

match that change? Whether there is or not, we have to assume an increasing demand for ministry, whether that demand is coming from within our community or outside it. If we don't experience an increasing demand, at least in line with the increase in the population, then we've failed.

But what are we going to view as *our* community? The Alban Institute has suggested that worshipping communities are going to have to change their structures as people move to being loosely affiliated, rather than being members. How will our governance respond? Will congregational autonomy be able to adapt and accept that its ministry is going to have to work substantially outside the membership of that congregation if our movement is to survive?

The Alban Institute has also predicted that, following historical precedent, that the waves of 20th Century immigrants to the UK would increasingly integrate into UK society. Logically, that suggests that we non-creedal Unitarians are going to encounter people who come to us relating to more than one religion and more than one culture. The report wondered about the possibility of multi-faith worship – which would not be a giant leap for us, theologically. To respond to that need – not just pastorally, but also spiritually – ministers are going to have to know about other religions, not just intellectually, but emotionally too. But we have to be careful not to lose our identity, there is a danger of just flowing with the tide and becoming something non-Unitarian.

So here's my vision. Not in the next 10 years, but in maybe in 20 or even 50 years, ministry will be entirely different. There will still be ministry. But it won't be delivered by the full-time professionals we recognise today. Those in ministry will be experts in a field now seen as part of ministry -- perhaps in delivering a particular kind of worship, or in the pastoral care of a particular group. And they will do this part-time, along with something else that will bring in money, probably a compatible activity like caring for the infirm. People in ministry won't be geographically tied as they are now, because technology will largely have removed that constraint. They'll be virtually, rather than physically, present.

It's possible the model will require people whose calling is every bit as deep, and who juggle other commitments in parallel with their commitment to ministry. But the structure is comparatively unimportant. What is important is continuing to provide spiritual leadership because we will continue to need it. Because, despite the superficially-secular environment around us, people continue to have a spiritual dimension to their lives.

- *This article is based on a talk given at Unitarian College, Manchester, late last year. The author wishes to acknowledge two primary sources: The Future of Ministry, a short paper by Ian Evison, published by the Alban Institute; and UK Healthy Work: Challenges and Opportunities to 2030, published by BUPA.*

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OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

A faith to come home to

Denise and Graham Birks discovered Unitarianism on a day out in Shrewsbury four years ago. Recently, they described their faith journey to their own congregation at Brook Street Chapel in Knutsford

We hope that our spiritual journey into the Unitarian movement is something you will all be able to relate to; we feel sure many of you will have travelled similar paths.

For most of us, our journey to faith will have begun in childhood, usually led by our parents, perhaps with bed-time prayers or Sunday school. Our grandson Jack springs to mind – he was once overheard saying his prayers – “Dear Jesus, I am very sorry that I keep switching the computer off at the base unit – please help me to follow the right procedures”. Jack was 3½ at the time, but was already starting to be aware of the power of prayer!

For Denise, the journey really started at about the age of 10, when one day she suddenly realised, with horror, that she was mortal and burst into tears at the awareness that there could be a world without her at its centre. As her Mum comforted her with a cuddle, she told her that she could remember feeling exactly the same as a child. She remembered that her father had calmed her fears by telling her to ‘have faith’. Simple words, but they have echoed throughout her life.

Our first church experience together was at a Pentecostal church. We had been invited by friends, who had become born-again Christians. It was a charismatic service: very lively, great hymns, and very appealing to young people (it was a long time ago!). The message from the pulpit was powerful and emotional, and we were drawn to the whole experience. We became quite involved over the next few months, but gradually became aware that, beneath the highly-charged atmosphere, not only were we not growing in faith, but we felt increasingly uncomfortable with what we were hearing, particularly the condemnation of other faiths. And so we drifted away.

Over the next few years we didn’t become involved with any organised religions, but nevertheless our spiritual journey continued, sometimes without us even being aware of it at the time! With the benefit of hindsight, there were many signposts we followed, some leading us forward, and some moving us further away.

There were people we met who inspired us: sometimes people within the ministry; sometimes friends or family quietly displaying their faith in how they lived their lives; sometimes by strangers made famous by their faith - watching the film of Gandhi’s life and the difference one man can make, moved us enormously. At other times, the

difficulties we all have to face, such as bereavement, and on one occasion, the church's lack of support at a very difficult time left us feeling estranged from God, and for many years we would have probably been best described as agnostics.

We drifted for quite a while, but as we reached our 40s, we found ourselves trying to find answers to all the big questions of life – perhaps we were having a mid-life crisis! At the time Graham worked within the Prison Service, and during this period, was fortunate to work with Dorothy Mellor, a liberal Anglican prison chaplain who became a great influence on both of us. She was always willing to listen and debate with us on the questions we were raising. As a result, we started to explore different churches, with varying results, as we tentatively resumed our spiritual journey.



Graham and Denise Birks at Brook Street Chapel.

We remember telling her about a visit to a church, describing the service in detail – the hymns, the processions, the incense, but as we left at the end of the service, we realised that no-one had spoken a single word to us. When we mentioned this to Dorothy she asked – “What did you feel”? Graham replied – “not much really, I’m not even sure that God was there”. Dorothy said – “Oh, God would have been there alright, he was probably at the back, weeping”.

A milestone for us was going to an Anglican church, one Easter Sunday. While the sermon was unequivocally evangelical, and the message given did not sit easily with us, we recognised that the church was a very loving and supportive community. At this stage, we were seeking a greater understanding of the Christian message. We wanted to make an informed decision about whether there really was a space for religion in our lives, and wanted to avoid making another emotional response. The biblical message spelt out by evangelical churches can make a big impression, particularly because its claims of certainty stands out in a world of constant change.

Still describing ourselves as agnostic, we wanted some clear-cut answers! We attended a Christian Starters course; in fact Denise did the course three times! However, the answers only served to raise more questions. We think the turning point for us in becoming Christian, was the realisation that you could not reach a final conclusion based on logic alone. Denise’s mother’s words of comfort spoken to her as a child were right – you have to have faith.

Although we continued to worship at the church for several years, and felt secure in our faith in God, we always knew that our journey wasn't over. We struggled to accept many of the requirements – that the Bible was literally true, and in particular the exclusivity of their Christian message. We also knew that this was not necessarily the view of other Christians. We continued to search, reading countless books and learning of other world faiths. We gradually became more aware that doctrines, creeds and even the Bible itself were not meant to be worshipped, but were tools to help you along the way. Then one day we passed a Unitarian Chapel on a day out in Shrewsbury. It had a notice-board outside which summarised Unitarianism. This is what we read:

The Unitarian path is a liberal religious movement, rooted in the Judaeo-Christian traditions, but open to insights from other world faiths, reason and science: and with a spectrum extending from liberal Christianity through to religious humanism.

When we read this, it was our 'Eureka' moment! From there it was only a short step to Brook Street Chapel. Someone once said that you don't become a Unitarian, you just find out you have always been one!

Is our struggle over? Of course not, but we have eventually learned that faith itself is the journey and not the destination. We have also learned that you have to have some understanding of why you are on the journey, and be able to defend that understanding, to yourself as well as others, with reason. But still, we cannot know, we can only believe in what we feel is right. As Paul said in his Letter to the Corinthians, "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known". In short – we have to have faith.

So, how would we describe ourselves now? Well, we would call ourselves Unitarian Christians, and are now members of the Unitarian Christian Association.

Occasionally we have the privilege of leading services, and this is the message we generally seek to convey:

We would struggle with many of the doctrine and creeds of mainstream Christianity. However, we do believe that in Jesus, we see what we are called to be. We clearly believe that Christianity can still be a positive influence within Unitarianism, because there should be no expectation of anyone having to let go of their culture or heritage.

Being a Unitarian Christian enables us to reflect upon these things in a more flexible and progressive way. We should look to the future, and find new ways to express our theology in a way which is more relevant to our time. Our religion needs to evolve, just as our understanding of our world and ourselves has evolved. The type of Christianity we express can appeal to those who yearn for a non-divisive religion, and should not be incompatible with others faiths. As Unitarians, it is paramount that we always display constructive tolerance and openness towards the sincerely-held beliefs of others.

Denise and Graham Birks are members of Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford in Cheshire, and of the UCA.



BOOK REVIEWS

Mind over matter

Frank Walker grapples with two metaphysical treatises

More than Matter? What Humans Really Are by Keith Ward, (Lion, 2010, pp.224)

Keith Ward, the former Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford and now Professorial Research Fellow at (the formerly Jesuit) Heythrop College, London, argues here for the primacy of mind and consciousness. These rather than matter are the ultimate reality. He seeks to rehabilitate Descartes, and contends that mind and consciousness are different from -- and over and above -- molecules and matter. He says ‘... such a belief is important if you put a great value on individual human experience and responsible moral action’.

He seems to think that value is somehow intrinsic, and yet he also insists ‘there are no actual values unless someone values them’ (p.89).

He attempts to prove his thesis by purely philosophical argument and deliberately rules out appeals to revelation or theological dogma (although as an Anglican priest he admits that he finds a place both for dogma and revelation). He conducts a running argument with his former teacher, Gilbert Ryle, stoutly defending the reality of the mind and of the inner life. He clearly lays out the main philosophical positions and comes down on the side of idealism

He believes that purpose is inescapably present in the universe from the Big Bang onwards, and that questions of purpose must be raised despite the unwillingness of scientists to admit or consider them. He even bravely considers what the purpose of the universe might be – it is, he conjectures, the development of intelligent consciousness. (I am reminded of the late Principal of Unitarian College, Manchester, R.V.Holt, who similarly argued for the centrality of purpose, and that the purpose of the universe was that we should put on personality).

Professor Ward’s vision is optimistic: "The cosmos is not a mindless, unconscious, valueless, purposeless, yet somehow strangely intelligible, mechanism," (p.58). He believes that: "It is not a selfish desire to continue to exist that leads to belief in immortality. It is the impact of the thought that goodness will not triumph, and that the noblest sacrifices will fade into insignificance in an indifferent universe ...

“If value and purpose are primary in the universe, then there must be some possibility of rectification of the ills of this life, space for a fuller development of our feeble moral efforts, and a possibility of a fuller realization of the value of finite beings than seems to be possible in this life. Thus it is deeply rational to hope for a life of the mind beyond the death of the body." (p.207). Many will dismiss this as wishful thinking; many will welcome it as a rational hope.

I am left with the thought that philosophical thinking alone is unlikely to persuade us into religious faith. We need the revelation given us in the lives of Jesus and the saints to inspire

us and lead us on. (By 'revelation' I mean the fact that a good life may reveal to us the possibilities of human life, and in this sense alone am I a believer in revelation). This makes it possible for us, even despite the bleakest accounts of life and the cosmos, to decide to follow Jesus and the saints – and, in the words of the great Unitarian novelist Herman Melville, to 'spread a rainbow over man's disastrous set of sun'.

Professor Ward's style is colloquial, with plenty of jokes, but he demands concentrated attention. He deals fairly and good-humouredly with objections to his own point of view. In considering these deep matters, he admits there is no clear and absolute way of deciding who is correct, which should 'make philosophers relatively modest in their claims and open to the possibility of reasonable disagreement. It may even be quite an intellectual advance to recognize the tentative nature of human guesses about the ultimate nature of reality, and the impossibility of aiming at complete agreement about it.' (p.20). With that eminently Unitarian thought, I conclude.

Why Believe? by John Cottingham (Continuum 2009, pp xiii & 186)

The belief that Professor Cottingham wishes to discuss, to defend, and to persuade us it is not unreasonable to accept, is orthodox Christianity, albeit of a liberal and open variety. It might almost be said he wishes to persuade us into Roman Catholicism, a faith he is a convert to.

John Cottingham is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Reading. He is eirenic in his approach and writes in a very gracious and attractive way, with great respect shown to those who disagree with him and tread a different path. He accepts that religious believers do not possess an 'exclusive passport to heaven'.

He understands Christianity as 'The Way', and although the road is partly lit by reason, it is built on faith. "The religious call is not primarily a call to sign up to a certain metaphysical doctrine, but involves a call for moral growth, a demand for righteousness, a challenge to change one's life." (p. 132).

He argues belief in God is fundamentally hospitable to the idea of genuine objectively normative standards like rationality and goodness, which in the Gospels are expressed as reason and love. His argument for God proceeds from the fact that we recognise values that make a demand upon us, and so they are more than simply human inventions -- although he might grant the force of Keith Ward's statement that 'there are no actual values unless someone values them'.

From this he argues that the basic thesis of traditional theism is true: "that there is a supreme supernatural being who created and conserves the entire fabric of the natural world" (p.182).

Those who advocate alternative views, such as Spinoza, Hume, Don Cupitt and the Buddhists, are treated with great respect.

This is an attractive book, and if anyone could persuade us into the Catholic Church it would be Professor Cottingham.

The Rev Frank Walker is Minister Emeritus of Memorial Church (Unitarian), Cambridge.

Resources for worship

Divine Discontent by Harry Lismer Short (Sebastien Castellio Press, Cambridge & Montmoirat, 2010)

This collection of 25 Prayers by the late Harry Lismer Short, Unitarian minister and a former Principal of Manchester College, Oxford, retain a freshness and relevance despite the fact that most were written more than 50 years ago.

In his introduction, Frank Walker describes Harry Short (who died in 1975) as ‘one of the finest English Unitarian preachers of his day’. These reflective prayers are an eloquent testimony to his gifts – some are for special times (*Sunday morning, Easter*), while others are more general (*Sorrow of Heart, Creativeness*). They would all enliven our current worship.

Copies of the booklet, price £3 including postage, may be obtained from F. Walker, 130 New Road, Haslingfield, Cambridge CB23 1LP. (Email: revfrankwalker@supanet.com).

Jim Corrigan



Sacred Earth by Cliff Reed (Lindsey Press, London, 2010). £9.00.

A new collection of prayers and poems from our leading liberal Christian writer, drawing inspiration from the natural world and encounters with other faiths. A valuable collection, for use in public acts of worship and for personal devotion.

-- JC



Gathering in Prayer: Words for inclusive worship by Roger Courtney (Lindsey Press, London, 2010). £8.00.

Roger Courtney is a song writer connected to the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland in Belfast. Most of these prayers are written to be used responsively, and would work well in a wide range of services across our denomination and at inter-faith services.

-- JC



A Broad-church Communion Prayer-book (Parts 1 & 2) by John Bunyan (2009).

These two volumes were written to mark the 450th anniversary of the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer which formed the basis for the 1662 Book, and draw their inspiration from ‘Catholic, Evangelical, Anglican and Unitarian sources’. The author, himself a Broadchurch Anglican and retired priest living in Australia (and a UCA member!), describes his purpose as ‘to provide an imaginative, revised, flexible form of Holy Communion – that takes into account the Scriptural scholarship and scientific and theological insights of today’. The first volume contains the liturgy, plus psalms and hymns, while the second is commentary. John Bunyan retains the beauty of the original prayers -- his Unitarian influences include King’s Chapel, Boston, and our own Dennis

Wigmore-Beddoes.

John Bunyan has also produced another book: *A Sydney Anglican's 75 Sonnets*. He describes these as 'poems of faith and doubt', and many display great good-humour. All these booklets are available from the author: John Reynolds Bunyan, PO Box N109, Campbelltown North, NSW, Australia 2560. Email: jrbpilgrim@bocnet.com.au . – JC



MAGNET Resource materials

There is no shortage of resources available to anyone who leads worship, and for that reason, it can be difficult to sort through varying levels of quality and the wide range of theological perspectives on offer to find materials that will be of use to anyone of a liberal ethos.

I was pleased recently to encounter MAGNET, which is a quarterly magazine that also offers poster sets, resource packs, booklets and cards through its website: www.ourmagnet.co.uk.

The organisation behind MAGNET has a 23-year history of encouraging and equipping people to take their full place in the church and in society. Its origins are in British Methodism, but the goal is to market the magazine more widely than before to members of other denominations and to those with an interest in spiritual matters but no formal church allegiance.

It is at all times, considered, informed, broad-minded and liberal in its content. It has strong links with the Women's Network of the Methodist Church. Unitarians and Free Christians of all shades would find that very little, if any, adaptation is required for use in worship. I commend it unreservedly to anyone who has responsibility for compiling and leading worship, and encourage its use throughout the movement, including for private devotions.

Jeff Gould



The Unitarian Christian Association aims to provide a place where liberal Christianity can be explored within our General Assembly. Have you considered joining us?

Details for how to join are to be found inside the back cover of this edition.

A sacramental meditation

By Lucy Harris

BREAD AND WINE

A Theory - From *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, by Douglas Adams, published 1980, based on current science:

“The Total Perspective Vortex derives its picture of the whole Universe on the principle of extrapolated matter analyses.

“To explain – since every piece of matter in the Universe is in some way affected by every other piece of matter in the Universe, it is in theory possible to extrapolate the whole of creation – every sun, every planet, their orbits, their composition and their economic and social history from, say, one small piece of fairy cake.”

A Practice based on the Theory –

Meditation over the Evening Embers, Lucy Harris, November 2005

This little bit of wine: God with us

God’s blood; Life’s blood

Life’s lifeblood poured out for us

All of God present here, as in a hologram, in this wine – as much as in anything else

This wine

Containing, intrinsically, the knowledge and understanding of all the laws of the universe

Containing, intrinsically, the knowledge and understanding of all human pain and dying

And violence

And poverty

And this wine also knowing and sharing the knowledge of the power of redemption, of healing, through love

Nothing so big or problematic that it cannot be mastered by God, by grace.

This little bit of wine:

And bread:

God with us.

In our hands then our mouths and heads

The lifeblood of Life with us, given for us through its existing, its being : as being is no more and no less than Love manifest.

I have separated myself so much from You, God.

In taking in this wine, this bread, this breath; in taking in these sensations, this knowing; in taking in this wide-sweeping vista that surrounds me and seeps into me, I reconnect with You –

And must therefore, in the instant, disconnect from all the rest: in order to say, and deliver

All that I am, Father; All that I am.

Lucy Harris is a UCA member who lives near Salisbury

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

17 – 18 June: The Power of the Word: Poetry, Theology and Life.

International conference, keynote speakers include: Prof Gianni Vattino (Univ of Turin), Prof Helen Wilcox (Univ of Bangor) and Prof Jay Panini (Middlebury College, Vermont). Heythrop College, University of London, Kensington Square, London W8 5HN. Tel: 020 7795 6600. www.heythrop.ac.uk

Sat 16th July: Unitarian Christian Association - 20th Anniversary Celebrations. Oldham Unitarian Chapel, Connaught Street, Oldham OL8 1EB. www.oldhamunitarians.org.uk

Sat 29th October: Unitarian Christian Association - 2011 Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture. Memorial Church (Unitarian), Cambridge CB1 1JW. www.cambridgeunitarian.org

***The Unitarian Christian Association
is an affiliated society of the General Assembly
of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches,
which has as its Object:***

*'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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