



THE INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians



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THE INQUIRER

The Unitarian and Free Christian Paper

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From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

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Inquiring Words...

Atonement theology assumes that we were created in some kind of original perfection. We now know that life has emerged from a single cell that evolved into self-conscious complexity over billions of years. There was no original perfection.

If there was no original perfection, then there could never have been a fall from perfection. If there was no fall, then there is no such thing as 'original sin' and thus no need for the waters of baptism to wash our sins away. If there was no fall into sin, then there is also no need to be rescued. How can one be rescued from a fall that never happened? How can one be restored to a status of perfection that he or she never possessed? So most of our Christology today is bankrupt.

Many popular titles that we have applied to Jesus, such as 'saviour', 'redeemer', and 'rescuer', no longer make sense.

John Shelby Spong

Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy: A Journey into a New Christianity Through the Doorway of Matthew's Gospel



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In his new book **Bert Clough** describes his Unitarian journey

On being a lapsed atheist

Dancing with Mortality

Reflections of a Lapsed Atheist

Bert Clough



‘Christ without God’, an excerpt from *Dancing with Mortality: Reflections of a Lapsed Atheist*: The late Margaret Hamer, a member of the Bury St Edmunds Unitarian congregation, described herself as a religious humanist. She was relieved to encounter God as neither He nor She, but more commonly as something unknowable, or a profound silence.

In Margaret’s words:

To claim simultaneously that a supreme being exists beyond both our language and our comprehension, and yet to persist in attempting to delimit it within terms such as father/mother, creator/goddess, seems contradictory to me.

There are probably as many Unitarian views on God as there are Unitarians. They might describe God as a universal father or mother; or as a unifying and life-giving spirit; or as the source of all being within which the creative process is unfolding.

Some might even be theological theists, believing that God is the highest Being, omnipotent and omnipresent. Hamer, however, felt that she existed in the limbo of doubt – the ‘grand perhaps’. She felt she was in the no-man’s-land, between the certainties of believers and atheists, many of whom struck her as crusaders dedicated to annihilating the opposition.

RS Thomas, that great poet and Anglican priest of the Welsh hills, felt that it is easier to say what God is not, rather than what God is: ‘the great absence in our lives, the empty silence within’.

This is the concept of ‘Via Negativa’ enunciated by St Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. We must content ourselves with considering ‘the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does’. As stated in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:

“There are probably as many Unitarian views on God as there are Unitarians.”

We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

If God is to be defined in terms of what he is not, then how are we to understand the role of Jesus Christ? The word ‘Christ’ means ‘The Anointed One’ who is the saviour and redeemer of the Jewish people, and mankind as a whole.

Was he a healer, a magician, a prophet, a teacher, a political reformer, the saviour of the world, the

Messiah?

That Unitarian deep thinker, the Rev Cliff Reed, regards Jesus as a man and a religious symbol who is constantly gnawing away at our collective and individual consciousness. But what if we strip away the supernatural qualities of Jesus Christ – born of a virgin, walking on water, raising people from the dead, being resurrected and sitting on the right side of God? Christ then becomes human flesh. And what if we remove his spiritual power as a saviour and redeemer of mankind? We then take the Christ out of Jesus Christ and are left with the man Jesus: a teacher and practitioner of supreme, sublime, universal love. We then, perhaps, have moved from Christian belief to religious humanism, both of which straddle contemporary Unitarianism.

Unitarian minister, the Rev Anthony Howe, looks at the

Continued on page 4 >

Separate Jesus from Christians

Continued from page 3 >

issue differently, and from a more Christian perspective. He says that when he looks at Jesus he is not, in fact, seeing God. Instead, he sees a reflection of God – perhaps a perfect reflection – and in this sense he sees Jesus as divine:

What I deny is the deity of Jesus. I don't believe Jesus is God. This is why, among other reasons, I'm a Unitarian. In Jesus, I see the Christ, the anointed, the chosen. When I say that, I mean that I draw a distinction between the human Jesus and the Christ.

Faith as a human construct

The Carmelite nun and mystic, St Theresa of Avila, saw a strong connection between ourselves and Christ. We have the power to reflect his compassion and continue his good works. We can be his instruments on earth:

Yours are the eyes with which Christ looks out his compassion to the world.

The theologian Don Cupitt of the *Sea of Faith* movement believes that the question of whether God exists outside the religious requirement is of no religious interest. To him, religious faith is merely a human construct. Perhaps the link between humans and God is simply love: *God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him (John 4.16).*

That love can be understood in the life and teachings of Jesus. But first we need to separate Jesus from the uncomfortable history of the Christian church; from the Crusades and Inquisitions to colonialism led by the bullet and the Bible. It is a legacy which disfigured the Christianity embarked on in His name. To understand the authentic Jesus, perhaps we need to end our obsession with his crucifixion and not roll the boulder from his tomb. In the words of the Unitarian minister, the Rev Sarah Tinker: *Resurrection and atonement of sins are not a theology that speaks to me. But what does speak loud and clearly is Jesus' mythic quality, combined with his earthly reality, this inspirational being, who left us a hugely potent legacy contained in fragments of text, reminding us, again and again, of the power of love.*

Radical Christians perhaps should develop an unselfish and disinterested love of their fellow beings, a love that does not ask for anything in return. Good actions can no longer be performed because we know that God is watching what we do or because we expect rewards in heaven. We must strive to attain a spiritual consciousness, because in doing so we lose the old ego, the part of us that fears death. As

Cupitt says:

Quickly we must die to death, escape from this natural ego that clings so hopelessly to life, and enter upon a new life and divine form of consciousness disinterested, universal, non-egotistical and free.

The conundrum is that Christian orthodoxy proclaims Christ as God Incarnate. It is an aspect of an essentially Trinitarian God who took human form to effect the salvation of humankind but, while doing so, remained uniquely God. Perhaps this conundrum is exemplified in the crucifixion of Jesus:

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, a darkness came over all the land. And then Jesus cried out in a loud voice 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'

If Jesus were part of an all-knowing, all-loving, Godhead, why should he fear abandonment? Could this in fact be Jesus, the human, in despair, asking himself why humankind has forsaken the path to universal love and moral perfection? Is this what we should be thinking as we look up at the cross, as opposed to feeling guilty for his supreme sacrifice for our sins?

Where does Jesus sit?

Perhaps we all have a choice: between a supernatural Christ sitting at the right hand of a supernatural God whom we worship, and the sublime teacher of universal love, Jesus, sitting at our right side, whom we struggle to follow.

Let me end with the words of Richard Holloway, former Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland:

If there is that which we call God, and God is more than the projection of our own best values and longing for transcendence, then God must be involved in all our moral struggles ... so that the attempt by humans to discover a morality apart from God might, paradoxically, be God's greatest triumph; and our attempt to live morally as though there were no God might be the final test of faith.



Bert Clough

Bert Clough is vice chair of Manchester College Oxford Chapel Society.

I was still chuckling at a cartoon-strip I'd seen in the January edition of the satirical (and scurrilous) magazine *Viz* (I have low-minded nephews!) when my review copy of Bert Clough's book arrived. The *Viz* cartoon-strip features a lad called Ivan Jelical who sees it as his mission to bring everyone to Jesus. His first task is to convert the atheists, so he attends a meeting of the Confederation of Atheists and Unbelievers presided over by Richard Dawkins.

'What do we want?' shouts Dawkins.

'A godless and meaningless universe!' replies the crowd.

'When do we want it?'

'Now!'

However, after reading them a few verses from 'Palpitations 2' (!) Ivan gets them all to see the error of their ways and they immediately renounce their atheism.

Bert Clough's lapse from atheism wasn't so quick or so dramatic. In the preface to his book, he tells us that he was for most of his life an 'unthinking atheist', but about 20 years ago, finding himself 'trapped in some existentialist torpor', he realised that he didn't want 'a godless and meaningless universe', but 'another dimension' to his life, something that would give support to the humanism which underpinned his 'long-held social and political progressive views'. He was fortunate to discover such support in Meadow Unitarian Chapel in Godalming, where the minister at the time, the Rev Dr David Usher (to whom the book is dedicated), taught him that 'authentic faith meant that you are encouraged to take your own unique experience in life and to craft it into your own understanding which makes sense to you as an individual and sustains you in times of crisis'.

Bert's book is an account of just how he has fashioned such an understanding and how, without necessarily adopting conventional theism, he has at least found meaning in the 'godless and meaningless universe'.

The book's 15 sections are based on sermons given at various times in Meadow Chapel and in the chapel of Manchester College, Oxford. But the word 'sermons' is somewhat misleading, as is Bert's humble claim to be an 'amateur Unitarian lay preacher'. They may have started as sermons, but they have been developed into something far richer and much longer. And there is nothing amateurish about them either. These are perfectly crafted, beautifully written, eclectic, intellectual – but accessible – explorations of what it means to be a human being, and what it means to live a life of integrity, happiness and value in the face of our transience.

The book's title is illuminating. Bert is 'dancing' with mortality. He's not lamenting it or suggesting ways of overcoming it (by postulating a life after death, for instance). Instead, he's embracing it, moving with it, accepting its rhythms, and admitting that, eventually, the music will

end. What is more, he acknowledges that he shares the floor with some remarkable and inspiring dancers, who have given him reason and confidence to continue to stay with the music. Some of these figures will be familiar to Unitarians. Jesus, the Buddha, Mohandas Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, and Norbert Capek, all make an appearance on the dancefloor, and Bert's account of Capek's life, ministry, and martyrdom, along with his explanation of the origin, administration and meaning of the Flower Communion Service (Chapter 10) is, without doubt, the best thing I've ever read on the subject.

Other figures, like the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day, the Protestant martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the unaffiliated mystic, Simone Weil, may not be quite so familiar to Unitarians, but Bert introduces them (and others) to us, and invites us to dance along with them in our common search for meaning and value.

I read the other day about the so-called hagiographical proof of the existence of God – the idea that saintly figures point us towards a deity. Bert's book seems, perhaps unconsciously, to suggest something similar.

I have two small quibbles. An index to give the reader an easy way of locating the inspiring characters and quotations the book contains would be useful. I would also have liked a few pictures of Bert's fellow-dancers, especially the less well-known ones whose faces might not be so easy to conjure up! However, these are minor issues. The book itself is extremely well-produced and a joy to hold and to read. It is the book to give to your friends who want to know something about the Unitarian approach to spiritual matters.

It is also the ideal text for use in congregational and group discussion. It is one of the best and most significant books to come from a Unitarian pen in a long time and I recommend it unreservedly.

Dancing with Mortality: Reflections of a Lapsed Atheist can be ordered for £10 (including packaging/postage) by emailing Bert Clough: b.clough947@gmail.com
ISBN: 1838169504

The Rev Bill Darlison is an author and retired Unitarian minister living in Pontefract.

EC candidate interviews

There are four openings on the Unitarian General Assembly's Executive Committee, necessitating an election to choose among these five candidates. Ballots and information packs were sent out to congregational secretaries last week. Jo James was co-opted onto the EC two years ago and is the sole incumbent in the race.

John Bates

Age: 70

Unitarian membership: New Unity, London

How long have you been a Unitarian? Member at Cambridge Unitarian Church from 1991 then Unity Church Islington from 2008 and of New Unity CIO since its formation in 2015.

Why would you like to be a member of the Executive Committee (EC)? I want to help more people find the Unitarian way of celebrating and reverencing life, love and community.

What is your most relevant previous experience and what particular strengths/skills would you bring? I have 40 years of experience as a business school educator and company founder, director and most recently as a non-executive director, supporting senior management without becoming embroiled in operational matters. As chair at New Unity, I have used these skills to help create a more sustainable, and growing congregation.



How do you believe is the best way to help our movement grow? Having a clear strategy that empowers congregations and staff to deploy our resources of money, physical assets and particularly our time and energy towards agreed goals is central to our future. I can help encourage the development of that strategy.

What ideas do you have for ensuring the financial health of the movement in the long term? A challenge for faith-based organisations with deep historical roots is that they can become a hostage to their past. Aligning the movements resources and capabilities with agreed goals may require some hard decisions. I can help us make decisions in a clear and collaborative way without compromising our spiritual purpose.

What, specifically, are the areas in which you are most interested in contributing to the EC?

As a movement, I feel we should strive to be greater than the sum of our parts, retaining all the vigour of our diversity and our localised autonomy, whilst working together towards a common vision of growth. I would like to contribute in strategy development, financial management and management development.

Describe yourself in one word: Effective.

Simon Hall

Age: 57

Unitarian membership: Leicester Unitarians, Great Meeting Chapel since 2012. Member of the Vestry Committee since 2014. Northampton Unitarians between 2014 and 2018 (bi-congregational). Member of the Committee.

How long have you been a Unitarian? I have been a Unitarian since I joined the Leicester congregation, 9 years ago, but I have always held what I now recognise to be the core Unitarian values of freedom, reason and tolerance.

Why would you like to be a member of the Executive Committee (EC)? I want to bring my life and business experience to support the changes and challenges that lie ahead for our movement, offering alternative visions and ideas for the future.

What is your most relevant previous experience and what particular strengths/skills would you bring? My business background as a trainer, project manager and customer account manager gives me the practical people-skills to support effective change and growth with sensitivity and empathy. My work as a worship leader and congregational committee member helps me understand varied spiritual and cultural needs within and between congregations.**How do you believe is the best way to help our movement grow?**



An incredible degree of talent and passion runs through our membership: let's harness this to communicate a clear vision of how Unitarianism can help satisfy contemporary spiritual needs. Communication is key: we must seek ways to reach the widest audience using all available channels, including marketing and social media.

What ideas do you have for ensuring the financial health of the movement in the long term? Let's be brave and ask more of our own members on a regular basis; and let's think creatively about alternative and radical initiatives for fundraising. We should not, for example, be afraid to think critically regarding the suitability and sustainability of some of our costly buildings.

What, specifically, are the areas in which you are most interested in contributing to the EC? I want to review the future needs of Unitarianism and the way it supports those seeking spiritual fulfilment; and to help define our future, however challenging it may appear. Above all, I want to offer practical help to ensure our movement remains sustainable, meaningful, and nurturing for generations to come.

Describe yourself in one word: Visionary

Celia Margaret Cartwright

Age: 69

Unitarian membership: Associate member of the Unitarian General Assembly, member of the Women's League, not currently a member of a congregation. Tutor on the Worship Studies Course, and Treasurer of the Unitarian Peace Fellowship

How long have you been a Unitarian? 65 years

Why would you like to be a member of the Executive

Committee (EC)? I want to support the General Assembly, as it has supported me, and as president I have experienced EC and see this as a continuation of support for the denomination.

What is your most relevant previous experience and what particular strengths/skills would you bring?

I have experienced the denomination in so many different ways, from congregant in many congregations, to lay preacher, student to minister which has given me a breadth of understanding of the denomination and the spectrum that is Unitarianism. This knowledge I believe will be useful within the Executive committee.



How do you believe is the best way to help our movement grow? I believe we need to listen to each other far more than we do. I believe we need to be more willing to embrace our common ground and celebrate our differences rather than polarising into different groups. Enabling each other, learning from each other that all our beliefs are important.

What ideas do you have for ensuring the financial health of the movement in the long term? My skills do not lie in the area of finance, however I shall listen, learn and be unafraid to question the spending of our resources.

What, specifically, are the areas in which you are most interested in contributing to the EC? It has always been my desire to see more unity in our movement. That we are a group of autonomous congregations is a fact, but I want every member of those congregations to know and feel part of the whole Assembly.

Describe yourself in one word: Passionate

Jenny Jacobs

Age: 64

Unitarian membership: St Saviourgate, York

How long have you been a Unitarian?

Four years.

Why would you like to be a member of the Executive Committee (EC)? I want

to support Unitarianism and introduce it to a wider audience. I wish I'd known about it years ago but it seems to be one of the world's best-kept secrets.

What is your most relevant previous experience and what particular strengths/skills would you bring? I've been a Trustee of the Progressive Christianity Network for the past five years. I'm a good communicator, and work hard for the causes I believe in. I've campaigned for the Green Party and have been secretary at York Unitarians since last September.



How do you believe is the best way to help our movement grow? I think we need a much higher profile. I don't have a magic answer to how this can be achieved. More use of social media, more boosting of posts, more press releases may help; also leafletting potential visitors/members in their workplaces (offices, factories, universities) with details of services and events.

What ideas do you have for ensuring the financial health of the movement in the long term? A healthy, growing membership is our best option. Encouraging legacies from our current members could play a part – many charitable organisations do this. Ethical investment is of course essential.

What, specifically, are the areas in which you are most interested in contributing to the EC? I would hope to raise our profile, link with other organisations with similar aims, grow the membership and thus secure our long-term future.

Describe yourself in one word: Hopeful.

Jo James

Age: 54

Unitarian membership: Mill Hill Chapel Leeds

How long have you been a Unitarian? About 16 years

Why would you like to be a member of the Executive

Committee? I've been co-opted within the EC this year and want to continue to contribute positively to a new spirit emerging within the movement at a time of extraordinary challenge.

What is your most relevant previous experience and what particular strengths/skills would you bring? In my ministry I've been very closely involved with dynamic phases of change-resistance into a period of some uncertainty, and on towards stability and sustainable growth. I bring resilience and curiosity to engage openly and honestly with people, considering discussion across difference a Unitarian strength, not a weakness.

How do you believe is the best way to help our movement grow? I think we have to re-establish our legacy of dissent; prove that we are an alternative to superficial and competitive



culture, a place of retreat, of spiritual nourishment and nurture. Emerson said, 'preach to the spirit and the people will come', I think that is right.

What ideas do you have for ensuring the financial health of the movement in the long term? We must re-align our financial priorities urgently to reflect more accurately our values by ethical investment and divestment from fossil fuels. We should realise our potential for cultural provision, and unlock more imaginatively the resources within our congregations and districts.

What, specifically, are the areas in which you are most interested in contributing to the EC? Navigating transformation during a time of great uncertainty. I am interested in applying creativity and imagination to re-invigorate the deep roots of our tradition.

Describe yourself in one word: Chwilfrydig (a Welsh word meaning 'curious')

Derek McAuley asks readers
to get involved

Stand against religious oppression

Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) is something that Unitarians have always been active in promoting – for themselves but also for others. The British Government has identified FoRB as a ‘priority’ issue for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). There are, therefore, opportunities to influence Government on concerns that congregations and individuals may have. I would highlight a number of current matters worth pursuing and issue a ‘Call to Action’.

In China the oppression of the 11 million mostly Muslim Turkic Uighurs in the western Xinjiang region has seen significant human rights abuses. According to independent estimates, more than a million men and women have been detained in a vast network of camps, which China says exist for ‘re-education’. Human rights groups say the government has gradually stripped away the religious and other freedoms of the Uighurs, culminating in an oppressive system of mass surveillance, detention, indoctrination, and even forced sterilisation. According to accounts obtained by the BBC in this month, women are being systematically raped, sexually abused and tortured. The Government is resisting efforts by the House of Lords to amend the post-Brexit trade bill and give British courts a role in determining whether a country is committing genocide. A judicial determination would require a review of any bilateral trade agreement with China, because of its abuses against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, and other regimes accused of genocide.

This issue was highlighted on Holocaust Memorial Day. In the last few years, there have been mass atrocities meeting the legal definition of genocide, including those perpetrated by Daesh in Iraq (see below); by the Myanmar military against the Rohingyas and by Boko Haram and Fulani militia against Christians in Nigeria. It is argued that the UK is not effectively fulfilling its duties under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention). Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) have called on the Pakistani authorities to end their persecution of the Ahmadiyya religious minority, now extending across borders, following an attempt by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) to shut down the website of the Ahmadis’ US-based community. Other actions

have included issuing notices to Google and Wikipedia to remove ‘sacrilegious content’. This will undoubtedly affect the UK, where the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community has its world headquarters.

Also relating to Pakistan, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Pakistani Minorities has launched an inquiry into the abduction, forced conversions and forced marriages of religious minority girls and women in Pakistan, which reportedly affects about 1,000 girls and women, mainly Christian and Hindus.

In France, issues have been raised in relation to a new bill ‘Consolidating Respect for the Principles of the Republic’. This proposal came about after the murder of a French schoolteacher and other attacks linked to the Charlie Hebdo cartoons. There are fears that this legislation will encroach on fundamental rights which have been raised by both the French Protestant Federation and the French Episcopal Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The UK Government is being urged to ensure that Christian, Yezidis and other minority communities displaced by Daesh can return safely to their homes in northern Iraq by working with the Iraqi authorities, the international community and non-governmental organisations to provide safety, security and prosperity.

The prime minister in December appointed Fiona Bruce MP as special envoy for freedom of Religion and Belief. If you wish to raise your concerns about any of these issues you can write to your MP or directly to Dominic Rabb MP, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs at King Charles Street, London SW1A 2AH or email fcdo.correspondence@fcdo.gov.uk

Derek McAuley is chair of the British Chapter of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) and a former Chief Officer of the Unitarian General Assembly.



Seek snowdrops of hope

My wife Sue spent the last Sunday of January making 'St Brigid's Crosses' for friends and family. Charlie the dog even got one to chew on. It's a small cross normally woven from rushes; in this case it was coloured straws. It has four arms and woven into a square in the middle. 1 February was 'St Brigid's Day' one of the patron saints of Ireland. This festival was formerly the Pagan festival Imbolc and marked the beginning of Spring. Many still celebrate it this way, Sue is one of them. The Goddess Brigid was originally one of the 'Tuatha De Danann' and was adopted by The Christians in Ireland.

So traditionally St Brigid's Day is the beginning of Spring. Although there have been some signs of this, the weather is protesting. February 2 officially marked the end of the Christmas Season with Candlemas. (This was always the end of Christmas and not Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas.) The Church of England actually announced that people could keep their decorations up until Candlemas this year in an attempt to fend off the January blues. We are living through unprecedented times after all and I know an awful lot of folk were grateful for this.

Snowdrops are everywhere

There were other signs of hope, suggesting the end of winter and the beginning of a new spring. On 1 February Stephen Lingwood, minister in Cardiff, posted on Twitter 'February will be better than January. March will be better than February'. I had the same feeling that morning. I saw small signs of hope around, new shoots coming through. The snowdrops are everywhere – symbols of hope. Legend has it that they appeared after Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden. Eve was about to give up hope that winter would ever end, but an angel transformed snowflakes into snowdrops, revealing that winter would eventually end. The flower is linked to the purification associated with Candlemas as the old rhyme goes: 'The Snowdrop, in purest white array, first rears her head in Candlemas day'. I have seen other signs of hope in this long winter. The vaccines continue. Many have received theirs now. We are not at the end of this – of course not – but maybe the beginning of the end. February 2 was also Groundhog Day another measure of how long the winter will be. I know most of us feel like we have been living through a version of that classic movie. Remember that eventually that day does come to end and Bill Murray, in the form of the character Phil Connors is transformed. He even gets the

FROM NOTHING TO EVERYTHING

By Danny Crosby



girl – Andie McDowell. There are signs of hope all around us.

Sadly bad news, the groundhog Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow. This, according to the tradition, means six more weeks of winter.

Seeds are waiting

This is not the end of winter, but maybe it's the beginning of the end or at least the end of the beginning. There are seeds of hope being planted and there are new shoots all around us. Hope springs eternal and we do not seem too far from spring. The seeds are there beneath the earth, waiting to give birth.

Maybe there are lessons in the patience of seeds as we wait for the spring of rebirth from this awful virus. They lay buried, surrendered to the process that is to come, when they will flower and flourish for all to share. Like those seeds there is so much buried within us waiting to be born. May we nurture those signs of hope.

There are many dark days to come – of course there are – but there is hope beyond this time. It grows in our hearts and souls. That doesn't mean there is not horror and destruction, but the horror in the present moment must not stop us seeing that there is goodness in our time and place. There is so much goodness and amazing work going on all around us.

We must make it so

I was thinking of this as I looked at the lovely Brigid's Cross Sue gave to me and to others. She had done something similar, offering crystals at Christmas. Those crystals that made little rainbows out of light in our homes – another symbol of hope. Life is tough right now; it does feel like Groundhog Day at times. There is much suffering, but that is not all. There is also much hope. I am seeing it in nature. February is better than January and March will be better than February. Stephen is correct, but we have to make it so.

Chief Officer **Elizabeth Slade**
discusses the thinking behind 'the
Unitarians' new website

New GA website is launched

What was the thinking behind the new website? Did you look at it as more than a style update?

Society needs what we offer more than ever, but our old website was a barrier to getting our message across to new people. It seemed to be primarily aimed at people who are already Unitarian 'insiders' – though there were some good nuggets of info and resources hosted there of course.

So the big change is one of positioning – the website is created to reflect the culture of Britain today, where a great many people have grown up without an experience of belonging to a faith group, but where a growing number are looking for more meaning than a secular culture can provide. So it shows the role that our congregations can play in supporting people to live meaningful lives of love and connection, and deepen their spiritual lives. It may sound strange to those who have devoted many decades to nurturing their congregation, but turning up to a church on a Sunday morning is a radical, counter-cultural act. I hope that we can be part of making this kind of belonging the norm – and the new website is a small step towards that.

The site was designed with a set of 'not yet Unitarian' characters in mind, representative of the type of people we may wish to attract to play an active role in a congregation.

The design also reflects that many more people use social media than when the previous website was made; the way that people use the internet has changed a lot in recent years.

How did the process work?

I started by speaking to branding experts who would understand our context, and when I met with Charlie Waterhouse and Clive Russell from 'This Ain't Rock & Roll', it was clear that they understood us, and were excited by our mission. They are the agency behind Extinction Rebellion's design, which felt important not just because XR had such a big impact, but because of it being a decentralised movement, with the designs put into the hands of everyone to use locally.

We recruited a steering group from across the movement, aiming to get different perspectives and experiences of Unitarianism represented. The steering group first met in

March 2020, so all of this work has been done remotely. We had a series of meetings for Charlie and Clive to understand Unitarianism, our history, our present, the hope of our future. They also joined several sessions at 2020's Being Together events, to help them to soak up more understanding of who we are.

We had several rounds of development discussions, with initial ideas and design options being shared, before settling on one path, and refining it further.

Charlie and Clive presented the design work to the Executive Committee in September. After that, we dived into the work of building the website.

How did you decide what from the old website would stay and what would go?

We started from scratch, identifying what the ideal site would need. We thought through what information different types of visitors would be seeking, and then how to present this in a succinct way. It wouldn't have made sense to do a 'copy paste' from the old site, but of course the information and ideas have fed in to shape the new site.

What were the most important things to get across about Unitarians?

We want people who don't know about us yet to feel welcome, whatever their background, and to know that we're looking for people to come and be part of building our future.

We also wanted to make it clear that each congregation is different – and that this is a healthy thing! Our decentralised nature, as well as our focus on equality and freedom of choice are things that many people don't associate with religion, and so emphasising these gives a chance to show what's important to us, and chime with the many people who have been disengaged with religion. To meet people's search for meaning, there have been

the unitarians



Website is just the start

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many new spiritual gatherings and products springing up in recent years (from meditation apps, to groups like Sunday Assembly) and it felt important to show that we're not a flash in the pan, but have a deep rooted history.

How do you see it serving Unitarians and their groups?

The 'news' and 'what's happening' sections will be a useful place for people to come to see what local and national events are happening. There is also a list of all the online services that are happening, so people can find other congregations to visit – we know that many people are finding a silver lining of lockdown is to be able to try out other Unitarian services.

And we've already had more people sign up to the GA's uni-news newsletter in the week since the website launched than we had in the preceding few months – so more people are connecting with our wider community. We hope that more people who encounter the website will find their way to a congregation.

For most people though, local comes first, and so congregations' own websites, social media and newsletters will be more important to most current Unitarians.

There are also incredible riches in the 'resources' section – many digitised Lindsey Press publications, noteworthy sermons, and other historic documents – and of course all the usual information about our constitution, how we work etc.

What is yet to come with the GA's rebranding project?

The GA website is just the first step. There will be simpler

website templates that congregations can use locally, something that will be relatively easy to use 'out of the box', and there will also be design elements available to those congregations that already have a good website, so they can choose to add elements to show they are part of the wider Unitarian family.

There are also templates for posters, letters, and other printed materials – all adaptable for local use, and with clear guidelines on how to use them to best effect.

How do you hope congregations/groups will use the new branding?

One thing that became clear very early in the design process was that there is no point imagining that each congregation will want to look the same. Part of our strength is in our diversity, and the whole approach to the design reflects that – we wanted people to be able to reflect their own local identity. So at the congregation level, there will be choices to be made about colours, patterns and fonts from a 'menu' that will all work together. The idea is that this work will make it easy for congregations to create good-looking materials that will be inviting to more people, in a way that allows freedom and flexibility.

Of course, it's up to congregations and groups to use the designs as they wish to – some will want to adopt elements immediately, and others may not, and that's totally fine!

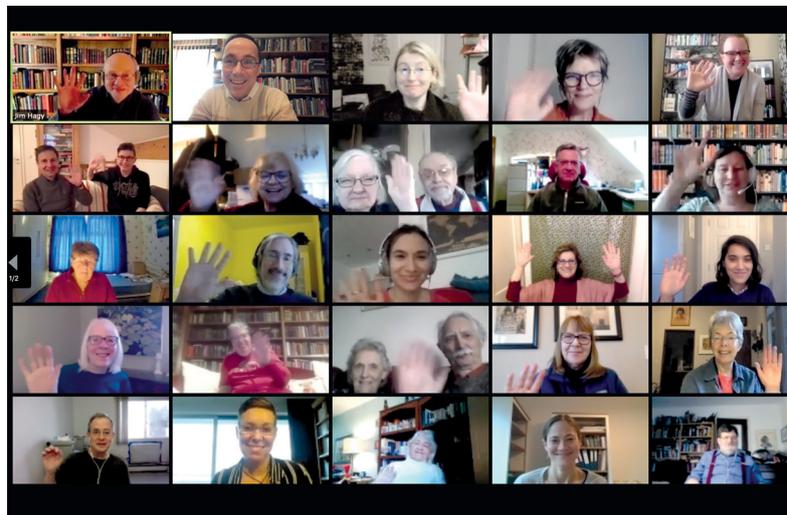
**Next Inquirer: an interview with 'This Ain't Rock 'n' Roll'.
GA website: www.unitarian.org.uk**

Unitarians enjoy coffee across continents

On the afternoon of 5 December, the North Shore Unitarian Church in Chicago organised one of a series of get-togethers for Unitarians across the world. Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians joined alongside our fellow UK Unitarians from Bury and Rosslyn Hill. Appropriately enough, our current building, the Church of the Divine Unity, bears a striking resemblance to North Shore's fellow Unitarian congregation in Chicago, the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Unity Temple*.

All congregations present introduced themselves; who they were, their building and minister (if they have either!), their general outlook and the nature of their community, and how they've been managing in one of the strangest years on record. We were a wide mix, encompassing Germany, Mexico, Switzerland, Chicago, and the UK. All were united by their commitment to their communities and determination to get through this challenge.

One of the unexpected upsides to this year has been the breaking down of geographical barriers between Unitarian fellowships and groups. When we can meet



Shown above: Some participants in 'Coffee across Continents'. Photo provided by Louise Reeve.

by sitting in our living rooms with a mug of coffee and Zooming, we can experience connections we might never have come across in earlier days. That said, I hope I'll one day visit North Shore's remarkable building – and they are welcome to visit us too!

You can read more about the 'Unity' buildings here: <https://tinyurl.com/55upzakv>

Louise Reeve

Bible group offers online talks

In March the Unitarian & Free Christian Bible Discussion Group, which meets on Zoom each Monday at 6.30pm, celebrates its one-year anniversary. The discussion format is very much appreciated, as it allows everyone to have their say, whatever their beliefs or level of Bible knowledge, but there is also an appetite for more specialist presentations of knowledge and ideas. So, we've come up with something new: a series of Bible Talks between Lent and Pentecost. The talks have been arranged to fit, sometimes loosely, with dates in the Christian calendar, so we have talks for Holy Week, Ascension Day and Pentecost. (One marking Lent was held on 17 February.)

Stephen Lingwood is giving our Holy Week Bible talk on Tuesday 30 March, 8-9pm. His title is 'Prophecy and Protest'. To attend this Bible talk, click on this link: <https://tinyurl.com/86jgv79m>

The Rev Maria Pap is giving Our Ascension Day Bible talk on 13 May, 8-9pm. To attend, click on this link: <https://tinyurl.com/13mac5br>

Our Pentecost Bible talk is by the Rev Sheena Gabriel



Shown above: (l-r) Stephen Lingwood, Maria Pap and Sheena Gabriel will offer talks on the Bible.

on Friday 21 May, 7.30-8.30pm. To attend, click on this link: <https://tinyurl.com/16lgtj4s>

We very much hope these Bible talks will become a regular fixture, not just in the Easter period, but throughout the Christian calendar. This is a great opportunity to invite friends who are not part of the Unitarian & Free Christian movement. See you there!

Francis Elliot-Wright