



THE INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians



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ever-present question

THE INQUIRER

The Unitarian and Free Christian Paper

Established in 1842, The Inquirer is the oldest nonconformist religious newspaper.

“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.”

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

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GA response to BLM

Unitarian General Assembly responds to the Black Lives Matter protests.

Unitarians recognise the worth and dignity of all people, and one of our objectives as a movement is 'the service of humanity'. We support human equality and oppose racism. We stand for the values of tolerance and inclusivity.

Many of us have been deeply shocked and saddened by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and stand in solidarity with those seeking justice. Additionally, we recognise the many killings of Black and Brown people in the UK who have been victims of racial injustice and systemic systems of oppression and grieve with their families. As a faith community committed to equality, we are deeply concerned by the disparities suffered by people of colour in all aspects of our society: our education systems, housing, health, immigration, economics, policing and employment.

We passionately condemn all forms of racism and discrimination.

We continue to educate ourselves in this endeavour, listening to the voices of the 'Black Lives Matter' protesters and examining our privileges for ways we perpetuate system injustice.

We are aware that like many organisations in the UK, historically, some of our income was derived from slavery and racial exploitation, and many individual congregations are beginning the process of revisiting our past, understanding our present position and accepting that our forebears were not always who we might want them to be.

Today, we seek to follow those Unitarian forebears who believed in the worth and dignity of every person and fought for the abolition of slavery. Today, we seek to understand through open and respectful discussion how we can work towards a future without racism or racial privilege.

We note that in 1963 we urged the government to enact its Racial Discrimination Bill No. 57, recognising the discrimination suffered on the grounds of colour, race or religion in accommodation, employment, and entertainment. We note in 1965, by emergency resolution, the problems of racial prejudice on these British Isles. We note in 1971 another resolution sent to the High Court of Parliament requesting amendments to the Immigration Bill that enacted indignities, denying basic human rights on immigrants. In 1978 we resolved as a faith group to 'resist all attempts at fomenting and exacerbating racial hatred' and in 1983 resolved to become ourselves 'reflective of the multiracial and multicultural society in Britain today'. In 2017 we called upon the government to 'Cease the practice of using obscure technical issues to deport people who have long been fully integrated into British families.' It feels a long time that Unitarians have been asking for equality of opportunity for people of colour in the UK. We acknowledge that there is more that must be done if true equality is to be achieved.

GA staff (was) proud to support the online event 'Let's Talk About Race' hosted by the Rev Winnie Gordon and the Rev Kate Dean, as a space to explore some of these issues as a community.'

The GA thanks Louise Reeve (Newcastle), the Rev Cody Coyne (Cross Street, Manchester) and the Rev Winnie Gordon (Birmingham and Kidderminster) for their help in drafting this statement.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

Early in the lockdown I got a call from someone I didn't know. She identified herself as Linda, and it took me a moment to realise that she was the wife of my friend and loyal cab driver, Len. She was crying. Through the sobs, I got her message. Len had become ill a couple of weeks after they returned from a Spanish holiday. He went into hospital, then intensive care. They phoned Linda to say he was dying, and she couldn't visit him because of the risk of infection. Three hours later, he was dead.

I've had a number of such calls over the years. I think they call me because they are hoping for an explanation, as well as comfort. One thing they have in common, whatever the circumstances, is what I think of as a prayer; they want to know *why*.

They don't mean the name of the disease, or the number-plate of the other driver in the accident. They have no particular interest in 'underlying conditions', or the blood alcohol level of the second driver. They want to know *why* this has happened. It's something that has eluded the calm narrative of their lives, something unexpected, something inexplicable. I believe they know I can't give them an answer, but the question has too much mass to ignore. They are like people standing on a cliff's edge screaming into the night, toward an unknown God.

In the last few years, we have been treated to a welter of popular theories from physicists, mathematicians, even biologists, like Richard Dawkins, for example. In their furious need to explain everything – or, perhaps to explain it away – they have done what can only be seen as metaphysical claim-jumping. Hence, we have autopsies and electrode experiments looking for what has been called the 'God node' in the human brain – the reason *why* the concept of God uniquely occurs to human beings. I'm not anti-scientific. How could I be, in these grim days when we hang on every word the scientists utter?

"I believe that there is an irreducible understanding within each of us that life is not random, that we are more than pinballs colliding in an alien cosmic game."

I'm certainly not opposed to the technology that – for example – saved the sight of my right eye a few years ago and has made marvellous new hip joints for a lot of my friends. What wearies me is the misuse of that three-letter word that science enthusiasts employ so readily when they say, 'This is *why* such and such a phenomenon takes place'. I feel that they don't mean 'why' at all, but a complicated version of 'how'.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle described four kinds of

causality. I forget the first ones, but the last two are interesting, and should perhaps be integrated into the curriculum of any budding scientist. They are 'efficient cause' and 'final cause'. Efficient cause is linked to the idea of agency: what it is that happens to make something else happen. The old joke expresses this perfectly: 'Why did the chicken cross the road?' The reply, 'To get to the other side' is both funny and unsatisfying, but it's as far as efficient cause can take you.

What Aristotle called 'final cause' is a bit more complex. We may try the scientific route, describing and circumscribing the stages of an event. But what we want to know is way outside the scope of scientific speculation – at least as we know it so far. Final cause would answer the question 'why was it necessary for the car to crash?'. In other words, the meaning and significance of the event, not just a description of it.

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“Seen this way, the prayer ‘Why?’ is not just a cry for help.”

Shown left: Pixabay photo by Ulrike Leone

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When the scientific method becomes the single lodestone of human knowledge – as it seems to have done lately – we are stuck one level too far back. We get caught up in an endless loop of ‘how’, when what our hearts long for is an answer to the bigger question: ‘why?’ I remember one Christmas Eve of my childhood asking my father why a furniture truck had just struck and killed my dog. He began to answer by saying that maybe Tim had grown too deaf to hear the truck as it approached. But I wanted more, and asked him again, ‘But why?’ Catching my meaning, that most plaintive human query of all, he said, ‘Son, I don’t know’.

When I have been called upon to deal with people who have suddenly become bereaved, I go through all the things I was taught in counselling and ministry training. I sit with them in their grief as much as I am able, and try to offer the pale comfort of another person’s presence. It does help, for sure, when the grief and shock are raw. But it’s never very long until that same question emerges, either spoken or implied, the one question that lies at the very heart of the human condition: *why?*

There are many quick remedies for this universal problem, ways of distracting oneself with hobbies, love affairs, patriotism, new cars. We are familiar with this – we all do it. It may work for a while, may offer some soothing music to drown out the drone of the constant question we might hear if we listened: *Why? What does it all mean? What’s the point?*

How hard we work to avoid hearing this question! How much we fear its being asked, and how we resist when it snatches us out of bed or descends upon us in a doctor’s surgery, or seems to float in the air of autumn like the leaves from the un-protesting trees. But, sometimes, when we simply cannot avoid it, the question grips us. This moment is not just an affliction but a gift. Just as crises may bear a secret benefit of opportunity, I think that the question of meaning, or the dread of its absence, carries with it something of our birth right, a treasure waiting to be discovered.

I said earlier that I considered the question ‘why?’ to be a kind of prayer. I think it may in fact turn out to be the root of all prayer, in that it is a plea for meaning. When you turn toward something you cannot see, and whimper or shout out, ‘Why?’ you are acting as if there were someone to hear, and perhaps to answer. It’s as if something basic in you understands that, beneath the raw

confusion of life, a floor of meaning exists.

Seen this way, the prayer ‘Why?’ is not just a cry for help. It is an authentication of meaning in the universe, an unintended statement of praise. The question not only implies that meaning must somehow exist; it is itself an expression of that meaningfulness.

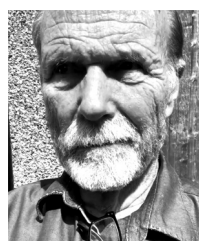
Sceptics might argue that we humans are projecting onto an empty universe our own needs for reason and order. Seen like that, it is no different from the other human attributes we insist upon as traits of a non-existent, fairy tale God. If human life is ordered and reasonable, then God must be also. But I would say that the human experience is anything but ordered and reasonable. The plain fact that such qualities are imputed to God speaks of the shape of that archetype of reason and order that lies doggo within each of us, as a birth-right.

Put simply, I believe that there is an irreducible understanding within each of us that life is not random, that we are more than pinballs colliding in an alien cosmic game. Crises evoke this in us. It makes us turn our faces to the unknown and demand an explanation. It makes us pray.

The answer to that kind of prayer comes in an unexpected way. Instead of receiving a chapter-and-verse response to the question, we may learn to be calm in the mystery. If we are not so easily mollified, we may remain angry. But this again implies that something, somewhere, holds an answer – because otherwise who, exactly, would we be mad at?

That old joke may turn out to be as subtle as a Zen riddle, a ko-an. Not satisfied with the answer given, we are required to dig down a bit. Why did the chicken cross the road?

There must have been something on the other side. There must be something on the other side.



Art Lester

The Rev Art Lester is minister with Croydon Unitarians.



This could be a turning point

If Unitarians and Free Christians are to confront racism effectively, we will need to examine not only the wealth and power structures of our society, but also of our chapels and denomination. And we'll need to search ourselves too, uncovering attitudes and assumptions within.

These were my thoughts following an outstanding webinar titled 'Let's Talk about Race'.

The event was hosted by the Rev Kate Dean, minister at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel at Hampstead, who co-organised the event with the Rev Winnie Gordon of Birmingham New Meeting and Kidderminster Unitarian churches.

This online video conference (via Zoom) on the evening of June 25 was supported by the General Assembly, and it attracted 150 people from all around Britain (and a few from abroad too).

In her introduction, Kate said the inspiration had not simply been the killing by police of George Floyd in the United States, but the fact that many people of all races in Britain were demonstrating in support of Black Lives Matter. This is an important moment, she said, one that could become a 'turning point'.

Kate spoke of her own background – of mixed parentage, she grew up happily in a largely white area of Somerset – but she has encountered racism in life, she said. In defining racism, Kate distinguished it from racial prejudice – which could be expressed by anyone. Racism is linked to power, particularly the structures of power and wealth in society. Ultimately, racism would need to be tackled at a structural level.

Learning Liverpool's slaving history

An elder at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Margaret Perry, gave the opening address. She recalled growing up in Liverpool, unaware of its history as the premier slave-trading port of Britain. It was only when Margaret was working for a shipping company aged 17, in 1955, that she learned for the first time of the horror of the slave ships that sailed from Liverpool's ports – ships designed for carrying

hundreds of manacled Africans ('commodities') packed tightly into their cargo holds. One-third of the millions of Africans transported thus across the Atlantic, died on these voyages.

She had learnt nothing of this in her youth, but this experience helped Margaret understand that the wealth of Liverpool and its grand buildings – like the wealth of much of modern Britain – was based on the slave trade and the industries associated with it, particularly cotton and sugar. Margaret, who had a long career in education, ended by emphasising that racism in our society today is based on this history. She posed the question: how then do we effectively teach anti-racism?

Facts on the Windrush

Garry Stewart, director of 'Recognize Black Heritage and Culture', (www.recognizeonline.com) was the next speaker. His organisation aims to share knowledge of the positive contributions black people have made to British history ... but he also spoke of the discrimination and racism suffered by the Windrush generation, past and present.

When the Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury in 1948, it was carrying almost 500 passengers from the Caribbean. Yet, our speaker said, it was important to realise key facts about this historical moment. Those aboard were not job-seekers; they had been invited to work in transport, health and other services to help Britain recover from the devastation of the Second World War. They were skilled people – men and women – who took up jobs across the country, not just in London.

And those on board – who had all paid their fares – came

Let's talk about race

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to these shores with full entry rights as British citizens, citizens of the British Empire. Many had served in the armed forces in the UK during the war. The RAF alone had had 6,000 West Indians in its ranks. And this was not the first time black people had arrived in Britain. Black people have been in these islands since Roman times, Garry Stewart reminded us. Nor was the Windrush the first ship from the Caribbean to dock in Britain after the war. Nevertheless, its arrival was seen as a symbolic moment.

Home Office betrayal

Those who came ashore faced racism and discrimination for decades, but there were moments of hope too.

Garry referred to the positive portrayal of the Windrush generation in the opening display at the Olympic Games in London in 2012.

But this moment was followed by the 'Windrush Betrayal', the result of the Home Office's 'hostile-environment policy', when people who'd come to Britain from the Caribbean in the post-war years, who'd worked here all their lives and paid taxes, were suddenly accused of being 'illegal immigrants' – resulting in thousands losing their jobs and livelihoods, as well as their right to use the NHS and other services. Some were imprisoned and even deported to a Caribbean they'd not seen since childhood. After the scandal was exposed, despite declarations that all those unfairly targeted would be compensated, only a small amount has been paid out in compensation. And, as Garry Stewart made clear, this scandal demonstrates more eloquently than words the extent to which racism still exists in Britain today.

We heard next from the Rev Winnie Gordon, whose topic was 'Being Our Authentic Self'. She spoke of herself as black British, of working-class Christian parents. At school as a teenager, an RE teacher had told her she had descended from 'savage African slave heathens'. When she tried to explain her Caribbean Christian roots to the teacher, she was called rude for arguing her point. Winnie said she had experienced racism in several guises, from verbal abuse to being stopped by police for no apparent reason, to discrimination in education and employment. Racism was a complex system, she said. Black pupils were encouraged to have low expectations for life while at school. She had heard it said she was only in a particular university or job, because of 'quotas' or 'affirmative action'.

Black people were taught at a young age how to behave at school or when stopped by police – always be polite, conform to the system, don't ask questions and do as you

are told. As a result, black people internalised their anger, and denied their real selves, she said.

Although she embraces the term 'black' it was one fraught with negative connotations in our society. Winnie had been told by some people that they didn't 'see her as black'. While this might have been meant as a compliment, it was in fact a complete denial of her ancestry, of her very self.

'If I am never allowed to be me, how can you ever say you know me?' asked Winnie. 'Racism denies all of us dignity and respect. We all need to be allowed to be our authentic selves.'

Dr Judy Ryde, a Unitarian and author of *White Privilege Unmasked* spoke next, telling of how whites often do not recognise their own racism. She said almost all white people have racist attitudes, but they find it hard to recognise these, and harder still to admit them.

'Whites in Britain, including Unitarians, have benefited from the historical injustices of the past centuries.

Although there were Unitarians who opposed slavery, others benefited from it, some greatly, and the wealth of many of our chapels derives from this. We need to recognise that we are still benefiting today from our racist past.'

Time to learn and act

Discussion in groups followed, with each group assigned a different question to consider. In the later, general discussion we talked of how difficult it was to recognise unconscious bias in ourselves. While we agreed racism was a 'white problem' that whites needed to address, it was also a problem for all to confront and overcome.

A section on 'Moving Forward' came next, with the Rev Cody Coyne and Adam O'Leary-Amponsah of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, outlining wide-ranging commitments they've made to tackle the legacies of racism at their chapel and congregation. (This was detailed in the last issue of *The Inquirer*, 27 June.)

Finally, Elizabeth Slade, the chief officer of our General Assembly, congratulated the conference organisers and all who'd taken part. It was, she declared, time to go beyond paying lip service to anti-racism. We must do the anti-racist work, she said, and it would be personal as well as collective work.

Access a video of the event here: <https://tinyurl.com/y8rpogdf>

The Rev Jim Corrigall is a member of Golders Green Unitarians.

Make online worship meaningful

The Ritual for Online Gatherings workshop, part of 'Ministry in a Time of Pandemic', was introduced and chaired by GA Chief Officer Liz Slade, who has gained many richly deserved plaudits for her innovative responses to pandemic conditions. Dealing with a crisis situation within her first year in post has shown the measure of her leadership abilities, and promises more innovation and lateral thinking to come, which is to be celebrated.

I recently read that 46% of people have tried new things in order to be connected during lockdown. So it is a ripe moment to invite people into our community; publicising our worship through social media can bring people in who have never entered a Unitarian chapel.

The workshop comprised presentations by three invited speakers. Offering encouragement, Rebecca Stevens, director of strategy and design at Mishkan, a Chicago-based organisation devoted to designing ritual for Jewish congregations, said religious communities have always adapted. She suggested that any ancient tradition is inherently well designed, so we should be able to translate our rituals for an online service. This article will concentrate on the most practical advice offered in the session.

Casper ter Kuile, a ministry innovation fellow at Harvard Divinity School put forward five key principles for creating good ritual online.

Preparing the space

Think about the background which will be visible online. At a bare minimum don't have your laundry-drying-rack on display over your shoulder. Examining the state of repair of your underwear will probably distract from the possibility of a deep spiritual experience for your viewers. Wall art, pot plants, a chalice and objects relevant to the service theme can provide a sense of sacred space – even if all is chaos and laundry is drying just off camera. Disorderly

“It is a ripe moment to invite people into our community; publicising our worship through social media can bring people in.”

Bookshelves can be disguised with draped fabric. Perhaps even more importantly – and easily overlooked as we concentrate on new online skills – is to think about our inner space, preparing to begin worship with a sense of quietness and spiritual connection. The service leader is responsible for 'holding the space' to enable attenders to fully enter into sacred time, just as when we gather in our chapels.

Provide a gentle entry

Entering an online gathering can be jarring; one minute you are alone in your living room and the next you see a screen full of faces peering into your private space. Opening the online room 10 minutes early, with music playing, allows people to settle gently – without the temptation to start the choppy, disjointed conversation – often a feature of online gatherings. Set up so that only the hosts can 'unmute' attenders. This can seem controlling but may be a good solution for a large group, or if some attenders are technologically challenged and likely to randomly unmute themselves.

Appeal to all senses

Although no one can smell it, you can burn incense to signify the entry into sacred space and time. It's not necessary to always look at the screen. When lighting the chalice, don't be afraid to move around and take time. Another suggestion is to ask attenders to bring a scarf or shawl, then invite them to put it around their shoulders at

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Helen Simpson gives tips rooted in therapy and spirituality.

Don't believe everything you think



As the country reopens following lockdown a lot of different feelings may surface. The vulnerable may feel left behind, still home as others go out. Others are coming to the end of an extended holiday of sorts. And for some, a return to work will be a break from bigger responsibilities at home. It will no doubt bring up a range of feelings.

The break from routines may have caused us to examine our own lives. Now, as lockdown eases, we may be questioning if we want to carry on with our old occupations. What was it I did all day anyway? Would it matter if I stopped doing it? Would anybody notice? Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a good way to consider these questions. It is a form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) that combines ancient wisdom with modern psychological techniques to help people overcome mental and physical challenges. It helps us to accept how we are thinking and feeling whilst getting on with what matters. Many of the techniques are designed to help us unhook from our minds and embrace our difficult emotions and sensations. ACT also helps us to define our values. What kind of person do we want to be? Deep down what is truly important to us? What do we want to be remembered for?

ACT teaches that no one else can tell us what our values are. If we are to follow our hearts, then only we can say where our hearts lead us. Before lockdown we may have got into habits and carried on doing the same thing every day without questioning. Or, perhaps while we were restricted, we enjoyed taking a local walk and want to include this in our post lockdown life.

If you have been shielding at home, your life has been even more restricted. And you will not yet enjoy the freedoms others are experiencing right now. You may feel fear, jealousy, resentment or sadness after a long period of isolation – while others are getting on with their lives. ACT explains that your body may react to unequal treatment. Those feelings are a way of letting you know something may be wrong. In evolutionary terms, our brains evolved when life was simpler, and we lived in small communities. If the leader of your tribe forced you to stay indoors while the rest of the tribe was free, you would be afraid of rejection and expulsion. In those more primitive times isolation would mean death, as humans could not

survive outside communities. So in those terms it is not an overreaction to have deep feelings.

Understanding that these feelings are our bodies' way of warning us can help us let go of the struggle. We notice the feeling, allow it to pass, accept it, then move on to do what matters. If our brain is working overtime telling us, 'It's not fair. This shouldn't be happening. What have I done to deserve this?' then we can thank our brains for trying to protect us from danger. They are just doing their job. They are designed to point out danger.

But a brain can overreact even when there is no danger – the way a dog might bark when a pizza leaflet comes through the door. So, we do not have to take to heart every message our brain sends. We do not berate our ears for hearing things, so we need not berate our brains for coming up with thoughts.

Once we have accepted our feelings and thoughts, our job is to behave in line with our values. One way to do this is to imagine how we would like to be remembered. An exercise I have often used with groups is to write a eulogy for yourself. It helps us boil down to a few statements the things that matter most. Then, you can imagine what would be written on your gravestone.

How does this all work in practice? Let me give you my morning as an example. I woke up feeling depressed and irritable. I could have laid there and thought about why I was feeling that way and – of course – I did that for about an hour. In that time I went on my phone to distract myself by playing spider solitaire and checking messages. It was now about 9.30am. I thought about having these words on my gravestone:

Here lies Helen Simpson

Who reached level 3 on Spider Solitaire

So, I got up and did what mattered. I had breakfast, I cleaned the kitchen, I hoovered and then I finished this article in time for the deadline. Do I still feel depressed and anxious? Well, if I am honest, yes, a bit. But I'm not nearly as down as I was. Still, I will continue to do what matters – including growing courgettes, phoning my friends and writing a comedy sketch for the church's performance night on Zoom. What will you do?

Helen Simpson is a therapist and a member of the Octagon Unitarian Chapel.

Just keep blaming the virus

Delightful to see, in a recent *Inquirer*, Alan Ruston's review of Eric Jones's book, *Best Foot Forward*. A very readable autobiography, it reveals that Eric is one of the few former presidents of the General Assembly, and probably the only Honorary Member, not having English as his first language. Can anyone name any others? A lifetime career behind him, he presents as a conventional minister, but do not be deceived. He remains active and in the past was not averse to a leading role in boisterous street demos in favour of Welsh language schools in Wales. Also, he was well to the fore in conducting same-sex marriages when they became legal. His book is full of his love of people and singing and stories, showing many of the enormous changes in Welsh society over recent years. Published before the lockdown, price £6.95 plus p&p, contact Tony.foster@talktalk.net. As, alas, a non-Welsh speaker, I am wondering what 'self-isolation' and 'social distancing' sound like in Welsh.

* * *

How best to describe the effect of the lockdown? A miscellany of grief, anxiety, disappointment and questions to which the answer is, 'We don't know'. Yet the human impulse to make the best of it and draw good things out of bad is alive and well too. I admit that being confined has sometimes had the effect of over-stimulating my imagination. Mostly I have dutifully remained indoors for safety. But one rainy morning I made a visit to the local post office, taking our favourite umbrella, the large, Mary Poppins-type that comes well down over my head and shoulders. It is completely transparent plastic, enabling me to see where I am heading. I'd walked only a few yards when I realised the excellent cover it provided. I could even stop and chat with a neighbour without anxiety, in my portable, private protection equipment. 'Is this a solution?' I wondered. 'The government should issue everyone with a see-through umbrella like this one!' But no, I was getting carried away.

* * *

I have also taken to blaming almost everything on the virus. On our balcony we have flowers and shrubs growing, and I was amazed to see one rose bush with a stem bearing two lovely blooms of completely different colours, one red, one yellow. Yes, on the same stem. Does Covid 19 affect plants, causing them to behave in strange ways? Nonsense, of course and such horticultural advice I can get has been of no help.

* * *

FUNNY OLD WORLD

By John Midgley



A major concern in all congregations everywhere has been when to re-open for normal services. Many have expressed a yearning to go back to regular worship and, so far, have found the advice about it confusing. So, I'm grateful to The Lighthouse Community Church, Sheringham, for spelling the guidance out in stark terms. They will not be reopening yet, not even for private prayer. It's because before people were allowed in, they would have to make sure they wash or sanitise their hands at the door, wear a mask, report if they have any underlying symptoms and turn away if they have; they must be instructed as to where they may sit, not sing, and make sure they left by a different door. And then everything in the church that they touched would have to be sanitised. The reminder goes on to tell people that they can pray or worship anywhere. It does not have to be in church. 'The church is shut. The ears of heaven are not.' Not the way Unitarians might express it, but the point holds good. Also, there is the concern as to who would be responsible if someone went to a place of worship and contracted the virus. Oh dear.

* * *

On a lighter note, it has been enjoyable to meet up with our neighbours on Sundays for a coffee morning. We each step out into our courtyard with our own cup of coffee and enjoy socially distanced chat and a catch-up with news. We've got to know each other better. Who would have thought that burly Yorkshire Michael, a heavy goods vehicle driver, could bake such delicious lemon and ginger cake? Nine-year old Braden shared his iced brownies one morning, and there have been exchanges of paperbacks, jigsaw puzzles and gardening advice. A major topic has been the unavailability of hairdressers. My hair has grown unbearably long, so to stop it flopping in my eyes I have begun wearing a silly hat indoors (though not when I appear on Zoom). 'Hairdressers are now taking appointments,' my neighbours report. Hurray! I am wondering what will be done with the hundreds of sacks of hair clippings that will be swept up from all their salons in the coming weeks. Is human hair recyclable to any purpose?

Here I go again with my fanciful lockdown musings. If this is what it is like to go 'stir crazy', I shall definitely go straight in future.

Letters to the Editor



Much anti-racism work to be done

The Rev Maud Robinson
Fulwood and Underbank Chapels, Sheffield

To the Editor › I was profoundly shocked by Martin Fieldhouse's letter about the Edward Colston statue, (*Inquirer*, 27 June) but also grateful to the Editor for publishing it. It is important for us to see that – in our liberal and tolerant Unitarian community – these attitudes exist, and need to be challenged. Fieldhouse suggests reinstating the Colston statue with a bold plaque telling the people of Bristol to be proud of their city, as a monument to the labours of (among others) those transported from Africa to the Caribbean, through the conduit of Colston.

I hope and pray that very few citizens of Bristol are proud of the part that slave labour played in the building of their city. If any such plaque were to be erected, I hope it would acknowledge the shame of the city that so much of its grandeur was built on slave labour, and would commit to redressing that great wrong by actively engaging in positive discrimination towards the black citizens of Bristol.

Yes, slavery is part of the history of Bristol, but it is a shameful and not a glorious part.

An important message I took away from Judy Ryde's address at the General Assembly *Being Together* Zoom gathering in April was that shame can be a force for good and not something to be buried, dismissed or unproductively wallowed in. Shame at how white people still benefit from racist policies of the past can be used productively, to recognise our own unconscious racism, be thoughtful about it, own it and be less likely to be unthinkingly racist in the future. (See Judy Ryde: *White Privilege Unmasked*, Chapter 9: How to Uncover Your Own Whiteness).

Fieldhouse writes, 'I would like to see colour prejudice fade away so that we do not talk about it.' This is one of the deepest problems of our current situation, the fact that white people want to see racism fade away, so that we don't have to think about it. The problem is that it hasn't faded away in the nearly 200 years since the abolition of the British slave trade; and it won't fade away until white people are willing to stand up and own it, and take positive steps to redress the results of it.

Finally, I was shocked by Fieldhouse's final paragraph asserting

that there are many inequalities in our society, and that although we should work towards reducing inequality, we should not aim to make all people equal. He goes on to write about inequity in the skills with which people are born. I'm sure this was not his intention, but this final paragraph can easily be read to mean that black people are born unequal to white people, and they should just accept this and get on with our lives. Disabled people often do not have equal opportunities with fully-abled people and so it is right that we put in place modifications to allow them to operate on a more level playing field. Black people have been systematically 'disabled' both by disgusting overt prejudice which wrong-headedly thinks that white people are superior, and by systemic structures in our society which mean that black people lack the privilege of being born into the dominant ruling section of society. It is incumbent on fair-minded and principled white people to do the difficult work of honestly facing up to the legacy of the appalling injustice of the degradation and enslavement of our black brothers and sisters.

Letter should not have been published

Marta Pacini
Lancashire Collaborative Ministry

To the Editor › I was shocked to see a blatantly racist letter published in the 27 June edition of *The Inquirer*. It was published with no critique of any kind, in an issue that purported to encourage anti-racist work through book reviews and examples of ongoing anti-racist work.

I am ashamed to have had my byline appear in the same issue as that letter. The Unitarian commitment to freedom of thought and expression cannot and must not trump our duty of care to each other, which makes the work of creating a world in which all beings are equally valued an essential and central component of our religious life.

RESPONSE

What should Unitarianism be?

Martyn Edwards (*Inquirer*, 13 June) regrets the decline of Unitarianism from 'a liberal, inclusive and open minded expression of Christian faith' to a 'self-centred, self-indulgent sham'. But what is a Christian faith? Belief in Jesus as God? Probably not for most Unitarians. A belief in Original Sin? It certainly was necessary for St Paul, who established the bedrock of Christianity. There is also predestination (some are saved, some are not). The Church of England believes in double predestination (some saved, some condemned) as in the 39 articles. Many of our clergy cross their fingers when affirming these articles. Perhaps it is a cosy belief that God and Jesus love us all, and there will be no retribution in the afterlife. So basically a wide range of beliefs from the Trinitarian to the almost atheist (or agnostic, which includes me) to say nothing of belief in the miracles and the resurrection.

But this wide range of beliefs can be catered for in Unitarianism. Many go to chapel for social reasons and some for inspiration, probably both. When I was an Anglican there was very little discussion of the theology behind the sermon – that's if the sermon had some theological meat. But I enjoyed the services, the hymn singing, thinking about the readings and the sermon and meeting people over coffee. Luckily they did not ask what I believed when I was voted onto a Parochial Church Council.

I liked the Anglican service. I was brought up with a daily assembly at my state school where I had the pleasure of singing with Mick Jagger (and a few hundred others). I also attended Sunday school. So I understand Martyn Edwards' point. I knew the format of a service and the language of the bible and so felt comfortable.

Most young people now have not had this experience. My children went to Sunday school for a while but do not go to chapel/church now; and being in their 30s would probably not feel comfortable with a Christian service. Added to which my son had been told not to be stupid when he asked the curate who made God. But my children ended up knowing more of other religions. I also think they are leading better ethical lives than I have lived.

We have to be aware that newcomers will not know Christian culture, may not know the Lord's prayer or the Bible. We also have to consider our terms. Sarah Tinker's article 'Souls Lost and Found' (*Inquirer*, 13 June) – also very thought-provoking – referred to the soul and the different interpretations. There are other difficulties, one being 'worship' itself. Why should we worship God, a Hindu god or nature?

As Marcus Aurelius said, if someone leads a good life but does not worship a god will that god condemn them? If yes, is that god worthy of worship? Perhaps are hedging our bets that we will be OK in the afterlife? I'd love to

meet up with my dead relatives and friends but I'm not confident.

I hope that a chapel service gives me something to think about how I live my life. As Plato said, the unexamined life is not worth living. Can I lead a better life? Can I act in a better way?

This is where Daniel Costley's article on faith and works was interesting (also *Inquirer*, 13 June). He told us about Channing who 'recognised that by keeping silent in the face of oppression, he was allowing the injustice to continue'. This was about slavery. There is little in the Bible about slavery; it was an ordinary occurrence. St Paul regarded freemen and slaves as equal in Christ but he advised that a runaway slave should return to his master. There is not a lot of moral guidance in the New Testament. Love thy neighbour, often quoted, comes from the Old Testament and is also in Confucianism and other faiths. However, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is excellent in that Jews hated their heretical cousins, the Samaritans. Jesus himself, being a good Jew, relied on the 613 Jewish laws in the Old Testament. It is thought St Paul (who opened the religion to non-Jews) relied on the basic Noahide Laws, seven of them, a few short of the 10 commandments.

The early church realised this lack of ethics and looked to the Greek philosophers. St Augustine used Plato to fill the holes in the New Testament. St Thomas Aquinas used Aristotle – and Aquinas is still influential in the Roman Catholic Church. These philosophers used reason and friendly argument to try and derive truth and what a good life should be. It is interesting that the great painting, the Greek philosophers, by Raphael, was commissioned by Pope Julius II for his apartment in the Vatican. Other philosophers such as Epicurus spoke of the value of friendship and a simple life (not the hedonist many think of today) and Zeno started Stoicism, a very practical philosophy which appreciates the world and nature. Marcus Aurelius, one of the five good Roman Emperors, was a stoic philosopher and it is interesting to speculate if he had made Stoicism the religion of the empire. The early Unitarian, Joseph Priestley, was also a famous scientist who applied reason and analysis to find the truth for his religion.

My attraction to Unitarianism is that it is a reasonable and transparent religion, where creeds are not forced on you; and that it is transparent for others to examine and understand, with contributions from other faiths and 'pagan' philosophers and the sciences as well as the arts. It is a religion, where we can work out the 'good' life for ourselves so that, as Daniel Costley reminds us, we may do 'good' works and I add, hopefully be happy.

Geoff Levermore is a member of Norcliffe and Dean Row Unitarian congregations.

Meaningful online worship

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a certain point in the service to illustrate that we are present together.

Lean into the new

We can't put everything we do in our churches into the online space and expect it to work. Try to think about what the rituals are trying to achieve. Ask first, 'what is the inner power in a particular ritual?' and how that power might be replicated online. Many congregations use candles of joys and concerns. Online, you can invite people to speak their joys or concerns aloud; or they can be shared by writing in the Zoom 'chat', then be read aloud by the service leader. If possible, appoint a 'chat chaplain'. Or, people can be invited to email or phone their requests ahead of time.

I co-led an international Zoom service with the congregations of Dublin Unitarians and the Fourth Universalist Society in New York City, during which the chat feature was extensively used. This seems a normal practice amongst the New York congregation. However, some may find it distracting. There are 'horses for courses' and each service leader will have to gauge them.

Create possibility of serendipitous moments

The speaker suggested teaching a simple song in a round or asking participants to share the highs and lows of their week.

Rebecca Stevens of Mishkan urged participants to innovate, saying, 'never waste a good crisis'; whatever you've been wanting to do, now is definitely the time to try something new.

Tim Hutchings also spoke. A sociologist of digital religion from the University of Nottingham, he said online worship is not new; the first such service happened in the 1980s – a Memorial Service for those who died in the Challenger space shuttle disaster. So, we have 30 years of experience. This view would certainly be endorsed by the National Unitarian Fellowship (www.nufonline.org.uk) which has been providing a focal point for distant Unitarians since 1944.

Online worship can be rich, meaningful

With Zoom there is bit of tension between those who post direct links to services on social media and those who – for reasons of online security – send interested people links via email. My own view is that access should be made as easy as possible, flinging our doors open and welcoming those who want to anonymously 'slip into the back pew' and leave immediately afterwards.

No matter how services are publicised, there was a lot shared about how to make online gatherings rich and meaningful. I hope this will encourage us all to try out something new, to enrich our Beloved Communities during the pandemic lockdown – and maybe take some new practices into congregational life.

Faith in Words

What inspires you? How do we live with uncertainty?

Contribute to *The Inquirer's* summer edition of creative material. Share expressions of faith, or how you hope the world will emerge after this difficult time.

- Prayers
- Addresses
- Visual art
- Meditations

For more information or to submit material, email: Inquirer@btinternet.com Or, send typed contributions to the editor's postal address on page 2.

Material is due by 23 July

THE
INQUIRER



Maud Robinson

The Rev Maud Robinson is minister with Underbank Unitarian Chapel and Fulwood Old Chapel.