



# THE INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians



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Unitarians must face slaver history

Education is faith in potential

Zooming around the country

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## Lent as a Unitarian journey

Stephanie Bisby finds some are  
rediscovering these 40 days

# 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.”**

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**Editor:** M Colleen Burns MA  
46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich  
NR4 6UF T: 01603 505281

**E:** [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com)

**Proofreader:** Sarah Reynolds

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**Write to:** Steven Bisby

71 Earlesmere Avenue, Balby, Doncaster,  
DN4 0QD T: 07764 486711

**E:** [admin@inquirer.org.uk](mailto:admin@inquirer.org.uk)

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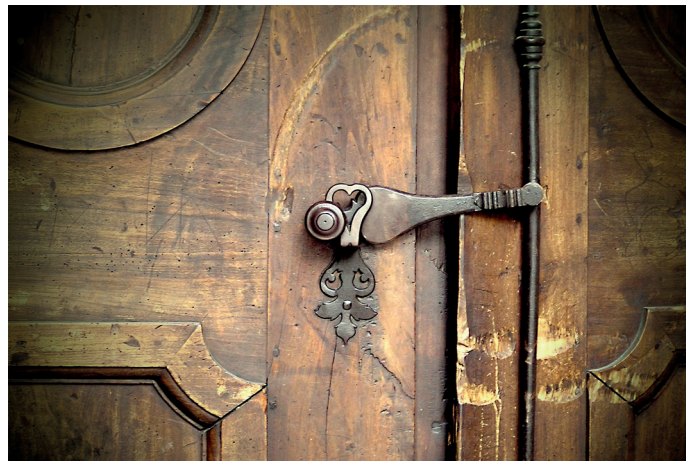
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**Find out more about Unitarians**

The General Assembly, Essex Hall  
1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY  
T: 0207 2402384

**E:** [info@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:info@unitarian.org.uk)

**[www.unitarian.org.uk](http://www.unitarian.org.uk)**



## To our church – one year on

There is a kind of knowledge that's a feeling not a fact - and maybe now you know what you have long since known:

a church is just a box.

But then, there are so many forms a box may take:

a jewellery box;

a tool box and a lunch box

that set you on your weekday way;

a musical box,

a theatre box,

a goggle box, or even just a bird box,

matchbox and dispatch box –

an incubator or a coffin;

maybe a fight, bare-knuckled or with gloves and rules;

a plant that gardeners may cultivate and shape,

or set in lines to raise a hedge;

Jack-in-a-box;

time capsule,

Bible box,

camera obscura,

sentry box and penalty box;

a box-you-in squeezebox;

a think-outside-the box, box,

or just a chatterbox.

Now our church has been a locked up, lockdown-empty box

so long you hardly miss it, or miss it very much,

each Sunday while we sit, as 1s and 2s

in spreadsheet rows of flat and tiny cells,

don't you now know what you have long since known:

our church is not the box, it's us –

and yearning, now swelling like a symphony,

to reach out hands beyond each box,

to search, encounter and embrace?

**By Stephen Jackson, member of the Unitarian Church of the Divine Unity, Newcastle upon Tyne.**

**Photo by PIRO4D via Pixabay**



Stephanie Bisby reports on Bob Janis-Dillon's recent talk on Lent

# Fasting for justice

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Lent might not appear the most appealing topic; it can seem dour, especially when times are hard already, as they are at present. Nor is it an obviously Unitarian topic; the practice of fasting during Lent is more associated with mainstream Christianity than Unitarianism as Bob Janis-Dillon reminded us at the start of his Ash Wednesday talk to the Unitarian and Free Christian Bible Discussion Group.

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Yet, ironically, it's also not an obvious topic for any Bible study group as Lent's origins are extra-biblical: nowhere in the Bible are we instructed to fast for 40 days in the run-up to Easter. The practice emerged after Jesus' death and wasn't formalised until the Council of Nicaea (which also cemented the doctrine of the Trinity, so not an auspicious occasion from a Unitarian perspective!)

Despite the potential challenges, Bob gave a compelling argument for the relevance of Lent to

Unitarians, now more than ever, as a time for reflection and anticipation of the hopeful message of Easter. In early church tradition Easter was a time of baptism, of being symbolically born again. Rebecca Parker and Rita Brock in *Saving Paradise* describe what a powerful and emotional experience it must have been to go into the water and come out a member of the church. Prior to this experience new church members would have undergone an extended period of preparation for their commitment. Lent, like Advent (or an FA Cup!), is a journey through time, and this aspect, Bob suggests, is just as important as the idea of a journey through space. Perhaps what makes Lent so potentially significant for us – while external travel is limited – is that Lent is a journey of exploration we can take without leaving our homes; we could consider it an inner pilgrimage. Bob describes Lent at its

“Despite the potential challenges, Bob gave a compelling argument for the relevance of Lent to Unitarians, now more than ever.”

best as wonderful, heartfelt and participatory. (Indeed, many books have sprung up helping people to experience Lent through different lenses – one example is *A Beautiful Friendship: A Lent Course based on Casablanca* by Paul Kerensa and Zoe Young).

Lent didn't initially last 40 days, and it's not entirely clear how this time period arose. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote in the 2nd century of a 40-hour period of fasting. The 40 days of Lent may have evolved to evoke the Israelites' 40 years in

the wilderness (see excerpt) as well as Jesus' 40 days and 40 nights of fasting. The period also has significance as the duration of the Biblical flood, the approximate length of time it takes to change or form a habit, and even, as one participant observed during the question-and-answer time, the rough number of weeks of a baby's gestation. During the 40 days of Lent, we may choose to give up something. Chocolate and alcohol are traditional choices but nowadays Facebook or a beloved computer game is just as likely. The point, Bob explains, is not so much what we give up – though that's an interesting challenge – but the way it encourages focus on what's really important. As it did for Jesus in the wilderness, resisting the temptations of the world allows us to clarify our priorities and gain power over ourselves and our lives.

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# Freedom rhymes with murder

Later this year the *Guardian* newspaper will celebrate its 200th anniversary. Watch for mention of its founding by Unitarians meeting in our Cross Street Chapel and that the first two editors were Unitarians: JE Taylor followed by CP Scott who held the post for no less than 57 years. Originally called the *Manchester Guardian*, a weekly, produced in response to the Peterloo Massacre, it moved in the 1960s to London, dropped 'Manchester' from its title and flourishes now with a woman editor, an online edition, an American edition and ownership of the *Observer*.

\* \* \*

I am grateful to reader Bert Clough of Oxford for correcting me when I wrote that comprehensive schools came into being following the Butler Education Act of 1944. They were rejected at that time, despite the best efforts of James Chuter Ede, a junior education minister. Some experimental comprehensives were introduced, but as Bert Clough says, they were not positively encouraged until 1965, a few weeks before Ede's death. A recent excellent article in *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* notes that Ede is a much-neglected UK politician (Home Secretary for six years) and Unitarian: preacher, public speaker, President and Honorary Member of the Assembly and President of IARF. I once heard him speak to a young people's rally at Great Hucklow. There is no biography of him available, an omission which the TUHS article's writer Stephen Hart aims to correct soon. Ede was an extraordinarily energetic and enthusiastic Unitarian, an internationalist, a progressive educationalist and an opponent of the death penalty. Hart's book is something to look forward to.

\* \* \*

I'm not much of a gardener, but as part of my corona restrictions therapy I planted some hyacinths, guided by TV Gardener Monty Don. I'm pleased to report that they are growing nicely. I've also dipped into his book, *Nigel, My Family and Other Dogs* (2017). The late Nigel, a gorgeous golden retriever was enormously popular among viewers. Monty puts it down to the unbiassed, non-judgmental affection that dogs can show. He goes on to compare Nigel's extraordinary level of attractiveness with (an astonishing choice) Bill Clinton. At a Hay Literature Festival event, Monty attended a talk by the former US President who 'appeared, to polite applause... and said nothing. For what seemed to be an agonising length of time, in fact about ten seconds, he looked down, shuffled, looked up and did and said nothing. At that point, the entire audience visibly and audibly leant forward. He had

## FUNNY OLD WORLD

By John Midgley



the entire audience craning towards him. He waited a moment or two longer and then started speaking quite softly. By then we were all in the palm of his hand and had walked gratefully into it. At dinner, I watched him ... it was as though he was a magnet. He had more charisma – the compelling attractiveness – than anyone else I have come across.'

One wonders what Nigel would have made of Clinton, or what either he or Monty would have made of Donald J Trump.

\* \* \*

Unitarian spotters' corner. Several readers saw the recent (albeit repeat) edition of *QI*, a popular BBC TV programme in which four comedians discuss topics that are 'Quite Interesting'. Thanks go to Joy Winder who alerted me that the panel had discussed the Edict of Turda and named it as a foundation idea of Unitarianism. Show host Sandi Toksvig's summary was good and positive, stressing that prior to the Edict, the idea of religious tolerance was unknown and therefore revolutionary. She spoke of Turda as a most beautiful place and quoted (in a simplified version) King John Sigismund, the world's only Unitarian king, who declared the Edict there in 1658: 'A preacher may preach the gospel by his own personal conception in any place that community is willing to accept him. Or, if it is not, no-one should force him.' How did the *QI* producers know about this? As mentioned in this column a while ago, Sandi Toksvig did attend a Unitarian church in the US on at least one occasion in the past, so maybe she drew the producer's attention to it. Nice to think we are quite interesting. She spoke of Transylvania as being in Romania, which it was not at the time of the Edict. The panellists immediately thought they would be discussing vampires but were quickly corrected, and Rastafarian poet Benjamin Zephaniah listened to the Edict with particular interest. There was a snigger or two over the pronunciation of 'Turda', but for the benefit of sensitive English-speakers it is usually translated to Torda, to rhyme with 'border' rather than 'murder'. (*Whew!*)

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Paul Lindsay Dawson challenges Unitarians to confront the past

# Atonement for slavers' wealth

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The planned removal of the statue of slave trader Sir John Cass in London, decided by the City of London Corporation in January, is timely: its removal will inconvenience pigeons and I am sure many racists cum white supremacists who will decry the action as 'Woke lefties destroying our culture'.

What has this to do with us as Unitarians? Quite a lot actually.

Many of our historic chapels and congregations have direct links to slavery: we as a movement have not yet acknowledged our part as people of faith in this crime against humanity. The Hibbert family, trustees of Cross Street chapel Manchester, and with links to Mill Hill Leeds have been rightly exposed for their part in slavery. Yet they were not alone.

Arthur Heywood, great-great grandson of the 'Puritan Apostle of the North' the Rev Oliver Heywood, with his brother Benjamin were slave traders. Arthur became a member of Westgate Chapel in 1762, renting pew 30 through to 1787. Arthur directly financed 74 slaving voyages and transported 20,327 slaves of which 16,958 arrived in the West Indies or America. He was responsible for over 3,000 deaths. His sons, Benjamin and John Pemberton each inherited vast wealth from their father in 1795, and his grandson Richard Heywood was a slave owner at abolition. The latter three all lie beneath Westgate Chapel. Arthur Heywood sat in the middle of a web of familial ties with major slave traders. The grim tally – a conservative estimate – is 265,184 men, women and children were dragged from their homes by the extended family of Arthur and Benjamin Heywood. Over a quarter of a million people!

## Slavers in many chapels

Also sitting in the pews at Westgate was Colonel Robert Prescott, whose marriage to Elizabeth Serjeantson was witnessed by the Milnes family. His slave, John Vernon, was baptised in Wakefield in 1762. Prescott would help advance the career of Robert Shore Milnes, chairman of the congregation 1812-1837, to become Deputy Governor General of Lower Canada in 1799.

Westgate was not alone in welcoming slave traders. At Northgate End, Halifax, Joseph Crabtree was both a slave trader and slave owner at the time of abolition; the Rev John Yates of Liverpool purchased a 25% stake in a West Indian Merchant company, 'France, Fletcher, Yates & Co' which traded in slaves amongst other commodities; George Hibbert Oates of Mill Hill was a slave owner, overseer and ran a slave-based prostitution racket; Samuel

Vaughan MP of Gravel Pitt Chapel was a slave owner like his family. And in the same congregation we find Robert Lindsay, a major slave owner.

## Chapels built on slave money

At Newington Green the Rev John Lindsay was a slave owner; John Fray of Bank Street Chapel, Bolton wrote a polemic in favour of slavery in the 1820s and owned numerous estates himself; the Birch and Bright families who attended Lewin's Mead Chapel were both slave traders and slave owners; the Slater family of Chesterfield and Westgate were slave traders who transported 13,623 slaves of which 11,894 arrived in the West Indies; the Shore and Diggles families of Upper Chapel and Cross Street traded slaves to tobacco plantations in Maryland, so too the Ogden and Pemberton families of Westgate. Westgate – thanks to Arthur Heywood – became a major regional centre of the slave trade.

Ellis Hodgson, who self-identified as Unitarian, educated at Warrington Academy, transported 55,010 people into slavery: 25% of all slaves taken into captivity were done so by families linked directly with Unitarian chapels.

Westgate Chapel was built primarily from money derived from the slave trade, like Lewin's Mead in Bristol. With our shared values of freedom, reason and tolerance, and seeing the inherent worth and dignity in all people, and in endeavouring to end racism, how can we as Unitarians 'own up' to the crimes of our forefathers?

## Our part in a great crime

My book on Unitarianism and slavery: *The Battle Against Slavery: The Untold Story of How a Group of Yorkshire Radicals Began the War to End the Slave Trade*, to be published in summer, will bring our part in the slave trade to light. Yet what else can we do? If we are to be seen as a progressive organisation, that no longer views our history from the eye of the victor but from the standpoint of the victims; from the eyes of those who were ripped from their homes and found their country invaded. If we are to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Black Lives Matter movement, surely we need to say 'mea maxima culpa'? The National Trust and English Heritage are showing the way perhaps. But as people of faith, we also need – when the time is right – to gather again inside our sacred walls and offer atonement for our part in a great crime.

**Paul Lindsay Dawson is a historian, author and member of Westgate Unitarian Chapel, Wakefield.**

# Lent as an opportunity

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Continued from page 3 >

The first temptation cited in the story (Bob's talk focused on the version in Matthew 4) is the most directly relevant to the practice of fasting during Lent. The Devil tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread to sate his hunger – the temptation of having our needs met.

## Jesus is tempted by power

The second temptation, to step off the cliff and rely on angels to break his fall, suggests a temptation to give up trying, to step away from our responsibilities. The third temptation, which Bob described as the 'classic devil's bargain' is, 'Worship me and I will give you the world'. Jesus is tempted with power, but in order to obtain it, he must do obeisance to Satan instead of God. Once again, the devil offers him power, this time over all towns and cities, as Emperor Augustus had. It's also interesting to note that the Devil is the first to refer to Jesus as the Son of God – a description often used for the Roman Emperor, a figure of almost unlimited power.

It's a dramatic story, with each of the three temptations reflecting a way in which our priorities can become inverted. Jesus, of course, has a Biblical argument against each of the temptations. Against the first, he points out (echoing Exodus, evoking the idea of a personal journey comparable with the journey taken by the Israelites) that 'one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Against the second, again quoting Exodus (this time Chapter 17, which interestingly refers to the Israelites not having enough to drink), he advises Satan not to put God to the test. And against the third, this time echoing the Call to Worship: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'. This is about not putting anyone ahead of God.

## Give up a meal and eat with God

Most religions' fasting rituals are about putting God first. There was a commentator who said that when you give up a meal, you're not really giving up a meal, you're having a meal with God. It's not about taking something away, it's about reorganising perspectives and living in a different way. Just as the Israelites learned about themselves as they crossed the desert, and learned that their needs would be met (whether there was literal manna or just enough food every day), Jesus had the same journey of learning and trusting in his own perspective.

In Luke (9:51), as Jesus approached Jerusalem, he and his disciples came to a Samaritan village where inhabitants didn't respond well to his message, so the disciples offered

to rain down fire on them. But Jesus rebuked them and said (in Bob's delightfully idiomatic rendition) 'Don't be smiting Samaritans just because they're not on the same page with you.' Then they came to another village, where one man offered to follow him just as soon as he'd buried his father and another when he'd said farewell to his loved ones. This time Jesus' response is more challenging: 'let the dead bury their dead', 'foxes have holes and birds of the field have their nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head', and finally, 'no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God'.

## Begin no matter where you are

Jesus might simply be stressing the urgency of his mission, but he may also be referring to how we often let things get in the way. There is never a perfect time; so begin now, wherever you are.

The final passage Bob referred to was from Isaiah:

*Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a bullrush and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

This passage tells us that fasting is not a performative act, not about being seen to do the 'right thing', but about justice, feeding the hungry and being there for the poor. Isaiah goes on to say, 'I despise your sacrifices.' If you're doing all the right sacrifices but not really changing your heart, what good are they? There is a wonderful note of the prophetic in this. Only if we use our fast days to stand up for what is right can we call for help and the Lord will answer.

**An excerpt from Bob's talk appears on page 7.**

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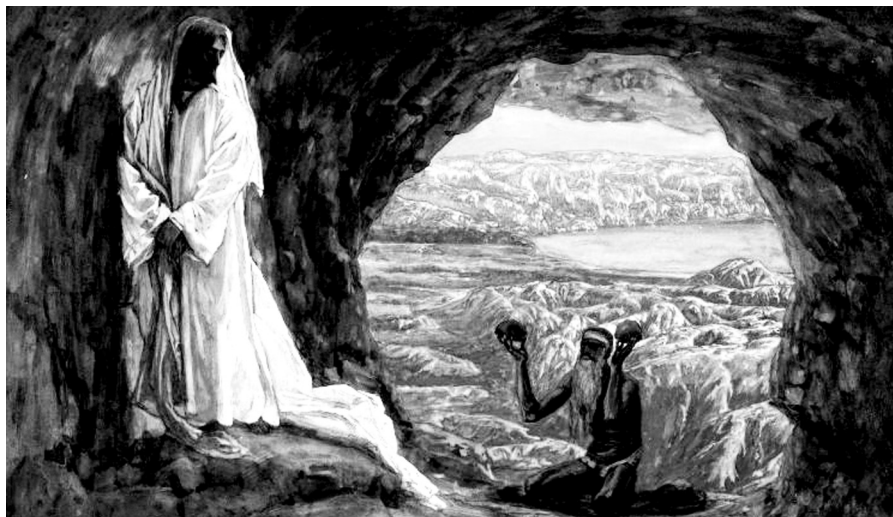


## Stephanie Bisby

The Rev Stephanie Bisby is a Unitarian minister and writer serving the congregation at St Saviourgate, York.

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“The idea of fasting is ... being aware of what we already have.”

*Shown left: Jesus is Tempted in the Wilderness, by James Tissot, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

## Excerpt: the meaning of manna

### Exodus 16: 14-30

*When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: “Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.”’ The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it over until morning.’ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted. On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, ‘This is what the Lord has commanded: “Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.”’ So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, ‘Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.’*

### What does it all mean?

What does Exodus 16 possibly mean? Well, basically you have a story – whether you take it literally or historically, or metaphorically or symbolically, it’s a story. It’s something that happened. Namely, that here you have

the Israelites, who were going to become the Jewish people, when you finish the journey of becoming. And it’s a story, rather than about fasting, it’s actually a story about having enough food to eat.

### Take only what you need

So you have this manna – we’re not exactly sure what it’s supposed to be, but it’s something on the ground, that they could pick up and eat. And if they take more than they need, it spoils. We thus have this idea of having just what you need. And really the idea of fasting is not about challenging ourselves to have less, but being aware of what we already have. The Jewish people become aware, in this story, of what they already have. It’s not about striving for more, more, more. As Jesus says in the Lord’s Prayer, ‘give us this day our daily bread’ – and here, they realise they have they have what they need for the day. But there’s another wrinkle too: in the story, on the seventh day, they are not to gather food for the day.

### Take only what you need

Now, you could make a case that this text was written afterward and used to retrospectively justify the Jewish Sabbath, who knows? But we do know for many centuries the Jewish people have had this tradition – which was peculiar to Judaism, in many respects – of this day of rest, this day of contemplation and reflection. It was this incredible spiritual invention, of a day when you *don’t* gather, when you don’t provide for yourself – instead, you spend the day doing something else. And what that something else is: whether you call it worship, or rest, or reflection, or even the foundations of Western civilization, it’s something pretty significant.

**Bob Janis-Dillon is Congregational Connections Lead for the Unitarian General Assembly**

# Education is a Unitarian concern

By Tony Cann

There are many problems that Covid -19 creates but perhaps the most important is the danger to the skills and knowledge creation in our country. For that supports our economy and our sense of wellbeing. It is no accident that Finland, at the top of the UN 'happiness' index, is judged to have the best education system in the world.

While education is fundamental it is also not instantaneous. It is complex and there are no quick solutions. Improvement of education takes much longer than the political voting cycle, and improvement is especially slow at the start. What it needs is an understanding of its importance and faith in the potential of all – but especially of the disadvantaged. A friend of mine set up a middle school in Atlanta and his students are mostly African Americans, one third judged to have learning problems and one third from disadvantaged homes. He releases the potential of all his students, and many move on with scholarships to prestigious high schools. It can be done.

In the long term, education has to be the key to everything else. It is key to running the NHS effectively. Key to innovation and productivity. Key to wellbeing and happiness. Key to reducing the costs of managing. Key to family life. Key to health. Key to peace and climate change. Key to not being misled by lies and propaganda which is in everyone's interest.

Education or the accumulation of skills and knowledge is a complex process. What is important is to remember that it is accumulative and it is not instantaneous. It is continuous throughout life, but because it is accumulative, the early years even before school are very important. It is also a complex process. Learning needs practice. The time when only a few were educated and the majority did physical jobs is long past. The world of knowledge is becoming more extensive and complex and the knowledge we need to be effective has grown enormously. We still need people with great skills and knowledge but the majority need much more too. Coping with all groups at the same time is a complex task.

The key objective of my family charitable trust is to improve education and we have spent 20 years developing 'Learning by Questions' (LbQ), a pedagogical system which provides teachers with instantaneous information on what their students have or have not learnt. It identified what their misconceptions are so that the teacher can act on it immediately. The system also provides automatic instant feedback to the students. It is known that the quicker

the feedback the better the learning. This helps all; but in particular we seek to help those from disadvantaged communities. It works.

Sir Kevan Collins has joined LbQ as vice chair. He has recently been appointed national Education Recovery Commissioner and shares our objectives. His appointment to help the government is a step in the right direction as he has extensive experience as a teacher and education leader. Dealing with these issues is a very Unitarian task. In the 19th century we provided for the need of education of many through our chapel schools. Now we need to promote new and some might say impossible ideas to help solve the issues. Tim Berners-Lee, a Unitarian, did this in computing and in a less general and extensive way the new pedagogy, ways of teaching, that LbQ promotes may lead the way to improving education in school – a crazy idea but it may point in the direction of a solution. I always remember that the crazy idea that a penny stamp could send a letter anywhere in Britain was promoted by a Unitarian.

**Tony Cann is a member of the Padiham Unitarian Congregation and sits on the Unitarian Penal and Social Affairs Panel.**

## Penal and Social Affairs Panel discussions

The Covid pandemic lockdowns and the closure of meetings in person, Zoom offers us a means of coming together to share views with Unitarians across the British Isles and even further afield.

The PSAP plans a monthly series of discussions on Zoom with a short introduction on a social issue followed by an opportunity to discuss them with other attendees. Our first discussion on Zoom is planned for Wednesday, 17 March at 7 pm, on the subject of education and whether it is the answer to inequality.

Further PSAP Zoom discussions will follow on the third Wednesday of each month at the same time.

To join with other Unitarians in the PSAP Zoom discussions, please register with us by emailing **carole.fahy@cannco.co.uk**

so that we can send you a Zoom link. Please let us know which Unitarian community, if any, you are associated with.

**Bruce Chilton**

*Can education solve inequality?*



Valerie Walker finds lockdown life is  
'Zooming busy'

# Catch up with distant friends

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At the moment, when a five-mile round trip to the local supermarket is an adventure, I doubt if anyone is not longing for restrictions to ease and for communal gatherings to be possible. For me, living in both domestic and in Unitarian isolation, the introduction of Zoom services – and also the 'chats' and other internet-enabled gatherings – has enlivened these difficult months and kept my mood light.

After a dodgy start – when the Watford Fellowship tried our first service with me playing the Clavinova while they sang the hymns – we all discovered that synchronisation is way off with Zoom! We now sing (individually muted of course) to the Unitarian Music Society CDs of *Hymns for Living* or *Sing your Faith*. It is good to hear the words, properly accompanied, not just one's own tuneless effort. I have explored more and more. Now it's difficult to choose where to go. But there are services in the afternoon and evening too. Yes, there are some Sundays when I have 'attended' three different venues!

I have also experienced many different ways that Unitarians 'worship'. That we have no 'Mass', no 'Creed', no defined 'Order of Service' could make newcomers uncomfortable or uncertain. Even fellow Unitarians could find big differences. It takes some searching on the new website to learn the 'shape and style of a Sunday service differs between congregations'. Perhaps leaders could welcome visitors and mention this individualised approach. I once encouraged some fairly new Unitarians to attend another chapel. Later I was told, 'Well, if that was the first Unitarian service we had been to, we would not have returned!' We do not want that.

As an 'oldie' who discovered Unitarianism 60 years ago, I have found some services outside my comfort zone – as have some others I know. I appreciate – because of my relationships with lively younger people – that change is happening. And I accept it should happen for our movement to survive and grow. Some, though, may feel uncomfortable or even alienated. Zooming can provide 'tasters'.

Joining different services is definitely catching on. I have encountered visitors not only from around the UK but from Germany, Finland and even some early-risers, desperate for their breakfast and coffee, from the USA!

On my first visit I usually send a brief message (via the 'chat' box to 'Everyone') to introduce myself. In the after-service chats, I am learning that if you want to be in a 'break-out' room with anyone in particular you may text the host via the 'Chat'. In addition, there are mid-week

or Saturday morning 'coffee chats' and in the evenings (bring your own glass or bottle) more chats, even a 'Juke-box' evening when you bring a piece of music that holds a meaning or a memory for you. These are the lighter offerings which have appealed to me but I know also of Poetry, Meditation and 'Heart and Soul' sessions, all Zooming. I must also mention 'Uni-Sing' on Saturday afternoons. Such a wealth of interaction possible, something for everyone, just look.

As I go visiting I have asked whether others have 'travelled' to services elsewhere and the responses indicate that this is happening. It is definitely something to be encouraged. Numbers attending different services around the country vary greatly. Sadly, some of the most fascinating and thought-provoking services have had small attendee numbers.

(To those whom I have encountered on my 'travels': please be assured that I was not carrying out a research project. This article was only suggested when I commented on my enjoyment in visiting so many different congregations.) I consider myself very fortunate that so many Unitarian communities have welcomed me – that wild-haired, (well, we all need a trim) talkative female. They have offered friendship and invited me to their 'chats' and other activities; I hope that I will see many of you again in the coming weeks.

Thank you; it has been lovely to see and speak with some old friends who live hundreds of miles away, and I do hope these new virtual friendships will eventually lead to actual meetings.

Not everywhere has reliable internet service, and some do not 'do' this modern technology. So there will always be a need for the telephone and of course we all look forward to when we can meet, sing and pray together – and hug – again.

When this happens, I hope that we will still retain some of our online activities to encourage communication among Unitarians who may never encounter each other in any other way.

So, until our happy release from 'lockdown', please try it, take the opportunities available to join other Unitarians and sample other forms of worship.

**Valerie Walker is a member of Watford Unitarian Fellowship and Chair of the Unitarian Music Society**  
**To find links to other Unitarian services see: <https://www.unitarian.org.uk/online-sunday-services>**  
**Hymn CDs and downloads can be obtained from the UMS Secretary: [margaretrobinson81@gmail.com](mailto:margaretrobinson81@gmail.com)**

# Letters to the Editor



## Progress's effects on cats and on dirty old men

Frank Walker  
Cambridge

**To The Editor** > I am grateful to Alan Ruston for his excellent review of John Gray's new book on cats. Like him I have admired and learned from all my cats. Mr Gray is not unknown to Unitarians. Years ago I reviewed his *Straw Dogs in Faith & Freedom* (favourably, but with reservations). Professor Gray is immensely learned, brilliantly clever and amusing. However, I cannot share his scornful view of the Enlightenment. I hope I am as sober and realistic as John Gray and St Augustine in my estimate of human nature, and I cannot easily love the human race, but I honour the Enlightenment thinkers for their desire for human improvement. Doubtless some were absurdly naive, but the intentions of most were noble, and they have shaped the best of the modern world.

Does Mr Gray really believe in the divine right of kings, autocracy, Papal infallibility, serfdom, slavery, the subjection of women, starvation level wages and slum housing for most workers, education for only the very tiniest minority? I honour the Enlightenment for wishing that improvements can and should be made. In the unimaginably vast sweep of time humanity is only just beginning and so may hope to improve. I applaud the great biologist Sir Peter Medawar's warning: 'To deride the hope of progress is the ultimate fatuity, the last word in poverty of spirit and meanness of mind.'

Of course progress is not inevitable and it takes place mostly in science. But science covers such a vast area of human life! Progress in science is also

progress in humanity – admittedly in only one side of humanity, but real nonetheless. It may not be seen in international relations and in politics, but it is certainly obvious in the magnificent development of modern scientific medicine in the 20th and 21st centuries. Let us at least be grateful for that!

May I give one humble example of progress? Something that harms nobody and helps everyone: the automatic washing machine. I remember the struggle and back-breaking labour for women on Monday washing-days in the 1930s, '40s and '50s. Now every day can be an effortless washing-day, and every morning I can don clean clothes. I need not be a dirty old man. There's progress for you!

## Easy way to help SACH

Hazel Warhurst  
Stockton on Tees

**To The Editor** > I signed up to [www.easyfundraising.org.uk](http://www.easyfundraising.org.uk) in December 2011, nominating Send a Child To Hucklow (SACH) as my chosen charity to benefit from any online shopping I might do. Donations collected have often been very small, but remember the saying – 'Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves'. Yesterday the confirmation email of some greetings cards I had bought online, showed my total donations have reached £500. This feels like a good time to invite/ encourage more people to sign up for this good cause.

Remember the page in the Christmas double issue of *The Inquirer* devoted to SACH, where [www.easyfundraising.org.uk](http://www.easyfundraising.org.uk) was mentioned? Once you have signed up, the hardest part is remembering to check before making a purchase if the company you are shopping with is part of the easyfundraising scheme. Some websites flash up a message asking you to confirm that you want their donation for your chosen charity. You can even add a reminder on your laptop/iPad, etc. Without much effort you can give a boost to SACH and help the Send A Child To Hucklow Fund reach its 2021 goal of £60,000. Please sign up today. [www.easyfundraising.org.uk](http://www.easyfundraising.org.uk)

## Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com). Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF. Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.

# OPINION

## Christian association objects to new website

The officer group of the Unitarian Christian Association greatly values and appreciates any effort to help grow our Unitarian denomination. But we believe that the Unitarian General Assembly's new website may actually limit the number of potential new members.

A first-time visitor to the website might get the impression that this was a political pressure group of some kind, rather than a religious and spiritual movement. The impression given is that spirituality is in our past, rather than our present.

The virtual invisibility of the General Assembly's Object is a serious deficiency. The Object is an official definition and a description, reached by consensus, and after much debate, which reflects the *full* range and diversity of our denomination. And, as such, it should be prominently displayed on the 'front page'. *The Inquirer* displays it prominently: why does the website not do so? Even when the term is typed in the website search box (and how would a newcomer know that there was even an 'Object' to look for?) it is still hard to find – and thus invisible for all practical purposes.

### Feature more congregations

There are approximately 170 Unitarian and Free Christian congregations in the UK and around 40 offer online worship of some kind. However, clicking the 'congregate online' box leads to a section which actually 'offer(s) some recommendations' – for only four congregations! Surely all congregations should be given equal prominence. To make matters worse, in order to find the full list of online offerings, any newcomer will have to click yet another link! Most will not get that far.

The overall impression given of British Unitarianism is of a movement more akin to a pressure group than a gathering of churches with a deep religious purpose and that we are closer to the realm of secular humanism rather than liberal religion. The word 'worship' is rarely used and someone who is seeking a community for worship may not look any further than the first page of the site. This could have been much improved if the website prominently displayed a full list of our societies (with contact details). This would give a much better idea of the diversity of religious thought in our denomination and give an inquirer the chance to think, 'there is something for me here as well'. As the site stands, it seems to give the impression that Unitarianism is not particularly religious at all.

The chalice symbol has no resemblance to most, if not all, the chalices that would be found in our churches and chapels. Once again there is no continuity between the

website and the reality of our congregations.

It has been said that the website is largely aimed at younger people and is not intended for Unitarians but only newcomers. Our national website should cater for individual Unitarians and our congregations and be geared to newcomers as well. The Methodist Church national website does both successfully, so why can ours not do so as well? Of course, we want to attract younger people, but this should not be at the expense of appealing to older people.

### Partial picture is inaccurate

Apart from the principle that, as Unitarians, we should not be 'ageist', there is much evidence to suggest that most people are likely to return to faith at a later stage in their lives, often after their children have flown the nest, or when they are in the later stages of their careers, or in early retirement. Such people can bring a breadth and depth of experience, as well as much-needed professional skills, to our churches and denomination. We have only to look at many of our national committees and their membership to see how valuable the more mature person is to our denomination.

The full title of the denomination, 'The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches', is placed at the bottom of a page, in very small font. This downplays the essentially religious character of the majority of British Unitarians and Free Christians and their congregations. The previous website did not display it particularly prominently either. But the new one obscures it even more.

We believe that the website offers only a partial picture of Unitarianism in this country and projects an image at odds with the vibrant and diverse religious currents in our denomination, among the Christian tradition, and other spiritualities as well, in favour of a secular image. The effect may well be to put off a large range of people, both those seeking a religious alternative to restrictive and repressive churches, and those who are unsure what precisely they believe but who know that they want a warm and welcoming liberal religious community, with worship and spiritual depth at its heart. We hope that this will be amended so that our spirituality – Christian, earth-centred, humanistic and other, is displayed in all its diversity and richness.

**The Rev Jean Bradley**  
Chair, Unitarian Christian Association Officer Group



# Website is bright, effusive

**Charlie Waterhouse and Clive Russell developed the Unitarian General Assembly's new website and are working on a new publicity design programme**

**Before this assignment did you know anything about the Unitarians?**

**Charlie Waterhouse:** I knew the name and probably had an idea of its dissenting nature, but the detail was absent. One of our early immersion sessions was Alastair Mackintosh's keynote (part of the GA's 'Being Together') in April. The way he darted from Indian texts to William Blake; WB Yeats to *The World Turned Upside Down*, was inspirational – the fact that he's not 'A Unitarian' too. The freedom to accept wisdom and perspective from anywhere is liberating; the lack of traditional dogma a real surprise to these non-religious ears.

Things need to change, and while everyone has a theory around that change – from climate to politics to economics and beyond – the one thing that never gets a look in is spirituality. It lies at the edges, often a marker of a bygone age, marginalised. But it cannot lie at the edges. It must be central.

I think society knows that in its heart of hearts. We saw glimpses in lockdown of that realisation in the joy of hearing birdsong in cities; many of us breathed a sigh of relief at getting off the hamster wheel – even while becoming financially precarious. Having smaller lives has for many meant more rewarding experiences. We've found new ways to meet, and met other people. And that 'feels very Unitarian'.

From a standing-start we've been tipped into Unitarianism at just the right point. This time feels liminal, and Unitarianism feels perfectly placed to wade into that uncertainty.

**Clive Russell:** As a resident of Hackney I'm slightly more aware of Unitarianism. One of my favourite chip shops is near Newington Green Chapel. I've admired the building and wondered about its past. And our immersion process opened my mind, giving me a better understanding of spiritual radicalism – both what it means now and might have meant in the past.

**What did you feel was most important to get across about Unitarianism?**

**CW:** Key for me is Unitarian values. Our work is centred around (and reflects) the ability to be Radical, Open-minded, Grounded, Loving and Alive. Five complementary values that stand as wonderful statements of intent. For me they draw a vital line back to Unitarianism's roots, and blast us into a wonderfully dynamic future.

**Can you tell us a bit about the symbols you created for the branding?**

**CR:** I've always liked the Elvis Costello (or maybe Frank Zappa) quote 'writing about music is like dancing about architecture'. With this in mind I'm cautious about describing what individual symbols are meant to communicate. I prefer to let people make up their own minds.

For me the new identity communicates the optimism and groundedness of the Unitarians while acknowledging there's complexity and darkness in our lives.

On a practical level I hope the design helps support the wonderful, decentralised nature of Unitarianism. How this happens is up to you, but we are working on some tools to help you...

**Can you explain a bit about how you came up with the colours and the palette?**

**CR:** The new Unitarian colours are inspired by its past – bright Georgian hues. Historic Royal Palaces are amongst our clients and we've visited Kew Palace on many occasions. It's amazing to experience these colours first-hand within their original context. We've added to them, building a full palette for different expressions.

**CW:** Colour that is 'old' but looks new feels like we're 'concertina-ing' time, which seems a Unitarian thing to do.

**Tell us about 'the Unitarians' logo?**

**CR:** Our new Unitarian logotype is also inspired by the past. The font is a digitised version of one first cut in 1828. It was the first font called 'sans serif'. But it sits somewhere between a 'serif' and 'sans serif' giving it accentuated thicks and thins. This makes it distinctive, while retaining legibility.

The design programme we are working on will offer a larger font palette, allowing for a breadth of expressions.

**Is there anything else you would like to say about the designs?**

**CW/CR:** There is no way this design solution could exist without the input from the Unitarian steering group and central team. We co-created the brief and worked to ensure we understood the current and future needs of the movement, both practically and intellectually.

We looked at existing tools like the chalice, exploring how we might reinterpret them. The chalice informed the new 'Radiance' but also supports it by appearing redesigned within the pattern scheme. A kind of 'and-and' solution – one that allows congregations flexibility.

One of the key points – and we go back to the original brief here – is Unitarianism's need to recognise the modern requirement for a more resilient, communal and more spiritual way of life. The design alone can't offer this but could signpost a way forward.

**CW and CR:** This whole project has been completely rewarding for us. The intellectual and emotional support and investment from Liz Slade's team and the wider Unitarian community has been unlike any identity project we've done before. That's reflected in what we see. And just as the new Unitarian presence is a bright, effusive, confident statement, we hope this next phase of the movement is similarly impactful in the wider world. The chance is there to rewrite religion's place in society, to recalibrate spirituality's role in how we navigate the future. We can't wait to see what happens. Good luck, Godspeed!