

Kensington Unitarians

community – spirituality – conscience



NEWSLETTER
SPRING 2026



Marvellous Music

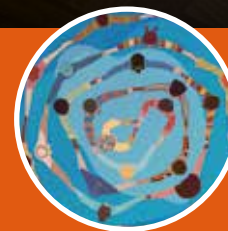
...and so much more on Sunday mornings as we co-create a safe and sacred space together



Walking Group



Equinox Labyrinth



Circles of Trust

www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Coming up...

Please keep an eye on our website for last-minute additions to the programme. Visit kensington-unitarians.org.uk

March

Sunday 1

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)

1pm 'Each Child a Light' Quilting Project (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Tuesday 3

7pm Finding Our Religion with Jane and Raj (online)

Wednesday 4

7pm Poetry Group with Brian (in-person)

Friday 6

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 8

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

12.30pm Community Yoga with Hannah (in-person)

Thursday 12

11am Spring Walk to Rainham Marshes RSPB (in-person)

Friday 13

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 15

11am Sunday Service led by Members of the Congregation (hybrid)

1pm Art Play Crafternoon (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Tuesday 17

7pm Finding Our Religion with Jane and Raj (online)

Wednesday 18

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (in-person)

Friday 20

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 22

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall and Dr. Azita Chellappoo (hybrid)

1-3.30pm Spring Equinox Labyrinth Mini-Retreat (in-person)

7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'Afropean: Notes from Black Europe' (online)

Friday 27

7pm Heart and Soul with Pat and John (online)

Sunday 29

11am Sunday Service led by Dr. Patricia Brewerton (hybrid)

2.30pm Find Your Voice: Singing with Margaret (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

April

Wednesday 1

7pm Poetry Group with Brian (in-person)

Sunday 5

11am Easter Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)

12.30pm – Community Potluck Lunch (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Friday 10

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 12

11am – Sunday Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker (hybrid)

12.30pm – Community Yoga with Hannah (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 15

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (in-person)

Friday 17

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 19

11am Sunday Service led by Members of the Congregation (hybrid)

1pm Art Play Crafternoon (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Thursday 23

11am Spring Walk – location TBC (in-person)

Friday 24

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 26

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)

12.30pm Essex Church AGM (hybrid)

7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'Finding the Mother Tree' (online)

May

Friday 1

7pm Heart and Soul with Pat and John (online)

Sunday 3

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Stephanie Bisby (hybrid)

7pm Heart and Soul with Mandy (online)

Wednesday 6

7pm Poetry Group with Brian (in-person)

Friday 8

7pm Heart and Soul (online – leader TBC)

Sunday 10

11am Sunday Service led by Dr. Mel Prideaux (hybrid)

1pm Art Play Crafternoon (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Charlotte (online)

Friday 15

7pm Heart and Soul with Rita (online)

Sunday 17

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker (hybrid)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 20

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (in-person)

Thursday 21

11am Spring Walk – location TBC (in-person)

Friday 22

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 24

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Friday 29

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 31

11am Sunday Service led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)

7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'Is This Working?' (online)



News from the Committee: AGM on Sunday 26 April

As introduced in our previous newsletter, and explained in announcements after the service on 4 January, we have made a start on the extensive behind-the-scenes work that is required in order for the church to become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). This process is intended to improve our governance and ensure that our organisational processes are up-to-date and in line with best practice. The next update on progress will be at our Annual General Meeting which will be held after the service on Sunday 26 April (this will be a hybrid meeting so everyone can join in). Keep an eye out for the Annual Report which will be circulated via email in the run-up to the event (if you would like to receive a printed copy of the report please do get in touch with Jane). As usual, congregation members will be asked to re-confirm their membership for this year, by filling in an online form as usual in March/April – please help us out by filling this in promptly so that we don't have to nudge you! And if you haven't yet joined and you would like to please do speak to Jane or a committee member. We will formally welcome new members in our service on the day of the AGM.



Choose Your Own Adventure

In each edition of the church newsletter we suggest 'just one thing' you might do for the benefit of our community. This time I want to encourage you to 'choose your own adventure'! Let me explain what I mean by that...

Not every activity we offer at church will be appealing to you – and that's alright – in fact I remember being told that if there's something going on in your church that you 'wouldn't touch with a barge pole', that could be seen as a healthy sign of a community which is offering a diverse programme, one that connects with lots of different sorts of people with varied interests and temperaments, rather than a homogenous social club for people who are all very similar.

Similarly, not every reading, hymn, or prayer we offer in services and small groups will be equally meaningful or resonant for you. It's likely that some things will really speak to your condition while you find others provoke a negative reaction. However, as a community with diverse theologies and concerns, we try to draw on a range of sources (so if you're not that keen on something you know that

something different will be along in a minute, or next week, that might speak to you more). And, if you do find yourself feeling strongly reactive, there's often something to be gained from asking yourself what that is all about. Might you benefit from looking into it more deeply, examining your own reaction, and what you can learn from it?

In our community, you very much have the freedom to choose where you put your energy and attention, so it is perfectly possible to put together your own 'pick-n-mix' church experience. However, there is something to be said for opening ourselves up to new things, trying activities that are a bit out of our comfort zone, or engaging with ideas and ways of seeing that we find a bit challenging. So why not 'choose your own adventure'? Gently move towards your 'growing edge'. Maybe you quietly attend Sunday services but you're not sure about participating in a small group where you might have to speak. Could you sign up for Heart and Soul one time, or come along to the poetry group, and think of it as a mini-adventure?

Sign up for weekly updates...

If you would like to be kept informed about upcoming events we encourage you to sign up for our weekly email bulletin. Every Friday afternoon we send out an update with a Zoom link for the Sunday's service and reminders about what's on in the week ahead (and forthcoming events you might like to sign up for). Sign up via our website: www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk





How to become a Member

If you are already a member of this church, we ask you to re-confirm your membership each year, ahead of our membership service and AGM which takes place in spring. Please keep an eye out for a renewal email in March and respond promptly if you can. Thank you for your support!

Membership is about affirming your personal commitment to this community and the Unitarian ethos. Each member is a vital and valued part of this church and its mission and its work in the world.

Membership does not depend on your financial contribution to the work of the church (though of course we are very grateful for your regular donations, which help

to make possible the ongoing work of the congregation, particularly during these economically challenging times).

If you are relatively new to this community, we ask you to attend and engage with our Sunday services or other activities for three months (in-person or online) before applying to join, so that you can get to know the congregation, develop a sense of belonging, and discern whether it is right for you. New members are formally approved by the committee and personally welcomed by the minister and chair at our annual membership service. Please contact our minister if you think you would like to join.

New Unitarian Beginnings In-gathering (NUBI)

Are you new to Unitarianism? Would you like to find out more? Maybe ask questions and meet other newbies? New Unitarian Beginnings In-gathering (NUBI) gatherings are small online groups hosted by Lizzie Kingston-Harrison and Kieren Mardle-Moss. These gatherings are open to anyone who is new to the Unitarian movement or would like to find out more. They are relaxed events with plenty of time for questions and discussion. NUBI (or Newbies) meets monthly on alternating Fridays and Saturdays. Contact Lizzie for more information: ekingston@unitarian.org.uk

Introducing our Minister

For those who haven't yet met our Minister here's an introduction to Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall.



Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (she/her) was appointed Minister with Kensington Unitarians in May 2023. She has been connected to the congregation since April 1999, first as a congregation member, then as an active volunteer, before joining the staff team as part-time Outreach Officer in 2008, and becoming full-time Ministry Coordinator in 2021, to steer the church community through a time of transition.

Jane is positively evangelical about the transformative power of engagement groups and created 'Heart and Soul' circles as a form of contemplative spiritual gathering where people can share deeply about their lives. Jane is increasingly energised by the potential of online spiritual gatherings to make our activities more accessible for those who find it hard to participate in traditional in-person services due to factors including disability, ill-health, neurodivergence, geographical isolation, work commitments, or caring responsibilities; she has first-hand experience of several of these issues.

Jane has been very much involved in organising Hucklow Summer School, the annual Unitarian residential for adult religious education and spiritual development, since 2005. In recent years she has co-developed and co-facilitated LGBTQIA+ training on the theme of 'Working on Our Welcome', to improve the levels of awareness and sensitivity in our denomination around issues of gender, sexuality and relationship diversity, and to help make our congregations ever more hospitable. Jane also serves as a spiritual director working with people from various Christian denominations, and those who are on the fringes of faith, or outside of the mainstream religious traditions altogether.

Prior to ministry training with Unitarian College (2018-2021), she gained a first-class BA in Philosophy, Religion and Ethics, at Heythrop College (2011-2017). Jane previously worked in academic research, in the field of medical imaging and radiological sciences, gaining her PhD in the Computational Imaging Sciences Group at Guy's Hospital, King's College London. When she is not working (or glued to the internet) Jane loves gardening, birdwatching, baking, listening to podcasts and audiobooks, and making art, and she is a fanatical follower of bike racing on TV.

To contact our Minister, email: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk



Hucklow Summer School 2026: Doing Our Best?

'Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.' — Maya Angelou

21st-28th August 2026 at the Nightingale Centre

www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk

Hucklow Summer School: 21-28 August 2026

Hucklow Summer School is now open for applications. Have a chat with Jane or Charlotte (who are on the panel organising the event) or any of the other congregation members who have been to summer school in previous years to find out more.

Doing Our Best?

'Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.' Maya Angelou

In aspiring to live well and make a positive impact on the world around us, we often find ourselves caught between the desire to hold ourselves to the highest standards, and do our very best, and the need to accept our human limitations, and our propensity (both as individuals and communities) to screw up and fall short. In 2026, through daily talks and in-depth engagement groups, we will explore various aspects of this dilemma and the ways in which it plays out in our inner lives, personal relationships, church communities, and social action. How can we rise to the challenges we face

in the 21st century, respond faithfully to the needs of a rapidly changing world, and courageously meet the call to learn, grow, and do better – without falling into self-recrimination at our own shortcomings? How might we move beyond 'good intentions' and pay closer attention to the impact that our action (and inaction) has on others? How can we gently hold ourselves and each other to account in a compassionate way which aligns with our core values? How might we dream a new world into being while being pragmatic about our individual and collective capacity? Join us at Hucklow Summer School 2026 to consider all these questions and more together.

In-Person Engagement Groups:

'Saints and Sinners' with Jane Blackall and Raj Savarapu

'For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.' (Isaiah 25:4) with Mel Prideaux and Arek Malecki

'You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.' (Mary Oliver from "Wild Geese") with Tina Gandhi, Danny Crosby and Molly the Dog.

Online Engagement Groups:

'How Do We Change the Things we Can and Accept Those We Cannot?' with Lizzie Kingston-Harrison and Jennifer Sanders

'Compassion & Connection: Being with Self, Others and the Spirit of Life' with Kate Dean and Kieren Mardle-Moss

Theme Speakers:

Tina Gandhi, Charlotte Chanteloup, Shana Parvin, Raj Savarapu, Emma Roberts-Jones, Stephanie Bisby, Sian Murray, Eleanor Chiari, Rob Oulton, and Angela Maher.

Visit the summer school website for further information and to apply for your place (deadline for applications is 10th April): www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk

'Finding Our Religion' Study Group

Our own Jane Blackall and Raj Savarapu of Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds are (at time of writing) half-way through running this online study group on 'Finding Our Religion: Being Unitarian in the 21st Century'. We're delighted that this has brought together members of both congregations, and indeed other Unitarians from across the country – over 40 people signed up! – to watch and reflect on the theme talks from Hucklow Summer School 2025. Although it's now too late to join this course, don't forget that all the videos of the talks are still available online, on the Hucklow Summer School YouTube channel: youtube.com/@hucklowsummerschool8933



Equinox Labyrinth Mini-Retreat

Sunday 22 March,
1pm-3.30pm

Join Jane and Sarah for this equinox mini-retreat where we will use our labyrinth to meditate on the turning seasons and the seasons of our lives. We will need you to take off your shoes to walk the labyrinth so please bring socks with you! Sign up with Jane (jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk) to participate as spaces will be limited.



Getting to Know You... Aisha Animashaun



Hello, I'm Aisha. I started joining services here in the spring of 2025 and found out about Kensington Unitarians through Ringwood Unitarians.

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, to a Christian mother and a Muslim father, I grew up with a Christian faith. However, my Mum was keen to let people know that I also had a Muslim heritage, and I felt encouraged to embrace it, letting people know about my Arabic name and joining Muslim friends at the mosque. I grew up in a community with many 'faith-fluid' people (mainly between Christianity and Islam—my friends and I joke about how many people in the community have a 'ChrisMus'/'Chrislam' religion and know people in our families who've been to both Mecca and Jerusalem with Christian and Muslim names). Much later on, my curiosity about my ethnicity's traditional religion, Yoruba Traditional Religion, also contributed to my spiritual outlook.

When choosing a congregation became more about personal choice than expectation, I became more aware

of a friction I was experiencing. While I appreciate many aspects of Christianity, there were parts of the doctrine, or expressions of it, that I found challenging. Through a series of Google searches exploring religious syncretism, including the Caribbean's Santeria and Brazil's Candomble, I found Unitarianism. It was accessible, inclusive and offered much of what I cherish about the Christian faith—including values, rituals, and community—while permitting me to make peace with the parts I was still struggling to understand after many years, all while respecting the faith. Mostly, I was looking for a place that mindfully held space for diverse spiritual paths.

The first time I attended Kensington Unitarians, I enjoyed the warmth and interactivity of the online setup. The service resonated and felt wholesome. I left feeling grounded and interested in the activities that happen outside of Sundays. I subsequently attended Heart and Soul and the Better World Book Club, kept coming back for more, and still keep on...

Today, my faith is expressed in my everyday life through meditation, reflecting on poetry, going on nature walks, working on cultivating and nurturing caring relationships, communing in belief-and-shared-values spaces, and being more intentional about supporting causes I care about.

What I have most valued about being part of this community is the rich experience of nurturing sermons with practical lessons in a 'this-is-an-offering-take-what-you-need' tone, feeling more attuned to life, and gaining perspectives from the openness and willingness to share of the diverse congregation and the people in the smaller groups.

I'm constantly learning each time I attend a service or one of the smaller groups. Recently, I gained a completely new perspective from the sermon led by Lochlann on the topic of 'Gender.' It was the first time I can recall listening to reflections on gender and being prompted to contemplate my own. The mindfulness fostered in the services and smaller groups has also been a great lesson for me. I admire the thought process behind them and how they're used to create safe and mindful spaces accessible to all, and I feel inspired to carry that mindfulness into my other interactions and foster it in spaces where I can.

Many things about Kensington Unitarians feel special, and I feel the people are a big part of that. The beauty of this place is how it feels welcoming and honouring of the different perspectives and journeys we all bring, and I'd encourage everyone to continue to be a part of creating this rich and meaningful experience.

Heartspaces at Essex Hall

Heartspaces at Essex Hall is a new programme of weekly spiritual gatherings led by Unitarian ministers and volunteers across London. Through this initiative we aim to re-establish a Unitarian community presence in central London (Essex Hall is on Essex Street, off the Strand, and the closest station is Temple on the District/Circle lines). Join us for a series of regular events from the monthly Wednesday Lunch Break sessions to weekly Thursday evening spirituality gatherings (and keep an eye on the Heartspaces website for the latest announcements: www.unitarian.org.uk/heartspaces)

Mindful Lunch Break:

First Wednesday of the month, 1-2pm

Mindful eating and connection. Led by Rev Kate Dean and Tatiana Kassessinoff

Spiritual Jukebox:

First Thursday of the month, 6.30pm

Sharing songs that move and inspire. Led by Rev Kate Dean, Rev Julio Torres and Adam Slate

Lucky Dip:

Second Thursday of the month, 6.30pm

Gatherings to explore aspects of spirituality, different each month. Led by various London ministers.

Heart & Soul gathering:

Third Thursday of the month, 6.30pm

Informal Unitarian service of ritual, poetry and music. Led by Rev Kate Dean and Rev Michael Allured.

Mystic of the Month:

Fourth Thursday of the month, 6.30pm

Discover the spiritual practices of mystics from East and West. Led by Rev Kate Dean and Rev Simon Ramsay.



Each Child a Light: Quilting as a way of Memorialising the Children of Gaza

On a perfect summer's day last year, I spent a couple of hours in an outdoor workshop at Angel Islington sewing my first square for the 'Each Child a Light' quilting project.

This project was initiated by Fiona Bailey in order to show the world that the more than 20,000 children killed in Gaza had names, each one was a universe of their own, they had their own way of smiling and their own dreams for their futures. They had names which their parents had carefully chosen, they were not numbers. There are more than 480 people across the UK and the world designing and sewing squares, one square for each child, bearing their name and their age carefully embroidered within the design.

Fiona has offered to run a workshop for us at Essex Church on Sunday 1st March at 1 pm after the service. You don't need to have excellent crafting skills – I really don't have any! All materials will be provided, and the project is open to anyone who would like to do something to protest the ongoing slaughter of children in Gaza.

Sylvia, who is just 11, made a square for Meira, who was also 11. "Palestine is so important to me, loads of children are lying in the rubble, and they need to be respected."

Patricia Brewerton



Community Lunch

Sunday 5 April, 12 noon

We've got a congregational potluck lunch coming up after the service on Easter Sunday (5th April) so please do save the date and plan to bring along some food or drink to share. Marianne will be coordinating the lunch so please keep an eye out for a sign-up sheet nearer the time.



Walking Group

A small-but-perfectly formed group of us went for a winter walk to London Wetland Centre in Barnes this February. This was a very last minute change of plan after we discovered that our intended destination, Rainham Marshes RSPB, was closed for the day. Despite the wet weather and travel troubles we had an enjoyable day out and nobody went home without seeing a wigeon! We're hoping that we do actually make it to Rainham Marshes at our second attempt on Thursday 12 March. The plan is to meet at Purfleet station at 11.21 am. Please do let Jane know if you're intending to join us so that we can let you know in the event of any last-minute changes of plan: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk. We have also pencilled in 23 April and 21 May for possible future walks so save the dates if you're interested and we'll confirm details nearer the time.



Better World Book Club



The fourth Sunday of each month, 7.30-8.45pm on Zoom

We've been running the 'Better World Book Club' since the start of last year. The books have been chosen to cover a range of social issues we might do well to be more informed about, interleaved with books on spiritual and ethical matters, on living well in hard times. In order to make this as accessible as possible we aim to choose titles that are available in print, e-book, and audiobook formats, and we will buy a few copies for the church library for people to borrow. Although it's great to have people joining the group on a regular basis you are also most welcome to 'drop in' for a particular book that appeals to you.

Please email Jane to let her know if you're planning to join and for further details. See contact details on p20

Sunday 22
March, 7.30pm:

Afropean: Notes from Black Europe by Johny Pitts



In the face of growing racial discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiment and the spectre of terrorism looming large over an economically stricken continent, Afropean is an on-the-ground documentary of areas where Europeans of African descent are juggling their multiple allegiances and forging new identities: too indelibly woven into Europe to identify with Africa and yet struggling with outdated ideas of what it means to be European. Afropean will plot an alternative map of the continent, taking the reader to places like Cova Da Moura, the Cape Verdean shantytown on the outskirts of Lisbon with its own underground economy, and Rinkeby, the area of Stockholm that is eighty per cent Muslim. The author visits the former Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, where West African students are still making the most of Cold War ties with the USSR, and Clichy Sous Bois in Paris, which gave birth to the 2005 riots.

Sunday 26 April, 7.30pm:

Finding the Mother Tree by Suzanne Simard



No one has done more to transform our understanding of trees than the world-renowned scientist Suzanne Simard. Now she shares the secrets of a lifetime spent uncovering startling truths about trees: their cooperation, healing capacity, memory, wisdom and sentience. Raised in the forests of British Columbia, where her family has lived for generations, Professor Simard did not set out to be a scientist. She was working in the forest service when she first discovered how trees communicate underground through an immense web of fungi, at the centre of which lie the Mother Trees: the mysterious, powerful entities that nurture their kin and sustain the forest. Though her ground-breaking findings were initially dismissed and even ridiculed, they are now firmly supported by the data. As her remarkable journey shows us, science is not a realm apart from ordinary life, but deeply connected with our humanity. In Finding the Mother Tree, she reveals how the complex cycle of forest life - on which we rely for our existence - offers profound lessons about resilience and kinship, and must be preserved before it's too late.



Sunday 31 May, 7.30pm (irregular date):

Is This Working? by Charlie Colenutt

For the best part of two years Charlie Colenutt travelled the country to talk to a hundred strangers, from all walks of life about their jobs: What did they do for a living? Why did they do it? Did they like it? They met in coffee shops, chain pubs or front rooms. Through hearing people tell their stories, he found out the number of birds killed a day in a poultry factory, the order in which patients are woken up in care homes, and the reasons why you shouldn't smile when you are shown your bonus in an investment bank. He spoke with the church minister who, maddened by his email inbox, has come to feel more like an administrator than a spiritual leader; the cleaner that became so frustrated by the lack of change in her local area that she ran to be a councillor and won; the baker who used to hate touching flour; and the trade union organiser, not pressured by hours or targets, but by the cause.



Community Yoga with Hannah

Usually the second Sunday of the month – contact Hannah to be kept informed

Come along for a gentle and relaxing, one-hour Hatha yoga class to help reduce stress and get your body moving. No prior experience is necessary, no advance sign-up required, and all levels welcome. Mats are provided, but do wear comfortable clothing that you can move in.

Interested, but not in London? Hannah also teaches free, virtual yoga sessions on Mondays (5:30-6:30pm via Zoom). Contact Hannah for full details: yoga@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Poetry Group

Wednesday evening, once a month, 7-8.30pm 4 March, 1 April, 6 May

Our poetry sharing group meets in-person on the first Wednesday in each month. Bring along a favourite poem to read on any subject. Maybe it'll be a poem you have written yourself, one you've just discovered, or a poem you've known for many years. Let us know if you plan to come and send a copy of your choices to Brian (brian.ellis@outlook.com) so they can be printed for everyone.



Finding Your Voice Monthly Singing Classes

Last Sunday of the month, 12.30-1.15pm 29 March, 26 April, 31 May

These relaxed and fun singing classes are for anyone who is prepared to open their mouth and make a sound. Using a few simple exercises you'll gain joy and confidence in singing. Classes are led by Margaret, an experienced and encouraging teacher, who has worked as a professional singer all her adult life. Drop in to one of these free and friendly sessions at Essex Church.



Art Play Crafternoon

15 March, 19 April, 10 May (note irregular date) 1-3pm

All are welcome to join us for at this relaxed art-and-craft hangout which continues on the third Sunday of each month. We'll get some basic art materials out to play with or you can bring your own craft project to work on in good company. It's not about showing off your amazing artistic skills – it's about having fun – and experimenting with colour, line, and form. Please let Jane know if you're planning to come along to any of the dates: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk.



One Light Gatherings

Second Tuesday of the month, meeting at Essex Church

10 March, 14 April, 12 May

OneLight Gathering is a welcoming circle whose sacred lineage is heart and soul connection, open to any faith or none. It is an offering from the compassionate heart to nourish and restore you. There is singing, readings, sharings, and a creative altar-building ceremony on universal themes that touch all lives. You will find warmth, sustenance, kindness, inspiration and encouragement. Free (donations welcome to cover costs of materials used, snacks and to offer half to the church). For more information contact Alison: contact@onelightgathering.co.uk



Nia Dance

Holistic movement and Dance at Essex Church.
Rediscover the joy of movement and the meaning of true fitness!

Nia is holistic movement for body and soul. It is an expressive movement practice promoting fitness, creativity, and wellbeing. Nia classes combine the grace and expressiveness of dance, the power and explosiveness of martial arts, and the wisdom and stillness of yoga and tai chi. Nia provides a holistic workout and leaves you feeling energised, relaxed and centred. It suits any level of fitness, age, and experience, working from where you are now.

Weekly on Friday at 12.30pm. £10 per session (or £40 for 5)
Online sessions on Wednesdays at 12.30pm

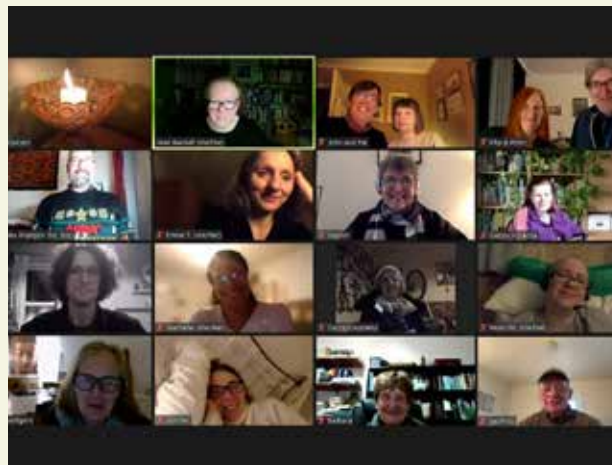
To find out about Nia see: www.nianow.com. For more info contact Sonya Leite on 020 7371 1674 or sleite@hotmail.co.uk

Kensington Choir

Monday evenings 7-8.35pm, Essex Church

The choir is a 30+ strong SATB four-part harmony choir based in West London. The singers all share a passion for singing and enjoy all the aspects that come with being a part of a choir; well-being, improved breathing, focus on musicality, friendship, delving into historical music periods and singing soulful music. Kensington Choir repertoire is vast and varied and sometimes includes classical pieces, spirituals and Christmas music. Join us to sing an eclectic mix of music, meet new people, and have fun!

Try a FREE taster session! Term dates and membership information on the website (www.kensingtonchoir.com) or email roseanna@kensingtonchoir.com



Heart and Soul Contemplative Spiritual Gatherings

Heart and Soul is a contemplative spiritual gathering in which you can take time to reflect on life in the company of others. These gatherings have been running for over a decade in-person at Essex Church and also more recently online via Zoom. Sessions follow a reassuringly regular pattern, with readings and music from a range of sources, time for guided prayers of gratitude, compassion for others, self-reflection, and silent meditation. Each session closes with refreshments, relaxed conversation, and an opportunity to get to know others at a deeper level.

In-person gatherings will be on 18 March, 15 April and 20 May at 7pm. We ask that if you have symptoms of respiratory illness (e.g. sore throat, runny nose, coughs) you stay home to help keep everyone safe and well. Do email Jane to let her know you're planning to attend: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Online gatherings are every Friday at 7pm and on Sundays at 7pm (except on the fourth Sunday when we have the 'Better World Book Club' instead). Email jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk for more information and to sign up for a session.



Minister's Reflection: 'Circles of Trust'

From the service on 25 January 2026



'Being fully alive requires both finding trusted others as well as being a trusted other. For trusting and being trusted allow us to blossom.'

Those words from Mark Nepo are at the heart of what today's service is all about – and I believe his message, it rings true to me – we humans need to trust, and feel trusted, in order to be fully alive. Yet I guess most of us will have had experiences – some small incidents, some devastating – of having trusted a person, or an institution, and having that work out badly for us, when our trust was broken, or abused, or taken advantage of. We know, don't we, that this troubled and often terrifying world is full of peril and risk. So it's understandable that we might retreat into a state of being wary and defended to protect ourselves from harm.

Let's just pause for a moment to consider (and hopefully clarify) what it is that we mean by trust. One of the dictionary definitions that I like best for 'trust' is this: 'to believe that someone is good and honest and will not harm you, or that something is safe and reliable'; that is, we need to have trust in situations in which we are in some way vulnerable. One way to think about trust, and trusting, is as putting yourself – or something especially precious to you – into the hands of another. We might put our body into the hands of a surgeon – or a lover – both of these require great trust. We might put our heart (in a less literal sense) into the hands of a beloved or a friend as we

share intimacies and confide in them – trusting that they will be kind and loving in response. On a rather more mundane level we might put our spare house keys in the hands of a neighbour, trusting them with access to our home and possessions, or trusting them to cat-sit or dog-sit, or water our tomatoes, while we're away. I'm sure you can think of lots of other instances where trust is woven into daily life.

It is risky to trust – to put ourselves into the hands of others – but if we never take such risks then we can become closed-off, and isolated, and miss out on so much in life. We might end our days realising we have not lived and loved as fully as we could have. But there is always a leap of faith involved in deciding to trust. We don't know how it will turn out. There's a short and slightly ominous quote from Ernest Hemingway on this, which acknowledges our trust will sometimes be misplaced and we can't know for sure. He said: 'The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.'

A more light-hearted take on the dilemma of trust is encapsulated in these words by Lemony Snicket, who wrote: 'Deciding whether or not to trust a person is like deciding whether or not to climb a tree, because you might get a wonderful view from the highest branch, or you might simply get covered in sap, and for this reason many people choose to spend their time alone and indoors where it is harder to get a splinter.' And this in turn links back to the quote from Frank Crane that I shared

at the top of the service: 'You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you will live in torment if you don't trust enough... We're never so vulnerable than when we trust someone – but paradoxically, if we cannot trust, neither can we find love or joy.'

Some of us might have a more trusting temperament and others may be naturally wary. I came across some thoughts on this from UUs Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins, who write of the basic trust which, if we are well cared for, we learn as infants – the inner sense that 'I can trust the world. I know what to expect. I will be cared for. It's OK.' They continue: 'Over our lives, we build on our foundation of basic trust with specific experiences of trust, gullibility, cynicism, and reconciliation after breaches of trust. Our experiences give us a sort of default trust setting, an attitude with which we face the world. Our default setting not only shapes our own feelings and behaviour, it also shapes the way others behave toward us. It might seem that a cynical attitude is safest, but since people who sense they are not trusted often withdraw from relationship, and sometimes even act in untrustworthy ways, it is actually a terrible risk. And while the happy-go-lucky, "trust the universe" stance might seem like an advanced spiritual practice, in actuality, it can invite exploitation.' Words from Robinson and Hawkins.

While I was pondering this subject during the week I found myself thinking about the temperamental variation of cats and dogs

as a model for thinking about trust (in fact on Friday I was in a ministers' meeting with my colleagues Laura and Michael, where Laura's dog Bess and Michael's cat Willow were also in attendance, and as I don't have any pets I took the opportunity to consult them all on this matter). I observe that some pets are self-contained, wary, and slow to trust, preferring to keep their distance; while others are utterly unboundaried, intuitively open, and demanding of love, affection, and belly rubs! My Instagram feed has ended up with a lot of cat and dog videos on it – I'm only human! – in the last week I've seen a lot of 'clingy cats' demanding cuddles (bucking the cat stereotype) – but I usually get loads of videos of kind and patient carers in animal rescue shelters doing the slow work of regaining the trust of animals who have been neglected or abused. Sometimes you get to see the long story unfold, where a dog that starts out trembling with fear in the corner of a cage, averting its eyes and making itself small, will eventually very tentatively approach the carer, then maybe allow itself to be cuddled, and you'll see a little wag of its tail... and by the end of the video it's all belly rubs and exuberant joy! Clearly this is often a long, painful process – but it's an incredible model of trust-building – and it's not too much of a stretch to see parallels in many of our human relations.

We each need to discern for ourselves who we can trust and who we can't. Or perhaps I should say when we can trust and when we can't – there may be people we can trust in some domains but not others – there's an element of context dependence here, I think. In each moment we need to consider what might be gained and what might be lost by taking the risk of being more trusting and open. We won't (and we shouldn't) trust everyone equally all the time. We need to set boundaries for our own protection. Each of us is probably aware, of the different levels of trust we have with others, radiating out in concentric circles. We'll most likely have an 'inner circle' of close confidantes, who we trust to share the intimate details of our lives, and trusted comrades who we can rely on to give us practical support and encouragement. Some of you have probably taken part in an exercise called the 'Trusted Ten' – it comes up a lot in diversity and equalities training (and I'm not going to focus on that aspect of the

exercise today but it's an interesting and important thing to reflect on the make-up of the ten) – but if you want to have a go it simply asks you to make a list of the ten people you trust the most. Then reflect on why you trust them, what it is that makes them trustworthy, to you. Perhaps there might be echoes of the qualities we heard from Brené Brown earlier.

I'm interested in how we might create the conditions for deepening trust – whether that's in the context of our personal relationships, or our community, or in the world – and I think they're all linked up anyway. That's why I so loved the poem we heard from Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, with the image of stopping what she was doing to be fully present, give her time and attention to her daughter, and those beautiful, inspiring, closing lines:

**“Let this be a reminder
to seek those
connections and to
be that safe place
for someone else.
In doing so, we invite
the blossoming of not
just ourselves, but the
world around us.”**

'To foster one moment of trust and love is to belong to a crucial revolution. It matters, how we hold each other. What happens everywhere starts right here.' And Mark Nepo said something similar about how the trust we build at a micro scale can have an impact that travels further than we can possibly know. He said: 'Let this be a reminder to seek those connections and to be that safe place for someone else. In doing so, we invite the blossoming of not just ourselves, but the world around us.'

I mentioned at the start of the service that the title 'Circles of Trust' was borrowed from the oft-quoted Parker J. Palmer. It's a phrase he uses for a certain way of holding space for small groups – very much like our own Unitarian Engagement Groups – these groups have a very particular structure which is intended to cultivate deeper trust and make space

for the soul to emerge. So I want to share an extended extract from him on this – a few paragraphs from his book 'A Hidden Wholeness' – Parker J. Palmer says this:

'The soul is like a wild animal...tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places... Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye—but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself.

Unfortunately, community in our culture too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away. In spaces ranging from congregations to classrooms, we preach and teach, assert and argue, claim and proclaim, admonish and advise, and generally behave in ways that drive everything original and wild into hiding. Under these conditions, the intellect, emotions, will and ego may emerge, but not the soul: we scare off all the soulful things, like respectful relationships, goodwill, and hope.

The people who help us grow toward true self offer unconditional love, neither judging us to be deficient nor trying to force us to change, but accepting us exactly as we are. And yet this unconditional love does not lead us to rest on our laurels. Instead, it surrounds us with a charged force field that makes us want to grow from the inside out—a force field that is safe enough to take the risks and endure the failures that growth requires. Circles of Trust combine unconditional love, or regard, with hopeful expectancy, creating a space that both safeguards and encourages the inner journey. In such a space, we are freed to hear our own truth, touch what brings us joy, become self-critical about our faults, and take risky steps toward change, knowing that we will be accepted no matter what the outcome.'

Words from Parker J. Palmer on 'Circles of Trust'. I think his vision really resonates ▶

▶ with what we're trying to create here, in this beloved community, and I hope you'll agree. Particularly in our Engagement Groups, gatherings like 'Heart and Soul', we're making a clearing into which the shy wild animal of our soul can emerge. A safer, softer, kinder space, where – over time, given constancy – a deeper level of trust becomes possible. And this way of being might just be something we can carry with us, out into the rest of our lives, changing those around us, and spreading transformative trust into the world.

In that spirit, I want to close with a few prayerful words, based on a prayer from Matthew Smith, in hope that they might prepare our hearts for the days to come.

**Spirit of Life, God of All Love,
In this moment let us be conscious
of the importance of trust in our lives.**

**While being open to others carries its risk,
we know our hearts will shrink and wizen
if we live mainly by wariness and
suspicion.**

**Let us be willing to open ourselves up
to love and trust – for our own dear
sakes.**

**There is good in the world,
and there is good in people.
Sometimes we need to look deeply
– but it is there.**

**We know there are tens of millions of
hearts yearning for the same things that
we do – love, justice, care, compassion.**

**As we reach out, let us have resolute faith
that we will connect with those
true hearts – the companions
we really need for life's journey.**

**So it is that we recognise and celebrate
this hard but invaluable work
of trusting and reaching out –
in our own personal lives,
and in the practise of spiritual community,
as we commit to creating a better world,
together.**

May it be so, for the greater good of all.

Amen.

Getting to Know You... Brian Ellis



Hello, I'm Brian, a member of the congregation for eleven years, a committee member and trustee of the church. An octogenarian

retired civil engineer, I have lived in London for sixty years. (For anyone interested in personality types I am INTJ in the Myers-Briggs personality types).

I arrived at Essex Church by chance. I was idly riffing through a magazine that my wife read, but I never looked at, when I was dealing with her affairs. A very short entry stated the basic Unitarian beliefs and I was interested enough to look up the Unitarian website. The Kensington congregation was my nearest so I came here for my first experience of the Unitarians. Had I riffed two pages of that magazine and missed that short entry I might still be unaware of the Unitarians and my life would have taken a very different path.

I remember standing at the bottom of the ramp up to the church doors thinking 'perhaps I'll turn round and go home' but I walked in and I'm still here. I've always been apprehensive of meeting groups of people that I don't know but the welcome was friendly and open and I left knowing that I would

be returning. Another factor of that first visit was how affecting I found the architecture of our church; an unusual square plan, no unnecessary details, the gentle curves, and the large roof lights giving us a view to infinity if we gaze upwards, a marvellous space in which to release our minds.

Essex Church is the only church I have attended. I don't remember my parents, relatives or neighbours ever entering a church; religion, or even discussions on whether life had any meaning beyond the material, was absent from my formative years. Except for a desultory once a week 'Religious Education' lesson in early teens, when I would ponder why all the various gods couldn't sort out who was the creator, and then who/what created the creator? End of interest in established religion, and the start of a journey of free thinking much abetted by the rapid expansion of our knowledge of the physical world which the 'digital revolution' has enabled. Without realizing, I was a fellow traveller of the Unitarians for sixty years.

If anyone asks whether I have a religion or spiritual outlook I say that if they need a label for me I am agnostic. Now, at my age, I believe that the balance of evidence available to me leads me to believe that there has been no directing force behind what we perceive as the universe. I cannot prove this to anyone with a deistic belief,

neither do I think it is possible with the conscious mind at the point in evolution that it has now reached, even though it is able to reason and question itself and to project a future. The need to nurture, co-operate and seek answers appears innate and I try to nurture life, all life, as best I can, co-operate as openly as I can, and continue to look for answers to the bewildering number of questions that confront us.

It is important to me that there is a physical and online church where I can share time and presence with others; I value the gentle discipline of our regular service where I can review the recent past, recoup in the present, and recharge for the future. Knowing how significant being a member of the church has been for me I now regret only being a fellow traveller for those sixty years!

Brian is also the keeper of our Sunday statistics and offers this report of attendance over the last quarter century 2000-2025...

Average Sunday service attendance: 29

Highest yearly average attendance: 37 (2009/10/19)

Lowest yearly average attendance: 21 (2004)

Christmas Festivities

We had a lovely time at all our Christmas services, with lovely music (including sleigh bells!) from Andrew and the quartet at our carol service, and from the Wigfield Brass quintet on Christmas Eve. We also enjoyed a splendid potluck lunch.



YouTube Channel

Our Sunday services are all archived on our YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/@kensingtonunitarians) so you can catch up on any you've missed or search through the archive (going back to summer 2020) to find services on a particular theme. Maybe you could share the link with friends who are curious about our community and the Unitarian approach to faith.

How to make a donation to our church

Your donation will help us continue our work and keep our progressive religious message out in the world. Our annual budget is around £180,000. That's around £3,500 running costs each week to pay for our staff team, run our programme of activities, and maintain our building.

A monthly standing order is the simplest way to support the church. A one-off donation by cheque or bank transfer is always most welcome. You can also set up regular payments via PayPal. Perhaps you might consider leaving a legacy donation in your will. Further details, including a Gift Aid form, are available on our website: www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk/get-involved

Thank you to everyone who has made a donation or taken out a standing order to support the work of this church. Your generosity is much appreciated! Your contributions will help keep our progressive spiritual message out in the world.

The Religious Life: Engagement Group Report

In the autumn we offered a six-part Engagement Group on 'The Religious Life: Integrating Our Faith and Daily Living'. Our own Jane and Charlotte reprised this course, first offered at Hucklow Summer School, for participants from all over the country. Marianne, Aisha and Rajan offer their reflections on the experience below.

We are planning to re-run this group on Thursday nights in June/July so please get in touch with Jane to register your interest if you'd like to join us next time around.

Marianne Harvey:

Signing up to a Study Group on religion was not an easy decision for me. I hesitated right up until close to the registration deadline. I've never been comfortable with the words 'religion' or 'religious', and that discomfort comes directly from the strict upbringing of my youth. So much of that experience felt confining, and for years I've carried a mixture of resistance, frustration, and distance from anything that reminded me of it. The idea of entering a space where religion would be openly discussed brought up all those old misgivings. And yet, something in me knew that my discomfort was precisely why I needed to go. I realized that my early relationship with religion was still influencing me. Avoiding it wasn't creating clarity. So, I joined with apprehension but also a kind of cautious openness, unsure of what I might uncover.

What I found was far gentler than I expected. The Study Group took place in a space that felt spacious rather than restrictive. People spoke from the heart about how they understand their faith or spirituality, who shaped their beliefs, and how they practice, or don't practice, what matters to them. Listening to these stories, I began to see how differently people hold their religious or spiritual lives, how personal and fluid it can be. It helped me recognize that my path was one among many. Another unexpected gift was the sense of community; it was a good opportunity to meet new people, but more than that, it was a chance to share in an atmosphere of trust. There was a quiet



respect in the room, a willingness to listen without judgment. That made it easier for me to reflect on my own experience with various religions and spiritual practices without feeling defensive or exposed.

Looking back, the Study Group didn't magically resolve my complicated feelings about religion, but it did help me soften around them. It reminded me that exploring something that once felt heavy can lead to a surprising sense of lightness. In listening to others, I learned something about myself: that I can hold both my doubts and my curiosity, and that there is value in being willing to look again at those parts of my life and what they have meant for me. It also confirmed to me that my Unitarian Church is my true home where I experience a freedom which allows me to grow, question, and simply be myself. Many thanks to our Minister Jane, and Charlotte, for leading the Study Group held on zoom once a week over a period of six weeks.

Aisha Animashaun:

'The Religious Life' course was an enriching experience filled with meaningful reflection prompts, an insightful range of perspectives and open contributions, all within a safe space mindfully created by Jane and Charlotte. I attended because I want to be more intentional about

nurturing my spiritual life, and I appreciate how this course has helped me do this. It provided me with the opportunity to carve out time in my life to contemplate relevant and important questions, empowering me to continue discovering my own answers while also learning from the experiences of others.

Rajan Rasaiah:

'The Religious Life' - skilfully created, crafted and facilitated by Charlotte and Jane - was a wonderful opportunity for me to catch a glimpse of the richness of the Hucklow Summer School experience (following the successful in-person pilot of the sessions there this year). As always happens in Jane's and Charlotte's orbits, I met some truly lovely, generous and thoughtful people. Their insights on the themes - and the reflective process of preparing my own sharing for each session - gave me some practical ideas for embedding more 'religiosity' in my life. Crucially, however, the key learning was a reinforcement of the message I have consistently received from all those at Essex Church, since my first contact with Kensington Unitarians via a Heart and Soul online meeting nearly three years ago: "Be present. Be yourself. You are welcome as you are."

Poems by our Members



By John Hands

Beech Tree II

Each year
Your girth expands
Each year
Your branches thrust
the sky
A little further from the
earth.
We hurry past in
multitude
Running
 Walking
 Rejoicing
 Sorrowing

Whilst you
Silently, imperceptibly
Grow and grow
Upholding nature.

By Brian Ellis

On the Piccadilly Line

packed; thirty-eight
seated sixty standing.
a babel of tongues
no obvious voice.
colours and shapes
of the species; babes
to the weary old.
creation's energies
released rattling
into Hammersmith;
entropy of humanity
arriving in a carriage.

Bramingham Wood

a child walking
in the wood

among the leaves
and twigs and
mystery that
hugged the ground
I found a skull

a small bird
once flew as
I now walked
with the spirit
of the wood

I stared
at the pale
soiled bone

there was silence
but I heard
the bird's soul
singing

By Marianne Harvey-Bertrand

Still, the Light

Humankind cannot bear very much reality
T.S. Eliot (Burnt Norton)

I make a cup of tea,
stand in the kitchen.

Light comes through the
window
and rests,
not urgent,
not asking,
simply itself.
The radio hums in the other
room,
the world enters:

Sudan
a word breaking open
into fire, into running,
women without shoes.

I am at the sink.
I have forgotten
what I meant to do.

How much
can one heart hold?

Iran
voices rising,
cut short.

Ukraine
no heat no light.

Gaza
ash.
Again the numbers.
Thousands.

As if we could count our
way
to understanding.

Grief finds you
while rinsing a cup.

You want to look away.
You do not.

The heart says
I cannot.
I cannot.

Still
it beats.
But look,
outside the window
the tree lifts its green arms,
asking nothing.

The bird opens its throat
not for us,
not against the dark,
but because this is morning

and morning
asks for song.

I stand there long enough
for my breath
to return.

I do not carry everything.
Nothing is solved.
Nothing is repaired.

Still,
light on the cup.

I stay with it,
looking
as carefully
as I can.

This is how I bear the world
when it is unbearable:

I look
at the light.

By Eliz Beel

St Olaf

...had your
Valentine, then?

...ere yet Winter struggles on,
through the dawn, undefined...
Then, as before,
Skies are blurred
over Wisdom's future...

And answering, comes the
Cards stuffed in the shop-racks;
as if a second Xmas's come around...

But, maybe then, I'll cease quaffing
From my medicine bottle;
Raise my eyes to the cheerie-byes
coming in the breeze;
And at last, see the music of the Spring-
trees

my neck-ties gone, pulled up now





Minister's Reflection:

FREE LOVE

From the service on
8 February 2026

I feel I should issue a disclaimer before I get into my sermon – this might be a relief for some and a disappointment for others – but as I asked Sarah to warn you last week, despite the title 'Free Love', this sermon is not going to be as racy as you might have anticipated! I'm not talking about 'free love' in the euphemistic 1960s sense of sexual liberation and orgiastic revelries (though by all means go for it – in your own time! – if you've got the stamina and the full consent of everyone involved).

Instead, I want to start by framing our exploration of love as a profoundly religious question. We speak so much of love in the church and indeed in the wider culture. The word 'love' is used in so many different ways and contexts that it is imprecise and confusing. Some years ago, 9 years I think, I wrote my dissertation on the subject of 'Models of God and the Meaning of Love'. I think there's still a copy in the church library! And I opened the dissertation with a Biblical quote from the first epistle of John: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.' Even if you are unfamiliar with the scripture you're probably familiar with the notion that 'God is Love'.

I am not going to try and get the gist of the whole dissertation into this sermon!

It's just a stop along the way. But the key point, for me, was that love is the centre and foundation of our human search for meaning, purpose, and value in this life. And that, somehow, our symbolic religious language interweaves with our practice of love, with the two supporting and reinforcing each other. The philosopher Keith Ward has said: 'We should not think of the word "God" as referring

"...Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

to any sort of being... to make such an assertion as "God is Love" is perhaps to have discerned, in our lived experience of loving and being loved by others, something worth ultimate commitment.' By this I think he means that, often, our experience of loving and being loved is the way in which we humans first intuit that there is a transcendent dimension to life, and this dimension may be known through love, in all its forms.

I will just share the concluding paragraph of the dissertation so you get an overview:

'Many religious people employ religious language, and God-talk in particular, as a symbolic means of affirming and cultivating that which is most worthy of ultimate commitment in life. "God is Love", in this sense, means that real, authentic, transforming love – in all its many and varied expressions – is of supreme worth and, as such, it offers a guiding principle for life and a glimpse of the underlying nature of reality.' I closed with a few words from theologian Edward Vacek, who said: 'Love is the heart of a person, the font of spirit, the power leading to growth, the bond tying human beings, the world and God into cosmic unity.'

So... that's the backdrop to this morning's exploration. Love is, for many of us, a primary source of meaning, value, purpose, depth in this life. And, for some of us, it's how we come to know God. One way or another, for many of us, love is our ultimate concern. If that's the case then – this is the premise of today's service – perhaps we're called to love ever more freely, more generously, more exuberantly, in our short time on earth. To broaden our sense of what love might look like in practice, and the shapes that loving relationships can take, liberating them from unnecessary convention and constraint. And also to be freer in our expression of love – be more ready to name and affirm it. What comes to mind when you think about

love? Maybe, by default, we picture the sort of love that's portrayed in pop songs, in novels, on screen. A certain sort of love story – romantic, passionate, dramatic – tends to be held up as the ideal. Or maybe the associations that come up for you are shaped more by your own experiences of love as you have known it in your own life. These real-life experiences might be more varied (and more complicated) than what is typically portrayed in mainstream culture. Though in the Better World Book Club last year we did read 'The Other Significant Others' which showed that significant loving relationships can take all sorts of different forms.

In previous Valentine's services we've talked about all the Greek names for different varieties of love – eros, agape, philia, pragma, and all the rest – but really there are as many forms of love as there are combinations of people. We don't have to follow the limited social scripts that our culture lays out for us. Each encounter between two souls is its own unique and precious thing – alive with possibility – if we can remain open to its unfolding. If we're fixated on a certain image, a certain ideal, of how love has to be, we might miss the opportunities to love and be loved that are right there in front of us.

I included a quote from feminist theologian Carter Heyward on the front of today's order of service (and in Friday's email). I think what she says is important as it frames love in the broadest terms – it doesn't limit love to any one particular flavour or expression – and it also doesn't hold back in affirming love's centrality, vitality, necessity. Heyward says: 'Love does not just happen. Love is a choice—not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretence or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity—a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world. Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family and a partner in the dance of life.'

The reading we heard earlier from David, by UU minister Vanessa Rush Southern, 'In Praise of the Romantic', actually praises both the romantic and the pragmatic. Both/and. She (rightly) lifts up the romantic vision, saying: 'In her headlong tumble, the romantic comes to see the Divine in each of us and, as such, that we are all deserving of the wildest

and most profound adoration.' Yes! And at the same time she acknowledges that mature, lasting, love can be hard work, as it requires an ongoing devotion to the flourishing of another. All that everyday maintenance, all those small acts of connection and caring, which can be quite mundane, but which can cumulatively add up to something very meaningful. I wonder how many of you are familiar with the wonderful U.A. Fanthorpe poem, 'Atlas', which speaks of this, with its opening line 'There is a kind of love called maintenance / Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it'.

“We grow up thinking love is a feeling. But real love – lasting love – is a practice. It's not built on how you feel in any one moment. It's built on what you choose to do.”

I recently read something from therapist and author Terry Real which resonates with this pragmatic view. He says: 'We grow up thinking love is a feeling. But real love – lasting love – is a practice. It's not built on how you feel in any one moment. It's built on what you choose to do. That choice often shows up in small, ordinary moments. You take a breath instead of snapping. You reach for your partner instead of retreating. You say, "That didn't come out right. Let me try again." These are not grand gestures. They wouldn't make for a good movie script. But they matter more than you think. Because every time you choose connection, you are building trust. Every time you stay in the room with an open heart, you are practicing intimacy. And every time you repair, even just a little, you remind each other: we can do this. That's true intimacy.' Words on the more pragmatic side of love from Terry Real.

The poem we heard by Marge Piercy, 'To Have Without Holding', which Chloë read, this paints another picture of love, one which illuminates both the profound challenge and the profoundly transformative potential of authentic love between human beings who remain free.

She says 'learning to love differently is hard', 'it hurts to love wide open', 'to love consciously, conscientiously, concretely, constructively'. The poem gestures toward an idealised image of a love in which each partner remains grounded in themselves, their own person, free and freely choosing to love another, without possessing them. It reminds me of the sort of love that proponents of relationship anarchy talk about: where each person approaches every encounter with an open curiosity about what form this relationship might ultimately take rather than forcing it to fit a particular box. Each connection is its own thing. In relationship anarchy, you would expect to have multiple loving connections – with friends as well as lovers – rather than focusing on one to the detriment or exclusion of all others. That's not to say that all our loving connections are, or should be, equally significant. Inevitably, we will prioritise some over others, as it takes time to do 'maintenance', to grow in intimacy, to know and be known, to tend to a sense of security and comfort. Love is all wrapped up with bonding and attachment. Yet it seems crucial that we never lose sight of the essential wildness of the other. Lover and beloved must know themselves to be both deeply connected and ultimately free.

Recently, I was talking to my dear friend Chris, who knows a lot about love – mainly because she's a wonderful big-hearted human being – but she also has the professional credentials to back it up, being an associate professor of psychology who specialises in intimate relationships. We were talking about what it means to say we love someone. She pointed me towards an article by Carsie Blanton who says this: 'The truth about love is: it happens. A lot... We have a mythology surrounding love that says it's a special, rare feeling, reserved for just a few people in your whole life. It says that love takes time to develop, and that the feelings you experience at the outset of a relationship are not love, but something else ("infatuation" or "a crush")... we tend to round some feelings up to love (i.e. when you first met the person you later married) and others down to not-love (i.e. your weekend fling with a Spanish dancer). The thing is, those experiences feel remarkably similar from the inside... instead of trying to deny it, or ignore it, or call it something different in each different situation, I want to call it like I feel it...' ▶

I fall in love all the time. And really, it's no big deal. It's actually kind of fun, once you get used to it.'

Blanton continues: 'Imagine if you could say... "I love you. It's no big deal. It doesn't mean you're The One... it doesn't mean you have to love me back. It doesn't mean we have to date, or marry, or even cuddle. It doesn't mean we have to part ways dramatically in a flurry of tears and broken dishes. It doesn't mean I'll love you until I die, or that I'll still love you next year..." Then, later, you could tackle the question of whether there's anything to do about it. All of the aforementioned – dating, marriage, cuddling, etc. – are options, and there are an infinite number of other options [such as sailing round the world together]. These are all things you can now choose or not choose, as two conscious, adult, human beings. The important distinction is that none of them is necessarily implied just by saying the word "love".' Some intriguing thoughts on love from the singer-songwriter Carole Blanton.

There are things in her article that resonate for me and things that really don't (and I imagine our responses to this will vary wildly). I think she makes a compelling case for being free with our love, not being stingy with it, not holding back. The one thing I took umbrage with was her statement 'I love you. It's no big deal.' 'I love you' IS a big deal! Surely! It matters! OK – I do get it, I think – she means 'I love you' isn't a big deal in the sense that it doesn't have to be rationed too much, it doesn't have to be something we only bring out for special, heightened, occasions. And, crucially, it doesn't have to be freighted with a whole bunch of heavy expectations about what it implies. We very probably won't mean precisely the same thing by it every time we say it. And, like she says, every pair of people in love get to decide what (if anything) they want to do about it. But those words, 'I love you', they mean something. And it can feel so good to say it and to hear it. Perhaps we can take her encouragement to be freer in naming and expressing love in a wider range of connections that we are generally accustomed to.

Around the same time, I came across another article by Shankar Sagram, which takes the rather interesting angle that 'I love you' is a kind of mantra. He says: 'A soul-deep "I love you" isn't just a string

of words — it's a mantra. Not a tool. Not a trick. It's a quiet ritual that heals, anchors, and connects. When spoken with intent, it doesn't demand anything in return. It simply gives. It flows without expecting. That's where its power lies.' He writes about how the expression of love can sometimes feel transactional (and how people can hear 'I love you' and reflexively think 'what do you want from me?!'). His remedy: 'To undo that damage, make it a habit to say it — not when you want something, but when you feel nothing in particular. Say it when you're bored. When you're scrolling endlessly. When your mind is blank and your heart feels dull. Pick up your phone, call them, and say it — just that. "I love you." Let it sound like a heartbeat, not a strategy. In time, it becomes a small ritual that waters your bond without you even realizing it... Be the first one [to say it]. Be the only one, if needed. Love is not a transaction. It's a flow.'

So where does this leave us? We're never going to exhaustively explore a subject as big as love, are we...? So expect us to return to this in the months and years to come. Perhaps we can come back to the notion that love is the centre and foundation of our lives – and our faith – maybe even that loving is the primary means by which we might know God. And so, let us free love from convention and constraint, be open to love in all its forms. In this world of so much suffering and harshness seems ever more vital to love exuberantly, extravagantly, abundantly, freely, (and imperfectly) while we still can.

I want to close with a few words which call us back to love's sacred centrality, an excerpt from a longer piece called 'When I Speak of Love', by UU minister Dan Schatz.

When I speak of love,
I mean nothing more
or less
than opening to what is sacred
in all of us,
even when it is broken,
even when it is hidden,
even when it is inconvenient.

This love transforms
and illumines
my heart.

This love
shapes my living.

This love
demands
better of me,
always.

This love
brings me home
when I have lost my way.

So
when I speak of love,
please do not shake your head,
or smile in condescension.
Instead,
listen
to your soul's own longing.

And together,
let us speak of love.

Amen.



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