

Kensington Unitarians

community – spirituality – conscience



NEWSLETTER
AUTUMN 2025



Finding Our Religion

This year's Hucklow Summer School explored what it means to be Unitarian in the 21st Century

Just One
Thing...



Tea Dance
with Rachel



Heartspaces
at Essex Hall



www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Coming up...

September

Wednesday 3

7pm Poetry Group with Brian
(in-person)

Friday 5

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 7

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

1-3pm Tea Dance with Rachel Sparks
(in-person)

Thursday 11

7pm Committee Meeting (online)

Sunday 14

11am 'Gathering the Waters' Service
led by Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall (hybrid)

12.30pm Community Lunch
(in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 17

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

Friday 19

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 21

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

1pm Art Play Crafternoon (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Friday 26

7pm Heart and Soul
(leader TBC – online)

Sunday 28

11am Sunday Service led by
Rev. Michael Allured (hybrid)

12.30pm Find Your Voice: Singing
with Margaret (in-person)

7.30pm Better World Book Club:
'Normally Weird and Weirdly Normal'
(online)

October

Wednesday 1

7pm Poetry Group with Brian
(in-person)

Friday 3

7pm Heart and Soul with Alex
Brianson (online)

Sunday 5

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

7pm Heart and Soul with
Amanda Reynolds (online)

Friday 10

7pm Heart and Soul with Rita
Woditsch (online)

Sunday 12 October

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

7pm Heart and Soul with
Lochlann Binney (online)

Wednesday 15

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

Friday 17

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Saturday 18

7pm Vigil for Palestine (in-person)

Sunday 19

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

1pm Art Play Crafternoon (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Thursday 23

7pm Committee Meeting (online)

Friday 24

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 26

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

12.30pm Find Your Voice: Singing
with Margaret (in-person)

7.30pm Better World Book Club:
'Chasing the Scream' (online)

November

Sunday 2

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

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 5

7pm Poetry Group with Brian
(in-person)

Friday 7

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 9

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

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Friday 14

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 16

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

1pm Art Play Crafternoon (in-person)

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 19

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane
(in person)

Friday 21

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 23

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

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Friday 28

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 30

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

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

7.30pm Better World Book Club:
'The Transgender Issue' (online)

Join us for hybrid services at 11am every Sunday, in person and online.

Please keep an eye on our website for last minute additions to the programme. **Community Singing dates are still TBC.**
Visit kensington-unitarians.org.uk and see www.youtube.com/@kensingtonunitarians for our Sunday Service archive.



Help needed with streaming our hybrid services

Do you know of anyone who can help us out with running the tech for our hybrid services? We are looking for someone to help out with hosting for our hybrid services and take on the role of tech host approximately once a month. Most weeks this is done by our warden Ramona but we need someone to cover for her once every four weeks (the precise dates are negotiable). As a minimum this involves turning up early to church (in-person) to run the zoom meeting from 10am, adjust the sound and vision, and share hymn words on screen. Ideally the tech host would also set up and take down all the streaming equipment.

We pay £80 per session for tech hosting and we can also pay for the time it takes to train someone up with our particular hybrid system. As well as being reasonably at ease and capable with the technology (including Zoom hosting on Windows), the candidate would need to be reliable, punctual, conscientious, and showing attention to detail; they would also need to be able to work collaboratively with the church team, in sympathy with our inclusive Unitarian ethos, and showing sensitivity to the church context.

If you or anyone you know might be interested in this role please get in touch: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk



'JUST ONE THING':

Delving Deeper

In each edition of the church newsletter we suggest 'just one thing' you might do for the benefit of our community. This time – inspired by the theme of this year's Hucklow Summer School – I'd like to encourage you to delve a bit deeper into questions of what it means (for you!) to be religious.

One way to kickstart your reflections on this topic might be to watch the summer school theme talks on 'Finding Our Religion: Being Unitarian on the 21st Century' which are available on YouTube (search for 'Hucklow Summer School YouTube' or visit www.youtube.com/@hucklowsummerschool8933). This series of six talks are a series of

in-depth explorations and stories of personal faith journeys which illuminate the many and varied ways in which Unitarians understand their own relationship to religion.

You might also consider signing up for 'The Religious Life' engagement group which we will be offering this autumn – Jane and Charlotte will be re-running this summer school group online – offering a space for participants to reflect on how they might integrate their faith and daily life. Spaces will be strictly limited (and you must commit to attending at least 5 of the 6 sessions) so sign up early to join in.

Contact Us

The best way to get in touch with us is by email:

Minister: Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall
jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Admin Team (for bookings)
office@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Chairperson: Liz Tuckwell
chair@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Treasurer: Patricia Brewerton
treasurer@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Warden: Ramona Cristea
warden@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

WhatsApp Group

Our InTouch WhatsApp Group is a gentle space for checking in and encouraging each other. If you're a member or friend of the congregation and would like to be added to the group just get in touch with Jane (see details, left)





Hucklow Summer School: Finding our Religion: Being Unitarian in the 21st Century

Seven members of our congregation (and a number of Kensington-Unitarians-adjacent people who come along to our events from time to time) attended Hucklow Summer School this August. Here are a few of their reflections:

John Humphreys:

I am still not sure how the decision to attend the Unitarian Summer School happened, but I am so glad Pat and I found ourselves driving into the Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow



last week – even though we had an argument on arrival about the parking!

There was definitely work for me to do each morning. Every day started with a theme talk which challenged my preconceptions and prejudices around what makes a religious community – I found the presentations fascinating as they were covering the historical basis of Unitarianism blended with the speaker's own faith journeys. After a welcome cup of coffee, I plunged into a two-hour engagement group which was tackling the subject of constructing a contemporary Unitarian identity. It was well facilitated, intense at times, but a transformational experience for me. We also built a beautiful chapel which was moving and a lot of fun. The weather was perfect for the daily afternoon walks I went on (each one well thought out and

led) - I needed to get out of the centre after the intensity of the mornings. The centre is very comfortable, the food good and plentiful, and the location is amazing. All the afternoon and evening activities are optional, and I loved the opportunities to sing and hear a range of music.

I was very impressed with the way the week was so skilfully managed by the speakers, facilitators and group leaders. I am so grateful for all the work they put in and the flexibility and love they showed to everybody who attended the summer school. In conclusion, I am now a significant step closer to being able to say I belong to a religion and hope they will let me attend next year to explore this further. I wrote five questions down before going and think I got answers to most of them.



Charlotte Chanteloup:

For the fourth time, I attended Summer School in Great Hucklow. This time, I co-facilitated an engagement group with Jane and I was a member of the organising panel. Theme talks and engagement groups in the morning, optional activities in the afternoon and evening, and epilogues (short, restful services in the Old Chapel) at night: the week would have been quite busy if I had taken part in everything! This year, I particularly enjoyed Jane and Mel Prideaux's theme talk as well as Sarah (Tinker) and Winnie Gordon's theme talk. In it, they each described their journey towards Unitarianism and what it means for them today.

This week has allowed me to think deeply about my beliefs and my faith and why it's important to me. I feel that my commitment has been renewed. I realised that my faith is strongly rooted in community, and what a community I was part of! From engagement groups to social hour in the sunroom, I was accepted for whom I am and was a part of creating a safe environment for the many newcomers we welcomed this year. I was delighted to see that some of these newcomers were from Kensington. It was wonderful to share this experience with members of our congregation. Although I need a rest after such a wonderful week, I already can't wait for next year!

Pat Gregory

Arriving at Hucklow for the first time I was very impressed by the lovely building and gardens. The surrounding countryside is beautiful and very calm. The accommodation was just right and after settling in I felt welcomed and relaxed. There was an extensive programme of events for all tastes and preferences and it was hard to resist doing too much but I somehow managed to find a balance of sharing with others and spending time alone. There were engagement groups with different themes

and I had signed up to be with 'Reclaiming Ritual and Exploring Ancient Wisdom'. I enjoyed finding the deeper meaning that rituals and ceremonies have in my life and in my religious practice. Many memories came back, and I valued the space we had to share our personal stories about how rituals have played a part in nurturing our lives. There were lots of optional additional activities such as walks, exercise, meditations, artwork and play. Also singing and dancing. Such a lot of work had gone into creating this week in a

way that everyone was welcomed and connected. I have great respect and love for all those who organise this event where every day there is something for everyone, or you can choose to do nothing.

I feel that I have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Unitarian – equality is alive in this religion which is open, curious and diverse and honours different cultures, backgrounds and beliefs. I came away feeling nourished in mind, body and spirit and there was a lot of laughter.

Sarah Tinker:

This photo of a group of walkers in the Peak District landscape encompasses two of my Summer School passions: people and places! To spend a whole week with 52 Unitarians was a treat, and an especial treat in meeting quite a few newcomers this year. I'd arrived full of thoughts about this being Summer School's 30th anniversary, thinking about being the only person there who'd attended the first Summer School back in 1995. But I quickly realised that apart from me, and Jane, and a few others with long Unitarian connections, most people were far more interested in this year's theme of 'Finding Our Religion: Being Unitarian in the 21st Century' and in the immediacy of the countryside around us. Our Unitarian conference centre, the Nightingale Centre, is set in a landscape of limestone drystone walls, fields, rocky outcrops, excellent walking country, and an area I've been hiking across much of my life.

The variety of theme talks and small group explorations, along with lots of other optional activities – all of such a high quality, helped to make this a really top-notch week – part holiday, part religious exploration, part worship in many forms. If you'd like to meet more Unitarians from around the country and spend a week considering a theme in good company with others, make a note now of next year's dates (21st to 28th August) and think



about applying for Summer School. If finance is an issue then there is a bursary fund to help and Kensington Unitarians can sometimes contribute towards costs as well. It's a great way to re-energise our faith and our lives, and thanks for that go to our minister Jane and the rest of the Summer School Panel. Planning and running a week like this takes a lot of hard work!



Vigil for Palestine

Save the date: On **Saturday 18 October** at 7pm we are planning to hold a vigil for Palestine. Plans are still at an early stage. We will keep you posted via Sunday announcements and Friday emails nearer the time.



Stride for Palestinians

Pat Gregory and Patricia Brewerton took part in a fundraising campaign, 'Stride for Palestinians' over the summer. They write: 'We covered 107 kilometres in 15 days, walking a bit every day. And we raised £3960 between us for Medical Aid for Palestinians. Our strides were logged onto a virtual map stretching from East Jerusalem to Gaza's Al Shifa Hospital. Thanks to everyone who supported us.'



Hope Flowers School – educating for the wellbeing of humanity

Earlier this year an organisation called 'Spirit of Peace', which works for a world where all can flourish, chose Essex Church for the London venue of a visit by Ibrahim Issa who runs 'Hope Flowers School' in Bethlehem. Ibrahim spoke powerfully of his experience of life in the Israel-occupied West Bank. When he was only thirteen years old, he was shot and injured by Israeli soldiers. A few years later he was imprisoned and tortured. These experiences led him to dedicate himself to campaign for peaceful ways of resisting the Israeli occupation.

Ibrahim was in Britain to raise funds for Hope Flowers School which for over 35 years has been a pioneer in constructive peace education for children in conflict areas. The school focuses on children between the ages of 5 and 14 years who have been traumatised by war and are exposed to poverty and malnutrition. Eighty percent of the children are from refugee camps in the area and alongside their education they receive trauma support from specialised trauma counsellors who help them with behavioural difficulties.

Given the current situation in the West Bank, many schools are no longer able to function so Hope Flowers has expanded its intake to its absolute maximum and now has 400 children attending. Recently they have been able to accept a few orphaned children from Gaza who are suffering complex trauma. Even when permission was given for the children to come to Bethlehem they had to go through Egypt and Jordan as direct travel between the occupied territories is not allowed.

It was an honour to be able to host Ibrahim Issa and to learn of the work of Hope Flowers and we received a small plaque as a "thank you". Donations for the work of the school can be made through this link: <https://bit.ly/HopeFlowersDonate>

Patricia Brewerton





Special Services this Autumn

Gathering the Waters and Congregational Lunch

– Sunday 14 September, 11 am

Our annual 'Gathering the Waters' service will take place on 14 September. You are invited to bring along a small container of water, either from somewhere you have visited over the summer, or simply from your own kitchen tap at home. In this special service, representing the gathering of our community, we will pour all the offerings into a common bowl and bless the waters. This service will be followed by a congregational potluck lunch which Pat and Anna will be coordinating. Please let them know what food or drink you are planning to bring.

Harvest Festival Service featuring our Quartet of Singers

– Sunday 21 September, 11 am

Our Harvest Festival service will take place on 21 September. If you grow your own fruit or veg please do bring some along to show off! Even if you don't grow your own you're invited to bring something along for the harvest table display. We'll be joined by our quartet of singers for this special occasion.

Save the Dates for Christmas and New Year

As usual we will be holding a number of special events for Christmas and the New Year including a festive potluck lunch. These are always lovely festive occasions so why not save the dates and bring your friends! The more the merrier.

Christmas Carol Service and Congregational Lunch

– Sunday 21 December, 11 am

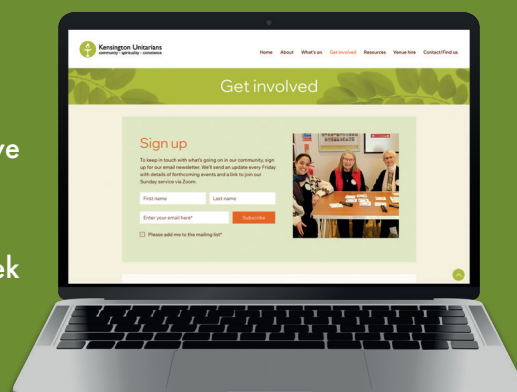
Candlelit Christmas Eve Service – Wednesday 24 December, 5pm

New Year Mini-Retreat - In-person on Sunday 28 December, 1pm and online on Thursday 1 January, 1pm.



Stay in the loop...

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



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 from September for a series of regular events from the monthly Wednesday Lunch Break sessions to weekly Thursday evening spirituality gatherings.

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. September's meeting will be an introduction to breathwork and mindfulness with Rev Simon Ramsay and Adam Slate.

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.



Sign Up Now:

'The Religious Life' Engagement Group

Jane Blackall and Charlotte Chanteloup are planning to re-run their summer school engagement group, 'The Religious Life: Integrating Our Faith and Daily Living' as a six-part course on Zoom this autumn.

This group will provide a chance to explore what it might look like for us as 21st century Unitarians to be bolder – more spiritually serious – and truly shape our lives according to our faith. We will consider various aspects of a well-balanced religious life – personal commitment and identity, prayer and practice, religious language and models of God, spiritual teachers, ethical principles, and faith community – and reflect on how we actually relate to each

of these dimensions in our everyday life. You will be invited to construct a personal 'rule of life' to help you live well and faithfully in the face of life's ups and downs.

Dates are TBC at the time of going to press but provisionally we expect to meet on six consecutive Thursday evenings from 30th October. It is essential to sign up by 15th October at the latest; numbers will be limited, you need to commit to attending at least 5 out of the 6 sessions, and there will be some written 'homework' to complete before the first session. Please contact Jane ASAP to register your interest as the group will be closed once we have twelve confirmed participants signed up.

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. Forthcoming gatherings will take place on Saturday 13th September, Friday 10th October, and Saturday 8th November at 10.30am. Contact Lizzie for more information: ekingston@unitarian.org.uk

LDPA Centenary Gathering

Saturday 20 September, 1-4pm at Richmond and Putney Unitarians, Ormond Rd, London TW10 6TH

Our district will celebrate its 100th anniversary on Saturday 20 September at Richmond and Putney Unitarians. Come and celebrate with us with music and refreshments. Lizzie Kingston-Harrison will offer the Agnes Wallace Bruce Address. In 1922, Agnes Wallace Bruce suggested and advocated for the merger of the Provincial Assembly and the London District Unitarian Society. She pushed for a joint committee to be established between these two bodies and she chaired it from the outset. To reserve your place email administrator@ldpaunitarians.org





Tea Dances with Rachel Sparks

Sundays: 7 September & 7 December, 1-3pm

Tea, cake, partner dancing (Ballroom and Latin), and a few line dances – all are welcome – from complete beginners to life-long dancers. Even if you think you have two left feet, don't worry, this will be a relaxed and welcoming space for all to enjoy (there'll be a dance lesson for complete beginners led by Rachel Sparks at the start of the afternoon). We encourage gender-neutral dance partnering which means that anyone can lead or follow. There's no need to bring a dance partner so just come as you are (though you're welcome to dress up if you'd like to!). This event is free of charge; donations will be invited in support of LGBTQ+ good causes. Help with baking and hosting welcomed. Contact jane@kensington-unitarianas.org.uk.



Minister's Reflection: 'Good Faith'

From the service
on 8 June 2025

Today we're exploring this concept of faith. This is a bit of a generalisation but over the years I've picked up the impression that a lot of us who end up in Unitarian congregations are a bit uncertain, or ambivalent – or even squeamish – about the very notion of faith (perhaps in large part because we're not entirely sure what it means). Do we really want to call ourselves 'people of faith' collectively, or consider ourselves as 'having faith' personally, when the way the word is often used in common parlance gives it a number of connotations that we might not feel entirely at ease with?

In the main, I think, people tend to associate faith with belief in something particular. Probably belief in God – with 'God' being understood in a very particular way, a way that's probably derived from the dominant religious tradition of our local culture which we reference by default – and also with 'belief' being understood in a very particular way, in the sense of an intellectual agreement that God exists, and that a certain collection theological doctrines that go with it are true, probably literally true.

As Unitarians we probably already know, intellectually at least, that religion doesn't really work like this, or at least it doesn't have to. Of course, there are plenty of religious traditions that seem

to emphasise belief – that put a lot of weight on subscribing to creeds or making declarations – that's a practice I would tend to associate mostly with the evangelical churches. But we are part of a free, creedless religious tradition, and I think we know that there's more than one way to be faithful (though perhaps our ambivalence and hesitancy around speaking of 'faith' comes from a sense that the more conservative traditions 'own' the word somehow? But, of course, that's not the case). That's why I shared those words from the Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg at the start of the service, to encourage us to reclaim the word, and to consider what faith means to us, how we might understand ourselves as progressive 'people of faith'. She said: 'I want to invite a new use of the word faith, one that is not associated with a dogmatic religious interpretation or divisiveness. I want to encourage delight in the word, to help reclaim faith as fresh, vibrant, intelligent, and liberating...'

So where do we start? It would be remiss of me to speak about faith here without crediting Richard Boeke, a Unitarian minister who sadly died just a few weeks ago at the age of 95 (and I want to pause to note that Richard's wife Jopie was also a Unitarian minister, and indeed served as interim minister here at Essex Church for a couple of years in the 1990s, which

a few of us will recall). Richard, who was deeply engaged with questions of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, spent many years wrestling with the meaning of 'faith' in that context, drawing on strands of wisdom from differing religious traditions, and he came to an understanding of faith as primarily being about trust. Richard made this observation: 'In the Quran, the word *amana* means to have faith. On the other hand, *zanna* means to hold an opinion. In Christianity, Aquinas, Augustine, Bach, all bear witness that *credo* means what it says, "I place my heart." [JB: that's the etymology of the words 'creed' and 'believe'] When Luther affirms "the just shall live by faith alone," he does not mean, "the just shall live by the right mental decision." Hebrews chapter 11 opens, "now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." This is not a discussion of intellectual assent, but of living trust.'

What I take from this is that faith means trusting in something beyond the rational. It's about accepting that we can't work everything out by ourselves – as wonderful as our human faculties might be – the universe we find ourselves in is too vast and complex for us to understand or control. We're part of an immense dynamical system, thrown in with all the other people, and creatures, and planets, and atoms, all doing their own thing



and bumping up against each other in challenging ways that we often can't do a thing about. In life we will frequently find ourselves at the limits of our power – and that's where faith comes in – this acknowledgement of something that's beyond us. Speaking about faith in this way makes me think about the spiritual language of 12-step groups. They know: When life is unmanageable, when we are up against it, there is something to be said for surrender. Faith can liberate us from the mistaken thought that we can control everything, fix every problem, and put things right through the force of our own individual efforts alone. Sometimes it's the right thing to do to let go of our struggles and 'hand them over to God' or a higher power as we understand it. In tough times there can be a huge sense of relief, comfort, even liberation in letting go like this, in faith. But to quote Richard Boeke again: 'Faith is not a matter of leaving it all to God, nor believing that we can do it all. Rather in the words of Paul Tillich, it is "finite freedom." The affirmation that we cannot do everything, but we can do something. This beginning of faith was beautifully stated by Reinhold Niebuhr when he wrote [the serenity prayer]: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Of course this is still pretty mysterious. It depends on how you understand 'God' or 'higher power' (and whether you are prepared to engage with those concepts at all). I reckon it's OK to adopt such an attitude before we fully understand it. Dive in. That's what we mean by a 'leap of faith'. I appreciate these words by William Sloane Coffin: 'There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith, for faith is not believing without proof but trusting without reservation. Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible. It has what we might call a limbering effect on the mind; by taking us beyond familiar ground, faith ends up giving us much more to think about.'

There's a parallel I have heard – and possibly shared before – one which I like very much – a parallel between coming to faith and falling in love (or maybe committing to someone in marriage). The 'leap of faith' involved in both cases opens up more possibility, more depth, than you

can reach while you are holding back and sitting on the sidelines. In both cases it is about giving your heart, making a commitment, and seeing where it leads, rather than constructing some sort of rational argument. If we are half-hearted or tentative about it we might just be missing out on something beautiful. And although there's some moment in time when you make the leap, that's not the end of the story, as with any ongoing relationship you have to make it work. You have to 'do' faith in the same way you have to 'do' love. As we heard in the last reading – faith is a verb – it has to shape how we actually live.

"As with any ongoing relationship you have to make it work. You have to 'do' faith in the same way you have to 'do' love."

So maybe we can think of faith as a way of being in the world – a way of seeing – an attitude we take to the life and the universe, to everyone and everything we meet. A way of receiving and responding to the ups and downs that life brings our way – not passively or fatalistically – but deeply engaged – whilst also recognising the limits of our power and control. To quote Richard Boeke again: 'Faith is... a responsibility in the face of ever-changing reality. The immature forms of faith or beliefs close us off from the world, until reality shatters our walls. Mature faith knows the terror and the void, knows the fear of rejection, and still reaches out in hope. In my search to define faith, I come to these words: "Faith is our perception of reality conditioned by relationship and ritual."'

Or how about this take from the Zen teacher Alan Watts: 'Faith... is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. You can only know God through an open mind just as you can only see the sky through a clear window.' Or there's this from the Lutheran theologian

Paul Tillich: 'Faith is not an acceptance of doctrines... but the acceptance of the power itself, out of which we come and to which we go, whatever the doctrines may be through which we accept it... a faith which can lose every concrete content and still exist as an absolute affirmation of life as life and of being as being.' That phrase might take a moment to grasp but I like that sense of faith as something universal that remains constant regardless of the precise details of the tradition through which we come to find it. And, for those who like God-language, just one last quote from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: 'Faith does not mean certainty. It means the courage to live with uncertainty. It does not mean having the answers, it means having the courage to ask the questions and not let go of God, as [God] does not let go of us.'

This is all so tricky to articulate! But for me, faith is about trusting that there is an underlying Goodness to the universe – that's something I'm happy to call 'God' – and God is trying to lure us all to join in with this Goodness, to recognise it, appreciate it, amplify it, actively participate in the creation of more of it, during this all-too-brief span when we're alive here on Earth. Goodness might take many forms – we might experience it as love, truth, beauty, justice – but while we are alive, we are called to simultaneously surrender to the flow of life, and get stuck in, doing whatever we can to serve the common good and help nudge reality in a slightly better direction. In this view we can see ourselves as part of a larger story, even as we endure disappointments and setbacks, as the moral arc bends towards justice and we trust that Good will prevail in the end. Or you might even frame it in more traditional language (I quite like it!) – faith commits us to the path of righteousness – striving to do God's will – ultimately helping to build the Kingdom of God.

That's my personal take on faith – or at least, it's where I'm at with it today – and my inevitably slightly clumsy attempt to put the ineffable into words. But as this reflection draws to a close, let's return to that question we meditated on earlier, and I encourage you to ponder it in the week ahead: What does faith mean to you? That's a question to wrestle with for the whole of our lives, I reckon. And I look forward to hearing your responses in the weeks to come. Amen.



Introducing Jane – 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



Getting to Know You... Charlotte Chanteloup

My name is Charlotte and I'm an English teacher in France. I was raised in an agnostic environment, but I always felt the pull towards something more. I had looked at other faiths but couldn't support some values. Then, I read a comment online about Unitarianism being the community without the dogma. I had never heard of it before (Unitarianism doesn't exist in France) so I used that spirit of enquiry and looked it up online! I felt like it was too good to be true so the first time I came (in June 2018), I was scared it was going to be a cult! But I was welcomed in a very friendly manner by the greeter (hi Roy!) and felt at home from the first words of the service.

I came back to France as Covid started because my mum was diagnosed with cancer. I've been an online member since then. During times of lockdown and personal tragedy, I felt supported by the congregation and the activities.

Heart and Soul has been a refuge and Sunday services a restful place.

Living in a very secular environment, I don't talk about my faith outside of church activities. I seek to live with integrity, and I try to forgive myself when I fall short. At this point in my spiritual journey, I don't have many answers. I do know that my calling right now is to be a teacher. Mostly I teach English... but I hope that I teach my students about the world by transmitting some of my values: kindness, openness and equality.

These days, my life has settled down. I don't need to draw strength from God/the Spirit/the Universe as much as I used to. I find happiness in small things. The practice of gratitude in candles of joy and concern, Heart and Soul or even the WhatsApp group has made my life better.

Our church and our congregation are a safe space for me. I can be myself, quirks and all, while also trying to become a better me. I'm inspired by congregation members' involvement in worthy causes. Mine is much more limited, still I try to be as supportive as I can. Kensington is also a place for

intergenerational friendship: there is so much to learn from each other. Although I've now been an online member for much longer than I ever was an in-person member, Essex Church is still my home away from home. I feel happy just thinking about the building, and seeing friends always brings me delight. I hope to be a welcoming and positive presence for everyone coming through our (virtual or physical) doors.

Another place I call home is the Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow where people meet every year for Summer School, a week for Unitarian religious education. I went for the first time in 2019 after I was convinced by someone who had gone the previous year. When I went back in 2023, for the first time since it opened again after Covid, the building was still as clear in my mind as it had been four years before. There, I have found community, spiritual nourishment, and somewhere I belong. For Summer School 2025, I'm on the organising panel and I'm co-facilitating an engagement group with Jane. It's a privilege to be a part of it and I hope that participants can feel what I feel when I'm there.

Flower Communion – a celebration of diversity

We celebrated our annual Flower Communion on 20 July. This is a uniquely Unitarian tradition which celebrates our human diversity – and also the give and take that is required to live in community – the vital importance of contributing according to our abilities and receiving according to our needs. Norbert Čapek, the Czech Unitarian minister who first devised the Flower Communion in 1923, describe this uniquely Unitarian ritual as ‘a new experiment in symbolizing our liberty and unity... in which participants confess that we accept each other as brothers and sisters without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as our friend who... wants to be good.’

This year’s flower communion service had the theme ‘Defending Diversity.’ Diversity has been a key principle, perhaps almost a buzzword, among Unitarians for a long, long, time – we often speak of celebrating diversity – but now we find ourselves in times where diversity is distinctly under threat. Increasingly, those who don’t conform to some very narrow ideas of ‘normality’, or who don’t

fit the profile of the ‘default human’ (i.e. white, straight, male, cisgendered, able-bodied, neurotypical, wealthy, etc.), find themselves targets – abused, marginalised, oppressed, to varying degrees – so our flower communion service is intended as a reminder that we are called not just to celebrate diversity but also to defend it.

The meaning and origins of this ritual are more radical and political than you might realise at first glance – Norbert

Čapek’s own story is inextricably linked to anti-fascist resistance in his own time – he was sent to Dachau and was killed in a Nazi gas chamber. As Evan Keely has written: ‘The marvellous natural beauty of the flowers that are brought to these ceremonies is certainly inspiring, but it is of the utmost importance that we continue to learn the broader and deeper lesson this rite teaches. The idea that we should accept one another, with all our differences, and that we should even

celebrate one another’s uniqueness, is a radical notion in any age, but in Europe in the 1920s it was downright dangerous; it became ever more so, of course, in the decades that followed, especially as Czechoslovakia found itself among the first nations to succumb to the opportunistic infection that was Nazism. The Nazis, of course, represent the polar opposite of Čapek’s ideals. Flower Communion is a defiant No! in the face of the brutal racism of Hitler and of the fascists’ craving to erect towering, horrific empires upon pediments of subjugation and terror, and it is a joyous Yes! to diversity, equality, and liberty.’



How to make a donation to our church

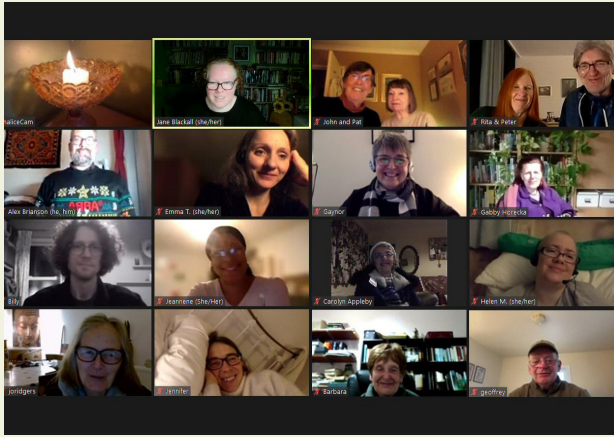
Your donation will help us continue our work and keep our progressive religious message out in the world. Our annual budget is around £180,000. That’s around £3,500 running costs each week to pay for our staff team, run our programme of activities, and maintain our building.

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.

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.



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 17 September, 15 October, 19 November and 17 December 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.

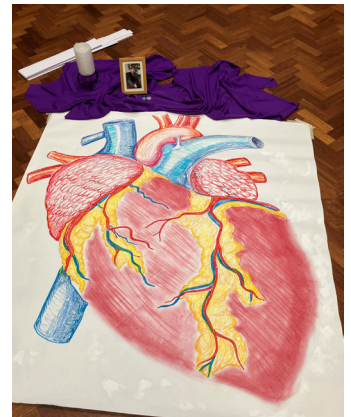


One Light Gatherings

Second Tuesday of
the month, meeting
at Essex Church

9 September, 7 October,
11 November, 9 December

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



Finding Your Voice – Monthly Singing Classes

Sunday lunchtime, last Sunday of the month,
12.30-1.15pm

28 September, 26 October, 30 November

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.

Please note: the regular date is changing to the last Sunday of the month from September 2025.



Community Yoga with Hannah

Dates TBC – please sign up with Hannah for updates

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. Dates are currently to be confirmed so keep an eye on the website and Friday emails for announcements or email yoga@kensington-unitarians.org.uk to find out more from Hannah.

Interested, but not in London? Hannah also teaches free, virtual yoga sessions on Mondays (5:30-6:30pm via Zoom). Contact Hannah, as above, for details.

Community Singing

We are awaiting confirmation as to whether community singing will resume in the autumn – dates still TBC – please do sign up with jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk to be kept informed and we'll let you know as soon as we have confirmation from Brian! Provisional dates: 24 September, 8 & 22 October, 12 & 26 November, 10 December.

Join our community singing group at Kensington Unitarians. All abilities welcome! The group is led by an experienced musician who has been leading a similar group in the neighbourhood for the last 20 years and who now wants to extend the invitation by creating a sister group for our Unitarian community and beyond. This is not a choir that will perform; it's just for the joy of singing together as a regular practice. We will sing a mix of pop, country, gospel and folk, all sung a capella. We will sing from lyric sheets, not scores, so there is no need to be able to read music. Our group leader is expert in bringing everyone's contribution into a joyful whole; whether you are new to singing or a professional musician, there is a place for all voices.

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



Art Play Crafternoon

Forthcoming dates: 20 September, 19 October, 16 November from 1-3pm

All are welcome to join us for at this relaxed art-and-craft hangout which is back for the autumn on the third Sunday of each month from September. 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.

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.

In person sessions weekly on Friday at 12.30pm from 12 September.

£10 per session (or £40 for 5 classes).

Online sessions on Wednesdays at 12.30pm from 10 September.

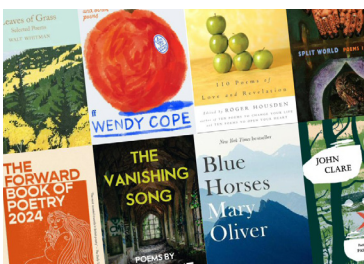
To find out about Nia see:
www.nianow.com. For more info contact Sonya Leite on 020 7371 1674 or email sleite@hotmail.co.uk.

Poetry Group

**Wednesday evening,
once a month, 7-8.30pm**

**3 September, 1 October,
5 November, 3 December**

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.



Getting to Know You... Jasmine Cooray

Please introduce yourself (however you'd like) for the benefit of those you haven't met.

Hello! I'm Jasmine. I'm a newish member of the congregation. I've been coming since the springtime 2025. I'm a poet and psychotherapist, and more recently a student of botany and herbalism.

How did you find Kensington Unitarians in the first place?

I used to run the Bright Lights children's programme for the Newington Green Unitarians and then was made aware, by a friend, of the Kensington branch, which is nearer to where I live in Kilburn so I decided to come along.

What were your first impressions of the congregation?

I really appreciate the gentle friendliness of the community and also the passion of lots of members. I often feel inspired by the political engagement and the respect with which people treat each other.

Had you moved from another type of church or faith tradition (or are you new to church-going)?

I grew up in a very cerebral, academic, anti-religious environment that dismissed spirituality so it's quite radical for me to start going to church. But most Sunday services I find myself in tears so I think that says something about the relief I feel being held in the environment, and to be part of something that makes room for the spiritual.

How would you describe your current spiritual outlook?

If I were to ask myself 'who is God, is there God?' I would say God is in all life, in the fact that I am alive, in the mystery that carries us like a tide from one shore to another. I don't really know how everything works, but can find comfort in divine surrender.

How would you say your faith is expressed in your everyday life?

I try to give thanks for the beings on my plate before I eat, and for



the land and those who've tended it. I intermittently talk to God in the mornings and/or evenings, and I always thank the plants that I gather for study or food or medicine. This is, I suppose, an attempt to acknowledge the sanctity and sentience of all life. I also try to choose kindness when possible. Sometimes this is very hard!

What have you most valued or appreciated about being part of this community?

Somewhere to come and just be, to listen, cry, enjoy music, and be inspired by the spirit of others in the room. I love Jane's services and presence, I find her so grounding and clear and humane.

What have you personally gained or learned from coming to our services or small groups?

That I can be welcome even if I'm not bending over backwards to be helpful. That people can be friendly to someone different. That what I have to contribute is valued.

What words of encouragement can you offer to fellow congregation members as we look forward and attempt to reach out to ever more people as a new hybrid community?

That everyone is important, and that it's tremendously valuable to have different kinds of people and experiences in the community. And to keep speaking your heart because it's very nourishing.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with the congregation to introduce yourself?

No, I'm sure we'll get to know each other in good time.

Better World Book Club



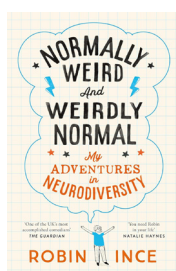
The fourth Sunday of each month, 7.30-8.45pm on Zoom

We've been running the 'Better World Book Club' for around eighteen months now. 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 p3

Sunday 28 September:

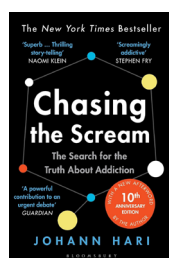
Normally Weird and Weirdly Normal by Robin Ince



'What if being a bit weird is actually entirely normal? What if sharing our internal struggles wasn't a sign of weakness, but strength? For over thirty years, award-winning broadcaster and comedian Robin Ince has entertained thousands in person and on air. But underneath the surface, a whirlwind was at play – a struggle with sadness, concentration, self-doubt and near-constant anxiety. But then he discovered he had all the hallmarks of ADHD and his stumbling blocks became stepping stones. In *Normally Weird and Weirdly Normal*, Robin uses his own experiences to explore the neurodivergent experience and to ask what the point of 'being normal' really is. Packed with personal insights, intimate anecdotes and interviews with psychologists, neuroscientists and many neurodivergent people he has met along the way, this is a quirky and witty dive into the world of human behaviour.'

Sunday 26 October:

Chasing the Scream by Johann Hari



'It is now 100 years since drugs were first banned. On the eve of this centenary, journalist Johann Hari set off on an epic three-year, 30,000-mile journey into the war on drugs to uncover its secrets - and he found that there is a startling gap between what we have been told and what is really going on. As strange as it may seem at first, drugs are not what we have been told they are; addiction is not what we think it is; and the drug war has very different motives to the ones we have seen on our TV screens. Hari reveals his startling discoveries entirely through the true and shocking stories of people across the world whose lives have been transformed by this war. *Chasing the Scream* lays bare what we really have been chasing in our century of drug war - in our hunger for drugs, and in our attempt to destroy them. This book will challenge and change how you think about the most controversial - and consequential - question of our time.'

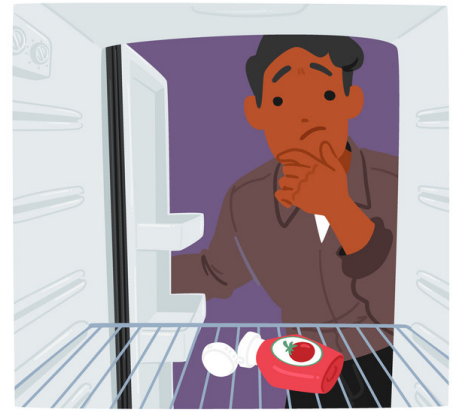
Sunday 30 November:

Note the irregular date

The Transgender Issue by Shon Faye



'Trans people in Britain today have become a culture war 'issue'. Despite making up less than one per cent of the country's population, they are the subjects of a toxic and increasingly polarized 'debate' which generates reliable controversy for newspapers and talk shows. This media frenzy conceals a simple fact: that we are having the wrong conversation, a conversation in which trans people themselves are reduced to a talking point and denied a meaningful voice. Shon Faye reclaims the idea of the 'transgender issue' to uncover the reality of what it means to be trans in a transphobic society. In doing so, she provides a compelling, wide-ranging analysis of trans lives from youth to old age in contemporary Britain and beyond. *The Transgender Issue* is a manifesto for change, a call for justice and solidarity between all marginalized people and minorities. Trans liberation offers the possibility of a more just, free and joyful world for all of us.'



Minister's Reflection: 'Making it up as we go along'

From the service on 6 July 2025

I feel I should begin my reflection with a confession: I am the last person who should be talking to you about improvisation. The idea of being spontaneous, speaking off-the-cuff, or – God forbid! – doing a role-play has struck terror into my heart for most of my life. I like to have a script, or a plan, and (more-or-less) stick to it. I need time to think things through and at the very least sketch out contingency plans for all the most likely ways that a situation will unfold. I expect that will always be my preference (as an autistic person) and I suspect I'm not alone, though I'm sure there are plenty of free-spirits amongst us this morning too, who tend to lean more the other way. So, if you're anything like me, you might need a bit of convincing about the idea of embracing improvisation. But, the thing is, whether you – or I – would choose to improvise for fun, or not – over the course of our lives the need to improvise occasionally is pretty much unavoidable. We're repeatedly going

to find ourselves in situations where the unexpected happens and we need to respond creatively to whatever new reality we suddenly find ourselves in.

Plans are, of course, still very much worth making. They can help us to live more intentionally, to act out of our principles and values, rather than following the crowd; plans can give us a sense of agency, rather than feeling we're drifting through our days, at the mercy of chance; and plans can keep our spirits up, by giving us things to look forward to, hopes on the horizon. At the same time we can (and we must) be clear-eyed and realistic about the possibility – perhaps the likelihood – that our grand plans won't entirely survive contact with reality. That refrain from the Jared Carter poem says it all: 'Each time you start, expect to lose your way.' The world we're living in seems ever more turbulent and unpredictable, doesn't it? So it helps if we can hold our plans lightly, with a certain openness-of-

mind-and-heart, and be ready to respond and adapt to whatever unexpected curveball life might throw at us next. As per the quote from Stephen Colbert we heard earlier: 'Life is an improvisation. You have no idea what's going to happen next, and you are mostly just making things up as you go along.'

When you hear the word 'improvisation', I wonder what first comes to mind? Comedy, perhaps? Certainly I remember watching the Channel 4 improv panel show 'Whose Line is it Anyway?' as a teenager back in the nineties and going to see the Comedy Store Players a few times. Or there's theatre: some of you might be aware of the 'Austentatious' collective who have improvised a parody of Jane Austen novel live on stage in the West End every week for the last eight years. Or indeed our own much-missed congregation member Veronica Needa who was a pioneer of Playback Theatre and improvised in response to audiences'

life stories. Our former warden Jenny, as some of you may remember, was a keen practitioner of a form of dance known as contact improvisation. Or, on a rather different tack, improvisation in the kitchen – who remembers ‘Ready Steady Cook’ on TV? – good old Ainsley Harriot! – that show where celebrity chefs are presented with a carrier bag of random ingredients by contestants and have to rustle up something edible out of it in just 20 minutes (with the help of a reasonably well-stocked store-cupboard of basics). Or you might think of improvisation in music, especially jazz – I don’t know if we’ve got any jazz musicians lurking in the congregation – though I know we’ve got some jazz enthusiasts here.

It’s no coincidence that a lot of the commentary I found on improvisation came from musicians. The Catholic writer Edward Hays has said: ‘Those who love life enjoy “playing it by ear,” engaging life without a printed score, simply flowing with its melody. By keeping our agendas flexible and minimizing our demands, life can be a melodic song. Whenever circumstances interrupt the normal rhythm of life, those who cultivate patience and inner freedom are able to improvise with a life situation like jazz musicians, making up music as they go along. And the emphasis in “playing it by ear” is on playfulness. Those who use that gift of the Holy Spirit make their way gracefully through life.’ Similarly the singer Bobby McFerrin has said: ‘Improvisation means coming to the situation without rigid expectations or preconceptions. The key to improvisation is motion – you keep going forward, fearful or not, living from moment to moment. That’s how life is.’

So we might usually think about improvisation in these specific spheres – comedy, theatre, dance, music, cooking – but what unites all these different expressions? In her book, ‘Improv Your Life – An Improviser’s Guide to Embracing Whatever Life Throws at You’, Pippa Evans writes this:

‘Improvisation is a mystery to many people because it is so tied up in its identity as a comedy show, rather than a skill in and of itself. So I would like to use the following definition of improvisation: Improvisation is the art of using what is available to you in the moment. This definition works for me because the strongest improvisers are

the ones who have unlimited access to everything they possess. ‘What is available to you’ means the people around you, the props on the table, and the treasure trove that is yourself. Your thoughts, your words, your responses, your presence in the moment. The best improvisers are not loud show-offs (not all of them, anyway) – they are curious and interested in the world around them. They want to expand their general knowledge, to be equipped for every scenario.’ Words from Pippa Evans.

“Improvisation means coming to the situation without rigid expectations or preconceptions. The key to improvisation is motion – you keep going forward, fearful or not, living from moment to moment. That’s how life is.”

I would call this ‘Improvisation as a Way of Life’: ‘the art of using what is available to you in the moment’. Think back to that piece that Hannah read for us earlier on, by Gordon McKeeman, about ‘Leftovers’. He uses that metaphor – of improvising something more-or-less edible out of the random bits and pieces we happen to have left in our fridge – to get us thinking more deeply about the process of improvising a life that is liveable out of the random bits and pieces – material, psychological, or spiritual – we have accumulated over the course of our lives so far. Given who you are, the resources you have at your disposal, and the situation you find yourself in, however sub-optimal, the way of the improviser is to ask, in the moment: ‘what can I make of it?’

Paradoxically, it actually takes a fair bit of preparation, in order to improvise skilfully and well. Preparation can increase ‘what is available to you in the moment’, enhance your metaphorical store-cupboard, by stocking you up with resources to draw on. But as Stephen Nachmanovitch succinctly put it: ‘Improvising means coming prepared, but not being attached to the preparation.’

The spontaneous delivery of ‘I Have a Dream’ by Martin Luther King illustrates perfectly how – despite appearances – the very best improvisation doesn’t just conjure brilliance out of thin air. It takes a huge amount of groundwork. Dr King had given many speeches before that day, none of which had seemed to work so well, but he had learned a lot through all that experience. And he was thoroughly steeped in so many crucial influences: the Bible, and Shakespeare, political pioneers and justice activists, all of which he had ‘digested, absorbed, and integrated’. Dr King ‘used what was available to him in the moment’: in his case a huge wealth of inner riches, which he drew on, riffed on, and remixed in real-time, in order to articulate his powerful vision. We can learn from his example when preparing ourselves to improvise in daily life. All the wisdom we are exposed to, that we can digest, absorb, and integrate, becomes part of our ‘treasure trove’. It shapes our way of seeing and responding to the world in each moment. Again, as Nachmanovitch puts it, ‘trust that the product of your preparation is not your papers and plans, but yourself.’ Many forms of improvisation – certainly in music, dance, theatre, and comedy – involve two or more people playing off each other – which requires some ‘tuning in’, sensitivity of perception, to allow responsive, constructive collaboration in the moment. This often involves some sort of framework or ‘rules of engagement’ to structure the interaction; it’s rarely a complete free-for-all.

Musicians might structure their improvisation by basing it on certain scales. Dancers – I know this much from my own experience of ballroom dancing – social dancers will have a repertoire of basic steps that they can join together in different combinations in response to the music. And we practice our scales or moves so they come more easily to us and are ‘available in the moment’. Again, the same principles might come in useful when thinking about improvisation in daily life, as we’re never truly living in isolation, and will face constraints and opportunities as a result. We’re part of an interdependent web with every other being in the universe, so the dance-that-is-our-life will always involve other people.... which inevitably complicates matters! ▶

And perhaps the final thing to mention about improvisation is that it's guided by some sort of vision of what it is we might hope to create – whether it's an audience rolling with laughter, a beautiful and flowing movement across the dancefloor, a delicious curry – or maybe even a speech that will change hearts and minds and 'bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice' (perhaps the rest of us won't have quite the impact that Martin Luther King did but all of our creative acts, however humble, play their part in nudging the universe in one direction or another).

So when it comes to Improvising as a Way of Life – well, what is it that we hope to create? What are the values and principles that guide us and shape our way of being in the world? What are the aspirations that we hold before us when we look at our life and ask 'what can I make of it?'

In a way, coming to church each week is a bit like practising our scales, or our steps, in preparation for the everyday improvisation that is our life. Here we remind ourselves, over and over, of our shared values and principles, internalising them, so that they become habits of mind and heart, so that they are 'available in the moment' – ready so that, when we're confronted by life's latest plot twist, we stand a better chance of spontaneously responding in a way that aligns with our highest values, and 'being our best selves' And each time we meet, I hope, we each tuck a little bit more wisdom into our store-cupboards, and build up our resources and our inner strength for whatever it is we might have to deal with next. Don't forget those words from Yehudi Menuhin: 'Improvisation is not the expression of accident but rather of the accumulated yearnings, dreams and wisdom of our very soul.'

So I hope to see you back here next week – same time, same place, eh? – let's keep on practising together as best we can. And, in so doing, let's support each other in responding ever more creatively to this precious life. May it be so, for the greater good of all. Amen.

Thoughts from our members

A poem by Marianne Harvey-Bertrand

A Church Without Walls

Sol Lucet Omnibus (The sun shines for everyone – for Hector, my tender father)

This morning,
I went to the garden-
early.
It hadn't been waiting for me,
it never does.

I had missed the dawn chorus,
the birds were singing without me.
They sing for themselves,
they always have.

Yet, the day was still,
the trees kept their silence,
the wind had gone elsewhere,
the night had left no message.

The grass was wet beneath my feet,
though there had been no rain;
perhaps the earth had wept softly-
or was it me in a sorrowful dream?

At the edge of my world,
the sycamores stood,
like priests at a ritual,
guardians of something sacred
in a church without walls.

They watched
they always have.

Then – Light!

The sun burst in,
fell on the dishevelled clematis,
on rose buds born yesterday,
on a robin slipping into shade,
on grass that twinkled playfully.

By the time it had warmed
the thin limbs of my old pear tree,
I felt it on me.

Nothing was missing,
nothing had ever been missing:
the sun had come for everyone,

and maybe, just maybe,
Someone else came too.

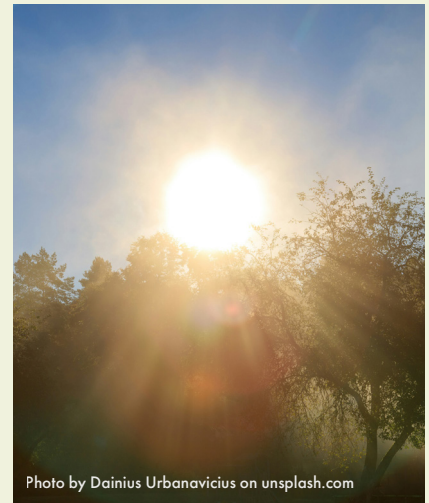


Photo by Dainius Urbanavicius on unsplash.com

Two poems by Brian Ellis

Shirts

I prefer them ironed,
a gentle touch on my
vanity when someone
says 'I like that shirt'.
two days from each,
I'm neither sweaty
nor blue-collared.
three a week for almost
sixty years, a square yard
each, two acres pressed,
four irons, many covers,
but just one board.
some things
are built to last.

Weaving

What is the loom
on which I weave
my cloths of life,
but sight.
touch, the shuttle,
unites scent of warp
to taste of weft,
while I hear
the making
of unique shawls
to throw around
the shoulders
of my travelling soul.