



A Vision for Our Future



Always start with a Vision

Never believe anyone who says we cannot
change.

Vision is one of the secrets of personal
transformation.

We are all artists, our mind is the arena of
creation and vision is what we are
constantly creating.

Always start with vision not action.

See it and you will be it.

Be it and you will do it.

This is how we create our own life.

www.thoughtfortoday.org.uk/create-vision/

Introduction

Last September (2014) leading Unitarians and Free Christians met at Cross Street Chapel in Manchester to share their vision for the Future of Unitarianism in this country.

They discussed many ideas and tried to deal with pictures rather than words, recognising the challenge of coming to an agreement. It is strange to record that the day passed almost without dissent and the outcome has served as the basis to develop the ideas contained in this book.



This is a vision for our future created by the members of our Movement themselves. It is not a product of Executive Committee thinking, though the Executive Committee are 100% behind it. It has evolved through fundamental thought, creative argument and consultation. Many of you will have seen these pieces published in *the Inquirer* and *the Unitarian*; there have been discussions on Facebook and conversations between individuals.

There is still much to do and the debate must continue as we develop our thoughts into some sort of cohesive picture. It will, of course, fall to the Executive Committee and the various Strategy Groups to evolve a plan on how to implement the thoughts and ideas that have been put forward.

This vision, though created with a view to the Unitarian Movement nationally, applies just as easily to Districts and congregations. How it is implemented will, of course, differ according to circumstance. But it can become a uniting factor in our search for a better future.

We all hope that it will serve to inspire those many individuals who love our Movement so deeply to join together in serving by whatever means they are able.

There are some practical things that we can do to improve this vision, because it relies on everybody to join in and have their say. Here are 3 ways in which you can become involved:

- If you are a member of any Unitarian Facebook groups - comment directly – go for it!
- If you are on the Internet, you can access the national Unitarian website and comment on any individual article at www.unitarian.org.uk
- For those without Internet access, for whatever reason; discuss the various pieces as a congregation and then get somebody with an Internet connection to make your contribution.

This is a vision for everybody. It will continue to develop with new ideas and new thoughts. Please come and be part of it.

Robert Ince
Convenor of the Executive Committee

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all those who took part in the Vision Day at Cross Street Chapel and those who have contributed pieces to this document.

Thank you to Jessie Ince for inspiring the cover design and to the unknown artist from the Vision Day who drew the outline figures anda very special thank you to Susie Ince for the editing and overall design.

A Vision for our Future

We want to be

- A faith that matters
- A reflection of the world's complexity bound together by our many different views
- A spiritual feast for each person to bring and share ideas and experience
- A promoter of social justice for all, listening and responding to the needs of others
- There for everyone

We must

- Tell the world we're here
- Be understood by the public
- Connect to people everywhere
- Serve our communities
- Develop personal leadership
- Be religiously literate
- Provide Ministry that enables ministry
- Prepare for our children's future

To do this, we need to

- Harness our energy
- Use our resources to the full
- Embrace new technology
- Acknowledge contribution and success
- Empower individuals
- Make change happen

The Executive Committee's Thoughts

The Executive Committee has spent considerable time reading through the various pieces. This is a summary of phrases that struck the EC as important together with thoughts and comments that came to mind in our discussions.

Our identity

If we are to be a faith that matters to both society and to the individual, we should recognise that we are first and foremost a faith community; social action, whilst part of who we are, is not our primary purpose. Our communities should be places where the imagination can be fed, where our deepest instincts can be satisfied, where our sense of transcendent otherness can be explored. Yet we understand the need for people to be inspired to express their faith practically.

We also see a need to re-establish an identity, a unique spiritual position. No creed does not mean no belief!

We are a reflection of the world's complexity, where the various strands that make up our Unitarian religious perspective, (Christian, Theist, Pagan, Buddhist, Mystic, Agnostic amongst others) are our great strength.

We understand the desire to and the value of sharing our time and our thoughts, not just for an hour on a Sunday but at other times and in other ways as a means of strengthening our communities.

We recognise the importance of giving something of ourselves for the benefit of our community. We learn about one another, and the more we learn about each other, the stronger the bond is between us.

What is now needed is for us to find new ways of being together and this is where the giving comes in. We need to give our time. We need to be willing to add at least another hour to the time we come together in church, as a church. To build new communities in the future, we are going to have to be prepared to change and move away from the classic Sunday Service.

We aspire to be there for everyone who shares our values, to create a place for everyone, but many of us are happy in our own little comfort zone. We have a long way to go to become an all-inclusive community. This means change – so be prepared to be uncomfortable!

We do social justice and social action because this is inherent in who we are – a deep theological claim is made on each of us within our congregation to hone our communal conscience as well. In truth though, many who feel that they are social activists feel more comfortable paying others to roll their sleeves up and get involved.

We need to consider how we might symbolise our identity and express the essence of who we are through our rituals.

The role of the Minister is to enable the ministry of the congregation. The dynamics within congregations should process moral sensitivity among members in ways that lead to specific commitments to action based on their skills and interests.

What are we going to do in the future?

We do not want to be a proselytizing religion, but we do need to announce our presence; to tell people what we stand for. We should not be worried if people are upset by this. We need to get out, rather than expect people to come in. There is a great opportunity now for outreach using electronic media, recognising that communication is a complex area with new risks if not handled well.

The Internet has reduced the cost of connecting to people and them with us – it has changed the rules! We need to overcome the fear of some of the Internet and get the younger people to help the older generation to embrace the new opportunities. Yet we must keep those who struggle with electronic media as active members of our community.

We are here to minister to the wider community. We should learn to be more adventurous with our resources: Money, buildings and people. They should all be net contributors to our activities. Each of us should establish a covenant with our community to agree what we will give. We need to accept the need for more live giving and make it a reality by asking ‘What could we do if we gave more?’

Children and young people should feel part of our supportive community. We should encourage them to speak the truth. They look for alternatives to our “hymn sandwich” culture and we should search for ways to bridge the gap between their ways of expression and traditional / classical expressions, whilst recognising the value that that the ‘hymn sandwich’ provides for many people.

Leadership can be expressed in many different ways, including servant leadership. Training can help in leadership and we have in some of our congregations people with skills and knowledge of leadership; we have people skilled in working with volunteers and we have people who work in education and training. We need to encourage these people to step forward and help develop others. There are many opportunities for us to develop religious literacy in other communities and through national programmes.

For us to thrive in an increasingly global world, we recognise our interconnectedness to people everywhere, but our focus will remain primarily within the UK. We still have problems understanding who we are and how we wish to be perceived. Although many have a clear idea of who they are as a person, more work needs to be done to develop a shared idea of who we are as a community. This should be far more friendly and accessible than our General Assembly charitable Object.

We must harness our energy by understanding who we are as communities and what we can offer to the world outside. It begins with opening our eyes and ears, by taking a good look around us and by listening to the voices of inspiration both near and far. This will include using all forms of media, including social media. This is likely to attract new people and new money but will make our communities more lively and creative in any case.



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'Matters to what or to whom?' one has to ask. I suppose the answer will be, 'To society and to the individual'. We Unitarians have been very good at saying and doing things that matter to society. We have taken a stand on many of the big social and political issues of our time and on the big social and political issues of times past. We can boast a proud record of standing up for the under-dog, of proclaiming freedom and tolerance in times when it was unpopular and even dangerous to do so. Our involvement in social justice issues has been, and is, exemplary.

But what about the individual? What about the person who feels an existential sickness of soul, who is seeking answers to life's deepest questions, who wants to learn how to pray, how to approach God, how to find forgiveness for past sins and how to find hope and faith for future endeavours? What can we offer him or her? Is it enough to say that words like 'God', 'soul', 'forgiveness', 'sin', 'prayer', and 'faith' are very troublesome and so don't get much attention in our churches? Is it enough to satisfy such a sensitive individual when we preach about world religions, global warming, gay rights, feminism, abortion rights, assisted suicide and the like? Is it enough to imply, as we often do, that when we eventually tidy up society our individual problems will evaporate? Is it enough to say to the earnest inquirer, 'Here you are free to find your own spiritual path.', when they probably came through our door thinking we could offer them one?

The great American playwright, Tennessee Williams, became a Catholic towards the end of his life. When he was asked why, he replied, 'To get some goodness back.' Would someone become a Unitarian 'to get some goodness back'? I doubt it. We don't deal in such categories. As James Woods wrote in the *Guardian* a few years ago, 'Unitarianism is tediously untragic', meaning that it is a fair-weather religion which speaks to the optimistic and the comparatively prosperous and which confidently (and often patronisingly) addresses issues of social amelioration but which has little or nothing to say about the anxiety and despair which afflict us all, not because we are poor or disadvantaged, but *just because we are human*. To the questions, 'Who am I?', 'Why am I here?', 'Where am I going?', 'What's the ultimate point of it all?' we can offer no answers beyond the dreary banalities distilled from Neo-Darwinism, that we are nothing special, that we got here by accident, that we're destined for the grave, and that there's no ultimate point.

This is not the Unitarianism of William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, James Martineau, Susan B. Anthony, and L.P. Jacks, who were not afraid to challenge the intellectual orthodoxies of their time and to bear the opprobrium of their peers as a consequence. We pretend to an intellectual freedom and fearlessness, but, as I can testify from personal experience, there is precious little freedom to deviate from the powerful but unacknowledged 'rationalist' dogmas which dominate contemporary Unitarian thought.

Like so many people who 'convert' later in life, I naively used to think that when people heard about Unitarianism they would immediately be attracted to it. But it's not true. Very few of my friends and family have shown much interest, and our declining numbers demonstrate lack of interest generally. People who like to *talk about* religion are attracted to it; people who want to *practise* religion aren't. Meanwhile, New Life Centres are springing up everywhere, and their services are packed. There are 18,000 Mormons in Britain and about 3,000 Unitarians. Mormonism, despite teetotalism and tithing is growing; Unitarianism, which doesn't require too much from its devotees, is declining.

And it's not, as we sometimes condescendingly assume, because the vast majority of people are simple-minded and in search of 'certainties'. It is, rather, because people instinctively feel that life has more meaning than the sterile rationalism of our white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant outlook will allow and so they go where their imagination can be fed, where their deepest instincts can be satisfied, where their sense of transcendent otherness can be explored. Our own ethical society-masquerading-as-religion satisfies few human desires.

We lost so much when we surrendered to contemporary naturalism. We need to start 'exploring boldly' again, to become, in the words of John Pickering, 'spiritual pioneers'. We need to stop the interminable agonising over words, to let the spirit move us, to re-learn the meaning and importance of prayer and of regular spiritual practice. And, most of all, we need to discard our literalism and discover the centrality of poetry and imagination in religion.

If we can do these things; if we can put as much emphasis on our interior life as we put on our political efforts, we can be a faith that matters.

Rev. Bill Darlison

In response:

From: *Rev Jim Corrigall*

The article by Bill Darlison on whether we can be a '*faith that matters*' was most stimulating. His warnings that we need to re-learn the importance of prayer and spiritual practice, and the value of poetic and metaphorical understandings, seem timely.

I was particularly interested in his statement that '*unacknowledged dogmas*' pervade our denominational thinking – he refers to sterile '*rationalism*'.

It seems to me perhaps the most pervasive '*orthodoxy*' of our denomination today is that we – as a denomination – have no shared theology, only shared values. And this is usually presented as a neutral or 'common sense' position, which requires no theological or philosophical justification.

Yet surely to assert that we are '*non-theological*' or that we have '*no common theology*' is itself a deeply theological statement – just as maintaining one is '*non-political*' is itself a deeply political stance (usually unacknowledged). Our position may well have developed from our radical protestant roots, and it may chime with some contemporary popular ideas, but surely in its

contemporary form it should be introduced as a starting point for theological reflection rather than as the conclusion?

In terms of practical theology, little support for such a belief is likely to be found among faith *practitioners* of the different world religions. Obviously most creedal Christians would reject it, but so too would Sufi mystics (who say *if you want to find water, dig one deep hole rather than 10 shallow ones*), to the spiritual teachers of Buddhism and Hinduism, who emphasise the need to choose a path if one is to advance spirituality, and for that path to have authentic cultural resonance for the devotee. Liberal Jews believe it essential to remain rooted in the Jewish Bible, even as they advance very liberal positions on contemporary issues.

Could the (mainly) unacknowledged point of maintaining we have no '*shared theology*' be that it allows us to 'leave behind' Christianity, the only theological tradition we are heir to, and thus leave behind the difficult task of renewing it in our assertively multi-faith world (a task we may be particularly well-qualified for)?

In response (cont):

From: *John C Hall*

Bill Darlison writes very challengingly for us. He asks: "How can we be a faith that matters?" and he goes on to address serious Unitarian shortcomings, from his point of view. Quoting from a *Guardian* article: 'Unitarianism is tediously untragic', Bill takes this to mean that our is, "...a fair weather religion which speaks to the optimistic and the comparatively prosperous but has little or nothing to say about the anxiety and despair which afflict us all, not because we are poor or disadvantaged, but just because we are human."

So that is concerning enough; but he presses on: "To the questions, 'Who am I?', 'Why am I here?', 'Where am I going?', 'What is the ultimate point of it all?' we can offer no answers beyond the dreary banalities distilled from Neo-Darwinism, that we are nothing special, that we got here by accident.... and there is no ultimate point." And if this, from Bill Darlison, isn't questioning current Unitarianism almost to a point of despair, he continues, after another pummelling paragraph: "Our own ethical society – masquerading as religion satisfies few human desires." And I would say that was the particular sentence that sparked off this personal response.

Perhaps the great question for Unitarians should be: what, truly, are we?

Is there, largely owing to our pulling away from traditional Christianity, combined with a rationalist

From: *Rev Frank Walker Cambridge*

It has long been apparent that many members - perhaps a majority - of the Society of Friends in England have a very similar liberal religious outlook to Unitarians. They are undogmatic and universalist, willing to include on an equal footing people who have a humanistic and non-theistic religious outlook, welcoming insights from non-Christian sources as well as from the Christian tradition. Quakers, though, are a tiny minority. Liberal views also find expression in the Progressive Christian Network and Modern Church within the C of E, to name but a few. These too are small groups, but there is evidence that lowercase 'unitarians' are present in large numbers within the great official and historic churches.

In January 2014, Prospect magazine published a survey of religious belief in England. It showed that 'one-third of the public count themselves as

intellectuality, something of the *loosely* religious about us?

Or, in the case of some Unitarians, not even tenuously religious? Yes, but then we are, as Unitarians, altogether concerned about what can be termed *spiritual* matters. And I think that we Unitarians *do* put quite as much emphasis on the 'interior life' as we put on our 'political efforts'. Certainly my personal view is that we are a brotherhood community that matters.

Indeed, in a climate of religious extremism, surely we matter very much! And don't we accept that we are *different*? For instance, there is no one Unitarian faith. So, personally I do feel that we need to believe in ourselves as Unitarians; and countering Bill Darlison somewhat, I'd say that we need to keep faith with our sensibly independent Unitarianism, while seeking to establish whether we can term ourselves Christian or Post-Christian.

As a comparative 'new boy', I have to acknowledge that we could be viewed as taking up an indeterminate position where religion is concerned. And whereas Bill Darlison wishes that we were more overtly religious within Unitarianism, some of us might see that as feeling like retreat rather than enlightenment?.

So what do you think?

part of the Church of England or Scotland; only 45 per cent of them say that Jesus is the son of God. The figure is higher among Catholics at 67 per cent - but this still means that one Catholic in three does not share this belief.'

These are astounding figures. What do they mean? Nearly one-half of Anglicans and an astonishing one-third of Catholics hold a humanitarian (or 'Unitarian') view of Jesus. They may well be perfectly loyal Anglicans and Catholics who would never dream of being anything else. In religion especially people are able to live with contradictions. They take what they can from a religion and leave aside what they find irrelevant or unintelligible. So Unitarians are by no means as isolated as they may think: there are millions of lowercase 'unitarians' in the most historic and seemingly orthodox churches.

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Being a Weaver

A Persian poet wrote 'Broad is the carpet God has spread and beautiful are its colours'. A Persian carpet is durable because of the long, arduous weaving process where the tough warp and weft hold together hundreds of woollen and silken knots that create its pattern, provide its richness of colour, its depth of texture and make of it one whole. The imperfections are woven into the design; sometimes an imperfection is deliberately created and the fringes around the edges will wear in time because they are unsupported by the weft and the knots.



Some years ago, I remember calling it 'ballast for the soul'. It was an awareness of the strength that comes from the many varied strands that make up our Unitarian religious perspective; Christian, Theist, Pagan, Buddhist, Mystic, Agnostic amongst others – none of these strands in any way a weakness, or a fatal flaw at the heart of our Unitarian religious identity, but a hard won strength borne out of the struggle to bear witness to religious differences in a complex world, a struggle not to capitulate to any one view, however persuasively argued.

Of course, the struggle goes on. Some strands seem to shine more brightly at certain times; a pattern emerges that feels the right one to follow but then life experience moves us in a different direction, a new perspective opens up and we go on weaving the path and the pattern that gives life meaning at that time.

Maybe here the analogy breaks down because, unlike the carpet that might adorn our homes, there isn't a finished product. We just go on creating it, all the time connected and strengthened by the process and by the people who accompany us on the journey. And because our lives are messy and complex and nothing is ever fixed like a Grecian urn or a Persian carpet, we find our truth in the process.....and that is good enough.

Rev. Margaret Kirk



We want to be

***a spiritual feast for each person to
bring and share ideas and experiences***

In order for us to fully engage with one another and be able to achieve this spiritual feast of ideas and experience we will have to be willing to 'give ourselves' in new ways which may feel alien to how we have related to church before. We may even have to review what we presently perceive worship to be.



Our time in communion with one another is extremely brief these days. At present, worship in most of our Unitarian communities, consists of an hour long service and then a cup of tea with a biscuit and off home. The time we give to listening to a service is 1 hour, but the time after the service rarely lasts more than 30 minutes, with individuals floating off as soon as cups are emptied. During this brief commune we may discuss the previous week, the week ahead, where we're going on our holidays and other snippets of our lives. What we don't tend to do is converse, as a group, about the worship that has taken place, the life of the church, our spiritual goals, needs or expectations. Strangely, these important areas of being 'church' are now, more often than not, left to church committees and councils to discuss behind closed doors, as if the rest of the community are programmed not to 'think' on such subjects.

Historically, the most bonding ritual known to humanity is the sharing of food and that is still the case. When sitting at a meal, there is a common purpose, to be nourished, and our distractions are limited. The people sitting around us are able to spend time in conversation with us. We learn about one another and the more we learn about each other, the stronger the bond is between us. Time is given to one another, in the preparation and the sharing. It is a wonderfully spiritual way of 'being together'. The ancients realised this and it became part of their spiritual ritual. Even Christianity, at its beginning, consisted of reading from the Gospel followed by a meal together. Both worship and communion were as important as one another. For us, it is the intended 'being together' which has diminished. In order to get that back, we may need to find new ways of coming together as a community, and it doesn't necessarily have to be a cooked meal.

It could be said that our chapels and churches hold events where we are able to socialise more intently with each other and the wider community, but do we discuss our hopes and dreams, our theologies and beliefs, the worship we've just experienced and our own takes on the subject, or do we place our concentration on the event at hand? Filling in the answers to the quiz, dancing with one another, watching and putting on plays together, days out, jumble sales, fairs and all the other events we host are wonderful and socially nourishing, but it is difficult to cultivate the community when there is the distraction of something else going on.

What is needed is for us to find ways of being together and this is where the 'giving' comes in. We need to give our time. We need to be willing to add at least another hour to the time we come together in church, as a church. This can be done in a multitude of ways; the sharing of food, a group discussion, an after worship presentation, or even, if space or pew-dynamics dictate, split into smaller groups each week to have set topic discussions (although it would be important to rotate these groups so that we don't establish cliques or give allowance to avoidances). Each church would need to find what works for them, what cultivates them as a community.

In order for our communities to be able to fully engage in a spiritual feast of sharing ideas and experience, we need to give ourselves and our time, and give it to one another. Sixty minutes is not much to ask of each other if we want to share the feast.

Rev. Shammy Webster

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***a promoter of social justice for all, listening
and responding to the needs of others***

Social Action, Social Justice: *Open the Door!*

Religious scholar Prof. Charlie Hallisey tells this story about what it means to live a religious - and thus, compassionate life. He writes, "There was a Protestant village in France during the Second World War that got involved, at great risk to themselves, in protecting Jewish refugees. The people who participated were extremely inarticulate when asked why they did what they did. They said, 'Someone knocks on the door, you open it. You don't think about it. You open the door.' How did they become so good? They said, 'I don't feel so good. I didn't decide to do anything. I just opened the door.'



It is a striking illustration. I have only one problem with this "parable of the open door" and that is with the idea that the villagers, "...didn't decide to do anything." I disagree; I think they did decide to do something. They decided to live a religious life in religious community. Unlike many in today's rapidly secularizing world, the French villagers were guided not simply by their own personal spiritual promptings. They lived in covenanted community: that is to say, their individual spiritual journeys were tempered in the flame of group devotion and reflection and emerged on the other side stronger and more purposeful than if they had gone it alone. It was in no small part this communal religious life that made their actions during the Holocaust seem almost second-nature. Of course we will open the door. How could we do any other?

It seems to me that we Unitarians and Free Christians sometimes stumble when facing similar, if far less stark, decisions. Our community ought to remind us - if it is to deserve both the title "religious" and "community" to open our doors, again and again, even when it is not comfortable to do so, even when we have other things that fill up our church calendars, even when we are small or primarily elderly or under-resourced or whatever it is that keeps us stuck in our own safe, small house. We speak a great deal about freedom of conscience; being a Unitarian/Free Christian also means that a deep theological claim is made on each one of us *within our congregations* to hone our communal conscience as well. "Slavery is bad. Stigmatising immigrants—not allowed. Loving our neighbours, even ones we don't quite understand or struggle to appreciate—that is good." We may differ on who or what makes this deeper claim on our souls, our minds and hearts: God or our basic humanity or some other universal impulse we sense deep within. Where I would hope we would not differ is in agreeing that it is within the sanctuary and support of our chapel "home" where that community conscience is made flesh. Doing social action as individuals is important and honourable; thinking that it supplants or makes up for justice-making congregations is to misunderstand why liberal religious congregations exist in the first place.

There is good news out there as well of course. Some have been quite keen to poke our heads out (together) and welcome in the larger world. *Send a Child to Hucklow* is in its 60th year of providing holidays to disadvantaged children; the *Penal Affairs Panel* and its work continues to remind us of our commitment to treating even the most outcast with humanity and basic dignity, and within the GA and the outside world we have collectively taken a stand on gay/lesbian/bi and transgender dignity and equal marriage rights.

I like to think that *SimpleGifts: Unitarian Centre for Social Action* (for which I work) is a part of this ongoing effort as well, both at the community centre in East London and through “The Road Ahead” congregational coaching programme to help chapels become more effective, creative and collaborative places in which to act on their communal conscience.

We at *SimpleGifts* are working hard to help congregations and our movement to think larger thoughts, to move together in common pilgrimage towards a more peaceful, more just, more compassionate UK and, ultimately, world. Of course we are not alone in this effort. All the same, many agree that the collective “we” can be rather tentative when it comes to taking common action.

“The Road Ahead” coaching programme is only one suggestion for becoming more dynamic and proactive from being a group adept at making motions (which undoubtedly have their place) to actually *moving* as a group in order to make the change we hope to see in our hurting, hopeful world. If we cannot or will not do that, then in my view we neither deserve to be called “religious” nor a real “community.”

On the other hand, we have made common cause in the past, and there is no reason why we can't “up our game” again in future. It is my hope that social action/social justice making will no longer be a sideline within the Unitarian/Free Christian tradition, but instead a cornerstone of the engaged liberal religious life in 2015 and beyond. Here we are, still together, unwilling to be either museum curators or religious patients on life support. We live together, you and I, in a safe and welcoming house. Before us is the door, and the knock, and the need. Why not open it together?

*Rev. Rob Gregson
Director
SimpleGifts
Unitarian Centre for Social Action*



The Road Ahead Programme

The Road Ahead is a Unitarian social action mentoring programme for small-to-medium sized congregations. The programme involves the SimpleGifts team visiting a congregation, assessing their current social outreach work, taking stock of what other projects are going on in the area, and coming up with plan to improve the outreach and effectiveness of their current and future projects.

We want to be

there for everyone.....

What do you expect from a church or chapel? Over the years two people have given me an insight into what they expected and found.

Bertha Lee was a retired teacher living in the village of Stoke Row near Henley and she belonged to a small congregation in Reading but her roots were at Todmorden In Yorkshire. Bertha had many friends including the Maharajah of Benares (who had built a well in the village) and Muir Mathieson the composer and conductor but it was some lesser-known people that Bertha valued more than any others. One day she gave me a treasured photograph of her beloved church in Todmorden and on the back were thirty-six signatures. On giving me the photo her expectations of a church were made clear, **“The church is where we find our real selves, it brings out the best in us”**. That’s what Bertha expected, found and helped to create, a place where people could find their real selves without any pretensions, status or creed.



The second person was the Reverend Dudley Richards who in his later years kept asking the question, “What is the church?” In one conversation I reminded Dudley that when I was eighteen years of age he had given me the answer. He then described the church as, **“The beloved community”** and until he died well over ninety years of age Dudley belonged to our beloved community in Oxford with some members visiting him in his nursing home every week.

The answers given by those two people still sum up for me what a church should be and one of Dudley’s favourite passages of scripture was Romans Chapter twelve which describes the ideal Christian as a person who uses his or her talents to the best of their ability, shares those gifts with the wider community and rejects all evil. Such people should, “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep”.

The ideal church should be for everyone with people living in harmony, never being conceited and living in peace. They should feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty and provide hospitality. Similar thoughts appear in many scriptures of the world and Dudley who was a fine scholar knew that.

If we follow the advice of my two old friends and that from the author of Romans chapter twelve then we will create a place for everyone.

However I add two provisos. I don't want people telling me that I am wrong and that they have the only truth! Nor do I want people who only take, without giving something of themselves.

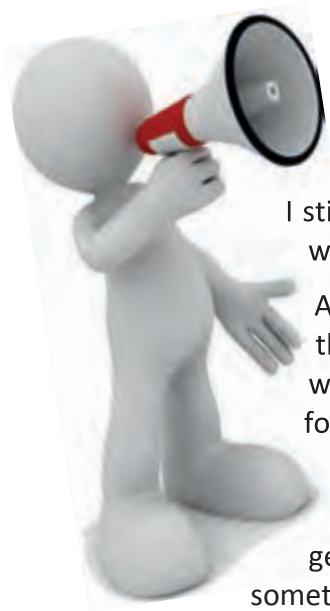
Only together can we create a beloved community where people can find their real selves, a place that will bring out the best in people.

A Vision of our Future

We must ...

- Tell the world we're here
- Be understood by the public
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- Prepare for our children's future

We must.....



... tell the world we're here!

I still get the feeling that many Unitarians believe our faith is illegal and we are the religion that 'dare not speak its name'.

A more generous view might be that in an attempt to ensure we follow the Unitarian ethos of not proselytizing, we end up not telling people we exist at all. We seem to believe that informing people what we stand for, might imply that other views are wrong or inferior and the discussion itself could be conceived as trying to 'convert' people!

Many of us have also experienced the wrath of the traditionalists who gets upset when we try to explain the Unitarian Christian position – something that some of them see as a corruption of their core values. So keeping quiet and getting on with our own personal journey is what we do for the main, after all it should be up to us all as individuals.

This would be fine, but the problem is that our numbers are decreasing and as the years go on, more churches will close or become little more than senior citizens clubs. Thus creating larger and larger areas of the country where future generations have no Unitarian group to join. The negative effect of shrinking can accelerate the shrinkage as each year we scrap over ever decreasing resources.

I know I am biased, but it seems crazy to me that at a time when our values are so in-tune with High Street political correctness we are still so quiet. We should be so proud of our basic philosophy. I believe it is our duty to let the world know we exist so they are in an informed position to decide if they want to join us. It must be done with respect for others of course but if we are to die out, let's go down fighting - non-aggressively of course.

There is also the problem or at least a perceived problem that our faith means such different things to different individuals and groups that whatever we say will upset someone. We don't have the advantage of the UUA who have their 7 principles defined. We do have an Object and GA resolutions, but we are far more than the sum of these parts.

If we are to 'tell the world that we are here', it means that not only do we have to be shouting, but that someone is listening to what we have to say. In such a busy, noisy world, cutting through that is complex and difficult.

It requires specialist skills that we need to learn, particularly if we are doing it with limited resources. It can be done if we change our head-space first.

Energy and imagination are free limitless resources and often, in my experience, money will appear when people see inspiring projects.

The Internet has changed the rules for just about everything and has opened up our ability to reach people easily and cheaply, we just need to learn how to do it effectively .

James Barry

We must.....

be understood by the public

It's not much fun being ignored by society and it's not much fun being misunderstood either; yet indifference and incomprehension have been the predominant Unitarian experience over many decades. This problem needs to be approached from a wider perspective.

The story of Britain over the last century is, in part, a dispiriting tale of the loss of faith in institutions of all kinds (the NHS being a possible exception) - and Churches have suffered at least as seriously as the rest. It is in this context that the word "Unitarian" today is likely to be met with blank looks or shrugs of the shoulders.



The challenge to communicate better is unarguable. But who are the 'public' by whom Unitarians in Britain should wish to be understood? It must surely be people *living in Britain* primarily - as this is the constituency that the General Assembly and its constituent congregations, fellowships, District Associations and Affiliated Societies serve.

There is a further stage required here, however, because to aim to be understood by the public is not as helpful as identifying particular 'publics' that might be interested in us. A communications strategy whose target audience is 'everybody' can more or less be said to be aimed at nobody! If multinationals with hundreds of thousands of pounds available to spend on advertising find it not only advantageous but essential to target their message to particular audiences (broken down by age/gender/income etc) this must be all the more true of organisations with limited resources. We ought to pick our publics! To give one example, it may be that setting up groups at universities is not so daunting a task but it's still essential to 'get the pitch right'.

Yet what does it mean for a religious community to BE 'understood'?

Success might be when a great number appreciate both our progressive values and our open tradition. Anything less and it may seem that there is nothing distinctive about us. We are not equivalent to a branch of the United Nations Association (UNA), worthy though that body is - we ARE religious. We must offer transformative and inclusive community that deepens a personal faith that is both human in its focus and open-minded to that which is beyond our understanding. Significantly, the General Assembly Object, though by no means perfect, is much underrated. If a Unitarian reads it again only to remind herself how unsatisfactory she found it first time round at least it can further a personal thought process about core principles and inclusive spirituality!

We want the 'public' to know that we are distinct - offering the milieu of a freethinking community that nevertheless values archetypal human story - how we make sense of our own lives within the panorama of a wider human drama that eternally resonates with Christian, humanistic and other themes such as love, redemption, equality, forgiveness, discovery of one's own potential and the healing power of being truly present to one another.

This 'being understood' business is not primarily a matter of institutional survival; frankly, the continuing value of an institution cannot be assumed from its mere continuation up to today. Churches - including our churches - close their doors partly because they have stopped meeting a need. We need to be honest about that.

Instead of aiming at survival for no very clear purpose, a genuine Unitarian process of seeking to be understood assumes implicitly that there IS a coherent, worthwhile, transformative 'we' that can BE understood - that we collectively ARE coherent. Yet can we truly claim to be coherent? How do we justify such a claim? Similarly, can we currently say that we even understand our essence as a faith community in order to be able to present it to others? From my perspective, values and tradition both matter.

We can bemoan that we are less well understood than the Quakers, for example, but this is a direct consequence of our historically chosen view of religious freedom which has stressed individual conscience above all else. This has much to commend it but without a balancing commitment to learn from and be bound by ties of community - by the old Puritan idea of covenant in fact - we will not be able to give Unitarian collective vision and action the priority it deserves, preferring to operate by an implicit consumerist view of our personal religious involvement whereby anyone can duck out whenever they're not getting their own way.

It is in painstakingly exploring the human implications of making a reality of inclusive community shaped in conversation with our shared values - not infrequently laying aside personal preference and trusting instead at times to the common will - that we will have a stronger message to proclaim and, more importantly, live out. In this way we become at last worthy of being understood and gaining acceptance and influence beyond the church doors. Nothing is more essential if we are to make our contribution as Unitarian communities to the healing of the world.

[Note: The next phrase from the Manchester event speaks of connecting to people "everywhere" but can we recognise this as engaging across Britain with more imaginative and braver outreach - NOT seeking to raise our profile abroad! Similarly the notion to "Tell the world we're here" could be problematic if understood to mean we can and should commit resources of time, effort and money in communicating here, there and everywhere].

Rev. Matthew Smith.

We must.....

connect to people everywhere

There was a time when the only method of connection was face to face. Then we learnt to write things down and send messages. As the 20th century dawned we invented radio, the telephone, then television and now we have the Internet. No doubt in the future some new method, as yet unknown, will be invented.

We now have so many different methods of receiving communication and far more communications to receive, that we have had to become adept at discarding all but the most important. And therein lies our challenge.

How can we convince others that our message is important to them personally? What is it we are trying to say? What is it that others are waiting to hear?

We can no longer rely on connecting by just one single method and we must ensure that our message is not discarded. The same message will have to be sent in many different forms and many different ways if we are reach those who may benefit. Neither should we forget those who struggle to come to terms with the latest technology.

There is an economical challenge for us in our communications. Post is increasingly expensive. The Telephone is very labour intensive, particularly if there is a general message to go to many people. Television can reach many people effectively but it is expensive. The Internet has spawned many different options. E mails are cheap and quick, but easily discarded. Facebook carries hidden dangers but we appreciate it provides the opportunity to give thoughts and opinions and we are still discovering how to use it effectively as we are with other sites of a similar nature.

What does the future hold?

I have no doubt Unitarian TV will develop and grow to reach those who need or want to receive the message at home at a time of their choosing. There is much competition amongst TV channels, although broadcasting is likely to move increasingly to the Internet. People will need to know that there is something worthwhile to be watched.

Our two publications, the Inquirer and the Unitarian, face challenges today of how to adapt to the Internet, as many including myself, read papers and books electronically. The same is true for the Lindsey Press; and yet many still enjoy reading paper versions.

Facebook, we read, is not necessarily going to be around in its present form for too long and is likely to morph into something new. The younger generation is far more willing than us oldies to advertise the minutae of their lives to anyone who wishes to know about it, and plenty who don't, yet it remains a powerful tool to discuss issues of importance. We are still learning how best to deal with complex and wide-ranging subjects not suited to the limited space Facebook provides. No doubt we will learn to do better in time.



When creating new national website, we recognised that there is a specific skill in writing for the Internet. This is something very different from the talent of writing we are used to. It requires a clearer more concise approach, rather than a developed argument. Presentation and layout have also assumed a new importance as we live in a society faced with many choices and increasingly able to reject anything that does not create immediate interest. Many will say that this is a very shallow approach, and so it is, but this is today's reality.

Distance is no longer an obstacle to communication and most methods these days are all but instantaneous. As our mobiles alert us instantly to a new message received and we interrupt what are doing in anticipation of something new and important, there is a great opportunity to be had, if only we can find a way through the web of possibilities.

And yet, we are famously unsure exactly how to explain what Unitarianism is all about, probably because we all have a different perception of what it means and each of us would explain it different way. As usual, a great virtue has turned into significant challenge for us.

I suspect in this ever more complex world the simple message is the most attractive.

What would *your* simple message be?

What should *our* simple message be?

In the short term, however, there are things that can be done and easily achieved:

- Each congregation should be able to communicate electronically. It doesn't have to be the secretary, but it would be good if it was.
- Everybody who can, should subscribe to Uni-News, so they know what is going on nationally.
- We should create special interest groups to allow messages and e mails to be sent easily and quickly to the right people. We already have the capability to do this at Essex Hall.
- We should share our resources through the Internet.

And there are plenty more ways – plenty more opportunities. We just need to find them and make them happen!

Robert Ince

We must.....

be a service to the community

An important aspect of our Unitarian identity is what we can offer, what we can offer not only to our own community, but the local and wider communities, of which we are a part.

This is something that perhaps we take for granted, we all nod in agreement; and then proceed to find reasons why we aren't doing anything!

We are too busy with repairing our roof/ struggling to fund our minister/ trying to find new members, but fail to see that many of these problems can be resolved, at least in part, by being more outward looking.

We have a lot to offer, if we would just let it be known to those outwith our congregations. We offer an environment where people can explore their spiritual beliefs within a caring, inclusive, outward looking community; a solid base from which people can explore their own spirituality.

As well as providing our own children with somewhere they can develop, flourish and grow, we can offer young people from our wider communities the same opportunities, those opportunities of regeneration, for the next generation.

How do we do this, how do we provide this 'service to the community'?

We do this by being amongst them, being with them, by being a spiritual home in a secular society. And if they find it difficult to see themselves in our churches, we must provide opportunities for them to see, experience and understand what we are all about, by our activities outwith our Churches.

We can do this in many ways, we can provide amenities for people to meet together with genuine connection, encouraging the use of our buildings by like-minded groups, Amnesty International, Fair Trade, and Mindfulness groups, groups open to all, not exclusively church members.

We can be with people at the important times of their lives, providing rites of passage ceremonies which reflect their needs, their situation, and their beliefs. But it doesn't stop there, we need to be willing and able to continue that involvement, as required, following on from these life changing events. To be seen to be willing to provide somewhere people can find their pathway in an open and dynamic community, and enable them to face life with confidence.

We can welcome, and act as advocates, for people who are marginalised within society, the poor, the homeless, differently abled, LGBT and refugee communities. Those with lifestyles which differ from the mainstream, sex-workers, or members of the travelling communities.

We can use our non-creedal foundations to facilitate discussions between other religious groups, especially those whose faith has become synonymous with fundamentalism, providing a multi-faith venue in each town.

We should be prepared to take advantage of all opportunities which come our way, to ensure that Unitarianism is something that everybody has heard about, knows about, is there for everyone, and understood by the public. We should respond to letters and articles in newspapers, on the radio, or social media, to speak out against unfair taxes, divisive policies, and government decisions, national or local.

It is the responsibility of all Unitarians to let people know that we are;

a Faith for today,

a Faith that matters,

a place for roots to grow and wings to fly!

Joan Cook



We must.....

develop personal leadership

The Question of Leadership

At the Executive Committee's Day of Visioning on the main issues affecting our church as discovered by President Marion Baker in her 'Listening to People' tour, we discovered that Leadership was an issue for many of us for many reasons.



- It was often unclear who was the Leader.
- There was lack of clarity in the roles of Ministers, committees and trustees as to leadership.
- There was little understanding of types of Leadership or leadership skills.
- Many churches spent all their time and energy on Management tasks leaving nothing for visionary work.
- We lack confidence or permission to lead.
- There is no area/district level leadership.
- In a leadership vacuum we are open to 'takeover bids' from unsuitable people.
- The Chief Officer role is not that of a Visionary Leader.
- Ministers sometimes fail to lead when it conflicts with their pastoral role.
- We are too individualistic.

Some positive comments were made.

- We are less constrained by our leadership than other denominations.
- We can be leaders in different roles and projects or for short periods of time.
- Modern culture leads people to expect more involvement and less top-down authority.
- We have flexibility.

In a time of increasing change we are more in need of leadership than ever. Resources are limited. It is not likely that each church that wants a minister will get one or even half a minister.

The days of '12 steps to an effective church' are over. Yes, we do need good systems to keep everything running, but we need to be adaptable and led by a vision of who we are and where we want to go. Sometimes we fall into the mistake of worshipping our committee system rather than being at the service of Life itself.

Edwin Friedman's book '*Leadership in the Age of the quick fix: A failure of Nerve*' finds the answers in Systems Theory. Originally used as a way of working with families in therapy, it explains the way church communities work. One person can take on and personify the dis-ease of the whole congregation. We are all interdependent as part of this system. Institutions work as systems in the same way families do. Leaders therefore need to understand themselves and the way their place in their own family dynamics has shaped them.

Chronic anxiety affects our organizations very negatively. It produces reactivity, blaming, quick fixes and a lack of well-differentiated leadership.

The underlying causes for this gridlock are always emotional, not intellectual.

- Leaders need to be free to try things without fear of losing their job or position.
- Leaders must be able to tolerate others' pain and not fix it.
- Stress and burn out are caused by taking on too much responsibility for others.
- Leaders must know when to make others do something rather than do it themselves.
- Leaders need to have stamina, resolve, self-regulation and remain connected.
- It will be temporarily more acutely painful to escape a chronically painful system.
- Good decisions are a result of how we act after the decision was made.

A Good Leader

- needs to take responsibility for their own emotional being.
- should be non-anxious: not 'peace at all costs'.
- should expect sabotage.
- must be motivated.
- understands boundaries and is unthreatened.
- does not rely on the group for their own meaning.

When we look at examples of successful Leaders in our church who have brought about growth, we tend to ask them "What did you do?" So they give us a long list of activities and innovations and we try to do the same but it doesn't work for us. Why is that? Perhaps we asked the wrong question. Perhaps we should have asked "Who were you?"

Two examples of Ministers I know who have grown their congregations have different theologies, different backgrounds and created different styles of church. Each has some skills and talents which the other does not share and could not implement in their church. Some people say they both have that elusive quality, charisma. But what is charisma? It is, I believe, a certain level of self-faith, of certainty that their approach is correct. These leaders are bold. They make big plans and people follow them. They do not back down when challenged. They are not afraid to be unkind on occasion. It is not what these leaders chose to do that made them successful, it was who they are.

How can we develop such attributes in those in Leadership positions?

I think training can help. I believe we have in our congregations people with skills and knowledge on Leadership. Up to date thinking is vital. We have members who work in the third sector, working with volunteers who have skills here. We have people who work in education or teacher training who again have experience with leadership skills. Can we put out a call for trainers to put on Leadership trainings in our districts and separately for our ministers?

This is an issue we will be discussing at the Annual Meetings and beyond. Let's start our discussion now.

Rev. Nicky Jenkins

We must.....

be religiously literate

I've been asked to produce some thoughts on what it means for Unitarianism to be 'religiously literate' following the GA Vision Day held in Manchester in September. There were 19 outcomes, from the question 'What could Unitarianism be in the next 5 years?' towards the end of this day long event and be 'religiously literate' was one of them.

I was not a member of the group from which this statement came so what follows are my own musings around the subject in the hope that others might be inspired to contribute more to the debate.

What does it mean to be literate in general terms?

Firstly there is basic speaking, listening, reading and writing. Primary school pupils who reach Level 4 or 5 at the end of their last year in school, Year 6, are considered to be literate to a satisfactory standard for their age. They understand and can use words with considerable fluency, they have a basic knowledge of grammar and they can spell accurately. They comprehend written and spoken passages of fact and fiction. They can talk about what they have read and written themselves.

For an adult, literacy is much more than this. It involves a depth and breadth of understanding of different genres of literature, an ability to express accurately or creatively thoughts, understandings and feelings in the spoken and written word. It involves comprehending texts that are considered difficult and confidently entering into in depth discussions with others or writing substantial written pieces about them.

Unitarianism is not a religion of one book like conventional Christianity or Islam. Literate Christians might well boast that they carry 5 translations of The Bible on their i-phone and thus consider themselves to be religiously literate. A Muslim might well be able to quote effectively and pointedly from the Q'ran and be thought to be religiously literate. It is not so easy for Unitarians to demonstrate their religious literacy.

One of the ways in which they can do it is by being able to articulate what Unitarianism is today in a clear and understandable manner to all adults and children who ask the question What is Unitarianism?

It's significant that some of the other outcomes from the Vision Day assume an ability to do this. For example, it would be difficult to give 'a riposte to fundamentalism' or to ensure that Unitarianism is 'understood by the public' or 'something that everybody has heard about' without being religiously literate. Every Unitarian needs to acquire an understanding of the story of Unitarianism as it has risen and fallen in popularity from its early days in dissent from the Church of England, to the complex pattern of its religious belief structure today.

But, that is very much the Level 4 or 5 of religious literacy.

Adult religious literacy would involve an increased understanding of other genres - other faiths, also humanism and earth centred religions and other threads of belief. It would also need to express the deep belief structures that underpin the Unitarian and Free Christian faith today and how they match or counter the belief structures of other world religions.



Adult religious literacy should reach down into the depths of human spirituality and bring forth in the spoken and written word the deep questions of life, reading extensively about them, sharing deep conversations with others about them, writing about them to inspire and inform others. To be 'Unitarianly' religiously literate is to be educated and knowledgeable across the wide field of religion.

So how can Unitarianism become increasingly religiously literate over the next 5 years?

It can only be done through members, people, becoming religiously literate. When I asked for comments around this topic on Facebook I only got one reply. I quote from part of it:-

'My friends in the Progressive Christianity Network read voraciously. They love books of bible scholarship which explain why their gut feeling that this or that did not happen was in fact based on fact... The Unitarians don't read, they don't need to know why they are right, that they are right is enough. ... Everything we need to know we learned at the knees of Flo and Jo.'

I hope there will be some reaction to these statements!

There are, in fact many opportunities for Unitarians to become more religiously literate which are better than 'Flo and Jo's knees' and which supplement reading appropriately and widely.

Courses are available and others could be offered in many media to enable new members to become fluent in Unitarianism and for longer-time Unitarians to extend and deepen their spiritual/religious knowledge understanding and experience. Such events as Summer School, Unitarian Discovery Holiday, GA Annual Meetings, FUSE a weekend event offered by London District are only a few of many that offer opportunities for Unitarians and, therefore, Unitarianism to become more religiously literate.

Dawn Buckle

We must.....

provide Ministry that enables ministry

My personal reflections might usefully start with a quote from SYF181

*Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;
brighten my pathway with radiance here;
mingle my calling with all who would share;
work toward a planet transformed by our care.*

My starting point for Ministry is the **congregation**, its ministry to the world and its covenant of membership.

The Covenant and the ministry are intimately linked but it might help to look briefly at each of these:

I believe that it is the task of the congregation to do its ministry and the task of a Minister to help it do this, not to do it for the congregation. As a Minister leads a congregation in its ministry to the world s/he acts as a spiritual leader of the congregation in many ways: acting as repository and explainer of the Heritage; being an example of integrity in action; modelling right relationship; teaching; inspiring & motivating; exploring ethical and social issues with members; enabling; leading the kind of worship that fosters individual growth and a compassionate community that can provide a model for larger society.

The covenant of membership is the expression of right relationship between members in their explorations and the care they exhibit to each other. This is too often implicit rather than explicit and its absence is the source of many splits within congregations. The basis of covenant in a liberal religious community centers on individuals in search, not on answers, but valuing nevertheless the variety of personal developing answers that are shared; valuing personal growth in sensitivity; in skill; in compassion.

A Minister fosters and enables this quality of relationship in a congregation through being alert to suffering, through teaching, inspiring, leading, through Presence and through worship that deepens individual and congregation commitment to bringing compassion and justice to each other and to those in the larger society who suffer.

The ministry of the congregation to the world will take different forms depending on the composition and situation of the congregation as well as the interests and skills of the leader.

The core activity of nurturing, teaching, and living our values **needs** a community to support individuals as they seek to make their lives meaningful, and meaningful is not just an intellectual exercise but is intuitive, spiritual, and practical. The unique thread of public worship brings things together but is not intended to stand alone and apart from action. As most of our congregations are urban and elderly, and as British society is more secular than formerly, the ministry to the world will often be less theological proclamation and confrontation than in our founding years of the early 19th Century. As our largely secular society is much more pluralist in faith and culture than formerly, our ministry will entail issues fostering and nourishing social justice, protection of minorities, working for community harmony, and providing space for reflection and refreshment.



There are so many injustices in today's world that only a few can be tackled effectively; this can be discouraging but it also implies a wide range of choice of what issues to tackle and which bodies to collaborate with. The dynamics within congregations should process moral sensitivity among members in ways that lead to specific commitments to action based on their skills and interests.

Some typical issues would be:

promoting interfaith understanding [contact programmes, public witness and even protection, joint activities, tracking religious education programmes];

attempting to alleviate the extremes of poverty in our communities [support for food banks, night shelters, micro-loan schemes];

educating members and the public about changes that are needed to avoid disasters [global warming, personal health, community health];

raising funds for local, national, and international relief work [Red Cross, Oxfam, Guide Dogs];

providing safe communities for people to come together [pensioners' clubs, drivers for events and hospital visits, community education on local fraud];

maintaining civil liberty watches [supporting Amnesty International, Liberty, attending Local Authority meetings]; etc, etc. No individual and no congregation can tackle every issue but these **and others** are there to be tackled as expressions of ministry to a suffering world.

Historically Unitarians worked more as individuals in social justice than as communities but the modern world illustrates the importance of collaborate efforts; individuals are generally successful to the extent that they can harness the energies and skills of others.

Training our leaders to exercise leadership in this ministry requires both practical skill development [conflict resolution, public speaking, effective committee dynamics, general group dynamics, working with electronic tools] and background information [history of the major religious groups encountered in Britain, sociology of religion, legal requirements of charities] as well as personal insight tools [meditation, research, time management]. Perhaps the greatest priorities for our ministers should include the ability to listen, a basic sense of fairness, an understanding of process, appreciation of historical perspective, and how our individual personalities affect our perceptions. This will, in my opinion, involve a sense of collegiate responsibility larger than the congregation s/he serves and which enables and fosters the congregation's larger identity.

Today's world is radically different to the world I trained in. Tomorrow's world will be radically different to today's world. A Minister's work will change/ develop and a Minister's training must enable maximum flexibility in approach and constant learning through life.

Almost everything about my sense of Ministry also applies to those who exercise congregational leadership on a non-professional basis, but the time available and the entry level skills will vary more widely. This can be good, as closed circles don't grow as well or as fast as open ones, but the commitment level required may be more than can be managed. Congregations that have "lay" leadership may therefore have to adjust their ministry to utilise the strengths of the situation while compensating for the lack of training, skills, and commitment.

Rev. John Clifford

At an induction service I attended a few years ago I heard the words of the American Unitarian Universalist Minister Gordon McKeeman that repeated a familiar refrain 'ministry is everything we do together.' I thought that those were very nice words, and certainly poetic and powerful. But they got me wondering; because, in a way, those words negated the very thing that was happening at that very moment. If 'ministry is everything we do together' then why do we need a person called a 'minister'? The purpose of that service was *not* for the congregation to commit to the work before them (though that might be a very good purpose for a service); the purpose of that service was for *one particular person* to be called by that congregation to a *specific role*. And yet what can we say about this process of calling a particular person to a specific role? In today's Unitarian community the answer is 'very little.' When asked to talk about 'ministry' the first thing we say is 'ministry is everything we do together.' Which is fine as far as it goes. But if there is nothing more to be said than that, the logical conclusion is that we should not have a separate 'ministry.' If we do have a separate 'ministry,' if we have 'ministers' then we need to be able to say *why* we have them.

That's why I'm glad the Ministerial Fellowship has been pondering this question about the nature of ministry. I believe we need to ask the theological question, 'Why do we have ministers?' This is a seriously pressing question. As the Unitarian community struggles under the secular world of the 21st century, as financial pressures hit hard, congregations are asking the question: Can we afford to pay the stipend of a minister? Why should we have a minister? What is a minister for, anyway? These are good questions.

It seems to me that in regard to ministry we are stuck between two 'theological instincts.' One can be labelled the instinct towards *equality*. The other is the instinct towards *education*. Both instincts have always existed in our tradition and both are good instincts, but they sometimes pull in different directions and we are stuck in the tension between them.

As Unitarians we affirm *equality*: our theological commitment is to the idea that each person has sacred inherent worth and value and is capable of discerning religious Truth using their own reason, understanding and spiritual experience.

And we also affirm the value of *education*: our theological commitment is to education, reason, the pursuit of truth and science. Ignorance is not a virtue, and all of us are called to deepen our understanding of truth by taking in as much truth and wisdom as we can.

Is it possible to construct a model of Unitarian ministry that respects these two instincts while serving to clarify the role of 'ministers' in today's Unitarian community? I believe so.

I believe there are some phrases that help us understand what a Unitarian minister is, that are built upon our commitment to equality and to education.

The Unitarian minister as *ministry coordinator*

Ministry *is* everything we do together. Ministry is the work of the church. The word 'ministry' means the work of serving.

The Sunday school teacher, the flower arranger, the committee member, the pastoral visitor, the marcher in the protest: all of these people are most certainly involved in ministry, as they are all ministering, they are all serving.

But none of these activities happens by accident, or purely spontaneously. They take some organisation and coordination. Every human community, if it is to last the test of time, requires structures of organisation. As much as any group might resist it, structures are always needed. Even Quakers have clear structures. There are 'elders' primarily concerned with worship and 'overseers' primarily responsible for pastoral care. Roles and structures of ministry help a religious community to function.

So, for the ministry of all to function effectively, Unitarian communities need some kind of ministry coordination. Though, conceivably this could be done in all kinds of ways, the easiest way is for one person to be in the role of *ministry coordinator*.

Ministry coordination is not easy. A person in this role will need specialist skills and training. Everyone can offer their own form of ministry, but the task of coordinating that ministry of the whole community is a specialist skill. David Heywood, an Anglican priest, in the book *Re-imagining Ministry* calls for ministry to be seen as something that is the work of the whole church. But he goes on to say 'the role of the clergy in this new model of ministry requires of them *more* professional expertise rather than less. But... their social role is no longer to be understood as that of the "professional", whose status is based on the possession of specialist knowledge. Instead, their calling is to give away their status and power their training might qualify them for and by using their expertise to empower the whole church. Explicit in this model is the Unitarian commitment to equality. It must be affirmed that the person in this role is in no sense spiritually superior to others. The *ministry coordinator* does not belong to a separated and ordained class of people who are 'holier' than others.

The Unitarian minister as *theologian-in-residence* and *community spiritual director*.

The model of ministry coordinator captures a great deal about what we mean by ministry in Unitarianism, but not all of it. There is another dimension to ministry. This dimension takes seriously the theological commitment to education. We can understand this dimension by using two phrases: *minister as theologian-in-residence* and *minister as community spiritual director*.

Historically, *theologian-in-residence* seems to be the most dominant understanding of Unitarian ministry. Being a *theologian-in-residence* requires the skill, the science, the art of relating the tradition, the intellectual understanding of the tradition, and ultimately God to the situation at hand in a particular community. The minister must lead the community into its own theological reflection. This requires teaching, prompting, questioning, inspiring.

Laurie Green calls this role being the 'people's theologian'. David Heywood writes, 'Rather than relating as professional over/against the community, she works *within* the community in something of the same way as the animator in community work, exercising the skills of the adult educator. While soaked in the Christian tradition, she must remain the servant rather than the controller of it, using her expertise to guide the process rather than claiming the right of final judgment, a role that requires considerable spiritual depth.'

The role of *community spiritual director* is many ways the same as *theologian-in-residence*. By using both phrases I do not want to suggest a sharp distinction between two different roles. Rather I want to suggest two vital dimensions to the same activity. Both dimensions ultimately ask the question 'how does this relate to the Holy?' Theology asks this question with the mind, spiritual direction asks this question with the heart. Again I must emphasise that these are not separate but two dimensions of the same process.

Whereas a spiritual director accompanies an individual in their spiritual journey, the minister accompanies the whole community. The minister does not dictate the will of God but prompting questions of the congregation: “Where is God? What is our mission? Where is our joy? Where are we being called to go? Why are we here in the first place?” The minister asks the questions, but the community must answer them.

The ministry of a *theologian-in-residence* and *community spiritual director* is not one that anyone can fulfil. It requires a level of intellectual and spiritual depth and maturity. It requires thorough education and training. It requires a great deal of resources to invest in this. And yet without it, there is a danger of spiritual stagnation and decline in a congregation; without it a congregation may be so busy getting on with things that it cannot remember why it is there in the first place.

We need ministers!

It seems that Unitarians are much better at articulating our commitment to equality than we are at articulating our commitment to education. This means we find it much easier to say ‘ministry is everything we do together’ than ‘we think it’s really important to have certain people called ministers in our congregations.’ We need to be able to say *both*.

I believe by thinking of Unitarian ministers as *ministry coordinators* and *theologians-in-residence/community spiritual directors* we can keep both of our instincts of equality and education in our sights and be faithful to both of them. We need the coordination and encouragement of the ministry of all in serving, and the presence of someone who helps us to understand our deepest *why*. For both of these reasons, we need Unitarian ministers.

Rev. Stephen Lingwood



Gertrud von Petzold
(first woman Unitarian Minister in UK)

We must.....

prepare for our children's future

One statement that got jotted up on the flip chart at the Vision Day was *'we need to prepare our children and young people for the rest of their lives.'*

Reflecting on this I thought about the activities and themes we explore on Youth Programme weekends.

Our topics include self-esteem, leadership, exploration of gender and sexuality issues, meditation techniques,

teamwork, listening skills, creativity and the building of rituals and sacred space. We all hope that these skills and experiences will help prepare our young people for valuable and happy adult lives in which they can find their voice, know some meditation and relaxation techniques, continue to develop an open, questioning faith if they wish and feel part of a supportive community. At youth weekends the youth leaders and young people have a great deal of freedom in choosing activities that seem relevant and we craft a kind of worship that feels fresh and engaging.

Many of our congregations have a rich tradition and history that holds and grounds them in the present. However, many of us know that it is this same rich heritage and church culture that can sometimes, paradoxically, prevent us from ensuring that the style of worship and kind of activities we offer are truly inviting and inspiring to local people who are seeking a vibrant, liberal faith and have yet to discover the Unitarian approach.

I believe we have a great deal to learn from our Unitarian young people. Our children and young people have a habit of speaking their truth, as many of us know only too well, and tend to have a preference for spontaneous exploration of the joys and challenges of today rather than the following old ways of doing things just for the sake of tradition.

Perhaps one could conclude that unless we make our weekly worship and mid-week activities more accessible to people of all ages, cultures and identities and truly keep our open minded, liberal faith alive and kicking and growing and really relevant for the needs of today's communities then we will inevitably watch our decline and slow transition from a dissenting, radical faith to a museum piece.

I believe it was a previous Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, who controversially predicted that the Unitarians would be the first religious movement in the UK to become extinct in the not too distant future. How can we collectively make sure that his fortune telling of doom does not come true?

So I would suggest that British Unitarians have a huge responsibility to continue to develop our work with children and young people for two main reasons.

Firstly, because our engagement with and investment in the younger generations has the power to transform lives.



Secondly, because unless we are proactive in bridging the gap between the way our young people want to put Unitarianism into practice and the way some of us want to protect our Sunday four hymn sandwich culture and other tried and tested ways of doing things then we may inevitably lose some of our relevance and vitality in today's ever changing society.

I would argue that we need to learn how children and teenagers' vision and ideas about our faith can prepare *us adults* for a more Unitarian, honest and vital future. We need to be more creative and proactive in seeking out this vision.

Greater involvement of young people in our decision making and governance would be a good step forward. Was it just a coincidence in the recent referendum on Scottish independence that young people of 16 and over were allowed to vote and the poll achieved one of the highest turn outs in recent history?

Recently, the newly formed Youth Strategy group made a formal proposal that an urgent priority for our Unitarian Movement should be to support a new position, preferably paid, to focus on engaging with and supporting the 18-35 age group.

For God's sake, or rather for the sake of ensuring that more people in Britain can find a welcoming, accessible liberal faith tradition when they look for it, let's invest more in our children and young people, not just financially but spiritually and politically.

*Rev. John Harley
GA Youth Coordinator*



A Vision of our Future

We need to...

- Harness our energy
- Use our resources to the full
- Embrace new technology
- Acknowledge contribution and success
- Empower individuals
- Make change happen

We need to

harness our energy

How do we as a free religious tradition make best use of our energy? How do we ensure we optimise all that we are and all that we have to offer? How do we use the power that we have?

I have thought about this a lot in my time as both a congregational Unitarian who has chosen this tradition and as a full time minister. How do I make best use of my own energy and power? Who and what do I look to for inspiration? Are there examples to learn from, to not so much follow but to be inspired by? How have they harnessed their power?



When I think of energy, in a human rather than spiritual sense, it is the power of example that has always inspired me. Not so much what people or institutions say, but how they are. There are Unitarian congregations throughout this land who have bucked the trend and breathed new life into their communities and drawn new people to them, inspiring them in a multitude of ways. They have harnessed what they have. Interestingly, it seems to have little to do with a particular theological approach or a type of community or leadership. They have though tapped into something present within the community and harnessed it appropriately. They have also used material resources wisely too. I have witnessed example of this within my own district.

The congregations at Chorlton and Oldham have breathed new life after years of struggle. This has been due to financial and other support from the district, commitment and energy from the few hands within the congregations and inspired and energetic leadership from the two ministers involved. This is an example to me and hope to others in our district and to Unitarians nationally.

I think the key to “harnessing our energy” is to understand who we are as communities and what we can offer to the world outside our windows.

I think the key is to not spread ourselves too thin. In many congregations, including the ones I serve, all too often gifted and energetic people are drawn out of congregational life to the centre. Hey, I did it myself and I saw this happen a lot during my time as a member of Cross Street Chapel in Manchester.

I think it is important to understand that we are congregational by nature and that our primary focus ought to be to the wider communities we serve, the people outside our windows. It is they who need to know who we are and what we are about and what we can offer to them, but we also need to learn to be better at what we say we are, “to do exactly as it says on the tin” as the old advert used to say.

How do we harness our power?

Well I do not think there is one single answer. That said, I will suggest somewhere to begin.

Look around at the examples close to home and further a field and uncover and further discover how they have “harnessed their energy”.

Then look at the communities outside our own congregational windows and begin to understand who they are.

Then look within our own communities and the energy present and look at what we do and do not do and if we can do it better.

Finally commit to building from within our own congregations and communities for it is impossible to really harness that power if it is spread all over the land.

Oh, and finally, let the world know about what we are doing. Make appropriate use of all forms of media including social media, ie use it in a positive way. We don't need to travel the land these days to deliver the good news, we can do so from our living rooms. I have harnessed my energy this way. Several people have over the last few years have contacted me to tell me that they were going to attend Unitarian congregations due things I have put out there through social media etc. A national contribution without having to take any of my energy away from the congregations I serve.

How do we "harness our energy"?

Well I suspect that it begins by opening our eyes and ears. I suspect that it begins by taking a good look around us and by listening to the voices of inspiration both near and far.

Rev. Danny Crosby

We need to

use our resources to the full

Our movement, like every organisation, finds itself now and then at a crossroads. At our present crossroads, we can look back with a sense of pride and confidence that we have made a difference. We have shared our values, lived our lifestyle and influenced changes which have made the lives of many people more meaningful and worthwhile for generations.

What we do, where we go, and how we do whatever comes next is the purpose of these vision papers and we need both leaders and followers as we prepare for the future.

If we decide on anything worthwhile it will seem, almost certainly at first, beyond our ability and beyond our resources. This purpose of this short piece is to help us to look again at the resources we have. It is about money – but not just that.

The theological thinking that faith communities are about people and not buildings is beyond dispute; but our buildings are part of our resource package. If we have historic buildings we are probably better placed now than ever before to obtain grants and raise money to preserve them. As well as being the focus of most of what we do, they can also provide places to celebrate a variety of life milestones and be used as venues for musical concerts and events of many kinds. If our buildings are more modern and maybe modest, we can emphasise the beauty of the simplicity of the space they offer. With a little effort we can create a venue which people will want to use and be associated with.



The Church in Portsmouth where I have worked is a simple post-war building, but it offers an uncluttered and light space and makes an impact on almost everyone who visits it. Obviously our buildings are a resource for supplementing our income, but in addition they can speak to our purpose as well. For too long we have treated our buildings as a constricting noose around our neck when in fact they can be a beautiful necklace to attract both visitors and income.

As a movement and as individual congregations we have significant financial investments. For many years these have served us well and paid sufficient dividends to provide for a relatively easily funded operation. Recent global events have significantly altered this scenario and the likelihood is that we will not return to investment returns at the level they were for a long time – if ever.



Most of these funds were given for specific restricted purposes and we will need to think and work hard at finding ways to use some of the capital as well as the income to serve these purposes. If we can't do this we may find we have missed the final window of opportunity. It would be a tragedy if Unitarianism in these Islands came to an end because financial resources were there but unable to be released to support existing and new congregations.

This will not be easy of course, but there are examples of congregations which have grappled with these issues and have made brave decisions. The result is that these visionaries are funding the human resource of Ministers and spiritual and skilled development leaders before it is too late.

Then of course there is the financial resource which we all have and which is still in our pockets. It has been said many times that if we could all give the cost of a couple of cups of decent coffee a week it would make a huge difference. In fact it would bring in over £710,000 a year that pretty well matches the annual income of the general Assembly (and it would also mean we could maximise the generous Bowland funding as well).

If the same number of people as our quota contributors gave an extra £5 a week it would raise over £825,000 and that could support another 24 full-time Ministers. Just suppose we make it three fewer glasses of wine a week at your local wine bar that's about £10 a week. That would provide £1.65 million and provide the income to run the General Assembly and fund those two dozen full time Ministers. – And I'm sure my GP would be happy too!

But it isn't all about money. The most precious resource we have is us - Unitarian people. People who are prepared to make a difference, by showing acts of kindness, getting involved in social action and social justice and by engaging with neighbours and friends about what we can do to make our world a better place.

Whatever we agree to make our vision for the future, it will need to be resourced. Can we find these resources by making better use of the buildings and funds we already have, by looking afresh at our 'live' giving and showing our commitment to our faith community with a new financial vigour.

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his book 'The Conduct of Life' said,

"Money often costs too much!"

Wouldn't it be good to show that we have moved beyond that?

And, we all can place some more of our time, our energy and ourselves at the service of a new vision. This may mean re-directing what we do to what is really important for our congregations and our Movement.

Resources? Whatever we decide that vision to be, as we stand at the crossroads, resources need not be our problem.

Rev. Martin Whitell



We need to

embrace new technology

Technology and Unitarianism – Oxymoron?

I think it's true to say that the idea of using more technology for any reason can evoke some pretty strong feelings in some people. Perhaps UK Unitarians are even worse than the average in this respect: maybe it's an age thing, I don't know. It seems to me that there are a number of reasons why technology gets invented: perhaps to meet a need or to make something easier or to automate a task. Indeed, perhaps the reason that scares people most is when technology is created to facilitate something completely new and foreign to our established ways of doing things - communicating on Twitter for instance.



Using Twitter seems to be more of a 'young person's game' – however you might be surprised to learn that apart from the quick, simple and free capability it offers for two or more people to have private conversations in 'real-time', sharing comments, pictures and other media, Twitter is also considered a vital part of the customer interaction strategy of many businesses. In fact, it's not just businesses; many other organisations (including churches) are getting in on the act because it's a quick (and mainly free) way to communicate information and respond to questions. The twittering population expects fast answers and because of the way twitter works, the tweets are usually public and easily searchable, so the organisations that use it take care to preserve their image and respond accurately and quickly. Some even scour the 'twittersphere' for tweets that mention their name so they can be sure they know what's being said about them. Please, if you haven't already, consider reaching out to someone who can teach you what Twitter might be able to do for your church or fellowship.

Within some Unitarian gatherings (particularly the more business orientated ones), tweeting what is happening live during the sessions, is not only allowed but usually encouraged. By this means, people that are not present can feel that they are connected to proceedings and can feel something of the enthusiasm or spirit of what is going on. It has even been suggested that this kind of live social media usage should be encouraged during regular Sunday worship and gatherings. Shocking right! Never mind the cries of 'put down your phone' to your kids; maybe it should be 'pick up your phone and tweet, tweet, tweet! – tell the world what a great place we have here and what brilliant things we do here'

Beyond Twitter, I think it's clear that almost everybody is engaging (willingly or otherwise) on Facebook. Unitarians are very active on Facebook. If you are not, I might tentatively offer that maybe you are missing an opportunity to engage with others in the wider (and nearer) Unitarian Movement and possibly even depriving said movement of your own unique and valuable opinion and insight.

If you do not currently use Facebook and are even slightly interested in what you might be missing, might I urge you to reach out to someone that does use it and find out how and why it works? If you can't find someone to assist, call me – or even better come to the Unicoms conference at Hucklow in November and there will be many willing hands to get you going.

OK – so that's all I'm going to say about this new-fangled social media stuff: yes there's a lot more out there that we could be using (and some are) but if you can understand and master Twitter and Facebook and actually use it either for personal connection and growth and / or better still for connection with and growth of the wider organisation, then we are all already winning as a result!

While I think about it, let me just interject two words: ‘smart phones’. I’ll come back to this, but I will say that with a ‘smart phone’, you can use just about every tool that I will discuss in this article...

So what about older technology that we could be using? This is the stuff that is perhaps too old and uncool for our kids to be using but that maybe has already passed us by or that we do not see the use of. What could I be talking about?

The first is Skype, the second is Google Hangouts. Both do the same thing in essence and that is to provide a way of having a telephone meeting (conference call) with one or even many people, without having to have everyone physically in the same room. This sort of technology is used every day by most companies across the globe but still the benefits of being able to do this are unknown by many, many people.

Both Skype and Google Hangouts are free programs (also available as free apps on all smart phones). They depend on the user’s computer or smart phone to be connected to wi-fi to work. Actually, they can also work over a 3G or 4G mobile data network as well but before doing this, users need to be sure that they have enough data allowance on the mobile plans.

Once a potential Skype user has registered (within the Skype program itself), they can connect to any other Skype user, anywhere in the world, free. All that is required is a network connection and a microphone connected to the computer. Similarly, a user with Google Hangouts can connect to any other Google user worldwide. By the way, any person who has a google account (i.e. gmail account) implicitly also has the capability of using Hangouts).



So what does ‘connect’ mean in this context? It can mean any or all of three things: messaging, audio or video.

- **Messaging** simply means typing text messages to the other party (or parties) that you have connected to and receiving their text responses. Rather similar to SMS messages on our phones, except for the fact that you can be connected to multiple other people simultaneously, who all see the conversation on their computer or phone at the same time.
- **Audio** means that you can connect to one or more people and use your microphone on your computer or phone to talk to those people simultaneously (and they back to you and / or the group also). Unlike dialling one or two people using your phone dialler and the public phone system, such audio sessions on Skype or Google Hangouts are actually being sent over the data network provided by your wi-fi. Because of this, no phone charges are applicable. By the way, you can even use either Skype or Google Hangouts to act like a regular phone and dial other phones (rather than computers or smart phones on a data network) anywhere in the world, but this feature does incur some charges, although these are very reasonable.
- **Video** (in the same way as audio) means that you can connect to one or more people and use the microphone and WebCam on your computer or phone to both see and talk to those people simultaneously (and they to you and / or the group) – again for free. This means that you are able to actually see who you are having a meeting with and they can see you, almost as if you were face-to-face. This can be very effective and amazingly, is still offered free by both Skype and Google Hangouts. The only real caveat with using these services to do a video meeting is that everyone on the call needs to have a good broadband / network connection or else the quality of the sound and video can be poor and also sometimes people tend to get disconnected from the meeting and have to re-join.

Why have I gone through the above in such detail? The reason is that I want everyone to know that you do not have to have your congregational or other meetings physically in the same room anymore. Using Skype or Hangouts, those people who couldn't get out to any given meeting can still join it remotely, or maybe nobody physically attends it at all and everybody joins in to the meeting from their home computers instead.

Finally, here's a 'Marmite' topic to think about: Use of audio / visual equipment as part of your services and gatherings. Have you considered using a computer, PowerPoint and other media as part of your services? Hook up to a projector and audio system of some description and you have the means to include all sorts of material into your worship. I'm thinking of stuff like pre-recorded hymn tracks (perhaps with film of singers too). Or maybe music/video footage such as the Pete Seeger 90th birthday conference rendition of 'We shall overcome' available on YouTube – moving indeed. Recently, I have been to many services that actually have almost all of the service displayed on the screen. This has included appropriate pictures and iconography setting the scene or supporting the theme, music if there is no organist, video for stories or illustrations, responsive readings that all present can see and read together and music / concert videos bringing variety and focus to services / gatherings that simply could not be done any other way.

Another opportunity many of us are missing is to record our worship or gatherings and make them available over the Internet – perhaps on YouTube or even more radical, to stream them live over the Internet as they happen. How many more people could benefit from your messages and participate in your worship if you did this? Unfortunately, I simply do not have space to address these topics here.

So I will leave you with two thoughts: firstly, embracing technology can help you grow by reaching out to and appealing to new audiences that might never otherwise have heard your message. Secondly, if you don't already have one, get yourself a smart phone (it doesn't have to be expensive). Install Facebook, twitter and other tools on it and join in with the wider Unitarian organisation online. Everyone will be the richer for it.

Finally, if you need help with any of the things I have discussed, call me or send me an email and I'll try to help. Better still, come to Unicomms at The Nightingale Centre in November and have your questions answered in person by any of the 'tech-savvy' helpers who attend and run it. Have fun!

Julian Smith

In Response

From: Dorothy Haughton

As communication is made more and more by email it has to be the responsibility of each congregation to find someone who is email savvy to receive communications and pass them on to the appropriate person. Similarly someone who uses Facebook could print out anything of interest from there. The idea that only one person 'the SECRETARY' is responsible for all forms of communication is outmoded. In some cases the new media person does not even need to be a member of the congregation.

We need to

acknowledge contribution and success

What is the point of working for no pay? We all do it for various reasons, in our congregations or in other areas of life. A frequent complaint from those trying to keep their congregations going is that they struggle to recruit volunteers. We need to ask ourselves if we actually acknowledge volunteer contributions and appreciate them enough when they do finally put up their hands.



It's important to remember that some people will have very different motivations for volunteering to you, and so you have to think of different ways to appeal to them.

During a Sunday worship service at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, the separate Children's Programme lights the chalice for their session with the following words:

'We are the chapel of the open minds, the loving hearts and the helping hands.'

One way of looking at people's motivations to volunteer is to think in terms of *head* people, *heart* people and *hands* people. Roughly speaking, *head* people like to plan and organise; *heart* people care deeply about the people they work with; and *hands* people see a job needs to be done and they get stuck in. Which are you?

Now think about how you might appeal to someone in a different category. Although *head* people care, they will want to know exactly what's expected of them, the time commitment and the goals. *Hands* people might be willing to help out with doing a reading in a service or a stint on the tea rota but not if they have to fill out a complicated spreadsheet first! *Heart* people will want to know how their work is going to help those in need.

Try to put yourself in the shoes of someone in another category and see what it takes to appeal to them. It might help to speak to friends and colleagues about their motivations for doing things; if they turn out to have a different viewpoint from you, they will be able to teach you a lot. What friendly advice would they give to someone trying to appeal to them as volunteers?

Finally, here are some general tips* on encouraging members of your congregation to get more involved:

Don't ... just try to fill a vacant position.

make assumptions about the person and their interests.

Do ... connect the role or task to the mission of the congregation.

show why this way of serving their community is a good fit for them.

explain how it will benefit them.

give an accurate role description showing expectations and time commitment.

offer support, give feedback and ask for it!

When we get things right, it makes sense to celebrate our successes. How you acknowledge someone's contribution also depends on his or her personality. Some people will appreciate a special ritual in a community worship service whereas others would prefer a simple thank you card. People may volunteer for many different reasons but unless we acknowledge their contribution and celebrate group successes, we risk putting them off next time. Working together on common goals can build thriving Unitarian communities, so let's get going!

Kate Dean

**From the Central East Regional Group, UUA 'Recruiting volunteers Do's and Don'ts' Video – search YouTube.com
Thanks to the participants of the Hands Up! Why Volunteer? workshop at FUSE 2015 for their contributions, which*

We need to

empower individuals

I am a member of the Bolton Socialist Club. It is one of the oldest in the country and is still active, supporting and campaigning on issues for the 'common man' - but it is not a church. Unitarians most often also support and campaign on issues for the 'common man', they are a church.



What is the difference?

Many years ago one of my colleagues suggested our churches were more like social clubs, that they were meeting places for middle class, like minded people who met up on a Sunday morning for an unchallenged hour of singing and listening. It was also suggested we were the irrelevant last hurrah of a great reforming religious movement when the name itself identified a person as an influential game changer.

It is indeed a great legacy but visit many of our congregations where there is only a handful of members and it does seem to be a legacy which is almost spent. It makes me ask: What we Unitarians can offer in today's world that others do not? Do we still have a unique selling point?

I learnt a lesson many years ago when the congregation decided to have a flower festival in the Chapel. Someone suggested that as well as the main theme we invited displays to represent the interests of our members. To my surprise these filled a very large section. The Bolton Equality Council, the Women's Refuge, Save the Children, United Nations Association, all founded by present day Unitarians and there were about fifteen other organisations in the display that people supported.

But no one said, 'I do this work because I am a Unitarian'.

They simply did it from the goodness of their hearts and they also happened to be Unitarians but never said so. After that I gave everyone a chalice lapel badge to wear. It made me realise that we are still more than the legacy of our past.

It is just that help is given in an unsung modest Unitarian way. It is not our unique selling point either, charity shop workers and interfaith supporters don't just come from the Unitarians. They come from all walks of life, all faiths and no faiths. I am not sure whether the worship we offer, even the rights of passage we offer, can be claimed as a unique selling point either. I have been to other churches just as happy as ours. I have been to non religious funerals just as sensitive as ours, and weddings.

There are two things we need to do to continue our existence as a church that matters in the world. First we need to transform ourselves into a living tradition and secondly we need focus on meeting the spiritual needs of the modern individual. The Living Tradition is about modifying our worship, using our space and extending our ministry.

Worship should be a joyful, happy experience open to participation and with a message that can be discussed openly. We don't need to be tied to the wheel that is the hymn sandwich. Our space should be an open space where other than worship groups can meet - meditation, yoga, fringe faith groups, support groups and discussion groups.

We shouldn't be afraid of collaborating with other faith groups for the mutual advantage of the wider communities we seek to serve.

Our ministry should be about leadership, not just spiritual leadership, but groups leadership, community leadership. We should not expect to find all these leadership skills invested in one person but be prepared to facilitate training of our own members and to work collaboratively with other churches and organisations.

In the communities around our churches there are many, many individuals who feel lost and isolated. Loneliness is an issue, meeting and socialising with other people is an issue, age is an issue, mind, body and spirit are issues. We have to ask ourselves as a church if we provide space and comfort for people to address those simple questions of, 'Who am I?', 'How can I feel better about myself as an individual and a participator in life?'

I often hear people say, 'But that is about counselling!' I say this is different. It is about spiritual development, finding the confidence and the place to explore those questions of identity and relate them to an overarching reason to belong in the world. Add to that a sense of being in a community where you feel you belong and yet you are still an individual.

How are we to achieve all this? It requires a change of direction, moving away from being just a worshipping community based on a Unitarian tradition. It requires developing a web of interdependence between individual Unitarians, congregations, districts and Essex Hall. We need to share experiences of what works and what doesn't. We need to financially support the training of leaders and the delivery of courses and resources.

We need to share templates for worship and personal spiritual development. We need to promote ourselves - wear the badge and the fly the flag that says who we are and what we stand for.

Above all we need to share a new vision for the future that meets the spiritual and emotional needs of the searching individual. We need to support, enable and empower our own generation to do great deeds because they have found a faith that speaks the truth of life to them?

When we are talking about empowering people it means giving them the opportunity to travel forward in life the way they would wish, being offered opportunities and being able to take them. By encouraging participation in worship we give opportunity to engage in discussion on content and to feel able to volunteer to take part in leading worship. And by offering training and opportunity people can develop skills if they want to. By collaborating with other churches and groups we reach a wider constituency and that gives opportunity in the community where none might have existed before.

Spiritual development gives people the opportunity to know themselves better and the confidence to be involved in the whole of life. I suppose empowerment to me means providing opportunity that allows people to give power to themselves and their life paths.

This is how I believe we can best serve the present age as Unitarians.

Rev. Tony McNeile

We need to

make change happen

Every single one of us knows that we must change. This is true for individual and institutions. Whether we like it or not, realities change around us and if we don't change in response, we become ineffective in relating to our world. We become irrelevant except to the other few who have not changed.

Although we know well about this need to change, we also know how often institutions and individuals fail to make change a reality. One of my favourite examples was the New England ice harvesting and storage industry. For many years, the ice they harvested in winter and sold in the warmer months was the only way to keep fresh food from spoiling quickly. They were successful. This industry created numerous jobs and generated wealth for the owners. And then some darned fool had to ruin it all by inventing mechanical refrigeration!



The way the ice-making industry responded to the threat of innovation is instructive. They worked harder and harder at harvesting ice and keeping it from melting. They even made real technological advances in their harvesting and storage processes.

Although they got more creative about harvesting and storing ice, these companies seemed completely unable to look objectively at the challenging technology of refrigeration. If they had, they might have seen the nature of the threat. Instead, they disparaged the new invention as it slowly improved to challenge them more and more - and eventually destroyed them entirely. They never adopted refrigeration. They disappeared.

Our congregations, in particular, often fail to change to meet the ways of the changing world. Why?

One important part of the answer is that the change comes upon us gradually. There is very rarely a sudden shift that causes us to notice. When the weather gradually gets warmer, we might not take our coats off until we're already wet with perspiration. Slow change is hard to recognise.

A second point is that it is especially hard to change when you have been successful in the past. The ice industry would not have been so hesitant to give up ice harvesting if they had not profited from it handsomely in the past. But wishing will not make the clocks turn back.

A third point is that we develop an overly narrow sense of purpose. The ice companies thought that their purpose was harvesting, storing, and selling ice. What if they had, instead, thought of their purpose as keeping food fresh? Might they now be the leaders in refrigeration, food packaging, and more?

The most important reason for lack of change, however, is that we know change will hurt. We cannot deny that change is accompanied by pain and we run from that pain.



The ice industry executives knew ice-harvesting and ice-storage. That's all they had done their whole careers. They knew nothing about mechanical refrigeration.

Their employees had all the right skills for what they were already doing and none for the new technology. A shift for these companies would have meant many people - including bosses - out of a job. A shift would have meant pain.

Ice customers were of little help in helping the ice companies see the need for change. On the contrary, their customers were probably telling them about how much they preferred natural ice and how reluctant they would be to get mechanical refrigeration. Of course, the companies were only hearing from the dwindling number of customers that remained loyal to naturally harvest ice and thus remained customers. The majority were soon happy with their cold, humming, full refrigerators and the ice companies never heard from them.

All of this is relevant to our congregations.

Change has come upon us slowly. There was a time when freedom, reason, and tolerance for radical concepts. It was hard to find a good, inspiring talk. Slowly, change came and what made us different was now part of the basic assumptions of our society. Gradually, taste in music changed. Gradually, attention spans shortened and great talks could increasingly be found for free at home via the Internet. None of it happened suddenly, but it has happened.

Like the ice-harvesting industry, we have also been successful in the past. The grand Unitarian chapels distributed around this land bear testament to the great success of the mid 19th century. The great names we reverently utter remind us too of a glorious heritage. It is hard to change when the past looks so bright and the dream of the return of those times remains so enticing.

Like the ice industry, we can have a narrow view of our purpose. Is it to put on a service on Sundays with some hymns, readings, and a sermon? Is it to keep a building in good shape? What if we understood our purpose more broadly as, for example, "transforming lives for the better in community" or "teaching peace, justice, and love"? How differently might we begin to act?

But, again, the most important impediment to change is that change hurts.

Our congregations are well-adapted for the old ways. Our ministers are trained for a particular way of doing church. (I can assure you that we ministers do not relish any change that requires leaders with skills we lack and might threaten to replace us.) The leaders of our congregations and our other institutions, like our ministers, are comfortable with leading as they always have. They don't welcome seeing much of what they've learned through the years become irrelevant. Their influence and ability to help would be undermined.

And the members of our congregations are members because they are among the ones who like the old ways. If they didn't, they - like the customers who abandoned buying ice - would not be present there to remind us of the need to change.

Change is hard.

And change sometimes does happen. When it does, it is because of leaders who are able to tolerate pain - their own and that of others close to them - in order to follow a greater vision. Think of Gandhi, Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. They moved mountains, but not because they were superb tacticians or knew how best to advertise their movements in social media.

They were great because they were able to project a non-anxious, visionary presence that overcame the enormous anxiety that would otherwise have held their people back.

In our congregations, such leaders may be clergy or not. Sometimes, they may not even have formal power in their congregations. They may not be able to preach or sing or build a website or keep a ledger of accounts, but it is not such skills that make them successful. These leaders are secure in themselves and able to exist in the midst of anxiety without succumbing to it.

The late rabbi, therapist, and leadership advisor Edwin Friedman's revolutionary thinking about leadership is elucidated in his two books "*Generation to Generation*" and "*A Failure of Nerve*" Friedman introduces such leaders and calls them "self-differentiated." They are great leaders not because of special skills, but because of their ability to be the non-anxious, firm, resolute, presence in an anxious community system.

And strong they must be! As Friedman explains, any self-differentiated leader successfully taking a community forward will be subject to sabotage and great resistance. As clergy in congregational contexts, doing the right thing for the institution they love rather than keeping people happy in the moment may well cost them their jobs.

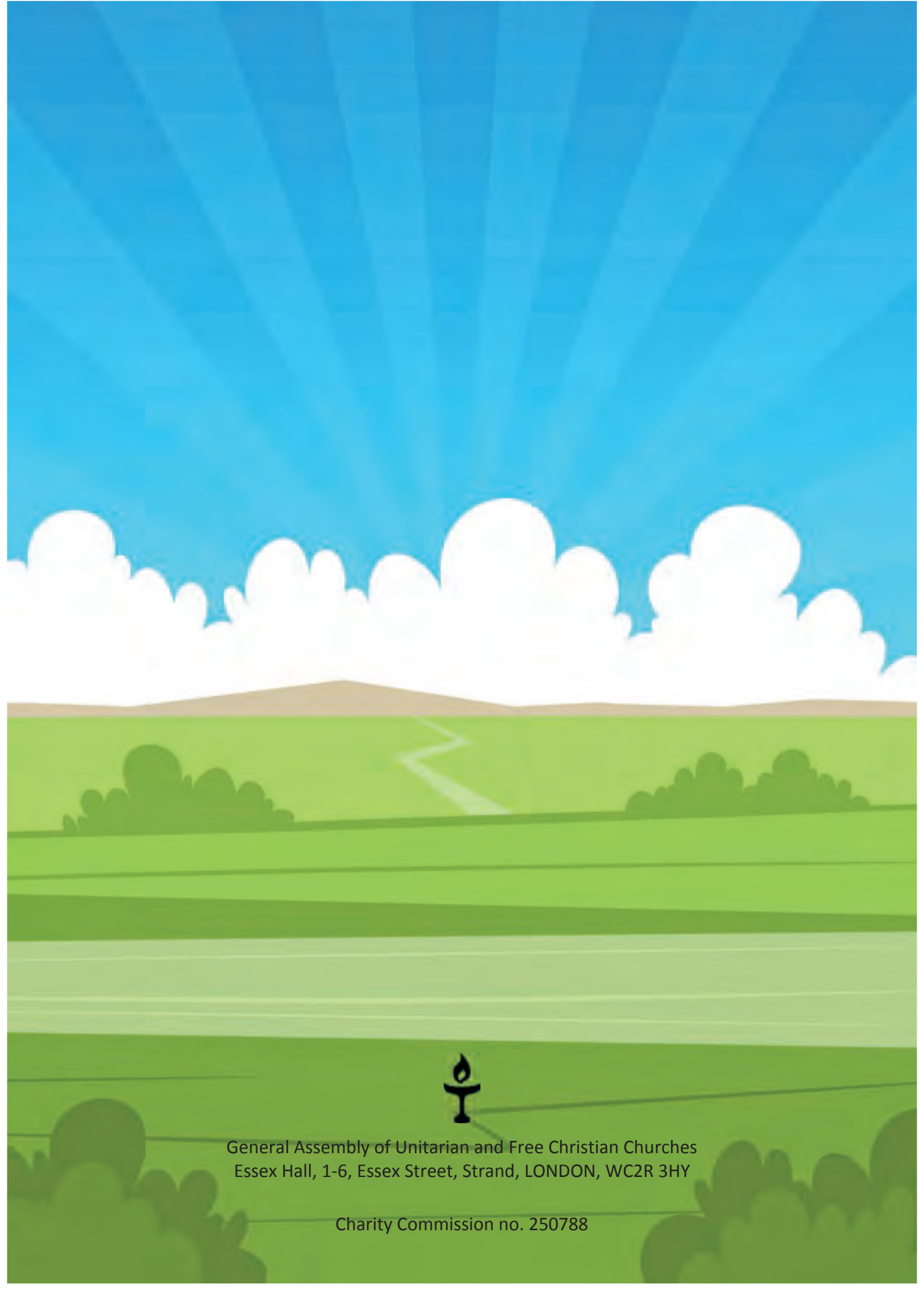
Making change happen. The answer is leadership - not specific skills, but specific ways of being that are borne of an inner strength, confidence, and adherence to a vision that is more compelling than our very natural desire to avoid discomfort.

We don't need tactics. The tactics are out there written in detail in countless books and available in hundreds of videos. We need to recruit and train and develop leaders who can bear the discomfort in themselves and others as the pain of change emerges and we need congregations willing to allow a leader to emerge and to lead.

Rev. Andy Pakula

**Together, We Can
Make a Difference!**





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