



Great Meeting Chapel Leicester

Newsletter - Winter/ Spring 2024



300 years of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance

SUNDAY SERVICES:

Starting at 11.00 am and led by the Minister unless otherwise stated

FEBRUARY

| | |
|------|--|
| 4TH* | IMBOLC/ CANDLEMAS |
| 11TH | VALENTINE'S SERVICE: <i>JUDE TO LEAD</i> |
| 18TH | 1ST SUNDAY OF LENT |
| 25TH | 2ND SUNDAY OF LENT |

MARCH

| | |
|------|--------------------|
| 3RD* | 3RD SUNDAY OF LENT |
| 10TH | MOTHERING SUNDAY |
| 17TH | SPRING EQUINOX |
| 24TH | PALM SUNDAY |
| 31ST | EASTER SUNDAY |

APRIL

| | |
|------|----------------|
| 7TH* | LOW SUNDAY |
| 14TH | |
| 21ST | ST GEORGES DAY |
| 28TH | |

MAY

| | |
|------|-----------------------|
| 5TH* | BELTANE |
| 12TH | |
| 19TH | WHITSUNDAY/ PENTECOST |
| 26TH | |

WEEKLY EVENTS

THURSDAY 11.00 AM – 1.00 : **COFFEE MORNING**
Tea, coffee and warm company in our beautiful garden room

Thanks to Ros Cole for our cover photo

THURSDAY 1.00 –1. 30 PM: **MID-WEEK RECHARGE**
Half and hour of meditation, music, poetry and pause.

UPCOMING SPECIAL EVENTS

- ⇒ *** Board Game Afternoons:** Join us after the service on the first Sunday of the month for a light bring and share lunch, followed by a convivial afternoon playing familiar and not so familiar board games. All welcome
- ⇒ The first meeting of the new monthly “**Life Spirit**” discussion group following David Usher’s book of the same title will meet in the Garden room on **Tuesday 30th January at 5pm**. If you can not attend in person you can do so via Zoom using the Sunday Service link on the website. To allow as many different people to attend as possible over the course of the year, the day of the week and the time will be different each month. Please look for information on the website and make sure that Arek has your current email address for regular updates. He can also email or photocopy you the relevant Chapter from the book, if desired.
- ⇒ **Faith in our Future** – a full day of talks and workshops on our movement’s role in tackling climate and bio diversity crises. **Saturday, 3 Feb, 10:30 – 17:00** at Kensington Unitarians W8 4RT. More information: tinyurl.com/faithfuture
- ⇒ **Wednesday 7th Feb, 7:00 pm**. Manjula Sood will be the speaker at the **Unitarian Hindu Connections** monthly online meeting to talk about her journey to Unitarianism as a Hindu person. Contact Manjula directly for Zoom details.
- ⇒ **General Assembly Annual Meetings** will be held at Staverton Park Hotel in Northamptonshire on 4-6 April. More information on unitarian.org.uk/annualmeetings

FROM THE MINISTER

What are you doing here?

How did you get here? In this edition of the newsletter Ros graciously shares with us what has drawn her to Unitarianism. And as it happened, it was precisely the kind of conversations I've been recently having with quite a few of you. Our stories vary: from the need to scratch the itch of curiosity after having read about Unitarians here or there, a long family connection, our community being there for you in a time of need, to a pure chance... As many people as many stories.

One way or another, recently or a long time ago, you have found your way here. Welcome. Now what? Recently, Mike shared with me the results of an old congregational consultation conducted in the time of "interregnum" between ministers. Those of you who were here back then may remember it. In a nutshell, the congregation were working out the desired direction of travel. You were asked, among many other things, about what you cherish here. By far the most people indicated "uplifting/challenging/insightful sermons". Not only did I suddenly feel under pressure to perform, but I was also a little surprised by this result! But data doesn't care about your feelings, they say. Yet, there is a part of me that just wants to squint my eyes in interrogation and ask: "really?". What about relationships? What about our way of being with one another? Well, it also made me laugh to find that only one person indicated "courtesy" as something that they value here. Which can mean one of two things: either our way of being with one another is just right and exactly as one would expect; or we are all offensive, foul-mouthed, unpleasant, and... and we secretly revel in our obnoxious charm! I hope – nah, I know – it is the former!

But what makes you keep coming back? Unitarians are unique amongst religious communities in the sense that we do not come with a single purpose of worshipping the same ideal of God, or to reconfirm each other in our dogmas and doctrines. Of course, I am not suggesting that a shared

profession of faith is the sole purpose for existence of other faith groups, not at all. It is sociologically true, however, that faith groups serve as “plausibility structures” – sociocultural contexts for systems of meaning within which these meanings make sense; or in other words what we help each other make our beliefs *feel* more plausible. But how can we make more plausible for one another when, from the outset, we do not hold the same religious beliefs? I have also heard it being said that a church is a place where you can practice being human before you take this practice out into the wider world. What does “being human” mean to you? What vision of humanity would you like to make plausible for your fellow Leicester Unitarians to believe in?

Interestingly, “working in a like-minded fashion to a common purpose” and “shared aspirations” also received zero votes in the now long bygone consultation. Again, my pointing of this out is a little tongue-in-cheek. The list of possible answers was long, and each person had a limited number of votes, so I am not suggesting for a second that we don’t care about cooperation. But perhaps there is some truth in it. Perhaps the famous platitudes that “we need not think alike to love alike” and that “it’s about the journey and not the destination” come to the forefront. Perhaps it is enough for us to know that we are here to uphold one another in a structure that makes it possible for us to believe in each other’s gifts, potentials, experiences and expertise. Where we make it possible to wholeheartedly believe in each other’s worth, even when self-doubt creeps in. Maybe we don’t have to be here for a single goal, but for a shared experience – the journey itself.

Our paths to this sacred space are diverse, yet collectively, we can reinforce a structure of plausibility that breathes meaning into our lives, creating a refuge where, amidst the chaos of existence, we help each other find composure and direction.

And I also hope that this letter, with a glint of humour, adds a dash of the sought-after “uplifting / challenging/ insightful sermons.”

With every blessing, *Arek*

CONGRATULATIONS TO:

Roy Crole who was recently announced as winner of the Leicester University's 2023 award for Teaching Excellence at a gala awards ceremony. The annual award is open to over 1500 academic staff. It recognises Roy's excellent student evaluations and teaching of theory alongside industrial practice; his delivery of major undergraduate curriculum reviews with over 25 years of professional accreditation; his lead role in the academic design of the Percy Gee Computer Laboratory, and the leadership and mentoring he has provided for junior staff.

Diane Roman Woodward who, in January, graduated from De Montfort University with a Post Graduate Certificate in Energy and Sustainable Development. During the course Diane deepened her understanding of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by undertaking assignments. Her most memorable were: designing a sustainable GP practice building; looking at the energy demands of a Potato Crisp factory; analysis and improvement of lithium ion batteries. It wasn't until Diane opened the envelope that she realised that she had achieved a Distinction in her certificate. Hard work rewarded.

Arek Maleki. Despite swearing blind that he is not a writer, Arek will have two book chapters published this year. The first will be in the upcoming Lindsey Press book *Right Relationship in the Real World: Learning to Live by Our Unitarian Values*, which is due to be launched at the GA Annual Meetings in April. Together with his co-author Rev. Laura Dobson he explores embodied expressions of spirituality. The second is a chapter in the upcoming Student Christian Movement Press book *Being a Chaplain: Contemporary and Global Perspectives*, in which Arek draws from his theological education and his experience as a group exercise instructor often finding himself in a chaplain-like situations at the gyms. The publication date still to be confirmed.

Manish Sood who has just received a certificate from Aston Business School to recognize his successful participation in the MBA mentoring programme.

HARVEST FESTIVAL

On October 1st the annual harvest festival service was held in Chapel which had been attractively decorated on an autumnal theme. Afterwards we shared a fabulous lunch, prompting Sue to remark “It was like the 2 loaves and 5 fish. We are blessed”



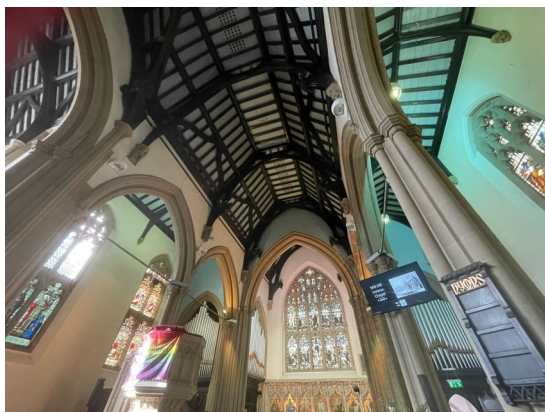
The sale of donated produce, together with donations from the congregation after the lunch, raised a total of £112. We donated this money to the Trussel Trust food bank, along with a big bag of tinned food.

Rory Palmer of the Trussel Trust, had been scheduled as guest speaker at the service, but was unable to attend on the day. We were pleased to welcome him to a service later on in November where he gave us an overview of the scale of the challenge faced by the Trust as the cost of living crisis deepens and more and more people struggle to feed themselves and their families. Rory thanked the congregation for their generosity and explained how important such support is for the morale of the volunteers that the charity relies on to staff its foodbanks

MILL HILL CHAPEL SERVICE

At the beginning of October, the weekend dawned warm and sunny for the journey up north for four of us from Great Meeting. We were excited to join Arek's home congregation of Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds, along with many of his Unitarian colleagues from far and wide and friends and family, to celebrate his ordination.

The chapel itself is awe-inspiring - a large 'dissenting gothic' Victorian building from 1847 with impressive doors opening in every direction. It stands on the spot where a more humble puritan meeting house from 1664 was the first Unitarian worship place in the city. Its ministers have



included Joseph Priestly from 1767-1773, and whose statue looks at the new chapel from the adjacent City Square.

The current minister Jo James welcomed us into the beautiful inside space where we marvelled at the William Morris stained glass and glistening mosaic reredos especially. He co-lead the service with Ant Howe who was Arek's tutor at Unitarian College for the three years of his ministry training. Jo started the service with words that the previous minister at Great Meeting, Arthur Stewart, had used for him as his tutor. It was a wonderful thread of connection in time and space. We had hymns, prayers, meditations and readings, and after an hour came Arek's opportunity to speak for the formal ordination vows. He then helped give communion using the silver set from Great Meeting, which we believe came from another Leicester chapel where Gertrude von Petzold was the first female minister in England.

A lovely part of the service was the sharing of well-wishing from different groups represented at the service, such as from Fulwood Old Chapel in Sheffield where Arek had his first placement, the Yorkshire Unitarian Union and Luther King House where he studied in Manchester.

We passed on the love and support from Great Meeting congregation and news of how well Arek was already settling in with us. Unfortunately, the date had clashed with a number of district meetings and other unitarian events and there had been talk of small numbers. However, this always seemed unlikely with the Arek's social network through his studies, placements and friendships, and it was lovely to meet some of these folk afterwards over high tea in the Priestly Hall at the back of the chapel. There was a fascinating photography exhibition on the walls which included a beautiful portrait of the newly ordained Arek, also Jo James and members of the Mill Hill congregation.

We felt very privileged to have to have been a part of Arek's special day, and a new chapter in the richness of Unitarian life.

Jude Casson



AREK'S OFFICIAL INDUCTION SERVICE

On the 18th of November we held the induction service of our new minister, Rev Arek Malecki. Arek has been with us since June, and is well settled in his role now so, in some sense, the service might have felt like a formality to fulfil. A significant formality nonetheless.

The service, led by Rev Ant Howe (senior tutor at the Unitarian College) and Rev Winne Gordon (Minister at Birmingham New Meeting Unitarian Chapel) was attended by the Lord Mayor Of Leicester—Dr Susan Barton; the City Mayor—Sir Peter Soulsby; the President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches—Mr Vince McCuly; representatives of neighbouring faith groups; and Unitarians from far and wide.

In the service, which was made special by the Great Meeting music team, led by Mr David Kent, the congregation and the Minister exchanged promises to each other and expressed the will to work together to offer a shared, meaningful Unitarian Ministry in Leicester.

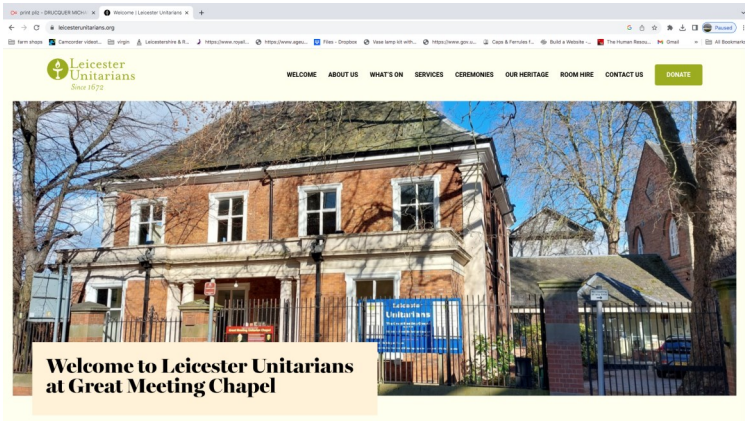
We would like to wish our Minister, and ourselves, a long and fruitful Ministry together.

The service was followed by a delicious afternoon tea in the Garden Room when participants were able to mingle and hear about the Chapel and its heritage.



WEBSITE RE-LAUNCH

Our website has changed address to leicesterunitarians.org and with this we have taken the opportunity to completely revamp the site. Will Frank of Xylo Design Ltd was given the brief to create a more contemporary feel to the website without relinquishing those elements which connect us to the denomination's heritage.



Important features of the site are the ease with which it can be updated by the minister or others who have the log-ins, and its mobile phone compatibility. We copied some of the best content from the old site, as well as many of the photos, and scoured our digital files for more. We showed the site to some people under the age of forty and tried to incorporate some of the features they thought important.

It was important to note that the website is primarily the shop window of our chapel and secondarily acts as a news reference for services, what's on etc for existing members of the congregation. Thus, those who visit the social media sites have somewhere to look if they want to find out more, as do those who might want information about ceremonies or room hire.

We are very grateful to Will for setting up the excellent new site promptly and also to David Newton who maintained and updated our previous site for many years so efficiently.

Mike Druquer

DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY CAROL CONCERT

On December 11th we were pleased to welcome back Leicester Musical Memory Box into Chapel for their annual dementia-friendly carol concert and singalong.

It was a joyful and informal occasion. The Chapel was warm and looked very festive, with a nicely decorated Christmas tree and windowsills bedecked with candles, baubles and pine cones. The event was made merrier by tea, coffee and mince pies served up at the back of the Chapel by Ros and Nicky.

Kyle and Christina from Memory Box led us through some of the best known carols and winter songs, from “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” to “Let it Snow”, accompanied on piano by Robin Lister.

The Lord Mayor, Dr. Susan Barton shared a short but heartfelt Christmas message and Arek brought a unique twist to the celebration by sharing the fascinating fact that the first song performed in outer space was none other than Jingle Bells, written by a Unitarian.



BURNS LUNCH

After the service, on the last Sunday in January, we met in the Garden Room for a shared Burns Lunch. This event has become an annual tradition with its origins traceable back to the time when brother and sister Charles Mackintosh and Morag Jones, who were born and bred in Scotland, started attending Great Meeting and introduced it to the Chapel calendar.

Stuart treated us to ceremonial readings by Robbie Burns and used his fearsome-looking dagger to make the first cut into the haggis. We all appreciated his fine Scottish accent and the sense of drama and occasion he brought to the proceedings.



Thanks to all those who helped make it such a tasty meal and relaxed, enjoyable occasion: Mike on haggis- sourcing and cooking, Jude and Gaby on “neeps and tatties”, Ros on onion gravy, Roy and Nicky on Cranach as well as Diane for setting up the room and all those who helped to clear up afterwards.



JUST A TREE?

Being drawn to Unitarianism was partly the result of two interesting leaflets, both entitled “Unitarian Views of Earth and Nature”, produced in 1994 and 2010. Having been rooted in ‘the natural world’ since early childhood, the explicit mention of nature as a facet of Unitarianism was appealing.

Trees are obvious and highly visible examples of nature in urban, sub-urban and rural environments. The tree in the image, in Bradgate Park, is no longer alive but remains a symbol of the beauty and complexity of nature but, of course, it is not *just* a tree. Each tree represents a rich range of habitats and can be home to, or shelter for, huge numbers of organisms living, feeding, growing and reproducing in the tree’s different components. All this happens on, in, around or under trees; from above, many animals use trees as landing sites and territorial watchtowers.



While most people are familiar with birds, squirrels, bats and other larger tree dwellers, the majority of organisms associated with trees are very small, some microscopic, and not so obvious. There are so many species of microorganisms, algae, mosses, lichens, ferns, fungi and numerous invertebrate and vertebrates that make use of trees. When dead, trees continue to provide habitats and nutrients used by a huge variety of organisms. When trees fall, or are felled, many remain lying on the ground to gradually rot, or left as log piles for various animals, plants, fungi, slime moulds and other organisms to utilise. Rotting is essential to nature and everything can be recycled by natural processes.

Trees have increasingly featured in the public arena as we are invited to plant more trees, to be aware of their importance to our environment, aesthetically and biologically, and to help mitigate the effects of climate change. However, it is crucial that understanding is more than superficial so that the right trees are planted in appropriate places and nurtured until they are established and thereafter. An understanding of the interconnectedness of nature as well as the relationships with underlying soils and organisms is vital. As an example, it is only fairly recently that mycorrhizal fungi, forming widespread communication networks beneath trees and other plants, have been regarded as being of major significance for their health, influencing agriculture, forestry and gardening practices.

Throughout the different seasons, trees are wonderful symbols of nature in all their beauty and in their relationships with many different organisms in the variety of habitats they provide. Felling and removing just one tree means more than just its demise; it is destruction of many important habitats and significant biodiversity.

The public outcry surrounding the recent destruction of trees including the once iconic Sycamore tree in Northumberland National Park indicate people's interest in trees and perhaps such acts encourage many to think more about trees and their significance. The Tree Council with over 6000 wardens and The Woodland Trust, with its over half a million members and over 1000 areas of woodland, are examples of the dedication of people and organisations to their natural surroundings.

Being 'out and about in nature' is now regarded as vital to health and wellbeing for every person whether meditating, doing yoga, foraging or just walking among trees (the Japanese practice of 'forest bathing'). Nature is now recognised as an important part of a social prescribing regime from general practice and, of course, there are only beneficial side-effects!

A quote from Cliff Reed's book* sums all this up:

Unitarians regard the maintenance of a sustainable, diverse and beautiful environment - 'natural' and 'human' - as needful for our survival and our well-being as a species.

Our relationship with trees in the environment exemplifies these ideas.

Rosalind Cole

* Cliff Reed (2018) *Unitarian? What's That?* The Lindsey Press.

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