



Northampton Unitarians News

*A spiritual fellowship, encouraging tolerance,
reason and independent thought*

Issue 82, December 2024 – February 2025

Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| Statement of belief & websites / social media | page 2 |
| Calendar for December 2024 – February 2025 | page 3 |
| <i>Northampton Unitarians: A Short History</i> by Sue Woolley | page 4 |
| Who we are and how to contact us | page 12 |
| <i>Chalice lightings for Christmas and Yule</i> by Yvonne Aburrow | page 12 |

Statement of Belief (taken from our website)

Unitarianism is a religious movement in which individuals are free to follow their reason and conscience; there is no pressure from creed or scripture. We are open to change in the light of new thought and discoveries.

We believe that:

- everyone has the right to seek truth and meaning for themselves.
- the fundamental tools for doing this are your own life experience, your reflection upon it, your intuitive understanding and the promptings of your own conscience.
- the best place to do this is a community that welcomes you for who you are,
- complete with your beliefs, doubts, and questions.

We offer:

- liberty of conscience from imposed creed, confessions, and dogmas.
- a fellowship where people come together to worship; to share times of celebration and trial; and to help each other in the quest for a faith to live by.

We affirm the universal values of love and compassion, peace, truth, and justice.

We welcome all who come to us in the spirit of goodwill and enquiry, regardless of ethnic or religious background, age, gender, or sexual orientation.

Our thanks to the General Assembly Information Department, for extracts from 'A Faith Worth Thinking About' by Peter Sampson et al; and to Ipswich Unitarians for extracts from a leaflet by Rev. Cliff Reed.

Websites & Social Media

www.northamptonunitarians.org.uk
[https://www.facebook.com/Northampton Unitarians](https://www.facebook.com/Northampton%20Unitarians)
<http://sue-still-i-am-one.blogspot.co.uk>
<http://www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk>
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Northampton Unitarians: A Short History

The text below is taken from a Carnegie Lecture delivered at Northampton Central Library on 16th November.

First, a brief history of the denomination. The first avowedly Unitarian congregation held its first worship service at Essex Street in London, under the ministry of Theophilus Lindsey, on 17th April 1774, just over 250 years ago. But Unitarian beliefs and ideas are much older than that, growing out of the Protestant Reformation of the early 16th century. When the Bible became available in translation, so that people could read the word of God for themselves, some discovered that the doctrine of the Trinity was not in the Bible, and therefore decided to worship God alone. Which is why we're called "Unitarians" – we didn't call ourselves that, it was a name given to us by our detractors, who insisted we were heretics of the darkest kind, because we denied that Jesus was equal to God and affirmed that he (as Christ) did not pre-exist his human birth. We were also known as "Anti-Trinitarians" or "Socinians" or "Arians".

Interestingly, when much of the intolerance of various Protestant sects was eased up on with the passing of the Toleration Act of 1689, Unitarians were specifically excluded, as were Roman Catholics. In fact, it was **illegal** to espouse Unitarian beliefs until 1813, only 200 years ago. But Unitarianism only formally began in Northampton in 1827.

A key influence in the origins of Unitarianism in Northampton was the presence of Dr Philip Doddridge's Academy of Learning, which was based in Northampton from 1729 to 1751, and again from 1789. As Frank Field remarks in his splendid history of our congregation (which is available on our website), "the Academy gained a reputation throughout the Midlands and the South of England. Nonconformist churches were sent a steady stream of

well qualified ministers, some of them outstanding.” Although Doddridge himself took a middle position theologically, he was tolerant of those with Arian and Socinian leanings. We know from a centenary article written in 1927 by our then minister Cellan Evans, that Doddridge once stated that he would “lose my place and even my life, sooner than excommunicate a real Christian for Arian proclivities.”

When the Academy returned to Northampton in 1789, it came under the care of the Rev. John Horsey, minister of Castle Hill Congregational Church, this tolerant position became more marked. In his interesting article on Unitarianism in Northampton, Alan Ruston quotes the Revs. Thomas Arnold and J.J. Cooper, who were later ministers at Castle Hill: “There was Unitarianism in the church, but according to the evidence before us it was in the pew, not in the pulpit, and there was not heat enough in the pulpit to burn it up or melt it down. ... From the Academy Unitarianism got into the church ... For years the students had been making friends in the congregation, finding opportunities to talk of their studies and air their views of theology.”

After Horsey’s retirement in 1827, after 50 years of dedicated service, his place at Castle Hill was taken by the Rev. Hyatt, who was a traditionalist, determined to root out heresies. However, the Unitarian-minded section of the congregation got in first. At Hyatt’s first church meeting, the following letter was read out (I’m giving you the gist):

“We the undersigned Members ... having in accordance with the dictates of our consciences, united in the formation of a society of Christians, whose worship is directed to the one God the Father ... deem it proper to withdraw ... from the worship and communion of the Church to which we have hitherto belonged on account of the discordance existing between the mode of worship

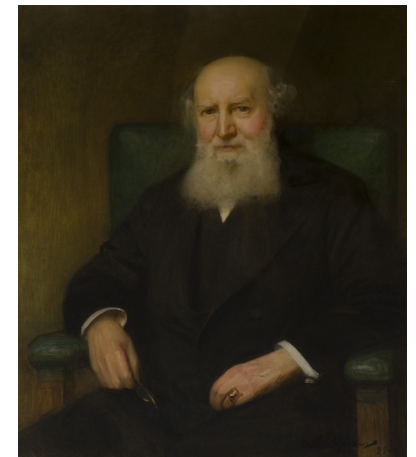
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In 1848, the congregation was augmented by members of the Princes Street Baptist Chapel, whose minister had been Rev. Henry Ierson, who went on to become secretary of the British & Foreign Unitarian Association in 1876. In 1852, he had married the daughter of James Milne, a Northampton architect and borough surveyor. Her sister married a certain Moses Philip Manfield, (right) who was the most



influential figure in our history in the second half of the 19th century.

Philip Manfield (as he was known) was born into a Unitarian boot-making family in Bristol in 1818. He moved to Northampton in 1843, and set up his



own highly successful boot & shoemaking business in the following year. Over the next 50 years he became a dominant figure in the town, eventually becoming its MP in 1891. His role in the Unitarian church was no less important. He was chairman of the congregation for three decades, and was responsible for funding the building of a splendid new church in Abington Square, (left) which was to be the congregation's home for more than 100 years.

The foundation stone for Kettering Road Free Church was laid in March 1896 by Lady Manfield, and was accompanied by an inspiring address by the then minister, T.W. Freckelton. The Manfields not only funded the building of the church, which cost £6,500 plus a further £850 for furnishing, but also endowed a repair fund. The new church could seat 400, with additional space for two large Sunday schools. The opening service was held on 7th

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Alan Ruston calls this statement “a notable example of the development of Unitarian thought to its extreme, in 19th century terms” I would like to read you part of it:

“The congregation has now been reconstituted upon a basis fitting it to represent the largest and freest Religious Thought of this time, in such a way as to leave full scope for all its reverent expansion in the future.

Following the natural order of development, this Church, and the Congregation worshipping herein, will belong to no sect, but will stand for Religion that is Rational, for Rationalism that is Religious, and for the practical advancement of the highest Ethical Culture. It has therefore no dogmatic name; no creed expressed or implied; enjoins no acceptance of articles of faith upon either Minister or members; but requires only that men should do justly, and love mercy, and walk reverently before God.”

I think you will agree that this is radical stuff indeed. So technically speaking, Kettering Road Free Church did not belong to the Unitarian movement for the first six years of its life. However, the congregation decided to return to the Unitarian fold in September 1903, when it joined the North Midland Unitarian and Presbyterian Union of Churches (now the Midland Unitarian Association). As Alan Ruston remarks, “Undoubtedly the

Unitarians of Northampton were a unique group, not to be replicated elsewhere.” You know, I’m rather proud of that!

The first 50 years of the 20th century saw a succession of six ministers, none of whom stayed long, apart from the Rev. H. Bernard Hannah, who was our minister from 1930 to 1946, which makes him the longest serving minister in our history. In her fascinating manuscript ‘150 years of Unitarianism in Northampton’, the late Nora Patenall recalls: “He was a theologian of advanced views, and altogether it was an inspiring ministry.” After the Second World War, our Unitarian church shared in the general decline in religion in this country, due to changing social patterns and increasing secularism. Our last full-time minister was the Rev. A.E. Mobbs, who resigned in 1950.

This is not to say that the church did not thrive during these years. Nora Patenall recalls: “Over the years there have been many cultural and social groups within the church. The members of these groups also made contact with the world around them. [The groups included] the Shakespearian Class, the Literary Society, Art Needlework, Floral Arrangements, the Choir, the Sunday School, the Scouts, the Institute, the Ladies Social Working Party, the Women’s League, the Dramatic Society, the Badminton Club, the Tennis Club and the Rugby Football Club.” Quite an impressive list!

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members was kept going by the late Bill Steiner: “Without him we would have come to an end.”

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Shortly after this, it was decided that we should give up the unequal battle and move to smaller premises. The church was sold to the All Nations Fellowship at the end of 1999, and we moved into a former estate agent’s premises at 31 Hazelwood Road on 7th March 2000. No slouches, we held our first committee meeting there on the evening of the same day, and our first service on the following Sunday, 12th March. As Frank reports: “within a year we had the plate glass window engraved ‘Northampton Unitarians’, twenty new seats, a new adjustable music stand as a lectern, a plinth and a new chalice and a picture of the world from space, as a symbol and reminder that we are people of one world. Our “worship room” had visually taken on the appearance of a place of worship.”

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Guides Association building on Horsemarket, opposite Sol Central, came up for sale in 2015.

At the time, the University of Northampton was looking for suitable buildings for development as student housing, and we got a top notch price for Hazelwood Road, moving to our current home (below) at the end of 2015.



We appointed Aleks Zglinska as our part-time Community Development Coordinator in 2019 and she had built links with the wider community, particularly the LGBTQ+ one. We've now participated in each of the four Northampton Pride days and are becoming known as an inclusive, respectful spiritual community.

The second half of the lecture was about the spiritual values of Northampton Unitarians and will appear in the March – May 2025 issue of this newsletter.

Sue Woolley

Northampton Unitarians

**Northampton Unitarians Meeting House,
St. Katherine's Terrace, Northampton NN1 2AX
website: www.northamptonunitarians.org.uk**

Chairperson: Mrs. Julie Small
e-mail: julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk

Secretary & Newsletter Editor: Rev. Sue Woolley
tel: 0785 325 3880 e-mail: revsuewoolley@gmail.com

Treasurer: Mr. Jon Small
e-mail: jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk

Organist: Dr. Mark Beaumont
tel: 079804 98970 e-mail: drmarksmusic40@yahoo.co.uk

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*Chalice Lightings for Christmas and Yule* by Yvonne Aburrow

Every child is a miracle and a mystery  
And in the one born at midnight  
In the dark time of the year  
We see all children leaping into the light  
And as we light this flame  
We honour the light in everyone,  
the Christ in everyone,  
the child in everyone.

At the time when the day is shortest  
And the Sun shows herself only briefly above the horizon  
We light this flame of hope  
To represent the solstice fire on the hilltop  
That ancient people lit to remind the sun to return  
And we honour the cycle of the seasons  
As their tides are echoed in our own lives.



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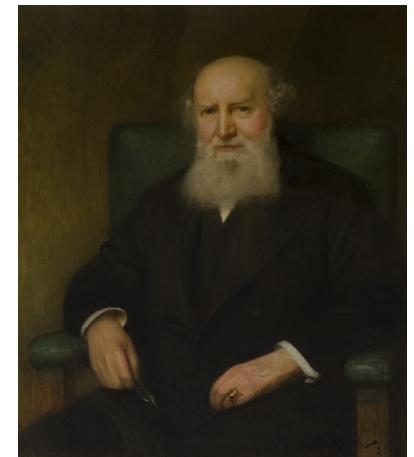
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**Chairperson:** Mrs. Julie Small  
e-mail: [julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk)

**Secretary & Newsletter Editor:** Rev. Sue Woolley  
tel: 0785 325 3880 e-mail: [revsuewoolley@gmail.com](mailto:revsuewoolley@gmail.com)

**Treasurer:** Mr. Jon Small  
e-mail: [jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk)

**Organist:** Dr. Mark Beaumont  
tel: 079804 98970 e-mail: [drmarksmusic40@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:drmarksmusic40@yahoo.co.uk)

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Every child is a miracle and a mystery
And in the one born at midnight
In the dark time of the year
We see all children leaping into the light
And as we light this flame
We honour the light in everyone,
the Christ in everyone,
the child in everyone.

At the time when the day is shortest
And the Sun shows herself only briefly above the horizon
We light this flame of hope
To represent the solstice fire on the hilltop
That ancient people lit to remind the sun to return
And we honour the cycle of the seasons
As their tides are echoed in our own lives.



Northampton Unitarians News

*A spiritual fellowship, encouraging tolerance,
reason and independent thought*

Issue 82, December 2024 – February 2025

Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| Statement of belief & websites / social media | page 2 |
| Calendar for December 2024 – February 2025 | page 3 |
| <i>Northampton Unitarians: A Short History</i> by Sue Woolley | page 4 |
| Who we are and how to contact us | page 12 |
| <i>Chalice lightings for Christmas and Yule</i> by Yvonne Aburrow | page 12 |

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- the fundamental tools for doing this are your own life experience, your reflection upon it, your intuitive understanding and the promptings of your own conscience.
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We welcome all who come to us in the spirit of goodwill and enquiry, regardless of ethnic or religious background, age, gender, or sexual orientation.

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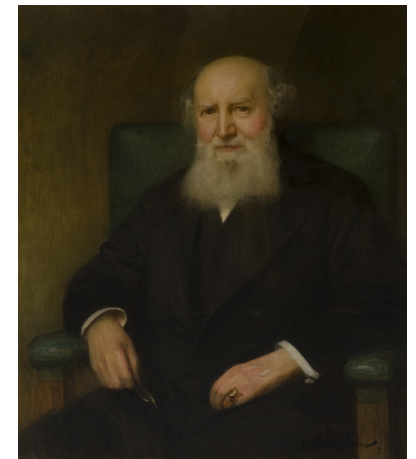
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website: www.northamptonunitarians.org.uk**

Chairperson: Mrs. Julie Small
e-mail: julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk

Secretary & Newsletter Editor: Rev. Sue Woolley
tel: 0785 325 3880 e-mail: revsuewoolley@gmail.com

Treasurer: Mr. Jon Small
e-mail: jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk

Organist: Dr. Mark Beaumont
tel: 079804 98970 e-mail: drmarksmusic40@yahoo.co.uk

~~~~~

*Chalice Lightings for Christmas and Yule* by Yvonne Aburrow

Every child is a miracle and a mystery  
And in the one born at midnight  
In the dark time of the year  
We see all children leaping into the light  
And as we light this flame  
We honour the light in everyone,  
the Christ in everyone,  
the child in everyone.

At the time when the day is shortest  
And the Sun shows herself only briefly above the horizon  
We light this flame of hope  
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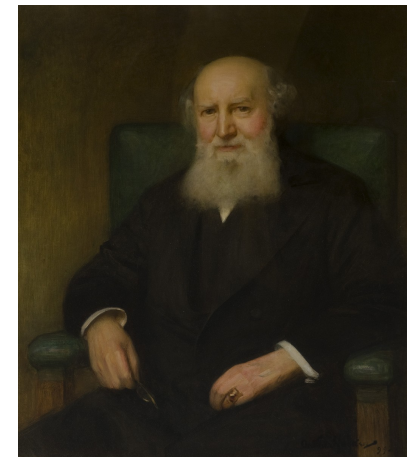
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e-mail: [julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk)

**Secretary & Newsletter Editor:** Rev. Sue Woolley  
tel: 0785 325 3880 e-mail: [revsuewoolley@gmail.com](mailto:revsuewoolley@gmail.com)

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e-mail: [jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk)

**Organist:** Dr. Mark Beaumont  
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the child in everyone.

At the time when the day is shortest
And the Sun shows herself only briefly above the horizon
We light this flame of hope
To represent the solstice fire on the hilltop
That ancient people lit to remind the sun to return
And we honour the cycle of the seasons
As their tides are echoed in our own lives.



Northampton Unitarians News

*A spiritual fellowship, encouraging tolerance,
reason and independent thought*

Issue 82, December 2024 – February 2025

Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| Statement of belief & websites / social media | page 2 |
| Calendar for December 2024 – February 2025 | page 3 |
| <i>Northampton Unitarians: A Short History</i> by Sue Woolley | page 4 |
| Who we are and how to contact us | page 12 |
| <i>Chalice lightings for Christmas and Yule</i> by Yvonne Aburrow | page 12 |

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- everyone has the right to seek truth and meaning for themselves.
- the fundamental tools for doing this are your own life experience, your reflection upon it, your intuitive understanding and the promptings of your own conscience.
- the best place to do this is a community that welcomes you for who you are,
- complete with your beliefs, doubts, and questions.

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We welcome all who come to us in the spirit of goodwill and enquiry, regardless of ethnic or religious background, age, gender, or sexual orientation.

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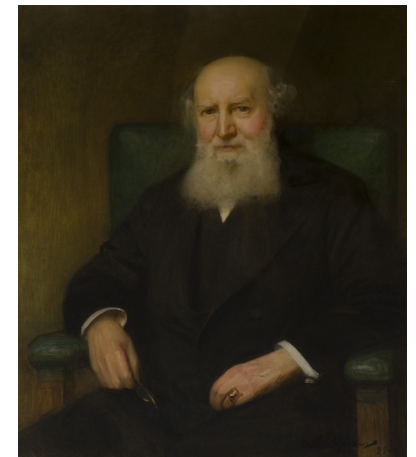
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St. Katherine's Terrace, Northampton NN1 2AX
website: www.northamptonunitarians.org.uk**

Chairperson: Mrs. Julie Small
e-mail: julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk

Secretary & Newsletter Editor: Rev. Sue Woolley
tel: 0785 325 3880 e-mail: revsuewoolley@gmail.com

Treasurer: Mr. Jon Small
e-mail: jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk

Organist: Dr. Mark Beaumont
tel: 079804 98970 e-mail: drmarksmusic40@yahoo.co.uk

~~~~~

*Chalice Lightings for Christmas and Yule* by Yvonne Aburrow

Every child is a miracle and a mystery  
And in the one born at midnight  
In the dark time of the year  
We see all children leaping into the light  
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the Christ in everyone,  
the child in everyone.

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|                                                                   |         |
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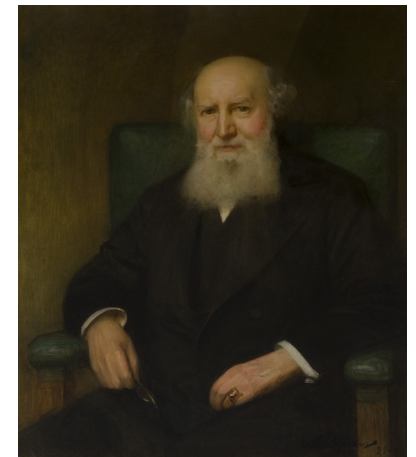
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e-mail: [julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk)

**Secretary & Newsletter Editor:** Rev. Sue Woolley  
tel: 0785 325 3880 e-mail: [revsuewoolley@gmail.com](mailto:revsuewoolley@gmail.com)

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e-mail: [jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk)

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We see all children leaping into the light
And as we light this flame
We honour the light in everyone,
the Christ in everyone,
the child in everyone.

At the time when the day is shortest
And the Sun shows herself only briefly above the horizon
We light this flame of hope
To represent the solstice fire on the hilltop
That ancient people lit to remind the sun to return
And we honour the cycle of the seasons
As their tides are echoed in our own lives.



Northampton Unitarians News

*A spiritual fellowship, encouraging tolerance,
reason and independent thought*

Issue 82, December 2024 – February 2025

Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| Statement of belief & websites / social media | page 2 |
| Calendar for December 2024 – February 2025 | page 3 |
| <i>Northampton Unitarians: A Short History</i> by Sue Woolley | page 4 |
| Who we are and how to contact us | page 12 |
| <i>Chalice lightings for Christmas and Yule</i> by Yvonne Aburrow | page 12 |

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We welcome all who come to us in the spirit of goodwill and enquiry, regardless of ethnic or religious background, age, gender, or sexual orientation.

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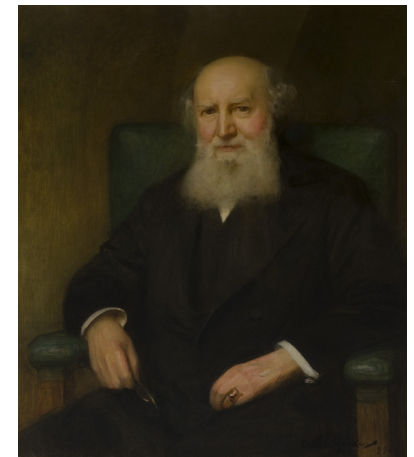
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website: www.northamptonunitarians.org.uk**

Chairperson: Mrs. Julie Small
e-mail: julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk

Secretary & Newsletter Editor: Rev. Sue Woolley
tel: 0785 325 3880 e-mail: revsuewoolley@gmail.com

Treasurer: Mr. Jon Small
e-mail: jonasmall@hotmail.co.uk

Organist: Dr. Mark Beaumont
tel: 079804 98970 e-mail: drmarksmusic40@yahoo.co.uk

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*Chalice Lightings for Christmas and Yule* by Yvonne Aburrow

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|                                                                   |         |
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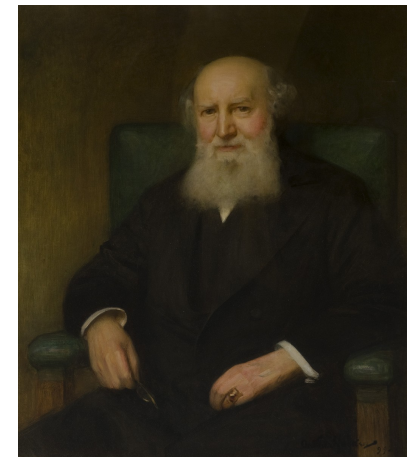
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e-mail: [julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:julieasmall@hotmail.co.uk)

**Secretary & Newsletter Editor:** Rev. Sue Woolley  
tel: 0785 325 3880 e-mail: [revsuewoolley@gmail.com](mailto:revsuewoolley@gmail.com)

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Chalice Lightings for Christmas and Yule by Yvonne Aburrow

Every child is a miracle and a mystery
And in the one born at midnight
In the dark time of the year
We see all children leaping into the light
And as we light this flame
We honour the light in everyone,
the Christ in everyone,
the child in everyone.

At the time when the day is shortest
And the Sun shows herself only briefly above the horizon
We light this flame of hope
To represent the solstice fire on the hilltop
That ancient people lit to remind the sun to return
And we honour the cycle of the seasons
As their tides are echoed in our own lives.



Northampton Unitarians News

*A spiritual fellowship, encouraging tolerance,
reason and independent thought*

Issue 82, December 2024 – February 2025

Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| Statement of belief & websites / social media | page 2 |
| Calendar for December 2024 – February 2025 | page 3 |
| <i>Northampton Unitarians: A Short History</i> by Sue Woolley | page 4 |
| Who we are and how to contact us | page 12 |
| <i>Chalice lightings for Christmas and Yule</i> by Yvonne Aburrow | page 12 |

Statement of Belief (taken from our website)

Unitarianism is a religious movement in which individuals are free to follow their reason and conscience; there is no pressure from creed or scripture. We are open to change in the light of new thought and discoveries.

We believe that:

- everyone has the right to seek truth and meaning for themselves.
- the fundamental tools for doing this are your own life experience, your reflection upon it, your intuitive understanding and the promptings of your own conscience.
- the best place to do this is a community that welcomes you for who you are,
- complete with your beliefs, doubts, and questions.

We offer:

- liberty of conscience from imposed creed, confessions, and dogmas.
- a fellowship where people come together to worship; to share times of celebration and trial; and to help each other in the quest for a faith to live by.

We affirm the universal values of love and compassion, peace, truth, and justice.

We welcome all who come to us in the spirit of goodwill and enquiry, regardless of ethnic or religious background, age, gender, or sexual orientation.

Our thanks to the General Assembly Information Department, for extracts from 'A Faith Worth Thinking About' by Peter Sampson et al; and to Ipswich Unitarians for extracts from a leaflet by Rev. Cliff Reed.

Websites & Social Media

www.northamptonunitarians.org.uk
[https://www.facebook.com/Northampton Unitarians](https://www.facebook.com/NorthamptonUnitarians)
<http://sue-still-i-am-one.blogspot.co.uk>
<http://www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk>
www.unitarian.org.uk

Calendar for December 2024 – February 2025

December

- Sunday 1st Worship service, Aleks Zglinska, 11.00 am
Sunday 15th Carol Service, Rev Sue Woolley, 11.00 am
followed by committee meeting.
Weds. 18th Threads, craft and chat group 2.00 till 4.00 pm

January

- Sunday 5th Congregational Circle Service.
Theme: New Year, New Beginnings, 11.00 am
Sunday 19th Worship service, Jon Small, 11.00 am
Weds. 29th Threads, craft and chat group 2.00 till 4.00 pm

February

- Sunday 2nd Worship service: Rev Sue Woolley, 11.00 am
followed by committee meeting.
Sunday 16th Worship service: Mark Beaumont
Weds. 26th Threads, craft and chat group 2.00 till 4.00 pm



Northampton Unitarians: A Short History

The text below is taken from a Carnegie Lecture delivered at Northampton Central Library on 16th November.

First, a brief history of the denomination. The first avowedly Unitarian congregation held its first worship service at Essex Street in London, under the ministry of Theophilus Lindsey, on 17th April 1774, just over 250 years ago. But Unitarian beliefs and ideas are much older than that, growing out of the Protestant Reformation of the early 16th century. When the Bible became available in translation, so that people could read the word of God for themselves, some discovered that the doctrine of the Trinity was not in the Bible, and therefore decided to worship God alone. Which is why we're called "Unitarians" – we didn't call ourselves that, it was a name given to us by our detractors, who insisted we were heretics of the darkest kind, because we denied that Jesus was equal to God and affirmed that he (as Christ) did not pre-exist his human birth. We were also known as "Anti-Trinitarians" or "Socinians" or "Arians".

Interestingly, when much of the intolerance of various Protestant sects was eased up on with the passing of the Toleration Act of 1689, Unitarians were specifically excluded, as were Roman Catholics. In fact, it was **illegal** to espouse Unitarian beliefs until 1813, only 200 years ago. But Unitarianism only formally began in Northampton in 1827.

A key influence in the origins of Unitarianism in Northampton was the presence of Dr Philip Doddridge's Academy of Learning, which was based in Northampton from 1729 to 1751, and again from 1789. As Frank Field remarks in his splendid history of our congregation (which is available on our website), "the Academy gained a reputation throughout the Midlands and the South of England. Nonconformist churches were sent a steady stream of

well qualified ministers, some of them outstanding.” Although Doddridge himself took a middle position theologically, he was tolerant of those with Arian and Socinian leanings. We know from a centenary article written in 1927 by our then minister Cellan Evans, that Doddridge once stated that he would “lose my place and even my life, sooner than excommunicate a real Christian for Arian proclivities.”

When the Academy returned to Northampton in 1789, it came under the care of the Rev. John Horsey, minister of Castle Hill Congregational Church, this tolerant position became more marked. In his interesting article on Unitarianism in Northampton, Alan Ruston quotes the Revs. Thomas Arnold and J.J. Cooper, who were later ministers at Castle Hill: “There was Unitarianism in the church, but according to the evidence before us it was in the pew, not in the pulpit, and there was not heat enough in the pulpit to burn it up or melt it down. ... From the Academy Unitarianism got into the church ... For years the students had been making friends in the congregation, finding opportunities to talk of their studies and air their views of theology.”

After Horsey’s retirement in 1827, after 50 years of dedicated service, his place at Castle Hill was taken by the Rev. Hyatt, who was a traditionalist, determined to root out heresies. However, the Unitarian-minded section of the congregation got in first. At Hyatt’s first church meeting, the following letter was read out (I’m giving you the gist):

“We the undersigned Members ... having in accordance with the dictates of our consciences, united in the formation of a society of Christians, whose worship is directed to the one God the Father ... deem it proper to withdraw ... from the worship and communion of the Church to which we have hitherto belonged on account of the discordance existing between the mode of worship

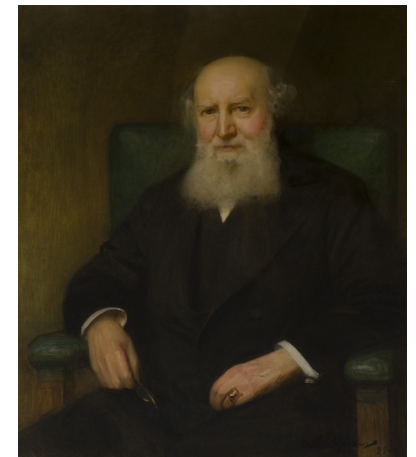
there practised and that which we believe to have been enjoined by Christ and his apostles.”

It was signed by nine members of the Castle Hill congregation. Unitarianism had arrived in Northampton!

The new Society began to meet for worship at the Fountain Inn (later the Criterion) at the corner of Bradshaw Street and Silver Street. They then bought a former Wesleyan Chapel in King Street for £500, and the first service was held there on 21st September 1827, from which we date our history. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find a photo of it and I understand it has been demolished.

The first minister, the Rev. Noah Jones, was appointed two months later, and was a great success. By 1832, there were three services every Sunday, with an average attendance of 200, not to mention a library, a Sunday school with 33 boys and 50 girls, and a day school for 16 girls. Quite a good start! Unfortunately Jones was severely injured in a stage-coach accident later that year, and was never the same again, retiring in 1834.

In 1848, the congregation was augmented by members of the Princes Street Baptist Chapel, whose minister had been Rev. Henry Ierson, who went on to become secretary of the British & Foreign Unitarian Association in 1876. In 1852, he had married the daughter of James Milne, a Northampton architect and borough surveyor. Her sister married a certain Moses Philip Manfield, (right) who was the most



influential figure in our history in the second half of the 19th century.

Philip Manfield (as he was known) was born into a Unitarian boot-making family in Bristol in 1818. He moved to Northampton



in 1843, and set up his own highly successful boot & shoemaking business in the following year. Over the next 50 years he became a dominant figure in the town, eventually becoming its MP in 1891. His role in the Unitarian church was no less important. He was chairman of the congregation for three decades, and was responsible for funding the building of a splendid new church in Abington Square, (left) which was to be the congregation's home for more than 100 years.

The foundation stone for Kettering Road Free Church was laid in March 1896 by Lady Manfield, and was accompanied by an inspiring address by the then minister, T.W. Freckelton. The Manfields not only funded the building of the church, which cost £6,500 plus a further £850 for furnishing, but also endowed a repair fund. The new church could seat 400, with additional space for two large Sunday schools. The opening service was held on 7th

October 1897, the address being given by the Rev. Joseph Wood of the Unitarian Church, Birmingham.

This was due to the remarkable statement of purpose that the congregation had agreed upon while the Rev. Freckelton was away in the United States, and with which he could not agree. He resigned before the opening ceremony, and many members left with him and joined the Congregational Church in Abington Avenue (now United Reformed).

Alan Ruston calls this statement “a notable example of the development of Unitarian thought to its extreme, in 19th century terms” I would like to read you part of it:

“The congregation has now been reconstituted upon a basis fitting it to represent the largest and freest Religious Thought of this time, in such a way as to leave full scope for all its reverent expansion in the future.

Following the natural order of development, this Church, and the Congregation worshipping herein, will belong to no sect, but will stand for Religion that is Rational, for Rationalism that is Religious, and for the practical advancement of the highest Ethical Culture. It has therefore no dogmatic name; no creed expressed or implied; enjoins no acceptance of articles of faith upon either Minister or members; but requires only that men should do justly, and love mercy, and walk reverently before God.”

I think you will agree that this is radical stuff indeed. So technically speaking, Kettering Road Free Church did not belong to the Unitarian movement for the first six years of its life. However, the congregation decided to return to the Unitarian fold in September 1903, when it joined the North Midland Unitarian and Presbyterian Union of Churches (now the Midland Unitarian Association). As Alan Ruston remarks, “Undoubtedly the

Unitarians of Northampton were a unique group, not to be replicated elsewhere.” You know, I’m rather proud of that!

The first 50 years of the 20th century saw a succession of six ministers, none of whom stayed long, apart from the Rev. H. Bernard Hannah, who was our minister from 1930 to 1946, which makes him the longest serving minister in our history. In her fascinating manuscript ‘150 years of Unitarianism in Northampton’, the late Nora Patenall recalls: “He was a theologian of advanced views, and altogether it was an inspiring ministry.” After the Second World War, our Unitarian church shared in the general decline in religion in this country, due to changing social patterns and increasing secularism. Our last full-time minister was the Rev. A.E. Mobbs, who resigned in 1950.

This is not to say that the church did not thrive during these years. Nora Patenall recalls: “Over the years there have been many cultural and social groups within the church. The members of these groups also made contact with the world around them. [The groups included] the Shakespearian Class, the Literary Society, Art Needlework, Floral Arrangements, the Choir, the Sunday School, the Scouts, the Institute, the Ladies Social Working Party, the Women’s League, the Dramatic Society, the Badminton Club, the Tennis Club and the Rugby Football Club.” Quite an impressive list!

After the resignation of the Rev. Mobbs, there was a 20-year interregnum with services being conducted by supply ministers and lay preachers, before the formation in 1970 of the Avon Group of churches (Banbury, Coventry, Northampton and Warwick) with the Rev. John Clifford as District Minister. He was succeeded in 1973 by the Rev. Frank Clabburn, who left in 1977. According to our late Treasurer, Martin Weiss, the next four years were hard – the small congregation of five to seven

members was kept going by the late Bill Steiner: “Without him we would have come to an end.”

In 1981, the congregation received a new lease of life with the arrival of Peter Galbraith, who held the lay charge for the next nearly 20 years, until his retirement in 2000. However, our numbers did not grow, and our beautiful church had become something of an expensive white elephant, with what Frank describes as “an overwhelming burden of maintenance”. It was in 1988 that I first attended a service there, in the little vestry room, and was thrilled to have found a new Unitarian home Peter’s services were a delight, as were the discussions afterwards, in which Bill Steiner often took the lead.

Shortly after this, it was decided that we should give up the unequal battle and move to smaller premises. The church was sold to the All Nations Fellowship at the end of 1999, and we moved into a former estate agent’s premises at 31 Hazelwood Road on 7th March 2000. No slouches, we held our first committee meeting there on the evening of the same day, and our first service on the following Sunday, 12th March. As Frank reports: “within a year we had the plate glass window engraved ‘Northampton Unitarians’, twenty new seats, a new adjustable music stand as a lectern, a plinth and a new chalice and a picture of the world from space, as a symbol and reminder that we are people of one world. Our “worship room” had visually taken on the appearance of a place of worship.”

Peter Galbraith resigned his Lay Charge in August 2000 and we made the conscious decision not to appoint a minister, but to supply our own “service takers” from within the congregation, supplemented by occasional guests from within the denomination. But the Hazelwood Road premises were desperately unsuitable, and we were delighted when the old Girl

Guides Association building on Horsemarket, opposite Sol Central, came up for sale in 2015.

At the time, the University of Northampton was looking for suitable buildings for development as student housing, and we got a top notch price for Hazelwood Road, moving to our current home (below) at the end of 2015.



We appointed Aleks Zglinska as our part-time Community Development Coordinator in 2019 and she had built links with the wider community, particularly the LGBTQ+ one. We've now participated in each of the four Northampton Pride days and are becoming known as an inclusive, respectful spiritual community.

The second half of the lecture was about the spiritual values of Northampton Unitarians and will appear in the March – May 2025 issue of this newsletter.

Sue Woolley

Northampton Unitarians

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At the time when the day is shortest  
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To represent the solstice fire on the hilltop  
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